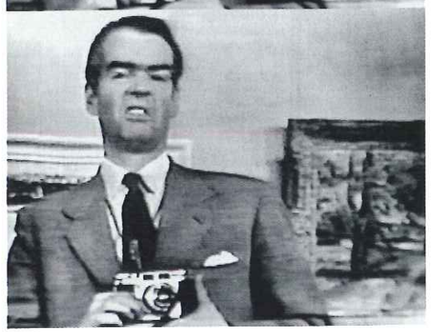
In the fifties, Alan Jarvis returned from London to head the National Gallery. Douglas Ord reports on a meteoric career that then came crashing down to earth

The Best Looking Man



ABOVE: Stills from "The Things We See" 1957
Courtesy: National Gallery of Canada

OPPOSITE: Portrait of Alan Jarvis by J. Karsh
Courtesy: National Gallery of Canada

In the summer of 1957, CBC television broadcast a thirteen-part series called "The Things We See." Filmed in black and white, it was hosted by Alan Jarvis, who two years earlier had become Director of the National Gallery. Jarvis would later be remembered by Sir Kenneth Clark as "the best looking man I've ever seen." And on camera, at forty-two, he did suggest Gregory Peck, with the addition of a slight English accent and a wide knowledge of art and design. Jarvis's goal was to acquaint his Canadian audience with the difference between "just looking around and really seeing." Informing this goal was an optimistic hedonism typical of a decade of new beginnings, after the global catastrophes of the thirties and forties. "The role of the artist is not so much to uplift us," he said in the final episode, "as to give us the joy of seeing our world with fresh eyes. Learning to see the way artists see does really give one an enormous amount of fun."

This linkage between art and fun suggests both Jarvis's desire to broaden the audience and his instinctive grasp of television's fondness for sound bites. The period's love affair with gadgets was put to similar service in his reference to artists as "people who've got a kind of built-in viewfinder." Yet, notwithstanding this enthusiasm for machines, some of the series' most revealing moments were a result of unedited blunders.

Holding up a camera in the first episode, Jarvis offers an analogy to the visual framing done by artists. "When you look through this viewfinder, you're making a picture," he says. "We've all had the experience of doing this either well or badly. You know the kind of amateur snapshot that cuts the top off of somebody's head. You lose the whole point of the picture you thought you were taking." As Jarvis says the word "amateur," his

TOP: Governor General Vincent Massey
Courtesy: National Archives of Canada

ABOVE: Lorne Building, 1960
Courtesy: National Gallery of Canada

OPPOSITE: Portrait of Kenneth Clark,
Courtesy: National Gallery of Canada

face, for a fraction of a second, changes. The eyebrows knit and his mouth twists into a grimace of contempt.

This moment might be of little consequence, did it not provide a clue to the tragedy of Alan Jarvis's directorship of the National Gallery. Jarvis's public persona was charismatic; he was both intelligent and internationally inclined. Nevertheless there was a private condescension which made him bitter enemies when it slipped out. These enemies would catch up with him in September 1959, when the Diefenbaker government demanded his resignation after he had allegedly bungled negotiations for some early renaissance paintings. Psychologically shattered, Jarvis turned to drink. Thirteen years later he would die alone in his Toronto room, of cirrhosis of the liver, heart failure and arthritis.

Since then, Jarvis the man—apart from a CBC radio documentary in 1975 by Elspeth Chisholm—has been largely forgotten. The TV series perhaps anticipated this neglect. Despite Jarvis's charisma, "The Things We See" was not widely seen. The series ran from June to September, then disappeared. Only a single episode was deposited with the National Archives.

In 1994, however, eleven episodes were found in the vaults of the National Gallery during cleaning. They open a window on a period that left a web of unresolved issues for art, democratic politics and the role of the National Gallery in Canada. They also provide a graphic springboard toward a reconsideration of Jarvis's legacy

As National Gallery Director, Jarvis was one of the most meteoric figures ever to brighten the Canadian art scene. Yet his tenure has gone without analysis. He was also transformed into a flattened fictional character by Robertson Davies in *What's Bred in the Bone*. In the novel—whose protagonist is based on Jarvis's sometime lover, the art patron Douglas Duncan—the "lighthearted" Aylwin Ross appears near the end. Ross, like Jarvis, is director of the National Gallery and, in a situation strikingly similar to Jarvis's, commits suicide after being forced to resign. But was Jarvis—as Davies hints—someone who "knew only that he often got what he wanted by enchanting those whose lives had been poor in enchantment..."? Or were his own complexity, ambivalence and fall a tragically focused mirror of the tensions that always lurk when art and the nation state enter into marriage?

