

The Beleaguered Biennials

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Article abstract

Entre 1955 et 1968, le Musée des beaux-arts du Canada a organisé sept expositions biennales itinérantes d'art contemporain canadien. Supposées présenter la crème de l'art produit au Canada au cours des deux années précédentes, ces biennales représentaient pour le Musée la voie principale d'acquisition d'œuvres d'artistes canadiens vivants. Bien que le principe guidant ces expositions paraisse simple, la réalité était tout autre. Pendant treize ans, les dirigeants du Musée des beaux-arts lutte ont été confrontés à une série de problèmes : existait-il une chose telle que l'art canadien, et si oui, à quoi ressemblait-elle ? La meilleure production artistique canadienne provenait-elle des principaux centres artistiques du pays ou se répartissait-elle de façon équilibrée dans les différentes régions du Canada ? Plus important encore, qui allait décider de ce qu'était la crème de l'art canadien ? Alors que le Canada vivait une période de montée du nationalisme culturel et cherchait à affirmer son indépendance par rapport à la Grande-Bretagne et aux États-Unis, on serait tenté de penser que la sélection de la meilleure production artistique du pays est alors devenue l'affaire d'experts canadiens. Ce n'est pourtant pas ce qui s'est passé. En fait, la plupart des biennales s'appuyaient sur l'avis de « spécialistes » étrangers pour rendre leur sélection plus crédible. Ouvrant à partir d'archives du Musée des beaux-arts, à l'intérieur d'un cadre théorique interdisciplinaire, notre étude examine la façon dont les biennales du Musée des beaux-arts du Canada ont été planifiées et mises sur pied à un moment politiquement fort de l'histoire de la nation.

The Beleaguered Biennials

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Résumé

Entre 1955 et 1968, le Musée des beaux-arts du Canada a organisé sept expositions biennales itinérantes d'art contemporain canadien. Supposées présenter la crème de l'art produit au Canada au cours des deux années précédentes, ces biennales représentaient pour le Musée la voie principale d'acquisition d'œuvres d'artistes canadiens vivants. Bien que le principe guidant ces expositions paraisse simple, la réalité était tout autre. Pendant treize ans, les dirigeants du Musée des beaux-arts luttent ont été confrontés à une série de problèmes ; existait-il une chose telle que l'art canadien, et si oui, à quoi ressemblait-elle ? La meilleure production artistique canadienne provenait-elle des principaux centres artistiques du pays ou se répartissait-elle de façon équilibrée dans les différentes régions du Canada ? Plus important encore, qui allait décider de ce qu'était la crème de l'art canadien ? Alors que le Canada vivait une période de montée du nationalisme culturel et cherchait à affirmer son indépendance par rapport à la Grande-Bretagne et aux États-Unis, on serait tenté de penser que la sélection de la meilleure production artistique du pays est alors devenue l'affaire d'experts canadiens. Ce n'est pourtant pas ce qui s'est passé. En fait, la plupart des biennales s'appuyaient sur l'avis de « spécialistes » étrangers pour rendre leur sélection plus crédible. Œuvrant à partir d'archives du Musée des beaux-arts, à l'intérieur d'un cadre théorique interdisciplinaire, notre étude examine la façon dont les biennales du Musée des beaux-arts du Canada ont été planifiées et mises sur pied à un moment politiquement fort de l'histoire de la nation.

In 1968 the National Gallery of Canada mounted its seventh biennial exhibition of Canadian painting. Despite valiant efforts by the gallery to promote the exhibition, it was clear by the time the show opened in Ottawa that the biennials' days were numbered. The death knell was sounded by the American William Seitz, the sole juror, who claimed that art in Canada was "already too multiform and copious to present painting, drawing, graphics and sculpture...in a single exhibition." He went on to declare: "It may be the last time, indeed, that the major medium of painting can be comprehensively presented."¹

Between 1955 and 1968, the National Gallery organized seven biennials of contemporary Canadian art. These juried exhibitions were conceived with great optimism. By showcasing the best Canadian art of the previous two years, they were intended to foster pride in the country's artistic achievement. They also functioned as the gallery's primary means of purchasing Canadian art. Despite high hopes, however, the exhibitions never achieved the degree of success that the gallery envisioned. They were difficult to coordinate: they were plagued by organizational problems and inconsistent selection processes. The works that were chosen often failed to excite the critics, and the increasingly abstract nature of the art alienated members of the general public. All in all, the organization of the exhibitions proved to be a frustrating process of experimentation and constant adjustment.

The very premise of the exhibitions was problematic. Was it possible to claim that there was such a thing as "Canadian" art, and, if so, who should be the judge? At a time of growing cultural nationalism, when Canada was coming of age and asserting her independence from Britain and the United States, one might imagine that decisions governing the selection of the best art in the country would have been made by Canadians, but this was not the case; in fact, the final juries for five of the

seven biennials relied heavily on the opinions of foreign "experts." The gallery's reluctance to trust its own curators' judgment was not the only challenge facing the biennials: any attempt by Ottawa to foster national identity was complicated by the rise of regionalism as well as by the decision of more and more Canadian artists to embrace international abstraction. Drawing on primary documentation from the National Gallery's archives, this paper examines the uneasy tensions that surrounded Canada's biennial exhibitions in the turbulent decades of the 1950s and 1960s.

Regular exhibitions of contemporary Canadian art at the National Gallery were nothing new; the Royal Canadian Academy of Art held annual exhibitions beginning in 1880, and in 1925 the Board of Trustees of the National Gallery, independent of the Academy, decided that "the National Gallery hold, in Ottawa, an annual exhibition of Canadian art from which it shall be the general rule to make all purchases of Canadian art for the National collection."² It is no coincidence that this decision was made at a time of strong Anglo-Canadian nationalistic sentiment in Canada. As Mary Vipond points out, there was a blossoming of organized cultural activity during the 1920s, a time of post-war prosperity in Canada. Proud of the role Canada's forces played in the First World War, Canada's intellectual elite was eager to help sweep away any vestiges of the country's colonial inferiority complex. Believing that it was their duty to foster national identity by bringing an awareness of culture to the masses, Canadian intellectuals revitalized or established cultural organizations such as the Royal Society of Canada, the Association of Canadian Clubs, and the League of Nations Society and published journals such as *Canadian Forum*.³ Despite their lofty ideals, the nationalistic attempts of the white, middle-class, middle-aged, and generally male Anglo-Canadian intellectuals were not as successful

as they anticipated, in large part because the general population remained relatively uninterested in the pursuits of this elite contingent.⁴

Undeterred, the National Gallery held eight annual exhibitions of contemporary Canadian art between 1926 and 1933 at the gallery's premises in the Victoria Memorial Museum on Metcalfe Street in Ottawa. The exhibitions were halted by the Great Depression and then the Second World War. After an interval of twenty years, they were revived with the 1953 *Annual Exhibition of Canadian Painting*, during a time of economic prosperity, rising consumer culture, the burgeoning baby boom, and yet another surge of nationalism.⁵ In the optimistic decades following the Second World War, the federal government was searching for new ways to articulate a national identity—ways that would bind together an increasingly diverse population while asserting the country's further independence from Britain and the United States.⁶ Cultural nationalism seemed the ideal solution.

The Irish scholar John Hutchinson represents well the line of thought that Ottawa appeared to be taking. Hutchinson asserts that cultural nationalism can be a powerful tool for social change when a select group of humanist intellectuals (historical scholars, writers, artists, and, I would argue, curators) act as moral innovators who, by invoking various myths and legends, construct and disseminate a collective identity to the public in order to regenerate the national community. They do so with the participation of the secular intelligentsia (journalists, school teachers, and politicians) who disseminate their message to the masses.⁷ Defining a nation is not a one-time process: Hutchinson agrees with the nineteenth-century German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder, who asserted that the identity of a nation has to be “continuously renovated in terms of the needs of each generation.”⁸ In order for this dynamic to be put into play, though, the nation has to be imagined in the minds of its citizens.

To Benedict Anderson a nation is “an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”⁹ Anderson posits that one of the ways in which nations have been imagined is through their museums, which act as repositories of national culture. The reproduction and dissemination of the museums' objects and collections through photographs and the print media indoctrinates the state's subjects into a national identity.¹⁰

The National Gallery of Canada, and its biennial exhibitions, seemed to the federal government like a logical place from which to narrate the nation. Canadian curators, artists, and intellectuals could put forth the idea that Canada had developed a mature and progressive style of art that was no longer

dependent on foreign influences or mired in the past. Through the circulation of the exhibitions, printed catalogues, and press coverage, the secular intelligentsia would bring the idea of a new, vibrant Canada to the populace.

