

Charles Hill, *The Group of Seven: Art For A Nation*. Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1995, 375 pp., 159 black-and-white illus., 101 colour illus.

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- 4 O'Brian is listed in the National Gallery of Canada's Annual Report 1995-1996 as a "Special Advisor" to the Acquisitions Committee for the period between 1 April 1995 and 31 March 1996.
- 5 De Duve's essay appeared previously in *Parachute*, LX (October-December 1990) in English and French (translated from the original French by Donald McGrath); see 194, n. 1.
- 6 John P. O'Neill, ed., *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews* (New York, 1990), 178.
- 7 O'Neill, *Barnett Newman*, 206.
- 8 Guilbaut (and I) use the term "Indian" instead of "First Nations," "indigenous peoples" or "natives" within the context of Newman's world view and writing.
- 9 It is not clear when *Voice of Fire* was painted. O'Brian (p. 103) refers to Thomas B. Hess who, in the 1971 Newman retrospective catalogue, writes that *Voice of Fire* was painted before Solomon asked Newman to exhibit a painting in the United States pavilion at Expo 67. According to Hess (p. 141), Newman realized *Voice of Fire* could never be exhibited, as no museum or gallery could accommodate such a tall canvas; however, by "happy chance," Solomon asked Newman to participate by contributing a vertically oriented painting.

Two details in a letter dated 9 December 1966 from Milton Freedman, Deputy Commissioner General of Expo 67, to Solomon serve to discredit Hess's assertion. Freedman reports that Jasper Johns, Ellsworth Kelly and Robert Motherwell were willing to lend existing paintings but would not produce paintings especially for the occasion. Therefore, one can suppose that had Newman painted *Voice of Fire* before Solomon's request, he could have offered it without consequence. Freedman also writes that Newman was "just recovering from [a] back injury but will start

work soon" [Alan Solomon Papers, Archives of American Art, Reel 3921]. Therefore, there is no reason to believe Newman's painting was started or completed three months before Expo 67 was to open.

- 10 *American Painting Now*, exh. cat. (Boston, 1967), n.p.
- 11 These intentions are well documented in Newman's writings and interviews. See, for example, the 1959 statement and preface Newman wrote for "The New American Painting" exhibition (O'Neill, *Barnett Newman*, 179-80), the 1961 interview with Dorothy Gees Seckler (O'Neill, *Barnett Newman*, 249) and Newman's statement for the 1965 Sao Paulo Biennale (O'Neill, *Barnett Newman*, 186-87).
- 12 For example, during a 1966 interview with artist/critic Andrew Hudson, Newman explained that in 1950-51, the year he painted *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, with dimensions of 8 feet high and 18 feet wide, he also painted canvases that were 8 feet high and 1½ inches wide (O'Neill, *Barnett Newman*, 271).
- 13 Newman's involvement with Jewish theology is well documented, from his reference to the medieval French Jewish scholar Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzhak, called Rashi, in "The First Man was an Artist" of 1947 (O'Neill, *Barnett Newman*, 159), to his statement and architectural model included in the "Recent American Synagogue Architecture" exhibition at the Jewish Museum in 1963 (O'Neill, *Barnett Newman*, 181), to his participation in a 1967 symposium ("The Problem of Religious Content in Contemporary Art") during which Newman referred to the "Jewish medieval notion of Makom is where God is" (O'Neill, *Barnett Newman*, 289). Some titles of works by Newman refer directly to Hebrew biblical narrative or Kabbalistic concepts, for example *Cathedra* (1951), *Zim Zum I* (1969) and *Zim Zum II* (1992, posthumous).

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Charles Hill's catalogue for the exhibition, "The Group of Seven: Art for a Nation," is a wonderful resource for the study of Canadian art; it is also a model of how not to write art history, and its weak point is to be found precisely where its value lies. For Hill, art history is an accumulation of "facts" – the minutiae of who said what to whom and when, the oh-so-troubling sequence of events, the precise ambiguities of every artist's stated intentions – and his considerable bibliographical energies are dedicated to getting all those pesky details in their places. His mission, in the great Canadian art historical tradition, is to avoid interpretation at all costs, so the book is not critical in any meaningful sense, but it does offer rich material for any number of future studies, some of which are bound to call up the most partisan of readings. If we do not hear any harrumphs ema-

nating from the clubrooms of Canadian culture, for the critical reader at least the book is a definite eyebrow raiser.

