



Esther Trépanier

*Scott, Brandtner, Eveleigh, Webber: Revisiting Montreal Abstraction of the 1940s*

Montreal and Kingston:  
McGill-Queen's University  
Press, 2022; Copublished with  
Les presses de l'Université de  
Montréal and the Musée d'art  
de Joliette  
272 pp., 60 colour illus.  
\$45.00 (paper)  
ISBN 9780228015956

/ Tim Chandler /

Esther Trépanier's *Revisiting Montreal Abstraction of the 1940s* accompanies an exhibition of works by Marian Dale Scott, Fritz Brandtner, Henry Eveleigh, and Gordon Webber shown at the Musée d'art de Joliette in 2022. This exhibition, entitled *Forgotten! Scott, Brandtner, Eveleigh, Webber: Revisiting Montreal Abstraction of the 1940s*, featured four Québécois artists, all Anglophones, thus far overlooked and understudied in Canadian art history. Its catalogue, which recently won the prize for Best Exhibition Catalogue from the Universities Art Association of Canada, introduces a general audience to these four artists by situating them within the larger, better-known context of Québécois abstract art in the mid-twentieth century. The preparation of this exhibition occurred while Trépanier was battling cancer, and with her recently succumbing to the disease, the success of both the exhibition and the catalogue stands as a symbol of her decades of work in Québécois art history.

Scott, Brandtner, and Eveleigh were connected by their membership in the Contemporary Arts Society, founded in

1939, and their explorations of non-objective art as early as 1930. Gordon McKinley Webber moved to Montreal in 1943 and, due to his familiarity with the European avant-garde, began exhibiting more abstract works than the other three artists. Their work was significant enough to cause Montreal critics to reflect on the meaning of abstraction. However, it would nevertheless soon be "overshadowed by the emergence from the francophone community of new players, who would decisively command the attention of critics interested in contemporary art" (17). Despite the significant influence of artists like Paul-Émile Borduas and Alfred Pellon on the artistic scene in Quebec in the 1940s, Trépanier shows that important work in abstraction also occurred beyond the emerging Automatistes and that understanding the abstraction of these neglected artists is an essential part of Canadian and Québec modernism.

The emphasis on francophone abstract painters in the historiography of Québec art history has resulted in a host of overlooked Montreal artists from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, leaving more work to be done on abstraction in this period. Trépanier's book does not intend to cover all issues in the 1940s exhaustively. Topics like the intersection of art and war, the persistence of non-abstract modern artistic practices, and the full extent of artistic networks linking now-famous and lesser-known artists are outside the scope of Trépanier's book. Instead, she is concerned with examining the status of abstract art in Montreal beyond the well-documented controversies surrounding the Automatistes, highlighting the need to reassess Québec art history during the mid-twentieth century. The text shifts the focus from the established francophone superstars, the Automatistes, Plasticiens, and Prisme d'Yeux, and draws attention to the formal innovations in the works of Scott, Brandtner, Eveleigh, and Webber and their contributions to Quebec art.

Chapter one of the book offers an overview of the development of abstraction in Québec in the 1930s and 1940s, while chapter two focuses on the four artists: Trépanier examines the ways that their diverse artworks contributed to a fluid concept of abstraction in the 1940s while offering an in-depth analysis of the individual influences and styles of each artist, including Marian

Dale Scott's American and British inspirations, Fritz Brandtner's Expressionism, Henry Eveleigh's transition from Cubism to gestural abstract paintings, and Gordon Webber's Bauhaus-influenced geometric abstraction. In addition, Trépanier explores the critical reception of their works, revealing the multiple meanings of the term "abstraction" in the writings of contemporary art critics.

In the third chapter, Trépanier is concerned with the social context of these painters' work. Scott, Brandtner, Eveleigh, and Webber were interested in democratizing art and making it more broadly accessible. Many artists in this period were drawn to left-wing social movements such as the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation and the League for Social Reconstruction— notably, largely anglophone organizations. Despite different approaches, the artists contributed by creating works depicting war, executing public murals, and advocating for art education among the disadvantaged. The chapter highlights some of these achievements, showcasing the distinctive features of the anglophone art community and the diverse aesthetic landscape of Montreal in the 1940s. As Trépanier notes, "As regards to their overall contribution, however, there is another aspect that must be underscored and that largely distinguishes them from their francophone counterparts: the role they played in a broader reflection on the social function of art" (142).

Above all else, Trépanier's book is an exercise in the disambiguation of the term "abstract." She is not trying to propose a new definition of the term or to show that current definitions are not carefully considered, but to show that multiple understandings of the term "abstraction" were present in 1940s Canadian art, depending on time and place. One advertisement from 1945 for an exhibition of abstract artists from Trépanier's study describes two senses of "abstract," one that means non-objective art and another in which is art trying to experiment with a recognizable form; one treating "abstract" as an adjective and the other treating "abstract" as a verb. Trépanier uses this as a jumping-off point, and just as she is interested in re-writing the historiography of Québec art history, she is interested in re-writing the historiography of the term "abstract" in Canadian art criticism:

There is a tradition in art history that tends to equate abstraction with non-objective art. Although the avant-garde art movements that emerged after the Second World War and a theoretical perspective grounded in formalism reinforced this alignment, the concept of abstraction, before becoming crystallized in non-representation, was nevertheless applied to a range of art practices and approaches. This was especially true in 1940s Quebec, where the word "abstraction" did not become part of art critical discourse until the late 1930s. (25)

The key here is that Trépanier identifies that she will primarily examine differences between the understandings of "abstraction" by reviewing the critical discourse on the subject in Canadian exhibition reviews from the 1940s. Well-known non-objective movements like New York Abstract Expressionism and the Automatistes dominate the popular understanding of the term. Trépanier counters this by offering examples of reviews that exemplify her more nuanced take that abstraction is more of a spectrum of styles. Revisiting the criticism of the time proves to be a skeleton key for unlocking the various tensions present in Montreal as abstract avant-garde painting became the preeminent art form in Canada. Due to cultural and language barriers, many aspects of Québécois culture today fail to make a mark outside provincial borders, which, in reading this book, also seems to apply to the criticism of abstract art in the 1940s.

Given that Scott, Brandtner, Eveleigh, and Webber were active in the 1940s in Montreal, it is natural to compare their work and political philosophy to that decade's most famous Montreal artist group, Les Automatistes, led by Paul-Émile Borduas.<sup>1</sup> Trépanier is aware of this, and the thesis she presents is concerned with canonicity. How do art historians affirm the importance of artists thus far overlooked in art history? Do we insert Scott, Brandt, Eveleigh, and Webber into the canon of Canadian art and acknowledge that they influenced the development of abstract painting in Québec and provided a formal bridge from earlier figurative painting? Or do we afford them a position distinct from what has been codified in Canadian art history?

Trépanier's goal is to work around this question and not limit the work

and accomplishments of these four artists by setting them up in comparison to Quebec's most famous mid-century art collective, The Automatistes. Borduas's name is often mentioned in the text because he was the vice president of the Contemporary Arts Society. This evocation generally refers to his legacy and influence concerning his francophone peers. However, direct references to Les Automatistes are rare. This is deliberate on Trépanier's part, who writes,

Since the question of abstraction during the 1940s cannot be reduced to the Pelland-Borduas rivalry, I have chosen to examine the various senses given to the term "abstraction" in the critical reception accorded to lesser-known artists—specifically Fritz Brandtner, Henry Eveleigh, Marian Dale Scott, and Gordon Scott. (46)

The title of the related exhibition, *Oubliés! Scott, Brandtner, Eveleigh, Webber: revoir l'abstraction montréalaise des années 1940s*, emphasizes that these artists have been forgotten, presumably passed over in favour of others, and the audience is left to ask who forgot these artists and why. Trépanier concludes that these artists were overlooked in part because of Montreal's linguistic and political divides in the 1940s and also because of the drive for Canada to establish a national aesthetic built around the Group of Seven in subsequent years. Since a comprehensive explanation cannot be reduced to a few sentences, Trépanier instead hopes to situate the reader in the period with a social art historical method that offers an extensive view of the field of cultural production in 1940s Montreal. However, this broad view still leaves avenues of inquiry open for future study. One is the notion of artist organizations replacing traditional academies in Canada. The Contemporary Arts Society is given much attention in the book and viewed as an essential node in the network of Montreal painters; to become a member, artists had to be unaffiliated with any formal arts academy. In the avant-garde world, these artist-led organizations started to supplant academies in that they were a place for artists to learn, develop, and expose themselves to new opportunities. Instead of the top-down, hierarchical system constructed to conserve the balance of power in the traditional academies of the past, these new organizations were more democratic and built on collaborations between members.

Claude Gauvreau explained this tendency in a 1946 article that Trépanier often cites in the book, explaining that the Contemporary Arts Society provided opportunities for Scott, Brandtner, Eveleigh, and Webber to exhibit together in various cities in Ontario and Quebec but also for Borduas to build a new community of artists as he began to feel constrained by the anglophone bent of Montreal society.

Another thread in the book that is not necessarily fully developed is the crucial role of geography and lived experience in differentiating these artists from their more famous francophone counterparts. For example, Eveleigh was born in China, educated in the United Kingdom, and lived in Vancouver before settling and working in Montreal. Brandtner grew up in Germany and became a *passer* figure when he immigrated to Canada, bringing knowledge of European avant-garde movements. Even the two Canadians, Scott and Webber, travelled to Europe and Mexico before they worked in Montreal, respectively, and these experiences dramatically influenced how each artist worked and the politics they brought to the work. Presumably, this is precisely where the political difference between them and their peers grew as their work looked outward. This view lurks under the surface of the text but is never explicitly stated. More can be said about this aspect of this anglophone/francophone divide in abstract painting. Still, Trépanier's book does well in mapping out the network of abstract painting in a way hitherto unexplored in Québécois and Canadian art history and offers avenues for possible future studies.

*Tim Chandler is a doctoral student in Art History at Concordia University.*  
—timothy.chandler@mail.concordia.ca

1 The art-historical narrative that the Group of Seven's post-impressionistic landscapes were then superceded by the Automatistes is largely the result of Canadian art survey courses and the texts they often use, such as Dennis Reid's *A Concise History of Canadian Painting* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1973). This linear timeline of popular movements was not necessarily intended by Reid, but is the result of trying to condense a vast amount of history into a simple story.