In the decades following the Second World War, the National Gallery was also eager to establish a presence in the international art world. As the wartime budget restrictions were relaxed and more money became available to support such endeavours, the gallery began participating in international biennial exhibitions of contemporary art. In 1951 Canada participated in the first São Paulo Biennial in Brazil; the following year it began sending entries to the long-running Venice Biennale, and in 1961 it began participating in the recently established Biennale de Paris, an exhibition specifically for young artists. Thomas Maher, Chairman of the Board of Trustees, reported that the gallery's participation in international events, such as the biennials, was “one of the most effective ways of projecting the Canadian image abroad.”¹¹ As a counterpoint to the international exhibitions, the Canadian biennials could provide a means to project the Canadian image in-country.

Although Canada's national collection was physically housed in Ottawa, the trustees had long realized that the gallery had an obligation to serve all of the country. This posed some problems in a country as large and diverse as Canada: the gallery had to beware of becoming too centralized and removed from grass-roots activities, while at the same time guarding against depleting precious resources by becoming “too closely bound up with local activity.”¹² There were other problems. In the early 1950s the National Gallery acquired a number of “worthy” international works of art, and the general consensus was that the gallery had moved from “the stature of an interesting smaller collection into the company of the world's more important collections.”¹³ Unfortunately, however, although plans for a new building were in the works, the collection and staff were still housed in inadequate quarters in the Victoria Memorial Museum, a circumstance that prevented the gallery from expanding its collection significantly and increasing its staff. Despite strong recommendations put forth since the early 1940s by the Federation of Canadian Artists that the National Gallery promote regional art production by building a series of arts centres and exhibition spaces across the country, H.O. (Harry) McCurry, the gallery's director, was loath to share too many of the gallery's own precious resources. Clearly, organizing a centralized biennial exhibition that would then travel across the country was one way to appease the regions.

The biennial exhibitions were mounted in the wake of the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences, popularly known as the Massey Commission. Tabled in the House of Commons on June 1951, the Massey Commission responded to numerous briefs and made some key

recommendations. The Commission stressed the vital role that culture played in the formation and sustaining of national identity and warned of the encroachment of American “low culture” on Canadian culture.¹⁴ The Commission specifically recommended that the National Gallery purchase more contemporary Canadian art and organize more travelling exhibitions of “higher quality.”¹⁵ Touting notions of democracy and decentralization, the Commission also stated that the National Gallery had a duty to care for and develop the national collections, as well as a responsibility to help art museums across the country and encourage local initiatives.¹⁶

By the mid-century, rumblings of regional discontent were being felt across the country. Geographic distance, immigration and settlement patterns, uneven economic development, unequal distribution of material resources, rapid urbanization, and the growth of regional metropolitan centres were fostering regional identities.¹⁷ In particular, economic disparities between central Canada and the Atlantic and Prairie provinces were becoming more apparent, and, in the midst of the Quiet Revolution, Québec nationalism was on the rise. Canadian historians J.M.S. Careless and Ramsay Cook proposed regionalism as a way of addressing Canada’s “perennial problem, its lack of national unity and identity.”¹⁸ Cook posited that “Canadianism” could be found by focusing on the “limited identities”—regional, ethnic, and class identities—instead of searching for an increasingly elusive pan-Canadian nationalism.¹⁹ Geographers, historians, literary scholars, Canadianists, political scientists, and art historians rapidly turned their attention to regionalism and the notion of “limited identities.” In this context exhibition organizers at the National Gallery were aware that they needed to respond to the issue of regional representation.

The 1953 annual exhibition had several regional committees, made up mostly of artists, who selected oil paintings and watercolours, which they sent to the National Gallery. Overall, close to eighty works were exhibited, the majority of which were for sale. The number of works from each region corresponded roughly to the population of that particular region.²⁰ Evincing a trend that would continue throughout the following biennial exhibitions, Ontario and Quebec were well represented, but some of the other provinces were not: only one artist was selected from Newfoundland and none from Prince Edward Island. The exhibition was stylistically diverse: statesmen of the former Group of Seven exhibited alongside members of the Automatists. The exhibition opened in Ottawa on 10 March 1953. The English art critic and writer Eric Newton commented, “I found it impressive—far more serious and inventive than a similar exhibition in the United States would have been, though not so self-consciously ‘modern.’”²¹ After its stay in Ottawa, the exhibition travelled to a number of galleries west of Ottawa. Time did not permit it to be circulated to Eastern Canada.²²

After the 1953 exhibition closed, the National Gallery’s trustees decided to transform the annual exhibitions into biennial ones: they reasoned that this would allow for a wider choice of material, more time for the selection of works, and more time to prepare an illustrated catalogue. The gallery also hoped that it could use the biennials as opportunities to add to its collection of contemporary Canadian art, continuing the principle of “keeping the National Gallery in close touch with current developments in Canadian art.”²³ Planning for the *First Biennial Exhibition of Canadian Painting* began immediately. While Director H.O. McCurry acknowledged that “the perfect method of choosing the best paintings produced in the country over a stated time...still remain[ed] to be worked out,” the National Gallery decided to follow the system used in 1953,²⁴ and the initial selection of works for the *First Biennial* was carried out by regional committees comprised of recognized authorities²⁵ in the Maritime provinces, Québec, Ontario, the Prairie provinces, and British Columbia (geographic divisions that remained constant throughout the subsequent biennials). The committees, which were comprised of well-known artists, curators, and arts educators, selected works, which were sent to the National Gallery (again in numbers roughly proportionate to the population of the region) for a final selection. After its sojourn at the National Gallery, the exhibition was circulated to eleven public galleries across Canada.²⁶

Although there was a variety of styles in the exhibition, the majority of the paintings in the *First Biennial* were abstract or non-representational. The nationalist mythology put forth by the Group of Seven and the idea that there could be art that was truly Canadian were thus sorely tested.²⁷ The general public, who were not conversant with abstraction, did not appreciate the nuances of the movement.²⁸ Newspaper arts columnists, on the other hand, responded more favourably to the selection. Pearl McCarthy, arts reporter for *The Globe and Mail*, hailed the exhibition as “a new period in the work of the National Gallery.” McCarthy saw abstraction as a step forward in Canadian art. She called Harold Town (who exhibited the abstract painting *Beach Fire, No. 2*, from 1953) an artist of “undoubted brilliance,” and singled out Gordon Smith’s *Structure with Red Sun* (1955) as a work of originality. McCarthy noted that a few of the members of the Group of Seven were present at the opening to “give their blessing to the new period.”²⁹ Other arts reporters agreed with McCarthy, and stated that the non-representational works by West Coast painters (Gordon Smith, Jack Korner, and B.C. Binning, in particular) were the “‘avant-garde’ of Canadian art.”³⁰ One critic even went so far as to attribute the artists’ fascination with abstraction to an existential reaction to the times that they were living in.³¹

Not all critics were enamoured with the show: the reviewer for the *Winnipeg Free Press* claimed that the works in the show

were disappointing, a fact that he attributed to the selection process. He reasoned that if one selected works “as political parties must choose their policies—with a weather eye on regional hopes and aspirations,” then the result would be paintings that were chosen on geography not merit.³²

The National Gallery’s selection processes also came under criticism from several artists. Goodridge Roberts wrote huffily to R.H. Hubbard, Chief Curator of the National Gallery, asking why he had not been included. (Hubbard replied to Roberts informing him that this was because the artist was in Paris at the time.³³) John Lyman also wrote a discontented letter to Hubbard stating that he thought the selection process was “secretive and partial.”³⁴ Lyman’s friend Jori Smith supported Lyman’s view: in a letter to F. Cleveland Morgan, a member of the National Gallery’s Board of Trustees, she wrote:

I am surprised indeed that I was ignored but well-nigh floored when I heard that such a painter as John Lyman had *not* been invited. A committee which does not include both John Lyman and Jori Smith in a National Show is an incompetent one, don’t you think?³⁵

In an attempt to improve matters, the National Gallery experimented with a different selection process for the *Second Biennial Exhibition of Canadian Art* in 1957 (fig. 1), in which three members of the National Gallery’s staff, with the help of advisors in each of the five regions, would survey art across the country. R.H. Hubbard visited artists’ studios in Ontario, Assistant Director Donald W. Buchanan travelled to the Prairie provinces, and information officer Jean-René Ostiguy went to Montreal, the Maritime provinces, and Newfoundland. Together the three men visited two hundred artists and considered over four hundred works.

Letters were sent to a number of established artists asking them to send their work to the gallery. So as not to overlook any expatriate artists, letters were also dispatched to gallery directors and embassies in Paris and London asking them if they knew of any artists beyond the student stage who were working overseas. Jacques Dubourg, a Parisian gallery owner, and Philip James, Director of Art for the Arts Council of Great Britain, were approached to make a selection of works from their cities.

