

# FALLACIES ABOUT ART

*Lawren Harris*

## The Literary Lawren Harris

"Painters are a bore because most of them would have you believe they are philosophers more than painters," Charlie Chaplin said in his *Autobiography*. There's an element of truth in his assertion: painters try to make sense out of life, as do philosophers. Some even write philosophic treatises, in Canada, for example, Paul-Emile Borduas, Alex Colville — and Lawren Harris.

Harris's manuscript draft of his "Fallacies About Art" is in the Public Archives of Canada in a file containing rough notes, quotations from his reading of critics such as Stephen Spender and Susanne Langer, and jottings on his own creative process and that of others. At the end of the file is his good copy — twenty-six neatly handwritten pages on foolscap, although the last section was still in draft form. The pages appear to have been extracted from a notebook. Harris wrote his treatise to deal with the public's inability to comprehend abstract art. His draft conjures up the artistic problems of his day with uncanny immediacy — the adverse criticism, the niggling comments, even of friends, in what Merrill Denison in 1934 called the "great Canadian art war." "Fallacies About Art" is a plea for understanding.

Probably the manuscript dates from the 1940's or early 1950's. The paper on which he drafted one section of the "Fallacies" is similar to that used in a manuscript dated 1943 ("Creative Life . . . An Interplay of Opposites"), and he used a similar, though different coloured, notebook in 1954. Internal evidence in the manuscript, particularly the reference to the Nazis, suggests a similar dating. Harris may have begun the manuscript in 1943 and completed the good copy in 1954, just as he was preparing his *A Disquisition on Abstract Painting* (1954). But similar ideas to the "Fallacies" had already appeared in a 1949 article he wrote in *Canadian Art*, "An Essay on Abstract Painting," so this dating remains a hypothesis.

Harris's attitude toward art was action-oriented. Even the kind of questions he asked show him ready to involve himself, whether as artist or art-lover. (In his rough notes for the "Fallacies," we find one fallacy is "that we can understand or respond to art without making any particular effort.") Putting one's shoulder to the wheel was involved, especially when Harris was revealing truths about abstract art. The way he set up his essay to answer falsehoods is unusual — and perhaps related to his upbringing (his forebears had been preachers, as he said). First he raises the public (and even the artists') point of view, then he shows where error lies. Mistakes and misconceptions were grist to the mill of his dialectic.

In his "Fallacies," Harris accurately and defensively evokes an era when abstract art is just gaining acceptance. He attempts to convey a rational critic's answer to the banal comments which reach him, and thus raise the artistic consciousness of the country. He gives art a broad basis in daily life: it is "as essential to our well-being as

the efficient handling of our practical affairs." "Fallacies About Art" falters when Harris deals with art criticism. He was himself a critic, but his many articles were more explanatory than critical. He called one article on Modern Art and Aesthetic Reactions in the May 1927 *Canadian Forum*, "An Appreciation"; he titled his 1954 essay on Abstract Painting "A Disquisition". He never came to terms with judgmental criticism, either to accept its constructive potential or to refute its validity. He may have felt that his dialectical presentation of this problem in the "Fallacies" was simply didactic, not based on reasoned argument. He incorporated many of his thoughts in other writings, but never finished the "Fallacies."

In a way, Harris in his "Fallacies About Art" was justifying himself to himself. He was instructing himself on how to handle criticism. An artist is "supremely himself" in his painting, as Harris quoted the English critic Eric Newton. Being supremely himself placed an artist — Harris — beyond the reach of criticism. Only sympathy and understanding would illuminate the work of art — and beyond that, we deduce, the artist. Harris's "Fallacies About Art" is a moving defence of abstraction, of artistic innovation, and of art itself.

JOAN MURRAY

**M**ANY PEOPLE TODAY HOLD the opinion that the new expressions in the arts are out of touch with public response.<sup>1</sup> This is in part true. It is true that many people cling to the old and established expressions and do not respond to the new. But it is also true that a large and increasing number of people do respond to the new expressions. The division between those who do not respond and those who do is accentuated today because we are in the midst of one of the world's great transition periods.

