



Looking back: Reid with Florence Carlyle's 1903 canvas *The Tiff* (top left) and J.L. Graham's *The Prodigal Son* of 1909 (top right)

# THE GRACIOUS EYE

In his new installation of the Art Gallery of Ontario's permanent collection, Dennis Reid comes to terms with the canon of Canadian art, and with his institution's place in history

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by Sarah Milroy

o converse with Dennis Reid, the Art Gallery of Ontario's curator of historical Canadian art, is to be entirely attended to, to be wrung for one's nuances, to be thoroughly perceived. If paintings and sculptures are living things — as one comes to believe walking through Reid's new installation of Canadian art at the AGO — then this must be what it feels like to be a work of art under his beneficent captivity. For Reid, as for any truly first-rate curator, a work of art's meanings are never exhausted, its secrets never fully disclosed. The curator's task is to give that object the room to speak — even if sometimes in whispers — and, of course, to offer it good company for conversation.

This Reid has done outstandingly well. Rather than seeming a mere sequence of objects — points on the graph of artistic development — his soon-to-be-unveiled installation of historical Canadian art feels instead like a gathering of old friends,

Portrait photo by Eden Robbins

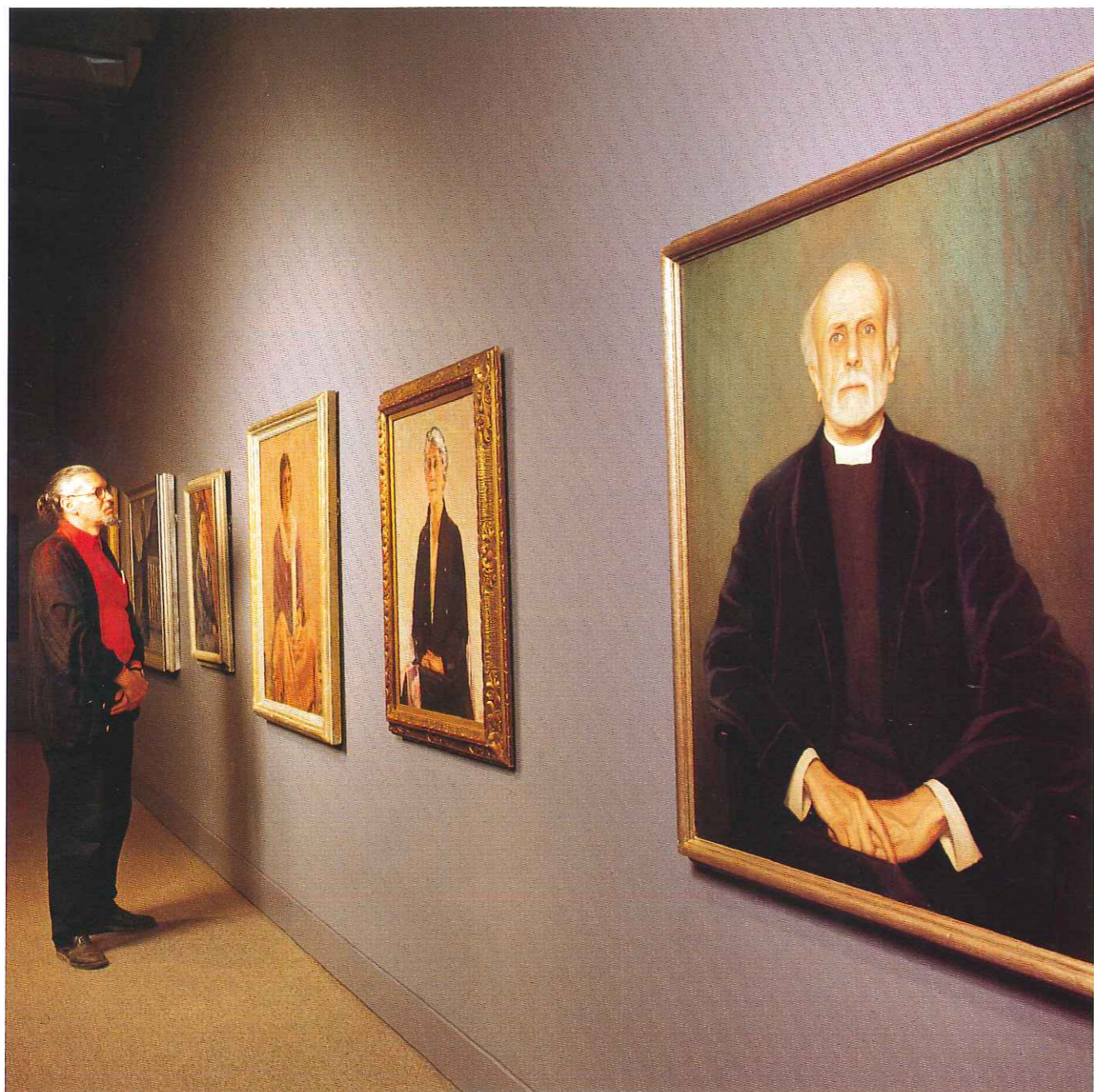


huddled together in convivial discussion. In part, this is because of the warm tones and domestic scale of many of the spaces. But largely it is due to the grace and tact of Reid's shaping hand. The Group of Seven, instead of looking like stuffy inevitables, fairly pulse with new life at the centre of the installation, connected by numerous archways to the Canadian Art Club of 1907 to 1915 (with its

emphasis on the Parisian idiom), the Arts and Crafts movement in Toronto at the turn of the century (including a preponderance of women artists such as Laura Muntz, Marion Nelson and Mary Hiester Reid as well as early works by J.E.H. MacDonald and Lawren Harris), the stylised and spiritual landscapes of Emily Carr, the figurative concerns of the thirties and forties (artists like Charles Comfort,

Carl Schaefer, Paraskeva Clark), and the new room full of David Milnes.

These connections, of course, are all intended by Reid and his team; the layout of the rooms suggestively positions the Group within the flow of history in a way that is multivalent and porous. For example, paintings made by Group members after about 1930 are woven through installations of later work by other artists, clarifying



