

OVERVIEW

DONALD W. BUCHANAN (1908 – 1966)

by Nancy Townshend

Certain formative qualities distinguish Donald William Buchanan that would make him “one of the most significant Canadians of our generation,”¹ according to Hamilton Southam. At an early age his high moral character and keen intellect were discernable. “I can and do bear testimony to his high character, attainments and interests,”² wrote Dr. Ralph Flenley, his former University of Toronto professor in 1934. Similarly, his Master at University College, Oxford, M. E. Sailler, noted: “Mr. Buchanan is a man of alert intelligence and varied interests. While he was in Oxford he showed a strong interest in art, and attended classes at the Ruskin School of Drawing.”³

Donald W. Buchanan grew up in Lethbridge. He was the son of Senator W.A. Buchanan (1925 – 1954), former publisher of the *Lethbridge Weekly Herald* and MP (1911 – 1921). The young Buchanan developed a keen interest in history, writing⁴ and in Canada.

Pivotal in Buchanan’s life (outside his family) was Harry McCurry, then Assistant Director of the National Gallery of Canada (NGC). In September 1934, McCurry wrote about him to Hon. Vincent Massey: “in my opinion, he is in every way the type...we badly need in Canadian Museum Service...I consider him extremely well-fitted [to work in the National Gallery.]”⁵ McCurry arranged in 1934 for Buchanan to receive a fellowship from the Carnegie Corporation to train with him in museum administration at the NGC, and to research a catalogue raisonné of paintings, watercolours and sketches by James Wilson Morrice in Montreal from February to April 1935. An extension of the Carnegie Corporation grant enabled the young art historian to work on Morrice in London and Paris.⁶ In March 1935, McCurry described the twenty-seven year old to Dr. J. C. Webster: “One of our [Carnegie Corporation] Scholarship students, and perhaps the most successful one, is Mr. Donald W. Buchanan....He has done a great deal of excellent work and has made a special study of the life and work of J. W. Morrice...When he completes his work on Morrice he will either come to the National Gallery permanently or”⁷ There followed a long and meaningful association with McCurry. In 1936 Buchanan wrote the Introduction to the Retrospective Exhibition of Painting by Members of the

Group of Seven (1919 – 1933) at the NGC, and then worked for McCurry as Director of its Industrial Design Division from June 1947 to 1953. Buchanan became the Division's Chief from 1954 to 1955 when McCurry retired.

By 1955, Buchanan, newly appointed Assistant Director of the National Gallery of Canada, was in his prime. The same year Robert Ayre noted that: "One of the first things that strikes you in Donald Buchanan is his Canadianism...he has helped develop our self-consciousness as a nation."⁸

Prior to his employment at the National Gallery starting in 1947, Buchanan had worked at the National Film Society of Canada (1936 – 1937), the Canadian Radio Commission (1937 – 1940), the National Film Board (1941 – 1948) and also written about Canadian art. As John Collins has so aptly pointed out, "long...before he undertook to organize a national design council, Buchanan was working to establish national cultural awareness among the public."⁹

As the first Secretary-Treasurer of the NFS, Buchanan furthered NFS's aim to disseminate and to have appreciated outstanding educational films across Canada. As Director of talks and public affairs for the Canadian Radio Commission (now CBC) from January 31, 1937 to November 30, 1940, Buchanan organized a network and regional programme of broadcasts and forums across Canada. While Director of Photo and Graphics Division of Wartimes Information Board (WIB) from 1940 to 1941, Buchanan collected photographs¹⁰ for, and edited his book, *This is Canada* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1944). From October 1941 to May 1948, Buchanan worked at the NFB for Director John Grierson who wanted "to encourage films that will relate our familiar scenes to wider concepts of citizenship and statehood."¹¹ The NFB created documentary films such as the "Toilers of the Grand Banks" and "Farmers of the Prairies" which aimed to put "the workaday face of Canada on the screen."¹² Buchanan wrote about "Promoting Democracy, With 16mm Film" in the *Canadian Forum* in 1943.¹³

