

Re-Hatching the AMS Collection: Written Assignment  
ARTH 443: Seminar in Canadian Art: Art and Activism in Canada  
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What initially started as an intended deep dive into the archives gradually developed into a query on how we tell our own stories, how we construct a “history” and how it is delivered to the public. Unpacking an assortment of self-written histories by Hatch curators we can see there is no singular narrative to the collection, rather intersecting stories, bizarre anecdotes and pointed opinions so disparate that it seems impossible to distill it all into a single story of the AMS Permanent Collection. These subjective histories tell us a lot about what we value: from the early days of the collection that valued the prestige of Canadian art with an emphasis on the legacy of Group of Seven transcendentalist natural landscapes to new curatorial strategies designed to interrogate the legacies of colonialism and its material effects on the landscape and its inhabitants.

Part 1: Yasmine Semeniuk

The Alma Mater Society’s permanent collection faces multiple problems in its current iteration. It no longer has funds allotted for acquisitions which implies failure of its original purpose. Furthermore, the collection lacks audience interest as can be attested to by the lack of students who are aware of its existence. The University of British Columbia's student union, known as the AMS, started the collection with its first acquisition in 1948. Over the years the AMS has appointed several student-led committees to oversee the collection--namely the Brock Hall Art Committee (1955-1969) and now more recently the Hatch Art Gallery. In this essay I will argue that the AMS permanent art collection was founded on capitalist ideals, and that this approach to

art collection, which continued in the early running of the society, is the root cause of many of the problems the collection continues to face today. I will demonstrate this through an examination of documents surrounding the founding of the collection, as well as the early days of its operations. Finally, a formal analysis through a capitalist lens of the collection's first acquisition, E.J Hughes' 1947 *Abandoned Village, River's Inlet BC* (fig.1) will illustrate the harm done to the entirety of the collection through the original misguided steps.

From the beginning of the AMS permanent collection its use as a symbol of status rather than a compelling art experience for students has been demonstrated over and over again. A prime example is seen in the initial address about the collection to the student body by English professor and founding member, Hunter Lewis. In this address, Lewis references the initial acquisitions as a

“fulfilment of a lady's long-frustrated desire to beautify herself for nearly twenty years she has pleaded for jewels and ornaments, and many times has been promised them; but each time necessity or accident has thwarted her...and to-day, her loveliness and her fame are both increased by the jewels in this first display of the new Brock Hall Collection of Canadian Paintings.”<sup>1</sup>

This metaphor, aside from the obvious misogyny, showcases how the collection was intended as a status symbol in the same vein as the same as jewellery. The address goes on to focus on the “number” of acquisitions and the goal to create “something that will have an influence and a fame that will go far beyond this campus,” further highlighting capitalist goals of the art collection.<sup>2</sup> These goals, which stand in contrast to a more audience-based approach to collecting, are also made evident in a 1958 memo regarding the hanging of the Canadian Prints

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<sup>1</sup> AMS Archives, Foreword by Hunter Lewis. October, 25th 1957.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

in Brock Hall. The author of the memo, June Barnish, notes not only that the room the works are displayed in is only open to a single gender for durations of the day, but that Emily Carr paintings had to be displaced, including into storage, to make room for the collection. Concerns were raised that, “this may well cause trouble as the Emily Carr’s are very famous and people may well ask to see them.”<sup>3</sup> This shows that a connection to an audience was never a priority in the founding of this collection, one of many oversights that would continue to plague it for decades to come.

