

An abstract painting by Harold Town. The top half features a figure with a blue head and a yellow face, wearing a dark jacket with colorful, wavy lines. The figure is set against a background of large, angular red shapes and a dark, textured area. The bottom half of the painting shows a yellow, curved structure with circular patterns, a blue horizontal band, and a purple rectangular area containing a brown horse's head and a tall, thin, arched structure. The overall style is expressive and colorful.

HAROLD TOWN

Life & Work

By Gerta Moray

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BIOGRAPHY

Harold Town (1924–1990) was a brilliant figure in Canadian art from the 1950s to the 1980s. A founding member of the Abstract Expressionist group Painters Eleven, Town went on to explore a variety of media and styles. International acclaim for his 1950s prints was followed by Toronto shows where his paintings fetched record prices and ignited a new local art scene. From the late 1960s Town fell from critical favour but continued to produce trail-blazing work.

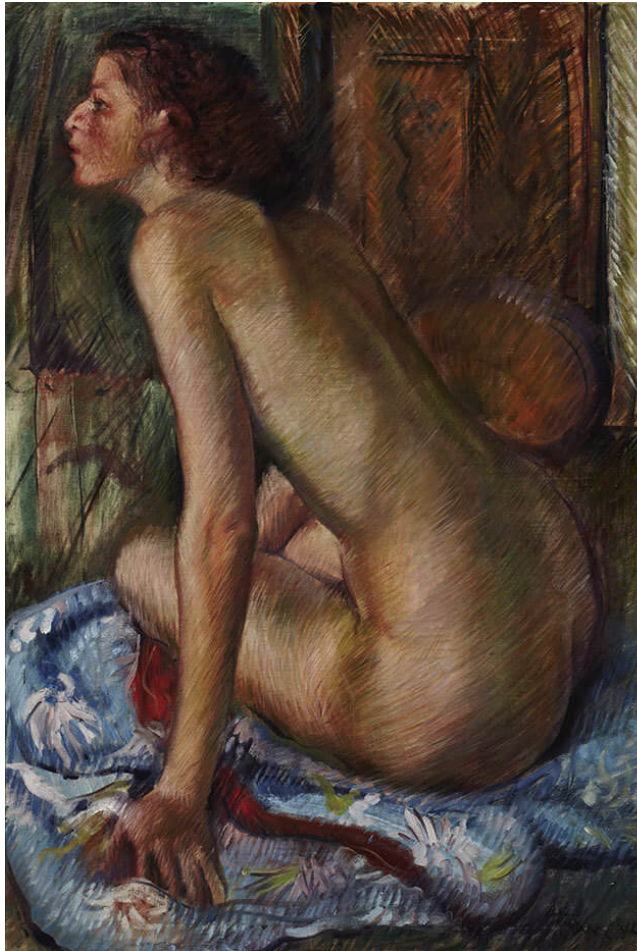
EARLY YEARS

Harold Town's artistic career was shaped by the rapid postwar development of his hometown, Toronto. The physical and social environment of that city—and the conditions it offered for the exhibition, sale, and reception of his art—are key to understanding the shifts in his production and in his reputation.

Town was born in Toronto in 1924 and grew up in the west end, in the Village of Swansea, where his father worked as a railway conductor. From childhood he was obsessed with drawing; his mother allowed him to use the enamel-topped kitchen table as his canvas. As a student at Western Technical-Commercial School, Town specialized in art, and his imagination was fired by studies of Renaissance art history and the Old Masters. He attended the Ontario College of Art (OCA; now OCAD University) from 1942 to 1944 but found the teaching there uninspiring.

As an OCA student Town received free admission to the Art Gallery of Toronto (now the Art Gallery of Ontario). He felt challenged by the achievements of great artists of the past. At age twenty he could emulate the work of Edgar Degas (1834–1917), though with a contemporary twist, as exemplified in his work *Seated Nude*, 1944. He resolved to master every aspect of figure drawing by the age of thirty.¹

The Royal Ontario Museum was an even greater source of inspiration. Town marvelled at the Oriental prints and ceramics, the grandeur of the Mesopotamian and Egyptian antiquities acquired by archaeologist C.T. Currelly, and the suits of European and samurai armour. This exposure gave him what he came to see as a global horizon, and it inspired his work as a commercial artist and his first experiments in abstraction.



LEFT: Harold Town, *Seated Nude*, 1944, oil on canvas, 96.8 x 65.9 cm, Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa. RIGHT: Harold Town, *Don Quixote*, 1948, oil on Masonite, 122.2 x 38.7 cm, Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa.



LEFT: Harold Town with his mother, c. 1940. RIGHT: A drawing by Town in the comic book style, which appeared in his 1942 Western Technical-Commercial School yearbook.

In his early painting *Don Quixote*, 1948, the knight is shown mounted on his rickety steed and compressed into a shallow faceted space, as Town riffs on both Cubism and the decorative patterning of European armour. In contrast, his early monoprint *Soldier Leading Horse*, 1953, renders a classical heroic subject with extreme simplicity and deliberate naivety, showing Town's early grasp of the expressive potential of diverse styles.

Town's work was inspired by his interest in the historical and the literary, but throughout his career he also drew on interests developed during his Toronto boyhood: the intertwining of industry and nature in the Toronto landscape; comic books (he landed a summer job at Double A Comics but was dismissed for adding too much detail in his drawings); and the cinema, where his job as an usher left him a passionate film buff.²

CAREER START

Town began his artistic career in commercial illustration, as many artists did at the time. He credited it with instilling a discipline that would sustain his whole artistic production. In commissions from Imperial Oil, he transformed the company's oil refineries into abstract images; in 1954 he was interviewed by the *Imperial Oil Review* for his views on contemporary abstraction. Through this commercial work he became a close friend of Oscar Cahén (1916–1956),

an artist of German and Jewish extraction who had trained and worked in Dresden, Prague, and London and who, after wartime deportation to Canada, became known as one of the country's best illustrators. Another important early mentor was Albert Franck (1899–1973), an older immigrant artist from Holland who painted scenes of Toronto's back lanes. Franck's job as a picture framer at Eaton's College Street Fine Art Gallery allowed him to help Town and other emerging artists by placing their work in shows at the gallery.



LEFT: The cover for the *Imperial Oil Review*, 1954, designed by Harold Town. RIGHT: A *Maclean's* cover designed by Oscar Cahén, Town's mentor, who like Town worked as an illustrator for much of his early career while making art.

By the early 1950s the wider world of modern art was at last reaching Toronto. A large survey exhibition in 1949 at the Art Gallery of Toronto, *Contemporary Paintings from Great Britain, France and the United States*, included the semi-abstract images of Britain's neo-Romantic painters like Graham Sutherland (1903–1980) and current work by New York's Abstract Expressionists. Canadian artists Jock Macdonald (1897–1960) and Alexandra Luke (1901–1967) were bringing the teachings of Hans Hofmann (1880–1966) to their colleagues, and individual experiments with abstraction were set to coalesce into a local movement.

PAINTERS ELEVEN

Town would play an important role in Toronto's emerging Abstract Expressionist movement, coining the name of the group Painters Eleven for their first show at the Roberts Gallery in 1954. The initiative to organize this heterogeneous, cross-generational group, which united to demand serious attention for abstraction in Ontario, came from Alexandra Luke and William Ronald (1926-1998). However, it was Town who wrote the statements for their catalogues. When Ronald moved to New York in 1955 and in 1957 resigned from the group, Town became the leading artist among Painters Eleven in terms of international and museum recognition for his work.

Town's first success came with an innovative form of monotype that he developed in 1953, which he called "single autographic prints." These prints caught the eye of gallery owner Douglas Duncan, who presented Town's first Toronto solo show at the Picture Loan Society in 1954. Two prints were immediately acquired by the National Gallery of Canada. In 1956 three more prints were acquired by the Art Gallery of Toronto, and the National Gallery chose Town's single autographic prints to represent Canada at the 1956 Venice Biennale, alongside paintings by Jack Shadbolt (1909-1998) and sculpture by Louis Archambault (1915-2003).



Painters Eleven in 1957, photographed by Peter Croydon. *Left to right:* Tom Hodgson, Alexandra Luke, Harold Town, Kazuo Nakamura, Jock Macdonald, Walter Yarwood, Hortense Gordon, Jack Bush, and Ray Mead. Missing from the photo are Oscar Cahén, who died in 1956 but is represented by the two paintings, and William Ronald, whose absence is marked by the three paintings that face the wall.

Town was also quickly acknowledged in Montreal, being offered a solo show in 1957 at Galerie L'Actuelle, recently opened by Guido Molinari (1933–2004). As home of the Automatistes, Montreal had already produced a succession of abstract movements, and Town's favourable reception there would continue throughout his career.

The National Gallery included Town's works in other international exhibitions—in the Smithsonian Institution's *Canadian Abstract Paintings* show that toured the United States in 1956–57, and in 1957 the Milan Triennale, the Ljubljana International Print Biennale (which awarded him an honourable mention) and the Bienal de São Paulo (where he won the Arno Prize for graphic art). By 1957 he had had solo painting shows in Toronto, Ottawa, and Montreal, and he was invited to show with Paul-Émile Borduas (1905–1960) at the Arthur Tooth & Sons Gallery in London, England.



A certificate presented to Town for his participation in the Milan Triennale, 1957.

That same year William Ronald arranged for the influential New York critic Clement Greenberg to visit Toronto and give studio critiques to the members of Painters Eleven. Town and his friend Walter Yarwood (1917–1996), another member of the group, declined to contribute toward Greenberg's expenses; Town saw no need for Greenberg's counsel. He wrote of abstract art in the 1957 Painters Eleven catalogue: "Painting is now a universal language; what in us is provincial will provide the colour and the accent; the grammar, however, is part of the world." His horizons, he believed, were already international, and he was determined to prove that significant new art could arise in Toronto.

THE ST. LAWRENCE SEAWAY MURAL

Town's career escalated as Toronto transformed into a modern city. In 1958 the ultra-modern design by Finnish architect Viljo Revell (1910–1964) was selected for the new city hall. Architect John C. Parkin (1922–1988)—who worked on the construction of Toronto City Hall and, during the 1960s, on the Toronto-Dominion Bank towers designed by Mies van der Rohe (1886–1969)—led younger Toronto architects into international modernism. Public and corporate-sponsored art was on the rise. Nevertheless, in 1958 it was a startling coup for the thirty-four-year-old Town to win the commission for a large mural (3 x 11.3 metres) for Ontario Hydro's Robert H. Saunders Generating Station on the St. Lawrence Seaway at Cornwall.



Harold Town's mural at the Ontario Hydro Generating Station on the St. Lawrence Seaway, commissioned in 1958.

Town threw himself into the challenge with élan, creating bristling mechanical forms and scooping curves that drew on his observations of work at the site. The mural symbolizes the clash between the forces of nature and the human intellect in "the bold remaking of a piece of the earth in Canada," as reported by Pearl McCarthy, art critic of the *Globe and Mail*.³



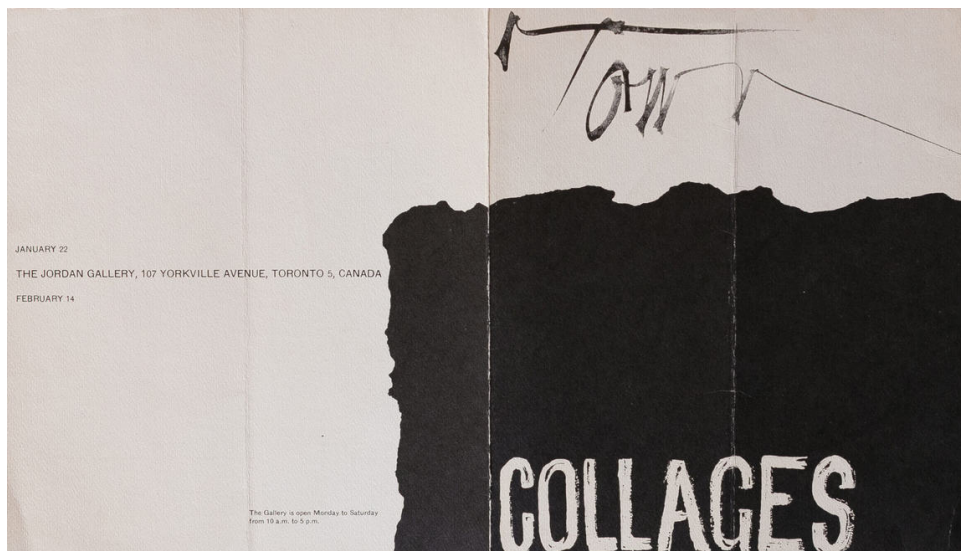
A brochure for Harold Town's mural at the Ontario Hydro Generating Station on the St. Lawrence Seaway.

Newspapers published photographs of Town leaping into the air to apply paint to this vast canvas, like some reincarnated Jackson Pollock (1912–1956), while Liberal MPP Arthur Reaume ensured the mural's notoriety by protesting the \$10,000 price tag.⁴ Town's mural exemplified Canada's ability to generate a heroic, locally engaged Abstract Expressionism—a radical departure from the well-groomed elegance of the figurative murals by York Wilson (1907–1984), such as those commissioned for the foyers of the Imperial Oil Building (1957) and the O'Keefe Centre for the Performing Arts (1959–60).

A MODERN ART SCENE FOR CANADA

By the late 1950s the growing concentration of wealth in Toronto set off a local art boom. The members of Painters Eleven, with their bohemian lifestyles, had delivered a jolt to their famously dull and puritanical hometown.⁵ Openings at art galleries drew large, socially mixed audiences and regular press commentary. New dealers were emerging, willing to show young experimental artists and groom upcoming local art patrons. Barry Kernerman, whose Gallery of Contemporary Art lasted for four years, gave Town his first solo painting show in 1957. Helene Arthur, with her Upstairs Gallery (later the Mazelow Gallery), the venerable Laing Galleries, and Jerrold Morris, who opened the Jerrold Morris International Gallery in 1962, would each hold a stake in Town's work.

Lively interest in abstract art was spreading across Canada, generating debates on the relative merits of the art scenes in Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver. The Biennial Exhibition of Canadian Painting, initiated at the National Gallery in 1955 with the appointment of Alan Jarvis as director, was an arena for such competitive jostling. Town's work was prominent there and also at various American biennials and international shows to which the National Gallery sent Canadian selections. A high point came in 1964, when Town was invited to represent Canada for a second time at the Venice Biennale and was selected as one of 361 leading world artists by the curators of Documenta 3 in Kassel, Germany.



A pamphlet for Harold Town's exhibition at the Jordan Gallery in Toronto in 1959.

TORONTO CELEBRITY

In 1961 Town had made the cover of *Maclean's*, and the following year the *Toronto Telegram Weekend Magazine* carried a two-part feature by his friend Jock Carroll, which included anecdotes about Town's outrageous exploits.⁶ When Town's work was shown in Europe in 1964, he became a local hero at home.

The press was fascinated both by his notoriety as a dandy and party animal and by his reputed earning power as "the hottest sales property in English-speaking Canada."⁷ By 1965 his large canvases were fetching up to \$4,000, a record price for contemporary Canadian work, and he was dubbed the "artist with a tax problem."⁸ In 1969 he was on the cover of the Canadian edition of *Time* magazine. Throughout the decade he was referred to as "synonymous with art in Toronto" or "Canada's most famous artist."

Town's success could not have happened had he not been prodigiously talented, hard-working, and motivated. He spent days and nights in his studios, producing an expanding range of works in different media: ever larger canvases, collages that expanded on the style and ideas explored in his single autographic prints, and successive new series of prints and drawings.

His large canvases of the early 1960s precipitated frenzies of acquisition by corporate and private patrons, first at the Laing Galleries in 1961 and then at Town's famous double openings in 1966 and 1967, when he launched distinct bodies of work simultaneously at the Mazelow Gallery and at the Jerrold Morris International Gallery. Young newspaper critics found his work exciting to decode, and Robert Fulford and Elizabeth Kilbourn became keen champions, reviewing his shows and contributing exhibition catalogue essays. Town rented a second studio unit in the historic Studio Building, at 25 Severn Street, which Lawren Harris (1885–1970) helped build for the Group of Seven.



LEFT: Harold Town on the cover of *Maclean's* magazine, December 1961. RIGHT: Harold Town featured in the issue's provocative article "The Overnight Bull Market in Modern Art".



Harold Town with his paintings at the Mazelow Gallery in Toronto in 1967, photographed by John Reeves.

In 1961 Town became an established member of Toronto's cultural elite when he was invited to join the exclusive (and oddly spelled) Sordsmen's Club. Defined in its charter as "devoted exclusively to the pursuit of pleasure, superb food, fine wine, exceptional women, and conversational excellence," the club was limited to fifteen permanent members, including author and broadcaster Pierre Berton, publisher Jack McClelland, architect John C. Parkin, Alan Jarvis (then editor of *Canadian Art* magazine and national director of the Canadian Conference of the Arts), and CBC TV producer Ross McLean. Through the Sordsmen he made close and influential friendships that generated invitations to publish newspaper columns, create art books, and appear on radio talk shows and in TV interviews.



Town and Janet Barker at an Art Gallery of Ontario reception in 1967, photographed by John Reeves.

With his sharp wit, conversational skills, and wide reading, Town defended abstract art in the face of Canada's conservatism, wrote book reviews for the *Globe and Mail*, and contributed a regular cultural column to *Toronto Life* magazine during 1966-71. He became engaged in the conflicts that attended the rapid pace of urban development. Town supported Mayor Phil Givens, who led the public fundraising campaign to purchase the sculpture by Henry Moore (1898-1986) now in front of City Hall and acquired contemporary Toronto canvases for the building's interior (a large Town was hung behind Givens's desk). He protested against the inroads of the automobile and the destruction of Toronto's historic buildings; he contributed posters for the 1969 campaign opposing the Spadina Expressway and for reformer David Crombie's 1972 mayoral campaign and bid to save Toronto's neighbourhoods.

Town cherished his own Toronto neighbourhoods: the Swansea of his boyhood, the Gerrard Street Village of his fledgling artist days, and finally South Rosedale. In 1961 he established a family home at 9 Castle Frank Crescent with his wife, Trudie, a librarian. Town's daughter Shelley recalls that she or her sister Heather would phone their father when supper was nearly ready.⁹ (Town had home studios, but his larger studio on Severn Street was a short walk away through the Rosedale ravine.)



Harold Town with his daughters Heather and Shelley in 1966, photographed by John Reeves.

Town's stock was still high in Canada in 1967 when his work was included in all the national centennial art projects of that year and he was awarded a Centennial Medal. He had been granted an honorary doctorate by York University in 1966 and was made an Officer of the Order of Canada in 1968. He was beginning to be framed as part of the establishment, a target for the barbs of a younger generation of artists. In 1968 Iain Baxter (b. 1936), under the pseudonym of his art collective N.E. Thing Co., exhibited *Dark, Four-Handled Carrying Case for Harold Town's "Optical"* at the 7th Biennial Exhibition of Canadian Painting at the National Gallery, alongside works titled *Bagged Rothko* and *Extended Noland*.

BACKLASH

A gradual shift in Town's reputation began in the mid-1960s. Developments in art and art criticism had moved away from the Abstract Expressionism within which his work had won international recognition. In 1964 the international reputation of fellow Painters Eleven member Jack Bush (1909-1977) was launched by Clement Greenberg, who included him in his exhibition *Post Painterly Abstraction*, at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. At the same time, counter-currents that Greenberg did not favour, neo-Dada and Pop art, were opening art into the worlds of new media and commercial production. Younger Toronto artists Michael Snow (b. 1928) and Joyce Wieland (1930-1998) spent most of the 1960s living in New York, partaking in the Pop art, Conceptual, and Minimalist movements there.

Canadian critics became anxious about the plurality of Town's art practices—drawing, printmaking, painting, and even excursions into sculpture (he attended workshops in metal sculpture in 1960-61 and exhibited in *Canadian Sculpture Today* at the Dorothy Cameron Gallery in Toronto in 1964). Negative commentary began to focus on his policy of remaining in Toronto. When Town chose not to attend the Venice Biennale where his work represented Canada in 1964, critic Paul Duval accused him of cutting himself off from the greater art world.¹⁰



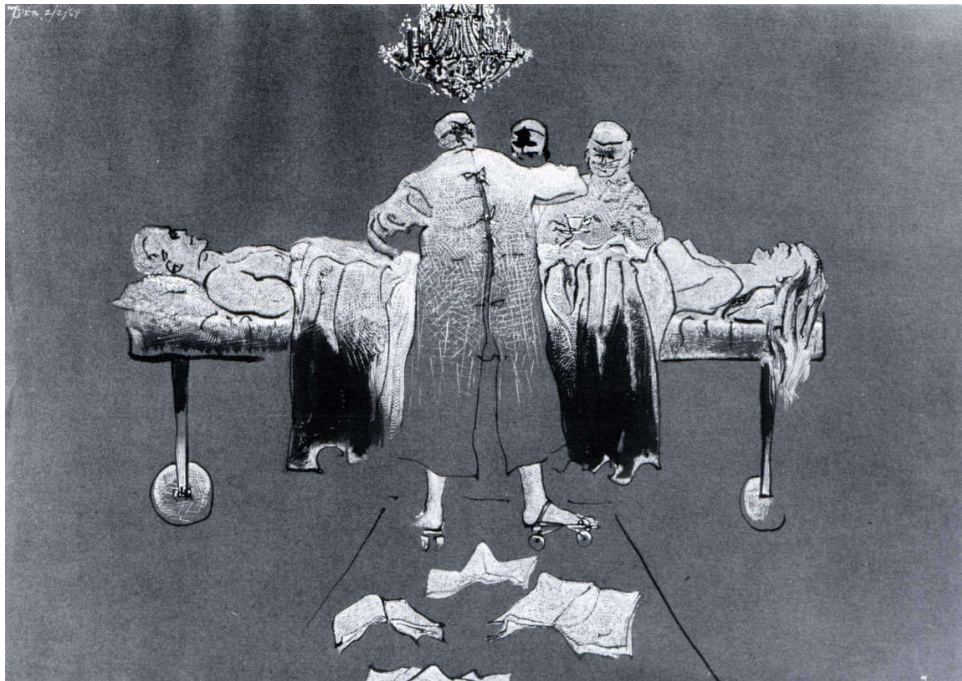
Harold Town, *Untitled (Crescent)*, 1961, bronze, 20.3 x 19.1 x 5.1 cm, Thielsen Gallery, London, Ontario.

