

Marc-Aurèle Fortin

The Experience of Colour





Best known for landscapes in which stately green trees hold pride of place, Marc-Aurèle Fortin (1888-1970) is one of the most popular and beloved figures in the history of Quebec art. His prolific body of work bursts with stunning expressive power, from the 1909 Chicago paintings to the Montreal-area views of the 1920s and 30s and the landscapes of the Charlevoix, Gaspé and Saguenay regions captured in the 1940s.

This major book reproduces more than 150 oils, watercolours, etchings and pastels that proclaim the modernity of a virtuoso draftsman and colourist. Illustrating the milestones of a remarkable journey of exploration and freedom, it surveys the career of one of the most accomplished landscape painters of his day. His singular style, developed through endless experiments with colour, has indelibly marked the collective imagination.

Reflecting many years of research, the book probes the Fortin "legend" in different ways, placing the artist and his work in a broad historical context. Written by authorities in the art of this period – Richard Foisy, François-Marc Gagnon, Michèle Grandbois, Sarah Mainguy and Esther Trépanier – it traces his biographical and aesthetic footsteps in detail and reveals the full import of his contribution to the history of Canadian art.

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 **LES ÉDITIONS DE
L'HOMME**


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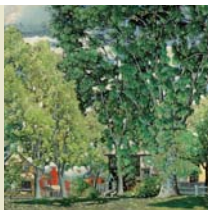



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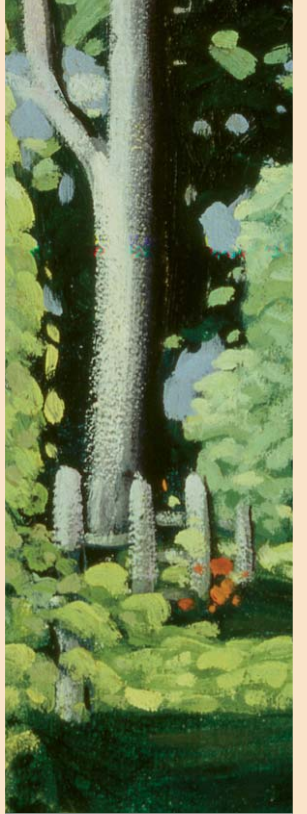
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The Art of the Rambler with His Bright Colours on Dark Backgrounds

MICHÈLE GRANDBOIS



Tradition and modernity, in the work of Marc-Aurèle Fortin, forge one and the same destiny. They overlap or, better yet, merge and become one. Fortin's artistic project retained its extraordinary vitality for a little more than forty years during one of the most fertile periods of modern art, when any number of aesthetic movements succeeded one another at a frantic pace. In the face of this abundance, critics and historians with a bent for classification quickly came to prefer one over the others. Often the progress made on art's exploratory front led them to see only the innovative aspect of an artist's work. This was the case with Fortin.

Marc-Aurèle Fortin's work was briefly consecrated by several critics animated by this idea of progress. Isn't the history of modern art in the West based on this theme—on one movement giving rise to another, constantly pushing aesthetic ideas and formal ventures further? Although Fortin's art was seen as modern, he was completely indifferent towards this forward march. He even claimed to be anti-modernist, or reactionary, more inspired by traditional values than by the aesthetics of the new norms.

In 1927, the writer and art critic Jean Chauvin, quite up to date on the latest developments, related how surprised he was by Fortin's conformism. He had expected to find a painter who was "difficult and like his work, full of resentment for the old ways and the most venerable aesthetics." He had been taken in by the paintings of this "dazzling, dense, harsh colourist." He thus had to separate the man from the work, because Fortin had "set opinions, claiming kinship with Impressionism alone, and [was] very hard on the moderns."¹

In 1940 it was the turn of the art historian Maurice Gagnon, in his volume *Peinture moderne*, to misjudge the motivations of the "phenomenal Fortin."² Gagnon described Fortin's inventions and sense of colour as following in the path of Matisse, Braque and Dufy, those "wild men"—the *Fauves*—who, at the turn of the century, had brought new life to painting by juxtaposing unaffected and violent colours. Nothing was further from Fortin's aesthetic intentions. If he was modern, it was despite himself.

In the present essay, I will try to understand the work of this modern artist who refused to be one. Grasping his art, full of contrasts and tenacity, is a difficult task. All his life Fortin mixed up his own powerful creative force with vital influences; as expressive as he was, he glorified the idea of craft and technique to the point of disavowing modern artists because they favoured expression. From the Impressionists he took their spontaneous touch, their exploration of light and their *plein air* practice, but he adhered to classical rules of composition and colour and believed in studio work. Finally, he tirelessly repeated certain motifs and very often reinterpreted works, especially his own, putting art historians to the test when it comes time to put his output in order.

I will try here to unravel this tangle by pulling on the threads of Fortin's abundant body of work, focussing on the work he produced before he was admitted to the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts (RCA) in 1942 and was consecrated by the Academy's venerable members. In the process, I will strive to understand what makes Fortin's contribution so forceful and to bring out the commonalities in his paintings, watercolours and etchings.

In the Footsteps of an English Artist: The Great Trees

Marc-Aurèle Fortin painted the great trees which launched his career in the mid-1920s. This prodigious group of paintings has long been seen as the product of a spontaneous gesture—of the artist’s “personal vision,” his “exuberant temperament” and “expert talent in search of a new and true art,” in the words of a journalist of the day.³ The expressive beauty of these trees, depicted in a palette of bright colours, had caught the attention of a critic open to innovative new work.

Our research makes us think that this series was, on the contrary, the fruit of a long process of reflection whose source lay in an encounter fifteen years earlier between Fortin and the painter Sir Alfred East (1849-1913). A representative of the late-nineteenth-century English school of landscape painting, dominated by *plein air* painting and the picturesque, East was then chair of the Royal Society of British Artists and the author of influential books on landscape art.⁴ He enjoyed an illustrious career in painting, engraving and watercolours.

In January 1910, the Art Institute of Chicago (AIC) presented an exhibition, prepared by the Carnegie Art Institute in Pittsburgh,⁵ of twenty-eight paintings by this prominent artist. East attended the event. He gave public talks and offered conversations with art students. The young Fortin was studying in the United States at the time, at the Art Institute in fact (pp. 64 and 65), and he met the then-sixty-year-old English artist and teacher.



fig. 42 ■ Alfred EAST, *Golden Autumn*, about 1904



cat. 21 ■ *The Lonely Road*, 1923