
2. 'The Beaver Hall Group'

The influence of the Group of Seven was not confined to Toronto. Montreal had an active group of artists who consciously allied themselves with the Ontario artists, recognizing the importance of their struggle for a contemporary, native art. In Toronto the Group had achieved a certain success in creating an interest in modern art among both collectors and the general public. Montreal, without the catalyzing influence of the Group, was a less favourable climate for new ventures.

The Art Association of Montreal was a private club of wealthy English-speaking Montrealers who still preferred the late nineteenth-century Dutch artists A.Y. Jackson had been criticizing since before the First World War. There had been an active art school at the Art Association under William Brymner and Randolph Hewton; however with the opening in 1923 of the *École des Beaux-Arts*, a provincial school offering free tuition, the Art Association school was closed.¹ The Royal Canadian Academy continued to offer life classes, and the Academy's influence pervaded the whole gallery.

Most of the Montreal artists associated with Toronto had originally studied under William Brymner and been involved in the Beaver Hall Group, a non-structured association of artists sharing studio space on Beaver Hall Square.² Formed in the fall of 1920, it survived only a year and a half though the friendships and alliances formed at this time continued throughout the next two decades.

At the time of the formation of the Beaver Hall Group, A.Y. Jackson had identified its goals as being those of the Group of Seven,³ and over the years Jackson maintained the contact between the two cities, supporting and stimulating the Montreal artists through regular visits and correspondence. He kept them informed of events in Toronto and arranged for their works to be included in the Group exhibitions.

A.Y. Jackson was naturally closest to the landscape artists Anne Savage and Sarah Robertson. Anne Savage had been an original member of the Beaver Hall Group⁴ and accompanied Pegi Nicol and Florence Wyle to the West Coast during the summer of 1927, following the example of Jackson and Edwin Holgate the previous year in connection with Marius Barbeau's documentation of the art of the native peoples of British Columbia.⁵ Teaching at Baron Byng High School from 1922,⁶ like many other artists, Savage had little time to devote to her painting. Her works of the thirties fall within the Group tradition with their rolling hills and panoramic views. Even in her more intimate landscapes, such as *Dark Pool, Georgian Bay* (1933, cat. no. 14), she maintains the Group's curvilinear outlines though with a greater concern

for structure and texture. Just as in Lawren Harris's *Maligne Lake, Jasper Park* in The National Gallery of Canada, the variety of projections framing the central open space create a dynamic and carefully structured interplay of angles and tensions.

Sarah Robertson's work of the late twenties had hardened into tightly controlled designs, at times stiff, and also stylistically reminiscent of Lawren Harris's work. By the mid-thirties however she had achieved a greater surety and freedom. In *Coronation* (1937, cat. no. 15) the arabesques of the branches joyfully sweep across the canvas echoing the movement of the fluttering flags. The brilliant colours are boldly applied in thick, parallel strokes. In *Village, Isle of Orleans* (1939, cat. no. 16) the colouring is much more delicate and the spatial recession more obviously determined by the curving roofs of the houses. While Sarah Robertson produced relatively few works, partly due to poor health, her oils and water-colours of the thirties have a spontaneity and brightness lacking in much of the work of the period.

While Montreal boasted several excellent landscape artists, observant art reviewers in the early thirties remarked upon the development of an independent school of artists primarily concerned with painting the human form.⁷ Unlike that of the Ontario College of Art, the teaching at the Art Association school (under Randolph Hewton) and later at the *École des Beaux-Arts* followed a French tradition, with a greater concentration on figure work than landscape.

The key person responsible for the development of a Montreal school was Edwin Holgate, who, soon after the formation of the Beaver Hall Group, returned to Paris to study under Adolf Milman, a Russian expatriate artist. Holgate had been interested in Russian theatre and folk art since his first visit to Paris before the First World War; but what especially interested him was the Russian's concentration on draughtsmanship and strong colouring.⁸

After a year with Milman, whom Holgate says was the greatest influence in his life, he returned to Montreal and in 1928 started teaching graphics at the *École des Beaux-Arts*.⁹ Fluently bilingual, Holgate was one of the few English-speaking Canadian artists able to cross the cultural barriers between French and English Montreal and his influence was felt in both communities. During the late twenties he was a member of an informal dining club of Quebec writers, musicians, and critics, *Les Casseurs* ('The Cassawaries'), which included among its members Louis Carrier, Jean Chauvin, Albéric Morin, Adjutor Savard, and Roméo Boucher.¹⁰ He also illustrated the works of several French-language writers.¹¹