In 1955 the National Gallery of Canada was located in the fortress-like Victoria Memorial Museum at the foot of Ottawa's Metcalfe Street, where it had been since 1911. Its first director, Eric Brown, had been both an Englishman and a Christian Scientist, and during his long tenure, from 1910 to 1939, the Gallery bought no works that he considered "degenerate." In practice this meant anything more "radical" than Monet—no Cézanne, van Gogh, Gauguin, Picasso or Matisse. These artists, Brown felt, distorted "nature's wonderland of beauty," which was the business of art to reveal, and which he believed *was* revealed in the landscape paintings of the Group of Seven. The agenda largely held under Brown's successor, H.O. McCurry, who had come to the Gallery in 1919 to do the accounts, and who—as a fellow Christian Scientist—stayed on as Brown's lieutenant. McCurry did eventually acquire the modernist masters Brown spurned, and even—through his assistants Robert H. Hubbard and Donald Buchanan—a Borduas abstraction. By his retirement in 1954, though, *The New York Times* could still describe the National Gallery as "tomb-like": "crusty, dark and forbidding."

McCurry's retirement gave the gallery's board of trustees a chance to break with the past, and the time seemed right. The early fifties saw rapid development in Canadian cultural affairs. In 1951, the government of Louis St-Laurent accepted a Royal Commission report headed by Vincent Massey. Best known for its recommendation—implemented in 1957—that Canada establish an Arts Council modeled after Britain's, the Commission had a special relationship with the National Gallery. Massey had sat on its Board of Trustees since 1925. In its report, the Commission urged a larger staff and budget, more independence and a new building. Then, in 1954, as Governor-General, Massey proved just as influential in finding a Director. During World War II he had been Canadian High Commissioner to London. There he had chaired the Board of Britain's National Gallery and worked

It was Clark's opinion that there was only one man "brilliant" enough to become the Director of Canada's National Gallery

with the Gallery's Director, Kenneth Clark, who, in 1970, narrated his own television series, "Civilization." It was Clark's opinion that there was only one man "brilliant" enough to become the Director of Canada's National Gallery—Alan Jarvis.

Born in Brantford, Ontario, Jarvis had attended the University of Toronto and gone to Oxford in 1938 as a Rhodes Scholar. When nominated for the directorship, he was living in London, and had been for fourteen years. The glamour he brought to Ottawa was described by Peter Newman in a 1958 *Maclean's* article. Jarvis, Newman wrote, "has been a fashionable sculptor, a personnel executive in the aircraft industry, a film producer, a best-selling writer, the dean of a slum settlement house, and an international *bon vivant*. He has dined alone in candlelight with Greta Garbo, played croquet with Noel Coward, danced with Gene Tierney, sipped tea with Somerset Maugham."

Jarvis's personality was clearly compelling. The Minister responsible for his appointment, Jack Pickersgill, remembered that "the moment I saw Alan Jarvis and talked to him, I said to myself this man may not be able to administer anything—and I later came to the conclusion that he couldn't. But he is a real charmer, he really knows what a National Gallery can be about, he's got a great capacity to appeal to all kinds of people."

Nevertheless there were wrinkles in Jarvis's past that might have suggested limits to this "great capacity." He lived away from Canada for more than a decade, picking up an accent that retained more than a little of imperial Britain. His time in England also involved a career rupture that suggested instability. Newman did not emphasize a chronology of Jarvis's background, but the role he was playing when offered the Gallery job was "dean of a slum settlement house." This role had a sectarian sub-

With such comments Jarvis laid claim to a capacity to distinguish between the "empty" and the "good"

text, to which Newman did allude: "Few of his London cocktail-party confidants realized that Jarvis was at this time undergoing a religious conversion. Discussions with the Rev. Mervyn Stockwood...changed his lukewarm atheism into a doctrinaire faith in high Anglicanism. In June 1951 he suddenly severed his film connections, gave his valet notice, and moved out of his plush west-end apartment into a whitewashed flat in a Chelsea barracks,...Jarvis spent the next five years as head of Oxford House, a drab three-story settlement house in Bethnal Green, an East London slum, at a salary of five hundred pounds a year."

