

Kodó, Krisztina

**Canadian artistic group formations: Art as a form of cultural and national identity**

*The Central European journal of Canadian studies*. 2016, vol. 10-11, iss. [1], pp. 57-72

ISBN 978-80-210-8690-6

ISSN 1213-7715 (print); ISSN 2336-4556 (online)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/138476>

Access Date: 27. 11. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.



# Canadian Artistic Group Formations: Art as a Form of Cultural and National Identity

La formation des groupes d'artistes canadiens :  
l'art comme forme d'identité culturelle et nationale

**Krisztina Kodó**

---

## **Abstract**

The terms cultural and national identity are fluid terms that allow for a wide scale of interpretation. What do we define as being a cultural identity specific to a nation? Canada, like all other nations of the world, has its own unique set of distinct features, that is, its symbols. Making occasional references to Tom Thomson and Emily Carr, this paper focuses on the specific groups of Canadian painters who officially formed the Group of Seven in Toronto and the Beaver Hall Group in Montreal. What made them “better” than other Canadian painters before and after? They strove for national content, hence an identity, and this aim was evident from the very beginning. The paper proposes to illustrate how as a group they succeeded where individual artists failed, and simultaneously created a steadfast and durable identity for Canada, thereby capturing the essence of the Canadian being through their paintings.

**Keywords:** Beaver Hall Group, Group of Seven, national identity, painting

## **Résumé**

Les conditions culturelles et nationales de l'identité sont des termes mouvants qui laissent une grande part à l'interprétation. Qu'est-ce que nous définissons comme l'identité spécifique d'une nation? Le Canada comme toutes les autres nations du monde a son lot de caractéristiques distinctes que nous considérons comme des symboles. La présente contribution se concentre sur des groupes de peintres canadiens spécifiques, sans inclure Tom Thomson et Emily Carr qui formaient officiellement le « Group of Seven » de Toronto et le groupe « Beaver Hall » de Montréal. Qu'est-ce qui les a rendus meilleurs que les peintres canadiens antérieurs et postérieurs ? L'essai propose d'illustrer la façon dont ils ont lutté en tant que groupe, mais aussi comment ils ont ou n'ont pas réussi en tant qu'artistes individuels, créant avec ténacité une identité durable pour le Canada en saisissant l'essence du Canada dans leurs peintures.

**Mots-clés :** Groupe de Beaver Hall, Groupe de sept, identité nationale, peinture



*In an earlier form, this article was first presented as a paper at a conference entitled “Multiculturalism in Canada: Changing Perspectives”, which was organized by Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary and Eötvös Loránd University on 24-25 November 2016.*

Cultural and national identities are fluid terms that allow for a wide range of interpretations. Due to their transparency, identities are not constant, but liable to shift and change in their meanings. Identities define the major outstanding features of a nation and as such formulate symbolic images. What do we define as a specific cultural identity of a nation? Generally, characteristics and general attributes that describe a nation’s culture. These may refer to human features, but also such inanimate objects as a specific landscape or a mountain, and such animate ones as plants or animals and also human beings.

Identities abound in every nation of the world, and Canada is no exception. How does a country go about acquiring identities? This is not an entity that can be purchased or borrowed, but presupposes a long process interlinked with traditional, historical and religious perspectives. The present paper endeavours to highlight the relevance of cultural identities with regard to artists’ groups and their cultural (hence artistic) goals at the end of the nineteenth and the turn of the twentieth century internationally and in Canada. Whether these international groups were linked with each other in any form or influenced one another in their artistic experimentation will be commented on, but the major focus will be given to two outstanding artists’ groups within Canada – the Group of Seven and the Beaver Hall Group – and their achievements in formulating their own set of unique Canadian identities. The work will focus on Canada as a relatively young country, one that was first officially created in 1867, a country that is still considered to be in its teens as a “high-school land,” according to Earle Birney in his poem “Canada: Case History: 1945” (Kuester 1995, 18).

In the first written accounts of explorers the “vast landscape and northern geography” of Canada was given considerable emphasis. Cartier’s well known phrase “the land God gave to Cain,” referring to Canada’s hostile and harsh nature, which dictates the terms of human existence, has by now become, as Ross King notes in *Defiant Spirits*, “a mythology involving arduous voyages of discovery and struggles for survival in the wilderness, from Jacques Cartier and Martin Frobisher to Samuel Hearne and David Thompson” (2010, 17).

