

The Sixties at the National Gallery of Canada

NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES
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On February 17, 1960, the Right Honourable John G. Diefenbaker, Prime Minister of Canada, officially reopened the National Gallery of Canada in the newly built Lorne Building on Elgin Street facing Confederation Square (1-3). This new location would be the Gallery's temporary home until May 21, 1988, when it would move to its permanent location on Sussex Drive.

The Gallery also had a new director, Charles Comfort, who had served as an official war artist during World War II and who was, at the time of his appointment, president of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts and associate professor in the Department of Art and Archaeology at the University of Toronto. Comfort's predecessor, Alan Jarvis, an outspoken and dynamic director, found himself a victim of partisan politics and had been forced to resign shortly before the opening of the new temporary building. As part of his mandate, the new director was expected to re-establish a sense of confidence and stability at the Gallery and avoid controversy. Among his early tasks, he had the pleasure of hosting a visit from Jacqueline Kennedy, who was quickly becoming an icon of the early 1960s (5).

Comfort encouraged a series of biennial exhibitions of Canadian art that sought to survey contemporary Canadian work. Although artists, particularly those who lived outside major centres, welcomed the opportunity to have their work shown across the country and in one biennial in England, as well (12), the exhibitions proved to be a frustrating experience from organizational and critical points of view. The seventh and last biennial was held in 1968. It did not make a substantial statement, nor had any of the others, as too many works were included, and they were too diverse in style and content. The goal of a national look was always overridden by distinct regional and linguistic identities. Consequently, exhibitions presenting regional work, such as *Five Painters from Regina* (6), with its distinctive catalogue, were much more successful.

As Director of the National Gallery, Comfort also served as the Canada Customs arbiter for art, with the power to issue certificates declaring any piece entering the country to be a work of art and thus exempt from import duties. In 1965 he deemed Warhol's *Brillo* not art but "merchandise" and therefore subject to taxes. That decision resulted in a storm of negative press indicting the Gallery for its inability to recognize new boundaries in art. Later that year Comfort retired from his position, strictly on schedule. Almost forty years later, Comfort's actions still reverberate in the art world, attracting attention in the press. (10-11)

Jean Sutherland Boggs was appointed director on June 1, 1966, under the Liberal Government led by internationalist Lester B. Pearson. In addition to being the first director with a doctorate in fine arts, Miss Boggs was also the first woman to occupy the position. She quickly established the National Gallery's visibility and credibility – nationally and internationally – setting professional standards that the institution has striven to maintain ever since (13). Because most of her predecessors had come from Great Britain, British cultural attitudes were reflected in the Gallery's management, programming, and acquisitions. With Miss Boggs's arrival however, any vestiges of a colonial mentality were soon discarded. Her most dramatic action was to lift the ban on the acquisition of contemporary American art: Warhol's *Brillo* was among the first works purchased. In 1967 she established a permanent collection of photography, a formal recognition of the photograph as a collectible object.

Miss Boggs's first year was committed to preparations for Canada's forthcoming centenary. The Centennial Lectures, a series sponsored by the National Gallery, featured internationally-renowned authorities appearing before audiences across the country. The Gallery mounted two celebratory exhibitions. *Three Hundred Years of Canadian Art*, complete with a birthday cake designed by Greg Curnoe for the opening (14), was the first. The cake's decorative orange and blue icing was flavoured with back bacon and maple sugar. The prepared text declared: "300 Yrs. Of Canadian Art I Think I Love You! But I Want To Know For Sure! 300 Yrs. Of Canadian Art, Hold Me Tight! I Need You!" The second exhibition, *A Pageant of Canada: The European Contribution to the Iconography of Canada*, curated by Roy Strong, director of the National Portrait Gallery in London, featured a Victorian pavilion interior (15). The Gallery was also responsible for preparing *Man and His World: International Fine Arts Exhibition, Expo '67*, and *Sculpture '67*. *Sculpture '67* was installed in front of Toronto's city hall.

The formidable Kathleen Fenwick, the Gallery's first Curator of Prints and Drawings, retired in 1968 after forty years of service (17). Her tenure was celebrated with an exhibition of drawings at Colaghi's Gallery in London, England, the Louvre in Paris, and the Uffizi in Florence, marking the first occasion that the Louvre presented an exhibition from another institution in its Cabinet des dessins. Separate catalogues were published for each venue and included an appreciation written by Jean Boggs in honour of Miss Fenwick's contribution to the Gallery and to its collection of prints and drawings.

