

RON LONGSTAFFE

The private collector who's the Vancouver Art Gallery's patron saint

By SEAN ROSSITER

In 1979, John Ronald Longstaffe gave the Vancouver Art Gallery a virtually complete collection of works by mid-20th-century Quebec painters, including the VAG's first three Alfred Pellans. The gift was valued at "in excess of \$100,000" by Luke Rombout, the gallery's director at the time, who announced that this windfall was only the first instalment of five annual donations from the Longstaffe collection—a donation then conservatively valued at \$500,000.

In 1980, Longstaffe gave the gallery nearly 40 contemporary Canadian works (including three each by Jack Bush, Claude Breeze and Jean McEwen) plus a number of sculptures. Representing two-thirds of all donations to the gallery that year, these works were the basis for its highly acclaimed *Recent Acquisitions* show of the same year. Longstaffe's 1981 donation comprised international graphics valued at \$200,000: 71 pieces, including 12 Gene Davis silkscreens, 10 Richard Hamiltons and 17 David Hockneys. In 1982 his 70 donations included four Gordon Smiths, five Takao Tanabes and 17 Vasarely prints. Last year he contributed 14 Frank Stellas, three Christopher Pratts, six Roy Lichtenstein prints, three B.C. Binnings and three Jack Shadbolts, one of which was the 15-drawing *Hornby Suite*. Over the five years, Longstaffe's largesse accounted for 237 of the gallery's 407 acquisitions. His donation is now valued at \$1 million.

Longstaffe's must be the most public private collection in the country, and for a gallery whose acquisitions budget in 1980 amounted to a paltry \$20,000, the impact of such large, high-quality donations has been immense. In fact, so many VAG shows over the past several years have consisted almost entirely of Longstaffe pieces that the gallery's curators have decided to do the obvious thing and mount a J. Ron Longstaffe collection show, which will open January 12 and run to February 24. About two-thirds of the collection—258 pieces—will appear.

Longstaffe's achievement in upgrading the VAG's collection is all the more remarkable given that he is a self-made man. As executive vice-president of Canfor Corporation, he is the highest-ranking non-member of the Bentley and Prentice families in the firm they control. (His first wife was a Prentice—he is, in the words of a close observer of the Vancouver corporate scene, "the first son-in-law to survive a divorce. It attests to his business acumen.")

As such, he currently makes an estimated \$200,000 to \$250,000 a year—nothing close to the kind of money behind some comparable collections. In *The Acquisitors*, Peter Newman relates a story that illustrates how Longstaffe, whom Newman believes "ranks among Canada's most knowledgeable collectors," has supplemented his relatively limited financial resources with native wit. A

decade or so ago, Newman reports, Longstaffe accepted a bet with Peter Cundill, a prominent Vancouver investor, that he could do better with Cundill's \$5,000, buying art, than Cundill could do with the same amount from Longstaffe, invested in Credit Foncier shares. Newman makes it sound as if there was no contest. During the five years covered by the bet, Credit Foncier dropped \$30 a share, while the Picasso print Longstaffe bought for \$3,500 more than doubled in value (partly because of the artist's death in the interval—which Cundill condemned as "unfair leverage"). The payoff was dinner at Umberto's, one of Vancouver's toniest restaurants. Cundill, of course, picked up the \$600 bill—but then he also got to keep the Picasso.