The capitalist mindset that initiated the collection also continued as the process of acquiring new works began. This is seen in meeting minutes which show a constant push to obtain new works, yet lack any discussion about connecting the art with students. This emphasizes the commodification of the art--treating it as a monetary investment, rather than something to be experienced. Hunter Lewis even indicated in his opening address that the AMS had “created something that by its very nature is more permanent than any building can be.” Lewis here is referencing the society’s recent completion of a handful of buildings, including Brock Hall and the men’s gymnasium. This point emphasizes what success for the AMS looked like: product. In the collection this would mean acquisition. In fact, in the 1960 collection catalogue the BHA committee clearly defined their mission:

The purpose of the Brock Hall Art Committee shall be to select and purchase works of art by Canadian artists for a permanent collection which is to be situated in Brock Hall or at suitable other locations acceptable to both the committee and the A.M.S.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> AMS Archives, 112-7-3, Memo from June Barnish to Bryan Williams. February 21, 1958.

<sup>4</sup> AMS Archives, 111-22-3, *Collection Catalogue*, 1960.

This purpose statement is important to examine, as five years prior the society had written to Hart House, the University of Toronto's former student union building and now student activity center, gathering information and advice on how to run the collection. The response the AMS received from EA Wilkinson, representative of Hart House, contained three pieces of advice that went unobserved by the AMS--and it shows in how the collection proceeded. Firstly, Wilkinson noted the idea of artist involvement within the committee, noting that Hart House benefited from "expert help" from artists such as AY Jackson and Lawren Harris among others.<sup>5</sup> Wilkinson suggested that the AMS collection do the same as well, and even contact Harris. But as far as meeting minutes and correspondences show, this step was never taken. Secondly, Hart House emphasized that art committees need to encourage Canadian talent--not only via the acquisition of new works, but also through the exhibition of young and lesser known artists.<sup>6</sup> As mentioned earlier, this focus was never an interest for the early society (this role is now covered by the Hatch Art Gallery, previously the S.U.B gallery). Finally, Hart House issued a telling piece of advice to the society, "You will have to decide [what] your collection is to be ... and many other problems, not the least of which will be financial."<sup>7</sup> As we don't have the original letter sent to Hart House, this piece of advice seems to point to the recognition by Hart House that the AMS is too narrowly focused on the monetary aspects of collecting art. The purpose statement seen above--written merely five years after this letter--reveals that this advice was not taken to heart. The emphasis on acquisitions, the lack of exhibiting lesser known artists and the committees

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<sup>5</sup> AMS Archives, 112-7-7, Letter from E.A Wilkinson to R. Longstaffe. April 4, 1955.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

disregard for obtaining help from artists, all point towards a capitalist mindset, one which echoes elements seen in the first acquisition of the collection, EJ Hughes' 1947 *Abandoned Village, River's Inlet BC*.

EJ Hughes' style was described as "natural and unnatural," and he is a prime example of a Canadian modern landscape artist.<sup>8</sup> It is appropriate that his work, *Abandoned Village, River's Inlet BC*, is the one which the AMS collection was founded on, as looking at it from a capitalist perspective reveals parallels between the society and the work in terms of genre, composition and subject matter. The work consists of numerous abandoned buildings sitting at the edge of the river with driftwood strewn across the beach below and dark trees in the background. This work is an example of an "inhabited landscape" as described by art historian Sandra Paikowsky, which typically depict places where humans had been, but leave the people outside the frame.<sup>9</sup> She notes that buildings were used as a tool to show the landscape. In *Abandoned Village* however, the buildings go one step further and are used to demonstrate the landscape's potential as a commodity. In this painting the cottages demand more attention than the landscape they sit upon--emphasizing the commodification of the natural resources. Sitting on a diagonal, they encroach and shorten the depth of the painting. This commodification is further seen, and perhaps commented on, in the broken watermill on the left as it churns a natural resource into something "useful" and profitable. The watermill reflects the AMS as they are focused on

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<sup>8</sup> AMS Archives, Alma Mater Society of the University of British Columbia Permanent Collection Catalogue 1948-2008, 8.

