

OSCAR CAHÉN

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Oscar Cahén



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BEAVERBROOK ART GALLERY

THE CAHÉN ARCHIVES™

2017

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THE CAHÉN ARCHIVES™/MC

Oscar Cahén™/MC

Dust Jacket

Still Life

1953

C.R.203

Oil on Masonite

49.5 × 115.6 cm

(19.5 × 45.5 in.)

Page 2

Self Portrait

1938

C.R.374

Oil on board

35.6 × 25.4 cm (14.0 × 10.0 in.)

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ABBREVIATIONS: **C.A.** Cahén Archives; **C.F.** Cahén Fonds. **C.R.** Catalogue Raisonné; **c.** circa; **DNF** data not found



On Monday afternoon, November 26, 1956, I walked straight home from school. As soon as our house in Oakville came into view, I saw a black-and-white police car in the driveway. Unusually, our front door was wide open, and with each step forward, I heard an eerie, horrific, wailing sound becoming louder and ever more unnerving—a huge disorientation for an eleven-year-old.

Halfway up the drive, a tall, lanky officer in uniform walked up and said point-blank, “Your father has been killed in a car accident.” I heard him clearly and understood his words. I remained calm and headed for the front door. A second uniformed officer was standing in the hallway—a softer, kinder, and rounder man who squatted down to my eye level.

“I’m sorry, but your mother will not be able to see you now,” he said quietly.

“Would you like me to stay with you for a while?”

At that moment the telephone rang. Although normally my mother would answer, I went straight into the kitchen to take the call. It was a Toronto newspaper, wanting my dad’s background story. In that single instant what might have become a moment of pure grief transcended to my first experience of pure purpose—to see that my father’s interrupted story would be told.

This book is for you, Dad.

—MICHAEL CAHÉN

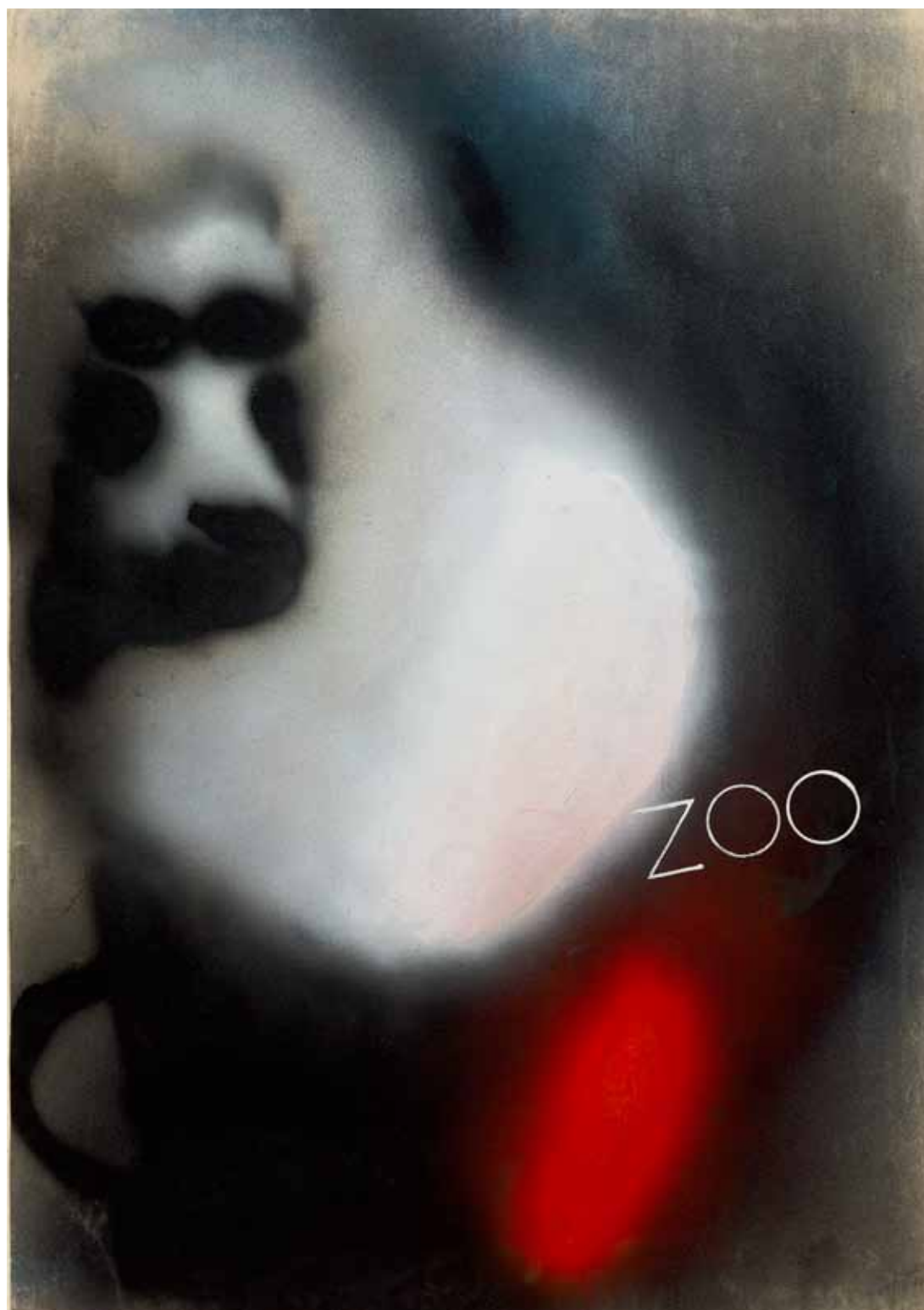
GABRIOLA ISLAND, B.C., AUGUST 2017

Oscar and Michael,
Fogwood Farm, King, Ontario, 1951



1

Jaleen Grove
Oscar Cahén:
The Early Years



A veritable sponge whose education had been interrupted by circumstances and war, Cahén appears to have been avidly self-directed in his artistic development.

OSCAR CAHÉN'S ARTWORKS slip easily through a gamut of emotional registers, from fiery slashes to taut formalism, from gaiety and delight to melancholy and irony. This abundance of self-expression is the fruit of a highly unusual early life, from his birth in Copenhagen during the First World War to the moment he was effectively reborn a free man in Montreal during the Second World War. He was only twenty-six, but he had already lived in seven different countries, engaged in art in five or more cities, freelanced for several years, been implicated in espionage, and narrowly escaped a Nazi concentration camp—only to spend two years in a Canadian internment camp. It is imperative to consider the impact of all this experience during Cahén's formative years, much of it traumatic and desperate, when interpreting his later oeuvre.

Much of the turbulence of Cahén's youth was due to the efforts of his father, Fritz Max Cahén (b. December 8, 1891, Saarlouis), to establish himself as a political strategist—a principled ambition that brought him into secret intelligence and anti-Nazi activities which frequently put the family at risk. Around 1910 Fritz Max, son of a Jewish businessman who served as president of the Saarländische

Produktenbörse [Saarland Commodity Exchange], initially pursued an education in law in Marburg.¹ But he soon shifted to studying under the philosopher Hermann Cohen, a proponent of neo-Kantianism and the natural evolution of an enlightened democratic socialism as well as an outspoken defender of Jewish culture and thought.² He followed with audited postgraduate courses at the Sorbonne and at the Haute École des sciences politiques et sociales, Paris.³

Cohen influenced Fritz Max not only in politics but in his theory of aesthetics: he regarded art as an ethical, humanist expression of transcendentalist “pure feeling” in which artists best expressed themselves in works concerned with universal human experiences of beauty, the sublime, and humour.⁴ Fritz Max soon turned to art himself, attracted by the socialists' call for art and design for the people.

Fritz Max's subsequent activity informs us about the values to which Oscar would have been formatively exposed.⁵ While in Paris in 1912–13, Fritz Max frequented the avant-garde café scene and met Modernist poet Blaise Cendrars and sculptor Alexander Archipenko.⁶ He wrote his own poetry and translated poets Guillaume Apollinaire and Léon Deubel for the Expressionist journals *Der Sturm*, *Die Aktion*, and *Die Bücherei Maiandros*.⁷ He briefly lectured in art history in Prenslau⁸ and wrote a controversial article opining that the war was about Expressionism, insofar as art encapsulated national feeling.⁹

FIGURE 1.1
ZOO
1931
C.R.559
Watercolour and gouache on paper
95.3 × 69.9 cm (37.5 × 27.5 in.)

That the piece earned invectives from no less than Wilhelm von Bode, a conservative art historian and museum director (patronized by Kaiser Wilhelm II) who condemned modern art outright, shows that Fritz Max's art criticism was taken seriously.¹⁰ His feeling that art was integral to culture likely led to his later support of his son's profession.

By July 1915 Fritz Max Cahén had moved to Copenhagen, where he became a foreign correspondent for the newspaper *Frankfurter Zeitung* and took an interest in the development of the art museum there.¹¹ On January 5, 1916, he and Eugenie Stamm (b. October 26, 1895, Nordeck)—daughter of a wealthy, aristocratic, Protestant family—were married (Figures 1.2 and 1.3). One month later, on February 8, 1916, Oscar Maximilian Cahén was born. British secret agents reported that Eugenie was disinherited.¹²

British intelligence was taking an interest in the Cahéns because, in 1916, Fritz Max met Ulrich von Brockdorff-Rantzau, state secretary for foreign affairs in the Rat der Volksbeauftragten [provisional postwar government], and, in his own words, became director of Brockdorff-Rantzau's "secret propaganda bureau" and "aide."¹³ British intelligence, however, believed that Cahén and Brockdorff-Rantzau were sexual intimates and that Fritz Max was conducting secret political activity of his own from Brockdorff-Rantzau's office.¹⁴ Nevertheless, Brockdorff-Rantzau made Cahén the head of the German Press Bureau in Copenhagen, where British intelligence thought him to be "in charge of a German spy organization."¹⁵ In 1918–19 Cahén assisted Brockdorff-Rantzau during the negotiation of the Treaty of Versailles (Figure 1.4). An American newspaper called him "the power behind the throne."¹⁶

After the war, Fritz Max Cahén became a special correspondent in Paris and then returned to Berlin in 1925;¹⁷ presumably Eugenie and Oscar accompanied him. It is unclear where the family lived between 1925 and 1930, when Fritz Max was working for various newspapers associated with the *Deutscher Matern-Verlag*,¹⁸ but Oscar later told authorities that he had attended a German gymnasium (preparatory school) for three years,¹⁹ and he told Canadians that he had studied in Paris.²⁰ Fritz Max resumed political activity that earned him a beating when he attempted to speak at a Nazi rally in 1930.²¹ That same year they went to Rome, where Oscar also may have studied art;²² and in 1931 Fritz Max, perhaps with Oscar and his mother, travelled to

FIGURE 1.2
Fritz Max Cahén and
Eugenie Stamm
Copenhagen
January 1916



FIGURE 1.3
C.F.002
Marriage certificate
Fritz Max Cahén and
Eugenie Stamm
January 5, 1916



Monte Carlo, the Zeuthener See lake (east of Berlin), and Czechoslovakia.²³

By 1932 they were in Hellerau, a modern “garden city” suburb near Dresden, an artists’ colony that promoted the Arts and Crafts principle of the “unity of the arts.” More trips to Italy and France followed from July to September, and to Czechoslovakia in April and September.²⁴ Fritz Max Cahén continued with his political activities,²⁵ and Oscar registered at the Staatliche Akademie für Kunstgewerbe zu Dresden [Academy of Applied Art], using a false birth date of February 7, 1915, because he was underage.²⁶ There, he took instruction with Max Frey,²⁷ who led the graphic design and illustration classes and whose oeuvre encompassed fantastical illustrations of mythical creatures and people, eerie landscapes, mystical Bible scenes, and poster design. One sample of Oscar’s Dresden work survives: a poster design featuring a baboon and the word ZOO (Figure 1.1). The baboon is rendered in a nearly abstract manner with an airbrush, and the lettering is set on a diagonal, showing the influence of modernist *plakatstil* design, which encouraged bold, minimalist visual communication.²⁸

A hotbed of Expressionism before the war, when it had been home to the influential group Die Brücke, Dresden was still thriving artistically, with leading painters such as Otto Dix and George Grosz at the nearby Dresden Academy of Fine Art (the Applied Art school would later merge with it). Both were proponents of Neue Sachlichkeit [New Objectivity], the postwar art movement that embraced social commentary. Dix and others rejuvenated traditional painting skills and detailed, descriptive narratives; still others pursued printmaking; and many artists informed their depictions of contemporary people, corruption, and the poor with caricature and psychological depth.²⁹

At the same time, Germany was steeped in Hollywood films, and a fascination with American popular culture and American concepts of modernity, advertising, and the liberated “new woman” permeated German culture.³⁰ Such elements come together in a sketch Oscar made in 1938, portraying scantily clad actresses on a film set, emblazoned with “MGM” (Figure 1.6).³¹

“Fled abroad; whereabouts unknown” is the abrupt final note for Oscar Cahén in the academy’s record book for summer 1933. The Nazis, who had seized power in late January of that year, were watching the

FIGURE 1.4
Fritz Max Cahén (far right) talking with Prof. Schücking
Arrival of the Treaty of Versailles delegation
(Marshal Foch’s private railcar, Rethondes station,
Compiègne)
January 1919

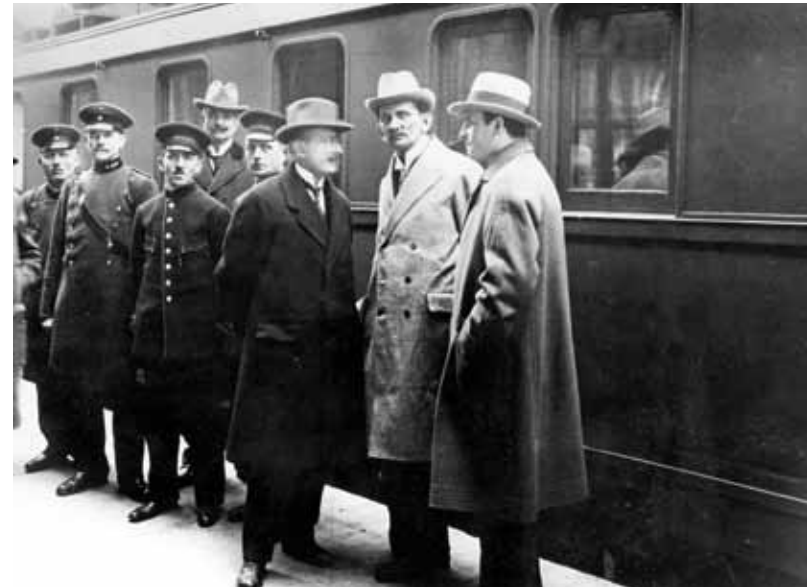


FIGURE 1.5
Oscar Cahén
Dresden
1932





FIGURE 1.6

Untitled [MGM]

1938

C.R.128

Watercolour, gouache, and graphite on
illustration board

35.9 × 26.0 cm (14.1 × 10.3 in.)

Cahéns.³² Following a tip, on August 3 the family pretended to go on an outing and instead took a train to Czechoslovakia—a terrifying journey that Fritz Max described in these words:

As the train neared the frontier, I felt completely calm. My wife also kept her sangfroid, but my son was in a state of nerves that might prove dangerous . . . I sat beside him and grasped his hand tightly until he regained composure . . . We were lucky. The police officer and the customs officer recognized me. Fortunately they had not known me as . . . an adversary of Hitler.³³

Having arrived safely in a village in Czechoslovakia where they had friends, Fritz Max reports that the innkeeper's daughter returned from a nearby town. "'What have you done?' she asked . . . 'A detachment of forty storm troopers were at the station looking for you . . . Everyone was thoroughly searched.'"³⁴

They arrived in Prague on August 6, where Fritz Max Cahén registered with the Jewish Aid Committee and found lodgings in the suburb of Žižkov.³⁵ Czech law prohibited them from employment, however, and by January 1934 they had depleted their funds—only Oscar's sale of some advertising art sustained them.³⁶ Father and son joined a German exile film crew in the borderland mountain region of Riesengebirge in February, Fritz Max as a writer, and Oscar supplying costume and set design (Figure 1.7).³⁷ Fritz Max asserts that he used the opportunity as a cover for his return to espionage.³⁸

From his own testimony and from British and Czech intelligence records, it is clear that from 1934 to 1937 Fritz Max Cahén was thoroughly involved in gathering and selling information. In 1934 he travelled between Czechoslovakia and Sweden at least nine times, visited England and other countries (Oscar accompanied him to Zurich, Switzerland, on June 1), and was implicated in a major Communist spy

FIGURE 1.7

Fritz Max Cahén (2nd from right)

Film crew, *Polibek ve Sněhu*

Czech-German frontier

1934



scandal in Stockholm (the "Kernig Affair").³⁹ Eugenie and Oscar lived for several months that year in the vicinity of Stockholm, where Oscar reported he studied art.⁴⁰

In spite of their tumultuous life, Oscar, now eighteen, held a solo show of seventy-nine works in Copenhagen in November 1934.⁴¹ His father's journalism connections garnered him some press: four reviews appeared, one with an interview and photographs that featured his portrait of Fritz Max (Figure 1.10). The exhibition also included designs for posters, book and album covers, advertising, watercolour landscapes, and pastel portraits. The drawings of pretty girls and frivolous city life in particular won praise.⁴²

The family returned again to Prague on March 3, 1935. Oscar had three cartoons published in *Der Simpl* (Figures 1.12, 1.13, and 1.14), a satirical magazine that mocked Nazis, published by Jewish exiles.

FIGURE 1.8
Oscar Cahén
Stockholm
1934

FIGURE 1.9
Fritz Max Cahén
Stockholm
1934



FIGURE 1.10
**Portrait of
Fritz Max Cahén**
1933
C.R.575
Media DNF
Dimensions DNF

FIGURE 1.11
Oscar Cahén
Stockholm
1934



Each cartoon featured risqué jokes concerning sexually liberated young women. In the context of Nazi aims to control sexual activity, these sexy cartoons have been viewed as transgressive political statements.⁴³ Applying for residency shortly after, Oscar told officials that he had been forced to flee Germany because of his father being persecuted as a Jew and democrat, and that he feared he would be put into a concentration camp if he returned. He swore he would refrain from political activity and would not “violate the hospitality of the state” while in Czechoslovakia—oaths he could not keep.⁴⁴

Around this time, Oscar borrowed studio space from the Prague illustrator William Pachner. The association was clearly advantageous for Oscar, and he soon adopted Pachner’s brush technique, manner of drawing faces and figures, and style of signature. He later told people that the two of them collaborated on illustrations, mirroring each other’s style almost perfectly.⁴⁵ They struck up a partnership of sorts, but police soon investigated them and, in February 1936, Oscar was fined for producing advertising art without a permit.⁴⁶ Pachner, at the age of ninety-nine in 2014, did not recall working with Oscar, but he did remember that Oscar spent time making pornographic drawings. If so, they were likely sold on the black market and would have provided a much-needed source of income.⁴⁷ But they were more than smut: like the *Der Simpl* cartoons, the transgressive, eroticized body was regarded

FIGURE 1.12
Saison-Beginn
 C.R.1226
Der Simpl, May 8, 1935



FIGURE 1.13
Erster Standpunkt
 C.R.1125
Der Simpl, May 29, 1935



FIGURE 1.14
Ein Gemüt
 C.R.953
Der Simpl, June 5, 1935



by the avant-garde as a liberated path to the power of the unconscious and an antidote to fascist control.⁴⁸

Fritz Max remained active in gathering information for the Czech Department of National Defence, using a number of aliases.⁴⁹ He also helped establish the Volkssozialistische Bewegung [People's Socialist Movement] in Prague in 1936, to unite the efforts of various political organizations that opposed Hitler (while agreeing on little else).⁵⁰ Although Fritz Max boasted of a complex network of informants and members throughout Germany and elsewhere in his 1939 book on the subject, *Men Against Hitler* (Figures 1.15 and 1.16), Czech intelligence considered the group a minor concern.⁵¹ Still, their aims were serious enough that Fritz Max became involved in a Spanish arms-smuggling deal to raise money.⁵² Unfortunately, due to his attempts to maximize his connections profitably and indiscriminately in order to fund the anti-Nazi effort, the British concluded he was a double agent—a Nazi and a

Communist informant.⁵³ This conclusion would complicate the Cahéns' lives later, contributing to their internments and separation.

In 1937 the Volkssozialistische Bewegung disintegrated—Fritz Max referred to “internal squabbles,” but British informants asserted that Fritz Max had been expelled for being a spy and for making wild promises about raising funds.⁵⁴ He left for the United States in June 1937, where he wrote *Men Against Hitler* in an attempt to convince American readers that overthrowing Hitler was practical, given the alleged network of organized resistance. Not one to pass up any opportunity to advance a cause meaningful to him, in a questionnaire issued by his publisher, Fritz Max describes his son as a “famous cartoonist.”⁵⁵

Oscar was affected by his father's dangerous activities. Not only was he named in conjunction with the gun smuggling,⁵⁶ but in February 1937 a driving instructor informed the police that Oscar had a suspicious radio transmitter in his car—and, indeed, the equipment was used to

broadcast anti-Nazi propaganda over the border into Germany.⁵⁷ Police searched the Cahén apartment and detained them and some friends for twelve hours for questioning, but released them because Fritz Max was known to the Department of Defence, and the police felt there was no risk in their activities.⁵⁸ Oscar had also attended Volkssozialistische Bewegung meetings, although the Czech agent noted that, before August 1937, he was not known to be political—an evaluation at odds with the guns and radio incidents, but indicating that Oscar’s status in the underground was peripheral.⁵⁹ Still, a change in the Czech secret police administration meant that some kind of negative action was taken against Oscar on account of Fritz Max’s allegiance to the outgoing administration.⁶⁰

Having been foiled in his collaboration with Pachner, and now with his passport expired, Oscar needed legitimate employment. He took a position at the Rotter School, a private art school run by the Rotter Studio—the largest advertising and design firm in Czechoslovakia, founded by the pre-eminent designer Vilém [William] Rotter.⁶¹ Students studied advertising art, but in the Czech context this included graphic design, painting, glass, film, children’s book illustration, photography, theatre design, and editorial illustration.⁶² Internal police documents allege that Oscar, specializing in fashion drawing, worked full time in the studio and taught two evenings a week, paid privately by Rotter.⁶³ He also painted advertising posters⁶⁴ and was exposed to high-end agency business: Rotter was well known for magnificent modernist poster design and an elite clientele that included Kodak and Skoda automobiles.⁶⁵ It is significant, however, that in all government records Oscar describes himself as an “academic painter” as well as an illustrator/designer.

Oscar’s activities in 1938 are not known, but he acquired a passport to travel to Yugoslavia and Austria, supposedly for health reasons but actually, as an application for a police certificate of good conduct shows, to try to immigrate to the United States.⁶⁶ Unfortunately, before he could act, Austria fell to the Nazis, and Yugoslavia denied him and Eugenie visas.⁶⁷ On September 29, 1938, Germany annexed the Sudetenland, making it even more difficult to obtain the right to travel. Desperate, they found a saviour in General Karel Paleček, who later testified that he helped them out because of the work the Cahén

FIGURE 1.15
Fritz Max Cahén
Men Against Hitler
(Indianapolis:
Bobbs-Merrill, 1939)

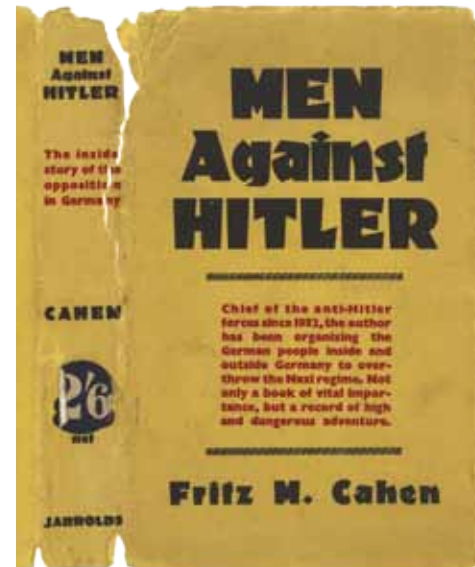


FIGURE 1.16
Fritz Max Cahén
Men Against Hitler
(London:
Jarrolds, 1939)



family had done.⁶⁸ He added that even he, due to Oscar's entanglement in Fritz Max's gun-smuggling scheme, was almost unable to obtain the documents. Oscar and Eugenie left Prague on March 3, 1939, and Hitler's forces invaded only twelve days later.⁶⁹

Taking a route through Poland and Scandinavia, they arrived at Herne Bay, England, on March 9, where they were to remain. Once again they were not allowed paid or unpaid employment, and they relied for support on the Czech Trust Fund, the New Lodge Windsor Forest, Berkshire (a humanitarian organization assisting refugees), and two friends.⁷⁰ Oscar's activity for the next fourteen months is unknown—although one humorous illustration of a nun with a British sports car reading a map indicates that he kept his skills whetted (Figure 1.17). Significantly, in the British visa application the clerk noted that Eugenie was Protestant, while Oscar had “no religion.”⁷¹ Earlier, in his Czech driver's licence application, under religion, Oscar had written “No.”⁷² Later, in the years 1946–52, he would grapple with tortured religious iconography and identity in his painting.

