

ART, SOCIETY AND THE MONTREAL STUDENT

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MONTREAL art students are juggling with thousands of combinations of form and colour like sorcerers' apprentices who hope, by stroking their masters' magic lamps, to summo myriad genii from the bowels of the earth, myriad sprites from the upper air. They are pilgrims who have stumbled onto the path saints, philosophers, artists and poets have trod through out the centuries in their search for truth.

Some of the students drum a call to arms against the greed and combativeness of our industrial civilization. Some seek to portray life as it is lived in Canada to-day. They are inspired by the sights and impressions of everyday life. Others see to probe the Infinite. Their imagination is their only guide.

The major art schools in Montreal are the Montreal Art Gallery, where studies are under the direction of Mr. Arthur Lismer, Associate of the Royal Canadian Academy, and the Ecole des Beaux Arts. M. Alfred Pellan, one of the leading abstract painters in French Canada to-day is a member of the Faculty of the Ecole des Beaux Arts. Another leading abstract painter is M. Paul Emile Borduas, a teacher at the Ecole du Meuble, which is likewise in Montreal.

World famous art galleries might well take an interest in the Montreal Art Gallery. On the ground and first floor are statuettes from Tanagra, gold-embossed, blue glass mosque lamps, Dr. Johnson's red velvet waistcoat, a "Salisbury Cathedral" by Constable, Daumiers, Rembrandts, Roualts, Cezannes. On the top floor are studios where children finger-paint in the mornings, business people sketch from the model at night, and aspirant professional artists practise all day long. The Faculty members include abstract painters. Discussions between partisans of one or another of the contemporary schools of art are heated and numerous. The atmosphere is that of a Renaissance master's workshop.

Mr. Lismer believes in absolute self-expression for his students. He encourages them to rely on their own judgment. They forget their partiality for one particular style, and learn to experiment for themselves. There may never be any great geniuses among the graduates of the Montreal Art Gallery.

Neither will there be devotees of one particular style, practising one particular style, unable to express themselves in any other, and either throwing up art altogether when they discover the limitations of that style, or practising it ad infinitum.

Among the students at the Montreal Art Gallery are a number of veterans. It is they who want to make painting the executioner of slums, superstition and squalor. One, a war casualty, and former textile worker, is now painting a fresco which depicts hundreds of exhausted men and women streaming past their bosses, expressionless, from the gates of a textile mill. These students, numbering perhaps half a dozen, feel little interest in even such mildly modern art as that of Modigliani. They feel it is too abstract, too little expressive of the realities they survived.

"Art can be a great spiritual force in the life of a people" one of them explained, as he was mixing mortar. "To-day it is not. Ordinary people pretend to understand abstract art but they do not. I think it is pure escapism, sheer cowardice on the part of the artists who know they should be telling people how greedy and ambitious they are, but are afraid that if they do, their paintings won't sell. So they shut themselves up in a cell labelled 'plastic expression'. We want to paint the history of Canada as it was lived. This painting would be inspiring because it would tell the lives of simple people."

Moe Reinblatt, a former official war artist, and one of the more outstanding of the students, is forever scrutinizing faces, crowds, buildings, shop windows. There are hundreds of drawings in his folders, sketched from beggars, riders, skiers, strollers in the city parks, shoppers crowding neighborhood stores.

The French Canadian students who are experimenting with abstract art are quite as aware as their English-speaking comrades at the Montreal Art Gallery that human greed and arrogance were responsible for Belsen and Maidanek. They express this truth in abstract terms, as the Hindus added many arms to their idols to express all-embracing divinity, because their traditions are humanistic and classical.

For generations French-Canadian families have expected one son, or a daughter, at least to join a religious order. They have felt themselves an island of the faithful in an all-engulfing ocean of Protestant infidels ever since they were conquered by the British. Their contempt for a civilization based on the dollar is that of the Frenchman for one based on German racial theories.

Perhaps abstract art expresses this feeling of insularity, which, fortunately, is gradually disappearing.

Artisans, painters and sculptors were honoured members of early French-Canadian society because France simply transplanted her feudal society, with its seigneurs and its guilds to America. The first arts and crafts school in Canada was founded during the reign of Louis XIV. Colbert, then Minister for the Colonies, staffed the school with French teachers and encouraged French-Canadian students to complete their training in Europe. To-day the government of Quebec is the only government in Canada which grants scholarships to its promising artists to enable them to study abroad. It also maintains two art schools, the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Montreal, and that in Montreal, the Ecole du Meuble, which trains furniture makers to become not only artisans but artists as well, and numerous handicraft schools.

