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Two Exhibitions from Smaller Galleries: Paraskeva Clark at Dalhousie, Albert H. Robinson at Kitchener-Waterloo

Paraskeva Clark: Paintings and Drawings. An exhibition held at the Dalhousie Art Gallery, Halifax, 9 September – 17 October 1982.
Catalogue: Mary E. McLaughlin, *Paraskeva Clark: Paintings and Drawings*, Halifax, Dalhousie Art Gallery, 1982. 80 pp., 66 illus., $10.00 (paper). Separate edition in French language.

Albert H. Robinson: The Mature Years. An exhibition held at the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery, 2 September – 17 October 1982.

Catalogue: Jennifer Watson, *Albert H. Robinson: The Mature Years*, Kitchener, Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery, 1982. 70 pp., 57 illus., $5.00 (paper). English /French edition.

The recent retrospective exhibitions of paintings by the Canadian artists Albert H. Robinson and Paraskeva Clark provided an opportunity to look more closely and deeply at the work of two artists whose artistic careers and personal temperaments offer a striking contrast. Robinson (1881-1956), supported generously by private patrons and without family responsibilities, led a sedate, even circumspect life. His substantial oeuvre is devoted almost exclusively to variations on the single theme of Quebec landscape (Fig. 1). Russian-born Paraskeva Clark (1898), on the other hand, was anything but sedate. Vivacious and outspoken, her personal suffering, family responsibilities and her constant awareness of contemporary European art and politics contributed dramatically to an eclectic range of subject matter and style (Fig. 2).

Both artists had the respect of their collegues and contemporary critics. Their paintings were included in virtually all of the major international exhibitions of Canadian art in the decades between 1930 and 1950 (*A Century of Canadian Art* at the Tate Gallery in London, 1938; The New York World's Fair of 1939; exhibitions of Canadian art at Yale University and Rio de Janiero in 1944 and at the National Gallery in Washington in 1950). Both were members of the Canadian Group of Painters and exhibited in the Group's first Canadian exhibition at the Art Gallery of Toronto in 1933.

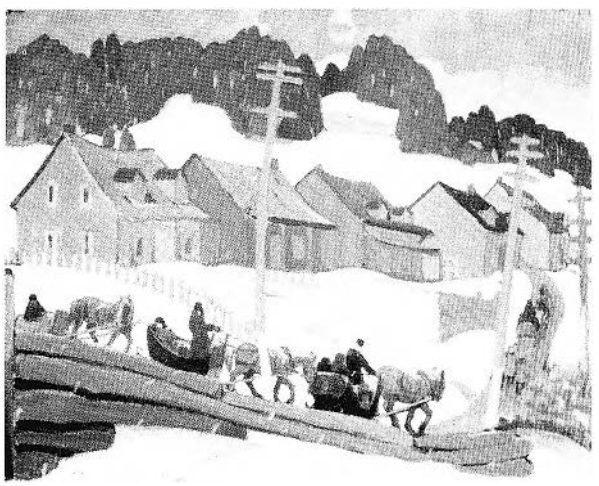

FIGURE 1. Albert H. Robinson, *Sunday in the Country: Return from Mass*, 1927. Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada.

FIGURE 2. Paraskeva Clark, *Wheat Field*, 1936. Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada. Both paintings (Figs. 1 and 2) were included in the exhibition *A Century of Canadian Art*, Tate Gallery, London, England, in 1938.

FIGURE 3. Installation view, *Albert H. Robinson: The Mature Years*, Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery (Photo: Brad Gleason).

But while Robinson and Clark share a common history of participation in these exhibitions, they participated individually in quite separate group exhibitions which underscore basic differences. Robinson, included as an invited contributor to the exhibitions of the Group of Seven, had several works selected for the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley, England in 1924 and 1925 – exhibitions that would bring the first international acknowledgement of a modern national school of Canadian painting – by the Group of Seven. Clark, by 1940, was an exhibitor with the Contemporary Arts Society in its important exhibition of *Art of Our Day in Canada* embracing international modernism. By looking at *Albert H. Robinson: The Mature Years* and *Paraskeva Clark: Paintings and Drawings*, it is possible to gain insight into what modernism meant to Canadian painting through the eyes of two painters who, until now, have been virtually relegated to the rank of minor Canadian artists. These exhibitions ask that we reconsider their achievements in light of the mainstream developments in Canadian art from 1920 to 1950.

