

GOODRIDGE ROBERTS IN NEW YORK

For over forty years Goodridge Roberts (1904-74) has occupied a prominent position in the fabric of Canadian art history. Yet despite the great attention paid to his work, only a few lines have been devoted to his years in New York.¹ While Roberts readily acknowledged that this was the most profound experience of his life, others have treated that period primarily as a matter of biographical fact. The reason for this scant attention may be the lack of work available from those years, 1927 and 1928. While a few drawings in the artist's estate could be attributed to this period, the works are undated and because of the consistency of Roberts' hand, they may be best considered "early" examples.

Nevertheless, New York had a lifelong effect on his painting and it was never superseded by any other experience as powerful or as influential. His stay in New York provided Roberts with a refined visual vocabulary and a sustaining definition of modernism. Perhaps most importantly, it instilled in him the confidence to commit himself totally to painting. New York also gave him an insight into the world of early twentieth-century cultural accomplishment and its concern for individual freedom.

Roberts' two years in New York, spent at the Art Students League was the second phase of his art training. With the support of his mother's sister, a Montréal high school teacher, and his maternal uncle Thomas Allen, a lawyer in Moncton, he had left Fredericton, New Brunswick to study art.² From 1923 to 1925, he attended Montréal's newly opened *École des Beaux-Arts* where he won prizes in Artistic Drawing, Decorative Composition, Decorative Painting and Ornamental Modelling.³ But his instructors, including Edmond Dyonnet, Robert Mahias and Charles Maillard seem to have had little lasting impact beyond introducing him to the structure of the academic classroom. While recalling a certain fondness for Dyonnet and the pleasure afforded him by the Morrice Memorial Exhibition at the Art Association of Montreal in 1925, Roberts rarely referred to this period of his life. Roberts' initial decision to study art was unusual considering his family's formidable literary background. But his choice of career met with neither great opposition nor approval, perhaps because his younger sister Dorothy Leisner had already demonstrated her abilities as a poet by this time and another generation of Roberts poets was secure.

Roberts' decision to go to New York after spending a year in Fredericton following his time at the *École des Beaux-Arts* was not merely a youthful whim to live in the emerging capital of the art world. Roberts' family ties with New

York, which were to prove so valuable, had long been in place. For example, his uncle Sir Charles G.D. Roberts (1860-1943) had been an editor of the *Illustrated American* and lived in New York from the late 1890's until 1907. His cousin Bliss Carmen (1861-1929) had already come to New York in 1890 to work on the *Independent*, remaining there for some time. His father Theodore (1877-1953) had also worked on the *Independent* in the late 1890's. As both Roberts' uncle and father had New York publishers, they continued to frequent the city long after their return to Canada. Undoubtedly the notion of ambition and accomplishment of Canada's most famous literary family provided Goodridge Roberts with an acute awareness of cultural achievement. While Roberts did opt out of the family business of poetry and story-writing, the legacy of his family's literary ascendancy and position made him unusually perceptive of the possibilities of New York.

But perhaps the most important personality in this New York connection was his aunt Mary Annabel Fanton Roberts (1871-1956).⁴ She was married in 1906 to his father's elder brother William Carmen Roberts (1875-1941). He had come to New York in late 1897 to join his brother Sir Charles at the *Illustrated American* and shortly after went to the *Literary Digest* where he was the managing editor for over thirty years. He was also a professor of politics at New York University. Mary Fanton had her own lengthy and impressive career as a writer and editor. In addition to years of reporting for numerous New York periodicals and newspapers, she was also the editor of *Demorest Magazine*, *New Idea Women's Magazine*, and *House and Gardens* as well as on the editorial boards of several others. Her involvement with the New York art community was particularly manifested by her work as managing editor of the influential *Craftsman* from 1906 to 1916 and as the founding editor of *Touchstone* from 1917 to 1921. As the managing editor of *Arts and Decoration* from 1922 to her retirement in 1941, she contributed regular art reviews under her own name and her pseudonym, Giles Edgerton, through the 1920's and early '30's.

