

With his
upcoming
exhibition at
the National
Gallery of
Canada,

by Robert Fulford

Canada,

curator

Charles Hill

is determined

to prove

that the

Group of Seven

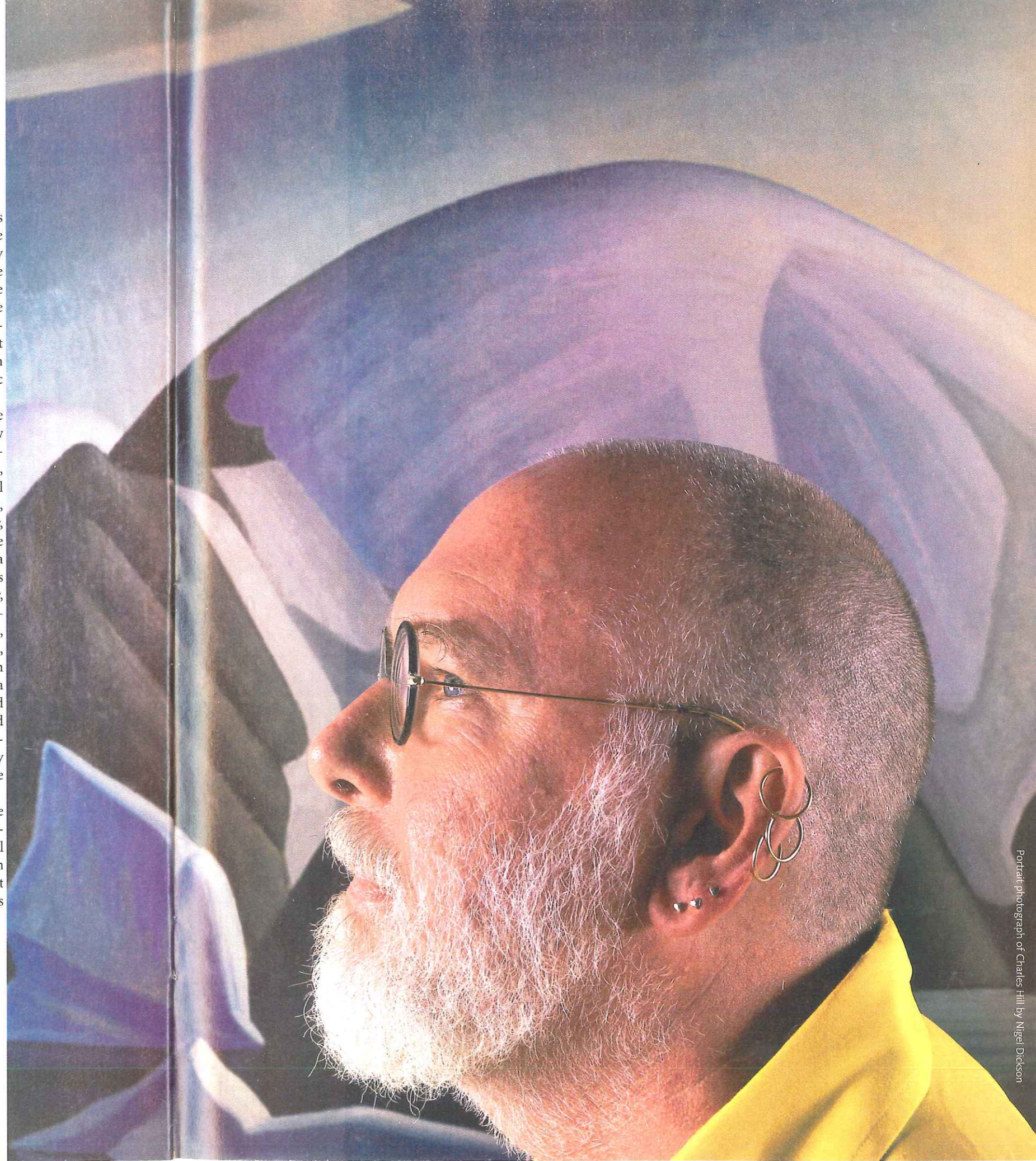
is not what

you think

It would be evasive to start with anything but Charles Hill's earrings. They are, after all, what everyone notices first about him, and beyond question they signify a great deal. They make a statement, these ornaments: they are not ordinary earrings. They are specifically the earrings of a scholar who draws fine distinctions, a curator whose working life is dedicated to imposing order on chaotic reality, the sort of earrings Carolus Linnaeus might have worn if, in eighteenth-century Sweden, the father of scientific classification had thought to wear earrings.

