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GTA

How Toronto's art scene grew from 'barren ground' to cultural powerhouse in the 1960s

Harry Malcolmson, now in his 90s, traces Toronto's shift from conservatism to artistic hub in his book, "Scene: How the 1960s Transformed Canadian Art."

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Harry Malcolmson, Toronto's 1960s art critic, was an essential voice in the city's cultural transformation. Through his work at the Toronto Telegram, Saturday Night, and the Toronto Star, Malcolmson documented the explosive growth of Toronto's artistic community as it evolved from a conservative outpost to a thriving hub of experimentation.

Nick Lachance Toronto Star

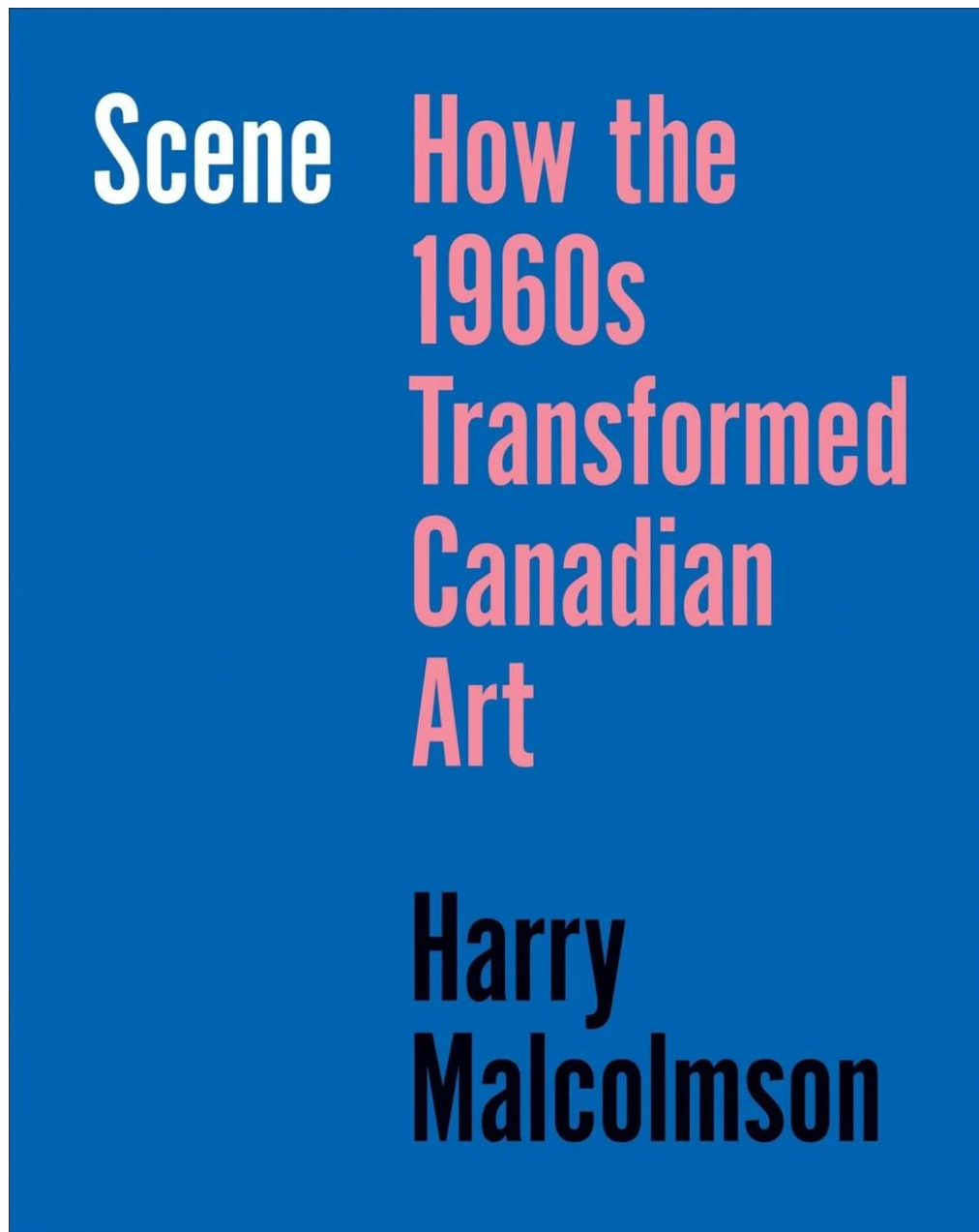
By Brandon Kaufman Special to the Star

In the 1960s, Toronto's art scene came into its own. What had been a quiet, largely conservative city became a place of creative risk-taking, shaped by a growing network of artists, galleries and critics. Harry Malcolmson was one of them, writing about the city's transformation as it unfolded.

In his new book, "Scene: How the 1960s Transformed Canadian Art," out now from University of Toronto Press, Malcolmson reflects on the decade through the lens of his own experience as a critic for the Toronto Telegram, Saturday Night, and the Toronto Star. He traces how a generation of artists, curators, gallerists and fellow writers helped turn Toronto from a sleepy provincial outpost into a hub of artistic experimentation and ambition.

Malcolmson incorporates memories, historical research, and his own contemporaneous columns in “Scene” to show how this moment came to be. The result is a comprehensive and captivating peek at a cultural renaissance that reshaped not only Toronto, but Canadian art at large.

Now in his 90s, Malcolmson spoke about his experience of the scene, its impact, and the legacy of the ‘60s.



EN-LIFE-MALCOMSON The cover of “Scene: How the 1960s Transformed Canadian Art,” Harry Malcolmson’s new book reflecting on a decade that reshaped Toronto’s art world. Uploaded by: Osborne, Mir

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How did the book come together?

It emerged with the recognition that the ‘60s were unique. I also came across a phrase that I use in the book: that “a lack of criticism is a conspiracy of silence against the artists.” I felt a moral obligation to the era and its artists.

What do you think contributed to the scene coming together?

