

The Fly and the Elephant

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Volume 20, Number 78, Spring 1975

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/55132ac>

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Publisher(s)

La Société La Vie des Arts

ISSN

0042-5435 (print)

1923-3183 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Hammock, V. (1975). The Fly and the Elephant. *Vie des arts*, 20(78), 69–71.

other hand, comparative "crudeness" may be distinguished from "virility" only by the bias of our terminology, and may represent a possibility of development and refinement beyond the impetus of an art showing the effects of over-sophistication. With Colin Campbell, this could be the case.

The works I have discussed were mostly produced some time ago: *True/False, Real Split* and the "Art Star" pieces in 1972; and *Janus* and *This is the way I really am* in 1973. I have preferred to limit the discussion mainly to those pieces, in part because I feel surer of my own reactions there, and in part because the critical issues on which the question of quality pivots remains the same in the more complex works that follow. It may be, however, that in these works we see, not only an enrichment that carries the art definitively beyond the limits of performance, but also a measure of resolution of those aspects that still cause anxiety. I find these indications most strongly in *Love-Life* of 1974 where the artist reads sections of love letters sent to him by various people, as an accompaniment to images of landscape and an apartment within which a figure can be seen indistinctly. The fragments of visual and verbal narrative interact in a way that can be very beautiful. The fundamental seriousness and emotional directness of the earlier work remains, but in a mellowed form that may almost consistently transcend the residue of over-statement.

THE FLY AND THE ELEPHANT

By Virgil HAMMOCK

*The following text was presented
at the A.I.C.A. meeting held in
Dresden, September 1974.*

There are two kinds of imperialism — one is economic and the other is cultural. While both are, of course, bad, the latter is far more insidious. As long as a country is able to hold on to its cultural identity, even if it is physically controlled by another nation either by the force of economics or actual occupation, it is a nation, but loose that identity and you lose everything. Is there really such a thing as national identity in this age of internationalism? The answer must be an unequivocal yes. The visual arts are international in many ways, in Western society mostly in form, but the artists are not. What makes a Dürer or Cranach German, or a Van Gogh Dutch? Is it the language they spoke? No, not really, because it is not necessary for me to understand either German or Dutch to enjoy the works of these artists, but neither must I understand these languages to see that there is a difference in their work that could only be attributed to something called a national spirit. As a Canadian, this issue concerns me, as our identity, if we have one, is in danger. The danger, I am afraid, is brought on as much by my fellow Canadians as it is by that more familiar bogey-man, the United States. Perhaps it would be fairer, at the outset, if I identified myself: I am a naturalized Canadian citizen, who was born in the United States and moved to Canada over seven years ago in an attempt to find a new, perhaps less hectic, life for my family and myself. I have found a

new life, but I am troubled by what I see as a gradual erosion of my country's cultural values and the failure of her artists and critics to fight back.

I would like to speak a little more about the ideas of international or universal language of some forms of art and see how they hold up. I believe that for purposes of comparison we can relate music and the visual arts in their universality, as does the American philosopher Morris Peckham, who calls painting 'visual music.' Music too, despite its claimed universality, has more than its share of nationalism or national spirit and I am not talking of the more obvious examples like Janack, Dvorak, or Smetana, but rather the change that takes place when Bach transcribes Vivaldi or Villa-Lobos' transcription of Bach and the same thing happens in painting with Ruben's interpretation of Titian. Italian becomes German or Flemish, German becomes Brazilian. These examples are far from mere copies but beautiful transformations from one national spirit to another. It is that gap in between that is so very hard to explain.

What internationalism generally means in the visual arts today is a kind of cultural homogenization, and like this process it may be healthy, but it is, as well, boring and without chance. Many American painters, Pollock among them, have tried to point out the international flavor of painting, but, as has been recently pointed out by such American critics as Max Kozloff, these same artists were confusing Americanism with 'universalism.' Not uncommon thinking among imperialists, even unconscious ones like Pollock. Of course, the United States has no monopoly on imperialism. In the visual arts since World War Two the U.S. has been the most important centre in the world. With Canada being the U.S.'s closest neighbor and a majority of its people sharing a common language, we could hardly escape its influence.

