THE ACADEMY SHOW

The fifty-first annual exhibition of the Royal Canadian Academy opened in Montreal on the 21st of November, and was the occasion for a social event of considerable proportions.

Throughout the world the term ‘academy’ is rapidly becoming one of abuse, and in Canada it is plainly not free from this stigma. Certainly the average in this exhibition is not a high one; on the crowded walls there is very little sign of originality or individuality. There is less even than in previous years, and it can be assumed that the powers-that-be in the Academy do not want to encourage anything but conformity to outworn ideas of painting. The chief of these obsolete ideas is, of course, that the artist is a sort of benevolent human-camera-with-a-colour-sense; his deficiencies as a machine are made up for by his colour sensibility. This idea was originally propagated by Ruskin, whose enormous influence has resulted in the procession of banalities which have flooded the Academies, royal and otherwise, for the last fifty years. Schools of painting have turned out large numbers of ‘artists’ more or less technically capable; their capability, where it exists, runs to accurate reproduction of the passing effects of light and shade over some natural scene, figure, object, or grouping, usually possessing some literary or romantic association-value. Where the technical ability is weak, we have inaccurate reproduction allied with heavily weighted association-value, usually of a sentimental kind. In this distorted field of values we might find a badly painted windmill preferred to a well-copied field of wheat. (Canadian wheat not yet having acquired the prestige of Dutch windmills as picturesque subject matter.)

While we are gradually becoming freed from late Dutch importations, most of our painters are still subject to the enfeebling influence of nineteenth-century European technique. Of the painters of this naturalistic school showing at the Academy the most successful, perhaps, are F. S. Coburn and Kenneth Forbes. In their respective fields, granted what they get out to do, neither can be criticized. Coburn’s ability at turning out pieces of Laurentian country of amazing verisimilitude, with the familiar pair of horses, is undoubtedly valid, while Forbes’ portraits are shockingly life-like, though by any current artistic standards, quite dead.

It is this confusing mixture of deadness and life that is so depressing in the photographic school. There is a ghostly feeling about the portraits, and an unsatisfying feeling about the landscapes. In either case the reality is, we feel, so much to be preferred!

At a stage removed from the naturalists, we have a number of impressionistic painters deriving from the school of Monet. Their attempt is to construct colour-compositions based on nature, but with the colour treated architecturally instead of naturally. Among these may be placed such works as ‘Avallon. Spring Time,’ by F. W. Hutchison, and ‘Pine Trees, Winter,’ by F. N. Loveroff.

As the French impressionist movement was only the first step in the reaction against naturalism, and was itself succeeded by post-impressionism, it is not surprising to find the bolder spirits in Canada pushing past the impressionist stage into a more austere and rarefied atmosphere in which forms as well as colours are treated architecturally; a stage in which the artist has not been subjugated by his material, but has to a greater or lesser extent dominated it.

This new movement in Canadian painting was chiefly due to the pioneer work of a few Toronto artists of whom it is not too much to say that they invented a new approach to landscape painting in this country. The element of design entered largely into their compositions, and if this aspect has perhaps been overemphasized by too-zealous but ineffective disciples, that is not the fault of the distinguished members of the Group of Seven. Their own work remains as fresh and individual as ever, as witnessed in the two winter landscapes by A. Y. Jackson, the sweeping mountain design of J. E. H. MacDonald, and Arthur Lismer’s canvas, of which the mountain and cloud forms are as fantastic (from the point of view of the camera) as they are powerful. We miss, however, the work of Casson, Carmichael, and especially that of Lawren Harris.

Among the Montreal group of moderns there are solid and satisfying portraits by E. H. Holgate and Lilias Torrance Newton, four landscapes by H. Mabel May of which ‘Winter Landscape’ is perhaps one of her most successful compositions, and two winter scenes by A. H. Robinson whose inimitable handling of bright colour in his Quebec landscapes has incidentally given us a permanent record of a fast-disappearing scene. ‘At the Theatre,’ by Prudence Heward, ‘Labour du Printemps,’ by André Bieler, and ‘Shacks at Percé,’ by Annie D. Savage, are among the interesting pictures exhibited by the younger painters of this group.

Imitation of this kind does much less than justice to some fine pictures. It is unfortunate that these paintings could not be hung by themselves apart from the mediocre medley of dead canvas among which they have been scattered at the exhibition. A survey of the past few exhibitions, and a guess at the rejections made this year, clearly show that the authorities shown on post-nineteenth-century innovations. The only course now seems to be the foundation of a Salon des Indépendants, or something of the kind, which would please both the stay-putts and those to whom painting is a changing and a developing art, reflecting the contemporary life of a community.

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