

# PORTRAITS IN TIME — CANADA'S CITIES THROUGH THE EYES OF ARTISTIC BEHOLDERS

Ihor Holubizky

Fifty years ago, the Cities of Canada exhibition commissioned by Seagram visited 23 Canadian cities after touring internationally to impressive crowds across Europe. The Canadian artists were commissioned by whisky baron Sam Bronfman, who believed in larger “horizons of industry,” and were selected by the eminent Canadian painters Robert Pilot and A.Y. Jackson. The resulting canvases of 22 Canadian cities constitute a unique Canadian collection, which has now been donated by Charles Bronfman to the McCord Museum of History at McGill University, where its mid-February opening coincides with the Bronfman-endowed McGill Institute for the Study of Canada’s conference on cities. Ihor Holubizky, who has curated the exhibition, looks back half a century to its corporate origins and the artists’ visions of Canada’s cities, which remain “relevant to the appreciation and understanding of Canadian art and history.” The paintings, he adds, “also underscore the complex issues of cities and urban life, then and today.”

En 1954, l'exposition Villes du Canada commanditée par Seagram faisait la tournée de 23 villes du pays, un an après avoir attiré dans toute l'Europe des foules impressionnantes. Samuel Bronfman, magnat du whisky désireux d'« élargir les horizons » de son empire, avait confié aux célèbres peintres Robert Pilot et A.Y. Jackson la sélection de 22 artistes canadiens qui peindraient chacun un tableau représentant une ville différente. Charles Bronfman ayant fait don de cette collection exceptionnelle au Musée McCord d'histoire canadienne de l'Université McGill, elle y sera exposée dès la mi-février en marge d'une conférence sur le thème de la ville organisée par l'Institut d'études canadiennes de McGill, et également parrainé par le donateur. Ihor Holubizky, conservateur de l'exposition, évoque les origines de ce mécénat d'entreprise et la vision offerte par ce groupe d'artistes, restée tout aussi utile à « l'appréciation comme à la compréhension de l'histoire et de l'art canadiens ». Les tableaux, ajoute-t-il, « mettent aussi en évidence la complexité des villes et de la vie urbaine, d'hier à aujourd'hui ».



**I**n 1951, Samuel Bronfman, president of the House of Seagram, commissioned 22 artists to paint the cities of Canada. To select the participants he relied upon the expertise of artists Robert Pilot, then president of the Royal Canadian Academy, and A.Y. Jackson. Both had played important roles in the formation of a modern vocabulary for Canadian art in the first half of the 20th century, and while their selection was drawn from members of the RCA, it also included younger artists — five of the 22 were under the age of 40. Not all the artists painted their hometown; rather, many were sent out across Canada to observe and sketch firsthand. For A.Y. Jackson, the occasion of painting

St. John's was his first time in Newfoundland, though we might imagine that by that time he had, indeed, painted “all” of Canada. Artists were paid an average of \$1,000 each for their completed work, a significant amount of money in the early 1950s.

Bronfman stated on many occasions his belief that the “horizons of industry should not terminate at the boundary-lines of its plants.” This was hardly a typical view, and coming from a “captain of industry” might even be seen as a self-serving platitude. Bronfman also felt that private enterprise had a responsibility to take an active part in promoting culture. An exhibition of the commissioned

paintings was organized to tour the Americas and Europe in 1953-54, and, in its patron's words, brought "to the peoples of the world...views of Canada's cities...rising from its sea-coasts, in the midst of its plains, at the foot of its mountains." This was followed by a cross-Canada tour in 1954-55. Bronfman's vision of a new urban Canada was of the land, the people, cities, and the will to prosper, which he described in a 1954 radio interview as "the sum of the nation."

The *Cities of Canada* works toured again in 1964 and made their final major public appearance during Centennial Year in 1967. Although an

*Cities of Canada* marks a shift in the depiction of Canada, now an emerging urban nation. Industry was very much a part of the Canadian landscape after the Second World War, with the growth of cities and suburbs, new prosperity and a general sense of optimism. Yet the Canadian wilderness was still being heavily promoted as the new growth industry. That wild, rugged image endures, even though the majority of Canadians live in cities today.

immensely popular exhibition, it had its critics. Some felt the corporate association compromised the integrity of the work, and art historian Rosemary Donegan suggested that Seagram had undertaken the project as part of a promotional program designed to circumvent legal and moral restrictions on the advertising of liquor. She singled out one work as a "rather saccharine, abstract treatment...symbolizing the power and beauty of modern industry."

