

# “A figure of a nude woman”: Art, Popular Culture, and Modernity at the Canadian National Exhibition, 1927

JANE NICHOLAS\*

*The Art Gallery of the Canadian National Exhibition in Toronto included in its display in 1927 three paintings of nudes. The ensuing debate carried out in newspaper editorials and letters to the editor extended beyond discussion of the paintings themselves to reveal concerns about being modern and negotiating cultural change in the 1920s. Perceived shifts in moral standards, popular culture, and women's bodies were key areas of unease. Issues pertaining to the challenge to established hierarchies and ways of ordering space and identity also became apparent in the discussions of class, gender, and age.*

*Trois peintures de nus étaient exposées dans la galerie d'arts de l'Exposition nationale canadienne de 1927 à Toronto. Leur présence a suscité dans les éditoriaux et les lettres à la rédaction des journaux un débat qui transcendait les peintures proprement dites pour révéler des préoccupations sur la modernité et la négociation du tournant culturel dans les années 1920. L'évolution perçue des mœurs, la culture populaire et le corps de la femme étaient des sujets de malaise. Les questions entourant les défis à l'ordre établi de même qu'aux modes d'aménagement de l'espace et de façonnement de l'identité ont également émergé dans les débats sur la classe, le sexe et l'âge.*

PRIME MINISTER William Lyon Mackenzie King officially opened the 1927 Canadian National Exhibition on August 27. The previous day, King had privately toured the CNE grounds and recorded the following observation in his diary:

\* Jane Nicholas is assistant professor in the Department of History at Lakehead University. The author thanks Wendy Mitchinson, Keith Walden, Cynthia Comacchio, and Jason Churchill for their insights and suggestions on earlier drafts. The author also thanks the editors of the journal, particularly Bettina Bradbury, and the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. Thanks also to Kathryn McPherson for her encouragement.

I was immensely interested in the other buildings as well, went thro' the Art Exhibit. ... Russell had a figure of a nude woman which may be good painting but seemed to me an immoral exhibit & not the kind of thing we should seek to accustom our people to, there was an even worse allegorical painting of two figures which I think should be burned instead of exhibited.<sup>1</sup>

The Prime Minister's reaction to the nude paintings in the Art Gallery was a precursor to a much more public discussion. In 1927 the Canadian National Exhibition included a display of three nudes in its Art Gallery: John Wentworth Russell's *A Modern Fantasy*, George C. Drinkwater's *Paolo and Francesca*, and Rosalie Emslie's *Comfort*.<sup>2</sup> The paintings sparked a controversy that lasted from the opening day to weeks and months after the closing of the gates and resurfaced in the 1930s.<sup>3</sup> These were not the only nudes hanging on the walls of the Fine Art Gallery in 1927, but they were the ones that sparked a contentious debate carried out in newspaper columns and over 100 letters to the editor. Although the majority of the coverage was in Toronto newspapers like the *Evening Telegram*, *Toronto Daily Star*, *Globe*, and *Toronto Telegram*, articles and editorials also appeared in *Saturday Night*, *Canadian Forum*, and *Hush* as well as regional papers like the *Kitchener Record*, *Hamilton Spectator*, and *Vancouver Sun*.

Nude art held (and holds) a simultaneously contentious and prestigious place within the canon of artistic production.<sup>4</sup> It should come as no surprise that Canadians debated its place in a public exhibition, but the nature of the discussion over these particular nudes is significant. On the surface, it may seem obvious that a controversy over nude art would erupt in "Toronto the Good." Yet the complexities of Toronto's urban environment in the 1920s dictate that the debates require a more intricate analysis than that posited by the simple dichotomy of moral Toronto versus nude art. Toronto certainly had a reputation for blue laws, an eager Morality Department, and an active Social Purity movement, but the notion of "Toronto the Good" obscures the self-constructed discourses

1 William Lyon Mackenzie King, *The Mackenzie King Diaries, 1893–1931*, transcript (Toronto, 1973), August 26, 1927.

2 On the paintings, particularly Russell's, see Brian Foss, "Living Landscape," in Rosalind Pepall and Brian Foss, eds., *Edwin Holgate* (Montreal: Museum of Fine Arts, 2005), pp. 46–47; J. Russell Harper, *Painting in Canada: A History*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), pp. 230–233; Paul Duval, *Canadian Impressionism* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1990), p. 70. The locations of all these paintings are unknown. I have not found a reproducible copy of Drinkwater's painting.

3 See, for example, "Morality Men do not Object to C.N.E. Nudes but Art Gallery Refuses to Hang One of Russell's," *Toronto Daily Star*, August 18, 1932, pp. 1, 3.

4 Jerrold Morris, *The Nude in Canadian Painting* (Toronto: New Press, 1972), pp. 3–4. Also informative in regard to the nude is Alison Smith, *The Victorian Nude: Sexuality, Morality and Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996).

of goodness, morality, and purity as well as the diversity of experiences available in the burgeoning urban area.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, the controversy was not just a prudish reaction by a Canadian public (particularly, although not exclusively, Toronto-based) unable to appreciate the artistic qualities of nude art.<sup>6</sup> During the 1920s the CNE’s Art Gallery displayed nudes that received little attention from the press or the public. Other CNE catalogues from the decade contain a number of nude paintings that sparked little discussion.<sup>7</sup> Of the 1927 display, Canadian artist Lawren Harris noted that “there were other nudes on the gallery walls, notably one by the Englishman, Proctor, that was clear, beautiful and unnoticed.”<sup>8</sup> A spokesperson for the Local Council of Women stated, “It isn’t that we object to nude pictures. There are very beautiful nude pictures which anyone should admire. ‘Eve Triumphant’ at the Exhibition last year was a beautiful picture. It was a nude, yet no one could object to it. It is the sensuous nature of the pictures shown this year that makes us want to rule them out.” The “sensuous nature” of the three particular paintings provides a starting point to explore why the controversy erupted in 1927 and the underlying cultural tensions that emerged, but it was not the only issue. The content of the paintings mattered, and so too did the space in which they were hung. The Local Council of Women also objected to their hanging in “such a public place at the Exhibition, where not only art lovers, but all classes and all ages of people, come to see them.”<sup>9</sup> The three factors of content, space, and spectator merged to form the controversy.

The three nudes provided a catalyst for discussion about being modern and the negotiation of cultural change in the 1920s. Through the context of the paintings, gallery-goers and concerned citizens debated a constellation

5 On the fiction of Toronto the Good, as well as a discussion of morality and pleasure in Toronto, see Carolyn Strange, *Toronto’s Girl Problem: The Perils and Pleasures of the City, 1880–1930* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), pp. 13–14 and *passim*. The phrase “Toronto the Good” comes from C. S. Clark, *Of Toronto the Good: The Queen City of Canada as it is* (Montreal: Toronto Publishing Company, 1898; Coles Canadiana Collection, 1970).

6 This idea was suggested in a few of the responses in which writers argued that Canadians were unaccustomed to European artistic sensibilities and implied that this was a good thing, since European culture had become “coarse.” See “The Observer” [pseud.], “Modern Art and the Old Puritanism,” *Toronto Daily Star*, September 22, 1927, p. 6; Lawren Harris, “The Nudes at the C.N.E.,” *Canadian Forum*, vol. 8, no. 85 (October 1927), p. 392. In his classic work on Canadian painting, Russell Harper argues that “puritanical Toronto shuddered” in reaction to the paintings (*Painting in Canada*, p. 232).

7 The only other incident of public protest over paintings in the Art Gallery in the period occurred in 1919, when notable artists and art critics such as P. G. Konody, J. W. Beatty, Arthur Lismer, and J. W. Bengough debated the “cubist monstrosities” depicting the gas attacks of the First World War. See the debates in the *Globe*, August 26, 1919, p. 5; August 29, 1919, pp. 2, 7; September 5, 1919, p. 5; September 8, 1919, p. 6; September 10, 1919, p. 6; September 12, 1919, p. 6.

8 Harris, “The Nudes at the C.N.E.,” p. 391.

9 “Women State Protest Over ‘Nudes’ at Fair,” *Toronto Daily Star*, September 9, 1927, p. 22.

of changes made apparent by the display of the nudes. Perceived shifts in moral standards, popular culture, and women's bodies simultaneously evoked anxiety and pleasure in modern Canada. Issues around the challenge to hierarchies and established ways of ordering space and identity became clear in discussions of class, gender, and age. The debates show the fault lines of the false constructions of high and low cultural forms and spaces (Midway versus Art Gallery, high culture versus popular culture). While it seems that some commentators were still invested in trying to maintain dichotomies, it is clear that these were being challenged. The debate, therefore, was about these deeper cultural shifts and the contested nature of becoming and being modern. The paintings offered an opening for discussion that revealed and crystallized already existing concerns.

In a fragmented and at times contradictory debate, why the paintings were problematic was associated with the very nature of modernity. For Canadians in the 1920s, Marshall Berman's description of modernity rang true. According to Berman, being modern is "to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world — and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are."<sup>10</sup> Modernity was not new to Canadians in the 1920s. Forces of modernization had begun to take shape in the previous century and had accelerated in the twentieth century. Issues of urbanization, industrialization, and immigration had already changed the nation and made an impact on the lives of Canadians. Scientific rationality, faith in technology, and the rise of the expert were being integrated into the social and cultural framework.<sup>11</sup> Yet part of being modern was an inextricable association with the past and the amorphous category of tradition. Anti-modern sentiments pervaded modern discourses, and, despite the promises of progress in the future, being modern meant a constant negotiation with past, present, and future.<sup>12</sup> The debate represented a deep-seated desire for moral standards,

10 Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London: Verso, 1983), p. 15.

11 Keith Walden, *Becoming Modern in Toronto: The Industrial Exhibition and the Shaping of a Late Victorian Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997); John Herd Thompson with Allen Seager, *Canada 1922–1939: Decades of Discord* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1985); Cynthia Comacchio, *Nations Are Built of Babies: Saving Ontario's Mothers and Children, 1900–1940* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993) and "Mechanomorphosis: Science, Management, and 'Human Machinery' in Industrial Canada, 1900–1945," *Labour/ Le Travail*, vol. 41 (Spring 1998), pp. 35–67; Katherine Arnup, *Education for Motherhood: Advice for Mothers in Twentieth-century Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994); Wendy Mitchinson, *Giving Birth in Canada, 1900–1950* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).

12 On the tension between tradition and modernity, see Mary Vipond, "National Consciousness in English-speaking Canada in the 1920s: Seven Studies" (PhD dissertation, University of Toronto, 1974), pp. 3–4; W. L. Morton, "The 1920's," in J. M. S. Careless and R. C. Brown, eds., *The*

which to different commentators seemed to be both terribly outdated and desperately needed.