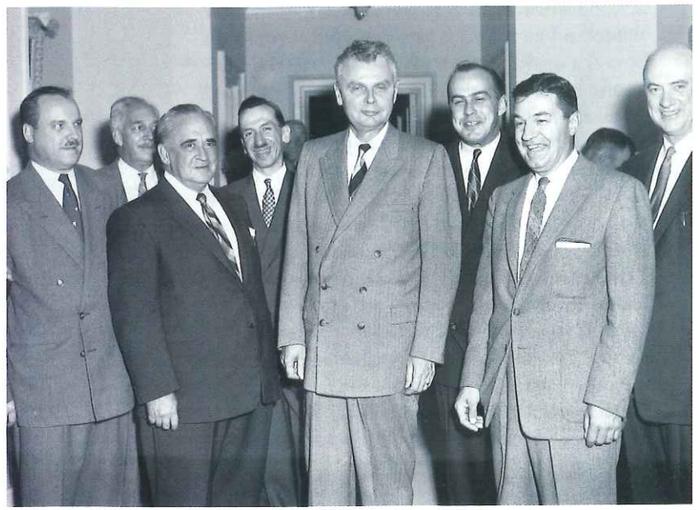
In fact, Jarvis did not exclusively spend those five years as head of Oxford House. Rather, in May 1955, he underwent what he told Newman was his "coronation," as director of a National Gallery in a country he had visited just once a year for the past decade and a half. There is no evidence that Jarvis saw his appointment as an extension of the spiritual calling that led him to the settlement house in 1951. Instead it seemed to offer some of the glamour for which he had been known in London during the nineteen-forties.

Nevertheless, the zeal carried over. Within months, Jarvis began to criss-cross the country, giving a speech titled "Is Art Necessary?" The title played on a pun made by Kenneth Clark about James Thurber and E.B. White's book, *Is Sex Necessary?* Clark had said that their quip about sex, that it should be faced fearlessly and frequently, applied to art. Jarvis also deemed himself "the Billy Graham of Canadian Art" as he travelled. His repertoire of gem-like comments was meant to charm his listeners, yet challenge their assumptions on art.

The role was timely. The mid-fifties was a period in which artists were repudiating local traditions and responding to the dynamism of American abstract painting. The trend made people nervous. It lacked grounding in transcendent values and national distinctiveness, and also in established standards of representation. But Jarvis insisted that modernist abstraction was important. "Artists are becoming less and less concerned with merely depicting photographic scenes," he told audiences. "They are using their new patterns and techniques to show us themselves and their own impressions...I can understand what they are saying because I have exposed my eyes to these new images. To me it's a familiar language. But I think it's extremely rude for some people to say it's all nonsense when they haven't taken the time to understand."

But Jarvis also played populist, with concessions to the layman's view. "There are a lot of pseudo-Borduas just as there have been many pseudo-Picassos," he said. "They are extremely empty and boring and I don't blame the public when it objects to this sort of thing...With a good deal of modern painting it is time someone said the emperor is not wearing any clothes...It puts me in an embarrassing position. There one is, defending abstract art as such whereas all one wants to do is defend the few good abstract artists."

With such comments Jarvis laid claim to a capacity to distinguish between the "empty" and the "good." He was cultivating a public that could count on his own "eye for quality." It was a cultivation that seemed at times to shade into invention. "Only honest art forms will be tolerated by the Canadian public," he declared in an interview with *Saturday Night* magazine in 1956.



"The time is long past to plead 'Canada is a young country.' "

But was Jarvis's notion of "honest art forms" what the Canadian public had in mind when they thought of art? In saying what the public did not want, Jarvis seemed to mock the school that had become most identified with Canadian art. "In the wake of the Group of Seven," he said, "we had quite a spell of the spurious. To be frivolous, a pine tree somewhere was vital to a Canadian painting. That period is done with now." The pine tree was Tom Thomson's *The Jack Pine*, the inspirational icon for the Group of Seven, painted the year the artist drowned, in 1917, and purchased by Brown for the National Gallery the next year. As though to emphasize his point, Jarvis closed the Group of Seven room in the Gallery to allow for office space. Relying on what he called the "mature taste" he had cultivated in London, and on his belief that "quality is a relatively constant factor," he looked back to Europe. "European art is necessary as a rule stick to guide Canadian artists," he said. "Canadian art must be judged by the same rigorous standards as set on the world at large."