Her publication of material on The Eight (a designation she may have invented)⁵ especially in the *Craftsman*, has long been recognized as exemplary of early support of the "Ashcan School" from the time of their inaugural exhibition at the Macbeth Gallery in 1908. Writing under her pseudonym, she commented:

they are not consciously trying to create a new art for a country that needs one; yet they are every one of them doing a kind of work that is essentially creative and absolutely typical of our racial characteristics, our social condition, and our widely diversified country.⁶

This phrase is frequently quoted as a seminal statement on the character of the "rebels."



fig. 1 Robert Henri, *Portrait of Mary Fanton Roberts*, 1917, Oil on canvas, 83.5 x 66 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Mary Fanton Roberts, 1957 (57.45). (Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)

Mary Fanton maintained a lifelong friendship with Robert Henri (1865-1929), the leader of The Eight who painted her portrait in 1917 (fig.1). The work was disliked by her nephew Goodridge who did however approve of Henri's aesthetic attitudes as expressed in his 1923 book, *The Spirit in Art*.⁷ Her ongoing relationship with John Sloan, George Bellows and William Glackens helped ensure that their contribution to the development of modern American painting was kept in the public eye through her many literary associations.

In addition to writing numerous other articles on music, photography, architecture, interior decoration and crafts, Fanton was a recognized supporter of modern dance. Her close association with Isadora Duncan and the Ballets Russes led to her making a major contribution to the Dance Archives of the Museum of Modern Art at its founding in 1930. Ira Glackens, in his biography of his father recalled that "Pavlova and Nijinski and other fabulous figures from the great days of Diaghilev were to be found at the Roberts' apartment on East 18th. St."⁸ As well, her association with such literary figures as Theodore Dreiser (who used Fanton as his model for Miriam Finch in *The "Genius"*), Jack Yeats, H.L. Mencken and Rebecca West to cite but a few, spans the breadth of the New York cultural milieu of the early decades of the twentieth century.

It should be stated that in retrospect, Fanton and her circle might be considered as somewhat conservative by the time her nephew came to New York. American-centered, the group was not strongly involved with the more avant-garde and European-oriented milieu around Alfred Stieglitz and his gallery "291."⁹ However, Fanton did publish material on Stieglitz. Nevertheless, it goes without saying that what might be called conservative in New York in the mid-1920's would most definitely be considered extremely progressive in Canada. Fanton's circle signified that New York notion of confidence and freedom that fostered the ambition of American modernity; and it was to have a lasting effect on Goodridge Roberts.

The exact date of Roberts' arrival in New York is uncertain.¹⁰ He became a member of the Art Students League on May 4, 1927 after fulfilling its basic requirement of having been enrolled as a student for at least three months.¹¹ Whether Roberts' decision to enter the League was prompted by one of Mary Fanton and William Carmen Roberts' rare visits to Fredericton in July of 1924 when their nephew was still a student at the École des Beaux-Arts cannot be documented. Yet it is not mere speculation to suggest that Fanton's involvement with the New York art community would have played a decisive role in his making the move to New York. Upon his arrival, his relatives brought him to John Sloan's studio in Washington Square where Sloan was characteristically critical of his academic drawings.¹² Much to his aunt's approval, this adverse response only served to heighten Roberts' determination to enter the League.

The freewheeling, energetic environment at the League was in many ways a kind of extension of Fanton's own milieu. Her later letters to her nephew

similarly display her ongoing ambition for him, impressing upon him the very American notion that perseverance will guarantee success and accomplishment.¹³ It was she, perhaps more than anyone else in his family who instilled in him the confidence that he could and would succeed as a painter. Roberts lived in a room in an apartment one floor below his relatives and perhaps because she was childless, Mary Fanton looked upon him as a surrogate son.

The Art Students League of the late 1920's continued to symbolize the ideal of independence that had led to its founding in 1875.¹⁴ Since the early 1900's the school had had no admission requirements, no prescribed curriculum nor method of instruction. Its success was determined by the commitment of its students and the idealism of its instructors. As John Sloan, one of its most influential teachers, put it: "A student at the League should cultivate an attitude toward his studies which is both flexible and critical. It should be flexible enough so that he can change his mind as often as need be and it should be critical in that he need not take either the professed 'modern' or the professed 'conservative' at their own evaluation."¹⁵ The mix of teachers and students alike created a charged atmosphere of freedom and individuality. As an example, it was one of the first art schools to allow women to work from the nude. The rivalry between teachers as unlike as Sloan and Thomas Hart Benton and the diverse aesthetic positions propounded in the classroom encouraged a spirit of rebellion. Roberts has often commented on the enormous stimulus this provided after his academically disciplined experience in Montréal. The ideology of individuality that had begun at the League in 1902 (when Robert Henri arrived), continued until the early 1930's. With the advent of social realism came the rejection of the notion that individual and communal identity could be synonymous.

