

The veiled art of Alex Colville

Art Gallery of Ontario exhibition

Lee Parsons
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At the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) from August 23, 2014 to January 4, 2015 and at The National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa from April 24 to Sept. 7, 2015.

In Canada, the country of his birth, Alex Colville was the best known living artist until his death July 16, 2013 at the age of 92. For those outside Canada, there is still a good chance you have seen a Colville painting at some point, if only in passing.

The Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) has brought together nearly 100 of his paintings, drawings and prints, the largest number ever in a single exhibition—along with supporting works and material from public and private collections, most notably from the National Gallery in Ottawa.

Colville's work is distinctive in many ways, not least for the expert craftsmanship and precision with which he is typically identified. Then there are the imaginative, if unusual juxtapositions and compositions of his paintings, done in his distinctively cool, even chilling version of realism.

The artist also played a notable political role, and was very public about his conservative (and Conservative) views. His service to the establishment's project of establishing a Canadian cultural identity along with his indifference to the advances in modern art put him at odds with many of his contemporaries and attracted a good deal of criticism, for both good reasons and bad.

Decidedly rejecting the move to higher abstraction that characterized modern art in the 20th century, Colville worked within the traditions of artistic realism throughout his career, albeit overlaid with a stylization that was often disturbingly unreal. His extraordinarily fine renderings have invited such designations as magic-realist, super-realist or even photo-realist, but his simplified figures and settings belong as much to the traditions of the Precisionists in the US during the 1920s and 1930s, who were characterized by their highly controlled approach and use of clearly outlined and simple forms with plain surfaces and minimal detail.

His work noticeably parallels or echoes other trends in 20th century art as well. Colville was inspired by such figures as Edward Hopper (1882-1967) and the latter's depiction of urban and rural loneliness, although, thematically, the two painters shared little otherwise. Colville has also been compared with another popular (and almost exact) contemporary, Andrew Wyeth (1917-2009), who also painted in a more traditional style. Colville's work, however, is conspicuously devoid of Wyeth's sentimentalism.

The AGO exhibition is divided into six parts: "Everyday Colville," made up of well-known images from the postwar period; "War Artist," featuring early works from the Second World War; "Home From Away," with more domestic themes; "Animals," featuring works about dogs, horses and other creatures; "Inherent Danger," featuring dramatic works suggesting violence or harm; and "Love, Life and Loss," focusing on images of his wife, Rhoda, who was his favored model throughout his career.

Trauma and war

David Alexander Colville was born in Toronto in 1920, the son of David Harrower Colville, a Scottish-born steel plant superintendent, and Florence Gault Colville, who ran a dress shop for many years after the family moved to Amherst, Nova Scotia in 1929. As a young child, Colville nearly died from a six-month battle with pneumonia. That brush with mortality and his isolation as he recovered led him somehow to artistic expression. During and after his illness, he took to drawing and the study of art, which was to be a lifelong passion.

Contributing further to what became a preoccupation with mortality and death as he came to maturity were his experiences during World War II. Serving as a war artist, he witnessed great horrors when he was assigned to work with the Allied forces in the liberation of the concentration camp at Bergen-Belsen in 1945. Those forces discovered tens of thousands of corpses and of the survivors another 13,000 died in the following days, so bad was their condition.

Speaking about his time in the concentration camp, Colville said, "The thing one felt was that one felt badly that you didn't feel worse ... you see one dead person and it is too bad, but seeing 500 is not 500 times worse. ... There is a certain point at which you begin to feel nothing." He apparently suppressed some of these drawings, but the ones that are shown bear silent witness to the Holocaust. "This was a profoundly affecting experience."

While studying at Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick, he met Rhoda Wright who was to become his wife and lifelong muse. She is featured in a number of the paintings shown here, and is woven throughout the quixotic and enigmatic narratives of his work. Colville's painting developed in the postwar period toward refined simplification as exemplified in the painting "Nude and Dummy" (1950). At this point he also made his official entry into political life as he took a seat on the Sackville town council, though this was the only public office he ever held.

Until fairly late in his artistic career, Colville was obliged to teach to make a living. He didn't get his first solo exhibition until 1951, and it wasn't until 1963 that he was able to retire from teaching and make a full-time living as an artist. He had been able to establish his name internationally to some extent after a solo show in New York in 1953. This was also the period in which he did what has to become some of his most recognizable work, such as "Horse and Train" (1954—made famous as the cover of the 1973 "Night Vision" album by singer-songwriter Bruce Cockburn). This work conveys the essential Colville in his offering of a vain, if heroic challenge by the natural and traditional to the inevitability of technology and social progress.

Having gained some international recognition, even with critics divided over the merit of his work, he came to the attention of the federal government and was chosen to design a full set of coins for Canada's centenary in 1967. This marks his ascension into the ranks of the cultural

elite and the political establishment, and he received numerous appointments and state awards in subsequent decades.

