



## 27 Alexander Colville

PC CC 1920 – 2013

### Cattle Show

oil on board, signed and dated 1955 and on verso signed, titled, dated and inscribed *Hewitt/8381* and variously 26 x 40 7/8 in, 66 x 103.8 cm

#### PROVENANCE

Hewitt Gallery, New York  
Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Verner Reed, New York, 1955  
*Important Canadian Art*, Sotheby's Canada,  
November 2, 2011, lot 39  
Important Private Collection, USA

#### LITERATURE

*Alex Colville, Paintings*, Banfer Gallery, 1963, listed page 7  
Evan H. Turner and William Withrow, *Fifteen Canadian Artists*,  
Museum of Modern Art, 1964, reproduced, unpaginated

Helen Dow, *The Art of Alex Colville*, 1972, reproduced page 144  
David Burnett, *Colville*, Art Gallery of Ontario, 1983, reproduced  
page 175

#### EXHIBITED

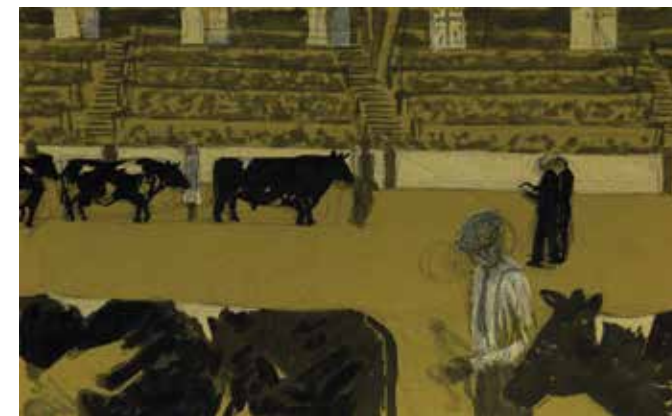
Hewitt Gallery, New York, *Alex Colville*, 1955  
Banfer Gallery, New York, *Alex Colville, Paintings*, 1963  
Museum of Modern Art, New York, *Fifteen Canadian Artists*,  
July 25 – September 7, 1964, traveling in 1963 – 1965 to the  
Hunter Gallery of Art, Tennessee; Currier Gallery of Art,  
New Hampshire; Phillips Exeter Academy, New Hampshire;  
University of Texas, Austin; Washington Gallery of Modern  
Art, D.C.; Mercer University, Georgia; Columbus Gallery of  
Fine Arts; Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center; San Francisco  
Museum of Art; City Art Museum, Saint Louis, catalogue  
#63.1482; and Minneapolis Institute of Arts, catalogue  
#L64.462.8

A MASTERPIECE OF magic realism,<sup>1</sup> Alex Colville's *Cattle Show* (1955) depicts the presentation of bulls in competition with all the solemnity of an ancient Egyptian frieze of the Apis cult. Colville was deeply impressed by Egyptian art while visiting the Louvre as an official Canadian war artist during the Second World War; painted a decade later, *Cattle Show* fulfills Colville's intuition that the two days he spent absorbing Old Masters at the Parisian museum would take years to fully process.<sup>2</sup> The numinous composition that Colville distills from a mix of ancient prototypes and acute observation of his contemporary surroundings recalls the similarly Egyptian-inspired works of pointillist Georges Seurat (1859 – 1891).<sup>3</sup> But where the French Post-Impressionist painted the circus rings and sideshows of the Parisian metropole as modern equivalents of ancient ceremonials, Colville substitutes the austere showmanship of a rural livestock competition.

Such venerable spectacles of exceptional livestock as the Hants County Exhibition's Classic Heritage Beef Show—held annually in Windsor, Nova Scotia, for over 260 years—offered Colville a fitting symbol of timeless tradition located in the specificity of his Maritime context. Colville's secular subjects often evoke the conventions of sacred art, his paintings having frequently elicited comparisons to the religious paintings of the early Renaissance master Piero della Francesca (circa 1415 – 1492).<sup>4</sup> But for all his reverence for the enduring lessons of art history—a subject that he taught at Mount Allison University for almost two decades—Colville was an artist equally attuned to the ephemeral trappings of modernity and to the quicksilver theatre of the particular “moment in time.”<sup>5</sup> The decisive moment of hieratic showmanship captured by *Cattle Show* epitomizes this recurring paradox in Colville's art.