The landscape, therefore, has been, from the beginning, a distinctive feature of the young and rapidly developing nation called Canada. The *Montreal Daily Star* heralded Canada in 1911 as “the richest, most promising, most prosperous country in the world” (King 2010, 15). In 1912 Algonquin Provincial Park was



advertising itself as one of “the beauty spots of the Dominion,” attracting nature lovers, sportsmen and artists as well (King 2010, 3). The view of nature, therefore, gradually shifts from a hostile and vast land to that of an attraction and a place of beauty.

At the turn of the century the Dominion of Canada was not yet fifty years old. This young nation had not previously experienced any great revolutions or battles, and due to this the nation had no great tragic heroes that it could name as its own. The movement from colony to nation went forth peacefully, but there was a lack of any traumatic effects “that bind a people together by means of a shared body of rituals, myths, heroes and sacred objects” (King 2010, 16). The nation also lacked a distinctive flag of its own and an official anthem, since these were first officially acknowledged in the second half of the twentieth century. Colonized by France and Britain, its lands were purchased (or stolen) from Natives, and divided between French and English speakers who were British subjects. Like the United States, Canada was not only populated by Protestant Scots, Irish and English immigrants in the late nineteenth and turn of the century, but also by immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe who had arrived as a result of the “Last Best West” campaign promoted by the Canadian Government. “In 1912 more than 80,000 immigrants who spoke no English arrived in the country” (King 2010, 16). This extremely varied and colourful cultural representation presented countless difficulties in terms of historical interpretation and the search for cultural identities.

Canada was ardently seeking its identities and heroes, and simultaneously trying to find answers to the question of what it meant to be a Canadian. Inherent in the ambition of many Canadian artists was the desire to rouse artistic consciousness in Canadians through their artistic endeavours. But what was Canada? The one common notion that most Canadians agreed on was that Canada was geography. This is a land of mountains, valleys, rivers, lakes, huge forests and endless prairies. And Canadians’ engagement with this “hostile and unforgiving land dictated the terms of human existence” (King 2010, 17). Man’s connection with his natural surroundings triggered an emotional response which included “fear, mystery, wonder, often frustration and disappointment. One confronted not other people, or even oneself,” but rather the “forces of nature and the vastness of the universe” (17).

By the second half of the nineteenth century, much of Canada had been painted by many skilled artists. The notion of experiencing Canada through art was in progress. Nevertheless, the art critic Harold Mortimer-Lamb wrote in *Canadian Magazine* in 1908 that “no painter has yet experienced the spirit of the great northland; none has possessed the power of insight which such a task would demand” (18). The solution ultimately lay in finding the precise technique and learning to see the unique particulars of the Canadian landscape.



Impressionist-inspired painting after 1895 produced numerous works that explored the winter landscape in Canada and this duly furthered its acceptance on Canadian soil through the canvases of Maurice Cullen (1866–1934), James Wilson Morrice (1865–1924), Marc-Aurèle Suzor-Coté (1869–1937), Clarence Gagnon (1881–1942), J.E.H. MacDonald (1873–1932) and others. Artists tried to adapt particularized light effects, which made many turn homeward where they sought to foster a national identity. The entire notion of seeking national identity and promoting the hardness of the northern races was heavily emphasized not only in painting but in literature as well, not least through Robert Grant Haliburton's expression with reference to Canada and the Canadians as "Northmen of the New World" (King 2010, 68).

The many landscapes, however, were often compared with European landscapes and were in effect not even recognized as being a Canadian landscape. J.E.H. MacDonald's early explorations were distinctly Canadian, but still executed with a "foreign-begotten technique" (Figure 1: *By the River (Early Spring)*), which was a result of his studies of John Constable at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

The first exhibition held on the North American continent presenting the works of Scandinavian painters, meanwhile, was at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 (Stacey 1995, 60). The following remarks on that exhibition stem from Charles W. Jefferys (1869–1951), an English immigrant painter:

Here we saw the work of artists dealing with themes and problems of the landscape of countries similar in topography, climate and atmosphere to our own: snow, pine, trees, rocks, inland lakes, autumn colour, clear air, sharply defined forms. ... Our eyes were opened. We realized that on all our painting, admirable as much of it was, lay the blight of misty Holland, mellow England, the veiled sunlight of France, countries where most of our painters were born or had trained. (qtd. In Stacey 1995, 60)

