



Bertram Charles (B.C.) Binning as an Artist

While Bertram Charles Binning is primarily known for his career as a painter, he was also a prolific sketcher, and always had an interest in architectural design. He seems to have been intrigued by painting all his life, but curiously exhibited few works prior to 1948 when he made the assertion that he was working for the public, as opposed to himself privately.

In 1938-39 Binning took an unpaid educational leave to travel extensively in the United States and Nova Scotia. This was greatly beneficial as

Vancouver's art scene was strongly insular. The style of Picasso and Matisse, two painters whom Binning was greatly exposed to while in New York, illustrate a presence in his work. Whether or not the influence is strong or not is debatable. Some critics suggest that there is only a slight touch of Picasso's linear composition present in Binning's work, while others suggest that his nude figures produced in the early 1940s closely resemble the figures in Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*, and his portraits of wife Jessie utilize similar colour schemes and angular formations to that of Matisse.

Despite opposing opinions regarding Binning's work, it is essentially uncontested that his mature graphic style evolved through a series of influences, and yet at once was completely his own. The drawings specifically possess notable accomplishment and strength, and it is through the grace and precision of artists like Matisse and Picasso that Binning acquired a similar quality in his work. Regardless of influence or training, Binning's drawings are composed of single lines, that are clear and definite in their purpose, that stand in their own right as solid artistic achievements. The unique sophistication for a relatively new artist did not go unnoticed by critics. Charles H. Scott and Doris Shadbolt commented on his work at length; articles from both critics appeared in *Canadian Art*.



What is perhaps more interesting though, is the explanation and configuration of colour in his work. There is a grounded flow in the colour scheme, although it maintains an element of minimalism. Binning seems to have been focused on oil painting in the 1940s, but his focus was not limited to this arena, he was additionally inclined towards architectural design. Although designing was a specialty of Binning's, his paintings are perhaps more interesting to analyze due to their structural complexity and variety of influences. Showcased in his nudes, is the influence of surrealism, most centrally in the singular eye

and contorted limbs. Despite this temporary interest in surrealist art, this does not seem to be an area in which Binning felt comfortable placing his concentration. Unlike his drawing style, his painting style exhibited a wide variety of influences and teachers. The majority of his paintings seem to place an emphasis on a degree of abstraction.

In 1968, Binning resigned as head of the faculty of Fine Arts at the University of British Columbia, which provided him with much more time to focus on his painting. An area of focus he decided to cultivate, which would eventually play a significant role in the development of Canadian abstraction, was working with modules, which was highly individual. It was in these modules, that Binning's skill as a colourist, ability to work with line, and architectural sense of design were combined into a singular entity. The sensitivity of Binning's eye, the depth of his astuteness in observation is something that marks all of his work; drawing, painting, and architecture.