

MODERN WOMEN

A Peek at the MAJ Collection

This new selection from the collection presents works produced by five women whose pictorial language illustrates the aesthetic trends of modernism among Québec painters during the interwar period.

Before the art historian Esther Trépanier's research on the subject, modern art in Québec was said to have begun in 1942, with the arrival of abstraction, or in 1948, with the publication of the Refus global manifesto. And yet, by that time many artists did not identify with tradition, academism, or regionalism from the aesthetic point of view. In these works, we perceive the influence of early-twentieth-century European avant-gardes, which were late to arrive in Québec. Modernism in painting brought new subjects (urban landscape, urban life, portrait), an increased emphasis on subjectivity, and expressiveness, along with arbitrary colours and plays on perspective that departed from representations of reality.

In the wake of the First World War, a growing number of women were acceding to the status of professional artist. The opening of the École des beaux-arts de Québec (1922) and the École des beaux-arts de Montréal (1923) contributed to this evolution. Agnès Lefort and Irène Senécal were among the first women to attend the École des beaux-arts de Montréal. Women were represented

in various group exhibitions organized in the 1920s and were members of the Beaver Hall Group (1920–22), the Canadian Group of Painters (1933–53), the Eastern Group of Painters (1938–50), the Jewish Painters of Montreal (1930–48), and the Contemporary Art Society (1939–48), as well as groups of watercolour artists, printmakers, and artists working in other media. They had shows in Montréal galleries and in department store galleries such as Eaton’s Art Gallery, and their works were included in exhibitions that toured Canada and abroad.

As professional painters, teachers, and activists engaged in modernity, they were fully involved in the Québec art scene. Belonging to three generations of artists, Agnès Lefort, Irène Senécal, Liliás Torrance Newton, Ghitta Caiserman, and Rita Briansky are recognized for their contribution to modern painting in Québec – that is, for their art, their participation in the major exhibitions of the era, their dissemination and promotion of the arts, their teaching, and, of course, their involvement in artist groups. Although they have remained in the shadows, we are bringing them into the light today to show how their art is carried on in the spirit of younger generations of artists.

Nathalie Galego, Assistant Curator of Collections

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1. IRÈNE SENÉCAL

Montréal, Québec, 1901 – Montréal, Québec, 1978

Rue sous le Cap, Québec, 1937

Oil on panel, 32 x 26.8 x 3 cm

Gift of Chantal Laberge

1989.010

A pioneer in art education in Québec, Irène Senécal devoted herself mainly to teaching visual arts. She was instrumental in having visual arts courses included in the curriculum of the Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec. Her art production, however, is not well known.

In *Rue sous le Cap, Québec*, Senécal presents a modernist aesthetic through her break with realism, probing of urban space, and choice of colours and composition. Through a chromatic range in which pinks, mauves, and whites predominate, she renders the ambience of a backyard and hints at the presence and daily activities of its occupants.

2. LILIAS TORRANCE NEWTON

Lachine, Québec, 1896 – Cowansville, Québec, 1980

Portrait of a Child, ca. 1940

Oil on canvas, 38.2 x 33.4 cm

Gift of Jacqueline Brien

1985.053

Lillias Torrance Newton was one of the first professional women artists to study at the Art Association of Montreal and to become a member of the Royal Canadian Academy of the Arts. With former colleagues, she formed the Beaver Hall Group (1920), named for the studios its members shared in Beaver Hall Square.

Newton's production is characterized by a modern style in which colour and pictorial material dominate. Here, the emphasis placed on the face is a slightly more conventional approach, but the canvas, left unpainted in places, reveals the rapidity of the painting gesture – a treatment associated with modernist painting.

3. RITA BRIANSKY

Gragewa, Poland, 1925

Early Spring, 1953

Oil on panel, 61 x 108.1 cm

Gift of Chantal Laberge

1986.001

Rita Briansky, a member of the Jewish Painters of Montreal, also worked within other artist groups, including the Montreal Artist School (1947–52). Like the Expressionists, she favoured subjective representations that transcend emotion by distorting reality, endowing art with a universal dimension.

Highly subjective and imbued with nostalgia for her childhood, *Early Spring* is a great example of Briansky's artistic approach. The apple trees' twisted branches, along with diagonal lines, opposed planes, active brushstrokes, and contrasts of dark and luminous tonalities, expertly express her feelings.

4. GHITTA CAISERMAN

Montréal, Québec, 1923 – Montréal, Québec, 2005

Boxes, 1963

Oil on Masonite, 121.5 x 80.7 cm

Gift of Claude Laberge

1984.046

As a prodigy, Ghitta Caiserman presented a work at the Spring Salon of the Art Association of Montreal when she was thirteen, receiving an honourable mention. She was later a member of the Jewish Painters of Montreal. Over the decades, she explored different themes and means

of expression, always experimenting with a modern figurative style.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Caiserman became interested in interior scenes, still lifes, and portraits. *Boxes*, painted in a semi-abstract post-Cubist style, presents a pile of boxes of various shapes and colours within which children are playing hide-and-seek.

5. AGNÈS LEFORT

Saint-Rémy-de-Napierville, Québec, 1891 – Montréal, Québec, 1973

Untitled, 1948

Oil on canvas, 100.4 x 75 cm

Gift of Paul Laporte

1995.332

In 1950, after a full career in different professional fields and as an accomplished artist, Agnès Lefort opened a gallery, for which she is best known. Galerie Agnès Lefort made a significant contribution to the dissemination of modern and contemporary art in Montréal.

Untitled, one of Lefort's last works, resulted from a short stay in Paris, in 1948, to study at Académie André. Its post-Cubist modernist style exemplifies the French influences that subsisted in Québec in the 1940s and 1950s. Here, Lefort simplifies forms to lines and calculated colour contrasts.

FLOOR PLAN

3rd floor in the hallway

Espace 3^e étage

