
THE CONCEPT OF "REGIONALISM" IN CANADIAN ART HISTORY

The term "regionalism" has been frequently used in connection with Canadian art of the 1930's and 1940's. In some cases, its employment suggests an interest in creating a category of Canadian regional art. In almost all instances the word is used with a decided lack of precision. This article will examine the use of the term "regionalism" as it has been applied to Canadian art of the thirties and forties in an attempt to isolate some of the factors that have conditioned its usage, so curiously vague, in Canadian art writing. The discussion is directed not at regionalism as such, but purely at the term as applied to painting of the thirties and forties in English-language texts.¹ Most of the texts cited were written subsequent to that period.

Three observations emerge from an examination of a selection of periodical articles, art-history text books, monographs, exhibition catalogues and other works published between 1948 and 1984. First, the English-Canadian use of the term as applied to art of the thirties and forties derives from American art discourse. Initially, the word appears to have been used to compare or relate Canadian painting to American Regionalist painting, that movement of the thirties that rejected European-style modernism in favour of American rural subjects depicted with a distinctive kind of mannered heroism. Although the American connection becomes attenuated, at times to the point of invisibility, it nonetheless continues to shape the implicit definitions used by most English-Canadian writers on art.²

The second observation is that the meaning ascribed to it tends to vary with the attitude of the writer toward figuration in art. Writers who approve of figurative art, or who are sympathetic toward a broad range of artistic expression, tend to see regionalism in a positive light. Those who see art in terms of an evolutionary process striving towards an apex situated in

an international context and manifested in non-figurative forms, tend to view it negatively.

The third observation is that the term, despite its frequent occurrence, never set down solid roots in Canadian art writing. It has served as a multi-purpose descriptive adjective; it has expressed forcefully, if not always clearly, a writer's feelings about certain kinds of art; and it has been used as a weapon in the battle between figurative and non-figurative art, usually as a code word for inferior. But it has not acquired a stable meaning of its own.

In his article "Canadian Painting, Sculpture and Print Making" which appeared in the *Journal of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada* in 1948, Charles Comfort is quite specific about the connection between Canadian and American regionalism. He views regionalism as a continent-wide movement:

In North America regionalism and the renaissance in mural art were among the tendencies that caught and held the imagination of a continent. These movements have not survived the war to carry on effective leadership today.

The movement . . . represented an enlightened effort to re-establish the contact between the artist and the larger community. . . .

In Canada itself regionalism may be said to have been active in the Provincial media societies, the Maritime Art Association, the Ontario Society of Artists and similarly organized groups on the prairies and the Pacific coast. . . . The characteristic tendency in Canada during this period, as will be shown, was not regionalism but rather the federation of such groups.³

The vague wording of the last paragraph, in which an aesthetic movement moves toward conflation with a political one, introduces the note of imprecision that will dog the word henceforth. Comfort does not leave the reader with a clear meaning for the term in the Canadian context.

R.L. Hubbard, in his 1963 survey text *The Development of Canadian Art*, clearly identifies regionalism as an American phenomenon. In statements such as this assessment of L.L. FitzGerald, he expresses his sense of its limitations:

FitzGerald never attempted to vulgarize his art into a mid-Western regionalism such as flourished in the United States

under Benton, Curry and Grant Wood. His later drawings . . . show an art too mathematical and personal to become illustrative.⁴

A more neutral view of regionalism is shown in his treatment of Carl Schaefer whose works "by their romanticism . . . provide a Canadian parallel to the work of the American regionalist painter Charles Burchfield."⁵ But a few pages later, the term is used as one of outright censure in the description of Clarence Gagnon's *Street Scene, Quebec at Night*: "Somewhat more of an illustration than any of Morrice's street scenes; it incorporates 'regionalism' as against the universalism of Morrice."⁶ Hubbard consistently emphasizes the values of universality and progress, referring for instance to "the combination of universality and personal integrity which is perhaps a sign of our growing cultural maturity."⁷

While Hubbard sees regionalism in a negative light, Russell Harper uses the term to refer to a quality in art that he perceives as valuable. The difference may lie in the fact that Hubbard views regionalism as a stylistic category whereas Harper sees it in terms of a quality of response to a region, the place being painted. His attitude is consistent with his interest in the local, social and human contexts of art.