The Board of Trustees hoped that the final selection of works would rest with a jury in Ottawa. They envisioned a jury comprised of the National Gallery’s director Alan Jarvis, who had studied in England and the United States, “some distinguished critic from abroad (probably the United Kingdom, France, or the United States), and one other Canadian.”³⁶ Alan Jarvis voiced his hope that the inclusion of a non-Canadian on the jury would become standard practice for future biennials.³⁷ In the end, the three-man jury for the biennial consisted of Andrew C. Ritchie, the director of the Department of Paint-

ing and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Jean Simard, a professor of design at the École des beaux-arts in Montréal, and Jarvis. In a letter to Jarvis, Ritchie admitted that Americans knew “far too little about Canadian art” and that the trip would afford him “an opportunity to see a good deal of the work of the past two years.”³⁸

To prime their audience the National Gallery held a press conference a couple of weeks before the opening. The three jurors were present and each spoke about the upcoming exhibition. Jean Simard praised the work of “young, strong and vital” painters from Vancouver and the Prairies. Alan Jarvis claimed that “as a geographical example of Canadian art,” the exhibition selection showed a “surprising balance.” Andrew Ritchie got a good deal of attention when he commented that he had been “surprised to find a vitality, variety and maturity in post-war Canadian painting.”³⁹ Admitting that he was previously unaware of contemporary Canadian art trends, Ritchie went on to say that he was excited that post-war Canadian art was “not provincial and no longer just pictorial.”⁴⁰ He crowned these remarks and gave the exhibition his official seal of approval when he said that the show “had the earmarks of an international exhibition.”⁴¹ The press conference was extremely effective at promoting the official National Gallery line, and the newspapers revelled in Ritchie’s rhetoric; in the next few days the headlines read: “Canadian Art Wins Praise of American,” “Critic Finds Vital Art By Canadians,” and “Modern Canadian Painting Has New Universal Outlook.”⁴² The stage was set for a triumphal opening.

The exhibition catalogue included a short introduction written by Donald W. Buchanan, justifying the selection of an American as one of the jurors and describing Ritchie as “an expert on contemporary art from the United States, who could now be expected to take his first exploratory look at Canadian art.”⁴³ While non-objective art had been a significant force in Canadian art for some years, Buchanan noted that the jury had actually rejected twice as many abstract works as they included in the exhibition. In fact, many of the works the gallery received were of questionable merit. As Buchanan rather floridly put it: “Many other artists active in this field, while serious in intent, only produce the non-flowering grasses and stalks of art, those that briefly shoot up in the warm sun of fashion and as briefly die to form the compost heap from which the more powerful growths are fertilized.”⁴⁴ (Buchanan’s analogies were met with considerable rancour by a number of Québécois artists not included who wrote a strongly worded letter of protest to the gallery.⁴⁵) Buchanan singled out Jean Paul Lemieux, Alex Colville, Jacques de Tonnancour, and Harold Town as artists with “individuality of talent.” He concluded his introduction by claiming that the “exhibition certainly speaks the language of our age, but in no one accent.”⁴⁶



Figure 1. Opening of the *Second Biennial Exhibition of Canadian Painting*, 1957, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. (Photo: Frank Gillespie; National Gallery of Canada fonds, courtesy of the National Gallery Library and Archives.)

Abstraction in Canada had been given a further boost that year by two significant events. In June 1957 the American art critic Clement Greenberg was invited to Toronto to meet with members of the Painters Eleven group. Greenberg's assertions that New York had succeeded Paris as the centre of the art world led many Canadian artists to look to the United States for inspiration.⁴⁷ Second, the Canada Council for the Arts was established on the recommendation of the Massey Commission, and began providing Canadian artists with travel grants. This meant that many artists could now afford to study outside the country, a circumstance that broadened their exposure to both European and American abstraction.⁴⁸ Therefore, in his introduction Buchanan noted that the jury members had tried to determine if there was anything "noticeably Canadian in the national sense" in the submissions,⁴⁹ and he concluded that they had not, especially if this meant anything distinctively regional.⁵⁰ Instead,

the jury found that Canadian artists had now accepted "the whole western world as their cultural home." Buchanan waxed lyrically: "The best of Canadian work is now being merged in the universality of art." He did note that if there was any national flavour in the works, it was that the artists with French backgrounds handled pigment and brush work differently than the Anglo-Saxon artists did.⁵¹

Although Alan Jarvis stated that the method of selection for the *Second Biennial* was "purely experimental" and might not be followed in future years, it proceeded virtually unchanged in the *Third Biennial Exhibition of Canadian Art*.⁵² The jury included two Canadians—Donald Buchanan, now Associate Director of the National Gallery, and Colin Graham, Director of the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria—and an American, Gordon B. Washburn, Director of the Department of Fine Arts at the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh. Washburn was the "distinguished

foreign authority” who would add an international cachet to the exhibition.⁵³ Jarvis initially asked Georges Duthuit, an esteemed French art critic, to serve on the committee, but in the end Washburn accepted the task.⁵⁴

The selection of artists for the *Third Biennial* was *ad hoc*. Letters were sent to the directors of major Canadian galleries asking them if they would be interested in helping select works for the exhibition from a list of artists provided by the National Gallery, and to suggest any other artists they considered worthy of consideration. Letters were also sent to established artists inviting them to submit works.⁵⁵ Societies such as the Picture Loan Society and various galleries also offered suggestions on new talent.⁵⁶ National Gallery staff members assisted with the selection process. Norah McCulloch was the National Gallery’s liaison officer for Western Canada; Claude Picher was the liaison agent for Eastern Canada and Quebec. Richard B. Simmins, Director of Exhibition Extension Services, visited artists in Toronto, and Jean-René Ostiguy visited artists in Vancouver and Victoria.

Again the jury struggled to categorize the art and to come up with a clear consensus as to what it meant in terms of the nation. The selected works were an odd hodgepodge of styles and subject matter, ranging from Alex Colville’s hyperrealist *Hound in a Field* (1958) to Jacques de Tonnancour’s loose landscape *Paysage* (1959) and Marcelle Maltais’s abstract *Iconoclaste* (1957). The jury’s struggle was exacerbated by the fact that although abstraction was being adopted in Toronto, Montreal, and to a lesser extent Vancouver, and seventy percent of the works were non-representational, the rest of the country’s art activity was more scattered.⁵⁷ In their catalogue essay, the jurors noted that there were a variety of “points of view” expressed by the artists: abstract expressionism, automatism, geometric abstraction, wilderness landscapes, and the rather nebulous “landscapes of the mind.” On the whole, the jury felt that there was “little real talent” devoted to “traditional forms of representational painting.” Canadian artists were now merging into the “mainstream of contemporary aesthetic expression in the western world.” They also noted that the influence of European art was waning, although they conceded that they had had to eliminate a number of works that “had not yet outgrown the influential masters” such as Paul Klee, Joan Miró, and Pablo Picasso. They concluded that it was therefore impossible to “speak in nationalistic terms of ‘Canadian Art’” any longer.⁵⁸

As they had done for the previous biennial, the three jurors held a press conference in advance of the opening, where they discussed the themes in the exhibition and explained that their selection of predominantly non-representational works was a reflection of international trends in art. Their ideas were eagerly absorbed by the reporters and appeared in print in the following days. Some of the things that the reporters focused on

were Washburn’s opinion that there was “new life” in Canadian painting, that there were eight or nine Canadian artists whose works were “worthy of international exhibitions on the highest levels,” and that the landscapes tended to be not so much representation as “landscapes of the mind.”⁵⁹

Once the exhibition opened the reception was generally positive, if unremarkable. Critics agreed that there were some very good works (particularly in the graphics section) but also a number of abstract works of lesser merit. The phrase “landscapes of the mind” continued to appear regularly to discuss the non-representational works. Amongst the general public, though, the degree of abstraction in the exhibition continued to be problematic. One visitor complained about the “extreme Modern Art” that was shown, and went on to posit that there was “a great deal of good modern Canadian Art, representational without being academic, that the public is being denied a view [of] because so many of our public Museums and Galleries are consciously ignoring it.”⁶⁰

In the end, it was evident that, while the exhibition was neither a resounding success nor an out-and-out failure, it could use significant improvement. After the exhibition was over, Jean-René Ostiguy provided a written report in which he commented on the organization of the exhibition and made suggestions for future biennials. He felt that by accepting so many works (around seven hundred), the regional advisors were placing too heavy a burden on the jury. For future biennials Ostiguy advocated having five National Gallery officers pick a pre-determined number of works from each region of Canada, which he reasoned would lead to better regional representation. Additionally, all of the selected works would be “definitively accepted for the exhibition,” which he believed would be more positively received by the artists. This meant that the jury would merely award special mentions or prizes and make recommendations for purchases to the Trustees, and would be spared the task of looking at more and more submissions of “low aesthetic quality.”⁶¹