It is not my place here to belittle the very real accomplishments of American art. I believe, as do many, that its very success spelled out its eventual failure. The rebellion was replaced by big business and genius by profit. Nor do I wish to give the idea that much of the art of the Communist world is any better because it has not been tainted by Capitalism. The only difference seems to be that in the non-capitalist world bureaucrats replace capitalists as the tastemakers, but the end result in either case is not art. In fact, very seldom does direct government intervention in the creation of art, no matter how laudable its motives, result in anything remotely memorable, much less important in the history of art. Of course, there were the Russian experiments of the period immediately following the Revolution, but we all have a pretty good idea of what happened there and, eventually, it was the West not Russia, who benefited from the truly original genius of her artists, who were in my opinion the most important group of artists in the first half of this century. Even so, most other modern nations have an even worse record as far as government interference in their art goes. Examine, for instance, the official art in Germany during the Nazi period or that of Italy during the era of Fascism or for that matter, the art in the People's Republic of China today. I would have to admit that many of the examples that I have named have had different functions than that of so-called High-Art, but I would draw to your attention how elegantly the art of a Wagner, Beethoven or Dürer speaks of German spirit or what better spokes-

man is there for the French Revolution than David.

During the world-wide Depression of the 1930's the United States did provide a measure of economic aid to many of the artists without a great deal of interference under the terms of the WPA or Work Project's Administration, but the vision was not there to continue nor did they even bother to care for the works that were produced under this programme, as recent research has pointed out.

I have called this paper 'The Fly and the Elephant' and for good reason — it has been said that when the United States coughs, Canada catches pneumonia. What this means in simple terms is that while we are a large country in area and natural resources, we have a small population in comparison with our neighbors to the South. But what is more important is the economic power of the United States and its control of secondary industry over the whole North American continent, which reduces Canada somewhat to the status of a banana republic, although a favoured one. Canada was never conquered by force of arms, but by the forces of economics and our culture, such as it is, or was, is not strong enough to stave off this invasion. Culture in Canada is something like the Canadian Edition of *Time Magazine*, eight pages of Canadian news, or the more euphemistic term, Canadian content stuffed into the American Edition. The problem is that many of our children grow up thinking that their country is an insert. Thank God for Watergate, because it has given Canadians, as well as Americans, a chance to rethink their values. But, before I am given the label of a typical anti-American, and one of the worst kind, an American anti-American who, rather like a convert to a religion or political dogma show more zeal than those born to the faith, let me say, right now, that one of the shames of our country is the wasted effort by many of our artists and intellectuals in becoming professional anti-Americans rather than professional pro-Canadians. In fact, I believe there is a good living to be made in Canada as a professional anti-American. Certainly there are a number of second-rate artists in Canada today whose only virtue seems to be being born in Canada and they are making the most of it. Even failed exiles have returned after years in the United States to drape themselves in the Canadian flag while singing the national anthem in an attempt at a new career.

A major problem in Canada is in communications and the control of the media. Most Canadians watch American television, which is readily available to most of our population and again many watch the American product because it is thought to be 'better,' as are American magazines, books, movies and popular music. Although at best a subjective judgment, I would use the word easier in this case, as the American mass product makes, as it is designed, very little demand upon the mind. Once again, I would remind you that I don't want to demean the real American accomplishment in the arts and many other areas, but these are not the things that are bombarded into our midst by the media masters. The danger is, of course, that many Canadians have a better picture of American Society than they do of their own and this includes the arts. One of the problems in thinking yourself or your culture second-rate is that they very well may become just that, second-rate. Art galleries in our country feature exhibitions by European and American artists at the expense of our own artists. This is not surpris-

ing because many of our public galleries are directed by non-Canadians or Canadians who, at best, are somewhat ashamed at not being an American, all of whom show little inclination either to show or learn about Canadian art. To be fair I should modify my criticism of the galleries somewhat because at times the problem is at a level other than the director. Sometimes it is the professional staff, curators and so on or the Board itself, who have a lack of confidence in Canadian culture and themselves. A recent example is the choice of an American as the new director of the Winnipeg Art Gallery, picked by a selection committee of Canadians, all of whom are themselves members of the Board of Directors, because they could not find a suitable 'qualified' Canadian. One cannot blame the American who took the position, only the mentality of those who picked him. For the record, the man who this new director replaces, a European who held the position for twenty years, had one of the most dismal records of showing Canadian content and contemporary content in his gallery in the country only exceeded by the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts!.

