



*Dr. Egerton Ryerson by Marshall Wood, 1873, (Chief Superintendent of Education for Canada West/Ontario 1844-76 and father of the Ontario Collection).*

In recent years, the Ontario government has rediscovered a part of its cultural past – a part that it had almost accidentally lost. The story of the rediscovery and the restoration of the Ontario Collection is one of the most fascinating chapters in Canadian art history. It's a story that dates back to the 1850s when Ontario was still called Canada West, a remote outpost of the British Empire in its early stages of development.

Under the leadership of the legendary Egerton Ryerson, the Chief Superintendent of Education from 1844 to 1876, the Ontario government began acquiring a remarkable collection of paintings and sculptures. These "objects of taste," as Ryerson called them, formed the nucleus of the first publicly-funded art collection in all of Canada and the initial holdings of Canada's first art gallery, Toronto's Educational Museum, opened in 1857.

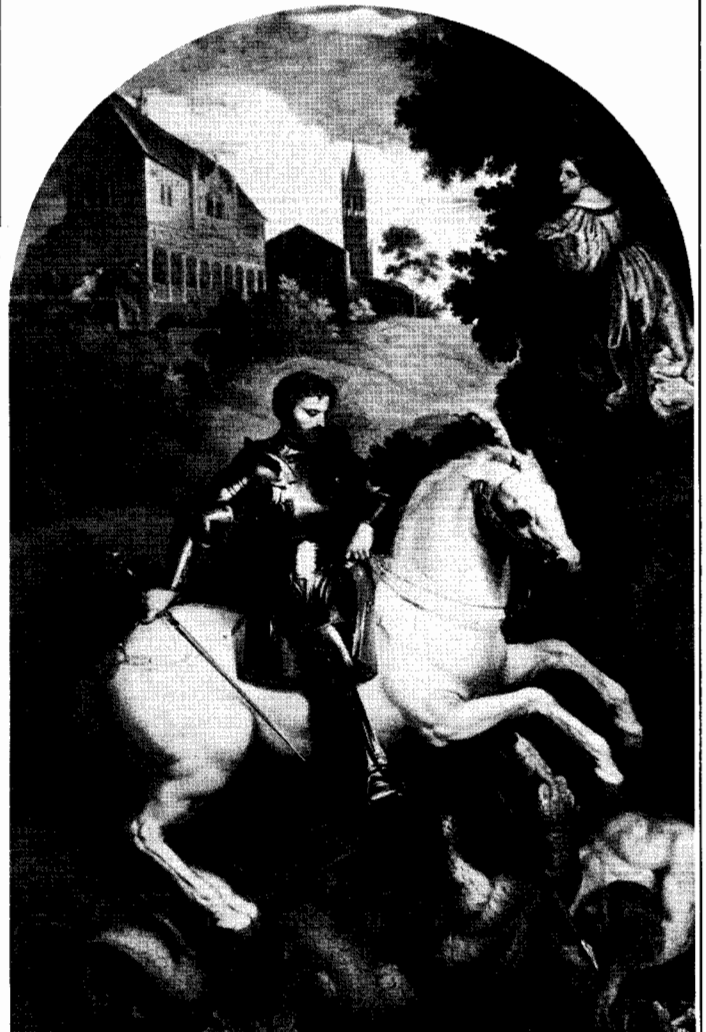
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*An art historian, Fern Bayer is curator of the Ontario Government's art collection and author of *The Ontario Collection*. (See Recent Publications section for a review of this book).*