A further rebuke came in 1970 from National Gallery curator Dennis Reid, who in an article discussed "the problem of staying in Toronto," stating that the only continuing achievements by former members of Painters Eleven came from the two artists whose inspiration originated in New York: Jack Bush and William Ronald (1926-1998).¹¹ This turned into an escalating dispute in the press, as Town, who was well read in the art criticism and debates of the time, lambasted the curators of the National Gallery and the Art Gallery of Ontario for what he saw as their subservience to New York fashions.¹²

A CANADIAN LOYALIST

Town was not unique in making an issue of loyalty to Canadian experience and, in his case, Toronto experience. Greg Curnoe (1936-1992) similarly refused to take his inspiration from abroad. He and Jack Chambers (1931-1978) in London, Ontario, were the leaders of a regionalist group that celebrated local landmarks and their own immediate lives, forging innovative styles to reflect on them. In Nova Scotia Alex Colville (1920-2013) imaged a realm of secluded, timeless truths. These artists offered recognizable figurative imagery of everyday, provincial worlds in Canada.

Town's Toronto, however, was an emerging metropolis with all its attendant pretensions and excesses as a corporate and cultural centre. Town's work addressed this environment in moods ranging between celebration, skepticism, and satire. He emphasized drawing as central to his inspiration—though this was not a medium considered central in the modernist hierarchy. In 1964 the exhibition of his *Enigma* drawings and their publication in book form aroused ambivalence: they demonstrated his indisputable mastery of a venerable medium but disturbed with their nightmarish satire of contemporary life.



Harold Town, *Enigma No. 9*, 1964, brush steel pen, black and white ink on grey paper, 43.8 x 66.3 cm, estate of Harold Town.

As the 1960s waned, Town was aware that while other Canadian artists were beginning to win international notice, interest outside Canada in his own work was drying up. He continued to show his work abroad, but with diminishing success.¹³ With the dominance now of big-name critics and curators, and the plurality of new art movements, Town no longer played a leading role.

SECLUSION AND RETROSPECT

Town continued to produce large-scale painting series during the 1970s and 1980s, each time setting up a pictorial concept and strategy and exploring it through scores or even hundreds of works. He continued to receive press notice, to sell his work to a committed Toronto following, and to receive invitations to show in galleries across Canada.

Although his gallery launches now were less frequent, they were still calculated for dramatic effect. In 1969 a large retrospective show of drawings mounted by the Mazelow Gallery coincided with the publication of Robert Fulford's book *Harold Town: Drawings* and toured to many Canadian cities the following year. In November 1970 his first painting exhibition in Toronto in three years—presenting the *Silent Lights*, *Stretches*, and *Parks* series—was held at the newly completed Ontario Place.

After another three years' interval, the Robert McLaughlin Gallery in Oshawa unveiled the Snaps series, some new Parks, and the Vale Variations at *Harold Town: The First Exhibition of New Work, 1969-73*. In the meantime Town fulfilled the 1960s dream of making his art available to a broad popular audience with the publication of a book of drawings, *Silent Stars, Sound Stars, Film Stars* (1971). His introduction was a witty analysis of the changing culture of cinema and of the way his generation had used the movies to fashion their identities.



Harold Town, *Rudolf Valentino*, 1971, lithograph, ed. 3/114, 35.6 x 50.8 cm, Gallery Gevik, Toronto.

As major Canadian museums gave retrospectives to Michael Snow and Jack Chambers (at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1969 and 1970, respectively) and major solo shows to N.E. Thing Co. and Joyce Wieland (at the National Gallery in 1969 and 1971), the omission of a Town retrospective was noted in the press. In part the slight was due to his own contrariness: William Withrow, director of the Art Gallery of Ontario, proposed a show to him in the late 1960s, an offer that was withdrawn when Town made it clear he expected control of the selection and presentation of the works.¹⁴ Town's disputes with the curatorial establishment escalated when he insisted on choosing which of his works were to be shown in the National Gallery's 1972 show *Toronto Painting: 1953-1965*, organized by Dennis Reid, and when he attacked that exhibition in the press for what he saw as its shortcomings.

Gary Michael Dault, in his review of a 1975 Town retrospective at the Art Gallery of Windsor, summed up the dilemma Town presented to a younger generation: "In order to think realistically about his art, you have to steer through his obsessive radio-active energy, his brilliant though sometimes hysterical writing, his memorable talk, his Byronic glamour, his defensiveness, and his Faustian belief in himself."¹⁵



Harold Town in his Old Orchard Farm studio in 1983, photographed by John Reeves.

In 1976 Town purchased Old Orchard Farm, just outside Peterborough, Ontario. The large farmhouse and its outbuildings provided him with several studios—space to make large paintings, to experiment with assemblage and cut papers, and to store his collection of materials and ephemera. Town finally received a retrospective at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1986 but was dramatically absent from its opening owing to an operation for bowel cancer. The accompanying catalogue, by the show's curator, David Burnett, was a substantial critical study. Unfortunately the exhibition itself was crowded with too many works, at Town's insistence, and did little to revive his reputation within the art establishment.



LEFT: Harold Town, *Toy Horse No. 184*, 1979, ink and acrylic on paper, 73.6 x 92.7 cm, private collection. RIGHT: Harold Town, *Toy Horse*, 1980, mixed media on paper, 61 x 76.2 cm, estate of Harold Town.

Town continued to produce new work: his Toy Horse series, a painting series he called Stages, and a group of large abstract canvases he called Edge Paintings. During the 1980s he no longer had a regular Toronto dealer, and his shows were fewer. A rare major commission came to him in 1987 as part of the Cineplex Odeon Art Commission Program, impresario Garth Drabinsky's project to place major works of contemporary Canadian art in movie houses. Town delivered a set of drawings of movie stills and two enormous canvases for the lobby of the Universal City Cinemas in Los Angeles.

In 1988 Town's cancer returned, and he died in 1990. He was sixty-six. His death elicited tributes from newer supporters, such as Christopher Hume,¹⁶ and from stalwarts Robert Fulford¹⁷ and Pierre Berton, who wrote: "Town was a great artist with an insatiable intellect."¹⁸ Curator David Burnett indicated the challenge that Town's legacy posed: "The heart of Town's work does not lie in his response to Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s or, later, in his reaction against the numbing conformity of formalist abstraction.... Our response to his death must be to begin the process of understanding his achievement as a totality, of facing all of his work in the present."¹⁹



KEY WORKS

Town regularly worked on several separate bodies of work at the same time, using a variety of media and styles, yet consistent themes and processes of composition run through them. The key works selected here reflect his use of a wide range of media and the succession of formats he developed for their exploration.

DAY NEON 1953

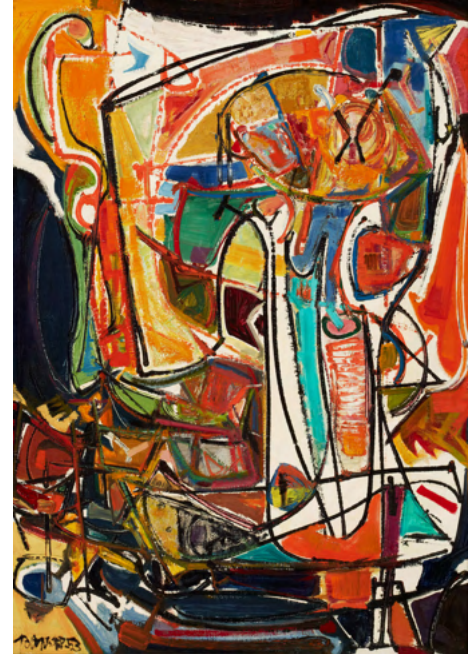


Harold Town, *Day Neon* (detail), 1953
Oil on Masonite, 91.1 x 63.5 cm
Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa

Shown in 1955 at the second Painters Eleven group exhibition, *Day Neon* offers an exuberant display of linear drawing with the painter's brush. Town fills in some of the areas between the lines, creating coloured planes, which then have more drawing superimposed on them. The lines are repeated and reinforced, building a Cubist grid that fills the frame with verticals and diagonals that suggest human figures or machine parts in movement.

Town's method of allowing forms to emerge through drawing is similar to the Surrealist automatism practised by the Automatistes in Montreal in the 1940s, and by New York painters Arshile Gorky (1904–1948), Jackson Pollock (1912–1956), and Willem de Kooning (1904–1997). As well, the colliding diagonals and sense of continuous movement recall the visual language of the action comics featuring Captain Marvel and Minute-Man that Town loved during boyhood.

The painting's title points to an urban scene; the neon lights of Toronto's developing streetscape are a frequent theme in Town's work at this time. He believed that great formal art could be inspired by the modern urban scene: "I suddenly realized these signs were beautiful, all those gorgeous blues, and I realized that if an Egyptian from the time of one of the great Pharaohs were to walk down the street he would have found them a mystery, an overwhelming mystery. There's everything there."¹



Harold Town, *Day Neon*, 1953, oil on Masonite, 91.1 x 63.5 cm, Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa.

DIXON PASSING 1956



Harold Town, *The Dixon Passing Mugg's Island*, 1956

Oil on Masonite, 122 x 124.5 cm

Estate of Harold Town



HAROLD TOWN

Life & Work by Gerta Moray

Town insisted that his paintings are rooted in his personal memories and experiences. The *Dixon* was a ferryboat operating between the city and Toronto Islands, where Town frequently went for beach outings with his friends Walter Yarwood (1917–1996) and Tom Hodgson (1924–2006). Many of his paintings of the time refer to these excursions. *The Dixon Passing Mugg's Island* shows the development of Town's pictorial thinking. The composition is simplified into larger, bold shapes, bounded by tautly curving outlines. The various areas have distinct qualities of colour and texture owing to the scumbled paint application. The painting creates a strong tension between the power of reference (we see a smokestack emitting a billowing greenish-black cloud) and the perception that this is a flat design filling out the square of the canvas.



Views of the Toronto skyline such as this one, seen from Mugg's Island in 1907, would have inspired Town. Photograph by William James.

TREE ZOO 1957



Harold Town, *Tree Zoo*, 1957
Single autographic print, 56.2 x 74.5 cm
Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa



HAROLD TOWN

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Town developed a complex and novel process to make the monotypes that he called "single autographic prints," such as this one. Here he takes a shadowy impression off a lithographic stone already inked for an earlier print. He then prints more shapes from inked paper cut-outs, using other cut-outs as stencils to mask off negative shapes. Having to wait for the ink to dry between pulls led him to work on several prints in parallel over a period of days. The process allowed accidental, suggestive shapes to emerge. Here the forms suggest a tangled forest with other lurking presences.



Harold Town in his print workshop in 1957, photographed by Jock Carroll.

MUSIC BEHIND 1958–59



Harold Town, *Music Behind*, 1958–59

Collage on hardboard, including hardboard backing of a TV set with plastic cone, cardboard package for paint tubes, waxed paper straws, paper labels, stamps and envelope, music sheet, leaf fan, razor blade, thread, fabric, string, Arborite, corrugated cardboard, printed papers, tissue paper, and gouache, 103.2 x 102.5 cm
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa



HAROLD TOWN

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In his collages Town often sought to immortalize contemporary artifacts and the junk that he believed would become the archaeological relics of the future.

He wrote eloquently about salvaging the garbage of his times. *Music*

Behind features at lower centre the back-panel of a TV set. The pegboard panels on which this is mounted were typically used to support the electrical circuitry of radios and stereos. Town dribbles paint down the composition, simulating elaborate electrical wiring. He pastes an Oriental fan and a page of sheet music on either side, as if to intimate the music and dance that might be magically transmitted by the receiver. Typographic fragments, labels, and a papier mâché carton add further local colour, while the whole is integrated by the red, blue, and white paint. This collage has the bold quality of an assemblage by Robert Rauschenberg (1925-2008). Town regarded it as his sole excursion into Pop art.

PAPER MONSTER 1958



Harold Town, *Paper Monster (Memory of Chinatown)*, 1958
Mixed media collage on Masonite, 121.9 x 61 cm
Christopher Cutts Gallery, Toronto



HAROLD TOWN

Life & Work by Gerta Moray

This collage reflects Town's experience of Toronto's multicultural milieu. The body of the monster is made from a "single autographic print" –Town's innovative monotype technique—with torn-off edges, and streamers made from cut-up pieces of a print. Given his free-associative method of generating images at this time, the particular shade of deep red could have triggered Town's memory of a New Year's parade in Chinatown or an elaborate Chinese kite he had admired. The collage has a festive air, with the sky-blue background and the white graffiti-like figure inside the monster. Letter-like scribbles and a heart at left centre also suggest graffiti, while a small red form near the lower right edge suggests an insect or a Chinese inscription.

BACCHANTE THREATENED 1959



Harold Town, *Bacchante Threatened by a Panther*, 1959
Brush and ink on paper, 56.5 x 76.1 cm
Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto

Robert Fulford wrote about Town's inspirations: "Since he was an adolescent, and perhaps earlier than that, Town has been fascinated by history and mythology.... He took to Greek mythology in high school and ... became fascinated with Elizabeth I—and both of these interests persist today."¹

In this rapid, assured brush drawing Town tests his mastery of the idealized classical figure within the Western tradition, taking his cue from the neoclassical etchings and brush drawings of Pablo Picasso (1881–1973). It is one of a group of drawings in which Town riffs on Bacchanalian scenes by artists such as Titian (c. 1488–1576) and Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot (1796–1875), creating a series of increasingly violent erotic fantasies. Two of these drawings are in the collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario. Erotic experience and relations between the sexes would be recurring themes for him. In later drawings of Amazons and in the Enigma series, he went on to adapt the allegorical potential of classical myth to convey more specifically contemporary experience.²



Titian, *The Bacchanal of the Andrians*, 1523–26, oil on canvas, 175 x 193 cm, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid.

INOUTSCAPE 1960



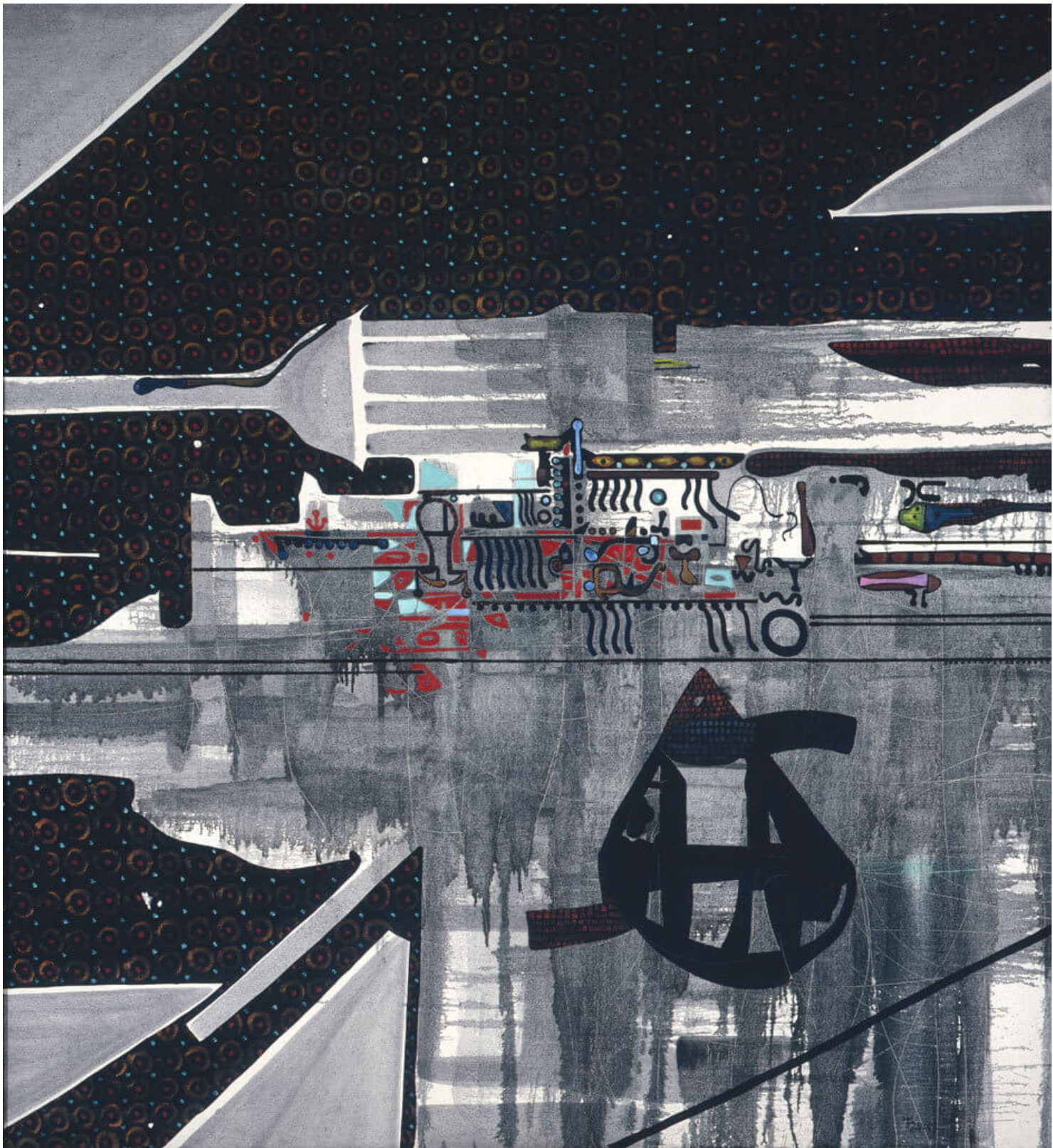
Harold Town, *Inoutscape*, 1960
Oil and Lucite on Belgian linen, 206.4 x 189.2 cm
McMaster Museum of Art, Hamilton

Inoutscape is one of a series of large canvases, more than 2 metres high, that Town began to produce in 1960. The composition has an architectonic framework: the structure—of black, white, blue, and red framing elements—suggests components of a composition by Piet Mondrian (1872–1944) that is being pushed out to the sides. Mondrian is quoted again in the small red squares and blue squares (borrowed from the Dutch painter's *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, 1943) that punctuate the work's central and lower areas. In 1961 Town made a collage titled *Death of Mondrian No. 1*.

Town's references to Mondrian's rigorously reductive abstraction introduce a theme that became central to his art in the 1960s: the deliberate contrast between order and spontaneity, between technical perfection and the eruptions of chance.

Boxed in at the centre of *Inoutscape* are brightly coloured areas of gestural brushwork that evoke human figures in vigorous action, while an adjacent diamond shape reminds us that Town dedicated several large paintings at this time to baseball—for example, *Pitch Out*, 1960, in which the pitcher stands poised in a bright-blue diamond.¹ The numerals along the top could be a scoreboard; the painting's title suggests the infield and outfield of baseball as well as the inner and outer worlds of the artist's inspiration. Is this painting—if about sport—also an allegory of art? Town was devoted to both art and baseball; both require the skill and discipline he valued so highly.

TYRANNY OF THE CORNER 1962



Harold Town, *Tyranny of the Corner (Sashay Set)*, 1962
Oil and Lucite on canvas, 205.7 x 188.7 cm
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa



In 1962 Town began a series of large formal canvases that depart from his lush and spontaneous Abstract Expressionist handling of paint. He set a number of predetermined rules to govern the composition. As the title informs us, the corners are to be the starting point. He places a triangle in each one—though the top right triangle has slipped down slightly, and the one in the lower right has slid far to the left. Before starting to paint on the primed canvas, Town applies thin washes of blue-black paint at the centre and tilts the surface to make the paint run. This creates an area of chance, of amorphous shapes. He fills in parts of the canvas in black, creating a figure-ground tension at the irregular edges where the black ends and the grey ground seems to invade it. The black areas would tend to recede and be read as background were it not for the pattern of painted rings and dots that sits on their surfaces.

These rings, which Town jokingly called “doughnuts,” recall the symbol for trees on architectural ground plans, an association that was confirmed for Town when he took his first airplane flight around this time and saw woodlands from above. Across the grey area near the top, a mechanical form—some kind of tailpipe? shower head? paintbrush?—seems to be moving from right to left, tracing a set of parallel lines. Beneath this is a register of small animated black shapes and lines and colour touches, like wiring on a primitive electronic circuit board, or symbols in some primeval alphabet. A larger hieroglyphic shape seems to loom toward us, almost like a comic cartoon figure. All these animated entities are held together by the insistent repetition of diagonal, horizontal, and vertical lines that echo the edges of the four corner triangles, yet as heterogeneous elements each seems to come from a separate lexicon. They do not add up to a coherent meaning. It is impossible to say what this abstract composition means, but it addresses us with an insistent rhythm of black and white and pattern, against a breathing, organic, amorphous space.