Harper's *Painting in Canada*⁸ is the first Canadian text to employ the term not as a passing comment, but to systematically illuminate certain aspects of Canadian painting of the thirties. "Regionalism in the Thirties" receives a chapter to itself. Harper derives his definition from American Regionalism; he begins the chapter by citing as a common factor in both countries the shift away from the study trip to Europe, a characteristic that is emphasized in standard American descriptions of American Regionalism:

This shift in interest had begun before the Depression, possibly because of wartime and post-war travel restrictions, but shortage of money accelerated it. The rift between experimental European painting and Canadian trends widened. More frequent parallels could be made between Canadian and American painting, particularly in the regional spirit which was vigorous both north and south of the border.⁹

However, Harper stops short of ascribing to the Canadians the populist ideological character frequently associated with American Regionalism. Regionalism is not described as a reaction against French art, or against anything else for that matter. He portrays it in terms of an *attraction*

rather than a *reaction*. Artists who couldn't afford to travel to faraway and exotic regions began, he says, "to observe their own immediate environment:"

They glanced at it, then re-examined it in the greatest detail and after meditation found unexpected wonder and significance in what lay immediately at hand.¹⁰

Notice the use of the word "meditation." In describing each artist, Harper uses language that suggests an intimate, in some cases almost mystical, absorption in a particular region:

[Carl Schaefer] disciplined himself strictly, painting and re-painting his grain fields, but each time trying to give them a more penetrating look, and each time achieving an inner glow which transforms the grain into a living object.¹¹

Two men [Muhlstock and Hébert] were looking with keen intensity at the Montreal city scene. . . .¹²

Jack Humphrey was always strongly rooted in the Saint John district of New Brunswick, just as Schaefer was in the Hanover district. Humphrey's windows looked out from high up over Saint John, a city where his ancestors lived for generations.¹³ From them he could see the box-like frame houses of this city, where for more than thirty years he recorded dilapidated streets, leaning houses on their rocky eminences, waterfront piers, and boats tied to the wharves. Humphrey examined them with the same loving care that Schaefer gave to the wheat fields, and is a regional artist in the same sense.¹⁴

Harper's assessment of Goodridge Roberts repeats the theme of the artist's immersion in his surroundings. In addition, Harper raises a question which frequently lurks behind applications of the term "regionalism," the question of the relationship between regionalism and representation:

Some may question whether Goodridge Roberts can be properly called a regional painter, since he was interested primarily in invoking certain inner responses to aspects of nature by a painterly investigation of particular districts. He asserted that his paintings are not just an interpretation of nature as it lay before his eyes but far more a reflection of the artist himself in which the viewer can see revealed his inner worth.¹⁵

A breakdown of the above yields the following: (a) Roberts' works investigate particular districts; (b) Roberts states that his works reflect himself and reveal the viewer's worth to himself; (c) Roberts' style was painterly.

The introduction of Roberts' motives is a red herring; similar statements could be found in the utterances of many artists. The key word is "painterly." Roberts' subject matter and attitude—his absorption in and depiction of the landscape of a particular region—qualify him as a regionalist according to the criteria Harper sets up at the beginning of the chapter. Yet he evidently feels uncomfortable with the idea of regionalist art in a loose, painterly style, one so different from the more precise styles of the other artists mentioned. The latter resembles the styles of the American artists from whom Harper derives his visual, if not his intellectual, concept of regionalism. His comparison of Miller Brittain with Reginald Marsh¹⁶ and Schaefer with Charles Burchfield¹⁷ is further evidence of the importance of American art in Harper's formulation of a concept of Canadian regionalism.

Paul Duval, in *Four Decades: The Canadian Group of Painters and Their Contemporaries 1930-1970* (1972), makes only very limited use of the term, applying it principally to Schaefer:

In an era when the word "regional" has often been used in a derogatory way, Carl Schaefer has always readily confessed to being a regional painter. He has said: "I find that the best subjects for me are concentrated in a pretty small area."¹⁸

Duval could appear here to be using the term simply to mean the depiction of subjects drawn from a limited geographical area. But he also raises the question that perplexed Harper in the latter's discussion of Goodridge Roberts: the relationship between regionalism, figuration and subject matter. Duval states that "high realist artists usually are regional artists in the most precise sense of the word."¹⁹ He does not expand upon his statement, but implies that such artists are so very regional because the extreme realism of their style makes identification of the region depicted especially easy.

