

## Canadian Art: An Important New Introduction for Young People

*A First Book of Canadian Art.* Richard Rhodes. Owl, 2001. 72 pp. \$24.95 cloth. ISBN 1-894379-21-7.

Richard Rhodes's book is the first survey for young audiences to tackle, in an engaging fashion, the vast and complex story of Canadian art history. Not only should it be celebrated for its much needed contribution to national arts education, but the dynamic and colourful design captures in bold ways the excitement of creative expression and sends the message that Canadian art is anything but boring. The layout of double-page spreads offers a playful display of reproductions accompanied by short texts that direct the reader's exploration of the works. Reflecting the beauty, richness, and diversity of artistic expression across the nation, it offers a pictorial survey that works as much as a picture book for young children as it does as a written departure point for further research by the teenage audience the author intended. In fact, the title *A First Book* suggests a veritable primer written in very basic language, while the actual text is more sophisticated and introduces concepts and ideas in an accessible manner, to challenge and inspire the target audience.

Beginning with the arts of Canada's First Peoples, Rhodes offers a chronological survey that selects major artists such as William Berczy and Paul Kane and particular "isms" such as Impressionism and abstraction to chart the highlights of Canadian art over the centuries and from coast to coast. Culling a selection of about 80 artists from over 10,000 years of artistic activity could not have been easy, and while the array acknowledges a great breadth of production, it favours central Canada in its representation, with the majority of artists featured coming from Ontario and Quebec. Happily, the mythical status of the Group of Seven is kept at bay: Thomson (who died before the Group formed in 1920) receives a double-page spread, and the seven member artists are juxtaposed over the following four pages. In many cases, Rhodes chose slightly lesser known works by well-known artists, such as Ozias Leduc's *Green Apples*, rather than the familiar *Boy with Bread*, thus expanding our visual repertoire. Another strength is the discussion of the range of media and concepts explored by contemporary Canadian artists.

While the format of the book inevitably imposed excruciating choices, it is a pity that historic sculpture, many other women artists, and works by the great contemporary Inuit artists such as Kenojuak Ashevak and Jessie Oonark were omitted. Nor did such a telescopic view allow for the representation of the hugely multifaceted production of aboriginal art over the centuries. Given these constraints however, Richard Rhodes has done a magnificent job in creating an inaugural book for young people to discover their visual heritage.

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