

Ninety-Year Perspective

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NINETY-YEAR PERSPECTIVE

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On a March evening in 1880 the young Marquess of Lorne, fourth Governor General of Canada, arrived by sleigh at the door of the Clarendon Hotel in Ottawa to inaugurate the Royal Canadian Academy. On hand to greet him were the new officers, Lucius O'Brien, the President and Napoléon Bourassa, the Vice-president. Lorne and his wife Princess Louise,* the artist daughter of Queen Victoria, were the real founders of the Academy. They had nominated the first Academicians and drafted the charter, by which members were to deposit 'diploma' works in a 'National Art Gallery'. This responsibility for housing these works, which included some of the most significant

paintings of the period, obliged the government to found a National Gallery in the capital.

The official opening took place two years later in May 1882, just in time for the inauguration of Lorne's other great foundation, the Royal Society of Canada; and he was one of the first visitors to the Gallery's rooms in the Old Supreme Court building. The Gallery became one of the charges of a busy Minister of Public Works and suffered neglect for a quarter of a century. After six years it was moved to other quarters in Victoria Hall, a mansarded Victorian building long vanished from the Ottawa scene. A report on the Gallery in the *Sessional Papers* for 1896 inscrutably states that 'The reopening of the Fish Hatchery . . . may have had a tendency to increase the number of visitors.' The

* Princess Louise is reported to have caused mutterings among the English-speaking ladies of Ottawa, whom she found somewhat less amusing than the vivacious and educated French-speaking ones of Quebec.

1. Opening of the Canadian Academy of Arts at Ottawa. His Excellency Declaring the Exhibition Open. Wood-engraving in *Canadian Illustrated News*, 20 March 1880. On the wall behind the Marquess of Lorne hangs *Sunrise on the Saguenay* (1880), the Academy diploma of Lucius Richard O'Brien, first President of the R.C.A. (see Plate 2).
2. Lucius Richard O'Brien (1832-1899): *Sunrise on the Saguenay*, 1880.

mystery is solved in a paragraph in the first (1894) edition of Baedeker's *Canada*:

At the corner of Queen St. and O'Connor St. stands the building which is occupied, in somewhat curious juxtaposition, by the National Art Gallery and the Fisheries Exhibit. The Fisheries Exhibit occupies the ground-floor and the basement . . . The National Art Gallery above is small and contains chiefly Canadian works . . .

To judge from photographs of the period, the most prominent object in the Gallery was a great stove in the middle of the room. When William Watson, art critic of the *Montreal Gazette*, visited the Gallery about 1907 he was greeted by the odours of the woman caretaker's lunch being prepared on this stove.

At the turn of the century there were in the collection, besides the Academy diplomas, a few treasures of early Canadian art. These included five Western subjects by

Paul Kane; pictures by Antoine Plamondon (*Still Life with Apples and Grapes*)**; William Brymner, and Maurice Cullen; and a sculpture by Philippe Hébert.

In 1907 the government appointed an Advisory Arts Council, composed of laymen, to administer its grants to the Gallery, thus detaching it completely from the Academy. The Council was dominated by two prominent art collectors, Sir George Drummond of Montreal and Sir Edmund Walker of Toronto. Their purchases included pictures of such a quality as to indicate serious intentions of forming a national collection. A sensitive early Reynolds, *Charles Churchill*, was the first Old Master of consequence and Boudin's *Vue d'Étapes* was the pioneer of the present modern French collection.

In 1910 the Council took the decisive step of appointing the first Director in the

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person of Eric Brown, an Englishman who became an enthusiastic Canadian. From then until his death in 1939 he built up the collection as consistently as his slender funds permitted. Under him the Gallery became not only a good museum but also an active extension agency, sending out loan exhibitions to meet the needs of a whole country. He fought many a battle against the forces of artistic conservatism, over the exhibiting of contemporary Canadian art. The Academy hotly opposed his sponsorship of progressive movements, especially the Group of Seven, and very nearly had his head on several occasions. But he survived, and beginning in 1910, he purchased important works by Ozias Leduc, Tom Thompson, A. Y. Jackson, and others in the very years in which they were painted. It is interesting, in the light of today's events, that from the first he saw to it that picture labels were in both languages.

In 1911 the Gallery moved to its third home, the Victoria Museum, a great stone pile designed in a style combining French château and Scottish baronial hall. For the next 48 years the Gallery occupied one wing of this building, the rest of which was devoted to scientific specimens. In 1913 the Gallery was incorporated under a Board of Trustees. Its semi-autonomy doubtless accounted for its independent policies and vigorous growth in spite of setbacks occasioned by wars and economic depression.

