

Pierre Théberge, *Guido Molinari*. Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada, 1976. 160 pp., illus., \$17.50 (paper)

Terry Fenton, *Jack Bush: A Retrospective*. Toronto, Yorkville Press and Art Gallery of Ontario, 1976. Unpaginated, illus., \$9.95 (paper)

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PIERRE THÉBERGE. *Guido Molinari*. Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada, 1976. 160 pp., illus., \$17.50 (paper).

TERRY FENTON. *Jack Bush: A Retrospective*. Toronto, Yorkville Press and Art Gallery of Ontario, 1976. Unpaginated, illus., \$9.95 (paper).

When the *Jack Bush* catalogue appeared in the fall of 1976, it led to frustration that the Art Gallery of Ontario should content itself with a glossy promotion piece as the catalogue for the retrospective of an artist who has played such a significant rôle in the art scene in Canada. When Jack Bush died, frustration was deepened by resentment and dismay because there can be no second chance to do the catalogue properly, no future opportunity to ask Bush the unanswered questions and resolve the unresolved issues. Coincidentally in the fall of 1976, the retrospective of another major Canadian artist, Guido Molinari, was mounted by the National Gallery of Canada. The almost simultaneous appearance of the *Molinari* catalogue presented the perfect foil against which to evaluate the *Bush* catalogue: it was lucid, informative, and well-designed.

Canadians complain constantly about the paucity of intelligent literature about Canadian art history. So little money is available for publishing that the majority of commercial publications about art in Canada are inevitably "coffee table" editions with many colour plates and a minimal amount of substantive information. A definitive history of Canadian art has yet to be written, and in the meantime exhibition catalogues form the basis for its historical documentation. Surely then, galleries which assemble major exhibitions and undertake to circulate them throughout the country are obligated to ensure that such exhibitions are well researched and well documented by publications of merit.

If one establishes the criteria of informing the public, documenting an exhibition, and contributing to the larger body of art historical knowledge, Pierre Théberge's *Molinari* (Fig. 1) meets these expectations. Curator Théberge chronologically traces Molinari's evolution as a poet and painter, a facilitator of the Montreal art scene, and a spokesman for the *avant-garde* within that scene. Théberge clearly links Molinari with his Automatist precursors and establishes a context which links him to the historic tradition of Borduas's *Refus Global*: "Guido is a noble prophet of freedom. . . . Like all authentic artists in our

country, he fervently wishes the province of Quebec to cease being a caricature of a spartan monastery!"

Théberge analyzes with clarity and precision the artist's stylistic and intellectual development, the rôle of outside influences on Molinari's art, and the method by which the artist absorbed such influences to create his own unique statement. Significant events in the artist's career are clearly designated. Extensive quotations from Molinari's own writings and those of contemporary critics place Molinari's art within the larger international context in which the artist himself saw his work: "To understand the development of abstract painting, it is important to place Kandinsky's work in its true perspective, which is not that of romantic expressionism but of a subordination of the plastic object to its free function. In this, his work — even if it explores other possibilities — shares the same concerns as Mondrian's." This situating of Molinari's work within the international context is appropriately highlighted by Théberge's citation from Molinari's article "Reflexions sur l'automatisme et le plasticisme," succinctly defining his own vision of the artist's rôle: "I would like to be the maker of new signs to express my inner movement." Théberge's

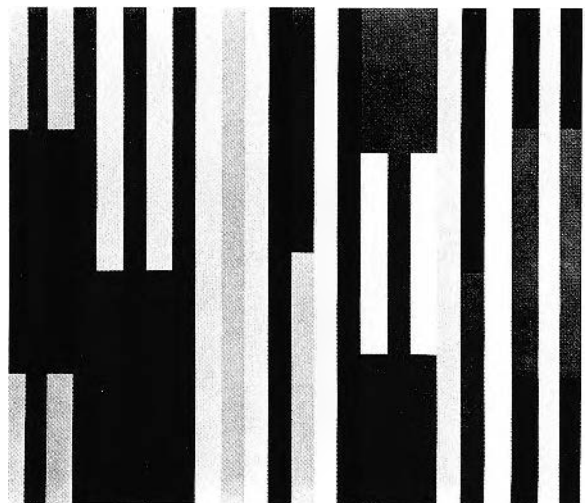


FIGURE 1. Guido Molinari, *Equivalence*, 1959. Théberge, cat. no. 12.

catalogue is replete with factual information and pertinent insights.

In addition to such data, the introduction is highlighted by a series of photographs ranging from reproductions of very early works (not included in the exhibition), to installation shots of exhibitions held during the years of Molinari's artistic development. Théberge chronicles those exhibitions, lists co-exhibitors, and is able to give the reader a flavour of the environment in which Molinari's art flourished. In forty-eight pages of text (inclusive of both French and English) and photographs, Théberge presents the casual viewer and the scholar with a wealth of documentation assembled to present an intelligent appreciation of the art of Guido Molinari.