World War I was a significant turning point in Canadian history and heightened concerns over what Cynthia Comacchio describes as “destabilizing trends of fearsome potential.”<sup>13</sup> In the decade following the war, the cloak of Victorianism, which had begun to slip before the war, continued to be shaken off. For Canadians living in the wake of the Great War, the nature of modernity’s potential for joy and peril intensified debates about the pleasures and problems of being modern. Yet being modern entailed a dialogue with the past, not a clean break from it.<sup>14</sup> As a result, debates over the paintings reveal a dialogue with an idealized memory of the past and nostalgia for traditional ideas that seemed to be under attack. One key point in the discussion was youth, who were frequently spoken about as representing generational conflict and as symbols of the emergence of a new and different era. Youth held a paradoxical position, exemplifying the promise of the future and the problems with the present.<sup>15</sup> The issue of popular culture and the “problem” of youth loomed large in the debates over the paintings, primarily because of the multifaceted connections of youth and a new (more permissive) moral standard. New trends in fashion, leisure pursuits, dating rituals, and more generally popular culture were discussed as both positive and negative features of modern Canada. Leisure could be productive in refreshing workers and contributing to the good of the nation, if properly ordered and controlled. It could, however, have disastrous results, as critics warned that some vulnerable young women were pulled into opium dens and prostitution for the promise of a movie ticket.<sup>16</sup> Canadians’ concerns about the sexualization of modern

---

*Canadians, 1867–1967* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1967), p. 237. On antimodernism, see T. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); Ian McKay, *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-century Nova Scotia* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994).

13 Cynthia Comacchio, *The Dominion of Youth: Adolescence and the Making of Modern Canada, 1920 to 1950* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005), p. 13.

14 Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, trans. Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), p. 4.

15 Comacchio, *The Dominion of Youth*, p. 43.

16 Fear over young women’s safety in the city was part of a racialized moral panic that young, single women entering the cities looking for work were being seduced and degraded by a “foreign element.” For a contemporary source, see “The Problem of the Missing Girl,” *Chatelaine*, March 1929. See also Mariana Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap, and Water: Moral Reform in English Canada, 1885–1925* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1991), pp. 111–112; Strange, *Toronto’s Girl Problem*, pp. 59, 152–157. Emily Murphy’s book *The Black Candle*, which was a collection of *Maclean’s* magazine articles, warned about the potential dangers of miscegenation and the potential threats young women faced as a result of the influence of men of colour. See Emily Murphy, *The Black Candle* (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1922; Coles Canadiana Collection, 1973).

entertainment extended beyond this most fearful situation to the issue of sexual experimentation. Nude art cannot escape associations with sexuality, and this connection helped to transcend the lacunae between “high art” and popular culture. As a result, concerns about modern (im)morality and sexuality percolated through the debates.

In contributing to the Canadian literature on the experience of being modern,<sup>17</sup> this study borrows from two recent and related historiographical “turns” that help to frame the analysis — the pictorial turn and the spatial turn.<sup>18</sup> Historians, theorists, and other scholars have become interested in the history of vision and visual practices.<sup>19</sup> The movement towards visual culture has been both fruitful and fraught with contention.<sup>20</sup> While I borrow from this developing area, I make no claim to be writing art history. I am interested in how the paintings served as a catalyst for the cultural contestation of meaning. My use of visual culture is limited to how the paintings provided a succinct visual forum to spark debate about other intangibles of modernity related to changes in class, gender, and age. These ideas are grounded both historically and in this discussion by social constructions of space. Recently, historians have become interested in the notion of space as historically contingent. In her study of mid-nineteenth-century London, England, Lynda Nead argues that space was “an active agent of modernity.”<sup>21</sup> Here I explore that active shaping of the space of the CNE’s Art Gallery by people and by the things displayed, as well as its power to shape expectations and ideas. At the core of much of this work is theorist Walter Benjamin. In *The Arcades Project*, he argued that the visual opened the door “to discover the crystal of the total event in the analysis of the small, particular moments.”<sup>22</sup> What

17 See, for example, Walden, *Becoming Modern in Toronto*; Len Kuffert, *A Great Duty: Canadian Responses to Modern Life and Mass Culture in Canada, 1939–1967* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2003); Comacchio, *The Dominion of Youth*; Christopher Dummitt, *The Manly Modern: Masculinity in Postwar Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2007).

18 W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), chap. 1; Lynda Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets, and Images in Nineteenth Century London* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), chap. 1. These “turns” reflect the influence of interdisciplinary studies on historical writing, in particular the interest in art history and critical museum theory.

19 The classic work is John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972).

20 The key debates on the emergence of visual culture are “Visual Culture Questionnaire” *October*, vol. 77 (Summer 1996), pp. 25–70.

21 Nead, *Victorian Babylon*, p. 8.

22 Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge: MIT Press [1989] 1991), p. 71. See also Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiederman, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002).

follows is an examination of a “small, particular moment,” read broadly to reveal some of the underlying meanings.

### **The Paintings: Seeing the Taboo?**

Given the concerns over the Americanization of Canadian culture in the 1920s, it is interesting that a controversy should erupt around three nude paintings done by two British artists (Emslie and Drinkwater) and one Canadian artist (Russell, who had been living in Paris since 1905).<sup>23</sup> In the developing Canadian artistic canon, the 1920s were dominated by landscapes of the Group of Seven that were meant to service the higher good of promoting a national spirit.<sup>24</sup> While members of the Group did paint nudes, their landscapes held the artistic imagination of many Canadians who found them a source for a burgeoning cultural nationalism and a collective outlet for antimodern sentiments. Nudes were shown to Canadian gallery-goers, although the genre remained “taboo.”<sup>25</sup> Female nudes in and as landscape more easily fit into the popular artistic sensibilities of the period, but had the potential to be controversial. The three paintings exhibited in 1927 broke away from the body/landscape connection that other Canadian nude painters of the interwar period, like Edwin Holgate, Kathleen Munn, and Prudence Heward, employed.<sup>26</sup> In this regard, the nudes were quite different, as they were not meant as allegories for nation or the land.

When nudes were accepted, it occurred because of the moral oxymoron of the discreetly presented nude. Modernist and realist nudes, especially those that were overtly connected to female sexuality, were apt to raise the ire of critics and patrons.<sup>27</sup> All three paintings had been described as realist in

23 On American culture in Canada, see David H. Flaherty and Frank E. Manning, eds., *The Beaver Bites Back? American Popular Culture in Canada* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993).

24 The historiography of the Group of Seven is prolific. See, for example, Peter Mellen, *The Group of Seven* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1970); Vipond, “National Consciousness in English-speaking Canada,” chap. 8; Douglas Cole, “Artists, Patrons and Public: An Enquiry into the Success of the Group of Seven,” *Journal of Canadian Studies*, vol. 13 (1978), pp. 69–78; Paul H. Walton, “The Group of Seven and Northern Development,” *Revue d'art canadienne/ Canadian Art Review*, vol. 17, no. 2 (1990), pp. 171–179; Lynda Jessup, “Prospectors, Bushwhackers, Painters: Antimodernism and the Group of Seven,” *International Journal of Canadian Studies*, vol. 15 (Spring 1998), pp. 193–216; David Silcox, *The Group of Seven and Tom Thompson* (Richmond Hill, ON: Firefly Books, 2006); Leslie Dawn, *National Visions, National Blindness: Canadian Art and Identities in the 1920s* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 2006). See also Maria Tippett, *Making Culture: English-Canadian Institutions and the Arts before the Massey Commission* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990).

25 Art Gallery of Ontario, *Taboo: The Studio Model in Canadian Art, 1900–1950* (exhibition, 2005).

26 This is not to say that some of the paintings by these artists did not evoke criticism. See Joyce Millar, “The Beaver Hall Group: Painting in Montreal, 1920–1940,” *Woman's Art Journal*, vol. 13, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 1992); Foss, “Living Landscape”; W. H. New, *Land Sliding: Imagining Space, Presence, and Power in Canadian Writing* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997).

27 Millar, “The Beaver Hall Group,” pp. 5–6.

Toronto papers, and the imaging of sexuality was part of all of them. Paolo and Francesca were naked and pinned together by a sword with which Francesca's husband had stabbed them.<sup>28</sup> By far the most contentious painting, Russell's *A Modern Fantasy*, depicted a reclining nude, almost perfectly prone, with an exposed vaginal area (Figure 1).<sup>29</sup> Emslie's painting depicted a strong, muscular woman staring at her own vagina (Figure 2). Images of female sexuality, sensuality, and strength were more likely to cause alarm. The representation of a powerful female sexuality would have been worrisome to a public anxious about sexual activity, from masturbation to sexual experimentation to venereal disease.<sup>30</sup>

In the three nudes displayed in 1927, other troublesome points can be identified. They elided differences between tradition and modernity as

28 From their reaction to the painting, people were quite clearly aware of the tale of Paolo and Francesca, but, even if they had not been, the *Toronto Daily Star* summarized it for readers on the opening day of the CNE. See "Nudes' Hung at Exhibition Likely Cause Controversy," *Toronto Daily Star*, August 27, 1927, p. 22. For the original text, see Dante Alighieri, *Inferno* (New York: Bantam Classics, 1982), Canto 5.

29 *A Modern Fantasy* had already been exhibited in Paris and had been awarded the highest honour at the Spring *Salon de Société des Artistes* earlier in 1927. Although Canadian by birth, Russell had a tenuous association with the Canadian art world. Russell left in 1905 to live and study in Paris and was, by most accounts, a maverick on the Canadian art scene known for his "naturally artistic temperament" and his refusal to join Canadian art societies. In 1932 the *Evening Telegram* described him as "John Russell, a member of nothing, honoured (by request) by nobody." Russell was also decidedly outspoken. (He once insulted the Group of Seven, calling them "the jazz band of art.") The exhibition of his work at the CNE marked a homecoming. See Muriel Miller, *Famous Canadian Artists* (Peterborough: Woodland Publishing, 1983), p. 73; Newton MacTavish, *The Fine Arts in Canada* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1925), p. 118; Duval, *Canadian Impressionism*, p. 70; Harper, *Painting in Canada*, p. 232. On the reclining nude, see Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p. 63; T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers* (New York: Knopf, 1985); Gerald Needham, "Manet, 'Olympia' and Pornographic Photography," in Thomas B. Hess and Linda Nochlin, eds., *Woman as Sex Object: Studies in Erotic Art, 1730–1970* (London: Allen Lane, 1972), pp. 80–89; Thomas Crow, "Modernism and Mass Culture in the Visual Arts," in Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, Serge Guilbaut, and David Solkin, eds., *Modernism and Modernity: The Vancouver Conference Papers* (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1983), pp. 215–264; Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Judy Chicago and Edward Lucie-Smith, *Women and Art: Contested Territory* (New York: Watson-Guptill Publications, 1999), chap. 6.

