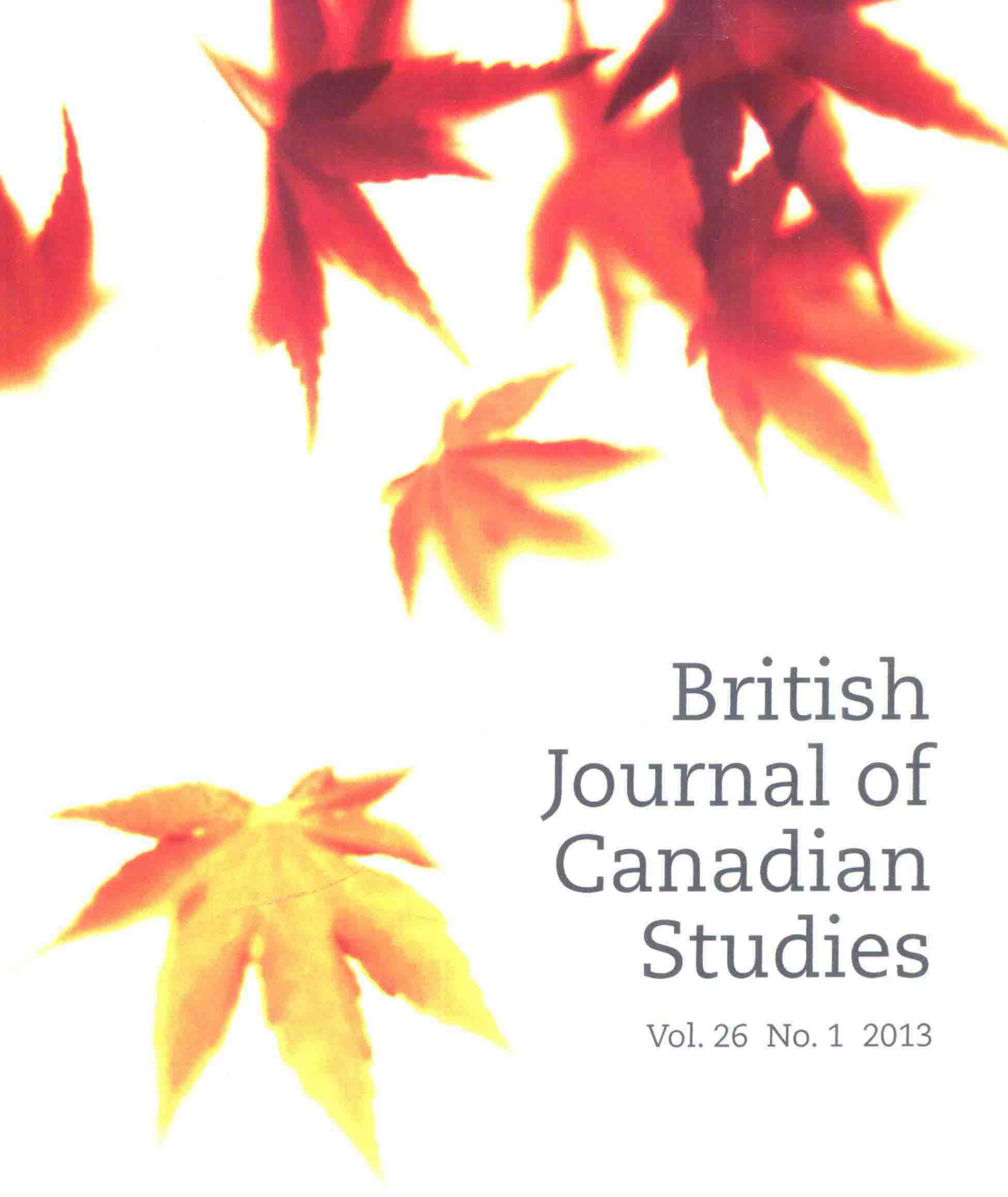

# British Journal of Canadian Studies

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# Contents

*Andrew Nurse*

# 'Beauty which we had not previously known': Walter Abell and the dynamics of modern art in Canada

A re-reading of the writings of Walter Abell, a well known art critic and theorist in Canada in the 1930s and 1940s, suggests a different way of thinking about the development of Canadian art and culture. Instead of viewing Abell's treatments of art – as have other cultural historians – as a stable discourse, this essay suggests that they are better viewed as a series of often incongruous treatments that do not constitute a cohesive whole. It is the very disjunctures and aporias in Abell's discourse, however, that make it most meaningful. Instead of treating Abell's contradictions and shifting perspectives as problems, this essay argues that they signify the diverse, and at times incompatible, ways that artists, intellectuals, and Canadians responded to the the development of modernist art and the conditions of artistic modernity in twentieth century Canada. In this sense, they present an image of Canadian artistic culture as a fractures field within which different subject positions, conceptions of cultural history, and forms of political activism became possible.