The catalogue which follows this introduction lists each of the works in the exhibition, beginning with *Emergence II* (1951), and includes, in each instance, pertinent information such as inscription details, exhibitions in which works have been displayed, bibliographies, and provenance. Drawings, listed separately, include size and inscription information. There are in all fifty-two black-and-white and eighteen acceptable colour reproductions. (The subtleties of an art form reliant totally upon colour are of necessity diminished.) In addition Théberge lists chronologically those exhibitions in which Molinari has been represented, including the dates, locations, catalogues, and reviews. Following, there is a listing of all of Molinari's writings, many of which have been compiled by Théberge into a separate book, *Guido Molinari: Écrits sur l'art (1954-1975)* (Ottawa, 1976, 114 pp., illus., \$10.00, the second in the series "Documents in the History of Canadian Art/Documents d'histoire de l'art canadien" to be published by the National Gallery of Canada). Interviews, quotations, books, and articles which refer to Molinari or his work are also included in the catalogue. If there be any complaint, it is that the cost of this soft-cover book is

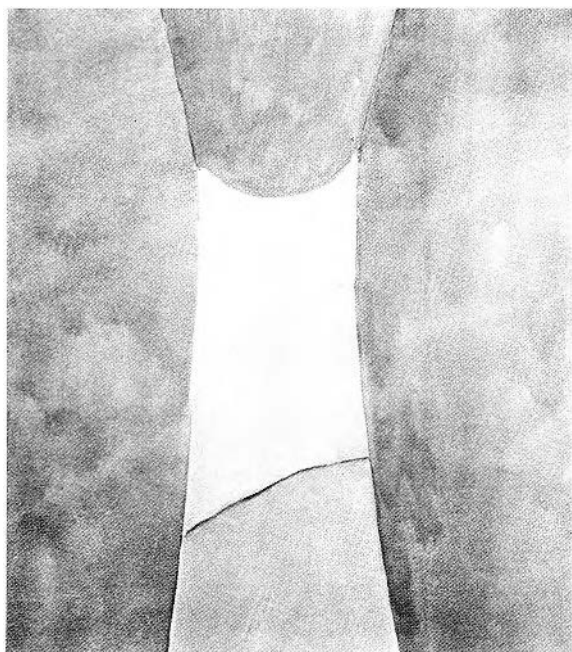


FIGURE 2. Jack Bush, *Color Column I*, 1964. Fenton, cat. no. 13.

prohibitive. (*Editor's note:* An inexpensive abridgement of the catalogue is available as Pierre Théberge, "Guido Molinari," *Journal of the National Gallery of Canada/Journal de la Galerie nationale du Canada*, no. 15 [2 July 1976], 8 pp., 22 illus., \$.50 [paper].)

The *Bush* catalogue (Fig. 2) is much more reasonably priced and is more attractive, but it will add nothing to our scholarly resources. It is overloaded with generalizations and oversimplifications that will likely confuse the uninitiated gallery-goer.

The introduction to the *Bush* catalogue is a jumble of conjecture by Terry Fenton. Apparently written to place Bush within an international context, it is filled with jargon, such as "cubist design," that is never adequately defined. The whole idea appears to be an attempt to establish Bush as a central figure in both the national and international art scene (or perhaps "market") in a manner reminiscent of Clement Greenberg. Substantive research detailing Bush's early growth, his relationship with the Painters Eleven, his meeting with Greenberg, his embarkation on international travel, and his influence upon a generation of young artists might have given us as lucid a picture of Bush the artist as Théberge offered of Molinari. There is, however, a scarcity of such concrete information in the *Bush* catalogue, and generalizations abound.

In the first portion of Fenton's rather confused discourse, he attempts to establish Bush's importance as a Canadian and to define his position in Greenberg's Post-Painterly Abstraction movement. In attempting to single Bush out as a leader in Canadian painting while reserving a place for him in the international coterie, Fenton navigates perilous waters with little success. Proposing that Bush's success lies in his unique handling of the figure-ground relation, Fenton then seems to say that this is due to the Art Nouveau influence of the Group of Seven in the '30s and '40s and to his isolation from "School of Paris modernism." What he ignores here are Bush's own remarks incorporated as an addendum to the text which testify to the artist's great admiration for Matisse, an alternative and more likely source for Bush's handling of this problem. Perhaps one day we shall get off the New York merry-go-round and re-examine Bush's painting in the light of his professed respect for Matisse.

