

Capturing North America on Canvas

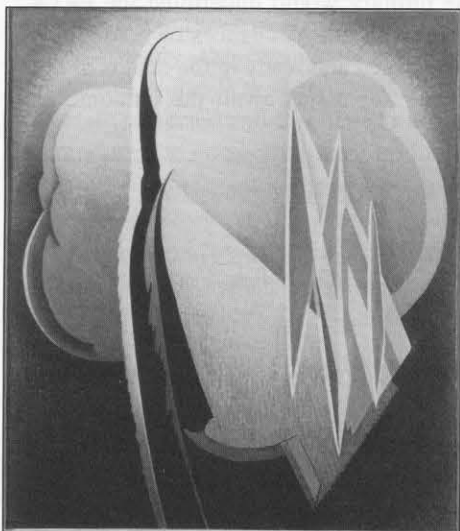
The paintings and photographs featured in *The Informing Spirit* provide a moving vision and give a sonorous voice to North American art, not in terms of the centuries of European masters that preceded it, but in and of itself.

The Informing Spirit Art of the American Southwest and West Coast Canada, 1925-1945

by Trixie Bobrovniczky
and Kristina Soutar

The Informing Spirit, featuring the work of 21 artists from western regions in Canada and the United States, neither intimidates the novice nor disappoints the seasoned art critic. The exhibit presents over eighty oils, watercolors and photographs by such prominent artists as Georgia O'Keefe, John Marin, Marsden Hartley and B.J.O. Nordfeldt from the U.S., and Canadians Lawren Harris, Emily Carr, Jock Macdonald and L.L. Fitzgerald. The work of these artists invites an exploration of how to capture the inner spirit of and human responses to nature, often in a highly refined abstract visual language.

Amidst the boundary conscious era of the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement and NAFTA, *The Informing Spirit* also addresses the barriers built along the 49th parallel. While one may wish to



Lawren Harris, *Mountain Experience I*, c.1946: lines expressing nature's vibrations. [The Art Emporium, Vancouver]

reserve judgement regarding the work of our politicians, the accomplishments of the curators who assembled this collection are easy to measure. Their collaboration breaks down some of the perceived boundaries that exist, and succeeds in providing the forum for a visual and literary discourse between the two nations. From their North American homes, these artists formed a new artistic tradition based on the unity of the natural and human spirit. The body of work displayed in *The Informing Spirit* considerably enriches the cultural inheritance of both nations by giving expression to this new tradition of landscape painting.

Eroding the Great Divide

The Informing Spirit is the third and final phase of a collaboration between the McMichael Canadian Art Collection and the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, and represents the culmination of their cross-border cooperation. The first exchange took place in October, 1992, when Colorado Springs loaned the McMichael an exhibition entitled *Images of Penance, Images of Mercy*, featuring nineteenth century religious folk images. In return, the McMichael sent south a

sampling of Inuit art from Baffin Island: *Cape Dorset Drawings and Prints*. In this third collaboration, the curators have linked the work of American and Canadian artists. An illuminating exploration of early twentieth century artistic currents and historical development, this exhibit demonstrates the distinctive character of North American art.

Ann Davis, Director of the Nickle Arts Museum at the University of Calgary was one of the first people to espouse such a comparative approach to the arts. She suggests that studying the traditions of art from a "hemispheric" perspective generates greater insights concerning both the similarities and differences between the countries in question. To the North American art lover who may be distraught about the marginalization of Canadian and American art to that of the Europeans, this angle of study challenges that stigma of inferiority.

The Informing Spirit transcends the traditional European framework of landscape paintings and gives evidence of a uniquely North American genre. Regardless of the fact that North America, the New World, has not provided storehouses full of Medieval religious icons or six-

The Informing Spirit's North American Tour

The Informing Spirit is the result of a cross-border collaboration between the McMichael Canadian Art Collection and the Taylor Museum for Southwestern Studies, Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center. The exhibit will appear across North America in the following locations:

McMichael Canadian Art Collection Kleinburg, Ontario 30 January to 17 April 1994	Vancouver Art Gallery Vancouver, British Columbia 15 June to 5 September 1994
Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center Colorado Springs, Colorado 1 October 1994 to 8 January 1995	Gibbes Museum of Art Charleston, South Carolina 26 January to 26 March 1995

teenth century portraits, the awe-inspiring visions of nature and the search for the spirit within serve as testament to the vast beauty of the continent and the character of its inhabitants. *The Informing Spirit* allows one to toss nationalities to the winds—at least while exploring the exhibit—and to revel in the spirit of a cultural exchange that is out of reach of the customs officials stationed at border crossings.