Albert H. Robinson: The Mature Years, organized and produced by Jennifer Watson, curator of the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery, is only the third solo exhibition to be devoted to the work of this painter (Fig. 3). In contrast to the previous exhibitions and publications (1955, 1968), Watson's catalogue provides thorough scholarly documentation, in the form of a revised biographical chronology, full exhibition history for each selected work, a well-researched presentation of Robinson's participation in national and international exhibitions and publication for the first time of a paper on Robinson delivered by A.Y. Jackson in 1955. Watson has wisely chosen to focus the exhibition on the mature period of Robinson's work, which covers the twenty years between 1921 and 1941. This allows us to see a substantial body of work and to assess Robinson's strengths in terms of the culmination of his painting career. The exhibition is especially successful because sketches and final works are presented together, for it is here, in the subtle changes of colour, form and compositional balance that Robinson's individuality as a painter becomes fully evident. Judged too often solely in relation to the work of the Group of Seven, Robinson's particular virtuosity in the manipulation of colour and form marks a personal approach to the painting of Quebec urban and rural landscape.

As is frequently the case, it is in the small oil on panel sketches, such as *Baie St. Paul* and *Moonlight in the Laurentians* (cat. 1 and 44), rather than in his larger finished canvases, *Baie St. Lawrence, March* and *Moonlight, St. Tite des Caps* (cat. 2 and 46), that Robinson's eye for unusual colour harmonies and delicate balances of formal elements are most successful. The exhibition's generous display of both is a credit to Ms. Watson's ability to search out related paintings from both public and private collections. This first-hand look at Robinson's working method offers an insight not simply into the method of one particular artist, but equally important, allows the viewer to gain a sense of fundamental elements of the process of artistic creation itself (a point which unfortunately is often lacking in the presentation of exhibitions where available sketch material is not included). The decision to choose sketches which directly relate to the selection of final canvases lies at the heart of the conceptual and visual success of the exhibition. For it is only with this format that a simula-

tion of the artist's own working method can be realized while at the same time providing a virtually immutable framework for each successive installation of this travelling exhibition.

The installation at Queen's University's Agnes Etherington Art Centre at Kingston, the only venue viewed by this reviewer, amplified the effect of both the visual selection and the decision to include as many preliminary sketches with final canvases as possible. Even in a quick walk through the exhibition, one was conscious of the fact that the repetitions of familiar subject matter need not produce stale painting. The fresh but muted colours of the small sketches of *Cacouna* (Fig. 4) done in 1921 are still in evidence some twenty years later in studies (cat. 44 and Fig. 5) for *Moonlight, Saint Tite des Caps* (Fig. 6). Indeed, the very limitations of Robinson's content may have much to do with the strength of his formal solutions.

The catalogue accompanying the exhibition, as noted earlier, provides much important new documentation about Robinson and his work. The impressive documentation (including titles of works and listed prices – where known) of Robinson's principal and group exhibitions as well as the extensive catalogue entries for each selected work are the most important components of the catalogue, notwithstanding the validations and corrections of chronology and dating of works themselves.

In contrast to the straightforward and successful presentation of the basic catalogue information, the essay offers a surfeit of information in a complex presentation. The essay, written in a dense style, is often difficult to grasp at first reading. While presenting important new research on Robinson's biography and his methods of painting, there seems to be an unwillingness to edit out extraneous material (i.e. birth and death dates of artists wherever they are mentioned, the notation of particular artists who received their ARCA at the same meeting as Robinson, etc.). All this hampers the readability. Such material might have been more successfully integrated in an accompanying footnote rather than in the body of the text. The attempt to include important new biographical information and a chronology of Robinson's works with possible new datings of certain works frequently results in paragraph structures which by the very nature of their complexity bog the reader down. Since a separate chronology exists at the end of the text, a more agreeable solution might have been to edit out all biographical points and place them here. The text is further complicated by the author's perceived need to debate Thomas Lee's 1956 publication on Robinson. While admirable, and appropriate to a scholarly argumentation, it unnecessarily complicates a text written for a general public audience. In one particular case, Watson's desire to establish new documentation for Robinson's chronology leads her to the questionable conclusion that Robinson visited Corsica while studying with T.W. Marshall. The 'firm' evidence of this trip is supplied by Robinson's inscription on a work done by his teacher, T.W. Marshall, in Corsica. Although it is not improbable that

FIGURE 4. Albert H. Robinson, oil sketch for *Cacouna*, 1921, cat. 5 (Photo: VIDA/Saltmarche).

