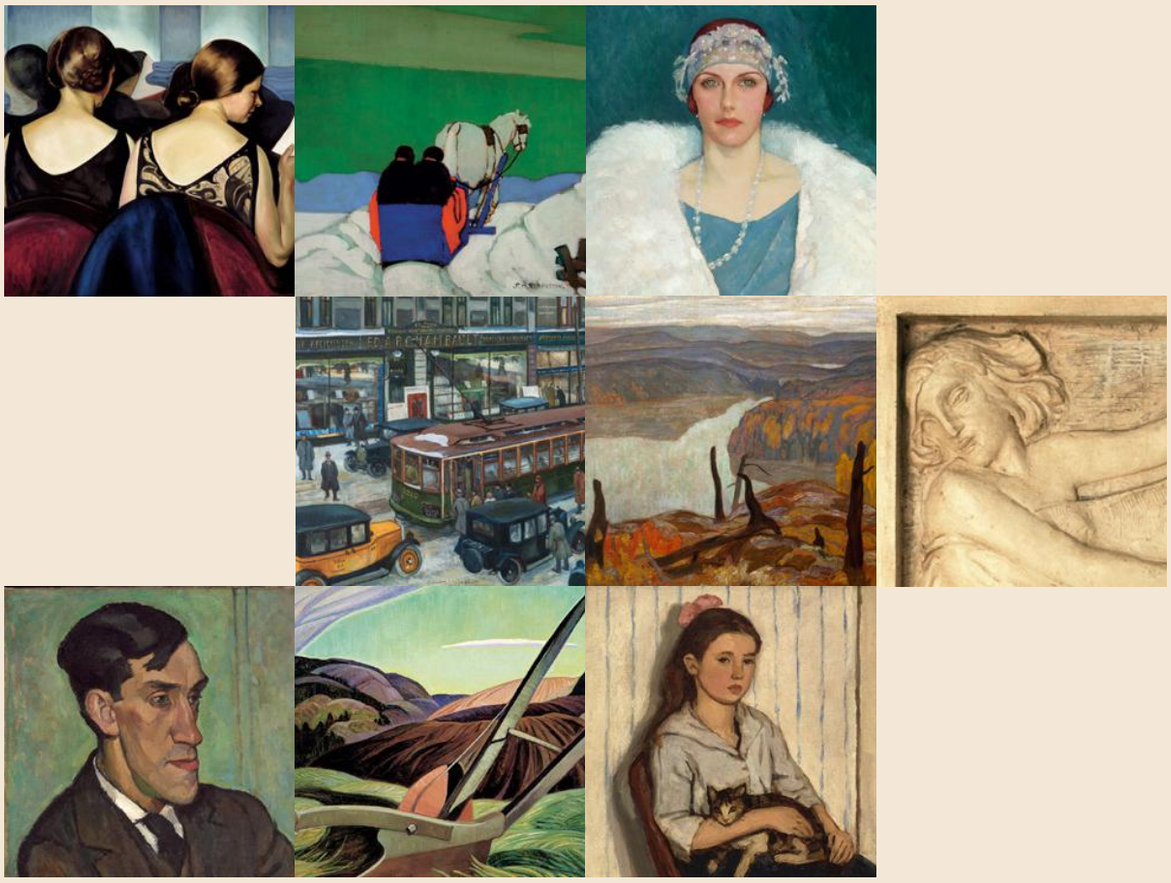
ART CANADA INSTITUTE | INSTITUT DE L'ART CANADIEN

JANUARY 20, 2023

PIVOTAL & PIONEERING MODERNISTS
MONTREAL'S BEAVER HALL

This month marks the anniversary of the Beaver Hall Group's first annual show in January 1921.



It was 102 years ago this month that the Montreal *Gazette* and *La Presse* celebrated a new exhibition by artists who were known as the Beaver Hall Group. Formed in the same year as Toronto's Group of Seven, the group was named after the street where, in October 1920, some of its participants rented a building they used as a studio and exhibition space. Its innovative members, including A.Y. Jackson, Edwin Holgate, Anne Savage, Mabel May, and Lilias Torrance Newton, created work that spoke to a pivotal turning point in the Canadian art world: the collision between conventional and avant-garde approaches to the visual arts.

