

HOLGATE'S THE BATHERS AND OTHER NUDES IN 20TH CENTURY CANADA

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In the history of Canadian art—and indeed in the history of art in general—the genre of the female nude has been a subject of controversy. While iterations exist, in the early 20th century, landscape was the preferred genre of painting in Canada. Still today, works by The Group of Seven and their affiliates, like Emily Carr and Tom Thomson, dominate the canon of this period. These landscapes, with their absence of the human form, were resolutely conducive to the formation of state-sponsored, ‘official’ Canadian culture¹: in their portrayal of the Canadian landscape, they acted as tokens of domination and ownership over the young nation’s otherwise seemingly wild and untamable nature, touchstones for nationalism and a “collective outlet for antimodern sentiments.”² As multiple scholars have contended in recent decades,³ landscape art within settler colonial nations, such as Canada, is often gendered: the female, then, can be seen as manifest in the landscapes of the Group of Seven, despite the absence of the female corporeal form. Building on conversations generated by these perspectives, an examination of three female nudes from the interwar period (Edwin Holgate’s *The Bathers*, Liliis Torrance Newton’s *Nude in the Studio* and Prudence Heward’s *Hester*) and their relationship to landscape can provide insights to the exclusions and reveal the white, male, and colonial biases involved in the construction of Canada’s national artistic identity.

While outside the generally recognized canon of Canadian art, the genre of the nude has been explored by both male and female Canadian artists, all of whom either perpetuated or challenged the inherently patriarchal nature of painting the female body as a passive object.

Some of these works were precursors to the feminist ownership of the naked female body (in the sense that they defied traditional depictions and challenged the viewer), but many others represented the continued control of the female body by and for the male gaze. Paintings of the latter genre could slip past harsh criticism more easily than the former. Women in these works looked away from the viewer, either not aware that they were being examined, or in some cases, resigned to the fact that they were. One such work, *The Bathers* (Figure 1) by Edwin Holgate (who was at one point admitted to the Group of Seven), is a unification of the passive landscape and the passive female. It centers on two nude women bathing on the edge of a seascape that would be familiar to coast-dwelling Canadians. In a successful attempt to create a harmonious composition, both women are composed of graceful arching lines, and a sweeping curve can be drawn between key points on the standing woman's body—her knee, crotch, navel, and left breast—which lead the eye to survey her. Holgate has thoughtfully angled the figures to orbit around the space between them, and the landscape behind them is just as intentionally composed. The setting is not just an afterthought, or a backdrop in front of which the *Bathers* exist. Its shapes are modest and carefully placed to accompany those of the women: for instance, the undulating edges of the trees in the background echo the line of the standing woman's hair.

Throughout Holgate's career he produced multiple nudes (though his oeuvre contains more landscapes), in the forms of both paintings (such as *Nude in a Landscape* (1930), *Nude in the Open* (1930), and *Early Autumn* (1938)) and prints (*Nude by a Lake* (1933)). In each, he shows a constant attention to the relationship between the figure and the background: specifically, Holgate seeks to integrate his female nudes with their surroundings, which are often landscapes reminiscent of the Group of Seven aesthetic. These works all display a very intentional effort to echo line, form, and color between woman and nature: a union which

Holgate achieved "more lyrically than any other Canadian artist,"⁴ according to one 20th century Canadian art dealer. Unintentionally, perhaps, but consequentially, this visual unity results in the symbolic unity of the landscape with the female figure. This unification revokes the autonomy of the female subject and reduces her to an object that, like her surroundings, exists for viewing pleasure, and can be controlled, owned, and dominated.

Conversely, Liliias Torrance Newton's 1933 *Nude in the Studio* is a depiction of, in the words of art historian Julia Skelly, "a personality rather than an anonymous figure."⁵ Newton, a prominent female Canadian artist who exhibited with the Group of Seven and helped found the under-researched but vital Beaver Hall Group, was known for her portraiture. In *Nude in the Studio*, a modern woman—identified as such by her heels, manicure, and setting—stands tall and confident, her body taking up the entire vertical space of the canvas. While she looks away from the viewer, she seems aware of their gaze, and is confident in both her sexuality and the viewer's reception of her. There is a sense of dimension in the painting that draws the viewer closer to the woman, forcing a

