Vie des arts

Texts in English

Volume 24, Number 97, Winter 1979–1980

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/58859ac

See table of contents

Publisher(s)
La Société La Vie des Arts

ISSN
0042-5435 (print)
1923-3183 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this document
The importance of collections, to allow the better situating of works, to be conserved; from whence arises the importance of the curator, taken in the sense of communicational ideology upheld by Abraham. Values put in concrete form in objects produced by a society and the Archaeology sectors, which has assured excellent discussions on the subject of museology in general. But what must be hailed as an event is the spontaneous defense of the art museum. It is clear that the art museum, as an absolutely indispensable institution, must be maintained and developed in order to allow it to remain a cultural tool of prime importance.

The malaise caused by the definition of the new museological concept set forth in Le Musée du Québec en devenir urges us to ponder. Doubtless, it reflects the agitations aroused by attempts at rationalization in the traditional domain of the discourse on art whose development we have followed for some years. Sciences related to language, which are at the base of the revolution in the language of criticism, have led to the passage from literary to scientific discourse on art. Sociology, psychology and philosophy have also contributed to enlarging the field of definitions. Artistic experiment has become a simple function like all other human and social ones. It was necessary at all costs to demystify. Fortunately, we seem to be coming back to more precise awareness. The artistic function is not really like the others. We shall never clarify completely what makes it possible. The museum of to-morrow cannot forget this fundamental truth. It is in the service of an unceasing process of clarification.

It is comforting to think that the principal objections to the concept of the future Quebec Museum were raised by the Arts and the Archaeology sectors, which has assured excellent discussions on the subject of museology in general. But what must be hailed as an event is the spontaneous defense of the art museum. It is clear that the art museum, as an absolutely indispensable institution, must be maintained and developed in order to allow it to remain a cultural tool of prime importance.

Let us consider the definition that aroused such violent opposition. "A museum is an institution which conserves and conveys values put in concrete form in objects produced by a society and which permits the comprehension of our way of being in the world." Is this in fact a difficulty in semantics, or else a difficulty of interpretation of the theory of the informational architecture of the work taken in the sense of communicational ideology upheld by Abraham? "Art is a programmed sensualization of the environment; as many possible sensualizations, as many possible programmes, as many works of art, and therefore as many artists as makers of environment." The coded transmission of the objet d'art or the artistic experiment is involved here and, when it is a matter of applying a theory of communication to the aesthetic universe, it is necessary to be particularly concerned with the creative act and the more or less obvious message it contains. What the museum seeks to emphasize, beginning with the object, is everything related to the creative act. From whence arises the importance of conservation; it is necessary to begin with the witness (the work), with the object to be conserved; from whence arises the importance of the curator, specialist in the illumination of the work, whose education is linked to the object and to collections. From whence arises, too, the importance of collections, to allow the better situating of works, the establishing of relationships, in order to assure permanent interrogation around the artistic process.

Our experience in the field of museology is still young. This fact assures its dynamism on the one hand and its desire for structuralization on the other. It is necessary, nevertheless, to consider consolidating existing experiments, enriching collections, supporting the efforts of curators, avoiding the risks of failure and fulfilling the immense hunger for comprehension that exists in the new public of museums.

(Translation by Mildred Grand)
What is involved, however, is not a vulgar one-to-one correspondence between a particular visual effect or a certain emotional twinge and a specific mark on the canvas. Over an extended period of time the viewer gains a keen appreciation of the variety and multilevelled, interrelated complexity that actually exist within the "ground", the lower half of the picture plane. No other figure-type in Bolduc's ample repertory is that it has led to Bolduc's invention of the elongated "checkerboard" motif. No other figure-type in Bolduc's ample repertory provides so clear and condensed an example of his methods of construction: in fact the checkerboard motif is a veritable paradigm of inversion, polar opposition and the quantification of form. It immediately prepares the viewer's mind to think in dialectical terms. At the same time the inherent iconographic and psychological authority of the motif endows the paintings with boldness and resonance. An exemplary work such as Common Sense is a picture of intelligence articulating itself exclusively through a purely sensuous medium. The continued exploration of this motif along the lines of distance and loneliness through a unique handling of space, FitzGerald concentrates on a close study of everyday scenes, often from an upstairs window looking into a neighbour's backyard. He experimented with many techniques and, as principal of the Winnipeg School of Art, urged his students to use technique as a tool, not an end in itself.

His early painting was decorative and Impressionistic. Working as a commercial designer by day, he studied at night with a Hungarian, A. S. Kesztheili, and exhibited in the Royal Canadian Academy Show of 1913. In 1921 Frank Johnston of the Group of Seven encouraged him to send pictures to Toronto, and there Lawren Harris invited him to join. From 1921-1922, FitzGerald studied in New York City at a time when the smooth sculptural modelling of American Scene painting was being developed. Back in Winnipeg his style changed. FitzGerald did not see Seurat's painting A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte until 1930 at the Chicago Art Institute, but his work had already shown Pointillist influence. The American Precisionist Charles Sheeler also influenced FitzGerald, as seen in the "blown technique of The Flats, Snowflake, 1926 and Ross Farm, 1930-1. For FitzGerald the way he used his brush was part of the picture. The three oils, Williamson's Garage, Doc Snider's House and Farm Yard combine a fine Pointillist stroke with some of Sheeler's realism. Ferdinand Eckhardt, former director of the Winnipeg Art Gallery, finds the surface of Williamson's Garage breathes, like the earth under the snow. FitzGerald himself said: "It is necessary to get inside the object and push it out rather than merely build it up from the outside aspect."

In the oil painting, Farm Yard, FitzGerald evolved the brush stroke that is his most characteristic feature. Charles Hill describes it as "risibly thin lines, dots, crosses to bring movement to the surface of their medium. McLean's, of course, jump to music. FitzGerald's work is more quiet and still. But the rhythm is there and the eye follows a balanced composition into an intricate texture which causes excitement. How does he do it?"

For FitzGerald, the challenge was to capture the light and space of the prairie. Unlike Jean-Paul Lemieux, who evokes a feeling of cold and hardness through his harmonies of distance, FitzGerald evokes a feeling of distance and loneliness through a unique handling of space. FitzGerald's work is more quiet and still. But the rhythm is there and the eye follows a balanced composition into an intricate texture which causes excitement. How does he do it?

L. L. FitzGerald, the painter from Winnipeg, was asked to join the Group of Seven in 1932 to take the place of the late J. E. H. MacDonald. He was a quiet, contemplative man and painter, perhaps the most "non-group" of them all. What distinguished his work is its garishness and stridency which lend a real authority to his apparent personal need to keep the painting under conscious, rational control as he works along.

The bold use of graphic patterns (diamond grids, polka-dots, etc.) to set up new situations for himself while they satisfy, at the same time, his personal need to keep the painting under conscious control. For one thing, the considerable liberating effect on Bolduc's notion of how far one can go in the ground area of his paintings. As a result, both the figure and the unique and eccentric personality of the figure. It also adds that for it is its garishness and stridency which lend a real authority to his apparent personal need to keep the painting under conscious, rational control as he works along.

What is involved, however, is not a vulgar one-to-one correspondence between a particular visual effect or a certain emotional twinge and a specific mark on the canvas. Over an extended period of time the viewer gains a keen appreciation of the variety and multilevelled, interrelated complexity that actually exist within the "ground", the lower half of the picture plane. No other figure-type in Bolduc's ample repertory is that it has led to Bolduc's invention of the elongated "checkerboard" motif. No other figure-type in Bolduc's ample repertory provides so clear and condensed an example of his methods of construction: in fact the checkerboard motif is a veritable paradigm of inversion, polar opposition and the quantification of form. It immediately prepares the viewer's mind to think in dialectical terms. At the same time the inherent iconographic and psychological authority of the motif endows the paintings with boldness and resonance. An exemplary work such as Common Sense is a picture of intelligence articulating itself exclusively through a purely sensuous medium. The continued exploration of this motif consists of joining or relating two individual, contrasting elements together and then applying them as a single unit to the work in progress. One of the terms of this unit will establish an equally compelling relation to the third element, of course. In the work, its partner term, however, will bear no relation to the third element at all. Thus by employing the most rudimentary means imaginable Bolduc is able to create fresh and totally unpredictable effects on both an over-all and a local scale. They enable Bolduc to constantly set up new situations for himself while they satisfy, at the same time, his apparent personal need to keep the painting under conscious, rational control as he works along.