# Lost and Found:

*The Extraordinary Story  
of the Ontario Collection*

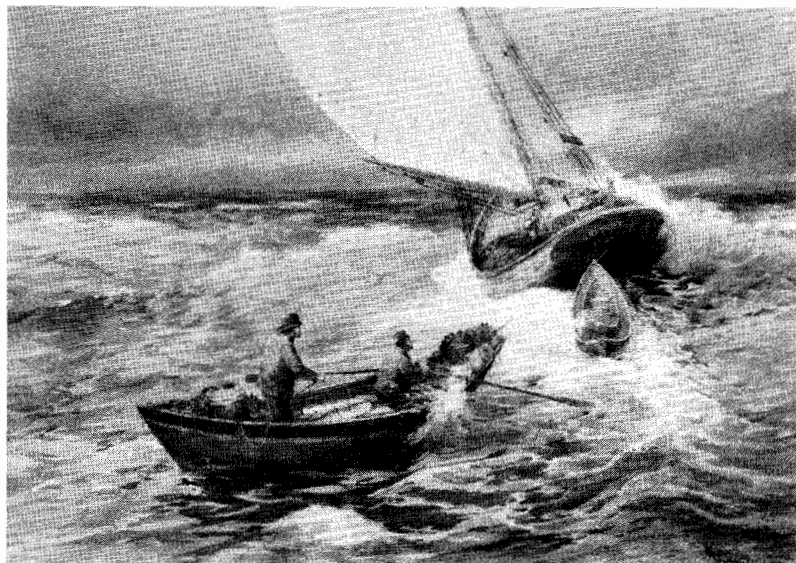
Fern Bayer



*Saint George Killing the Dragon, 1855, copy after Paris Bordone (Italian 1500-71). One of the earliest of Ryerson's purchases.*



A Selection from the early Canadian phase of the collection: above *Mackenzie Crossing the Rockies* by Arthur Heming, 1932; at left *Henrietta Vickers*, Artist by George Agnew Reid, c. 1894; below *Deep Sea Fishers*, by Robert F. Gagen, 1902.



The government's art acquisition program continued until 1914 and following a fifty-two year hiatus resumed in the 1960s, with the introduction of the "art-in-architecture" program