Buchanan's **Design For Use** exhibition honouring Canadian talent in industrial design opened on October 1, 1946 at the NGC. Good design in manufactured products, for Buchanan, meant simplicity, fine proportions and functional utility. Altogether, 95 metal products, 60 wood, 40 plastic, 25 glass, 12 ceramic and 20 textiles – all recently Canadian-made objects for everyday living - were exhibited in this show. "Design For Use, Design For Millions"¹⁴ was its slogan. **Design For Use in Canadian Products** circulated throughout Canada from 1946 to 1950.

Buchanan's subsequent work in Design helped formulate Canadian culture. From June 1947 to 1954, Buchanan worked as the Director of the Industrial Design Division of the NGC including its Information Services. He was instrumental in establishing the National Industrial Design Committee (NIDC) in 1948. Buchanan became its first secretary. In February 1953 Buchanan set up the Design Centre at the NGC. This became, in effect, the headquarters for the NIDC which maintained The Canadian Design Index, a registry of Canadian industrial design products of merit. The NIDC also gave out annual Design Awards to Industry. From April 1, 1954 to 1955 Buchanan worked as Chief of the NGC's Industrial Design Division.

Concurrently Buchanan also worked in the NGC's Extension Department., thereby further implementing his strong belief in the democratization of the arts.

Buchanan's writings before and after 1955 ensured that he shaped Canada's "self-consciousness as a nation."¹⁵ This impressive legacy included twelve books, on Morrice in 1936 and 1947, Pellan in 1962, and Zadkine posthumously in 1967, and one hundred and twenty-one articles on Milne, Carr, Schaefer, Quebec's Roberts and Borduas, and Alberta's Beny, and nine exhibition catalogues.

Buchanan also wrote about other subjects crucial to Canada's cultural identity. In his article titled "Lost to Canada" in *Canadian Art* (1946), Buchanan deplored the fact that the National Gallery of Canada could ill-afford immediately postwar to purchase major European artworks held in private Canadian collections. Instead some Canadian collectors such as Gordon Edwards, H. S. Southam and William Van Horne were selling their major artworks to New York markets. "If the [Canadian] museums cannot pay the full New York prices, cannot some other way be found...[so that these masterpieces] may be saved for the nation? The wider question of the relation between public and individual interests, which this exodus of modern masterpieces raises, should be the concern of all Canadians interested in the cultivation of a liberal and well founded national understanding and appreciation of the fine arts."¹⁶ The Canadian government heeded Donald Buchanan. Six artworks in the Edwards Collection including Daumier's *Third Class Carriage* had "now been saved for the nation:"¹⁷ reported Buchanan in his May 1947 article. From 1944, as Co-Editor of *Canadian Art* until 1958, he furthered shaped Canadians' awareness of Canadian art.

In his work at the National Gallery, Buchanan helped acquire Borduas's *Les Parachutes vegetaux* (1947), its first abstraction by Borduas, for its

permanent collection¹⁸ in 1948, just after the publication of Borduas's *Refus global*. He wrote insightful Introductions to the NGC's exhibition catalogues on the Group of Seven in 1936, Zadkine in 1956, the Second and Third Biennial Exhibition of Canadian Art in 1957 and 1959, Fine Canadian Crafts in 1957 and Pellán in 1960.

Buchanan's contributions to the Man and His World International Fine Arts Exhibition at Expo '67 (1965- 1966) in Montreal as its first Director, became the culmination of his lifework and interests, and reflect the meaning that art held for him. Negotiating with the Louvre, British Museum and other international public museums and collectors for works of art for this important show, Buchanan sought art which embraced "human universality which governs man's expression in art in all its manifestations, archaic, primitive, classical and contemporary."¹⁹

In 1963, Donald Buchanan, and his brother Hugh, offered many fine works of art to the City of Lethbridge. This became the first significant public art collection ever to exist in Lethbridge. Such a meaningful gift and profound legacy for his birthplace, Lethbridge, Alberta.

