RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne
Canadian Art Review

RACAR
Revue d'art canadienne | Canadian Art Review

A.J. Casson at Windsor

A.J. Casson. An exhibition held at the Art Gallery of Windsor, 14 May—9 July 1978

Natalie Luckyj

Volume 5, Number 2, 1978–1979

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1077019ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/1077019ar

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)
1918-4778 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this review

Luckyj, N. (1978). Review of [A.J. Casson at Windsor / *A.J. Casson.* An exhibition held at the Art Gallery of Windsor, 14 May—9 July 1978]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, *5*(2), 132–134. https://doi.org/10.7202/1077019ar

A.J. Casson at Windsor

A.J. Casson. An exhibition held at the Art Gallery of Windsor, 14 May – 9 July 1978.

Catalogue: *A.J. Casson.* Windsor, 1978. 44 pp., 34 illus., $6.50 (paper).

A.J. Casson, an exhibition organized by the Art Gallery of Windsor in Windsor, Ontario, as one of its series of retrospectives of contemporary Canadian artists, is the first major presentation of the work of Alfred J. Casson, R.C.A. (b. 1898). Links are evident between Casson and the Group of Seven, of which he was a disciple and which he joined in 1926. Fortunately, however, the exhibition concentrates upon Casson's own artistic development and allows reflection upon his individual achievement without constant comparisons to the works of other members of the Group.

The careers of two other members of the Group of Seven have been subjects of individual exhibitions: Lawren Harris (*Lawren S. Harris: Urban Scenes and Wilderness Landscapes, 1906-1930*, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, 14 January – 26 February 1978; reviewed in RACAR, v:1, pp. 49-51) and J.E.H. MacDonald (*J.E.H. MacDonald, RCA, 1873-1932,* Art Gallery of Toronto, 13 November – 12 December 1965). The work of Tom Thomson, whose spiritual membership within the group is unquestioned, has also been examined in an exhibition (*The Art of Tom Thomson,* Art Gallery of Ontario, 30 October–12 December 1971). Both Thomson and MacDonald have been given additional treatment in recent publications (Harold Town and David Silcox, *Tom Thomson: The Silence and the Storm,* Toronto, 1977, and Paul Duval, *The Tangled Garden,* Toronto, 1978). The importance of such exhibitions and books to the understanding of the Group of Seven will only be fully measured when corresponding examinations of other members and disciples of the Group have been made.

The Casson retrospective includes eighty-seven oil paintings, watercolours, and pencil drawings selected by Kenneth Saltmarche and by Casson, representing the artist's creative output over the last sixty years. It is a wide selection, intelligent and perceptive, and excludes Casson's silkscreens and other graphic work.

Casson's orchestration of subtle grey tonalities, his fusion and consolidation of forms into simplified areas, and his delight in the texture and properties of paint are already evident in early works such as *Old Mill at Meadowvale* (1917, cat. no. 1), *First Snow, Grenadier Pond* (1921, cat. no. 5, Fig. 1), and *Stocks and Primula* (1924, cat. no. 8). These early paintings immediately establish his personal approach to colour, surface, and form, elements which become distinguishing features in his later oils and watercolours. The exhibition clearly shows Casson's steadily growing interest in ever more simplified and geometricized forms.

The selection includes a number of preliminary sketches in oil, watercolour, and pencil which serve to reveal important aspects of Casson's creative process. His broadly painted sketch *Grey Day, Lake Kushog* (1923, cat. no. 6) is closely followed in the final canvas without alteration and the original quality of the sketch is faithfully transferred. In a later work, *Blue Heron* (1957, cat. no. 53), Casson follows his small watercolour sketch *Backwater, Lake Baptiste* (1954, cat. no. 47) but adds the blue heron to the final canvas. This serves as an example of his increasing interest in the introduction of a narrative element into the landscapes. This interest is more evident in his paintings of the gabled houses of Ontario towns, where simplified human forms move quietly around architecture and inanimate objects (such as chairs on porches) mutely suggest the mysteries of human occupation – an effect distinctly personal to Casson. The four preparatory sketches for *Rock Pool in the Cloche Hills* (1954, cat. no. 49), which are precise notations of colour and form, show Casson's method of working from nature. His simplification, abstraction, and consolidation parallel similar qualities in the Group of Seven, but the emphasis on static quietude is again Casson's own. His rich arrangement of tones (no doubt an influence of his work in the graphic arts) tempers the effect of abstraction of form. Nature is revealed as being more comforting and quiet than in Harris's coldly bleak and awesome landscape

abstractions, while remaining just as individual and personal.

