

65 years of Artistic Achievement: A History of the FCA

by Ellen Poole, FCA Historian

Chapter One: The Birth of a Legacy

June 1942, Toronto, Ontario: In his report to the first Federation of Canadian Artists' annual meeting, President André Biéler proclaimed, "Let the artist's hand be unbound! Let the emotions of his heart find expression! And let the work of art be shown to all, that our pride may find satisfaction!"¹

After teaching at the Banff Summer School and meeting western artists for the first time, painter and fine art professor 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, 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 his university in Kingston, Ontario. These beginnings are well documented by his biographer, Frances K Smith.

Imagine over 150 professional artists, art critics and art educators from across the nation attending a series of technical workshops, seminars, and discussion groups. Wouldn't you love to have been there! Ernest Lindner from Saskatchewan reflected that "physically it took us all of three weeks to recover from the conference, spiritually we fortunately never quite recovered..."²

Delegates were faced with the issue of examining the role of the artist in Canadian society and whether the organization would be a federation of Canadian art societies - or a body of artists, independent but cooperative with any existing societies. Fortunately for all of us they chose the latter.

Canada was divided into five Regions, each with its own regional organizer: West Coast - Lawren Harris; Western - Gordon Sinclair; Saskatchewan - Ernest Lindner; Manitoba - Byllee Lang; Ontario - AY Jackson; and Maritimes - Walter Abell.

One of their aims was to try and dissipate any feeling among artists and Eastern art societies that the Federation was in any way an usurper of their rights. Soon after, a chain of groups and individuals sprang up from coast to coast consisting of both artists and art lovers. "With a large, unified membership, the Federation hoped to become the voice of the artist - strong enough to be heard from Nanaimo to Nova Scotia."³

¹ Federation Bulletin, published by the FCA, Summer 1942 (including President Bieler's report entitled No Blackout For Art)

² André Biéler: An Artist's Life and Times by Frances K. Smith, published by Merritt Publishing Co.Ltd., Toronto/Vancouver, 1980

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The "Artists" part of our association's name originally referred to artists from every walk of life - painters, sculptors, architects, graphic artists, designers and craftspeople as well as art lovers, critics and curators. There were even music, poetry and drama divisions!

In announcing the newly formed FCA, the Vancouver Art Gallery stated, "This is not just another art society, nor is it intended to replace any existing art society. It is an organization formed to unite all the artists in Canada, whether member of existing societies or not, in a federation which it is hoped will become a power in the country. The Federation hopes to bridge the isolation of artists in different parts of the country, discover talent and organize regional as well as country-wide activities and to publish an art magazine to serve the interests of art and artists in the country as a whole..."⁴

In addition to various exhibitions, instructional workshops, classes and painting studios, the FCA sponsored lectures and plays (but rejected the proposal to sponsor a new opera due to high costs.) This started to change about 1949 as the Federation began to focus on the world of visual art.

National headquarters shifted from city to city in which the FCA President resided at the time, although all correspondence was handled by capable National Secretaries. Remember, this was the era of carbon paper and erasers, well prior to the computer age. In the late '40s these extraordinary women (notably, Alison Palmer and Nancy Bakewell) were paid the princely honorarium of \$250 per year!

Membership benefits included the periodical Canadian Art, published under the auspices of the National Art Gallery in Ottawa with co-editors, DW Buchanan and Robert Ayre. Members received both regional and national bulletins as well.

WWII was still raging in Europe. Under the heading of "War and the Artist," the executive passed resolutions that the government be asked to employ artists professionally for purposes of national defense, that the government permit artists to draw and paint in military areas for the purposes of record, that the Federation be allowed to organize loans of painters to army camps and the artists be assured of a place on committees for post war reconstruction.

Among Canada's war artists, FCA members included Eric Aldwinckle, Abe Bayefsky, Molly Lamb (Bobak), Bruno Bobak, Paraskeva Clark, Albert Cloutier, Charles Comfort, Orville Fisher, Charles Goldhamer, Rik Kettle, Rowley Murphy, Jack Nichols, Peigi Nicol McLeod, William A Ogilvie, George Pepper, Moses Reinblatt, Goodridge Roberts, Carl Schaefer, Jack Shadbolt, and Charles H Scott.