This is the first of a series of comments on this situation. They are all of them written with the hope that the presentation of the creative artist's point of view will aid those interested to a better understanding of the creative process and its demands on the artist and thus to an appreciation of and participation in the art expressions of our day.<sup>2</sup>

#### FALLACY I *The fallacy that art is separate from life*

If we reduce the significance of life to the practical affairs of the world, its material pursuits, then art can be no more than a decoration of life. But if our conception of life includes all emotion and thought, all speculation and meditation, the total realm of the mind and heart, then the arts, because of their contribution to the enrichment of our understanding and the development of our sensibility, are as essential to our well being as the efficient handling of our practical affairs. Indeed

if we view as a part of the totality the practical affairs of the world from an all inclusive conception of life we would dedicate them to the service of the mind and heart even though they must first serve our bodily needs.

Maxwell Anderson, the American playwright, recently wrote that "the arts of a democracy are its life. Business, law, politics, government, science — these are outward signs of what men are thinking, but the arts are the thoughts themselves." Which is to say that the significant life of man is the life of the mind and heart, and when we speak of the mind and heart we do not refer to the brain and physical heart. We refer to the receptive and creative consciousness which uses the bodily organs, senses, and faculties toward ends that transcend the body's needs, and this movement of the consciousness toward higher ends is not only embodied in the arts in every age and country that has any life above the physical, but is the means by which we create a life of greater and more satisfying [inclusive] meaning.

This projection of the creative consciousness toward fuller meaning, because it greatly enlarges the experience of the mind and heart, creates an area of life that can in part replace the predominance of the acquisitive and possessive instinct and thus offers a way out of the destructive power maze. Let us see how this works.

We are in one of the great transition periods in history. This means that we are participants in a struggle of great and opposing forces. It means also that we are in the midst of a dynamic creative adventure in every pursuit: in science, education and world politics; in economics and in the arts. Every individual is thereby faced with or involved in a process of readjustment. Those who oppose the readjustment can be destructive of creative values. Those who accept the process of readjustment become participants and in some degree creative agents in giving this world wide adventure direction toward new constructions in the hearts and minds of men. For as Edmund Taylor wrote in *Riches by Asia*, "we are all actors in the great drama of our day, the drama of the integration or disintegration of man." But we can be more than the products of our time and environment. For there is an element in the creative consciousness that transcends whatever environment just as there is a quality in all great works of art that transcends their historical period.

The very fact that the best works in the arts transcend the time in which they were created means that they were separate from the routine [practical] affairs of their day. They were and are created and function [operate] in another realm. They do, however, affect the practical affairs of the world indirectly. They do this by changes brought about through their agency in our awareness of and sensibility to other values in life. As Roger Fry, the English artist and writer, wrote, "All art depends upon cutting off the practical responses to sensations of ordinary life, thereby setting free a pure and as it were disembodied functioning of the spirit." The arts thus serve mankind best because they are separate from business, law,



LAWREN HARRIS, *Snow II*, 1916.  
ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO, TORONTO

politics, and science. But they can have a marked effect on the minds and hearts of those who administer and work in these fields.

If we are to give a deeper meaning to all professions and occupations than inheres in them and make the best use of the great discoveries of science we must have and apply a standard which lies outside and beyond all of these and the only standard we can apply if we are to serve the highest ends is the one of the spirit.

We are all aware that the principles of the spirit function in that part of our consciousness which is beyond physical concerns and responses; that part which has an affinity for higher values. These have to do with a sense of justice in life, and its equivalent fine proportions in art and the appropriateness of these to the motif or theme; with integrity in life and art; and with individuality responsibility in thought and deed and its equivalent creative inevitability in art. Above all we are aware in our moments of keenest insight that spirit is one however varied and limitless its expressions, and life and art therefore interdependent in all their phases.

The principles of the spirit may be a reflection in us of universal harmony, of a dynamic equilibrium at the very heart of universal life. They constitute "the moral order of the universe" as E. M. Forster wrote. They are the only guide we have in making anything on earth fine, just, harmonious and meaningful and they are the

motivating impulse, the very basis, meaning and value of art. That is the reason that the life of the spirit finds its actions in spiritual heroes and its fullest expression in the arts, and this is also the reason that when we truly experience a great work of art we feel it justifies man's existence.

The history of the arts is the story of man's sensibility of the finest values and his awareness of the glory of life beyond the acquisitive and the "practical." We can learn more about man's resources, his potentialities, through his creative life and its works than we can in any other way. That is the reason that mankind in its better moments has revered the arts as a great life-giving force [power agency]; and that is also the reason that the greatest works in the arts have endured, have become part of the heritage of the mind and heart of man. They belong to his potential spiritual maturity.