The most recent works in the exhibition, *Annable's General Store* (1975, cat. no. 85), *Casson Lake* (1976, cat. no. 86), and *Below Ragged Falls* (1976, cat. no. 87), continue to show the artist's concerns with the interaction of subtle colour, the texture of paint surface, and the simplification of form. Throughout his work, two different aspects of nature – the domestic calm of the small town (Fig. 2) and the isolated wilderness of natural landscape – are linked together by their common mood of quiet mystery.

The inclusion of numerous watercolours presents yet another aspect of Casson as painter and colourist. He uses dramatic deep contrasts of colour and broad controlled washes (*October, Lake Superior,* 1928, cat. no. 16). This medium was an important aid in his search for simplification and consolidation of form.

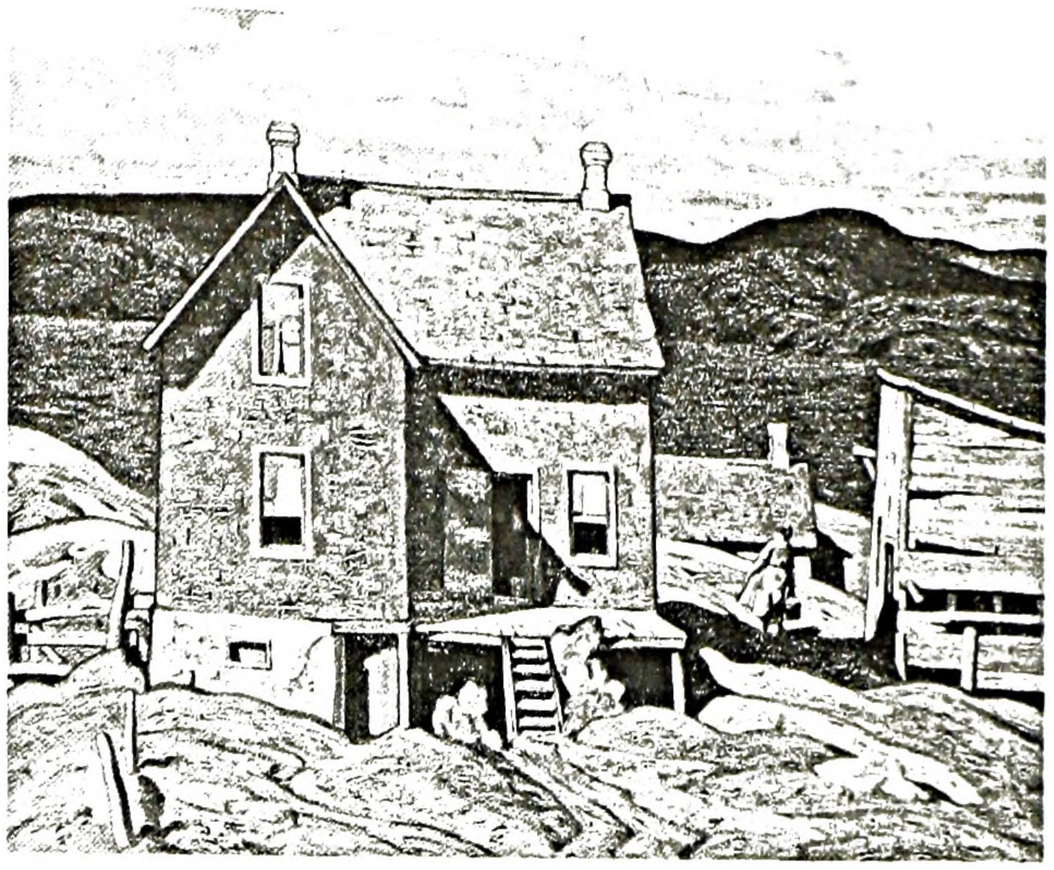

FIGURE 2. A.J. Casson, *Old House, Parry Sound,* 1932. Toronto, Roberts Gallery. Cat. no. 22 (Photo: Saltmarche–Toronto).

