

Roger Boulet, *The Canadian Earth: Landscape Painting by the Group of Seven*, foreword by A.J. Casson. Scarborough (Ont.), Cerebrus and Prentice-Hall, 1982. 226 pp., illus., \$75.00 (cloth)

Ann Davis

Volume 11, Number 1-2, 1984

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1074345ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1074345ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Davis, A. (1984). Review of [Roger Boulet, *The Canadian Earth: Landscape Painting by the Group of Seven*, foreword by A.J. Casson. Scarborough (Ont.), Cerebrus and Prentice-Hall, 1982. 226 pp., illus., \$75.00 (cloth)]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 11(1-2), 152–154.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1074345ar>

en moins de dix lignes, est identifié comme ayant «... a style akin to Action Painting», là où on aurait aimé voir mieux saisir la spécificité de l'intensité picturale de cet artiste puissant. Ou encore, on constate un manque d'affirmation à l'égard de Richard Serra, au sujet duquel on lit que son œuvre ne démontre que «... little unity of style apart from its 'antiform' orientation».

Il y a, à coup sûr, des articles, parmi les plus importants, qui constituent de véritables monographies. À cet égard, on peut se féliciter sans réserve de la place importante accordée au Canada, et à une sélection de ses artistes et de ses mouvements artistiques les plus marquants. Ainsi, Guido Molinari, Michael Snow, Greg Curnoe, pour ne nommer que quelques contemporains, se voient attribuer des notices indépendantes d'une longueur appréciable. Il en va de même pour les plasticiens, pour les automatistes et pour le «Group of Seven». Et c'est dans l'article «Canada», occupant à lui seul près de sept pages, que Dennis Reid (*A Concise History of Canadian Painting*, Toronto, 1973) brosse un tableau passionnant de l'art canadien, alliant à l'inventaire historique un sens nuancé de la synthèse.

Mais si, en même temps, cet aspect monographique ne s'étend pas au-delà de quelques foyers, ceci est certainement dû au type de discours imposé par le projet encyclopédique qui le circonscrit. Fondamentalement didactique, soumis à une organisation formelle et arbitraire, visant typiquement la consultation plutôt que la lecture suivie, le discours encyclopédique procède par fragmentation du champ qu'il veut livrer sous forme d'un corpus de connaissances. Et encore le fait-il en récusant le plus souvent l'autorité de toute recherche excentrique ou contestataire, qu'il finit par passer sous silence afin de ne pas troubler l'intégrité de son tour d'horizon. Est-ce alors dire que le discours encyclopédique, et plus particulièrement celui de l'*Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Art*, est, malgré les efforts manifestement prodigieux de son éditeur, un discours qui trompe en gommant les nuances? Je ne crois pas, du moins pas exactement. Il s'agirait plutôt d'un type de discours qui a les raisons de sa méthode et de sa vocation. Quiconque, à l'instar de l'étudiant faisant démarrer une recherche sur un sujet d'art du xx^e siècle, éprouve le

besoin d'une orientation initiale consultera avec bonheur l'ouvrage de Osborne. On y découvrira, sinon toujours la nature problématique de ses thèmes, du moins un certain état présent, la clarté d'un énoncé succinct: en somme, un point de départ et non pas un point d'arrivée. J'ose même dire que les enseignants en feront furtivement emploi, ne serait-ce que pour se familiariser avec une foule d'artistes qui œuvrent et qui ont œuvré en dehors des grands centres. C'est là d'ailleurs une des qualités premières du volume, par laquelle il se distingue nettement des ouvrages à vocation semblable déjà disponibles sur le marché. À titre d'exemple, il y a jusqu'au Finlandais Mäkilä, au Yougoslave Marinkovic, au Russe Matiushin, et combien d'autres encore, qui apparaissent dans de brèves notices.

Il est cependant des cas où les nuances se brouillent au détriment d'une information digne de confiance. Présumer, par exemple, un trait commun aux onze peintres que Osborne regroupe sous l'appellation «Fauvists» (mais qui sont tous traités individuellement ailleurs dans le volume) pose aujourd'hui problème. Pour parvenir à ce regroupement en une colonne et demie, l'auteur se voit obligé de concevoir un mouvement unitaire qui ne peut tenir compte de la retenue et de la timidité naturaliste de l'œuvre d'un Manguin, ou du caractère souvent superficiel et mondain de l'œuvre d'un Van Dongen. Osborne finit par attribuer aux fauves le trait caractéristique de «an apparent clumsiness and even carelessness in their technique»; mais quoique cette remarque isole un élément saillant de la peinture de Vlaminck, elle pourrait moins facilement s'appliquer à celle de son ami Derain ou à celle de Braque.