**Keywords:** Modern art, art history, art criticism, cultural history, Walter Abell

In a span of a little more than 15 years, the American-born art critic Walter Abell (1897–1956) left a mark on Canadian cultural history. He was among the first full-time art professors appointed to a Canadian university, the founder of the first regional and then national periodical devoted exclusively to the plastic arts, the key organiser of an important regional art association – the Maritime Art Association – and an important figure in the organisation of the Federation of Canadian Arts (FCA), the first national artists' body that strove to unite artists on the basis of their vocation. These accomplishments have not been lost on Canadian cultural historians, but there is a significant division in the way in which Abell's work has been interpreted. On the one hand, Kirk Niergarth has argued that Abell's work for the arts constituted part of a politically progressive shift away from Group of Seven-styled landscape painting and toward social engagement. In effect, the institutions Abell

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helped build represented a movement toward the democratisation of culture in Canada (Niergarth 2006; see also Sicotte 1988). On the other hand, Jeffrey Brison has argued almost the opposite point. According to Brison, Abell's work represented a shift in Canadian culture but one that was part of an elite-driven programme that solidified the role of the 'expert' in Canadian culture. This move represented a form of class politics in which the newly fashioned institutions of modern culture in Canada (some of which Abell played a key role in building) undercut popular dynamics and solidified the hegemony of specific groups over the national cultural project (Brison 2005).

My objective in this article is neither to reject these interpretations outright nor mediate between them. Instead, my aim is to open a new trajectory of inquiry on Abell in a twofold sense. First, on an empirical level, I will suggest that Abell's importance lies not simply in the realm of what he did (that is, the cultural institutions he helped to forge) but in what his artistic thought signifies. There can be little doubt that Abell played an important role in the development of twentieth-century Canadian art institutions, organisations, educational programmes, and periodicals (Brison 2005; Niergarth 2006). It is this very prominent role, I argue, that makes his thought important. Abell was among those critics, artists and intellectuals who grappled with the changing economic and cultural dynamics of interwar Canada and its implications for the arts. In effect, Abell's cultural project was to define the problems confronted by the arts in modern culture and ways in which these problems could be resolved. My aim is not to review Abell's initiatives in this regard but to assess his artistic thought for what it can tell us about the dynamics of art and its interaction with the wider cultural context. Here, I will argue that a close examination of Abell's artistic thought suggests a different way of thinking about Canadian art and culture under conditions of modernity.

Second, on a theoretical level, I argue that established interpretations of Abell's work and thought rely on a specific heuristic position. In effect, existing assessments of Abell rely on what Harold Mah, in a different context, has called a closed circle of signification (Mah 1994 and 2003). By this, Mah means an interpretation that draws a direct line between thought and action, words and deeds. Both Niergarth and Brison, for example, in effect argue that Abell's words (his writing on art) demonstrate his intentions even while they disagree on their precise nature. What is more, a closed circle of signification is necessarily stable and coherent within the framework of its context. Said differently, Abell's words represent a stable ideological position either in support of democratisation or elite hegemony. It is the

very nature of this stability, previous studies suggest, that is important to Canadian art and cultural history. From Brison's perspective, Abell's work and thought demonstrate the process through which inequalities based on a constructed elite authority were fused to Canadian cultural life (Brison 2005). From Niergarth's, Abell's work demonstrates the democratisation of Canadian cultural life in the twentieth century (Niergarth 2006).