Reid with his row of Varley portraits, from *Dhârâna* to Janet P. Gordon, headed up by Lawren Harris' formidable Dr. Salem Bland (1925)

the way in which the influences of the various Group members continued to be felt. This approach was impossible before, when the collection was confined to linear configurations. "Before," says Reid, "there was simply a sense of preponderance."

Within the Group itself, Reid's installation suggests other important shifts. Given that we tend to think of the glory of the Group in terms of its landscape images, there is a startling emphasis here on portraiture — as there is indeed throughout the whole installation. In particular, Reid focuses on the work of Fred Varley, who created, according to Reid, "clearly the most important portraiture of his time." A group of paintings of women are assembled on one wall, ranging from the stiff, almost caricature-like commissioned society portrait of Janet P. Gordon, to the more affectionate

Harris abstracts of the late thirties (the subject of an exhibition entitled *Atma Buddhi Manas*, which Reid organised in 1985). Even the portraiture of the thirties and forties is often inflected with an eerie sense of spiritual presence. The recently acquired self-portrait by Charles Comfort, for example, simply stops you dead.

All these shadings are, of course, the consequence of one very personal view of Canadian art, a view that must intersect both with the existing strengths of the collection, the gradually shifting framework of art history, and the vagaries of private collectors and donors. It was the chance to work directly with this constituency that drew Reid to the AGO from the National Gallery of Canada, where he had worked from 1967 to 1979. (He was hired for the National Gallery by Jean Boggs when still only half way

area of the nineteenth and very early twentieth century, particularly in his recreation of a traditional exhibition salon, complete with benches for viewing and scarlet walls, densely hung. If there has been an area of particular growth in Reid's understanding of Canadian art as a result of this process, he says it is surely in his understanding of the nineteenth-century material. Looking at Reid's salon, one shares his sense of discovery. Classic icons like Watson's *Death of Elaine*, Otto Jacobi's rivers and waterfalls, and Paul Peel's *After the Bath* now share wall space with Florence Carlyle's delicately hued interior scene, *The Tiff*, and Sidney Strickland Tully's grave and subdued portrait of an old woman entitled *Twilight of Life* (c. 1899). Reid restored these and other women's works to the collection from dead storage at Queen's Park.