As disciplined as elite troops, they march down the right side of Charles Hill's head, beginning just below his carefully cropped white hair. First come the earrings proper, five of them, handsome gold loops, swinging outward from the ear's helix in graceful arcs. Just beneath them, in a straight descending line, are three small, precise, triangular studs. Finally, toward the bottom of the lobe, as punctuation, there is a single ruby stud, a circle, the period that ends a highly expressive sentence. In all there are nine objects on the right ear, but the left ear holds slightly fewer, as if to suggest that their owner, no slave to convention, eschews formalist symmetry. Then, of course, there are the tattoos — careful tattoos on his arms, nothing flagrant, nothing excessive. The right arm displays plain bands in varying widths, suggesting a painting Kenneth Noland might have made if he had decided to have a black-and-white period around 1970. Sleeves rolled up, ready for work, the fifty-year-old curator of Canadian art places his tattoo firmly on his desk at the National Gallery in Ottawa as he explains the rescue of history.

These are the personal embellishments of a reliable man, a serious fellow, someone we can trust to safeguard the nation's culture and defend it against all enemies, including those whose treason takes the form of oversimplification. There is nothing frivolous about Charles Hill, and nothing lighthearted about his



Portrait photograph of Charles Hill by Nigel Dickson

Regrouping the **G**roup

current project, a major exhibition he's been preparing for two years, *The Group of Seven: Art for a Nation*, which opens in Ottawa in October and later travels to Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal. The exhibition celebrates the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Group's first show (in May, 1920, at the new culture palace then called The Art Gallery of Toronto) but it is not the automatic ritual of simple-minded piety that some might expect. It is an exhibition with a precise aim, built carefully around a structured argument. Something is at stake here.

Hill sets out to restore the Group of Seven's position in Canadian culture by scraping away the encrusted images and assumptions that hide its true origins and obscure its meaning in history. He wants us to revisit its beginnings by poking around in the rich stew of contentiousness that was 1920s art in Canada, particularly Toronto. It was a time when the famous journalist Hector Charlesworth (an often shrewd writer, who admired some Group paintings and hated others) went so far as to warn *Saturday Night* readers that Group of Seven art should not be sent to a 1924 show in Britain because "it is going to be a bad advertisement for this country. We should advise the Department of Immigration and Colonization to intervene to prevent such a catastrophe." Hill wants to remind us how radical the Group was then in the Canadian context, and what it meant to the development of Canada. He wants to recover the Group's legitimacy as an avant-garde and place it once again in the stream of Modernism.

"Modernism was born," Hilton Kramer has noted, "in a spirit of criticism and revolution. It was predicated on the existence of an official culture — at once bourgeois in its origin, unenlightened in its intellectual outlook, and philistine in its taste — that would remain adamant in its resistance to fundamental change." Against this background, Modernism was a radical gesture, and in the 1920s the Group was Canada's version of that gesture. Necessarily, the gesture had to be made from outside the Establishment. The invisible World Congress of Art Opinion, which meets only on a subliminal plane, had proposed, passed, and ratified a rule from which no appeal is ever allowed: to be significant, it is not enough for art to be good, it must also be rebellious, and if possible part of a larger social rebellion.

