ART'S FIRST LADY

As the NGC's new director, Dr. Shirley Thomson inherits a difficult job and a troubled institution

By PETER DAY

Even in the best of times, the director's job at the National Gallery of Canada has not been easy. The task has frustrated — if not overwhelmed — many previous directors. In the last seven years, four different people have filled the post. "It's like walking on eggs," Alan Jarvis used to say. He held the position from 1955 until 1959, when he resigned after suffering months of criticism by the newly elected Diefenbaker government for his ambitious acquisitions policy. Many say he was forced to quit by the prime minister, who at one point insisted on comparing the cost of a Pieter Bruegel painting Jarvis wanted for the gallery with the cost of cattle and bushels of wheat.

The Gallery relies totally on the federal government for its funding and as a result, the director has always needed to be highly political. The director must also be an administrator, capable of leading and managing a staff of over 240, while at the same time be a diplomat, adept at public relations. The director must almost certainly be a Canadian citizen, be bilingual and have won the respect of his or her colleagues at the Gallery and other institutions across the country and around the world.

Since 1968, the National Museums of Canada Corporation has managed Ottawa's major national museums, including the National Gallery and the museums of Civilization (formerly the Museum of Man), Natural Science and Science and Technology. This arrangement was intended to facilitate operations, but the directors of the institutions soon began to chafe under the yoke, let alone the weight of paperwork, of the NMC. The National Gallery wanted out.

In 1986, to the great relief of the Gallery's staff, a federal task force recommended just that — independence from the NMC. After almost a year of suspense and heavy politicking, the federal government finally endorsed the recommendation, with April, 1989 slated as the date of devolution. This decision removed a major irritant from the life of the Gallery's director and staff, but their independent status will undoubtedly pose a whole new set of challenges and problems.

Another long-standing complaint that frustrated former directors was the need for an appropriate permanent facility. The Gallery now has its own building, of course, but this will inevitably generate its share not only of prestige but also of uncertainty. Will the Gallery in fact draw people in? Is the building actually "too posh," as writer and editor Robert Fulford has already suggested, too imposing and intimidating? Despite these fears (which some of the staff privately share), the Gallery is betting heavily on the new premises. The hope is that both the Gallery itself and its spectacular site will be big draws, although sceptics — and even some Gallery studies — have pointed out that the place is difficult to get to, lacks adequate parking facilities and is not on existing pedestrian and tourist routes. Unlike the previous downtown Elgin Street location, the Gallery will no longer be able to rely on a lunchtime crowd to boost attendance figures.

In August of last year, after a year-and-a-half-long search, 58-year-old Shirley Thomson was appointed director of the National Gallery of Canada. Thomson has a Ph.D. in art history from McGill and was formerly secretary general of the little-known, low-profile Canadian Commission for UNESCO, an agency of the Canada Council. Prior to that she had served for four years as director of the McCord Museum, a small Montreal institution specializing in Canadian social history.

Thomson is the eighth permanent director in the NGC's 108-year

PHOTO BY RICHARD DESMARAIS

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history. She inherits a difficult job, an untried building and an institution not only in transition but also in all kinds of trouble. Over the last decade the Gallery has been rudderless, staff morale has been low and annual attendance figures have tumbled dramatically, from 452,244 in 1973 to 280,366 in 1979, down to 242,258 in 1985. This slump comes at a time when other major institutions across Canada have been pulling in crowds in ever-increasing numbers. The Art Gallery of Ontario, for example, drew over 700,000 for its 1979 exhibition of the *Treasures of Tutankhamun* and the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts had 517,000 people come to see its 1985 Picasso show. By contrast, the National Gallery has become almost invisible, no longer relevant to contemporary art activities locally in Ottawa, regionally in the Montreal-Ottawa-Toronto area, nationally or internationally.