In a series of important studies of modern European culture, Mah suggests that language does not work in this type of direct fashion. For a variety of reasons,[1] it is unstable and these very instabilities create disjunctures, contradictions, and aporias in cultural formations (Mah 1989, 1991, 1994, 2000 and 2003). In this situation, language does not become impotent. It continues to carry meaning but that meaning becomes intensely problematic. The instability of language as a signifying system conveys multiple or fragmented meanings that, Mah suggests, can subvert authorial intention (Mah 1994).[2] In the context of Canadian cultural history, attention to the fluidity and instability of cultural discourses is not an idle academic issue. Instead, it focuses a different type of attention on the remarkably contested character of Canadian culture. It draws that contest into a different analytic light that highlights the way in which seemingly stable ideological perspectives move simultaneously in different directions. As is well known, Canadians have long disagreed on the character and scope of Canadian culture (cf. Cupdio 2009). The specific foci of Abell's artistic thought did change over time. As he grappled with the context of modern life in Canada and witnessed important world-historical events, such as the Second World War, Abell's thinking was pushed in different directions. He also increasingly drew on internationalised ideas – particularly in art criticism and psychology – as he continued to probe the character and nature of art in modern Canada. Even with this, however, Abell's thinking also evidenced important continuities. His attention was devoted over time to the same problem: the relationship between art and society. What attention to Abell's discourse can do is to show how diverging trajectories are built into perspectives that have appeared consistent and cohesive. I will return to this issue at the conclusion of this article. For now, I will suggest that close attention to Abell's discourse demonstrates not its stability but its multiplicity. In this sense, Abell's cultural discourse demonstrates the fragmentation of modern Canadian cultural and artistic ideology.

My objective is to demonstrate this conclusion through an examination of Abell's artistic thought. I will begin by establishing the context in which Abell worked and then turn to a series of efforts he made to diagnose and

resolve the artistic problems of Canadian cultural modernity. In succession, this article explores three different approaches Abell articulated to this issue: one based in aesthetics, one in economics and one in collective psychology. After this discussion of the shifting parameters of Abell's thinking, I will conclude by considering its implications for the development of modern Canadian culture.

## The problem of artistic modernity

Walter Abell arrived in Canada at an important moment in the nation's cultural history. Born in Philadelphia 1897, he earned his BA from Swarthmore and edited the liberal Quaker *Friends Intelligencer* before completing a Master's degree under noted philosopher George Santayana. He taught briefly at Antioch and won Carnegie grants to continue his training in art theory and criticism at the Art Institute of Chicago and Harvard before coming to Canada to take up a Carnegie-funded position as Professor of Art at Acadia University, a small liberal arts university in Wolfville, Nova Scotia (Niergarth 2006; Paikowsky 2006). Abell's appointment was part of a wider trend in the international political economy of philanthropy directed outward from the United States to supposedly under-developed regions. Maritime Canada fit into this definition and became a focus of health, educational and economic funding (Reid 1984; Brison 2005). Abell's task was to improve cultural education. The Carnegie foundation provided him with a small library and periodic support for his organisational and educational work in the region (Paikowsky 2006). Over the next 15 years, Abell became involved in virtually all aspects of art education and professional organisation, first in the Maritime Provinces and then more broadly across Canada (Niergarth 2006). He founded specialist magazines, organised art exhibitions, wrote educational catalogues, spoke to artists' groups and worked with artists and critics to build a national artists' organisation in Canada (ibid.). His work contributed to a broader institutional reorganisation of Canadian art and addressed then-important questions about the social role of the arts in society.

This reorganisation was set in the context of significant cultural and economic change. Abell began his Canadian career on the geographic periphery of Canadian public life in the Maritime Provinces, a poorer and politically weak region of Canada (Forbes 1979). The 1920s witnessed the rapid development of nationalism in Canadian art as central Canadian cultural institutions, as Leslie Dawn notes, came to exercise increased authority over

the national art scene (Dawn 2006). Abell's work, first in the Maritime Provinces and then later in Ottawa, strove to connect the Maritime region to broader national and international developments. At the same time, economic growth and technological change introduced new forms of mass culture through radio and film (Vipond 2000). While Canada's transition to consumer culture was interrupted by the Depression of the 1930s and the Second World War (and hence was not complete until the 1950s – see Owram 1996 for a consideration of consumer culture), many key mass media institutions – such as a national radio network and film distribution systems – were well established in the interwar era. Consumerism also increasingly found public expression in mail-order catalogues that helped to construct a national market in consumer goods, and in the new prominence of the advertising industry, as well as commercial art and store displays that focused on the material benefits of modern economic production (Johnston 2001; Walden 1989; Belisle 2003). Demographically, Canada remained deeply polarised with significant divisions between different linguistic and ethnic groups. Economic growth, however, particularly in the 1920s, was helping to build a new middle-class public connected to each other through mass media, a developing consumerism and increased urbanisation (Axelrod 1990).

