



BOOK RELEASE

Miller Brittain

When the Stars Threw Down Their Spears

Tom Smart

With an essay by Allen Bentley

Art
English
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When the stars threw down their spears,
And watered heaven with their tears,
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

— William Blake, "The Tyger," *Songs of Experience*

In ***Miller Brittain: When the Stars Threw Down Their Spears***, Tom Smart examines the life and work of one of Canada's most important and accomplished artists — the only Official War Artist to have seen active duty in World War Two. The book is being released in conjunction with the first major exhibition of Brittain's work in decades, which opened at the Beaverbrook Art Gallery in Fredericton in April and will travel to cities throughout Canada. The exhibit will open at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Kleinburg, Ontario on November 16, 2007.

Miller Brittain, born and raised in Saint John, remained true to his aim of exploring the expressive potential of figurative art, whether working in social realist, abstract or surrealist modes. His legacy to Canadian art is an expressive and poignant counterpoint to the supremacy of the Group of Seven and their disciples, a challenge to the order of the day. Author Tom Smart points out that Brittain's subject is human experience in all its dimensions, expressively rendered in a unique and compelling personal style.

"Each image, real and surreal, is grounded in an artistic logic that became instinctive when Brittain was a young art student. . . ."

Brittain's work shows the rigorous training he received in New York at the Art Students' League in the early 1930s where he studied under Kenneth Hayes Miller, who espoused the Renaissance ideal — that form and structure are the most important elements in art. He was also influenced by John Sloan, a strong modernist who advocated expressing the "art life" of a subject through symbolic images. In fact, Brittain was present at the clash between those two styles and the dawn of Abstract expressionism in American art.

Upon his return to Saint John, Brittain became known for his many social realist tableaux, but service in the Second World War would change that. Serving overseas as a bomb aimer, for which he received the Distinguished Flying Cross, he carried William Blake's *Songs of Innocence* on every mission. ***When the Stars Threw Down Their Spears*** takes its name from Blake's poem "The Tyger," which inspired a pervasive motif in his post war work: the star and the spear. His post-war paintings and drawings courageously trace the mind of a man exploring the depths of despair and the heights of ecstasy. As Tom Smart elucidates in this beautifully illustrated volume, for Miller Brittain, art, humanity and psychology were never estranged.

— more —

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tom Smart is the Executive Director and CEO of the McMichael Canadian Collection, Kleinburg, Ontario, and the President of the McMichael Canadian Art Foundation. For seven years he was Director of Collections and Exhibitions at the Frick Art & Historical Center, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where he developed an ambitious international exhibition program, and at the same time, he was appointed a Distinguished Visiting Scholar at Carnegie Mellon University and the University of Pittsburgh. He served as Acting Director of the Winnipeg Art Gallery from 1997 until 1999 and was Curator of the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton from 1989 to 1997.

Smart is the author of nine books and catalogues. His most recent book is the critically acclaimed *Alex Colville: Return*, which moved criticism of Colville's works to a new intellectual level. His 1995 book *The Art of Mary Pratt: The Substance of Light* won the Atlantic Provinces Booksellers Association Booksellers Choice Award, the Studio Magazine Award of Merit, and the Printing Industries of America Award of Merit. It was included in *Great Canadian Books of the Century*.

Writer, philosopher, and art critic Allen Bentley considers William Blake the pre-eminent mythic poet of all time and Miller Brittain Canada's greatest mythic painter. As a professor of English at St. Thomas University, Bentley specialized in literary myth and symbolism. He has lectured extensively on Brittain's work.

ACCOLADES for TOM SMART

Alex Colville: Return

"What Tom Smart accomplishes in this more-than-coffee table book is to define the art of Alex Colville in terms that are accessible to the appreciative viewer. Yet [he] . . . also takes his reader deep into the artist's technical side, revealing . . . the means by which he executed his work."

— **The Saskatoon Star-Phoenix**

"An ably written, amply illustrated, beautifully produced book. It's persuasively argued, too."

— **Georgia Straight**

The Art of Mary Pratt

"A handsome volume . . . Smart traces Pratt's evolution from out port mother and wife painting impressionist-style still lifes to full realized artist."

— **Macleans**

"Fascinating and revealing,"

— **Quill & Quire**

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