The selection of works was well complemented by the fine installation at Windsor (Fig. 3). Space was ample in the broad galleries and the lighting was adequate. Works were presented in chronological sequence with pertinent sketches accompanying the final canvases, a sensitive and perceptive hanging.

The catalogue of the Casson exhibition displays considerable strengths, but is also marred by serious flaws. It is well illustrated with approximately one-quarter of the works reproduced in good black-and-white images suitable for study purposes. The eight full-page colour reproductions are adequate, although they lack Casson's elusive grey tonality, making the tonal ranges somewhat high. In all of the reproductions the texture of paint surface is particularly well captured. There are also pictures of Casson sketching outdoors and in his studio and of Casson's and Carmichael's campsite on Lake Superior. These extend the reader's perception of the artist and his environment to a considerable degree.

FIGURE 1. A.J. Casson, *First Snow, Grenadier Pond,* 1921. Art Gallery of Windsor. Cat. no. 5 (Photo: Saltmarche–Toronto).

In a lively conversation called 'On The Early Years,' Casson informally reminisces about his artistic beginnings and his later friendships within the Group of Seven. His restrained comments on his work also serve to provide important primary documentation and establish a sense of his personality. A good supplement to this informal documentation is provided at the end of the catalogue by a full chronology of Casson's life as well as listing group exhibitions with notations of prices, dates, and the locations of works. These appendices, prepared by Jennifer Watson, provide immediate access to substantial archival material for those who study Canadian art history. The absence of an extended bibliography is an unfortunate omission.

The main essay on 'The Art of A.J. Casson,' by Joan Murray, is disappointing. Murray's chronology of Casson's development from 1917 to 1978 is satisfactory only in very general and superficial terms. It often simply repeats the facts already presented in Casson's conversation, with little attempt at serious analysis or definition of Casson's style. In her attempts to link Carmichael, Harris, and Casson, she offers comparisons with works not included in the exhibition (e.g. Carmichael's *Silvery Tangle* and Casson's *In the Clearing*), and without any analysis. The improper titling of Casson's work (the latter is listed in the catalogue of the National Gallery of Canada as *Clearing*) is sloppy, and the generality of her basic points is compounded by the lack of visual material. In reference to Casson's *Ice Hummocks,* also neither included in the exhibition nor reproduced in the text, Murray gives the site as being Humber Bay and the date as 1928. Paul Duval, in *A.J. Casson* (Toronto, 1975, p. 37), refers to a painting of the same title painted some four years earlier at Sunnyside Beach. The lack of illustration in the

FIGURE 3. *A.J. Casson*, view of installation (Photo: Saltmarche–Toronto).

Windsor catalogue makes any resolution of this contradiction difficult. But further discrepancies between Duval and Murray would suggest that Murray was unaware of the Duval publication, the only major monograph on Casson.

The importance of Casson's watercolours as an 'attempt to simplify his composition and colour' is fleetingly noted by Murray. Again, no real stylistic analysis or comparison with later oils is provided to support such a statement. Murray acknowledges that both Casson and Carmichael 'developed their watercolours at home, and in the Group of Seven exhibition of that year [1928], filled a room with them,' but neglects to mention Casson's role as co-founder in 1926 of the Canadian Painters in Watercolour, a fact which might give even more credence to Casson's interest and unique treatment of this medium. Unfortunately, Murray's text skims the surface rather than treating the work of this important painter in any substantive manner.

Regrettably the design and layout of the catalogue contain several aggravating technical oversights. Illustrations are titled without catalogue numbers, works described by Murray give no references to catalogue numbers or the appropriate illustrations, non-exhibited works cited by her are not illustrated, black-and-white and colour reproductions are positioned without any apparent organization, and pertinent illustrations are rarely placed close to the relevant text. The care and precision so evident in the selection and installation of the exhibition and in the preparation of the chronology and appendices would have been welcome in the catalogue.

In spite of the catalogue's flaws, it and the exhibition are important for the study of Canadian art history. It is only through such explorations that the collective myth of the Group of Seven can be analysed, reconsidered, and, if necessary, dispelled. One can only hope that future exhibitions will continue the high quality of the Windsor selection. Even so it is necessary to develop a rigorous framework to support a more perceptive and critical evaluation of Canadian art. The maturation of Canadian art history rests with such explorations.

NATALIE LUCKYJ
Art Gallery of Ontario
Toronto