In discussing his experience at the League, Roberts has implied that he studied drawing with John Sloan (1871-1951) and Boardman Robinson (1876-1952); and painting with Max Weber (1881-1961). However, the classes were actually "ateliers libres" combining life drawing, painting and composition. The students could choose to focus on their own particular interest and the instructor might visit the classroom as infrequently as once a week. The League which encouraged visits to New York art galleries gave Roberts his first introduction to Cézanne, Picasso and Matisse as well as to American art. The Metropolitan Museum, where he held a sketching ticket from November 1927 to July 1928, provided him with a previously denied access to the history of art.¹⁶ Roberts has recalled that while at the *École des Beaux-Arts* his only contact with past art was through plaster casts of the antique and a few reproductions, especially those of Puvis de Chavannes. Modern trends were totally ignored. His Introduction to the writings of Roger Fry and Clive Bell occurred at the League and they would have appealed to him as much for their aesthetic content as for their literary accomplishment. (Both Fry and Bell

frequently published in New York periodicals during the 1920's.) In addition, his relatives provided him with tickets to concerts, readings and exhibitions.

From the time that Roberts returned to Canada in the summer of 1928 until his death in 1974, his painting evolved consistently without dramatic change or drastic reconsideration of the basic attitudes he had formed in New York. The essence of his painting always resided in his response to the motif and his deeply intuitive transcription of the meaning of that motif. The intense ambiguity between the real and the painted which invests his work with its visual resonance are all manifestations of the lessons of New York. In particular, they express the influence of John Sloan and Max Weber and an interpretation of modernism current in New York in the 1920's.

Because of the history of their careers and the work they produced, Sloan would seem to present an American viewpoint in contrast to Weber's more European outlook. But in fact, during Roberts' time at the League, they both shared the conservative definition of modernism that emerged in the United States during the latter part of the second decade of the twentieth century.¹⁷ The experimental spirit fostered by the Armory Show of 1913 had slowly lost its momentum in the aftermath of World War 1. The resultant growing dissatisfaction with European aesthetic ideas and the onset of the Depression eventually led to the strident reaffirmation of earlier American traditions in the 1930's. Even the most steadfast supporters of European avant-garde art associated with Stieglitz had to deal with American disenchantment with abstraction and the suspicion surrounding "foreign" art. The general retrenchment in American modernism, which finally resulted in the move to social realism and regionalism, was also part of an international "classic" phase of modernism perhaps best exemplified by Picasso's neoclassical period. The situation in New York in the 1920's reflected the rise of conservatism in Europe and its spirit of isolation and restraint. This, therefore, goes far in explaining the similarities in attitude shared by Sloan and Weber at this particular moment, despite the major differences in their backgrounds (and the fact that they personally disliked each other).

Weber's painting became particularly conservative in this period although he did not repudiate his earlier, more radical approach. While Sloan continued to maintain an intellectual interest in European art because of his participation in the organization of the Armory Show, his own work reflected a new concern for more traditional subjects and earlier artists especially from the seventeenth century. This confluence in both the thinking of Sloan and Weber and their similar approach to painting in terms of flattened space, geometrical simplification of form with its interplay of volume and surface as well as restrained emotional content did not occur at any other time in their careers. But this brief moment of compatibility provided Roberts with a relatively consistent definition of the form and function of art.

It is in Weber's work that one finds the greater visual resemblance to Roberts' own painting.¹⁸ It is also due to Weber that he accepted the School of Paris dictum that there was no hierarchy of subject among the figure, the still-life and the landscape. Interestingly, Roberts' *Nude on a Red Cloth*, 1939 (fig. 2) is the only image in which he actually combined all three motifs. Roberts was one of the first Canadian artists to treat his subject matter with equal emphasis and despite the particular demands of individual motifs, his acceptance of the modernist notion that subject was subservient to content came from the experience of aesthetic freedom he first encountered in New York. But unlike Weber, Roberts never experimented with sculpture or printmaking.

A student of Matisse and a friend of Picasso, Fry and the Steins, Weber taught at the League in 1920-1921 and again from 1925 to 1927. Roberts had less contact with him than with Sloan although his influence was none the less important. In fact Roberts has remarked that he preferred painting with Weber rather than with Sloan. That Weber was one of the most sought-after instructors at the League may be explained by Roberts' own reaction:

I fell under the spell of his personality immediately. It was strongly moving to watch him in the classroom. ...on entering the room he would seat himself at an easel before the model and paint on a fresh canvas as if in the privacy of his own studio. As a concession to his pupils, he would formulate his thoughts in words but these were uttered in so dreamlike a way that one felt one was not hearing words but actually reading a mind as it pondered the problems of painting.¹⁹

When Roberts himself taught at the Art Association of Montreal's School of Art and Design, he regretted that he lacked Weber's courage to paint in public although his own students responded to him in a markedly similar manner.

