

Canadian Painters as Art Educators 1920 – 1950

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The 1920s in Canada was a time of vibrant change. Following the First World War Canadians began to hold a greater concern for what constituted their reputation internationally and the question of what identified Canada culturally was beginning to blossom. Many Canadian artists were becoming fed up with the notion that in order to be considered successful they were required to follow the paths dictated by their European counterparts. Further to that feeling of powerlessness, Canadian artists also felt conviction for the vistas that surrounded them and challenged that they be considered valid subject matter.

It was difficult for artists to make a living; following the war there was less money for public gallery acquisition than in the past and private collectors didn't think Canadian art held the same value as European works. To combat this, artists began to form regional associations in order to develop markets for their art and worked in various ways to introduce a modern Canadian aesthetic to the public. Many artists took to supplementing their art sales income by becoming educators either directing classes or by writing in regular publications, but there were also individuals who took to heart the value of art education and made it an integral part of their careers.

Canadian Painters as Art Educators 1920 – 1950 is drawn from Hart House's significant collection of Canadian art to highlight key figures in the revolution of public art education. Interestingly, many of the painters involved in this exhibition participated in the early days of Hart House's arts-related activities with an interest in promoting their message through education. It was a truism even then: the new generation of Canadian painters presented ideas that the public first saw as controversial and/or ridiculous, then eventually accepted as fact. It is not uncommon to find that even today the general public takes for granted issues of cultural aesthetics and rarely seeks to shake up the status quo. With or without a market for their creations, artists will always continue to forge new ground but certainly if they wish to derive a living from the sale of their work they must take steps to educate the public and cultivate their tastes. This is just what happened in Canada in the 1920s.

Modernism in art was beginning to gain a strong presence in Europe but it is interesting to observe how it also developed in Canada with its own regional qualities. Canadians were becoming introduced to a mystic movement (of which Theosophy was a part) and, with this, understanding of their surroundings began to change. The natural landscape was welcomed as an integral part of the Canadian experience and it was for the first time elevated to a status that granted it validity as a central theme in artwork. But theme was not enough to create a truly moving painting, and the Modern Canadian painters knew this; their images were not merely visual reproductions of life but analyses of seeing and of experience. The artists often described themselves as explorers or interpreters and some also promoted art as a casual activity for the public in the hopes of offering them the tools they needed to better appreciate art in general. Discussion was constant on the topic of free artistic purpose and at times it seemed a continual upward battle to convince non-artists that there was more to art than just the mere reproduction of imagery.

Arthur Lismer, a member of the Group of Seven, was one of the most noted pioneers of public art education in Canada. His dedication to the practice was as important to him as his activities as a professional painter. Yvonne McKague Housser studied under Lismer, and described him as:

an inspiring teacher who conveyed his enthusiasm not only through the liveliness of his physical manner but also in his articulate and impromptu speeches. He had a great wish both to charm and to enlighten. His teaching was something of an art form in itself: a harmony of knowledge, imagination, control, and timing -- evanescent, leaving an impression of dynamism that cannot entirely be evoked through his writings or the recording of his words.¹

When teaching students at the Ontario College of Art to draw he would explain that more important than copying, they were creating: "A sketch is an essence, a summary of what you see and

¹ J. Murray. *Yvonne McKague Housser*. Oshawa: The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 1995. (Excerpted in the Ontario College of Art and Design Archives)

experience."² He believed that in order for one to be a good artist one needed to feel a sense of uninhibited courage, the type of which children know so well. In addition to his work teaching individuals intending to have careers in the arts, Lismer was also an advocate of classroom arts education for children. In a pamphlet printed by the Ministry of Education Lismer wrote that children's ideas could be increased by telling them interesting things about the world in order to direct their observation, but ultimately the child should be left on his own to construct from his own mind choosing how to use the knowledge given to him. He added that children should be left free to work in their own natural groups and with the media of their choice to promote expression.

Arthur Lismer believed that anyone should be able to take pleasure in visual beauty and should receive every incentive to do so. Further, he believed that with art education the level of public taste could be raised and that many non-artists would begin to make a genuine effort to contemplate art properly and no longer expect simple images unchallenging to their perceptions. He said in a lecture that if people are truly to understand artists (and through them the world of imagination and reality that they are trying to interpret for us) we must use intelligent sympathy, which is not pity but the desire to understand. "It is with this attitude that we shall overcome prejudices and foolish likes and dislikes."³

Isles of Spruce is one of Lismer's most successful paintings and it demonstrates exactly the issues he addressed in his work as an educator: the mind's eye is the one that sees most clearly. The magnificence of natural splendor is captured in the essence of strength characterized in the trees through strictly upward motion; growing from dense and rocky island and climbing towards the luminescent sky. The image is a summary of the awe one experiences in the presence of a life form so much older and so much stronger.