A.Y. Jackson first approached Edwin Holgate about

joining the Group of Seven in 1926 during their trip to the Skeena River,¹² though he was not actually invited to become a member until 1930. While not a reluctant member of the Group,¹³ Holgate did recognize its limitations. The Group's concentration on landscape, he felt, left little room for the figurative work that interested him. Moreover, Holgate's formal interests were quite different from those of the rest of the Group. In such works as *Ludovine* (c. 1930, cat. no. 17) and *Interior* (c. 1933, cat. no. 18) he was concerned with the structure of the body and the modelling of its planes in contrast to the more linear, patterned designs of the Toronto artists. The strong colours and concentration on draughtsmanship which had attracted him to Milman are reflected in his own work.

In his later works, such as *Early Autumn* (c. 1938, cat. no. 19), while his formal concerns remain the same, the forms and colours are more gentle, lacking the psychological intensity of the earlier *Ludovine*.

Lilias Newton went to Paris in 1923 and, on the advice of Edwin Holgate, studied with another Russian artist, Alexandre Jacovleff, an associate of Milman.¹⁴ Returning to Canada she began a successful career as a portrait-painter. Her portraits of friends and figure studies best show her ability to portray the personal characteristics of the model. Her commissioned works often have a stiffness and air of social pretension due to the demands of the commission. With friends or with models of her own choice there is a greater personal identification between sitter and artist, contributing to the intensity of the work.

In the *Portrait of Frances McCall* (c. 1931, cat. no. 20) Lilias Newton shows the same concern for solid structure derived from Cézanne as seen in Holgate's work. The unity of texture and colour successfully integrates the figure with the landscape background. In the *Portrait of Louis Muhlstock* (c. 1937, cat. no. 21) the confined space concentrates the viewer's attention on the hands and face. The restrained greens and greys of this portrait contrast with the rich blacks, reds, and beiges of *Maurice* (1939, cat. no. 22).¹⁵ In the latter work the colour, texture, and gentle modelling create an aura of sensuous calm. In all three portraits, unlike many of her official portraits, the sitters look to the side, withdrawn into themselves, adding to the contemplative mood. In all, however, the artist concentrates on the structure and the architectonic quality of the forms.

Lilias Newton and Edwin Holgate both gave private life classes during the early thirties, and in 1934 they approached the president of the Art Association of Montreal, H.B. Walker, offering to re-open the art school with the artists bearing full financial responsibility.¹⁶ After two years the arrangement proved to be unsatisfactory so they

left. However, Dr Martin, former head of the Medical School at McGill, became president of the Art Association in 1937 and he re-opened the school the next year, inviting Lilias Newton and Edwin Holgate to direct it, with the Association bearing full responsibility for the work, space, and equipment.¹⁷ Will Ogilvie, Charles Comfort's partner in a commercial art firm, was brought from Toronto to teach the commercial course and the school flourished for the next two years. Following the methods of his teacher Milman, Holgate was an excellent and popular teacher, but he found teaching too demanding as it left him little time for his own work. He and Lilias Newton both left the school in the spring of 1940.¹⁸

Figure painting was definitely the prerogative of Montreal artists during the early thirties, though they did have their followers in Toronto. Bertram Brooker's *Figures in Landscape*¹⁹ was inspired by the nudes of Edwin Holgate and Yvonne McKague's *Indian Girl*²⁰ by the work of Lilias Newton. Lawren Phillips Harris was also painting within a similar tradition. He spent two years, from 1931 to 1933, at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston where the teachers, graduates of the Slade in London, also concentrated on draughtsmanship and figure work.²¹ But, whereas Holgate and Newton created structured forms through the interrelationship of planes, Harris, in *Decorative Nude* (1937, cat. no. 23), relies on careful modelling and silhouette, owing nothing to Cézanne.

The richness of flesh tone seen in Lawren Harris's work is also found in the paintings of Prudence Heward, the 'enfant terrible' of the Montreal figure painters. Born into a wealthy Montreal family, she received her early art training at the Art Association under William Brymner. Like Lilias Newton and Edwin Holgate, she studied in Paris after the First World War with the former Fauve artist Charles Guerin at the Académie Colarossi.²² In 1929 she won the Willingdon Prize for her painting *Girl on a Hill* (now in The National Gallery of Canada) and returned to France.²³ She attended sketching classes at the Scandinavian Academy in Paris with Isabel McLaughlin²⁴ and painted at Cagnes in the south of France.

