

# A *Canadian* Portraiture? Some Thoughts on Edwin Holgate

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*Resumo:* Este artigo examinará alguns retratos de canadenses pintados por canadenses. A intenção será observar se tais retratos transmitem um sentido do que é ser canadense e, também, se podemos falar, legitimamente, sobre um estilo canadense de pintura de retratos. O artigo girará em torno da idéia de uma “geografia” da arte, ao invés da “história” da arte. Tratar do empenho artístico que qualquer povo tem em comum, como é o caso do caráter nacional expresso na arte – argumento – é tratar da geografia da arte. O artigo focalizará quatro retratos pintados por Edwin Holgate provavelmente caracterizado no imaginário de muitas pessoas como um dos membros ‘extras’ do Grupo dos Sete, o único a viver em Montreal, e o único artista de estatura a emergir do chamado Grupo de Beaver Hall. Na verdade, é a associação de Holgate com o Grupo dos Sete e sua ramificação, o Grupo Canadense de Pintores, que é, aqui, particularmente relevante. Ambos os grupos foram explícitos no seu nacionalismo. Ambos buscaram pintar o Canadá, e ambos buscaram um estilo que fosse apropriado à cena canadense. Buscaram ainda afirmar a primazia da temática canadense para os canadenses, e uma linguagem visual distinta. No entanto, em última instância, o artigo irá abandonar o conceito de uma pintura canadense de retratos e demonstrar como os maiores retratos de Holgate são proposições universais.

*Abstract:* This paper will examine a number of portraits of individual Canadians painted by Canadians. The intention will be to assess whether these portraits convey a sense of what it is to be Canadian and, of equal significance, whether we may legitimately talk about a Canadian style of portraiture. The paper will revolve around the idea of a ‘geography’ of art, rather than the ‘history’ of art. To talk about what the artistic endeavour of any one people has in common, how national character is expressed in art, is – I argue – to talk about a geography of art. The paper will focus on four portraits by Edwin Holgate, probably characterised in many people’s minds as one of the ‘extra’ members of the Group of Seven, the only one to live in Montreal, and the only artist of stature to emerge from the so-called Beaver hall Group. It is in fact Holgate’s association with the Group of Seven and its off-shoot, the Canadian Group of Painters that is especially relevant here. Both groupings were explicit in their nationalism. Both sought to paint Canada and both sought a style that would be appropriate to the Canadian scene. Both sought to assert the primacy of Canadian subject matter for Canadians and both sought a distinctive visual language. However, ultimately, the paper will relinquish the concept of a Canadian portraiture and demonstrate how Holgate’s greatest portraits are universal statements.

This paper seeks to explore a number of portraits by the artist Edwin Holgate, with a view to assessing whether they convey a sense of what it is to be Canadian and even whether we may legitimately talk of a *Canadian* style of portraiture. What this discussion will entail is the notion of a geography of art, rather than a history of art. To talk about what the artistic endeavour of one people has in common, how national character is expressed in art is, I suggest, to talk about a geography of art. Indeed, such geographical factors as climate can come into play, although they will not be evoked here.

Now, before we go any further, there is one major objection to all of this that must, at the very least, be acknowledged and it is this: even within nations that have been long established, or established longer than Canada, there does not exist anything like a national character consistent over centuries. In the introduction to a book entitled *The Englishness of English Art* – a study that deals with the very issue we are addressing – the famous critic Nikolaus Pevsner gave a quick riposte to this objection. What he argued was this:

In Act three, scene five, of *Romeo and Juliet* [the famous play by Shakespeare] Juliet says 'It was the nightingale and not the lark.' If this line is pronounced aloud first in this form and then in Italian and German, three national characters arise at once, each recognizable without hesitation; 'E l'usignol non è la lodola', 'Es ist die Nachtigall und nicht die Lerche'. The contention of the geography of art is that, as long as these three lines sound so radically different, the cultural question is begged if one lays all the emphasis on the fact that the cover pages of illustrated magazines in nearly all countries are shaped on the pattern of *Life* magazine, or that research developments in atomic energy and global destruction run parallel in all countries which have the means to indulge in them. (1)