Inseparable from the Maritime milieu that he immortalized in paint, Colville's relationship to regional identity is also more complicated than is sometimes assumed. He was born in Toronto in 1920, and Colville's images of Atlantic Canada were informed by his wartime documentation of the low-lying terrain of the Netherlands. The magic realism of *Cattle Show* highlights additional transnational currents in Colville's oeuvre. Its icon-like flattening of space and elimination of detail sets a mood of mystery that is typical of the “surrealist quality” of his works dating from the early 1950s.<sup>6</sup> Reminiscent of the “dream-like” figures of Belgian surrealist Paul Delvaux (1897 – 1994),<sup>7</sup> the dapper grey-suited gentleman in the foreground of Colville's painting appears almost to float above the hallowed arena of the show ring. This loosening of gravity's hold on the body is consistent with Colville's symbolic elevation of mundane subjects—an approach that paralleled the work of American “Symbolic Realists” associated with the Hewitt Gallery in New York, such as Jared French and George Tooker.

Colville's first visit to New York brought him into the orbit of these artists when his work was accepted by gallery owner Edwin Hewitt in 1952. Including Colville in a group show later that same



#### ALEX COLVILLE

##### Study for Cattle Show

pencil and ink on paper, November 5, 1955  
6 3/4 x 10 3/4 in, 17.1 x 27.8 cm  
Private Collection  
Courtesy of A.C. Fine Art Inc.

Not for sale with this lot



*Cattle Show* in frame



Joseph Verner Reed Jr., serving as U.S. Chief of Protocol, stands with President George H. W. Bush and Soviet President Mikhail S. Gorbachev during the Washington Summit at the White House, June 1, 1990  
Photo: Jose R. Lopez/The New York Times/Redux



The Reed family at home in their New York apartment, photographed by Horst P. Horst for *Vogue*, November 15, 1967

year, Hewitt would give him solo exhibitions in 1953 and 1955.<sup>8</sup> An influential connection forged through Colville's initial meetings with Hewitt was Lincoln Kirstein (1907–1996), co-founder of the future New York City Ballet with George Balanchine in 1946, and a member of the legendary “Monuments Men” during the Second World War. A lynchpin of mid-century New York cultural life, Kirstein had penned the introduction to the catalogue accompanying the Museum of Modern Art's important exhibition *Americans 1943: Realists and Magic Realists*. The latter paired nineteenth-century realists including Thomas Cole and Thomas Eakins with contemporary artists who would subsequently join Hewitt's roster, such as Jared French.<sup>9</sup> Appropriately, Kirstein also wrote the essay for Hewitt's exhibition of Symbolic Realists in 1950.<sup>10</sup> After meeting Colville, Kirstein would go on to purchase several of his works and become a champion of the Canadian artist in the United States.

Colville's growing visibility in the US included representation by the New York-based Banfer Gallery. *Cattle Show* was lent to the 1963 Banfer solo exhibition, whose success encouraged Colville to quit teaching that year.<sup>11</sup> It was later included in the touring exhibition *Fifteen Canadian Artists*, which opened in 1963 and toured 10-plus venues, including the Minneapolis Institute of Arts and the San Francisco Museum of Art (today's SFMOMA). Circulated by the Museum of Modern Art, where it showed in 1964, *Fifteen Canadian Artists* also included masterworks by Paul-Émile Borduas and Jack Bush. Billed as “the first major exhibition [of Canadian art] organized for extensive circulation in the United States,”<sup>12</sup> *Fifteen Canadian Artists* was representative of post-war cultural projects whose cooperative ethos mirrored economic and political initiatives aimed at “fostering unity and community” in the aftermath of the Second World War, from the Marshall Plan to NATO and the UN.<sup>13</sup> An acute observer of Colville's art, curator Ray Cronin views its almost architectural sense of order as another manifestation of this collective search for alternatives to “nihilism and despair” amid Cold War tensions.

It was perhaps these qualities that appealed to Joseph Verner Reed Sr. (1902–1973), who acquired *Cattle Show* from the Hewitt Gallery in 1955. Like Kirstein, Reed was a remarkably protean figure. He was a Broadway impresario in the late 1920s and early 1930s, and his passion for collecting art would lead him to found the Triton Press, renowned for its limited-edition folios of the American realist Andrew Wyeth. From 1957 to 1960, Reed served as a cultural attaché to the American ambassador to France, Amory Houghton.<sup>14</sup> Reed's son Joseph Verner Reed Jr. (1937–2016) would follow in his father's political footsteps, serving as chief of protocol of the United States under President George H.W. Bush, and subsequently as under-secretary-general of the United Nations from 1992 to 1997. Reed Jr.'s passion for collecting animal-themed paintings was showcased by photographs of his New York apartment shot by Horst P. Horst in 1967 for *Vogue*.<sup>15</sup>

Dominated by non-representational art, *Fifteen Canadian Artists* promoted a consciously modern image of Canada to American audiences. *Cattle Show* was a strategic inclusion of a contemporary realist artwork within this broader context of abstraction. Colville's compression of space generates broad

expanses of earth tones reminiscent of the colour-field abstractions of his compatriot Jack Bush. But though justly renowned for their rigorous construction, Colville's paintings never engage in formal exploration as an end in itself.