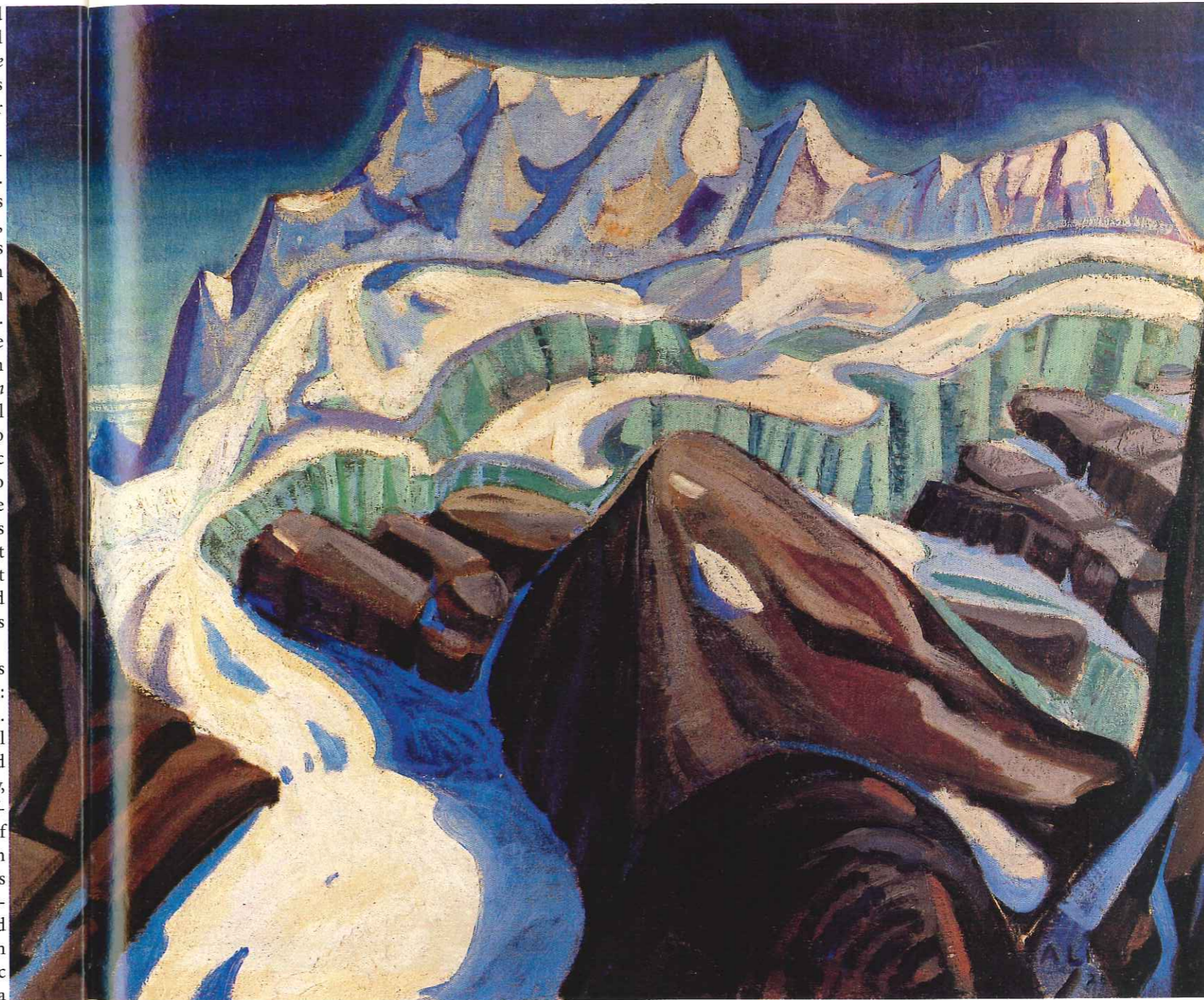
Today Charles Hill describes his own tastes as conservative, but he retains some of the instincts of a radical. In 1969, the same year the Trudeau government eliminated homosexual lovemaking from the Criminal Code, Hill was one of six men who created, at a meeting in Toronto, the

first gay activist organization in Canada. In 1977, when there were almost a hundred such groups in Canada but open homosexuals in the professions were still rare, Hill appeared in a photo-spread accompanying a much-discussed *Weekend Magazine* cover story, "Gay in the Seventies." Around the same time, he sometimes turned up at the National Gallery in pigtail, fringed paisley shawl and jeans skirt — an *assemblage* he described as "radical drag," meaning clothes that subvert expectations by "destroying gender identification."