⁴ Vancouver Province, Feb 10, 1945, "Art For All: FCA, Looking Ahead, Would Draw Dominion Into One Great Cultural Venture - Dominion Government will be Invited to Set Aside \$10,000,000 to assist communities to build art centres," by J Delisle Parker

In June, 1944, the Federation, in concert with other national art organizations, was responsible for drawing up a significant Brief concerning the cultural aspects of Canadian reconstruction. The main feature of the Brief was the responsibility of the FCA. Ultimately, this action spawned the Canadian Arts Council, forerunner to the Canada Council for the Arts.

During his presidency, Lawren Harris said, "It is significant that the Federation was born in the early years of World War II, when people were beginning to realize that war not only meant a struggle for existence but also an urgent search for a new pattern of living."⁵

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The next chapter in this series will take a look at the Federation's contribution to The Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letter & Sciences 1949-51 (popularly known as the "Massey Commission") which led to the formation of the Canada Council for the Arts.

Chapter Two: The FCA and the Canada Council

Dateline, Dec 20, 1950:

"If the Federation had done nothing else, the action which it took in 1949, in connection with the hearings of the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences, was more than sufficient both to justify its existence, and to establish it as the most influential cultural body in Canada".⁶

Hunter Lewis, National President

With the war over, veterans returned to their families, sought new jobs or finished school and manufacturers turned from making bombs and military equipment to refrigerators and cars. After years of being head of household, women sought new roles that included some of the activities were accustomed to performing in addition to housework and raising their families. War-brides settled in Canada, along with immigrants who had fled war-torn countries for a better life. The new normalcy was under way.

During the first decade following the Federation of Canadian Artists' founding in 1941 the whole art and cultural life of Canada had been transformed. Activity surrounding the arts had increased enormously and geographically extended to all kinds of communities, in all parts of Canada.

As FCA President Hunter Lewis said, "It would be absurd to claim the credit for all these changes and all this growth for the FCA."⁷ It would be even more absurd, however, to

⁵ What Is The Federation of Canadian Artists, brochure, c.1945, published by the Federation of Canadian Artists.

⁶ Excerpts from President Hunter Lewis' letter to the FCA Executive and Members of Regional and local Branches, Dec. 20 1950 found in the Hunter Lewis Family Fonds, UBC Library, Archives & Special Collections

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ignore the very great influence the Federation had exerted in achieving them. The FCA was one of, if not the very first, national organization to be established in the field of the visual arts which continued to work for the general cultural objectives it adopted.

Apart from forming its own branches, the FCA had provided the stimulus and the model for the formation of many local and provincial organizations. It was largely influential in the creating of the "Canadian Arts Council" of which it was a member (not to be confused with the "Canada Council For the Arts" established by the Federal Government in 1957). It sponsored the only national art magazine of the day, *Canadian Art*. The Federation was linked with other art organizations in other countries through its membership in the Canadian Council for Reconstruction, through UNESCO and other international organizations. It assembled and sponsored local, regional and national exhibitions. It integrated painting and the other arts in Canada...and it kept art constantly in the news and thus in the minds of the public.

In February of 1949, the Federal Government announced its intention to enact new long-awaited legislation with respect to cultural development in Canada. In April, the Privy Council appointed a Royal Commission on National Development of Arts, Letters, and Sciences (chaired by the Honorable Vincent Massey) - potentially the most important single event that had ever occurred in the cultural life of Canada. The FCA held its National Conference in Montréal that same month.

Following the announcement, the FCA resolved to revise and amplify their 1944 "Artists Brief" to this end. It's National Brief Committee (many of them university professors and most from BC - included Hunter Lewis [chair], Charles Scott, BC Binning, Gordon Couling, Donald Flather, Doris Hunt and Nancy Bakewell) took ideas from their earlier work about the setting aside of \$10 million from which any community in Canada could be entitled to for assistance in the building of an art centre, with the communities and province contributing on an established pro rata basis.⁸ They also emphasized the need for a nation-wide extension to Canada's National Gallery.