confrontation between the two. Intriguingly, the model's head is positioned to obscure a painting *within* the painting from view, which appears to be a man standing in a Russian landscape. Here is an inversion of Holgate's figuring of nude and landscape: instead of combining the two into a passive object, Newton's woman self-assuredly steps in front of the landscape. Allegedly due to the work's nudity, it was removed from an exhibition at the Art Gallery of Toronto in 1933: the most likely case for this removal was the displeasure it incited with the figure's self-assurance, sensuality, and uncomfortable proximity to the viewer.⁶ Without the patriarchal conventions of visual subjugation like those employed by Holgate, Newton's figure appears naked instead of nude. In Kenneth Clark's seminal work "The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form," he cites a distinction between nudity and nakedness: the former represents a longstanding category in Western art that encapsulates the ideal female form, and the latter classifies the woman in Newton's painting.⁷ Nakedness implies shame and the action of undressing, while nudity conjures images of idealized Greek figures from antiquity. As scholar Barbara Meadowcroft has posited, in early to mid-20th century Canada the nude was acceptable as a "mode of representation of the white, female body within western high art" and that "to be experienced as art, rather than as pornography, the female body had to be transformed into a suitable object for male aesthetic contemplation."⁸ Conversely, works that depicted the female subject as autonomous and were "overtly connected to female sexuality"⁹ were ripe for scrutinization. Three nude paintings exhibited in 1927 at the Art Gallery of the Canadian National Exhibition in Toronto, for example, raised much controversy and were deemed as too openly sexual by the public and the press. Scholar

Jane Nicholas, who analyzed these responses in her 2008 article, concludes that due to the “concerns about the sexualization of modern entertainment”¹⁰ and the country’s fraught relationship with modernism at the time, many felt that the gallery, as a respectable cultural institution, should have no part in displaying the works. Regardless of their scandalous nature, people flocked to the exhibition to see the paintings for themselves. Newton’s image of a self-confident, naked woman confused, repelled, and intrigued the public, indicative of Canadian society’s fraught relationship with the nude genre.

Black female nudes represented a different set of conventions for the artist, brought different judgements from the public, and now demand different considerations from the art historian. Generally, the artists who painted Black female nudes were white- Elizabeth Wyn Wood, Lawren P. Harris Jr., Louis Muhlstock, John Lyman, Dorothy Stevens, and notably, Prudence Heward- thus, their depictions are often clearly informed by problematic stereotypes. In the disparaging response to Heward’s *Hester* (Figure 2), which depicts a downcast nude Black woman reclining against a tree, critics called the figure, among other things, “hideous” and “exceedingly ugly,” despite having the vulnerability and situatedness in landscape which were so valued in white female nudes.¹¹ Heward, a white female Canadian artist noted for her portraiture, painted several Black women during her career, many of which were in the nude (such as *Dark Girl* and *Girl at the Window*) and represented as unideal figures. Although the body in *Hester* “thwarts the traditions of Woman as Fantasy for the male heterosexual gaze,”¹² writes Black Canadian art historian Charmaine Nelson, the Black woman is placed in

deference to the white artist and viewer by being portrayed as downcast, weak, and defeated. Notably, although *Hester* is situated within a landscape which could be read as Canadian, she seems to lean against it instead of being integrated seamlessly within it, unlike the figures in *The Bathers*. Further, unlike Newton's contentious *Nude in the Studio*, the woman lacks agency and personality. Seemingly, even if the white female nude could be incorporated into the Canadian landscape after being stripped of her agency and individuality, the Black female nude could only exist as a curiosity. The relationship between the two genres seems to be informed by the complex web of power relations in 20th century Canadian society, between the subject and artist, female and male, and Black and white. Holgate's success—or rather, lack of repercussions—with *Nudes in a Landscape* seems to signify that the Canadian public, art world, and media in the interwar period found no issue with nudes that objectified their female subjects and placed them in a natural setting, in agreement with the historically pervasive equating of woman and nature.¹³ Both could be colonized and objectified, and thus could meld together. Ideas of Canada as a “virginal wilderness”¹⁴ peddled through the Group of Seven's landscapes allows for this, which “gendered the landscape and effectively kept women in their place.”¹⁵ Conversely, Newton's nude threatens the idea of a passive and objectified woman. Her figure operates outside of Western art historical conventions by being naked as opposed to nude. She is endowed with more agency and gives herself primacy over landscape by placing herself in front of one, quite literally. For this, the work confused and repelled viewers. Heward's figure, by contrast, lacks any sense of agency or individuality, and is instead passive and at odds with her surroundings: this

incongruence with landscape can lead to the interpretation that the Black body was not accepted as part of early 20th century Canadian artistic identity.

