

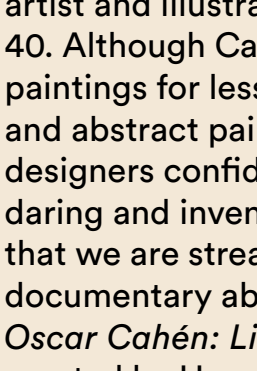
APRIL 11, 2025

# DISCOVERING OSCAR CAHÉN THE CANADIAN ART DOCUMENTARY

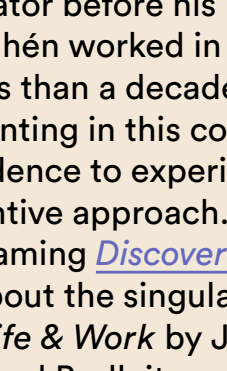
Now streaming on the Art Canada Institute website.



Film still from *Discovering Oscar Cahén: The Warrior* (2023), courtesy of Howard Brull.



Howard Brull



Jaleen Grove

Few Canadian painters have made an impact like that of Oscar Cahén (1916–1956). As journalist Robert Fulford wrote about him in the *Toronto Daily Star*, “If any one man can be given credit for the vitality of Toronto art in the 1950s, the man is Oscar Cahén.” Cahén arrived in Canada as a refugee of Nazi Europe during the Second World War and went on to become a celebrated artist and illustrator before his untimely and tragic death in a car accident at age 40. Although Cahén worked in Canada for only fourteen years and exhibited his paintings for less than a decade, his role in the development of both illustration and abstract painting in this country was pivotal. Cahén gave fellow artists and designers confidence to experiment, setting an inspirational example with his daring and inventive approach. The Art Canada Institute proudly announces that we are streaming *Discovering Oscar Cahén: The Warrior*, a celebrated documentary about the singular painter. The film took root in the ACI publication *Oscar Cahén: Life & Work* by Jaleen Grove. Over two years in the making and created by Howard Brull, it presents insightful and relevant observations on Cahén’s life and career, bringing his art to a new generation of audiences.

**Sara Angel**

Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

## WHO WAS OSCAR CAHÉN?



Members of Painters Eleven during the Simpson's department store *Abstracts at Home* display, 1953, photograph by Everett Roseborough. (From left) Tom Hodgson, Oscar Cahén, Alexandra Luke, Kazuo Nakamura, Ray Mead, Jack Bush, and William Ronald.

Oscar Cahén (above, standing under the lamp) is best known for being a co-founder of Painters Eleven, Canada’s most renowned collective of avant-garde abstract artists, active in Canada between 1953 and 1960. The Painters Eleven members admired and lauded him. Tom Hodgson (1924–2006) remarked that “Cahén was by far the giant of the group.” Jack Bush (1909–1977) [stated that](#) Cahén brought to the group “a wonderful sense of European colour and daring.” Painters Eleven had its first exhibition at Simpson’s department store in 1953. As Art Canada Institute author [Jaleen Grove writes](#), “The group legitimized abstract art, inspired younger artists to follow avant-garde directions, and brought Canadian art into conversation with international contemporary art trends and critics.”

[Learn more about Painters Eleven](#)

## AN ILLUSTRATOR AND A FINE ARTIST



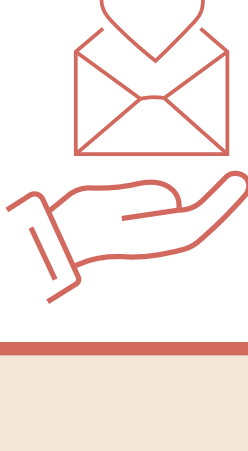
Oscar Cahén, cover illustration for *Maclean's* magazine, January 15, 1952, courtesy of The Cahén Archives.



Oscar Cahén, Cover of *Maclean's* magazine, April 14, 1956, courtesy of The Cahén Archives.