30 Members of the social purity movement were concerned about venereal disease prior to the 1920s; however, as a result of the First World War, Canadians became increasingly concerned about the spread of venereal disease. Canadian soldiers returned from Europe with the highest rate of venereal disease among Allied forces. The issue was brought to the public's attention through newspaper articles and the government's public knowledge campaign that sought to halt the spread of the diseases. See Jay Cassel, *The Secret Plague: Venereal Disease in Canada, 1838–1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), chap. 6–7; Angus McLaren and Arlene McLaren, *The Bedroom and the State: The Changing Practices and Politics of Contraception and Abortion in Canada, 1880–1980* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1986), chap. 3; Valverde, *The Age of Light Soap, and Water*; Christabelle Laura Sethna, "The Facts of Life: The Sex Instruction of Ontario Public School Children, 1900–1950" (PhD dissertation, University of Toronto, 1995), chap. 2.





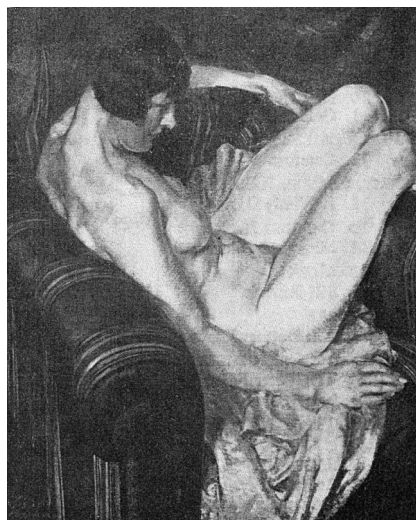
**Figure 1:** John Wentworth Russell's *A Modern Fantasy*, oil on canvas (reproduced from the 1932 *Catalogue of the Exhibition of John Wentworth Russell at the Canadian National Exhibition*). Location of painting unknown.

they combined established artistic practices with new symbols. All of the women had the flapper's modern, bobbed hair. In regard to Drinkwater's painting, one viewer described Francesca as "a flapper, bobbed-hair and blonde of 'the complexion that gentlemen prefer'" who seemed "entirely undisturbed by the assassin's dagger."<sup>31</sup> The painting *Paolo and Francesca*, like the original story, illustrated the fear of seductive texts. The modernization of Francesca suggested a connection between the painting and contemporary concerns over the conspicuous consumption of cheap fiction, theatre, and film.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Russell's painting suggested elements of popular culture and consumption as the woman was surrounded by a number of goods, including china miniatures of a jazz band and dancers. Despite the bobbed hair, neither Russell's nor Emslie's nude was a flapper.<sup>33</sup> *Comfort*, for example, depicts a young

31 The phrasing was originally from an article in the *Evening Telegram*, but was repeated in a letter in the *Globe*. See "Letter Presents Artist's Reply to Toronto's 'Viragoes of Virtue,'" *Evening Telegram*, September 17, 1927, p. 18; Alice Humler, letter to the editor, *Globe*, September 22, 1927, p. 4.

32 See Cynthia Comacchio, "Dancing to Perdition: Adolescence and Leisure in Interwar English Canada," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, vol. 32, no. 3 (Fall 1997), pp. 11–17; Strange, *Toronto's Girl Problem*, pp. 122–127.

33 Emslie's position as a female artist may have made her acceptance as a professional more difficult. Women artists faced formidable challenges in being accepted as legitimate; they were more readily recognized if they painted as a hobby or painted subjects considered appropriate for women, like still life, landscape, or paintings for children's books. Nudes of women painted by women pushed the limits of acceptability because they implied familiarity with anatomy, a relationship to a studio model (women who often existed on the margins of society), or the possibility of a self-portrait. Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (New York: Routledge, 1988), pp. 44–46; Alison Prentice *et al.*, *Canadian Women: A History* (Toronto:



**Figure 2:** Rosalie Emslie's *Comfort*, oil on canvas (reproduced from the 1927 *Catalogue of Fine, Graphic and Allied Arts and Salon of Photography*). Location of painting unknown.

woman with short, dark hair, sitting naked in a club chair with a piece of crumpled fabric underneath her. The woman's body is not the idealized one of a classical nude, or even the idealized body of the flapper. Her neck and shoulders are muscular and defined. Her legs look powerful. The angular lines used by Emslie around her head and shoulders imply a hardness or roughness. Her breasts and stomach, however, reveal a softness of the female body not typical of the angular, sparse physique of the flapper. Despite her bobbed hair, her face looks mature, and her body is not that of the youthful, taut, sharp-angled flapper.

Certainly the artists who made up the Fine Art Committee would have realized the potential for controversy. The Committee, composed of prominent artists and businessmen such as Fred S. Haines, George Agnew Reid, A. H. Robson, and Frederick Hebert Deacon, was a select group of elite men with strong connections to other artistic institutions such as the Art Gallery of Toronto and the Ontario College of Art, as well as the graphic art firm Grip, where members of the Group of Seven got their start as commercial artists. The question remains, however, whether or not the paintings were deliberately selected to generate publicity and increase attendance for the Gallery. In fact, in 1927 the Art Gallery

---

Harcourt Brace, 1996), p. 306; Virginia G. Berry, *Taming the Frontier: Art and Women in the Canadian West, 1880–1920* (Calgary: Bayeux Arts, Inc./ Winnipeg Art Gallery, 2005).

more than tripled the expected attendance and profits, with approximately 158,000 people passing through its doors, spending almost \$16,000.<sup>34</sup> An increase in attendance may have been expected that year, given the special events planned for the celebration of the Diamond Jubilee of Confederation and the growth in attendance at the CNE over the course of the decade.<sup>35</sup> Neither of these factors alone, however, explains the three-fold increase in Gallery attendance. The paintings were seen as the key factor influencing the turnout in 1927. The Ontario Society of Artists described the attendance as “phenomenal partly owing to the newspaper publicity given to paintings to which exception was taken by some of our citizens.”<sup>36</sup>

The newspaper coverage of the paintings began on the first day of the Exhibition, which was not in itself entirely unusual. On the opening day Toronto newspapers discussed the Gallery’s offerings, and one even printed a photograph of Russell’s painting.<sup>37</sup> The difference was that the first strains of controversy were reported immediately, and some newspapers warned that Gallery-goers would find the three nudes offensive.<sup>38</sup> The *Evening Telegram* printed a letter, curiously placed in the main section of the paper rather than on the typical editorial page, in which the author expressed outrage at the Exhibition. The letter, signed “A Father,” argued, “[I]t is obvious that our ‘art leaders’ have nothing to tell our youth that will help them along the road of happy, healthy, helpful, wholesome citizenship.”<sup>39</sup> In the late edition of the *Star*, the editors ran a lengthy article with the headline “‘Nudes’ Hung at Exhibition Likely Cause Controversy: but Art Gallery Committee is standing pat on what it has shown – John Russell’s ‘Modern Fantasy’ Excites Comment.”<sup>40</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly, some sceptical readers, artists, and

34 M. O. Hammond, “Strong Encouragement is Given by Exhibition to All Creative Arts,” *Globe*, August 27, 1927, p. 16. The revenues of the Art Gallery illustrate this point as well. In 1926 the revenues from admission were \$6,134.50 and jumped to \$15,840.20 in 1927. In 1928 revenues fell to \$10,866.90. Canadian National Exhibition Archives [hereafter CNEA], Annual Meeting of the Canadian National Exhibition, February 22, 1928.

35 “All Records Smashed,” *Globe* September 12, 1927, p. 1.

36 Archives of Ontario [hereafter AO], Ontario Society of Artists fonds F1140, Ontario Society of Artists, President’s Annual Report, 1927–1928.

37 Hammond, “Strong Encouragement is Given by Exhibition to All Creative Arts,” *Globe*, August 27, 1927, p. 16; “C.N.E. Pictures this Year Galaxy of High Average,” *Toronto Daily Star*, August 27, 1927, p. 3.

38 The *Toronto Daily Star* described Drinkwater’s painting as one that “censorious people will ask to have turned to the wall” (“C.N.E. Pictures this Year Galaxy of High Average,” *Toronto Daily Star*, August 7, 1927, p. 3).

39 “A Father” [pseud.], “Those Pictures of the Nude at the Exhibition Art Gallery,” *Evening Telegram*, August 27, 1927, p. 21.

40 “‘Nudes’ Hung at Exhibition Likely Cause Controversy: but Art Gallery Committee is standing pat on what it has shown – John Russell’s ‘Modern Fantasy’ Excites Comment,” *Toronto Daily Star*, August 27, 1927, p. 22.

critics accused the newspapers of stirring up “cheap sensationalism” for the Art Gallery.<sup>41</sup>

On September 3 CNE officials responded to the accusation that the box office rush was only due to the nudes. One official was quoted as saying, “We are getting a good class of people in the gallery, not just the seekers after a cheap sensation or a thrill. Our sales of the art catalogue are much greater than ever before. Casual callers who are looking for nudes do not as a rule buy catalogues. The art lovers do.” Within three days of the denial, a conflicting report appeared in a different Toronto newspaper, wherein one official allegedly thanked the paper for printing a reproduction of one of the nudes. He was quoted as saying, “I figure that the publicity given the picture by *The Telegram* was worth at least 30,000 admissions.”<sup>42</sup> Both seem to be plausible responses given the internal tensions of the Fine Art Committee. Sybille Pantazzi has suggested that there were conflicting interests between artists desiring to cultivate public appreciation for art and businessmen wanting sensational works to increase profits.<sup>43</sup> The strict dichotomy may be too neat, but competing interpretations of the purpose of art are apparent.

Given the track record of the CNE, it may be likely that paintings were chosen because they would cause debate and spark people’s desire to see them. Certainly this occurred in 1927, as a number of people admitted in their letters to the editor that they were stirred to see the paintings for themselves after hearing or reading about the controversy. One letter to the editor was particularly revealing, if only for its ironic depiction of the event. The author wrote:

Having seen in the press news about there being in the art gallery at the Exhibition certain pictures of the nude that ought not to be there, I decided to go and see those pictures so that I could decide for myself about them. But imagine my disgust when, on reaching the place, I could not get in owing to the long line of people ahead of me. Those people were going to see those pictures drawn by vulgar curiosity. I went out again the next night about dark but again found the same disgraceful crowding and was unable to get in. . . . It is evident from the way the crowd acted

41 “The Nude in Art and Life,” *Saturday Night*, September 24, 1927, pp. 1–2; “Gene” LeVerne Devore, letter to the editor, *Globe*, September 14, 1927, p. 4; H. I. MacDonald, letter to the editor, *Globe*, September 16, 1927, p. 4; “Honi Soit” [pseud.], letter to the editor, *Evening Telegram*, September 17, 1927, p. 24; Lawren Harris and H. K. Gordon, “The Nudes at the C.N.E.,” *The Canadian Forum*, vol. 8, no. 85 (October 1927), p. 392.