One of the reasons for this is that the arts cultivate the life of the spirit directly. They do this above the restrictions of any class, creed, dogma, sect, or ideology. They thus leave us free to experience the informing spirit of life each one in his own way.

We know that the best works of art cannot be created without an awakened and keen awareness of the highest values. We know that without freedom the expression of spiritual values will be thwarted. "The Nazi could not experiment in art — communism has looked upon art solely as an instrument of propaganda. Art and spirit are in danger of becoming bond servants to ideologies; they are forbidden to fulfill their natural role as the bootstraps by which humanity helps to lift itself." We know that when sensibility is thwarted and awareness blinded by dogmatism, bigotry, sectarianism, class distinctions, or any ideology, a part of mankind suffers, as witness the Spanish inquisition, the witch hunts in puritan New England and the debasing and dishonest technique of the smear and the dreadful repressions and cruelties of fascism and communism. In that direction there lies no shred of hope for mankind.

If hope lies anywhere it is in the direction of a developing sensibility and an increasing awareness of the highest values. Indeed the real success of any civilization depends on the wide-ranging awareness of its people as much as on its knowledge. It is therefore essential that the arts are creatively alive and functioning as an organic part of the life of the people.

Heraclitus, the early Greek philosopher, wrote that "man is a portion of cosmic fire imprisoned in a body of earth and water," which is to say that the real man is compounded of thought, vision and sensibility and cultivates the powers of the mind and heart as basic to the good life, and leaves not only a living account of his spiritual culture in the arts, but the creative spirit in the arts.

Another meaning implied in Heraclitus's statement is that mankind is a spiritual solidarity, that is, that all mankind is akin in the spirit, which transcends his sense

perceptions, his emotional reactions and his mental processes but can inform, relate and use these to higher ends. This last is the art of the spirit in man, of which every creative artist is in some degree the agent and the awakened public the participants.

The arts are the ageless aspects of Society. Because at their best they rise above the topical, the local and the taste of the day, they are thought to be separate from the life of that day, whereas they belong to the greater life which, being greater, transcends the immediate concerns [practical] of whatever period.

FALLACY II *The fallacy that one art is superior to [better than] another*

I have known a number of writers for whom literature is the greatest of the arts because it is a living record of man's intuition and thought and embodies some of his most marvellous emotional and mental structures. I once knew a theatre director who considered the theatre, the drama, to be supreme because it used all of the other arts in integrated, living performances. I have known some great musicians for whom music alone offers the fullest life. Jean Cocteau says that "the language of poetry is the highest form of expression given to man." [Stated poetry is "the most finely-poised manner of thought known to man."] Frank Lloyd Wright once told me that "painting was the lowest of the arts, only a handmaiden to architecture."

It is of course right that the creative worker, in whatever art, considers his art the best. In one part of his being he must and should feel that the art which is the vehicle of his life's concentration and devotion is the greatest of the arts. Indeed, for the creative worker one art must be the art above all other arts. At the time his whole nature is engaged therein. Nothing else can exist for him within the pace of his creative momentum. It is the only way in which great works are created. But that does not say that any one art is lower or higher [better] than any other. It may say, however, that creative life in the arts is the highest experience man can have this side of complete sainthood.

Indeed any person who finds a great expression of his life in the arts, an elevation of the spirit over material concerns, an increase of consciousness beyond his normal response, will find the experience of each art to be similar. The same experience will be almost the same with great works in every art, and all such experiences [will be] equally rewarding, and this even if he should feel when experiencing one master work that it contains [embodies] the greatest and most moving experience.

If we experience a Beethoven Symphony, Bach's St. Matthew Passion, Mozart's [*The*] *Magic Flute*, a Rembrandt, Titian, El Greco or David portrait, the best paintings of Van Gogh, or Cézanne, the dramas of Euripides or Shakespeare; the best in poetry, in architecture the St. Chapelle in Paris, the Alhambra in Granada, the French cathedrals, the sculpture of Gaudier-Brzeska. For these and many more

are magical works; all of them on the same elevation; no one of them handmaiden to another; no one of them translatable into another art — proving each art to be autonomous, alive and self-contained within its own medium, the highest expression of the human spirit — and each one inducing the feeling that they justify man's life on earth.