Also a champion of art education as a part of foundational learning was Anne Douglas Savage. Trained formally as a painter yet a self taught teacher, her success in these two areas was concurrent. In 1921 she began her teaching career in Québec and pioneered new developments in the teaching of art that permitted self-expression in an environment designed to cultivate an appreciation for aesthetics. In 1937 she initiated and directed Saturday morning Art Classes for children at the Art Association of Montreal and from 1940 to 1960 she worked with community groups to convince parents and educators of the value of art in personal and social development.

Anne Savage's paintings always emphasized mood but clearly her concern for issues of design and space dominated, as evidenced in *Spruce Swamp*. She taught what she knew and conveyed her artistic passions to her students, inspiring them to capture the world not literally but as their imaginations carried them. Examples of work created by her students show evidence of her influence on them through emulation of her signature style, but ultimately she taught them to embrace their own ideas as artists.

J.W. Beatty's reputation as a defender of the Canadian landscape was so primary to his character that as a teacher he was considered by many to be the most influential man of his generation.⁴ He believed that personal feelings in art were acceptable but that meaningful expression could only be achieved when subject matter dealt with things that the artist and viewer shared, thereby making the best choice the Canadian landscape. His position could not be mistaken:

The Art of Italy is dead, Holland has no art, nor Spain or Belgium. The art of France is a chaotic state that it does not know whether its pictures are upside down or not. England is indeed the only European country that can lay claims to art today. Ten years from now the United States will lead the world... what of Canada? I come to you as a prophet. The future of this country stands for more than that of any country on earth.⁵

² *Ibid.*

³ Lismer, Arthur. *Art and Understanding*. (Art Gallery of Ontario Archives, Lismer's lecture notes.)

⁴ D. Hoover. *J. W. Beatty*. Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1948. (Excerpted in the Ontario College of Art and Design Archives)

⁵ Ontario College of Art and Design Archives

In 1912 Lismer convinced Beatty to give up independent teaching and join the faculty of the Ontario College of Art. He was considered a born teacher with all of the necessary traits from an authority of presence to a fondness for people but overall, an unwavering patience. His advice to students was to simplify their observations by eliminating 9/10ths of what they saw in order to capture the most basic characteristics, a clarity demonstrated in *Beech Tree*. He expected hard work from his students and wished to pass onto them his years of accumulated experience but he never sought to steer the direction of their work, rather he left them to be free.⁶

One of the first female faculty members at OCA, Yvonne McKague Housser taught full-time from 1918-1845. While her teaching methods were based on the standards of the day, (drawing as a foundation for layers of colour in painting), she was thought of very highly by those she worked with. A former student said of her that she was "a real glowing light and humanitarian who made work really fun. She brought the best out of the worst of us. We did handsprings to please her."⁷ Her value to the students was undisputable; perhaps it was her studies of Theosophy that caused for her to be looked up to for emotional and spiritual as well as intellectual support. Despite all of this, her fight for the case of women's rights to work pensions at the art college was dismissed. Perhaps her peers finally recognized her contributions to the school when at the time of her retirement she was teaching so many subjects that she needed to be replaced by three men.⁸

Growing up in Gananoque, Grace Coombs met the Struden sisters and through their encouragement taught art at the special school the sisters co-operated.⁹ In 1913 Coombs attended the Ontario College of Art and in 1919 began teaching at such institutions as Havergal College in Toronto and Edgehill College in Windsor, Nova Scotia. In 1912 Coombs was appointed an associate instructor at OCA and assisted with classes in drawing, painting, composition, colour, commercial art, and sculpture. In addition to these many responsibilities she eventually became involved as a lecturer in the teacher's training summer school program under the department of education. She once said: "Teaching is a great teacher. It is a constant reproof to untidy thinking and slovenly methods. It also shatters one's precocity and preciousness. A teaching painter strives by all means to be understood."¹⁰ Coombs continues to be recognized among the best painters of flowers and landscapes in the history of Canada and *Windswept Pines* is a shining example of this as its unique imagery is certainly of the most inspired kind.