Artistically, the interwar era witnessed a diverse series of cross currents in Canadian artistic production, aesthetics and criticism as artists and critics grappled with the changing dynamics of Canadian society. The 1920s were dominated by the nationalist landscape of the Group of Seven, key members of which argued that a post-impressionist-styled landscape was the natural Canadian artistic style, linking culture to the land (McKay 2011; Hill 1995). The dominance of the Group of Seven, however, made it easy to miss the depth and vibrancy of different approaches to culture and the arts. By the late 1920s and early 1930s, a broad range of different painters had begun to work with more abstracted modernist aesthetics. Some placed a high value on the spirituality of art (Davis 1992) while others moved in the exact opposite direction, criticising Group of Seven work for its lack of social engagement (Trépanier 1984). Questions about the social role of the arts in Canada began to develop in the 1920s and became more pressing during the Depression of the 1930s. In part, the worsening economic conditions of the 1930s accounted for artists' concerns about their place in society (Sicotte 1992), but immediate circumstances were, a wide variety of artists and intellectuals argued, only one element of a wider problem: what appeared to be an increased social indifference to the arts, artists and

artistic production. Different cultural critics addressed this issue in a variety of ways. The music critic Leo Smith, for example, argued that democratisation combined with technological advances to lower society's aesthetic standards (Smith 1932). Well-known Group of Seven artist Arthur Lismer faulted commercialisation (Lismer 1933), a position broadly supported by folklorist Marius Barbeau (Barbeau 1932). And critic A.M. Stephens faulted the economic system in general (Stephens 1931). One prominent approach linked economic and ideological issues. Canadian artists, a variety of different commentators suggested – including, ultimately, Abell – had become too focused on nationalism and landscape. The effect was to confine and stultify artistic expression, directing it toward a series of predictable patterns and themes that robbed it of vitality (cf. McInnes 1939).

Abell did not reject the work of the Group of Seven and their thematic focus on romantic landscape, but did suggest that the revitalisation of Canadian art required new directions. His interest lay in the promotion of more abstract styles of art that had been rejected by supporters of the Group of Seven and more conservative art critics. His views were set out in his first monograph *Representation and Form* and in a series of critical essays he wrote for Canadian periodicals. Critics of modernist aesthetics rejected them as 'monstrosities' and signs of European decadence (Forseby 1930; Phillips 1982). Abell argued that new trends in art could be assessed using the same aesthetic criteria that would be applied to art in general: the technical ability to effectively manipulate formal relations and media (Abell 1936b). For Abell, artistic value developed out of an artist's ability to combine form and subject matter in such a way as to create an aesthetic response from an audience. As he explained in an assessment of one younger Canadian modernist artist,

> An artist [may have] individual experiences to express and yet lack the ability to express [them]. Before his experiences can become art he must achieve a synthesis between the world to which he responds, the feeling through which he responds, and the materials in which his response is embodied. He must bring into the complex realm of creative activity a sensitiveness to all elements present; a power of reducing them to order and harmony, or what we call form. (Abell 1936a: 16–17)

Said differently, the artist's personality was an important element of artistic expression, but expression, by itself, remained aesthetically valueless unless it met two conditions. First, the medium needed to cooperate with the artist's aims. Second, formal properties – line, surface, negative space – had to be brought together into what he called 'significant design' (ibid.: 17). By

this he was referring to the technical ability to organise properties through media with reference to a subject that elicited an aesthetic response. The logic of Abell's argument was clear: there was a timeless quality to art. The properties and skills that made one type of representation 'good art' – and popular with an audience – were the same skills and properties that also made more recent work 'good'.

In laying out a general criteria for 'good' art, Abell recognised that it pointed to a problem. According to his criteria, new trends in art could be treated as aesthetically valuable in the same manner as more popular traditional works. The problem was that the Canadian public did not seem to feel this way. It rejected many of the same artists whose work he lauded. 'The concern for formal significance', Abell continued in the same assessment, which 'recommends [modern artists] to the critics, renders him unintelligible to the greater portion of the public'. Audiences, he noted, were often 'shocked' by modernist work, which they interpreted as 'a disregard to tradition'. In his view, this led to a disturbing situation whereby vibrant, aesthetically poised artists 'faced a crushing measure of indifference and rejection, and not a little opposition'. This situation forced at least some artists into near abject poverty (Abell 1936a: 17). Critics of modernist art pointed to public indifference as a mark of its problems. W.J. Phillips, for instance, an important western Canadian artist and critic, likened public indifference to modern art to estrangement and suggested it was part of a natural market process through which limited sales drove bad artists to other professions (Phillips 1982).

