

Notes

¹ Henry-Russell HITCHCOCK and William SEALE, "Notes on the Architecture," *Court House, a Photographic Document*, ed. Richard Pare (New York: 1978).

² *Court Houses in Ontario*, Drawings and water-colours by Stephen Britton OSLER, Preface by Joan MURRAY, Foreword by Kenneth JARVIS, Q.C. (Toronto: The Carswell Company, 1979).

³ Marion MACRAE and Anthony ADAMSON, *Cornerstones of Order: Court Houses and Town Halls of Ontario, 1794-1914* (Toronto: Clarke Irwin, 1983).

David Milne and the Modern Tradition of Painting

John O'BRIAN

Coach House Press, Toronto, 1983

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John O'Brian's book is the first in-depth study of the formal and theoretical sources for David Milne's work. Although the text is not long and the illustrations, called "reference photographs" by the publisher, are never larger than two by three inches, the book is rich in ideas, and constitutes a superior piece of scholarship that will have continued importance. It was edited by Dennis Reid and is part of the recent extension of the activities of Coach House Press into serious studies of Canadian art and architectural history. For O'Brian this culminates an involvement with Milne's work that began when he was an M.A. student in Toronto and continued with an exhibition and the catalogue *David Milne: The New York Years, 1903-1916* for the Edmonton Art Gallery in 1981. The text of the Edmonton catalogue evolved slightly to become part of the Coach House book.

Since O'Brian is a writer as well as a Ph.D. candidate in art history at Harvard University, it is not surprising that his own style is assured, disciplined and precise. It also seems natural that when he chooses to quote from Milne's critics, positive and negative, he finds comments that are sharp enough to illuminate a whole period of opinion; there is a 1912 *New York Times* review cited on p. 21, for instance, which calls Milne's paintings "violently alive" enough to "send the pictures around them back into a shadowy and invalid region." Elsewhere in the book O'Brian quotes one of the most beautiful pieces ever written about a Canadian artist, D.G. Jones' "A Garland of Milne": "No one in France / could make such galaxies / of glass and water / intricate

with flowers."¹

The effect of O'Brian's enthusiasm for writing which goes furthest in shaping the book, however, is the attention he gives to Milne himself as a serious writer and reader. Since the author is uniquely qualified to do such a study it is unlikely that this aspect of the book will ever be surpassed. In the first of his five essays, after summarizing the brief history of Milne criticism and scholarship, he describes the major characteristics of the artist's writings. Milne wrote a great deal once he had ended his New York City residence. Having decided that he would live in quieter places, he compensated for his distance from any circle of discussion for most of the rest of his life by exchanging complex, unhurried letters with a few other artists and with selected patrons and critics; these letters were a means of distilling the ideas that affected his painting. Sometimes he also wrote private, detailed analytical notes on the progress he made from one painting to another, and in the last decade of his life he produced broad, brief essays, such as *Feeling in Painting* and *Aesthetic Agents*, as well as segments of an autobiography.² Writing was important enough to Milne to be discussed, at least on one occasion, on the same level as painting pictures:

The thing is that while I write or paint with one hand I have to have someone – nature mostly – hold the other. I have to have a person to debate with, or an object to paint from or write about.³

Thus, O'Brian's emphasis on Milne's writing as "an essential complement of his paintings" (p. 36) is well justified. The author defines what Milne wrote in terms of its lean style, its didactic side, and the overall movement it demonstrates from specific analysis of works of art to larger theory. He also refers to a "peculiarly North

American," Thoreauvian attitude which the writings project, of having been produced out of a spiritually healthy isolation (pp. 42-43).

The fourth essay, "Milne's Theories of Art," deals with Milne as both a writer and a reader. It is a search in literature for the sources of Milne's theories, based on the premise that "just as the style of Milne's New York paintings may be traced to certain contemporary and historical antecedents, so the ideas about art expressed in his writings have their genesis in what he read" (p. 87). This premise gives structure to an interesting twenty-page discussion, and O'Brian demonstrates connections with a number of authors who were read by many artists of the period: Clive Bell, Ruskin, Whistler and Thoreau. However, Milne's theories were not rooted so specifically in books as this premise states. By the time he had read the influential modernist critic Bell, for instance, he was already a mature artist who had seen and understood the work of Cézanne, upon whose work Bell's conclusions were principally based, and Milne was capable of drawing his own conclusions. In fact, the independence of his perspective shows in a comment he made on Bell's narrow viewpoint in a 1920 letter:

