



## Wall Texts

# Women Artists

## Gaining Space, 1900-1965

From May 22 to August 29, 2010

### From Amateur to Professional

By and large, women in Canada were denied professional artist status until the early 20th century, but the education of well-bred young ladies included instruction in drawing and watercolours. This training produced many gifted amateurs who could exhibit their work through organizations such as the Women's Art Society. Most of the 19th-century artists whose works have been selected for this exhibition came from Great Britain. Some of the women who left an artistic record of their time in Québec were the daughters or wives of artists, like Georgina M. de L'Aubinière, or of British officers, like Amelia Frederica Dyneley. Others, such as Edith Hemming, were already practicing professionals. After an initial career as a painter at the Livernois studio, in Quebec City, from 1870 to 1893, Hemming worked in other parts of Canada and exhibited at the Ontario Society of Artists, the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts and the Art Association of Montreal before returning to England.

### Professional Training and Artist Groups

Access to specialized art training – at the Art School of the Art Association of Montreal as of the 1880s, at the Conseils des arts et manufactures and, more importantly, at the École des beaux-arts de (1922) and its Montreal counterpart (1923) – was all-important to achieving professional artist status. This training was often a prerequisite to the teaching or commercial art work that enabled women to earn a living. Meanwhile, they regularly took part in exhibitions, earned growing notice from art critics, and joined networks and groups such as the Beaver Hall

Group, in the early 1920s, the Contemporary Arts Society, from 1939 to 1948, and the Automatiste group, in the 1940s and 1950s, all of which helped foster recognition for their contribution to modern art in Québec and across Canada.

## **The Exhibition *Femina***

In 1947, the Musée de la province de Québec (now Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec) held what was likely the first Canadian museum exhibition of professional artists explicitly identified as a women's show. Although women had been exhibiting at venues such as the Art Association of Montreal, the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts and the Contemporary Arts Society for several decades, and some had even had shown solo, never before had an institution explicitly devoted space to a group of professional female artists. The exhibition, titled *Femina*, featured works by Sylvia Daoust, Simone Dénéchaud, Suzanne Duquet, Claire Fauteux, Agnès Lefort, Georgiana Paige Pinneo and Marian Dale Scott. *Femina* was shortly followed by *Canadian Women Artists*, which opened in New York before touring in Canada in 1947-1948, and then by *Canadian Women Painters*, in 1949, at Montreal's West End Gallery, headed by Rose Millman, one of the first women gallerists.

## **The Human Figure**

In Quebec, as in other parts of Canada, male artists turned to the landscape for the subject matter of early modern experiments. With the exception of commissioned portraits and archetypal rural characters, the human figure was a fairly secondary choice. Conversely, many works by women reveal a distinct affinity for human subjects. In the early 20th century, Helen McNicoll, Gertrude Des Clayes and others followed in the Impressionist footsteps of artists like Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt, known for portraying women and children. In the years between the wars, the influences of Cézanne and Matisse became more evident, both in the use of colour and in the construction of volumes, notably in the work of Emily Coonan, Mabel May, Liliás Torrance Newton and other members of the Beaver Hall Group. This period also saw children's portraits shed their prettified gloss; the eyes became harder, more resolute. French-speaking women artists were evolving as well, as seen in works from the 1940s that demonstrate an awareness of modern international trends.

## **Space**

The representation of "natural" space – often ideologically connoted by various forms of nationalism – dominated Quebec and Canadian painting in the early decades of the 20th century. But though bound up with conquest, control of the land and the assertion of identity, landscapes and depictions of country life, with its picturesque customs, also appealed to the tastes of many collectors. Male painters commonly chose rural or northern landscapes to

render their explorations of form and to express their “virile” vision of the country and untamed nature. At the same time, women tended to explore other sorts of spaces, urban, rural and intimate. Their approach reveals an openness to multiple subjects and to the often complex forms of spatial representation that lie at the heart of modern figurative issues.

## Urban Space

Representations of the city by women abound. They reflect the female experience of personal living and working spaces, but also the social slant of the artists’ views of their times. Urban pictures also offered experimental opportunities for women looking to combine innovative formal exploration with meaningful reflection on contemporary experience.

## Natural Space

Women artists who worked as teachers during the year often chose to portray the natural space of the countryside or resorts where they summered. Their landscapes rarely exhibit the symbolism associated with the conquest and domination of geographic space frequently found in paintings by men at the time.

## Intimate Space

The intimate spaces of home and studio were also popular with women painters. In addition, interiors offered opportunities for still life compositions, which were gaining favour with modern artists.

## **The *Refus Global* Women**

History tends to focus on the names of the leading male members of the Automatiste group, but the numerous female signatures on the *Refus global* manifesto reflect the growing importance of women in the avant-garde movements. In the visual arts, women helped to break boundaries in many different ways. The renowned painter Marcelle Ferron is equally famed for integrating art and architecture with her monumental stained-glass walls for Montreal subway stations. Madeleine Arbour made her mark not only in interior design and the performing arts but also in art education for children, through the new medium of television. And while Françoise Sullivan was exploring the vocabulary of modern dance at the time the *Refus global* was issued, she later turned to sculpture and painting, paving the way for contemporary multidisciplinary and performative practices.

## **Abstraction**

In Québec, the decade from 1955 to 1965 was marked by the coexistence of two major abstract movements: post-Automatism and Plasticism. For the most part, geometric abstraction is identified with male painters, but the women associated with post-Automatism achieved significant fame. Art critics hailed their courage, assurance, determination and even their “virility,” while occasionally noting a link between post-Automatiste expression, seen as gestural, and the supposedly more emotional and instinctive feminine nature. Although the Plasticien group had no female members, a few women ventured into geometric abstraction, among them Marian Dale Scott and Rita Letendre. Dynamic composition and the diagonal rhythm of flat areas of colour give their paintings an expressiveness sometimes lacking in the work of their more purist masculine colleagues.

By the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec