

PAUL DUVAL

CRITIC, 96

INFLUENTIAL ART WRITER CHAMPIONED LAWREN HARRIS

For decades, he shared his vast knowledge through newspapers, magazines and books, as well as advising creators of the McMichael collection and many others

MARTIN MORROW

Long before the American comedian Steve Martin was championing his work, the great Canadian painter Lawren Harris was being touted by another impeccably tailored gentleman with the suave good looks of a movie star.

For more than half a century, influential art critic Paul Duval was the eloquent advocate, not just for Harris and his Group of Seven confrères, but for a broad spectrum of significant Canadian artists, from Quebec's avant-garde Automatistes to the popular realist Ken Danby.

In newspapers and magazines – most notably *Saturday Night*, where he was the art editor for more than 20 years – as well as countless catalogues and many a handsome coffee-table book, Mr. Duval poured forth his enthusiasm for, and shared his vast knowledge of, Canadian art. His list of more than 30 books included authoritative studies of Harris, Danby, J.E.H. MacDonald and A.J. Casson. But his devotion went beyond his pen. He befriended both artists and collectors and delighted in bringing them together. He was instrumental in helping build the collections of the Art Gallery of Hamilton (AGH) and the McMichael, that shrine to the Group of Seven in Kleinburg, Ont. His expertise – lauded in *Time* magazine – was tapped by the tycoon likes of Lord Beaverbrook and Helena Rubinstein.

He did it all with the panache of a swinging bachelor – roaring about in a 1957 Ford Thunderbird, regularly jetting off to Europe – and the exquisite taste of a born connoisseur.

"He had a *savoir faire* about him," Canadian art collector and long-time friend Fred Schaeffer said of Mr. Duval, who died on Aug. 4 in Toronto at the grand old age of 96. (His death was not immediately reported.) "The ladies loved him." Collectors such as Mr. Schaeffer, meanwhile, deferred to his judgment: "He was the most knowledgeable guy on the scene."

"For those of us in the field, Paul Duval was always a towering figure as a writer," said AGH president Shelley Falconer, speaking for a younger generation.

"He had a profound understanding of art, but he was able to communicate it to the average reader," added Linda Rodeck, vice-president of fine art at Waddington's auction house. "He avoided writing for the intelligentsia. When I was starting out in art world, he was able to explain a lot to me."

That common touch came from a self-made, largely self-taught man who had grown up in grinding poverty during the Depression.

Born in Toronto on July 9, 1922, Mr. Duval was the fourth of eight children of British immigrant parents. His father, Daniel Droy, was a commercial artist left disabled and unemployed because of severe arthritis. His mother, Harriett (née Tuppen), cleaned houses to supplement their inadequate welfare cheque. Although Mr. Duval left home at 15 and later changed his name, he never concealed his impoverished beginnings. He fondly recounted his childhood in 1930s Yorkville – now a high-priced enclave, but then a slum – in his 2000 memoirs, *Berryman Street Boy*. Deprivation, he wrote, gave him "a poignant appreciation of the itinerant pleasures" to be found between the hardships. His capacity to find joy in small and simple things never left him.

Early on he showed an artistic talent that was quickly recognized. At the age of 8, he was one of a select number of public-school students chosen to take lessons from the Group of Seven's Arthur Lismer at the Art Gallery of Toronto (now Ontario). He went on to study art at Central Technical School and was soon making his way as a graphic artist. One of his more lucrative jobs was painting background murals for the window displays at the Eaton's department store on College Street.

But Mr. Duval also loved to write. By the age of 18, he was providing book reviews for *The Globe and Mail*, which he embellished with sketches of the au-



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thors. His work caught the attention of *Saturday Night* editor B.K. Sandwell, who in 1944 hired him to serve as its art critic. At the time, little attention had been paid to Canadian art and its history. Given the forum of a prestigious national magazine, Mr. Duval made it his mission to acquaint his readers with the unappreciated artists of their own country. His debut article was a two-page spread reviewing Mr. Harris's first major one-man exhibition. Mr. Harris contacted him as a result, beginning what would become a lifelong friendship.

Apart from *Saturday Night*, Mr. Duval spread the word on the airwaves, hosting CBC Radio's *The Live Arts*, and later became involved in film and television. He was also a columnist for *The Hamilton Spectator* and the now-defunct *Toronto Telegram*.

As a close friend of the Art Gallery of Hamilton's first director, Thomas Reid MacDonald, he assisted him in growing its permanent collection, which is now one of the finest in Canada. "They came up with a strategy," explained Tobi Bruce, the gallery's senior curator. Mr. Duval would quietly buy notable artworks, then sell them to local private collectors, who later donated the pieces to the gallery. Among the iconic works Mr. Duval acquired for the AGH are Emily Carr's *Yan, Q.C.I.* and Lawren Harris's *Hurdy Gurdy*, both the gifts of Hamilton collector Roy G. Cole.

It was Mr. Duval who advised neophyte collectors Robert and Signe McMichael to buy their first painting, Mr. Harris's oil sketch *Montreal River*. He became fast friends with the couple, often staying at their log-built home in Kleinburg. When they turned the house and their private Group of Seven stash into a public gallery in 1966, Mr. Duval wrote their first exhibition catalogue.

Mr. Duval was also there when Lord Beaverbrook established the Beaverbrook Art Gallery in Fredericton in 1959, helping with its first acquisitions. And he became chummy with cosmetics queen Helena Rubinstein, arranging Toronto exhibitions of her art collection.

As a critic, Mr. Duval prided himself on his discoveries. He brought national attention to such artists as Montreal's Goodridge Roberts and Vancouver's Jack Shadbolt, and revived interest in the then-forgotten Helen McNicoll, whom he deemed "possibly [Canada's] best Impressionist painter," arranging

her first Toronto exhibition since her death in 1915. He also introduced Québécois artists to English-Canadian readers. "He spliced together the narratives of art in English and French Canada," said former *Globe* critic Sarah Milroy, now chief curator of the McMichael Canadian Art Collection. "He started to pull the Two Solitudes together."

He travelled widely but remained based in Toronto, not far from his Yorkville roots. From the late 1950s on, he lived in Rosedale's legendary Studio Building, built in 1914 for members of the Group of Seven and now a Canadian heritage site.

Mr. Schaeffer remembered Mr. Duval as a perpetual bachelor who "always had a girlfriend." That changed when he met Alexandra Ochitwa, the stepdaughter of British-Canadian painter Michael Foster, one of his many artist friends. The pair began a May-December romance in 1995 and were eventually married in 2010.

That same year, Mr. Duval was given the Founders Achievement Award by the Toronto Friends of the Visual Arts. He had previously won prizes for his books, but he never sought accolades. "He knew who he was and the legacy he had left," Ms. Ochitwa said.

As always, he preferred to turn the spotlight on the Canadian artists he felt deserved attention. In 2016, when the AGO opened its major Lawren Harris exhibition co-curated by Mr. Martin, Ms. Ochitwa said she was annoyed that an American celebrity was being brought in to promote a Canadian master. But Mr. Duval brushed away her complaint. "All he said to me was, 'Alex, I'm glad that Lawren is getting some respect south of the border.'"

Mr. Duval's mind remained sharp into his 90s and his health only seriously declined in the past year. He died peacefully at the Bridgepoint hospital. He leaves his wife, Ms. Ochitwa, and members of his extended Droy family.

Ms. Rodeck said his contribution was unique and perhaps not fully appreciated in his time. "He gave us an undistorted view of the artists themselves, having known so many of them personally," she said. "I don't think many of us have realized yet what a gap he's going to leave in our understanding of Canadian art."

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