Il reste néanmoins que cet exemple ne se généralise pas. J'ai sous les yeux l'article «Constructivism», probablement écrit par Osborne et Bowlt qui, ici, ne dissimulent pas le problème susmentionné; ils le posent et suggèrent ensuite des éléments de solution. En faisant la distinction entre un constructivisme soviétique et un constructivisme international, les auteurs montrent comment les conflits qui font la spécificité de l'un entraînent la fondation de l'autre, impliquant leur irréductibilité à une conception unitaire. De Malevitch à Ben Nicholson, Osborne et Bowlt déploient ainsi un

éventail de virtualités tout en signalant le jeu, à l'arrière-plan, d'une communauté d'intérêts possibles.

Le projet encyclopédique est typiquement le projet d'une utopie de la connaissance, et comme toutes les utopies, l'encyclopédie ne peut définir la totalité de son projet que par rapport à quelque chose d'omis. Aussi un volume de ce genre sera inévitablement critiqué pour des exclusions que tel ou tel lecteur trouvera inexplicables, voire impardonnables. Pour ma part, je constate que l'*Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Art* choisit de ne pas consacrer d'article à Dennis Oppenheim, à Eva Hesse et à James Bishop, entre autres, préférant dans certains cas limiter le commentaire à des mentions dans des articles comme «Conceptual Art», consacrés à des mouvements. Il y a des articles sur le Japon et sur une quinzaine d'artistes japonais, mais l'art du reste de l'Asie n'est pas représenté dans le volume. À part un article qui fait le point sur la longue carrière de Sir Herbert Read, je ne trouve aucune autre analyse sur un critique d'art ou sur la critique d'art en général. Mais en fin de compte, l'ensemble de l'ouvrage ne souffre pas de ces quelques lacunes.

Une bibliographie de près de cinquante pages enrichit l'ouvrage. La première partie, «General Works», compte quelque soixante-quinze titres tandis que la seconde, «Specific Works», de loin la plus importante, présente, pour la quasi-totalité des rubriques, une sélection de titres (de monographies comme de catalogues) en anglais, français, allemand, italien et espagnol. Aucun article de périodique n'y figure.

ELLIOTT MOORE
Université Laval

ROGER BOULET *The Canadian Earth: Landscape Painting by the Group of Seven*, foreword by A.J. Casson. Scarborough (Ont.), Cerebrus and Prentice-Hall, 1982. 226 pp., illus., \$75.00 (cloth).

Even nationalists and collectors of Canadian myth tend to forget just how long the Group of Seven bibliography really is. The first book about these outspoken propagandists appeared almost sixty years

ago, in 1926, and it had been preceded by enough articles, letters and catalogues to fill a fat scrapbook. In many ways Fred Houser's 1926 volume, *A Canadian Art Movement*, set the tone for virtually all subsequent publications, including the one under review. *A Canadian Art Movement*, written in a chatty, informal style, proceeded chronologically to record events in the history of the movement and activities in the lives of the participants; the purpose was twofold: to give credibility and substance to the Group's history by quoting contemporary documentation, especially newspaper reviews, and to popularize the Group painters by describing their methods and attitudes in an anecdotal manner. Houser was most effective: he not only contributed to the Seven's growing notoriety but he also ensured that some effective myths were given credence and permanence. Other volumes proceeded in a like manner, notably A.Y. Jackson's *A Painter's Country* and Lauren Harris' *Story of the Group of Seven*. In producing *The Canadian Earth*, Roger Boulet, A.J. Casson and Cerebrus/Prentice-Hall have continued this tradition of a popular book, written in an informal way and concentrating on factual documentation rather than theoretical or visual analysis.

Luckily Houser's methodology and ideals have not overpowered all subsequent writers, especially those working in art galleries. Dennis Reid, in his important volume on *The Group of Seven* (1970, National Gallery exhibition), effectively exposed a number of myths but continued the biographic and chronological approach. More recently Jeremy Adamson and Christopher Varley, in their respective catalogues, have analysed the philosophies and examined the paintings with considerable perspicacity. Yet, in many aspects, *The Canadian Earth* is a throwback to the early genre.

