Review of *The Art of John Snow* by Elizabeth Herbert

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Elizabeth Herbert’s aim in The Art of John Snow is to restore John Snow (1911–2004) to the register of the most significant artists in Calgary’s recent art history. She does this by documenting the recognition he received in his lifetime, the close working relationship he had with other significant artists of his day, the reasons she sees for his neglect by historians, and, more than anything else, the sophistication she sees in his work.

The book is the ninth in a series titled Art in Profile that aims to provide “insight into the life and work of an artist or architect who asserts creativity, individuality, and cultural identity.” At first, John Snow seems an odd choice for such a series. Snow was born in Canada to British parents, grew up on a farm, fought in the Second World War, and supported his artistic practice for all of his working life as a full-time banker. His “cultural identity” seems at first glance to be indistinguishable from Calgary’s mainstream. But this identification with Calgary is in fact the point. As the author repeats several times, a study of Snow is in essence a study of Calgary. The cultural factors that surround Snow and his contemporaries—the pain of isolation, the yearning for outside recognition, the combination of pride and shame that many Albertans feel in their pioneer heritage—are as useful to the reader in understanding the Canadian West as they are to understanding its art.

The Art of John Snow is the definitive study of the artist, and it seems likely to remain so, as the author has apparently consulted every known source of information about him in the course of her research. Snow is presented as a man who said little about himself, and consequently as a man about whom little was written. This results in the frequent repetition of quotations and of accounts of key events in different contexts within the book. Through this repetition Snow emerges as an almost mythic figure whose first night course was a revelation, whose research was a pilgrimage, whose studio was equipped by fate, and whose closest friends have come to overshadow him in art history as if they had been rivals.

John Snow was an artist whose home has been preserved as a provincial historic resource, whose work is held in many major public collections, including the National Gallery of Canada’s, and who received national attention for most of his forty-year career. The fact that “reconsideration” is required to validate his contribution to Calgary’s art history speaks a great deal about the isolation and self-reproach that still persists in Alberta.

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