Successive catalogues of the collection, beginning in 1912, record a procession of important works entering the Gallery. A Monet, a Sisley, a Degas, a Pissarro; several Flemish and German masters; and a whole series of Italian pictures by Tintoretto, Veronese, Bronzino, and Canaletto—these and many more arrived in the two decades from 1910 to 1930. The thirties saw further development in the various schools: Piero di Cosimo and Veronese among the Italians; El Greco and Murillo among the Spanish; Rubens and Van Dyck among the Flemish; Rembrandt and Lievens among the Dutch; and Claude and Rigaud among the French. There were also English paintings, ancient and modern. The Department of Prints and Drawings, for which the Gallery has since achieved a measure of fame, was founded in 1921.

The Second World War scotched plans for a new building, and, with its acquisition funds wiped out, the Gallery increased its



3. Napoléon Bourassa (1827-1916): *Légende du berceau: L'Enfant sourit aux anges*. Exhibited at the Academy in 1881 and deposited as his diploma in 1883.

4. Antoine Plamondon (1804-1895): *Sœur Saint-Alphonse*, 1841. Bought in 1937 and shown in *A Century of Canadian Art*, Tate Gallery, London, 1938 (the first major exhibition to include earlier painting in Canada).







5. The National Gallery's rooms in Victoria Hall, Ottawa, occupied 1888-1911. A photograph of 1894 showing a portion of the Royal Canadian Academy annual exhibition of that year.

6. Louis-Philippe Hébert (1850-1917): *L'Inspiration*, bronze, c. 1900. An Academy diploma, deposited in 1907.

7. The upper gallery in the east wing of the Victoria Museum, Ottawa, occupied by the National Gallery 1911-59. The photograph shows a portion of the collection as it was c. 1914.



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8. *Claude Monet (1840-1926): Waterloo Bridge:
Le soleil dans le brouillard, 1903. Bought for the
National Gallery by the Advisory Arts Council
1914.*

9. *Ozias Leduc (1864-1955): Pommes vertes,
1914-15. Bought for the National Gallery by the
Advisory Arts Council after its showing at the
Canadian National Exhibition, Toronto, 1915.*





loan exhibitions throughout the country, embarked on films and school broadcasts, and founded the periodical *Canadian Art*. After the war, however, purchasing resumed on a grander scale than previously, resulting in accessions on the order of *Abraham and the Three Angels* by Murillo, the *Pietà* by Quentin Massys, and a whole constellation of French paintings by Corot, Daumier, Courbet, Monet, Pissarro, Degas, Renoir, Cézanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Braque, Matisse, Picasso . . . All these were acquired during the directorships of the late H. O. McCurry (1939-55) and Mr Alan Jarvis (1955-9). Also in this post-war period the Gallery kept pace with Canadian developments, buying important examples of the work of Pellán, Borduas, Riopelle, and many others as they appeared, and exhibiting them at the Venice Biennale and other international manifestations.

The greatest event of the fifties was the purchase of a dozen masterpieces from the Prince of Liechtenstein's collection. These included works by Simone, Filippino Lippi, Memling, Massys, Rubens, Rembrandt, and Chardin. Examples of sculpture, a field long

neglected in the collection, were now added in some quantity: Rodin, Matisse, Lipchitz, Arp, Henry Moore . . .

In 1960 the Gallery moved into the present building, which afforded something like adequate space for the display of the collection. During the directorship of Charles Comfort (1960-5) and the acting directorship of Dr W. S. A. Dale (1965-6) the Gallery's holdings were further augmented by the purchase of works by Jacopo di Cione, Dosso Dossi, Orazio Gentileschi, Guercino, Veit Stoss, Jordaens, Jan Steen, Jacques-Louis David, Bourdelle, Mario Marini . . . and modern Canadian art in all its manifold forms. Under the present director, Miss Jean Sutherland Boggs (since 1966) progress has accelerated. The collection has developed along lines of highest importance (works by Jordaens, Rembrandt, Frans Hals, Canova, Delacroix, Degas, Gauguin, Rouault, Fernand Léger, Jackson Pollock, James Rosenquist . . .); major exhibitions have been organized (*Expo 67*; *Jacob Jordaens*); and a highly varied national extension programme is in full flight.

(Traduction française, p. 77.)