In one important respect, however, this new volume is different. While Houser reproduced a few key paintings in black and white, Boulet packs his volume with luxurious, full-page colour plates. In essence Boulet has reversed Houser's relative proportions of text and reproductions, such that *The Canadian Earth*, unlike *A Canadian Art Movement*, is very much a picture book. As a picture book, *The Canadian Earth* has distinct plusses. Each work, with

the exception of a few used in the introduction, is printed on the right-hand page, in colour. With each reproduction occupying a whole page, the title, medium, size, ownership, and occasionally date are put on the facing page, offering an uninterrupted view of the piece. These colour plates – almost one hundred of them – are of unusually high quality. The tonal fidelity is particularly accurate while the rendering of textures is virtually unequalled. Would that the choice of illustrated works had been done with as much skill as the photography and printing!

Why these paintings and not others were used is very much of a puzzle. Questions start with the artists selected and illustrated. Frank Johnston, for example, represented by five works, was an active, early participant but left the association in 1921 and only hung works in one Group of Seven exhibition. Fred Varley, on the other hand, also favoured with only five reproduced pieces (the remaining nine painters have eleven each), participated in all the Seven's shows. The implication that Varley was mainly a portrait painter who did virtually no landscapes suitable for inclusion in a book such as this has surely been effectively disproven by the recent Varley retrospective exhibition. Then two Group members, Edwin Holgate and Lionel LeMoine FitzGerald, are completely ignored. Although they were both late joiners (Holgate in 1930 and FitzGerald in 1923), each participated in two Group shows, double the number in which Johnston hung. A.J. Casson, fully featured here, also joined well after the initial 1920 Group of Seven exhibition, in 1926. In defence of Boulet's unexplained choices, it has been argued that neither Holgate nor FitzGerald ever participated in the essential Group activities, particularly their 'wilderness' sketching trips, and, since they did not live in Toronto, developed neither stylistic nor philosophic affinities with the Seven. Yet they were invited to join, and recent studies have surely demonstrated the fallacy of a single 'Group' style and even of 'Group' subject-matter. Boulet, perhaps unconsciously, is following Houser in excluding Holgate and FitzGerald.

Again, looking at the selection of reproductions in terms of subject-matter, the reader is left confused or

ignorant. Landscapes, rural scenes and cityscapes are included, but all figures are eliminated. Nor is the choice of works reproduced predicated on historic importance or popularity for many such key pieces do not appear. Missing are Jackson's *Terre Sauvage*, Harris' *North Shore, Lake Superior*, Varley's *For What*, MacDonald's *Fall, Montreal River*, Lismer's *Cathedral Mountain* and other important icons. Reproductions are drawn almost entirely from two public collections, the National Gallery of Canada and the McMichael Canadian Collection, while the rich holdings of the Art Gallery of Ontario are virtually ignored as are more isolated gems in numerous other public collections. This lacuna is somewhat balanced by an unexpectedly large number of plates from private collections, a nice addition which, however, does not ensure a well-rounded representation in terms of development, style, or theme. For instance Harris is represented by three early Winter scenes, a small lake sketch of 1919, four house pieces, and three mountain works. Excluded are his Algoma and Lake Superior works, and everything done after 1930. In short, the colour plates are stunning but, taken as a whole, they give a distorted view of the range and development of the landscape paintings of the Group of Seven.

The text is no more helpful. Written in a grade-school manner, it recapitulates the Seven's perambulations across the country in the now familiar mushy nationalistic language. Like Houser, Boulet quotes extensively from the Group's own well-known writings and thus manages to perpetuate the myth that the Seven were publicly derided, when they were noticed at all. Analysis is absent. Boulet's text is complimented by a foreword written by A.J. Casson, the one surviving member of the Group of Seven, who, of course, is interested in perpetuating the contemporary Group atmosphere. Biographical notes, preceding each section of illustrations, were produced by art historian Paul Duval. Unlike other writers, Duval takes a more individualistic tack, especially lauding the accomplishments of painters relegated to more minor places within the annals of the Group: Carmichael, Casson and Johnston. As a whole, however, the book does not hang together. The

Housser textual style is no longer appropriate and the lavish illustrations do not adequately cover the material. With the frightening escalation in the cost of colour printing, it is regrettable that such an opportunity was missed to produce a much-needed, pithy and critical book on these national heroes.

ANN DAVIS
London, Ontario

PEGGY STOLZ GILFOY *Fabrics in Celebration from the Collection*. Indianapolis, Indianapolis Museum of Art, 1983. 391 pp., 262 illus., 32 colour plates, \$45.00 (cloth), \$35.00 (paper).

It is appropriate that the Indianapolis Museum of Art in choosing to reflect on the accomplishments of its first 100 years has selected to celebrate its little known, but significant textile holding. *Fabrics in Celebration from the Collection* – the title of both an exhibition and the catalogue reviewed here – documents 168 textiles from a collection of over 7,000 fabrics and costumes representing cultures from across the world and ranging in date from Pre-Columbian Peru to contemporary America.

