

Alberta Rhythm: The Later Work of A. Y. Jackson

Dennis REID

Art Gallery of Ontario, 1982

104 pp., 9 colour, 95 b/w illus., \$9.95

Alberta Rhythm: The Later Work of A. Y. Jackson is the first of a series of three exhibitions that Dennis Reid, Curator of Historical Canadian Art at the Art Gallery of Ontario, is organizing in order to bring to light the post-Group of Seven paintings of Jackson, Arthur Lismer, and Lawren Harris. It opened at the Art Gallery of Ontario in May 1982 and was later seen at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary. Everything in the exhibition was reproduced and documented in the accompanying catalogue and an excellent chronology of Jackson's activities from 1933 until his death in 1974 was provided by Jackson's niece, Naomi Jackson Groves. Carol Lowrey also prepared a bibliography of titles omitted from Reid's 1971 *Bibliography of the Group of Seven*. Both these inclusions are very useful but I would have liked to have seen the chronology expanded to cover Jackson's entire life. It is unfortunate that the bibliography, which goes back to 1917, was primarily designed to be used in conjunction with Reid's now difficult to find *Bibliography*.

The catalogue is very attractive, although I feel that Jackson's "romping rhythms" would have benefitted from a more spacious or relaxed format. The layout is beautifully balanced but is just a little too tight for the works at hand. As for the exhibition, it is clear that Reid chose the work with care, hoping to show Jackson in the most favourable light and prove his own case for the post-Group work. The catalogue's colour reproductions are certainly marvelous. *Alberta Rhythm* and *South from Great Bear Lake* come across well, as dense, sonorous and majestic paintings. But *Early Snow, Alberta*, which I know well, is a slippery Disneyes-

que fantasy that does little to strengthen Reid's argument. Although the few drawings illustrated are punchy and vigorous, they are hardly "exceptional works of art" as Reid contends. Varley, Lismer and FitzGerald were the finer, more *feeling*, draughtsmen within the Group; and compared to Picasso, Matisse or Bonnard, Jackson's scrawls look pretty witless. Like most of his paintings, the drawings are overly general. They tell us little about the particulars of his particular surroundings.

Reid is well aware of this often heard charge and made a valiant, but ultimately unsuccessful, attempt to refute it in his catalogue essay. The first paragraph ends with the remark that "This 'later' work has been dismissed wrongly as dull, repetitive, or formulaary." Yet in the pages that follow, he as much as admits that there is truth to the charges. Writing of Jackson's 1938 Alberta sketches, he quite correctly points out that "they are the same work as Jackson did at St. Tite des Caps the previous spring, and essentially the same work he had been producing since 1914." Jackson's "conservative vision," as Reid politely calls it, made every part of the country look the same. Canada looks like a great jello of jiggling forms when seen through Jackson's art. Nothing has much flavour of its own. The paintings run into each other and eventually put many of us to sleep.

If Reid really believes that Jackson identified with each "subject place," and that his identification adds to the character and to our understanding or the resulting work why did he include so few Quebec paintings in the exhibition? According to Groves' chronology, Jackson painted there almost every year during the thirties and forties. But where is this activity reflected in the exhibition? Given the fact that many Arctic and Ontario, as well as Alberta, subjects were included, I cannot understand Reid's decision.

Nor do I understand why Reid dwelt so

much on Jackson's private life, rehashing the news of his friendship with Anne Savage and telling us when his tonsils came out. I would have liked to have heard much more about his relationship with the Canadian Group of Painters and something about the enormous, and sometimes repressive, influence that he exercised in English Canada during the thirties and forties. And it would have been interesting to have heard more about what others thought of Jackson, for despite the care with which Reid documented his activities, I still have no sense of his presence, which seems to have been the whole point of the essay.

I have great respect for Reid's scholarship, but I do not understand many of the decisions that he made with this exhibition and catalogue. I hope that the Lismer and Harris exhibitions that follow are better tuned and focused.

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