## THE COLLECTION REFLECTED CULTURAL LIFE IN TORONTO, AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PRIVATE TASTES OF ITS PATRON CLASS

and stylistically relaxed portrait of Barker Fairley's wife, Margaret, to *Dhârâna*, Varley's ecstatic hymn to Vera Weatherbie, his young student and lover. (This same wall also bears Lawren Harris' famous 1925 portrait of Dr. Salem Bland.)

Another surprise is Reid's emphasis on the spiritual in Canadian art, of which Varley's *Dhârâna* is a major icon. But the connection of classic Lawren Harris paintings such as *Above Lake Superior* of 1922, to the Lismers, to Varley's *The Cloud*, *Red Mountain*, and to the newly acquired Frank Carmichael, *North Shore*, *Lake Superior*, gives us a new sense of ourselves. All of these works are dazzling records of transcendent states of being in nature. This spirituality carries on through Reid's installation of Milne and Emily Carr, also in a room of her own here for the first time. Later, Bertram Brooker's abstracts hum amongst Reid's beloved

through the M Phil program at the University of Toronto.) In Ottawa, Reid had worked with a collection that was by necessity scrupulously balanced, regionally sensitive, uninflected, thorough. Most of the new acquisitions were made through purchases. Such was certainly not the case in Toronto. Reid arrived to find strong holdings in the area of the Group of Seven — thanks in large part to the gifts of J.S. McLean and Charles Band — a smattering of nineteenth-century pictures like Sir Edmund Walker's *The Tired Model* by Paul Peel, and only the most cursory representation of Quebec — some Pellan, Borduas, Goodridge Roberts. In all, the collection reflected — for better and for worse — cultural life in Toronto, and the development of the private tastes of its patron class.

Nowhere are Reid's revisions and reallocations more evident than in the

(Later Canadian women painters like Mary Hiester Reid, Paraskeva Clark, Sarah Robertson, Yvonne McKague Housser and, of course, Emily Carr, also receive new emphasis.)

One finds, in the arrangement of pictures in the salon, another theme that runs through the entire installation: the parallel and rarely contiguous development of painting in French and English Canada. On one magnificent salon wall — divided into two parts by the door which leads to the paintings of the Canadian Art Club — Quebec painting of the 1890s is installed to the left (G. Horne Russell, Helen McNicoll, William Brymner, Ozias Leduc), and Toronto painting of the same period to the right (George Reid, Wyly Grier, Florence Carlyle, William Blair Bruce, A.D. Patterson). The comparison is rich. While the subject matter — landscape and figure study — is much the same, the



Montreal paintings show a much greater awareness of modern style, while the Toronto work has a darkly glazed, moodier ambience. Step through the doorway, and you are brought neatly to the consolidation of these impulses in the Canadian Art Club — Curtis Williamson, Homer Watson, Edmund Morris, Clarence

which the collection has developed. After all, there have been, over the last five years, five major installations or reinstallations of Canadian collections in different parts of the country — the Musée du Québec, the National Gallery of Canada, the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Montreal, the AGO, and the Vancouver Art Gallery — and each of

of course. And a whole installation on the development of painting in the West.” Like Reid, it would seem Thom embraces the dictum “Never play down a strength to strengthen a weakness.”

The point of all this, of course, is that there is no one history; there are only histories. In any museum collec-

## IN NEGOTIATING THE ISSUE OF THE ABORIGINAL PRESENCE, REID AND HIS COLLEAGUES HAVE TO WRESTLE WITH A LARGER ISSUE: WHAT DOES THE TERM “CANADIAN” MEAN?

Gagnon, Maurice Cullen, James Wilson Morrice, Suzor-Coté — artists from both sides of the Canadian cultural divide united by their immersion in European painterly style. “They literally came into contact with each other in France,” says Reid. “The whole point of the Canadian Art Club was to bring back to Canada the work of expatriate Canadians. There was a belief that all the most important Canadian artists were working abroad at that point. A few like Ozias Leduc and Homer Watson persisted in staying in Canada, but even Watson sold his most famous painting, the first time, to a Scot.”

Stepping from the Canadian Art Club room — with its wonderful new wall of Morrises — into the Group of Seven, Quebec disappears from view, emerging only sporadically in subsequent installations. It’s not until the final chapter of Reid’s installation that Quebec again has a strong presence, in his arrangement of the Painters Eleven and the Automatistes, hung on facing sides of a long, rather narrow space. “It’s installed as a confrontation,” says Reid. Linked to each other by a common aesthetic challenge from France and from the U.S., these paintings find they have a lot to talk about.