J.E.H. MacDonald was a Transcendentalist and through his art he wished to express his belief that through nature, man reached a higher spiritual end. It was in part his stories of physical struggle in the wilderness that helped the Group of Seven gain public credibility by shifting attention from how they painted to what they painted. Artists and non-artists alike were fascinated with him both as a painter and as an individual. In 1921 financial difficulties forced him to teach. It is said, "this necessary sacrifice of his own painting was a deep loss for Canadian art but a bonus to a generation of students."¹¹ Charles Schaefer was one of his first students and remembers him as an inspired instructor who encouraged students to develop their own special talents. Quoting William Blake, MacDonald said such things as "See not with but through your eye" and "Art is the ordering of the material in harmony with the spirit."¹² MacDonald often read from texts to inspire the imagination of his students and he introduced them to figures as diverse as William Morris, Walt Whitman, Cézanne and Ernest Thompson Seton. His positive influence upon his students' personal and professional

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Op. Cit.*, Murray. *Yvonne McKague Housser*. (Excerpted in the Ontario College of Art and Design Archives)

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ C. S. MacDonald. *A Dictionary of Canadian Artists: Vol. 1 A-F*. Ottawa: Canadian Paperbacks. 1967. p 143.

¹⁰ L. E. Pierce. *Grace Coombs: Artist*. Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1949. (Excerpted in the Ontario College of Art and Design Archives)

¹¹ P. Duval. *The Tangled Garden*. Toronto: Cerebus/Prentice Hall, 1978. (Excerpted in the Ontario College of Art and Design Archives)

¹² *Ibid.*

development was so profound that in 1929 he succeeded George Reid as the principal of OCA following the students' threat to strike were he not chosen.

Charles Comfort's work as an artist, educator and arts administrator places him forefront in Canadian cultural history. His painting *Young Canadian* (a portrait of fellow artists Carl Schaefer) was quickly deemed a masterpiece and through its careful expression it is considered a documentary representation of its era. From the mid to late 1930s, Comfort was the Director of Mural Painting at the Ontario College of Art. From 1938-60, as an Associate Professor in the Department of Art and Archaeology at the University of Toronto, his aim was to have students gain appreciation for art historical scholarship through learning old techniques. During his time at the University of Toronto he also taught informal classes at Hart House, but as a departure from his credit courses, these were opportunities for the interested amateur. Throughout this time Comfort developed a fine reputation for himself as a unique instructor and was invited to give lectures in many Canadian institutions including the Banff School of Fine Art. In addition to his teaching, Comfort contributed articles to such publications as *Canadian Art* and *Canadian Forum*, and served in a variety of significant positions, including as a war artist and as Director of the National Gallery.

It was not until later in his career as an artist that Franklin Carmichael was convinced by his cousin, Frederick Haines (a Group of Seven member and Principal of OCA) to teach at the Ontario College of Art. Carmichael left behind his well paying commercial art job in exchange for the promise of long painting holidays but things worked out so well that by 1932 he was appointed Head of Graphic and Commercial Art at the school. Students described him as a wonderful teacher particularly in the art of lettering which was a discipline that he approached with a sense for the abstract.¹³ *Snow Clouds* well demonstrates the personal tastes he advocated in his teaching.

Formerly a stockbroker, druggist, engraver and interior designer, in 1924, painter Lionel Lemoine Fitzgerald was hired as a teacher at the Winnipeg School of Art, where he later went on to become principal. Since the position was very demanding on his time, Fitzgerald's output as a painter was limited in quantity during these years. Of this, William Colgate wrote: "In spite of his necessary preoccupation with teaching, he steadily pursued his bent as a landscape painter and has occasionally been represented in more important exhibitions of Winnipeg, Toronto and elsewhere."¹⁴ Fitzgerald's early paintings were representational landscapes and still life, and it wasn't until 1942 that he increasingly experimented with abstracted forms based upon natural imagery. *Summer* is a fine example of these changes in his work.

Born in Poland, Fritz Brandtner arrived in Canada in 1928 and spent his first few years working a variety of jobs until settling in Montreal where he began to take an active interest in children's art. Brandtner directed classes for a variety of community organizations, including the Children's Memorial Hospital as a support to their recreational-occupational therapy program. Affectionately called "Dr. Brandtner" in the hospital "crippled children forgot their pains and handicaps in the joy of creating designs."¹⁵ Brandtner collaborated with Dr. Norman Bethune to establish a children's art center in Bethune's home that was intended to be a free art school for underprivileged children in Montréal. As an instructor to students intending careers in the arts, Brandtner took a number of assignments, most notably teaching summer school sessions at the University of New Brunswick where he taught, among others, Mary Pratt. Brandtner's own painting drew influences from the German Expressionists and varieties of abstraction. In addition to his work on canvas Brandtner was also commissioned to paint many murals across Canada. The success of his work has been attributed to his ability to offer a sense of underlying structure even in abstract images¹⁶ as is notable in his painting *Lost City*.