Just as the best [great] compositions in music do not serve any other art, the best paintings do not serve any other art. They are quite separate organisms. They each have a complete, self-enclosed life of their own. Yet at the same time all of the arts evoke much the same transcendent response, however much their vehicles differ, and despite the fact that the channels of their communications are the senses. They do so because they are all the product of the creative spirit in man.

The service rendered by one art to another is of a different order, creates another autonomy, evokes a different concatenation of response but the response is still to living work of the creative spirit as creative [motivating] power is the same in all ages and places.

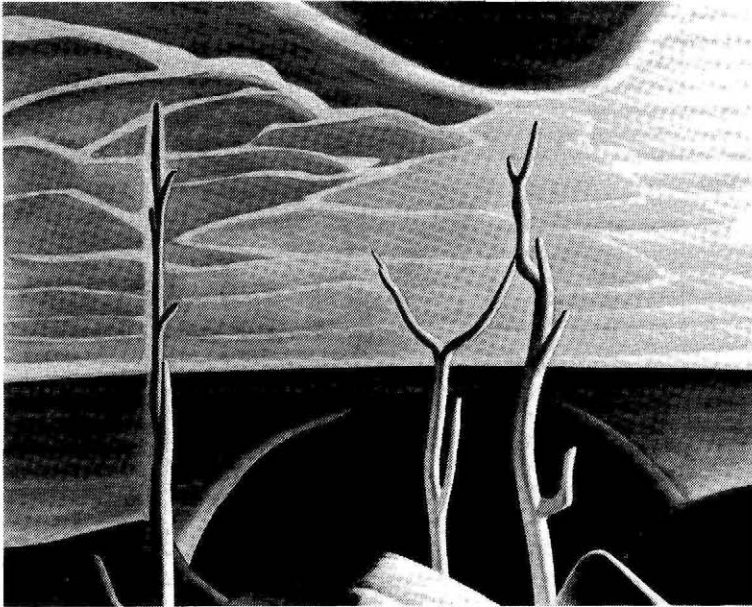
One work of art may have a greater variety of related themes than another, a more complex organization, a larger size, but that does not make it greater in terms of the informing spirit.

In one sense also duration in a work of art signifies little. A poem such as "Fern Hill" by Dylan Thomas may be experienced in a few minutes, a Beethoven symphony in less than an hour, a painting by El Greco or Cézanne in a short time, a play by Shakespeare or Shaw in a few hours. If one were never to read the poem again, hear the symphony, witness the play, live surrounded by the architecture, the experiences according to their intensity and depth and because they are great "moments" in one's life, become embedded in the innermost consciousness as part of the accumulating heritage of a man, just as great works in all the arts are the objective heritage of mankind.

Only decorative painting and sculpture subserve architecture, just as incidental music serves the drama or the movies. Yet, on a higher level, music unites with the drama and dance to create opera and the ballet, just as the painting of the Sistine Chapel is inseparable from its architecture and thus transcends the decorative, and just as the sculpture of the façade of Amiens cathedral not only enhances it but is part of its very organization. Even commercial art at its best has a quality that transcends its use. So every art, while it is dependent on its vehicle and one with its medium, transcends its technique, its medium and means, and is alive in a realm that transcends beliefs, rules, dogma, observances, and subjects.

### FALLACY III *The fallacy that artists should paint what the public wants*

What we term "the public" is made up of many parts, each one of them with somewhat different perceptions and degrees of awareness. There is not just one un-



LAWREN HARRIS, *Lake Superior*, c. 1924.  
THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA, OTTAWA

differentiated public. If we were to ask an artist to paint “what the public wants” he would therefore be bewildered. He could not decide what part of it he should try to satisfy. Should it be businessmen or housewives, country folk or city people, seamen or landsmen, young people or old folks, the ignorant or the wise, saints or sinners, politicians or simple people? Should he paint a literal or an imaginative work, a profound or a light-hearted one, a sentimental or an austere one? The creative artist does not think in this way and cannot paint in those terms.

George Russell, the Irish poet, painter, and editor known as “A.E.,” wrote: “I am certain that nothing first class came when the artist’s mind was fixed on his public rather than on his subject.”

The reason for this is simple. If an artist is concentrated on his work every other consideration, such as public appreciation and acclaim, is far from his mind. If in his working periods he should think of anything other than the work in hand, then his mind and soul and heart are not creatively concentrated and nothing of significance will be accomplished.