IN MEMORY OF PEARL MCCARTHY 1964



Harold Town, *In Memory of Pearl McCarthy*, 1964
Oil and Lucite on canvas, 205.7 x 188 cm
Private collection

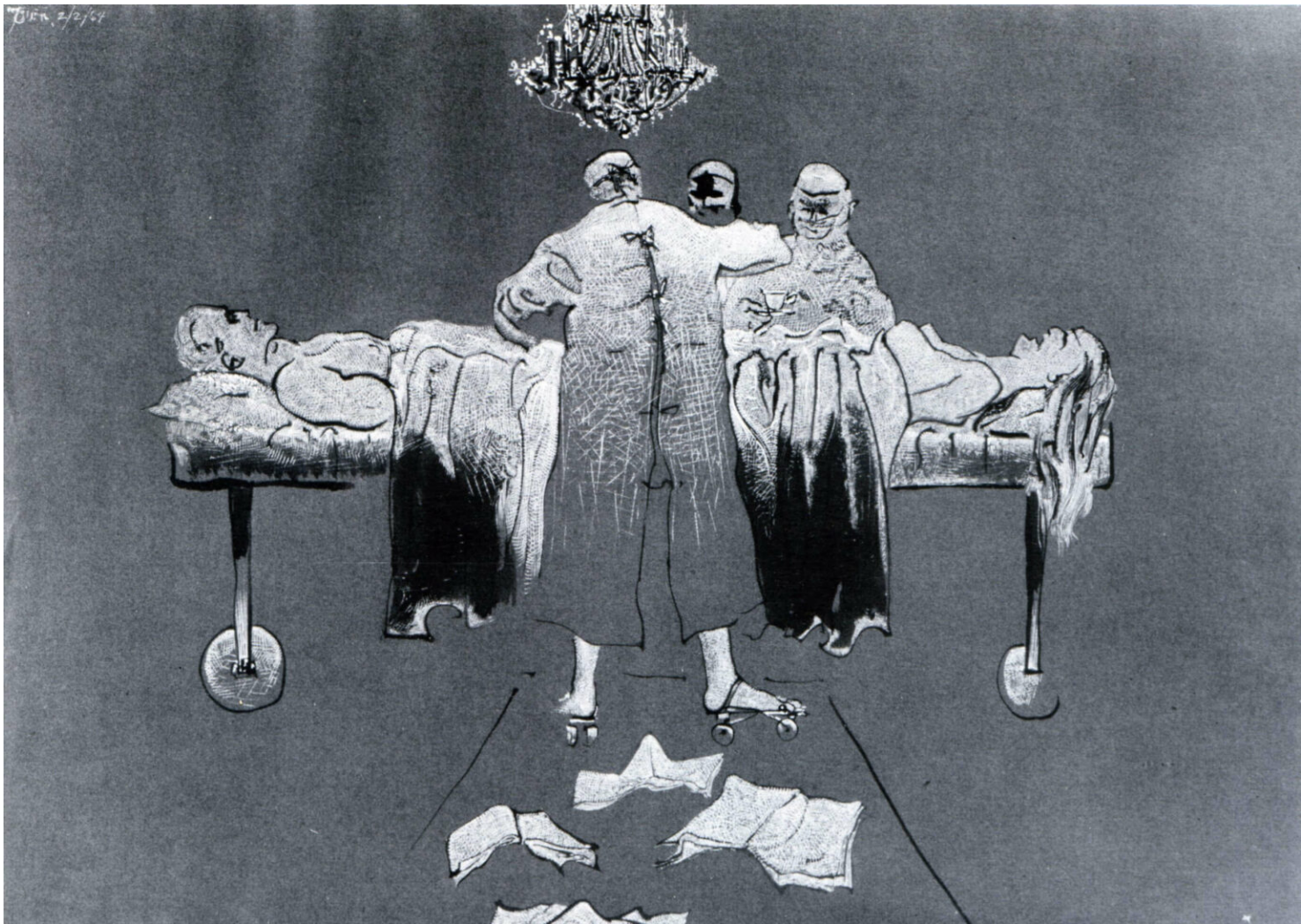
This painting is both a grand culmination of Town's Set paintings and a transition toward his next series of works, where geometric discipline will prevail. Two open rectangular frames, just inside the edges of the canvas, are superimposed over the jostling animated forms that spill across the canvas from left to right. The painting is dedicated to Pearl McCarthy, the long-time art critic of the *Globe and Mail* who had recently died, and who had first noticed Town in his student graduation show and written in support of his work ever since.

McCarthy's presence is suggested by an organic form at the left that contains dispersing shreds of cellular patterning and a throbbing cluster of tiny coloured shapes. As though issuing from her mouth, three great speech bubbles take up the right, while the spaces between them form undulating feminine shapes. Set just off the vertical axis of the painting are two framed rectangles, picture frames within the picture. The "doughnut" patterning inside them is related to the patterning within the adjacent speech bubbles—McCarthy is discussing Town's paintings. By changing the size of the doughnuts in different areas of the composition, the artist creates visual gradients that suggest fluctuating depth behind the surface. The symmetrical and formal distribution of irregular shapes within the painting creates a sense of dynamic authority. Town interweaves many levels of association within this work.



Harold Town and Walter Yarwood in front of *In Memory of Pearl McCarthy*, 1964, photographed by John Reeves.

ENIGMA NO. 9 1964



Harold Town, *Enigma No. 9*, 1964

Brush, steel pen, black and white ink on grey paper, 43.8 x 66.3 cm

Estate of Harold Town



In 1964 Town was etching the metal panels for a large mural screen commissioned for the Toronto International Airport. To while away the time as the acid did its work, he began to draw. The figure that emerged was one he had drawn before; in his annoyance at repeating himself he drew a fire bucket wedged onto the figure's foot. Surrendering to free association, he began to channel feelings and frustrations into a series of drawings made with steel pen and brush in black and white ink on tinted grey, green, and brown papers. The drawing technique is virtuosic and varied, ranging from boldly sketched to finely modelled. Alarmingly recognizable social types emerge from his imagination—businessmen caught with their pants off, powerful female nudes carrying men on their shoulders, men parading as priests, soldiers, or clowns.

In *Enigma No. 9* a man and a woman lie end to end on a hospital gurney. With a trail of papers behind him and a chandelier overhead, a surgeon on roller skates performs an operation, apparently to suture the couple together at their knees. A satire on the state of marriage? On the venality of medicine? As Robert Fulford comments: "We are allowed to consider not only masses and lines but dreams and nightmares; indeed we are permitted to examine both a personal and an intellectual history."¹

FESTIVAL 1965



Harold Town, *Festival*, 1965
Oil and Lucite on canvas, 160 x 160 cm
Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto



Festival is part of Town's Optical series. Characteristically, he steals features from a current style and twists them for a new purpose—here the repeated discs and lines that appeared around 1960 in the works of Victor Vasarely (1906–1997) and Jesús Rafael Soto (1923–2005). Town was more in tune with the organic references admitted by these Paris-based Op artists than with the geometric regularity of American practitioners. He mixes these Op art elements into a rich and dramatic fabric. The theme of festival was one he had treated in earlier paintings. Behind a foreground layer of frantic activity that evokes jugglers, strings of lights, ticker tape, and confetti, we glimpse an intergalactic darkness in which writhe twisting, faintly painted nebulae made up of dashes, waves, and “doughnuts.”

Ted Fraser, curator of Town's 1975 retrospective at the Art Gallery of Windsor, points out the lurking connotations: “The mixing of comedy and tragedy ... is very clearly defined in *Festival*. The lush surface of the painting with its carnival rhythms and Mardi Gras excitement belie a distant ominous space rotating upwards towards the flat surface. Here is a dark, cellular and psychological interior, a psychic storm in full force.... Town had plainly turned the tables on the decorative art of the mid-1960s and created works highly personal, extremely memorable and amazingly descriptive of perceptual and physical space.”¹



SILENT LIGHT NO. 11 1968–69



Harold Town, *Silent Light No. 11*, 1968–69
Oil and Lucite on canvas, 132.1 x 132.1 cm
Estate of Harold Town

An Op art vocabulary is well suited to record one of the popular decorative arts that Town relished—the Christmas tree. His own tree was legendary for the incredible number of ornaments it always held.¹ *Silent Light No. 11* is one of a series of paintings he produced that were sparked by the visual memory of a floor covered with broken Christmas tree balls. Town created this technical tour de force with a complex agenda in mind: “I was interested in the problem of ultimate depth and the immutable two-dimensional surface. There are implied infinities all over the canvas,” says Town as he points to the largest one of all, which he dubbed his own Vermeer.”²

How could Town connect this painting with Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675)? He had long been interested in Piet Mondrian (1872–1944), whose work is noted for its order and structure, and Town now turned to Vermeer and Diego Velázquez (1599–1660), Old Masters whose work shared those qualities. They were masters, too, of rendering light and space. Here Town interweaves random curvilinear shapes (the fragments of broken glass balls) with the surface dazzle of Op art and integrates both into a highly ordered composition. In *Silent Light* a sequence of concentric frames pulls the eye into a steep recession toward the centre, but at the centre we find a band of diagonals so strong in contrast that they reassert the flatness of the surface. In a 1967 catalogue essay on Town, his dealer, Jerrold Morris, sums up the priorities that came to the fore in his late 1960s work: “It is characterized by complexity controlled by intelligence, lyricism contained by formality.”³



Johannes Vermeer, *A Lady and Two Gentlemen*, c. 1659, x 68 cm, Herzog Anton Ulrich Museum, Braunschweig, Germany.

SNAP NO. 17 1972–73



Harold Town, *Snap No. 17*, 1972-73
Oil and Lucite on canvas, 182.9 x 182.9 cm
Christopher Cutts Gallery, Toronto



HAROLD TOWN

Life & Work by Gerta Moray

Harold Town's Snap series of paintings of 1972–76 make a monumental impact with their intense blasts of textured colour and simple, concentrated forms. He applies the pigment by stretching a string in front of the canvas, loading it with paint, and then snapping it against the picture surface. These are "excruciatingly demanding pictures formed an eighth of an inch at a time," to quote the critic Gary Michael Dault.¹ At the same time, *Snap No. 17* contains a lexicon of Town's long-time abstract motifs. The corners are emphasized; coloured discs that imply advancing and receding movement are cut by the frame, a hint that space goes on beyond its edges. A mysterious abstract form thrusts in from the left, its silhouette resembling architectural mouldings (as in the Parks series) while at the same time suggesting a comic gesture—an arm delivering a punch or held out in a dance. Two small contrasting entities—flatly painted and sharply outlined—seem to float in front of the canvas. Each element in the painting is highly ambiguous, and together they create an illusory, fictional space. The overall concern is with richness of colour and powerful impact: the painting engulfs the viewer and dominates any setting within which it is placed.

TOY HORSE NO. 184 1979



Harold Town, *Toy Horse No. 184*, 1979
Ink and acrylic on paper, 73.6 x 92.7 cm
Private collection

During the 1970s Town made several series of works on paper in which he uses a variety of media to explore the wide range of ideas and associations that can be evoked by the manipulation of style. Inspired by an antique rocking horse, Town's *Toy Horse* series has a fairy-tale quality—but a fairy tale for grown-ups. This image, *Toy Horse No. 184*, evokes a nightmare atmosphere, as the horse's anatomy transforms into abstracted machine forms. Town colours in a vivid orange background and then fills in the dynamic silhouette of the horse's body with intricate geometric details using a mechanical pen. The horse is frozen in mid-gallop, and our eyes linger with fascination—and repulsion at the strange growths that invade its anatomy.

SPENGLER WRITING THE DECLINE OF THE WEST 1980



Harold Town, *Spengler Writing The Decline of the West at His Desk on Top of the Kitchen Table*, 1980
Oil and Lucite on canvas, 228.6 x 188 cm
Private collection

This is one of a group of figurative paintings that Town exhibited at the Waddington Galleries in Toronto in 1981. They feature an assortment of “heroes” in monumental, flat, emblematic designs that range through moods of celebration, irony, and anger. Town’s thoughts about Oswald Spengler, the pioneering cultural theorist, must be deduced from the painting, since he refused to explain his images. Town shows Spengler wearing the rainbow-striped robe worn by the figure in the painting *The Sleeping Gypsy*, 1897, by Henri Rousseau (1844–1910), an artist whose style had long interested him.

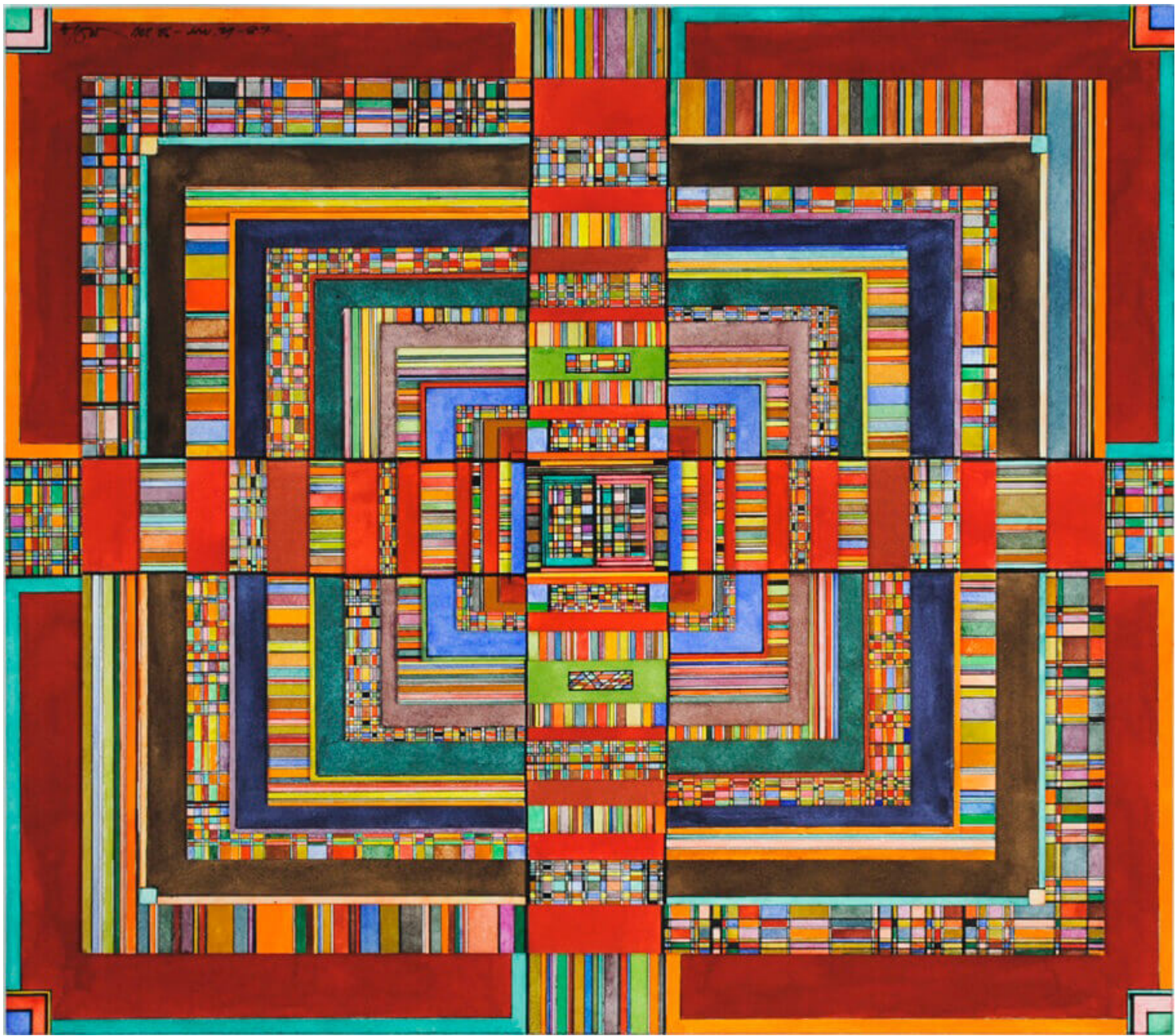
Spengler sits sublimely elevated above the mundane domestic world that supports him, his head ironically placed under a light bulb that showers him with swastika-like rays. Spengler’s 1918 book *The Decline of the West* was considered prophetic of Nazism; he argues that autocratic rule, or Caesarism, is the necessary last stage of Western civilization, though Spengler himself condemned Nazi race theory and demagoguery in the 1930s and was duly censored in Germany. The light bulb and triangular composition of Town’s painting bring to mind the painting *Guernica*, 1937, by Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), another vision of doom.



Pablo Picasso, *Guernica*, 1937, oil on canvas, 349.3 x 776.6 cm, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, Spain. © Picasso Estate / SODRAC (2014).

Spengler’s book was an early attempt to discern the stages of development within all great world civilizations without assuming European superiority. It was controversial among scholars but influential in literary circles: Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye gave a talk on it in the 1955 CBC radio series *Architects of Modern Thought*. Town would have found support in Spengler’s cultural analysis for many of the positions he took as an artist. Both put high value on the achievements of non-European civilizations. Both were fundamentally conservative and assumed the supremacy of the Old Masters within the European tradition while deploring an inevitable artistic decline accelerated by the dominance of critics and the commercialization of art—in Spengler’s words, the “pursuit of illusions of artistic progress, of personal peculiarity, of ‘the new style,’ of ‘unsuspected possibilities,’ theoretical babble, pretentious fashionable artists.”¹ This large painting is an homage, tinged with irony, to Spengler and his colossal, visionary masterpiece. Did Town see Spengler’s obsessive researching and his rejection by academic specialists as a mirror of his own fate?

STAGES NO. 8 1986–87



Harold Town, *Stages No. 8*, 1986–87
Mixed media on acid-free rag board, 40.6 x 46.2 cm
Thielsen Gallery, London, Ontario



HAROLD TOWN

Life & Work by Gerta Moray

During 1986-88 Town undertook a new series of abstract works, the Stages paintings. Cultural critic Brian Boigon aptly dubbed them “the bionic circuitry of Harold Town,” observing that they “freeze framed the visual language of his entire graphic repertoire... with an all-out instant replay on compact disc.”¹ Town glues a succession of diminishing rectangles of mat board one on top of another, allowing the visible edges of each to become the frame for the one glued over it. These frames, painted or printed in acrylic, carry strips of pattern that interweave from one layer to the next, reprising some of his earlier compositional devices (attention to corners, the use of frames as spatial and ordering devices) in aesthetically skilful juxtapositions that rival the art of Japanese kimono fabric. Turning to one of his favourite metaphors, the theatre, Town presents the central square as a lighted stage toward which all the surrounding layers converge.

An abstract painting by Harold Town, featuring a complex composition of bold, expressive brushstrokes in a wide range of colors including red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and black. The painting has a dynamic, almost architectural feel, with thick, layered applications of paint and prominent black outlines that define various shapes and forms. The overall effect is one of intense energy and visual complexity.

SIGNIFICANCE & CRITICAL ISSUES

Harold Town made a distinct contribution to the Abstract Expressionist movement in 1950s Canada as a member of Painters Eleven. He went on to launch numerous and varied bodies of work, usually executed in series, always with an experimental rigour and in pursuit of a consistent and evolving set of themes. His paintings and collages, drawings, and prints create a dynamic dialogue between traditional artistic modes and the contemporary urban, technological environment.

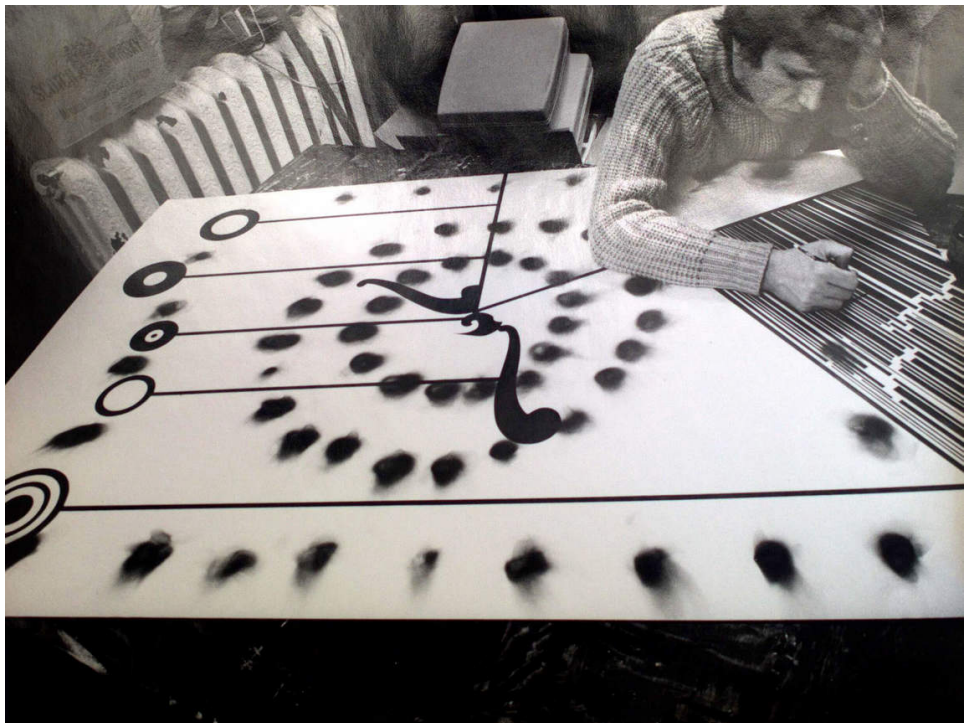
ACTION PAINTING

With his early international success and his determination to make world-challenging art while remaining rooted in Toronto, Town contributed a new confidence and maturity to the Canadian art scene from the late 1950s on. During this early period he wholeheartedly espoused the imperative for “action painting” articulated by American critic Harold Rosenberg: “A painting that is an act is inseparable from the biography of the artist.... [It] is a ‘moment’ in the adulterated mixture of his life.”¹ Town remained faithful to this axiom throughout the vicissitudes of his career. It underlay his rejection of both the formalism championed by critic Clement Greenberg and the “dematerialization” of Conceptual art.

Town’s work is unified by a number of interwoven themes: the collision of technology and nature in the urbanized environment; tensions between spontaneity and order, discord and harmony; human identity as performance and the artist as performer; erotic experience and gender roles; and comments on a period in the history of art when a huge range of visual languages and codes were simultaneously accessible. His late work is stylistically eclectic and asserts a self-conscious awareness of his location in a rapidly transforming world of communications and globalization.

Determined to continue within the traditional media of drawing and painting, he opened them up to a self-reflexive exploration of their historical dimensions and contemporary relevance in ways that anticipate the concerns of postmodern painters in the 1990s and after.

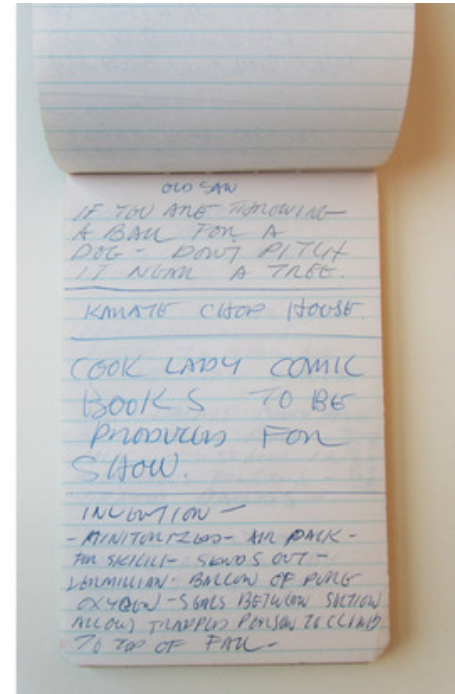
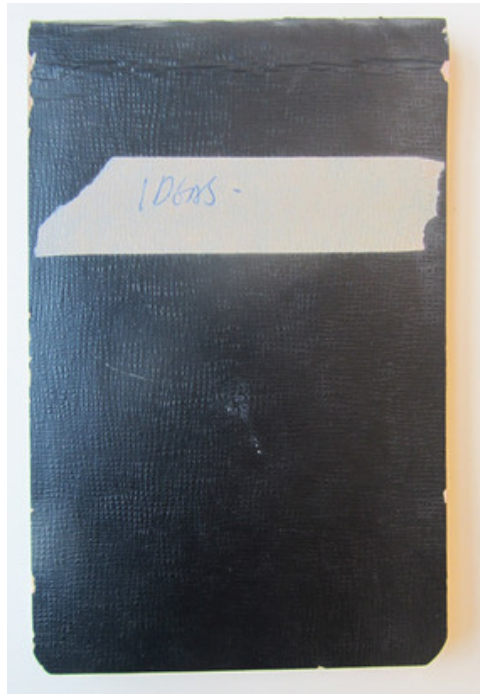
Town’s exploration of an extraordinary range of contemporary and historical styles throughout his career was a forward-looking strategy. At the time, artists were expected to develop an original signature style or mode of working and then pursue it single-mindedly, while the art scene was splintering into doctrinaire and mutually exclusive camps. For Town art was a challenging assortment of diverse languages that demanded to be studied and understood. From his vantage point in Toronto, contemporary currents in art had no more claim on him than the art of the past and of other cultures. To each he brought a high respect for technique and craft and the faith that it could expand his horizons and inform his engagement with the world in which he lived.