Beginning in October 1939—with the Second World War now well underway—Fritz Max Cahén applied several times to visit England but was denied repeatedly because of his unsavoury reputation with the British. Officials there viewed his book *Men Against Hitler* as lies and plagiarism at best or, at worst, a ruse to hide pro-Nazi sympathies. Americans, in contrast, felt that although he was self-aggrandizing, he was neither a Soviet nor a Nazi spy.⁷³

On May 5, 1940, the British began arresting young refugee men of German origin. One week later Oscar was seized and sent first to Huyton, near Liverpool (where he began carving a chess set),⁷⁴ and then to the Isle of Man (Dada artist Kurt Schwitters was also there). Much to her bewilderment (she knew nothing of her husband's bad reputation), Eugenie was taken ten days later, classified as “B” (very suspect), and not allowed to travel to the United States. Her attitude was “strongly anti-Nazi and pro-British,” her keepers noted.⁷⁵

On July 3 Oscar and several hundred others were sent to Canada on board the *Ettrick*—an uncomfortable, overcrowded, and terrifying trip, given that a previous ship of refugees had been torpedoed only a day or so earlier.⁷⁶ It arrived in Quebec ten days later, where the men were put into Camp L on the Plains of Abraham.⁷⁷

FIGURE 1.17

Untitled

[*Nun and Sports Car*]

1939

C.R.084

Pastel, gouache, India ink, and
watercolour on paper

68.6 × 54.0 cm (27.0 × 21.3 in.)



Accounts of the internment life in Canada are dismal. The detainees were not wanted, anti-Semitism was rife, and living conditions were strained. To keep themselves occupied and to show their new hosts that they were refugees—not prisoners of war, as the official papers dubbed them, or German soldiers or criminals, as some ignorant Canadians assumed—within a week of arrival they organized an art show and a concert, and publication of a mimeographed newsletter.⁷⁸ A fellow inmate penned a tongue-in-cheek account of the journey, illustrated by Oscar, that a Canadian soldier kept; Oscar drew a portrait of an officer's wife.⁷⁹ The interns included vastly accomplished men such as Oscar Cahén's friend Helmut Blume, who later became head of music at McGill University, and the respected Vienna School art historian Otto Demus, who gave lectures and praised Oscar's versatility in a review of the impromptu show.⁸⁰

Several weeks later, Oscar, Blume, and several hundred others were moved to Camp N near Sherbrooke, Quebec. The officer in charge was deeply anti-Semitic, the guards were abusive, and the "camp" was a flooded, uninsulated industrial site with few toilets.⁸¹ For the next two years Oscar and the other men focused on physical and psychological survival. An eerie Surrealist sketch of alienated, primitive figures dates from this period (Figure 1.20). The interns busied themselves with the activities they were allowed, and Oscar found that drawings of pin-ups counted as a currency among guards and fellow inmates.⁸² In his notes he refers to "my art class," so it is possible he also offered some instruction.⁸³

In October 1942 Oscar completed *Canadian Landscape* (Figure 1.21), perhaps his first oil painting in Canada. It was created for and presented ceremonially to the retiring ombudsman Clarence Halliday, who had mediated strongly on the inmates' behalf with the unkind camp administration.⁸⁴ Halliday was a fan of the Group of Seven,⁸⁵ and Cahén seems to have captured hints of their style in the loose, painterly handling and direct observation of autumn colour. The landscape is also a remarkable example of prison art: it is executed on a support of unprimed scrap cardboard with a seam running through it, obviously a compromise of quality in order to gain size. The simple frame is clear cedar, with one side bearing a prominent knot. The paints themselves have a dull, chalky quality that suggests they may be the

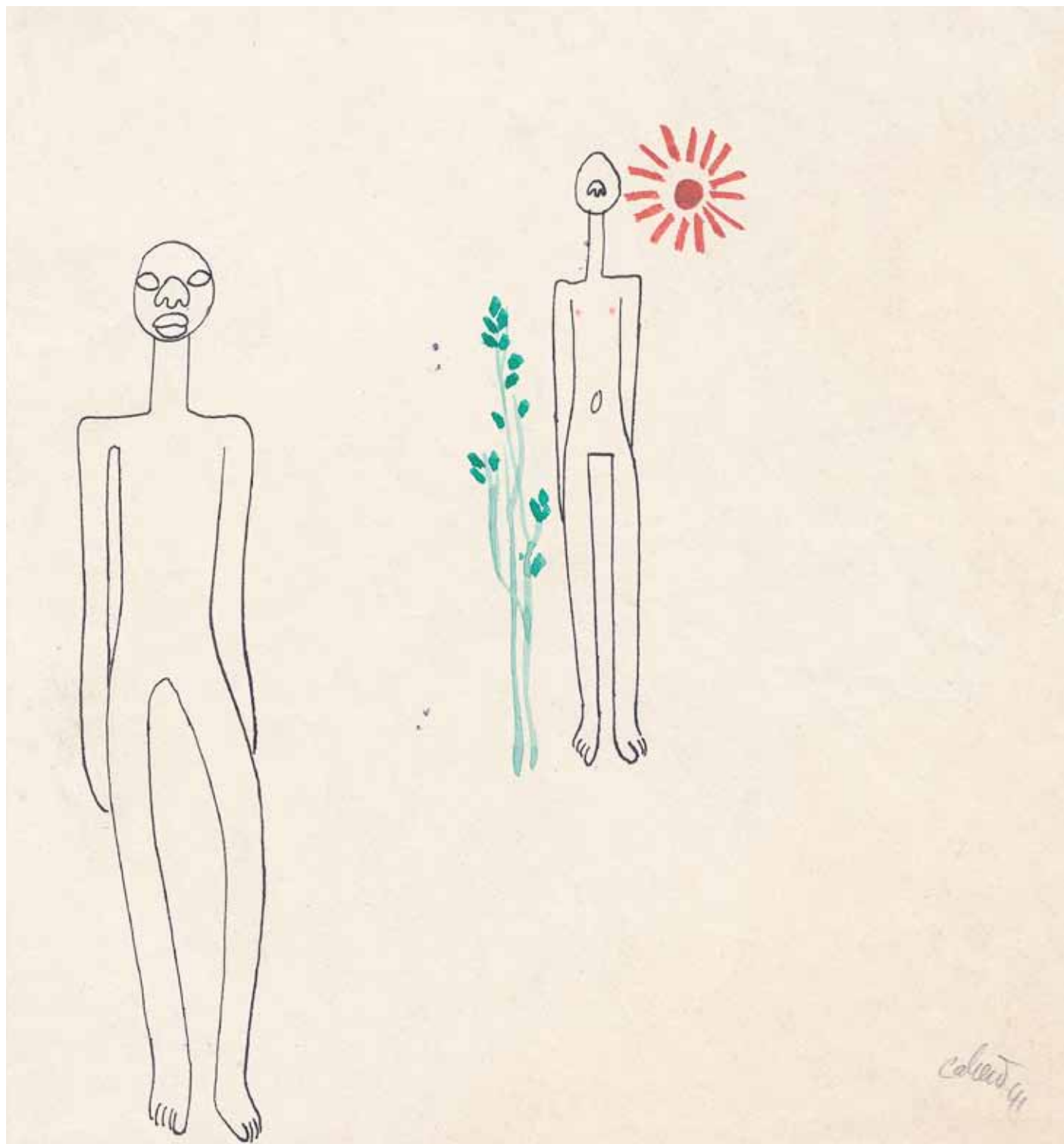
FIGURE 1.18
Chess Set Black Queen
 c. 1940
 C.R.1237
 Found wood
 Internment Camp N
 7.6 × 2.5 × 2.5 cm (3.0 × 1.0 × 1.0 in.)