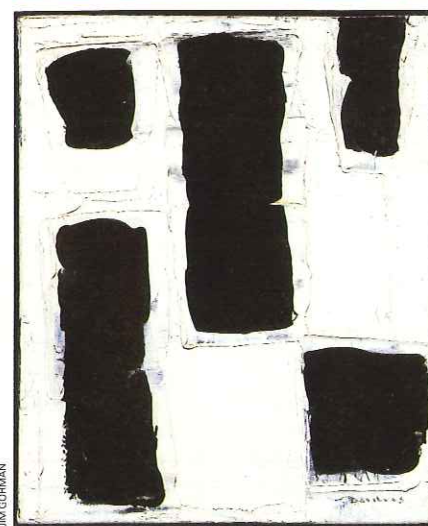
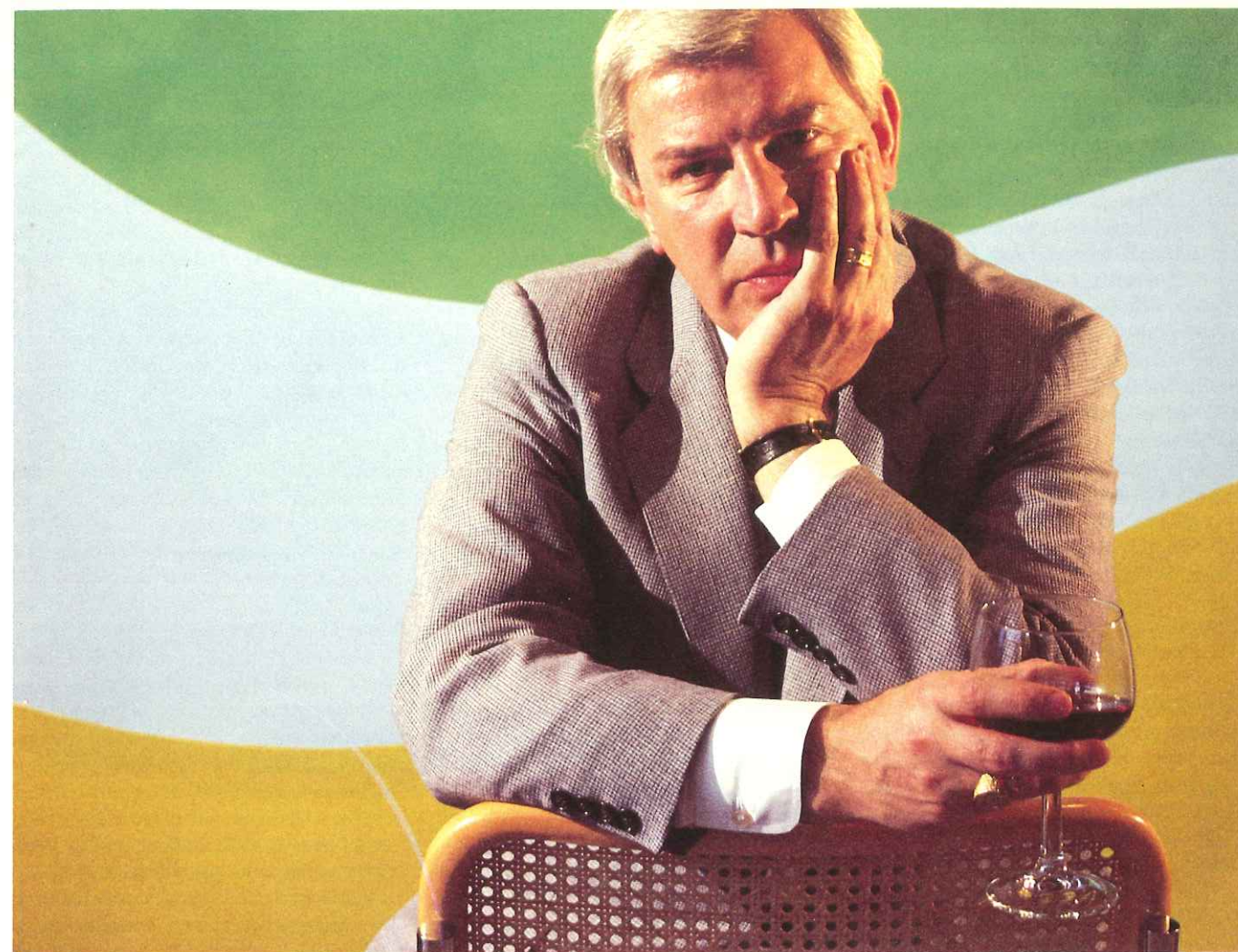
Few collectors are as intimately connected to one gallery—at least, a gallery not named after them—as Longstaffe is to the VAG. One third-floor gallery within the VAG's new quarters in Vancouver's old courthouse is named after him, but that honour seems slight when weighed against Longstaffe's contribution: the 237 pieces Longstaffe has given the VAG outright and the roughly 120 the gallery holds on extended loan represent 90 percent of his collection. Under the circumstances, it is perhaps only human to wonder what treasures he keeps for himself.