The Gallery also promoted contemporary Canadian art internationally by organizing exhibitions for biennials and conferences abroad. Smaller in scope with few artists presented, these exhibitions met with greater success than did the Canadian biennials. Critics praised Canadian artists who were winning awards or honourable mentions. Jean-Paul Riopelle landed the UNESCO Prize for painting at the Venice Biennale in 1962 (8). The Canadian section won the Grand Award for best national representation, and Harold Town was awarded the second Purchase Prize at the first Primera Bienal (1963) Americana de Grabado in Santiago, Chile. At the fifth (1967) Paris Biennale, John Max won an award for his photographs, and in 1968 at the Venice Biennale, Guido Molinari won the David Bright Prize for painters under 40 (21).

The collecting of post-war American art, such as paintings by Jackson Pollock and James Rosenquist, as well as Robert Morris's *Untitled* sculpture (a random pile of 254 pieces of felt) and Carl Andre's *Lever* (an installation of 137 firebricks), forced the Gallery to champion and defend the work it acquired from innovative and sometimes controversial artists (18). An angry public reacted to Morris's felt piece by throwing garbage onto it. The first exhibition following centennial year was a one-person show, curated by Brydon Smith, of the American Pop artist James Rosenquist, sometimes referred to as the "Billboard Michelangelo." The artist collaborated in the publication's design and also contributed a text of "descriptions of experiences" (20). Successive exhibitions by the N.E. Thing Co. (22), Dan Flavin (23), and Greg Curnoe (24), involved

the artists with the design and content of their catalogues and posters. Flavin designed a spare black-and-white cover for his catalogue, recalling the artist's fluorescent light sculptures. He also included writings for the catalogue, as did fellow New York artists Mel Bochner and Donald Judd; Brydon Smith compiled a detailed catalogue of Flavin's work in the exhibition. Greg Curnoe's catalogue for the São Paulo X Bienal consisted of snapshots, taken by the curator Dennis Reid, documenting the artist's daily life: views of his city, his studio, the artist at work and play, and with his family. The cover, designed by Curnoe, featured a boldly coloured rubber-stamped text that simply repeated the title in the three languages of the Bienal. Curnoe, anti-American and an ardent Canadian regionalist, included six questions at the end of his São Paulo catalogue, the sixth echoing the self-doubt with which the Gallery had struggled in its patriotic efforts in the Canadian biennials: "Can my culture survive the constant destruction of its parts in favour of a 'better' (American, British) culture? Or is that what my culture is?"

In 1968 the National Gallery of Canada lost its administrative autonomy to the National Museums Corporation and ceased to be a separate legal entity. Instead of an annual report that year, the Gallery published its *First Annual Review* (25), featuring a detail of Michael Snow's *Snow Storm* on the cover. The choice of image reflected the turbulent atmosphere of the time and illustrated the uncertainty about the future facing the institution. For the National Gallery of Canada, the 1960s proved to be not only a decade of transition but also one of upheaval.

Peter Trepanier, Head, Reader Services
In memory of Mary Hilda Stephens

FURTHER READING

Leclerc, Denise, and Pierre Dessurault. *The Sixties in Canada*, exhib. cat. Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 2005.
Nemiroff, Diana. *3 x 3: Flavin, Andre, Judd*, exhib. cat. Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 2003.
Ord, Douglas. *The National Gallery of Canada: Ideas, Art, Architecture*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003.

Checklist

- 1, 2. February 17, 1960. Lorne Building exterior; Prime Minister and Mrs. John Diefenbaker arriving at the National Gallery for the official opening. (Photo: Duncan Cameron, Capital Press Service, Ottawa.) (two b&w photographs)
3. February 1960. Art Reference Library, third floor. (Photo: Bill Lingard, Photo Features, Ottawa.) (b&w photograph)
4. February 18 – April 24, 1960. *Canadian Design in Retrospect, 1949–1959*. (Photo: Bill Lingard, Photo Features, Ottawa.) (exhibition catalogue and b&w photograph)
5. May 13 – 18, 1961. Janet Lukas, "Noses Pressed the Windows to Watch Jackie at Gallery," "Jackie Enjoys Tour of Art Gallery," "At the Art Gallery," "Protocol Pares Tour of Gallery;" Starr Cote, "Private Visit – In Public," "Brant Portraits Catch Jackie's Eye;" Gordon Dewar, "3,000 Cheer First Lady," "At National Gallery," "A Picture at the Gallery." (nine newspaper clippings from the *Ottawa Journal* and the *Ottawa Citizen*)
6. November 30 – December 26, 1961. *Five Painters from Regina: Bloore, Godwin, Lochhead, McKay, Morton*. (exhibition catalogue)
7. December 9, 1981. Gwen Cowley, "Dress Informal – Two Little Words with 101 Interpretations. Here Are a Few by Top Canadian Designers," *The (Toronto) Star Weekly*. (newspaper clipping)
8. June 16 – October 8, 1962. *Jean-Paul Riopelle, Paintings and Sculpture: XXXI International Biennial of Art*. (exhibition catalogue)