FIGURE 1.19
Chess Set
c. 1940
C.R.1237
Found wood and fabric
Internment Camp N
64.3 × 64.8 cm (25.3 × 25.5 in.)
Gift of Brenda Osborne



FIGURE 1.20
Untitled
1941
C.R.1223
Ink on paper
11.1 × 10.2 cm
(4.4 × 4.0 in.)



sort shipped with paint-by-numbers kits. In all, *Canadian Landscape* encapsulates dignity under straitened circumstances and an interest in adjusting to Canadian ways. Mr. Halliday kept the gift his entire life.

Meanwhile, Eugenie continued to be held as well, on account of her defence of Fritz Max's anti-Nazi organizing. But her excellent behaviour and winning personality as attested to by overseers, and the fact that she was the "daughter of a noble" with a brother who had useful intelligence connections, convinced authorities that perhaps she was ignorant of Fritz Max's alleged dubious activities.⁸⁶ She was finally released on December 14, 1941, though her movements and mail continued to be monitored.⁸⁷ She worked to bring Oscar back to England, retrieving drawings that had been left in Herne Bay and looking for a job for him, with a reference letter in hand from Rotter (who had also fled to England).⁸⁸ The Artist's Refugee Committee—which advocated on behalf of Czech and avant-garde artists in particular—was also applying for his release.⁸⁹

Fritz Max, in contrast, was stuck in the United States, where he tried to keep up international correspondence with potential collaborators such as Hermann Rauschning, presciently telling him that post-Hitler Germany would see a "revolutionary birth of the feeling of solidarity in a Federated Europe, which will become a portion of the larger circle of Western civilization."⁹⁰ But his isolation and complicated past and personality led Connecticut doctors to deem him mentally ill. They institutionalized him in the summer of 1942 and, describing him as "paranoid and delusional," administered "chemical therapy" and would not allow him to travel.⁹¹ He soon began denying treatment, but remained a ward of the state and was intermittently in hospital until he returned to Germany in 1954.⁹² There is no record of Oscar or Eugenie disputing his diagnosis.⁹³ Perhaps afraid that Fritz Max might disrupt their lives once again, Oscar avoided his father even when it became possible to visit, and in 1948 he declined to bring him to Canada—events that bear consideration in relation to his paintings.⁹⁴ Yet it is difficult to assess just how ill Fritz Max had ever been: after 1954 he became an adviser to the German government, published books, and settled into a dignified old age with Eugenie, who rejoined him in 1956—some twenty years after they had last been together.⁹⁵

FIGURE 1.21

Untitled

[*Canadian Landscape*]

1942

C.R.1199

Oil on card

39.5 × 51.0 cm (15.6 × 20.1 in.)



While Oscar's mother was working to bring him back to England, Oscar himself was on the brink of finding work in Canada—the key to securing his freedom. In September 1941 he applied for release, and British intelligence found that "[Oscar Cahén] has nothing to do with his father's nefarious activities. He is non-political . . . he is loyal and all right."⁹⁶ On April 29 the following year, the Canadian government was informed that "the alien is suitable for release in Canada."⁹⁷

The timing was good: Montreal's *The Standard* (a nationally syndicated magazine) had just done a story on Camp N and its talented internees, with a photo of Oscar at work.⁹⁸ He had also met a young Canadian journalist, Beatrice Shapiro (now Beatrice Fischer), when she visited Camp N to get a story.⁹⁹ Following their instant romance, Oscar sent her two ethereal watercolour landscapes (Figure 1.23), and she began showing samples of his work around Montreal to find him a position.¹⁰⁰ The United Jewish Relief Agencies made direct contact with *The Standard*, which allowed several of the interned men to submit work on a trial basis.¹⁰¹ Impressed, *The Standard* began awarding Oscar illustration jobs regularly. Shapiro convinced Montreal public-relations man Colin Gravenor to employ him, with the assurance of *The Standard* that it would continue to give him work.¹⁰²

FIGURE 1.22

Beatrice Fischer (née Shapiro)
Painting by Oscar of Beatrice in
background (unlocated)
Montreal
c. 1943



FIGURE 1.23

Untitled
c. 1940–42
C.R.613
Watercolour on card
15.2 × 25.4 cm (6.0 × 10.0 in.)



Satisfied, the authorities let Oscar go on October 26, 1942, on the condition that he avoid political activity.¹⁰³ Had Shapiro not intervened with Gravenor, Oscar would have gone back to England, because the British had approved his return.¹⁰⁴ At last he could begin anew, the years of constant moving, desperate plots, persecution, and delayed opportunity at an end. He and Shapiro would remain close.

A veritable sponge whose education had been interrupted by circumstances and war, Cahén appears to have been avidly self-directed in his artistic development. His exposure to visual cultures throughout Eastern, Western, Northern, and Southern Europe is reflected in the multitude of visual languages he employed in his illustration career, from caricature to academic draftsmanship,

Primitivism to Cubism, simplified cartoon to fully developed narrative description. In Canada he absorbed more influences and passed along in return what *The Standard* in 1942 described as a “typically European” flavour.¹⁰⁵ Reviewing the state of commercial art only ten years later, Canada’s most accomplished designer, Carl Dair, noted that Oscar held “a pre-eminent position.”¹⁰⁶ By 1946 he resumed painting for himself, moving through figurative subjects wrought with emotion before turning to abstraction around 1950. Oscar Cahén continued to pursue illustration and painting together until his untimely death in November 1956, bringing to Canadian art what his Painters Eleven comrade Jack Bush called “a wonderful sense of European colour and daring.”¹⁰⁷