In the most recent paintings — those exhibited in Montreal, Quebec City and Washington, D.C., during February and March of this year — the decorative impulse so essential to Bolduc's art acquires a greater range of stylistic and formal possibilities than it has yet been given. The checkerboard pattern is found throughout the predominantly purple field and boldly used throughout the predominantly purple field. The blatant orange and white stripe which caps the central figure in Nine Below Zero, for example, seems at first to have come out of nowhere. It is absolutely essential to the picture, however, for it is its garishness and stridency which lend it an authority that is unique and eccentric personality of the figure. It also adds that for it is its garishness and stridency which lend a real authority to his apparent personal need to keep the painting under conscious, rational control as he works along.
Harris that if he ever painted he would paint music, FitzGerald’s painting. “Fond of water”, which hangs with Farm Yard, Prairie Fantasy and From an Upstairs Window in Ottawa’s National Gallery, evokes a wide, fresh scene far more open and grand than its actual 95 x 45 cm warrants. The cascading brushwork has a sense of music. The pencil lines of the reeds reveal the canvas background in a hairline on either side of the bending forms. A fine brush has been used. The pencil strokes are flecked on the sides to create tiny delicate lines. The sky falls into the pool in limpid reflection. The shapes of the reeds, combined with the ethereal brushwork, are musical and lyrical.

In The Jar, FitzGerald applies his meticulous drawing technique to oil, using the tip of his brush to build up glistening highlights that round out the jar from within.

During the ‘40s FitzGerald’s teaching responsibilities took him time for painting. Rather than being inspired by the frustration of oils, he spent the years experimenting with water-colour. Dennis Reid sees his work “as an intense personal need to refine his experiments to essence”. The results were not seen for another 20 years. The New FitzGerald Exhibition, Winnipeg, 1963, showed a series of nude drawings and self-portraits, both rare occurrences in Canadian painting. The nudes emerge, tentatively, through a cloud of cross-hatching that barely covers the board, creating a dense, velvety texture. The white spots, left unpainted, resemble Seurat in a homespun Canadian way, like folk weaving or Scottish homespun versus French tapestry. FitzGerald’s apples have been compared with Cézanne’s. Eckhardt sees Vermee’s still lifes as a precursor to the FitzGerald’s stuffed apples.

Coloured chalks were another medium used in this period. They required yet another authoritative modelling to Two Apples on Window Sill, 1943. In Four Apples on Tablecloth, 1947, the cross-hatches give way to flying dashes. This is the style that resembles McLaren’s abstract films, Dots and Loops. Like drifting, blowing sand, come to rest in soft apple shapes, the little dashes seem inevitable, like breath. The movement is like McLaren’s drawing-on-film technique — one tiny line chasing the next. In Winter Apple, 1951, oil is combined with white space to form a deliberate design. Two Apples, 1951, shows a broadened Pointillist treatment in muted colours.

FitzGerald switched his brushes with versatility; e.g. Geranium by the Window, 1946, shows depth and solidity in water-colour. The Little Plant, 1947, in oil, shows concave strokes which no longer reflect the form of the brush but cover the surface like scales. Another experiment was with black chalk, as in Chris’ Barn, 1949, with short strokes applied to soft drawing paper to produce decisive accents.

In 1949 FitzGerald retired from teaching and returned to oil to paint From an Upstairs Window, 1951, generally regarded as one of his best works. The picture reflects a working-out of ideas tried in pen, chalk and water-colour. The spatial treatment is more complex than in the works of the ‘30’s.

His work of the ‘50’s shows a measured tread into abstraction. Robert Ayre calls it “the natural development of his pondering of form in still life and of his drawings rather than parts because of his association with Lawren Harris during visits to the Pacific Coast”. The non-objective world takes over, for instance, in Study, Apples, 1955. In a work like Still Life with Hat, 1955, FitzGerald fills the pen and ink study with what Eckhardt calls “iron filings or cloudless stars in the Milky Way”. Flooded Landscape, 1956, creates a mood of solitude with wainscotting and put in place in Dining Room a very handsome appearance where the panels occur”. In May of 1894, Albert Peters, contractors and builders in Quebec City, wrote: “The men will go down shortly with wainscoting and put in place in Dining Room... It will give the Dining Room a very handsome appearance”.

One of FitzGerald’s best works is Miniatures, 1955, which shows a broadened Pointillist treatment in muted colours. Another experiment was with black chalk, as in Chris’ Barn, 1949, with short strokes applied to soft drawing paper to produce decisive accents.