Moreover, in every creative venture the artist begins with a subject, an idea or intuition which is not clearly formed in his mind. Once he starts the creative process of clarification toward unity of expression and the painting begins to “live,”



it then takes hold and will lead him into ways that he did not foresee. These ways he must follow in utter disregard of whether the result will please or displease a public.

When the French Impressionists first painted their pictures their minds were concentrated on the creative endeavour to embody in paint on canvas a new vision of nature. It would have been impossible for them to do this had they given any consideration to what the public wanted. For there was then no public who could want such paintings, seeing they were unknown.

We know definitely that Cézanne never painted to please any part of the public. He painted as he said "to realize," meaning thereby to embody in paint on canvas his vision of a new fullness and form in the expressive quality of paint on canvas. We know from Van Gogh's letters that he never had a public in mind when he painted. It was the expression of his all-consuming devotion that he sought and which dictated the rhythms of his brush strokes and the radiant living colour of the paint.

If those Canadian artists who were the first to paint the Canadian landscape with new vision, that is in its own terms, had painted it as most Canadians then thought it should be painted, that is through the eyes of the circumspect English and tidy Dutch painters of the day, there would have been no beginning of an art expressive of this country.

If Emily Carr had painted the kind of pictures the people in Victoria once wanted, the result would have been a series of maidenly and innocuous water-colours. These would have had no relation whatever to the bold paintings of the full rhythms, depth and mystery of the west coast forest and Indian totems she did paint and which were ignored or rejected by the popular taste of her day.

The best in art in any country never originates in terms of "what the public wants." No creative artist paints to please the public though he may be very gratified when his work finds favour with some part of the public. While at work the creative artist no more thinks of a public than a surgeon does while performing an operation or a scientist when engaged in the process of research. As an enthusiastic amateur artist said, "Painting uses the whole of your head, there is no room for thought or feeling of other than the picture."

If an artist is to clarify and bring to life what he paints it demands undeviating concentration on the work in hand. If the work comes alive and it becomes clear and meaningful to him then it is bound eventually to become clear and meaningful to a perceptive onlooker, in the degree of his awareness. There is no other way.

Yet the vision of the artist in one part derives from his people, his time and place, and thus the response of the people inheres in it in some degree. This is one source of the stimulus to the artist's creative faculties. The other source is indi-

vidual to the artist; it is his particular bent and verve. It is the dynamic interplay of these two sources which constitutes the creative act.

#### FALLACY IV *Art Criticism: First Part*

There are two different points of view from which art criticism is written. The first one is to introduce and explain the artist and his work to the public; to try to bridge the gap between artist and public by bringing the public to understand the artist's purpose and the means he uses to achieve it and whether the means are adequate to his aim or not. It is founded on sufficient humility and humility's companion, open-mindedness, to lead the critic to enter into and understand what the artist is aiming at with real sympathy and convey this to the public. This can be a social task of real value.

The second point of view is concerned to uphold the established styles in art and hence rejects and condemns new creative ventures and seeks to defend the public against them. It considers that *avant garde* paintings are not works of art at all but the work of disordered or perverse minds or notoriety seekers. In the last hundred years this kind of criticism has been directed at every new movement in art and at every genuine creative artist. This can only mean that the writers lack any understanding of the creative process. Because of this obtuseness their writings are frequently arrogant and infallible. This comes from an inflated ego and thus, in the degree of the inflation, inhibits the critics from seeing that creative life in art has always been the same in all ages and places and is only kept alive by the creation of new ventures, movements, idioms, and styles and that these in turn become established and defended by the same type of mind.

There are two effects which result from the writing of art critics. One is the effect of criticism on the artist and his work; the other the effect on the public. This article deals with the effect on the artist.

Criticism affects only [can only affect] the work of the academic artist and that of the painter who imitates the work of others. They are both vulnerable because they work in established grooves. The more their work conforms to accepted ways, idioms and styles, whether old or new, the less creative it is and the more it lends itself to critical appraisal. But the new in art, the untoward and unpigeonholed offers most critics nothing to grasp hold of. It is beyond their criterion, which is founded on the already accomplished and standardized. Even such a modest change in style and emphasis, dictated by the Canadian scene itself as the paintings of the Group of Seven caused the critics at the time of the Group's existence to ridicule, vilify, and condemn the paintings.

We read and hear it said that what the art of this country needs is a few first-class critics. We hear it said that the artist lacks the means of relating his work with the best in present-day painting unless a few good critics come to his aid, that

the artist will remain unconscious of the undeveloped areas of his talent unless the critic draws his attention to them and that the artist is so constituted that he doesn't know when he paints a good or poor picture.