Pevsner's riposte has much to be said for it, but it is ultimately meretricious, not least because no language is monolithic, all languages are constantly fluctuating. If a prime means of expressing national character such as language is constantly shifting and undergoing change, how much

permanence can one anticipate in character? But there is another, even more powerful counterblast to be made: Pevsner's riposte is, in fact, fundamentally misleading. In language, the relationship between the signifier and the signified, that is to say between words and what they stand for, is arbitrary. Indeed, we must talk, in the plural, of languages – impenetrable to those who are not familiar with them but decodable and translatable for those who do – in which communicative desires common to most human societies will be verbalized in a variety of ways which are not existentially determined by the meaning of the communication itself. Painting, or to widen our perspective for a moment, film, is a different sort of discourse. We cannot conceive of Brazilian painting or film, or Canadian painting or film, in the same way as we can of Portuguese and English as languages. The obvious national characteristics of paintings or films from different cultures may derive as much from a predilection for certain formal devices as from actual content, but this should not disguise the basic denotative legibility of a single discourse to all linguistic groups.

However, whilst begging any number of questions, let us accept that it is meaningful to talk about Canadianness, Brazilness, Englishness or whatever, and move our discussion on. And to do so, I would like to take up three key notions to which I have just referred. These are: formal devices; content; decoding. Before coming to the core of this paper, the analysis of Holgate's portraits, let us remind ourselves of what the formal devices or aspects of a portrait are that allow us to decode the statement that is being made about the sitter, that allow us to communicate with the sitter, those qualities that allow us to grasp – and this point needs emphasizing – what *both* artist and sitter are trying to reveal. Now, some of what follows may seem a little obvious. We do, after all, instinctively recognize the poses and gestures of basic body language which suggest physical and psychological qualities. On the other hand, it has to be said that it is all too easy to look at portraits without seeing them, by that I mean properly registering them, since the human form is quickly recognized and dismissed as ordinary. Or there is the 'good likeness' syndrome, so that – somewhat ironically – it is the non-

figurative portrait or caricature which actually provokes a more critical, dynamic response from the viewer.

So, what are the elements which we are invited to decode? Firstly, as has already been suggested, there is the pose and expression of the sitter. Facial expression, in particular, is clearly of the essence: people identify and assess each other primarily by the face. A major source of expression is the direction of the eyes and the set of the head, and the various combinations of these. The sitter's body can also be arranged in significant ways. Often quite small details – weight distribution, position of the shoulders, fingers even – are important. And then there is gesture or implied bodily movement. Secondly, even in portraits which are not overtly concerned with rank or status and in which the sitter is not portrayed wearing some kind of ceremonial outfit (robes, uniform, or whatever), *clothes* are important. What is worn may be assumed to hold some sort of significance for both the sitter and the artist, and to relate in some way to what the portrait is saying. Thirdly, the setting or background is potentially meaningful. Or, to put it another way, what the artist does with the negative space is potentially meaningful. In addition, accessories tell their own tale. Posts of responsibility, positions of authority, vocations, skills can be stressed, for example, by the inclusion of appropriate objects such as tools. There is, of course, the whole complex issue of symbols. And then, such factors as colour, size, medium, even the choice of frame play a role. Certain colours have symbolic value and their use, as we will see, can be highly significant. The selection of blending or clashing tones is something the artist can deliberately employ to create emotion. As for size, well, the majority of portraits are slightly smaller than life size – certainly this holds for those we are about to discuss – but very large portraits can of course dominate the viewer and are meant to give expression to and emphasize status.

But let us turn, after this broad introduction, to the issue of *Canadian* portraiture and attempt a little historical contextualization. After the Conquest, a growing bourgeoisie, French and English, with money to spend, responded to the advent of peace and the new prospects that it brought by,

amongst other things, taking an interest in painting. During the French régime, in fact, the Church had been virtually the only patron of painting but now a new economic climate favorable to artistic development meant that new patrons multiplied and portraiture in particular became all the rage. A good many portraits from around the turn of the century have come down to us. Most of them are unsigned and even those attributions that have been ventured are sometimes proving suspect as more and more critical study is brought to bear on them. Still, it is possible to distinguish several artists who stand out from the throng. These are Louis Dulongpré (1754-1843); François Beaucourt (1740-94); and François Baillairgé (1759-1830). Beaucourt, a native Canadian, was perhaps the most accomplished: many consider his portrait of Madame Trottier dite Desrivières (Musée du Québec, Québec), painted a year before his death, to be one of the greatest Canadian portraits of the era. What is significant for the purposes of our theme, is that it is possible to identify what amounts to a distinct Canadian style in many of the portraits painted at this time. As J. Russell Harper puts it:

The break in direct contact with France during the Napoleonic wars left Canadians very much to their own resources at the crucial time when the demand for paintings was reaching unprecedented proportions. Her artists responded to the challenge by creating a distinctive Canadian portrait style. In their new portraiture the rococo heritage was tempered by sober thoughts of revolution and war in Europe and threats of American invasion at home. It blends alert and lively touches with a trace of sadness, and a curious provincial naïveté with sophistication. (2)

In essence, however, their Canadianness may be said to amount to no more than a primitive or naïve quality. Dennis Reid contends that they in fact display characteristics often found in developed provincial schools of painting. That is to say they are generally shallow in modelling, decoratively embellished and follow one or two simple portrait compositions. The clothes of the period, particularly the elaborately gathered headdresses of the women were, he claims,

suiting to such schematized, decorative handling. (3)

Whatever our response to this Canadianness, what cannot be denied is the artists' and the patrons' growing interest in their own land and its citizens. Canadians had previously considered themselves as colonialists, transplanted Frenchmen and Englishmen, living away from their mother country. They had, or at least a certain class had largely regarded Canada as inferior to those mother countries. Now, however, Canadian artists began to paint this land of theirs and their compatriots with a developed sense of kinship. This new interest was, of course, given impetus by events and movements already alluded to - the American invasion of 1812-14, by the increase in business ventures - but also by the dozens of books on Canada that were being published and by the journeys of exploration that were being undertaken.

What rather complicates the issue, however, is the fact that, whilst the next generation of portraitists, and more especially the extremely talented Antoine Plamondon (1802-95), did indeed delight in painting the people of Quebec, there is nothing particularly Canadian about his style. On the contrary, having traveled to Paris in 1826 to study - he was the first French Canadian artist to do so in nearly 50 years - Plamondon quickly absorbed the classical style of Paulin Guérin, a minor portraitist and pupil of the great David, whose studio he entered. Although some of the portraits he was to paint when he returned to Quebec in 1830 show signs of romanticism, he is best remembered for his refined, classical austerity. Most notable is a quite stunning series of portraits of young nuns of the Hôpital-Général. His *Soeur Saint-Alphonse*, now in the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, is remarkable for its simplicity of composition, its exquisite use of colour, and for its psychological penetration. The device of the finger in the breviary, suggestive of a moment's meditation prompted by her reading, is one that is particularly favored by Plamondon. (It recurs, for example, in his very similar portrait of Mère Sainte-Anne.) But, if we can immediately grasp the implications of the finger caught in the book, we are perhaps less consciously aware of the effect achieved by the attention paid to the space

which the young nun occupies. And yet this, too, enables the artist to stress aspects of her character which her calm, rather impassive face hints at.

Plamondon's pupil, Théophile Hamel (1817-70) took over his mantle. Hamel had great technical facility and his very best work, such as his portrait of Madame de Sales Laterrière (Archbishop's palace, Chicoutimi), with its flowing lines and romantic feel, vies with that of Plamondon. We might add that Hamel's work includes a rich source of iconography for the historian of nineteenth-century Canada. Amongst the countless politicians, ministers, statesmen, leaders of the church and so on that he painted were, for example, Judge Jean-Roch Holland, who sentenced Papineau and his followers after the 1837 rebellion, and Sir Narcisse Belleau, Canada's Prime Minister for the two years leading up to Confederation. Hamel traveled widely in Europe and absorbed many influences. He was especially excited by the discovery of Rubens' palette and his portraits of children often remind us of the Flemish master's use of colour. It is hardly surprising, then, that – as in the case of Plamondon – Hamel's portraits seem to have re-entered the mainstream of what I have earlier termed 'a basic denotative legibility'. With the decline and death of Hamel what might be called a golden age of Canadian portraiture came to an end. He was succeeded by several pupils, including his nephew Eugène. However, as the portrait he painted of Monseigneur Routhier (Vancouver Art Gallery) illustrates, Eugène Hamel's work is vacuous, lacking in vigour and innovation. Though the features are realistically rendered, there is no attempt here to do more through compositional organization or the search for volume. The flat black ground does nothing in terms of exploring further the psychology of the sitter: it merely defers nervelessly to the proprieties. (An afterthought does strike me and that is that the portrait does parody, unwittingly, an increasingly hidebound, suffocatingly dogmatic church).