In 1960 preparations began for the *Fourth Biennial Exhibition of Canadian Art*. Almost none of the organizers were happy with the existing biennials. Jean-René Ostiguy believed that the gallery had to find ways to address claims that the National Gallery had an undemocratic attitude and the public perception that the biennial was exhibiting works of inferior standards of quality in “a big exhibition of no importance.”⁶² The configuration of the jury was hotly debated. Proposals were put forth that the jury be comprised of a foreign expert but no National Gallery staff members.⁶³ Another suggestion was made to include a jury member from each of the regions of Canada, to ensure adequate regional representation and to alleviate complaints that the National Gallery was “dictatorial” in its approach.⁶⁴ In an attempt to please Canadian artists and to be seen as more democratic and less dictatorial, the *Fourth*

Biennial allowed any artist who wished to submit works to send up to two works to the National Gallery for consideration.⁶⁵ As J. Russell Harper, who had been appointed Curator of Canadian Art in December 1959, put it: “This way every painter in Canada has a chance to have his work considered. We hope to encourage and perhaps discover young artists by opening the competition to everyone.”⁶⁶ A number of leading artists were personally invited to submit. Entry forms were sent to various museums, galleries, dealers, libraries, and selected artists, and were mailed to anyone who requested one. In order to attract the maximum number of artists, the gallery decided to place ads in newspapers in every province and in leading Canadian magazines such as *Maclean's*, *Star Weekly*, *Saturday Night*, *Weekend*, the *Tamarack Review*, *Canadian Art*, and *Vie des Arts*.⁶⁷

The National Gallery's decision to open the biennial to any artist was met with universal approval by the popular press. The *Toronto Telegram* lauded the changes, noting that the past practice of invitation only, while making the work of the selecting committee “easier,” also “left much room for bias and omission.”⁶⁸ The *Guelph Guardian* believed that the changes would create a chance for unknown artists to “win national recognition” and to provide them an opportunity for “some Canadians to climb higher on the professional ladder.”⁶⁹ Although generally in favour of the change, the *Ottawa Citizen* cynically asked whether the shift in policy indicated the “[d]emocratization” of art—or a practical means to prevent complaints and dissatisfaction?⁷⁰

The jury for the *Fourth Biennial* eventually consisted of five men, none of whom worked at the National Gallery: Philip James, Secretary of the Museums Association of England and former Director of Art at the Arts Council of Great Britain; Clare Bice, Curator of the Public Library and Art Museum in London, Ontario; Ferdinand Eckhardt, Director of the Winnipeg Art Gallery; Alex Colville, artist and teacher at Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick; and Jean Paul Lemieux, artist and teacher at the École des Beaux-Arts in Quebec City (fig. 2).⁷¹ Charles Comfort, who succeeded Alan Jarvis as the National Gallery's director in 1960, defended the selection of James as the chairman of the jury. James was “one of the leading world authorities on contemporary painting. For this reason and because an unbiased opinion of Canadian art was required, he, rather than a Canadian, was selected to chair the jury.”⁷² James, besides acting as the British advisor for the *Second Biennial*, had for a number of years advised the National Gallery on the purchase of contemporary European works of art, a task for which he received a fee of \$900 per year.⁷³ James was reportedly “thrilled” to be asked to be chairman of the jury.⁷⁴

Because there was no pre-selection by regional committees, the open call resulted in a deluge of submissions—over 1,900 works. The jury eventually selected ninety-one works by eighty-one artists. The jury believed that the open submission process

resulted in an exhibition of “less cohesion” but “greater variety.” They contended that one of the benefits of such a process was that a number of lesser-known artists were getting national exposure. Without naming any specific artists, the jury noted that a variety of stylistic trends was in evidence: abstract works and representational ones “with some marked degree of personal vision and stylization” rubbed shoulders with academic and “so-called naïve” works. Although they discerned a few similarities (“a certain indigenous quality”) among artists working in Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal, for the most part, they believed Canadian artists were not displaying overt allegiances to any particular group. The question of whether or not the biennial showcased Canadian art was evident again. The jurors concluded that “one cannot today speak of a purely national Canadian style.” Instead, any new movements in Canadian art reflected an “international flavor.”⁷⁵

The *Fourth Biennial* opened on 19 May 1961 at the gallery's new premises on Elgin Street in Ottawa.⁷⁶ Press reaction to the exhibition was positive, and, as usual, relied heavily on the National Gallery's press releases and the exhibition catalogue foreword for their copy. Much was made of the predominance of abstract or non-figurative works in the exhibition. Jacques de Tonnancour's abstract work *Composition in Green* (1961) was singled out for praise in the *Ottawa Journal*, the *Montreal Star*, and the *Toronto Daily Star*.⁷⁷ Referring to the gallery's press release, several reporters mentioned the unusually high number of new young artists being shown.⁷⁸ Robert Ayre of the *Montreal Star* was one of the few critics to question the gallery's official line. Firstly, he noted that calling the jury “international” was misleading. Yes, Philip James was from England, but the rest of the jurors were Canadian. He also pointed out that the gallery's claim that the jury's selections represented “the best created in Canada during the past two years” fell somewhat short of reality. He laid the blame for the inconsistent quality of the exhibition with the jury's decision to include so many young, unknown artists. If the gallery was going to function as a showcase for up-and-coming young artists, then more established artists like Jean-Paul Riopelle, York Wilson, and Harold Town would “have to stand aside.” He concluded:

It will have to be made clear that the Biennial is primarily for the untried and we should not expect it to be a roundup of the best in Canadian painting. You can't have it both ways. The National Gallery will have to make up its mind what kind of exhibition it wants the Biennial to be.⁷⁹

In 1963 the National Gallery of Canada held the *Fifth Biennial Exhibition of Canadian Painting*. This time, an honorary committee of Canadians recommended artists to the National Gallery, and J. Russell Harper was then dispatched on a three-month, cross-country trip to visit the artists and to select works,



Figure 2. The jury, *Fourth Biennial Exhibition of Canadian Painting*, 1961, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Standing left to right: Art Schultz (NGC staff), Ferdinand Eckhardt, Jean Paul Lemieux. Seated left to right: Philip James, Alex Colville, Clare Bice. (Photo: National Gallery of Canada fonds, courtesy of the National Gallery Library and Archives.)

which were sent to the gallery. There an all-Canadian jury of seven curators and members of the Board of Trustees determined what works would be included.⁸⁰ Upon the recommendation of the honorary committee, Harper visited two hundred and sixty-nine artists, from whom he pre-selected almost three hundred works, and the jurors eventually selected eighty-six paintings for the biennial. One of the first Canadian scholars to champion regional art production, Harper believed that each region of the country formed a distinct “artistic community, each with its own trends and approaches.” Despite this, he did not find much indigenous art expression in Canada or any identifiable national style in his travels; in fact, he referred to the painting that he saw in his search as a “confused pattern.” He believed that this was partly because each of the five artistic regions in Canada looked to external sources for their inspiration. French Québec artists looked towards Paris, while Ontario (which essentially meant Toronto) looked toward New York. The Prairie provinces were also strongly influenced by New York artists through the summer Emma Lake Workshops. British Columbia, not surprisingly, retained strong ties to England and to Japanese art. The Atlantic provinces, Harper contended, were mired in the past, clinging “tenaciously to figural painting,” and he felt that many Canadian artists, particularly in that region, were suffering from an “inferiority complex towards their own artistic convictions and their own surroundings.” In addition, they were reluctant “to use Canadian motifs or to paint ‘Canadian.’” He also held that the creativity of artists in Toronto and Montreal was in danger of being compromised by “the effects of commercialism.”

However, he was encouraged by growing art scenes in several Ontario communities—among them London, Kingston, and Ottawa—and by the efforts of “some of the deeper and more sensitive of younger Ontario painters.” Not mentioning any artists in particular, he wrote: “Most have undergone a rigorous art training. These are serious people with nothing whimsical in their makeup, but surprisingly enough they are exploring nostalgia, surrealism, and social realism as possible further avenues.”⁸¹ Toronto Daily Star art critic Elizabeth Kilbourn presented the only notable challenge to Harper’s conclusions:

Mr. Harper’s introduction to the biennial catalogue is full of pious rural misconceptions. He emits peevish noises about the baneful influence of commercialism and the metropolis. He seems to believe the more remote an artist is physically from the centres of activity, the greater will be his honesty and aesthetic perception.⁸²

The *Fifth Biennial* opened in the spring of 1963 in London, England, instead of Ottawa, because of a request by the Commonwealth Institute in England for an exhibition of contemporary Canadian art.⁸³ A reporter for *Time* magazine claimed that Canada agreed to send the *Fifth Biennial* exhibition to England for financial reasons: “[W]hen the Commonwealth Institute asked for a show, the austerity-pinched Gallery decided the Biennial would be the least expensive answer.”⁸⁴ Whatever the reasons, Charles Comfort was gratified by the Commonwealth Institute’s request and obligingly rescheduled the exhibition. He commented:

We find particular satisfaction in sending this biennial exhibition to Britain and to the new Commonwealth Institute in London. The Director, Sir Kenneth Bradley, C.M.G., and his art advisor, Mr. Eric Newton, have offered us enthusiastic and most friendly encouragement in our effort to present to the interested British public an exhibition of new Canadian paintings.⁸⁵

British reviewers came to the exhibition with little idea of what constituted Canadian art, and they were unimpressed with what they saw. While they conceded that the works showed promise (which in the opinion of one reviewer meant an awareness of international styles), they were not bowled over by Canada’s efforts.⁸⁶ Eric Newton wrote: “It would be difficult to spot outstanding genius in this collection. Unlike the contemporary school of Australia, Canadian artists are seldom fierce or brutal, nor do they attempt to evolve a Canadian pioneering mythology.”⁸⁷ Without singling out any artists in particular, Newton went on to claim: “The impact of this exhibition makes one feel confident that there is plenty of energy and courage to be found in the art of Canada today but that no single personality has discovered a new or startling kind of pictorial message. The general

tone is sophisticated rather than daring.”⁸⁸ Taking a line more consistent with 1920s ideology, John Richardson of *The Evening Standard* lamented the fact that Canada had not developed an identifiably Canadian style. He wrote: “For all their vitality, Canadian artists have not yet developed a national style. Given the splendor and drama of the countryside, it is odd that so few Canadian artists do anything about it.”⁸⁹

The National Gallery tried to put a positive spin on the lukewarm British reception. In a press release Charles Comfort claimed: “No Canadian exhibition in recent years has created so favourable an impression among critics of contemporary painting in Britain.”⁹⁰ Some Canadian critics, however, remained unimpressed with the show. Tony Emery deplored the absence of works by Jack Shadbolt, B.C. Binning, Alfred Pellán, and Jacques de Tonnancourt in the exhibition, while lamenting the inclusion of Jack Chambers’ “simpering piece of wishy-washy Bastien-Lepage” (*Sunday Morning*, 1961), Christopher Pratt’s “yawn provoking *House and Barn*,” and Jan Wyers’ “totally undistinguished *Summer Pasture*” (1962). All in all, Emery felt the works were sub-standard, a condition he attributed to the fact that Canada, after years of trying to “catch up” with international art trends, had finally arrived “alongside everyone else,” but had yet “to discover now where here exactly that is, and ... [to] decide where to go from there.”⁹¹ On 19 September 1963, the *Fifth Biennial* finally opened at the National Gallery in Ottawa. Considering the tepid reception of the exhibition in England, how would Canadians react to the work? Would British opinions be the kiss-of-death to the exhibition? While people like the *Ottawa Citizen*’s art editor, Carl Weiselberger, considered the “diversity of styles and trends” to be a positive indicator of Canadian artists’ versatility,⁹² and while the reviewer for the *Ottawa Journal* claimed that the show’s paintings “indicate in no uncertain way there is nothing static in the Dominion’s contribution to contemporary art,”⁹³ the exhibition was not the resounding success the organizers had hoped for. Robert Ayre claimed that the show’s “sense of emptiness” left him unsatisfied and gave him malaise: “What’s going on in Canadian painting today is the same thing that is going on in painting everywhere.” While Ayre agreed with the director that young Canadian painters like Suzanne Bergeron, James McElheron, and Denys Seguin were “in the forefront of the contemporary international art movement,” he was ultimately unhappy with the show. He wrote: “The longer I look at it, the more repetitions I see, the more I wonder if it is worth doing.”⁹⁴

Dissatisfied with the 1963 selection process, the gallery decided that for the 1965 version a single “internationally known authority” would visit various locations across Canada to select works for the exhibition.⁹⁵ The lone juror was William Townsend, a professor and Deputy Director of the Slade School of Art at the University of London in England. Townsend was

presented as the ideal authority for the job, with his “broad background and special interest in Canadian art.”⁹⁶ (Between 1951 and 1973, he taught periodically at the Banff School of Fine Arts and worked as a visiting professor at the University of Alberta in 1962–63.) Indeed, Townsend’s status as an “outsider” was perceived as a plus, as it was felt that it gave him a critical distance from any political problems or regional biases in Canada. *Time* magazine’s Canadian edition called Townsend a “brave juror [who] was, for the first time, all on his own, and a visitor too.”⁹⁷ Townsend was generally considered to be a man with discerning judgement, and David Silcox of *The Globe and Mail* described him as a man of “perspicacity and taste.”⁹⁸ While he admired the energy and enthusiasm of young Canadian artists, Townsend believed that they were at a disadvantage to their European counterparts because “they had little opportunities for travel and study abroad to develop their abilities.” To help remedy this problem Townsend established the Leverhulme Scholarship at the Slade School of Art in 1961. The scholarship enabled “the most talented art students from across Canada” to live in England and study at the Slade School of Art for one year.⁹⁹

Although the selection of works rested entirely with Townsend, an honorary advisory committee was established to help him with his choices. Townsend made trips to Western and Eastern Canada in 1964 to select works for the exhibition. The locations and dates of his visits were publicized and artists were advised to submit “a maximum of two works” to their nearest gallery.¹⁰⁰ To avoid any potential contestations, artists were advised that Townsend’s selection would be final.¹⁰¹ Townsend visited nineteen cities and viewed the works of over five hundred painters. In the end he selected one hundred and fourteen works by ninety artists.

The *Sixth Biennial* opened on 3 June 1965 in Ottawa. The catalogue that accompanied the exhibition featured a foreword by Charles Comfort in which he wrote:

The purpose of the National Gallery Biennial has always been twofold: to present to the interested public the most creatively interesting aspects of contemporary Canadian painting and to access if possible the direction of those highly susceptible winds of change and invention that continually sweep the contemporary world without reference to national boundaries.¹⁰²

Comfort acknowledged the difficulties in putting together the Biennial, and addressed the decision to invest a single individual with the task of selecting all the works:

Recent experience in Canada and elsewhere recommends that the selecting authority be a highly qualified individual of demonstrable artistic integrity rather than a group of

notable personalities. Today such a group invariably holds such conflicting views, even though its members be individually authoritative, that the resulting compromise selection is often discouragingly pedestrian.¹⁰³

In the exhibition catalogue essay, Townsend noted that he was given “a free hand” with the selection of works, and that, as an outsider, he “was under no obligation to represent all the provinces nor to follow the pattern of any previous Canadian Biennial.” (He did make special mention of the Regina Five, whom he referred to as the “School of Saskatchewan,” stating that artists in Saskatoon and Regina were producing “the most striking development of the last few years.”) Nor did Townsend feel any compunction to pick works that demonstrated any special Canadian qualities. In fact, he believed Canadians were labouring under the misapprehension of “the myth of a nationalist art.” He observed:

The pervasiveness of anxiety about Canadianism in art, about the possible loss of such character, the need to renew it, its special virtue, appears strange to an English artist.... [I]n Canada the debate on nationalism, while it may not affect serious artists too much, seems to inhibit their public. It is irrelevant now.”

Townsend believed that nationalism in art was only a factor when a country was establishing cultural and political independence. Demonstrating a shocking ignorance of the debates still raging in Canada about cultural nationalism and the country's attempts to assert her independence from both Britain and the United States, he claimed that “[o]nce independence is assured, there are other things to think about.” Townsend believed that artists in Canada who were producing “Canadian” art were doing so for purely financial reasons: the market for such art was putting pressure on artists to produce it.¹⁰⁴

While critics such as Lenore Crawford of the *London Free Press* agreed that nationalism was passé,¹⁰⁵ Rea Montbixon of the *Montreal Gazette* argued that “[w]hen Mr. Townsend implies that our outlook is still clouded by the myth of a nationalist art, he perhaps means our search for identity, personal and national, this Canadian characteristic which might well appear as an anachronism to those who have never experienced it as a need.”¹⁰⁶

By the mid-1960s curators and staff at the National Gallery were in the midst of preparing *Three Hundred Years of Canadian Art*, a grand-scale exhibition that was part of the country's Centennial celebrations. As a result, the National Gallery decided to postpone the *Seventh Biennial Exhibition of Canadian Painting* until 1968. This meant that there was an extra year's worth of work to choose from. It also meant, unfortunately, that the exhibition was overshadowed by the Centennial celebrations.