There is no doubt that a few critics of wide-ranging sensibility, sympathy and understanding would be most valuable in raising the quality and standard of the public's appreciation and thus indirectly benefit the creative artist. But even if the critic happened to have a wide acquaintance with the best of modern art and a generous outlook on all creative endeavour it is not only very doubtful if he can be of any direct benefit to the work of the creative artist, that is work in the process of being accomplished, but by the very nature of the case it is not quite possible.

The creative artist moves on a self-generated momentum. This momentum by the concentration essential to its pace, clarity, and creative power prevents any impingement from outside at the time the creative process is taking place. At other times it may aggravate the artist to read criticism that points out the failings or limitations of his work or please him if the comments are favourable. But once the creative process is moving again the self-enclosed interplay between perception and response and all the other creative complementaries take hold and lead and control and direct the artist, this momentum is such that no outside opinion, suggestion, or judgment can enter. That is the reason that the academic, doctrinaire, institutionalized, or critical mind, whatever value they may have in the realm of education, have no value in the creative realm of the artist.

I have never known of a case where the writings of a critic helped the work of a real creative artist, nor can I imagine such a case. It is just as unthinkable that the work of Tom Thomson, Emily Carr, or A. Y. Jackson was affected in the least by what any critic wrote as it was for the work of Van Gogh, Cézanne, Paul Klee, or Renoir. Has any one heard of a professional critic whose writings helped the painting of Blake, Courbet, Constable, Manet, Monet, Whistler, Gauguin, Braque, Picasso, or any creative artist?

The artist is constantly aware that there is an almost unbridgeable gap between the attitude [outlook] of the creative artist and the critic. That gap can only be bridged by understanding and sympathy on the part of the critic. When that occurs to a meaningful degree we no longer have a critic but a lover. And it has always been the intelligent lover of the great in art that first discovered it and has since kept it alive.

That gap also exists between the work of art and most of those who explain, administer, and depend on art and art institutions for a living. This has led creative workers in the arts to make such statements as "Art is what is left when the explanations are over." Rainer Maria Rilke, the German poet, once wrote, "Works of art are of an infinite loneliness and with nothing so little reached as with criticism. Only love can grasp and hold and fairly judge them." And E. E. Cummings, the



LAWREN HARRIS, *Lighthouse, Father Point*, 1929.

THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA, OTTAWA

American poet and painter, made this comment on Rilke's statement: "In my proud and humble opinion, those two sentences are worth all the soi-disant criticism of the arts which has ever existed or will ever exist." The English author E. M. Forster wrote this a few years ago "If we apply even the best aesthetic theory to art and apply it with its measuring rods and pliers and forceps . . . it doesn't work, the two universes have never collided." On the other hand "if criticism strays from her central aesthetic quest to influences and psychological and historical considerations . . . contact is established. But no longer with a work of art."

Eric Newton, one of England's best writers on art, asks this question "Has the critic no obligation to tell the artist where he has failed, how he could have done better?" and goes on to say, "My definite answer to that is 'No.' One does not tell another human being that his nose ought to be longer, his voice more melodious, since it is his particular length of nose or quality of voice that gives him his unique personality. To alter a personality is to turn it into a different personality and since every artist is precious only because he is supremely himself . . ."

That last syllable "because he is supremely himself" tells the whole story. Only

when the artist is "supremely himself" can he really employ all his creative faculties and when he does so he is at the time beyond the reach of criticism.

#### FALLACY IV *Art Criticism: Second Part*

It would seem that the right approach of the critic to a work of art has been stated by the most enlightened critics

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|---------------------------------------|---------------------|
| 1. What art criticism can accomplish. | The Record. Part of |
| 2. The wrong way to go about it.      | reason for          |
| 3. The right way.                     | failure.            |

The effects of art criticism on the public depend upon whether the critic understands that man is a creative being — that the creative process is a continuing process in all ages and places that are creatively alive and thus finds its own way inevitably — moves into new expressions — that no work of art replaces another — that each age creates its own art — that in Wordsworth's word "acts as a go-between." No finality on-going. Then his writing will be illuminating. The effect of this order of criticism on the public can do immense good. By its conviction create a favourable climate for present day painting.