Weber's dedication to Cézanne's structure and composition as seen for example in *Still Life with Chinese Teapot*, 1925 (Museum of Modern Art, N.Y.), after his rejection of cubism in 1917, is readily discernible in Roberts' still-lives of the 1930's. As well, Weber's concern for the sculptural quality of form and the expressive potential of flat nuanced colour is evoked in Roberts' figure paintings until the 1950's:

As a student under Max Weber I had learned the importance of seeking for the true relationships of all shapes and colours to one another and to the whole structure of the design. ...With unfaltering insistence he sought to make every part of the picture explain its presence to the utmost within the limits imposed by the architecture of his idea.²⁰

Weber's concept of the arbitrarily posed nude, simply represented and without rhetoric, which he learned from Matisse, is strongly evident in all of Roberts' figure paintings. It is particularly apparent in his images of the MacDonald children and those of his first wife, Marian in the early 1940's. Weber held an



fig. 2 Goodridge Roberts, *Nude on a Red Cloth*, 1939, Oil on board, 68.6 x 81.3 cm, Private Collection, Montréal. (Photo: Denis Farley, Montréal)

opposing position to Sloan in upholding the importance of the simplification of line. Despite Roberts' enthusiasm for drawing with Sloan, it is most evident on the basis of Roberts' landscapes, that Weber's opinion prevailed.

Weber's intense belief in the spiritual content of art was expressed in his 1916 *Essays on Art*. While he, like many others who moved away from abstraction in the 1920's became less concerned with the spiritual in favour of the physical, Weber's attitude may have been an influencing factor on Roberts' own



fig. 3 Goodridge Roberts, *Man Reading Newspaper*, c.1933, Ink on paper, 24.1 x 18.3 cm, Private Collection, Montréal. (Photo: Courtesy of J. Roberts)

sense of identification with the subject: "I know in my own painting, I feel I have succeeded when the pictorial symbols call up neither too much nor too little of the nostalgia of contact with the place or the person or the thing."²¹ Roberts was greatly impressed with Weber's notion that painting should be approached with Blake's "fear and trembling," an attitude that Roberts always maintained despite his great self-confidence and belief in his work. He has written that:

I have so often tried, with no hope of success, to find the key to the meaning of things. At that moment when, in the presence of the subject, my relationship to the subject induces in me a sensation that is not altogether free from what I can only describe as fear or awe... I realize that I have grasped and am setting down some inexplicable meaning that has hitherto lain sleeping... I ask myself, as I have a thousand times, what is it. This feeling of fear in the face of a mystery.²²

John Sloan was probably the most influential force that Roberts encountered at the League as well as being the instructor with whom he took the most classes.²³ Whenever Roberts filled out museum biographical forms, he listed his instructors as Sloan, Weber and Robinson which perhaps also suggests their order of importance to him. If Weber had provided him with a visual model for the work, Sloan formulated his ideas about art.²⁴ There is little visual evidence of either Sloan's style or subject matter in Roberts' work. Although Sloan is most readily associated with images of New York's bars and backyards, he did not emphasize any particular subject matter in the classroom. However, he maintained that, "art springs from reality;" and "there must always be an interest in life greater than a concern about making art, but when the creative life of the picture is established, form or style is the way the artist wraps the thing up."²⁵ Sloan did encourage his students to make rapid sketches of life on the city streets and Roberts continued this practice on his return to Ottawa and then in Montréal until the late 1930's (fig.3). But he became uncomfortable with the process and the remarks it generated from passersby. It is important also to note that, about 1928 Sloan himself was moving away from urban images to paintings and etchings of the female nude. At this time he also became more interested in a more abstract formal order than had occurred in his earlier work. Similarly, Sloan's cityscapes were much less anecdotal and relatively more abstracted.