The Porteous children summered at the Island of Orleans with Emily, Charles’ unmarried sister, in her home, Rosemont. This house, now across the road from the Charles Porteous property, was on “the Island which was not completely round or separation from the river as it would be today. In 1894, Alex C. Hutchison, the Montreal architect, wrote to Porteous about plans for a ‘proposed house’. He mailed Porteous a copy of Building News for 1882 which Hutchison had found in the library of the Mechanics Institute. In this issue, a bound volume, there were photographs of ‘dwelling houses’, pictures of which had been reproduced in the News previous to 1882. Hutchison recommended that Porteous choose a plan from the volume. Was this a plan for the house at the Island? It is possible, since on February 4, 1895, Porteous received the following message from George Wood of Hutchinson’s office in Montreal: ‘... sending by express, plans and specifications for your proposed house. Mr. Hutchison is in Italy... we are calling for tenders’.

One set of plans, whether from Hutchison or not, was completed during the summer of 1895 and Frances, Charles’ wife, sent him a telegram saying that the plans for Homewood had arrived and she asked if she should “send them on”. Tenders for the house began to arrive. H. Staveley, architect at 212 Peter Street in Quebec City, tendered for painting and glazing at "the Island House" of 4, Peter Street, B. C. Pye, wrote to give Porteous a price for canvas “on the wall of where the panels occur”. In May of 1896, Albert Peters, contractors and builders in Quebec City, wrote: “The men will go down shortly with wainscoting and put in place in Dining Room. It will give the Dining Room a very handsome appearance.”

While tenders were submitted and work set in progress, Porteous considered the decoration to go above the wainscoting in the dining room. The first commission did not work out. In 1897 Rex Stovel, a Toronto artist, sent the following letters to Porteous from New York: “I take the liberty of asking you to allow me to go to your country house, camp in the stable, on the verandah, anywhere, so that I may be near the house and commence decoration for you. I have for the past few months been studying all the fine decorations to be found in New York, Boston and Washington and am feeling very strongly that I am ready to do something of which I shall be proud. Your dining room (judging from the description which I had from a mutual friend who visited your wife last summer) presents an excellent opportunity. I think an arrangement of apple trees in bloom, with the head and shoulders of one or two figures enjoying the blossoms and a glimpse of the river and hills, will make a charming composition, suggestive of spring and all its promise.”

Stovel had studied with George Reid, the Toronto muralist in Reid’s studio at Onotdeo in the Catskill Mountains of New York State, during the summer of 1894. Among visiting artists that year was Mr. McKim, a friend of the Porteouses. It is likely that she spoke about Charles Porteous’ ideas for murals to the Onotdeo painters. Certainly Stovel did not finish the work. Indications are that he did not progress very far with the murals and the whereabouts of anything he may have painted is presently unknown.
The relationships of light and dark, sunshine and shadow, in subjects Quebec, harvest scenes and landscapes by the river.

Brymner's subject matter was simple and direct, occasionally narrative and sentimental, only rarely allegorical; his composition formal; his palette reflecting something of earlier nineteenth-century classicism. He was drawn to the delicate greyed tonalities of Corot but when confronted with the atmosphere of the Canadian countryside, he painted with colours in a higher key.

In his very young years Brymner's family had holidayed at Baie St. Paul and this is where he chose to work when, in 1885, he returned for the last time from his student days in France. Here, in the lower St. Lawrence, Brymner painted some of his most beautiful works, both genre and figures in a landscape. Both subject matters reflected his ability to create subtle tonal relationships and to adjust his limited palette to the grey days he loved and the moments of sunshine which he never ignored? During this period he painted with great skill the relationships of light and dark, sunshine and shadow, in subjects such as the form of a handsome woman or the classical, framing, compositional devices of which he was so fond.

As the years passed, his summer holidays from the School of the Art Association were spent in many places. He travelled frequently to Europe; in 1892 and 1893 he painted in the Rocky Mountains; but as the century came to a close he spent much of his time in Quebec City, at Beaupre and Baie St. Paul. He experimented with water-colour on fine canvas and painted water-colour views of Quebec, harvest scenes and landscapes by the river.

Brymner's work was reviewed sympathetically in the Montreal press when there was a Spring Exhibition at the Art Association of Montreal or when the Royal Canadian Academy had their annual show. As a result of all these circumstances it is not difficult to understand that Porteous offered Brymner the Homewood mural commission.

