

SELECTED  
SCENES FROM  
THE 1950s AT  
THE NATIONAL  
GALLERY

National Gallery of Canada  
Library and Archives  
10 September–19 December 2008

This exhibition celebrates the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Volunteers' Circle of the National Gallery of Canada.

Launched in 1958, the National Gallery Association of Ottawa—as the organization was then known—succeeded in recruiting about 750 members in its first year, including an honorary membership for the Group of Seven painter A.Y. Jackson. Among its first speakers was the Montreal artist and gallery dealer Agnès Lefort, who moderated a series on contemporary art. [1] Rather than providing a comprehensive survey, the installation comprises a sampling of documents from the National Gallery Library and Archives collections chosen to give a flavour of the times.

After the Second World War, the federal government recognized that Canada needed to articulate its own national cultural policy at home and abroad. *The National Gallery Act* (1951) gave the Gallery more autonomy, through its Board of Directors, in managing acquisitions, collections, and exhibitions and in promoting art in Canada. [7] Alan Jarvis, director from 1955 to 1959, used the popular press and the new medium of television to educate the general public about art and to raise the institution's profile. [8–9] Under his leadership, the staff was more than doubled. By the end of the decade, the Gallery had moved from the Victoria Memorial Museum Building to its own “temporary” home (it was housed there for almost thirty years) in the Lorne Building on Elgin Street. [23]

During the 1950s, the Gallery explored new areas of interest in an international modernist era: it fostered good Canadian design in consumer goods and fine crafts, presented its first exhibition of Inuit art, and hosted the most famous exhibition of photographs in history, Edward Steichen's *The Family of Man*, during its world tour. [11–20] Exhibitions marking royal connections also reflected the period. Queen Mary, the grandmother of Queen Elizabeth II, made a million-stitch needlepoint carpet between 1941 and 1950, offering it for purchase by a public institution as her contribution towards Britain's national effort in the financial crisis that followed the war. The Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire (IODE) raised \$100,000 to buy the work, and donated the carpet to the National Gallery. [2–6] The Gallery also mounted exhibitions on senior Canadian artists, and in 1953 (it became a biennial in 1955) reinstated the Annual Exhibition of Canadian Painting surveying contemporary painting in Canada. In addition, the Gallery promoted Canadian art abroad, notably at the Brussels world's fair in 1958, as well as at the biennales of contemporary art in São Paulo, Lugano, Paris, and Venice.

The year 2008 also marks the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of Canada's national pavilion at the Venice Biennale, the premier international venue for contemporary art in Europe. First invited to participate officially in 1952, Canada was allotted a small room in the Palazzo Centrale. Gallery officials recommended to Parliament that Canada have its own national pavilion, and Parliament responded by granting \$25,000 from a reserve for cultural projects in Italy. A contract was awarded to Enrico Peressutti of the Milanese architectural firm BBPR, and the pavilion was constructed in time for the 1958 Biennale. Located in the cul-de-sac of a broad avenue, the small, wigwam-like octagonal structure

is surrounded by trees (it even encases a tree) and backs onto a body of water. [21] Robin Collyer, Canada’s artist designate for the forty-fifth Biennale in 1993, used the building as the subject of a publication in which he interposed pictures of the Venice Pavilion with those of the area around his Ontario cabin. [22] The book design fuses Peressutti’s romantic notion of the Canadian wilderness with our First Nations heritage, creating a work that is both historical and timeless.

