UNDER the dynamic presidency of Dr. C. F. Martin, the Art Association of Montreal has suddenly become alive. Speaking at the opening of the Fifty-eighth Exhibition of the Royal Canadian Academy last week, Dr. Martin showed a keen grasp of realities. A museum, he said, was no mere storehouse, but an educational institution thoroughly alive and in tune with contemporary activity. It should work along creative lines to bring art to the community, and to encourage its appreciation on the broadest possible basis. Such truths can bear repeating. But whether or not he was aware of it, Dr. Martin’s remarks could have been applied equally well to the great majority of the pictures that were behind him on the walls as he spoke.

In the Art Gallery of Toronto, the Academy has sometimes appeared a little uneasy, but in Montreal it was usually more at home—the surroundings were familiar. But now that Dr. Martin has removed the old monk’s cloth from the walls, the Fifty-eighth Exhibition, while admirably hung, stands alone in its dullness. The showing, however, is of considerable interest for one event: the emergence of the new academicism. The old academicism is still in evidence, of course, as far as official portraiture is concerned; though there is enough poor painting to secure the rejection of many works even at Burlington House (Kenneth Forbes and Mrs. Newton—each in their own way—are exceptions). But in all else, the new academicism is well to the fore.

AT LONG last, the discoveries of the Group of Seven and the Montreal Group have become respectable enough to be freely admitted to official circles. After nearly twenty years (the normal time-lag) the broad design, the rhythmic flow and the light Impressionist palette have become conventionalized to the point where they are devoid of feeling and almost entirely meaningless. It is this development which has given rise to the strange misapprehension that the Academy has in some way become liberal. It is not the function of an academy to be liberal, for it represents the traditional and conservative elements in easel painting. Experiment and creative discovery are rightly left to independent artists. Some of their works may be seen at an Academy showing, but it is only as a concession which, in my opinion, progressive artists ought not to accept.

Those who expect to see anything new or vital at such a showing are doing the Academy a grave injustice. What one does expect, however, is some recognized level of competent craftsmanship. But it is precisely this which appears to be lacking. There are notable exceptions—the work, for instance, of Scott Carter, Leonard Hutchinson and Charles Comfort—but what strikes one most of all is that at an Academy show, one can almost always rely on seeing work which, even on technical grounds, would not be admitted to any other major exhibition. The Academy has gone a long way since the original pronouncements of the Marquis of Lorne, with their insistence upon the broadening of relations between art and the people. Unfortunately it has been a backward march, and the point has now been reached where any attempt at broadening the basis of inclusion leads almost automatically to a lowering of the standard of acceptance.

IN SUCH a showing it is extraordinarily hard to spot good work, because, contrary to general belief, a good painting does not shine through being placed between two bad ones. But I feel that Arthur Lismer’s two water colors, Leonard Brooks’ “Muggly January,” Mabel May’s lake and Sam Borenstein’s “Tunnel Station” (not one of his best) deserve a second look. It is in the water color and graphic arts section that there is most spirit, as is usually the case. Among the oils Harold Beament is at least tackling new material, and Lawrence Panton’s excursion into pointillism is instructive. But the complete absence of feeling—the dominant characteristic of the whole showing—is what depresses one. The sculpture section is dignified by Frances Loring’s fine miner’s head and Lillias Farley’s woodcarvings. Montreal will be even more exciting if Messrs. Shorey and Ritchie’s projected bus terminal ever goes up. But I miss the President’s magnolias.