The painting that hangs over the living-room mantel of Longstaffe's silvering cedar eyrie atop the spine of Vancouver's exclusive Point Grey district—or did until the painting was shipped off to the VAG for inclusion in the upcoming show—is a prime late-period Paul-Emile Borduas entitled *Noir et Blanc*. Completed in 1958, two years before the artist's fatal heart attack, it is at first glance an edgy statement of desperation, a painting that draws a line and dares you to cross it.

"Most people can't relate to it," Longstaffe muses, looking into the Borduas. "People say, 'My kid could do that.' I say, 'If your kid does a painting of the same quality as that, I'll pay the same price I paid for that.'" Which was how much? He won't say. Longstaffe never talks money in relation to works of art, on the grounds that doing so brings up another question: is it worth that much? Instead, his long look of appraisal is an implicit invitation to a visitor to do the same.

Black on white or white on black, the Borduas is a masterpiece. "Tough," Longstaffe says, standing in front of it, peering straight into its black-on-white despair.

At that moment, near the end of a private showing of the fraction of his collection he keeps near at hand, he was emphasizing a point he had made a half-hour before—that as a self-taught collector, he has had to con-



Paul-Emile Borduas, *Noir et Blanc* (1958), oil on canvas, 61 x 50 cm. (24" x 19"). Collection: Mr. and Mrs. J.R. Longstaffe. Courtesy: Vancouver Art Gallery.

Ron Longstaffe has collected art for 30 years and has been, since 1979, the Vancouver Art Gallery's most generous donor. Among the few pieces that still hang in his Vancouver home are Jack Bush's *Sway #1* (top, behind Longstaffe) and Paul-Emile Borduas' *Noir et Blanc*. Longstaffe is particularly proud of the Borduas painting, one of the artist's last works. "Most people can't relate to it," he muses.

stantly confront himself and test the limits of his taste. Lounging on a sofa, a glass of wine to hand, the remnants of the Sunday *New York Times* at his feet and the art page beside him, he looked very much at home. He gestured towards a Guido Molinari hanging in the dining-room to make his point, but the Jack Bush, the Jean Paul Lemieux, the Robert Young and, especially, the Borduas—the four paintings closest to him in the living-room—said it in italics.

All four have that same immediate and compelling impact. Longstaffe would, in all likelihood, not have bought any of them when they were new. He was then buying more literally illustrative work. "You tend to buy work early on that is readily understandable," he says. "You find out that some of the early works don't stand up over time. You look for work that is tougher. I don't quite know what I mean by tougher—maybe work that makes you ask yourself questions about why you want it."

The wall-sized Jack Bush, *Sway #1* (1966), seems to flex in the reflected light from the spectacular window next to it. If the Bush isn't appearing to jump right off the wall, the 1969 Robert Young monochrome portrait of Young's great-grandparents entitled *Archie Young Down in*

Quebec glares with two intense pairs of eyes from the wall Longstaffe usually sits facing. Not that everything in the Longstaffe living-room shouts for attention. Next to the Borduas, Jean Paul Lemieux's *Nu Sur Fond Bleu* looks almost playful, while an exceptional Joe Fafard ceramic miniature of a workman at lunch, *The Carpenter*, is at first overlooked. "They're all strong works," Longstaffe acknowledges. "But once you live with them for six months you're more comfortable with them."