In his discussion of Painters Eleven, some astounding remarks, such as "the younger artists (Town and Ronald) quickly assimilated the *large scale cubism of the abstract expressionists*" (author's emphasis) left this reader concerned, to say the least. The abstract expressionists may well have been influenced by the cubists but they were not "cubist" painters, and cubism is not synonymous with "flatness." Fenton's statement that "older artists (like Bush and Jock Macdonald) produced abstract paintings which acknowledged cubism incompletely and uneasily" indicates no awareness on his part that Macdonald had been painting abstractions since the '30s when his "Modalities" grew out of a visit to California; there he was exposed to most of the great European masters of the twentieth century.

Fenton concludes this introductory essay with the statements that Bush's style is "idiosyncratic to the point of eccentricity" and that "he may be the first truly influential artist that Canada has produced." A catalogue of such import deserves a well-researched and properly documented presentation that in itself would establish both the nature of the eccentricity and the significance of the contribution.

This introduction is followed by twenty-four colour plates, beginning with *Red Vision* of 1958. No earlier works are reproduced, not even for documentary purposes. Each plate is identified by title, date, medium, size, and present ownership. The colour is often poor and one painting has been illustrated upside down (*June Lilac*, pl. 44). There are also thirty-two black-and-white illustrations. Interjected casually between the colour and the black-and-white photographs is an extremely interesting transcript of a tape recording of 1975 called "Reminiscences by Bush." Six pages of the catalogue are devoted to a redundant, verbatim recital of the information included, with each plate suggesting that the want of substantive information in the catalogue must be attributed to lack of research rather than lack of funding. So little thought was given to this document as an historical record or a source of information that its pages were not even numbered. A concise biographical summary and a "selected" bibliography conclude the text.

Bush is dead. We shall have to rely on secondary sources in the future. The catalogue will serve as a souvenir item for many, but it will do nothing to establish Bush's true rôle as an artist either in Canada or in the international scene.

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originates more often in the task of survival among early cultures (canoeing, bows and arrows, fishing), frequently in the technology of warfare and personal forms of combat (riding, shooting, fencing), in the need for means of transportation (snowshoes, riding, sleighing), and, sometimes, in religious and competitive ritual such as the ceremonial "ball-games" of the Mesoamerican Indians.

Sport conceived as "sport," without utilitarian function other than sheer pleasure in the activity itself, like "art for art's sake," is a special phenomenon within human history. High development of sport is limited to cultures which place value upon the individual conceived as having free will, as self-creating, and self-disciplining. It is a conception of humanity not limited to Western culture, but is one which reached its fullest and best known expression in the context of ancient Greece and in the phenomenon we have come to cherish and preserve as the Olympic Games.

The publishers missed a wonderful opportunity by not exploring more thoroughly the concept of sport, the ideal of the self-governing, disciplined human body, and the significance of the ideal, performing human organism as an "idea" as well as an image in the history of art and thought. Instead they chose this mediocre, jumbled enterprise.

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Editor's note: Images of Sport in Early Canada/Images du sport dans le Canada d'autrefois was declared a prize-winner in the 1977 Book Show and 1977 Jacket Show of the Association of American University Presses. The book was designed by Fritz Gottschalk and Don Kindschi of Gottschalk + Ash Ltd.

NANCY J. DUNBAR, compiler, introduction by HUGH MACLENNAN. *Images of Sport in Early Canada/Images du sport dans le Canada d'autrefois*. Montreal, McCord Museum and McGill-Queen's University Press, 1976. 96 pp., 126 illus., \$14.95 (cloth), \$7.50 (paper).

Images of Sport in Early Canada is a meaningless concoction prepared out of a sense of duty to the Montreal Olympic Games of 1976, yet it is the sort of thing that so often substitutes for more worthwhile forms of art historical or ethnographic endeavour among Canada's educational institutions.

In the first place, the rationale for the selection of images — objects, photographs, paintings, and drawings, most of which are in the collection of the McCord Museum — is unclear, imprecise, and inconsistent. Musical objects, such as the woodcarving of a Quebec fiddler (Fig. 1) or a ceremonial Haida Indian rattle, are combined with a lady's costume and embroidered Cree gloves. Nor are all of these images representative of sport: Eskimo kayaks, bows and arrows, and the portrayal of a buffalo chase by the American painter Catlin (why not Kane, Canada's equivalent?) have to do instead with the quest for food and sheer survival. How is a nineteenth-century copper weathervane an image of sport? Is it because it depicts a horse which, in turn, may suggest racing or riding?

The feeble and no doubt hastily written introduction by Hugh MacLennan leaves a good deal to be desired. For one thing, not all sport is an outgrowth of innocent play. It



FIGURE 1. Adélar Turgeon, *Fiddler*. Dunbar, p. 35.