

The National Gallery and Our Two Cultures

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THE NATIONAL GALLERY AND OUR TWO CULTURES

The National Gallery has been fortunate among federal institutions in Canada. Its responsibility — painting, sculpture, the graphic arts — is an answer to the Tower of Babel, an art form which does not have a tongue. Few care whether Camille Corot, for example, spoke French or Italian when he was painting the Pont de Narni (plate 2) near Rome. And I hope the Gallery will always remain free to make its judgements with the eyes rather than the ears of its staff. We followed this policy at the Fine Arts Gallery at Expo 67, when the two Canadian works were by Riopelle and Borduas, and at the Venice Biennale, where in 1968 the two artists were Comtois and Molinari (both Montrealers) and where on the other hand in 1970 there will only be the ex-Torontonian Michael Snow.

At the same time there is a dual cultural heritage to which we must pay proper respect in our exhibitions and in our acquisitions. From the moment the National Gallery became a professional institution with the appointment of the first director, there was an acknowledgement of the roots from which our two cultures have grown and of the way they have developed in Canada. Recently we have happily been able to illustrate this more fully with galleries of Canadian art on the third floor.

It would have been impossible for any of my predecessors in Ottawa to have forgotten the richness of the art of French-speaking people in Canada, with the late Marius Barbeau as a colleague at the National Museum which, for fifty years, shared the Victoria Memorial building with the National Gallery. Indeed, Barbeau not only kept an interest in the art of Quebec alive; he showed an equally aggressive concern for the art of the two other principal cultural traditions, those of the Eskimos and Indians, and collected some of the finest examples of their works for the National Museum. Although I can remember him coming to the Gallery only once after I was director (it was for a lecture by his old friend Gérard Morisset), his presence can still be felt in our reinstallation of the first gallery of Canadian art (which is a gallery of French-Canadian art — plate 3) and of our recent magnificent exhibition of *Chefs-d'oeuvre des arts indiens et esquimaux*, which included several items he collected for the National Museum of Man.

Our collection of the early art of French Canada can never equal that of the Musée du Québec; but with gifts like those of Mrs. N. Sharp of two evangelists by Urbain Brien dit Desrochers, or purchases like the most recent of two portraits close to Roy-Audy, we are trying to strengthen the sense of the continuity of Canada's past. With modest acquisitions of decorative arts and generous loans of furniture from the National Museum of Man, we are also attempting to give a suggestion of the domestic world in which such painting and works of sculpture were produced.

We can justify our interest in French art by our interest in exploring a cultural tradition which had the same source as those of French Canada. In acquiring our Fernand Léger, *Le Mécanicien* of 1920 (plate 4) in 1966, we could even point out that the painter had spent a part of the Second World War in Montreal. But actually, it is with disinterested pleasure that we buy

1. DEGAS, Edgar (1834-1917)
Woman with an Umbrella
Oil on Canvas: 24 x 19¾ in. (60.97 x 50.17 cm).
Lower left: Degas atelier stamp; C. 1887.
The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.
Acquired 1969. (Photo L. V. CAVE)

2. COROT, Jean-Baptiste-Camille (1796-1875)

Le Pont de Narni

Oil on canvas; 26 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 37 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. (67.95 x 94.62 cm).

Lower left: Corot atelier stamp.

The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Acquired 1940.

3. A gallery of Canadian art at the
National Gallery of Canada, 1970.





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a drawing by Matisse (plate 5) or a painting by Degas (plate 1). The portrait by Degas of an unknown woman has a particular significance for me, because, hopelessly English Canadian though I may be, I have done most of my research on Degas and have even written a book on his portraits. I, therefore, take a particularly personal pride in its acquisition. Under my predecessors, works by French contemporaries like Manessier and Nicolas de Staël (plate 6) were added to the collection.

There is, however, another side to the Gallery's responsibilities: this is the need to explain and (even though I should never confess it about a federal institution) to teach in both languages. At the most rudimentary level it is a matter of providing an accurate label in both languages for each work of art. But it also means that our publications and our services should be bilingual, that mechanical devices like "acoustiguide" tapes should be available in both English and French and that there should be equal educational programmes of guided tours, films and lectures in both languages. And here we face the frustrations and the sense of desperate inadequacy of other government agencies. We try — but we do not achieve perfection.



4. LÉGER, Fernand (1881-1955)
The Mechanic
Oil on canvas, 45½ x 35 in. (115.58 x 88.9 cm).
Signed and dated lower right: F. LÉGER 20.
The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.
Acquired 1966.

5. MATISSE, Henri (1869-1954)
Dancer Resting in an Armchair
Charcoal, 25¼ x 18 13/16 in. (64.15 x 47.65 cm).
Signed and dated lower right: 9/XI 39/Henri Matisse.
The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.
Acquired 1967.

6. STAËL, Nicolas de (1914-1955)
Port de Sicile
Oil on canvas, 45 x 57½ in. (114.3 x 146.1 cm).
Signed and dated lower left: Stael 54.
The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.
Acquired 1956.



Translation is our nightmare. A mere label can present problems and stimulate interminable discussions. With longer texts the difficulties increase, particularly in capturing in the translation the flavour of the original — often written by an artist with an unconventional but expressive language of his own. We look forward eagerly toward a more genuinely bilingual world in which equal space will be given to both English and French but not in identical texts. Even now, we would like to publish a magazine directed to the young, in which there would be English and French texts about the same work (perhaps the Léger), the same artist or the same exhibition — but with different material and interpretations — a stimulus to read in both languages.

Our two cultures cannot flow parallel with each other into infinity. They are abrasive. They challenge and stimulate each other. It happens in the arts. It happens at the National Gallery. And out of the exchange and response, the National Gallery will continue to grow and be given its future forms.

(Traduction française, p. 77.)