After escaping Nazi Europe and as one of its most renowned painters. Before his too-early death, he created thirty-eight covers for *Maclean's* magazine and other publications while simultaneously helping Canadians develop an appreciation for abstract art. For the January 15, 1952 *Maclean's* cover (above left), he poked fun at a cliché of Canadian art: the wintery landscape. In the illustration, the art gallery wall is lined with winter scenes, but its visitors, in their heavy clothing, have eyes only for the one picture—the summer scene—marked as sold with a red star. For the April 14, 1956 *Maclean's* cover (above right), Cahén presents a well-dressed couple in a convertible on a country road, stopped short by a large cow. The cover became the source for *Roadster and Cow*, c.1960s, by Nova Scotia folk artist Maud Lewis (1901–1970).

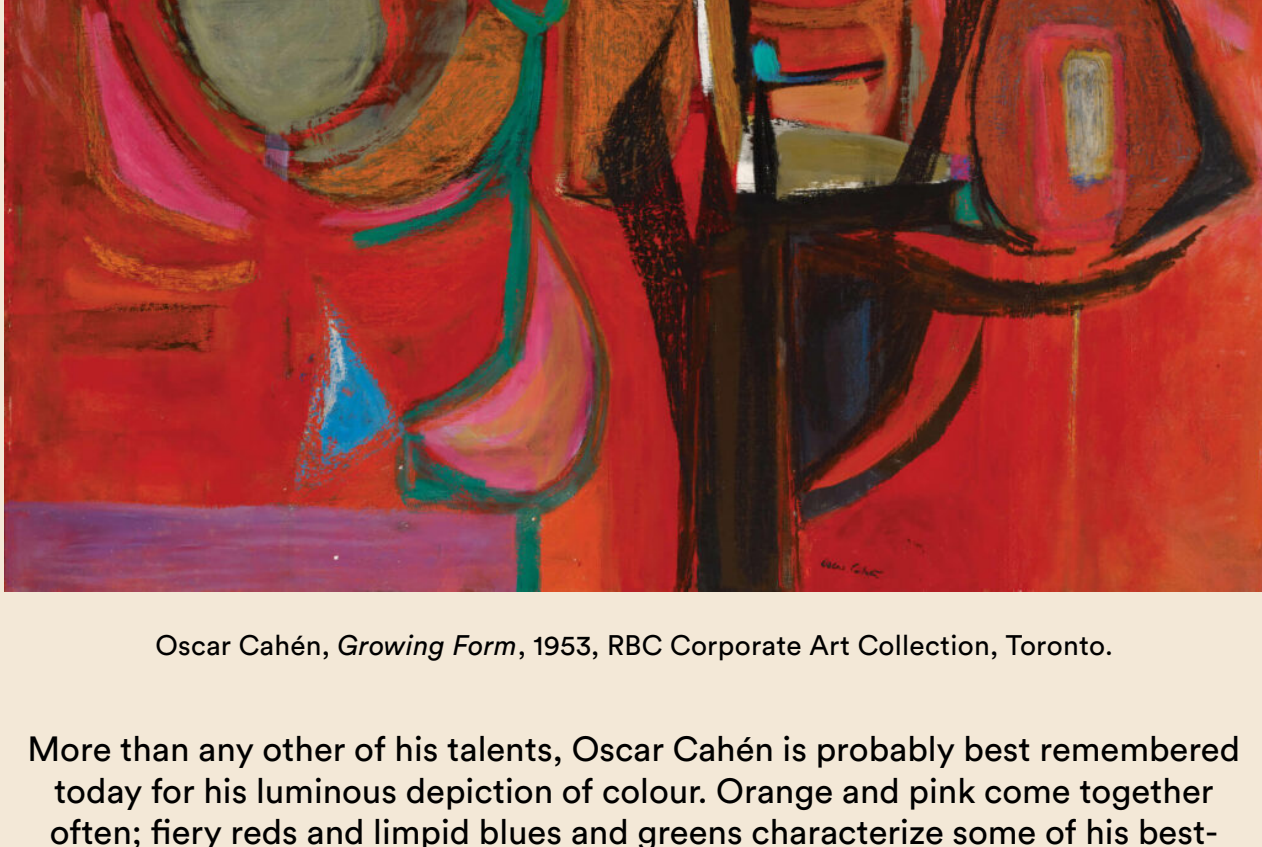
[Learn more in the online exhibition  
Double Vision: The Twin Talents of Oscar Cahén](#)



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## A MASTER OF COLOUR



Oscar Cahén, *Growing Form*, 1953, RBC Corporate Art Collection, Toronto.