Within feminist reckonings of the 21st century, the female body in society and the female nude in art are in the process of being wrested from the male hands in which they have so long been held. Female artists, especially those of color, continue to vie for space in the maledominated field of art, where women get paid less and exhibit less.¹⁶ In the canon of interwar Canadian art, the nude is still overlooked, relative to artists like the Group of Seven, in scholarship and public acclaim. As art historian Devon Smither writes, although they “did not set out to marginalize women artists or the genre of the nude, an unintended consequence of their hegemonic position in the writing of Canadian art history (and exhibition making) has been precisely that.”¹⁷ Throughout history, this genre of art has symbolized innocence, sin, vice, sexuality, empowerment, bliss, freedom, intimacy, and a host of other characteristics. How women are painted can show how gender relations were structured and thought of in the artist’s time, depending on the work’s reception at the time of its creation. Because of its multiplicity (which is intensified when racist and colonialist contexts are considered), the female nude can be indicative of sociocultural beliefs and patterns. In interwar Canada, where gendered landscapes were dominant and the main artistic voices were white and male, the female nude could only survive within the bounds of what was deemed as appropriate or acceptable pictorial representation: the visual and symbolic unification of passive woman and passive nature. These nudes, like landscapes, couldn't talk back.

FIGURES



Figure 1. Edwin Holgate, *The Bathers*, 1937. Reproduced with permission from Mr. Jonathan Rittenhouse.



Figure 2. Prudence Heward, *Hester*, 1937. Reproduced with permission from Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University.

NOTES

¹ Devon Smither, "Defying Convention: The Female Nude in Canadian Painting and

Photography during the Interwar Period," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 32, no.1 (April 2019).

² Jane Nicholas, "'A figure of a nude woman': Art, Popular Culture, and Modernity at the Canadian National Exhibition, 1927," *Histoire sociale / Social History* 41, no. 28 (November 2008): 319, [doi:10.1353/his.0.0036](https://doi.org/10.1353/his.0.0036)

³ Paul Hjartarson, "'Virgin Land,' the Settler-Invader Subject, and Cultural Nationalism: Gendered Landscape in the Cultural Construction of Canadian National Identity," in *Gender and Landscape: Renegotiating the Moral Landscape*, ed. Josephine Carubia, Lorriane Dowler, and

Bonj Szczygiel (Routledge, 2005): 203-20; Anne McClintock, "Empire of the Home," in *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 1995) 17-203; Gill Saunders, *The Nude: A New Perspective* (Cambridge: Harper & Row, 1989).

⁴ Jerrold Morris, *The nude in Canadian painting* (Toronto: New Press, 1972): 13. ⁵ Julia Skelly, "Prudence Heward: Life & Work," Art Institute Canada, accessed March 14, 2022, <https://www.aci-iac.ca/art-books/prudence-heward/biography/>.

⁶ Smither, "Defying Convention", 82.

⁷ Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

⁸ Barbara Meadowcroft, "How Many Artists Are There in the Family?: The Career of Montreal Painter Regina Seiden (1897-1991)," *RACAR : Revue d'art Canadienne / Canadian Art Review* 25, no. 1-2 (1998) : 78, <https://doi.org/10.7202/1071615ar>.

⁹ Nicholas, "A figure of a nude woman", 319.

¹⁰ Nicholas, "A figure of a nude woman", 318.

¹¹ Smither, "Defying Convention", 90.

¹² Charmaine Nelson, *Representing the Black Female Subject in Western Art*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), 27.

¹³ Saunders, *The Nude*, 91.

¹⁴ Paul Hjartarson, "'Virgin Land'", 216.

¹⁵ Paul Hjartarson, "'Virgin Land'", 218.

¹⁶ "Get the Facts about Women in the Arts," National Museum of Women in the Arts, published July 22, 2020, <https://nmwa.org/support/advocacy/get-facts/>. ¹⁷ Smither, "Defying Convention", 78.

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