The studied disregard for these paintings, which assumes they are tainted by a corporate vision, is a double-edged problem. The art world often assigns merit by a formalist criterion that looks beyond content, or privileges content-driven art that forms (some say, must form) a social critique. The middle ground is often regarded as anecdotal or irrelevant picture-making. The *Cities of Canada* paintings have fallen into the latter category. Nevertheless they remain relevant to the appreciation and under-

standing of Canadian art and history. The paintings also underscore the complex issues of cities and urban life, then and today, and should be read as visual-social documents.

Although industrial images appeared in Canadian art prior to the First World War, the prevalent subject matter for the first half of the 20th century remained the genres of landscape, portrait and still life, with abstraction just on the horizon (clearly, a different horizon than the one Samuel Bronfman saw). *Cities of Canada* marks a shift in the depiction of Canada, now an emerging urban

nation. Industry was very much a part of the Canadian landscape after the Second World War, with the growth of cities and suburbs, new prosperity and a general sense of optimism. Yet the Canadian wilderness was still being heavily promoted as the new growth industry, a destination for tourists from abroad but also for the modern Canadian family in search of leisure and recreation. That wild, rugged image endures, even though the majority of Canadians live in cities today. A 2003 poll by the Centre for Research and Information on Canada indicated that "the vastness and beauty of the land" is what most citizens think of as the essence of the country.

The 1951 census is pivotal to understanding the dynamics that were changing, and continue to change, Canadian life and society. It was a portrait of the modern nation, the first conducted with 10 provinces and two territories, as Newfoundland had entered Confederation just two years

earlier. There had been a dramatic increase in population over the 50 years since the 1900 census, almost tripling to 14 million (whereas the population merely doubled from 1950 to 2000). Sixty percent of Canadians lived in rural areas in 1900, but by 1951 the urban population was in the majority, almost 57 percent. This trend continues, and today almost 80 percent of Canadians live in urban areas. At the beginning of the 1950s, after 20 continuous years of hardship with the Great Depression and the global conflict of the Second World War, there was a sense of a new social purpose, well-being and optimism; this despite new global tensions arising from the Cold War and the war in Korea. Many of the artists included in *Cities of Canada* had served in the military, and, to state the obvious, had also been affected by the Depression.

In the immediate aftermath of the war in 1946, the Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation held a competition for the design of a small house that could be built for \$6,000. The three regional winning designs illustrated how the new post-war family would live and how its needs would be met with open concept living/dining areas, floor to ceiling windows, basements with a recreation room, and even a fanciful helicopter landing pad incorporated into the design by John C. Parkin. A reviewing journalist wrote that the post-war Canadian family was different "from every other kind of family that has ever existed," and that the housing designs offered "the future opportunity for the development of a lively Canadian vernacular art."

In 1953, the first Canadian urban-social engineering experiment was launched, the suburb of Don Mills, Ontario. There was no turning back.

In addition to the boom in resource industries and manufacturing, there was unprecedented research undertaken in the sciences and engineering — aeronautics, for example. Consumer



The Seagram Collection, McCord Museum

Montreal, looking north on McGill College to the Roddick Gates and the Arts building of McGill University. Albert Cloutier's oil painting includes the train tunnel's south portal, later covered up by the Montreal building boom. Many paintings in the Seagram Collection, writes Ihor Holubizky, "now serve as important historical documents of urban development, as some prominent landmarks no longer exist."

products began to re-enter the marketplace after wartime manufacturing restrictions, as well as new products, such as Canadian-designed modernist furniture. Television provided a window on the world and would have as profound an effect on the sense of Canadian nationhood as the transcontinental railway did in the 1890s. The cultural sector saw significant developments in the 1950s. There were individual initiatives, such as the publication of Marshall McLuhan's *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* (1951), but public galleries were also established and new buildings constructed, the Canada Council was formed (1957), and recurring events such as the Stratford Shakespearean Festival appeared (1953).

The logistics of the *Cities of Canada* project appears daunting even 50 years later. The city locations stretched from St. John's, Newfoundland, to

Victoria, BC, a distance of 7,314 km. Windsor was the southernmost city at 42° latitude, the same as the top of Northern California. Edmonton was the most northern city at 53° latitude. Equally challenging was the relative size of the 28 cities depicted — Montreal had the largest population at 1.4 million, and Charlottetown was the smallest at 16,000. There were also significant differences in historical development, and hence the urban fabric — Quebec City was established in 1608, and Montreal in 1642, while many of the Western Canadian cities did not appear until the end of the 19th century.

Each city posed a challenge for the individual artists. What to depict relative to old and new landmarks, how to reflect the geographic terrain, and how to capture the essence of a city in a single, succinct work? The works had to be dynamic portraits as well as visual documents, which precluded the use of abstraction.