The attitude of the French-Canadian students to art is best illustrated by a story Clive Bell tells in his *Essay on Art*:

In the days of Alexander Severus there lived at Rome a Greek freed man. As he was a clever craftsman, his lot was not hard. His body was secure, his belly full, his hands and brain pleasantly busy. He lived amongst intelligent people and handsome objects, permitting himself such reasonable emotions as were recommended by his master, Epicurus. He awoke each morning to a quiet day of ordered satisfaction, the prescribed toll of unexacting labour, a little sensual pleasure, a little rational conversation, a cool argument, a judicious apprehension of all that the intellect can apprehend. Into this existence burst suddenly a cranky fanatic, with a religion. To the Greek it seemed that the breath of life had blown through the grave, imperial streets. Yet nothing in Rome was changed, save one immortal soul. The same waking eyes opened on the same objects; yet all was changed; all was charged with meaning. New things existed. Everything mattered. In the vast quality of religious emotion the Greek forgot his status and his nationality. His life became a miracle and an ecstasy. As a lover awakes, he awoke to a day full of consequence and delight. He had learnt to feel; and because to feel, a man must live, it was good to be alive. I know an erudite and intelligent man, a man whose arid life had been little better than one long cold in the head, for whom that madman, Van Gogh, did nothing else.

Art, argue the French-Canadian students, cannot be rationalized. It cannot be explained. It must be felt. They are keenly sensitive to the distinction between art "felt" and art "appreciated". The former implies a nervous, emotional response on

the part of the spectator, the latter an intellectual respect for the artist's skill and a cool appraisal of his genius such as might have made the Greek freed man before he abandoned the cult of Epicurus for that of Christ.

"We want to create music," Jean Paul Mousseau explained, as we examined his pictures in his garret, a typical artist's garret. "You do not say when you hear Tchaikowsky, such and such a chord sounds like a bird's song. You simply say it is beautiful. Painting should be like that, enjoyed for its own sake, not because it resembles this or that."

His painting "Chasse Gallèrie" is a satanic canvas.

The theme is the French-Canadian superstition that if the lumbermen in the bush in the far north surrender their souls to the Devil on Christmas Eve, he will carry them back to their homes in the towns, but they must neither cross themselves nor invoke God during their journey. In the picture a red cloud slits a black sky, a green wave the black river. The impression of the whole is of a pitch-black night seething with the glee of Satan, who has won yet more souls from God.

Jean Paul Mousseau's sketches are all sombre, sometimes ebony phantasms of the damned soaring through hell, painted in the intense, clear, rich reds, blues, amethysts, greens and ambers of a Chartres window or a Roualt Crucifixion. He is a disciple of Paul Emile Borduas, who teaches at the Ecole du Meuble. M. Borduas, who studied in France for a number of years, is convinced his painting and that of his followers presage some change in human history of which we are not yet aware, as the kitchen scenes of Jean Baptiste Chardin forecast the shift of power from the hands of the nobility to those of the middle class during the French Revolution. Charles Daudelin, another of M. Borduas' followers now in Paris, has interlaced ovals in his sculpture "The Couple". The effect, reminiscent of Herbert Read's statues, is very harmonious.

Alfred Pellan is less mystical but no less a champion of abstract art than Borduas. His style has been compared to that of Picasso, but is very individual. He spent fourteen years studying in Paris before the war, thanks to the financial assistance received from the Quebec Government. He was responsible for the first riot in Canadian art history.

Mr. Pellan believes in complete self-expression for his students, as does Mr. Lismer. Two of his pupils had submitted pictures for the annual students' show at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. The Director, M. Maillard, refused to hang them. M.

Pellan insisted. M. Maillard still refused. Finally, the paintings were altered and hung.

The night of the opening, students blocked the Director's exit as he was leaving the building and shouted:

"A bas Maillard! Vive Pellan!"

Police were called to disperse them.

Throughout the ensuing week stickers reading "A bas Maillard! Vive Pellan!" appeared in restaurants, street cars and theatres. Eventually M. Maillard resigned and M. Pellan became undisputed master of the younger artists at the school. The moderns had won their first victory.

Nonetheless, Mr. Lismer, M. Borduas, and M. Pellan are far from being the only painters influencing the development of Canada's future artists. The city itself has become an artists Mecca. It is a vast network of studios in which each artist is expressing in his own way the cultural heritages of the races living and working side by side in this cosmopolitan city, and the currents and cross-currents of contemporary thought blowing through it from every corner of the globe. History, moreover, proves that the artist whose name is written upon no banner frequently is greater than he who founds a school. Montreal has several such. They are neglected by the partisans of the art cliques, to which it has become fashionable to belong. They are gradually evolving their own style. It is this tremendous variation in artists' visions and modes of expression that promises that Montreal may one day become the Montmartre of North America.

Canadian art has outgrown the brilliantly-coloured landscapes, which so well expressed the growing sense of Canadian nationalism that followed the First World War. This short article has purposed not to paint a canvas of Montreal art trends to-day, but to show that some students, whether in classical or abstract terms, are trying very hard to find a way of expressing the growing sense of Canadians that they are citizens not only of Canada but of the world. They are trying to say that they themselves feel responsible not only for the well-being and progress of their fellow countrymen, but of their fellowmen.