

Some New Canadian Painters and Their Debt to Hans Hofmann

JOE PLASKETT

Joe Plaskett is a young New Westminster painter who has returned to his home on the Pacific Coast after an absence of some six years. As winner of the first Emily Carr scholarship in 1945 he studied for a year in New York and San Francisco and then for two years he taught, chiefly as principal of the Winnipeg School of Art. Afterwards he spent two years and a half studying, travelling and painting in England, France, Spain and Italy.

Several one-man exhibitions of his work, including major showings at the Vancouver Art Gallery, the University of British Columbia Gallery and the Winnipeg Art Gallery, have been held since his return. These have revealed an artist of outstanding sensibility. His pastels, charcoals and canvases are vivid and direct translations of his emotional response to the world; things and situations are of importance only as catalysts of feeling. And the powerful element in effecting these translations is coloured light. A child, playing with a glass prism by daylight in a window, enjoys an intensified experience of light; this, however, is an element which adults tend, in everyday living, to take for granted. In Joe Plaskett's paintings, light surges through colour. Here, too, is an experience of light such as the child obtains with the prism, but here it becomes so intense as to symbolize the life-giving power which light possesses. His deft hand orders his coloured lines about with all the verve and assurance of a Chinese calligrapher. Such qualities make his pictures memorable.

BEFORE the nineteen-forties, particularly in the United States, the cry was for a regional art, a literary kind of painting, concerned with saying something about the life of the people but with little real interest in how it was said. During the forties there came a greater awareness of aesthetic purposes. How it was said replaced what was said. The fifties may well bring a fusion: a conviction that knowing what to say means nothing without knowing how to say it, and that knowing how to say it means nothing until the artist consciously forgets how to say it in the fire of his struggle with a new idea.

The forties, hastened by cataclysm, dispatched the traditions of our past masters of painting as cruelly and swiftly as they destroyed life and the monuments of architecture. When death is urgent so is life. Creative forces arose which shattered the old and established the new as drastically as in any previous period of renaissance. A new concept of space in painting has come to us; before it we are still blinking our eyes.

These new ideas had already for a generation or two been slowly developing in

Europe. Many of us might still be hankering to paint the Canadian shield if the war had not helped to put us more closely in touch with the contemporary thought of Europe. This arose partly through the arrival, as exiles on this continent, of many advanced critics and painters from Germany and France. One of the first to arrive—he left the year before the shadow of Hitler fell upon and blacked out his native land—was Hans Hofmann. In him these new revolutionary ideas of space found a protagonist, a prophet and a teacher. He established a school in the United States; for a decade now Canadians have been travelling to New York in winter and to Provincetown on Cape Cod in summer to study under him. There they found him to be ruthless in breaking down their academic and naturalistic vision, in pushing them to see in terms of the plane and of the space divisions.

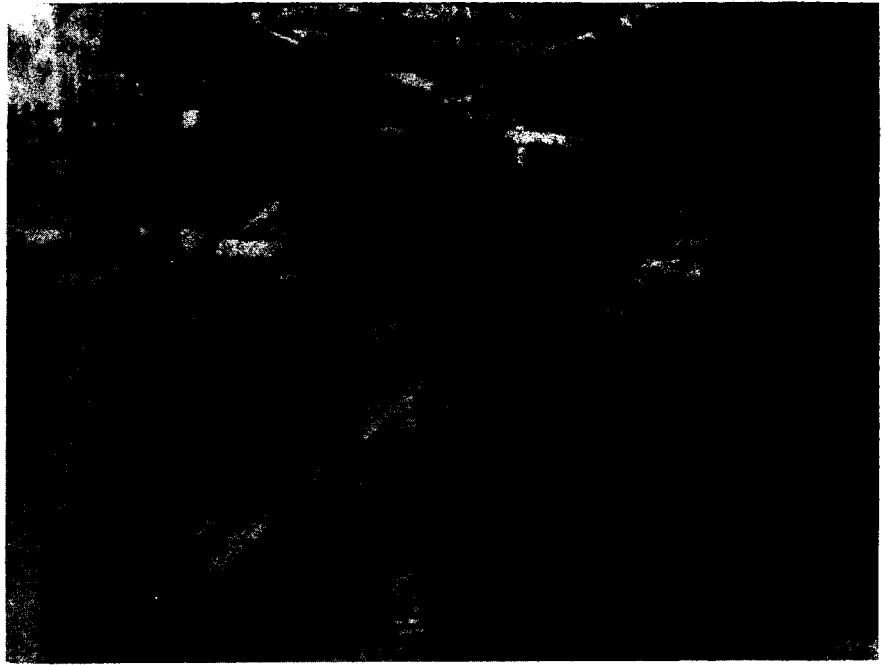
In 1947 Canadians invaded the Hofmann school in force. I had been there since February of that year and in the summer there came Alexandra Luke and Ron Lambert of Oshawa and Lionel Thomas of Vancouver. Hortense Gordon of Hamilton, who had been one of

