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BETWEEN 1913 AND 1970, the Hudson's Bay Company produced and distributed an annual calendar, commissioning popular artists to produce images drawn from the Company's then nearly 300-year history. The calendars were distributed for

free across the country at the HBC department stores, administrative offices and trading posts, and they quickly became fixtures of Canadian visual culture. For many Canadians, especially those in remote or Northern communities, these images were an early

introduction to a visual understanding of Canadian art—helping to define what Canada “looked like”—at a time when the country's sense of national identity was still being formed.

More than a patriotic enterprise, the calendars were produced as a commercial public relations exercise. Established in 1670, the HBC by the twentieth century was a modern, diversified business, less interested in trading furs or claiming land than expanding retail operations. Along with other corporate publications like *The Beaver* magazine, the calendars served to advance the PR goals of the Company and market its corporate mythology. In particular, the aim of these images was to market and mediate the Company's unique relationship to the past, underscore its immense importance in establishing Canada as a nation, and establish its continued centrality in a Canadian identity. To this end, the images present a heightened and dramatic vision of history. Fur traders, boats, trading posts and the natural landscapes that contained them are the primary focus, but so too are the individual figures and authorities—guides, explorers, labourers, administrators—that worked to expand and manage the Company's extensive trade networks across the continent.

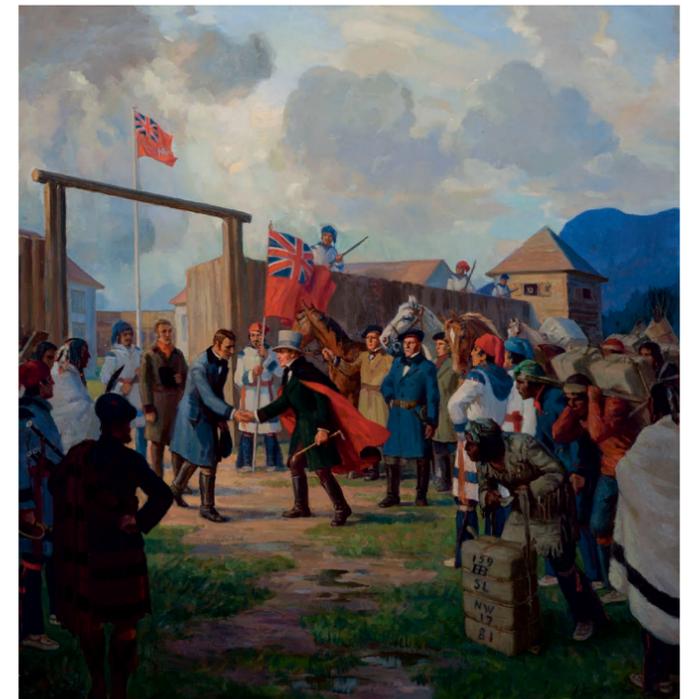
The artists that the HBC chose to represent its history were among some of Canada's most celebrated of their day. Here, works by Walter J. Phillips, Charles Comfort, Franklin Arbuckle, Adam Sherriff Scott, Lorne Bouchard and Group of Seven member Frank Hans Johnston are represented (future Group member L.L. Fitzgerald would produce a painting for the 1926 edition, not included in this selection). These artists' interpretations brought drama and vitality to the historical moments depicted, often straddling the line between fine art and commercial illustration. Many called on their skills as landscape painters to produce sweeping, grandiose backgrounds, while the graphic potentials of mass reproduction encouraged the use of bold, vivid colours.

The Company was diligent in directing the scenes: its goal was to depict specific, historically located events, and to strive for an accurate (if romanticized) representation of moments and figures drawn from the HBC's long history. This requirement was not much of a limitation for the artists represented here, all of whom had extensive careers as commercial illustrators before and alongside their personal artistic practice. The HBC was also willing to dig into its own visual and material archives to furnish the painters with models and photos of the boats, costumes, and buildings it wanted depicted (see, for example, *The Spring Fur Brigade Leaves Lachine*, lot 14). The Company even went so far as to provide information about the weather of a particular event (note the puddles from recent rains in *Governor George Simpson Welcomed by James Douglas, Fort St. James, B.C., 17th September 1828*, lot 6). The skill of these artists in depicting the look and feel of Canada between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries is evident in these vibrant scenes, which also provide compelling examples of figurative and architectural work from artists we might be more familiar with as landscapists.