Writer, scholar and painter Barker Fairley's exceptional contributions to the University of Toronto, particularly University College, has been recognized in the naming of the college's residency program: "The Barker Fairley Distinguished Visitor in Canadian Culture at University College". Fairley

¹³ Ontario College of Art and Design Archives

¹⁴ *Op. Cit.*, MacDonald. p 212.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p 78.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p 79.

was already active on campus as an Associate Professor of German when he was selected by Warden Bickersteth to become the Chairman of the Sketch Committee at Hart House in 1922.¹⁷ Fairley met regularly with the Group of Seven at the Arts and Letters Club, went on camping trips with them and wrote about them. In fact, Fairley has at times been called the ninth member. In addition to the influence Fairley exerted within Hart House to ensure that art by the Group of Seven was exhibited, as an art critic in the 1920s he was their enthusiastic supporter. When he reviewed the 1920 Memorial Exhibition of Thomson's paintings for a publication he described his sense among the paintings as "the presence ... of an essentially unsophisticated mind but a genius nonetheless."¹⁸ Most important to Fairley's writing was that he sought to give context to the art being created in Canada during those years and asserted that the true merits of the work, if not properly recognized at the time, would be judged "more nicely"¹⁹ as the years progressed. Further to his work as a writer and promoter, Fairley took interest in arranging public art discussions concerning the exhibitions at Hart House. In 1925 he invited A. Y. Jackson, Lawren Harris and a visiting British artist named Leonard Richmond to talk about their work.²⁰ The event was certainly successful as Bickersteth recalls that the artists and fifty undergraduate students debated old and new art until nearly midnight.²¹ In 1938 Fairley organized a collective of amateur painters known as the Studio Group and although they never attracted any significant attention to themselves professionally, Fairley did use his influence to give them a show at Hart House. *Shirley* is reflective of these changes in Fairley's art interests that championed use of the figure in painting.

In 1924 George Pepper graduated from the Ontario College of Art and in 1930 he began a 30-year teaching career there that saw him rise to the position of vice-principal with a break between March 1943 and June 1946 when he served as a war artist. Besides painting landscapes and portraits for which he is most commonly known, he also created murals, etchings and dry point imagery. *Tobacco Patch* is characteristic of his tendency for brightly contrasting shades that emphasized a staged quality to the image but ultimately conveyed clarity and enthusiasm for the subject matter within.

After furthering his art education in Paris, Edwin Headley Holgate returned to Montreal and in 1928 he began teaching wood engraving at the École des Beaux-Arts. Asked to join the Group of Seven in 1930, Holgate had by then established a reputation for his figure paintings and West Coast and Laurentian landscapes. He also painted many murals, the best known being his designs for the Totem Pole Room at Ottawa's Chateau Laurier Hotel. After the Group of Seven years Holgate took a teaching position at the Art Association of Montreal. Among the talents he brought to this post were his skills as a book illustrator and a wood engraver. His lifelong interest in graphics, drawing and printmaking are evident in the strong lines and design of his painting.²² Over his many years as a teacher Holgate taught many students, among them Jean Paul Lemieux, Stanley Cosgrove and Paul-Emile Borduas.

When Emily Carr returned to British Columbia in 1895 following the completion of her art education in San Francisco, she created a studio for herself in the barn behind her home in which she painted and taught art. From her time spent as a teacher she saved enough money to study at the Westminster School of Art in England. In 1904 she returned home and was invited to teach classes at the Ladies' Art Club of Vancouver but this only lasted for one month because the students found her mannerisms too unsophisticated and her teaching methods too serious. Despite this Carr continued to teach children in Vancouver and with much success.

Born in Switzerland, André-Charles Biéler arrived in Canada with his family in 1908. His own artistic education was diverse: from studies with his uncle while still a child, to training at the Lycée Carnot in Paris then later at the Art Students' League in New York. Biéler was employed as a Professor

¹⁷ C. Siddall. *The Prevailing Influence: Hart House and the Group of Seven, 1919-953*. Oakville Galleries, 1987. p 21.