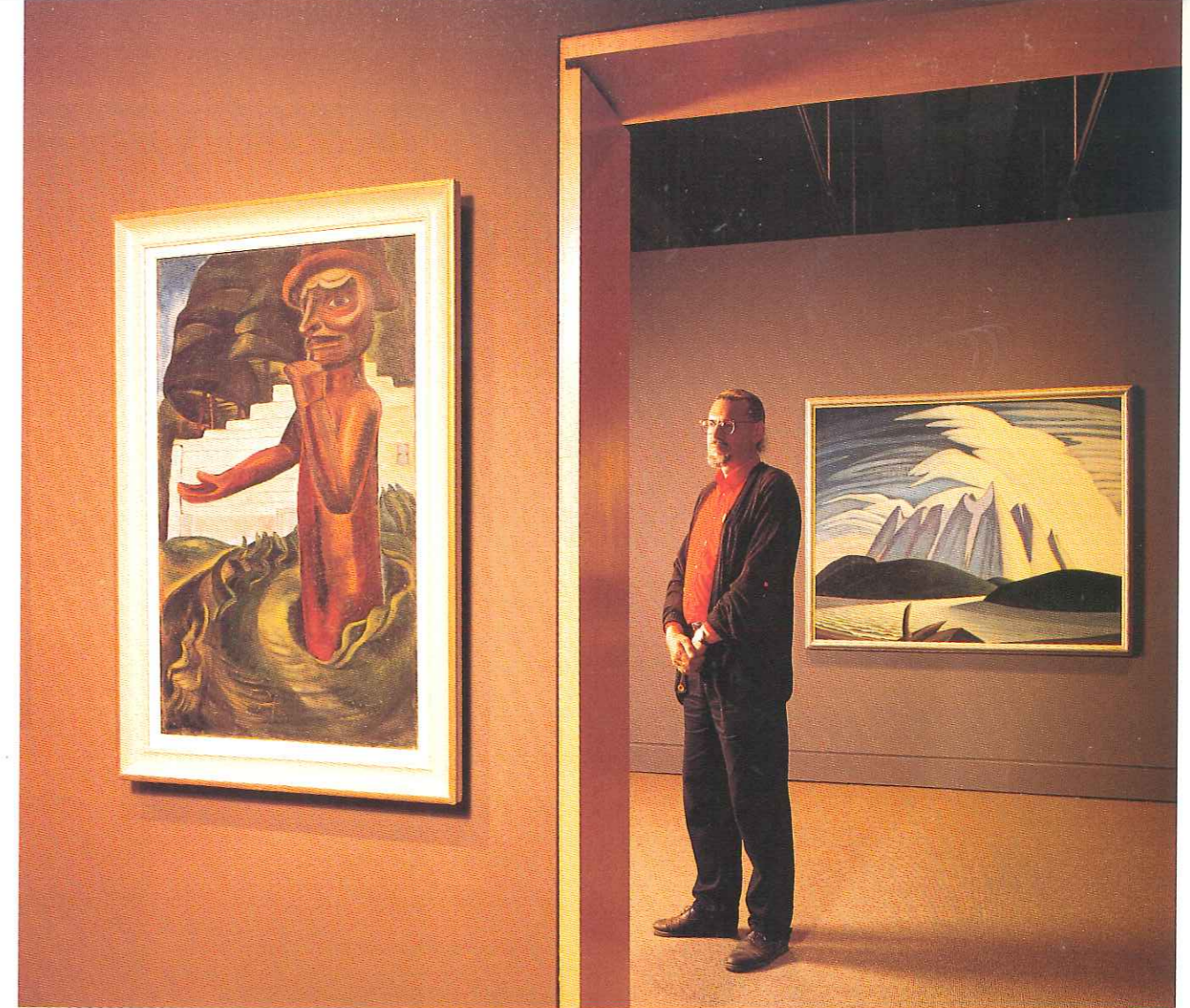
Of course, the relative absence of Quebec painting can be seen as a weakness of the collection. But it can also be seen as the insignia of the particular site and political conditions under

them tells a different story. Says Reid, “It was interesting to look at the Musée du Québec. It’s fascinating and rich and... at first, unrecognisable! Their emphasis, of course, is Quebec. There is one splendid, splendid floor which is dedicated almost entirely to the work of Napoléon Bourassa on the one side — an artist who we never even hear of here — and, on the other, Suzor-Coté. Incredible, huge, heroic paintings that have to do with a sense of nationality, a sense of race and culture.”