Bell is almost exactly in the position of Ruskin with Whistler when he attempts to view a new man (of course without Ruskin's greatness). . . . Cézanne is Bell's Turner, he will be the first to miss anything outside that."⁴

Milne did owe a debt to Bell, as O'Brian proves, but the nature of the debt is stated more accurately in the first essay, when O'Brian says that modernist criticism gave Milne a way of stating his theories: "a diction matching his own unsentimental aims, to describe what he had in fact already done in his painting" (p. 29). O'Brian points out

in particular that the phrase "aesthetic emotion" and its formalist implications, central in Milne's writings, came from Bell (pp. 89-94).

The main purpose of the fourth essay is to establish that Milne's ideas, aside from a few seemingly contradictory ones, were very much aligned with international modernist principles, which locate the meaning of a painting in its line, colour and other abstract qualities rather than in its subject. Milne's relationship to modernism is, in fact, the central theme of the book, and the second and third essays, "Stylistic Coordinates I" and "Stylistic Coordinates II," work out a pattern of visual sources for his New York City period that is strongly modernist. This close involvement with modernism put Milne among the vanguard of early twentieth-century North American painters, although he has not usually been viewed in this way. Modernism became a powerful force in New York precisely during the time that Milne lived there, in large part because up-to-date European painting and sculpture was being shown at Stieglitz's 291 and at other galleries, and because many young American artists were returning to New York from Europe with enthusiasm for the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists, Matisse, Picasso and other great early modern painters and sculptors.

Milne's pre-1911 paintings reflect, as O'Brian explains, his interest in French and American Impressionism. O'Brian suggests that this interest subsided quickly, but Milne himself argued that Monet was his one great lifelong influence. This argument deserves consideration, especially in studying the Boston Corners landscapes (only *Trees in Spring*, a somewhat atypical oil from this important phase, is included in the book, although there are a few reproductions of Boston Corners watercolours). O'Brian presents possibilities of influences

from Cézanne and the Cézanne-influenced Prendergast, and from the flattened compositions of New York illustration, on paintings showing the first glimmerings of Milne's maturity. I would include Bonnard in this list as a direct influence on Milne's composition.

The hundreds of modernist paintings in the 1913 Armory Show did not shake up Milne's style as they did the work of some Americans, but O'Brian does demonstrate both that Milne freed himself of commercial conventions soon after and that he looked very seriously at Matisse's paintings in the show. The author finds that Whistler influenced this phase of Milne's painting as well, in the 1914 interiors with figures. I find more Whistler influence in the paintings around 1911, at the time that Milne's etchings were very close to those of the older artist. I would also add Japanese art to this pattern of sources from the New York City context. Japanese art was very visible in America in Milne's day. He would have known that some of the artists he professed to have admired most, such as Monet and Whistler, were deeply indebted to Japanese art and as a result their own work, like Milne's, emphasized the two-dimensional rather than volume and deep space. Milne's own familiarity with it later on is evidenced by the fact that in his long autobiographical letter to Alice and Vincent Massey in 1934 he referred to prints by Hiroshige and Hokusai as naturally as he did to European works.⁵ He probably also knew Arthur Wesley Dow's influential book *Composition*,⁶ this agreeably undogmatic, illustrated lesson book based on Japanese design principles would have been both a visual and a theoretical source for the artist.

While the modernist tendency is the most important aspect of Milne's New York painting, and while it is strongly expressed later in his theories, it should not be

emphasized so much that other aspects of his work seem like contradictions (as on p. 119, where O'Brian states that Milne's late fantasy paintings "ran against the current of modern art to which he had attached himself"). If modernism is understood as a force which distinguishes late nineteenth- and twentieth-century painting from what came before it, but which mixes with other new forces in most of the work of the period, then there is a way of fitting Milne's career naturally into its age. Very few European artists followed modernist principles to their logical extremes as did Mondrian and the Constructivists; Expressionism, Symbolism, Dada, Surrealism and other tendencies emphasizing emotional and other kinds of content entered or dominated the work of much of the avant-garde. North American art reflected this mixed attention to form and content. Such members of the Stieglitz circle as Marin and Hartley painted less rigorously formal, more descriptive pictures in their middle and late careers. Marin did some compositions with figures which compare strikingly with Milne's fantasy pictures. Even the later "abstract" artist Gorky has been seen as a man obsessed with the very personal content of his pictures, which he hid in fields of sophisticated line and colour that no one searched for decades.⁷

Milne's late work includes many pictures that have an undeniable orientation toward content. He did insist on discussing these in terms of line, colour, and value, as O'Brian points out, but his writings are not one hundred percent modernist in tone. A change of outlook is suggested as early as 1933 in a letter describing

a rather curious development for me. Subject – that is story – had played about as little a part with me as with anyone I know; yet this direction has to do with subject.