Sloan's association with the League since 1916 had gained him a strong reputation as a superior, if demanding instructor. While he and The Eight had long ago established the validity of the urban environment as pure American subject matter, in the mid-1920's he was still regarded as the symbol of a rebel as Roberts' fellow student, the sculptor David Smith has remarked.²⁶ A harsh critic in the classroom, it is known that he "figuratively took the student by the

neck and shook him until academic notions were emptied out of him."²⁷ Despite Sloan's caustic tongue, Roberts recalled that he himself "was one of those fortunate ones who just got the occasional word of approval and encouragement."²⁸ Sloan also made him monitor of his classes in 1927 which entitled him to free tuition.²⁹ His responsibilities included posing the models as he wished and maintaining the attendance records. But Sloan's most important indication of his support of Roberts' work (something he never felt from Weber) came in the open letter of recommendation he gave him in May 1928 stating that Roberts' drawings "are in my opinion of the highest order — they show observation and control, they have character and viewpoint."³⁰

Although it is speculation, it is possible that Sloan's interest in Roberts, initiated as it was by his friend Mary Fanton, may have been reinforced by his prior association with another Canadian, James Wilson Morrice. Sloan had met Morrice in New York with Robert Henri, owned two pochades by him and wrote in his diary that he regarded Morrice "as one of the greatest landscape painters of the time."³¹ Given Fanton's close association with Henri, it is quite possible that she too had contact with Morrice and she was presumably aware of her nephew's own admiration for him.

In Sloan's classes, Roberts learned a fundamental working method which he has described as the way "to get something in the shortest time possible." Sloan's use of two models in the classroom, one whose pose changed every ten minutes, the other more frequently, was in sharp contrast to the academic procedures Roberts had encountered at the *École des Beaux-Arts*, where, also, he did not deal with the nude until the second year of study. Sloan's method of encouraging quick studies of the figure was to provide Roberts with a strategy for his own landscape painting. The intense concentration and rapid working method instilled by Sloan enabled Roberts to respond to the changing impressions of nature in one sitting and it goes far in explaining Roberts' ability to quickly impose a unified order onto the shifts of light and movement in the landscape (fig. 4).

In more general terms, Roberts always retained Sloan's emphasis on realization rather than realism: "The art life of a thing... comes through the use of symbols combined to make images of ideas."³² His concern for the mental image of the object without distraction from its essence by details is a common thread throughout Roberts' career. Sloan's belief that the subject is where the artist begins but should be the matter of least importance in the finished product was reflected in Roberts' attitude to content and his concern for the symbolic meaning of the motif. Sloan's notion that "the artist seeks to record his awareness of order in life" and "to invent ways to put that sense of order in his work as a document of his understanding" may help to explain Roberts' tense interplay of the real and the imaginary in his images.³³ However, Roberts and



fig. 4 Goodridge Roberts, *Green Day in the Laurentians*, 1945, Watercolour, 54.6 x 70 cm, Concordia Art Gallery, Concordia University, Montréal, Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Max Stern, Dominion Gallery. (Photo: Brian McNeil, Montréal)

Sloan did hold opposing views on the importance of colour. While Sloan defined painting as drawing with the additional means of colour, for Roberts painting was colour with the additional means of drawing. In this respect Roberts is closer to Weber's approach.

Roberts' work shows his lifelong concern for drawing as articulation, low relief composition, large rhythms and the differentiation of the sensation of one form to another. That it relates so closely to the ideas expressed by Sloan in his *Gist of Art* of 1939, is no coincidence. The first one hundred and thirty-five pages were derived from notes taken by Helen Farr Sloan when she and Roberts were students together in Sloan's classes in 1927 and 1928.³⁴ Although Roberts had little contact with New York and with Sloan after he left the League, he wrote to Sloan in 1944 saying that the *Gist* was one of the very few books he had brought with him to England as a war artist: "and it brings back very vividly the time I spent at the League."³⁵ In an earlier letter to Mary Fanton in 1940, he had commented that: "Quite a few of the painters here in Montreal own the book. I shouldn't wonder if it would bring about a great change in our painting methods in Canada — among other things, a realization of the advantages of using glazes of colour over an underpainting in tempera. I have strongly recommended the book to what few libraries we have in this backward place."³⁶ Interestingly, it was at this time that Roberts did his only known painting with glazes, *Girl in Red and Blue Jacket* (priv. coll., Montréal). Although Sloan began using traditional methods of underpainting and glazing in 1928, he did not discuss this in the classroom when Roberts was a student.³⁷

Roberts rarely spoke of his classes with the Canadian-born Boardman Robinson who taught at the League from 1919 to 1930 and who was widely admired for the individual treatment he gave each student. While Mary Fanton Roberts had published articles on him in *Touchstone*³⁸ and he had been with John Sloan at the *Masses*, Robinson was not an integral part of their circle. At the League he voiced little interest in the School of Paris, he referred to these artists as "such clever bastards,"³⁹ although he did admire Picasso. Preferring Renaissance and Baroque painting, his interest in monumental design led him from political cartooning to mural commissions in the 1920's and early '30's. While antagonistic to formulae and virtuoso painting, Robinson's teaching emphasized the need to understand the procedures of making paintings, a result of his close association with Thomas Hart Benton and their research into traditional materials and techniques. However, Roberts was never to show any particular interest in painting processes or craftsmanship *per se*, except to have quality materials at hand.