Begun in the 1880s, the collection includes many important donations made prior to 1940, but for most of the century being celebrated by the Museum it was relegated to storage. In many ways, the catalogue and exhibition are tributes to the Museum's textile curator, Peggy Stolz Gilfoy. Since her appointment as Curator of Textiles and Ethnographic Art in 1975, she has reclaimed this important collection from the oblivion of storage and developed it into one of the better managed textile holdings in North America.

Fabrics in Celebration from the Collection is an attractive, sensitively-designed book. The typography is easy to read; the photographs of uniformly high quality integrate well with text. The descriptive catalogue itself documents the fabrics in the exhibition. Separate entries, each fully illustrated, some with details, are organized into eight sections: Indonesia, India, China,

Japan, Eastern Islam, Western Islam, Europe and America, Africa and [indigenous] America. Among the real surprises in this collection are remarkable Indonesian fabrics acquired at source prior to 1930, and fabrics from Tunisia and Morocco which are seldom seen in North American collections. Thirty-two pieces are also reproduced in colour, one fabric per page with a brief identification, making this section easy to use with the text.

In addition to the catalogue, there are lengthy preliminary sections: the history of the collection and of its more interesting donors, the history of the curatorial department, explanatory notes by the curator on the rationale for the catalogue, a conservator's report by Harold Maitland, outlining the methodology used for examining the collection, a note on the structural analysis by Katherine Dolk-Ellis, curatorial assistant, whose detailed technical descriptions accompany each piece, and a glossary of technical terms. The volume contains also a very lengthy bibliography citing literature consulted, an index, and an appendix presenting the results of tests conducted on the composition of precious metal threads by L. P. Stodulski, D. Nauman and M. Kennedy.

Fabrics in Celebration from the Collection seems to want to rectify years of neglect on many fronts simultaneously. Despite its impressive table of contents, however, the book is not entirely successful as a catalogue to the collection it celebrates. The variety and sheer volume of data it contains threaten to overwhelm the reader. Each bit of information is directed at a separate audience. In trying to serve too many masters, the catalogue risks satisfying none.

The 'masterpieces approach' for selecting pieces which 'represent the best the collection has to offer,' not its numerical or geographical range, exacerbates the problem of focus for this book. Some of the items truly are masterpieces of their types (e.g., n^o 14, 18, 81, 123); many are good examples, and some are only significant in relative terms when compared with the collection itself. This form of connoisseurship, all too common in museum publications, is, ultimately, a matter of personal taste. This reviewer is not taking exception to the author's selection; however, such value

judgements have shortcomings as an organizational principle for a catalogue to a collection, particularly when there is no critical discussion of how this value system is defined, or what purpose it really serves in promoting an understanding or appreciation of fabric.

In contrast to the aesthetic choices made for each item, the curatorial rationale for discussing the pieces as reflecting 'the wide ranging use of techniques, materials, distribution and influences unique to the textile arts' has imposed geographical groupings and chronological arrangement. Unfortunately, the level of generalization in the overviews, introducing each section, contributes little real understanding or insight into the fabrics themselves or to the cultures which used them. These views and the entries for individual items read much like a decent guide to an exhibition installation. Like such guided tours, information can be distorted through factual error or oversimplification. For example, the date of the embroidered coverlet (n^o 28) is given as 1850, but is certainly closer in date to 1750 (possibly a typographical error). Catal Huyuk is an archaeological site in Turkey, not northern Iran as stated on page 152. The suggestion that the flared hems of the short Persian coats (n^o 52 and 53) reflect the influence of 17th-century European women's hip pads is neither substantiated nor convincing. In other areas, particularly when faced with the precision of the technical descriptions, information about the alterations to garments would be appreciated: the sleeves of the Tekke Turkman coat (n^o 70) are reset incorrectly, or the embroidered cuffs and neck facings of the Chinese coat (n^o 34), which do not match the tapestry-woven silk coat fabric, were not part of the original construction.

At this level, such criticism seems petty. It should not detract from the Herculean efforts of the author, who is a noted African specialist; but it does point out a major pitfall posed by this genre of descriptive catalogue. Perhaps the broad, comprehensive survey of a medium cannot be done in a single catalogue, or with a unique, but imperfect collection. It is unlikely that a curator of painting would ever attempt to discuss the developments in pictorial art from all periods and places with less than 200 examples.