Dennis Reid, writing in 1973 at a time when Canadian scholarship had moved out of its pioneering phase, devotes fewer words to regionalism than Duval. Reid's position is more carefully considered and consistent. He postulates an American influence in both style and attitude:

A number of painters . . . like Henri Masson . . . and André Biéler . . . were, in the late thirties, vigorous and often con-

vincing proponents of a Canadian equivalent to the regionalist concerns that were then so prominent in the United States.²⁰

Reid mentions Schaefer²¹ and Charles Comfort²² in association with American Scene painting. He reveals that there is a stylistic factor in his conception of regionalism when he associates Schaefer with "a style . . . that the American Scene painters were just then successfully applying to the depiction of regional themes."²³ He is, perhaps, the first Canadian writer to suggest the existence of regionalist themes.²⁴

Reid's use of the term to describe and situate Canadian work, consistent with American art historical usage, suggests a concern to bring some precision to the use of the word. Curiously, however, he also uses it in another way. He appears to share Harper's feeling that the word, distinguished this time by single quotation marks, refers to a certain kind of attitude of the painter towards his subject. However, whereas Harper's image was one of concentrated or meditative absorption, Reid's is one of loving intimacy. Speaking of L.L. FitzGerald he says that his work "is 'regional' in the sense that it has no pretensions as a grand subject but is homely and unaffected in its loving depiction of what would have been a very familiar scene to the artist."²⁵

Charles Hill, in *Canadian Painting in the Thirties*, published in 1975, also applies more than one meaning to the term. The first appearance is a brief and unambiguous reference to American Regionalists and their reaction "against what they felt to be the swamping of the American art market by French art and art dealers and the lack of support for American artists."²⁶ His use of the word in the Canadian context is less clear. Carl Schaefer, we are told, "interpreted the landscape in all its many moods and facets, becoming a 'regionalist' artist in the truest sense of the term."²⁷ He does not say what the truest sense of the term is, nor does he indicate why this true regionalism merits quotation marks.

In the chapter "Regionalist Manifestations in Quebec" the term appears to be related to nationalism. We learn that ". . . Fortin was a regionalist artist in the same sense as the Group of Seven. While less vocal . . . than the members of the Group, he transformed the landscape into an expression of a national identity;"²⁸ André Biéler was "inspired by the regionalist literature that had developed in France during the twenties . . .,"²⁹ and Jean-Paul Lemieux "illustrated several novels based on regionalist and historical themes."³⁰

The case of Fortin deserves special attention. Hill equates Quebec regionalism with a form of nationalism, stating that "he[Fortin] transformed the landscape into an expression of a national identity." This identity seems to have something to do with "the traditional way of life of the rural inhabitants of Quebec. . . ."31 Hill's regionalism as nationalism, however, is not the same thing as American Regionalism. The former is a form of inclusion—an art movement that speaks for a nation—and Hill's position appears to be that Quebec is a nation. The latter implies a breaking away, a making of distinctions between the region and the larger unit. In this instance Hill's concept of regionalism does not appear to derive from American usage. Nor does it derive from the Canadian writers whose usage is based on the American model. The source may well be a Francophone conception of regionalism. Hill quotes several articles by Jean-Charles Harvey published in *Le Jour* in the late thirties, where Harvey called "upon the artists to break away from regionalist local color, *ceinture fléchée*, and *habitants*, to seek a non-colonial universal expression."32 And Hill praises Pellan for having done precisely that, describing him as "a Quebecker who had left behind regionalist clichés."33

Brief though it was, Hill's treatment of regionalism was provocative enough to occupy the pen of François-Marc Gagnon at some length in his review of *Canadian Painting in the Thirties* published in *The Journal of Canadian Art History* in 1976. Like Hill, Gagnon frequently uses images that bespeak a concept of regionalism as the depiction of a traditional way of life. Gagnon cites Fortin as a typical Quebec regionalist and describes one of his paintings in these words:

Here, the house is in the foreground, under the shade of a big tree. The village with its main street, its inhabitants and the horses and sleighs are frequent subject matter; the Laurentians serve only as background.³⁴

Gagnon contrasts the regionalism of Fortin with the work of the Group of Seven who paint a pre-cultural landscape which is therefore non-regionalist, though possibly Canadian: "Quebec painting emphasized cultural traits and used nature only as a backdrop. . . ."35 Regionalism for Gagnon involves man and culture, not only nature. However, it need not necessarily express traditional culture of the kind depicted by Clarence Gagnon and Fortin. Gagnon is insistent that the depiction of traditional subject matter is incidental:

As the expression of a special cultural group . . . Quebec re-

gionalism could have asserted Quebec's idiosyncrasies. . . . [This however] did not happen . . . [because] the perception the regionalist painters had of Quebec culture was a reflection of an ideology lagging behind the reality of Quebec, an ideology that had no future.³⁶

Quebec regionalism was in effect the pictorial counterpart of Marcel Rioux' "ideology of conservation,"³⁷ but it need not have been. Some of the differences between Francophone and Anglophone conceptions of regionalism in art can be deduced from Gagnon's remarks; however, to my knowledge no study of the subject exists.

Charles Hill can be said to have amplified the regionalism discourse by introducing the Francophone conception of the term into the Anglophone context. However, the discourse does not in consequence become clearer. Subsequent appearances of the word in Canadian art writing include examples that are among the vaguest in the history of its usage. The American origins, which provided a structure of sorts, have been forgotten and the word has acquired an all-purpose flexibility.

Joan Murray remarks in *The Best of the Group of Seven* that "without realizing it they [the Seven] remained regionalist, favouring Ontario and Quebec."³⁸ According to this usage, a regionalist would seem to be an artist who depicts one or more, as opposed to all the regions of a country—a situation which could give a distinctly unfair advantage to artists who live in small countries. Peter Mellen is opaque in *Landmarks of Canadian Art* where he states that "under the impact of Holgate, Montreal developed a strong figurative school which, although it was regional in character, looked abroad for stimulus and support."³⁹ In *Frontiers of our Dreams*, Ann Davis' application of François-Marc Gagnon's text is marred by a lack of familiarity with the complexities of the Quebec milieu. Overestimating the importance of the academic regionalists promoted by Charles Maillard and discussed by Gagnon, she places John Lyman in opposition to Maillard and the "recognized Quebec regional painters of the 1930's." She posits a struggle that in fact never took place, Lyman's energies being engaged with larger issues. And Davis mistakenly equates "ideology of conservation" with conservatism:

In his [Lyman's] approach to subject matter and in his aesthetic philosophy he went beyond the recognized Quebec regional painters of the 1930's. Unlike the principal of the Montreal École des Beaux-arts Charles Maillard, he did not

subscribe to Quebec regionalism, French academicism, or conservative ideology.⁴⁰

Texts such as these illustrate the contention that the term "regionalism" as applied to Canadian art of the thirties and forties did not take root in any consistent and meaningful way. Given the imprecision and inconsistency that have accompanied its use, one wonders if the best course might not be simply to allow it to wither away entirely. In fact, this may be what is happening. In several recent texts, where a consideration of "regionalist" characteristics seemed indicated, the authors made their points by comparing Canadian art with American Regionalist painting without invoking a special category of Canadian Regionalism. Jean-René Ostiguy in *Les Esthétiques modernes au Québec de 1916 à 1946* on several occasions mentions the influence of American Regionalism on Canadian artists.⁴¹ Chris Varley in his catalogue *Carl Schaefer in Hanover* distinguishes Schaefer's work "from the so-called regionalism of his U.S. contemporaries."⁴² In *Modern Painting in Canada*, Terry Fenton and Karen Wilkin discuss regionalist and populist art, American and Canadian, but again do not set apart a category of Canadian regionalist art of the 1930's and 1940's.

Although one might argue that "regionalism" has lost its credibility as a label for Canadian painting of this period, this is not to suggest that the word may have no future as a more generally applicable term. It has already carved out a legitimate place for itself in the context of the London School of the 1960's. To take a less restrictive example, David Burnett in his *Alex Colville* catalogue hints at, though he does not develop, a more sophisticated and provocative usage associated with the idea of "a sensitivity to the limitations by which all of us are bound," a usage which is, paradoxically, also "an assertion of individuality."⁴³

Visual-arts writing might, in this regard, find useful points of contact with the regionalism discourse in Canadian literature. For a variety of reasons, this discourse has developed along richer and more cogent lines than has its sister in the visual arts. Northrop Frye, for example, associates regionalism with the sense of identity nurtured in a particular environment,⁴⁴ a use of the word not dissimilar to Burnett's. Equally provocative is Eli Mandel's conception of the region as "a region of the human mind." For Mandel, "regional literature is . . . a literature of the past," a vision of "the place we know as the first place, the first cism of things, the first clarity of things." His suggestion that Colville may be seen as a regionalist because his work "evokes with extraordinary clarity objects, people,

places in a design at once objective and dream-like,"⁴⁵ is the kind of insight that could conceivably lead to a genuinely useful role for this much-battered word.