Harold Town in his studio in 1967, photographed by John Reeves.

RATING TOWN

Town's work raises the fascinating question of how the enduring value of art is established. His career was long and productive, but while his early Abstract Expressionist work has been broadly praised, his later work was rejected by the powerful art institutions that have shaped the accepted narrative of Canadian art history. Is this, as curator David Burnett argues, because they judged him against the prevailing critical theories that Town himself rejected?² Perhaps it is time to re-evaluate Town's significance.



Town's notebook containing ideas and questions about how the enduring value of art is established.

The standard accounts of modern art have been constructed by art historians in Europe and the United States, for whom Canadian art has been either invisible or deemed provincial. To enter the dominant mainstream, artists of Town's generation felt pressured to work in a major centre like New York or Paris. Is Town's significance limited to that of a local phenomenon? Should we value his work as reflective of a provincial experience, or as an example of the margin challenging the mainstream?

TOWN AND THEORY

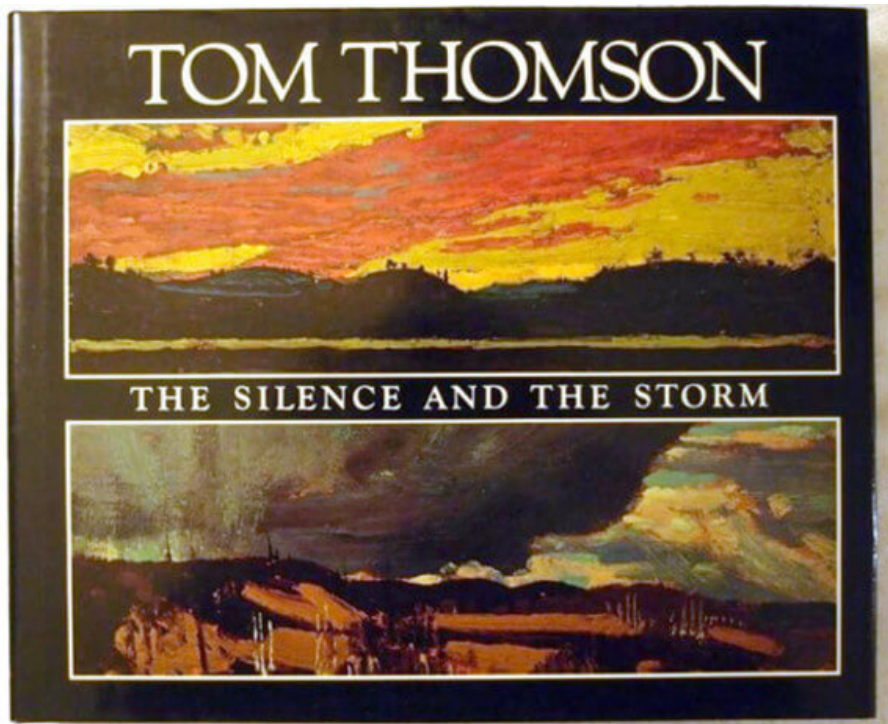
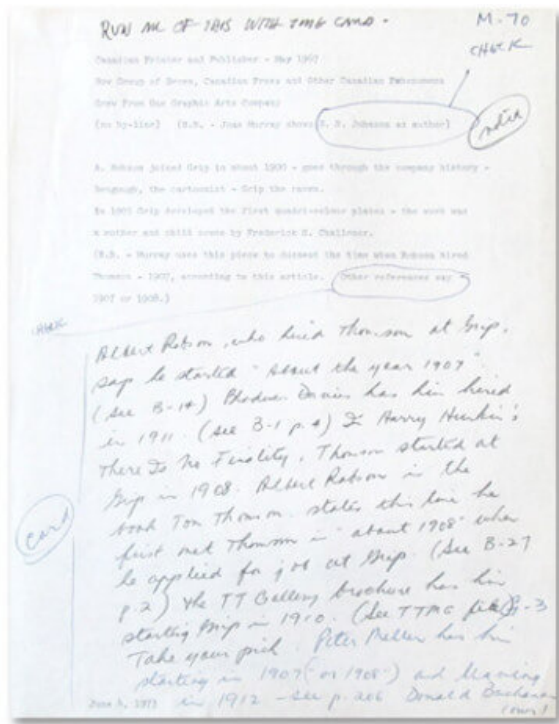
Being the polymath he was, Town took a keen interest in ideas about art and avidly followed contemporary criticism and art history. While he always upheld the primacy of artmaking over theory, his published statements, cultural commentary, and reviews reveal an awareness of the premises of his own art and those of artists he admired.

In 1964, reviewing a retrospective of Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) at the Art Gallery of Toronto (now the Art Gallery of Ontario), Town characterizes the Spanish artist as “the best maker of variations on a given theme in the history of art,” who had “made many ages of history his own.” His comments on Picasso highlight aspects present in Town’s own art practice. He observes: “Picasso has been seen by many critics as a sort of rocket blazing on and on into space in a straight line.... I think he is more like a wheel with a hub and spokes but no outer rim. He goes up the spoke and then slides back to the hub, picks up another familiar theme and goes up another spoke.”³ The spokes of Town’s wheel were his appropriations of historical and contemporary art modes and his exploration of media that accommodated his combination of technical virtuosity and intellectualism. The central hub that held his many and varied projects together was his enduring commitment to Rosenberg’s vision of art as a continuous exploration and analysis of self and world.



Harold Town in his home at 9 Castle Frank Crescent in 1964, photographed by John Reeves.

Rosenberg, and with him Town, rejected Greenberg’s prescription that painting and sculpture should act as autonomous disciplines, purge all external demands and realms of reference, and explore only their own inherent properties and constraints. They found this a reductive, academic formula and objected to its implied linear narrative of modern art as a progressive purification of art from all extraneous demands. Rosenberg regarded contemporary art since the Second World War as the product of a fundamental rupture. “All the art movements of this century, and some earlier ones,” he wrote in 1966, “have become equally up-to-date.” With society and values in continuous turmoil, and all of art history and the prewar modern movements now simultaneously accessible and legitimate, artists were faced with what he called the “anxiety of art”—the question of what to do in the face of this superabundant choice, when everything seemed already to have been done.⁴



LEFT: Manuscript page for *Tom Thomson: The Silence and the Storm*. RIGHT: Book cover of *Tom Thomson: The Silence and the Storm* by Harold Town and David P. Silcox. A prolific author and journalist, Town wrote about institutions, exhibitions and artists as diverse as Thomson, Albert Franck, and Pablo Picasso.

For Rosenberg the source of artistic value lies not in art's material products or stylistic turns, but in the unfolding mind of the individual artist who takes the risk of wrestling with this predicament. Rosenberg's critical method asserts the value of relativism: "The first requirement of art criticism is that it shall be relevant to the art under consideration; how correct are its evaluations of specific art objects is of lesser importance," he wrote in 1975.⁵ In emulation, Town's purpose—when writing about artists as diverse as Albert Franck (1899-1973), Tom Thomson (1877-1917), and Picasso—is to open the viewer's eyes to the artist's stages of decision making, to unravel "the painting as a formal object set into dialogue with creative intentions."⁶

Rosenberg's open-minded consideration of the great variety of new art movements gave permission to Town's investigation of a plurality of styles. Town's constant attention to the works of Old Masters as a measure of possibility and artistic attainment accords with Rosenberg's view that "the density of meaning in a modern painting is always to some degree an effect of the artist's engagement with the history of art, including ideas about it.... An historically ignorant painter has no better claim to attention than the ideas of an economist who never heard of the Stock Market Crash."⁷

ANTICIPATING POSTMODERNISM

The term "postmodern" has had no universally accepted definition, depending as it does on prior assumptions about the nature and meaning of the "modern" in art. Most broadly, it signals a number of breaks that artists made with the accepted norms of modern art practice during the 1960s. In Town's case this was a turn away from the autonomy and strictly formal concerns prescribed by Clement Greenberg. Town brought a gamut of external reference into his paintings, drawing on the worlds of the city and its museums.

Since Greenberg's doctrines were by then widely accepted in Canada, Town's combination of eclectic sources appeared to curators and critics as self-indulgently eccentric. With his 1962-64 series, the Set paintings and Tyranny of the Corner paintings, Town engaged in a new area of investigation, adjacent to that of the Pop art movement but in a more abstract vein. Using tools of appropriation, irony, and humour, he highlighted the artificial nature of sign systems and art styles, and the random ways in which signs collide and coexist in the contemporary environment.

The term postmodern was not available when Town made these series, but comparisons with later artworks that define the category show that Town was indeed entering this new frontier. For example, the paintings of Carroll Dunham (b. 1949) in the 1980s and those of Lydia Dona (b. 1955) in the 1990s combine drawn and painted elements from diverse visual worlds, including comic books, drawings of machine parts, decorative patterns, and abstract design elements. These elements collide in an open space that seems unbounded by the canvas while they are held to its surface by their identity as painterly marks.⁸ Town's 1962-64 paintings likewise combine elements taken from bewilderingly different symbol systems—maps, Asian character writing, or patterns of electronic circuitry, as in *Tyranny of the Corner* (*Sashay Set*), 1962.



Harold Town, *Festival*, 1965, oil and Lucite on canvas, 160 x 160 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

Town's anticipation of postmodernism can be seen again in his idiosyncratic response to the international Op art movement that became a sensation in New York with the Museum of Modern Art's 1965 exhibition *The Responsive Eye*. In a painting like *Festival*, 1965, the effects of layering, the implied continuation of the organic elements beyond the frame, and the sheer technical intricacy of interwoven elements move into a postmodern celebration of excess.

When Town brought figurative images back into his canvases in 1980, he was following in the wake of Philip Guston (1913-1980), who rejected modern abstraction.⁹ Rosenberg's defence of Guston—"Painting needs to purge itself of all systems that place so-called interests of art above the interests of the artist's mind"—was one that Town might have claimed as his own.¹⁰

LEGACY

Town did not surround himself with disciples or followers. Although friends found him generous and charming, as an artist he was highly competitive and spent vast amounts of time alone in the studio. He did directly mentor one emerging artist, Landon Mackenzie (b. 1954), whose grandparents lived across the street from Town on Castle Frank Crescent. Town was a close friend of Mackenzie's parents and particularly of her mother, Sheila, who hosted late-night parties at which Town and others held court until dawn. Mackenzie acknowledges the vivid impression his art left on her. Her first body of work, a series of diaristic monoprints in 1977, was done with Town in mind. She received her copy of Town's retrospective catalogue with the inscription "To my one and only pupil."¹¹ Other artists of the postmodern generation who have expressed interest in his work include Brian Boigon (b. 1955),¹² Oliver Girling (b. 1953),¹³ Cliff Eyland (b. 1954),¹⁴ Michael Davidson (b. 1953), and Eric Glavin (b. 1965).

Town may be compared in some respects to philosopher Marshall McLuhan: both rejected a narrow disciplinary focus, incorporating in their creative horizons the worlds of historical "high" culture, avant-garde experimentation, and popular media production. Both fell from a peak of extraordinary success to temporary oblivion. McLuhan's prophetic mapping of postmodern culture is now widely acknowledged, while Town's legacy is currently being reassessed.



Landon Mackenzie, *Signal (Birthday Party)*, 2010-11, synthetic polymer on linen, 200 x 300 cm, collection of the artist.

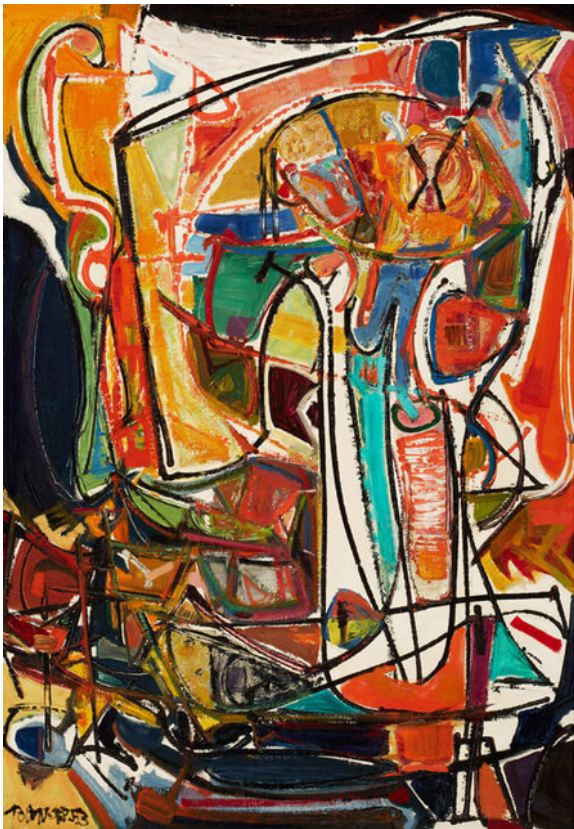
An abstract artwork featuring a dense, layered composition. The background is a mix of muted earth tones (beige, tan, grey). Overlaid on this are vibrant, dripping streaks of red, blue, and yellow paint. A large, circular, textured red shape is prominent in the lower-left corner. In the center, there's a dark, circular object, possibly a lens or a small sculpture, surrounded by more paint. A small, rectangular, light-colored object with the word 'KOPPE' is visible in the lower-right. The overall effect is one of intense, chaotic energy and layered textures.

STYLE & TECHNIQUE

Town is best known as a painter, but throughout his career he also developed bodies of work in drawing, printmaking, collage, assemblage, and sculpture. He retained a lifelong allegiance to abstraction as the distinctive mode of twentieth-century expression. In the graphic arts he found apt means to comment on contemporary icons. The stylistic variety in his work sprang from a determination to bring all the resources of art to bear on analyzing the rapidly changing environment in which he lived.

EARLY GESTURAL ABSTRACTION

As one of the youngest recruits to the international current of Abstract Expressionist painting in the 1950s, Town perceived it as an exciting liberation into an increasingly open-ended, free-associative way of painting, prompted by an inner world of stored sensory experiences and personal memories. With Painters Eleven he looked to New York, and his lifelong admiration for Willem de Kooning (1904–1997) began at this time.



LEFT: Harold Town, *Day Neon*, 1953, oil on Masonite, 91.1 x 63.5 cm, Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa. RIGHT: Harold Town, *The Dixon Passing Mugg's Island*, 1956, oil on Masonite, 122 x 124.5 cm, estate of Harold Town. This painting and *Day Neon* show the influence of Abstract Expressionism.

Town's stylistic signature was energetic drawing with the brush and flourishes of calligraphic detail. Increasingly he balanced these graphic marks against larger, textured colour areas and dense layers of pigment, creating shapes that evoke multiple associations.

"BIG ATTACK" PAINTINGS

After his experience of painting the St. Lawrence Seaway mural in 1958, Town began working on much larger canvases, roughly 2 by 2.5 metres.¹ By 1960 he was structuring these architectonic compositions with bold lines and large areas of black and saturated colour, as in *Inoutscape*, 1960, to create emblematic configurations. He also made many smaller paintings that began with complete spontaneity, building up thick layers of luscious paint that suggest human presences and locations in memory. A persisting theme was that of the hero, sometimes legendary but more often contemporary: baseball pitcher, aviator, architect, artist.

Town had rejected from the outset the idea of a single motif that would be the painter's hallmark, like the floating rectangles of Mark Rothko (1903-1970) or the central motifs of William Ronald (1926-1998). Instead every painting is individual and develops an emerging cluster of associations.



Town in front of his monumental St. Lawrence Seaway mural, 1958. Painting the mural led him to work on much larger canvases, such as *Inoutscape* (right).



Harold Town, *Inoutscape*, 1960, oil and Lucite on Belgian linen, 206.4 x 189.2 cm, McMaster Museum of Art, Hamilton.

SINGLE AUTOGRAPHIC PRINTS

Town earned international success for an innovative form of printmaking he developed during 1953-59, the monotypes that he called "single autographic prints." In this medium he developed procedures that would have a profound effect on his approach to artmaking in general. In 1953 he bought a lithographer's stone and press from Oscar Cahén (1916-1956). He used this not to make multiple copies of a particular work, but as a field on which to generate unique compositions. His first essays are simple line drawings done by reverse drawing. In *Soldier Leading Horse*, 1953, the paper is laid face down on the inked stone, and the motif is traced out with a pointed tool on the back so that the lines pick up the ink.



Harold Town, *Soldier Leading Horse*, 1953, print drawing ("single autographic print"), 42 x 57.4 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

Soon he developed more complex procedures. He might pull several impressions from a pre-inked plate, each of which could then be developed in a different way. Or he could print from the surface of a wet print onto another sheet of paper. In works like *Tree Zoo*, 1957, he placed cut papers onto the stone to generate shapes from stencils, or pre-inked them and printed them directly onto the print's surface.



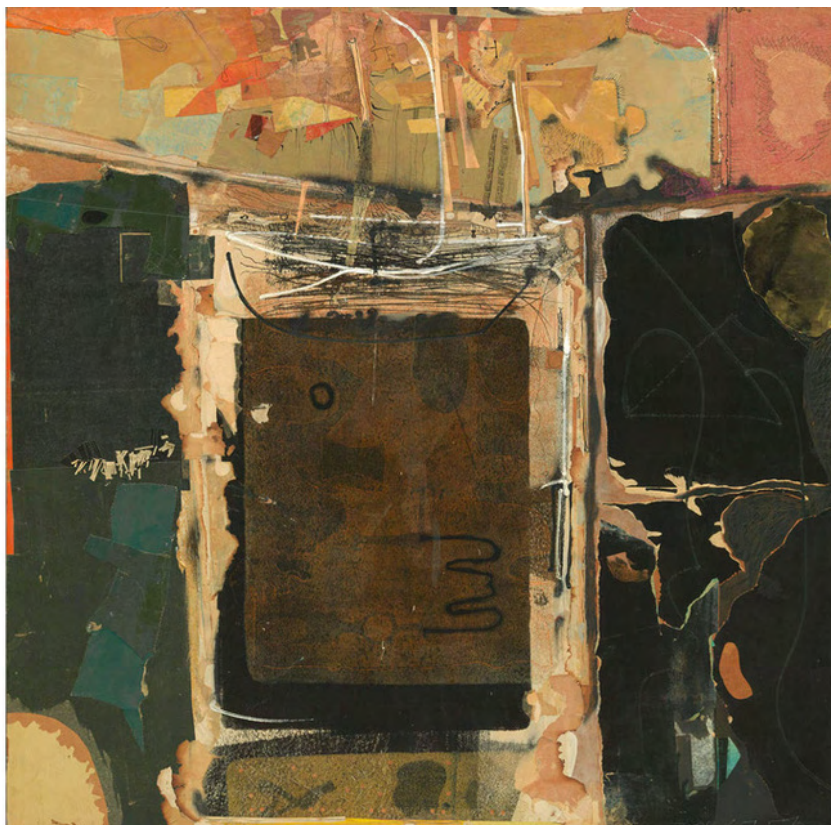
LEFT: Harold Town, *Tree Zoo*, 1957, single autographic print, 56.2 x 74.5 cm, Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa. RIGHT: Town and Museum of Modern Art's Riva Castleman select prints for *Canada '67*, photographed by John Reeves.

He developed increasingly sophisticated designs created with accidental and found shapes and with negative and positive use of stencils. Intangible effects of colour, texture, and illusory space result from many layers of overprinting. Town also used found materials—paper, string, cotton, leather, felt—that he placed on the stone to impress onto the print surface. Occasionally these materials remain embedded in the surface ink, like collage. This method of generating images challenged Town to think beyond his facility with the paintbrush.

COLLAGE, ASSEMBLAGE, AND SCULPTURE

Town shared the widespread interest in collage that flourished in the 1950s as the postwar generation claimed the legacies of Cubism, Dada, and the Surrealists. In 1956 he began pasting found materials onto sheets of Masonite.

The compositional modes of his collages share the aesthetic of his paintings: they spread out to fill the surface yet are given focus as configurations by areas of drawing in ink or paint, as in *Homage to C.T. Currelly No. 1*, 1957, Town's collage in honour of the first director of the Royal Ontario Museum. He juxtaposed contrasting or unexpected textures and fragments pulled from myriad everyday sources, leading the viewer through sequences of association and ambiguity, of close-up and distant viewing.

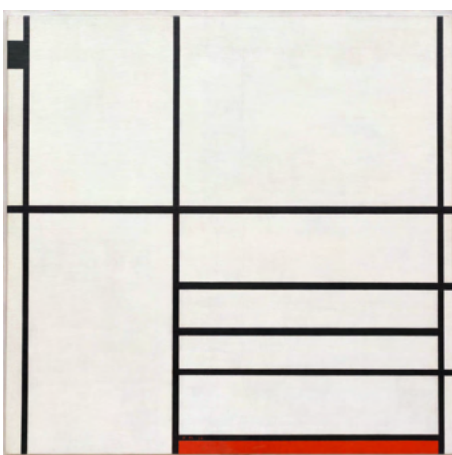


LEFT: Kurt Schwitters, *Hitler Gang*, 1944, collage, 34.7 x 24.5 cm, Sprengel Museum, Hannover, Germany. © Estate of Kurt Schwitters / SODRAC (2014). RIGHT: Harold Town, *Monument to C.T. Currelly No. 1*, 1957, paper, monoprint, ink, burned paper, thread, oil, pencil, pastel on panel, 121.9 x 121.9 cm, Vancouver Art Gallery. Influenced by Dada artists like Schwitters, in 1956 Town began to collage found materials onto sheets of Masonite.