NOTES

- 1 Fritz Max Cahén, quoted in “Interview with Fritz Max Cahén,” *Generalanzeiger* [Bonn] (Mar. 5, 1965).
- 2 W.C. Swabey, “Hermann Cohen: Eine Einführung in sein Werk by Walter Kinkel [book review],” *The Philosophical Review* 35, no. 1 (Jan. 1926): 71.
- 3 Fritz Max Cahén, Bobbs-Merrill General Questionnaire, Lilly Library Bobbs-Merrill papers: Bobbs-Merrill Company (1939), 2.
- 4 Liisa Steinby, “Hermann Cohen and Bakhtin’s Early Aesthetics,” *Studies in East European Thought* 63, no. 3 (Aug. 2011): 236–40. See also Stephan Nachtsheim, “Zum zeitgenössischen theoretischen Kontext von Hermann Cohens Ästhetik,” *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 62, no. 2 (2010): 142–56, and Reinier Munk, ed., *Hermann Cohen’s Critical Idealism*, in *Amsterdam Studies in Jewish Thought* 10 (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005).
- 5 Fritz Max Cahén, *Der Weg nach Versailles: Erinnerungen, 1912–1919* (Boppard/Rhein: Harald Boldt, 1963), 37.
- 6 Ibid., 5, 8.
- 7 Ibid., 29–30; Willard Bohn, *Apollinaire and the International Avant-Garde* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 103–6, 126; Guillaume Apollinaire, “Zone,” translated by Fritz Max Cahén in *Der Sturm* (Nov. 1913). According to Bohn, Fritz Max also translated other Apollinaire works and wrote a review. His work in *Die Aktion* und *Die Bücherei Maiandros* are catalogued by De Gruyter German Literary Expressionism Online.
- 8 Informant D-1, report (May 3, 1916), MI-5, File KV 2/2832, Minute 1.
- 9 Fritz Max Cahén, “Die neue Kunst und der Krieg,” *Vossische Zeitung* (Dec. 30, 1914).
- 10 Wilhelm von Bode, “Hoffnungen und Aussichten für die deutsche Kunst nach dem Kriege,” *Die Kunst für Alle* 30, no. 17/18 (1914–15): 332; Fritz Max Cahén, “Offener Brief an Bode,” *Die Schaubühne* 2 (1915): 53.
- 11 Fritz Max Cahén, *Men Against Hitler* (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1939), 22, 49; Fritz Max Cahén, *Der Weg nach Versailles*, 66–67, 149.
- 12 “Fritz Max Cahén,” memo (1938), MI-5, File KV 2/2832, Minute 10a (May 18, 1938; Aug. 24, 1939). The disinheritance is corroborated by Michael Cahén.
- 13 Fritz Max Cahén, *Men Against Hitler*, 22–23.
- 14 “Extract from SIS Report” (May 18, 1938), MI-5, File KV 2/2832, Minute 17a; report (Aug. 24, 1939), MI-5, File KV 2/2832, Minute 21a.
- 15 IP Form 28c (Oct. 13, 1918), MI-5, File KV 2/2832, Minute 2.
- 16 “Fritz Max Cahén,” report (undated, 1938), MI-5, File KV 2/2832, Minute 10a.
- 17 Fritz Max Cahén, *Der Weg nach Versailles*, 339; *Men Against Hitler*, 64–65.
- 18 “Interview with Fritz Max Cahén,” *Generalanzeiger*; “Cahen, Fritz Max,” *Biographisches Handbuch der deutschsprachigen Emigration nach 1933: Band I, Politik, Wirtschaft, Öffentliches Leben* (Munich, New York, London, Paris: K.G. Saur, 1980).
- 19 “Forfalsket Sin Daabsattest,” unidentified Danish newspaper, Nov. 14, 1934, The Cahén Archives; Oscar Cahén, application for driver’s licence (1937), National Archives, Police Headquarters Prague II – General Registry – 1931–1940, signature: C 101/18 Cahén Oskar 1916, Folder 5080, Folio 12.
- 20 McKenzie Porter, “Volcano with a Paint Brush,” *The Standard* (Apr. 7, 1951); Information Form, National Gallery of Canada (May 2, 1947).
- 21 Fritz Max Cahén, *Men Against Hitler*, 67.
- 22 Ibid., 95; Porter, “Volcano with a Paint Brush”; Information Form, National Gallery of Canada (May 2, 1947).
- 23 Fritz Max Cahén, *Men Against Hitler*, 95, 67, 68.
- 24 Oscar Cahén, passport application to General Land Office, Prague (Feb. 4, 1937), National Archives, Police Headquarters Prague II – General Registry – 1931–1940], Signature C 101/18 Cahén Oskar 1916, Folder 5080, Folio 41v. This document transcribes departures and arrivals in Cahén’s previous German passport.
- 25 Fritz Max Cahén, *Men Against Hitler*, 69, 74.
- 26 Registration records, Archives of the Hochschule für Bildende Künste. Cahén told Danish media that he had falsified his birth certificate to gain admittance.
- 27 Registration records, Archives of the Hochschule für Bildende Künste.
- 28 ZOO. Pencilled in one corner in Oscar’s hand is *Dresden Hauswand* 1931. According to Michael Cahén, recalling what his mother said, ZOO was part of a school exhibition; according to him, *Hauswand*, or *house-wall*, may refer to a gallery space, or perhaps Oscar was indicating that the poster was for outdoor display. Why the date precedes their known time in Dresden remains a mystery; perhaps it was added later and reflects a faltering memory.
- 29 Birgit Dalbajewa, *Neue Sachlichkeit in Dresden* (Sandstein Kommunikation, 2011); catalogue for *New Objectivity in Dresden: Paintings of the 1920s from Dix to Querner* [exhibition], Kunsthalle, Lipsiusbau, Dresden (Oct. 1, 2011–Jan. 8, 2012).
- 30 Thomas J. Saunders, “How American Was It? Popular Culture from Weimar to Hitler,” in *German Pop Culture: How “American” Is It?*, ed. Agnes C. Mueller (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 58–59.
- 31 Oscar Cahén, *Untitled* (C.R.128), 1938, watercolour, gouache, and graphite on illustration board.
- 32 Fritz Max Cahén, *Men Against Hitler*, 97.
- 33 Ibid., 100.
- 34 Ibid., 102.
- 35 NA Police records signature: C 101/18 Cahén Oskar 1916, Folder 5080, Folios 1–8]
- 36 Fritz Max Cahén, *Men Against Hitler*, 114.
- 37 *Polibek ve Sněhu* [Kiss in the Snow], directed by Robert Katscher but attributed to Václav Binovec due to Katscher’s having no work permit. Some two thousand mainly Jewish film professionals had been forced to emigrate. Jan-Christopher Horak and Jennifer Bishop, “German Exile Cinema, 1933–1950,” *Film History* 8, no. 4 (1996): 373–89.
- 38 Fritz Max Cahén, *Men Against Hitler*, 115.
- 39 Report (Aug. 24, 1939), MI-5, File KV 2/2832, Minute 21a; Report on Oskar Cahén’s registrations (undated, after Jan. 21, 1937), National Archives, Police Headquarters Prague II – General Registry – 1931–1940, signature: C 101/18 Cahén Oskar 1916, Folder 5080, Folio 8v.
- 40 Information Form, National Gallery of Canada (May 2, 1947).
- 41 Ole Haslund House, Østergade, Copenhagen, Nov. 1934. In an interview Cahén says he had already exhibited in Prague as well. “Forfalsket Sin Daabsattest,” unidentified Danish newspaper, Nov. 14, 1934; “Ung tysk Tegner,” unidentified newspaper; “Udstilling hos Ole Haslund,” unidentified newspaper, The Cahén Archives.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 Oscar Cahén, “Saison-Beginn,” *Der Simpl* (May 8, 1935): 215; “Erster Standpunkt,” *Der Simpl* (May 29, 1935): 234; “Ein Gemüt,” *Der Simpl* (June 5, 1935): 248; Martina Pachmanová, “The Liberating Power of Exiled Laughter: Gender, Caricature, and the Antifascist Movement in Pre-War Czechoslovakia—The Case of Simplicus,” *Umění* 1 (Summer 2003): 44–52.
- 44 Oscar Cahén to General Land Office, Prague, application for residency in Bohemia (Aug. 21, 1935), National Archives, Police Headquarters Prague II – General Registry – 1931–1940, Signature C 101/18 Cahén Oskar 1916, Folder 5080, Folio 33.
- 45 Gerry Waldston, interview with Grove (Sept. 26, 2013). It is likely Cahén caused Pachner much trouble, so he wanted to distance himself. In 1942, when Pachner was working at *Esquire*, he did not respond when Cahén wrote to the *Esquire* office looking for freelance work. William Pachner, interview with Grove (Sept. 29, 2014).
- 46 Report on Cahén-Pachner Advertising Designs and Painted Posters (Jan. 3, 1936), National Archives, Police Headquarters Prague II – General Registry – 1931–1940, signature: C 101/18 Cahén Oskar 1916, Folder 5080, Folios 1–8, 19.
- 47 Pachner, interview.
- 48 Pachmanová, “The Liberating Power of Exiled Laughter,” 48.
- 49 National Archives, Police Headquarters Prague II – Presidium – 1931–1940, signature K 104/104, Folder 906, Folios 1–4.
- 50 Ursula Langkau-Alex, “Der Parteivorstand der SPD im Exile. Protokolle der Sopade 1933–1940 [Review],” *International Review of Social History* 41, no. 2 (Aug. 1996): 248–51; Fritz Max Cahén, *Men Against Hitler*, 163; “Volkssozialistische Bewegung” (Aug. 19, 1937), National Archives, General Land Office Prague, Signature 207-913-42, Folder 913, Folios 18–29.
- 51 Ibid.
- 52 “Bandler Leopold – Suspicious Contacts with Germany,” report (Feb. 16, 1937), National Archives, General Land Office Prague, Signature 207-585-2, Folder 585, Folios 2–5.
- 53 Informant T to Doctor ---, letters (Aug. 21 and Aug. 28, 1939), MI-5, File KV 2/2832, Minutes 21a and 22a; N.D. Borum of the U.S. Embassy to G.M. Liddell (Aug. 7, 1940), MI-5, File KV 2/2832, Minute 33a; report of 1947; MI5 file KV 2/2832, Minutes 44, 95–96 (1940–1945); “Extract from Memorandum on the Interviews with Hedi and Paul Massing Regarding Soviet Espionage” (undated; extracted Apr. 12, 1947), MI-5, KV 2 2833, Minute 109b; Eugenie Cahén to Fritz Max Cahén, letter (July 5, 1942), MI-5, file KV 2/2832.
- 54 Fritz Max Cahén, *Men Against Hitler*, 246; Informant “T” in British SS (Aug. 24, 1939); Informant “RCC” report translated from German (Mar. 12, 1940), MI-5, file KV 2/2832, Minute 30.
- 55 Fritz Max Cahén, Bobbs-Merrill General Questionnaire, 2.
- 56 General Karel Paleček, prison interrogation record (Nov. 27–28, 1949), Archiv bezpečnostních složek [Security Services Archive] Prague, files of Second Department of Military Intelligence, Signature 302-57-2, Folios 87–88.
- 57 “Cahen Oskar et al.,” report (Feb. 23, 1937), National Archives, Ministry of Interior I – Presidium, Prague, Signature 225-1117-1, Folder 1117, Folios 35–36; Fritz Max Cahén, *Men Against Hitler*, 222–27.
- 58 Ibid.
- 59 “Volkssozialistische Bewegung” (Aug. 19, 1937), General Land Office, National Archives, General Land Office Prague, Signature 207-913-42, Folder 913, Folio 20.