In the classroom, Robinson's students produced copies of early Renaissance frescoes, particularly those of Giotto. One can see in Roberts' painting of the 1930's examples of the dusty tonalities and generalized forms of the

Trecento, but the most direct link to his classes with Robinson is demonstrated by his pictures after scenes from Duccio's *Maesta* and Giotto's frescoes of St. Francis in Assisi. (These were produced while he was in therapy with Dr. Miguel Prados in the early 1950's.) While Roberts' method of drawing has some resemblance to Robinson's work of the 1920's, it was probably his notion that "a good drawing is a balanced composition of what you know, what you see and what you feel"⁴⁰ that is ultimately more important for Roberts' work than any visual similarities.

Roberts left New York in the summer of 1928 despite Mary Fanton's attempts to keep him in the city. Although the ambitions she voiced for him in her letters over the years may not have been fully realized in her own terms, the confidence and cultivation she encouraged in Roberts were realized. The New York art community's attitude of dedication and perseverance remained a steadfast model for Roberts. Perhaps because his definition of art was so securely formed at the Art Students League, nothing he was to encounter in Canada offered as formidable a challenge to his imagination. While he had numerous friends with diverse interests whom he gathered together for the type of conversation he had witnessed in his aunt's apartment in New York, the two worlds were very different entities.

Whatever the aesthetic or political battles that occurred in Canadian art during Roberts' career, he always maintained the definition of individuality learned in New York. He had little sympathy for the nationalist tendencies of the Group of Seven; he had little affinity for the notion of the collectivity advanced by Borduas and his circle; and he did not accept John Lyman's adherence to a single ideology. Like Sloan, he did not believe in the use of art for social criticism although they were both highly sympathetic to social causes. Similarly Roberts was never to reject the conservative definition of modernism offered at the League. Although he had a more open mind toward abstraction than did Lyman, his response to non-objective art was, in its own way, as cautious and as circumscribed as John Sloan's had been.

New York had evoked an intense conviction about art and an immense cultivation that perfectly suited Roberts' own unusual sensibility. While it is not difficult to acknowledge the influence of New York in the form and content of his painting, it is perhaps just as important to recognize Roberts' formidable ability to take advantage of his unusual and privileged experience. And he was right on the mark when he wrote to Mary Fanton shortly after he returned to Canada that, "I am beginning to get results from the training your kindness has made it possible for me to receive."⁴¹ These lessons were to last a lifetime.

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Notes

- 1 A version of this paper was delivered at the Philip G. McCready Annual Memorial Lecture on Canadian Art at the Art Gallery of Ontario on November 11, 1987. I wish to thank Dennis Reid and Peter Gale for that opportunity. I also wish to acknowledge the generous support of my research by the John Sloan Memorial Foundation and the great encouragement given to me by Helen Farr Sloan.
- 2 Thomas Allen provided Roberts with a monthly allowance in Montréal and New York. Goodridge Roberts, interview by Alfred Pinsky, summer 1966 in Calumet, Québec. Transcript of tape courtesy of Joan Roberts, Montréal; hereafter referred to as ROBERTS, *transcript*. Many of Roberts' comments cited here are taken from the transcript.
- 3 "École des Beaux-Arts," dossier, Bibliothèque des arts, Université du Québec à Montréal (U.Q.A.M.), Montréal.
- 4 Much of the biographical information on Mary Fanton Roberts cited here was derived from the *Mary Fanton Roberts Papers*, Archives of American Art (A.A.A.), Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
- 5 While Fanton claimed she was the first to use the term, James Gibbons Huneder first used the label in print in the *New York Sun*, May 15, 1907, see B. PERLMAN, *The Immortal Eight and its Influence*, exhib. cat. (New York: The Art Students League [A.S.L.], 1983), 16.
- 6 Giles EDGERTON, "The Younger American Painters: Are They Creating a National Art?" *The Craftsman*, XIII, no. 5 (Feb. 1908): 531.
- 7 Dorothy Roberts Leisner, State College, Pa. to the author, March 21, 1984.
- 8 Ira GLACKENS, *William Glackens and The Ashcan Group* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1957), 231.
- 9 Helen Farr Sloan in conversation with the author, November 1987, said that when she visited "291" while a student at the League with Roberts, Stieglitz grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her vigorously when he learned she was a student of Sloan.
- 10 Roberts himself was never very precise about the exact amount of time he spent in New York, merely saying he was there for "two years." Letters suggest he left New York in the summer of 1928.
- 11 Lawrence Campbell, Archivist, A.S.L., letter to the author, March 31, 1981. Roberts' dues were paid until May 1929.
- 12 ROBERTS, *transcript*.
- 13 For example, Fanton to Roberts, Toronto, February 14, 1929, A.A.A.. Roberts continued to send press clippings to his aunt for many years.
- 14 See Marchal LANDGREN, *Years of Art. The Story of The Art Students League of New York* (New York: Art Students League, 1940).
- 15 John SLOAN, *Gist of Art*, rev. ed. (New York: Dover Publications, 1977), 11.
- 16 Courtesy of Joan Roberts, Montréal. The Metropolitan has retained no records of which pictures Roberts and his contemporaries might have copied.
- 17 A general survey of the issues may be found in Milton W. BROWN, *American Painting from the Armory Show to the Depression* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955).
- 18 For a general study of Weber, see Alfred WERNER, *Max Weber* (New York: Abrams, 1975).
- 19 Goodridge ROBERTS, book review of *Max Weber* by Lloyd Goodrich, *Canadian Art*, vol. VIII (Summer 1951): 182.
- 20 ROBERTS, "From this Point I Looked Out," *Queen's Quaterly* (Autumn 1953): 324.