This trip to France resulted in a severe hardening of her style, especially noticeable in *Sisters of Rural Quebec* (1930, cat. no. 24) and *Girl Under a Tree* (1931, cat. no. 25). In the former work this almost sculptural treatment is uniformly applied to all the elements of the composition. In *Girl Under a Tree*, however, there are disturbing contradictions of style. John Lyman wrote an astute criticism of the work in his journal:

When an idea becomes explicit it dies . . . She has so stiffened her will that it mutes the strings of her sensibility . . . She [has] so concentrated on the volitional

15. SARAH ROBERTSON, *Coronation* (1937)



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effort that she is numb to the lack of consistent fundamental organization – relations and rhythms . . . [it is] disconcerting to find with extreme analytical modulation of figures, [an] unmodulated and cloisonné-treatment of [the] background without interrelation.

Bouguereau nude against Cézanne background.²⁵

The freely-brushed vegetation in the foreground isolates the highly finished, almost overworked, figure in the centre, and the landscape background does have the air of a studio backdrop; yet the work has an extremely compelling quality. The staring eyes, the tension in the muscular body, the projections and sharp angles surrounding the figure create an aura of high-strung sexuality reminiscent of Gauguin's *La Perte du Pucelage*, in the Walter P. Chrysler Collection, Norfolk, Virginia.

Most of Prudence Heward's works have a brooding quality to them. She portrays strong, independent women, women with individual lives and personalities, yet there is always a certain tension in her work. Apart from *Ludovine* (c. 1930, cat. no. 17), Edwin Holgate's women are objects for studies in structure and form. Liliás Newton's sitters are persons confident of their place in society and the direction of their lives. Prudence Heward's subjects seem disjointed and uncertain, her children staring at the viewer, suspicious or incomprehending, as if they were all affected by the uncertainties of her own life.

In such later works, as *Dark Girl* (1935, cat. no. 26), the forms are softened and the surrounding landscapes more summarily treated and more successfully coordinated with the central figure. She also heightens the intensity of her colours using rich, almost acidic tones. She moves from the creation of sculptural forms on a flat surface to brilliant rendering of colour and light.

Prudence Heward was very interested in the work of the New Zealand artist Frances Hodgkins²⁶ and perhaps the freer brushwork in her later works is partly attributable to this interest. Frances Hodgkins's introduction of still-life into a landscape setting also finds its reflection in Prudence Heward's *Fruit in the Grass* (c. 1939, cat. no. 27). However, the brilliant, acidic colours are very much her own.

Unlike most of the other Group associates in Montreal, Prudence Heward remained an active participant in the newer developments in Montreal in the late thirties and forties. A friend of John Lyman, she was one of the founding members of the Contemporary Arts Society in 1939. Her work of the forties continued her search for newer forms of expression and was cut short only by her death in 1947.