The Massey Commission (as it popularly became known) held hearings across the country. FCA regions and their branches were urged to explore, discuss and submit points they particularly wished to present for consideration in their national brief. They were also encouraged to write to Ottawa in support of this action. The submission of this brief became the Federation's prime project and was publicized as such.

A sense of excitement aroused a nation of artists to participate. During the course of the Massey Commission's two-year inquiry, it received 462 briefs, hundreds of letters from Canadian citizens, and held 114 public hearings throughout Canada at which some twelve hundred witnesses appeared.⁹

⁸ Excerpt reprinted from the Vancouver Daily Province, Feb 10, 1945 from a column by J. Delisle Parker headlined "Art For All - Federation of Canadian Artists, Looking Ahead, Would Draw Dominion Into One Great Cultural Venture - Dominion Government will be Invited to Set Aside \$10,000,000 to assist communities to build art centres"

⁹ Library & Archives Canada: Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences, 1949-1951.

The Federation's national brief (presented by Messrs. Lewis, Scott and Binning) became widely supported and had important educational effects upon the people and the Government of Canada. The Royal Commissioners were themselves gracious enough to admit the FCA was instrumental in producing the large number of submissions that made those hearing the most significant event that had yet occurred in Canada cultural life. Six years later, Parliament, through the Minister of Canadian Heritage, passed The Canada Council Act which resulted in a national arm's-length agency fostering the development of the arts in Canada through grants, services and awards for professional artists. It would also take over the Canadian Commission for UNESCO work. Initial funding for programs came from an endowment fund of \$50 million. In 1957, the revenue related to arts activities equaled \$2.7 million. (In 2002, the Government increased Council funding to \$75 million).¹⁰

After its magnificent presentation to the Massey Commission, and communicating about art across the country became easier, the Federation of Canadian Artists began to phase itself out as a national body.

By the 1960s, the FCA barely existed on a national level but still carried on under that name. It was structured a bit differently in a few areas of Canada - including British Columbia where it was reported the association had about 600 members. We shall explore these changes in the next Chapter.

Chapter Three: The Cost of Fulfilling a Mandate

Dateline: Fall 1954

"If we believe that through the arts a people has its vision clarified and its life given point and meaning over and above the economic, political and material concerns... then all the artists and interested laymen in the country should not only be willing, but should be anxious to join a country-wide inclusive organization to further the function of art in life." - Lawren Harris¹¹

In the Federation of Canadian Artists' first decade, enthusiasm had continued to build across Canada as each region formed new branches and membership continued to grow rapidly. National Conferences, held every second year, provided knowledge and inspiration to artists of all persuasions - bolstered by the personal visions of national presidents, André Biéler, Lawren Harris, Albert Gillson and Hunter Lewis.

If the greatest achievement of the Federation was ultimately its' influence on the Canada Council for the Arts, the FCA owed a great debt to Hunter Lewis, chair and principal writer of their 1949 national brief to the Royal Commission on National Development of Arts, Letters,

¹⁰ Various facts excerpted from the Canada Council of the Arts website, 2004

¹¹ Federation of Canadian Artists letter to Branch Members and Affiliations, ca. Fall 1954, based on one of the philosophic objectives cited by Lawren Harris in an earlier FCA Membership Brochure.

and Sciences (best known as the "Massey Commission"). Professor Lewis was an erudite man, and one who really got caught up in causes.

Normally, Lewis' two-year presidency would have ended in October, 1951 - the same year that the Massey Commission tabled their report - except it was consensus that he would be just the right person to lead members to greater heights when the Federal Government acted on the Commission's recommendations.

In lieu of a National Conference and FCA elections, a long projected tour of local branches across the country was planned for Lewis, during which he would personally share his vision for the Federation and Canada. Unfortunately, the man became seriously ill just before the tour was to begin and failed to recover sufficiently to ever resume the plan.

The FCA had, in achieving its early ambitions, outgrown its machinery and hence its financial structure. Having previously gone to considerable pain to keep its financial difficulties to itself, the National Executive finally laid out its woes in a letter to its members.¹² The outstanding debt of having widely distributed copies of their national brief was formidable. Ongoing costs of serving and supporting members, including the FCA's share of producing the magazine *Canadian Art*, had risen sharply. From 1950 no fees were even available to honour the FCA's commitment to the Canadian Arts Council.