Philosophical and Literary Foundations

Individuals' understandings of the world around them are not usually isolated bursts of inspiration; rather, they must be placed into the historical context of their times. Artists are no exception, though they are oftentimes the ones who forge ahead and explore unknown realms of ideas and form. With the landscapes themselves as sources, the painters of *The Informing Spirit* contributed significantly to the language of the new, North American tradition that they sought to establish.

The intellectual climate of the early twentieth century offered several innovative philosophical movements from which these artists drew inspiration. Theories of the fourth dimension, Eastern mysticism, European avant-garde art and color theory were all explored by these artists. Channeled

“The source of our art then is not in the achievements of other artists in other days and lands, although it has learned a great deal from these. Our art is founded on a long and growing love and understanding...of oneness with the informing spirit of the whole land and a strange brooding sense of Mother Nature fostering a new race and a new age.”

Lawren Harris



W.P. Weston, *Unvanquished*, 1933: depicting the towering omnipresence of nature. [The Vancouver Art Gallery Acquisition Fund]

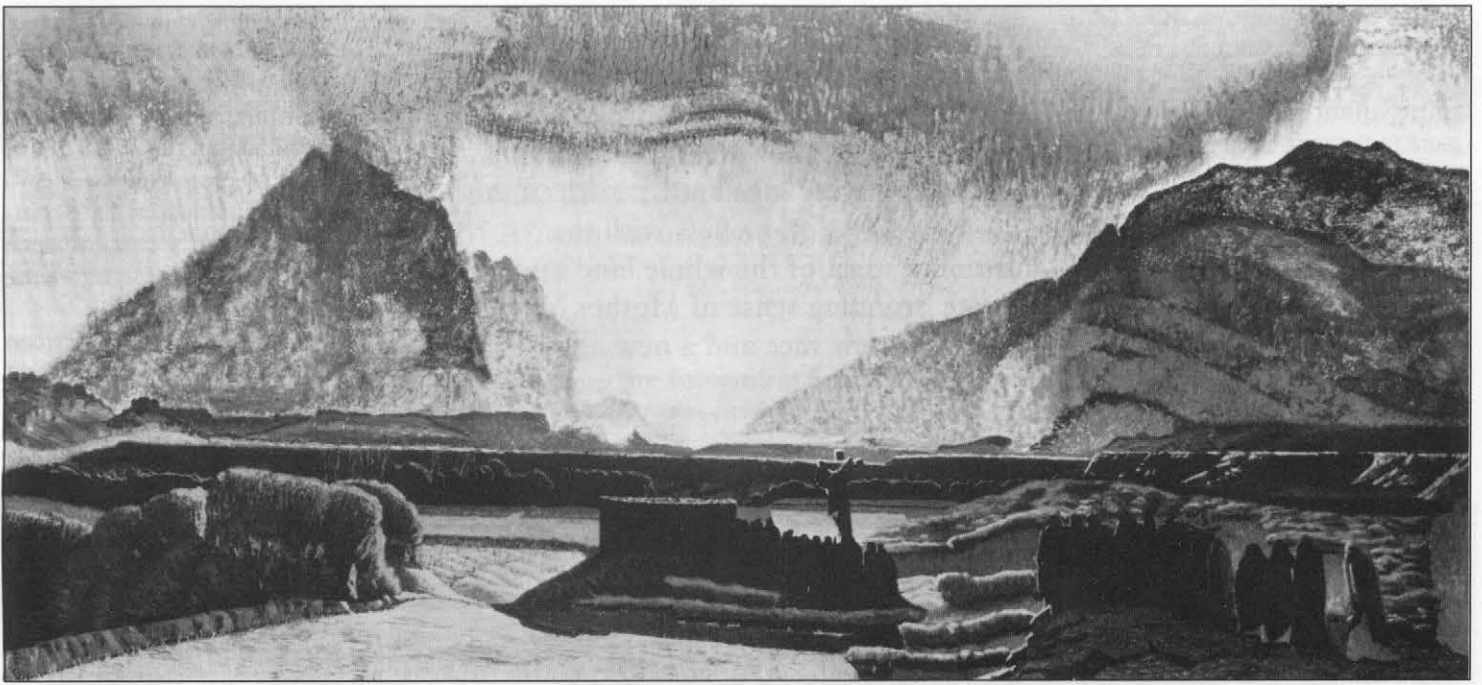
through the cultural centers of Europe and North America, these trends played an important role in shaping the work of artists on the West Coast. Two of these philosophies—Transcendentalism and Theosophy—clearly capture some of the roots of *The Informing Spirit's* visual message.