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JOE PLASKETT

*Pont des Arts,
Paris*

Charcoal drawing



the first Canadians to learn from Hofmann, was also there. In 1948, J. W. G. MacDonald made his first contacts with the school and the winter sessions in New York have since been attended by Don Jarvis of Vancouver and Tak Tanabe of Winnipeg.

The result of this has not been, as some would imagine, the formation of a "school" of abstract painters in Canada. The dynamism of Hofmann's personality does not produce submissive disciples. His teaching is of such force that those who are strong pupils eventually rebel against it, but by then he has given them the power to go their own way.

The tense and tragic figures, for example, in the paintings of Don Jarvis have a quietness and restraint that is a far cry from Hofmann's furious optimism.

Tak Tanabe has entered a region of calligraphy in his painting, "using", as he says, "what would amount to a kind of writing, hieroglyphics." He adds, "In this I think I have broken away from the definite plane extensions, form building, volume defining of Hofmann." Besides, the influence of Tanabe's Japanese ancestry is strangely present in his work, particularly in his early landscapes of mountains, done at Banff; he possesses a subtlety we hardly know in Canada, a colour sense that blends the harsh and the tender.

Lionel Thomas, when he visited Hofmann, was striking strong notes in shape and colour, but he turned, after a summer in San Francisco with Mark Rothko, to drowning these clamorous forms in a painting of more liquid transparency. Floating amorphous shapes and dissolving colours now push the canvases of Thomas out of the realm of set problems of thought and set them free from physical laws; they seem to obey their own waywardness. In this, Thomas seems to defy Hofmann's insistence that "the frame is the spiritual limitation of the work, the first and last line of the composition". Yet Hofmann never set limits to the imagination: "When there is life you never think of the paper. The paper is forgotten. It becomes a world."

Ron Lambert began, in a way, as a Tom Thomson of a latter day. He is a lover of the out-of-doors, not an intellectual at all, nor a primitive, but a natural painter. When he began painting abstractly it was with the same instinctive sureness which his landscape sketches possess, without either pretension or sophistication. Such a painter need only trust himself.

J. W. G. MacDonald retains his own delightful spirit, poetic, fanciful and humorous. He found in Hofmann's painting a parallel to his own researches in automatism, whereby the

conscious controls, ruled by logic, are suspended and the subconscious impulses are given free play.

Alexandra Luke of all these Canadian painters perhaps comes closest to finding a common ground and a link with the buoyant and energetic spirit of this teacher. Her work is forthright and joyous. It does not know suavity, sentiment or charm, those overtones which win affection for many lesser artists. I remember Hofmann saying, "Painting is not a woman's profession. . . . It needs a strong fellow to do it. But sometimes a woman is strong too!"

The intellectual demands Hofmann makes on his students are enormous. They must painfully break down preconceptions and learn to command what is almost a mystical science of creation, which, however, is not guided by rule or logic, but by "empathy" or a "feeling into". He says: "When you think too much you think too little. It pushes you from intuition and natural impulse. . . . Make not with the mind but with the heart." Hofmann seeks what he calls a "golden between". "If there is too much emotion, the work will not be plastically formed (dilettantism). If there is too much thought, also not, —there comes a dryness. Perhaps better too much emotion than too much thought."

My own development has led me away from force and violence in abstractionism towards what I accept as my personal equation, an acceptance of nature, heightened by sensitivity, an unabashed romanticism.

