

# Sixty Years Later

By Ellen Poole, FCA Archivist

This year the Federation of Canadian Artists celebrates its sixtieth birthday. As the FCA's archivist, one of my goals is to try and understand how the FCA fits into the Canadian cultural community and why a once truly national organization became a chiefly western one. Obviously, the effort to be a national body while still representing the diversity of Canada (both culturally and economically) is an age-old struggle in the history of Canada. But, as more information comes to light, our own unique pieces of the puzzle are slowly fitting together.

The FCA's beginnings are well documented as a vision of a group of Canadian artists led by painter and fine art professor, André Biéler. After teaching at the Banff Summer School in 1940 and meeting western artists for the first time, Biéler recognized a "great need for Canada's artists to meet, commune and understand each other." So, with the blessing of his employer, Queens University, the sponsorship of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, under its then president, F.P. Keppel (who directed that his \$3,000 be used to assist in travel expenses for artists), and assistance from the National Gallery of Canada - who agreed to mount a special exhibition of Canadian art - Biéler organized the 1941 Conference of Canadian Artists at the university in Kingston, Ontario. Over 150 professional artists, art critics and art educators from across the nation attended a series of technical workshops, seminars, and discussion groups. Delegates to the conference included several members of the famed "Group of Seven" - plus an impressive list of painters from the traditional school including Lismer and Holgate, as well as abstract artists such as Fritz Brandtner. According to Frances K. Smith, Biéler's biographer and good friend, "this was the first time any meeting of artists from each and west in Canada had been conceived and organized to examine the role of the artist in Canadian society in free and open discussion."

During the final session of the conference, delegates, acknowledging the need for a national representative body, struck a 'Continuation Committee' that was charged with planning a permanent national arts organization. Members of the committee included Biéler, A.Y. Jackson, J.P. Lemieux, Arthur Lismer, Walter Abell and Frances Loring. In 1942, after several meetings, the group made the Federation of Canadian Artists a reality, electing André Biéler as its first president. (Lawren Harris, living in Vancouver, followed in 1943 for a three-year term). The membership was divided into regions with a representative in each. The list is very impressive, featuring Lawren Harris as West Coast Rep., Ernest Lindner in Saskatchewan, and A.Y. Jackson in Ontario as well as Western, Manitoba, and Maritimes representatives. The newly formed federation's principal objective was "to unite all Canadian artists, related art workers and interested laymen for mutual support in promoting common aims; the chief of these is to make the arts a creative factor in the national life of Canada and the artist an integral part of society." Their first annual general meeting, attended by delegates from all regions, was held in Charles Comfort's Toronto studio, May 1 to 2, 1942.

The Carnegie Corporation continued to support the FCA during its first two years. Apart from this, the sole financial support of the federation seems to have been from membership fees (which were then \$5 annually for artist members and \$3 for interested laymen). Our first publishing endeavour, apart from our constitution, was a 1943 reprint of the technical part of the Kingston Conference Proceedings in response to artist demand. These bound books included scientific information and formulas that were shared during the Conference workshops. The FCA made this publication available to all, free upon request.

The aim of the federation, under the leadership of Messrs. Biéler, Harris and their successors, was being realized, as the organization became a unifying voice for artists across Canada. In December 1941, Lawren Harris wrote to A.Y. Jackson, "The Federation has made a good start. It should not be permitted to fade out... No, this thing is important - far more important - than the Canadian Group of Painters for if hell doesn't freeze over, only a country-wide, all inclusive society or federation of artists can hope to handle the problems with which art and artists will be faced."

Members of the FCA collectively and individually began to use the growing influence of their organization to represent the voice of artists across the country. They wrote briefs and organized petitions to the government in a sustained effort which would contribute significantly to the formation of the annual Canadian Conference of the Arts and later, to the Massey Commission report.

A National Plan for the Arts, the federation's brief addressing the problem of establishing and servicing cultural community centres across Canada, was incorporated in the more major brief submitted by the federation in 1949 to the Royal Commission on National Developments in the Arts, Letters and Sciences (known as the Massey Commission). Its main emphasis was the nation-wide extension of the National Gallery of Canada services. In 1951, having urged its regional branches as well as other cultural organizations to submit additional briefs to the Royal Commission, the FCA reprinted some 500 copies of its own with the tabling of The Massey Report in the House. Given time, it became clear that the report contributed significantly to the establishment of the Canada Council in 1957.

The Canadian Artists Council (CAC), now known as The Canadian Conference of the Arts, also began gaining strength and recognition with a mandate that grew to encompass not only artists but also all cultural workers from writers, poets, and administrators, to musicians and actors. This representative body took on the role of cultural voice to the government. The federation began phasing itself out as a national body. In 1955, membership had dropped off sharply in the east and the remaining assemblage was left with the financial debts. A meeting of the national executive was held in Edmonton to consider reorganization. Jack Shadbolt expressed his views, "Now that the Canada Council of Arts is on the point of becoming a reality, this would seem like a good time to re-evaluate the function of the FCA in the light of its two original basic aims: to offer a professional bond and program for the artists of Canada, and to provide a group cohesion of all others interested in art and who would like to contribute

their interest and energies to the supplementary community art activities that make for an invigorating artistic climate."

Shadbolt argued that while the Federation had done much for artists its initial aims were now over and, with so many splinter art groups having been formed to pursue their regional interests, it was time for the FCA to get 'up-to-date' and become a 'Federation of Canadian Arts' (e.g., a 'federation of Canadian art societies' rather than individual members, as originally proposed by Lawren Harris). A proposal was made to reconstitute membership into a federation of Canadian art groups with independent branches, offering national news and national exhibitions, but there was not enough member will, time or energy to make this happen. The dream of an FCA to meet the demands of Canada's changing art scene was put on hold.

In the '60s, the federation was reduced to a mainly social club. However the '70's brought renewed interest and the relentless energy of Allan W. Edwards. His enthusiasm and dreams for the group infused everyone with whom he came in contact and membership grew. Operating out of Allan's business office, a permanent FCA gallery with classroom space was established followed shortly by the wildly successful annual Saltspring Island art seminars, and summer painting classes for children held in the public parks. The FCA was alive and thriving again.

Our current constitution cites the FCA's purpose, "to share and promote the passion and pleasure of the visual arts through exhibition, education and communication." We continue to meet these aims through a significant number of traveling and international exhibitions, through the Federation Gallery, through international art exchanges, through the individuals that comprise our membership, and most recently, through the very successful AIM For Arts show in 2000. These activities and combined efforts are largely responsible for the current level of public awareness and the continuing growth in membership, both national and international.

The only constant thing in our travels through time is change. However, today, with new technologies in place, with the legacy of our founding members to back us, and with the intent and spirit of our current membership, we are once again a force in Canada's cultural community.