The Impressionist methods and techniques acquired in France, Germany and England greatly influenced the artists, and as Ernest Lawson (1873–1939), an expatriate Canadian painter, said: "As with medicine, French influence kills if taken in too large a dose" (Stacey 1995, 58). This referred to the fact that the artists who trained in France, England and Germany would be taught to use techniques and especially colours that suit the 'colouring' of that particular country. Emily Carr (1871–1945) also makes a note of her own perceptions and observations in her work *Growing Pains: An Autobiography* (1946), comparing England with Canada:

All England's things were tame, self-satisfied, smug and meek... The forest was almost like a garden – no brambles, no thorns, nothing to stumble over, no rotten stumps, no fallen branches, all mellow to look at, melodious to hear... (1946, 143)



Similarly, Group of Seven member A.Y. Jackson (1882–1974) was also known to have said that after “the soft atmosphere of France, the clear, crisp air and sharp shadows of my native country in the spring were exciting” (Newlands 1995, 20). These comparisons highlight the vital differences these painters faced in trying to adapt the skills learnt to their home environment.

The winter landscapes were acknowledged and had value, because “they paid tribute to a typical Canadian reality” (Lacroix 1995, 51). The Canadian winter, the North and the snowy landscapes were appealing subjects for the public and the critics, who – like the artists themselves – were intent on achieving a specifically Canadian art. The early winter landscapes in Impressionist style helped pave the way for the following generation of artists to combine and adapt “the techniques of painting in high keys to their perception of the Canadian landscape” (51). The Impressionism that eventually found its roots in Canada in the depictions of the rugged wilderness of landscape scenery promoted the awakening of cultural identities that were to be firmly established two and three decades later by the Group of Seven, Tom Thomson, Emily Carr and even by the Beaver Hall Group.

Experimenting and exploring technical formulas that would help capture the particularly Canadian atmosphere and colouring set many artists to work, but none were effective enough to confront and overcome the hostility of art critics and the public. The seven Canadian painters (excluding Tom Thomson and Emily Carr<sup>1</sup>) who officially formed the Group of Seven in May 1920 were all gifted and talented artists. All had studied abroad, except for J. E. H. MacDonald. The fact that most of these artists worked at Grip Limited, Engravers, was no coincidence, since the late nineteenth century was “the heroic age of commercial illustration” (King 2010, 14). Many ambitious artists who were on their way to becoming famous were designing commercial posters, logos and pamphlets. Besides making commercial illustrations, they also went on joint sketching trips to Algonquin Provincial Park, where they sketched and painted *en plein air* in the manner of the Impressionists. Furthermore, they met regularly at the Arts and Letters Club in Toronto, where they were able to discuss the artistic and cultural trends arriving from Europe and the technical merits of painting. The discussions and the joint sketching trips all influenced the friendship, comradeship and the quality of their work, and also the realization that what they ultimately wanted was to create an altogether distinctive Canadian art: “something Canadians would recognize and support” (Hill 1995).

1) Tom Thomson, a close friend of the members of the later Group of Seven, would have been the eighth member of the group had he not drowned in July 1917 in Canoe Lake in Algonquin Park. Emily Carr, however, met the Group of Seven only in 1927, when her works appeared in an exhibition organized by the National Gallery of Canada that was held at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. Her work, therefore, was never associated with that of the Group of Seven.



It was evident from the very beginning that these artists strove for nationalistic content. The appeal of these artists was, therefore, that they “believed the fine arts could play an active role in creating a better and healthier society” (King 2010, 321). This form of civic reform had active followers in England, the United States and Canada who had been “hoping to tame violent passions, improve morals, inspire patriotism and uplift the spirits of their population [...] through a provident use of everything from architecture and monuments to music and public murals” (321). These artistic inspirations were intended to promote a consistent national identity and a fundamentally healthy society.

This notion is further enhanced by F.B. Housser’s book *A Canadian Art Movement* (1926), in which he quotes J.E.H. MacDonald:

The Canadian spirit in art is just entering on the possession of its heritage. It is opening a new world and the Canadian artists respond with a spirit that is very good. This world... has character attractive to the artist; not often so softly beautiful as ruggedly strong, large, homely, free, and frankly simple in colour. ...It aims to fill its landscape with the clear Canadian sunshine and the open air, following faithfully all seasons and aspects... (143)

The would-be members of the Group of Seven realized that the “most effective way to confront and perhaps overcome ossified academics and dyspeptic critics was by collective action” (King 2010, 303). This notion is given emphasis in a letter written by A.Y. Jackson to Arthur Lismer (1885–1969) in 1918 in which he writes “the only way we will ever get anywhere will be by a group of us working together” (303).