- 21 Goodridge Roberts, Montréal, letter to his sister Dorothy Leisner, State College, Pa., Jan. 15, 1952, Archives, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton.
- 22 ROBERTS, "From This Point," 323.
- 23 Sloan taught at the League during the years 1916-24, 1926-30, 1935-38.
- 24 The numerous studies on John Sloan include the biography by David SCOTT, *John Sloan* (New York: Watson-Guption Publications, 1975).
- 25 Helen Farr SLOAN ed., *John Sloan, Art Nouveau, The Poster Period of John Sloan*, exhib. cat. (Lock Haven State College, Pa., 1967), n.p.
- 26 Garnett McCOY ed., *David Smith* (New York: Praeger, 1973), 19. Roberts participated in an ASL exhibition with Smith, Frances Reswick, Stuart Edie and Joseph Meert, Feb. 21-28, 1928. *Announcement of Exhibition* (courtesy of Joan Roberts, Montréal)
- 27 PERLMAN, *The Immortal Eight*, 24.
- 28 ROBERTS, *transcript*, 16. Alma Duncan recalls that Sloan remarked that "the work of Goodridge Roberts was outstanding at the Art Students League," in Joan MURRAY's *Alma Duncan and Men at Work 1943 to 1986* (Oshawa: Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 1987), 7.
- 29 Executive Secretary, A.S.L., letter to Roberts, Fredericton, September 19, 1927 (courtesy of Joan Roberts, Montréal).
- 30 John Sloan, letter dated May 24, 1928 (courtesy of Joan Roberts, Montréal).
- 31 John SLOAN, *John Sloan's New York Scene: from Diaries, Notes and Correspondance* (1906-1913), ed. Bruce St. John (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 16.
- 32 SLOAN, *Gist*, 18.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 20.
- 34 Helen Farr Sloan, New York, letter to the author, July 26, 1983.
- 35 Goodridge Roberts, R.C.A.F., Overseas Headquarters, England, letter to John Sloan, New York, March 9, 1944 (Delaware Art Museum, Sloan Archives, Wilmington).
- 36 Goodridge Roberts, Montréal, letter to Mary Fanton, New York, Nov. 10, 1940, A.A.A.
- 37 Helen Farr Sloan in conversation with the author.
- 38 For example, Mary Fanton ROBERTS, "Boardman Robinson: Artist and Student of Humanity," *The Touchstone* (January 1928): 207-11.
- 39 Arnold Blanch in Albert CHRIST-JANER, *Boardman Robinson* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), 74.
- 40 CHRIST-JANER, 59.
- 41 Goodridge Roberts, Fredericton, letter to Mary Fanton and William Carmen Roberts, New York, undated (prob. late 1928 or early 1929), *Mary Fanton Roberts Papers*, A.A.A.