The effect of the writings of critics who hold the opposite point of view — that their duty is to defend the public against new works instead of explaining paintings that project themselves into the formation of new idioms, outlook and style — have always two effects —

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the in nay saying, negative — conserve

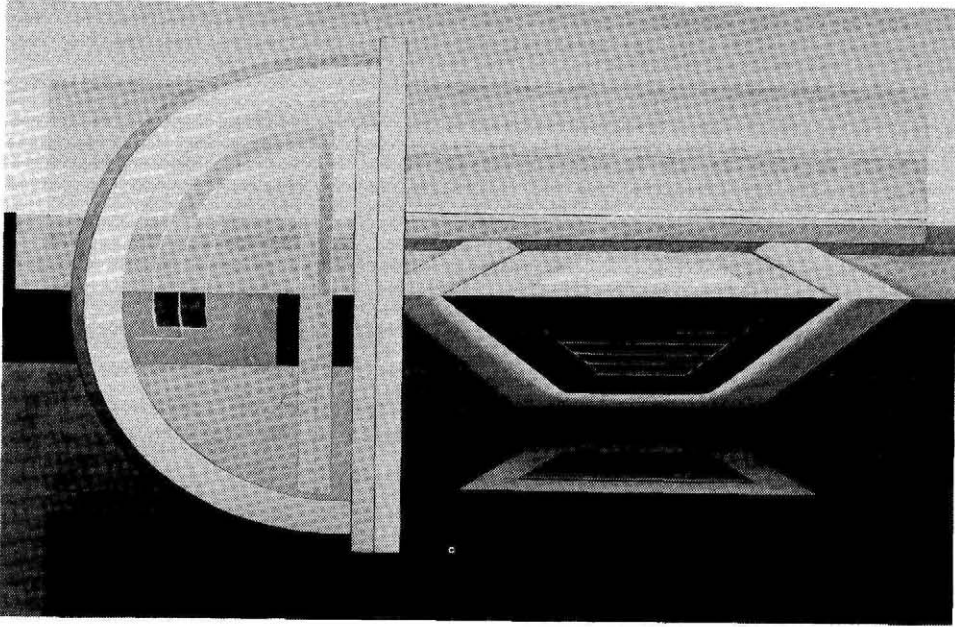
finds values because it looks for such whatever the kind of painting the other everything is bad that is beyond their understanding.

The interplay of these two approaches to art criticism, like all the dynamic friction of the opposites, denotes that new life is stirring — the way of the negative and positive. Perhaps as in electricity both are necessary for illumination.

The record — which is a sorry one — shows the % of aware, perceptive, creative critics is small.

Since the days when the paintings of Courbet were condemned every artist and art movement has been belittled or condemned by the critics; Ruskin maligned the paintings of Whistler throwing a pot of paint in the public face, called his style "Blottesque"; the French Impressionists' paintings were dubbed "unfinished and adolescent," the Group of Seven was named the "hot mush school" "artistic perverts."

The record shows that name-calling on the part of the critics is a sure sign that they do not understand the works they condemn. From the day Ruskin dubbed



LAWREN HARRIS, *Equations in Space*, c. 1936.  
THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA, OTTAWA

Whistler's paintings "Blottesque" to the day the critics called the paintings of Manet, Monet, and Picasso "vulgar and incompetent," to the time Canadian writers called the Group of Seven "the hot mush school," down to today's such epithets "my child could paint that," "screaming monstrosities," "the drip and dribble school" etc., we find the same thing taking place.

The great Post-Impressionist painters were neglected — Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Cézanne were never even noticed. The number of critics who have discovered the best contemporary painting in any period has been [is so] small that we are quite safe in concluding that every original artist and each new movement that has made a real contribution to the art of painting and thus to man's heritage of great art works has either been neglected by the critics, belittled or condemned.

It seems that every movement in art, every creative contribution has to pass through the purgatory of neglect, vilification, condemnation, and rejection by professional and amateur critics alike before it is accepted and takes its place in the hierarchy of enduring works.

For this and other reasons Eric Newton, the noted English art critic, says that he once contemplated giving up being an art critic and wrote an article entitled "Concerning the impossibility of art criticism." He further wrote that the difficulty "accounts for the miserable inadequacy of nine-tenths of art criticism." D. W.

Harding said that "before we can make a discriminating assessment of their work we have to get beyond the simple hostility or derision that springs from having our preconceptions disappointed." Herbert Read, the English poet and critic, once wrote, "I would say that a blindness to contemporary modes of expression in any of the arts is generally due to some psychological inhibition in the spectator."

