

Frederick Horsman Varley at Edmonton

F. H. Varley – A Centennial Exhibition. An exhibition held at the Edmonton Art Gallery, 16 October to 6 December 1981, and four other Canadian venues.

Catalogue: Christopher Varley, *F. H. Varley*, Edmonton Art Gallery, 1981. 195 pp., 209 illus., \$20.00 (paper).

This centennial exhibition of F. H. Varley is the most comprehensive to this time. It follows several other major exhibitions of the works of this artist since World War II (*F. H. Varley – Paintings 1915-1954*, Art Gallery of Toronto, 16 October – 14 November 1954; *F. H. Varley Retrospective*, Willistead Art Gallery, Windsor, 12 April – 17 May 1964; *Varley – The Middle Years*, Burnaby Art Gallery, 1 May – 2 June 1974). There are 156 works in the Edmonton exhibition, and this total varies as it travels to Victoria, Ottawa, Montreal and Toronto. With additions from its own collection, the National Gallery of Canada will exhibit the largest number, a total of 162. Not all of the major works are included, and among those missing is *Sunken Road* (1919), *Night Ferry, Vancouver* (1937) and *Dr. T.* (1944), but the deficiencies are, in most cases, represented by supporting works from the same period.

The exhibition was organized chronologically and was divided into time periods corresponding to locations associated with the artist's changing domiciles and his war service. The catalogue, written by Christopher Varley, Chief Curator of Canadian Art at the Edmonton Art Gallery and grandson of Frederick Varley, follows the same arrangement.

Among the original members of the Group of Seven, Varley (1881-1969) was the least typical, the most troubled and probably the best painter. In spite of his initial excitement with the Group, he began to find their nationalistic emphasis on a Canadian landscape movement very limiting and because patronage for his work was slow in developing he was forced to travel to seek support. Nevertheless, at each stage of his turbulent career Varley painted some works of high quality which stand among the best art produced in Canada in the first half of this century.

There are few works from the early years in England. Those available to us in this exhibition reveal a gentle English lyricism. *Seven Fields*, 1900 (cat. 5), is a small, lively watercolour of trees in the country side with two figures in the middle distance. It shows the mastery of this technique that the nineteen year-old Varley had already attained.

Following an art school training at the Sheffield School of Art, Varley went to the Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts in Antwerp where his talent was recognized by awards of medals for figure-drawing and painting. It was also in Belgium that Varley developed an interest in Eastern religions, for he mentions Sir Edwin Arnold's small volume, *Light of Asia*, in one of his letters at this time. This interest was to become an important factor in his attitude towards life and art, but outside of the period at Lynn Valley, B.C., where he had a cabin, the 'orientalism' does not seem to have altered the course of his art in any fundamental way.

After Antwerp, in London, and involved with commercial illustration for newspapers and periodicals, Varley was enriched by the cultural offerings of the metropolis. His relationship to Augustus John, a near contemporary working in London, seems to have been an admiring one which, later, during their service as war artists, became a rivalry, at least on the part of Varley. Christopher Varley includes a John portrait in the catalogue (*Robin*, c. 1912, cat. 10). He observes that, 'At first glance ... [it] might even be mistaken for a work by the Canadian artist' (p. 22). The author thus establishes a link between Varley and what some have called the 'tame Post-impression,' with which the art of John and other British artists was infused at the time.

A small landscape (cat. 11) of 1908, which is boldly romantic, ties the painter to Turner and Constable and suggests prophetically that the young Yorkshireman is ready for the Canadian wilderness. Even at this point, nature rather than the actuality of the English city life occupied his attention, and when Lismer spoke glowingly of Canada, Varley needed little urging to emigrate.



FIGURE 1. F. H. Varley, *For What?*, 1918. Oil on canvas, 147.3 × 183 cm. Ottawa, Canadian War Museum (Photo: Museum).

There is no painting in the exhibition to represent the period following his arrival in Canada in 1912, and up to the time of his commission as a war artist in 1918. Christopher Varley does include a reproduction in the catalogue of *Indian Summer*, 1914-18 (cat. 14), which even at this time has a Group of Seven quality about it.

Varley received his appointment as a Canadian Official War Artist late in the hostilities. In the short time available to him he produced work that revealed an entirely new direction – one might say a subversive direction – for military art. It was in stark contrast to the heroic jingoistic art so common at that time. *For What?*, 1918 (Fig. 1; cat. 33), is brutally uncompromising in its scrutiny of the final tabulation of war; an issue seldom faced before in war annals. In *Britain at War*, an exhibition of British war art held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1941, there was so little of the reality of war that in the catalogue Herbert Read was moved to explain to Americans that, 'It must be remembered that though the English are energetic in action they are restrained in expression. Our typical poetry is lyrical not epical or tragic.'

The drawings and watercolours and the oil sketches of the war period, many from private collections, which are included in this section, expand our knowledge of Varley's war art enormously, and compensate for the absence of *Some Day the People Will Return* (available in Ottawa only) and *The Swoken Road*, although the latter is represented by the original oil sketch.

In the Toronto period, from 1920-1926, Varley became a member of the Group of Seven, which held its first exhibition at the Toronto Art Museum in May of 1920. In those years he painted some of his best portraits including that of Vincent Massey, 1920 (cat. 44), and the well-known *Self-Portrait* of 1919 (cat. 42).