**Peter Trepanier**

*Head, Reader Services*

## CHECKLIST

- 1 “L’Association d’Ottawa de la Galerie nationale du Canada”; “Gallery Association Executive Meets 200 Representatives of Arts’ Groups”; “Nouvelle association”; “L’Association de la Galerie nationale.” From *Le Droit* and the *Ottawa Citizen*, 20 November 1958–26 October 1959.
- 2 Committee for Queen Mary’s Contribution to the Dollar Drive. *Queen Mary’s Carpet: Official Souvenir* (London, 1950), p. 9 [souvenir booklet].
- 3 “Ottawa Views Queen’s Carpet Symbol of Sacrifice, Industry”; “Admirateurs à l’exposition du tapis de la reine Marie”; “250,000 Help Buy Carpet for Gallery”; “Queen Mary’s Carpet—A Bridge Across the Half-Century,” “Une petite-fille présente une oeuvre d’art de sa grand-mère...” From the *Ottawa Journal*, *Le Droit*, *Ottawa Citizen*, and an unidentified Montreal newspaper, 27 March 1950–11 October 1951.
- 4 “Londres a enfin payé sa dette de guerre,” *Le Devoir*, 29 December 2006.
- 5 2 June–13 September 1953. *Exhibition of Canadian Painting to Celebrate the Coronation of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II*. Ottawa, 1953 [exhibition catalogue]; “Coronation Regalia Here”; “Coronation Regalia on Display”; “Charge for Royal Exhibit Justified”; “Exhibition Coronation Robes and Regalia Queen Charlotte High School”; “Exhibition of Coronation Robes and Regalia.” From the *Fredericton Telegraph*, *St. John’s Evening Telegram*, *Charlottetown Guardian*, and *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 2 July 1954–10 January 1955.
- 6 T. Hebron, The Chapter Office, Westminster Abbey, to S.F. Bowman, Director [sic], The National Gallery, 21 September 1955. National Gallery of Canada Archives, National Gallery of Canada fonds, Exhibition in Gallery, 5.5C Coronation Robes Regalia Exhibition (File 4).
- 7 *National Gallery of Canada Act*. 1951. (2nd Session), c. 16, s. 1. Ottawa: Edmond Cloutier, Queen’s Printer, 1952 [pamphlets].
- 8 Peter C. Newman. “Is Jarvis Mis-spending our Art Millions?” *Maclean’s Magazine*, 22 November 1958, pp. 20–21, 40–42.

- 9 Alan Jarvis, *The Things We See*. Ottawa: CBC-TV/National Gallery of Canada. 2 July–24 September 1957. Broadcast in English only.
- 10 National Gallery of Canada. *Annual Report, 1955–1956 and 1956–1957*. Ottawa, 1956 and 1957; Galerie nationale du Canada, *Rapport annuel, 1957–1958 and 1958–1959*. Ottawa, 1958 and 1959.
- 11 Conseil national d'esthétique industrielle. *Formes utiles dans la vie canadienne*. Ottawa: Le conseil, 1955 [?] [portfolio].
- 12 December 1953. *Christmas Gifts of Good Design*. Ottawa: Design Centre, 1953 [exhibition catalogue].
- 13 "All-Canadian," *Ottawa Journal*, February 1953.
- 14 Donald W. Buchanan. "The Co-operative Approach towards Better Design of Canadian Products," *Industrial Canada* 55 (January 1955), pp. 58–59, 61 ff.
- 15 Joan M. Jackson. "Design Comes of Age: Canadian Industrial Design Stresses a Unity of Elements—Form, Material and Finish," *C-I-L Oval*, October 1953, pp. 8–10.
- 16 18 January–10 February 1952. *Eskimo Art*. Ottawa, 1951 [exhibition catalogue].
- 17 19–28 January 1955. *Eskimo Sculpture*. Ottawa, 1955 [exhibition catalogue].
- "Eskimo Artist at Museum," *Ottawa Citizen*, 24 February 1958.
- 7–26 June 1957. *First National Fine Crafts Exhibition*. Ottawa, 1957 [exhibition catalogue].
- 20 1–22 February 1957. Edward Steichen. *The Family of Man*. New York: Published for the Museum of Modern Art by Simon and Schuster, 1955 [exhibition catalogue]; *The Trustees of the National Gallery of Canada / invite you to the opening of / The Family of Man / an exhibition of creative photography / dedicated to the dignity of man, / on Friday, 1<sup>st</sup> February 1957, at 5:30 p.m. / an exhibition created by Edward Steichen / for the Museum of Modern Art, New York* [card].
- 21 "Le Pavillon canadien sur le terrain de la Biennale de Venise, une construction permanente réalisée pour la Galerie Nationale du Canada." Galerie nationale du Canada, *Rapport annuel, 1958–1959*, pp. 30–31. Ottawa, 1959.
- 22 13 June–10 October 1993. Robin Collyer, *Canada XLVth Biennale di Venezia*. Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1993 [artist's book/exhibition catalogue].
- 23 Lorne Building under Construction; Guests Attending Laying of the Cornerstone, Lorne Building, by the Governor General Vincent Massey, 22 May 1959. (Photos: Newton Photographic Associates Ltd., Ottawa); *The Laying of the Corner Stone of the / Lorne Building / National Gallery of Canada / Ottawa / by / His Excellency The Right Hon. Vincent Massey, C.H., / Governor General and Commander in Chief / Canada / 4:00 p.m. / May 22, 1959* [card].

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