In his work as a curator, Hill has been similarly eager to challenge rock-solid assumptions. Like all good historians, he's a revisionist: his self-chosen task is the correction of opinion, and he seems to understand history-writing as the constant remaking of perceptions. He's an ombudsman for historical artists, doling out from his office in Ottawa the justice they've been denied. It was Hill who decided two decades ago that the artists of the 1930s had been given far less than their due; his 1975 exhibition, *Canadian Painting in the Thirties*, established them as artists of national importance and made a heroine of the Toronto communist Paraskeva Clark, whose ruefully chic self-portrait on the show's poster became a retro icon of the seventies, smiling down from the walls of cafés and university dormitories across Canada. Around the same time, Hill decided that the Dutch-born photographer John Vanderpant (1884-1939) had been unjustly forgotten, and organized an exhibition that gave him back his reputation as a pioneer Canadian pictorialist.

Ambitious though they were, those exhibitions addressed a familiar and relatively simple problem: the obscurity of art that deserved to be known. With *The Group of Seven: Art for a Nation*, Hill confronts something far more daunting: fame and its deleterious effects. Fame compresses history, irons out its ambiguities, turns it into clumsy half-truths. In the Group's case, it packed a variety of artists into a cultural monolith. Today the Seven suffer from their own popularity, and it is Hill's mission to save them from the distortions popularity has produced. Their fabulous, unparalleled success — they remain the only creative Canadian artists in any field who have captured the public imagination of English Canada for more than a generation — brought them the blessing of long life but the curse of misunderstanding.

The Group's decision in 1920 to create themselves as an institution was a way of constructing a context in which their accomplishments could be seen clearly for the first time. Before 1920, appearing in shows put together by traditional art



Arthur Lismer
The Glacier 1928
 Oil on canvas
 34 x 50 in.
 Collection: Art Gallery of Hamilton
 All photos courtesy National Gallery of Canada



J.E.H. Macdonald
The Wild River 1919
 Oil on canvas
 53 x 64 in.
 Collection: Faculty Club, University of Toronto

associations, painters such as J.E.H. MacDonald seemed isolated and even eccentric. But when they came together, the same artists — sometimes precisely the same pictures, such as MacDonald's *The Wild River* — looked altogether different. The artists threw a fresh light on each other, and in that new light they flourished. As Hill says, "The formation of the Group was a tool. It allowed them to make a statement together."

Over the years, their success turned into a peculiar kind of defeat. On the most obvious level, Lawren Harris, A.Y. Jackson and others became automatic big-ticket items at Canadian art auctions, though destroying the tyranny of the auction rooms was one of their original goals. In a sense, they became what they despised. More subtly, history slowly turned them, against their wishes, into a narrow, calcified establishment. Several decades ago, the image of the Group that many of us carry in our minds lost its vibrancy.

"A lot of sins are laid at their door for which they have no responsibility," Hill insists. "There was a real watering down of their art in the later period — somebody like A.J. Casson was very unfortunate." Casson was invited to join the Group at a late stage, but by the 1980s, labelled in the newspapers as "the last surviving member of the Group of Seven," he was churning out paintings that were flat and forgettable pastiches of the Group at its best. Jackson's case was more complicated, and sadder. As a visually sophisticated and ambitious young man, he derided artists like Maurice Cullen for endlessly repeating themselves, but in his late years he turned out a multitude of paintings that looked for all the world like fake A.Y. Jacksons.

Hill wants to take us back to the moment when this kind of patterned, predictable art was far from their intentions. At its birth the Group wanted to create not an orthodoxy but a richly various national art movement, using the freedoms of modernity to express the essence of Canada. From the beginning they generously invited non-Group artists to appear in their exhibitions — and in fact they included in their own number at the start an artist of great talent, Fred Varley, who only occasionally shared their interest in landscape. That decision alone proved that Harris and Jackson had something larger than landscape painting in mind. But in the event, their landscapes made such a deep appeal to the Canadian spirit, and became so firmly embedded in the national consciousness, that they obliterated just about everything else on the scene. The painters who followed the Group became a lost generation, and the painters who preceded them vanished from sight. This was not what the Group had in mind. They wanted

some space for themselves, not *all* the space. Worse still, members of the Group who moved on to other modes of art — the most famous case was Harris' switch to abstraction in the 1930s — disappointed a public that had adopted the landscapes as tokens of national pride. It was a colossal case of a public-relations strategy turning against the strategists.