There were a couple of significant changes to the *Seventh Biennial*. First, unlike previous exhibitions, the *Seventh Biennial* did not travel. The gallery initially intended to send the biennial across the country: in early 1965 Charles Comfort turned down a request by External Affairs to send the exhibition abroad, claiming that the biennial was “booked solidly.”¹⁰⁷ Despite Comfort's assertion, over the next two years the biennial's organizers began seriously considering sending the exhibition overseas instead of circulating it across Canada. Their plans eventually fell through leaving no time to reinstate a cross-country tour.¹⁰⁸ Hence, the National Gallery was the biennial's only venue. Second, this time both the initial and the final selection of the works was done by a single juror, a non-Canadian, and there was no honorary advisory committee. William Seitz, an American and the director of the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University, was chosen for this job by Jean Sutherland Boggs, the new director of the National Gallery.¹⁰⁹ Seitz, accompanied by his wife and by Richard Graburn, the executive assistant to the director at the National Gallery, and later by Pierre Théberge, travelled across Canada on a “45-day trek,”¹¹⁰ searching for works that he considered worthy of inclusion.

Boggs, a Canadian trained in the United States, claimed that the gallery was “fortunate in finding such a knowledgeable and sympathetic juror as William Seitz,” and cited his superior awareness of painters, or as she called it, his “responsive eye,” as evidence of his suitability. She wrote:

It is appropriate that he is the first American juror for the Biennial at a time when the United States and New York, in particular, are becoming such a spiritual magnet for Canadian artists and when the National Gallery of Canada is buying the works of contemporary American artists for the first time.¹¹¹

Critics were divided on the selection of Seitz. Some reacted favourably. The arts reporter for the *Toronto Star* wrote: “I am convinced that William Seitz...was a perceptive and sympathetic juror.”¹¹² Kay Kritzwiser, art columnist for *The Globe and Mail*, described Seitz's cross-Canada trip as an “indefatigable journey” and a “marathon” that resulted in a “fresh viewpoint on Canadian art.”¹¹³ Virginia Lambe of the *Montreal Gazette* believed that Seitz's “outsider” status was ultimately beneficial for the biennial. She wrote: “[H]appily, Mr. Seitz' relative unfamiliarity with the Canadian art scene seems to have resulted in a real freedom of choice based on significance and interest, and an ability to disregard our local sacred cows.”¹¹⁴

The choice of an American as juror was problematic for others. Bernadette Andrews of the *Toronto Telegram* wrote:

To mind, it does seem nationalistic provincialism, if there can be such a thing, to ask a foreign art historian to go across Canada in a matter of days and then parade our best art out for us. The obvious disappointment voiced by the first night

audience was described by some as Seitz's inability to choose Canada's best while others put it down to the lack of availability of the paintings.¹¹⁵

Barry Lord, sometime curator, art writer, editor, and outspoken critic of the United States, reacted even more scathingly: "The Americanization of the National Gallery keeps pace with the adoption of the U.S. election techniques by the new Prime Minister, and, more somberly, with the increasing U.S. control over our economy." Lord contended that most of the works that Seitz selected resembled current trends in American art, and "seriously de-emphasized our vital new figure painting and new regionalism, and ignored our few excellent organic abstractionists." This resulted in some "unforgivable omissions" such as Claude Breeze, Jack Chambers, Esther Warkov, John Meredith, Ted Godwin, and Gordon Rayner.¹¹⁶ "In the days when U.S. approval seemed important, that would have been enough. Today, when we see U.S. civilization in far more dubious perspective, while recognizing the validity of our own culture with post-Expo confidence, it doesn't seem to matter very much."¹¹⁷

In the exhibition catalogue, Seitz wrote that "[d]efense of the 'national spirit in art,' and what J. Russell Harper calls the 'cult of Canadianism,' based on landscape as a national symbol, now belongs as much to the past as does the touted 'American Scene' paintings of the twenties and thirties practiced by Benton, Curry and Wood." Instead, "the locality, the small group, the milieu" or "the scene" was in the process of replacing the national in Canadian art. Seitz singled out the work of Greg Curnoe and John Boyle of London, Ontario, as examples of "a new localism." Seitz felt Canada lagged behind the rest of the world artistically, and the country's active art centres were "still receivers rather than broadcasters in their relationship" to major international art centers like New York and Los Angeles, partly because Canada was a much less populous country than the United States. Seitz wrote: "[T]he movement of Canadian art from provincialism into the international arena is still in progress." Although his introduction ended on a positive note, praising Canadian painters and sculptors for their "creativity, vitality and intelligence," Seitz's essay reinforced the well-established view in the minds of many Canadians that their art was inferior.¹¹⁸ Equally potent was Seitz's idea that the time for biennial exhibitions in Canada was ending:

In question this year, is the efficacy of the biennial system.... Art in Canada is already too multiform and copious to present painting, drawing, graphics and sculpture (even without considering the varieties of "intermedia") in a single exhibition. It may be the last time, indeed, that the major medium of painting can be comprehensively presented.¹¹⁹



Figure 3. Opening of the *Seventh Biennial Exhibition of Canadian Painting*, 1968, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Left to right: Jean P.W. Ostiguy, Chairman of the Board of Trustees for the National Museums; William Seitz, Director, Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University; Jean Sutherland Boggs, Director, National Gallery of Canada. (Photo: National Gallery of Canada fonds, courtesy of the National Gallery Library and Archives.)

This idea took root among Canadian critics, who circulated it almost verbatim. The art critic for the *Toronto Star* wrote: "My final impression of the Biennial is simply that Canadian art is at least diverse enough and interesting enough to dispense with the biennial format. We've entered an era when it seems pointless to create an exhibition around a nationalism which clearly does not exist."¹²⁰ Kay Kritzwiser also supported Seitz's opinion that the *Seventh Biennial* "might be the last as such."¹²¹ Gail Dexter agreed: "The days of the biennials may be numbered. Because of the diversity of Canadian art, the exhibition has become unwieldy." Despite the fact that the Whitney Biennial continues in the United States to this day, Dexter quoted Seitz: "You couldn't do this kind of show in the U.S.—it's too big.... Soon, you won't be able to do it in Canada."¹²²

From the beginning it was clear that the *Seventh Biennial* was a failure. Dexter reported that the exhibition "opened on a low key as about 200 guests, artists, dealers, collectors, curators and the curious wandered around no less than three floors of exhibition space"¹²³ (fig. 3). Despite valiant attempts by the gallery and many art critics to promote the show, it failed to catch the public's attention in any significant way. Various reasons were cited for this. Barry Lord believed that it was because Seitz as an American did not have his finger on the pulse of Canadian art. Others, such as the critic for the *Ottawa Journal* believed that it was because Canadian art was becoming too outrageous and was alienating the "serious public."¹²⁴ Some merely took it as evidence that Seitz was right and the breadth of work being produced in Canada made such an exhibition impossible.

Over the course of thirteen years the National Gallery searched for a rationale to justify mounting the biennials, but in spite of continual adjustments the biennial exhibitions did not live up to the gallery's expectations. Failing to create an "imagined community," the biennial exhibitions received mixed reviews from the critics, the public, and the participants. Unable to come to any clear consensus as to what constituted Canadian art, the organizers were equally unable to settle on a satisfactory method of selecting works. By relying on foreign experts who were attuned to international art trends, the biennials failed to represent the breadth of Canadian art production. Ultimately, the biennials reflected the challenges affecting the country as its government and intellectuals strove to redefine a national identity in the mid-twentieth century.

