

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 "Aesthetic Agents," an unpublished essay written in 1947, and the autobiography, written about the same time, are in the Milne Family Papers, Toronto.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

Coach House Press, Toronto, 1983

144 pp., 62 illus., \$12.00

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

he lived and by using his own writings, not as the final authority, but as simply another type of useful source material.

O'Brian's thesis is essentially that Milne was a formalist painter. Support for this idea can be found in the artist's writings; he considered his art to be "simplifications of line and colour, intended to produce a thrill, a kick,"¹ rather than works of art created to depict a specific place or subject. The book is arranged by topic rather than chronologically. O'Brian begins by examining Milne as a Canadian and in particular in relation to Northrop Frye's and Margaret Atwood's ideas about Canadian character. The study continues by examining criticism of Milne's work beginning with the notices the artist received in New York newspapers and also discusses Milne's own criticism of his art. The heart of the book is the chapters written specifically about the New York years; a chapter then follows on Milne's theories of art and a final summary section discusses the apparent contradictions to Milne's formalist aesthetic in the artist's paintings of religious subjects.

In the section on Canadian character, I found O'Brian's ideas and his selection of quotes to be interesting. "National character" is an idea more often discussed in Canadian than American art literature and O'Brian convincingly argues that Milne's art and life were consistent with many of the ideas about a peculiarly Canadian outlook. This idea does not imply that an artist must "paint Canada," but merely that certain attitudes should be prevalent in his or her mind. In the discussion of how Milne developed his own style by drawing upon the innovations of such modern masters as Cézanne and Matisse, O'Brian also presents strong evidence for the idea that Milne was influenced by these painters. Less developed is the analysis of the relationship of Milne's art to contemporary American art.

Milne wrote about the lack of interesting American art on view in New York, yet his paintings clearly draw upon motifs and subject matter frequently found in the work of early twentieth-century Americans. Like many other writers, O'Brian dismisses the period during which Milne worked in New York as a time of artistic decay. Although thirty years ago most American art historians would have agreed with him, today the period is better understood as having involved an aesthetic that was simply different from that of contemporary European art. In addition to American Impressionist painting, "tonal" landscapes were popular in this period; Milne's choice of subject matter for his works may have been influenced by these broadly painted, expressive works, which present the landscape as if it were seen through a haze. Admittedly, the period in American art is a confusing one, and much of the source material is still lurking in archival collections. This failing, however, brings up one of the serious challenges faced by any author who seeks to examine an artist in relation to traditions outside of his own: one must become an expert, not only on the artist and his background, but also on each tradition which the author seeks to compare with the artist's work.

The question of the audience for which O'Brian wrote also arises. Of the books published by Coach House, a Toronto press that concentrates largely on poetry, drama and fiction, *David Milne and the Modern Tradition* is the only book of art criticism on the current publication list. Although O'Brian writes in a fluid, readable style, the ideas presented are complex. O'Brian assumes that his reader has a considerable amount of background knowledge about Milne (a chronology would have been helpful even for a well-informed reader), and the black and white illustrations, while they are beautifully printed, are so small that

they only serve as vague reminders of what the actual works of art are like. Many of the visual points that O'Brian makes are not described in enough detail. One has to take the author's word that *Alcove* by Milne recalls Matisse's *The Red Studio*, since the illustrations reveal only that both paintings depict studio interiors. Although colour illustrations would have added to the cost of the book, I think a few examples would have strengthened O'Brian's points. The book is short (116 pages of actual text) and in certain sections I also wished that the ideas were discussed at greater length. I found this to be particularly true of the sections on Milne's reading of art theory and literature and its influence on his art; although it is difficult to establish causal relationships, more detail would have made the analysis better. If one knows a great deal about Milne already, it is easy to accept the fact that he was reading Marcel Proust while living in the Adirondack Mountains in New York, but to a reader less familiar with the artist his choice of reading material might seem odd.

Three of the five chapters of this book were originally published as the catalogue *David Milne: The New York Years, 1903-1916*, an exhibition organized by the Edmonton Art Gallery in 1981. To this information O'Brian has added two chapters which expand the discussion of Milne's relationship to modernism and attempt to view its influence in relation to the artist's entire career rather than just the early period. The book complements two other substantial publications about Milne: Rosemarie Tovell's *Reflections in a Quiet Pool: The Prints of David Milne* (the catalogue raisonné of the artist's prints), and the August 1973 issue of *Artscanada*, which contained ten pages of Milne's writings from 1920 and 1921. Tovell's careful study of the prints includes a wealth of biograph-

ical information as well as detailed technical notes on the production of each print, while the *Artscanada* excerpts make apparent just how seriously Milne was examining his own life as an artist. A catalogue raisonné of the paintings and watercolours is being compiled by David Milne, Jr. and David Silcox.² O'Brian's study is a worthy companion to these texts. For anyone interested in digging into the questions about Milne's art and writing, *David Milne and the Modern Tradition of Painting* is an important book in its approach and in its attempt to look in a different way at the work of a familiar artist.

Gwendolyn Owens

Associate Curator,

Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art,

Cornell University,

Ithaca, New York.

Notes

¹ Letter to Vincent and Alice MASSEY, 20 Aug. 1934, Massey Family Papers, Massey College, University of Toronto.

² My own study of Milne's watercolours, *The Watercolors of David Milne: A Survey Exhibition* (Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, 1984) was published after O'Brian's book. Written primarily for an American audience completely unfamiliar with the artist, the essay is intended to discuss this one aspect only of the artist's work, and also supports the idea that Milne was a modernist.