In recent times, at least four forces have reduced or narrowed the Group's position. *First*, their work was embraced with unprecedented enthusiasm by the business class, a cause of suspicion in all other sectors of society and even among many business people. *Second*, the painters who followed them at a distance of two generations felt an Oedipal urge to reject and overthrow them; the abstract painters, some of whom (such as Harold Town) eventually came to admire the Group, saw them in the 1950s and the 1960s as a giant obstacle blocking the progress of the Canadian imagination. *Third*, Postmodern critics nowadays sometimes see the Group as unconscious agents of white Canadian imperialism who not only ignored the presence of Native peoples but encouraged the exploitation of Native lands, their depiction of a landscape without people becoming (as Hill's catalogue paraphrases the argument) "a weapon in the cultural genocide of the native population." One critic has gone so far as to suggest that the Group's paintings of Algoma were made to help Sir Edmund Walker (one of their patrons), whose Canadian Bank of Commerce had put a lot of money into the Algoma Central Railway. *Fourth*, a few critics have argued that the Group was never significantly radical and in fact was blessed from the beginning by major institutions, notably The Art Gallery of Toronto and the National Gallery of Canada. I confess to membership in this last cabal of critics, having stated that the Group manufactured a fantasy of unpopularity in order to obscure a major embarrassment: the fact that never before or since, in any country, has an art movement begun life with such impeccable Establishment credentials. (I find my 1992 *Globe and Mail* column to that effect duly cited on the first page of this show's catalogue.)

As Hill explains in his clear, articulate and well-argued text, there were those who saw the fallacies and dangers in myth-making almost from the start. Mythologist-in-chief to the Group was Fred Housser, a journalist and the husband of Bess Housser, the journalist who later became Lawren Harris' second wife. Fred Housser, like Harris and many other Canadian intellectuals of the day, was a theosophist, an adherent of that peculiar, synoptic omni-creed that imagined all of creation moving

inexorably toward a higher plane of existence. The artist-theosophers saw this upward movement running through the North, and emphasized the purity of humanity's relationship with nature — in particular Canadian humanity's. For Harris, the North (which meant anything from Algonquin Park to Ellesmere Island) held a magic power that could make the world a better place. As Harris wrote in 1928, in his most eloquent and confident statement on this subject, "We live on the fringe of the great North...and its spiritual flow, its clarity, its replenishing power passes through us to the teeming people south of us.... We, who are true Canadians imbued with the North, are an upstart people with our traditions in the making." Four decades later, Glenn Gould would put forth similar ideas in his essays and broadcasts on the meaning of the North.

Canadian art, in Harris' and Housser's view, was a conduit for this purifying power. In the summer of 1924, after Group of Seven paintings were praised by English critics at the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley, Housser set to work on a book that would codify both his own ideas and those he had gathered from his friends in the Group. It was published by Macmillan in 1926 as *A Canadian Art Movement*, and it soon became the seminal art document of the era. It was an enthusiast's book, a fan's notes, and in those terms a valuable record; it has earned the gratitude of everyone who has since written about the Group. But at the core of it there was a fundamental error, and in the years that followed, simple-minded publicity turned that error into a monument of stone. Ever since, scholars have been chipping away at it.

Housser's mistake was his outlandish attempt to enhance the purity of his heroes by placing them not only outside the Establishment but also outside art history. In truth, they were, like most artists, products of their aesthetic conditioning, which in their case included everything from Post-Impressionism to Art Nouveau and the styles of North American commercial art studios. This seems obvious now — in fact, it would be astonishing if it were not true. But Housser chose to see his friends as artists "unequipped with the mental paraphernalia of academies...inspired as the result of a direct contact with Nature herself." He even invoked the word "amateur" to underscore the artists' freedom from academic rules.