This brief, superficial survey of a golden age of portraiture in Canada has, I hope, exemplified and concretized some of the issues to do with national character and the decoding of pictorial elements raised in a general way earlier. I

would also like to think that it will encourage readers to find out more about the artists fleetingly referred to. What I want to do now – with scant regard for the demands of chronology or comprehensiveness – is come to the crux of the question in hand and explore the Canadianness of portraits by Edwin Holgate.

Edwin Holgate (1892-1977) is probably characterized in many people's mind as one of the 'extra' members of the Group of Seven, as the only one to live in Montreal, and as the only artist of real stature to emerge from the so-called Beaver Hall Group. And it is indeed his association with the Group of Seven and with its offshoot, the Canadian Group of Painters, that is especially relevant here. Both groupings were, of course, explicit in their nationalism. Both, to put it in broad terms, sought to paint Canada, and both sought a style that would be appropriate to the Canadian scene. Both sought to assert the primacy of Canadian subject matter for Canadians, both sought a distinctive visual language (I use the word deliberately in the light of earlier remarks) with which to express themselves. Unlike Harris, MacDonald, Jackson and the others – but with the exception of Varley – Holgate was not primarily interested in landscape and he quickly developed a reputation as a portraitist. The Canadian Group of painters in fact embraced figures and portraits as a valid source of inspiration, as was brought out in their manifesto published in November of 1933. Now, it would be misleading to infer from these remarks that Holgate's primary artistic concern was the search for an authentic, distinctive Canadian voice above all else. On the other hand, the fact that he was interested in Canadianness and how to formulate this pictorially cannot be, or rather should not be underestimated since, beginning in 1924 and over a period of some 24 years or so, Holgate painted a series of Canadian (more specifically, Quebec) types. There can be little doubt that these are meant to be representative since, rather than naming the individuals portrayed, Holgate refers to them generically in his titles. Two further points justify the focus on Holgate. Firstly, though it would be wrong to suggest that he ever attempted to mediate between the French and English communities, he did –



so to speak – have a foot in both camps. He was bilingual and in his younger days particularly, he maintained strong ties with the francophone literary and artistic community in Montreal. He was a close friend of the critic Jean Chauvin and during a six-year stint at the Ecole des beaux arts he was on good terms with the likes of Lemieux, Borduas, and Saint-Denys Garneau, who were all his students. He illustrated several books by French Canadian writers and collaborated with the poet Robert Choquette on a *livre d'artiste* entitled *Metropolitan Museum*, published in 1931. In other words, Holgate may be said to have represented both linguistic communities. The second point has less to do with the theme of this paper and is simply that I believe Holgate deserves to be better known, certainly outside Canada but even in Canada, though an exhibition, the first major retrospective since his death, that toured Canada in 2005-2007, will undoubtedly have brought him to the attention of a wider public.

The first of the portraits to be discussed is that of a lumberjack. It is not for nothing that I start with this one because the lumberjack is an archetypal Canadian figure and a potent symbol of Canada. Like the portraits that follow, it is in oils on canvas. It measures 64.8 x 54.6 cm and is in the Sarnia Public Library and Art Gallery. It is known that that the sitter was a *métis*, that he was originally from the Gatineau Valley near Ottawa and that, when Holgate asked him to sit, he was working in the Laurentians where he was considered to be one of the finest woodsmen. What do we learn from the portrait?