FIGURE 5. Albert H. Robinson, oil sketch for *Moonlight, Saint-Tite des Caps*, cat. 45. Coll. Mr. and Mrs. Frank Benish (Photo: Sotheby Parke Bernet, Toronto).

FIGURE 6. Albert H. Robinson, *Moonlight, Saint-Tite des Caps*, 1941, cat. 46. Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada.

FIGURE 7. Installation view, *Paraskeva Clark: Paintings and Drawings*, Dalhousie University Art Gallery, Halifax (Photo: Mern O'Brien).

Robinson could have accompanied Marshall the fact that no known Robinson works of Corsican subject matter exist would seem to suggest the contrary. At very least, Watson's firm statement: 'Nor is it generally known that in addition to accompanying the Marshalls through Normandy, Robinson visited Corsica', must be queried in light of the fragility of the evidence presented here.

One other small disappointment is the minimal discussion of the works themselves. Certainly, works are referred to in the text and often with tantalizing observations ('Robinson's sketches are invariably lively and spontaneous: it is rather his canvases which show a distinct development', p. 16) which lead the reader to expect fuller discussion of the works. Nevertheless, the positive aspects of Watson's diligent research are many. For the first time we have access to solid exhibition history for the works included in the exhibition as well as a firm framework for Robinson's participation in exhibitions at home and abroad. Without the availability of these basic tools further research on this artist would be difficult. And as Watson herself states in conclusion, it is the encouragement and stimulation of new research which will be the finest legacy of this exhibition.

Paraskeva Clark: Paintings and Drawings organized and produced by the Dalhousie Art Gallery in Halifax, with Mary E. MacLachlan as guest curator, is the first solo exhibition of Clark's work (Fig. 7). The selection of works, like that of the Robinson exhibition, concentrates on a substantive core of works produced in the 1930s and 1940s. The selection is judicious and underpins the success of the exhibition which, while not fully retrospective, presents a comprehensive body of works which allows one to gain an understanding of Clark's achievement. Clark's Russian roots, her knowledge of European art and her involvement in social and political issues at home and abroad, shaped her response not only to Canadian art but also her conception of the role of the artist in society.

The straightforward organization of the exhibition and its accompanying publication present the artist's paintings and drawings as a function of Clark's own personality and life experience. The well-written text presents important scholarly documentation in an organized, highly readable form. Comments from the artist herself, critics and other artists, are skilfully interwoven with biographical and historical information, contemporary photographic material and analysis of works. We learn of Paraskeva Clark's early training under the Russian artist Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin, her introduction and acceptance into the Canadian art scene by the leading artists (the Group of Seven, the Canadian Group of Painters and the Contemporary Arts Society), her vigorous pronouncements on the place of the artist in society (including the infamous 'Precambrian Shield' war of words with sculptor Elizabeth Wyn Wood) and her involvement with the charismatic Norman Bethune. This 'public' chronology of Clark's life history is carefully balanced by developments in her personal domestic life. A chronology and a brief exhibition history for the artist and the works selected for exhibition complete the catalogue package. The result is an extremely effective catalogue text written with the general reader in mind. The successful integration of historical and art historical context, biographical documentation and stylistic analysis of works presents a reasonably complete portrayal of the artist's life and work, given the limitations all exhibition deadlines demand.

The selection of works, drawn from both private and public collections, reveals the variety and the vitality of Clark's eclectic style and fortunately allows us to see works normally not on public view. With subject matter ranging from sensitive, bold self-portraits, and the evocative and powerful imagery of *Petroushka* (Fig. 8), to commissioned scenes of the women's war effort, portraits of friends and family, small landscapes and still life compositions, the full range of Clark's vision is presented.

MacLachlan's catalogue essay is particularly successful. The works are discussed in clear, simple and often illuminating language. For example, in the discussion of *Petroushka* she completes a stylistic analysis of the work and describes the origin of its content, derived from two sources – a contemporary event in which police retaliated brutally against a workers' strike in Chicago, and the artist's memories of Russian street puppet shows. Discussion of other works – the portrait of her second husband Philip Clark (Fig. 9), *Parachute Riggers* (Fig. 10), and *Russian Bath* (cat. 13) – is succinct and useful. But MacLachlan's continued emphasis on the importance of Petrov-Vodkin in the formation of Clark's personal style is suspect – a suspicion the artist herself would seem to confirm.