The idea of creating something fundamentally distinctive and lasting called for the formation of artists’ groups within Europe and on the North American continent. In most cases these were painters, sculptors, writers and musicians who revolted against the enclaves of the set establishments. Notable early international examples are the Belgian *groupe des XX* (“Les Vingt”), founded in Brussels in 1883, and the Group of Eleven, established in Berlin in 1892. The early twentieth century also produced its set of artistic groups, with, for example, the “Eight” becoming “one of the main currents in twentieth-century American painting” (“The Eight”), the Hungarian *Nyolcak* (translated as ‘the Eight’) between 1909 and 1912 formulating an image of modern Hungarian painting, and The Young (‘De Unga’) in Sweden in 1909, who later split up and created another group, also named The Eight (“De Åtta”) in 1912. These are just some of the most noteworthy artistic circles that were created on the heels of the Impressionist and Post-Impressionist trends and styles emerging from France, specifically Paris and the Académie Julian, from the first decade of the twentieth century. The new ideas, colours, forms and technical skills introduced by these international groups were to launch a new era in modernist painting.



The idea, therefore, of officially forming an artists' group was not new, but nevertheless an effective way in which these Canadian artists could promote their cause and works. By the time the Group of Seven officially formed in May 1920, they, as individuals, had dominated the art scene in Toronto for much of the previous decade. They were not unknown to the public and the artistic scene; in fact, the National Gallery had already bought and held more than a dozen of their paintings. These artists had friends in high places, notably Eric Brown (Director of the National Gallery) and Sir Edmund Walker (Canada's leading patron of the arts), and several held positions of power themselves.<sup>2</sup> As they had already exhibited their works together in previous years they were often referred to as the "Algonquin Park School" (King 2010, 330) in the press, but instead of forming a school or an association they decided on becoming an official group, perhaps with the intention of following the European and American trends of forming such groups. In 1920 they were a nucleus of seven young Canadian artists who wanted to "produce something really significant" (King 2010, 330). In calling themselves a group they merely wished to emphasize that "they were a cooperative group of like-minded artists joined together to articulate their ideas for the advancement of Canadian art" (Hill 1995, 88). The Group's first official exhibition was scheduled to open on 7 May 1920 and it was to be a group show that consisted of the works of Lawren Harris (1885–1970), Arthur Lismer (1885–1969), A.Y. Jackson (1882–1974), J.E.H. MacDonald (1873–1932), F.H. Varley (1881–1969), Frank Johnston (1888–1949) and Franklin Carmichael (1890–1945). From 1920 onwards the Group held annual exhibitions. Their last group show, in 1931, also allowed another twenty-eight Canadian artists to exhibit their works.

The Group of Seven was not the only artists' group active at the time in Canada, since the Beaver Hall Group in Montreal was doing what the Group of Seven was doing in Toronto. This Group was originally started by four artists (Mabel May, Lilius Newton, Randolph Hewton and Edwin Holgate), who were all former students of William Brymner (1855–1925) at the Art Association of Montreal, where he had been Director for thirty-five years. Like many painters of the period, he too trained in Paris, at the Académie Julian, and organized curricula according to the Parisian model. Brymner's person and teachings are considered important in the sense that he encouraged his students' enthusiasm for new artistic trends and developments and "emphasized the importance of self-expression" (Walters 2005, 14). The social conventions of the time dictated that for women art and painting were merely a pastime. Nevertheless Brymner "arranged scholarships for the talented" female students as well (15).

2) Arthur Lismer was Vice-Principal of the Ontario College of Art; Lismer, MacDonald and Johnston were members of the Ontario Society of Artists' Executive Committee.





The Montreal of the early 1910s was rapidly developing, like the city of Toronto, and many artists were aware of the changes taking place in Canadian art. The spring exhibition of Montreal's Art Association in 1913 displayed many canvases that adopted the techniques of the Post-Impressionists, which resulted in horrified outbursts from art critics. Samuel Morgan Powell of the *Montreal Daily Star* is perhaps the most often quoted critic:

Post-Impressionism is a fad, an inartistic fetish for the amusement of bad draughtsmen, incompetent colourists, and others who find themselves unqualified to paint pictures. (Walters 2005, 15)

His harsh dismissal of the style, however, was by no means short-lived, as he again damned the technique and strong colours five years later as being

rough splashy meaningless blatant plastering and massing of unpleasant colours in weird landscapes... the same blustering spirit of Post-Impressionism, all conveying the same impression that the artist didn't know how to do it, and wasted considerable good pigment in a disastrous attempt. (Walters 2005, 15)