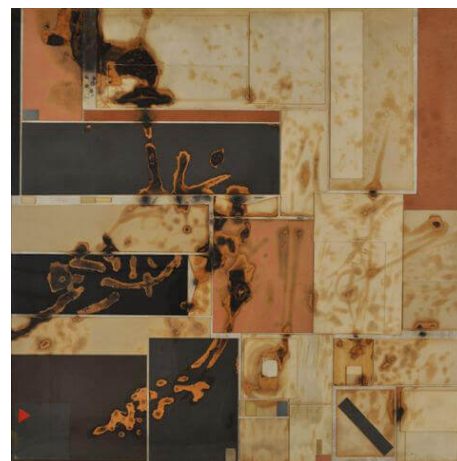
Town often incorporated the proliferating materials and new forms of the industrial world, products that rapidly mutated or became obsolete, making them witness to their moment in contemporary material culture and its transitory nature. He wrote: "[Collage] seems to me the one medium most suited to the age of conspicuous waste, and it's marvellous to think of the garbage of our age becoming the art of our time."² He brought these ephemeral contemporary materials into dialogue with the art forms of the past, from Japanese prints to Cubism and works by Piet Mondrian (1872-1944).

In *Death of Mondrian No. 1*, 1961, Town used a propane torch to scorch and burn the edges of the collaged papers. As art historian David P. Silcox comments, "The scorch marks ... speak of everything that Mondrian ignored."

The burning stood for spontaneity and motion and against stillness, for nuance and shading and against stilted forms and flat colours."³ In other works of the early 1960s he exploited smoke and singed the paper to generate accidental and evanescent forms that interact with geometric elements.



Piet Mondrian, *Composition en blanc, noir et rouge*, 1936, oil on canvas, 102.2 x 104.1 cm, Museum of Modern Art, NY © Mondrian/Holtzman Trust c/o HCR International USA.



Harold Town, *Death of Mondrian No. 1*, 1961, collage, 121.3 x 118.7 cm, Museum London. In opposition to the purity of Mondrian (left), Town created *Death of Mondrian No. 1*, using a propane torch to burn the edges of the collaged papers.

Town's work in collage suggested a logical extension into the three-dimensional modes of relief and assemblage. He had attended welding classes in 1961-62 at Central Technical School, Toronto, and in 1963 cast three bronze figures made from found materials that he titled *Greek Dynasty Group*.⁴

During the 1980s, when he had ample studio space, he created a variety of freestanding works that could be classified as either sculpture or assemblage (they were listed as collages in a Town retrospective catalogue), incorporating found objects and fragments from his own earlier production.⁵

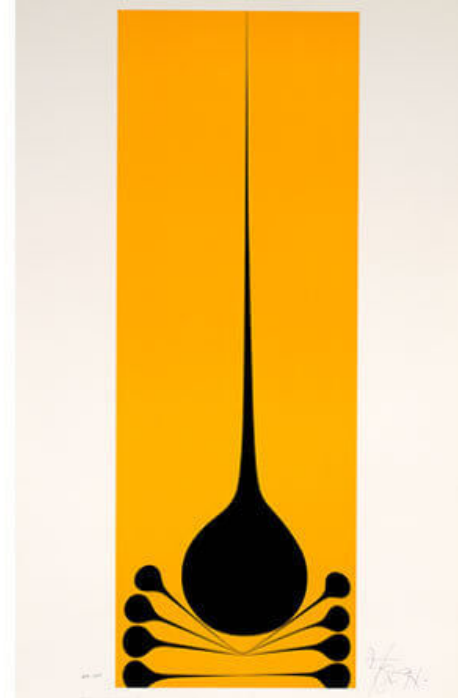
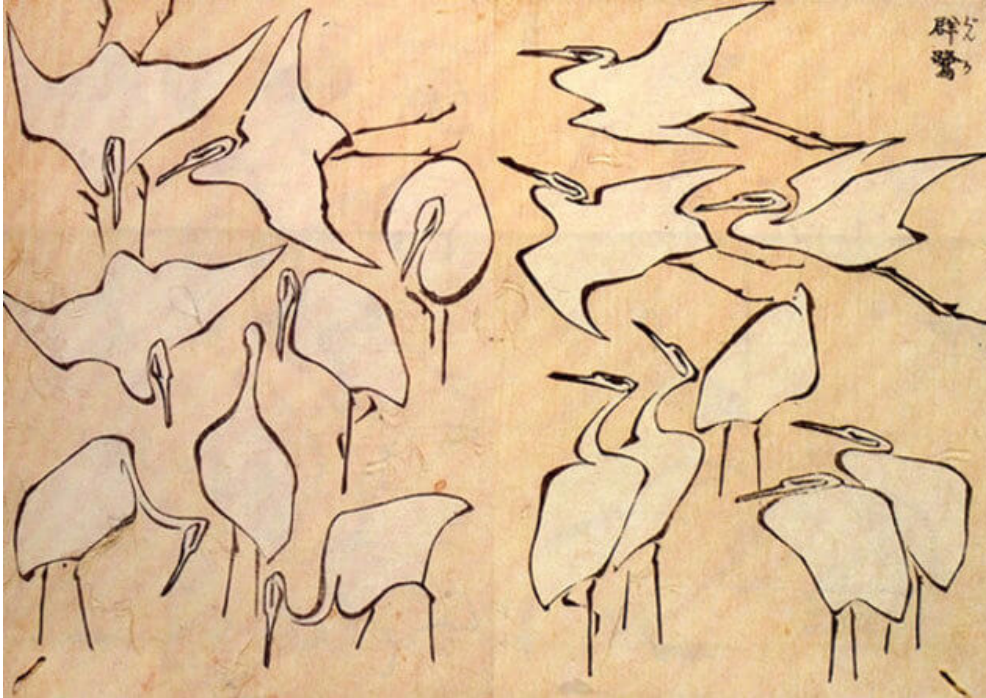


Two works by Harold Town in the Aeroquay Lounge in the now demolished Terminal 1 (1964-2004) at Toronto International Airport. *Left: Untitled* (from the *Tyranny of the Corner* series), 1963-64, oil on canvas, 243.8 x 426.7 cm; *right: Untitled* (double-faced mural), 1963-64, brass, 243.8 x 609.6 cm (made up of 60 panels, each 40.6 x 61 cm).

Town received commissions for two large architectural reliefs. One of them, a 2.4-by-6-metre screen for the Aeroquay Lounge at the Toronto International Airport in 1964 (reinstalled in the new Terminal 1 in 2006), is made up of sixty brass panels etched with intricate abstract patterns that resemble cryptic hieroglyphs. The other, an exterior relief for the North York Public Library in 1959, deploys writing symbols from different cultures inscribed on large ceramic tiles.

WORKS ON PAPER

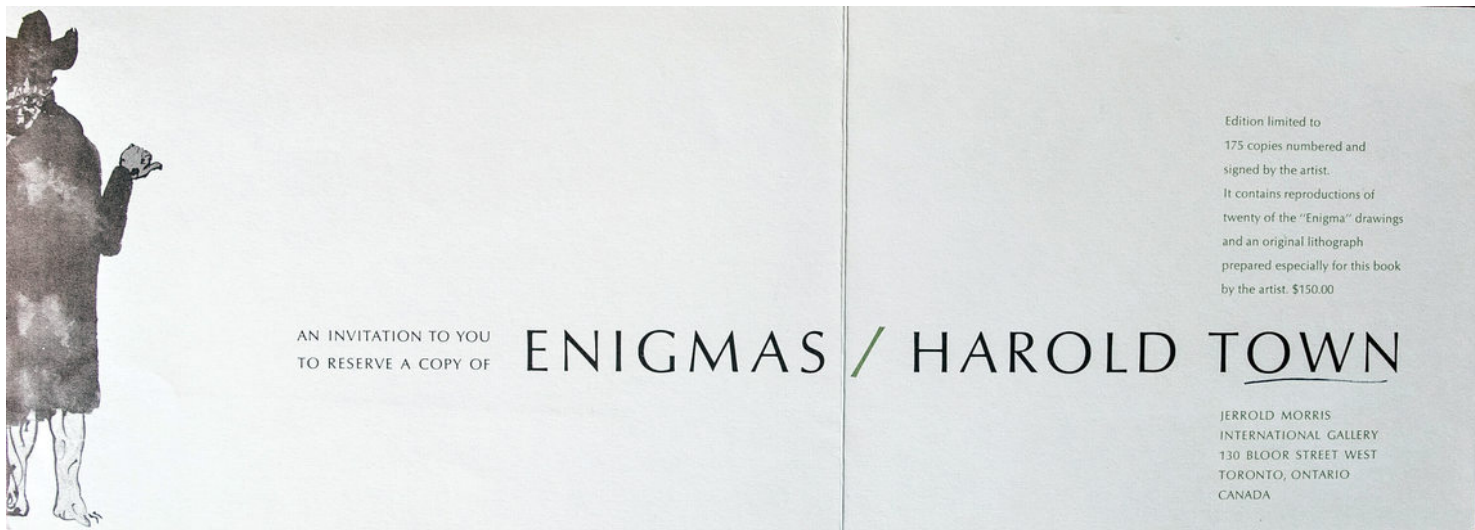
By 1960 Town had stopped making single autographic prints, but throughout his career he continued to pursue printmaking and drawing as independent creative modes. His increasingly formal investigations of abstract languages in the 1960s could be accommodated equally in painting and in works on paper. For example, the advent of serigraphy and commercial photo-offset lithography provided a vehicle for his flat, hard-edged designs, such as *Untitled*, 1971 (an offset lithograph made after a painting).



LEFT: Katsushika Hokusai, *Cranes* from *Quick Lessons in Simplified Drawing*, an art manual published in 1812. Town revered the work of Japanese ukiyo-e master Hokusai and regarded him as one of his teachers. RIGHT: Harold Town, *Untitled*, 1971, photo-offset lithograph on calendered wove paper, 95 x 60.8 cm; image: 88.7 x 31.8 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Town's outstanding gift and love for the discipline of drawing enabled him to create a graphic commentary on contemporary culture that abstract painting could not achieve. The human figure was his predominant concern. As a student he had drawn from live models and begun a lifelong study of different stylistic approaches to the figure, from Renaissance pen-and-ink drawing, through Western and Asian brush drawing, to the expressive distortions of Honoré Daumier (1808–1879) and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864–1901). He assimilated a lexicon of styles that fascinated him, claiming two prime masters, Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849), the great chronicler of Japanese life, and Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), the stylistic transformer.

Between 1964 and 1972 Town made the Enigmas—a series of compelling, obsessively detailed pen and brush drawings intended as sardonic personal comments on the shortcomings of the Canada that he loved.⁶



A limited-edition facsimile book of Town's Enigmas, each containing an original signed lithograph, was sold at the Jerrold Morris International Gallery in Toronto.

From the early 1950s on, Town also made virtuosic charcoal and brush drawings that condense into bold hieroglyphs a range of contemporary Toronto types and celebrities from the worlds of entertainment, sport, literature, and popular music.⁷ During 1968–71, with the help of his printmaker friend Frank Johnston, he made such drawings directly as limited-edition lithographs on zinc plates, titled *Popsters and Celebrities*.⁸

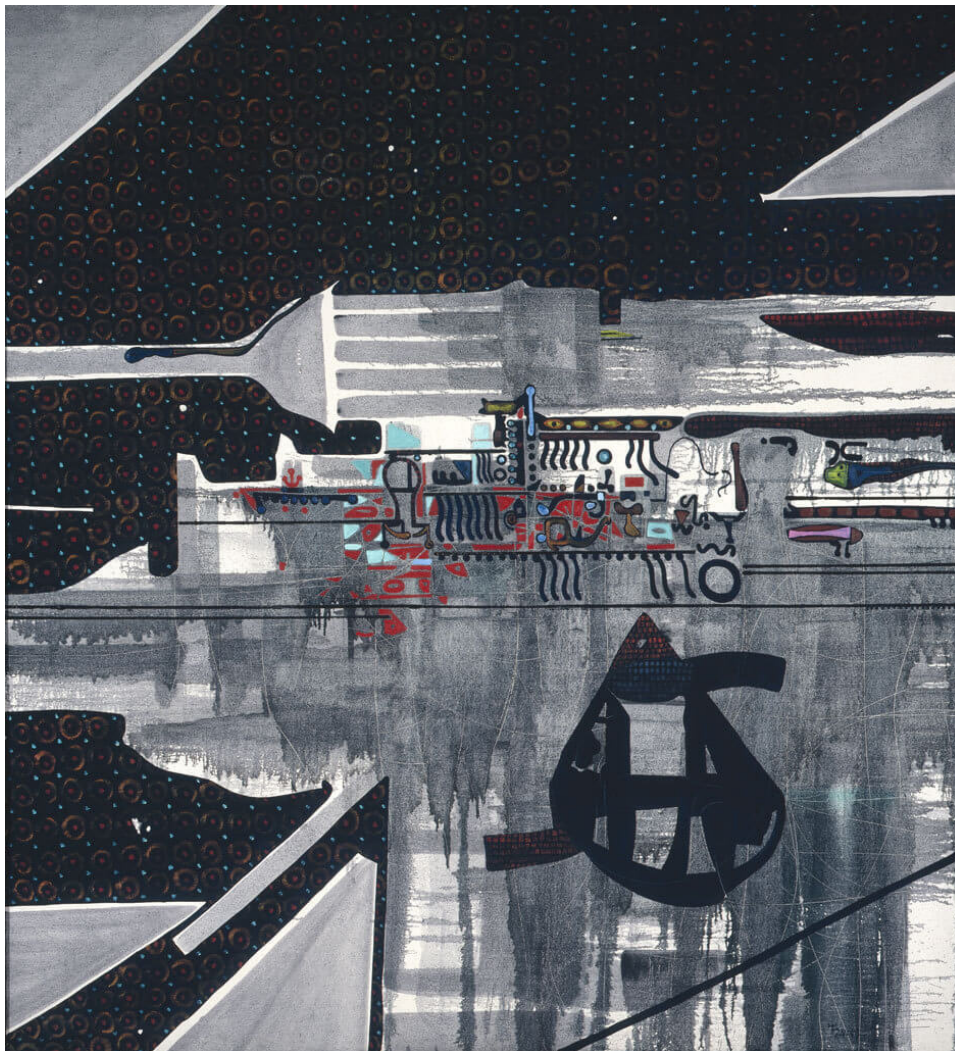
Throughout the 1970s and 1980s Town produced series that explored variations on appropriated images of the human figure. Often he took a motif or image by another artist as a starting point and explored it through a range of styles and media, as Picasso had done in his 1957 paraphrases of *Las Meninas*, by Diego Velázquez (1599–1660). Town's own suite, titled *The Lady in the Cook Photo* (1969–72), is based on a nineteenth-century Toronto photographer's portrait of an unidentified woman, a plain but monumental matron.

Drawing and printmaking suited Town's interest in erotic imagery. As the Women's Movement gained momentum in the 1970s, he placed such imagery at an ironic remove. Each of three late series—the *Vale Variations* (1972–77), the *Gods* (1975–79), and the *Toy Horses* (1976–84)—uses a sexually charged motif long established within his repertoire but now playfully deconstructed. These are images that comment on the history of styles and images.

SERIES PAINTINGS

In 1962 Town turned decisively away from the conventions of Abstract Expressionism to embrace a more conceptually driven approach. His paintings now were made in series, still abstract, each governed by specific, deliberately chosen formal constraints. Unlike the purely non-figurative abstraction of high modernism, however, these paintings allude to aspects of a dynamic urban-industrial environment with its physical and psychological tensions.

Two overlapping series, the Set paintings and the Tyranny of the Corner paintings, represent Town's first forays into what would later be called postmodern concerns. By using the term "set" in their titles, Town indicates that they are to be associated with the artifice of theatre and performance—the term is used for both a theatrical *mise en scène* and a session in jazz.



Harold Town, *Tyranny of the Corner (Sashay Set)*, 1962, oil and Lucite on canvas, 205.7 x 188.7 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Abandoning brilliant colours and thick impasto, Town lays down black areas and lines on a white-primed canvas. The almost monochrome palette is enriched with a dark Prussian-blue paint mixed into the black, giving it richness and variation. Onto many of the black areas Town paints a texture of small repeated units, sometimes dots, dashes, or crosses but most frequently little O's, which he called his "doughnuts."

In *Tyranny of the Corner (Sashay Set)*, 1962, the repetition of units invokes the presence of the machine and mechanical production. Because the units are hand-drawn, the brush has to be repeatedly loaded with paint, giving a living, organic feel to these areas of pattern. Another of Town's procedures was to pour a diluted wash of paint onto the central area of his canvases, which he then tilted so that the paint could flow and run in streams, introducing the element of chance into the composition. This interweaving of discordant components was a technique Town had exploited in his collages.

With the Tyranny of the Corner paintings Town posed an additional constraint. He started building the composition at the corners, an area of the canvas that

tends to be neglected if the focus is at the centre, as happens when dynamic symmetry or all-over compositional strategies are being used.

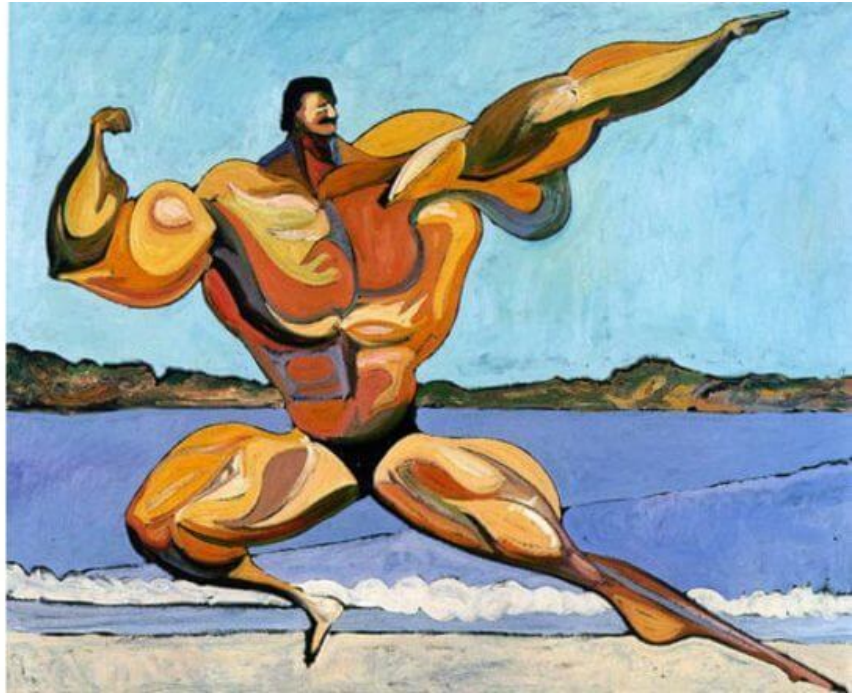
Through the 1960s and 1970s Town continued to devise compositional formats each of which he then explored: the Optical and Silent Light paintings (1964–69), the Stretch series (1968–70), Parks series (1970–72), and the Snaps (1972–76). Geometric elements had entered his work in 1964 paintings such as *Optical* and *No-op*, in which Town used masking tape as a tool, setting up a counterpoint between straight lines and organic, irregular components. With contrasts of light and dark, and with variations in the size of pattern units, he created shifting illusory spaces that exist in tension with a respect for the flatness of the canvas.

With the Stretches, the Parks, and the Snaps, Town further developed the principle of placing opposed stylistic vocabularies in tension, subverting what he saw as the reductionism of high-modernist, “pure” painting.

For the monumental Snaps series in 1972, Town adapted the snap-line, a traditional carpenter’s technique for transferring straight lines to a surface. He applied pigments by stretching a string in front of the canvas, loading it with paint, and then snapping it against the picture surface. This method eliminated the “hand” of the artist from the work, while producing an unprecedented intensity of colour.

PAINTINGS OF THE 1980S

In 1980 Town brought figurative imagery back into his painted canvases, a move that had parallels with the “return to painting” that burst upon the international art scene between 1978 and 1981. Both his works on paper of the 1970s and his monumental new emblematic paintings like *Spengler Writing The Decline of the West at His Desk on Top of the Kitchen Table*, 1980, would have fit the parameters of the 1978 exhibition “*Bad” Painting*, at the New Museum, New York. The show’s curator, Marcia Tucker, defines this anti-modernist turn: “The freedom with which these artists mix classical and popular art-historical sources, kitsch and traditional images, archetypal and personal fantasies, constitutes a rejection of the concept of progress per se.”⁹



LEFT: Harold Town, *Spengler Writing The Decline of the West at His Desk on Top of the Kitchen Table*, 1980, oil and Lucite on canvas, 228.6 x 188 cm, private collection. RIGHT: Harold Town, *Musclemans*, 1983, oil and Lucite on canvas, 121.9 x 137.2 cm, estate of Harold Town.

Stylistically Town's 1980 paintings refer to the naive drawing and bright colours of folk art. Town continued this absurdist figurative vein in another late painting series, the *Musclemen* (1981-84), which reflected ironically on the masculine ideal in popular culture.

Town's final series of abstract paintings done in the four years that preceded his death were dedicated to sheer visual pleasure and beauty. These included his *Stages*, a series of paintings on collaged mat board, and the *Edge* paintings, a series of monumental abstract canvases. Here again we see two stylistic languages in collision: the undulating horizontal colour stripes that fill the centre create a sensation of oceanic calm as they push to the edges a border of brightly coloured animated graphic shapes.

Town's practice of working simultaneously in different media and styles was described by his contemporaries as bewildering. In a postmodern world of appropriation and boundary blurring, it simply seems normal. What validated the practice in Town's eyes was his assimilation of sophisticated artistic traditions that could be used to reflect on his own life experience. What keeps his work fresh today is his witty and critically acute fusion of the art museum in his head with the popular culture of the urban industrial world.



Although the works listed below are held by the following institutions, they may not always be on view.