A month later, however, the walls were bare except for the outlines of the works sent to the gallery to be photographed for the January exhibition. Longstaffe says he buys only for his own satisfaction—but others see him as the VAG's patron saint.

Longstaffe came to British Columbia to attend university in 1954 primarily to put distance between himself and his father, Jack Roy Longstaffe, an electrical engineer who made his fortune manufacturing and importing radio components during World War II, and who had the political ill-fortune to lose to Toronto Conservative Donald Fleming during the great Liberal sweep of 1949. "I realized I could never

flower under him," Longstaffe says now. "I had to get away from his immediate and direct influence. He *was* an enormous influence on me, and I would use the expression love-hate to describe it. I knew I could benefit most from what I learned from him at arm's length."

One lasting legacy was his father's encouragement to begin collecting. From the time that Longstaffe and his brothers turned 16, they each received \$100 annually from their father to buy art. By the time Longstaffe arrived at the University of British Columbia, he had saved \$300. Fortuitously, he found himself in the midst of the city's vibrant early-'50s art and architecture scene which had been developing in the years since Jack Shadbolt, Gordon-Smith, the Bobaks and Arthur Erickson arrived home from the war. Longstaffe took his \$300 to Abraham Rogatnick and Alvin Balkind's pioneering New Design Gallery and bought himself a Joe Plaskett. ("I was in a fraternity—Alpha Delta—at the time, living in this little closet with a Joe Plaskett on the wall," Longstaffe remembers. "It was of an Australian girl living in Paris who had very striking eyes. It was good stuff. Today I look at Plaskett, but not seriously.")

In those days the Vancouver art scene coalesced around the late B.C. Binning, founder of the UBC fine arts department and a tireless campaigner for modern architecture and abstract art in a city still attuned to Tudor houses and Pre-Raphaelite reproductions. It was Bert Binning who invited the Los Angeles architect Richard Neutra to Vancouver and introduced him to Ron Thom and Arthur Erickson.

Binning was also an influence in Longstaffe's early collecting. While Longstaffe was at UBC (he graduated in 1958 with degrees in arts and law), Brock Hall, the student union building, burned down, and Binning suggested buying some new works to decorate the rebuilt structure. In 1955 Longstaffe persuaded his colleagues on the Alma Mater Society—UBC's student council—to collect 10 cents per student to buy paintings to accompany the lone E.J. Hughes left over from a similar scheme in 1949.

"We had \$1,000 to buy Canadian art. A thousand dollars went a long way then. Bert knew the artists," Longstaffe recalls, "so it was Goodridge Roberts, Jacques de Tonnancœur, stuff like that. The next term, '56, we got 15 cents. Through Bert we got an outstanding late-period Lawren Harris for less than a thousand...."

But the great *coup* came in 1958, when *Maclean's* magazine commissioned Binning, Smith, John Korner and six other British Columbians to do paintings for its B.C. Centennial issue, and Binning talked the editors into donating the originals to the student collection.

Later, in the early '70s, Longstaffe was the prime mover behind another UBC collection. "I spend part of my Saturdays looking around galleries, and one day I ran into Toni Onley," he recalls. "He told me the art school had got a donation of \$10,000—American—to buy works costing less than \$1,000 apiece. The artists had to be living and active, and the money had to be all spent in one year. I said, 'Toni, whatever you do, don't form a committee. Give it all to one person to spend.' And I forgot about the whole thing." But the school liked Longstaffe's suggestion, and offered him the job. Longstaffe's idea was to buy international graphics and Canadian prints and put them

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side by side. "And when the show was hung we put a Toni Onley etching next to the Picasso etching [bought for \$900, three weeks before Picasso died] and Toni wasn't blown away at all. He held his own very much. We put a Betty Goodwin next to, I think, an Oldenburg. Betty Goodwin held up very nicely. And we had a very good Eskimo print. The Canadians belonged. They deserved to be there."