The ultra-conservative, prevailing academic and public attitude to new trends had been challenged. These groups, whether in Toronto or Montreal, consciously went against public approval to raise public awareness. Their methods often went beyond the conventional norms, with the aim of shocking their audience. The paintings exhibited by the Group of Seven were at first considered too vibrant in their colours, mere splashes of paint without a distinctly identifiable landscape. The Beaver Hall Group worked with a broader subject matter, not only landscapes, but also urban cityscapes, portraiture, figure studies and nudes (Figure 2: Prudence Heward: *Countryside*; Figure 3: Prudence Heward: *Girl Under a Tree*; Figure 4: Sarah Robertson: *The Blue Sleigh*). The nudes placed on exhibition by the female artists created an immediate uproar, with critics condemning them as lacking good taste and morals. Nevertheless, by shocking their audience they succeeded in making themselves noticed, which is what they ultimately strove for in the first place.

The two groups worked parallel, each in their home environment. And like the Group of Seven in Toronto, the Beaver Hall Group were looking for studio and exhibition space, which they found at "305 Beaver Hall Hill, an old house just down from Dorchester St. [now Boulevard René Lévesque] which backed onto the gardens of St. Patrick's Church" (Larsen, *Montreal Gazette*). At the time Montreal was already a bustling modern city, but the artists seemed to want a place reminiscent of the "old world charm of European cities" they had visited and studied at on the continent



(“About Beaver Hall Hill”). This seemed to be the ideal place where they could get together and discuss their own and other painting techniques, paint and exhibit their works, as well as, “to break away from the constraints of the vetted, institutional exhibitions with their tendency to favour ‘traditional’ art over ‘modern’ art” (“History Beaver Hall Group”).

The Beaver Hall Group officially formed in the fall of 1920, only a few months after the official forming and first exhibition of the Group of Seven. They were the first modern artistic group in Montreal – indeed, the first in Canada – to form “male-female parity” (“Exhibition”). The Group of Seven consisted of only men and basically did not invite any female members. Wayne Larsen of the *Montreal Gazette* quotes a specific source with regard to this issue: “I once asked old A.Y. [A.Y. Jackson] why my Aunt Pru (Prudence Heward) was excluded from the Group of Seven,’ recalled the late Heward Grafftey, Heward’s nephew. ‘Well, I guess we liked our brandy and cigars too much,’ he replied regretfully. He knew there was a prejudice against women artists” (Larsen 2015). Interestingly, some critical sources often mention Emily Carr as a possible “would-be” eighth member. This was due to her close friendship and correspondence with Lawren Harris from the end of the 1920s. However, nothing of this kind ever materialized.

The Beaver Hall Group was joined by both Anglophone and Francophone artists, creating a diverse and loosely knit group of about fourteen men and fourteen women. Beyond the official members, there were artists who associated with them through friendship and solidarity. While various critical sources available offer a diverse list of the names of artists involved, the main core consisted of the following: Nora Collyer (1898–1979), Emily Coonan (1885–1971), Adrien Hébert (1890–1967), Henri Hébert (1884–1950), Prudence Heward (1896–1947), Randolph S. Hewton (1888–1960), Edwin Holgate (1892–1977), A. Y. Jackson (1882–1974), John Y. Johnstone (1887–1930), Mabel Lockerby (1882–1976), Mabel May (1877–1971), Hal Ross Perrigard (1891–1960), Robert W. Pilot (1898–1967), Sarah Robertson (1891–1948), Anne Savage (1896–1971), Adam Sherriff Scott (1887–1980), Regina Seiden (1897–1991) and Liliás Torrance Newton (1896–1980), as well as André Biéler (1896–1989), Ethel Seath (1879–1963), Kathleen Morris (1893–1986) and Albert Robinson (1881–1956). The major core of the group consisted of women, who, like the artists in Toronto, fostered long-standing professional friendships. They encouraged each other in their work, providing inspiration, which ultimately had a beneficial effect on their work. Their first exhibition was held in January 1921. This was succeeded by only three more exhibitions before they eventually disbanded roughly two years later, though some sources mention this period as being a year and a half.