HAROLD TOWN

Life & Work by Gerta Moray

ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO

317 Dundas Street West
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
1-877-225-4246 or 416-979-6648
ago.net



Harold Town, *Soldier Leading Horse*, 1953

Print drawing
42 x 57.3 cm



Harold Town, *Bacchante Threatened by a Panther*, 1959

Brush and ink on paper
56.5 x 76.1 cm



Harold Town, *Festival*, 1965

Oil and Lucite on canvas
160 x 160 cm

MCMASTER MUSEUM OF ART

1280 Main Street West
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
905-525-9140
museum.mcmaster.ca



Harold Town, *Inoutscape*, 1960

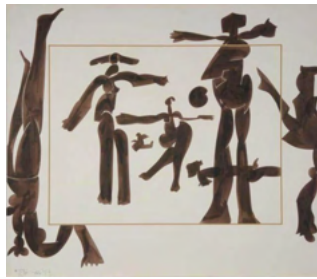
Oil and Lucite on Belgian linen
206.4 x 189.2 cm

MUSEUM LONDON

421 Ridout Street North
London, Ontario, Canada
519-661-0333
museumlondon.ca



**Harold Town, *Death of Mondrian*
No. 1, 1961**
Collage
121.3 x 118.7 cm



**Harold Town, *Vale Variation*
No. 145, 1975**
Ink on paper
66 x 76 cm

NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA

380 Sussex Drive
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada
613-990-1985
gallery.ca



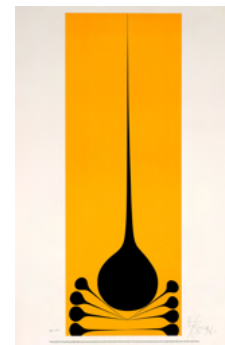
**Harold Town, *Mechanical Forest*
Sound, 1953**
Oil on Masonite
122 x 167.8 cm



Harold Town, *Music Behind*, 1958-59
Collage on hardboard, including hardboard backing of a TV set with plastic cone, cardboard package for paint tubes, waxed paper straws, paper labels, stamps and envelope, music sheet, leaf fan, razor blade, thread, fabric, string, Arborite, corrugated cardboard, printed papers, tissue paper, and gouache
103.2 x 102.5 cm



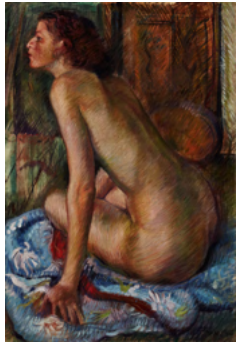
Harold Town, *Tyranny of the Corner (Sashay Set)*, 1962
Oil and Lucite on canvas
205.7 x 188.7 cm



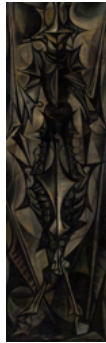
Harold Town, *Untitled*, 1971
Colour photo-offset lithograph on calendered wove paper
95 x 60.8 cm; image: 88.7 x 31.8 cm

ROBERT MCLAUGHLIN GALLERY

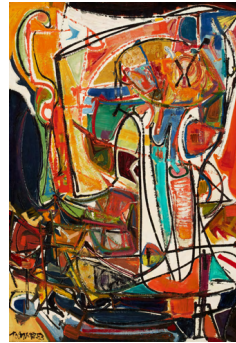
72 Queen Street
Oshawa, Ontario, Canada
905-576-3000
rmg.on.ca



**Harold Town, Seated
Nude, 1944**
Oil on canvas
96.8 x 74.5 cm



**Harold Town, Don
Quixote, 1948**
Oil on Masonite
122.2 x 38.7 cm



**Harold Town, Day
Neon, 1953**
Oil on Masonite
91.1 x 63.5 cm



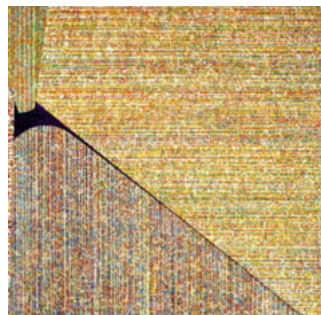
**Harold Town, Tree Zoo,
1957**
Single autographic print
56.2 x 74.5 cm

UNIVERSITY OF LETHBRIDGE ART GALLERY

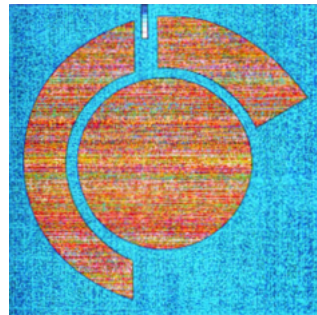
4401 University Drive
Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada
403-329-2666
uleth.ca/artgallery



**Harold Town, Mick
Jagger, 1969**
Ink on paper
62.9 x 73.7 cm



**Harold Town, Snap No.
78, 1974**
Oil on canvas
185.4 x 185.4 cm



**Harold Town, Snap No.
80, 1974**
Oil on canvas
185.4 x 185.4 cm



**Harold Town, Vale
Variation No. 108, 1974**
Mixed media on paper
76.8 x 97.8 cm



Harold Town, *Toy Horse*

No. 196, 1982

Acrylic on board

86.4 x 111.8 cm

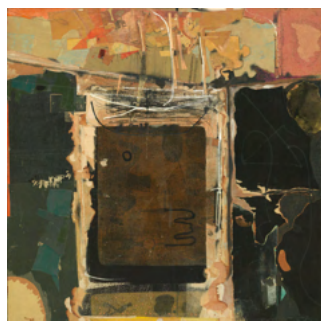
VANCOUVER ART GALLERY

750 Hornby Street

Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

604-662-4700

vanartgallery.bc.ca



Harold Town, *Monument to C.T.*

Currelly No. 1, 1957

Paper, monotype, ink, burned
paper, thread, oil, pencil, pastel
on panel

121.9 x 121.9 cm



NOTES

BIOGRAPHY

1. Robert Fulford, *Harold Town: Drawings* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1969), 69.
2. Iris Nowell, *Hot Breakfast for Sparrows: My Life with Harold Town* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1992), 24.
3. Pearl McCarthy, "Town and His Country: The Realm of Power and the River," *Globe Magazine*, October 25, 1958, 16-17.
4. "World of Art," *Toronto Star*, February 11, 1959.
5. Barrie Hale, *Out of the Park: Modernist Painting in Toronto, 1950-80*, Provincial Essays, vol. 2 (Toronto: Phacops Publishing Society, 1985); Roald Nasgaard, *Abstract Painting in Canada* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2007); Iris Nowell, *Painters Eleven: The Wild Ones of Canadian Art* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2010).
6. "Harold Town: Bad Boy of Canadian Art," *Toronto Telegram Weekend Magazine* 12, no. 16 (1962).
7. Alan Phillips, "Canadian Painting's Angriest Young Man," *Star Weekly*, April 2, 1960, 12.
8. Antony Ferry, "Harold Town: Artist with a Tax Problem," *Toronto Star*, January 29, 1966.
9. Conversation with the author, April 16, 2012.
10. Paul Duval, "Town Goes to Town," *Toronto Telegram*, March 21, 1964.
11. Dennis Reid, "Notes on the Toronto Painting Scene, 1959-69," in *Canadian Art Today*, ed. William Townsend (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1970), 33-35.
12. Harold Town, "The Art Boom That Was a Trifle Flat-Chested—Not a Complete Bust," in *Canadian Art Today*, ed. William Townsend (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1970), 44; and Town, "An Artist and Critic-at-Large Embarks on a Toronto Odyssey," *Globe and Mail*, May 3, 1975.
13. In New York Town had two solo shows, at the Andrew-Morris Gallery in late 1962 and the Bonino Gallery in 1964. For four years, from 1966-69, Town had annual exhibitions in Chicago at the Sears Vincent Price Gallery. But neither New York nor Chicago would become permanent venues for Town's work.
14. Iris Nowell, *Painters Eleven: The Wild Ones of Canadian Art* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2010), 171.



15. Gary Michael Dault, "It Isn't Easy to Handle Harold Town and His Art," *Toronto Star*, December 19, 1975.

16. Christopher Hume, "He Was an Artist the Way Mozart Was a Composer," *Toronto Star*, December 28, 1990, D19, 22.

17. Robert Fulford, "Harold Town: 'Mad for Drawing,'" *Globe and Mail*, December 31, 1990, C1

18. "Artist Town, 66, Is Dead," *Toronto Star*, December 28, 1990, A1.

19. David Burnett, "Tribute: Harold Town," *Artpost* 40, no. 8 (Spring 1991): 15.

KEY WORKS: DAY NEON

1. "Toronto's Beauty Enthralls Painter," *Toronto Telegram*, November 16, 1960.

KEY WORKS: BACCHANTE THREATENED

1. Robert Fulford, *Harold Town: Drawings* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1969), 9.

2. Robert Fulford, *Harold Town: Drawings* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1969), 18-19.

KEY WORKS: INOUTSCAPE

1. David Burnett, *Town* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1986), 105.

KEY WORKS: ENIGMA NO. 9

1. Robert Fulford, *Harold Town: Drawings* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1969), 8.

KEY WORKS: FESTIVAL

1. Harold Town and Kenneth Saltmarche, *Indications: Harold Town, 1944-1975; Paintings, Collage, Drawings, Prints, Sculpture*, preface by Ted Fraser (Windsor: Art Gallery of Windsor, 1975), catalogue entry 45.

KEY WORKS: SILENT LIGHT NO. 11

1. Iris Nowell, *Hot Breakfast for Sparrows: My Life with Harold Town* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1992), illustrations between pages 116-67.

2. Paul Russell, *Toronto Star*, December 5, 1970.

3. *Harold Town: 1954/59 Prints and Collages* (Toronto: Jerrold Morris International Gallery, 1967).

KEY WORKS: SNAP NO. 17

1. Gary Michael Dault, "It Isn't Easy to Handle Harold Town and His Art," *Toronto Star*, December 19, 1975.

KEY WORKS: SPENGLER WRITING THE DECLINE OF THE WEST

1. Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, vol.1, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson (London: Allen & Unwin, 1926), 294.



KEY WORKS: STAGES NO. 8

1. Brian Boigon, "Harold Town," *Canadian Art* 5, no. 3 (Fall 1988): 126.

SIGNIFICANCE & CRITICAL ISSUES

1. Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," *Art News*, December 1952, 23.
2. David Burnett, *Town* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1986), 38-39.
3. Harold Town, "Town Looks at Picasso," *Globe Magazine* (Toronto), January 11, 1964, 17.
4. Harold Rosenberg, "Foreword to the Second Edition," in *The Anxious Object: Art Today and Its Audience*, 2nd ed. (New York: Horizon Press, 1966), 13.
5. Harold Rosenberg, "Criticism and Its Premises," in *Art on the Edge* (New York: Collier-Macmillan, 1975), 135.
6. Harold Town, "Town Looks at Picasso," *Globe Magazine* (Toronto), January 11, 1964, 9.
7. Harold Rosenberg, *The Anxious Object: Art Today and Its Audience*, 2nd ed. (New York: Horizon Press, 1966), 25-26.
8. For a discussion and other examples of this approach to painting, see Elisabeth Sussman et al., *Remote Viewing: Invented Worlds in Recent Painting and Drawing* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2005).
9. Philip Guston, quoted in Bill Berkson, "The New Gustons," *Artnews* 69, no. 6 (October 1970): 44.
10. Harold Rosenberg, *The De-definition of Art: Action Art to Pop to Earthworks*, 2nd ed. (University of Chicago Press, 1983), 140.
11. Letter from Landon Mackenzie to the author, November 13, 2012.
12. See Brian Boigon, "Harold Town," *Canadian Art* 5, no. 3 (Fall 1988): 126.
13. See Oliver Girling, "Curatorial Laboratory Projects #2: Impostor" in Gary Michael Dault et al., *Curatorial Projects* (Hamilton: Art Gallery of Hamilton, 1993), 11-24 (exhibition catalogue).
14. See Cliff Eyland, "Harold Town," curatorial text for exhibition *Museecology*, 1997, at Gallery One One One, University of Manitoba.

STYLE & TECHNIQUE

1. These larger canvases were made possible when Town acquired a roll of Belgian linen that was discovered backstage at the old Shea's Hippodrome Theatre when it was demolished in 1957. Email from David Silcox to the author, February 22, 2012.



2. Quoted in a letter from Town to curator Linda Milrod, November 27, 1978, cited in Linda Milrod, *Pasted Paper: A Look at Canadian Collage, 1955-1965* (Kingston: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1979), 7.
3. David P. Silcox, "Harold Town at the Jerrold Morris Gallery, Toronto," *Canadian Art* 19, no. 4 (July/August 1962): 260.
4. *Canadian Sculpture Today* (Toronto: Dorothy Cameron Gallery, 1964), exhibition catalogue.
5. David Burnett, *Town* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1986), 223.
6. Robert Fulford, *Harold Town: Drawings* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1969), 60-79.
7. Robert Fulford, *Harold Town: Drawings* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1969), 42-53.
8. Iris Nowell, *Hot Breakfast for Sparrows: My Life with Harold Town* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1992), 89-92.
9. Marcia Tucker, press release for the exhibition "*Bad*" Painting, New Museum, New York, 1978, http://archive.newmuseum.org/index.php/Detail/Occurrence/Show/occurrence_id/5.

GLOSSARY

Abstract Expressionism

A style that flourished in New York in the 1940s and 1950s, Abstract Expressionism is defined by its combination of formal abstraction and self-conscious expression. The term describes a wide variety of work; among the most famous Abstract Expressionists are Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, and Willem de Kooning.

Archambault, Louis (Canadian, 1915–2003)

A significant figure in twentieth-century Canadian sculpture, whose numerous public commissions can be found in Montreal, Toronto, and Ottawa. Archambault also contributed to the Canadian pavilions at the Brussels World's Fair, 1958, and Expo 67, in Montreal. He was a signatory of the 1948 *Prisme d'yeux* manifesto.

Automatistes

A Montreal-based artists' group interested in Surrealism and the Surrealist technique of automatism. Centred on the artist, teacher, and theorist Paul-Émile Borduas, the Automatistes exhibited regularly between 1946 and 1954, making Montreal a locus of mid-century avant-garde art. Members included Marcel Barbeau, Marcelle Ferron, Jean-Paul Mousseau, Jean Paul Riopelle, Fernand Leduc, and Françoise Sullivan.

BAXTER&, IAIN (Canadian, b. 1936)

A seminal figure in the history of Conceptual art in Canada. In 1966, he co-founded, with Ingrid Baxter, the N.E. Thing Co. Conceptual artists' collective, and that same year launched the gallery and the visual arts program at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, B.C. His work typically incorporates photography, performance, and installations. In 2005, Iain Baxter changed his name to IAIN BAXTER& to reflect his non-authorial approach to art production.

Borduas, Paul-Émile (Canadian, 1905–1960)

The leader of the avant-garde Automatistes and one of Canada's most important modern artists. Borduas was also an influential advocate for reform in Quebec, calling for liberation from religious and narrow nationalist values in the 1948 manifesto *Refus global*. (See *Paul-Émile Borduas: Life & Work* by François-Marc Gagnon.)

Bush, Jack (Canadian, 1909–1977)

A member of Painters Eleven, formed in 1953, Bush found his real voice only after critic Clement Greenberg visited his studio in 1957 and focused on his watercolours. Out of these Bush developed the shapes and broad colour planes that would come to characterize a personal colour-field style, parallel to the work of Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland. With them, Bush participated in Greenberg's 1964 exhibition *Post Painterly Abstraction*.

Cahén, Oscar (Danish/Canadian, 1916–1956)

Born in Copenhagen, Cahén attended the Dresden Academy of Fine Arts and taught design, illustration, and painting at Prague's Rotter School of Graphic Arts before his family's anti-Nazi activities forced him to flee to England. He was

deported to Canada as an enemy alien and settled in Montreal before moving to Toronto in 1943; he was one of the founders of Painters Eleven in 1953. (See *Oscar Cahén: Life & Work* by Jaleen Grove.)

Chambers, Jack (Canadian, 1931–1978)

A London, Ontario, painter and avant-garde filmmaker, whose meditative paintings typically depict domestic subjects, Chambers was committed to regionalism, despite the international outlook he developed during five years of artistic training in Madrid. He was one of the founders of CARFAC, Canada's artists' rights protection agency. (See *Jack Chambers: Life & Work* by Mark Cheetham.)

Colville, Alex (Canadian, 1920–2013)

A painter, muralist, draftsman, and engraver whose highly representational images verge on the surreal. Colville's paintings typically depict everyday scenes of rural Canadian life imbued with an uneasy quality. Since his process was meticulous—the paint applied dot by dot—he produced only three or four paintings or serigraphs per year. (See *Alex Colville: Life & Work* by Ray Cronin.)

Conceptual art

Traced to the work of Marcel Duchamp but not codified until the 1960s, "Conceptual art" is a general term for art that emphasizes ideas over form. The finished product may even be physically transient, as with land art or performance art.

Corot, Jean-Baptiste-Camille (French, 1796–1875)

Although known today as a landscape painter—among the most influential of the nineteenth century—and the leading member of the Barbizon school of French nature painters, Corot rose to prominence in his own time for the Romantic tableaux he exhibited regularly at the Paris Salon.

Cubism

A radical style of painting developed by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque in Paris between 1907 and 1914, Cubism is defined by the representation of numerous perspectives at once. Cubism is considered crucial to the history of modern art for its enormous international impact; famous practitioners also include Juan Gris and Francis Picabia.

Curnoe, Greg (Canadian, 1936–1992)

A central figure in London regionalism from the 1960s to the early 1990s, Curnoe was a painter, printmaker, and graphic artist who found inspiration in his life and his Southwestern Ontario surroundings. His wide-ranging art interests included Surrealism, Dada, Cubism, and the work of many individual artists, both historical and contemporary. (See *Greg Curnoe: Life & Work* by Judith Rodger.)

Dada

A multidisciplinary movement that arose in Europe in response to the horrors of the First World War, whose adherents aimed to deconstruct and demolish traditional societal values and institutions. Artworks, often collages and ready-

mades, typically scorned fine materials and craftsmanship. Chief Dadaists include Marcel Duchamp, Tristan Tzara, Kurt Schwitters, and Hans Arp.

Daumier, Honoré (French, 1808–1879)

A prominent artist in politically tumultuous nineteenth-century Paris, known primarily as a satirist. Daumier's published drawings and lithographs viciously mocked political figures and the bourgeoisie, for which he was jailed for six months in 1832–33. He also helped develop the genre of caricature sculpture.

Davidson, Michael (Canadian, b. 1953)

A Toronto-based painter of large, emotionally intense canvases who often uses a reduced palette dominated by black and white, recalling the abstraction of Robert Motherwell and Helen Frankenthaler.

Degas, Edgar (French, 1834–1917)

A painter, sculptor, printmaker, and draftsman, Degas was aligned with but separate from the Impressionist movement, frequently departing from its norms: he was not interested in changing atmospheric effects and rarely painted outdoors. Characteristic subjects include the ballet, theatre, cafés, and women at their toilette.

de Kooning, Willem (Dutch/American, 1904–1997)

Although a prominent Abstract Expressionist, de Kooning was not concerned with strict abstraction—figures appear in the dense and riotous brushwork that characterizes much of his work. Among his most famous works are those of the Women series, first exhibited in 1953 to much critical scorn.

Dona, Lydia (Romanian/American, b. 1955)

Dona trained in Jerusalem before moving to New York, where she studied under Keith Haring at the School of Visual Arts. Her brightly coloured paintings straddle the line between abstraction and figuration, rigid geometry and gesture. Graffiti-like forms figure prominently in her canvases.

Dunham, Carroll (American, b. 1949)

An abstract painter active since the 1970s in New York, whose early works evoke modernist predecessors such as Arshile Gorky and André Masson. Dunham's more recent paintings often display cartoon-like forms, lurid colours, and an interest in organic matter.

Eyland, Cliff (Canadian, b.1954–2020)

An artist, writer, curator, and professor of painting at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg. Since 1981 Eyland has concentrated on creating small-format drawings and paintings, the size of index cards. A permanent installation of over one thousand of his small paintings opened at the Millennium Library in Winnipeg in 2005, and another at Halifax Central Library in 2015.

figure-ground relationship

A compositional term referring to the perception of an object (the figure), as distinguished from its surround (the ground), especially in a context where this distinction is ambiguous. These two elements are interdependent—one defines the other. They can also be articulated as positive and negative shapes.

**Franck, Albert (Dutch/Canadian, 1899–1973)**

Born in the Netherlands, Franck immigrated to Canada following the First World War. He is known for his watercolours and oil paintings of Toronto streets and houses. Franck was an important influence on Painters Eleven.

Girling, Oliver (South African/Canadian, b. 1953)

Girling's roughly rendered representational paintings and drawings—on canvas, paper, vinyl, cotton, and other materials—treat a range of subjects in both imaginary and more realist modes. His work is in the collections of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, and the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

Glavin, Eric (Canadian, b. 1965)

A digital media artist, painter, and sculptor trained in the Experimental Arts program at the Ontario College of Art (now OCAD University) in Toronto. Glavin was a founding member of the Toronto collective Painting Disorders and has participated in exhibitions in Ireland, Austria, China, the United States, and Canada, among others.

Gorky, Arshile (Armenian/American, 1904–1948)

Gorky immigrated to the United States after his mother died in his arms during the Armenian genocide. Among the most eminent painters of the postwar New York School, he had a seminal influence on Abstract Expressionism, and he was a mentor to other artists, including Willem de Kooning.

Greenberg, Clement (American, 1909–1994)

A highly influential art critic and essayist known primarily for his formalist approach and his contentious concept of modernism, which he first outlined in his 1960 publication "Modernist Painting." Greenberg was, notably, an early champion of Abstract Expressionists, including Jackson Pollock and the sculptor David Smith.

Group of Seven

A progressive and nationalistic school of landscape painting in Canada, the Group of Seven was active between 1920 (the year of the group's first exhibition, at the Art Gallery of Toronto, now the Art Gallery of Ontario) and 1933. Founding members were the artists Franklin Carmichael, Lawren S. Harris, A.Y. Jackson, Frank H. Johnston, Arthur Lismer, J.E.H. MacDonald, and F.H. Varley.

Guston, Philip (American, 1913–1980)

A significant figure in postwar American art. Guston's paintings and drawings range from the intensely personal and abstract to the expressly political, as with his murals of the 1930s and 1940s for the WPA Depression-era Federal Art Project. After nearly two decades of success as part of New York's Abstract Expressionist movement, Guston triggered the anger and scorn of the art world with his return to figurative and symbolic imagery.

Harris, Lawren S. (Canadian, 1885–1970)

A founding member of the Group of Seven in Toronto in 1920, Harris was widely considered its unofficial leader. Unlike other members of the group, Harris

moved away from painting representational landscapes, first to abstracted landscapes and then to pure abstraction. The Group of Seven broke up in 1933, and when the Canadian Group of Painters was formed in 1933, Harris was elected its first president.

Hodgson, Tom (Canadian, 1924–2006)

An Abstract Expressionist painter, advertising art director, respected art teacher, and champion athlete raised on Centre Island, in Toronto Harbour. Hodgson was a member of Painters Eleven; he trained with Arthur Lismer at the Ontario College of Art (now OCAD University), Toronto, and made action paintings that were often immense in scale.

Hofmann, Hans (German/American, 1880–1966)

As both an Abstract Expressionist painter and a teacher who influenced a generation of artists, Hans Hofmann was a key figure in the American art world following the Second World War. Trained in Munich, where he grew up, and in Paris, Hofmann began his career as a Cubist painter and showed in Europe in the early part of the twentieth century. His style moved through Expressionism, and by 1939 he was creating the Abstract Expressionist works that would secure his place in art historical narratives. Hofmann's later work is defined by his bold use of colour and gesture, and by a sense of the Cubist structure he developed as a young painter.