Comprising nearly one-third of his total output, Colville's paintings of animals extend his signature metaphysical themes to address the mystery of non-human consciousness.<sup>16</sup> For art historian Mark Cheetham, Colville's representations of animals convey the profound otherness of non-human ways of being in the world. Occasionally, Colville's animal symbolism addresses less lofty ontological concerns, however. The rationale that he offered for his iconic centennial coin designs, for instance, was a back-handed critique of political mediocrity: “I could not find any person admirable enough to be commemorated ... so I used animals,” he quipped.<sup>17</sup> The bovine motif of such Colville works as *Cow and Calf* (1969) invites interpretation as a witty literalization of his tongue-in-cheek observation that “a cow eats grass and produces milk—so the production of art requires the consumption of something else.”<sup>18</sup> By contrast, the stately bulls and sacramental atmosphere of *Cattle Show* suggest that it is a more spiritual diet which sustains the artist. This work is a culminating statement of Colville's spellbinding magic-realist period.

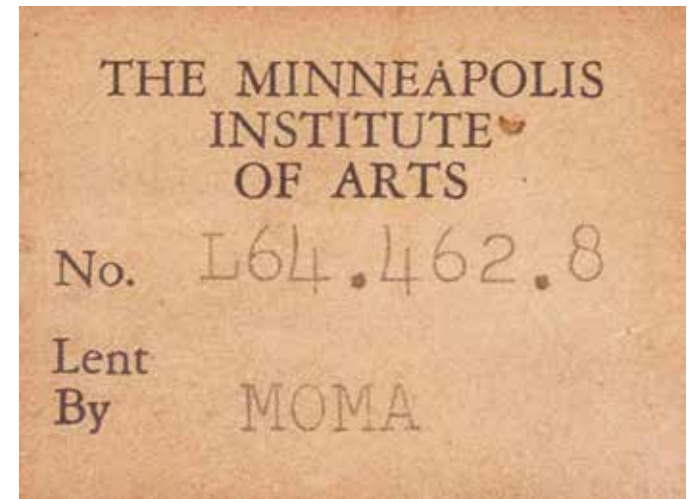
We thank Adam Lauder for contributing the above essay. Lauder is an art historian based in Toronto and an adjunct professor at the Ontario College of Art and Design.

1. See Helen J. Dow, “The Magic Realism of Alex Colville,” *Art Journal* 24, no. 4 (1965): 318–29.
2. Ray Cronin, *Alex Colville: A Rebellious Mind* (Gaspereau Press, 2018), 34.
3. See David Burnett, *Colville* (Art Gallery of Ontario in assoc. with McClelland & Stewart, 1983), exhibition catalogue, 60.
4. See, for instance, Cronin, *Alex Colville*, 43; Mark Cheetham, *Alex Colville: The Observer Observed* (ECW Press, 1994), 106.
5. Cronin, *Alex Colville*, 39.
6. *Ibid.*, 43.
7. Cheetham, *Alex Colville*, 107. See also Burnett, *Colville*, 96.
8. See Burnett, *Colville*, 112.
9. *Ibid.*, 111.
10. *Ibid.*, 112.
11. Cheetham, *Alex Colville*, 50. See also *Alex Colville, Paintings* (Banfer Gallery, 1963), exhibition catalogue.
12. René d'Harnoncourt, introduction to *Fifteen Canadian Artists* (Museum of Modern Art, 1963), exhibition catalogue, n.p.
13. Cronin, *Alex Colville*, 11.
14. See Steven R. Weisman, “Joseph Verner Reed, Patron of the Stage, Is Dead,” *New York Times*, November 26, 1973, 34.
15. See “The Reed Speed,” *Vogue* 150, no. 9 (November 15, 1967), 150–53.
16. Burnett, *Colville*, 157.
17. Quoted in Cheetham, *Alex Colville*, 103.
18. *Ibid.*, 110.

**ESTIMATE: \$700,000 – 900,000**



Museum of Modern Art exhibition label on verso



Minneapolis Institute of Arts exhibition label on verso