A “cunning PR strategy” (Larsen 2015) was to make Group of Seven member A.Y. Jackson their President and spokesman. Jackson is an important figure since he



seems to be a connecting link as cofounder of the Group of Seven, an Anglophone Montrealer and fellow Brymner alumnus. Also, he was emotionally involved with Anne Savage (a Beaver Hall member) to whom he also proposed in 1933. Jackson's name and popularity also attracted attention and ensured that the Beaver Hall Group's first exhibition acquired sufficient publicity. His inaugural speech sums up the major ideas that defined not only the Beaver Hall Group but also the manifesto of the Group of Seven as well:

Montreal has long had an association (the Art Association of Montreal) but no association of artists, so it cannot be alleged that this body of young painters is in any sense a secession. ...Its aim is to give the younger painters a regular opportunity of showing creative work, to give a place to efforts, which, possibly experiments in the earlier stages, may develop along some new and vital line ... 'Schools' and 'isms' do not trouble us; individual expression is our chief concern. (Larsen 2015)

The key phrase that in this instance requires further explanation is "individual expression," which is an artistic concept that goes beyond that of the Beaver Hall Group and also the Group of Seven. One of the major ideas that Impressionism introduced at the end of the nineteenth century was that the artist was free to choose his own form of expression, which would in turn offer a release from the bondage of the established enclaves of artistic academia. To generalize, one may ascertain that the many European and North American artists' groups aimed at this specific idea of formulating their own "individual expression." This individuality was in fact the unique attribute that helped artists voice their own 'impressions' of what constituted the various notions of cultural identity. For the Group of Seven this meant the Northern Canadian landscape, which was barren of human habitation, especially the North Shore of Lake Superior, the Algoma region, the La Cloche region and Algonquin Park. The Beaver Hall Group, however, explored in their paintings the subjects of the port of Montreal and its downtown streets, modern city life, portraiture and nude compositions. They focused exclusively on the region of Quebec, the small villages near the big city of Montreal and Quebec City. Each group provided an 'individual expression' of their interpretation of what Canadian cultural identity meant to them.

What were the ultimate causes for why one group could reach great fame, success and popularity, while the other virtually disappeared and was all but forgotten? Based on contemporary sources, the financial means of the Beaver Hall Group were restricted and they could probably not afford to rent Beaver Hall any longer (Gibbs "History"). The Group of Seven in Toronto had no such problems, since Lawren Harris used his inherited fortune to build a studio building for his artist friends in 1914.



Nevertheless, of the original Beaver Hall Group, six of the women continued to paint together, each working from their own studios. Three more female artists joined this group, making a final group of nine women. These were: Nora Collyer (1898–1979), Prudence Heward (1896–1947), Mabel Lockerby (1882–1976), H. Mabel May (1884–1971), Kathleen M. Morris (1893–1986), Liliás Torrance Newton (1896–1980), Sarah Robertson (1891–1948), Anne Savage (1896–1971), and Ethel Seath (1879–1963) (Gibbs “Artists”).

The Beaver Hall Group was by all means a great endeavour that brought together the most talented artists within the Quebec region. Nonetheless, they were unsuccessful, whereas the Group of Seven gained in recognition and popularity. Why? Perhaps their coalition was too big and too loose, since the first Beaver Hall Group exhibition included the works of eighteen artists, including both men and women (Gibbs “Artists”). This meant altogether too many names to remember, not to mention that it was also harder for the public to generalize about what they did. In addition, they did not have a published manifesto like F.B. Housser’s book *A Canadian Art Movement* on the aims and creation of the Group of Seven. Many of the artists that were first present in the Beaver Hall Group left after the first exhibition and perhaps sought other opportunities and outlets to present their works. Though these artists were all friends, still the group was missing the strong bond of friendship and comradeship that existed within the Group of Seven. But perhaps the fact that this was considered a “women’s circle,” instead of the “male den” of the Group of Seven, had a greater impact than one is willing to admit. Not only were they women, but also mostly Anglophones within French Canada. In addition they were also young artists, lacking the experience of the Group of Seven, just embarking upon a career considered mostly the terrain of men. The very conservative milieu existing not only in Francophone Quebec, but the whole of Canada in the 1910s and 1920s, simply did not allow women the same recognition as men. Women were viewed as “little more than hobbyists and were left out of the mainstream world of professional art” (Gibbs “History”). This, even though important personalities of the contemporary art world, such as A.H. Robson,<sup>3</sup> praised and acknowledged their work and wrote the following in comparing their work to the Group of Seven: “[the Beaver Hall Group] display more subtlety in their use of colour, a stressing of rhythm of line, and greater simplicity in their planes” (Gibbs, “Beaver Hall Group”).