<sup>9</sup> Sandra Paikowsky, "Modernist Representational Painting before 1950," in *The Visual Arts in Canada: The Twentieth Century*, ed. Anne Whitelaw, Brian Foss and Sandra Paikowsky (Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2012), 127.

monetary value of resources and less about how people can experience them. A further parallel between the painting and the AMS can be drawn from the similarity between the abandoned houses. The repetitious pattern of the wooden cottages echoes the beginning of the collection which only brought in works a single style of painting, created by a single type of artist: male, and almost always, white. Hughes himself said of the buildings in the work,

Why they were abandoned to the bleaching and rotting elements of the weather, I don't know. On viewing the scene, I was impressed by the loneliness, the starkness and the emptiness of the pale buildings against the dark cedar background, and the contrast of the twisted driftwood root forms with the straightline forms of the buildings.<sup>10</sup>

This loneliness and emptiness Hughes refers to seems like a perfect metaphor for the collection, as the works are not being seen or used by students, and are regarded more for their symbol of status. And like the buildings of the cannery, the collection in disrepair, reflects the values of the people that built it.

## Part 2: Keri MacLeod

In our research we have come upon many instances of mismanagement by the committees overseeing the preservation and display of the collection. The adverse effects of poor conservatorship have led to theft, vandalism, sporadic documentation and deterioration of the works. These issues will be further addressed in our final project- designed to interrogate moments that shifted the trajectory of the collection. Instead, this portion of our essay will serve to respond to the curatorial challenges faced by contemporary directors of the Hatch Gallery in their efforts to tell some of the histories of the collection.

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<sup>10</sup> AMS Archives, 111-22-3, *Collection Catalogue*, 1960.

The AMS Permanent Collection is mandated to be exhibited twice annually in the student-run gallery, now the Hatch Gallery.<sup>11</sup> Without formal guidelines on what works are to be included in the exhibitions, and the limited space afforded by the gallery itself, the gallery directors are free to interpret, reframe and recontextualize the disparate works in the collections to respond to or produce new histories of the collection. This focuses on two distinct curatorial strategies, by Maxim Greer and Yasmine Whaley-Kalaora: the collection's history as a landmark of Canadian art and how to challenge the dominant narratives it evokes, and an interrogation into its declining state, respectively.

On the eve of its 70th anniversary, the AMS Permanent Collection remained relatively unknown to UBC's student body. Hatch Gallery Director (2018-19) Maxim Greer admits there is a "disconnect" between students and the collection. Part of this can be attributed to the content of the collection—the majority of the works reflect a singular view of Canadian art and were acquired under the leadership of BC Binning, but more importantly, the works have been in storage, largely inaccessible to UBC's public. One turning point in the handling of the collection can likely be traced to the AMS's proposal to sell off several paintings to fund other ventures: in 2017 the AMS formed the Ad-Hoc Committee for the Sale of Hatch Art Planning and Execution (SHAPE) in order to figure out which paintings to sell and what to do with the money.<sup>12</sup> The

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<sup>11</sup> Formerly the AMS Art Gallery located in the Student Union Building (SUB), now named the Student Life Building.

<sup>12</sup> Marissa Birnie, et al. "AMS Art Sale Committee 'Revitalized' after Year of Inaction." *The Ubysey*, 13 June 2018, [www.ubyssey.ca/news/ams-art-sale-committee-revitalized-after-year-of-inaction/](http://www.ubyssey.ca/news/ams-art-sale-committee-revitalized-after-year-of-inaction/).

initial proposal to sell emerged in 2002 and was passed by a referendum in 2009 but nothing materialized until years later. With two of the collection's pieces identified as auction candidates, 1957 painting *Jeune fille en uniforme* by Lemieux and a sculpture, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* by Rodney Graham, the legacy of the collection was put into question. Though Lemieux's painting was eventually deaccessioned from the collection and sold at auction, the historical significance of a student art collection was reconsidered.<sup>13</sup>