The spirit of American Transcendentalism was best exemplified by the nineteenth century poet Walt Whitman.

He travelled extensively throughout both the U.S. and Canada, offering a literary vision which grew from the union of nature in the North American experience and human spirituality. Whitman's poetry is featured in *The Informing Spirit* alongside many of the paintings.

As Colorado Springs curator Sharyn Udall observes, “vigorous expression of personal ideas was sacred, and Whitman inspired generations of North American painters and writers to celebrate themselves, their time and their native place...Encountering new places and fresh perceptions—whether in travel or in paintings—freed him to see beyond the familiar into spiritual realms that lay beyond what was depicted...”

Another popular philosophy at that time, pioneered by Russian-born Madame Blavatsky, was Theosophy. A liberal religious philosophy promising



Ernest L. Blumenschein, *The Penitentes*, 1935: the re-enactment of native lenten rites practiced in New Mexico and Colorado. [McMichael Collection]

divine knowledge through spiritual ecstasy, Theosophy incorporated notions of intuition, freedom, individualism and nature. Theosophy taught that humankind could be elevated to a higher level of awareness through internal spiritualization, and artists, poets, even mystics were considered most able to engage in this spiritual quest.

The artists featured in *The Informing Spirit* exchanged ideas through such forums as the Transcendental Painting Group which brought together artists with common interests. The exhibit catalogs the cross border correspondence, art exchanges, and academic education which united the key figures in this exhibition as they eroded the great divide: their artistic interaction knew no boundaries.

Capturing the informing spirit

Earth Rhythms, Dynamic Symmetry, Strange Sky, Dancing Trees—these are titles of some of the captivating pieces in this exhibit. Among the iconography, one absorbs the arid New Mexico landscapes—mountains, desert expanses, cliff dwellings and native rituals—and the Canadian Rocky Mountains' vast skies and glorious trees. Varying from soft,

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translucent hues to bold contrasts, the colors and forms range from abstract to representational. What emanates most strongly, however, is a "feeling", and this, to quell the queries of the art skeptic, is what we are being informed of.

Many of these paintings challenge the viewer to explore new means of interpreting the physical world beyond that which meets the eye. Often the paintings study the *effect* that the awesome spectacle of nature has on the observer. For many of the artists whose works are displayed in *The Informing Spirit*, the beauty and essence of nature as it relates to the human spirit, is what is to be found in their depictions. At once both enigmatic and incomprehensible to the casual viewer, the works compel the intellect to grapple with emotion.

After all, have you ever set foot on a mountain precipice, to find what seemed like the the whole of the earth lay sprawled at your feet—and then, with a powerful gust of wind which would hurl you down, you were reminded that it is you who is at the mercy of the earth and not the other way around? How does one turn to others and recount this experience of being so overwhelmed by the enormity of the forces of nature?

These are the types of emotions which the painters struggled to portray. Some relied on refined geometric abstractions; others depicted nature from dramatic angles which re-enforced its might and

towering omnipresence; still others looked to the spirituality of indigenous peoples. Though looking upon a painting which is abstract in form may be an alienating experience for some viewers, the art in this exhibition offers alternative ways of seeing, feeling and experiencing.

"I stand in my own place with my own day here."

These words of Walt Whitman resonate from within *The Informing Spirit*, whose aim is to give a voice and definition to North American artists who stood in their own, new land, and carved from it their unique portrayals of the form and spirit of nature that hold a key to humanity.

Megan Bice, curator of the McMichael Canadian Art Collection writes that "for so many immigrants from the ancient civilizations of Europe and Asia, North America was the 'New World', the opportunity to begin again, to create a new history." Apart from the allure of images which seek to express feeling and emotion rather than reproduce concrete reality, it is this sentiment of newness and of a uniquely North American tradition which has so much to offer North Americans' perception of their own culture. The chance to discover anew the sources and joys of the self is reflected in *The Informing Spirit* by these artists, who sought the spirit which informs life in their land and its people. ●