42 “Box Office Rush at ‘Ex’ Art Gallery Not Due to Nude Art, Says Official,” *Toronto Daily Star*, September 3, 1927, p. 19; “Line up Crowds Art Gallery Many Pictures Are Sold,” *Evening Telegram*, September 6, 1927, p. 21.

43 Sybille Pantazzi, “Foreign Art at the Canadian National Exhibition, 1905–1938,” *National Gallery of Canada Bulletin*, vol. 22 (1973).

that we have a large element in the city that is attracted by the coarse and prurient so that a clean minded man can't get near the place.<sup>44</sup>

In another letter, one woman admitted that, after hearing about the exhibit, she marched down to the CNE to see them herself, but then would not let her children go.<sup>45</sup> In trying to attract this sort of publicity, however, the Fine Art Committee risked offending patrons, especially those who frequented the Gallery. The patronage of those attracted merely by the nudes was temporary and, it was assumed, would not necessarily turn into long-term gallery support.

There were other reasons to get people into the Art Gallery, which in the 1920s had seen a decline in both the quality of the art on display and the interest expressed in it.<sup>46</sup> The Art Committee wanted a new gallery to replace its current space, and increased attendance and profits would give a wash of credibility to these demands. Fred S. Haines, a member of the Fine Art Committee and director of the Art Gallery of Toronto, pushed for a new building for the CNE's Art Gallery.<sup>47</sup> The decision in favour of one was made by the Fine Art Committee a month after the closing of the 1926 CNE. The Committee also wished to increase sales of art and expressed concern that the Gallery would not be able to attract artists in the future given the slim chance of selling pieces at the CNE.<sup>48</sup> In the annual report for 1927, attendance at the Gallery was heralded as proof of “the ever increasing appreciation that Art is receiving at the Canadian National Exhibition, and stresses the need for a new gallery.”<sup>49</sup> One letter writer, however, objected to the use of the nudes to garner interest, and ultimately financial support, for a new Gallery. The writer argued, “One thing is certain. The Exhibition directors will not get the taxpayers to vote money for a new Art Gallery so long as the crowded condition is due to the display of ‘nudes’ that so many people are ashamed to be seen looking at except perhaps furtively and

44 “Those Pictures in the Nude,” *Toronto Daily Star*, September 10, 1927, p. 6. See also “An Artist's Daughter” [pseud.], letter to the editor, *Globe*, September 15, 1927, p. 14.

45 “Another Woman” [pseud.], letter to the editor, *Globe*, September 13, 1927, p. 6. See also the response by Thomas C. Rumney, letter to the editor, *Globe*, September 15, 1927, p. 14.

46 In the 1920s the committees involved in selection made a conscious effort to improve the quality of both the foreign and the domestic art shown in the Gallery and to make the art show of interest to the public generally (CNEA, Minutes of the Canadian National Exhibition Graphic and Applied Arts Committee, October 28, 1926).

47 The need for a new Gallery was described by the Ontario Society of Artists as “most urgent.” See Ontario Society of Artists, President's Annual Report, 1927–1928; *Toronto Daily Star*, September 7, 1927, p. 1.

48 CNEA, Minutes of the Meeting of the Fine Arts Committee, October 28, 1926. The motion to attempt to sell more Canadian art was originally passed in 1919 (CNEA, Minutes of the Meeting of the Fine Arts Committee, May 30, 1919).

49 CNEA, Annual Report, 1927.

at a distance.”<sup>50</sup> The 1928 annual report of the CNE noted that the interest expressed in 1927 was sustained in the following year, but in 1928 the Gallery was significantly less crowded, and revenue fell by almost \$5,000.<sup>51</sup>

At the same time, the mere presence of potentially scandalous paintings would not cause such a raucous debate. There had to be a connection between the paintings and the larger cultural atmosphere.<sup>52</sup> The increased attendance suggests that people wanted to see the paintings. Moreover, people wanted to debate what they saw and expressed opinions in letters to the editor. Concerns over the paintings, however, extended beyond the actual images to deeper cultural concerns over shifts in gender, class, and youth culture. This connection between the image and already existing anxieties was further influenced by another factor. Providing the context and important fodder for the debate were ideas related to the multiple spaces with which the paintings were connected.

### **Sites and Sights of the Canadian National Exhibition**

Layers of controversy converged around the issue of space. Never neutral, spaces shaped and were shaped by experiences and ideas. In this case study, space played a key role in fashioning the debate over the paintings on a number of levels. First, the fairgrounds of the Canadian National Exhibition were a unique space in terms of education, order, goals, regulation, and the mixed assemblage of people and places. The CNE was touted as appealing “to all classes and creeds and colors of people” who would all “find something to wonder at, to admire, to appreciate, to enjoy.” This openness, however, was tempered by existing ideas of identity and privilege.<sup>53</sup> Secondly, as part of the CNE, the Art Gallery was shaped and differentiated by its place on the grounds and its relationships to other venues of education and entertainment. Its status as an Art Gallery was mediated by its increased accessibility as part of the fair. As one person described, “[T]he Exhibition art gallery is not an ordinary art gallery visited only by lovers of the beautiful. It is one of the buildings ‘to be done’.”<sup>54</sup> This helps to explain why, when the paintings were moved from the Art Gallery and hung in the Toronto Art Gallery in 1928,

50 “One of Them” [pseud.], letter to the editor, *Toronto Daily Star*, September 8, 1927, p. 6. A similar argument was made by a staff writer for the *Toronto Daily Star* (“New Highway Through Exhibition Means Wrecking of Art Gallery,” *Toronto Daily Star*, September 7, 1927, p. 1).

51 CNEA, Annual Report of the Canadian National Exhibition, 1928; CNEA, Annual Meeting of the Canadian National Exhibition, February 22, 1928.

52 Griselda Pollock, “Beholding Art History: Vision, Place, and Power,” in Stephen Melville and Bill Readings, eds., *Vision and Textuality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 50.

53 “New Novel Features to Help 49<sup>th</sup> C.N.E. Surpass All Records,” *Toronto Daily Star*, August 27, 1927, p. 1. On the complex interplay of identities on the fairgrounds, see Walden, *Becoming Modern in Toronto*, chap. 4.

54 “Art Lover” [pseud.], letter to the editor, *Toronto Daily Star*, August 29, 1927, p. 6.

a staff writer for *Saturday Night* reported that quite possibly the most shocking aspect of this collection was that it no longer shocked the Canadian public.<sup>55</sup> The inner workings of the CNE and its Gallery were ordered by both the “things” and people inside and thus established a particular space for viewing the paintings and voicing concerns. Despite the arguments for the Gallery’s accessibility, interactions in the space were mediated by class and gender as well as by expectations about behaviour. Thirdly, both the CNE and the Art Gallery were associated with other spaces of amusement and concerns over them, particularly as these spaces related to issues of class, gender, and youth. On the grounds of the CNE, the comparison was most often framed as a dichotomy between spaces such as the Art Gallery and the Midway.

American historian Robert Rydell argues that fairs performed a hegemonic function because they replicated the ideals and values of the county’s leaders and offered their ideas as “the proper interpretation of social and political reality.”<sup>56</sup> The social and political reality being publicly promoted at the Canadian National Exhibition was that of moral reform, education, and progress. Organizers of the “Ex” billed the 1927 CNE as:

A panorama of Canadian progress since the early days. It affords opportunity for gathering the latest information regarding progress in all fields of Canadian endeavour and it is the assembling place for the latest achievements in Science, Art, Industry and hosts of other activities that stamp themselves upon the face of Canadian history, a tremendous effort to place before the Canadian people the last and best word in the realm of progress in all that is of interest and concern to every citizen.<sup>57</sup>

The CNE was also likened to an “industrial university.”<sup>58</sup> Organizers of the Exhibition saw their purpose extend beyond highlighting progress and achievement to education and the encouragement of moral standards. This conception of the Exhibition was part of the late-nineteenth-century drive to reform the fair from a space of pleasure and disorder to an educational one. Maintaining a presence into the 1920s at the CNE, the pedagogic impulse helped to spark moments of tension on the fairgrounds. The dialectic between established ideas of moral education and new standards espoused by popular culture seemed in flux, and in 1927 the nudes afforded an opportunity for people to debate these

55 “The Nude in Art and Life,” *Saturday Night*, September 24, 1928, pp. 1–2.

56 Robert Rydell, *All the World’s a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876–1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 2.

57 CNEA, *The Official Catalogue of the Canadian National Exhibition, 1927*.

58 CNEA, *The Annual Meeting of the Canadian National Exhibition*, February 22, 1928.

changes. Education was on the minds of some patrons who questioned what type of ideas the paintings might impart on viewers. One person described Russell's painting as "of such a subtle, daring, grossly indelicate and sensual character, that it cannot fail to do incalculable harm. What a picture for our young people from all parts of Canada visualize and carry home with them!"<sup>59</sup> What type of education and moral standard the CNE was attempting to impart and whether or not, given the accessibility of the Gallery, this was even possible were part of the debate.

In particular, the Art Committee of the CNE was supposed to play an important role in applying the ideas on moral reform and education as well as shoring up cultural hierarchies. One of the changes that had occurred in the decades before the controversy was the separation of art from the rest of the fair. At the turn of the twentieth century, the establishment of an Art Gallery was part of a middle-class drive to create a space that would provide inspiration for morality, decency, idealism, and beauty. Art had been part of the Exhibition since the incorporation of the Toronto Industrial Exhibition in 1879, and in 1902 the Art Gallery was separated from commercial exhibitions and, thanks to the ambition of the Ontario Society of Artists, had its own building erected. In 1905 a more permanent, fireproof structure was constructed. Both galleries were built with inspiration from classical Greek styles, an architectural representation of "high culture." The close connections between the CNE, the Ontario Society of Artists, and the Art Museum of Toronto suggest that the CNE's Art Gallery was at least a moderately significant place to exhibit.<sup>60</sup> One of the central thrusts in the move to separate art from practical objects was the increasingly popular idea that art could serve a social role as a civilizing force that underscored elite leadership and taste. Further, art served as a moral force, lifting the viewers from a preoccupation with their appetites and focusing on developing their spiritual character. It is not a coincidence, then, that, as the new Gallery was being constructed, the Midway was being moved from a central location to the periphery of the fairgrounds with its own separate entrance.<sup>61</sup> The separation of art from the Midway served a greater goal of showcasing differences between divertissements and the products of and for material and moral progress. Yet, as Tony Bennett argues, the sensational and raucous carnival haunted Gallery spaces, as the two were historically

59 "A Woman" [pseud.], letter to the editor, *Globe*, September 9, 1927, p. 4.