3) A. H. Robson (1882–1939) was a graphic artist specializing in illustration and advertising design. At Grip Ltd., an engraving-house in Toronto, as artistic director he had under him J. E. H. MacDonald, Tom Thomson, Frank Johnston, Arthur Lismer, Frank Carmichael, F.H. Varley, Tom McLean, William Broadhead, Neil McKechnie and others. Five of these artists became members of the Group of Seven. He was also a well-known art historian, and author of *Canadian Landscape Painters* (1932). As Vice-President of Art Gallery of Toronto he was responsible for the acquisition of paintings by Canadian artists, especially the Group of Seven. (MacDonald, “A.H. Robson”)



Who were these nine women who dared to challenge the unwritten rules that bound women in the first decades of the twentieth century? Anne Savage simply said in 1966: “A very simple group of a few people with no means and big ideas” (Everett-Green 2015). Unfortunately, they were gradually forgotten with merely a handful of critical works written on their achievements, a few exhibitions and one documentary film. The whole story of the Beaver Hall Group has “never been told where it counts, in a kind of comprehensive survey put on by the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts” (Everett-Green 2015). The new exhibition “1920s Modernism in Montreal: The Beaver Hall Group,” held recently in the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts,<sup>4</sup> set out to tell their story and “to dispel the mythology around these artists and to place them in their proper context” (Everett-Green 2015).

During the decade that the Group of Seven worked together as an official group they succeeded in becoming the symbols of the Canadian art establishment and gave Canada a definite cultural identity through the representations of its unique northern landscape. The artists of the Beaver Hall Group also sought to portray similar objectives with their urban scenes and portraits; they were not, however, able to achieve the level of fame and domination of the Canadian art scene that the Group of Seven had in their time. Nevertheless, all of these artists succeeded in portraying a segment of Canada through their interpretations of the Canadian landscape, whether it was of pure nature or the urbanized dwelling, hence awakening the cultural identities of a nation that needed to establish itself on the international scene.

And in considering Northrop Frye’s famous question of “Where is here?” perhaps it is most appropriate to conclude that both groups provide an answer through their paintings, which capture the essence of the Canadian being. The “here,” therefore, lies in the Canadian northern landscape, encompasses the geography, the urban scenery of Montreal or Toronto, and the people portrayed. All these distinctive features offer “individual expressions” of the Canadian cultural identity.

---

4) See [mbam.qc.ca/en](http://mbam.qc.ca/en).



**Figure 1:** J. E. H. MacDonald: *By the River (Early Spring)* 1911

(<http://discoveryportal.ontla.on.ca/en/about-parliament/the-legislative-building/art-legislature/river-early-spring>)



**Figure 2:** Prudence Heward: *Countryside (probably Rockville Village)*, 1934. Oil on canvas 22" × 25"

(<https://fineartmusicandbooks.wordpress.com/2013/07/22/prudence-howard-countryside-probably-rockville>)



**Figure 3:** Prudence Heward: *Girl Under a Tree*, 1931. Oil on canvas.  
<http://www.thespec.com/whatson-story/2255657-from-a-woman-s-perspective/>



**Figure 4:** Sarah Robertson: *The Blue Sleigh*, c. 1924. Oil on panel 8 1/2" × 11 1/2"  
[\(http://wiki.cultured.com/people/Sarah\\_Robertson/\)](http://wiki.cultured.com/people/Sarah_Robertson/)



