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Art built new Canadian identity

Hart House works coming to art gallery

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PREVIEW

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

Where: Art Gallery of Alberta

When: through July 1

Tickets: \$12.50 adults, \$8.50 seniors and students, youraga.ca

Though the Hart House collection is now monumental with vintage Canadian art, everything within it was once deliberately fresh and contemporary.

That's an interesting point about the Art Gallery of Alberta's new show, *A Story of Canadian Art: As Told by the Hart House Art Collection*. Decades before Group of Seven paintings adorned mouse pads, postage stamps and desk calendars - penetrating our culture wholly - these seven determined "Algonquin school" artists reacted against prescribed European artistic doctrine.

They were the punk rockers of their time, intentionally forging a new character for themselves, and us.

It certainly worked - though the Seven didn't do it alone. And it wasn't just their art, which this AGA presentation explores. Enter the House.

Established in 1919, the University of Toronto's gothic Hart House was created as a nexus of discovery and intellectual, philosophical and artistic inspiration.

Every year, backed by the Massey family, Hart House collected works, often by emerging artists - though it sometimes played catch-up to fill in gaps - adding to its halls names like Tom Thomson, Emily Carr, David Milne and of course the Group of Seven's Lawren Harris, A.Y. Jackson and Arthur Lis-mer. All are represented in this exhibition.

"Anybody who knows anything about art will recognize some of these pieces," explains the show's curator Christine Boyanoski, walking with a smile through the space.

"They were being bought at the time they were being produced, and then shown in important exhibitions that represented Canada abroad.

"The story of the Hart House collection is woven into the story of Canadian art history. It was being collected and built at the same time. Because there was no history of Canadian art in 1920."

One of the first student activity centres in North America, Hart House was visited by everyone from then-Princess Elizabeth to John F. Kennedy, who infamously remarked in a 1957 debate there:

"I personally rather approve of keeping women out of these places."

Fortunately, for a number of artists, from Carr to Yvonne Housser, the place evolved.

"The Hart House collection, when it first began was - and is now - a historical work," says Boyanoski.

"When they first started collecting, the idea was to pick the best of Canadian art, at the time, to hang on the walls.

It was for the undergraduates and graduates, male members, of course. It took until the '70s for them to admit women as members."

Why note the House's history? It comes back to the show's title, A Story of Canadian Art.

Yes, the walls tingle with gorgeous portraits of rugged people like Edwin Holgate's Fire Ranger - sometimes in canoes, as in Thomson's boldly stroked The Pointers - or in iconic landscapes like A.J. Casson's Autumn Evening. But there's also a strong narrative of art collection and presentation running throughout. A picture of invention and intention itself.

By noting not only when works by proto-modernist Milne and his peers were created but also brought into Hart's fold, Boyanoski's show succeeds as a behind-the-scenes peek at the construction of our Canadian identity. Though the Toronto Masseys behind Hart House had purchased the contents of Milne's studio to keep the artist going in 1934, for example, Milne didn't show up in Hart House until 1947.

Major moments of Canadian emergence abroad are also noted. Among others on the walls here, Prudence Heward's striking nude Dark Girl and Kathleen Morris's gorgeous Nuns, Quebec were works that found their way into London's Tate for a Canadian survey in 1938 with help from Vincent Massey, who initiated and funded Hart House, naming it after his grandfather.

Seminal shows like the Tate's are echoed in continuing interest in the pieces. Muses Boy-anoski: "The reason some of these works continue to be loaned to exhibitions abroad is because it set us apart at a period when nationalism was everywhere internationally in the '20s and '30s. That was the big issue. Canada had produced art that was set apart. In fact, it was more highly praised than American art, which was still very derivative of European art.

"We still hearken back to that as a period where we established ourselves as separate."

She adds: "This is a unique opportunity to see the collection. They no longer hang on the walls of Hart House for reasons of conservation. It's not a gallery.

There's no climate control, no security. The students, they eat, they use it as a house, which is how it was intended."

Though some of the paintings, like The Pointers, "travel more than we do," the curator notes, many are in the backrooms of the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery in Toronto. "Their mandate is contemporary; it's not historic. But the works weren't meant to be in storage; they were meant to be seen. They were hanging on the walls when I was an undergrad at U of T, so it was like seeing old friends."

Organized roughly by date of acquisition, the show's final section contains French-Canadian work and its only taste of modernism, including a striking Harris, Abstract (War Painting) from 1943. The painting is of a luminous white sphere - hope or horror - amid jagged, conflicting mechanizations.

It's like W.P. Weston's delicious 1933 mountain painting, Cheam, one of the show's most gorgeous pieces, ripped apart from the inside, and just as striking. "He gave this picture, and the fact they didn't have to buy it freed up funds to buy other works - as long as they were abstracts."

The adjoining shows, The Bequest: Ernest E. Poole and the AGA Collection, and David Janzen's Transfer Station, fit perfectly, historically, on either side of the Hart House show.

They symbolize the past and present, traditional and contemporary.

"But," Boyanoski notes, "some people argue that all art is contemporary because we're seeing it with contemporary eyes.

"Every generation will bring knowledge or experience to a viewing, the weight of what happened between this and now."

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