COMING so soon after the first show of the Canadian Group of Painters, the 54th exhibition of the Royal Canadian Academy of Art is a depressing experience.

There is variety enough, but it is variety in the commonplace. If red geraniums move you but slightly, you may have tracks in the snow; or, if tracks are not enough, horses hauling logs; if you object to this Canada of ours being libelled as ‘Our Lady of the Snows’, you may enjoy picnics on the sunlit grass, or gay autumn woods, or seapumpe flung against the rocks along the shore; there are bright ideas for Christmas cards in French-Canadian sleighs and quaint old houses; and any number of pictures just made for calendars or jigsaw puzzles, from pretty ladies to canoes plunging theatrically into perilous rapids.

That is as it should be, no doubt. The Academy is the sanctuary of tradition, and tradition in Canadian painting seems to mean mediocrity. Yet once the Academy might have been saved from itself: it might have been enriched by the infusion of those strong elements which today make up the Canadian Group of Painters. Perhaps it would be against nature for any academy to welcome the new, when the new is powerful enough to threaten a change in the structure. Fearful of invasion, the Canadian Academy fought off the moderns, and now we watch its vitality ebbing away.

However, life is not quite gone. Some of those elements obstinately remained. To one interested in painting for its own sake, and not looking for a nice bit of woods or pasture for the blank space on the wall above the book-case, there are notable exceptions to the prevailing commonplace. Among them are two or three of Lismier’s vital works and a small head by Varley which makes the enormous ballet dancer posing naked on one toe beside it look vulgar indeed.

What is most depressing in the 54th show is the evidence that the Academy has relaxed discrimination in the attempt to make up for its losses. If we cannot expect the adventurous in an Academy exhibition, the least we can ask is dignity and proficient workmanship. There is plenty of this, in both portrait and landscape, but there can be no excuse for such vulgarity and amateurish daubing as are displayed in a number of the contributions.

On the other hand, the Academy is to be congratulated for including some of the sincere younger painters who are not well known, such as Aleksander Bercovitch, Marjorie Smith, Louis Muhlstock, and Ernest Neuman. In the company of the great, they appear with becoming modesty, some of them in black and white, but they promise to be moderns.

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