More accurately, and stranger still, with titles.⁸

In letters from the forties Milne calls the fantasy paintings "subject pictures," the strongest possible reference to the non-formal concepts behind them. Most interesting is the comment he made in 1940 about T.S. Eliot's writing: "Eliot's welding of meaning to music seems to me to be a happy one for poetry or painting."⁹ As a younger man Milne might have emphasized the abstract "music" in the work (Eliot's and his own) without giving such importance to the meaning. But in the last years of his life, working in his studio and only seldom directly from nature, he turned to images conceived entirely in his imagination, and their meanings are mysterious and full of poetry.

There is much still to be said about Milne's "subject pictures;" the last half of O'Brian's fifth essay, "Perspectives of Feeling," discusses them, but not in a conclusive way. The first half of this essay, however, must be mentioned as a brilliant and beautifully written critical piece. It is about space in Milne's painting as a thing which is felt rather than described, something related to Matisse's *espace spirituel*, and also linked by O'Brian to "the paradox of vastness found in intimacy" of Proust (pp. 114-15). This section alone is enough to make one look forward to O'Brian's next book.

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Notes

- ¹ D.G. JONES, "A Garland of Milne," *Under the Thunder the Flowers Light Up the Earth* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1977), p. 10. Quoted in O'Brian, p. 118.

² "Feeling in Painting" was published in *Here and Now*, I (May 1948) pp. 57-58. "Aesthetic Agents," an unpublished essay written in 1947, and the autobiography, written about the same time, are in the Milne Family Papers, Toronto.

³ Letter to James CLARKE, 13 Nov. 1927, David Milne Papers, Public Archives of Canada/Archives publiques du Canada, Ottawa.

⁴ Letter to James CLARKE, 30 Sept. 1920, published in "David Milne: His Journals and Letters of 1920 and 1921: A Document of Survival," *Artscanada* XXX (Aug. 1973) p. 24.

⁵ Letter to Alice and Vincent MASSEY, 20 Aug. 1934, Massey Family Papers, Massey College, University of Toronto.

⁶ Arthur Wesley DOW, *Composition* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1899). There were thirteen editions between 1899 and 1931.

⁷ Harry RAND, *Arshile Gorky: The Implication of Symbols* (Montclair, N.J.: Allan Head and Schram, 1980).

⁸ Letter to James CLARKE, 8 Oct., 1933, David Milne Papers, Public Archives of Canada/Archives publiques du Canada, Ottawa.

⁹ Letter to Donald BUCHANAN, 14 Jan. 1940, National Gallery of Canada/Galerie nationale du Canada, Ottawa.

David Milne and the Modern Tradition of Painting

John O'BRIAN

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In recent years a number of fine histories and monographs on Canadian and American artists have been published, adding greatly to the understanding of these two artistic traditions. Most of these books have concentrated on one artist or movement and have not attempted to place the subject within a larger context. This type of approach has helped to establish the individualism and greatness of North American painting apart from European art. *David Milne and the Modern Tradition of Painting* by John O'Brian is among the important new books which look beyond political boundaries to find the relationship between the artist's work on the one hand, and modern painting and art theory on the other.

When the paintings, watercolours, and prints of David Milne (1882-1953) were discovered by Canadian critics, they were frequently described as the product of an artist whose work stood apart from any artistic school or tradition. Such statements were easy to assert, since at the time Milne was living alone in an isolated cabin at Six Mile Lake in Ontario. Milne was not, however, a cultural recluse; he read copious amounts of modern literature and art theory. Having spent thirteen years in New York City, he was familiar with modern art and his own early style shows the obvious influence of Post-Impressionist and Fauve painting. Milne was also a gifted writer, and wrote about his own paintings as well as about more general theories of art. O'Brian's book examines the role that modern art played in the development of Milne's style, looking beyond his biography by analyzing his relationship with the time and place in which