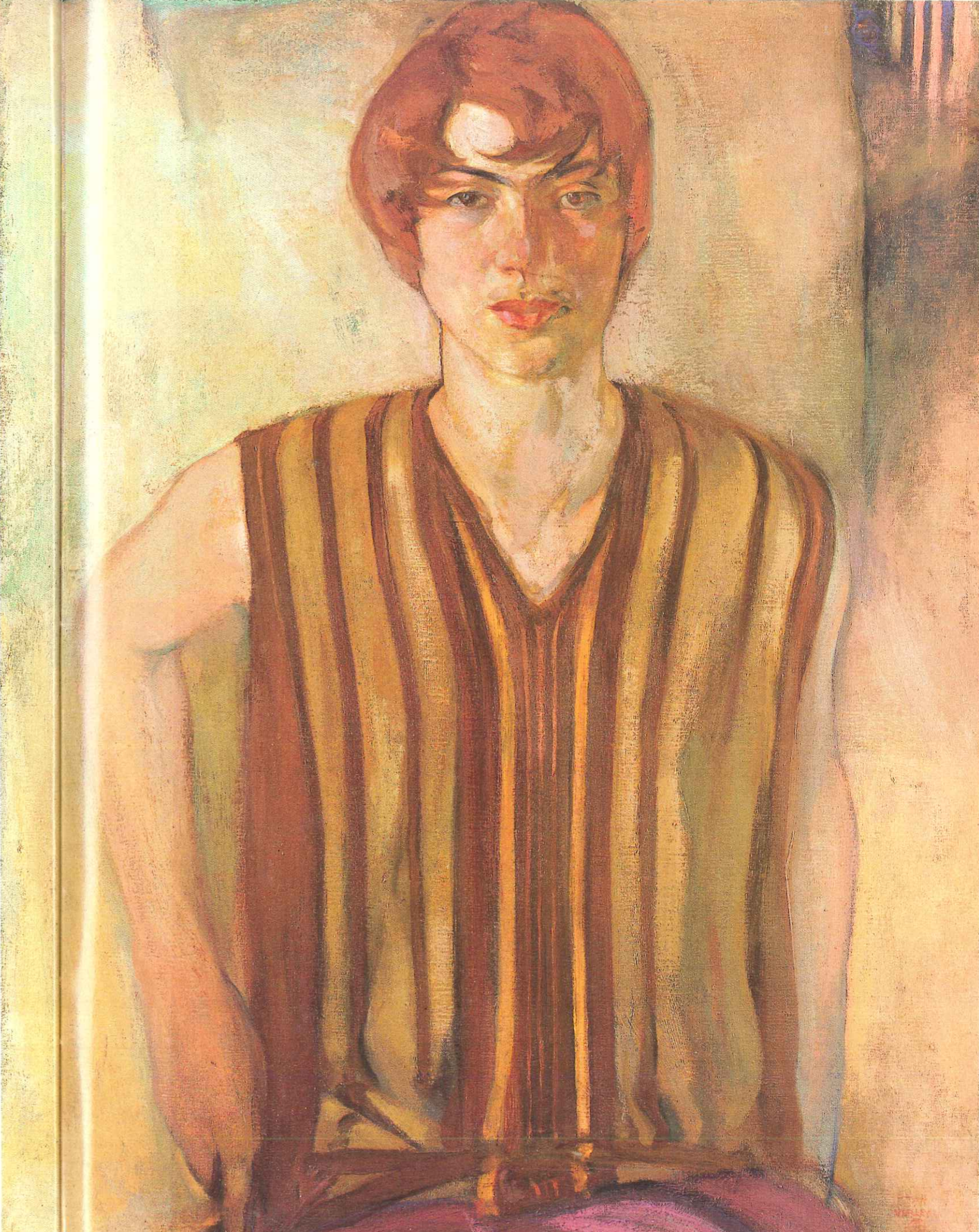
An anonymous reviewer in *The Canadian Forum* was among the first to point out this mistaken notion: "It grossly overstates the native independence of these artists, identifying the English-Dutch tradition, from which they broke, with the whole of contemporary Europe and forgetting