The fellow stands square on but his left shoulder is slightly lower than his right and is pulled round to the front as he grips his pole. This characteristic pose is utterly convincing and persuades us of his sense of balance, his physical coordination, his vigour, his skill. What is perhaps slightly surprising is that there is no implied bodily movement. This man of action is portrayed as quite still and calm. He is not leaning into his pole, rather it rests on his shoulder. Even more significantly, his gaze is not fixed on an immediate task, on a log to be shifted, for example. In fact, there is a distant, contemplative expression in his eyes as he looks out, beyond

the viewer. His eyes are in the shadow of his hat, almost as if withdrawing from us. His chin is forward, his lips firmly closed. All of this is suggestive of a man who is confident, sure of himself, self-contained, and yet strangely sensitive. It is suggestive of a man who is, to use the evocative French phrase, *bien dans sa peau*, but also a man who is at one with his environment. The blue of his shirt enhances the calmness and essential serenity of the portrait. But we should also note how the fresh green of the trees beyond does not attempt to imitate natural tonal gradations and acts as a kind of relief to the warm browns of the planes of his face and of his hat. In general terms, the painting exploits shades of similar colours, creating a warmth and uniformity. The organization of the picture is important for the way in which the pyramid shape of the man's torso and head, the pole he is holding and the logs in the water behind him all combine to lead our gaze to his face. In terms of pictorial organization, that is to say the position of the figure in relation to the trees and the logs, Holgate has chosen to emphasize pictorial unity rather than closely imitate reality.

The second portrait, entitled *The Skier*, is of Hermann Johannsen, better known by his Cree nickname of Chief Jackrabbit. Norwegian-born Jackrabbit, who settled permanently in the Laurentians during the Depression, became a notable pioneer of all forms of skiing and was responsible for cutting alpine and cross-country trails across Ontario, the Eastern Townships and the Laurentians. It is no exaggeration to say that, through his long career, he came to epitomize a certain sort of Canadianness and, indeed, became a legend in his own time. He was awarded the Order of Canada in 1972. Holgate was himself something of a skier; he painted a number of snowscapes and scenes of ski slopes and was, in fact, a friend of Jackrabbit. This portrait was painted in 1935 and may be seen in the Montreal Museum of Fine Art. It measures 65.4 x 54.6 cm. It is immediately apparent that it shares several features with the portrait of the lumberjack that we have just discussed. The skier occupies much the same picture space and also stands square on. Too rigid a symmetry is avoided by placing the curve of the mountains – and those who know the area will recognize the

unmistakable shape of Mont Tremblant – off-centre at the top. The gentle arcs of the snowfields behind the figure complement the curves of his shoulders. Like the lumberjack, and again somewhat surprisingly, he is portrayed standing stock-still. His mittened gloves grip the sticks in front of him and there is no implied bodily movement. He is obviously not about to launch himself off on a run. His gaze, too, looks out beyond the viewer, unwavering, but there is an alertness there, a quick-wittedness that is accentuated by the mouth which surely betrays a slight amusement.

Again, like the lumberjack, he is shown to be at one with his environment: he is – literally – in his element. This is reinforced by the harmony of colour: his jacket is almost indistinguishable from the snow. Note, however, that Holgate has avoided making the white cold and sterile, which would have detracted from the warmth of the man. The bright, brilliantly rendered scarf at his throat serves to alleviate the simple compositional divisions and colour harmony of the painting. At the same time, it serves as an important point of focus around the head. Yet again our gaze is led to and concentrated on the face, whose planes are so well modeled. And yet again, the absence of any real tonal gradation is noticeable.

Our third portrait is entitled *The Naturalist*. It depicts the elder brother, Harry, of A. Y. Jackson (the Group of Seven Jackson). It was painted in 1941, six years after *The Skier* and, measuring 64.8 x 54.6 cm, is very much of the same dimensions as the two paintings already discussed. It can be seen in the Musée du Québec. It, too, shares several notable features with its predecessors. Again, Holgate has used a landscape background and again the relationship between the figure and this background is crucial – both in terms of the composition (that is to say the shape of the figure and the surrounding space) and in terms of its significance. The compositional organization is obviously akin to that of the earlier pictures: the pyramid shape within the confines of the rectangle establishes a strong, stable structure which, of course, influences and underpins our understanding of and response to the man himself. As for the

significance of yet again putting the figure in a landscape? Well, obviously, there is no sense of the man being dwarfed by it. Equally, there is no sense of proprietorship (as there is, for example, in eighteenth-century English portraits of aristocrats in the grounds of their mansions). Rather, this portrait is a statement about being part of, about belonging in. This relationship is effectively symbolized, as in the case of the two earlier portraits, by the overt clue to the sitter's occupation or interest, here the binoculars hanging around his neck.