Accordingly, each artist took on the role of social geographer in selecting their view and interpretation of the city, its past and present, with a glance toward the future. Artist Charles Comfort noted in his approach to painting Edmonton: "In the mid-summer of 1952, [it] was like a great booming vortex of industrial enterprises. I chose to paint a portrait of Edmonton and not a created myth of my own about the city; no artificial symbolism could communicate...the vigor and promise contained in that location."

Comfort's thoughts were repeated by many of the artists, and in turn, thematic threads can be seen. City skylines are the most obvious indication of urban growth, but tall modern buildings were rare in Canada in 1951, even though the tallest building in the British Empire always had pride of place. Structures in Montreal and Toronto took the premiere position in quick succession until the construction

of the 34-storey Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce, designed by architects Darling and Pearson and completed in 1931. As a consequence, CPR hotels built in the late 19th and early 20th century often dominated. They figure prominently in the paintings of Victoria, Quebec City, Toronto, and Winnipeg, and served as actual vantage

ing of Calgary, a view of downtown and the Centre Street Bridge over the Bow River, the tallest building was the CPR Pallister Hotel. It was designed by architects E. and W.S. Maxwell of Montreal, and opened in 1914. The 1929 hotel addition was done by architect Lawrence Gotch in the so-called Chicago Look, with very pronounced geometric lines

The contrast in architectural styles caused Edmontonians to refer to the addition as “the Mac [as the original MacDonald Hotel was called by locals] and the box it came in.”

**N**o Edmontonians I contacted could identify the building in the painting because it was demolished in 1986.

This is yet another condition of the new urban environment: short-term memory, or out-of-sight, out-of-mind. A similar situation arose while identifying two tall buildings in a sketch of Toronto’s downtown by Joseph Hallam. One was the Bank of Nova Scotia, completed in 1951, a site now occupied by the 68-storey Scotia Plaza Complex. My

search for the identity of the other building had an amusing conclusion. A friend and colleague, who also happened to be the art and architecture critic for the *Toronto Star*, could not identify it. It turned out to be the 22-storey Toronto Star Building, which opened in 1929 and was demolished in 1971.

A preliminary sketch by Albert Cloutier shows another long-gone Canadian urban landmark, the entrance to the five km long Mount Royal Tunnel. The Canadian Northern

At the beginning of the 1950s, after 20 continuous years of hardship with the Great Depression and the global conflict of the Second World War, there was a sense of a new social purpose, well-being and optimism; this despite new global tensions arising from the Cold War and the war in Korea. Many of the artists included in *Cities of Canada* had served in the military, and, to state the obvious, had also been affected by the Depression.

points for some artists. Churches were also prominent landmarks, as were provincial legislative buildings, often the first major public building projects. Bridges, built before skyscrapers and another sign of the modern age, can be seen in the paintings of Calgary, Edmonton, Halifax, Hamilton, Hull, Sarnia and Windsor. They were essential for the development of transport and industry, and a connection to trade with the United States. Prominent factory and industrial sites were depicted in Hamilton, Hull, Fort William/Port Arthur, Sarnia, Sudbury, and Windsor, as well as the ocean ports of Halifax, St. John’s, Vancouver, and Victoria.

**W**ith few exceptions, the artists strove for accuracy. For this reason the paintings now serve as important historical documents of urban development, as some prominent landmarks no longer exist and urban expansion and suburban development eventually encroached on the landscape. It is here that the documentary value of these paintings is located — they reveal how “modernity came to Canada.” In Alfred C. Leighton’s paint-

and an E-shaped design that gave it the appearance of being three adjacent towers. Charles Comfort’s painting of Edmonton, likewise, is a view of the city centre from across the North Saskatchewan River, and included the High Level Bridge, completed in 1913. It was the first bridge in Canada to carry four modes of transportation: rail, streetcar, automobile and pedestrian. There is an “anomalous” white box building in Comfort’s painting, and the only such “international style” skyscraper in any of

Each city posed a challenge for the individual artists. What to depict relative to old and new landmarks, how to reflect the geographic terrain, and how to capture the essence of a city in a single, succinct work? The works had to be dynamic portraits as well as visual documents, which precluded the use of abstraction. Accordingly, each artist took on the role of social geographer in selecting their view and interpretation of the city, its past and present, with a glance toward the future.

the *Cities of Canada* paintings. Only after much searching was I able to verify the identity of this building as the 16-storey extension to the chateau-style MacDonald Hotel, built in 1915. The tower was started in 1950 and completed in 1953. Comfort’s painting, done in the summer of 1952, depicts the incomplete building, hence, the “white box.”