¹⁸ C. MacHardy. *An Inquiry into the Success of Tom Thomson's "The West Wind"*. University of Toronto Press: <http://www.utpress.utoronto.ca/journal/UTQ/utq/683/articles>.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Op. Cit.*, Siddall. p 39.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² The McMichael Gallery - <http://www.mcmichael.com/holgate.htm>

of Fine Arts at Queen's University from 1936-64 and also taught at the Banff School of Fine Arts 1940, 1947, 1949 and 1952.²³ Biéler wrote articles for a variety of periodicals including *Maritime Art* and *Canadian Art*. As a painter he has been described as a "leading expert in the technique of paintings, colours, canvas and the chemistry of a craftsman's materials."²⁴ Many of his better known works were drawn from his experiences living in Quebec as represented in *The Saw Mill*.

While Head of the Art Department at the Tech in Calgary from October 1946 to the summer of 1947, J.W.G (Jock) MacDonald encouraged the exploration of an artist's inner self, subjectivity and abstraction thus signaling a severe change from the widespread naturalism in Alberta's art.²⁵ When MacDonald came to OCA in the 1950s he saw that it was quite backward in art education and furthermore that it offered its students an unstimulating atmosphere. According to MacDonald there were two types of painters: "those working out their own turmoil and painterly touch and those with no intellectual awareness of how our history evolved, and those with a narrow, academic, disciplined approach."²⁶ MacDonald wanted to promote his philosophy of "art against the academic sleep-walking" but the school was caught in its old-fashioned ways that promoted painting in the style of Rembrandt and Rubens, or on the other side of the spectrum, industrial design that undermined fine arts altogether. It was rare that others appreciated or understood MacDonald's paintings or his method of teaching. Past students of OCA remember clearly the time when MacDonald and his students were victims of petty meanness from not only conforming students, but from staff as well.²⁷ MacDonald's choice to paint in abstract forms came out of his fervor for spiritual life that he believed he could capture through automatist techniques. In 1940 he wrote:

Art is not found in the mere imitation of nature, but the artist does perceive through his study of nature the awareness of force which is the one order to which the whole universe conforms. Art in all its various activities is trying to tell us something, something about nature, something about the universe, and something about life. Art must include in its study of nature the whole universe if it is to envisage some aspect of the universal truth and help humanity to become conscious of the meaning of life. ²⁸

Carl Schaefer, like many artists in the 1930s, was so poor that his part-time work as a teacher provided barely enough money to support his family. Even though in 1940 he became the Chairman Emeritus, Department of Painting, at the Ontario College of Art, he continued to teach amateur art classes at Hart House until 1956. He also taught at such institutions as Queen's University and the Doon School of Fine Arts. Since his work did not use vastly abstract methods his audience connected with him easily. It is his simple landscapes such as *R R No. 3*, *Hanover* and *House on A Hill* that are most popular with his fans, and though they are documentary of a time of great poverty in Canada, they are admired for their careful and detailed beauty.

Born in Sheffield, England in 1881, Frederick Varley studied at the Sheffield School of Art then later at the Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts in Antwerp. In 1912 he immigrated to Canada, took a job in commercial art and met the individuals with whom he would later join together under the name "The Group of Seven". Varley "disapproved of extreme forms of abstraction as untrue to nature. Hence his criticism of Picasso for 'tearing the world apart.'"²⁹ Although Varley regularly shared his opinion that the foundation for art rested in "the human", he is still widely recognized for his landscapes. It was his need for additional income that led Varley to seek a teaching position at the Ontario College of Art,

²³ *Op. Cit.*, Macdonald. pp 47-48.

²⁴ *Op. Cit.*, Macdonald. p 47.

²⁵ N. Townshend. *Alberta: The Land of Plenty*. <http://www.affta.ab.ca/gallery/3bright2.html>.

²⁶ J. Murray. *Jock MacDonald's Students*. Oshawa: The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 1981. (Excerpted in the Ontario College of Art and Design Archives)

²⁷ Ontario College of Art and Design Archives

²⁸ The McMichael Gallery - <http://www.mcmichael.com/collect.htm>

²⁹ Robert Stacey. *The Fabric of All Things: Celebrating F. H. Varley* in "Varley: A Celebration – The Frederick Horseman Varley Art Gallery of Markham". 1997. p 6.