The National Executive concluded that on all levels the Federation was starving itself for lack of funds. In setting its sights for fulfilling all its responsibilities, it needed more money at its disposal. Membership totaled 856 (over 500 of these were visual artists), hence the decision to refocus FCA activities solely to the visual arts. In addition to securing loans from wealthier members, membership fees were increased.

Still expecting an early Federal Government announcement which, disappointingly, failed to come until 1957, plans to hold the next National Conference were delayed. Lewis stepped down as National President. In October 1952, following the tradition of electing officers alternately from Western and Eastern Canada, the National Executive chose Gordon Couling from Guelph, Ontario as Lewis' successor.

A view of the importance that the FCA should hold in the fabric of Canadian cultural life was not always clear to individual members. Shortcomings and frustrations intruded. Rumbblings were heard that Couling had not officially consented to be nominated. Boxes of files and financial records transferred from Vancouver to Guelph mysteriously disappeared, bills were unpaid, and for several months all communication came to a deadly halt.

Reports from Manitoba to Quebec and Ontario to the Maritimes, indicated the Federation had gone into a slump. Former members in Regina simply transferred their allegiance in bulk from the FCA to their local Art Centre Association, and Saskatoon members turned to the artist-run centre they had established in the early '40s.

¹² President Hunter Lewis' letter to the FCA Executive and Members of Regional and local Branches, Dec 20, 1950.

Lawren Harris' stirring call was no longer heard. It seemed that the Federation of Canadian Artists had become just another Canadian art association based on the friendship and camaraderie of like-minded amateurs who enjoyed painting, sculpting and showing their work together. Interest waned across the country and there seemed to be nothing anyone could do about it.

Following two years of serious neglect, a new National Executive headed by Professor Henry Glyde from Alberta felt its responsibility very strongly. They tried in every way to serve and support the members on a national basis, hoping to foster a new maturity of art in Canada. But the spontaneous national recovery hoped for didn't happen.

About 1963, a committee of Hunter Lewis, H.G. Glyde, Jack Shadbolt, Alison Palmer and Nancy Bakewell (all from BC and Alberta) was formed to "give information and possibly financial assistance to any new regions which might wish to create branches in smaller towns away from the already well-organized art centres." Five years later the committee was wound down.¹³

Down in the '60s, but not dead, pockets of FCA members met to organize and sponsor annual exhibits of paintings, sculpture and graphics, followed by the odd traveling show. Workshops were presented, along with painting demonstrations; taped lectures and slides were distributed. Camaraderie continued through painting trips and social events. In the West, some groups flourished.

One of the greatest success stories during that period was Painting in the Park, the FCA's imaginative summer education program for young artists (...no undraped human forms, please...) With financial help from both the City and the Province, the first sessions, organized in Stanley Park, became so popular that they quickly spread to other parks throughout the City - and then throughout BC and beyond. Ninety-two youngsters had registered in 1952, 1500 in 1965. This program's pattern has been borrowed and is still used in widely dispersed areas around the world.¹⁴

Slowly within the next decade, a group of new faces would once again pick up the reins and provide inspiring leadership - leading to the rebirth of a Federation.

¹³ Letter from A M Bakewell to Prof. H.G. Glyde dated May 6th, 1968.

¹⁴ "Park Painting Fundamental - Trees, People, Orange Subs," by Clive Cocking, Vancouver Sun, June 30, 1965.

