

(December 13, 1926)

Canadian Art

BY MR. ARTHUR LISMER.*

In a humorous introduction of the guest of the day the President of the Club, George H. Sedgewick said that in the matter of art laymen were generally a generation or so behind the times, and that by the time they had grown accustomed to one school of art another had sprung up to take its place. Only a day or so previously, he said, he had come across some verse by Sir Walter Raleigh, late professor at Oxford University, in which he said:

The world of beauty that we see
The artist cannot let it be.
He fiddles with the works of God
And makes them look uncommon odd.
The artist uses honest paint
To represent things as they ain't,
And then asks money for the time
He took to perpetrate the crime.

Mr. Lismer, the president said, had achieved high position in the world of art and was one of the Group of Seven whose work had stirred up much discussion throughout Canada and, he had no doubt, throughout a much wider area.

MR. ARTHUR LISMER: Mr. President and gentlemen, I am very conscious of the honor you have conferred on me—I was going to say favor, but I am not feeling exactly that it is a favor. But I do feel it to be a privilege to say something to you about Canadian art. It was intimated that you would possibly be interested in hearing something about the Group of Seven. Well, I don't want to say much about the Group of Seven except that it is a

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curious thing to me that when you talk about Canadian art and the Group of Seven the terms are used as if they were synonymous, although the Group of Seven does not include all Canadian art by a long way. But when we talk about Canadian art nowadays we are willing to include the Group of Seven.

I would like to be able to talk to you very freely about certain phases of Canadian art, and I suppose if I were talking to a group of art students, who are very receptive, I should have a chance to bully them a little. But I am rather afraid of the Canadian Club in that respect and if there is any appearance in my manner of being a little too professorial I don't feel it, and you will excuse it as my business of art instructor created the habit.

There is no reason to apologise for, nor defend the work of any truly Canadian painter today, and although there may be—indeed there are, those who with prejudice and a natural clinging to older and perhaps more worthy traditions feel no impulse towards appreciation of the work of any particular group—yet it has undoubtedly occurred that some standard or attitude of appreciation towards the art of this country is in the course of unfoldment and people are finding that art is a necessity. This is amply evidenced in our own City of Toronto, in the growth of art schools and technical and art courses and lastly the development and enrichment of our civic life by the widening and growth of that best of all institutions in the cultural rounding out of our civic life—the Art Gallery. From a small institution with a perverse gift of connoisseurship and traditional preciousness has grown the Art Gallery of Toronto, in the hands of earnest and wise citizens who in the main claim no intimate knowledge of the Fine Arts, and who seek no reward. With well-placed and distinguished energy and effort they have given to the city an institution that is worthy of the generous bequests made by those who have contributed towards the building of such a splendid home for works of art, and have made possible the beginning of a collection of Canadian Art. And it has provided a resting place for that magnificent canvas "The West Wind" by Tom Thomson, so generously and spontaneously

given by the members of the Canadian Club. You may have done other things of more useful merit, but never was an action more in keeping with our national and artistic development. In a year or two, if the present energies of the membership committee are sustained, nobody with an income above \$2,000 a year will be able to say that they are not members of the Art Gallery. So you might as well give in your name now.

What is Canadian art? What does it mean? I will try and give you one or two ideas. Is it merely that certain painters, born here, or imported into the country, are painting pictures of Canadian subjects—spruce trees, rocks and mountains—and because of certain anarchic tendencies in unbalanced and capricious natures are giving to these pictures strange and uncouth forms; colors that are not natural, shapes that are absurd and exaggerated? *That* belief was possible a year or two ago, but not today. Is it due to the natural and spontaneous impudence of the Canadian type that he loves to stick his tongue out at tradition and go gaily on his own livelier road through his own native bush instead of following the shady, flower-strewn ways of older countries? Is he more adventurous and not quite so complete as those painters of other countries? I think all these things might be true. But more than this the Canadian painter of today has been given courage to express the belief that in this country there is a vast background of unexplored territory. In the objective sense this may be typified by our north country and the boundless west. In the historical sense this may be typified by our religious, racial and pioneer origins. In the industrial sense this may be typified by our vast natural resources. In the spiritual sense by our hidden yearnings and national creative desires to know our own country and to seek its beauty. A nation's resources are manifold, and if you will permit me we will take up one or two of these things in order.