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¹ Hamilton Southam in a speech at the National Gallery of Canada on the occasion of the launching of Donald W. Buchanan's posthumous book, *The Secret World of Zadkine as Seen by Donald Buchanan*, (Paris: Editions L'art, c. 1966).

² Dr. Ralph Flenley, Professor of History, University of Toronto, in a letter dated Feb. 13, 1934, Library and Archives Canada.

³ M. E. Sailler, Master, University College, Oxford in a letter dated Feb. 13, 1934, Library and Archives Canada.

⁴ *A Complete Guide to Waterton Lakes National Parks*. Lethbridge, Lethbridge Herald Job Press, 1928.

⁵ Harry McCurry in a letter dated September 29, 1934 to Hon. Vincent Massey, National Gallery of Canada Archives.

⁶ On meeting Matisse, he confided to Director Eric Brown in May 1935: "Matisse, although pleasant, is a formidable person to meet; he has the stable well-planted assurance of a powerful business man of a responsible statesman, also the seriousness. He gave me useful information [on Morrice]." (Donald Buchanan in an undated letter to Eric Brown, National Gallery of Canada Archives.) Buchanan later published an interview with Matisse in *Canadian Art* [VIII, 2, (1950 – 1951), 61-65]. Matisse corresponded with Donald regarding the possible purchase of *Nu sur le canapé* in his studio in January 1952. [Henri Matisse in a letter dated January 25, 1952 to Donald Buchanan, Donald W. Buchanan – James Wilson Morrice Collection, CA OTAG SC056, E. P. Taylor Research Library and Archives, Art Gallery of Ontario.]

⁷ Harry McCurry in a letter dated March 29, 1935 to Dr. J. C. Webster, 7.4C, Carnegie Corp. – Individuals: Buchanan, Donald W. – vol. 2, Outside Activities/Organizations, National Gallery of Canada Archives.

⁸ Robert Ayre, "The New Associate Director of The National Gallery," *Toronto Daily Star*, July 16, 1955.

⁹ John Collins, "Design for Use, Design For The Millions: Proposals and Options of the National Industrial Design Council 1948 – 1960," MA Thesis, Carleton University, 1986, 15.

¹⁰ NFB's photographs of Canadian life and industry with some by Nicholas Morant of Banff and sections on Canadian industries such as logging, hydro-electric projects and agriculture, "How We Live", "The Community" and "The Seasons."

¹¹ Donald W. Buchanan, "The Projection of Canada," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 13, No. 3, April 1944, 298.

¹² Donald W. Buchanan, "The Projection of Canada," 298.

¹³ Donald W. Buchanan, "Promoting Democracy, With 16mm Film," *Canadian Forum*, 22, March 1943, 351-52.

¹⁴ Donald Buchanan, *Design for Use: A Survey of Design in Canada of Manufactured Goods for the Home and Office, for Sports and Outdoors*. Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada, Department of Reconstruction, National Film Board, 1947, 6.

¹⁵ Robert Ayre, "The New Associate Director of The National Gallery," *Toronto Daily Star*, July 16, 1955.

¹⁶ Donald Buchanan, "Lost to Canada," *Canadian Art*, 3, No. 3, Apr./May 1946, 124.

¹⁷ Donald Buchanan, "Important Paintings from the Edwards Collection Acquired by the Nation," *Canadian Art*, 4, No. 3, May 1947, 124. The National Gallery of Canada purchased them for its permanent collection.

¹⁸ Douglas Ord, "The National Gallery of Canada: Ideas, Art, Architecture," (Montreal and Kingston: Mc Gill-Queens University Press, 2003), 119, 133.

¹⁹ Donald W. Buchanan in a letter dated July 7, 1965 to Mr. Matta of Paris, Refusal of loan of works of art 1965 – 1967, Exhibition files – box 1, Man and His World, National Gallery of Canada *fonds*, National Gallery of Canada Archives.