Of Charlie Hill’s reinstallation at the National Gallery, Reid says the strain of regional allocations and scrupulous balance — dictated by the institution’s mandate — can sometimes be felt. “Milne was badly done by. He didn’t emerge in the way I thought he might have. As well, someone like Cornelius Krieghoff ended up not getting what he deserves. If you approach things with too much of an eye to even-handedness, you run the risk of not responding to the richness of a collection. Instead, you are bringing out a sense of what the history *should* be. For example, they have one of the fantastic Krieghoff collections. They could have done an *incredible* pile of riches display.” Reid seems more comfortable with the strategy of Ian Thom at the Vancouver Art Gallery who has embraced the idiosyncrasies of the collection, and its obvious regional slant and spottiness. “He has a whole installation of Emily Carr,

tion, many histories are left out. The most notable lacuna here is Canadian art made by aboriginal peoples, with the exception of the new Inuit galleries — the result of two massive gifts: the Sarick and Klamer family collections. (In the new installation, the Inuit material intersects with Reid’s chronology at about the time the objects first entered the southern market: the fifties.) This aside, Canada’s first artists are notably absent. In this, the AGO’s approach is no different than that of any other major museum showing Canadian historical art, with the exception of the McMichael Canadian Collection, and the new McCord Museum of Canadian History in Montreal, where native artifacts and works of art are paced through displays drawn from white colonial culture.

It should be noted that Reid has organised the only major exhibition of aboriginal art at the AGO in recent memory: *From the Four Quarters*, in 1984. As well, he was the coordinator of *Norval Morrisseau and the Emergence of the Image Makers* in the same year. But the parameters of the institution’s collecting policy nonetheless reflect the prevailing ideology of the public. It is an ideology that cherishes Varley’s *Dhârâna* — an image of enraptured spirituality painted in 1932, during the artist’s stay in the Lynn Valley in British Columbia — more than it does those works of art created by the Salish carvers living in



West meets East: Emily Carr’s *Potlatch Welcome* (1929) in dialogue with Lawren Harris’ *Lake and Mountains* (1927–28)

the next valley over, whose ancestors had been moved for centuries by the same talking rivers, the same warm cedar breath of the forest, the same unearthly lavender twilight that so transfixed Varley.

This, too, will pass. Says Reid, “We just got an incredibly tightly focused collection of argillite from Roy Cole — the same man who gave us our new Harris. Fifty pieces, little poles, originally from the Cunningham collection, so that means they were gathered from the 1870s to the ’90s. Cunningham founded Port Essington and was married to a Haida woman. It looks like there are three hands in the collection, and it looks like one of them is Charles Edenshaw, who was one

of the greatest carvers of that period. It’s going to get us started in a very focused way. I’m looking at a way of displaying them at the entrance to the Canadian collection.”

In negotiating the issue of the aboriginal presence — as in countless other decisions — what is at stake, ultimately, is not just the question of aesthetic quality. Reid and his colleagues must wrestle with a larger question: what does the term “Canadian” mean? Given the centrality of this collection, it is a question that the institution is bound to address. But such issues have always been at the heart of Reid’s revisions of history and identity. Of the Group of Seven, he says, “These pictures simply insist

on being at the centre of certain arguments. If you are talking about art and nationality and place, then they have got to be there.” Reid pauses. “Someone like David Milne has always insisted that the issue of national identity is *not* an issue. He lived his life like it was not an issue; he made his art as though it was not an issue. His work was a highly personal process, brought to a level of exquisite subtlety. But it has meant that Milne has not been drawn into most people’s consideration of what are the central issues of Canadian art history.” Perhaps the true beauty of this installation is the peculiar freedom it offers to arrive at one’s own sense of the central issues, to create one’s own living version of the past. ■