60 Art galleries were important institutions that reflected cultural standards and had been re-ordered in the late nineteenth century as spaces where middle-class ideals and values could be transmitted to other classes (Walden, *Becoming Modern in Toronto*, pp. 239–242). See also Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 28. On the construction of the CNE's art galleries, see Walden, *Becoming Modern in Toronto*, pp. 242, 287–288; Pantazzi, "Foreign Art at the Canadian National Exhibition," pp. 1–3.

61 Walden, *Becoming Modern in Toronto*, pp. 287–288.



related.<sup>62</sup> The Midway did seem to haunt the Gallery space and the minds of its patrons in 1927. As much as organizers desired the Art Gallery to be a space of self-improvement based on middle-class standards, it could never entirely live up to this claim. Rife with contradictions, the CNE grounds were far less a space of social control and far more one of ongoing negotiation and ambiguity.<sup>63</sup> The frequent comparison between the Midway and the Art Gallery allows for an exploration of the expectations and the contradictions.

The debate over space revealed tension between areas on the fairground and the educational goals of the CNE. While the distinction between the two spaces was frequently troubled in practice, the divide remained sharp in some fair-goers' minds and they continued to expect differences. When the lines seemed blurred by the nudes, they spoke out. One writer cheekily suggested that Midway operators be in charge of choosing next year's paintings since the Fine Art Committee had selected "circus pictures."<sup>64</sup> Others pointed out the apparent shift in space on the fairgrounds as it related to class. One person questioned whether, given the lack of censorship in the Art Gallery and the ostensibly perpetual surveillance of the Midway, there was a different artistic law for the rich and for the poor.<sup>65</sup> Under the headline of "An Exhibition Mistake," the editor of the *Globe* commented, "If these works of art had been exhibited in a Midway booth at ten cents a view, as they were in the Art Gallery under the auspices of the Exhibition management, the place would have been closed within five minutes."<sup>66</sup> D. McTavish, writing on the opening day of the CNE, expressed shock that the "blot on the C.N.E." was to be found in the Art Gallery and not (as usual) on the Midway.<sup>67</sup> The contention that there was a different standard for the Midway and the Art Gallery was true. In spite of all the rhetoric about education and morality, the fair was also a place of amusement. Different spaces sought to achieve these

62 Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, p. 3.

63 Stephen Bann has challenged Bennett's interpretation of the museum as a disciplinary institution and instead argues it is more a space of multiple understandings. See Stephen Bann, "Art History and Museums," in Mark A. Cheetham, Michael Ann Holly, and Keith Moxey, eds., *The Subjects of Art History: Historical Objects in Contemporary Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 230–249. Also important in this regard, although on a slightly different subject, is Ruth B. Phillips, *Trading Identities: The Souvenir in Native North American Art from the Northeast, 1700–1900* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998), p. 69. My reading of the evidence is informed by Bennett's work as well as Bann's challenge, since the space of the CNE demands recognition of a multiplicity of people and areas.

64 Norman Harris, "'Circus' Pictures at Exhibition, People Say Nudes Poor Taste," *Evening Telegram*, September 3, 1927, p. 8.

65 "Those Pictures of the Nude at the Exhibition Art Gallery," *Evening Telegram*, August 27, 1927, p. 21.

66 Editorial, *Globe*, September 10, 1927, p. 14.

67 D. McTavish, letter to the editor, *Globe*, August 30, 1927, p. 4.

goals in diverse ways, were oriented to supposedly altered expectations, and had their own standards of behaviour.

As Walden argues, urban space was delineated by class, as the middle classes sought “to quarantine problematic social groups, isolate unpleasant activities, and insulate their own territories from competing sources of power.”<sup>68</sup> Although the Exhibition was advertised as open to everyone, there were limits and certainly different disciplinary orders at work. As Peter Stallybrass and Allon White argue, “each ‘site of assembly’ constitutes a nucleus of material and cultural conditions which regulate what may and may not be said, who may speak, how people may communicate and what importance must be given to what is said.”<sup>69</sup> While rigorous definitions of class and space were crossed by people who ventured into all corners of the fair, specific definitions and accompanying codes of decorum applied in different areas. Visitors were welcome to the Gallery if, for the most part, their viewing practices and behaviour matched the established middle-class standard. With the popularity of the nudes, this standard was often challenged. In letters to the editor, visitors who had once claimed the Art Gallery as their place of reprieve from the chaos of the Exhibition grounds now argued that the Gallery was crowded and, perhaps more to the point, distressing. The *Evening Telegram* reported that people expecting their “quiet half hour” in the Art Gallery this year would be disappointed, since “long after the hour when the doors of the gallery are usually closed, a line-up four deep” remained. It was not, the paper reported, the “usual crowd of art lovers.”<sup>70</sup> A *Globe* editorial succinctly described the shift, noting the “long queues of cigarette-smoking youths and giggling girls who stood in line daily to see paintings which to most of them must have been merely pictures.”<sup>71</sup> Concerns about young members of the working classes viewing the paintings simply as a quick pleasure were repeated in countless letters. The Toronto Local Council of Women also protested the hanging of two of the nude pieces in the Art Gallery. The Council did not wish to debate the artistic merits of the paintings, but objected on the grounds that they were hung in a public place where “mixed classes” could view them. The Council argued that the paintings were too accessible for “children and adolescent youth and scoffing and sneering people with no artistic sense [who] could pass in for a dime.”<sup>72</sup> An anonymous writer to the editor of the *Globe* who appreciated the art still did not

68 Walden, *Becoming Modern in Toronto*, p. 245.

69 Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 80.

70 “Public Display Unusual Interest in ‘Art’,” *Evening Telegram*, September 2, 1927, p. 24.

71 Editorial, *Globe*, September 10, 1927, p. 14.

72 “Council of Women Protests Hanging of Nude Paintings,” *Globe*, September 15, 1927, p. 14; “Women State Protest Over ‘Nudes’ At Fair,” *Toronto Daily Star*, September 9, 1927, p. 22.

want any more nudes hung, so as to protect the art from the “sacrilege” of the “vulgar gaze of people who do not understand even the rudiments of art.”<sup>73</sup> As another letter writer suggested, the Gallery should attract a certain class of “people of the finer type in which the intellectual and the moral and spiritual faculties predominate and the grosser physical qualities are not so much in evidence.”<sup>74</sup>

One means of regulating the space was the price of admission. Although art was supposed to uplift the masses, it was not one of the free exhibits. The admission charge of ten cents to the Gallery was the same as or less than for displays on the Midway and half the price of unlimited Midway rides. While the ten-cent fee was not unduly prohibitive, it did suggest a shift in space, and the price of admission played an important, though largely symbolic, role. Only those with the necessary money and the willingness to spend it had the privilege of looking. The charge forced fair-goers to decide where to spend their sometimes limited resources as the Art Gallery competed with other spectacles, vendors, and spaces. Visitors to the fair were well aware that the Art Gallery at the CNE was different from other galleries in the city exactly because of the eclectic composition of people who gathered at the “Ex.” In a letter to the editor, one writer complained that in the past the “nominal” fee was enough that very few people took advantage of the opportunity to visit the Gallery. This year, the writer noted, the gallery was crammed with people from “whom one would never expect either a knowledge or appreciation of art in any form.” These people simply wanted to be directed to the nudes and were willing to spend their dime to see them.<sup>75</sup>

The issue of class was closely tied to gender as well. One “Indignant Mother” wrote, “One glance at those pictures was sufficient, I hung my head in shame and made a hasty retreat. There were young boys there about sixteen, and scores of men jeering and laughing and making rude remarks. Were they lovers of art, think you?”<sup>76</sup> Another woman reported that she decided to leave the Gallery when she realized that there were few if any other women there.<sup>77</sup> According to the Local Council of Women, the potential danger for women provoked by men viewing the nudes was real. The Council argued it could and did lead to aggression against women. In an appeal to the President of the CNE, one woman argued that “after a somewhat similar picture had been shown in Toronto some years ago

73 “An Artist’s Daughter” [pseud.], letter to the editor, *Globe*, September 15, 1927, p. 4.

74 “Characterologist” [pseud.], letter to the editor, *Toronto Daily Star*, September 25, 1927, p. 6.

75 “Public Display – Unusual Interest in ‘Art,’” *Evening Telegram*, September 2, 1927, p. 24.

76 “An Indignant Mother” [pseud.], letter to the editor, *Globe*, September 12, 1927, p. 4. The letter called on “mothers” to do something about the exhibition of the nudes.

77 “School Marm” [pseud.], letter to the editor, *Evening Telegram*, September 10, 1927, p. 16. See also Harper, *Painting in Canada*, p. 232.

there were a number of offences against women.”<sup>78</sup> The concern expressed by “Indignant Mother” and the Local Council of Women reveals two issues related to the construction of space. First, the Art Gallery was a space defined by class and gender. Secondly, it was an area that shared a particular, although not unique, social and cultural logic around looking. These two issues need to be explored further in relation to the Gallery and its counterpoint on the fairgrounds — the Midway.

Some of the concern expressed by the women pertained to the underlying fact that cultural institutions like the Art Gallery relied in part on women’s alleged moral influence in constructing the space as a pedagogic one. Women, in particular white, middle-class women, were expected to bring a level of decorum and a civilizing force to the gallery since the space itself was meant to be open to a wide scope of social classes.<sup>79</sup> Their influence, it was hoped, would allow others to learn from and emulate the women’s “proper” behaviour. This idea was premised on the fact that women would find the space conducive to their sensibilities as “respectable” women.<sup>80</sup> In 1927 the presence of the three nudes chafed against this construction. When women reported boys’ and men’s disruptive behaviour around them or fled the Gallery when they realized it was crowded with men, this response signalled a potential shift in the construction of the space and its purpose. Laughing and jeering at nude images was far more suited to rough, male, working-class culture than that associated with the social logic of the Art Gallery.<sup>81</sup> The desire to create an educational space where the civilizing force of the middle class could be imparted to others was potentially placed in jeopardy if the nudes, more often than not, attracted people who broke those conventions.

Underlying the claim to space was the varied nature of looking in the Gallery. Ostensibly art was the main attraction, but bodies, intentionally or unintentionally on display, were intriguing. Some women in the Art Gallery expressed concern about potentially becoming the object of

78 “Women State Protest Over ‘Nudes’ At Fair,” *Toronto Daily Star*, September 9, 1927, p. 22.