Once again, we cannot help noticing how Holgate has selected and organized the shape and colour of his sitter's clothes to such good effect. Here, the comfortable, generous jacket complements and yet attenuates the slightly austere, ascetic features and the rather severe glasses, whilst the vitality and warmth of his red shirt serves, like Jackrabbit's scarf, as a point of focus to the face and also contrasts with and tempers that impression of asceticism.

Now, it must be pointed out that, whilst the three portraits by Holgate that we have looked at so far do indeed share certain key features, others do not, and that the necessary process of selection (and hence of exclusion) has inevitably made any attempt to draw general conclusions somewhat problematic. It has to be said – indeed the final portrait to be discussed will make this quite clear – that not all Holgate's portraits involve landscapes. His portrait of his friend, the critic Jean Chauvin (private collection), and his famous portrait of Stephen Leacock (National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa) are both set inside (although in the latter case we are merely given the wooden chair on which the writer is sitting and, behind him, empty wall space), as is Holgate's self-portrait (Montreal Museum of Fine Art). Still, by the same token, it is possible to point to further examples of outdoor portraits: *The Fire-Ranger* of 1926 (University of Toronto) and the captivating 1947 portrait of *Uncle George* (Hamilton Art Gallery). Moreover, whilst they are not portraits as such, a series of female nudes in landscapes, painted during the thirties, perhaps adds weight to our contention that Holgate sought to integrate people into the natural world, to show them as part of it, neither dominating nor

dominated. Indeed, it is appropriate to add two further remarks regarding these female nudes. Firstly, Holgate clearly sought to establish correspondences between the human form and the shape of rocks and trees, formal relationships reinforcing the physical one. Secondly, he brings out the women's self-containment: there is, for example, no eye contact with the viewer.

It is equally important to indicate that not all Holgate's portraits make no attempt to suggest movement. *The Cellist* of 1923 in the McMichael Canadian Collection, Kleinburg, Ontario, is a convincing study of movement in which spatial organization, pose, gesture and the play of light all combine to suggest the physical effort of making music. Again, the portrait of Jean Chauvin catches him in the very act of looking up from the book balanced on his knee, right hand turning the page. There is in this painting a degree of tension and dynamism that is absent from those we have already seen.

With these caveats firmly in mind, let us return to our three portraits and rehearse some of the conclusions already implied or, indeed, inferred. Obviously, their Canadian content is indisputable. They represent three distinctive identities but, as we earlier indicated, the titles given to each portrait intend them to be taken as representative types, representative not just of their specific category but also of a broader community. Holgate's sense of what it is to be Canadian largely involved, I believe, a relationship between people and the Canadian space in which nature is not an obstacle, not something to be dominated or overcome, not – to take up Margaret Atwood's term – a *monster*. In Holgate's paintings – to paraphrase Atwood – Canadians do not come to nature with unreal expectations or ready to fight its conditions. Rather, they accept them and learn to live with them. Moreover, crucially, the formal qualities of each painting, the positioning of each figure in relation to the perimeter of the canvas, the deliberate exploration of space, the sense of uniformity born of his use of colour, all suggest this acceptance as much as the actual content.

We can conclude that these Canadians know where they are, literally and metaphorically. Each portrait exudes,

moreover, a sense of self-containment. This should not be equated with a sense of alienation from others (or, worse, a misanthropy). In each case, in fact, the vantage point of the artist (and hence the viewer) and the fact that the figures do not recede into space (even when, in the case of the woodsman, the pole he grasps does in all logic imply distancing) precludes any sense of detachment. True, the relative position of the naturalist – Holgate would seem to be slightly below his eye-level – accentuates his austerity but this is not done in a judgemental way.

I repeat, Holgate has given us a diversity of individual appearance, of individual psychology within a repeated format. That format is an essential part of his strategy. In addressing the issue of Canadianness, Holgate has exploited formal devices that, as it were, act in symbiosis with the content. Now, the sense of Canadianness that emanates from these paintings is not, it goes without saying, prescriptive or exclusive. One of the quotations with which Margaret Atwood prefaces *Survival* maintains that ‘searchers for a Canadian identity have failed to recognize that you can only have an identification with something you can see or recognize. You need, if nothing else, an image in a mirror.’ (4) The portraits we have considered do not, of course, offer a mirror image. For one thing, 50% or so of the Canadian population would have some difficulty with that on grounds of gender. However, they do – if I may risk my own metaphor – act like a shard of mirror picked up on a sunny day and held at different angles.

