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For first time in decades, Hart House puts national treasures on display

FEB 23, 2015 | BY YUKON DAMOV



Charles Comfort, *Young Canadian*, 1932. Watercolour. Purchased by the Hart House Art Committee, 1934/35.

Canada emerged out of the First World War's wasteland relatively triumphant -- embattled and shaken, but with a renewed nationalistic fervor. No longer merely a former British colony, the interwar period became fertile ground to explore Canadian expression. Artists at the forefront of that movement were a generation who forged a formative vision of our country.

In Toronto, some young painters called the Group of Seven, and their friend Tom Thomson (who died in 1917), forged Canada's self-image in the space between the United States, with which we share geography, and Britain and France, to which we owe much of our culture and tradition. By re-imagining the northern landscape as a place that could only be "Canada," and nowhere else.

The exhibit currently on at the University of Toronto Art Centre, *A Story of Canadian Art: As Told by the Hart*

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House Collection, curated by Dr. Christine Boyanoski, has no intention of upsetting that conventional story.

It tells a smaller story about how Hart House and those artists mutually reinforced each other as important Canadian enterprises: the paintings make Hart House a vital artistic landmark, and Hart House continues to foster Canadian artists.

It is a story about that mythology as it was being written, and the other contemporary exhibition currently on display, *Sign, Sign, Everywhere a Sign*, shows how U of T is continuing to write that story.

THE ART

It has never been a secret that Hart House has possessed such a prestigious and valuable collection. The paintings hung on the House's walls until the 1970s, when security and conservation concerns brought them under professional curatorial care and evaluation, and eventually into storage. (The wisdom of that decision has been reinforced by the theft this month of three paintings at U of T which are valuable, but nowhere near the value of these "national treasures").

Many of the collection's works were taken on a national tour in 1987-88, and since then, many have been lent out, most frequently Tom Thomson's *The Pointers* (1916-17) and Lawren Harris' *Isolation Peak* (1930). Memory, nostalgia, and the tease of seeing them on other institutions' walls has led to fairly high demand for their showing, and can be confirmed when a bus trip to see *A Story in Kitchener* sold out in minutes.

The Group of Seven is primarily responsible for making this collection so influential -- and, except for Frank Johnston, every member of the Group of Seven is represented in the exhibition, including close acquaintance Tom Thomson -- but they were not immediately praised by the Canadian press. In his seminal *Painting in Canada: A History*, art historian J. Russell Harper tells of how they were subject to "bitter denunciation and invective" for their "decadent ideas ... which most columnists felt were an affront to common decency." They were labelled as the "Hot Mush School" and their paintings compared to "Hungarian goulash" or "the insides of a drunkard's stomach."

Eventually, in the public's mind, they rose to the top as "the country's first and maybe only real artistic achievement," wrote Harper. "Everything earlier tended to be forgotten or castigated as traditional and old-fashioned."

"I think it's interesting to celebrate them as 'the ones that got out' [to achieve global recognition]. They're an interesting Canadian artifact in that sense, but they're not my favourites. I've never freaked out for the Group of Seven or thought they were fantastic," said an alumnus of U of T's Art History program.

"The nostalgic and overwhelming power of the natural landscape seems to trump all other modes of visual expression in the Canadian consciousness," said contemporary Canadian artist Charles Pachter, when asked for his thoughts prior to seeing the exhibition.

"I would say that Charles is probably looking at it in a singular way, or looking too closely at the myth of it," responded Barbara Fischer, chief curator for the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery and University of Toronto Art Centre, which federated into a single entity just this year. She would credit the paintings' appeal instead to "a sense of familiarity ... a part of a sense of collective belonging."

It's hard to blame a painting for being old or familiar, and they can be lauded for simultaneously generating praise and contempt, even today. The Group of Seven's paintings lay lodged somewhere near the surface of Canadian identity, beside a cup of Tim Horton's coffee and the Toronto Maple Leafs, and that can be taken as the double-edged sword of Canadiana.

"What I think is very interesting is that as they began to collect beyond the Group, it was still very much in terms of the Group's point-of-view," said Dennis Reid, U of T art history professor and former AGO Chief Curator. "These are people that began to get involved with the Group and not imitating, but responding to some of the ideas and point of view that was inherent in the Group's work. Some of the very best work known by these artists are here.

Many significant painters who aren't Group of Seven are represented here: Emily Carr, L.L. Fitzgerald, and David Milne, a Group of Seven contemporary whom Harper called "one of the generation's most sophisticated painters."

Charles Comfort is represented by his *Young Canadian* (1932), one of the most referenced and reproduced Canadian paintings of the 1930s. It sets his friend and fellow painter Carl Schaefer in the middle of a field during the Great Depression. Dennis Reid: "There's a funny realism to it, though it's so stylized. There's an element of despair, but at the same time, visionary eyes. You don't write it off as somebody lost and wondering, What the hell next?, due to the very fact that he's sitting there with the brush in his hand. ... I always really liked the hues in this one. A very limited range of hues but still an incredible tonal range within that."