Notes

- 1 William Seitz, "Introduction," *Seventh Biennial of Canadian Painting*, exh. cat., National Gallery of Canada (Ottawa, 1968), 5.
- 2 Alan Jarvis, Memorandum to the Minister, 22 June 1959, National Gallery of Canada, Exhibition Records, EX 0923, *Third Biennial of Canadian Art, 1959*, Vol. 8, National Gallery of Canada fonds, National Gallery Library and Archives.
- 3 Vipond, Mary, "Nationalism in the 20s," in *Interpreting Canada's Past*, 2nd edition, ed. J.M. Bumsted (Toronto, 1993), 448–55.
- 4 Vipond, "Nationalism," 449.
- 5 For a good overview of the conditions surrounding Canadian art practice in the 1950s, see Denise Leclerc, *The Crisis of Abstraction in Canada: The 1950s*, exh. cat., National Gallery of Canada (Ottawa, 1992).
- 6 For an excellent analysis of the complex issues surrounding multiculturalism in the post-war decades, see Eva Mackey, *The House of Difference: Cultural Politics and National Identity in Canada* (London and New York, 1999).
- 7 John Hutchinson, *The Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism: The Gaelic Revival and the Creation of the Irish Nation State* (London and Boston, 1987), 9.
- 8 Hutchinson, *Cultural Nationalism*, 13.
- 9 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1983), 15.
- 10 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 182.
- 11 Thomas Mayer, "Introduction," *National Gallery of Canada Annual Report 1952–1952* (Ottawa, 1953), 13.
- 12 Charles P. Fell, "Introduction," *National Gallery of Canada Annual Report 1955–1956* (Ottawa, 1956), 7.
- 13 Fell, *Annual Report 1955–1956*, 7.
- 14 Mackey, "Managing the House of Difference: Official Multiculturalism," 54.
- 15 *Report of the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences, 1949–1951* (Ottawa, 1951), 85.
- 16 Michael Bell, "Museums and Federal Cultural Policy," *Queen's Quarterly* 94, 3 (Autumn 1987): 554. Despite calls for decentralization, the Commission's recommendations led to nationally focused projects such as the establishment of the Canada Council and a new building for the National Gallery.
- 17 Andrew Nurse, "Rethinking the Canadian Archipelago: Research Trajectories in Region, Identity, and Diversity in Canada," Report prepared at the request of Canadian Heritage, 2002. See <http://www.canada.metropolis.net/events/diversity/Region.pdf>.
- 18 J.M.S. Careless, "'Limited Identities' in Canada," *The Canadian Historical Review* 50, 1 (March 1969): 1.
- 19 Ramsay Cook, "Canadian Centennial Celebrations," *International Journal* XXII (Autumn 1967): 663.
- 20 "Foreword," *Annual Exhibition of Canadian Painting, 1953*, exh. cat. National Gallery of Canada (Ottawa, 1953), n.p.
- 21 National Gallery of Canada, Canadian Press Despatch, 5 March 1954, National Gallery of Canada, Exhibition Records, EX 0747, 5.5B, *First Biennial Exhibition of Canadian Art, 1955*, File 2, National Gallery of Canada fonds, National Gallery Library and Archives. In 1953 Eric Newton crossed Canada on a coast-to-coast lecture tour. National Gallery of Canada, *Annual Report 1953–1954* (Ottawa, 1954).
- 22 National Gallery of Canada, Memorandum re: Travelling Arrangements for National Gallery Biennial 1955, EX 0747, 5.5B, File 2.
- 23 National Gallery of Canada, "Announcement of Biennial Exhibition of Canadian Painting, 1955," EX 0747, 5.5B, File 1.
- 24 Letter from H.O. McCurry to Jacques de Tonnacour, undated, EX 0747, 5.5B, File 1.
- 25 National Gallery of Canada, Canadian Press Despatch, 5 March 1954, EX 0747, 5.5B, File 2.
- 26 Letter from R.H. Hubbard to Reginald Shepherd, EX 0747, 5.5B, File 3.
- 27 Leclerc, *Crisis of Abstraction*, 77.
- 28 Art Lover, "Commonplace is Beautiful," letter to the editor, *Halifax Mail Star*, 7 May 1956.
- 29 "Canadian Paintings on Show," *The Globe and Mail*, 19 May 1955.
- 30 Carl Weiselberger, "Exhibition of Canadian Painting Bewilders, Pleases Young Students," *Ottawa Citizen*, 19 May 1955.
- 31 "Display of Canadian Paintings at Gallery," *Regina Leader Post*, 13 May 1955.
- 32 Angelo, "The Winnipeg Gallery," *Winnipeg Free Press*, November 1955.
- 33 Letter from Goodridge Roberts to R.H. Hubbard, undated, EX 0747, 5.5B, File 2.
- 34 Letter from John Lyman to R.H. Hubbard, 30 June 1955, EX 0747, 5.5B, File 2.
- 35 Letter from Jori Smith to F. Cleveland Morgan, 17 June 1955, EX 0747, 5.5B, File 2.
- 36 Letter from Alan Jarvis to Avery Shaw, 30 May 1956, EX 0747, 5.5B, File 3.
- 37 Letter from Alan Jarvis to Andrew C. Ritchie, 26 October 1956, EX 0747, 5.5B, File 1.

- 38 Letter from Andrew C. Ritchie to Alan Jarvis, 30 October 1956, EX 0747, 5.5B, File 1.
- 39 "Finds Canadian Painting Has Surprising Vitality," *Ottawa Journal*, 13 March 1957.
- 40 "Vitality," *Ottawa Journal*, 13 March 1957.
- 41 "Vitality," *Ottawa Journal*, 13 March 1957.
- 42 "Canadian Art Wins Praise of American," *Montreal Gazette*, 13 March 1957; "Critic Finds Vital Art By Canadians," *Ottawa Citizen*, 13 March 1957; "Modern Canadian Painting Has New Universal Outlook," *Toronto Telegram*, 31 March 1957.
- 43 "Introduction," *Second Biennial Exhibition of Canadian Art, 1957*, exh. cat., Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada (Ottawa, 1957), n.p.
- 44 "Introduction," *Second Biennial*, n.p.
- 45 The group referred to themselves the "weeds." Letter signed Belzile, Ewen, Jasmin, Leduc, Letendre, McEwen, Mousseau, and Toupin to the National Gallery of Canada, undated, EX 0747, 5.5B, File 1.
- 46 "Introduction," *Second Biennial*, n.p.
- 47 Leclerc, *Crisis of Abstraction*, 39.
- 48 Leclerc, *Crisis of Abstraction*, 79.
- 49 "Introduction," *Second Biennial*, n.p.
- 50 Buchanan is clearly referring to American regionalism of the 1930s with its nationalistic overtones.
- 51 "Introduction," *Second Biennial*, n.p.
- 52 Letter from Alan Jarvis to J. Gordon Sinclair, 21 May 1957, National Gallery of Canada, Exhibition Records, EX 0923, *Third Biennial Exhibition of Canadian Art, 1959*, Vol. 1, National Gallery of Canada fonds, National Gallery Library and Archives.
- 53 Letter from Alan Jarvis to Robert Ayre, 20 May 1958, EX 0923, Vol. 1.
- 54 Letter from Alan Jarvis to Gordon Washburn, 15 January 1959, EX 0923, Vol. 1.
- 55 Letter from the National Gallery to various artists, 18 February 1959, EX 0923, Vol. 3.
- 56 Memorandum from Jean-René Ostiguy to Mr. Simmins, 3 February 1959, EX 0923, Vol. 2.
- 57 Leclerc, *Crisis of Abstraction*, 78.
- 58 Donald W. Buchanan, Colin Graham, Gordon B. Washburn, "Report of the Jury," *Third Biennial Exhibition of Canadian Art, 1959*, exh. cat., National Gallery of Canada (Ottawa, 1959), n.p.
- 59 "Gallery Finds 98 Canadian Works," *Montreal Gazette*, 7 May 1959; Stuart Lake, "Abstract Art Leads Canadian Paintings," *Ottawa Journal*, 7 May 1959; Carl Weiselberger, "Looks To 'New Life' in Canadian Painting," *Ottawa Citizen*, 7 May 1959; "Non-Objective Art Holds Popularity in Canada," *London Free Press*, 23 May 1959.
- 60 Letter from B. Galbraith-Cornell to Alan Jarvis, 4 July 1959, EX 0923, Vol. 9.
- 61 Jean-René Ostiguy, "Third Biennial of Canadian Art: Comments on its organization and suggestions for the future," EX 0923, Vol. 9.
- 62 Jean-René Ostiguy, "Further Suggestions for the Biennial Policy," 10 June 1960, National Gallery of Canada, Exhibition Records, EX 1003, *Fourth Biennial Exhibition of Canadian Art, 1961*, Vol. 1, National Gallery of Canada fonds, National Gallery Library and Archives. In a final memo a week later, Ostiguy amended this last point to read: "a big exhibition of no importance to any artist who already has several of his works in the Gallery." Jean-René Ostiguy, "Further Suggestions for the Biennial Policy," 17 June 1960, EX 1003, Vol. 1.
- 63 Memorandum from Richard Simmins to the Director, 8 June 1960, EX 1003, Vol. 1; Memorandum from Richard Simmins, Claude Picher, and Norah McCullough to the Director, 10 June 1960, EX 1003, Vol. 1.
- 64 Memorandum from D.W. Buchanan to Dr. Comfort, Dr. Hubbard, Mr. Simmins, and Mr. Ostiguy, 3 June 1960; Memorandum from Claude Picher to Dr. Comfort, Mr. Buchanan, Dr. Hubbard, Mr. Simmins, and Mr. Ostiguy, 10 June 1960, EX 1003, Vol. 1.
- 65 Privately, R.H. Hubbard confessed that he was personally opposed to open exhibitions. He stated that he preferred "a hand-picked exhibition by someone whose taste [could] be trusted." Letter from R.H. Hubbard to Mrs. E.G. Berry, 24 July 1961, EX 1003, Vol. 6.
- 66 J. Russell Harper, quoted in "Biennial Exhibition Now Open to All," Press Release, 8 November 1960, EX 1003, Vol. 1.
- 67 Joan Munn, Memorandum, "Ads for Biennial," 14 November 1960, EX 1003, Vol. 1.
- 68 "National Gallery's Biennial Exhibition: It's Open To ALL Canadians," *Toronto Telegram*, 26 November 1960.
- 69 "National Art Gallery," *Guelph Guardian*, 1 December 1960.
- 70 "Canada Biennial Wide Open," *Ottawa Citizen*, 12 November 1960.
- 71 Eckhardt, who was originally from Austria, had worked at the Winnipeg Art Gallery since 1953. It is interesting that neither artist was a nonobjective painter; in fact, they were firmly the opposite.
- 72 Letter from Charles Comfort to The Honourable Treasury Board, 11 April 1961, EX 1003, Vol. 5.
- 73 Comfort to Treasury Board, 11 April 1961.
- 74 Letter from Kathleen [Fenwick] to Bob [R.H. Hubbard], 16 August, 1960, EX 1003, Vol. 1.
- 75 "Report of the Jury," *Fourth Biennial*, n.p.
- 76 The National Gallery moved to the Lorne Building on Elgin Street in February 1960.
- 77 G.G.L., "Art Show Strong On Abstractions," *Ottawa Citizen*, 20 May 1961; Robert Ayre, "The Fourth Biennial Exhibit," *Montreal Star*, 24 May 1961; Robert Fulford, "Surprise Biennial," *Toronto Daily Star*, 27 May 1961
- 78 "Youth Well Represented in Fourth Biennial," *Montreal Gazette*, 20 May 1961; Jean Carrière, "Peu de toiles figuratives à la biennale d'art canadien," *Le Droit* (Ottawa), 20 May 1961; "Art Lovers Flock to Gallery Exhibit," *Ottawa Journal*, 8 July 1961.
- 79 Ayre, "Fourth Biennial," *Montreal Star*, 24 May 1961.
- 80 The jury was comprised of Kathleen Fenwick, Curator of Prints and Drawings; J.R. Harper, Curator of Canadian Art; R.H. Hubbard, Chief Curator; Frank Panabaker, Trustee; Jean Raymond, Trustee; Charles Comfort, Director; and Thomas Maher, Chairman of the Board of Trustees. *Fifth Biennial Exhibition of Canadian Painting, 1963*, exh. cat., National Gallery of Canada (Ottawa, 1963), n.p.