1. *Art Association of Montreal, Sixty-Third Annual Report, 1924*, p. 7.
2. There are variances in the accounts of the membership of the Group. Norah McCullough lists Nora Collyer, Emily Coonan, Prudence Heward, Randolph Hewton, Edwin Holgate, Mabel Lockerby, Mabel May, Kathleen Morris, Liliás Torrance Newton, Sarah Robertson, Anne Savage, and Ethel Seath (Norah McCullough, *The Beaver Hall Hill Group* [Ottawa: The National Gallery of Canada], 1966). Edwin Holgate mentions Mabel May, Emily Coonan, Randolph Hewton, Adrien Hébert, Anne Savage, Sarah Robertson, Scoop Torrance, Liliás Torrance Newton, Robert Pilot, and Edwin Holgate (Interview with Edwin Holgate, Montreal, 20 September 1973). Liliás Newton mentions Randolph Hewton, Emily Coonan, Liliás Torrance Newton, Mabel May, Adrien Hébert, Henri Hébert, Albert Robinson, and Adam Sherriff Scott (Interview with Liliás Newton, Montreal, 11 September 1973).
3. 'Le Groupe Beaver Hall,' Montreal *La Presse* (20 January 1921). Edwin Holgate, however, states that the members of the Beaver Hall Group were hardly aware of the activities of the Toronto artists. (Interview with Edwin Holgate, Montreal, 20 September 1973).
4. 'Anne Douglas Savage,' National Gallery of Canada Information Form, n.d. [1920s].
5. The resultant works were exhibited at Ottawa, The National Gallery of Canada, December 1927, *Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art, Native and Modern*.
6. Leah Sherman, *Anne Savage* (exhibition catalogue) (Montreal: Sir George Williams University, 1968).
7. Bertram Brooker, 'The Seven Arts,' Ottawa *The Citizen* (19 April 1930).
8. Interview with Edwin Holgate, Montreal, 20 September 1973.
9. *Idem*.
10. *Les Casoars* (Montreal: 1928).
11. Georges Bouchard, *Other Days, Other Ways* (Montreal, New York: Louis Carrier & Cie, 1928). Robert Choquette, *Metropolitan Museum* (Montreal: Herald Press, 1931). Léo-Paul Morin, *Papiers de Musique* (Montreal: Librairie d'action canadienne, 1930).
12. Interview with Edwin Holgate, Montreal, 20 September 1973.
13. J. Russell Harper, *Painting in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1966), p. 315.
14. Interview with Liliás T. Newton, Montreal, 11 September 1973. Another Canadian portrait artist, Nan Lawson Cheney, studied under Alexandre Jacovleff at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston in 1936. ('Nan Lawson Cheney,' The National Gallery of Canada Information Form, n.d.)
15. Prudence Heward used a similar background with stairs ascending at the right in her painting *Rosaire* (1935, oil on canvas; 40 x 36 in., 101.6 x 91.4 cm) in The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.
16. Interview with Liliás T. Newton, Montreal, 11 September 1973.
17. *Art Association of Montreal, Seventy-Seventh Annual Report, 1938*, pp. 8 – 9.
18. Will Ogilvie remained as acting director of the school and Goodridge Roberts was hired to take charge of the life classes. (*Art Association of Montreal, Seventy-Ninth Annual Report, 1940*, pp. 7 – 8). Arthur Lismer joined the staff as Educational supervisor in January 1941 after Will Ogilvie left on military service (*Art Association of Montreal, Eightieth Annual Report, 1941*, pp. 7 – 13).
19. *Figures in Landscape* (1931, oil on canvas; 24 x 30 in., 61.0 x 76.2 cm) Estate of M.A. Brooker. See Dennis Reid, *Bertram Brooker* (Ottawa: The National Gallery of Canada, 1973), p. 53 repr.

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20. *Indian Girl* (c. 1936, oil on canvas; 30 x 24 in., 76.2 x 61.0 cm), The McMichael Canadian Collection, Kleinburg. See Paul Duval, *A Vision of Canada* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Company Limited, 1973), p. 154 repr. This painting has also been entitled *Girl with Mulleins*.
 21. Interview with Lawren P. Harris, Sackville (N.B.), 31 October 1973. The artist has destroyed most of his work from this period.
 22. Prudence Heward attended the Académie Colarossi in Paris in 1925. See Clarence Gagnon, Paris, to Eric Brown, [London], 21 May 1925; in *The National Gallery of Canada*. See also Prudence Heward, 'Biographical Notes' (c. February 1945); in *The Art Gallery of Windsor*.
 23. Bertram Brooker, 'The Seven Arts,' Ottawa *The Citizen* (1 February 1930).
 24. Conversation with Isabel McLaughlin, Toronto, 18 February 1974.
 25. John Lyman, 'Journal,' vol. II, entry for 28 April 1932; in the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec, Montreal.
 26. Prudence Heward purchased a Frances Hodgkins *Still Life* from the *Exhibition of Contemporary British Painting* (Catalogue no. 31) circulated by The National Gallery of Canada in 1935.