Abell treated this matter differently. In his view, the public might not support modernist art, but neither, it seems, was it completely estranged from it. In private correspondence with other arts professionals he suggested that the wider public was 'anxious to learn more about the appreciation of art'. The problem was that the public had little to guide it (Abell 1935). The disjuncture between the work of modernist artists and popular taste, he felt, related to a number of factors. The public tended to look only 'for the reproduction of familiar [...] formulas of beauty' (Abell 1936a: 17). Hence, audiences accustomed to particular styles were 'shocked' by the new. Abell seemed to feel, as well, that there was a natural human tendency to conservatism in cultural taste and support for tradition as a virtue in itself. 'New forms of experience throw the mind into temporary confusion. That confusion is naturally unpleasant to the person experiencing it' (1944a: 197–8). Finally, the general public lacked the aesthetic knowledge it needed to fully appreciate innovative work. In particular, the public lacked an

understanding of media and form: 'failing to see that paper may function in a drawing or fluidity be vital in a water color, giving little thought to the subtler phases of organization' (Abell 1936a: 17). The effect was to impoverish the artist and detract from the social and cultural capacity for 'the promotion of maximum accomplishment' in the arts.

What the public needed to understand, Abell argued, was that innovation was vital to artistic development. 'No artist', he argued, is

> worthy [of] the name whose chief concern was to give his work conventionality and naturalness. The significant artist is and always has been, interested in other and more important possibilities in art. Far from wanting his work to be conventional he rather seeks to explore new possibilities in art: to experiment with untried effects or to express a personal reaction which in some degree will be different and unique [...] (1936–37: 2)

This meant that art was not static if it was to be art. Instead, guided both by formal properties and experimentation, vibrant artists pushed the boundaries of established expression. Through experimentation, he believed, art reached higher levels of significance: 'Art which repeats an easy and familiar beauty is insignificant as compared with that which opens eyes to beauty which we had not previously known' (1935–36: 2). Almost by definition, then, artistic vibrancy challenged public taste. 'The real artists, those whose work endures', he wrote, 'are more often found among the rebels, the struggling, the unrecognized, than among those who win official recognition' (1942: 177).

Abell's assessment of art in general, and modern trends in artistic expression in particular, placed new developments in an historical continuum. He believed that this perspective was particularly important in Canada because the dominance of Group of Seven-styled landscape painting produced misconceptions about the nature of art in the sense that it naturalised one form of expression, and one subject matter, as *the* Canadian approach to painting. He also believed that overt nationalism in the arts had the further drawback of isolating both artists and public from the aesthetic benefits of international interchange, a potential source of innovation. The problem with public taste in Canada, then, was twofold. First, it naturally resisted experimentation in favour of established approaches to art. Second, nationalism produced an edited art historical consciousness that denied the basis upon which artistic vibrancy – including that of its most nationalist painters – was built. 'There is no painting in Canada', Abell contended, 'so exclusively national that it shows no international affinities. [...] The Group of Seven itself began with

a foundation derived from French Impressionism, and in its colour, texture, and brush-work remained on the whole Impressionistic' (1942: 174).

Abell's argument bent toward a specific conclusion: disjunctures between artists and audience, new forms of expression and public taste were all a natural part of cultural history. They were augmented in the Canadian context by the specificities of Canadian history, but were not in themselves unusual. Indeed, the separation of art from the public could almost be considered positive. Abell valorised the 'rebel' rejected by the public as an artistic hero whose work stood a better chance of standing the test of time than that of his or her more conventional colleagues. Time and education addressed these problems. As the shock of the new wore off, broader sections of the public came to appreciate the beauty and vibrancy of new forms of art (Abell 1944a: 197–8). Original assessments were revised if an open mind could be maintained and effort was put into the process (ibid.: 197).

## Materialism and the socio-economics of art

What is most interesting about Abell's argument is not its specific formulation. The intent of his original discourse was to naturalise modern art as a legitimate form of cultural expression, a perspective shared by an increasing number of artists and critics in the 1930s and 1940s (cf. Ayre 1933, 1936; for scholarly treatments, see Hudson 1997; Trépanier 1984; Varley 1980). Here Abell explained the social detachment of art from a cultural perspective. What is interesting about Abell's art theory is that at the same time as he employed aesthetic and cultural considerations to explain the social detachment of art, he approached this same issue from a different direction: economics. While his art criticism and theory sought to naturalise modern art and explain public indifference through a historical principle that would, eventually, see its acceptance, another dimension of Abell's thought broached the same issue from a materialist perspective that viewed the problems of art in the modern age as uniquely rooted in the changing economics of culture. In effect, then, at the same time as he articulated a cultural theory of aesthetic social detachment, he developed a different materialist treatment of the same subject.

Abell's materialist conception of the social detachment of art was predicated on a broad conception of what actually entailed artistic practice. It was important, he argued, not to conceptualise art 'in a narrow sense which would reduce it solely to paintings and sculpture but in the broader