Hokusai, Katsushika (Japanese, 1760–1849)

One of the most prolific and influential artists of Edo Japan, who created some 30,000 drawings and illustrated 500 books during seventy years of artistic production. Hokusai's output includes paintings, prints, and drawings that range from landscapes to erotica and draw from Chinese, Japanese, and Western traditions.

London Regionalism

From the 1960s to the early 1990s, the arts community in London, Ontario, was exceptionally productive and dynamic, centred on the artists Greg Curnoe and Jack Chambers. Like-minded local artists, writers, and musicians rejected the notion of the metropolis as the necessary location and subject of artistic production, preferring to look for inspiration in their own lives and region.

Luke, Alexandra (Canadian, 1901–1967)

An Abstract Expressionist who trained under Jock Macdonald and Hans Hofmann, Alexandra Luke organized the Canadian Abstract Exhibition in 1952, which led to the formation, in 1953, of the group Painters Eleven. Known as a colourist, Luke showed as a member of Painters Eleven until the group disbanded in 1960.

Macdonald, Jock (British/Canadian, 1897–1960)

A painter, printmaker, illustrator, teacher, and a pioneer in the development of abstract art in Canada. Macdonald began as a landscape painter but became interested in abstraction in the 1940s, influenced by Hans Hofmann and Jean Dubuffet. Macdonald was one of the founders of Painters Eleven in 1953. (See *Jock Macdonald: Life & Work* by Joyce Zemans.)

Mackenzie, Landon (Canadian, b. 1954)

A Vancouver-based artist and teacher whose large-format abstract paintings are conceptually based while evoking natural forms. They are characterized by brilliant colours and often incorporate elements of collage, text, and map-making. Mackenzie teaches painting and drawing at Emily Carr University of Art + Design.

Mies van der Rohe, Ludwig (German, 1886–1969)

A leading twentieth-century architect, furniture designer, and teacher largely responsible for the development of modernist architecture. He was director of the Bauhaus from 1930 until he closed it, under pressure from the Nazis, in 1933. In 1938 he moved to Chicago, where he taught and practised into the 1960s.

Minimalism

A branch of abstract art characterized by extreme restraint in form, Minimalism was most popular among American artists from the 1950s to 1970s. Although Minimalism can be expressed in any medium, it is most commonly associated with sculpture; principal Minimalists include Carl Andre, Donald Judd, and Tony Smith. Among the Minimalist painters were Agnes Martin, Barnett Newman, Kenneth Noland, and Frank Stella.

Molinari, Guido (Canadian, 1933–2004)

A painter and theorist who was a member of the Plasticien movement in Montreal. His work, beginning in the mid-1950s, set new models for geometric painting internationally. His “razor-edged” Stripe Paintings create the illusion of a dynamic space, evoked by the viewer’s active engagement with how colours appear to change as they rhythmically repeat themselves across the canvas.

Mondrian, Piet (Dutch, 1872–1944)

A leading figure in abstract art, known for his geometric “grid” paintings of straight black lines and brightly coloured squares, whose influence on contemporary visual culture has been called the most far-reaching of any artist. Mondrian saw his highly restrictive and rigorous style, dubbed Neo-Plasticism, as expressive of universal truths.

monoprint

A printmaking technique invented by Giovanni Castiglione around 1640 and revived in the late nineteenth century by, most notably, Paul Gauguin and Edgar Degas. A monoprint is produced by printing from a plate that is inked but otherwise untouched; the process typically yields only one good impression.

monotype

A type of print resulting from a process that yields only one impression. A monotype is produced by drawing or painting an image directly onto a bare matrix and then transferring it to paper under the pressure of a printing press.

Moore, Henry (British, 1898–1986)

One of the twentieth century’s most important sculptors, Henry Moore was influenced by non-European sculpture; later he also drew from natural sources,



such as bones and pebbles. His technique most often involved carving directly into his material, whether wood, stone, or plaster.

N.E. Thing Co.

The incorporated business and artistic handle of IAIN BAXTER and Ingrid Baxter, N.E. Thing Co. was founded by the couple in 1966 as a way to explore the interactions between their daily lives and various cultural systems. The artworks produced by the N.E. Thing Co. are among the earliest examples of Conceptual art in Canada. It was disbanded in 1978.

Neo-Dada

A term for the constellation of experimental and conceptual artworks and styles of the 1950s and 1960s, from Fluxus to Pop art. It was popularized by the art historian and critic Barbara Rose. Like their Dadaist predecessors, Neo-Dada artists were primarily interested in social, art historical, and aesthetic critique.

Op art

A style of abstract art that was developed in the 1950s and 1960s, primarily by Victor Vasarely and the British artist Bridget Riley. It aimed to produce an intense visual experience through the use of severe colour contrasts and hard-edge forms.

Painters Eleven

An artists' group active from 1953 to 1960, formed by eleven Abstract Expressionist Toronto-area painters, including Harold Town, Jack Bush, and William Ronald. They joined together in an effort to increase their exposure, given the limited interest in abstract art in Ontario at the time.

papier mâché

A material traditionally used to create small objects and sculpture, composed of wet pulped or shredded paper mixed with a binding agent, such as glue or tree resin. It hardens when baked or air-dried. Papier mâché is now extensively used in packaging.

Parkin, John C. (Canadian, 1922–1988)

A modernist architect and proponent of the arts in Canada, known for shaping Toronto's urban landscape. Parkin's architectural style features clean lines, functionality, glass, and steel. Notable Toronto buildings of his design include the original Don Mills Shopping Centre (1957–58), the original Toronto International Airport complex (1963–66), and the first expansion of the Art Gallery of Ontario (1973–77).

photo-offset lithography

A photomechanical process—that is, a means of translating photographs into ink-based prints—in use since the 1950s. Offset lithographs are composed of differently coloured dots, visible under magnification, that blend together when viewed by the naked eye, thus creating the illusion of continuous tone.

Picasso, Pablo (Spanish, 1881–1973)

One of the most famous and influential artists of his time, Picasso was a prominent member of the Parisian avant-garde circle that included Henri



Matisse and Georges Braque. His painting *Les Femmes d'Alger*, 1907, is considered by many to be the most important of the twentieth century.

Pollock, Jackson (American, 1912–1956)

Leader of the Abstract Expressionist movement, best known for his drip paintings of the 1940s and 1950s. Pollock is also closely associated with action painting, in which the act of painting is gestural and the artist approaches the canvas with little notion of what he or she will create.

Pop art

A movement of the late 1950s to early 1970s in Britain and the United States, Pop art adopted imagery from commercial design, television, and cinema. Pop art's most recognized proponents are Richard Hamilton, David Hockney, Andy Warhol, and Roy Lichtenstein.

postmodernism

A broad art historical category of contemporary art that uses traditional and new media to deconstruct cultural history and deploys theory in its attack on modernist ideals. Canadian postmodern artists include Janice Gurney, Mark Lewis, Ken Lum, and Joanne Tod.

Rauschenberg, Robert (American, 1925–2008)

A significant figure in twentieth-century American art whose paintings, sculptures, prints, photographs, collages, and installations span styles and movements from Abstract Expressionism to Pop art. Together with Jasper Johns he led a revival of interest in Dada. Among Rauschenberg's best-known works is *Bed*, 1955, one of his first "Combines," or paintings that incorporate found objects.

Revell, Viljo (Finnish, 1910–1964)

An architect and leading Finnish modernist whose functionalist aesthetic and collaborative working methods had a widespread and lasting impact on architecture in Helsinki. Revell designed numerous buildings in Finland and internationally; in 1958 he won the design competition for Toronto's iconic new city hall, which was completed in 1964.

Ronald, William (Canadian, 1926–1998)

An Abstract Expressionist and member of Painters Eleven, which sprang from the Toronto group exhibition that he organized in 1953, *Abstracts at Home*. Ronald lived in New York from 1955 to 1965. His work is held both by New York institutions—including the Whitney Museum of American Art, Guggenheim Museum, and Museum of Modern Art—and by numerous Canadian museums.

Rosenberg, Harold (American, 1906–1978)

An influential critic, literary writer, and lecturer who developed the concept of action painting, which he expounded in several articles from 1952 onward. Between 1962 and 1978 Rosenberg wrote monographs on New York School luminaries Arshile Gorky, Philip Guston, Willem de Kooning, and Barnett Newman.

Rothko, Mark (American, 1903–1970)

A leading figure of Abstract Expressionism, Rothko began his career as an illustrator and watercolourist. In the late 1940s he developed the style that would come to define his career, creating intense colour-field oil paintings that express the same anxiety and mystery that informed his earlier figurative work.

Rousseau, Henri (French, 1844–1910)

A self-taught painter known for his dreamlike canvases depicting exotic landscapes and animals, such as *The Sleeping Gypsy*, 1897, and *The Repast of the Lion*, 1907. Rousseau was admired by Pablo Picasso and other artists of the Parisian avant-garde. Despite the technical naivety of his work he is considered a modern master.

scumble

To scumble is to modify the colour or tone of a painted area by applying over it an opaque or semi-opaque colour, usually with a fairly dry brush, so thinly and lightly that the base colour partially shows through.

Shadbolt, Jack (Canadian, 1909–1998)

Primarily known as a painter and draftsman, Shadbolt studied art in London, Paris, and New York before returning to British Columbia. He taught at the Vancouver School of Art from 1945 to 1966, becoming the head of the school's painting and drawing section. Major influences include Emily Carr and Aboriginal art of the Pacific Northwest.

Snow, Michael (Canadian, 1928–2023)

The paintings, films, photographs, sculptures, installations, and musical performances of artist Michael Snow kept him in the spotlight for more than sixty years. Snow's *Walking Woman* series of the 1960s holds a prominent place in Canadian art history. His contributions to visual art, experimental film, and music have been recognized internationally. (See *Michael Snow: Life & Work* by Martha Langford.)

Soto, Jesús Rafael (Venezuelan, 1923–2005)

A painter and sculptor born in Caracas, Soto directed Maracaibo's art college before moving to Paris in 1950. His highly inventive monumental works create optical sensations through movement by their component parts, or by the spectator. They have been commissioned for cities throughout Venezuela, Europe, and North America and include *Suspended Virtual Volume*, 1978, installed in Toronto's Royal Bank Plaza.

Surrealism

An early twentieth-century literary and artistic movement that began in Paris, Surrealism aimed to express the workings of the unconscious, free of convention and reason, and was characterized by fantastic images and incongruous juxtapositions. The movement spread globally, influencing film, theatre, and music.

Sutherland, Graham (British, 1903–1980)

A painter, printmaker, and designer interested primarily in landscapes and natural motifs, which he represented in a non-traditional, almost Surrealist style.

His Crucifixion and Thorn Head images gained wide currency as expressions of the human condition in the aftermath of the Second World War.

Thomson, Tom (Canadian, 1877–1917)

A seminal figure in the creation of a national school of painting, Thomson is known for a bold vision of Algonquin Park—aligned stylistically with Post-Impressionism and Art Nouveau—that has come to symbolize both the Canadian landscape and Canadian landscape painting. Thomson and the members of what would in 1920 become the Group of Seven profoundly influenced one another's work. (See *Tom Thomson: Life & Work* by David P. Silcox.)

Titian (Italian, c.1488–1576)

Tiziano Vecellio, known as Titian in English, was one of the greatest painters of the Venetian Renaissance, whose formal innovations in brushwork and colour signalled the rise of a new aesthetic in Western art. Patronized by royalty, Titian enjoyed a formidable reputation throughout much of Europe. His work influenced later painters, including Diego Velázquez and Peter Paul Rubens.

Toulouse-Lautrec, Henri de (French, 1864–1901)

A painter and printmaker best known for his depictions of Parisian nightlife, who created a vast body of work despite physical and psychological hardships. Toulouse-Lautrec was celebrated by both the avant-garde and the general public, and the distinctive aesthetic of his turn-of-the-century posters influenced commercial art well into the twentieth century.

Vasarely, Victor (Hungarian/French, 1906–1997)

A painter, printmaker, and graphic designer, and a leader of the Op art movement. Vasarely studied the work of Bauhaus artists in Budapest before moving to Paris in 1930. He continued to concentrate on geometric abstraction throughout his career, even as styles like Tachism came to dominate the art scene in Paris.

Velázquez, Diego (Spanish, 1599–1660)

A towering figure of the Spanish Golden Age, Velázquez was court painter to Philip IV. His portraits of members of the royal family—including his celebrated *Las Meninas*, 1656—as well as his mythological, historical, and religious scenes were greatly respected by innovative artists of later centuries, including Francisco Goya and Édouard Manet.

Venice Biennale

Founded in 1895 as a biannual exhibition of avant-garde and contemporary art from participating countries, many of which have permanent pavilions in the Venice Giardini, a section of parkland that serves as the heart of the event. There have historically been several additions to the Biennale's programming, including film, theatre, and musical festivals. At present, the main events are the International Art Exhibition, which is held in odd-numbered years, and the International Architecture Exhibition (or Venice Biennale of Architecture), which is held in even-numbered years. Today, it regularly attracts more than 370,000 visitors. Canada has been participating since 1952.



Vermeer, Johannes (Dutch, 1632–1675)

A major figure in seventeenth-century Dutch art, whose technically masterful and evocative paintings are among the most celebrated in Western art history. He is best known for genre scenes—such as *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher*—that display meticulous construction and attention to light.

Wieland, Joyce (Canadian, 1930–1998)

A central figure in contemporary Canadian art, Wieland engaged with painting, filmmaking, and cloth and plastic assemblage to explore with wit and passion ideas related to gender, national identity, and the natural world. In 1971 she became the first living Canadian woman artist to have a solo exhibition at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa. (See *Joyce Wieland: Life & Work* by Johanne Sloan.)

Wilson, York (Canadian, 1907–1984)

A painter, collagist, and prominent muralist who lived for many years in Mexico. Wilson worked as a commercial illustrator prior to the 1930s, and while he experimented with abstraction for much of his life, he never abandoned his concern for drawing technique, which he worked continually to refine.

Yarwood, Walter (Canadian, 1917–1996)

Originally a painter, Yarwood abandoned the medium for sculpture after the demise of Painters Eleven, of which he was a member. He constructed his works from such materials as cast aluminum, bronze, wood, and found objects. His public commissions can be found in Winnipeg, Toronto, and Montreal.

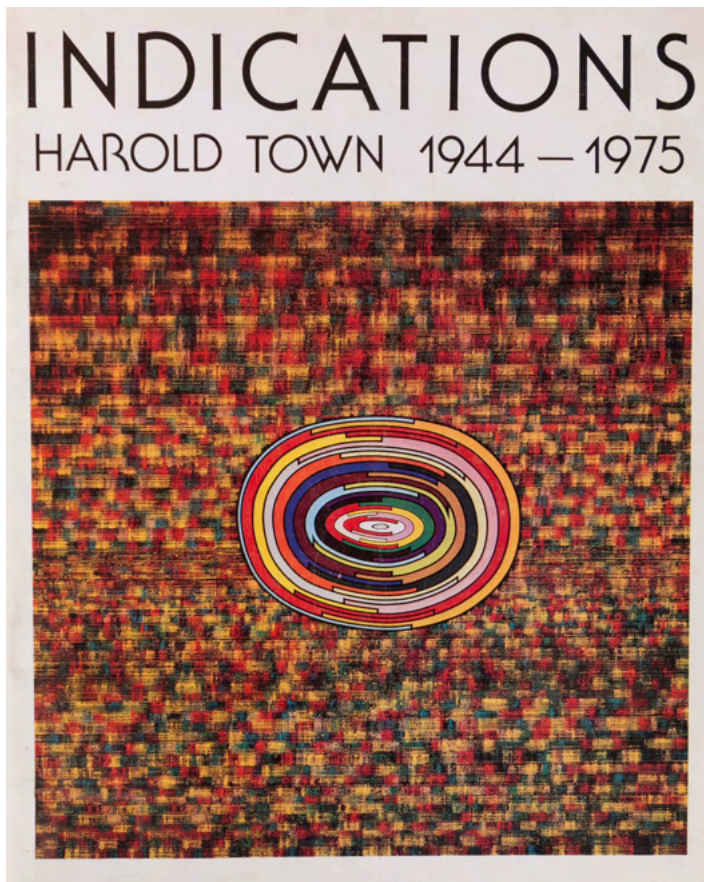
A black and white photograph of a man in a suit and tie, focused on his work at a desk. He is using a typewriter, with his hands positioned on the keys. The desk is cluttered with various items, including an open book in the foreground, a pen holder, and several papers. In the background, there are shelves filled with books, suggesting a library or an office from a past era. The overall atmosphere is one of quiet concentration and professional diligence.

SOURCES & RESOURCES

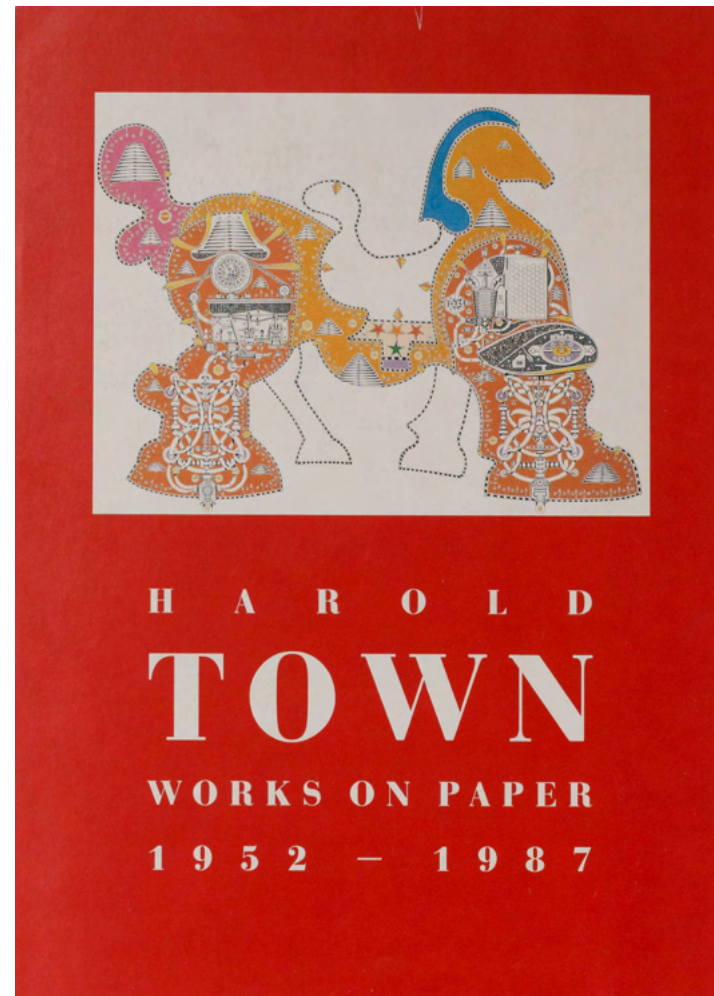
Town's career is discussed in all publications on modern art in Canada. He has an extensive exhibition history, and his writing and interviews have been preserved. His archives are held at Library and Archives Canada, in Ottawa.

KEY EXHIBITIONS

Town's exhibition history is voluminous. Selected exhibitions, some with valuable catalogue essays (as indicated), are listed below. More complete listings can be found in the publications by David Burnett (1986) and Iris Nowell (2010).



Catalogue for the 1975 exhibition *Indications: Harold Town, 1944-1975* at the Art Gallery of Windsor



Flyer for the 1987 exhibition *Town: Works on Paper, 1952-1987* at the Canada House Cultural Centre Gallery, London, England

1954

March 1954, *Painters Eleven*, Roberts Gallery, Toronto. Inaugural Painters Eleven group exhibition. Subsequent annual Painters Eleven shows, 1955, 1956, 1957 with catalogue, 1958, 1958-59 circulated by National Gallery of Canada.

Prints, Picture Loan Society, Toronto. First solo print show; second print show at this gallery, 1956.

1955

October 1955, *One Man Show: Recent Colour Print Collages*, Helene Arthur Upstairs Gallery, Toronto. Subsequent solo shows at this gallery (under new name, Mazelow Gallery), 1966, 1967, 1969, 1970, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1974, 1975.

1956

June-October 1956, 28th Venice Biennale, *Louis Archambault, Jack Shadbolt, Harold Town*.



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- 1957** January 1957, *Harold Town*, Gallery of Contemporary Art, Toronto. First solo painting exhibition.
March 1957, *Autographic Prints by Harold Town*, Galerie L'Actuelle, Montreal.
July–September 1957, 2nd Ljubljana International Print Biennale, Yugoslavia. Town receives award; represented here subsequently, 1959, 1961, 1963.
July–November 1957, Milan Triennale.
September–December 1957, 4th Bienal de São Paulo. Town wins the Arno Prize.
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- 1958** October 1958, *Two Canadian Painters: Paul-Émile Borduas and Harold Town*, Arthur Tooth & Sons Gallery, London, England.
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- 1959** January–February 1959, *Town Collages*, Jordan Gallery, Toronto. Catalogue; essay by Robert Fulford.
September–October 1959, *An Exhibition of Drawings by Harold Town*, Laing Galleries, Toronto. Subsequent show at this gallery, 1961. Catalogues; essays by Robert Fulford. (The 1961 show brought Town notoriety when thirty works were sold within two hours of the opening.)
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- 1960** *Guggenheim International Exhibition*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Catalogue.
October–November 1960, *Salon d'automne: Kazuo Nakamura and Harold Town*, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.
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- 1962** January 1962, *Harold Town*, Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery.
April–May 1962, *Harold Town: New Paintings, Collages, Drawings*, Jerrold Morris International Gallery, Toronto. Subsequent exhibitions at this gallery, 1964, with catalogue, essay by Elizabeth Kilbourn; 1966; 1967, with catalogue, essay by Jerrold Morris; 1969.
October–November 1962, *Art of the Americas*, Trabia-Morris Gallery, New York.
November 1962–January 1963, *Town*, Andrew-Morris Gallery, New York.
December 1962, *Harold Town*, Galerie Dresdnere, Montreal. Subsequent show at this gallery, 1964.
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- 1963** March 1963, *Town: An Exhibition of Recent Paintings of the Theme of "The Tyranny of the Corner,"* Fairleigh Dickinson University, Madison, NJ.

November–December 1963, 1st Bienal Americana de Grabado, Santiago. Canadian section (curated by Kay Fenwick) wins Grand Award for best national representation; Town wins Second Purchase Award.
-
- 1964** March 1964, *Harold Town Retrospective: 80 Drawings*, Jerrold Morris International Gallery, Toronto. Catalogue; essay by Elizabeth Kilbourn.



