



**'Portrait of a Lady in a Green Hat' by Roberts: bold swatches of bright color**

cluded in the CAS exhibition), the original group still encouraged the 28 English-speaking artists in the pursuit of a nationalist landscape art, a goal that was hopelessly out of step with international painting. As the Canadian Group of Painters confirmed in the catalogue for its first U.S. exhibition in 1933: "Modernism in Canada has almost no relation to modernism in Europe." Although critics found the landscape formula repetitive, A.Y. Jackson—at that time rooted in the rearguard rather than the avant-garde—opposed a local "diluted internationalism" which sneered at the mention of Canada's North and fought the influence of contemporary French painting.

To this xenophobic atmosphere, Lyman returned in 1931 from Paris where he had learned the lessons of modernism which Jackson scorned: postimpressionism, fauvism and the classical modern styles of Picasso, Braque and Matisse (whose atelier he attended). Montreal, preferring a figurative tradition, had never been won over by the Group of Seven's landscape style. For Lyman, who worked from the figurative tradition and officially opposed the Canadian Group of Painters with the formation of the CAS, "talk of the Canadian scene has gone sour. The real Canadian scene is in the consciousness of Canadian painters, whatever the object of their thought." That object was the esthetics of art for art's sake—the pure relation of form to form and color to color externalizing the artist's consciousness in a recognizable portrait or abstracted still life. In contrast to the basically art nouveau stylized patterns of the Group of Seven, Lyman built his portraits from simple symmetrical planes and blocks of raw color. His urbane landscapes—*Band Concert* and *Yacht Club, North Hatley*,—reflect the lemon sunlight of Claude Monet's France rather than the rugged Laurentian Shield and are closer to James Morrice's subdued elegance than Clarence Gagnon's habitant Quebec.

Lyman's influence can be traced through a whole series of portraits in the exhibition, those of Jori Smith to Jack Humphrey and Philip Surrey, from the fashionable, painterly elegance of Jacques de Tonnancour's *Jeune Fille Assise* to the fresh rendition of Matisse's fauvism in Goodridge Roberts' *Portrait of a Lady in a Green Hat*. Less restrained than Lyman, Roberts boldly laid on swatches of bright color, finishing with shocking, symmetrical flushed cheeks and brazen red lips. Similarly, he translated Lyman's principles into landscape, releasing it in a different manner than the Group of Seven

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## ART

# Giving a decade its due

## *Contemporary Art Society and the banner of modernism*

By Philip Monk

It is a paradox that for each successful advance in art another is blocked, and more than once the Group of Seven has acted as an impasse to the progress of Canadian painting. Nowhere has the weight of the group on the national psyche been heavier than in eclipsing John Lyman, painter, organizer, critic and general proselytizer for modern art, the man responsible for the Contemporary Arts Society (CAS), from its founding in Montreal in 1939 to its bitter breakup in 1948. This association, which ushered in a Montreal school of abstract painting and a shift of cultural energy from English to French Canada, is the subject of an exhibition organized by the Edmonton

Art Gallery travelling across the country until September. On a small scale, it restores to the '40s what the National Gallery's 1975 *Canadian Painting in the Thirties* did for the previous decade.

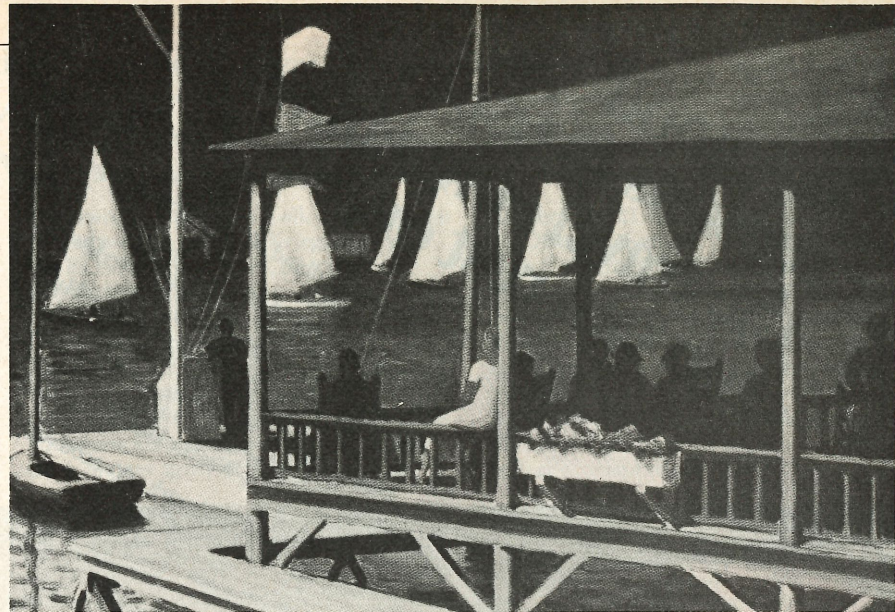
By the beginning of the '30s, the Group of Seven was Canada's national school, dominating Canadian exhibitions abroad and the object of complaints of support by a partisan National Gallery at home. After more than a decade of success, the mainly Toronto-based group was in a crisis of renewal. Neither wishing to relinquish its subject matter nor its control, it dissolved into the larger creation of the Canadian Group of Painters in 1933. While allowing a few figure painters into the select circle, such as Edwin Holgate and Prudence Heward (whose portraits are in-



from the foggy Dutch cow-scapes popular with Montrealers. Both Roberts and Louis Muhlstock, in his abandoned and decaying interiors, infuse the atmospheric tones with painterly subtlety.

Fundamentally, Lyman saw modernism as a renewal of the classical tradition broken by the anecdotal sentimentality of the 19th century, lingering in the Victorianisms of academic painting. But Lyman could not abide the developing intrigues of abstract art and politics. The belief that art could lead to revolutionary and iconoclastic cultural change eventually split the CAS, leading to its demise, and was coincidental with the rise of the French faction of the CAS headed by Alfred Pellán and Paul-Émile Borduas. Greeted as a prodigal art star in 1940, Pellán pushed Lyman and the other English artists into the shadows with his jazzier version of modernism, picked up during 14 years in Paris: an eclectic synthesis of Picasso's decorative cubism and abstract cubism which was more conflicted than complementary. His paintings, such as the confident self-portrait *Jeune Comédien*, are saved only by their technical virtuosity.

Borduas, the finest painter to come out of the CAS, had none of the assurance of Pellán at this time. Compared with the restraint and good taste of Lyman's portraits, Borduas' dark and brooding figures seem brutally con-



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**Lyman's 'Yacht Club, North Hatley': closer to France than Laurentian Shield**

structed with a painting knife; the rough three-dimensional planes that facet the face of *La femme à la mandoline* and match the diamond background take Lyman's techniques to a violent extreme. These planes soon would float on an infinite background to create surreal interior landscapes. With his students and followers—Fernand Leduc, Jean-Paul Riopelle — who were freer in their abstraction than their teacher,

Borduas called for complete liberty from social and artistic constraints in his brave and shocking manifesto of 1948, *Refus global*. Its searing anticlerical attack on a repressive priestly society was to ostracize him from Quebec. The CAS was fractured with resignations in the opposition between Borduas' radicalization and Pellán's continuation of Lyman's purist beliefs. Its death coincided with the violent birth pangs of abstraction in Montreal, leaving Lyman's contribution to modernism in its wake. ☚

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