

The Role of Collegial Spirit in Canadian Art: The Group of Seven and Beyond



Canada's art history provides compelling examples of how collegiality and shared artistic goals have shaped the national art scene. Canadian art movements, like their global counterparts, often emerged from groups of artists who shared common ideals, philosophies, and inspirations. The **Group of Seven** is a particularly notable example, but other movements and collaborations also played a significant role in defining Canadian art.

The Group of Seven (1920–1933)

- **Artists involved:** Lawren Harris, A.Y. Jackson, Arthur Lismer, J.E.H. MacDonald, Frederick Varley, Frank Johnston, and Franklin Carmichael. Tom Thomson is often associated with the group but died before its formal founding.
- **Key Concept:** The Group of Seven sought to define a distinctly Canadian identity in art, emphasizing the rugged beauty of the Canadian landscape. Their works often depicted remote and untamed areas, highlighting the natural grandeur of the country.
- **Collegial Influence:**
 - The Group of Seven emerged from friendships and shared aspirations. The artists supported one another through feedback and discussions, fostering a collective vision for Canadian art.
 - They exhibited together, which helped establish their reputation both within Canada and internationally.
 - Lawren Harris, for instance, was deeply inspired by his interactions with other members, particularly J.E.H. MacDonald. These relationships informed his exploration of spiritual and geometric abstraction in landscapes.
- **Impact on Quality:** The mutual support and shared goal of promoting a Canadian artistic identity pushed individual members to new creative heights. Their efforts helped raise the profile of Canadian art on the global stage and set a precedent for future artistic collaboration in the country.

The Beaver Hall Group (1920–1922)

- **Artists involved:** Anne Savage, Prudence Heward, Sarah Robertson, and Lilia Torrance Newton, among others. Unlike the Group of Seven, it included a significant number of women.

- **Key Concept:** This Montreal-based group focused on portraiture and urban scenes, diverging from the landscapes celebrated by the Group of Seven. They explored modernist techniques and themes while maintaining a strong sense of individuality.
- **Collegial Influence:**
 - The Beaver Hall Group represented a more urban and socially conscious perspective. While less cohesive as a movement than the Group of Seven, the members provided mutual encouragement and an alternative vision of Canadian art.
 - Their work highlighted Canadian life in its complexity, including urban experiences and human figures, offering a counterpoint to the nature-centric focus of the Group of Seven.
- **Impact on Quality:** The group's collaborative dynamic allowed for experimentation and innovation, particularly in how modernist techniques were applied to distinctly Canadian subjects. The Beaver Hall artists significantly enriched the diversity of Canadian art.

Painters Eleven (1953–1960)

- **Artists involved:** Harold Town, Jack Bush, Jock Macdonald, and others.
- **Key Concept:** Painters Eleven championed abstract art in Canada at a time when abstraction faced skepticism. They aimed to bring Canadian art into alignment with international trends in modernism.
- **Collegial Influence:**
 - Members of Painters Eleven shared exhibitions and public platforms, working together to promote abstraction in Canadian art.
 - They were instrumental in creating opportunities for abstract artists, influencing public perception, and gaining international attention.
- **Impact on Quality:** The group's shared commitment to abstraction provided a strong foundation for individual creativity. Harold Town's work, for example, gained a new boldness through his engagement with the group, while Jack Bush's connections to Painters Eleven helped him transition to international acclaim.

Inuit Art and Cooperative Spirit

- **Context:** Inuit artists have long relied on collaborative networks and shared practices to sustain their work and cultural traditions.
- **Key Examples:**
 - In the 1950s, the creation of Inuit art cooperatives, such as those in Cape Dorset (now Kinngait), allowed artists to share resources and ideas. These

cooperatives emphasized printmaking and sculpture, producing internationally renowned works.

- Artists like Kenojuak Ashevak and Pitseolak Ashoona were able to thrive in these collaborative environments, blending traditional techniques with modern influences.
- **Impact on Quality:** The cooperative spirit among Inuit artists has been instrumental in preserving cultural traditions while fostering innovation. The sense of community and shared purpose continues to enrich the quality and diversity of Inuit art.

Key Characteristics of Canadian Collegial Art Movements

1. Regional Identity:

Canadian artists often focus on reflecting their unique environment and culture. The Group of Seven, for example, celebrated the wilderness, while Inuit artists draw from their Arctic heritage.

2. Mutual Support:

Many Canadian groups were founded on principles of mutual encouragement and collaboration, providing a platform for innovation and growth.

3. Diversity of Vision:

While the Group of Seven emphasized landscapes, the Beaver Hall Group and Painters Eleven explored urban life, portraiture, and abstraction, enriching the Canadian artistic narrative.

Balancing Individuality and Collegiality in Canadian Art

Canadian art movements exemplify the delicate balance between individual creativity and collective influence. Artists within these groups often maintained their unique styles while benefiting from the shared resources, critiques, and ideas that collegial environments provided. This balance contributed to the high quality and distinctiveness of their work, underscoring the viability of the hypothesis that collegiality enhances artistic innovation.

By considering movements like the **Group of Seven**, **Beaver Hall Group**, and **Painters Eleven**, as well as the cooperative models of **Inuit art**, we see that the spirit of collaboration and shared purpose has been central to the evolution of Canadian art, inspiring some of the country's most celebrated works.