We will take first our national background. It is generally assumed, of course, that a painter is moved by picturesqueness; that is, that he is fond of painting sunsets and scenery. You have often known of people inviting painters to their summer cottages because of the sunsets

and beautiful view. He is supposed to be thrilled by classical trees and formal romantic scenery and it is thought he must paint entertaining pictures to please people who have no concrete idea of the purpose of art except that it shall soothe their leisured hours. I met a business man the other day walking through the Art Gallery picking out certain pictures and he said: "These are the pictures I should want in my room." I think a business man should have the type of pictures that pleases and soothes him. You can imagine what a load it takes off the duties of a wife to know she can push her husband into a room where he will be soothed by his own collection.

We are conscious of our newness and of the respect due to older countries—although fortunately that is rapidly passing, but we are entrenched in our opinions about art, which have always been antagonistic to the artist of today and especially in our own country. We desire to live in contentment and peace. We don't desire to be disturbed. Physically and intellectually we are adventurous. We possess as a nation a creative imagination willing to explore and experiment. Aesthetically we accept the view of our Anglo-Saxon heritage that art is a kind of hedonistic pursuit that might have some value in it, but only when public opinion abroad has given it the cachet of quality. And we love with a tremendous affection our natural and boundless background of lake and stream, forest and prairie, mountain and coast, each with their precious memories of pioneer, explorer and prospector. Is it any wonder that with the newly-opened opportunities to explore this background the Canadian painter intuitively sensed a way out of the manifest ennui of decadent academicism of European art into an independence of thought and freedom from mere technical dexterity that comes like a blight at times in the annals of the art of all nations. What a vast array of subject matter never before attempted by painters! And incidentally, it was not the way these things were painted that gave objection, but that the painters were experimenting with forbidden forms—by which I mean not commonly accepted forms, not classical nor romantic. It was the stark realism of some aspects of the north country

in its austerity and severe aloofness that appalled by its searching and objective reality. To those accustomed to be pleased by a pictorial representation these pictures could not be art, nor the work of artists. But consider what was happening. Commonplace picturesqueness disappears in the north country and is replaced by epical and powerfully moving shapes. Conventional paintings, easy atmospheric effects, tepid and non-committal attack, has, perforce, to be discarded. Here are noble shapes, strangely moving dramas of form and color, effects of light and weather that make the timid one duck for shelter and send the bolder one farther afield. The north country is not by any means a timid painter's paradise. Gradually it was borne in on these painters of a newer school that if ever this country was to receive its interpretative baptism in paint then older theories and rules to a great extent must be discarded and a return made to the simpler forms and distinctive design common before the decay of the painters' craft into an exhibition of skill of the hand. There had to be a firm grasping of the design and rhythm of mountain and stream, of the serrated aspect of spruce and pine against skies of such glorious clarity, unsurpassed in beauty in any other country in the world.

It was a new paradise and a new idiom was needed and if credit can be given to the Group of Seven then it is that they have moved the art of landscape painting into a more rhythmic and plastic idiom, more in harmony with the energy and quality of our national character.

In the history of any country a new movement occurs when societies and official art have impressed too strongly an apathetic indolence regarding the native growth and environment. That new movement expresses itself almost inevitably in a return to landscape. It was so in Holland in the seventeenth century; in England in the eighteenth century; in France and the United States in the nineteenth and it is so in Canada in the twentieth century. That is why I say that our national background is so valuable aesthetically. The changes of season, topographical contours, native trees and majestic forms of rock and mountain are moulds for the form of a nation and if we cannot be

moved by strange, primitive fears and religious impulses that stirred the earliest inhabitants of these vast areas then the artist is entering into his true vocation when he depicts and presents them in the form of paintings and literature.