In 2015, Art Canada Institute author Brian Foss and Montreal Museum of Fine Arts curator Jacques Des Rochers presented the award-winning exhibition

1920s Modernism in Montreal: The Beaver Hall Group, a major, nationally touring show that celebrated the accomplishments of this remarkable ensemble. To honour the anniversary of Beaver Hall's first annual show, we're presenting selections from the scholarship of Des Rochers and Foss, who summed up the group's significance with these words: "[They were] anything but monolithic… Like the city in which they lived, the Beaver Hall artists occupied both sides of a dividing line between tradition and modernism.

Sara Angel
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

AT THE THEATRE

by Prudence Heward

Prudence Heward, *At the Theatre*, 1928, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

The unusual composition of Prudence Heward's (1896–1947) *At the Theatre*, 1928, sets the delineated bodies and clothing of two women—sisters of Beaver Hall artist Sarah Robertson (1891–1948)—against the more abstracted bodies of other members of a theatre audience. When the painting was exhibited at the 1929 annual exhibition of the Royal Canadian Academy, Albert Laberge, writing for *La Presse*, lauded the originality of the painting's conception and considered it to be evidence of Heward's status as a "true artist." Although there is no definitive confirmation that she exhibited with the Beaver Hall Group, Heward was a key figure for the collective.

Read more in ACI's
Prudence Heward: Life & Work by Julia Skelly

THE BLUE SLEIGH

by Sarah Robertson

Sarah Robertson, *The Blue Sleigh*, c.1924, Tom Thomson Gallery, Owen Sound, Ontario.

Sarah Robertson (1891–1948) had a particularly strong personal and professional relationship with the Beaver Hall Group's first president, A.Y. Jackson (1882–1974), who greatly admired her perceptiveness as an artist. He particularly esteemed Robertson's abilities as a colourist, clearly evident in *The Blue Sleigh*, c.1924, with its striking juxtaposition of blue, red, and the large, unnaturalistic swathe of green that occupies the background in the upper half of the image. Jackson, also a member of the Group of Seven, arranged for the inclusion of *The Blue Sleigh* in the Toronto group's 1928 exhibition, where he described it in a letter to Robertson as looking "très distingué."

Learn more about Sarah Robertson

MISS MARY MACINTOSH

by Randolph S. Hewton

Randolph S. Hewton, *Miss Mary Macintosh*, 1924 or earlier.

Randolph S. Hewton (1888–1960), the second president of the Beaver Hall Group, was renowned for his figure and portrait painting. He often portrayed modern women in powerful poses, as in *Miss Mary Macintosh*, 1924 or earlier. Wearing a lavish white fur coat, understated blue dress, and delicate accessories, Hewton's sitter is the epitome of style, grace, and sophistication. From 1921 to 1924, the thirty-three-year-old artist served as director of the school of the Art Association of Montreal. He promoted a modern approach to art, as had his predecessor, William Brymner (1855–1925), who had taught and greatly influenced several Beaver Hall Group members.

Learn more about Randolph Hewton

SAINT CATHERINE STREET

by Adrien Hébert

Adrien Hébert, *Saint Catherine Street*, 1926, Collection of the Archambault family.

Well known for his many views of Montreal's port, Adrien Hébert (1890–1967) was also a prolific recorder of daily urban life in the city. His rendition of signage and advertising is so precise that this picture can be dated to January 1926 on that basis alone, thanks to a prominently displayed poster advertising the Montreal Operatic Society's production of Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado*. The Archambault music store, the principal establishment in the image, was located at 312-316 Saint Catherine Street East, half of the long commercial artery that ran through what was becoming Montreal's new downtown, thus diminishing the earlier importance of Old Montreal, further to the south.

Learn more about Adrien Hébert

PROCESSION AT SAINTE-FAMILLE

by André Biéler

André Biéler, *Procession at Sainte-Famille*, 1929, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Although André Biéler (1896–1989) spent much of his time during the first half of the 1920s in the United States and Europe, he maintained friendships with members of the Beaver Hall Group. Steeped in Swiss and French regionalist literature and sentiments, Biéler moved to Île d'Orléans, in Quebec, shortly after his return to Canada in 1926, and resided in the village of Sainte-Famille from 1927 to 1929. *Procession at Sainte-Famille*, 1929, is among the many affectionate records he produced of religious events in this French Canadian community in which he felt entirely at home.