79 On women, respectability, art, and exhibition culture in the nineteenth century, see E. A. Heamann, *The Inglorious Arts of Peace: Exhibitions in Canadian Society during the Nineteenth Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), pp. 263–264. On the symbolic role of white, middle-class women in wider culture, see Sarah Carter, *Capturing Women: The Manipulation of Cultural Imagery in Canada’s Prairie West* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1997).

80 Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, pp. 28–30.

81 On working-class culture, see Bryan Palmer, *Working Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800–1991*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1992); Lynne Marks, *Revivals and Roller Rinks: Religion, Leisure, and Identity in Late-Nineteenth-century Small-town Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996); Karen Dubinsky, *Improper Advances: Rape and Heterosexual Conflict in Ontario, 1880–1929* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Craig Heron, *Booze: A Distilled History* (Toronto: Between the Lines Press, 2003), and “The Boys and their Booze: Masculinities and Public Drinking in Working-class Hamilton, 1890–1946,” *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 86, no. 3 (September 2005), pp. 446–452.

other people’s — especially men’s — attention in the same space where sensuous nudes were hanging. The crowded nature of the fair, which mimicked that of the growing Canadian urban landscape and the diversity of people in attendance, meant that looking at other people was a necessity that could be pleasurable or dangerous. Yet looking did not escape social construction in relation to who held power. Class, gender, and age played an important role in defining the social and cultural dynamics of looking.<sup>82</sup> The expectation that middle-class women’s behaviour would be watched and mimicked assumed that they would be studied respectfully as opposed to being leered at. After all, ogling semi-nude and scantily clad women’s bodies was most acceptable on the Midway, where lines of race, class, and gender established different hierarchies of who could look and who was the object of that look.<sup>83</sup> These subtle shifts in looking reflect that seeing, like space, was not neutral.<sup>84</sup>

Appetites of all kinds were encouraged and satiated on the Midway. Despite continuing efforts to clean it up, the Midway remained a space where “low” culture was experienced and social and cultural norms were tested.<sup>85</sup> As a low form of entertainment that was physically and psychologically separated from the middle-class attractions and ideals of progress, it stood in stark contrast to the well-ordered exhibitions of farm machinery, new and useful household products, or the history of Canada spectacle in the grandstand.<sup>86</sup> It was an educational space, but it employed other methods and had marked differences. Despite the challenges it presented, the Midway remained a necessity. People expected such amusement, and it provided substantial amounts of money for the CNE.<sup>87</sup>

82 For earlier incarnations of this dynamic at exhibitions, including the CNE, see Heaman, *The Inglorious Arts of Peace*, pp. 262–264; Walden, *Becoming Modern in Toronto*, p. 154. For an exploration into the history of looking in a different Canadian context, see Lianne McTavish, “Learning to See in New Brunswick, 1862–1929,” *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 87 no. 4 (December 2006), pp. 553–581.

83 Walden, *Becoming Modern in Toronto*, pp. 157–158.

84 The history of visibility has become a significant scholarly area richly engaged with various theoretical perspectives from Freud to feminism. The literature is too numerous to list here. Following the seminal work of Jonathan Crary, it has also added a significant amount to the history of the body and the embodiment of sight in the nineteenth century. See, for example, Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990); Teresa Brennan and Martin Jay, eds., *Vision in Context: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Sight* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Lynda Nead, “Strip: Moving Bodies in the 1890s,” *Early Popular Visual Culture*, vol. 3 no. 2 (September 2005), pp. 135–150.

85 In advertisements throughout the 1920s, the CNE suggested that the Midway had been cleaned up by using the line “nothing to offend.” See, for example, the advertisement from the *Evening Telegram*, August 31, 1920, p. 17. On the carnival menace, see Tina Loo and Carolyn Strange, “The Travelling Show Menace: Contested Regulation in Turn-of-the-Century Ontario,” *Law and Society Review*, vol. 29, no. 4 (1995), pp. 639–667.

86 “New Novel Features to Help 49<sup>th</sup> C.N.E.,” *Toronto Daily Star*, August 27, 1927, p. 28.

87 Auditor’s reports show the receipts from the Midway as estimated to be worth \$69,000 to \$81,000 for the CNE. This would not include what the contracted shows themselves would make. Johnny J. Jones

The Midway, with entertainment features like the “two-headed cow positively alive” and the semi-nude, grossly obese woman, was the place where people went to gawk at “unusual” bodies on display, to look at the exotic, and to experience the raucous, and sometimes aggressive, carnival.<sup>88</sup> Part of the culture of the carnival was the acceptability of staring at bodies. In freak shows, commercial displays, and public performances, bodies were deliberately used for entertainment or advertising. On the Midway, different bodies or the bodies of racial “Others” were the most frequently viewed. In particular, women existed as part of the spectacle associated with freak shows, amusements, or commercial exhibitions, where the semi-nude or fully nude body was used in exotic and erotic spectacles. These sexualized and racialized performances sought to reaffirm dominant constructions about gender, race, and ethnicity. Available for visual consumption were scantily clad women in girl shows or diving beauties who performed acrobatic tricks in bathing suits for money. Earlier shows highlighted performers such as the “Arabian girl,” the “Nautch girls,” and “hootchie coochie” performances.<sup>89</sup>

Nude art had also appeared as a sideshow amusement. Astley Cooper’s painting of Trilby was on display in 1900 and elicited comment from one female visitor who expressed concern about the men leering at the painting.<sup>90</sup> Earlier in the 1920s, the Midway included a nude painting entitled *Stella*, which could be seen as a pay-per-view exhibit.<sup>91</sup> These types of displays sometimes caused public protest. Walden argues that sideshow

---

stated that the CNE receipts for his company were expected to be worth over \$100,000. See CNEA Auditor’s Report, Midway File; *Billboard*, January 25, 1919 and September 6, 1919.

88 See the advertisement in *Globe*, September 2, 1927, p. 2.

89 On sideshows and freak shows, see Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Robert Rydell, *World of Fairs: The Century-of-Progress Expositions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 135–146; Benjamin Reiss, *The Showman and the Slave: Race, Death and Memory in Barnum’s America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Rachel Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Linda Frost, *Never One Nation: Freaks, Savages, and Whiteness in U.S. Popular Culture, 1850–1877* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005). For discussion in the Canadian context, see Heamann, *The Inglorious Arts of Peace*, p. 269; Walden, *Becoming Modern in Toronto*, pp. 269–274. On women’s performances in sideshows and midways in Canada, see A. W. Stencell, *Girl Show: Into the Canvas World of Bump and Grind* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1999).

90 Walden, *Becoming Modern in Toronto*, p. 270.

91 To view the painting, which was advertised in the *Globe*, one paid the fee and entered a darkened tent where the painting was hung at the far end. *Stella* was a painting of a life-sized, nude, blonde-haired, blue-eyed woman reclining on her right side. The Jones Exposition described *Stella* as “the world’s most perfectly formed woman.” *Stella* is mentioned in advertisements and reports about Johnny J. Jones in *Billboard Magazine*; see, for example, *Billboard*, January 25, 1919, p. 75; July 5, 1919, p. 67. The Johnny J. Jones Exposition had most of the contracts for the CNE Midway throughout the 1920s as it was on contract in 1919 and 1920 and from 1923 to 1927. On which company was awarded the Midway contract during the 1920s, see CNEA, Midway File.

controversies relating to immoral exhibitions cropped up when traditional constructions of middle-class identity were challenged. The controversies revealed the beginnings of a subtle and contested social shift from character and restraint as the defining qualities of the middle class towards “pleasure, expression, and consumption.”<sup>92</sup> In some ways the 1927 controversy continued this trend, and the idea of “pleasure, expression, and consumption” could well describe how people felt about popular culture in the 1920s. As with all changes in social logic, however, this shift happened unevenly and, in relation to the nude art, continued to spark public debate in the cultural milieu of the 1920s when working-class culture was increasingly becoming part of the popular culture enjoyed by the middle classes. In 1927, however, one important difference made this controversy unlike the earlier ones: it erupted not in regard to a sideshow exhibition, but rather to the art hung in the Gallery. To some, the cheap thrills of the Midway had made their way into the Art Gallery.

The threads of debate related to space, education, class, and gender were revealed in one particular lengthy letter to the editor. On September 13 “Stenographer” wrote to the *Globe*, bringing into sharp relief some of the concerns in reaction to Russell’s painting. The writer identified herself as a young, working, educated woman and made a conscious effort to define herself as someone with good moral standing. According to her letter, she was “pure-minded” and did not typically patronize the Midway. Earlier in the decade, however, the writer and a friend saw the pay-per-view nude painting *Stella* on the Midway. Only with hesitation had they gone into the tent. Upon gazing at *Stella*, “Stenographer” was

spellbound. . . . The golden ringlets, the dancing life in the blue eyes, the dimples, the lips that looked as though they were just about to speak to us, the pretty, pretty hands and shapely feet — and the absolute innocence and naturalness of her, just held us breathless — never had I looked upon such loveliness, such beauty of body, but even far more striking, the beauty of the young girl’s soul and spirit that shone at us. A lump in my throat and my thoughts were something like this: “Oh, what glorious beauty! Could any woman be so altogether lovely? Surely only God could make such beauty, and if God made her then He is indeed to be worshipped, humbly and adoringly.” I was filled with delight and reverence and cried out: “That — that — is art!”

It seems that the two young women had an almost religious experience being “spellbound” by *Stella*’s beauty. Not only was *Stella* inspiring; she inspired moral and religious thoughts. Upon hearing about the paintings

92 Walden, *Becoming Modern in Toronto*, pp. 278–279.

in the Gallery in 1927, “Stenographer” decided to see them, hoping to have a similar experience. She was disappointed. *A Modern Fantasy* was

Simply the naked body of a young woman, shapely and most beautifully tinted and shaded, it is true but where was the soul and the inspiration? Utterly lacking — in fact, the first sight of that picture sent such a bolt of horror through my being that my heart actually tightened, and I just longed to rush forward with a knife and rip it to shreds — I even wondered if the nail-file in my purse would do the job — but, like the others, I merely turned quietly away, for was I not, after all, in the Art Gallery?

Whereas *Stella* was ennobling and uplifting and gave “grace to live better and purer lives,” *A Modern Fantasy* was “so lewd that even the cushions and the silk coverlet seemed to shriek licentiousness.”<sup>93</sup> In her comparison of the two paintings, purity and grace were on the Midway, and the dirty picture was in the Art Gallery. Similarly, others described the art as muck, unclean, low, or “art in a mud hole,” and “Father” described the woman in the painting as “indolent, luxurious, naked and unashamed . . . lounging, lolling, frenzied, dead, freak postured.”<sup>94</sup> The dichotomy between “high art” and what was essentially a girl-show image was upset. The psychic inversion of space revealed the related social hierarchies as well as the difficulties in regulating spaces and the need for constant policing. The Midway could be pedagogic and spiritually uplifting, and the Art Gallery could appeal to low and basic impulses. The items on display continued to shape the space and its purpose. Yet the constructions of space did not completely collapse, as “Stenographer” revealed her own suppression of the violent impulse to destroy the painting.