Now this same background provides for industrial expansion. It contains the hoarded treasures for the sustenance of countless generations. It is a recreational background to which we go gladly for our physical well-being, and I think we get more thrill in paddling down a rock-ribbed shore line in Algoma, lined with crimson and yellow maple and birch, with the sombre spruce, like the deep notes of an organ, massed along the water's edge, than we do by a stolen half day knocking a stupid ball into the void.

Why not grant some of this difference in subject to the painter and accept his change of mood and attack imposed by his newer environment? In this city alone (and Toronto may justly claim to be the art centre of Canada) there are hundreds of young painters and art workers receiving art training; there are many fine painters who represent achievement in their own manner of expression rather than experiment; there are also individuals, both men and women, who have never touched a brush before and who find infinite joy in stealing into distant places to experiment with a new medium. This is wholesome enjoyment and I commend it to you as an anodyne for mental sickness and distaste of our modern man-made efficiency. A few hours with a pencil before a tree or a stretch of landscape will cure all the animosity against groups or factions and distorted trees and blasted rocks. You will find yourself dropping into the language of your childhood when we mixed all our endeavor with the medicine of unadulterated joy and a courage born of lack of knowledge.

Now I come to a consideration of the historical background. Canadian history is not a subject we read often. We push it into the limbo of High School studies and give it a remote and picturesque past. But it will not be treated thus. It is too vivid, too glorious, too full of romance and tears, of energy and courage. This background has been explored by only a few artists who have reconstructed in fine paintings and mural decorations the episodes of ex-

ploration and discovery. Re-creations such as this are needed and valuable, especially in public education.

A great work to be undertaken by some society in the future would be to place in every great school in the province noble and dignified mural decorations representing great episodes in the Canadian story, these to be produced by Canadian artists who will employ advanced students of art working under their guidance and carrying out their designs, and not by imported foreign artists, as is quite a common custom. Our own are so much better for the work. The more we can tell in song, word and picture of our historical background the more enriched our national consciousness will be—and the picture is the modern idiom.

Now for the quality of Canadian art in industry. This is a huge problem which, as the years go by, must be faced. The current keynote of industry is efficiency and the machine is the medium of expression and the colossus of output. The common problems among manufacturers and distributors are mostly on such subjects as speed of output, elimination of waste, disposal of by-products and physical well-being of employes. But the efficiency is concentrated on the greatest output in the shortest time at the least cost. What is sadly needed in modern Canadian commercial life is that our commodities for home and export trade should not only be well and artistically advertised, but that the efficiency and quality of the "Made in Canada" goods should bear the stamp of the designer who can use the natural resources of design in the country and make of them valuable commercial assets.

In the field of industrial design there is no need to consider ourselves incapable of producing distinctive goods of fine craftsmanship. When we consider the best industrial art objects of other countries, objects of everyday life, there is in them a decidedly national feeling. English furniture, French silks and pottery, Japanese fabrics—they come to us in countless quantities, dumped on our doorstep, often without paying duty, and we buy them, cheap as many of them are, because we as a nation are neglectful and imitative and prefer to take what other nations send us in the shape of well-designed goods that sell in the markets of the world.

We spend millions per annum on technical education and scientific research and almost nothing on the kind of industrial research into national design that will make our products sought in the markets of the world. I would like to suggest that perhaps a little of the same impulse that motivated the early efforts of the modern Canadian painter would be of value to the manufacturer of modern Canadian products in the present day. There are craftsmen and women from other countries coming almost daily to this country and we bend them to the work of our idea of production. We either stick them helplessly on untilled land or put them to work on the machine. At the present time we are throwing away valuable industrial assistance for many of these immigrants are workers in metal and wood, weavers and potters, who might be made better Canadians by wise introduction to our national products. We have vast resources of clays, timber and metals and the raw materials of fabrics and we export wastefully this raw material for other nations to make into objects of commercial value for re-importation into Canada. Industrial design research is a necessity of the evolutionary process of finding our national place in the markets of the world.

