



A Story of Canadian Art: As told by the Hart House Collection

Art Gallery of Alberta

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Hours

Tues to Sun 11 am - 5
pm, Wed till 9 pm.

and The Bequest: Ernest E. Poole and the AGA Collection

March 9 to July 1, 2013

Art Gallery of Alberta, Edmonton

By Douglas MacLean

Passion: That's the key word that jumps out at me as I wander through these two collections of Canadian art – the passion of collecting and taking chances to explore the unknown of art's creation. Of course, currently, we look at Group of Seven works as somewhat conservative, but in 1922, when a 22-year-old Vincent Massey and his art committee for Hart House at the University of Toronto embarked on a project of collecting, they, and the artists they chose, were anything but conservative. The Hart House building itself was a grand vision of imposing Gothic Revival architecture; and then to envision a contemporary art collection within its vast halls, well, that was pure genius!

Curator Christine Boyanoski reached deep into the vaults of Hart House to bring these works out of storage and give us the opportunity to assess what collecting is all about. She succeeds and we reap the benefits of a grand vision. The works, overall, are Group of Seven and contemporaries, featuring landscapes on a large scale and figurative works that reveal the soul of the characters portrayed. Just inside the door is Frederick Varley's portrait of Massey himself. The work is highly abstract in many ways, and the use of colours and flat shapes goes well beyond just an image, yet the detail in

Massey's face reveals all. The incredible large format of so many of the Group of Seven pictures is astounding. Some excel well beyond the landscape, being painterly and abstract, and some tell of the artist's insecurity with painting on a grand scale, which was so advanced for the time.

The brilliance and passion of collecting join together again as you step into the final galleries and view the bequest of Alberta businessman Ernest E. Poole. The fact that these prominent works, collected well before museums and galleries around the world confirmed they were worthy of note, is one giant step. But when you consider it was done by a man of the Prairies, for reasons not about money or gain, the second giant step is apparent. The collection has huge variety, from Tom Thomson's iconic image of Canada's love for the outdoors, ***The Fisherman***, to David Milne's modernist painting, ***The Ski Jump***, through to important European masters and even artists unknown at the time, like Augustus Kenderdine of Saskatchewan.

The motivation to collect – its whys and wherefores – is what needs to be kept in mind when wandering through these two incredible and rare exhibitions. Such passion has provoked many incredible collections and stories about art, and therefore, humanity, around the world and in our own young country of Canada. The Art Gallery of Alberta is a hub of activity, and should be commended not only for the brilliance of exhibitions like these, but for being active and progressive in Canadian art and culture.