"I started collecting about 25 years ago," Longstaffe told a meeting of the Young Presidents Organization in 1980, "and in those days I started off buying one painting a year. Within a short period, I was buying two paintings a year and then it rapidly increased to, say, four or five paintings a year. The more I got into it, the quicker the 'high' from my last purchase seemed to wear off and I was ready for another 'fix,' with the result that I now go through periods where I am buying a work of art every week or so; and on occasion I have even 'overdosed'—at least in financial terms—by buying five paintings in one day. I don't suggest to you that the process is rational, but I stand before you as a confirmed art junkie. I have never tried to kick my habit."

Part of the hold is that his collection is the only thing Longstaffe can do all by himself. "My work is fairly disciplined," he explains. "The joy of collecting has been that I'm not answerable to any committee or anyone else. You buy art because you want to own it and possess it and have it around you."

Doris Shadbolt, who was acting director

of the VAG the second year Longstaffe was president, says he is, "in the best sense, a compulsive collector. That is, you don't stop when you have all your walls hung. You keep on collecting. Eventually you have to put it in a warehouse. The VAG was Ron's warehouse. After a while, knowing your purchases are going to a gallery both gives a rationale to your collecting, and enhances the enjoyment and understanding of the art you're buying."

Longstaffe doesn't remember exactly who invited him to offer his name as candidate for the VAG in 1962. In any event, he wasn't elected to it until the following year. Not much status was involved. "In those days," he says, "there was a certain vacuum at the gallery." So much so that when he became president in 1966 the director at the time, Richard Simmins, thought that—at 32—he was probably the youngest president of a major gallery in North America.

Longstaffe first entrusted his collection to the VAG's safekeeping in 1969, when he was invited to London to become the first director of corporate planning for Britain's giant Reed International Group, a pulp and newspaper combine with links to Canfor. If Longstaffe's collection seems to lack coherence "in the curatorial sense," as he puts it, that is because it has been built in accordance with his developing taste, and shaped by such opportunities as his three years in England. He found the Robert Young portrait at a Cork Street gallery four blocks from where he was working. The kick of buying it before Elton John, an avid collector of Youngs, could get his hands on it, is just one among hundreds of stories about buying art that Longstaffe seems to enjoy almost as much as the works themselves.

With picture after picture he describes that first electric moment: for the Borduas abstract watercolour that hangs over the sky-lighted stairway at his house, "it was 1980 and I was in Toronto for the *Financial Post* seminar on collecting. When I saw it, it gave me the gimmes. I was determined to be a good boy and not buy anything," but Gallery Moos was right across the street from his hotel, "so I went to see Walter Moos and when I came back I had this."

For Longstaffe, the organization man, a visit to an artist's studio, especially in the course of a business trip, represents an escape. Christopher and Mary Pratt give Longstaffe previews whenever he's in the Maritimes. Standing before a Mary Pratt still-life watercolour in his main hallway, he rhapsodizes about the exact instant last year when Mary opened her drawer of just-finished watercolours and he first laid eyes on the wonderful effect of transparency she was able to achieve in rendering the glass vase filled with flowers. He stands for minutes on end in front of her offhandedly



Paterson Ewen, *Flag Effect* (1974), acrylic on gouged plywood, 228 x 244 cm. (90" x 96"). Collection: Mr. and Mrs. J.R. Longstaffe.

Longstaffe is known as an ambitious collector. Last year he bought Paterson Ewen's *Flag Effect* from Toronto dealer Carmen Lamanna. "He told me it wasn't for sale," Longstaffe remembers. "That was probably a mistake."

erotic *Girl in My Dressing Gown*, which he first saw as a slide at the Aggregation Gallery in 1981. "I said, 'I want that. Let me know when it does come in.' It was two years before I had it in my home. It was scheduled to appear in shows for two years. Same with the Joe Fafard downstairs. I always say yes. What else *can* you say?"