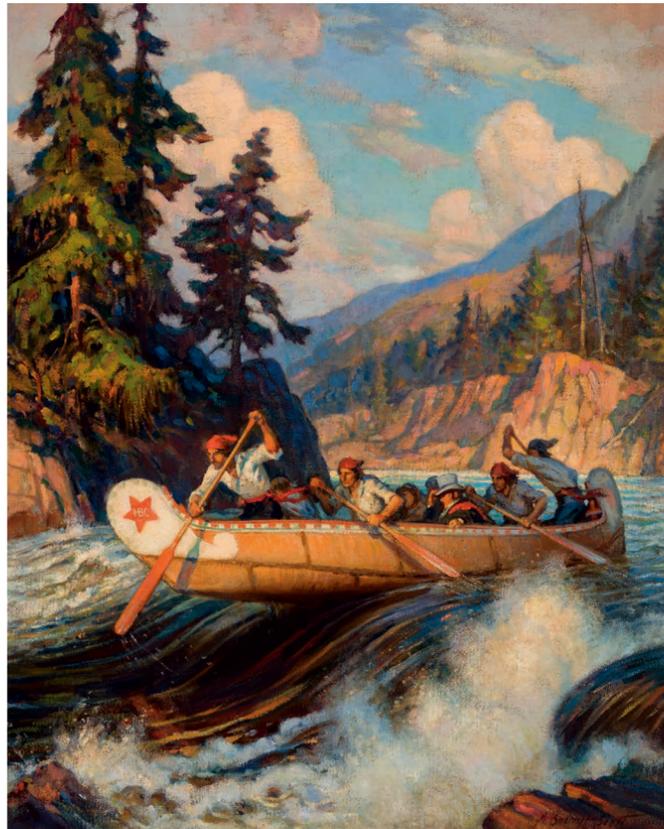
It is worth remembering that the calendars were an exercise in corporate storytelling, realizing a product that would anchor the HBC in its history while also reappraising it as a forward-thinking,



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modern retailer—as much a part of Canada’s present and future as its past. This does result in some exaggerations of history. In these paintings, the officers and administrators of the HBC are noble and sober, the trappers are hard-browed and burly, the explorers are intrepid, energetic and proud visionaries. By comparison, Inuit, Métis, First Nations and female figures are rarely afforded the same centrality, which belies their historic and crucial contributions to establishing and maintaining the HBC’s trade networks.

At the same time, the calendar paintings were fertile ground to demonstrate an evolving understanding of the Company’s values, as seen in several of the works in this sale. Franklin Arbuckle’s *Ambassador of Peace* (lot 9) dramatizes Thanadelthur, a young Dēnesųłne (Chipewyan) woman, negotiating a peace between her people and the rival Cree. Frank Hans Johnston’s *Discovery of the Coppermine River by Samuel Hearne* (lot 12), despite its disobliging title, literally places Hearne and his guide, the Dēnesųłne trader Matonabbee, on equal ground. Métis figures also feature here, though less distinctly, as the traders and boat-builders in W.J. Phillips’s *Hudson’s Bay Company York Boats at Norway House* (lot 2) or in the depiction of what would become important Métis communities, such as Waskahikanihk, shown in Franklin Arbuckle’s painting *Hearne Builds Cumberland House, 1774 - 1775* (lot 7).

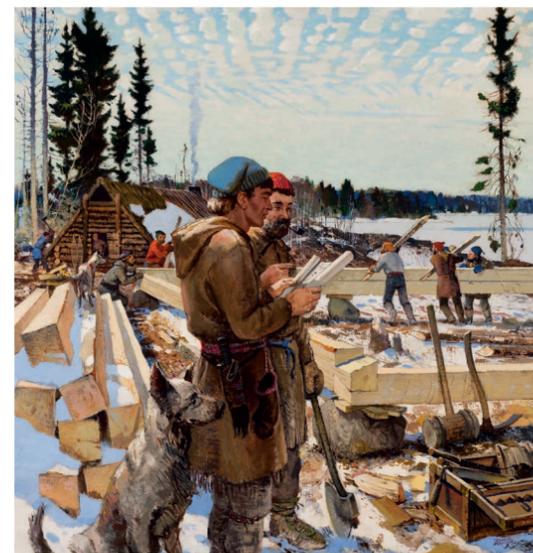
In both issues of representation, as well as broader understandings of how the Company viewed its role in colonial history, the paintings should be received as products of their time, full of the complexities and ambiguities that arise from combining artistry, history and enterprise. The HBC calendars were commissioned as a PR campaign for the Canadian consumer, a way of advancing a positive corporate identity that confronted the popular understanding of the Company’s history while simultaneously using this historical grounding to signpost a modern business. What is most immediately apparent remains the quality of the artworks themselves: the romance of their landscapes, the drama of their compositions and their heightened reality, reflecting a story of Canada that was still being painted in the public imagination.

This auction presents a valuable opportunity to acquire works from this significant and fascinating project. Many of the original calendar paintings were held in corporate or institutional collections, with relatively few entering private hands. Many of the images also had a long afterlife after their initial publication, being reproduced as prints, covers for governmental pamphlets and magazine illustrations, to say nothing of the active collectors’ market for the calendars themselves. The paintings represented here remained a part of the Hudson’s Bay Company collection and are drawn from across the years where the calendars held their widest appeal. Maintained in very good condition, their rarity and documentary value cannot be overstated.

Today, the HBC calendar paintings represent an immensely valuable historical record. They can be appreciated both as products of their time and as starting points for broader conversations about representation, reconciliation, mythologies, and the role of patronage in the shaping of public memory.



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