Despite the sense of outrage, not all viewers were concerned about the apparent collapse of the Gallery/Midway dichotomy, and some upheld the dichotomy by extolling the virtues of the Gallery in contrast to the morally troubling Midway displays. In defence of the paintings, a writer chastised a *Globe* editorial, arguing that it had conflated the two spaces, which, quite clearly to the writer, remained very different.<sup>95</sup> One man argued that people should turn their attention away from the Art Gallery and focus it on the Midway, which in his opinion had none of the redeeming qualities of education, artistic merit, or social value. To him, the Midway was a place where “the hideous deformities of both man and beast are open for public inspection; half nude dancing girls, without art as an alibi, performing at

93 “Stenographer” [pseud.], letter to the editor, *Globe*, September 17, 1927, p. 4.

94 D. McTavish, letter to the editor, *Globe*, August 30, 1927, p. 4; “A Mother” [pseud.], letter to the editor, *Globe*, September 8, 1927, p. 4; “Father” [pseud.], letter to the editor, *Evening Telegram*, August 27, 1927, p. 21.

95 Jas. W. Hird, letter to the editor, *Globe*, September 16, 1927, p. 4.



the bidding of the public, and so on.”<sup>96</sup> One letter to the editor juxtaposed the beauty of the woman’s body in *A Modern Fantasy* to the “disgusting” freak show bodies. To “An Artist’s Daughter,” the paintings belonged in the Gallery because they displayed beauty, unlike the 400-pound side-show performer Chrissie, who had “masses of superfluous flesh.”<sup>97</sup> The passionate arguments on both sides revealed the disparate feelings about the spaces and bodies, but more than likely many patrons of the CNE, like “Stenographer,” visited both the Midway and the Art Gallery. Since the end of the nineteenth century, the middle classes were increasingly comfortable with such commercial entertainment, but there remained limits (always shifting and uneven) that were still carefully patrolled by consumers like “Stenographer.” Nonetheless, different behaviour was expected in diverse places. Space was important in delineating the controversy at the same time as it helped to frame a second aspect of it. Modern anxieties about class, gender, and popular culture emerged in the debate.

### **Art, the Gallery, and Popular Culture**

Some of the tensions and fears over the perceived direction in modern culture were funnelled into the discussion of the nudes. The concerns, however, were related to a widely debated issue of the 1920s: popular culture.<sup>98</sup> From the flapper and movies, to beauty contests and fashion, to marathon dancing and motoring, the increasingly youth-based culture received a significant amount of attention from prominent cultural commentators, parents, and concerned citizens.<sup>99</sup> The conception of an enjoyable and dangerous popular culture played a key role in the extension of the debates from the Gallery to other areas. In these discussions, ideas of class, gender, and age played an important role in outlining the possibilities, pleasures, and anxieties.

Citing Michel Foucault, Tony Bennett in *The Birth of the Museum* draws attention to the museum as a heterotopia, or space where other cultural

96 Rentoul Castell, letter to the editor, *Globe*, September 22, 1927, p. 4.

97 “An Artist’s Daughter” [pseud.], letter to the editor, *Globe*, September 15, 1927, p. 14. The implicit and highly problematic assumption here is that thinness is an aspect of beauty.

98 I use this term recognizing that it is contested, difficult to define succinctly, and caught up with other terms like mass culture. In using popular culture, I mean to extend the concept beyond the products of culture to the ideas and application of these ideas. See Paul Rutherford, “Made in America: The Problem of Mass Culture in Canada,” in Flaherty and Manning, eds., *The Beaver Bites Back*, p. 260; Kuffert, *A Great Duty*, pp. 16–17. See also Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson, *Rethinking Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

99 Comacchio, *The Dominion of Youth*, chap. 6; Strange, *Toronto’s Girl Problem*, chap. 6; Allan Levine, *The Devil in Babylon: The Fear of Progress and the Birth of Modern Life* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2005), pp. 298–304. On aspects of this, see also Jarrett Rudy, *The Freedom to Smoke: Tobacco Consumption and Identity* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2005), chap. 6.

institutions “are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted.”<sup>100</sup> The images, and how the public read them in the context of the cultural debates of the 1920s, allowed the controversy to spread from its original context to other areas. The contested nature of popular culture, particularly as it related to class, gender, and youth, became apparent as letter writers drew connections between the three nudes and what they saw as worrisome changes. The controversy extended from the Art Gallery to the streets, theatres, and fashion shows as arenas of popular culture and consumption.

Concerns over class, gender, and youth reflected two issues related to the art museum as heterotopia. Implied and made explicit in letters to the editor were changes in the realm of popular culture and their effect on participants. Writers underscored changes in the way people saw and reacted to the paintings. In short, they identified changes in the “ways of seeing” in relation to the people and things around them in the Gallery and, more broadly, in popular culture.<sup>101</sup> Writers who defended the paintings noted how curious it was that, in an era of allegedly loosened sexual mores and a sexualized popular culture, such paintings caused controversy at all. A columnist for the *Toronto Daily Star* questioned whether “a generation accustomed to the modern dance, public or private, to beauty contests, or even the accepted bathing attire, finds much in any genuinely artistic picture to shock or even startle it.”<sup>102</sup> The very fact that a generation of Canadians might be used to this type of display and not be shocked by it was in itself a problem. John Wentworth Russell responded to a reporter who asked him about the effect his painting might have on the morality of youths by asking, “Did you ever see anything more sophisticated than the young people of to-day?”<sup>103</sup>

Sophistication was a problem that relates to the pressing question of what made these images so potentially dangerous in the eyes of some viewers. After all, the paintings were simply “the exposure of an inanimate figure on a two-dimensional picture.”<sup>104</sup> The answer lies in the Gallery space as it reflected broader issues related to modern popular culture, which had seeped into the Art Gallery. The art, some writers argued, needed to be protected from the “sophisticated” minds of youth. John C. Reade, writing to defend exhibition of the paintings, made it quite clear that the problem was not the art but those who looked at it. He pointed out that, to “the vast army of tolerant and serenely minded

100 Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, p. 1.

101 Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p. 9.

102 H. Paulin, letter to the editor, *Toronto Daily Star*, September 17, 1927, p. 6; “The Observer” [pseud.], “Modern Art and the Old Puritanism,” *Toronto Daily Star*, September 22, 1927, p. 6.

103 “Why Make Vulgarly and Divine Thing?” *Toronto Daily Star*, September 8, 1927, p. 16.

104 Alice Hulmer, letter to the editor, *Globe*, September 22, 1927, p. 4.

people,” the paintings were “a natural subject produced with skill and honesty.” In the distorted minds and “erotic and sensuous imaginations of callow youths,” however, these pictures became an affront to womanhood.<sup>105</sup> As Cynthia Comacchio points out, “Discussions about modern youth made constant reference to the special attraction that mass culture, actuated by modern technology, held out to the young, who were more modern than their parents could ever hope to be. Critics worried that young Canadians were being sucked into the intensely materialistic, commercialized, immoral/amoral vortex of modernity.”<sup>106</sup> A key concern was that modern popular culture from Europe and especially the United States was warping the minds of Canadian youth. How could a generation raised on salacious popular culture appreciate the finely skilled artistic qualities of the apogee of painting? Main Street had come to Canadian culture in the forms of dime novels, jazz, movies, dancing, and beauty contests and was trapping youth in a debauched world.<sup>107</sup> Concerned citizens complained that homes and schools were no longer the moral training ground for youth. Now movies, amusement parks, and dance halls educated young Canadians in ways that seemed to run counter to traditional Canadian values. Further, traditional venues for moral education like the Art Gallery of the CNE now seemed to be taking a dangerous turn.<sup>108</sup> Implicit (and occasionally explicit) in these judgements was that some too-permissive parents, but especially mothers, were no longer doing their duty in raising the next generation of citizens.<sup>109</sup>

Of particular concern in the debates were young women, for what they represented both in the paintings and to the nation. As a group, but especially working-class women, they were paradoxically presented as vulnerable and too sophisticated. In displaying these paintings at this time, the Art Committee tapped into public fears echoed in newspapers and magazines that young women were treading a dangerous path in the name of fun, bringing them farther away from the traditional areas of family, church, school, and community. Building from trends that began at the end of the nineteenth century, modern life offered new venues for work, play, and fashion. New clothing styles were touted as giving women more freedom and opportunity to engage in various leisure activities,

105 John C. Read, letter to the editor, *Globe*, September 15, 1927, p. 14.

106 Comacchio, *The Dominion of Youth*, pp. 167. See also Comacchio, “Dancing to Perdition.”

107 H. Paulin, letter to the editor, *Toronto Daily Star*, September 17, 1927, p. 6; (Rev.) A. W. Shepherd, letter to the editor, *Globe*, September 27, 1927, p. 4.

108 There were class and race implications to the discussions over protecting Canada from outside influences, particularly from the United States, where many of the popular trends originated. See Comacchio, *The Dominion of Youth*, chap. 6. On American culture in Canada, see Rutherford, “Made in America,” pp. 260–280, especially 265–270.

109 Comacchio, *The Dominion of Youth*, p. 32.

including sports and driving.<sup>110</sup> Some of the most drastic changes were symbolized by the flapper. In her study of “brazen performers,” Angela J. Latham argues that the fashions that defined the flapper were a “visual synopsis of all that was morally wrong with American womanhood.”<sup>111</sup> The panic over the flapper occurred despite the fact that very few women could mould their bodies to emulate the look or escape the confines of family, work, and community to experience her carefree gin and jazz lifestyle.<sup>112</sup> Nevertheless, in American and Canadian magazines, a debate raged on women’s dress, morality, leisure, and health.<sup>113</sup>

Letters to the editor expressed similar concerns about the relationship between physical exposure and behaviour. One author went so far as to suggest that the sexual behaviour of Paolo and Francesca was repeated “daily on any popular bathing beach.”<sup>114</sup> Certainly this is an exaggeration, but apprehension over generational changes in style and the spaces of heterosocial amusement remains important. If *Fantasy* was “womanhood . . . so disgustingly portrayed,” as one angry letter to the editor described it,

110 Comacchio, “Dancing to Perdition,” pp. 13–15, and *The Dominion of Youth*, p. 26; Strange, *Toronto’s Girl Problem*, chap. 6. On changes in fashion, see Eileen Collard, *Decade of Change, ca. 1909–1919: Women’s Clothing in Canada Just Prior to, During and After the First World War* (Burlington: Eileen Collard, 1981) and *Women’s Dress in the 1920s: An Outline of Women’s Clothing in Canada During the Roaring Twenties* (Burlington: Eileen Collard, 1981).