- 60 General Karel Paleček, prison interrogation record (Nov. 27–28, 1949).
- 61 Vilém Rotter, “O životě reklamy [On the Life of an Advertisement],” *Měsíc*, n. 8, y. IV (Prague 1935): 16–19; Zuzana Kopcová, “Atelier Rotter (1928–1939),” BA thesis, Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci (2007).
- 62 Zuzana Kopcová, “Atelier Rotter (1928–1939).”
- 63 National Archives, Police Headquarters Prague II – General Registry – 1931–1940, Signature R 1953/6 Rotter Vilém\ing. 1903, folder 10183, Folios 7–10; Otto Blacek to Labour Office, Prague (Oct. 24, 1937), National Archives, Police Headquarters Prague II – General Registry – 1931–1940, Signature C 101/18 Cahén Oskar 1916, Folder 5080, Folios 38, 40.
- 64 Oscar Cahén, Application for Residence in Protected Area (Apr. 12, 1940), MI-5, File KV 2/2832, Minute 76a; “Offence Against Traffic Regulations” (June 1937), National Archives, Police Headquarters Prague II – General Registry – 1931–1940], Signature C 101/18 Cahén Oskar 1916, Folder 5080, Folio 32; General Karel Paleček, prison interrogation record (Nov. 27–28, 1949).
- 65 Zuzana Kopcová, “Atelier Rotter,” 13; General Karel Paleček, prison interrogation record (Nov. 27–28, 1949).
- 66 Oscar Cahén, passport application to General Land Office, Prague (Feb. 4, 1937), and application for and certificate of good conduct (Mar. 29, 1938), National Archives, Police Headquarters Prague II – General Registry – 1931–1940], Signature C 101/18 Cahén Oskar 1916, Folder 5080, Folios 41, 44, 45v. The police probably approved the certificate despite his many violations because of Czechoslovakia’s desire to rid itself of refugees.
- 67 Oscar Cahén to the General Land Office, Prague (Apr. 6, 1938), *ibid.*, Folio 54v.
- 68 General Karel Paleček, prison interrogation record (Nov. 27–28, 1949).
- 69 The Catholic Committee arranged the visas. “Excerpt from Report on Moeller Dostali” (undated, 1940), MI-5, File KV 2/2832, Minute 26a.
- 70 Continuation Card (Mar. 16, 1941), MI-5, File KV 2/2832; Oscar Cahén, Application for Residence in Protected Area (Apr. 12, 1940). Miss A.H. Carter and Charles Sydney Thompson were the friends.
- 71 “Excerpt from Report on Moeller Dostali,” (undated, 1940), MI-5, File KV 2/2832, Minute 26a.
- 72 National Archives, Police Headquarters Prague II – General Registry – 1931–1940, signature: C 101/18 Cahén Oskar 1916, Folder 5080, Folio 58; Oscar Cahén, application for driver’s licence (1937).
- 73 Informant’s report (Aug. 24, 1939), MI-5, File KV 2/2832, Minute 21a; Informant T to Doctor ---, letters (Aug. 21 and Aug. 28, 1939), MI-5, File KV 2/2832, Minutes 21a and 22a; Passport Control Department (Mar. 6, 1940), MI-5, File KV 2/2832, Minute 26a; U.S. Embassy to G.M. Liddell, letters (Apr. 3 and Aug. 7, 1940), MI-5, File KV 2/2832, Minutes 32a and 33a.
- 74 Oscar Cahén, short memoir of internment, manuscript (undated), collection of The Cahén Archives.
- 75 C.G. Hardie to Home Office, memo (July 19, 1941), MI-5, File KV 2/2832, Minute 55a.
- 76 Eric Koch, *Deemed Suspect: A Wartime Blunder* (Toronto: Methuen, 1980).
- 77 *Ibid.*
- 78 Koch, *Deemed Suspect*, 80; Walter W. Igersheimer, *Blatant Injustice* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2005), 73.
- 79 Ernest K. Sawady, “The Internees’ Journey to Canada,” typescript with illuminations by Oscar Cahén (1940). The portrait is found among the scrapbooks compiled by George Machum of the Veterans Guard of Canada, Collection of the Canadian War Museum, uncatalogued. Oscar’s own account is found in Oscar Cahén, short memoir of internment.
- 80 Otto Demus, “Kunst Lagerausstellung,” edited by the Refugee Committee (Camp N, Sherbrooke, Quebec), *Camp Chronicle*, no. 2 (Oct. 2, 1940): 2. Copy in collection of Paula Draper.
- 81 Koch, *Deemed Suspect*, 126–45; Igersheimer, *Blatant Injustice*, 107.
- 82 Eric Koch, “Double Vision: The Transformation of Oscar Cahén,” *Sketches* (Sept. 28, 2015), <http://erickoch.ca/2015/09/28/double-vision-the-transformation-of-oscar-cahen/>; interview with Grove (Sept. 2014).
- 83 Oscar Cahén, short memoir of internment. A likely student was Egon Reich, who exhibits a similar style to Cahén and Pachner in “Gay and Serious Poems and Songs of My Internment 1940/41,” in “Behind Barbed Wire [scrapbook],” Eric Koch fonds, Library and Archives Canada, MG30 c192 Vol. 2; Koch, *Deemed Suspect*, 157. Christine Whitehouse brought Reich’s artwork to my attention.
- 84 Information from label on back of *Canadian Landscape*. Private collection.
- 85 I viewed Clarence Halliday’s art collection, which included Group of Seven works, in 2013.
- 86 G.R. Mitchell to Aliens Dept. Home Office (Oct. 26, 1941), MI-5, File KV 2/2832, Minute 62a; MD, memo (Nov. 7, 1941), MI-5, File KV 2/2832, Minute 63a; Shaw, memo (Mar. 1, 1942), MI-5, File KV 2/2832, Minute 73a.
- 87 Memo (Dec. 14, 1941), MI-5, File KV 2/2832, Minute 67a.
- 88 Eugenie Cahén to Oscar Cahén, letter (Apr. 2, 1942), MI-5, File KV 2/2832, Minute 78a.
- 89 *Ibid.*
- 90 Rauschnig, considered a Conservative Revolutionary, portrayed Hitler unfavourably, based on personal meetings and conversations, in the book *Gespräche mit Hitler* (1939). The authenticity of these meetings is still being debated. Fritz Max Cahén to H. Rauschnig, translated letter (May 13, 1941), MI-5, File KV 2/2832.
- 91 Correspondence in the Archives of the Ontario Jewish Association, Toronto; correspondence in the Archives of the United Jewish Relief Agencies, collection Series BC, Montreal.
- 92 *Ibid.*
- 93 *Ibid.*
- 94 *Ibid.*
- 95 Michael Cahén to Grove, conversation.
- 96 Informant Ja., memo (Sept. 15, 1941), MI-5, File KV 2/2832, Minute 59a.
- 97 Home Office (Aliens Department), memo (Apr. 29, 1942), MI-5, File KV 2/2832, Minute 81a.
- 98 Boulkind, “Friendly Aliens in Camp,” *The Standard* (Feb. 7, 1942). The photo was unfortunately misidentified as a picture of Richard Hoff.
- 99 Beatrice Fischer, interviews with Grove (July 12, 2013; Aug. 12, 2014).
- 100 *Ibid.*; correspondence in the Archives of the United Jewish Relief Agencies, collection Series BC, Montreal.
- 101 Ben Turner, letter to Samuel Goldner (May 2, 1942), archives of the United Jewish Relief Agencies, collection Series BC. *The Standard* was later renamed *Weekend Picture Magazine*, then *Weekend*.
- 102 Colin Gravenor, cited in Dick Hersey, letter to Stan Furnival (Dec. 4, 1956), collection of The Cahén Archives.
- 103 *Ibid.*
- 104 Ian Roy to W.C. Edwards, Office of the High Commissioner for Canada, memo (Apr. 1942), MI-5, File KV 2/2832, Minute 80a.
- 105 *The Standard*, undated news clipping (1942), The Cahén Archives.
- 106 Carl Dair, “New Patterns in Canadian Advertising,” *Canadian Art* (Summer 1952): 157.
- 107 Jack Bush to J. Russell Harper [letter] (June 2, 1964), J. Russell Harper fonds, Library and Archives Canada.