Jarvis's talks and interviews were peppered with such pronouncements. The self-assurance with which he made them, however, disguised the extent to which his mouth was outrunning his mind. The "rule stick"—if rule stick there was in the nineteen-fifties—was no longer provided by Europe, but the United States. Equally misleading was Jarvis's claim for "rigorous standards," when aesthetic value had become problematical, especially in regard to the emergent art taking its cues from New York. Exploration of these standards was also hampered because Jarvis was bound by a National Gallery policy—reaffirmed by the Trustees in May 1956—not to buy contemporary American art at all.

ABOVE: **Paul-Émile Borduas**
***Nature's Parachutes* 1947**
Oil on canvas 81.8 x 109.7 cm
Courtesy: National Gallery of Canada

OPPOSITE: **John Diefenbaker and his cabinet**
Courtesy: National Archives of Canada

Jarvis's flamboyance then hid a variety of inconsistencies, both his own and the Gallery's. Nor were they the only ones that could be glossed over as long as he was moving among relatively unsophisticated audiences with the same speech. Back in Ottawa after his tour he gave an interview to *Weekend Magazine*, unleashing impressions evidently kept at bay by his prepared text and his genial persona. Here was the verbal equivalent of his grimace on TV. He sounded stratospheric, no longer the populist or the conciliator. "Saint John," he declared, "is probably one of the silliest cities in the world." Saskatchewan's new Provincial Museum "was the ugliest creation I have ever laid eyes on—a modern pomposity. It is a contemporary mockery of what was fatuous enough when they built the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts." There was a "general poverty in the Maritimes of social and cultural life." And the arts in Montreal and Toronto were in thrall to "social affectation."

Jarvis's most extreme comment, however, was reserved for "amateurs": in this case, "liberated housewives" who aspired to paint. "They are doing tiny, piddling, fiddling little things," he said. "They are not really painting. They are doing needlepoint. One should charitably say to them, 'Look, stop it. Go back to your needlepoint or relax and play bridge.' "

The comments prompted stunned and largely negative editorials across the country. They also did a disservice to Jarvis's good efforts at the Gallery, where he was creating a congenial working environment for an expanding staff and enlarging the Gallery's loan program. He was also beginning to build collections of European modernism and sculpture, areas that had been neglected in the past. With an eye to Canada's international profile, he arranged for the construction of a permanent pavilion for the Venice Biennale. And, with the Federal Government and the City of Ottawa failing to agree on a site for a permanent National Gallery, he was working through plans to move the Gallery to an office building. He handled this inherited situation with aplomb, insisting on adaptations that would make the building optimally suited for the public viewing of art.

Nevertheless, the pronouncements continued. Jarvis could not help, he said, "but feel depressed when flying over a city like Toronto." Ottawa, too, was beginning to "ooze out" across the landscape, in a sprawling suburban "mess" of television masts.

The irony in Jarvis's confidence in his "mature taste"—which he believed enabled him to recognize quality—was that it let him down badly in the major crisis of his career. In the early fifties, his predecessor, McCurry, had begun to buy paintings from the Prince of Liechtenstein, whose collection dated from the sixteenth century and was considered one of the best-authenticated in the world. The twentieth century had not been good to the Liechtensteins, and the Prince, to raise money, was obliged to sell off some paintings. When Jarvis became director, the Gallery had negotiated purchase of two lots from the collection, eight paintings in all, by Rembrandt, Filippino Lippi, Hans Memling, and other less known painters, for $640,000. Jarvis himself wrapped up a third $885,000 transaction, involving paintings by Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, Peter Paul Rubens and Simone Martini. The funds had been negotiated by McCurry from a Liberal Cabinet that was willing—if not eager—to take advantage of the opportunity.

Undoubtedly the aesthetic merits of the Liechtenstein paint-

ings surpassed the "good things without great names" that Eric Brown, in the nineteen-twenties, said purchases had to be on a limited budget. Jarvis, however, got caught in a trap that closed from several sides. In 1957, he alluded to his ambitions for the Gallery in a speech that verged on hubris. Of the Gallery, he said: "We are very rich and therefore we are not only the most generous patron of Canadian painting but we are the most powerful." Of the Gallery's relationship to Parliament, he said: "I can go to the government, as I did last spring, and say that I want $885,000 with which to buy four pictures, all quite small ones too, and get it through the House of Commons." And of his own stature, he declared: "I am one of the most envied gallery directors in the whole world. When I go to conventions in Venice, or Switzerland, or Washington, I am looked upon with tremendous envy."