Railway built it to provide access to lines north of Montreal without having to go around the city. The tunnel opened for service in October 1918 at a cost of \$5 million, and because of its length electric locomotives used it; there were three electrical power substations along the line. The Montreal building boom that started in the 1950s eventually covered

up the tunnel's South portal, and the tracks leading to it.

There are also historical "truths" represented in many of the works. In his commentary for the *Cities of Canada* catalogue Bernard K. Sandwell wrote of Windsor's proximity to Detroit: "The American Revolution separated the two places, but...they are still almost a single city in two nations." That "singularity" refers not only to the "walking distance" proximity, but the auto industry that the two cities shared. This compressed view is reflected in one of Frederick B. Taylor's oil sketches of Windsor, with the skyline of Detroit looming above that of Windsor along the river and dominated by the Penobscot Building, designed in the deco-style and completed in 1928. It was the tallest building in Detroit until 1977. Taylor's view is a still accurate representation of a visitor's first impression of Windsor. Meanwhile, his finished presentation work for *Cities of Canada* requires the key of knowledge of local and social history to unlock the pictorial door. It shows an area along Riverside Drive known as Ford City, which developed out of the French parish Notre-Dame-du-Lac. Ford City was incorporated as a town in 1915 and was the centre of the Windsor auto industry. It was amalgamated into Windsor proper in 1935. Taylor's point of view was from the roof of the original Ford assembly plant, the location of a famous Canadian Auto Workers strike in 1945.

The 1950s saw the United States and European nations circulate art worldwide for cultural and promotional purposes. Canadian group exhibitions were also mounted through the National Gallery and toured within the British Commonwealth, but none matched the scope and ambition of *Cities of Canada*. The international tour was launched with an inaugural preview at the Chateau Laurier in Ottawa in March 1953, then went to 16 cities in

the Americas and Europe, together with a custom-built gallery and display units consisting of moveable aluminum panels that weighed four tons in total. Catalogues were printed in English, French, Spanish, Italian and Portuguese editions, and in full colour, unheard of for gallery catalogues at the time. In addition a limited-edition deluxe folio catalogue was produced and used to promote the exhibition to government officials, gallery directors and curators, and other "captains of industry." To further promote the exhibition a special feature appeared in the May 1953 issue of *New Liberty* magazine, with a national circulation of 500,000. The article

With few exceptions, the artists strove for accuracy. For this reason the paintings now serve as important historical documents of urban development, as some prominent landmarks no longer exist and urban expansion and suburban development eventually encroached on the landscape.

included commentary by the artists themselves.

The exhibition lasted a mere 7 to 13 days in each city, but cumulative attendance figures were impressive — close to 200,000 visitors. The highest attendance was in Stockholm, with 28,000, and the show was extended in Paris to accommodate the high degree of interest. Venues varied, but were primarily grand hotels and public buildings. In Rome the opening took place at the ballroom of the Grand Hotel; a Seagram report noted "the dramatic moment [with] the arrival of His Eminence Cardinal Tisserand escorted by two official candle bearers." The public exhibition opened ten days later at the International Fair Grounds. In two days alone, it attracted 19,000 visitors.

Upon returning to Canada the display units were refurbished and the exhibition opened in Montreal in

April 1954. There were 24 stops in 23 cities — it was shown twice in Toronto — and a venue was added for the Memorial Gallery at the University of Rochester. Typical venues included public galleries, libraries, hotels, and other public spaces. As with the international tour, the exhibition dates were short, between 5 and 16 days, but the attendance figures were equally impressive. The cumulative total was 304,000 visitors; Saskatoon topped the attendance figures with 52,000 visitors over six days; Regina was a close second with 49,000 visitors over six days.

There is an ironic and tragic analogy in the ever-changing urban fabric.

Many of the artists in the Seagram *Cities of Canada* project have been covered-up by art history, and it is a rule of thumb in the art world that when artists' "fortunes" fall, they rarely recover. But this is only one perspective on the merits of art. Writing for *New Liberty* in 1953, Robert Pilot stated that art provides a vision for any nation: "We see the surging forth shown in [Canada's] oil developments, its mining communities, its vast wheat fields, summarized eventually in these skylines." Unlike the wheat fields — or mountains, lakes or rivers — skylines are not resolute, eternal subjects, and as an urban culture and society we may have less critical knowledge of our environment than an agrarian one. Learning about it, in the popular terminology of the day, is a steep curve. If the Group of Seven announced in 1920 that their modernity was "Art for a Nation," the *Cities of Canada* paintings, 30 years later, were "A View of the Nation." Above all else, we should be reminded that photography does not provide a complete historical document, and that art can be much more than something for its "own sake."

*Ihor Holubizky is curator of the Cities of Canada exhibition and collection at the McCord Museum of Canadian History at McGill University.*