Lorna Farrel-Ward, who is curating the Longstaffe collection show, had no idea until recently what it would look like. This September, facing what appeared to be an impossible deadline to make her selections, she glanced at the foot-and-a-half-long card-file drawer itemizing the collection, sighed, and said: "It's certainly not a collection about which you can say, 'This is what it is.' And, in a sense, he himself doesn't know what the exhibition will look like. He's quite interested himself in seeing it all together."

Two months later, Farrel-Ward has found a pattern to Longstaffe's collecting. In addition to the large concentrations of Canadian works bought during the late '60s and late '70s, she sees a process, early on, of following trends: the British art scene, the New York printmakers, the late-'60s B.C. artists of

whom many, such as Onley and Young, had roots in England. During the '70s Longstaffe developed his interest in Quebec artists, and it is these acquisitions, Farrel-Ward thinks, which have made the biggest impact on the gallery's collection. More recently, she observes, he has been purchasing with an eye to "filling historical gaps in his collection, for example, in his representation of French-Canadian artists, and he is starting to look at smaller works, such as drawings." Longstaffe has bought three large Jack Bush works since 1979, she notes, "so that has really expanded the image of Bush that we could show in the gallery."

It seems that what Longstaffe has been buying has been exactly what the gallery has needed. Can that be an accident? "Certainly the VAG has been weak in its permanent collection," Longstaffe says, choosing his words carefully, "as have most Canadian art galleries. And that *has* been a consideration."

"Having said that, I have never tried to be an underground curator for the VAG. People at the art gallery have pointed out to me artists or works they thought I should pay attention to. I used to take Luke with me for a second opinion, but only after I'd become interested in [a work] myself. But I've never consciously gone and bought a painting saying to myself, 'The art gallery should own it.' In the end it has to be me."

But many suspect that with extraordinary generosity comes extraordinary power—in the affairs of what is, after all, a public insti-

tution. Furthermore, it is widely assumed that anyone who had a direct hand in raising \$100,000 toward the gallery's move to new quarters, as Longstaffe did, would in turn receive some long-term dividends—in influence if nothing else. Longstaffe obliquely addressed this question in *Vancouver Art and Artists, 1931 to 1983*, the VAG's catalogue of its first show in the new premises, when he stated, "Businessmen have no interest in dictating museum policy."

Yet questions about Longstaffe's influence have arisen once again in conjunction with the VAG's search for a new director [see page 6]. Art Perry, art critic for the *Vancouver Province*, is one of those who perceive Longstaffe's hands in the murky background of recent gallery politics. As Perry puts it: "By giving so much to the gallery, how much say does he get in the selection of a new director? This is something you can only guess at, but I would speculate that he had an extreme input into the search. Terry Fenton was an ideal choice in terms of the kind of art that Longstaffe deals with."

Fenton, director of the Edmonton Art Gallery, was initially the top candidate for the VAG directorship job. And it was Longstaffe who, in a move running counter to his expressed hands-off position, convened six Vancouver artists—Toni Onley, Gordon Smith, Gathie Falk, Alan Wood, Robert Young and Richard Prince—to review Fenton's candidacy. But if, as Perry suggests, Longstaffe and Fenton have similar tastes, the outcome of this meeting—the artists unanimously rejected Fenton—shows that, in public at least, Longstaffe remains objective. (All Longstaffe will say about this episode is that he did convene the meeting, and that he did so out of the same concern for the artists' viewpoint that he shows in trying to make sure their work stays visible. Other than that, he says that anyone who wants to have genuine influence within an institution has to avoid becoming an advocate.)

If it seems possible that, without really trying to, Ron Longstaffe has built an art collection that happens to be what the gallery would choose if it had his income to spend on paintings, it might also be that he only does what is absolutely required of a member of its board. It may be that the same sense of responsibility that has put him so in tune with the gallery's curatorial needs also makes him its dispassionate servant behind the scenes.

If this is the case, then perhaps it is no surprise that Longstaffe, who has amassed one of the largest private art collections in Canada, is currently living in a house with almost bare walls. After all, as he would put it, what choice does he have?

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Sean Rossiter is a freelance writer living in Vancouver.