There were a number of factors. It was a period in which patriotism became manifest, expressed in Toronto in the new City Hall, and of course in Expo ‘67. This was driven by the prosperity of the period, and the realization that the Depression was not coming back. The country could feel positive about its future.

The issue then is: how was the society to demonstrate all of that? As I suggest in the book, it adopted art as a vehicle to articulate and demonstrate its modernness. Toronto was no longer tainted by the forms, orders, puritanism, and the church establishment.



Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau and Margaret Sinclair dance together at a National Art Gallery Ball in Ottawa in 1969. The National Art Gallery symbolized the growing importance of the arts in defining Canadian identity during a time of cultural and political optimism.

FILE Canadian Press

You enrolled at the University of Toronto in the mid-'50s. Can you talk about your first encounters with art in the city?

Coming from St. Catharines, it was an extremely different environment. I was overwhelmed by the city and the arts opportunities. Occasionally, I would look in on the Laing Gallery on Yonge Street.

The Toronto of the time was intensely Anglo-Saxon. The development of the arts generally was facilitated, initiated by individuals who came from England. They developed the Stratford Festival, the Ballet, the Opera.



VISUAL ARTS

How this Toronto artist creates massive abstract art pieces on the frozen surface of Lake Ontario

They were not interested in what was happening in the United States, like the emergence of abstract expressionism. In fact, there was a lot of antagonism toward the United States.

An important shift was the influx of immigrants in the '50s and '60s, which created a very different ambiance in the scene. In particular, Jewish immigrants had a degree of sophistication.

This was exemplified by Sam Zacks (the prominent art collector whose collection of 147 20th-century paintings and sculptures was donated to the AGO, including work by Picasso, Rodin, and Matisse.)

The Zacks' collection was focused on European modernism and proved influential to other collectors.



In the 1960s, David Mirvish was a central figure in Toronto's art scene, though his gallery's heavy emphasis on American artists sparked controversy. As Harry Malcolmson reflects in his book, Mirvish's close ties to U.S. cultural figures like critic Clement Greenberg led some to view his gallery as "an outpost of US cultural imperialism."

Spremo, Boris

As a law student, you were asked by the Toronto Telegram to become its art critic. At the time, you had no formal training in art or art history. Why do you think they approached you?