under Premier John Robarts. Under this program, original works of art were commissioned for new government buildings constructed throughout Ontario. The program continues to this day. One half of one per cent of the construction cost of major new provincial buildings is set aside for the commissioning of large-scale works of art for public areas of the buildings.

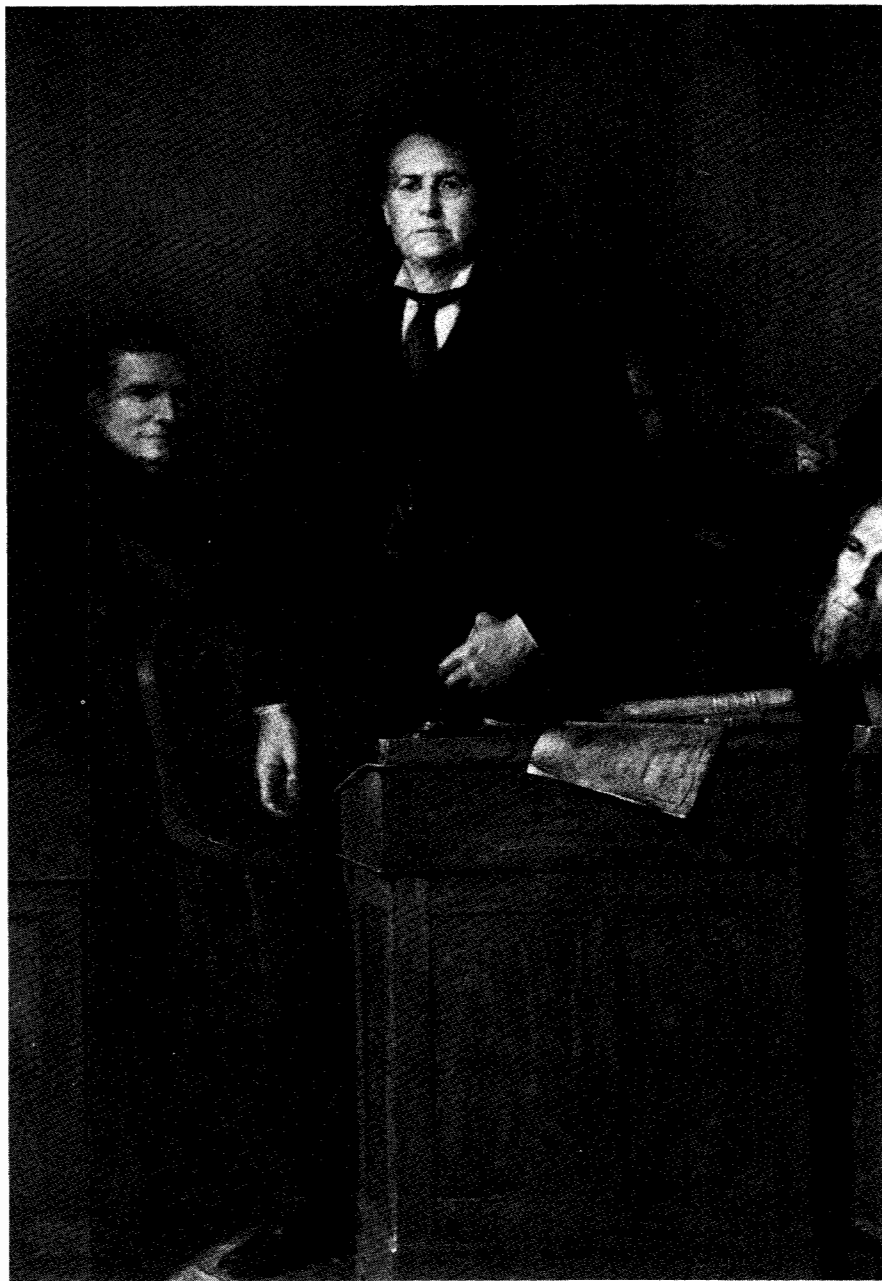
Because of the long pause in government art collecting from 1914 to the mid 1960s, the Ontario Collection consists of two quite distinct elements. There is the "historical" collection, amassed between 1855 and 1914, and the "contemporary" collection acquired from the 1960s.