what it is easy to see, that the new Canadian technique is almost as close to Post-Impressionism as the old technique was to English watercolour." The *Ottawa Journal's* review, by the portrait painter Ernest Fosbery, was especially prescient. Fosbery saw that Housser was creating a series of myths, and he tried to strangle them at birth: "The Amateur Myth: the fable that the members of the group were amateurs uncontaminated by European influence... The Discovery Myth: the fable that they 'discovered' that Canadian landscape was paintable... The National School of Painting Myth: the claim that these men are the first and only Canadian painters...." But Fosbery and other critics were too late. These fables were already flowering, and to this day they can be encountered in the newspapers, the popular histories, and the classrooms. Unlearning them, in fact, is one of the tasks of all sophisticated students of Canadian cultural history.

Not all members of the Group were grateful to the author of *A Canadian Art Movement*. Hill quotes a critical letter about the book that J.E.H. MacDonald wrote to Housser in December, 1926, but apparently never mailed: "It has made me realize the cynical truth of Napoleon's saying that 'all history is a lie agreed upon'... Memories put a haze around things which falsifies them or at all events poetizes them." Perhaps more than any of the others, MacDonald knew the origins of the Group's styles, not only in Europe but in earlier Canadian painters such as George Reid and William Cruikshank. He understood the point that Charles Hill is now trying to emphasize: this art movement was far more complicated — and a good deal more interesting — than the founding mythologists insisted.

Hill's exhibition first outlines the artistic world in which the Group was born by showing a selection of ten Royal Canadian Academy pictures from the same period, made by artists who not only identified with British imperialism but even identified with the people whose portraits they were hired to paint. His next room shows selections from the Group's first show in 1920, and then five more galleries exhibit samples of their subsequent shows, with Group members shown alongside their invited guests — one room each for 1921, 1922, and 1925, then a room combining 1926 and 1928 and another combining 1930 and 1931. With the exception of a few special cases (such as the Jackson that the Tate Gallery purchased), Hill includes only paintings the Group exhibited in their Toronto shows.

F.H. Varley
Vera ca. 1929
 Oil on canvas
 32 x 26 in.
 Collection: National Gallery
 of Canada



Aside from recreating the milieu in which this art was made, Hill wants to pry the individual members of the Group apart, reminding us that even the core members — Jackson, Harris, MacDonald, and Arthur Lismer — were as interesting for their differences as for their similarities. They came from different places, geographically as well as artistically, and later they moved off to different places: Vancouver, Montreal, the American southwest, portrait painting, abstraction. As Hill says, "To their credit, in the 1930s, they dispersed — they weren't going to keep reliving their history." By the end of World War II, they had mainly disappeared from Toronto. Of the prominent members, only Jackson remained, keeping the flame and the old resentments alive, and on one occasion — at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection — even snubbing a woman who was unwise enough to reveal that she was the daughter of his ancient foe, Hector Charlesworth.

Just as Hill strips something away from the story of the Group — the narrowness, the monolithic quality — he also adds to it, describing in detail not only the cultural world from which the Group emerged but also the world they did a great deal to create, a Canada in which living art mattered. "They wanted to create an art consciousness in society," Hill says, and to a spectacular degree they succeeded. Hill describes, in more detail than any previous scholar has attempted, the extent and complexity of the public debate fostered by the Group: "People defined themselves through their reaction to the Seven." Shows they sponsored or encouraged in Sarnia, Saskatoon, Fort William and Vancouver led to excited talk about current art where no such talk had been heard before. Montreal in the 1920s lacked even a professional art society, and the Group — by showing there, and inviting Montreal artists to show with them — gave local modern artists an unprecedented prominence. The Group functioned as missionaries, and not only for themselves.