Learn more about André Biéler

SELF-PORTRAIT

by Lilias Torrance Newton

Lilias Torrance Newton, *Self-portrait*, c.1929, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Lilias Torrance Newton (1896–1980) employs a warm and rich colour palette in this arresting portrait of herself as a self-assured young woman and artist. Just above her head is a frame of a painting or window, while in the lower right the curved edges of her palette can be seen. These references to Newton's identity as an artist made this portrait one that underscores the Beaver Hall Group's insistence on the equal status of men and women artists. She would go on to establish a reputation as an eminent portraitist: one whose sitters included Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip.

Learn more about Lilias Torrance Newton

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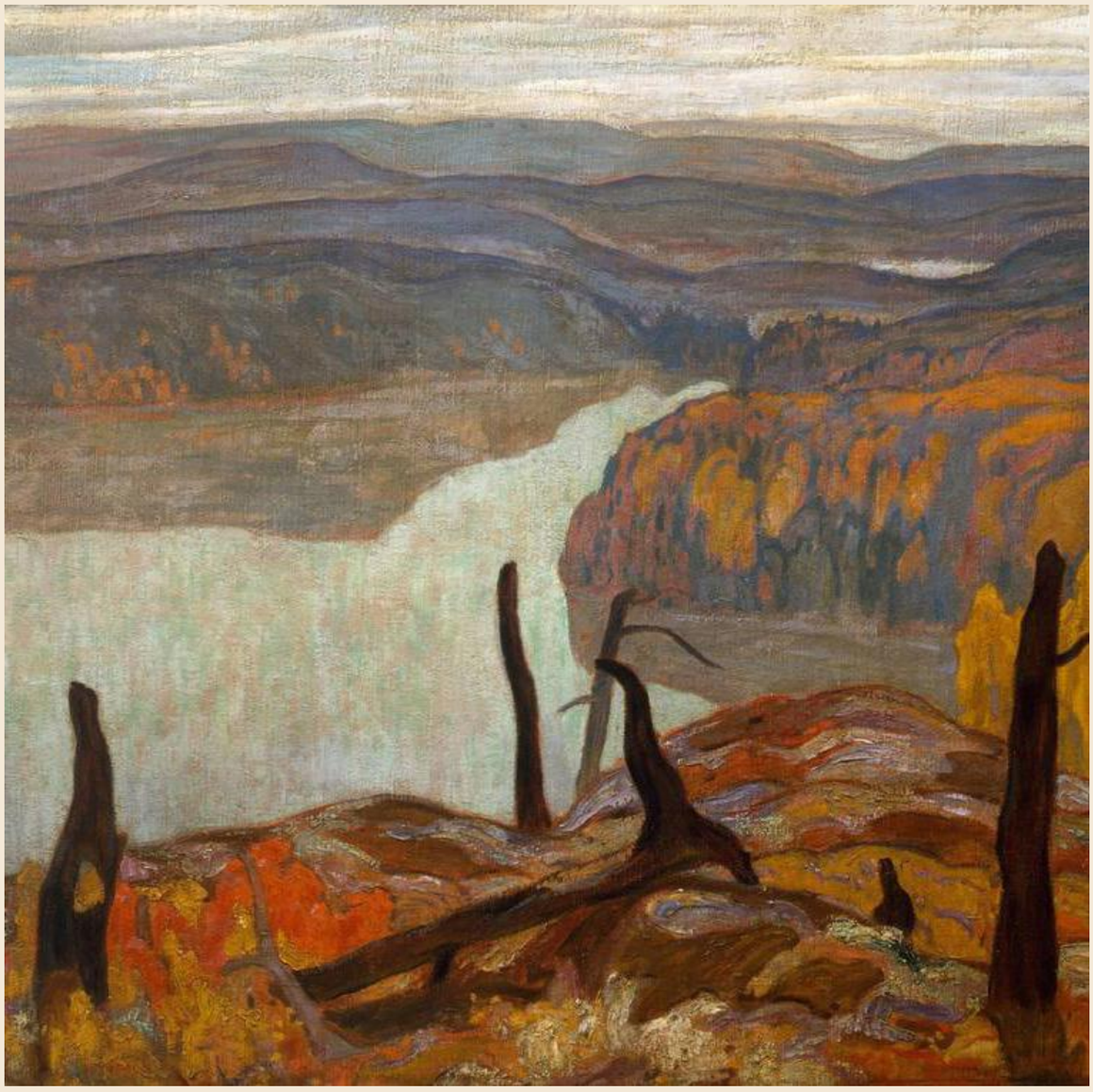
OCTOBER MORNING, ALGOMA (WARTZ LAKE, ALGOMA)

by A.Y. Jackson



A.Y. Jackson, *October Morning, Algoma (Wartz Lake, Algoma)*, 1920, Hart House Collection, University of Toronto.