Chapter Four: Rebirth

Dateline: August 26, 1978

"Who said the Federation of Canadian Artists was dead? The BC branch of the organization (which, at the moment, is the only branch) is still alive and kicking ... As a national body the federation had been in decline for years and is now extinct. Unable to attract young artists or absorb new trends, the group sank to sketch club status ... But the BC region of the FCA, with active chapters in Vancouver and Victoria, is obviously regaining some of its strength. Four hundred members, including such figures as Donald Jarvis, Gordon Smith, Sam Black, Raymond Chow, Ken Prescott, Harry and Caren Heine, Brian Johnson and Bruce Stapleton, can't be wrong..."¹⁵

During the 60's and early '70s, small, dedicated clusters of members in the West were keeping the Federation of Canadian Artists alive and attempting its rejuvenation. Vancouver and Calgary branches registered their groups under their respective Provincial Non-Profit Societies Acts. The few remaining branches scattered here and there across the country had all but disappeared. Eventually, the 'national' society, operated from Vancouver, became a not-for-profit organization regulated by the Canadian Companies' Act.

The Federation had always been keen on encouragement and support of the next generation of painters. In addition to ongoing Painting in the Park summer classes for children, the Vancouver branch began organizing successful annual and open juried exhibitions for Young Artists under the age of 25 or 30. From 1958 to 1976 a Canada Council Grant was received annually for approximately \$7,000,¹⁶ as was funding from the Vancouver Cultural Fund for sponsoring workshops.

Continually short of funds and members, it became clear that the Federation of Canadian Artists desperately required strong, dynamic leadership with new ideas. And, just as the need was greatest, up popped the internationally-known interior designer and artist (he had not only designed all the furniture for a hotel in Honolulu, but painted 350 large pictures for the guest rooms), landscaper, author, teacher, poet and raconteur, Allan W. Edwards, returning to his birth place from years in Detroit, New York and California. He taught art in Victoria (to Pierre Berton, Sid Barron and Bill Reid, among others). Stories about Edwards are legend.

Long-time member Jean Greenwood wrote, "We've come a long way since the old days of 1976 when Allan Edwards, Bruce Stapleton, George Grant and Ken Prescott used to meet, almost daily it seemed, in the back office of Allan's design studio, plotting 'the way.' The air was smoky, with Bob Thornton, puffing and cussing because these characters had expropriated his office, copier, typewriter and telephone. The plotting was, of course, how to re-activate the once famous and flourishing Federation of Canadian Artists, which had all

¹⁵ The Vancouver Sun, "Ailing artists' group rallies in Gastown gallery," by Andrew Scott, August 26, 1989

¹⁶ "About the Canada Council for the Arts" website, 2004

but disappeared across the country except for the small dedicated group here in Vancouver, chaired by Gladys Perrin, who were keeping it alive and attempting its rejuvenation."¹⁷

This planning group developed very definite aims:

- to rebuild the FCA by creating an organization and climate conducive to nurture beginners and encourage emerging painters to hone their skills
- to provide a meeting place and the opportunity to learn in classes and seminars from top-flight professional artists
- to establish a public gallery for members to exhibit their work, including the trials of jurying
- to build up a strong group of supporting members

The energetic Edwards, the person primarily responsible for its resurgence and president of the FCA in 1977, wrote a new history of the FCA:

"The prime purpose of the FCA is to act as a showcase for the work of its members. In order to accomplish this it is the aim of the Federation to hold as many group exhibitions as possible throughout the year. Aside from these exhibitions other activities are planned such as workshops, demonstrations and lectures ... Eventually it is hoped that the FCA will function in a manner similar to the Royal Academy in London or the Society of Western Artists in the USA ... It is my hope that, by working together and exhibiting together, we will be able to make the FCA not only an important and vital part of the art scene in BC but also an important promotional and social tool for its many members."¹⁸

Membership grew from 80 to 400 members in Vancouver and Victoria. Edwards helped Brian Johnson build a new Vancouver Island Chapter. Membership fees were raised and Edwards encouraged donations towards exhibit prizes. Until they acquired their own space, the FCA showed regularly at Presentation House, Centennial Museum, Oakridge Auditorium, Eaton's Department Store and at Edward's own Design Gallery in West Vancouver.

The first Federation Gallery, what is believed to be the first completely artist-sponsored gallery-workshop-studio in Canada, was opened on Wednesday, August 30, 1978 at 367 Water Street in Gastown, located in downtown Vancouver. Mrs. Henry Bell-Irving, the wife of British Columbia's Lt. Governor, cut the ribbon during the opening ceremony. A special juried exhibition was mounted to establish the community value of the new gallery and after two weeks it traveled to Prince George, Vernon, Kelowna, Penticton and Victoria.