Prudence Heward is represented by her incredible portrait *Dark Girl* (1935-35). Dennis Reid: "Up until recently, everyone thought that the young woman was in a tropical setting, until someone pointed out that in fact these are sumachs. One of the most perceptive portraits. You just feel the personality so strongly, to such a

degree that you don't even think of her sitting there nude."

"The way they've installed [the exhibition] helps a great deal because it is related work together and the work resonates together for various reasons, and that's really impressed me. Christine [Boyanoski] has really hung them beautifully."

"They're not all in the top echelon," concluded Reid, "but still, some real zingers."

THE MAN

"This exhibition is a 'monument to Massey,'" said Reid, referring to Rt. Hn. Vincent Massey, Canada's first native-born Governor General, inheritor to the Massey-Harris fortune, patron of the arts, and founder of Hart House.

Massey offered Hart House to U of T as a memorial to his grandfather, Hart Massey, an early twentieth century industrialist who made a bonanza in agriculture.

"As Christine [Boyanoski] has described very well, he had this Oxfordshire vision of what Massey College must be. All of this served the male community and at the same time he had these excellent connections to dwell from," said Reid. Massey wanted Hart House to provide a space where students could acquire a well-rounded humanist education, through exposure to the arts, physical training, and intellectual stimulation.

Massey encouraged the creation of the U of T Sketch Committee (which later became the Hart House Art Committee) in 1917, by promising it space in Hart House even before it opened, in 1920. (Coincidentally, but also symbolizing the intertwining of Hart House and the Group of Seven, the Group's first exhibition was that same year). He spurred what would become a unique situation: a student-centred institution that collects art.

As a major player in Canadian life and art at the time, his influence is seen throughout the exhibition. During the period in which these paintings were acquired -- 1920s - early 1950s -- Massey was a diplomat in Washington and then High Commissioner to Britain. He was a trustee of the National Gallery of Canada, and its chairman from 1948-52. He was a personal collector, who had A.Y. Jackson as an advisor. Incidentally, Lawren Harris was also a principal descendant of the founders of the Massey-Harris firm. Massey was also a patron of David Milne. These connections were brought to bear on Hart House and its collection, which also saw various Group of Seven members cycle through its advisory committee.

THE HOUSE

In the companion book to the exhibition, Boyanoski writes that after the House opened, its walls were barren, and without a collection to draw from, needed some acquisitions for "interior decoration." Massey was a part of those heady discussions in 1925 which produced the Committee's mandate, "to purchase the best in contemporary Canadian art."

In those first couple decades of the House's existence, the Canadian avant-garde was centred in Toronto, and the exhibition reflects that regionalism. Some Quebecois artists are represented, as well as British Columbian Emily Carr, but Ontario looms large. Hart House afforded artists, in what was then still a small city and a small art scene, the opportunity to show their art in the House when few venues were available or open to presenting new forms of painting.

It has been altogether a mutually reinforcing relationship. The Art Committee's mandate was "a wise, thoughtful approach, because it was therefore a part of creating a history that didn't yet exist," said Fischer, the chief curator for JMB and UTAC. "It encouraged artists, supported artists directly. When artists have their work bought, it means a lot, because it supports what you do and gives you a sense of value."

Just as the exhibition is a product of its place and time, so the Hart House committee has evolved to reflect a cosmopolitan and urban society. With a budget of \$10,000 of student fees -- often in addition to matching funding from donors and fundraising -- the committee, comprised of students, goes out into the city, to galleries and studios, to find the pieces and learn the processes of acquisition. When Fischer came to U of T in 2005, she deepened the mandate. "Artists have contributed so much to our idea of what the art experience is by expanding the media, that that is a really critical part of contemporary art." Now the House also acquires visual art that is not painting, like photo-based text works, film, cinematic installations, "and sometimes conceptual works that don't even exist in material, but only exist when they're made."

But when there is so much artistic activity across the country, this has meant that the Hart House collection has remained Toronto-centric, curtailing its mandate to serve the entire country. "Can the collection still attempt to build a story of 'Canadian' art? It is quite clear that that is not possible," said Fischer.

As Hart House has accumulated a collection of roughly 600 items, it has rotated parts of the collection through its spaces, yet much of the collection remains out of sight. Fischer can envision a new, central gallery that joins UTAC and JMB into a single, dedicated building, but there are no plans in the works, and adding space is not a priority. "We don't want to make the museum a shrine, so when you only show the one generation -- that was never the idea."

De-accessioning the works -- in order to increase the acquisitions budget, for example -- is also out of the question. "Museums are pledged to take care of the works that they have," she said. "There is an ethic about that. If you start to sell, you are messing with a lot of stuff -- donors, history ... "

Even if the national treasures now on display will return to storage, some of them will be lent out again, and the current exhibition represents the House's answer to accessibility. Fischer sees A Story as a progressive way to deal with the question: since it's a national travelling exhibition, it will reach a larger public; and the loan fees generate revenue that allows the curators to better maintain the works.

The touring exhibition began its national criss-cross in Alberta in 2013, and will finish in Ontario at Queen's University in Kingston in July. The exhibition is in Toronto until March 7.

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