The Ontario Collection is quite literally a "museum without walls". While most art collections are housed in one location, the Ontario government's holdings, now numbering in excess of 1500 works of art and valued at over \$10 million, can be seen in provincial buildings across the province.

The Legislative Building at Queen's Park is the main focus for the historical collection of paintings and sculptures. In its role as the seat of government the Legislative Building at Queen's Park also informally functions as an art museum dedicated to Ontario's political history. Outside, on the grounds is a collection of late-Victorian public sculpture of considerable artistic merit. Sir John A. Macdonald, Canada's first prime minister peers down University Avenue from the edge of the park, clutching the *British North America Act*. Not far away, Queen Victoria sits regally upon her throne. Nearby are some of her nineteenth century Ontario first ministers: Among them are Sir Oliver Mowat and Sir John Sandfield Macdonald. Even the "great rebel", William Lyon Mackenzie, one of the founders of responsible government, has a place of honour.

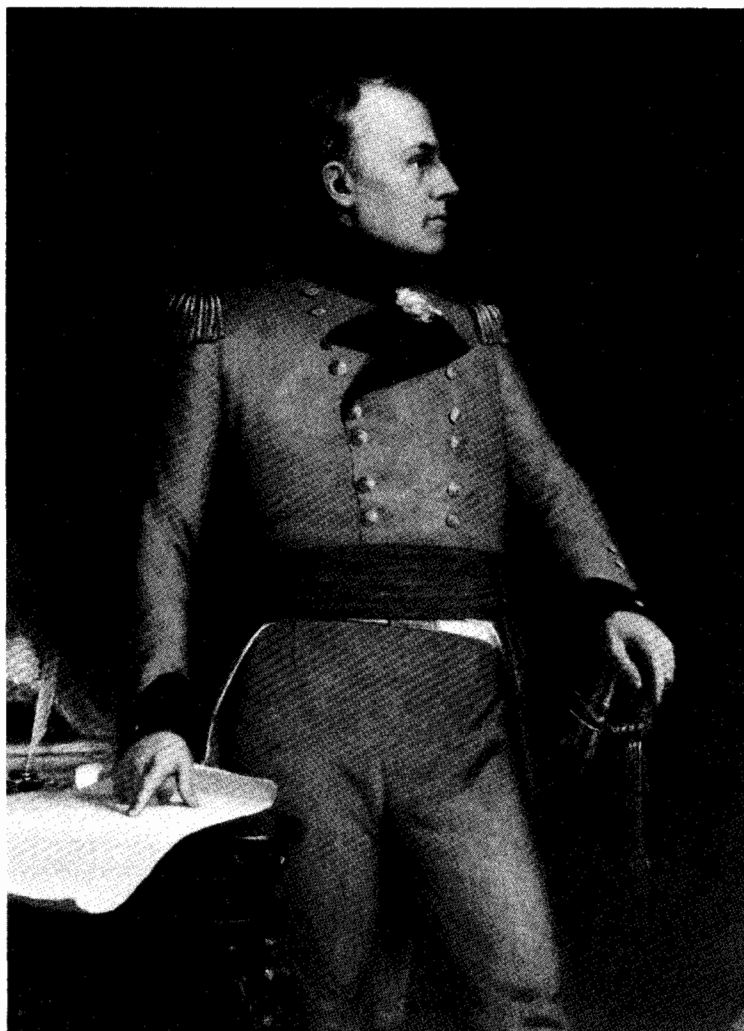
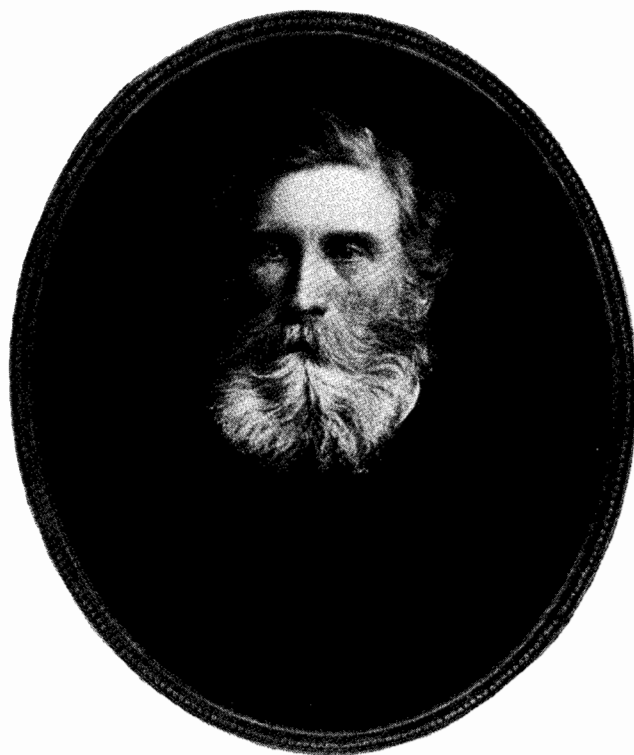
Inside the Building, lining the Grand Staircase and decorating the state rooms, is a remarkable group of political portraits of Ontario's governors, premiers, speakers of the Legislature, and such famous historical figures as Major General James Wolfe, Sir Isaac Brock and Laura Secord.

In the Lieutenant Governor's Suite are portraits of all the province's vice-regal representatives beginning with Colonel John Graves Simcoe. This collection was instituted in the 1880s



*The Honourable Edward Blake* by E. Wylie Grier, 1897, Premier of Ontario 1871-72, Blake is shown addressing the Legislature. To his right is Alexander MacKenzie, the Provincial Treasurer and later Prime Minister of Canada and, to his left, Archibald McKellar, Minister of Agriculture.