More than any other of his talents, Oscar Cahén is probably best remembered today for his luminous depiction of colour. Orange and pink come together often; fiery reds and limpid blues and greens characterize some of his best-known works. By 1953, Cahén was confidently painting many large abstracts in oil. *Growing Form*, 1953, was included in his first solo show, held at Hart House at the University of Toronto in October 1954. When Toronto critic Hugh Thomson walked into the exhibition, [he said](#), “As soon as you enter, the colors and startling designs come out at you from the wall.” *Growing Form* is typical of Cahén’s ongoing interest in converting recognizable subject matter into emotionally resonant abstracted forms.

[Learn more in the online exhibition  
Double Vision: The Twin Talents of Oscar Cahén](#)

## WARRIOR, 1956



Oscar Cahén, *Warrior*, 1956, private collection.

The subtitle of the Cahén documentary references one of his most celebrated works, *Warrior*, 1956. The work gets to the heart of how Cahén’s life was impacted by war and warriors: his father, voluntarily mobilized an underground anti-Nazi operation, was one kind of warrior; the thousands of average men (Nazi and Ally) conscripted to fight to their doom were another. With *Warrior*, Cahén presents a human figure whose head is shattered, as if by an explosion. With the Second World War, the Korean War, and the Cold War so fresh, *Warrior* functions as an archetype, as expressive of the period as any abstract painting. Cahén’s friends Walter Yarwood (1917–1996) and Harold Town (1924–1990) hung *Warrior* in pride of place on the title wall of the *Oscar Cahén Memorial Exhibition* at the Art Gallery of Toronto in 1959.

[Learn more in the online exhibition  
Double Vision: The Twin Talents of Oscar Cahén](#)

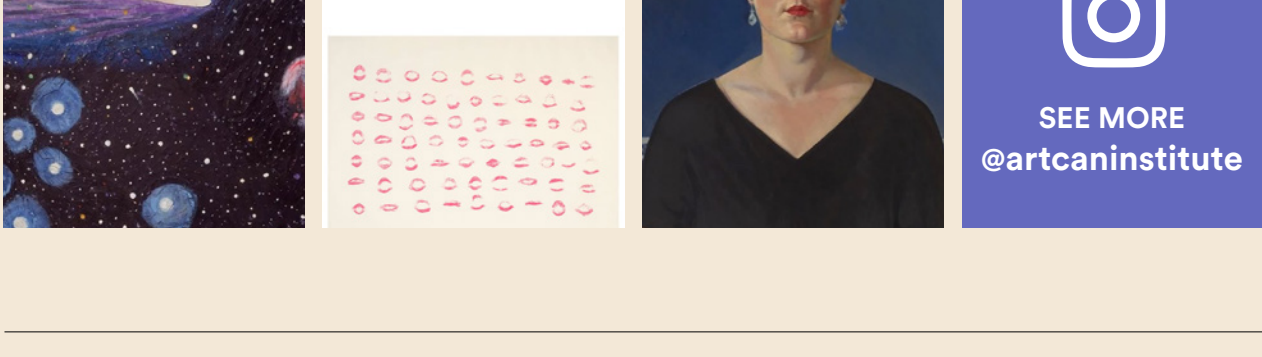
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**Image Credits:** [1] Film still from *Discovering Oscar Cahén: The Warrior* (2023). Courtesy of Howard Brull.

[2] Members of Painters Eleven during the Simpson's department store *Abstracts at Home* display, 1953. Photograph by Everett Roseborough. Collection of The Cahén Archives. [3] Oscar Cahén, cover illustration for *Maclean's* magazine, January 15, 1952, tearsheet, 35 x 27 cm. Collection of The Cahén Archives. © The Cahén Archives. Original illustration in a private collection. [4] Oscar Cahén, cover of *Maclean's* magazine, April 14, 1956. Collection of The Cahén Archives. Courtesy of The Cahén Archives. [5] Oscar Cahén, *Growing Form*, 1953, oil on Masonite, 71.12 x 114.5 cm. RBC Corporate Art Collection, Toronto. © The Cahén Archives. [6] Oscar Cahén, *Warrior*, 1956, oil on canvas, 201.7 x 260.6 cm. Private collection on loan to the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. © The Cahén Archives.