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REVIEW: Arthur Lismer: Visionary Art Educator (author: Angela Nairne Grigor)

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ANGELA NAIRNE GRIGOR. *Arthur Lismer: Visionary art educator*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press (2002). 447 pp. C\$65.00. (ISBN 0-7735-2295-6).

While teaching a course in Canadian art history last winter, I had a chance to revisit the legacy of the Group of Seven. Alongside their majestic painterly investigations of untamed Canadian wilderness driven by patriotic aspirations, many members of this group were also known as teachers of art. Written by Angela Nairne Grigor, this book examines the life and educational work of Arthur Lismer (1885-1969), an artist-teacher whose vision and social responsibility influenced many generations of artists and educators in this country. It presents to us not only a comprehensive analysis of Lismer's life and ideas embedded in his work of a museum educator, but also some important insights into the development of Canadian modern art education.

Grigor developed an interest in Lismer while pursuing her graduate work in art education. Interestingly enough, while researching the Public Archives of Nova Scotia, she discovered that one of her teachers in Britain, Marjorie Tozer Leefe, who encouraged her to become an art educator, was one of the most promising students of Lismer at the Victoria School of Art and Design in Halifax. Grigor's analysis draws not only upon Lismer's unpublished papers and notes secured in the archives of Quebec, Nova Scotia and Ontario (the provinces in which he lived and worked after his arrival in Canada from Sheffield, England in 1911), but also upon interviews of his colleagues, friends and former students. In spite of the vast volume of data that span over the fifty-year period and that must have been a great challenge to organize chronologically, Grigor states that, ". . . the energy inherent in Lismer's written material made his work constantly fresh and interesting" (p. xiii).

The book is divided into two major sections, each consisting of seven chapters, each including also some exceptionally charming photographs and reproductions of Lismer's drawings. I particularly enjoyed the delicacy of his pen and ink sketches of South African native costumes and Basutoland villages (p. 138-139). The first part of the book, *Life in Art*, focuses on Lismer's life (his upbringing and education) uncovering also various challenges that he encountered as an artist and educator in Canada. Moreover, it is in this part of the book that one begins to realize Lismer's struggle to balance his dedication to painting with his commitment to the teaching of art. In 1915, while living in Toronto, Lismer was offered a teaching job at the Ontario Department of Education Teachers Summer Courses in Art. While living in Toronto from 1911 to 1916, he became also associated with

the Graphic Arts Club, and Arts and Letters Club. These activities helped him establish his voice as an art educator as well.

According to Grigor, Lismer saw teaching also as a possibility that would allow him to carry on with his painting. Further, "he idealized art and artists, seeing them as sensitive to physical as well as spiritual experience, and had a strong desire to pass on something of his vision to others" (p. 31). Georgian Bay was Lismer's favorite spot for painting – a magical country for a painter. Some of this magic was etherealized in his paintings *Georgian Bay* (1913), *Pine Wreckage* (1929) and *Sunlight in a Wood* (1930), which Grigor does not forget to mention. Moreover, Grigor states that it was a painting trip to Algonquin Park in March 1914, with legendary artist Tom Thomson, that greatly influenced Lismer as a painter, and reaffirmed his fascination with nature and spirituality.

Grigor speculates why, with very little experience as an artist and administrator, Lismer was chosen to be head of the Victoria School of Art in Halifax, the position that he occupied from 1916-1919. Something has to be said about Lismer's luck, when on December 6, 1917, he missed the morning train from Bedford to Halifax, avoiding the catastrophic explosion in the Halifax harbour, which obliterated the city and left over 1500 dead. In 1919 Lismer moved back to Toronto, taking on the position of Vice-principal at the Ontario College of Art. This was, according to Grigor, one of the busiest times of his career. Alongside his administrative duties, Lismer had a full teaching schedule. "He was in charge of elementary course work, the junior class for school-age children, and the Department of Education Teachers Summer Courses in Art, of which he became principal in 1920" (p. 68). Grigor's descriptions of Lismer's appearance and his enigmatic personality are simply delightful to read. He was not only a tall, slim and somewhat bohemian looking Yorkshire man as I imagined, but also a charismatic lecturer whose wittiness was capable of energizing many audiences across the world. "But inwardly he was an intensely private person who never discussed personal or family affairs and avoided talking about his painting" (p. 348). It is interesting that Grigor often compared Lismer to a slower paced and more traditional George Reid who was a principal of the Ontario College of Art at the time. Although Reid was initially very fond of Lismer and might have helped him to get positions in Toronto and Halifax, there were many conflicts between Lismer and Reid. These led ultimately in Lismer's resignation from his position at OCA in 1927. This controversy was followed by the petition which included signatures of 135 of his students. Lismer's sensitivity and dedication to students are well remembered. Grigor writes that while presiding at the Student Club, established in 1922, Lismer organized Friday night suppers that brought day and evening students together, promoting the sense of an artistic community at OCA. He was also one of the instigators of a masquerade ball. "For him, the