but when he felt he had done all he could do as a painter in the Ontario region, he moved to Winnipeg and Edmonton and later to Vancouver. In British Columbia, Varley took a job with the Vancouver School of Decorative and Applied Arts as Head of the Department of Painting and Drawing.³⁰ The move to British Columbia was just what Varley needed: his impact on the people of the region was monumental. J.W.G. Macdonald, also a teacher at the VSDAA, taught with Varley for five years of him said: "[Varley] conducted [his classes] with diplomacy and devotion... Today western Canada still feels grateful to him for his masterly teaching and for his deep sincerity in promoting art in the west."³¹ Owing to pay-cuts, in 1933 Varley resigned from the VSDAA and participated in the organization of an independent school called the British Columbia College of Arts but sadly the establishment was forced to close a year later on account of economic problems. Varley "demanded that his students put forth their best efforts, and taught them to think for themselves without fear."³² In addition to his formal teaching in art schools, Varley also taught students privately in his home. *Magic Tree* and *The Open Window*, although two very different paintings, demonstrate clearly Varley's special talent for making the simplest subjects come alive with a dynamic use of colour; a characteristic which he passed on to many of his students.

There were other artists who became teachers for want of income but found the added profession too great a sacrifice for them. For some, training others was too distracting from their own passion for creating, but in other cases it was constant resistance from colleagues that burned them out. Although these painters may not have felt so at the time, future generations benefited greatly from the expertise they were able to offer.

In 1936, short of money, Alfred Pellan sought a position as an art teacher in Quebec's École des Beaux-Arts, but his painting and ideas were rejected as being too modern. When Pellan attempted to teach again in 1940, things were beginning to change, artistically and culturally, granting him a better opportunity to be recognized. Despite this progressiveness the school remained resistant to change, and when its director, Charles Maillard, realized Pellan's sympathies for complete artistic freedom he saw Pellan as a threat to the status quo. With the intention of keeping a close eye on him, Maillard sought to make an ally of Pellan but soon enough relations deteriorated and in 1945 Maillard eventually resigned. The victory was temporary; soon another director, unaware of the progress made by Quebecois art, took charge and dullness prevailed at the school yet again. In 1948 Pellan founded Prisme d'yeux, a short-lived organization of 15 Quebec artists who all shared the philosophy of art without obligation to politics, trends or other such creative-freedom restrictors. Pellan eventually grew tired of the constant uphill struggle and in 1952 he went to Paris. All he wanted was to teach art the way he thought it should be taught - free of any particular ideology. *La fenêtre ouvert* is a clear example of the forward-thinking and innovative art that brought Pellan the resistance he experienced again and again. Had Pellan not required the money it is possible that he would not have taught at all. It is fortunate in the greater scheme of Canadian art history that he did because the ground he broke and the inspiration he provided was monumental.

A.Y. Jackson is another example of an exceptional painter who also was an inspiring teacher, but who found the pressures of the job too contradictory to his choice of lifestyle. In the autumn of 1924, on a whim, Jackson applied for a part-time position at OCA by recommendation of Lismer who wanted to bring more forward-thinkers to the college. Although Jackson was accepted easily enough, George Reid, who had constantly opposed Lismer's practices and spirit, was very annoyed, so he appointed Jackson to teach drawing from the antique which forced students to draw from imperfect models made by the class a year before. Next Jackson was assigned to teach a still life class which had historically never been more interesting than a few assorted bottles positioned here and there. Naturally, the students all hated still life class so Jackson tried to find ways to encourage them by requesting they bring in broken bits of pottery and glass and he himself purchased different vegetables each morning on the way to class.³³ As much effort as Jackson put into teaching these classes, they

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp 8-9.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p 9.

³² Christopher Varley. *F.H. Varley: A Centennial Exhibition*. The Edmonton Art Gallery, 1981. p 74.

³³ Ontario College of Art and Design Archives

did so much to change his own way of life as an artist that after a year he resigned, despite how much he had appreciated that monthly cheque.

In the 1930s, although Lillias Torrance Newton's reputation as a portrait painter was firmly established thanks to her portraits of Vincent and Alice Massey, times were hard and she was forced to teach. This was a great tension upon her because, as a single parent, income from portrait commissions was limited. At the same time teaching did not come easily to her. Not only was she impatient but one student also recalled that she would paint on their work robbing them of their incentive.³⁴ It wasn't that she didn't like people because certainly she did - not only as subjects for her painting but as studies during quiet moments of daily life. In 1940 she resigned from teaching for good and it is believed that this was the result of increasing health problems that prevented her from pursuing a double life.³⁵

Newton explained in interviews that it was impossible for her to jump into a portrait and felt it was important to take time to decide about what would be the best pose for each individual. She did many preliminary sketches so the subject became more natural and she liked to talk to her sitters while painting as this rapport did much to uncover the qualities that contributed to a truly special representation. Through this relationship, she developed friendships with many of her sitters. By the 1940s Newton had painted most of the famous Canadians of the time and is applauded for bringing a welcome informality to Canadian portraits.