What then is the debt to Hans Hofmann? It is this: the time lag which hindered our understanding is now ended. Instead of remaining content with outmoded and archaic forms, we are now aware that the cubists before 1914 had prophetically "split the atom" of academic form. Hofmann's aesthetic is built upon the cubist revolution of form and the fauve revolution of colour. In Paris, Hofmann had been an intimate of Picasso, Braque and Matisse, in the decade before 1914, when they began and finished a revolution. Ever since, paralleling Mondrian and Miro, Hofmann has been pushing these new frontiers to their seeming limits; yet the secret of his teaching lies in his comprehension of the *sine qua non*

of contemporary art, the releasing of form and colour from natural limitations, discoveries made respectively by cubists and fauves.

It is difficult to paraphrase what he says in his teaching. Hofmann has a horror of formulae. He constantly contradicts himself. His ideas take shape as he stands before the student's work. Asked why he did not write down his explanations, he said that he was not sure that he was right, and that as soon as an idea is written down it is no longer alive. The occasional papers he has prepared give little clue to the liveliness of his teaching.

First the student must learn to see. Seeing is an art. "Not by looking, but by looking and comparing do you really see." And he adds, "Everyone can see everything but not everyone can see the essential." What is this essential? As long as you just see the object, he says, you do not see the essential. You must first see the space.

Hofmann can show that the area between the cheek-bone and the chest has a shape just as the empty area inside a cup has shape. Space has as precise a form as the object that displaces it. Having seen the space, the student must learn to represent it, but it cannot be represented by the illusions of academic art. Fortunately the cubists gave a means to define space with precision: the plane. Through manipulation of planes the painter explores the negative space of nature. So the space volume of nature is translated into the pictorial space of the paper.

The student used to spend years in learning to draw the head in isolation. Hofmann now shows him that there is life, not in the head alone, but in the space surrounding the head. This space is not emptiness but is charged with potential force. When the artist becomes aware of this space he can control it. He can bring it to the highest pitch of force and expressiveness by even the smallest adjustment of spatial division on the paper before him. Hofmann can show that an adjustment of one millimeter can change a space from being small to being enormous. "Between two points", he says, "can be made a giant or a dwarf. That is what composition is."

Composition begins with the picture plane, and it must to the end be true to the essential

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TAK TANABE. *Caged*

flatness of canvas or paper; that is to say, to present three-dimensional space you must use two-dimensional means. But the effect which the artist creates by the use of pictorial space is anything but flat or mathematically measured. The space pushes forward and backward, into depth and out, as well as up and down, right and left on the surface. Dry, dead elements, lines, tones and colours, at some point leap into life. This is the pulsating, breathing quality in a composition which Hofmann calls "push and pull". This counterpoint is no illusion of life; it is life itself.

The result has been called "abstract", a word which, however, here loses its common meaning. Actually the painter is drawing what he sees as objectively as ever Ingres did. The difference is that he is seeing another aspect of reality. Hofmann's students work always from the model. "Look more to nature than to Picasso", he tells them.

Colour can be used to create space and tension. Academic colour, however, merely decorates. To Hofmann colour is a force. It does not lie on or cover a form: it *is* form. The old idea of colour was a static one. For

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ALEXANDRA LUKE. *Abstract Landscape*



Plate: Courtesy, The Picture Loan Society

*The Montreal
Museum of Fine Arts*



THOMAS GAINSBOROUGH. *Mrs. George Drummond*



Pottery Bowl. Persian. Nishapur. 10th Century A.D.

SOME NEW CANADIAN PAINTERS

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example, the academic rule says that blue recedes. To Hofmann this is not a rule (there are no rules). Blue does not recede, because blue exists not in isolation but in relation. In one context it may recede. In another it will come forward. Or it will do both; it will recede and come forward at the same time, like a heart beating, whose pulse reveals the work of art to be an active creature, vibrating like a machine, dynamic like a symphony. The colours play, each one is a dynamic force, all are held in intimate control. This is Hofmann's conception of a painting.

Painting means forming with colour. No tonal concept must enter, no thinking in terms of dark and light but only in terms of colour intervals.

Until it reaches the end the painting must be all the time destroyed. Out of destruction comes the beauty because the unexpected happens. What comes from the unexpected is something that could come out through no power of thinking.

Hofmann's insistence on these plastic qualities gives him the power to make artists of painters who might otherwise be only sensitive technicians. "Construction is there in order to be overcome—to leave the earth and reach the sky, but the construction must be there in order to be overcome."

Then anything is possible. This gives us power, he once told us, "not to imitate the old masters but to become masters ourselves by the means we have. We can become as great as Michelangelo. After all, he was only a human being!"