- 81 Harper wrote that the artists' insecurity and reluctance to paint "Canadian" "is so apparent in Newfoundland as to require special comment." J. Russell Harper, "The Contemporary Canadian Scene," *Fifth Biennial*, 3–5.
- 82 Elizabeth Kilbourn, "The Art of Artmanship," *Toronto Daily Star*, 15 February 1964.
- 83 "Fifth Biennial to Open in England," National Gallery of Canada Press Release, 23 January 1963, National Gallery of Canada, Exhibition Records, EX 1086, *Fifth Biennial Exhibition of Canadian Painting, 1963*, Vol. 2, National Gallery of Canada, Library and Archives.
- 84 *Time* also claimed that the cash-strapped gallery had abandoned "the customary international jury and culled the selections itself," in an effort to save money. "The Biennial Abroad," *Time* (New York), 21 June 1963.
- 85 Comfort, "Foreword," *Fifth Biennial*, 1.
- 86 "Canadian Painting," *London Times*, 14 June 1963.
- 87 Eric Newton, quoted in Paul Duval, "Un-palette-able Platitudes," *Toronto Telegram*, 27 July 1963. Newton's review of contemporary Canadian art was significantly kinder than David Storey's had been a year earlier when he described Canada's contribution to a Commonwealth exhibition as "17 of the most banal paintings which, with intent and purpose, one could wish to assemble in any one place." David Storey, quoted in "The Arts," *Time*, 21 June 1963.
- 88 Newton, quoted in Duval, "Platitudes," *Toronto Telegram*, 27 July 1963.
- 89 John Richardson, quoted in Duval, "Platitudes," *Toronto Telegram*, 27 July 1963.
- 90 "Coast to Coast Tour Produces Fifth Biennial," National Gallery of Canada Press Release, 18 September 1963, EX 1086, Vol. 3.
- 91 Tony Emery, "Critically Speaking," transcript for radio broadcast, 30 June 1963, National Gallery of Canada, Exhibition Records, *Commonwealth Institute Exhibition*, EX 1086, Vol. 1.
- 92 Carl Weisberger, "Canadian Art Showcase 'Fifth Biennial' Opens," *Ottawa Citizen*, 20 September 1963.
- 93 "Gallery Art Show Held Attraction for Centennial," *Ottawa Journal*, 20 September 1963.
- 94 Robert Ayre, "Emptiness in the Fifth Canadian Biennial," *Montreal Star*, 28 September 1963.
- 95 "*Sixth Biennial Exhibition of Canadian Painting, 1965*," National Gallery of Canada Press Release, 22 July 1964, National Gallery of Canada, Exhibition Records, EX 1174, *Sixth Biennial Exhibition of Canadian Painting, 1965*, Vol. 1, National Gallery of Canada, Library and Archives; see also "6th Biennial of Canadian Painting—1965," *Ottawa Citizen*, 24 July 1964.
- 96 "Sixth Biennial Exhibition of Canadian Painting, 1965," National Gallery of Canada Press Release, 28 August 1964, EX 1174, Vol. 1.
- 97 "The Arts," *Time*, Canadian Edition (Montreal), 18 June 1965.
- 98 David Silcox, "Biennial Show Poses Question," *The Globe and Mail*, 5 June 1965.
- 99 "Sixth Biennial," Press Release, 28 August 1964, EX 1174, Vol. 1.
- 100 "Sixth Biennial," Press Release, 17 September 1964, EX 1174, Vol. 1; "Sixth Biennial," Press Release, 14 October 1964, EX 1174, Vol. 1.
- 101 "Sixth Biennial," Press Release, 17 September 1964, EX 1174, Vol. 1.
- 102 Charles F. Comfort, "Foreword," *Sixth Biennial Exhibition of Canadian Painting, 1965*, exh. cat., National Gallery of Canada (Ottawa, 1965), 3.
- 103 Comfort, "Foreword," *Sixth Biennial*, 3.
- 104 William Townsend, "Introduction," *Sixth Biennial*, 4–8. Nineteen sixty-five was also the year that the political philosopher George Parkin Grant published his widely read *Lament for a Nation: The Defeat of Canadian Nationalism*, one of the direst warnings about Canada's increasing dependence on the United States.
- 105 Lenore Crawford, "Show Gives Up to Date Account of Canadian Art Trends," *London Free Press*, 8 December 1965.
- 106 Rea Montbixon, "Canadian Painting 1965—A Shift in Focus," *Montreal Gazette*, 19 June 1965.
- 107 Letter from Charles Comfort to J.A. McCordick, 25 March 1965, National Gallery of Canada, Exhibition Records, EX 1296, *Seventh Biennial Exhibition of Canadian Painting, 1968*, Vol. 1, National Gallery of Canada fonds, National Gallery Library and Archives.
- 108 Letter from Joanna Woods Marsden to Hans Strelow (Dusseldorf), 11 April 1968, EX 1296, Vol. 16.
- 109 Boggs received her MA and her PhD from Radcliffe (1947 and 1953 respectively).
- 110 "Freedom to Grow," *Time* (Canada), 19 July 1968.
- 111 *The Responsive Eye* was the title of a 1965 exhibition on Op Art curated by Seitz at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York City while he was the MOMA's Curator of Exhibitions. *The Responsive Eye* included the works of Guido Molinari and Claude Tousignant. This was cited as clear evidence of his "awareness of painters in Canada." Jean Sutherland Boggs, "Foreword," *Seventh Biennial Exhibition of Canadian Painting, 1968*, exh. cat., National Gallery of Canada (Ottawa, 1968), n.p.
- 112 "We've Outgrown Biennials," *Toronto Star*, 6 July 1968.
- 113 Kay Kritzwiser, "The Biennial: The Fruit of a Search for Canadian Works," *The Globe and Mail*, 6 July 1968.
- 114 Virginia Lambe, "A Colorful Biennial, Without Sacred Cows," *Montreal Gazette*, 17 August 1968.
- 115 Bernadette Andrews, "The Biennial," *Toronto Telegram*, 6 July 1968.
- 116 Barry Lord, "*Seventh Biennial Exhibition of Canadian Painting*: National Gallery of Canada," *Artscanada* 25 (August 1968): 38, 39.
- 117 Barry Lord, "Art and Artists: It's What Isn't There That Hurts Showing," *Kitchener Waterloo Record*, 6 July 1968.
- 118 Seitz, "Introduction," *Seventh Biennial*, 7, 11, 12.
- 119 Seitz, "Introduction," *Seventh Biennial*, 5.
- 120 "We've Outgrown Biennials," *Toronto Star*, 6 July 1968.
- 121 Kritzwiser, "Fruit of a Search," *The Globe and Mail*, 6 July 1968.
- 122 Gail Dexter, "Days of Biennials Numbered?" *Toronto Daily Star*, 5 July 1968.
- 123 Dexter, "Days of Biennials," *Toronto Daily Star*, 5 July 1968.
- 124 "The Seventh Biennial: Outraging the Philistines," *Ottawa Journal*, 13 July 1968.