As one might expect, the very diversity of Clark's subject matter can present problems for installation. With such a wide range of subjects, styles, sizes and media it is difficult to avoid the inevitable compromise of the coherence of the presentation by separating sketches from final works and ignoring chronology. The installation at the National Gallery in Ottawa is to be particularly noted for its insensitivity to the chronological and artistic relationships between the sketches for *Petroushka* (cat. 17, 18). Nevertheless, consideration of the juxtaposition and visual effectiveness of works placed together is especially important in an exhibition which, because of its diversity, may confuse the general viewer. After viewing the installations in three of the four venues, all of which differed to some degree in basic organization, this reviewer concluded that the most effective presentations were those which maintained a balance between chronological sequence and visual compatibility.

The unity established by the author and the designer between illustration and written text is central to the success of the exhibition publication, remaining as it is, the sole tangible residual of the exhibition after its inevitable dispersal. Both Watson and MacLachlan have wisely illustrated each work exhibited and included important illustrations of works not included but pertinent to the concept of each exhibition. MacLachlan has added supplementary illustrations of the artist and events signalling the fullness of the artist's life. The major weakness, characteristic of most art exhibition catalogues is the practice, in both cases, of not integrating the illustration of the exhibited works in the catalogue essay where they are discussed. While this may not be a problem for those familiar with the works it can present unnecessary complications for the general reader. Coloured illustration in any exhibition

FIGURE 8. Paraskeva Clark, *Petroushka*, 1937, cat. 17. Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada. This painting, considered by the artist to be her finest, was shown at the New York World's Fair of 1939.

FIGURE 9. Paraskeva Clark, *Portrait of Philip*, 1933. Collection of the artist (Photo: Gary Castle).

FIGURE 10. Paraskeva Clark, *Parachute Riggers*, 1946-47, cat. 36. Ottawa, Canadian War Museum, National Museum of Man, National Museums of Canada (Inv. 14,086).

publication is necessarily conditioned by extra cost. Watson, by selecting a colour detail from Robinson's 1922 painting *St. Joseph* (cat. 13) for the cover, solves in part the dilemma of providing a colour illustration of Robinson's work as well as presenting an appealing cover design to help the marketing of the publication. One only regrets that the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery did not see its way clear to fund exhaustive colour illustrations of the paintings of an artist whose work depends upon his skills as a colourist.

The Dalhousie Art Gallery, while respecting the budgetary constraints, has been able to include two coloured illustrations as well as colour cover illustration of Clark's most important painting, *Petroushka*. Both publications present a handsome choice on the book shop shelves. The obligation to produce bilingual catalogues in both French and English (a stipulation of the National Museums Exhibition Assistance Program funding) introduces yet another logistical and financial burden for public art galleries intending to produce exhibition publications. The solutions offered by each of these galleries point to the additional complexities of layout and graphic design encountered in dual language publications. The Robinson publication achieves a bilingual format with French and English texts appearing simultaneously on each page. Undoubtedly the most inexpensive solution to the problem, this presentation nevertheless tends to complicate the integration of illustrations and the text as well as distracting the reader in either language. The Paraskeva Clark publication is published in separate French and English editions; this not only allows the reader the luxury of a single language text but also provides greater flexibility and control of the visual coordination and graphic design. The decision to produce separate English and French language publications in spite of the increased cost is an important one which warrants consideration of any institution facing a similar choice.

But far more important than the logistics of bilingualism, these two exhibitions and their accompanying publications reveal the strength and vision not only of the two young curators, Jennifer Watson and Mary MacLachlan, but of the initiating public galleries, Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery and Dalhousie Art Gallery. Watson and MacLachlan have organized exhibitions which demonstrate the ability of smaller public galleries to make important contributions to the study of Canadian art history with modest means. It is a credit to the authors' individual skills as researchers, writers and curators that even with the demands of unrealistic deadlines, budgetary constraints and institutional duties, the exhibitions offer fresh presentations of two neglected Canadian artists. It is regretable that the major public galleries do not use their resources to make similar modest, but significant contributions. In the absence of such committments, the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery, the Dalhousie Art Gallery and their like must be encouraged.

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Request/PAUL PEEL RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITION
London Regional Art Gallery

Request for information and location of art works by Canadian painter Paul Peel (1860-1892) for major Retrospective exhibition, planned opening date September 1986, travelling through 1987. Contact: Paddy O'Brien, Assistant Director, London Regional Art Gallery, 421 Ridout Street North, London, Ontario N6A 5H4 – Tel.: (519) 672-4580.