## Works cited

- “About the Beaver Hall Group.” N.p. Web. 12 Dec. 2015. ([http://cybermuse.gallery.ca/cybermuse/enthusiast/thirties/content\\_e.jsp?chapter=2](http://cybermuse.gallery.ca/cybermuse/enthusiast/thirties/content_e.jsp?chapter=2))
- “Berlin’s Belle Epoque.” N.p. Web. 21 Sept. 2012. (<http://www.la-belle-epoque.de/berlin/berlinxe.htm>)
- Birney, Earle. “Canada: Case History: 1945.” In Kuester, Martin (ed.) *Canadian Studies: A Literary Approach*. Bochum: Universitätsverlag Dr. N. Brockmeyer, 1995. Print.
- Carr, Emily. *Growing Pains: An Autobiography*. Toronto: Irwin Publishing, 1946. Print.
- Everett-Green, Robert. *The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts gives Beaver Hall Group Overdue Exposure*. 27 Oct. 2015. Web. 12 Dec. 2015. (<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/art-and-architecture/montreal-museum-of-fine-arts-gives-beaver-hall-group-overdue-exposure/article27004162/>)
- Gibbs, Andrew. *The Beaver Hall Group*. Web. 12 Dec. 2015. (<http://beaverhallgroup.weebly.com/history.html>)
- Harper, Russell. *Painting in Canada: A History*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985. Print.
- Heward, Prudence. *Girl Under a Tree*. N.p. Web. 13 January, 2017. (<http://www.thespec.com/whatson-story/2255657-from-a-woman-s-perspective/>)
- . *Countryside*. N.p. Web. 31 August 2017. (<https://fineartmusicandbooks.wordpress.com/2013/07/22/prudence-howard-countryside-probably-rockville>)
- Hill, Charles. *the Group of Seven . Art for a Nation*. Ontario: National Gallery of Ottawa, 1995. Print.
- Housser, F.B. *A Canadian Art Movement. The Story of the Group of Seven*. Toronto: Macmillan Co. of Canada, 1926. Print.
- “History of the Beaver Hall Group.” N.p. Web. 12 Dec. 2015. ([http://cybermuse.gallery.ca/cybermuse/enthusiast/thirties/content\\_e.jsp?chapter=2](http://cybermuse.gallery.ca/cybermuse/enthusiast/thirties/content_e.jsp?chapter=2))
- King, Ross. *Defiant Spirits. The Modernist Revolution of the Group of Seven*. Vancouver, Canada: Douglas and McIntyre Publishers, 2010. Print.
- Lacroix, Laurier. “The Surprise of Today is the Commonplace of Tomorrow.” In Lowrey, Carol (ed.), *Visions of Light and Air. Canadian Impressionism, 1885–1920*. New York: Americas Society Art Gallery (1995): 40–51. Print.
- Larsen, Wayne. “Portrait of the Beaver Hall Group Emerges at MMFA Exhibition.” In *Montreal Gazette*, 23 Oct. 2015. Web. 12 Dec. 2015. (<http://montrealgazette.com/entertainment/arts/portrait-of-the-beaver-hall-group-emerges-at-mmfa-exhibition>)
- “Les Vingt.” N.p. Web. 21 Sept. 2015. (<http://www.britannica.com/topic/Les-Vingt>)
- MacDonald, J.E.H. *By the River (Early Spring)*. N.p. Web. 11 May 2015. (<http://discoveryportal.onlta.on.ca/en/about-parliament/the-legislative-building/art-legislature/river-early-spring>)





- Newlands, Anne. *the Group of Seven and Tom Thomson*. An Introduction. Ontario, Canada: Firefly Books, 1995. Print.
- Robertson, Sarah. *The Blue Sleigh*, N.p. Web. 31 August 2017. ([http://wiki.cultured.com/people/Sarah\\_Robertson/](http://wiki.cultured.com/people/Sarah_Robertson/))
- “Swedish Art.” N.p. Web. 21 Sept. 2012. (<http://www.ringsurf.com/online/1651-sweden.html>)
- Stacey, Robert. “The Sensations Produced by (Their Own) Landscape.” In Lowrey, Carol (ed.), *Visions of Light and Air. Canadian Impressionism, 1885–1920*. New York: Americas Society Art Gallery (1995): 54–71. Print.
- Szalay, Péter. *In Search of the Eight*. Documentary film. Budapest: Museum of Fine Arts, 2011.
- “The Beaver Hall Group.” N.p. Web. 12 Dec. 2015. ([http://cybermuseum.ca/cybermuseum/enthusiast/thirties/content\\_e.jsp?chapter=2](http://cybermuseum.ca/cybermuseum/enthusiast/thirties/content_e.jsp?chapter=2))
- . N.p. Web. 12 Dec. 2015. (<https://www.mbam.qc.ca/en/exhibitions/on-view/the-beaver-hall-group/exhibition/>)
- “The Eight.” N.p. Web. 21 Sept. 2012. (<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/181021/The-Eight>)
- Walters, Evelyn. *The Women of Beaver Hall. Canadian Modernist Painters*. Dundurn Press, Toronto, 2005. Print.

---

**KRISZTINA KODÓ** / is currently Chair of the Department of English Language and Literature at Kodolányi University of Applied Sciences, Hungary. Her main field of research encompasses American and Canadian Studies (multicultural identities, the Northern myth, Native literatures, contemporary Canadian drama and poetry). Her most recently published book is titled *Variations on a Canadian Theme: Identities, Icons, Stereotypical Images and the Northern Myth* (2014).

**e-mail:** krisztina.kodo@kodolanyi.hu