His boastfulness and his provocations—and such countercharges as the label "artistic ignoramus," given him by the Mayor of Halifax—might have counted for little had the Liberals stayed in power. In 1957, however, the Conservatives, under Saskatchewan's John Diefenbaker, formed a minority Government, and the next year, one with a large majority. The Tory victory was to some extent a reaction against the accelerated pace of the nineteen-fifties. Diefenbaker's caucus—many of them, like their leader, from rural Canada—had little use for Jarvis's urbane wit, his rumoured homosexuality, and his policy of buying "the best" for the Gallery, regardless of whether or not it was Canadian. While in Opposition, Diefenbaker had subsumed art within his Canada-first policy. "With all due regard to the benefits that flow from viewing art for art's sake and pictures that are painted outside our country," he said, "I feel that first and foremost the national gallery in the capital city should be one to encourage, develop and expand Canadian art."

Jarvis, meanwhile, in his eagerness to leave the stamp of his judgment on the Gallery's old masters, chose to ignore the political climate. He had decided to look beyond the Liechtenstein collection to make a European purchase. In 1957, he was courted by Dr. Hans Schaeffer of New York, on behalf of Baron Gerhard von Pölnitz of Bavaria, who owned a "truly great and magnificent painting" by Pieter Brueghel the Elder, "which only came to light recently." *Landscape with Christ Appearing to the Apostles* was presented as the earliest Brueghel to bear a dated signature. That its provenance was unknown for the first century after it was painted, between 1553 and 1679, did not seem to trouble Jarvis. Nor did the scholarly comment questioning whether Brueghel could have painted the figures. Jarvis had often spoken of the difficulty of prying "quality" paintings out of tourism-conscious European countries. Most Brueghels were in state collections, and the Gallery was weak in sixteenth-century Dutch and Flemish painting. Moreover, in the course of the correspondence, Schaeffer's client seemed to have another buyer waiting.

At the same time, Jarvis was negotiating for another painting from the Liechtenstein collection, a *Virgin of the Annunciation* by the fourteenth-century Italian monk Lorenzo Monaco. He believed $400,000 remained from a special purchase fund set up for the Liechtenstein paintings by the Liberals. The record remains murky, but the paper trail suggests that Jarvis mistook the Tory Cabinet's permission to negotiate for the paintings as permission to make an offer. He called the agents to see whether $350,000 for the Brueghel and $90,000 for the Monaco would be acceptable to the owners. Independent of one another, on the basis of earlier dealings with the Gallery, both agents construed this as a formal offer to buy. They consulted their clients, then cabled Jarvis to confirm that the offers had been accepted. A week later Jarvis asked Davie Fulton, the new Minister in charge of the Gallery, to confirm budget estimates which included the purchases but was told that he was not to buy the paintings at that time.

This set in motion a desperate attempt by Jarvis to undo the "offers." In the case of the Monaco, however, the agent had already purchased it for re-sale to the Gallery, and von Pölnitz insisted he had already committed the (unpaid) funds for the Brueghel. Jarvis then tried to convince the Government itself to buy the paintings for quiet resale. This also failed and—amid threats of lawsuits from both the agent for the Monaco and von Pölnitz—the Government simply denied there was a legal contract to buy the paintings. The international embarrassment was considerable and Jarvis was blamed. The new Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, Ellen Fairclough, demanded and received his resignation.

Jarvis was forced out only months before the opening of the Lorne Building, on which he had worked since his arrival. He was not even mentioned in ceremonial speeches by the Prime Minister and the new Director, Charles Comfort. But there were possibilities. Jarvis was quickly offered the editorship of *Canadian Art* magazine, the directorship of the Canadian Conference for the Arts and a syndicated newspaper column. He declared that he would also return to his career as a portrait sculptor, a career that—despite the conventionality of his work—had made him the first National Gallery director also to be a practicing artist.

But Jarvis seemed unable to recover from the loss of the prestigious bully pulpit the National Gallery had given him. By the early nineteen-sixties he had sunk into alcoholism. His marriage disintegrated. In December 1972, while living in a room provided by a friend in downtown Toronto, he died of a heart attack at the age of fifty-seven. At his own request, there was no religious service.

The philosopher George Grant would later call Diefenbaker's election "the Canadian people's last gasp of nationalism," and his failure, a "tragedy." Whether Grant was right or not about Diefenbaker, the more acutely focused tragedy of Alan Jarvis was nestled within and accelerated by this larger current. For it seemed to be precisely Jarvis's attachment to internationalism and "quality" that, at a crucial moment, blinded him to the will of the public that he claimed to be teaching to "really see." ■

The record remains murky, but the paper trail suggests that Jarvis mistook the Tory Cabinet's permission to negotiate