However, as we come to the fourth and last portrait to be discussed, let us relinquish the notion of a *Canadian* portraiture. Portraits are *universal* statements, they speak to all mankind – we are back with that basic denotative legibility – and it would be wrong to confine them to a narrow, nationalistic significance. *Ludovine*, to be seen in the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, was painted in 1930 in a small cod-fishing village called Natashquan on the north bank of the St Lawrence. (Holgate was on his way to the Labrador coast.) The young woman wears black for she is in mourning – her mother had just died – and, as the eldest child, she had been left to care for a numerous family of siblings. Even if we did not know these

details, the portrait could not fail to have an effect on us. Holgate places Ludovine uncompromisingly in the middle of the canvas, again square on. Her head is, however, held slightly to one side: the neckline of her dress is off-set. The effect of this is to hint at her vulnerability in a time of grief, and render the sense of resolution and responsibility all the more poignant and admirable. Her dark eyes look directly into ours, unflinching, and yet also seem to be contemplating an unknowable future. Her calm and poise, together with a slight tension, are also conveyed by her clasped hands. In formal terms, her head to one side, together with crenellated middle of the chair-back (opposed to the smooth curve on the other side) prevent too rigid a symmetry. A harsh light casts a dark shadow which accentuates the somber mood. However, the expanse of light blue counters this to a certain extent (even though it is a cool colour) and perhaps suggests that the promise of youth, despite her grievous loss, is not altogether blighted.

This is a hauntingly beautiful portrait. Like Plamondon's portrait of Soeur Saint-Alphonse, it speaks to us about Canadian/Quebec women. Beyond that, it speaks to us about all women. Beyond that, it shares with us thoughts about the *universal* spirit, about human loss, grief, vulnerability, and quiet courage.

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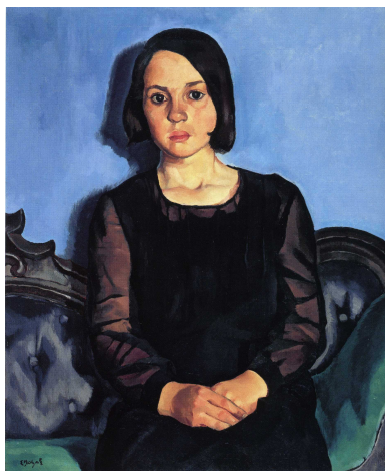
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Antoine Plamondon, *Soeur Saint-Alphonse*,  
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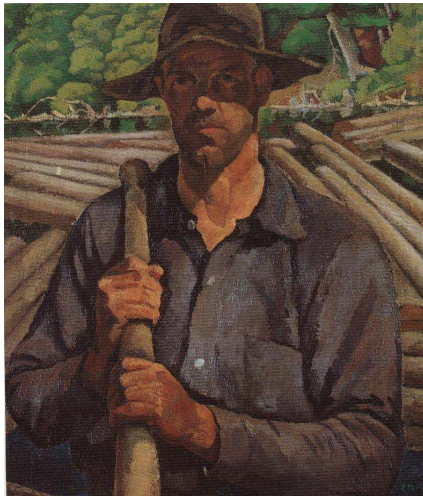


Edwin Holgate, *Ludovine*, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

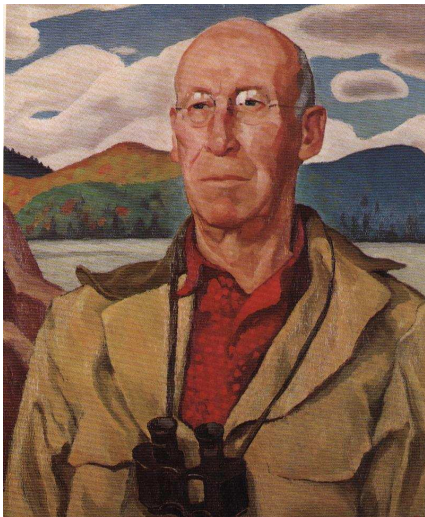




Edwin Holgate, *The Skier*, Montreal Museum of Fine Art



Edwin Holgate, *The Lumberjack*, Sarnia Public Library and Art Gallery



Edwin Holgate, *The Naturalist*, Musée du Québec