An establishment figure

Most artists of his time, through the years of the Great Depression and the War, in some fashion, took an oppositional stand against what was seen as a bankrupt social order. Colville, on the other hand, sought shelter in conformity to the status quo. At the same time, he openly sought popularity and fame and lent his images to numerous business enterprises, from postcards to record album covers. His self-promotion was early on buttressed by support from the prestigious National Gallery, and his subsequent celebrity was well exploited by collectors and the art market in general. His “Man on Verandah” (1953), sold for \$1.287 million in 2010, setting a record for the work of a living Canadian artist.

The support of such a venerated institution for an artist who wanted to be brought into the fold, as it were, made him suitable for the role he would play as a state-sanctioned celebrity. In 1967 he was named an Officer, and fifteen years later, a Companion of the Order of Canada, the highest honor granted by the Canadian government, for recognition of achievement and “service to the nation.” This was followed in 2003 by the prestigious Governor General’s Award in Visual and Media Arts.

The AGO has given special attention to the place of Colville’s work in popular culture and particularly its appearance in various films presented in “pairings” throughout the exhibit. Four of his paintings appear in Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining*. Coincidentally, the TIFF Cinematheque in Toronto is currently running a retrospective of Kubrick’s film work. Directors such as Wes Anderson and the Coen brothers have used images or compositions from various Colville paintings. It is noted that the composition of his painting “To Prince Edward Island” (1965) is clearly reproduced in Anderson’s film *Moonrise Kingdom*. One offbeat addition to the exhibit is the biographical comic book by David Collier that amusingly follows the life and exploits of Colville.

A card-carrying member of the Conservative Party for many years, Colville was very much an establishment figure. And although he gained recognition through the support of the political elite and the corporate media, he was not so popular among art critics and artists who, in the main, saw his work as formally and artistically static. He expressed little interest in the artistic currents of his day, proud in his independence. Statements like, “I’m a conservative and I want to be an aristocrat,” didn’t exactly endear him to his more liberal-minded or bohemian peers. It is sometimes difficult to draw a clear connection between an artist’s politics and their art, but in Colville’s case, it is difficult not to.

He approached his artistic practice with a truly religious devotion, once declaring that he had to be “in something like a state of grace in order to work.” One can admire the care and discipline with which he approached his art and still notice a stultifying repression in him personally, which in his art nevertheless produced some successful images.

The world at a distance

In weighing the merits of the work of Alex Colville, one is offered to choose between two general responses: that he ranks among the giants of contemporary art in Canada (the view promoted by the political and cultural elite) or that his work is largely irrelevant and ultimately empty (the “radical” standpoint). The truth is somewhat more complex than

either of these alternatives.

It may be that Colville’s alienation from the abstract schools gave him a certain “advantage” in the postwar period, i.e., it was left to him and a few others to paint the human figure and various mundane human dramas that continue to fascinate us and which painting ignores entirely at its peril. At the same time, the fact that a very conservative individual in terms of his temperament and social views, who was closed off to large parts of human experience and turmoil, was doing this sort of work, limits it dramatically. In effect, one is saying that Colville still appeals *in part* by default, because he continued to paint subjects and themes that more dynamic artistic personalities would not, or could not.

In part by default, but not entirely. Certainly Colville’s early work and particularly the painting and drawing he did during the war express a real compassion for his subjects and in a more direct and less finished form than the detached style he became known for: paintings, for example, such as “The Nijmegen Bridge, Holland” or “Infantry, near Nijmegen,” both done in 1946. However painful, these were his most genuine moments.

After that point one senses a growing reluctance to engage with the world. The artist’s own emotional distance from his art lends a forlorn character to these works. Following the war, his portraits of barren figures and settings were in some way a response to the stagnant atmosphere of postwar life.

Some of the work done in the prime of his career such as, “Horse and Train” which make a striking, even magical impression, nevertheless withhold the artist’s own feelings about the narrative. A story is described, such as the oddly familiar drama illustrated in “Family and Rainstorm,” and we are invited into the tension of the situation, but simultaneously alienated from the people involved whose feelings are not evident, with faces turned away or obscured. This transforms what might otherwise be a heartwarming tale of a family sheltering from a storm, into something strangely troubling.

This becomes a theme in much of Colville’s work. When he uses animals, a favored pet often takes centre stage, such as in “Dog and Priest” (1978), while the human figure is pointedly obscured. Even his human portraits are given impassive expressions, as though mere props or even shapes in a composition. The way people are treated in his paintings in general leads one to infer a certain misanthropy (or lack of deep interest perhaps?), which in turn leads to a more critical consideration of his outlook. It is possible that witnessing the atrocities committed during the war, the worst of man’s inhumanity to man, may well have critically soured his affection for his fellow beings.

This may be understandable, and though his work does inspire curiosity and admiration, ultimately where does it lead? It is a hard irony to see such great industry, skill and imagination invested in an extraordinary body of work, but to feel about it overall such a quiet despair.



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