I have a sort of ideal of what makes good, or the best of painting country for me and I don’t know if I’ve ever found it or whether I dreamed it up. It would be some high spot overlooking a really large expanse of country and that country would be varied by having farm land and wooded areas and a river or a lake at quite a distance away and we’ll say the possibility of seeing 30 or 40 miles under a particular sort of light.

- Goodridge Roberts

Goodridge Roberts emerged in a period of Canadian art history that falls between two significant eras: the rise of the Group of Seven in Toronto during the 1920s and early 30s, and the move away from representation to abstraction as best exemplified by Les Automatistes in Montréal and Painters Eleven in Toronto, in the 1940s and 1950s respectively. In 1923, Roberts enrolled in the École des beaux-arts de Montréal where he received his formal art training. Several years later, Roberts moved to Wakefield, Québec – just 20 minutes north of Ottawa – and started the “Gatineau Summer School of Painting”, which would mark his first teaching job. It wasn’t until the fall of 1932 when he had his first solo exhibition at The Arts Club in Montréal, at the invitation of his friend Ernst Neumann whom he had met at art school. This drew the attention of painter and critic John Lyman. In letters to Roberts, Lyman called his work “the real stuff… particularly your ability to see colour, not merely use it illustratively or as a schematic ornament.”

Shortly thereafter, Roberts was appointed the first Resident Artist at Queen’s University in Kingston in 1933 but left his post after three years as he was unhappy about the lack of time to devote to his painting and he returned to Montréal. Despite his disinterest in teaching, due to poor finances he returned to teaching in 1940 for the income; he taught at the School of Art and Design of the Art Association of Montreal until 1949. “Although admired by his students as an archetypal role model, Roberts considered himself a failure as a teacher because of his reluctance to articulate what he determined art to be. In fact, he had little interested in art theory, disliked discussing it and distrusted those who did.”

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2. William Goodridge Roberts was born on 24 September, 1904, in Bathsheba, St. Joseph, Barbados; he died on 28 January, 1974, in Montréal, Québec.
4. During his time at the School of Art and Design in Montréal, Roberts took one year to serve as a war artist in England; 1933 – 1934.
5. Paikowsky, *Goodridge Roberts: The Figure Works*, 7.
Over the course five decades, Goodridge Roberts developed a strong practice, produced a wealth of work and exhibited extensively. In 1952, Roberts was included in Canada’s first official presentation at the XXVI Biennale di Venezia. Then, in 1957, he was elected to full membership in the Royal Canadian Academy, depositing his diploma painting, *Laurentian Landscape*, c.1957 with the National Gallery of Canada (7010). In June 1960, he was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Laws at the University of New Brunswick.

*Eastern Townships* follows certain pictorial devices that he used in earlier works which have been incorporated into his later images of the rough, scraggly topography of this part of Québec… Sandra Paikowsky identifies another key element in his compositions of this period: “The relative flat terrain is often animated by a single tree that serves to anchor the image and to function as a fulcrum controlling the disposition of the other dappled elements.” The “tachiste-like gesture” of his later period is modern, emotional and full of life. Typical of his work in late 1950s and early 1960s, Roberts’ colour palette is brighter and more energetic than his earlier works with their muted and somber tones. Roberts never worked from sketches; during the winter months he would typical teach and or produce his still-life and portrait works, but during the warmer months, he would travel in Ontario and Quebec and paint in situ, thanks to his use of Masonite. Roberts was regularly using Masonite (rather than canvas) by the end of the 1940s; according to Sandra Paikowsky, this change to “a more resistant support is part of the reason that his surfaces now appear denser and more tactile, as the paint actually “sits” on the masonite. The support also allowed the brush to slip easily and quickly as it does in watercolour painting. Although he was doing proportionately few watercolours, he had never abandoned aspects of its process. The new “abstraction” of the landscapes found a counterpoint in certain of his still life pictures.”

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6 Of note, five paintings by Roberts (along with 18 by Alfred Pellan, Emily Carr and David Milne) were shown in Canada’s first official presentation at the XXVI Biennale di Venezia. The only other Canadian to have participated in the Venice Biennale since it began in 1895 was James Wilson Morrice who showed in 1903 and 1905 in the International Pavilion but was not listed as a Canadian in the exhibition catalogues. Canada would not inaugurate its own pavilion until 1958.


9 *Ibid*, 119-120.