balls, were an extension of his theatrical interests, and in keeping with his imaginative, playful personality, he enjoyed assuming disguises and wearing costumes" (p. 70).

The first part of the book also introduces Lismer's seminal work at the Art Gallery of Toronto, where he occupied the position of the supervisor of education from 1929 to 1938. It is remarkable how, during the years of the great depression he was able to establish and ran Saturday art classes for children. Grigor suggests that, "his first objective was not to train artists but to encourage children to enjoy art through their own 'creative experiences'" (p. 92). While working at the gallery, Lismer was also able to engage in numerous educational activities outside of Canada. For instance, in 1934 he attended the National Education Fellowship conference in South Africa, which also attracted influential thinkers such as John Dewey, Bertrand Russell, Bronislaw Malinovsky, Helen Parkhurst, Harold Rugg, and Wilhelm Viola. Two years later at the invitation of the government he was invited to teach and lecture again in South Africa. In 1937 he attended the NEF conferences in New Zealand and Australia as well as the subsequent conference in Honolulu in 1938. In the same year he was also appointed visiting professor at Teachers College, Columbia University.

The second part of the book, *Arthur Lismer's Ideas in Education*, provides a great deal of insight into Lismer's pedagogy – its underlying philosophical foundations, methods and objectives. Lismer's interest in the democratization of art and museum education finds its roots in the work of Victorian thinker John Ruskin, whose contextualist theories about art and society were further developed by William Morris and John Dewey. Ruskin's ideas helped Lismer to envision a holistic approach to art teaching, an approach that was open to naturalistic and pictorial aspects of art as much as to social awareness. During his appointment at the Victoria School of Art and Design, he stressed the importance of drawing, which he saw as a basis for all art. He believed that through drawing students can learn how to see while also being engaged in expression and self-discovery. Grigor also examines the relationship between Lismer's pedagogy and the work of the American painter and a formalist teacher of art, Arthur Wesley Dow. He was also known for his influential texts, *Composition* (1899) and *Theory and Practice of Teaching Art* (1912). Lismer's teaching stressed the principles of compositional design and drawing, leaving me with an impression that his teaching philosophy accommodated both notions of the *innocent* (Ruskin) and *trained* (Dow) eye – the concepts which were foundational to modernist teaching of art.

Lismer's sense for social responsibility is exemplified in great detail in the second half of the book. Grigor introduces Lismer as a teacher who was also critical of modern society. She reminds us that "industry as a subject for art

was a twentieth-century idea based on the concept that art was more concerned with life than conventional beauty,” as exemplified in the work of Fernand Leger and Antoine Pevsner (p. 261). However, although concerned about the meaning of art and human life in the industrialized world, Lismer’s drawing classes often involved field trips to industrial areas, factories and docklands. Grigor also writes that Lismer believed that expression is what comes first and that skill should be acquired in process. Thus, during the 1920s, while teaching at OCA, he was seeking a fine balance between encouraging self-expression and providing students with technical skills. While teaching at the Children’s Art Centre at the Art Gallery of Toronto, Lismer’s pedagogy was informed by the ideas of Austrian artist Franz Cizek, who was a contemporary of the painter Gustav Klimt and influential Vienna Secession group. Grigor provides a great insight into the work of Cizek’s which privileged children’s expression over all other technical and skill oriented concerns. One may also assume that it was Cizek’s work that influenced Lismer to believe that artistic ability was innate and that ultimately, art could not be taught – an issue that has been revisited recently by James Elkins (2001), in his book *Why Art Cannot be Taught: A handbook for art students*.