I shouldn't be unduly hard on the art galleries because the same mentality extends throughout the arts in Canada as was again recently shown when our Stratford Theatre picked an Englishman to be its new artistic director for that same familiar reason that a 'qualified' Canadian couldn't be found for the job. The list goes on and on. Theatres import featured American and European actors and actresses, which is just as well because most of our theatres are not doing Canadian plays anyhow. Our orchestras are conducted by third-rate European conductors playing programmes almost totally devoid of any Canadian content, although I must admit our major orchestras sometimes have the services of first-rate foreign conductors while they are waiting to get a job with a major American orchestra. Our own talents in the arts, and they are considerable, are allowed to drift off to other countries to gain fame in the very places from which we feel it necessary to import talent.

There are some, and I would count myself among them, who would insist that there is such a thing as a Canadian identity. I must add here that I have been addressing myself to the problems of English and not French Canada. Although they may share many problems with us the French Canadians have one very large advantage, as far as culture goes, and that is the French language which makes them somewhat immune to the American media invasion, but not, of course, completely so and again they have their problems with us, their fellow Canadians, who in general don't understand the unique value of French-Canadian culture. The answer to the vexing question of how to gain and hold our identity is complex. First, we cannot, as many chauvinists have advocated, invent a culture by turning a deaf ear to the realities of art history. Examples of this type of invention always result in disaster, but still, we must instill in our public a sense of pride in country. What must be found in a nation are those things that make unique and different from other nations. One area where this should and could be carried out is education and this is certainly true in my area of art education.

Art education in Canada — what it does and does not do for a strong cultural identity? One, the nationalists have a point when they say that post-secondary education, including art, is controlled by foreigners, mainly Amer-

icans and Englishmen. I am sorry to report many of them, at least in my area, are unabashed imperialists, and, sadly, so are many of their products — Canadian born and trained artists and art historians who themselves end up teaching in our universities and schools. Let me relate some of my own experiences. It is quite normal when a colleague from the United States or England learns that I originally came from the United States to share his thoughts with me on how backward Canada and his students are. They may give as examples that their first year students do not even know who Jackson Pollock or Henry Moore is, yet if I ask these very same teachers, some of whom have been teaching in Canada for years, a question about modern Canadian art or, even worse, Canadian art history, all that I receive in return is a blank look or I am told that these things aren't important in the overall picture. As another example, survey courses in art history are taught across the country in the standard Pharaoh to Picasso fashion without a single mention of Canada, simply because the professors neither know or care about Canadian art. In their opinion it is not important. This would not happen in the United States or England and it should not happen in Canada. Of course, another good reason for the lack of Canadian content in such courses is that there is no standard textbook on this broad subject that even mentions Canada in passing and not many professors are inventive enough to bring such content into the course without a textbook. That lack of books with Canadian examples in major general areas, such as this, accounts for much of this problem of identity among our own students, but that is surely the subject for another paper.

Both of the examples I have given are what I would call cultural imperialism, but worse in its implications, and sadder, is yet another example. At the University where I teach we take our students on a field trip to Chicago to see the 'great' art at the beginning of their third year. Since coming on the faculty in 1970 I have advocated changing the field trip from Chicago to Ottawa, our capital and home of our National Gallery and collection, as well as Montreal and Toronto, our two largest cities both of which have large galleries. The reasons are obvious. In Chicago and Minneapolis (which is visited on the way) combined there is exactly one Canadian painting, a rather beat-up Riopelle in Chicago. There is no shortage, however, of American art, both contemporary and historic, nor should there be. It is not surprising then that our students come away from our school knowing more about American art than their own and when they look for examples to emulate it is to the south that they look and not to their own history or even to their own peer group. What is surprising, however, is that what little support I get for the change in the programme comes from some of the Americans on the staff who can understand the value of students learning from their own national artistic heritage, while many of the native born Canadians on the staff will not support the change because they say that there is more 'good' art in Chicago and art is international. It may not be as surprising as I think if you realize that these people are themselves products of the kind of education that I have just described.