As previously noted, art education in the studio is not the only way that an understanding of art may be generated; several notable artists of this era also took to writing as a means of explaining their own work and influencing public awareness and taste. Bertram Brooker was one such educator.

Often considered one of the most remarkable figures in Canadian cultural history, Brooker was an editor, critic, dramatist, novelist and artist. As an artist, he was the first Canadian painter to exhibit abstract art, and his paintings today hang in every major gallery in Canada. Owing to the public presence of his writing, his opinion reached great distances and held a significant amount of influence. Believing that beauty and truth were related to God and thus only attainable through ecstatic visions of mystics, Brooker condemned useful art and proclaimed that artists would only be able to create with validity when they learned how to expand their sight. In his paintings Brooker worked to escape the chains of both the past and the present and thus avoid reproduction but instead felt he was able to make the truth tangible. He did not believe that expression needed to rely on the world as we know it.

When Brooker met the Group of Seven they connected with the common goal of wishing to find a nationalistic expression for Canadian painting. Brooker began to paint after forming a friendship with Lawren Harris despite having had no previous formal instruction. His 1927 exhibition at the Arts & Letters Club in Toronto marks the first showing of purely abstract art by a Canadian. He argued for a strong nationalist approach to art but felt Canadian artists had a more difficult task than did others because the people of Canada were not unified geographically, racially or historically. He added that inadequate critics would fail to recognize authentic Canadian unities when against huge odds artists were able to uncover them.³⁶ In "When We Awake", the introduction to the *Yearbook of Arts in Canada, 1928*, Brooker urged artists to reject oppressive realism and the materiality of old traditions in exchange for an examination of the elements of time and space. "The artist is a person whose experiences crystallise [sic] into unified wholes that can be embodied in some medium, as contrasted with persons whose experiences seem fragmentary, unrelated and chaotic..."³⁷ In the same way that members of the Group of Seven called themselves explorers, Brooker used similar imagery often calling artists guides for the rest of civilization.

From 1928 to 1930 Brooker wrote a syndicated column "The Seven Arts" where he analyzed theatre, music, visual arts and poetry through reviews that underlined the qualities of a distinctly

³⁴ La Galerie Walter Klinkoff. *Lillias Torrance Newton (1896-1980) Retrospective Exhibition*. 1995.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ D. Arnason. "Reluctant Modernist" in *Provincial Essays*. No. 7. Phacops Publishing Society at the Coach Hound Press, 1989. p 81.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

Canadian arts and culture. The writing of this column helped the Group of Seven and their associates become known but over the years Brooker became increasingly disenchanted with the Group's narrow view of a nationally based aesthetics. He wrote to L.L. Fitzgerald: "The experimentation is over, the old aggressiveness has declined. The Group of Seven has become orthodoxy and now, I suppose, the public will start buying their pictures."³⁸ Brooker's own paintings were unlike anything else being produced in Canada at that time. *Leaf Sonata*, *Wings and Waves*, and *Abstract Nude* all have a sense of Futurism influence but ultimately Brooker was working with something that was intensely personal and very much a product of his own concerns for art in a civilization which he believed so needed it.

Although described by some as a shy intellectual, Lawren Harris has also been considered one of the most vocal members of the Group of Seven as he wrote and spoke regularly about the ideas that guided his art, primarily Theosophy. Harris believed that Theosophy offered him the path through which he was able to enter a transcendental world of pure form that he felt gave his art a timeless quality. His goal was to incorporate his spiritual feeling for the landscape into his work and it is noted that after 1924, he no longer dated or signed his works because he did not want them to be tied to a specific artist or place.