9. January 10 – February 3, 1963. *Jean-Paul Riopelle: Painting and Sculpture*. (exhibition catalogue)
10. June, July, August 2004. “Brillo Boxes: Warhol’s 1968 Brillo Boxes Caused a Furore in the Art World,” *Christie’s Magazine*, pp. 34–35. (journal)
11. June 23, 2004. Randy Boswell, “Art or Merchandise, It’s Yours for \$1M: Customs Ruling on Warhol’s Work Caused Media Uproar,” *Ottawa Citizen*. (newspaper clipping)
12. September 20 – October 27, 1963. *5th Biennial Exhibition of Canadian Painting 1963*. (Photo: Fednews, Toronto) (exhibition catalogue and photograph of the Queen with Charles Comfort at the opening, held at the Commonwealth Institute in London)
13. June 1968. Wendy Michener, “Jean Boggs: The Woman They Didn’t Want,” *Chatelaine*, pp. 28–29, 74–75. (Left to right: Dennis Reid, Mimi Cazort, Brydon Smith, Nathan Stolow, Pierre Théberge, Pamela Osler, Jim Borcoman, Guy Viau, Jean-Paul Morisset, Bill Bragg, Amos Paget, Jean Sutherland Boggs, Michel Amyot, André Vigeant, Dorothea Coates.) (magazine article)
14. May 12 – September 17, 1967. *Three Hundred Years of Canadian Art: An Exhibition Arranged in Celebration of the Centenary of Confederation*. (Photo: John Evans Photography Limited.) (ten colour Polaroid photographs of cake decorating, featuring the Canadian artist Greg Curnoe; b&w photograph of the Secretary of State Judy LaMarsh cutting the cake, flanked by Greg Curnoe, Pierre Théberge, and Jean Sutherland Boggs; note from Judy LaMarsh, to Jean Boggs, May 17, 1967)
15. October 27, 1967 – January 19, 1968. *A Pageant of Canada*. (Photo: John Evans Photography Limited, Ottawa.) (sixteen b&w photographs of Jean Sutherland Boggs with Roy Strong, curator of the exhibition; one b&w and three colour Polaroid photographs of installation views of the “Victorian Pavilion”)
16. January 24 – February 23, 1969. *The MacCallum Bequest of Paintings by Tom Thomson and Other Canadian Painters (and) the Mr. and Mrs. H.R. Jackman Gift of the Murals from the Late Dr. MacCallum’s Cottage Painted by Some of the Members of the Group of Seven*. (Photos: John Evans Photography Limited, Ottawa.) (two b&w photographs; left to right: the Governor General and Mrs. Roland Michener, A.Y. Jackson, and Mr. Henry R. Jackman at the opening; installation view of reassembled panels during exhibition opening)
17. June 16, 1968. Kathleen Fenwick with the Director, Jean Boggs, on the occasion of Miss Fenwick’s retirement. (Photo: John Evans Photography Limited, Ottawa.) (b&w photograph)
18. December 7, 1968. Gail Dexter, “Brydon Smith and His Little Collection of Artistic Shockers: The National Gallery’s New Curator of Contemporary Art Wants to Shock Us, So He Bought a Felt Sculpture,” *Toronto Star*. (newspaper clipping)
19. June 21, 1969. “Here’s a \$203,000 Return on Your Taxes” *Weekend Magazine*. (newspaper clipping)
20. January 24 – February 25, 1968. *James Rosenquist*. (exhibition catalogue)
21. June 22 – October 20, 1968. *Ulysse Comtois, Guido Molinari: XXXIV International Biennial Exhibition of Art, Venice*. (exhibition catalogue)
22. June 4 – July 6, 1969. *N.E. Thing Company Limited*. (poster)
23. September 13 – October 19, 1969. *Fluorescent Light, Etc. from Dan Flavin*. (exhibition catalogue)
24. September 23, 1969 – January 8, 1970. *Greg Curnoe: Canada, X Biennal São Paulo*. (exhibition catalogue)
25. 1968–1969. *First Annual Review of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa*. (journal)
26. October 31, 1969. Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau and Margaret Sinclair at the National Gallery Association Ball. (Photo: United Press International Photo.) (two b&w photographs)

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