Gone are the days when the Gallery was an active player in the Canadian art scene, the days when it was a vigorous champion of Emily Carr and the Group of Seven, the days in the '60s and early '70s when Pierre Théberge mounted a series of important group and retrospective exhibitions, including solo shows by Joyce Wieland, Greg Curnoe and Guido Molinari. Many of these shows travelled to institutions across the country, accompanied by substantial catalogues that in some cases are still the only major publications on the artists.

Théberge is no longer with the National Gallery and, since assuming her job in 1983, Diana Nemiroff, and Jessica Bradley, her former colleague in the contemporary section of the Gallery, have been virtually invisible. Apart from mounting Canada's participation at the Venice Biennale (Bradley in 1984, Nemiroff in 1986), their single major contemporary Canadian exhibition/publication has been the survey exhibition *Songs of Experience* in 1986, the first such survey the Gallery had undertaken in six years.

Admittedly times have changed, with regional galleries becoming increasingly important and occupying the role the NGC once had all to itself, but the performance of other NGC departments is just as underpowered. Unlike Katharine Lochnan, curator of prints and drawings at the Art Gallery of Ontario and the organizer of recent large-scale exhibitions on Turner, Alexander and John Cozens and Whistler, Rosemarie Tovell, the National Gallery's assistant curator of Canadian prints and drawings, has kept a very low profile since her 1980 exhibition and publication on the graphic work of David Milne. Patricia Ainslie of Calgary's Glenbow Museum has been far more active in the field of historic Canadian printmaking, with an almost annual succession of exhibitions and catalogues. Tovell's boss, Charles Hill, the National Gallery's curator of Canadian art, has had an even lower public profile since his pioneer 1975 exhibition and publication *Canadian Painting in the Thirties*.

Compare this with the track record of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, which has a staff less than half the size and an annual operating budget less than a third the size of the National Gallery's but has still managed to mount major annual travelling exhibitions, including *De Stijl* (1982), *Hockney Paints the Stage* (1983), *The 20th-Century Poster: Design of the Avant-Garde* (1984), *Tokyo: Form and Spirit* (1987), and *The Architecture of Frank Gehry* (1987). All these critically acclaimed shows have been accompanied by book-length publications. So what have the curators been doing at the National Gallery of Canada? It is a question people have been asking for almost a decade, without getting a really convincing answer.

It seems the curators have been obsessed, almost to the point of paralysis, with the new building and their move into it. During the last couple of years of this process, all loans to other institutions were discontinued, at the same time that the gallery was closed to the public and not showing the works. Such actions have not endeared the Gallery to other institutions across the country.

Staff have also apparently been occupied with the catalogue of the National Gallery's collection. For over 10 years, the curators have been consumed with work on this scholarly four-volume set. The first volume of European and American painting, sculpture and decorative art from 1300 to 1800 appeared late last year. The catalogue of the Canadian collection is due to be published at the time of the opening of the new Gallery and the final volume is slated for 1994.

The new director, Shirley Thomson, clearly intends to encourage such research. She sees it as part of the Gallery's role. "I am very concerned that the research capacity of the National Gallery, and the difficult process of synthesizing that research, isn't lost because the Gallery becomes so involved in instant communications and providing instant gratification. It is important that that research element of the National Gallery is maintained — the end of years of research is not necessarily a popular product, but it is essential if we are to look at ourselves as a civilizing institution." Thomson sees scholarship and research taking "the form of popularization through the education department. To teach people how to look is a very strong and important role that we have to play."

As to her own specific role, Thomson sees herself as a synthesist of the disparate components of the Gallery. "I also think that the director acts as a facilitator," she says. "Unless the conditions are there for the curators to make exhibition proposals, and assume that those proposals have some hope of being realized, then their research is not translated into public wealth such as exhibitions, education programs and pleasure in art." Thomson is also being practical. She admits that her immediate priorities are the move to the new, permanent home. "We need to stabilize ourselves in the new building, then we must start to make full use of the building's potential."