Harris had a strong belief in what he called the "vital relationship" between artists and viewers and the exhibitions at Hart House in the early 1920s offered him the perfect environment to explore these ideas because students were naturally receptive to new theories.³⁹ He was always interested in explaining and promoting the motivation for his art and soon organized public discussions became radio talks and regular articles. Harris titled one of his radio talks "Thought and Responsibility" and therein he discussed the parallel between the spiritual and the artistic. He said: "The aesthetic attitude implies a divine being within each one of us and to be disclosed over the ages by self-devised, creative effort and experience."⁴⁰ Harris held firmly that art must express spiritual values as well as portray the visible world because he felt that the role of the artist and the function of art were to reveal the divine forces in nature. In a 1933 article in *Canadian Comment* Harris wrote that subject matter was the distinguishing factor for Canadian art and he asserted that modern Canadian art was best derived from first-hand experience of the country itself.⁴¹ However, as Harris became more immersed in Theosophy, he gradually moved toward greater abstraction which he began to feel offered a more complete expression of his philosophical views. Harris relocated in Vancouver in 1940 and to support his first exhibition at Vancouver Art Gallery in 1941 he gave a lecture on abstraction that was probably much needed by the public since they were thoroughly startled to discover this momentous change in his painting.

Despite John Lyman's significant contributions to the development of modern painting in Canada, he is surprisingly unknown compared to members of the Group of Seven. As a teacher, art critic, theoretical writer and host of regularly occurring artists' meetings in his home, Lyman was extraordinarily influential. He inspired many young painters, particularly in Quebec, and as the person behind organizations such as the Contemporary Arts Society in Montréal (established in 1939) he was able to drive the messages of international modernism even further. It has been argued that Lyman's upper-middle class background had a certain negative impact on his career but at the same time he was benefited by being granted the ability to focus on his art.

What made Lyman so truly a modernist was not merely his selection of subject matter but the way that he chose to represent the subject via an interest in formal relationships. Lyman studied under Matisse in France and was encouraged to act independently so when Lyman himself became a teacher and critic he never provided formulas.⁴² Lyman took a great deal of interest in young artists and this is reflected not only in his teaching but also in his efforts to bring them together and work with them.

³⁸ McLaren Art Gallery. *Assembling Sounds: The Drawing and Illustration of Bertram Brooker*. 1996.

³⁹ *Op. Cit.*, Siddall. p 13.

⁴⁰ T. G. Davy. "Lawren Harris' Theosophic Philosophy" in *The Canadian Theosophist*. Vol. 72 No. 3. Toronto: The Theosophical Society, July-August 1931. p 61.

⁴¹ L. Dompierre. *John Lyman: 1886 – 1967*. Kingston: Agnes Etherington Art Center. 1986. p 61.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p 21 and 31.

Following a fourteen-year period of living abroad that was in part caused by poor reception to his work at home, Lyman returned to Canada a more mature and confident individual. Despite rampant traditionalism in the nation, Lyman set about creating opportunities for artists and the public to experience new art, and created a period of cultural radicalism.⁴³ Aligning himself with assorted art schools, publications and free-thinkers' organizations, Lyman successfully encouraged artists and the public to consider alternatives to the overpowering influence of the Group of Seven and The Canadian Group of Painters that replaced them. Lyman stressed the importance of art as an expression of the individual and he emphasized the value of formal qualities in a work of art.

Writing was as much a part of Lyman's career as painting itself and he contributed to a wide variety of publications such as *The McGill Annual*, *The Montreal Daily Star*, *The Montrealer*, *Canadian Art*, *Saturday Night* and *The Canadian Forum* (which has been described as the most influential cultural periodical of the time). Lyman warned his readers about the dangers of art criticism and his concern that he was giving them formulas rather than teaching them how to truly experience art; his ambition was to show the public the things that artists had in common among themselves and with the epoch in which they lived.⁴⁴ He wanted people to dispose of their "superstitions about art" such as the belief that art was for the wealthy or that formal training was a pre-requisite to appreciating art or that there is no practical value in art education.⁴⁵

Canadian Painters as Art Educators 1920 – 1950 covers not only the development of Canadian painting as a uniquely defined aesthetic over the years in which these debates were for the first time waged publicly, but it also embraces the divergent trends that demonstrated the clear need for artistic freedom of choice as made possible through art education. The works drawn together for this exhibition will inevitably strike to mind two significant things for viewers. First, the artists are among Canada's elite. Second, the images dominant in the paintings will remind viewers of the images that have since become synonymous with what we call Canadian. Yet it is ultimately the Canadian spirit for polite debate and acceptance that dominates these works of art beyond subject matter, and it is the Canadian appreciation for understanding that has enabled art education to become so much a welcomed part of our lives today. As successful works of art these images are certainly to be celebrated for their vision and skill, but as successful works of art created by individuals who contributed substantially to the history of art education in Canada, these images should also be celebrated for the inspiration they provided generations that followed.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p 55.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p 65.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*