Indeed critics who have failed not only to recognize the best in contemporary art when it was first shown but condemned it — and societies formed to work for what its members call "Sanity in art" and the many people who consider it a virtue to think new movements in art to be communistic and Hitler who condemned modern art and the rulers of Russia who layed down rules for conformity to a rigid, moribund formula are, in so far as art is concerned, all in the same.

They all assume their criterion is to be final, and therefore whereas the entire history of art and its changes in technique, its difficulties in vision, its transitions in outlook from one period to another, its shifting emphasis in impact, its varied styles and idioms and technical devices and discoveries, all prove that there is no finality in art, that the dynamic and beneficent creative power in mankind is limitless, that the ultimate in art will never be reached.

We can be quite sure that "spectators" and critics alike who have failed to recognize the best in contemporary art and societies that are formed to work for what its members call "Sanity in Art," and the many people who consider it a virtue to think the new movements in art to be communistic and Hitler, who condemned modern painting, and the moribund rulers of Russia who laid down rules for conformity to a pattern in art that is "sane" and completely innocuous; all, have no notion what the creative in art, nature [life] and mankind signifies because of some "psychological inhibition."

These are the nay-sayers; those who are so conditioned by the past and its works that they cannot believe that the future can possibly produce works that equal those of the past. They therefore [believe] that anything painted today should repeat that past achievements, conform to past styles, and acknowledge and if asked how any style in the past was created, how El Greco, Giotto, Rembrandt, Vermeer, Constable, the Florentine and Venetian painters each painted in a way that was new in their day and thus made their contribution to the world? They have no answer. Such is their blindness, their inhibition. "O," but they say, "that is different."

They have a perfect right to their opinions of course, but they should not be critics, as it is bad both for themselves and the public. The more they write and the more a part of the public acclaim their opinions and prejudices, the more convinced they become that their opinions are absolute and final and that they are on the side of the angels. And so they join the detractors of the ages, that band of "infallibles" who harm themselves, the artists and the public.

But let us turn to the cheerful side of art criticism and consider the statements of the intelligent, perceptive, and beneficent critics.

James Johnson Sweeney says that "the only genuine constructive criticism that exists in the plastic arts is a creative act which provokes or follows upon another creative act." He states also that "neither the plastic arts in their essential nature nor our response to them are explainable." The key words in the last statement is "in their essential nature." The constructive critic can talk intelligently and rewardingly about all the factors that are both necessary to "their essential nature" and that surround it, but he cannot explain a painting in its essential nature. He can, however, create a piece of writing that parallels the painting and by reflection illuminates it. That is precisely what André Malraux does. "Inspired by the love of truth . . . can rise to the greatest heights of thought and eloquence and . . . become in itself another art." Herbert Read, the English poet and critic, says, "There can be no true interpretation (of a work of art) without complete sympathy and understanding."

Let us consider an episode that illustrates another trait of the intelligent and responsible critic. In the first interval of a performance of Alban Berg's opera "Wozzeck" in London, the music critic, Stephen Williams was asked, "Are you enjoying it?" "No," he replied, "of course I'm not enjoying it. I'm enduring it, I'm grappling with it, I'm meeting its challenge." This is the opposite attitude to the critic who condemns a work of art because he doesn't understand it. He does not challenge the work of art. It challenges him, which is the creative, productive, rewarding way for both the critic and the public. As Eric Newton wrote, "I submit myself to the picture"; and Philip Carr, another English writer, states "Sympathetic appreciation. They interpret and analyse, and they express interest and pleasure and enthusiasm — not contemplate anger or disgust."

Good paintings that last have a quality and significance beyond the taste of the day in which they were painted. They then survive the chastisement of the critic and take their place in the long, rich and rewarding series of works which constitute the ever-enlarging heritage of man's.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Fallacies About Art* is found in the Public Archives of Canada, Lawren Harris Paper M630, D208. It was written between 1943 and 1954. I have edited the manuscript conservatively for clarity. Asterisks \* indicate words unclear in the original; square brackets indicate where Harris has not decided between two possible words or phrasing. JM

<sup>2</sup> This opening appears at the end of "Fallacy III" in the original order.

<sup>3</sup> In the manuscript this passage reads: "What is the record — is a sorry one — the record shows the the % of aware, perception, creative critics in outlook critics has been rare."