Under the directorship of Greer, an effort was made to renew interest and increase visibility with regard to the remaining works. In reference to the potential sale of landmark Canadian paintings, Greer believes the Group of Seven works by Lawren Harris and AY Jackson "contribute an intrinsic value to the collection that cannot be replicated...If you get rid of them, then the importance of the collection is diminished".<sup>14</sup> Though he also notes that doesn't mean the canon can't be challenged and problematized. A prime example of a work that challenges the colonialist "untouched natural landscape" narrative of Group of Seven transcendentalist paintings is Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun's *Untitled*, commissioned by the AMS in 2003. Yuxweluptun, a Cowichan/Syilx First Nations artist destabilizes the idea of an uninhabited natural landscape, demanding visibility for Indigenous peoples and their connection to land. Additionally,

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<sup>13</sup> Yasmine Whaley-Kalaora, Director, "The Works of the AMS Art Collection (yes, all of them)", *Hatch Gallery*, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Marissa Birnie, et al. "From the Vault: The AMS Permanent Art Collection's Tumultuous History Comes with a \$4 Million Price Tag - and You Own It." *The Ubyyssey*, 6 Nov. 2018, [www.ubyssey.ca/features/ams-art-collection-from-the-vault/](http://www.ubyssey.ca/features/ams-art-collection-from-the-vault/).



Yuxweluptun's painting challenges UBC's relationship with the Musqueam peoples, whose unceded territories are occupied by the University.<sup>15</sup>

Part of Greer's and Assistant Director Leo Cocar's curatorial strategy to increase visibility and promote discussion was to hold rotating exhibitions in the front windows of the gallery. In doing so, two works are put into conversation with one another, allowing for critical engagement.

Placing Yuxweluptun's work in dialog with a work by Lawren Harris or AY Jackson encourages discussion about what it means to be situated on ancestral Indigenous land, who is understood as belonging, and how other marginalized groups are treated within education institutions.<sup>16</sup> The

series "A Piece from the Collection" featured two works—Ian Wallace's *Remote*, 1967, and Roy Arden's *Development #1*, 1993, two pieces directly related to the process of urbanization.

Wallace's *Remote*, a minimalist grid speaks to the logic and uniformity of urban planning, whereas Arden's *Development #1* signals more to its material effect. When paired, these works offer insight into the nuances of modernism and to Vancouver's shift from natural to urban landscape.<sup>17</sup>

Despite the challenges of annual administrative turnover and the lack of consistent faculty oversight, the theme of critical engagement has continued through the subsequent work of Hatch Gallery Directors Yasmine Whaley-Kalaora and Kiel Torres (2019-2020). One of their main

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Leo Cocar, Assistant Director, "A Piece from the Collection", *Hatch Gallery*, 2018.

concerns was “how to effectively engage a collection that had no centralized history, mandate, or strategic plan. By and large, it appeared to have slipped between the cracks, both logistically and physically, despite the efforts of those working with it over recent years.”<sup>18</sup> The mandated semi-annual Permanent Collection exhibitions curated by Whaley-Kalaora and Torres both engage with the content self-reflexively.<sup>19</sup>

The exhibitions, “The Works of the AMS Art Collection (yes, all of them)” and “How To Unroll a Baxter&?” bring awareness to the challenges faced by student directors in unpacking—literally and figuratively—the histories embedded within the works. The emphasis on a research-driven exhibition strategy not only exposes past missteps but puts them into a critical framework to be revisited in future endeavours. Specific care/management issues such as the unfortunate deflated state of Iain Baxter’s *Bagged Landscape*, 1965-69 are made visible through its deliberate foregrounding. It is the exemplar of systemic neglect and administrative fissures, but it also provides opportunities to question how and why works have reached a state of dereliction and hopefully fuel discussion on how to initiate a process of repair, or as Whaley-Kalaora and Torres propose, “healing”.<sup>20</sup>

Throughout this research project, we expanded on two major aspects of the AMS Permanent Collection—its conception and early years manifested as a result of desire for prestige, rooted in

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<sup>18</sup> Yasmine Whaley-Kalaora, Director, “How to Unroll a Baxter&?”, *Hatch Gallery*, 2019.