In addition, she has to pilot the Gallery through its period of devolution from the National Museums of Canada. To date, neither the members of the Board of Trustees of the National Museums of Canada nor the existing Advisory Committee of the National Gallery has been required to fund-raise for the National Gallery. After April of next year, the National Gallery will have its own board of trustees. What does Thomson see as the role of this future board? "The board will deal with policy and the image of the National Gallery as a national institution in all areas of the country," says Thomson. It is often said that in the United States, the role of a board member of a cultural institution is "To give it, get it or get out." In other words, the board member should give money or works to the institution, get others to do so or get off the board. Thomson clearly feels that her board will have important duties. "There is a lot of strategy to be employed in Ottawa to make sure that the mandate of the National Gallery is recognized as seriously as, for instance, Environment Canada." She adds that traditionally, arts and culture have not exactly preoccupied the government of the day. "Part of the future board's role, under an autonomous agency, is to ensure that the mandate and responsibilities of the National Gallery are apparent to the government."

The question of the acquisition of works for the Gallery's collection is a complex one. The Gallery's acquisition fund has remained the same since 1972. It stands at $1.5 million Canadian, in an era when even minor works by European masters regularly top $1 million and often considerably more. Since November 11, 1987, when a van Gogh painting fetched $53.9 million US at a Sotheby's auction, the sky's the limit for prices of major works of art. "There is no way that the National Gallery could compete in that arena," says Thomson. "I do not think we should talk just about the actual object in the museum. Ideas have no barriers. The world is full of planeloads of people going around to various museums. In terms of looking at great works, Canadians have access to the whole New York, Washington, Baltimore corridor. The world, or at least the western hemisphere, is travelling."

Many Canadians who cannot afford international travel will have to content themselves with seeing the National Gallery's own collection. However, the Gallery's holdings of international works pale in comparison with those of national galleries around the world (the Louvre, the National Gallery in London or Washington) or, for that matter, in the major institutions across North America. Admittedly, the National Gallery of Canada does have the best collection, and the largest permanent installation, of historic Canadian art in the world, but shackled by a paltry acquisition budget, and apparently with no burning ambition on Thomson's part to change that situation, the Gallery will in the future have to rely heavily on donations from private collections. In the past, some important collections, including the Hirshhorn collection now in Washington, D.C., have got away from Canada. Thomson believes that the Cultural Property Export & Import Act, which provides checks to the export of culturally important objects, will help impede works leaving the country and as a result enrich collections across Canada.

The time and attention of the Gallery staff have also been consumed by the much-heralded Degas retrospective. This massive exhibition has been jointly mounted by the National Gallery, the Réunion des musées nationaux of France and The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. It will run all summer long in Ottawa, and is being sponsored by United Technologies Corporation, an arms and aircraft-engine manufacturer. This sponsorship is clearly a touchy subject for the new director. "We had nothing to do with that," she asserts. "That was a negotiation with The Metropolitan Museum in New York, signed some three years ago, and we are living with that....That kind of contractual arrangement you have to be with from the beginning, so I can't criticize it at all." Thomson professes to have no problems in principle with the National Gallery having to resort to private sponsorship to put on its shows. "But it shouldn't be a blind alliance," says Thomson. "There are certain standards that the National Gallery must always maintain." Whatever Thomson's explanation for the deal with United Technologies, there is no doubt that the Gallery is off to a questionable start with its first private sponsor.

What follows the Degas blockbuster? "The Ivan Eyre retrospective," offers the new director. When it is pointed out that the Winnipeg Art Gallery is organizing this travelling exhibition and the National Gallery is just one of the many institutions hosting the show, Thomson can only offer one exhibition that the National Gallery itself is organizing between now and spring 1989. That is an exhibition of master drawings, put together from the NGC collection and organized in co-operation with the National Gallery of Art in Washington. This exhibition will open at the Vancouver Art Gallery, then travel to Ottawa.

The Gallery also has long-term plans for a biennial or triennial exhibition of contemporary art, to be organized in collaboration with other public institutions across the country. If the show and collaboration take place (plans are still unconfirmed and negotiations under way with a high-profile sponsor), this will be a move in the right direction to reassert some sort of National Gallery presence, and relevance, in the contemporary art of the country.

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