GOODRIDGE ROBERTS À NEW YORK

Goodridge Roberts (1904-1974) reconnaissait volontiers qu'il avait acquis, durant son séjour à New York, en 1927 et 1928, une expérience qui devait être l'influence marquante de sa vie. Après des études à l'École des Beaux-Arts de Montréal, de 1923 à 1925, Roberts s'inscrivit à la «Art Students League» de New York, sans doute sur le conseil de son oncle, William Carmen Roberts, et de sa tante, Mary Fanton Roberts, tous deux bien connus dans le monde littéraire de New York. Mary Fanton, directrice-rédactrice de l'influente revue *Craftsman* et rédactrice-fondatrice de la revue *Touchstone*, l'introduisit dans le milieu culturel de New York où s'épanouissaient les ambitions de la modernité américaine. Parmi ses nombreux écrits sur l'art, l'architecture, la photographie, la décoration, l'artisanat, on trouve des articles inédits sur la «Ashcan School». Elle fut aussi parmi les premiers défenseurs d'Isadora Duncan et de la danse moderne.

C'est elle qui présenta Roberts à celui qui allait devenir son maître le plus influent à la «League», John Sloan. Dans les années vingt, la «Art Students League» continuait de soutenir l'idéologie de la liberté et de l'individualité qui était apparue au tournant du siècle et qui présentait un contraste marqué avec l'académisme que Roberts avait pratiqué à Montréal. En fait, les classes de la «League» étaient plutôt des ateliers libres, combinant le dessin d'après modèle, la peinture et la composition, et le maître laissait les élèves libres de se développer selon leurs propres goûts et aptitudes.

À l'école de John Sloan, de Max Weber et de Boardman Robinson, Roberts s'initia à une forme conservatrice du modernisme qui vit le jour aux États-Unis à la fin des années vingt. Après la première Grande Guerre, une insatisfaction croissante à l'endroit des concepts esthétiques européens devait éventuellement amener les artistes américains à réaffirmer, au cours des années trente, leurs propres traditions nationales. Ce repli sur soi du modernisme américain, dans les années vingt, s'inscrivait dans une phase internationale, «néo-classique», du modernisme dont Picasso a laissé de remarquables exemples sur le thème de la mère à l'enfant.

Sous l'influence de Weber, dont l'oeuvre ressemble le plus à la sienne, Roberts accepta le principe de l'école de Paris, selon lequel il n'existe pas de hiérarchie parmi les sujets. C'est aussi à Weber qu'il doit son souci du caractère sculptural de la forme et de l'efficacité des aplats subtilement contrastés; il avait, d'ailleurs, une grande admiration pour les qualités pédagogiques de Weber et sa constance à défendre «l'authenticité des rapports des formes et des couleurs entre elles et avec l'ensemble de l'oeuvre». Bien que l'oeuvre de John Sloan ne présente que peu de ressemblance avec celle de Roberts, il sut, cependant, exprimer les idées de ce dernier sur l'art, et lui transmettre une méthode de

travail rapide, exigeant une concentration intense particulièrement adaptée à la peinture de paysages, et dont il tira profit tout le reste de sa vie. Ce que Roberts retint surtout de l'enseignement de Sloan, c'est l'importance accordée à la réalisation matérielle plutôt qu'au réalisme. Que plusieurs des commentaires de Sloan, dans son livre *Gist of Art* (1939) semblent décrire les oeuvres de Roberts n'est pas une simple coïncidence. Une bonne partie de cet ouvrage, auquel Roberts accorda une très grande importance, se compose de conférences données par Sloan à l'époque où le peintre canadien suivait ses cours. Les deux artistes, cependant, différaient totalement d'opinion quant à l'importance de la couleur. Alors que, pour Sloan, la peinture était d'abord du dessin avec de la couleur en plus, pour Roberts, c'était d'abord de la couleur avec du dessin en plus. Sur ce point, Roberts se rapproche davantage de Weber. Quant à Boardman Robinson, bien que son influence sur Roberts ait été moindre, il l'initia aux formes monumentales et imprécises et aux tons atténués de la peinture à fresque à la manière de la Renaissance.

À son retour au Canada, Roberts demeura fidèle à la définition de l'individualité qu'il avait apprise à New York, et ne rejeta jamais la forme conservatrice du modernisme à l'honneur à la «Art Students League». Il ne devait jamais trouver au Canada de plus grand défi à son imagination. Bien qu'il ait été plus ouvert à l'abstraction en art que ne l'était son contemporain, John Lyman, son attitude à l'endroit de l'art non-figuratif était, à sa manière, tout aussi prudente et réservée que celle de John Sloan. Pour Roberts, New York représentait ses convictions profondes sur la nature de l'art et une culture originale en harmonie avec sa propre sensibilité; il lui devait un langage visuel raffiné et l'assurance nécessaire pour se consacrer entièrement à la peinture. La métropole américaine devait lui apporter une expérience profonde et durable.

Traduction: Élise Bonnette