Better known as a member of the Group of Seven, Montreal-born A.Y. Jackson (1882–1974) was also part of the Beaver Hall Group and served as its first president. *October Morning, Algoma (Wartz Lake, Algoma)*, 1920, painted in the year of the formation of both collectives, exemplifies the Group of Seven's iconic images of the Canadian wilderness. Jackson offers a captivating view from the top of a cliff of the autumnal landscape and placid waters below. The artist was an important link between the Group of Seven and the Beaver Hall Group, which were united in their desire to promote a broader vision of modernist Canadian art.

Learn more about A.Y. Jackson

COMÉDIE

by Henri Hébert

Henri Hébert, *Comédie*, 1926, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

This preparatory plaster by sculptor Henri Hébert (1884–1950)—the older brother of painter and fellow Beaver Hall Group member Adrien Hébert (1890–1967)—illustrates the influence of the Art Deco movement on some members of the collective. The final version of *Comédie* is part of a series of decorative reliefs installed at McGill University's Moyse Hall, and shows a female figure holding the theatre mask representing the Muse of Comedy. Art historian Esther Trépanier explains, "By the late 1920s, the impact of Art Deco was being felt across the world. The style often borrowed elements from classical art, which, seen through a prism of archaism and lightheartedness—very apparent in [the] fine series of decorative panels by Henri Hébert—was once more in vogue."

Learn more about Henri Hébert

THE PLOUGH

by Anne Savage

Anne Savage, *The Plough*, 1931–33, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Acclaimed for her rhythmic paintings of the Quebec and Canadian landscape, Anne Savage's (1896–1971) widely admired work *The Plough* (1931–33) depicts undulating fields dominated by a monumental farming implement in the foreground. With its fresh colour palette and seamless integration of nature and machine, Savage's striking composition celebrates the fertile landscape and the human ability to domesticate it. The artist and pioneer of art education worked in a studio at 305 Beaver Hall Hill, sharing the space with Nora Collyer (1898–1979) from 1921 to 1923, and with Emily Coonan (1885–1971) and Randolph Hewton (1888–1960) in 1923.

Learn more about Anne Savage

PROFESSOR OF MATHEMATICS (ALBERT HENRY STEWARD GILLSON)

by Edwin Holgate

Edwin Holgate, *Professor of Mathematics (Albert Henry Steward Gillson)*, 1924, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

In 1923, Beaver Hall Group member Edwin Holgate (1892–1977) set up a studio in a building belonging to the sculptor Alfred Laliberté (1877–1953) on Montreal's Sainte-Famille Street, where he came into contact with the French-speaking art and literary scene. It was here that he painted this powerful portrait of Albert Henry Steward Gillson. The Montreal art critic Jean Chauvin wrote that Holgate's portraits "were really psychological portraits (one must mention, among the most comprehensive, that of the Professor of Pure Mathematics)." Holgate lends his model a sculptural presence by the way he delineates Gillson's features, the volumes of his clothing, and his silhouette against the painting's ground.

Learn more about Edwin Holgate

SNOWFLAKES. STUDIO WINDOW

by Mabel May

Mabel May, *Snowflakes. Studio Window*, 1928, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Favouring landscapes and city scenes, Mabel May (1877–1971) painted this winter view from the window of her Montreal studio. The snow-covered roofs lead our gaze to the dome of Saint James Cathedral (now Mary Queen of the World), in shadow against the softly lit sky. The top of the dome is partially out of frame, creating the impression that the building is much closer than it was in reality. Montreal's abundant religious structures appear in several scenes painted by Beaver Hall Group members.

Learn more about Mabel May

GIRL AND CAT

by Emily Coonan

Emily Coonan, *Girl and Cat*, 1920, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Disarmingly fresh and richly painted, *Girl and Cat*, 1920, is one of the most beautiful and engaging of the several outstanding paintings Emily Coonan (1885-1971) made of seated girls and young women between 1913 and the early 1930s. Painted the year of the founding of the Beaver Hall Group, *Girl and Cat* is a startlingly subtle and touching image. During the Beaver Hall Years, its quiet power charmed critics as different as Augustus Bridle and Eric Brown, who described it, respectively, as “a marvelous bit of realistic type-portraiture” and as “a masterpiece of quietude and strength, without either a harsh or a weak note in it.”

Learn more about Emily Coonan

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