The Federation committed over \$30,000 to the venture, renovating the premises of a former printing shop into a modern gallery, studio and headquarters. It supported its gallery through painting sales (Allan, practical about painting prices, realized that the buying public would snap up artworks priced at \$100 but not \$200) and by conducting workshops and study groups on the premises.

¹⁷ The FCA Newsletter, May 1985: "We've Come a Long Way," article by Jean Greenwood

¹⁸ 1977 Membership Brochure written by Allan W. Edwards

The first Fall Exhibition in the new gallery, with the Hon. Grace McCarthy as special guest at the opening reception, attracted 215 entries from 115 artists, the calibre of work never being as high. Because this show also went on tour, a replacement "Runners Up" exhibit followed. In the first month, the new gallery attracted 3000 visitors!

Small sculpture was still being exhibited at Federation Gallery until the early '90s when it became understood that this type of art required more specialized expertise than the Federation could provide. Two-dimensional visual artwork of high technical quality by emerging and professional artists was what the gallery had become known for. Furthermore, it became understood that with such a large membership, one or two-person shows were no longer possible.

From the beginning of the FCA's resurgence it was evident that in addition to Active and Supporting membership levels, there should also be a structure for established professional artists, those with at least 20 years of experience in professional art and capable of producing high-calibre work. The original Senior Signature Members appointed were Sam Black, Nel Bradshaw, Valerie Brouwer, Allan W. Edwards, Harry Heine, Brian Johnson, Fenwick Lansdowne, David Maclagan, Ken Prescott, Bruce Stapleton, Brian Travers-Smith and Alan Wylie. A quorum of ten of these Senior Members would elect further members to either full Senior or Associate status and, originally, any five would serve as a jury for juried exhibitions.

Conceding that although all were well-trained and talented artists, critics had often accused the Federation members of being "traditional realists," and those who painted "nice and easy to look at" pictures. The press was advised that the Federation was now making every effort to exhibit the broadest range of styles and expressions in the art field, encouraging practitioners of abstract and non-objective art as well as representation provided that they each show evidence of ability and sincerity.

Traveling shows were organized to other parts of BC and Alberta, and sometimes shipped as far as eastern Canada or to the USA. An indication of calibre is the exhibition of FCA work that the prestigious Charles and Emma Fry Art Museum in Seattle mounted in November 1980.

The FCA's annual Saltspring Island Seminars were introduced in the '80s, bringing students from Alaska and the Queen Charlotte Islands in the north, from Winnipeg in the east and from California to the south. Distinguished artists came from as far as Alabama, California, Washington, Oregon and even Hawaii, with pleasure, to join the Federation's favourite senior painters in tutoring at the Saltspring workshops. Teachers and pupils all loved the total immersion of painting on Saltspring, outdoors and in, from morning until night.¹⁹

Many painters having received instruction on Saltspring during the 80's will always recall instructors William Reese, Kathy Wengi O'Connor, Linda Doll, Rex and Joan Brandt, Carol

¹⁹ The FCA Newsletter, May 1985: "We've Come a Long Way," article by Jean Greenwood

Barnes, Judi Betts, Carl Christophersen, Al Brouillette, Carrie Burns, Jane Burnham and Carl Dalio. And, of course, the irrepressible Allan Edwards.

After Edwards' death in 1993, Alan Wylie wrote, "A man of unwavering artistic beliefs, a sharing and compassionate man with an unbridled enthusiasm for the arts and the artists." Said Dave Maclagan: "It was Allan's inspiration, hard work and unflagging enthusiasm that put the FCA back on the map." Tom Huntley: "Allan was principally responsible for starting the Seminars on Saltspring Island. He had expanded plans for a permanent art school - which had to be put on hold for a better time when the economy became healthier (sadly, the time never came). And the late George Weber: "The national body of the Federation disbanded...then early in 1981, Allan Edwards of Vancouver was responsible for Edmonton and Calgary's revival as Chapters of the organization with headquarters in Vancouver."²⁰

²⁰ The FCA News, December/January 1993.