Further, Lismer’s practice of a museum educator was also influenced by the works of John Dewey and Lewis Mumford. In fact, Grigor draws important parallels between Lismer’s teaching philosophy and Dewey’s philosophy of education. On one side, she suggests that Lismer accepted Dewey’s criticism of traditional teaching methods, insisting on experimentation and the idea of all encompassing aesthetic experience that is inseparable from life. On the other, by focusing on inner self and spirituality, he might have been opposed to Dewey who saw these as rather trivial and also capable of perpetuating the further alienation of self from society. By embracing both his theosophical beliefs in spirituality and his awareness of society, Lismer’s teaching somehow compromised conflicting theories of individualism and collectivism. As Grigor says, “for Lismer, who worked with both individualist and collectivist notions in his teaching practice, there appeared to be no conflict in the way he applied opposing theories” (p. 292-293).

Grigor also writes that Lismer was regularly assigning readings for his teaching staff. Some of those included Lewis Mumford’s books *Technics and Civilizations* (1934) and *The Culture of Cities* (1938). This suggests that Lismer wanted his staff also to be critical of modern society and aware of its underlying moral values. Further, Lismer was also aware of Bauhaus teaching. According to Grigor, he became a friend with Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, who was a leader of New Bauhaus in Chicago, established in 1937. Lismer’s openness to innovation was also reflected in his teaching at Teachers College, Columbia University. Grigor indicates that while teaching his “Teachers’ Course” at Columbia he developed a unique approach in dealing

with students. He encouraged students to reflect on their backgrounds, teaching interests, and their social life, fostering the inseparability of art and life. "His approach, which encouraged non-linear thinking, included an exploration of diverse topics ranging from concepts and ideas to symbolism, design structures, and interrelationship in art and life" (p. 317).

In spite of being socially aware, Lismer continued to see art as expressive and emotional rather than as intellectual pursuit. "The inventive self is the creator – exhilaration and joy. The intellect is the watchdog – critical, suspicious" (p. 324). As opposed to the growing intellectualization of art education in 1940s and 1950s, Lismer stated once that "art education has been distorted by intellect for century" (p. 324). Grigor also discusses various influences of child-centered theories of art education on Lismer. I found her insights into Herbert Read's *Education Through Art* (1943), Victor Lowenfeld's *Creative and Mental Growth* (1947), Wilhelm Viola's *Child Art* (1944) and Marian Richardson's *Art and the Child* (1948), very nicely developed. These works, according to Grigor, strengthened Lismer's commitment to child-centered education and expressive experimentation in art. Even though he initially distanced himself from the Jungian psychoanalytic legacy, during the 1940s, Lismer started to be more analytical and looked at children's drawings as expressions tied to their dreams and childhood experiences, perhaps trying to grapple with their inner selves. Grigor seems critical of this tendency towards psychoanalytic approaches in art education, which according to her turned many art educators at the time into "amateur psychologists." Lismer's opposition to the intellectualization of art education grew even stronger in the 1940s and 1950s – the decades that were marked by the emergence of university art education departments. Grigor reminds us of the problematic segregation between art teachers trained in art schools and those trained in universities.

Those trained as artists, with a minimum of educational theory, focused on art, rather than on education, and were first recognized during this period as artist-teachers. For those trained in universities, a teaching degree in art education generally included a liberal arts background with courses in studio work, art history and education. (p. 332)

Grigor's writing leaves us with an impression that Lismer's pedagogy as well as his professional attitude matured during his teaching and educational supervision at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. While in Montreal, he also taught at McGill University (1941-1955) and served as the principal of the Montreal School of Art and Design (1942-1967). Grigor points out that while teaching at the MMFA, Lismer pedagogy demonstrated a great deal of sensitivity to students' age and maturity, and that he understood very well the distinction between teaching art to children and teaching art to adults. Moreover, he would encourage his staff (mainly third-year art students) to question their teaching procedures, methods and materials used, in order to

respond better to the needs of students. "Constantly challenging, he would ask, "How could you have done that better?" or "How could the project be developed further?" " (p. 339).

Regardless of its length, and the extent of Grigor's research, which I have found difficult to accommodate within the book review format, this book will both inform and inspire its reader, offering an invaluable background to all teachers of art. However, one may wonder of what practical significance Lismer's ideas might be today, since his teaching belongs to the first half of the twentieth century and owes much to his spirited personality. In conclusion, Grigor states that Lismer's ". . . approach emphasizes values that, with the growth of dehumanizing technology, will be sorely needed in the future" (p. 349).

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