Brymner's first studies for the murals were pencil sketches from nature. A letter to Morris indicates he finished the paintings in his studio in Montreal. Some pencil sketches which relate to the murals are in the Art Gallery of Hamilton; some have colour notations. It is possible that Brymner, using these sketches and others as studies, composed his subjects directly on his canvases. No intermediary water-colours or oil sketches are currently in evidence. Grids for enlarging from smaller works are not apparent on the canvases, although, of course, they may be there. Brymner used grids to work up large canvases which were painted from subjects sketched and photographed during his trips to the Rocky Mountains in the early 1890's.

The mural qualities which Brymner admired sprang from a single source, his love of the work of Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, and some of this influence is reflected in the paintings at the Island of Orleans. They are formal in composition; Brymner's palette is limited to soft tones of green, blue and brown, highlighted with pink.

There is harmonic unity over all the mural scheme. Of necessity the water-colours or oil sketches are currently in evidence. Grids for enlarging from smaller works are not apparent on the canvases, although, of course, they may be there. Brymner used grids to work up large canvases which were painted from subjects sketched and photographed during his trips to the Rocky Mountains in the early 1890's.

The paintings are decorative and while in contemporary art analysis this word has become a pejorative, it is not so in this case. They fulfill their purpose, which is to be decorative in the context of the dining room of a family summer home.

Whatever the influence and intentions, Brymner painted with a fresh point of view an ancient subject for artists, the four seasons. He has chosen harvest as his theme, the part of each season which is most relevant to the function of the dining-room to which the fruits of the harvest are brought.

The sequence commences on the west wall across from the original entrance door to the room. Spring, the harvest of the river, is depicted by fishing boats and the seine net. Summer is the early harvest of the fields which is characteristic of eastern Canadian agriculture. While some men bring in grain, others, with their oxen, prepare fields for a second sowing. Gathering apples, representing the harvest of autumn, is painted on the east wall; and on the south wall around a big bow-window are scenes of early winter and harvest in the sugar bush.

The room is about twenty-four feet long by nineteen feet wide, and a little more than nine feet high. The panels on the east and west walls are painted in three sections, the canvases on each side of the door measuring approximately three and a half feet in height by six feet in width; the joining panel over the door jamb is seventeen inches high. The panels on each side of the window on the south or river wall are about six feet high by seven feet wide and the joining panel over the window, seventeen inches high and eleven feet long. Over the chimney piece is the work attributed to Harriet Ford and on the mantle the motto "I Bide My Time". The panels on each side of the chimney piece measure four feet ten inches in height by three feet two inches in width.

Most, but not all, of the canvases are signed on the lower left, WM BRYMNER. Some are dated 1900. It is almost eighty years since they were painted. They are dirty, and the paint is cracking; there is paint loss; in some spots the canvas is bare. The "Ford" canvas, doubtless as a result of its location over the fireplace, is buckling.

There is much to study in this lovely house. In 1902, plans were made with Darling and Pearson, Toronto architects, to enlarge Homewood and a section was attached or rebuilt at the west end. The name of the house was changed to Les Croisardieres and more commissions were given by Porteous for murals. Maurice Cullen is reputed to have painted scenes which now hang in the hall between the two parts of the house, stories of early Canadian history. There is correspondence in the Porteous papers which indicates Homer Watson painted canvases for what was to become the billiard room, now a sitting room. One large, dark mural by Brymner hanging in this room is dated 1903. It depicts apple trees in blossom and different in colour, composition and brush work from his earlier harvest scenes.

To-day the house is a private residence belonging to F. A. Reid, Canadian Artist, Toronto, 1946. Open to the public, it is a haven for elderly brothers, who can enjoy their retirement years in this beautiful turn-of-the-century summer family home.

The paintings are decorative and while in contemporary art analysis this word has become a pejorative, it is not so in this case. They fulfill their purpose, which is to be decorative in the context of the dining room of a family summer home.

Whatever the influence and intentions, Brymner painted with a fresh point of view an ancient subject for artists, the four seasons. He has chosen harvest as his theme, the part of each season which is most relevant to the function of the dining-room to which the fruits of the harvest are brought.

The sequence commences on the west wall across from the original entrance door to the room. Spring, the harvest of the river, is depicted by fishing boats and the seine net. Summer is the early harvest of the fields which is characteristic of eastern Canadian agriculture. While some men bring in grain, others, with their oxen, prepare fields for a second sowing. Gathering apples, representing the harvest of autumn, is painted on the east wall; and on the south wall around a big bow-window are scenes of early winter and harvest in the sugar bush.