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Notes

- 1 The Francophone discourse differs from the English-Canadian. This will be discussed in the text.
- 2 An exception is Barry Lord, who, in *Painting in Canada / Toward a People's Art* (Toronto: NC Press, 1974), p.183, sees "budding [Canadian] social realists" such as Nathan Petroff as having been negatively affected by their contact with American regionalism.
- 3 Charles COMFORT, "Canadian Painting, Sculpture and Print Making," *Journal of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada*, 25 (January 1948), p.4.
- 4 R.L. HUBBARD, *The Development of Canadian Art* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1963), p.116.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p.112.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p.85.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p.113.
- 8 Russell J. HARPER, *Painting in Canada: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977; first published 1966).
- 9 *Ibid.*, p.305.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p.305. Compare with E.P. Richardson, *A Short History of Painting in America* (New York, 1963), p.292: "The decade of the thirties was a time when the imagination of artists turned suddenly again to the United States. . . . It was a time of rediscovery for the nation as a whole of the importance, the vastness, the picturesque variety of the life, people, and traditions of their own country."
- 11 *Ibid.*, p.306.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 Harper intensifies the sense of rootedness by connecting the artist with earlier generations of his family. He employs the same device with Carl Schaefer: "Money was so scarce that for eight successive years he, his wife, and their small children spent their summers on his grandfather's farm whose every fence, stone, and barn he knew and loved as a boy." (*Ibid.*, p.305).
- 14 *Ibid.*, p.306.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p.309.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p.308.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p.306.
- 18 Paul DUVAL, *Four Decades: The Canadian Group of Painters and Their Contemporaries 1930-1970* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Company, 1972).
- 19 *Ibid.*, p.183.
- 20 Dennis REID, *A Concise History of Canadian Painting* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1973), p.193.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p.178.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p.181.

- ²³ *Ibid.*, p.179.
- ²⁴ Reid's implicit definition of regionalism not unexpectedly results in a different selection of artists than Harper's. In apparent rebuttal of the latter, he says that "one man who might mistakenly have been called a regionalist was Jack Humphrey." (*Ibid.*, p.193).
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.161.
- ²⁶ Charles C. HILL, *Canadian Painting in the Thirties* (Ottawa: NGC, 1975), p.27.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.89.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.115.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.116.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, p.115.
- ³² Jean-Charles HARVEY, "Les Bourses d'Europe et M. Maillaird," *Le Jour*, 1 (28 May 1938), p.132.
- ³³ HILL, p.132.
- ³⁴ François-Marc GAGNON, "Painting in Quebec in the Thirties," *Journal of Canadian Art History*, 3 (Fall, 1976), pp. 2-20.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- ³⁸ Joan MURRAY, *The Best of the Group of Seven* (Oshawa: Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 1984), p.16.
- ³⁹ Peter MELLEN, *Landmarks of Canadian Art* (Toronto: McLelland and Stewart, 1978), p.192.
- ⁴⁰ Ann DAVIS, *Frontiers of Our Dreams* (Winnipeg: Winnipeg Art Gallery, 1979), p.12.
- ⁴¹ Jean-René OSTIGUY, *Les Esthétiques modernes au Québec de 1916 à 1946* (Ottawa: NGC, 1982).
- ⁴² Chris VARLEY, *Carl Schaefer in Hanover* (Edmonton: Edmonton Art Gallery, 1980), p.1.
- ⁴³ David BURNETT, *Colville* (Toronto: AGO, 1983), p.199. Burnett here draws on Heinz Ohff's article "Provinziell wie Caspar David Friedrich," *Der Tagesspiegel / Feuilleton* (Berlin, 25 Aug. 1971), p.4.
- ⁴⁴ Northrop FRYE, *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (Toronto: Anansi, 1971), p.ii.
- ⁴⁵ Eli MANDEL, "Images of Prairie Man," in *Towards a Canadian Literature: Essays, Editorials and Manifestos*, Vol.2, 1940-1983 (Ottawa: Tecumseh Press, 1985; first published 1973), p.541.