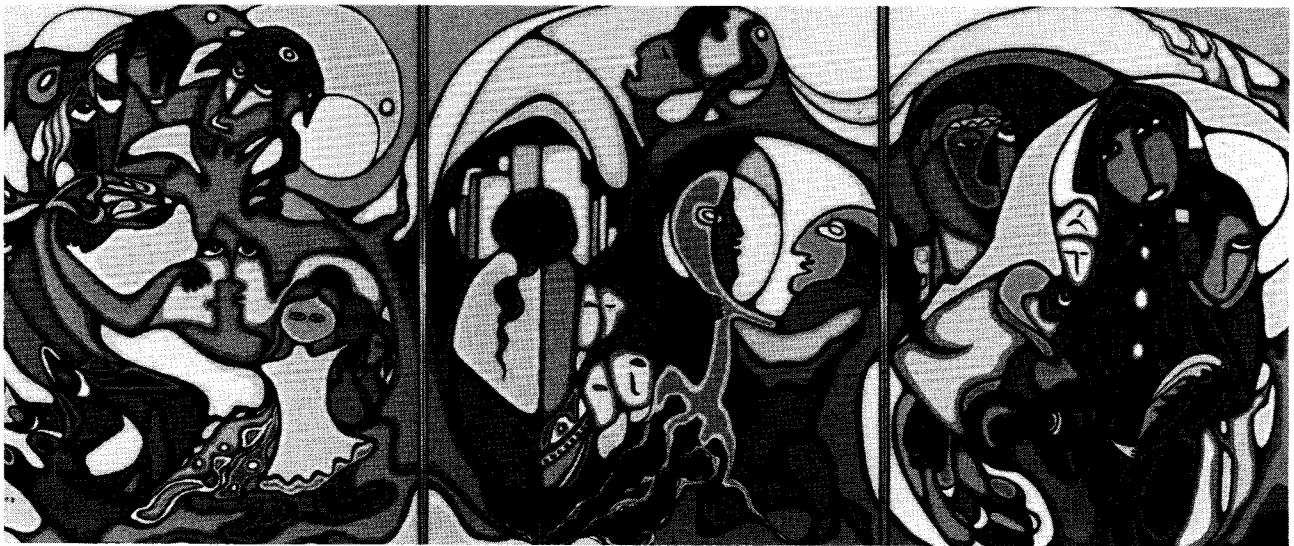
Examples from the portrait collection: below *Major-General Sir Isaac Brock* by J.W.L. Forster, 1900, (President and Administrator of Upper Canada, 1811-12) and on the right *Sir Richard William Scott* by George T. Berthon, 1872, (Speaker of the Ontario Legislature 1871).



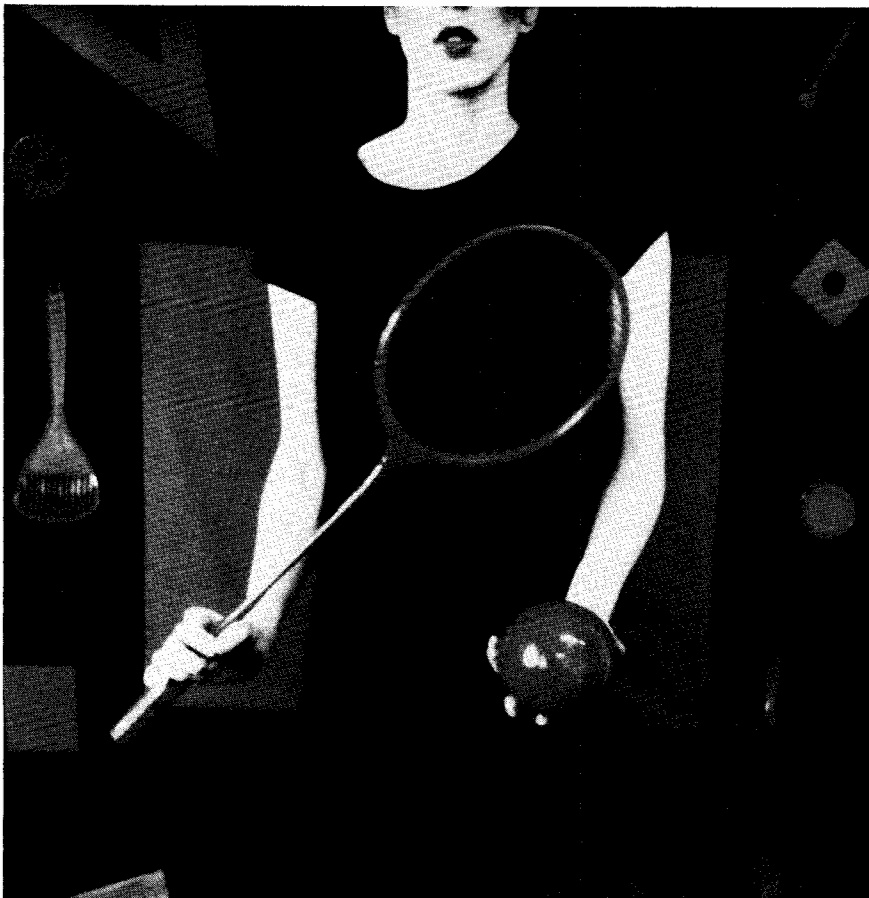
by Lieutenant Governor John Beverley Robinson to decorate the halls of the old Government House which once stood at King and Simcoe Streets but was demolished in 1915. Coincident with the opening of the new Legislative Building at Queen's Park began the tradition of commissioning portraits of former premiers and speakers of the Legislature.