We have the ability to train designers, we have the materials and a wealth of distinctive motifs in an abundantly rich background, to weave it into our fabrics, to carve into our furniture and cast into our metals. That is a worthwhile problem to study and is a real Canadian art subject of national importance.

Art can and does enrich life in all its phases and the art of the Canadian designer can enrich our industrial life. But the imitative product of the machine without art impulses to guide the form of its output can and does impoverish our life. If other nations are capable of enriching their products with distinctive design then we as a nation are surely capable of effort to that end. Necessity of beauty of design, unfortunately, has not been a part of the manufacturer's training.

You will wonder perhaps why I am introducing the subject of industrial design into a discussion of Canadian art. It is because we have too long become accustomed to

traditional and timeworn forms in almost everything of refinement and taste, and to easy acceptance of the professionalism and pontificalism in the arts. We mistrust the courage and powers within us to achieve our national independence in anything but politics and sport. We do not affirm with sufficient emphasis that we also possess an aesthetic independence if we would encourage and exercise it.

We have talked too long of art in terms of connoisseurship. We are affected by common art sale room gossip. We wonder and comment on the high prices paid for pictures, as if this common-place sale room barter was important to us. We read the humbug of art news—somebody has discovered a Rembrandt, another has discovered a Van Dyke. We are either bored or thrilled at the wonder of this pseudo art news and we know not the names of our own artists nor do we sense the great destiny of Canada as an art-producing nation.

There is a generation of Canadian-born youth painting in all parts of the dominion and they are going to be as important contributors to the enrichment of the art of the world as those of any nation, and there is need of that sympathy which is the truest appreciation, between public and artist, between manufacturer and designer. Sympathy is not pity but a desire to understand the meaning of Canadian art. It has nothing to do with academies nor societies nor groups. It has to do with ourselves and the responsibility for the quality of Canadian art is vested as much with the kind of sympathy and appreciation extended as it is with the work of the artist himself. Art of some kind we are bound to have for it is a necessity of human relationships. And the best that can be said for the modern movement in Canadian art is that it has awakened in other countries, as well as within our own consciousness, a sentiment that Canada is no longer a raw, struggling nation, but has courageously embarked upon an independent pathway, freed from the deadly formulas of foreign "isms." That pathway is a highroad to perfection for what we call Canadian art, in that it reflects our own energy and resourcefulness, and reveals it to other nations; and national art, in that it interprets our environment and types.

Three years ago an exhibition of Canadian paintings went to the great British Empire Exhibition at Wembley and a room in the Fine Arts Building was given over to Canadian art. The London critics spoke in glowing terms of Canadian art, and if any of you were, as I was, privileged to go into that room, you saw that here was a great national art in the process of unfolding, and like all growth, it glowed with a vital energy. In that exhibition were about two hundred paintings and only about fifteen were by members of the Group of Seven. And more than the work of any other of the Overseas Dominions this Canadian art reflected its nationality. You have only to write to the director of the National Gallery at Ottawa and you may receive a copy of the collected criticisms of Canadian art, and there you will see that approval and praise were generously bestowed. The same thing occurred at the second Wembley and high honors were paid to Canadian painters of the modern movement at the Philadelphia Sesqui-Centennial also.

The modern Canadian art movement needs no defence, nor apologies. It challenges the apathy of indifference. It has no quarrel with academic thought because it will soon become the tradition of the country. But it will also seek expression in education and industry, giving courage and independence to our national development.

The direction of its outward trails was in the search for new territory, North, East and West, but its deeper significance has struck a trail into the life of the Dominion. All that the critics have said of it may be true but none may say (imperfect and lacking in traditional form though the movement may be) that it has not touched the art life of Canada. And when the art impulses of a nation are stirred then something vital moves into a responsive rhythm and we recognise a spiritual force that rises far above the trivialities or differences of schools and methods, foreign customs and stale fashions.