<sup>19</sup> Yasmine Whaley-Kalaora, Director, “The Works of the AMS Art Collection (yes, all of them)”, *Hatch Gallery*, 2020.

<sup>20</sup> Yasmine Whaley-Kalaora, Director, “How to Unroll a Baxter&?”, *Hatch Gallery*, 2019.

monetary and cultural value, and strategies by later generations of the collection's stewards to challenge and reframe the embedded histories. It's clear there is no singular history, linear trajectory or one way to evaluate the significance of the collection. We have offered critical inquiry into key moments of the collection's complex history but the work of self-reflexive inquiry must and surely will continue as future directors of the Hatch Gallery will have opportunities to unpack and reflect on its lineage.

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AMS Archives, 112-7-3, Memo from June Barnish to Bryan Williams. February 21, 1958

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Image List

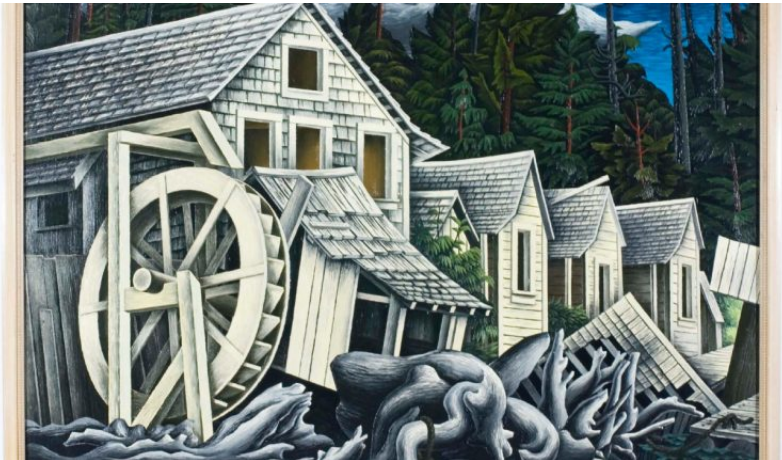


Figure 1: EJ Hughes, *Abandoned Village, River's Inlet, BC*, 1947.



Figure 2: Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, 2003, *Untitled*.

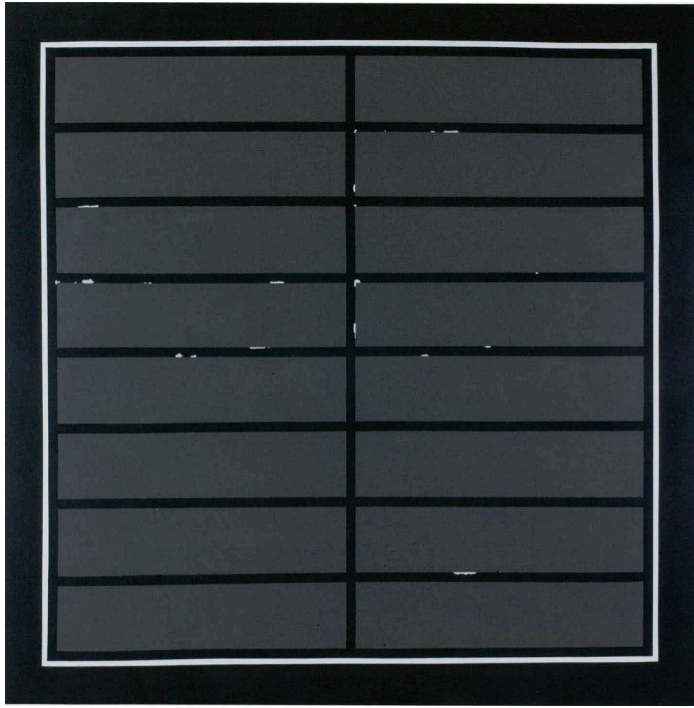


Figure 3: Ian Wallace, 1967, *Remote*.



Figure 4: Roy Arden, 1993, *Development #1*.