First the positive side, by which of course I mean "the facts." The book includes many beautiful drawings and prints by members of the Group that have not been widely seen with little known works by Lismer and Macdonald in particular. It is a major addition to the richness of the Canadian canon and is bound to provoke new assessments of the latter two artists. Excellent material is included on many crucial exhibitions – at Wembley, Buffalo, Boston, Ottawa, Paris, Atlantic City – documented with useful and interesting installation photographs. There are also detailed lists of exhibitors in the Group's shows, the 1931 exhibition being especially important, and accounts of the critical controversies surrounding the Group, certain of which are quite significant, such as the response to Jackson's Montreal exhibition of 1913. But here is a good place to call Mr Hill up short, for the main effect of the catalogue is to render even the most inflamed aesthetic debates of a piece with its

overall archival flatness, and of a character typical of official Canadian culture – rather dry, remote and dull; that is to say safely immured in an asbestos mausoleum that keeps any potential historical fuel far away from the heat of the present.

Perhaps I should mention some of the moments that stood out for me. First of all, the already noted final show of 1931. The juxtaposition, on facing pages of the catalogue, of Prudence Heward's *Girl under a Tree* and Anne Savage's *The Plough* dramatically points to the social context in which the Group's heroic vision of Canada was becoming irrelevant. Widespread farm failures coupled with urban unemployment caused by the crash of '29 meant a crisis for the male role of breadwinner that inflected the portrayal of the stereotypically "feminine" land. It is in the light of this historical background that one should discuss the increased participation of women in the Group's shows towards the end, as well as the attempt to save the nationalist enterprise by dissolving the original group into the larger and more diverse Canadian Group of Painters. Here is a perfect example of how a mere account of what happened says nothing about what was really going on. It is not necessary for artists to comment directly and openly on the events of their time; their work does that on its own, and those events have a habit of speaking back. In this case it is as hard not to see Harris's *Mount Lefroy*, from the same show, as an icon of desperate masculinity as it is impossible to miss the sheer unbelievability of the Group's vision of Canada in the new context.

Another very important area opened up by Hill's exhaustive research is the nature of the Group's anti-modernism. The brighter thinkers knew that Canadian art had to become more modern; the question was what kind of modernity to embrace, and our boys aligned themselves with conservatives in the United States who accused French modernism of decadence and excessive conventionalization. In rather adroitly threading a path between the available political and aesthetic positions of the time, the Group had to perform the trick of modernizing Canadian art while bashing the modernists, who represented a pernicious (read French) foreign influence. Yet Hill's research really gets in-

teresting when he looks at Quebec. It was not until the late 1930s and early 1940s that Quebec intellectuals began their own debate over what kind of Parisian modernism to adopt as a counter to the Group's northern nationalism. That material lies outside the scope of the catalogue and show, but my antennae began to twitch at Hill's account of the rabid anti-modernism that drove both Lyman and Jackson out of Montreal in 1913, of the split in Anglophone and Francophone responses to modernist work and, even more interestingly, of Marius Barbeau's vision of a modern Canadian art which was to be based in the folk art of Quebec. This side of Barbeau's thinking raises interesting questions about his later attempts to annex West Coast First Nations art as a primitive, non-western source for Canadian modernism. For a contemporary critic, in the era of the Parizeau referendum, however, the implications of the whole complex of *völkisch* nationalism and anti-modernism ca. 1913 (in both Montreal and Toronto) is potentially explosive. Anyone who seriously believes in the concept of "art for a nation," (the subtitle of the exhibition and catalogue) has to acknowledge that it is precisely these sensitive areas of Quebec culture that *English* Canadian, as well as French Canadian, writers should be investigating in depth. Needless to say, Hill evidently does not agree.

This catalogue is necessary for any serious student of Canadian art, but the question, of course, is what such students will do with it. Outside of Vancouver there are very few art historians in English Canada who escape the historicist fallacy. In Quebec I fear that the alternative to historicism is post-modernist theory, and that means another kind of neglect of the historical in all its vivid *contemporaneity*. Meanwhile, the public who attended the Group of Seven exhibition were asking serious questions of the art on display, questions full of echoes of the traumatic history unfolding outside the gallery walls. It is the curator's role, and the critic's role, to articulate those questions in a way that gives that public a place to stand, if only until they decide to move elsewhere. To do anything less is to let down the nation, and its art.

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ANNE DERBES, *Picturing the Passion in Late Medieval Italy: Narrative Painting, Franciscan Ideologies, and the Levant*. Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Cambridge University Press, 1996. 270 pp., 95 black-and-white illus.

For all Vasari's concern with the *maniera greca* as midwife to the art of the Renaissance, and all our concern with

Vasari, Italianists of the twentieth century have been comparatively neglectful of quattrocento painting and its relation to Byzantine art. But, then, thirteenth-century Italian painting in its entirety has prompted little serious scholarship until very recently. Bernard Berenson had very limited interest in the material; Richard Offner dealt with quattrocento pictures in his *Italian Primitives at Yale*, but the remainder