Hill demonstrates, in a way that will surprise many of us, the astonishing reach of the Group across Canadian culture. These were not art-world provincials, locked inside the views of their fellow painters. They were interested in promoting far more than their own paintings, even if (as it turned out) self-promotion was the clearest result of their efforts. They were soaringly ambitious for all of Canadian culture. Famously, MacDonald and others decorated St. Anne's Church in Toronto, reasserting art's ancient role in religious institutions. At the same time, however, they were also designing and illustrating books — by Bliss

Carman, Pauline Johnson, E.J. Pratt, among others. They designed sets for many dramatic productions at Hart House Theatre in Toronto: Jackson did Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*, Lismer did Euripides' *The Trojan Women*, Harris did Shaw's *You Never Can Tell*. Harris took particular interest in promoting the work of the playwright Merrill Denison, who was attempting to articulate Canadian nationalism in the theatre. They were all assiduous promoters of other painters. As Hill writes, "The Group of Seven defined a communality of spirit with J.W. Morrice, Ernest Lawson, and Tom Thomson, and argued for the appreciation and affirmation of Canadian creativity in all its forms." The Group's organizing led eventually to a much more expansive institution, the Canadian Group of Painters; whether that institution was a great success or not, it was proof of the generous spirit that animated the Group — a spirit we can only understand if we think our way into the 1920s and compare it with the world of the 1990s we know. It is as if Betty Goodwin were currently illustrating Michael Ondaatje, and Jeff Wall was designing backdrops for the Stratford Festival.

Hill makes it clear that theosophy, while it fired the early rhetoric, didn't last long as an organizing principle. Harris of course embraced it, Lismer was interested, but Jackson was skeptical and MacDonald — a no-nonsense, nineteenth-century farm boy — never took it seriously. But in Hill's view, a quasi-religious idealism animated the Group through its most vigorous years, and theosophy's focus on the North contributed to it. The Group's feeling toward the land — or, rather, the feelings of Harris, Lismer, Jackson and MacDonald — was grounded in their need for idealism.

So was the persistently unpeopled landscape. Even the Group's most passionate admirers, including the part-time painter and professor of German literature, Barker Fairley, sometimes wondered why human beings almost never appeared in the paintings. Hill says, "I believe that for them the landscape and the people of Canada were the same thing — that if you wanted to depict the Canadian people you depicted the Canadian landscape. Canadians were defined by the landscape. It wasn't an evasion of the reality of Canadian life, it was a way of going deeper into that reality."

Why, at this moment, should someone like Charles Hill devote such effort (the catalogue shows the happy results of endless library hours) to this subject? "It is very self-indulgent," Hill suggests. "I like the learning part of it." What he's learning about, and teaching the rest of us about, is nothing less than the formation of a modern



Lawren Harris
Algoma Hill 1920
 Oil on canvas
 46 x 54 in.
 Collection: The Toronto Hospital

artistic consciousness in Canada. As he says, "They articulated through their images a wide public sentiment. They articulated the post-war national pride, the moving away from English culture. They certainly created a greater awareness of art in Canada. They helped to create, by the 1930s, an acceptance of being Canadian." Even in the year 1995, no small matter.

Will *Art for a Nation* alter our ideas about the Group? For one thing, it may disturb the now common view of the Group as an exclusive boys' club. All of them were men, and our most familiar mental picture depicts them as males bonding happily in the wilderness. In fact, they showed a more than cursory interest in the work of their female contemporaries. Harris did his clumsy best to act as mentor-by-mail to Emily Carr, and women often exhibited with the Group by invitation. Hill — who has demonstrated in earlier exhibitions a desire to reclaim forgotten women in Canadian art — includes in the show not only Carr but also less well-known figures such as

Prudence Heward and Lilius Torrance Newton, both of them elegant and still underappreciated painters. Their work, connected to the Group of Seven, will come as a surprise.

Beyond that, Hill thinks Lismer will be better appreciated after this show, and he hopes we will see Jackson as a painter of greater diversity. "Jackson can be very refined — or rough, as if deciding not to use that refinement." Perhaps we'll cease to regard the Group as a kind of harmless, neutral national wallpaper. "I like their uglier paintings," Hill says. There's a Harris, *Algoma Hill*, from The Toronto Hospital collection, and his *Miners' Houses*, *Glance Bay* that aren't easygoing pictures, even after three-quarters of a century. Hill imagines that Harris will emerge from this showing as meaner and rougher than we imagine him. "Hopefully, there are paintings people won't like in the show." Possibly arguments will start. That, of course, would be one way of reuniting us with the grandest of all the traditions of the Group of Seven. ■