Political portraits constitute the core of the historical collection but although they are the most visible part of the government's collection at Queen's Park, they are not the most significant element of the Ontario Collection. Throughout the Legislative Building the intrepid visitor will likely stumble upon Old Master paintings or early Canadian works. These are the famous "lost pictures" – those artworks purchased by Ryerson and successive administrations between 1855 and 1914. The story of first their acquisition, then their loss, and finally their rediscovery, constitutes one of the most extraordinary tales in the history of Canadian art and an essential chapter in Ontario's cultural development.

If any single individual can be called the "father" of the Ontario Collection, it is Egerton Ryerson. This remarkable man is widely acknowledged as the architect of popular education in Canada. Less well known is the role he played in founding the province's major art museums and schools. In



From the contemporary collection: above *Roots* by Daphne Odjig (1979) is one of the best Indian paintings in the collection; below *Red* by Barbara Astman (1980).



executing this task he was a true son of mid Victorian culture.

In the mid-1800s, in both Europe and North America, art was viewed as an indispensable tool in teaching history, literature and culture.

Traditionally, men of breeding finished their studies by making the "Grand Tour" of Classical and Renaissance art in Greece and Italy. Nineteenth-century educators like Ryerson believed that if the masses could not journey to Athens and Florence, they would bring art of these centres of European culture back home to the people. Throughout Europe and North America "educational" museums full of copies of Old Master paintings and plaster casts of antique sculpture were established. To this day, the statuary hall of the world-renowned Victoria and Albert Museum in London, England is full of copies of such masterpieces as Michelangelo's *David*.

In 1855, Ryerson travelled to Europe for the express purpose of bringing back a treasure trove of such copies and casts to Canada. (He purchased 236 copies of Old Master paintings and over 1000 plaster casts of antique statuary.) The booty was installed in the new museum, the Educational Museum of Upper Canada, opened in 1857 and located in the Toronto Normal School.

Like most of Upper Canada's mid-Victorian public figures, Ryerson was essentially a "colonial" who looked to England and Europe as his cultural home. Within a generation, however, Confederation created a new Canada, and Ontario became the centre of a much more mature and self-confident society.

By the 1870s, the government began buying Canadian art for the first time. This second – more "nationalistic" – phase in the history of the Ontario



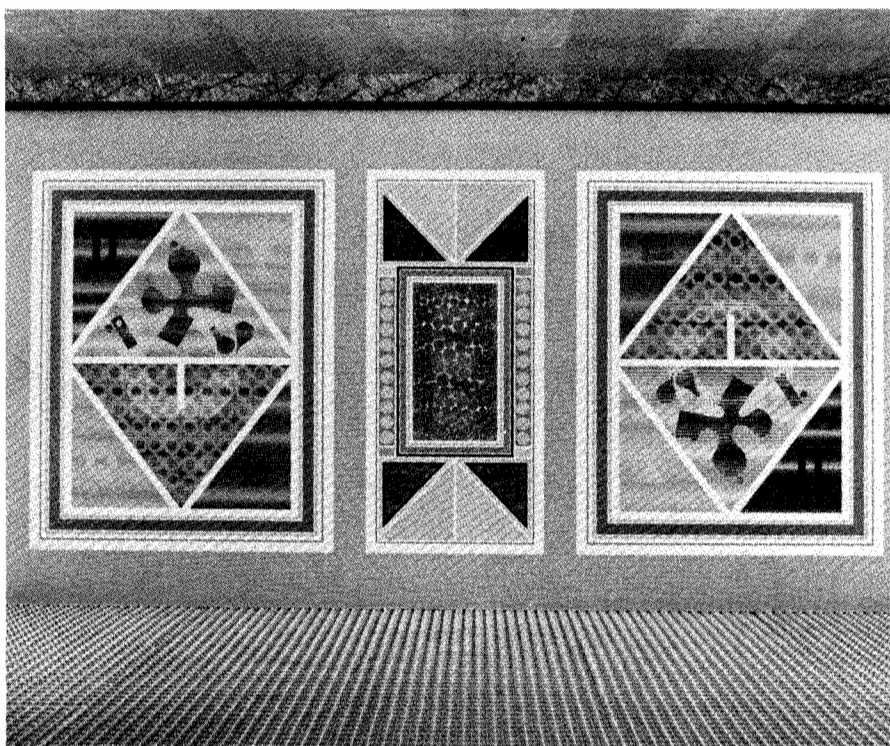
Collection owes its impetus to the successful lobbying efforts of the Ontario Society of Artists. This unique organization of professional artists was formed in Toronto in 1872 to hold annual exhibitions of its membership. Indeed, in late-Victorian Toronto the art world was a "closed shop". To exhibit, it was necessary to be a member of the OSA.