Another situation that I believe makes a Canadian cultural identity difficult is the refusal of many Canadians to identify themselves as Canadians. We'll call ourselves English-Canadians, French-Canadians, Welsh-Canadians,

Ukrainian-Canadians, Polish-Canadians, Irish-Canadians, German-Canadians, the list is limitless. Always a qualifier before the word Canadian, as if by itself it is not enough. Remember that the United States has nearly the same ethnic mix, but there is no shortage of people willing to call themselves Americans. A better simile for the purpose of this meaning would be that very seldom when one approaches a Frenchman and asks of him his nationality is the answer, "I'm a Hun." In Canada, however, one finds generations of native born Canadians holding on, for dear life, to obscure ethnic customs of the 'old country.' In my own city of Winnipeg groups of citizens spend a great deal of their time organizing and putting on ethnic festivals, dressing up in ethnic costumes that the natives in the 'old' country wouldn't be caught dead in. In fact, and a sad fact it is, many of the practices of the various ethnic groups in Canada prove to be an embarrassment to the legitimate immigrants who came to Canada for a new life, not to be reminded of their 'foreignness.' Often the customs held onto by ethnic groups in Canada are less than realistic and their time might be better spent forming their own identity rather than holding on to one that does not, and probably never did, exist. Cultural identity in Canada becomes even more elusive when the people in that culture cannot even identify themselves as Canadians first.

The visual arts, as I stated earlier, are regarded by many as a universal language, whereas the written work is, by its very nature, more nationalistic, at least by group — English, French, Russian, and so on, but in any case, even the best novel written in Greek and presented to me in that language, remains, if you pardon the pun, Greek to me, while it is possible for me to look at a painting from an other culture and *think* that I am in full understanding of it. I say *think*, because I believe that you need to know more than just the formal aspects of the visual arts to understand what a particular culture's art is about. Why was the art of the North so much different than that of Italy during the Renaissance? It was not lack of skill on behalf of the Northerners, as was once thought as the derisive title Flemish Primitives given to the period by 19th century art historians, but, rather, a fundamental difference between the cultures that was manifest in their art. It is still the same today. Pop Art that was done in England or France a few years ago was, and is, very different than the American model, as was Abstract Expressionism, in its various national modes, and any critic who can't see these differences is either blind or stupid, likely both. These differences are formed by the national character of the artists, and when strong, as was the case of American artists in the past 1945 period, made for a vigorous art. The danger of American art in Canada stems from its very success in our country, and we are hardly alone; we tend to follow American art fads about three paces behind the Bandwagon. Where art is at its weakest, is where it blindly copies without understanding and we have had more than our share of this kind of art in Canada.

And this, friends, is where we as critics come in. This sham, third rate, art is usually lauded in official and critical circles as being up to date, with it, and the rest of the crap that we are all too familiar with, but the truth is often overlooked by people who should know better, *us*, in a feeble attempt to appear up-to-date. None of us want to appear the provincial or the critic who ridiculed any important art

movement and was later proved wrong. I am reminded once more of the parable of the Emperor's New Clothes. And who's the fool here, the honest conservative critic or the myopic camp follower, who is too much the coward to have any opinion? Fortunately, not many people read art magazines and if they did, many would find that they couldn't understand them anyway, as many articles appear to be written in tongues, a language so clouded by jargon that only the initiate could possibly understand and they would likely need the latest copy of the art critic's lexicon.

Let me return to my own problem. Every time that I travel, be it to Europe, Africa, Asia or another country as close as the United States, I am reminded of how really unique Canada is, but so often when I see Canadian

art it has the same dulling sameness of other 'modern' art that I have seen all over the world. I really don't believe that there is so much a world-wide brotherhood of artists as there is seemingly a loss by many artists of an ability to understand their own environment. I am not suggesting that all Canadian landscape, the *Group of Seven* have already done this with predictable dreary results, or that they should stop learning from history, but I am suggesting that they gain some pride in their own ideas and that some of these ideas might be supported by our critics. As for the critic in a country such as Canada and the rôle that they can play in the forming of a society that can be proud of its own culture, there must be some basic rethinking, as well. First as a profession in Canada, it is practically non-

existent. Criticism in Canada is not so much a lost art, Northrop Frye and Marshall McLuhan excepted, as one that has never been found. People with little or no background on the subject write columns in newspapers that offer little above the pedestrian level; our art magazines, with exceptions, offer little more than quasi-scholarship and at best a pale imitation of the worst sort of American criticism, which is very bad indeed. Oh Lord, where are our Ruskins, Baudelaires and Apollinaires now that we need them! I wouldn't want to look for them at this meeting; we seem to be too busy trying to figure out if the Emperor is wearing a two or three button suit.

1. S. M. Cream, *Who's Afraid of Canadian Culture*, York University, May 1973, Table #7, Toronto, Ontario.

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