June–October 1964, 32nd Venice Biennale, *Harold Town and Elza Mayhew*.
October–November 1964, *Thirteen Paintings by Harold Town*, Vancouver Art Gallery.
October–November 1964, *Harold Town Paintings*, Bonino Gallery, New York.

-
- 1966** January–February 1966, *Harold Town*, Sears Vincent Price Gallery, Chicago. Subsequent shows at this gallery, 1967, 1968, 1969.
May 1966, *Exhibition of Autographic Prints and Drawings in Brush, Pen and Ink*, Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery.
June 1966, *Harold Town*, Waddington Galleries, Montreal. Subsequent exhibitions at Waddington, Montreal branches: 1970, 1972, 1974, 1977, 1978, 1979, 1980; and Waddington, Toronto: 1981.
-
- 1967** January 1967, *Harold Town Paintings*, Scarborough College, University of Toronto.
-
- 1969** January 1969, *Harold Town: Enigmas*, Hart House, University of Toronto.
-
- 1970** February 1970, *Retrospective Drawing Exhibition*, Art Gallery of Windsor.
-
- 1973** May–June 1973, *Harold Town: The First Exhibition of New Work, 1969–1973*, Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa; curator Kay Reid. Catalogue; essay by David P. Silcox. Toured Ontario.
-
- 1975** *Indications: Harold Town, 1944–1975; Paintings, Collage, Drawings, Prints, Sculpture*, Art Gallery of Windsor; curator Ted Fraser. Travelled in a reduced version to Sarnia Public Library and Art Gallery, October–November 1975; Macdonald Block, Queen’s Park, Toronto, December 1975–January 1976. Catalogue; essay by Ted Fraser, includes information directly from the artist.
-
- 1980** September–October 1980, *Poets and Other People: Drawings by Harold Town*, Art Gallery of Windsor. Catalogue; essay by Robert Fulford.
-
- 1986** May 1986, *Harold Town: A Retrospective*, Art Gallery of Ontario. Book-form catalogue by David Burnett.
-
- 1987** June–September 1987, *Town: Works on Paper, 1952–1987*, Canada House Cultural Centre Gallery, London, England. Travelled to Centre culturel canadien, Paris, December 1987–January 1988; Koffler Gallery, Toronto, December 1989. Catalogue; essay by David Burnett.
-
- 1997** November 1997, *Magnificent Decade: The Art of Harold Town, 1955–1965*, Moore Gallery, Toronto. Catalogue.
November 1997, *Harold Town*, National Archives of Canada, Ottawa. Exhibition of items from the Town fonds, acquired by the National Archives.

Town was a gifted writer. He contributed regular cultural commentary for the Canadian press and polemical pieces on contemporary art, and he spoke about his own art when he gave interviews. But he disliked theorizing and agreed with his preferred critic, Harold Rosenberg, that “art should not be supported by words.” Below is a selected list of his most revealing writings, book publications, and interviews, in chronological order.

Invitation to the exhibition *Painters Eleven*, Roberts Gallery, Toronto, 1955.
Includes a statement by Town.

Painters Eleven. Toronto: Roberts Gallery, 1957. Exhibition catalogue.
Includes a statement and essay by Town.

Introduction to *Painters Eleven with Ten Distinguished Artists from Quebec*.
Toronto: Park Gallery, 1958. Exhibition catalogue.

“Toronto’s Beauty Enthralls Painter.” *Toronto Telegram*, November 16, 1960.

Kilbourn, Elizabeth. “Eighteen Print Makers.” *Canadian Art* 18, no. 2 (March/April 1961): 110–11.

Includes Town’s description of the full range of his printmaking processes.

“An Afternoon with Harold Town.” Interview by Jerrold Morris and John Richmond. *Imperial Oil Review*, October 1962.

Town discusses the definition of art, contemporary art movements, criteria for good painting, and the fallacy of romantic inspiration.

Layton, Irving, ed. *Love Where the Nights Are Long: An Anthology of Canadian Poems*. With illustrations by Harold Town. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1962.

Town, Harold, and David P. Silcox. *Enigmas*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1964.

Town’s preface to these elusive drawings is an all-too-explicit diatribe against everything that angered or irritated him in Canadian politics and culture at the time.

Town, Harold. “The Art Boom That Was a Trifle Flat-Chested—Not a Complete Bust.” In *Canadian Art Today*, edited by William Townsend, 36–44. Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1970.

Town’s article follows one by curator Dennis Reid, “Notes on the Toronto Painting Scene, 1959–69,” which dismisses Town’s work, beginning a long animosity between the two; Town counters with an artist’s perspective on the Toronto art scene.

Town, Harold. *Silent Stars, Sound Stars, Film Stars*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1971.

“Sinews of an Ideal Critic.” *Globe and Mail*, May 5, 1973.

Town’s discussion of contemporary art critics, including Harold Rosenberg and Clement Greenberg.

Town, Harold. *Albert Franck: Keeper of the Lanes*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1974.

An homage to the Toronto painter whom Town considered an important mentor.

“From the CN Pinnacle to an AGO Exhibit, Harold Town Muses on Professionalism, Quackery.” *Globe and Mail*, May 3, 1975.

A typical example of Town’s cultural commentary.

Town, Harold, and David P. Silcox. *Tom Thomson: The Silence and the Storm*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1977.



Poster for the 1973 exhibition *Harold Town: The First Exhibition of New Work, 1969–1973* at the Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa

This became one of the year's bestsellers; Town's text is noteworthy for its close reading of the meanings and methods of Thomson's paintings and as a manifesto of Town's own vision of art.

FILM

The CBC archives holds Town film footage, but it is not readily accessible.

Christopher Chapman. *Pyramid of Roses*. Christopher Chapman Ltd. & Chartres Film, 1982. 35mm film, 10 minutes.

A film about Town's Vale Variations.

CRITICAL INTERPRETATIONS

Town's work during his lifetime elicited continual scrutiny, critical attention, and debate. His reputation is still being revised as his work generates renewed interest and new scholarship. In Town's lifetime, debate became sharply polarized between supporters who had extensive exposure to his work and hostile critics and curators who were attuned to rival aesthetic frames of reference or were alienated by his intemperate manner. Interesting responses to his work can be found in the catalogues noted in the exhibitions list above. Even among favourably disposed critics there are wide disagreements as to which of his late series have merit. Further study is required to better understand the sources, implications, and potential meanings in Town's varied, multi-layered, and complex body of work.

Burnett, David. *Town*. Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1986.

This extensively illustrated book-length exhibition catalogue was prepared for the definitive Town retrospective at the Art Gallery of Ontario. As curator, David Burnett held extensive discussions with the artist about his techniques, ideas, and development and had access to a great proportion of his existing works. Burnett's goal was to reflect "through its changes and constants, its internal contrasts and external responses, and its innovations and criticisms, the integrity of [Town's] artistic production." He provides a detailed analysis of representative examples from Town's most important series of works, bringing out the underlying constants and concerns that emerge. The catalogue has a full exhibition history and bibliography on the artist to 1986, four years before his death.

Fulford, Robert. *Harold Town: Drawings*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1969. *An extensive collection of Town's drawings with commentary by an influential critic who knew him well.*

Nowell, Iris. *Painters Eleven: The Wild Ones of Canadian Art*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2010.

A lively account of Painters Eleven and the careers of its members. The section on Town has excellent illustrations and is particularly rich in telling anecdote, by a writer who was Town's close companion for many years.

FURTHER READING

In addition to the sources already noted, readers will find the following titles useful.

Burnett, David. *Town: Works on Paper, 1952-1987*. London, U.K.: Canada House Cultural Centre Gallery, 1987. Exhibition catalogue.



Dault, Gary Michael. "Harold Town." *Canadian Art*, Spring 1986, 45-53.

———. *Harold Town: The Snap Paintings*. Toronto: Christopher Cutts Gallery, 2011.

Exhibition catalogue.

Hale, Barrie. Introduction to *Toronto Painting: 1953-1965*. Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1972. Exhibition catalogue.

———. *Out of the Park: Modernist Painting in Toronto, 1950-1980*. Provincial Essays, vol. 2. Toronto: Phacops Publishing Society, 1985.

Leclerc, Denise. *The Crisis of Abstraction in Canada: The 1950s*. Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1992.

Murray, Joan. *Confessions of a Curator*. Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1996.

Nasgaard, Roald. *Abstract Painting in Canada*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2007.

Nowell, Iris. *Hot Breakfast for Sparrows: My Life with Harold Town*. Toronto: Stoddart, 1992.

Town, Harold, Robert Fulford, and David P. Silcox. *Magnificent Decade: The Art of Harold Town, 1955-1965*. Toronto: Moore Gallery, 1997. Exhibition catalogue.

Town, Harold, and Kenneth Saltmarche. *Indications: Harold Town 1944-1975; Paintings, Collage, Drawings, Prints, Sculpture*. Preface by Ted Fraser. Windsor: Art Gallery of Windsor, 1975.

Townsend, William, ed. *Canadian Art Today*. Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1970.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

GERTA MORAY

Gerta Moray is a Professor Emerita of the University of Guelph, where she taught art history in the School of Fine Art and Music from 1989 to 2005. She continues to write and lecture on modern and contemporary art, women's art and feminist theory, and Canadian art seen within local and international contexts. Moray is the author of *Mary Pratt* (McGraw-Hill Ryerson Press, 1989), with co-author Sandra Gwynn; and *Unsettling Encounters: First Nations Imagery in the Art of Emily Carr* (UBC Press, 2006), which won a Clio Award from the Canadian Historical Association and was shortlisted for British Columbia's National Award for Canadian Non-Fiction. She has published articles in the *Journal of Canadian Studies*, *RACAR*, *The Burlington Magazine*, *Canadian Art*, and *C Magazine*, contributed chapters to books, and written exhibition catalogues for artists including Suzy Lake, Jakub Dolejs, Mary Kavanagh, Nataalka Husar, and Margaret Priest. Born in Czechoslovakia, Moray was educated and began her career in England. In 1970 she moved to Toronto, where her two daughters were born. She holds a PhD in the History of Art from the University of Toronto, a Postgraduate Diploma in Art History from the Courtauld Institute, and an MA in Modern History from the University of Oxford. In the U.K. she has taught at the Universities of Sheffield, Stirling, and Edinburgh, and in Canada at the Universities of Guelph and Toronto (Scarborough Campus), Nova Scotia College of Art & Design, and OCAD University.



“When I began teaching modern Canadian art history in the 1980s, Harold Town’s work presented a puzzle. Why was this artist, whose youthful Abstract Expressionist works had fetched the highest prices for a living Canadian artist, now universally dismissed by the art world? What was the common denominator for his later diversity of styles and media? Since his death in 1990, appropriation, quotation, and dizzying complexity have become common artistic strategies. In another reversal of fortune, his later works now look exciting and relevant.”



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From the Author

My warm thanks to Shelley Town, John Reeves, David Silcox, and the many others who generously shared memories of Harold Town; to Sara Angel and Landon Mackenzie for encouragement and inspiration; to the helpful staff at the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Vancouver Art Gallery, and Library and Archives Canada; and to the outstanding editorial and web team at ACI, especially Rick Archbold and Meg Taylor, for the wonders they have performed.

From the Art Canada Institute

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Credit for Cover Image



Harold Town, *Spengler Writing The Decline of the West at His Desk on Top of the Kitchen Table*, 1980.
(See below for details.)

Credits for Banner Images



Biography: Harold Town in his home at 9 Castle Frank Crescent in 1964, photographed by John Reeves.
(See below for details.)



Key Works: Harold Town, *Silent Light No. 11*, 1968-69. (See below for details.)



Significance & Critical Issues: Harold Town, *Day Neon*, 1953. (See below for details.)



Style & Technique: Harold Town, *Music Behind*, 1958-59. (See below for details.)



Sources & Resources: Harold Town in his office at his home in 1967, photographed by John Reeves. City of Toronto Archives, fonds 1405, series 796. Courtesy of John Reeves.

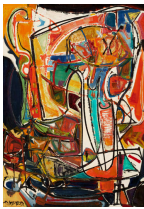


Where to See: Harold Town at a retrospective exhibition of his work at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1986, photographed by John Reeves. City of Toronto Archives, fonds 1405, series 796. Courtesy of John Reeves.

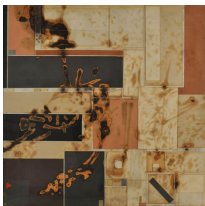
Credits for Works by Harold Town



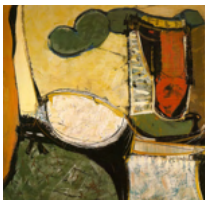
Bacchante Threatened by a Panther, 1959. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Estate of Harold Town.



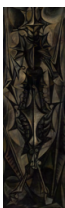
Day Neon, 1953. Collection of the Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa, Gift of the artist's estate, 1994.



Death of Mondrian No. 1, 1961. Museum London. Estate of Harold Town.



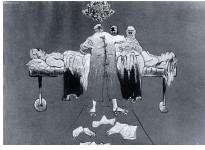
The Dixon Passing Mugg's Island, 1956. Estate of Harold Town.



Don Quixote, 1948. Collection of the Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa. Gift of the artist's estate, 1994. Estate of Harold Town.



Drawing by Town in the comic book style, which appeared in his 1942 Western Technical-Commercial School yearbook. Library and Archives Canada, MG 30 D 404, vol. 1, *Westward Ho*. Western Technical Commercial School Yearbook, 1942. Estate of Harold Town. Photograph by Gaeby Abrahams.



Enigma No. 9, 1964. Estate of Harold Town.



Festival, 1965. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Estate of Harold Town.



In Memory of Pearl McCarthy, 1964. Private collection. Estate of Harold Town.



Inoutscape, 1960. McMaster Museum of Art, Hamilton. Gift of Mr. Irving Zucker, 1992. Estate of Harold Town. Photograph by John Tamblyn.



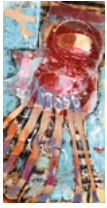
Monument to C.T. Currelly No. 1, 1957. Vancouver Art Gallery. Purchased with the financial support of the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Assistance Program. VAG 58.6. Estate of Harold Town. Photo: Rachel Topham, Vancouver Art Gallery.



Muscleman, 1983. Estate of Harold Town.



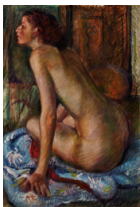
Music Behind, 1958-59. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Estate of Harold Town. Photo © NGC.



Paper Monster (Memory of Chinatown), 1958. Christopher Cutts Gallery, Toronto. Estate of Harold Town.



Rudolf Valentino, 1971. Gallery Gevik, Toronto. Estate of Harold Town.



Seated Nude, 1944. Collection of the Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa. Gift of the artist's estate, 1994. Estate of Harold Town.



Silent Light No. 11, 1968-69. Estate of Harold Town.



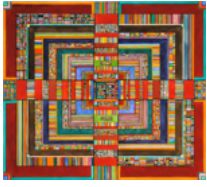
Snap No. 17, 1972-73. Christopher Cutts Gallery, Toronto. Estate of Harold Town.



Soldier Leading Horse, 1953. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.



Spengler Writing The Decline of the West at His Desk on Top of the Kitchen Table, 1980. Private collection. Estate of Harold Town. Photograph by Kayla Rocca.



Stages #8, 1986-87. Barb & Jens Thielsen, London, ON. Estate of Harold Town.



Toy Horse, 1980. Estate of Harold Town.



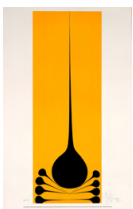
Toy Horse #184, 1979. Private collection. Estate of Harold Town.



Tree Zoo, 1957. Collection of the Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa. Purchase 1971. Estate of Harold Town.



Tyranny of the Corner (Sashay Set), 1962. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Estate of Harold Town. Photo © NGC.



Untitled, 1971. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Estate of Harold Town. Photo © NGC.



Untitled (Crescent), 1961. Barb & Jens Thielsen, London, ON. Estate of Harold Town.

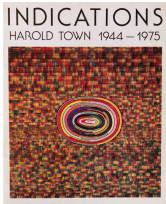
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The Bacchanal of the Andrians, 1523-26, by Titian. Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid.



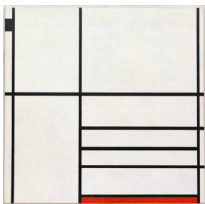
Brochure for Harold Town's mural at the Ontario Hydro Generating Station on the St. Lawrence Seaway. Courtesy of Toronto Reference Library. Photograph by Kayla Rocca.



Catalogue for the 1975 exhibition *Indications: Harold Town, 1944-1975* (Windsor: Art Gallery of Windsor, 1975). Courtesy of Toronto Reference Library. Photograph by Kayla Rocca.



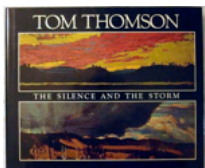
Certificate presented to Town for his participation in the Milan Triennale, 1957. Library and Archives Canada, MG 30 D 404, vol. 57, Memorabilia, Awards and Degrees, 1943-1973, n.d. Estate of Harold Town. Photograph by Gaeby Abrahams.



Composition en blanc, noir et rouge, 1936, by Piet Mondrian. Museum of Modern Art, New York, gift of the Advisory Committee. © Mondrian/Holtzman Trust c/o HCR International USA. Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY.



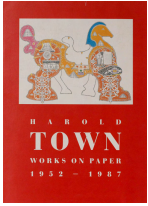
Cover for the *Imperial Oil Review*, 1954, designed by Harold Town. Courtesy of Toronto Reference Library.



Cover of *Tom Thomson: The Silence and the Storm* by Harold Town and David P. Silcox (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977).



Cranes from *Quick Lessons in Simplified Drawing*, 1812, by Katsushika Hokusai. Collection unknown.



Flyer for the 1987 exhibition *Town: Works on Paper, 1952-1987* at the Canada House Cultural Centre Gallery, London, England. Courtesy of Toronto Reference Library. Photograph by Kayla Rocca.



Guernica, 1937, by Pablo Picasso. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, Spain. © Picasso Estate / SODRAC (2014). Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY.



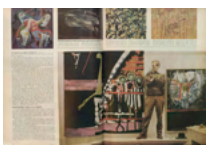
Harold Town and Janet Barker at an Art Gallery of Ontario reception in 1967, photographed by John Reeves. City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 1405, Series 796. Courtesy of John Reeves.



Harold Town and Museum of Modern Art's Riva Castleman select prints for *Canada '67*, photographed by John Reeves. City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 1405, Series 796. Courtesy of John Reeves.



Harold Town and Walter Yarwood in front of *In Memory of Pearl McCarthy*, 1964, photographed by John Reeves. Courtesy of John Reeves.



Harold Town featured in *Maclean's* article "The Overnight Bull Market in Modern Art," December 1961. Reprinted with the permission of Rogers Publishing.



Harold Town in front of his monumental St. Lawrence Seaway mural, 1958. From the brochure for the mural at the Ontario Hydro Generating Station. Courtesy of Toronto Reference Library. Photograph by Kayla Rocca.



Harold Town in his home at 9 Castle Frank Crescent in 1964, photographed by John Reeves. City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 1405, Series 796. Courtesy of John Reeves.



Harold Town in his Old Orchard Farm studio in 1983, photographed by John Reeves. Courtesy of John Reeves.



Harold Town in his print workshop in 1957. Photo Jock Carroll.



Harold Town in his studio in 1967, photographed by John Reeves. City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 1405, Series 796. Courtesy of John Reeves.



Harold Town on the cover of *Maclean's* magazine, December 1961. Reprinted with the permission of Rogers Publishing.



Harold Town with his daughters Heather and Shelley in 1966, photographed by John Reeves. City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 1405, Series 796. Courtesy of John Reeves.



Harold Town with his mother, c. 1940. Courtesy of Shelley Town.



Harold Town with his paintings at the Mazelow Gallery in 1967, photographed by John Reeves. City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 1405, Series 796. Courtesy of John Reeves.



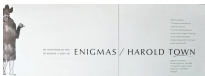
Harold Town's mural at the Ontario Hydro Generating Station on the St. Lawrence Seaway, commissioned in 1958. © Kevin Lamoureux/KAV.



Hitler Gang, 1944, by Kurt Schwitters. Sprengel Museum, Hannover, Germany. © Estate of Kurt Schwitters / SODRAC (2014). Photo: Michael Herling/Aline Gwose. Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY.



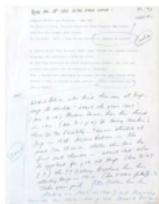
A Lady and Two Gentlemen, c. 1659, by Johannes Vermeer. Herzog Anton Ulrich Museum, Braunschweig, Germany.



Limited-edition facsimile book of Town's *Enigmas*, sold at the Jerrold Morris International Gallery. Courtesy of Toronto Reference Library. Photograph by Kayla Rocca.



Maclean's cover designed by Oscar Cahén, Town's mentor. Reprinted with the permission of Rogers Publishing and the Oscar Cahén Foundation. Image courtesy of Leif Peng, Today's Inspiration.



Manuscript page for *Tom Thomson: The Silence and the Storm*. Library and Archives Canada, MG 30 D 404, vol. 30, Tom Thomson Project, Research Material, 1973. Estate of Harold Town. Photograph by Gaeby Abrahams.



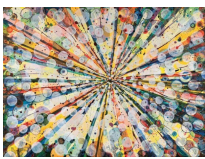
Painters Eleven in 1957, photographed by Peter Croydon. © 2011 Lynda M. Shearer. All rights reserved.



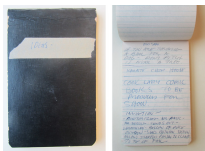
Pamphlet for Harold Town's exhibition at the Jordan Gallery in Toronto in 1959. Courtesy of Toronto Reference Library. Photograph by Kayla Rocca.



Poster for the 1973 exhibition *Harold Town: The First Exhibition of New Work, 1969-1973* at the Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa. Courtesy of Toronto Reference Library. Photograph by Kayla Rocca.



Signal (Birthday Party), 2010-11, by Landon Mackenzie. Courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Scott Massey.



Town's notebook containing ideas and questions about how the enduring value of art is established. Library and Archives Canada, MG 30 D 404, vol. 34, Ideas, Drafts and Outlines Notebook, n.d. Estate of Harold Town. Photograph by Gaeby Abrahams.



Two works by Harold Town in the Aeroquay Lounge in the now demolished Terminal 1 (1964-2004) at Toronto International Airport. Collection of Transport Canada. Photo courtesy of Greater Toronto Airports Authority.



View of Toronto skyline from Mugg's Island, 1907. Photograph by William James.



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