Between 1873 and 1914, the government continued to purchase works from the annual exhibitions of the Society. During this forty-year period an outstanding collection of late nineteenth century Canadian art was acquired. Although many of the artists whose works were acquired never became famous – William Blatchly, Frederick M. Bell-Smith and Robert Gagen, for example – others like the Group of Seven's J.E.H. MacDonald and Arthur Lismer became major figures in the history of Canadian art. These "modern" paintings and watercolours were exhibited at the Educational Museum alongside the collection of copies and casts acquired by Egerton Ryerson years before. Together they constituted the first phase of government art collecting in Ontario.

Fiscal austerity caused by the Great War forced the government to abandon its art acquisition program. New purchases ceased at that time and active collecting did not resume until the 1960s. In the ensuing years there were a few additions, notably the collection of C.W. Jefferys drawings commissioned to illustrate the provincial history text books and the donation of 459 works of art by the artist, George Agnew Reid, in 1944 on the proviso that the majority of them be circulated to the various secondary schools in the province. Such additions were, however, rare and idiosyncratic.

The ending of the active art acquisition program coincided with a period of official neglect of the collection the government already owned. For a sixty-six year period – from 1914 to 1978 – the Ontario Collection lacked any central curatorial control. This neglect actually began with the closing of the art galleries in the Educational Museum in 1912 and the dispersal of Egerton Ryerson's collection and the collection of early Canadian paintings to the six provincial normal schools.

Once they left Toronto the pictures quickly fell into disrepair. No funds were allocated to maintain them. Most were either misplaced, damaged or destroyed. By the middle of the 1970s the government had virtually forgotten



Untitled painting by Harold Town (1968).

All photos courtesy of the Ontario Government Art Collection.

they once owned a significant collection of art.

The final chapter in the story of the Ontario Collection began in the late 1970s when the government, almost by happenstance, put in motion a chain of events that resulted in the rediscovery of the collection.

Curiously, the project was inspired by a group of government auditors. Keen to document the government's art assets, the auditors suggested that an inventory of the pictures at Queen's Park be made. The last such list was completed in 1905. The author was hired to undertake this project.

It quickly became evident that the art at Queen's Park constituted only a small portion of the collection that historical documents suggested the government once owned and I set out to discover the whereabouts of the "lost pictures". Several years of searching uncovered only a fraction of the original collection. Of the 1000 or so works acquired by Ryerson in 1855, only thirty-six remain. Of the several hundred early Canadian pictures bought from the annual exhibitions of the Ontario Society of Artists, only thirty-nine are now in government

hands. Less than two hundred of the four hundred and fifty-nine George Reids remain. The "lost pictures" were found in basements and in closets, in attics and boiler rooms of government buildings and schools across the province. Most of them were in appalling condition.

Since then, all the rediscovered pictures have been painstakingly restored and catalogued. This important legacy of Ontario's cultural history is now on public exhibit in the Legislative Building at Queen's Park. In pure art historical terms, of course, the Ontario Collection is not remarkable in any particular way. But, as a manifestation of a pioneer society's struggle to achieve a cultural maturity, it is a collection of outstanding historical importance. Together with the political portraits at Queen's Park and the contemporary collection housed in government buildings around the province, the "lost pictures" form a corpus of artworks that vividly demonstrate Ontario's cultural development from a colonial outpost to a dynamic centre of Canadian cultural life.