I think I was just around in the middle of this explosion. Between 1950 and 1960, there were just two galleries, Laing and the Roberts. But by the mid-'60s, eight galleries had opened.

I was caught up in it, going around to the galleries and talking about art with others.

When the Telegram was looking for a writer, I guess the arts editor asked around. I think he was kind of desperate, since there were not many people interested in writing about this new art.

There was an explosion of arts coverage along with the galleries. The Telegram was a bit of a poor cousin compared to the other newspapers. At the time, The Star was in every home. It was the newspaper of the public and it had the biggest budget; they could send me to Venice and Vancouver.

The Globe & Mail was very Anglo-Saxon and had national news and business. There was also Saturday Night, and on television, "This Week Has Seven Days." Each tried to keep up with the changing culture, since it was the carrier of Canadian pride.



In his new book "Scene: How the 1960s Transformed Canadian Art," Harry Malcolmson reflects on the artists, critics, and gallerists who helped shape Toronto's artistic renaissance.

Nick Lachance Toronto Star

Could you feel that pride and excitement about the changes that were happening?

Yes, absolutely I was feeling the excitement. It was self-fulfilling, self-generating. People were very emotionally involved. It separated them from their parents' generation. It also differentiated them from other people — there was a "hip" kind of sense about it. What is not to be forgotten is the influence of The Beatles. They were so different, with their foppishness, their casualness. They were enormously influential.

In politics, too, there was a spirit of positive thinking, with figures like Tommy Douglas and the adoption of Medicare.



The building of a new City Hall in the 1960s was, as critic Harry Malcolmson writes, one of the ways Toronto expressed its growing sense of national pride and modern identity. In "Scene: How the 1960s Transformed Canadian Art," Malcolmson traces how landmarks like this paralleled a cultural awakening that reshaped the city's once-conservative arts scene.

James, Norman

You write that certain cracks began to emerge in the scene, many of them having to do with Canadian identity.

The flashpoint became the issue of Americanism and the American effect, which centred around (gallerist) David Mirvish, (artist) Jack Bush, and (critic) Clement Greenberg.



A drawing by Inuit artist Annie Pootoogook has been named one of the best artworks of the 21st century

(Mirvish Gallery, Malcolmson writes, was “increasingly identified as an outpost of US cultural imperialism” because it showed so much American art. Clement Greenberg, the most influential American critic of the postwar period, was said to be in the ear of both Mirvish and Jack Bush, who some accused of blindly following Greenberg’s prescriptions.)

This underscored the question of the distinctiveness of Canadian art. A lot of my motivation was to establish, to make visible the continuity of Canadian art, its unique character over the century. For example, one continuous thread between the country’s past and present is the emphasis on land, from Indigenous culture to the Group of Seven and beyond.

By the end of the ‘60s, you were practicing law full-time. What was your relationship with the arts scene in Toronto in the subsequent years?

Ann and I still went to the galleries and sustained our interest in them, but I wasn’t that much involved anymore in itself. I began to work for the Ontario Securities Commission, and we also began collecting more seriously.

Later, we got caught up in photography. We went down to Jane Corkin’s gallery to see the photographs that she had, and we couldn’t believe how fabulous the historic photographs from the 20th century were. We got rid of all our paintings and bought photographs. It changed our lives.

We went on to collect work from every significant period in the history of photography. (In 2014, the Malcolmson’s donated their collection to the AGO.)



GTA

This beloved Toronto vintage shop turns 50. Inside the Kensington Market institution that’s been turning ‘garbage’ into treasures for decades

Looking back, what is your assessment of the scene? Did it live up to its promises?

A lot of the art, and some of the artists, have not stood the test of time. Great artists did emerge, and I think the two greatest to come from the ‘60s were Alex Colville and Michael Snow. I was also a champion of Les Levine, Ian Baxter, and Jack Bush.

However, when I look back, I think the two most significant accomplishments were the transformation of the Art Gallery of Toronto and the National Gallery in Canada from virtually nothing to becoming serious, mature, independent institutions. That, I think, is the greatest accomplishment of the ‘60s.

This interview has been condensed for brevity and clarity.

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