14.
ANNE SAVAGE
Dark Pool, Georgian Bay 1933

15.
SARAH ROBERTSON
Coronation 1937

*16.
SARAH ROBERTSON
Village, Isle of Orleans 1939



*17.
EDWIN H. HOLGATE
Ludovine c. 1930

18.
EDWIN H. HOLGATE
Interior c. 1933



- *19.**
EDWIN H. HOLGATE
Early Autumn c. 1938



- *20.**
LILIAS TORRANCE NEWTON
Portrait of Frances McCall c. 1931



- 21.**
LILIAS TORRANCE NEWTON
Portrait of Louis Muhlstock c. 1937



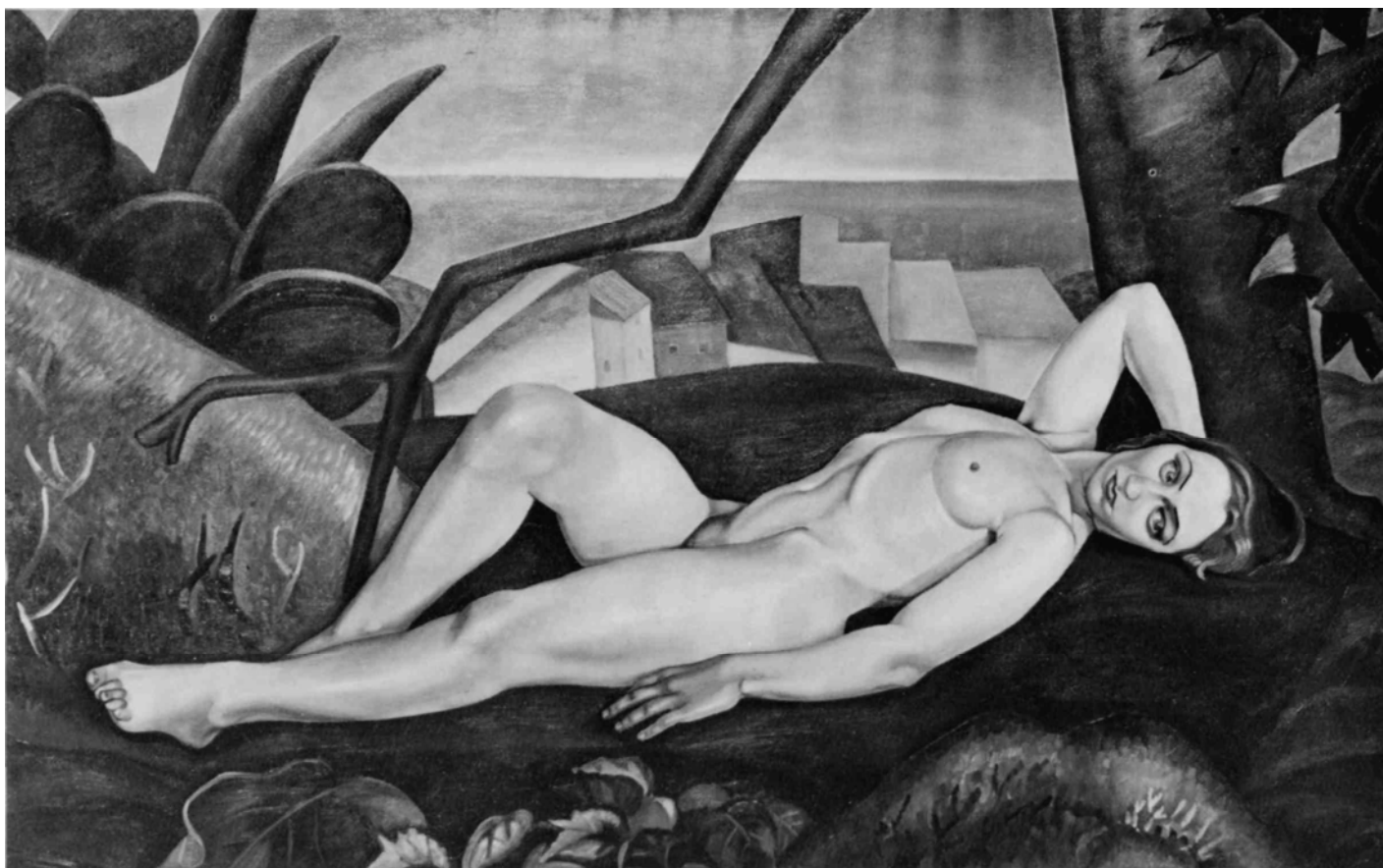
22.
LILIAS TORRANCE NEWTON
Maurice 1939

*23.
LAWREN P. HARRIS
Decorative Nude 1937

*24.
PRUDENCE HEWARD
Sisters of Rural Quebec 1930



25.
PRUDENCE HEWARD
Girl Under a Tree 1931



26.
PRUDENCE HEWARD
Dark Girl 1935

*27.
PRUDENCE HEWARD
Fruit in the Grass c. 1939