Several landscapes are shown in this section of the exhibition which mark Varley's only close association with the activities and ideals of the Group. It turned out that he was really more interested in portraiture, while the others, with the exception of Lawren Harris, were not. Notwithstanding, Varley produced one of Canada's best known landscape paintings completely within the Group's tradition. *Stormy Weather, Georgian Bay*, 1920-21 (Fig. 2; cat. 50) is, however, no shallow replica of the great Canadian motif, but rather an authentic statement by a man with extraordinary powers of perception. At first glance we see Thomson's familiar composition of a flat foreground figure against a tapestry-like background, but Varley has enriched and elaborated the theme with no loss of impact, indeed his colour has become radiant with implied light. Even the sketch, *Squally Weather, Georgian Bay*, 1920 (cat. 48), which he has followed with surprising fidelity is complex by the Group's standards. In the catalogue Christopher Varley's discussion of this work is brief and somewhat dismissive when one considers its position as a sort of watershed in the painter's career.

The major achievements of this time are the portraits wherein Varley continues to demonstrate his mastery of the oil medium and his sensitivity to the subject. Although he was free of the more glaring mannerisms of modernism, his use of Cubist-like shafts in the background of the portrait of *Chancellor Charles Allan Stuart*, 1924, is nevertheless rare, although it is present in several other works, such as *Liberation*, 1936-37 (cat. 67, 143).

The Vancouver years from 1926 to 1936 were relatively productive for Varley. There were few portrait opportunities but the exotic West Coast environment quickened his interest in landscape. His interest in Eastern religions reasserted itself and for the first time permeated his paintings. Stylistically his forms became more generalized, his space ambiguous and his colour more exotic. He had often included figures in his landscapes in England; now figures reappeared completing, as he saw it, the unity of all things. One would not, however, confuse a Varley landscape at this time with a landscape of the Sung dynasty nor is there the oriental spirit manifest in the works of Mark Tobey and Morris Graves. Varley's technique overrides his stylistic borrowings and maintains a solid centre that for the most part precludes broad fluctuations.

Among many fine works of this period is the well-known *Dhavana* of 1932 (cat. 104), Varley's most overt presentation of an Asian theme. His *Studio Window* series (Fig. 3; cat. 100) is well-represented by three canvasses which are interesting in their treatment of space. The experimentation of this period involves colour as well as space and form, and the catalogue deals briefly with his views on the Munsell and Ostwald colour systems.

Vera Weatherbie entered Varley's life at this stage and provided him with both a model and a confidante.



FIGURE 2. F. H. Varley, *Stormy Weather, Georgian Bay*, 1920-21. Oil on canvas, 132 × 162.6 cm. Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada (Photo: Museum).

His portrait of her (cat. 95) has the same radiance as *Stormy Weather – Georgian Bay*, and has become, if anything, better known. The exhibition includes other studies of Vera and thus provides an opportunity for a careful scrutiny of this important work.

In 1936 Varley returned to Central Canada. His final years were not always tranquil, but he managed to produce some important work. His trip to the Arctic on the government ship *Nascopie* superimposed a certain order on his life and he responded with predictable enthusiasm. The watercolours resulting from the two-month voyage are perceptive illustrations done with a skillful spontaneity.

The artist was without a steady income and was therefore dependent upon portrait commissions, occasional teaching and most importantly the kindness and generosity of friends. His work seemed to lose its momentum and at times was repetitious. An untitled landscape of about 1943-44 (cat. 181) is very close to *Seven Fields* (cat. 5) done in 1900, back in Yorkshire. *Canadian Soldier*, 1942 (cat. 176), seems based on one by Augustus John in 1917, in the National Gallery of Canada.

These last years were not without achievement. Varley seemed able at times to venture into new concepts, to probe new stylistic directions. *Liberation*, 1936-37 (cat. 143) and *Night Ferry*, 1937 (cat. 146, not in the exhibition), are examples of this.

As organizer of the exhibition and author of the catalogue Christopher Varley has made an important contribution to our knowledge of this artist. He has had access to family documents and correspondence and has been able to discuss the artist with many who knew him at first hand. It is to his credit that he does not



FIGURE 3. F. H. Varley, *The Open Window*, 1932. Oil on canvas, 102.3 × 87 cm. Hart House, University of Toronto (Photo: Museum).

gloss over the dark and tragic aspects of his grandfather's life. Nor does he avoid rigorous criticism of Frederick Varley's artistic shortcomings and failures.

The bilingual catalogue is well produced and logically organized. The *Notes* at the end of the text provide generous documentation which will prove most helpful to students of the artist. A *Chronology* and *Bibliography* are also included. The author has up-dated and corrected the dating and other details in his book *F. H. Varley* in the Canadian Artist Series edited by Dennis Reid, although some discrepancies remain.

Perhaps the most disappointing feature of the catalogue was the paucity of information relating directly to Frederick Varley's art. With so many personal letters available and with the possibility of interviews with people who were relatives and personal friends, one might have thought Varley would have had more to say about his own teachers, his fellow artists, the influences on his art and the profound changes that were taking place during his life time. Did he know, for example, the work of Munch, of Bonnard? How did he respond to Fauvism and Cubism? The complexity of Varley's thought and art will now require a larger format than an exhibition catalogue. Christopher Varley and the Edmonton Art Gallery have provided a valuable base for further research.

JOHN ALLISON FORBES
University of Alberta