111 Angela J. Latham, *Posing a Threat: Flappers, Chorus Girls, and Other Brazen Performers of the 1920s* (Hanover, NH: University of New England Press, 2000), p. 69.

112 On the panic, see, for example, Gertrude E. S. Pringle, “Is the Flapper a Menace?” *Maclean’s*, June 15, 1922. The tabloid *Hush* also ran regular columns and features allegedly exposing the escapades of “real life” (although always anonymous) flappers in Toronto. For example, see *Hush*, August 16, 1928, p. 8; January 31, 1929, pp. 5, 9; February 7, 1929, p. 2; February 14, 1929, pp. 8, 12. The focus on ideas of freedom and emancipation with which advertisers, writers, and cultural critics described the flapper’s clothing and appearance was a double-edged sword. Few women could meet the rigorous body standards projected by the flapper as ideal. Flappers were drawn in geometric style that obliterated the curves of breasts and hips. For many women, attempting to achieve this look required uncomfortable physical restrictions. On the disjuncture between the image of the flapper and the lived experiences of women, see Veronica Strong-Boag, *The New Day Recalled: Lives of Girls and Women in English Canada, 1919–1939* (Toronto: Copp, Clark, Pitman, 1988), chap. 1; Suzanne Morton, *Ideal Surroundings: Domestic Life in a Working-Class Suburb in the 1920s* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), p. 131; Jane Walters, interview in D. Read and R. Hann, eds., *The Great War and Canadian Society: An Oral History* (Toronto: Hogtown Press, 1978), p. 214.

113 Comacchio, *The Dominion of Youth*, pp. 175, 179–182; Rebecca Coulter, “Teen-Ages in Edmonton, 1921–1931: Experiences of Gender and Class” (PhD dissertation, University of Alberta, 1987), p. 128. On dress reform in Canada in the nineteenth century, see Barbara E. Kelcey, “Dress Reform in Nineteenth-century Canada,” in Alexandra Palmer, ed., *Fashion: A Canadian Perspective* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), pp. 229–248. On physicians’ push for dress reform, see Wendy Mitchinson, *The Nature of their Bodies: Women and their Doctors in Victorian Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), pp. 66–71. On the American debates, see Latham, *Posing a Threat*, pp. 48–62.

114 Alice Humler, letter to the editor, *Globe*, September 22, 1927, p. 4.

many found the painting far less offensive than what they saw marriageable daughters — and some of their mothers — wearing and doing on the street.<sup>115</sup> One writer argued:

Many women are indignant because they consider themselves exposed. Have women not been unnecessarily exposing themselves for some years now? What do we see in our offices, on our street cars, on our streets, at bathing beaches and summer resorts, to say nothing of fashion parades and beauty shows — mothers and daughters alike all flapping their sex before the eyes of man and flaming youth.<sup>116</sup>

It seems that generational changes went well past simply their impact on youth. Another letter by J. W. Jones also made the connection between the nude art and popular culture:

It seems to me rather funny that people can get shocked over this when the general decree of fashion these days is to border as close to the nude as possible. Can any one avoid seeing the extraordinary display of silk stockings and short skirts every day in evidence, not in art galleries but on our public streets? After all to exhibit the nude is not half as sinful as to exhibit that which creates an evil suggestiveness in the mind. .... If they think these things should be censored, then let short skirts, lipsticks, petting parties, and cigaret [*sic*] parties and open spooning come in also for a little of their attention.<sup>117</sup>

Suggestions of sensuousness and sexual activity were disconcerting to bystanders. Nudity in art seemed to be a lesser concern in an age when flappers allegedly ran wild, engaging in behaviour and dressing in ways that were offensive at best and imperilled the future of the nation at worst.<sup>118</sup> The very real differences between nude art and more revealing clothing were elided by the anxieties over the dangers of popular culture. The erotic undertones of popular culture dovetailed with the sensuous nature of the nudes, allowing viewers to make the connection between the traditional forum of painting and new styles and venues of popular culture. In both areas, the meanings over the symbolic nature of women’s bodies were debated. Even CNE President J. J. Dixon spoke out, saying that the beauty contests in which women competed in their

115 “Another Woman” [pseud.], letter to the editor, *Globe*, September 13, 1927, p. 6.

116 R. H. McD., letter to the editor, *Globe*, September 16, 1927, p. 4.

117 J. W. Jones, letter to the editor, *Globe*, September 22, 1927, p. 4. The point that people should be less concerned about the art and more concerned about their daughters was brought up in other letters. See also “A Lover of Real Art” [pseud.], *Toronto Daily Star*, September 13, 1927, p. 6.

118 Comacchio, *The Dominion of Youth*, p. 84.

bathing suits in front of crowds of men and women were much more distasteful than the paintings.<sup>119</sup> Looking on the streets, critics found all the evidence they needed that the overexposure of women's bodies was happening at a remarkable rate, and for some this was far more disconcerting than nude paintings.

A deeper shift was suggested by the debates over the paintings and the look and behaviour of women in public. Still lingering in the public memory was the fact that revealing clothing, make-up, and women "flapping their sex" in public and creating an "evil suggestiveness in the mind" were related to the "public woman" as prostitute. The well-known connection between studio models for nude paintings and prostitution may have made this link stronger. Yet the paintings displayed in 1927 seem to have replaced the older conception of "public woman" with a new one. Russell's work in particular reflects not a prostitute, but a mature woman of leisure. The painting announced a new public woman, but in a traditional and controversial form that fused old and new in strange ways.<sup>120</sup> Here was a woman of leisure casually lying about in the nude, surveying her collection of mass-produced, commercial goods. How could such a collection of goods be explained in relation to the nude woman who was so fond of them? Had she tossed away respectable life for a collection of consumer goods? Women who had fought for a more public role in terms of suffrage, prohibition, and education faced criticisms for being in public, going against their "natural" roles, and psychically (and sometimes physically) aping men. Young women in the 1920s seemed to appropriate and exploit these criticisms with fashions that emphasized boyish bodies, shorn hair, and public behaviour such as smoking and drinking.<sup>121</sup> The impact of youth culture seemed to be increasingly part of the dominant popular culture. Despite being modern, the notion of woman in public continued to carry multiple connotations that reveal the conflict in understanding traditional categories and the challenges to them. The paintings collapsed the differences in "indignant" ways. How would people tell the differences between working girls, "working girls," "public women, and "public women"? The lingering tension between tradition and modernity appeared in many strands of the debate, and all coalesced around the figure of a nude woman. The multiplicity of meaning framed the dialectic of cultural hierarchies, which by the end of the 1920s seemed to suffer at the hands of "progress" in modern Canada. Despite

119 "Women State Protest Over 'Nudes' At Fair," *Toronto Daily Star*, September 9, 1927, p. 22.

120 Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, p. 110.

121 Cheryl Krasnick Warsh, "Smoke and Mirrors: Gender Representation in North American Tobacco and Alcohol Advertisements before 1950," *Histoire sociale/ Social History*, vol. 31, no. 62 (November 1999), pp. 183–221; Robert A. Campbell, *Sit Down and Drink Your Beer: Regulating Vancouver's Beer Parlours, 1925–1954* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001); Rudy, *The Freedom to Smoke*, chap. 6.

this fact, there were defenders of the paintings and gallery-goers who celebrated the changes and signalled an acceptance of the new day. The order and direction of society seemed unclear. The fact that the paintings remained on the walls, despite calls for censorship and an investigation by Toronto police, reflects an acceptance of modern life through its images. The Morality Department of the Toronto Police briefly became involved, but quickly quashed the rumour that police had asked the CNE directors to remove the paintings on the basis of section 207 of the Criminal Code, which referred to obscene pictures tending to corrupt morals. Inspector McKinney argued that there was nothing objectionable about the pictures, although “it would be different if the pictures were shown elsewhere than in an art gallery.”<sup>122</sup> The paintings were deemed to be inoffensive, and, despite the anxieties over space, the Art Gallery afforded them a modicum of moral protection. In the end, it seemed that the cry for tradition faltered.

#### **“I Saw the Painting”: Conclusion**

In December 1927 William Lyon Mackenzie King was questioned regarding a rumour that the National Gallery of Canada was planning to purchase *A Modern Fantasy*. King responded, “I have not heard anything about buying Russell’s painting for the National Gallery. It may be so, however. An Art Committee deals with these matters. I saw the painting at the Exhibition and thought it a marvellous work.”<sup>123</sup> King’s comment contradicted his earlier and private sentiments about the “immoral exhibit” that contained a painting worthy of burning. What could explain the contradictory statements? Perhaps he did not want to express his private views to the public, or perhaps time had softened King’s view. It may also be that his reaction to the painting was only fleeting. In this respect, fleeting may well describe the controversy as a whole. For weeks the nudes were hotly debated in newspapers as people promoted their own understanding of the issue, but then faded away, only to resurface a few times in the 1930s when nude art once again caused a stir. In a way, the conflicting nature of King’s comments reveals the very character of the debates: ephemeral, contradictory, enigmatic.

I have suggested that the controversy in the summer of 1927 arose out of the particular context in which the paintings were hung, and in the end began to mark a shift in social and cultural order. Concerns brought to the fore by changes in modern society, particularly a changing moral standard reflected in popular culture, were revealed in this specific historical

122 “Art’s Art in Gallery, Nudes are Fine Art,” *Toronto Daily Star*, September 14, 1927, p. 2; “Paintings to Remain in ‘Ex’ Art Gallery,” *Evening Telegram*, August 30, 1927, p. 21; “Nudes’ Not Banned,” *Evening Telegram*, September 14, 1927, p. 23.

123 “Premier Back in Ottawa,” *Toronto Telegram*, December 31, 1927, p. 17.

instance. The Art Gallery absorbed and refracted issues related to its own construction as well as the wider culture in which it was situated. How the moral standards and pedagogic impulse of the CNE and the Gallery could be maintained with sensuous nudes was a point of discussion that incorporated dialogues regarding the Midway, the collision of high and low cultures, and shifts in gender and class. The CNE, as a microcosm of society, allowed people literally to see and discuss wider cultural changes through readily accessible lenses. What they revealed was an essence of being modern. Modern life was a balance between pleasure and peril, with the haunting of tradition. The line between them remained difficult to pin down, although the desire to do so was strong. Exploring this small moment for its internal workings and contradictions reveals the contested changes in the experience of being modern in the 1920s. The nudes provided an opening for discussion, which made cultural changes palpable and more readily discernible. It was a brief moment made from a constellation of forces — the content of the paintings, the publicity, the space, and the current cultural concerns — that converged in 1927 to reveal anxieties over the unsettled dynamics of class, gender, and youth.