3

Jaleen Grove

Oscar Cahén's
Vulgar Modernism



Struggles, longings and regrets
marked those rugged pioneer days

January 24, 1948

23

. . . *from Cubist to academic, levity to gravity,
brush to scratchboard.*

BETWEEN 1946 AND 1956, as Oscar Cahén's illustrations became highly visible in Canada, the design community expressed disgust with the state of visual culture in this country.¹ In the words of designer and critic Paul Arthur, the Group of Seven ideal had become "an undigested lump sitting on the chest of the public . . . a kind of droning of the radio" in the background of daily life, while mainstream illustration and design was a pathetic imitation of America's worst examples: "unimaginative and preoccupied with 'technical excellence.'"² In the late 1940s Cahén was instrumental in breaking up this visual monotony with the "vulgar modernism" of his illustrations for *New Liberty* magazine, setting Canadian mass periodicals apart from their American counterparts.³ Simultaneously, he imbued personal paintings with this sensibility as well, as in a lost painting of Jesus with cadaver-like features and withered, black-holed eye sockets (Figure 6.15 [Untitled]); vulgar modernism informs Cahén's abstract paintings as well.

The startling direction taken by the formerly split-run magazine *Liberty* in 1947 was unprecedented in the Canadian popular press.⁴ Recently acquired by Jack Kent Cooke and Roy Thomson, the money-losing *New Liberty* (as it was renamed) had to stand out among Canada's

cash-strapped mass media.⁵ The magazine already had a lowbrow reputation, so art directors Harry W. McLeod (1947) and Gene Aliman (1948–50) began printing edgy illustrations with morbid expression and outlandish humour drawn by Cahén and his peers Ed McNally and Harold Town. Cahén's impression of the crazed clairvoyant boy in D.H. Lawrence's classic "The Rocking Horse Winner" (Figure 3.2) is typical.⁶ In 1954 Cahén remarked that the previous eight to ten years had seen "a promising surge" where progressive art directors took chances that, in a few instances, resulted in illustration that was "as good, and in some [cases] better, than found in leading magazines of other countries."⁷

Marg Stewart, who became art director of *Canadian Home Journal* in 1952, corroborates this midcentury shift in aesthetic taste. Typical American fiction illustration of the forties and fifties, such as Jon Whitcomb's ubiquitous beaming brides, represented "a very ordinary kind of artwork, not creative, almost to a formula [that] certainly wasn't giving anything new to the viewer,"⁸ she said. "I really looked down on that commercial style . . . We went for real graphics. Discrimination of the best kind."⁹ And, she continued, experimental approaches represented "a more intelligent reader, one who expected to see as good as they read."¹⁰ She too used Oscar Cahén—his pleasantly comic styles rather than his more outré *New Liberty* ones.

Art directors were optimistic that good applied art could benefit Canadians—a belief in harmony with the report of the Massey

FIGURE 3.1
Illustration for "The Californian's Tale"
C.R.115
New Liberty, January 24, 1948
60.6 × 44.8 cm (23.9 × 17.6 in.)

Commission in 1951.¹¹ This strongly nationalist commission warned of the encroachment of American mass media and encouraged a more uniquely Canadian content in publishing and other cultural production.¹² Stan Furnival, art director of the fashion and high-society magazine *Mayfair* in the early fifties, credited Oscar Cahén with shifting Canadian illustration toward a national ideal:

There isn't any doubt that [Cahén] was the greatest single force in Canadian illustration since [Charles W.] Jefferys. He revitalized the whole business of illustration in Canada and encouraged a lot of good people to stay here and work here. He brought an academic art training to his illustrations—which, combined with a sense of freedom and vitality, radically changed a tight slick Americanized attitude almost overnight.¹³

Arthur, Furnival, and Stewart all referred to American illustration as tight, slick, formulaic, and endangering Canadian identity. Cahén, with his European background, was extremely useful in building a new postwar Canadian national identity that was multicultural and modernist and in developing a better, more artistically diverse mass media distinct from that of the United States. Cahén agreed with his art directors. He argued, "Of all the professional visual arts, Editorial Illustration is one of the few which offers truly great opportunity for creative work . . . the opportunity to contribute actively towards the cultural development of our society."¹⁴ And, he said on another occasion:

Much of the material we are asked to illustrate is of inferior quality. Yet, good art work can be used with it and by itself will do much to raise the standard of the publication in question and stimulate the minds of its more alert readers . . . Commercial artists need to take more time to reflect upon this power which is at their command.¹⁵

For Cahén, this power to stimulate was exercised in *New Liberty* through the distortions of face, figure, and movement and the commingling of horror and humour that he used in "The Rocking Horse Winner." Deviant and unsettling, such illustrations were not easily dismissed as mere novelty of form, because they related to the emotional heft of Expressionist graphic art by the likes of Käthe Kollwitz and Georges Rouault.

Despite Canadian stereotyping of American illustrators as creative dullards, many among them were progressive. Some, like David Stone Martin—whose loosely limned sketches of jazz musicians Cahén likely saw on albums in his own record collection—even appear to have influenced him. Meanwhile, other Canadians were also introducing avant-garde illustration and cartoon styles: Eric Aldwinckle's collages owe something to Cubism and Surrealism, and in the 1940s Mike Mitchell contributed ink-line grotesqueries in the pages of *The Standard*, Cahén's best client from 1942 to 1956. Something of Mitchell's taste for overly wrinkled clothing and wiggly brushed lines appears in Cahén's work for *New Liberty*. Cahén was not alone, though in 1942 *The Standard* considered that, given his experience in Dresden, Stockholm, Prague, and England, he was different, "typically European," his drawings "like a light breeze."¹⁶ He in turn felt free to experiment with a range of media and styles, from Cubist to academic, levity to gravity, brush to scratchboard.

Cahén brought four basic ideas from Europe that contributed to his accessible yet subversive popular culture forms. First, he absorbed the belief commonly held in institutions such as the Bauhaus that design for the masses had a redemptive power equivalent to fine art.

Second, given his father's socialist interest in art and previous relationship with Expressionist literary journals, Cahén would have been familiar with discussions about the artist's duty to serve and reform society.¹⁷ Additionally, the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) art circle around painter Otto Dix in Dresden (where the family briefly lived in 1932–33 when Cahén studied with Symbolist painter Max Frey)¹⁸ believed that avant-garde art, to be socially responsible, should be figurative rather than abstract.

Further cementing the connection between figurative art and social change, illustrators in magazines such as *Der Simpl* and *Simplicissimus* shared an interest in examining the rapidly shifting social makeup, whether the satirical commentary of George Grosz or Heinrich Zille or the quaint cartoons of romanticized peasant life by the Czech Josef Lada.¹⁹ In 1935 Cahén published subversive cartoons in the Jewish exiles' satirical magazine *Der Simpl* in Prague (Figures 1.12, 1.13, and 1.14).²⁰ For both *Neue Sachlichkeit* and cartoonists, exaggeration of social types through telling physiognomy and costume, and shrewd

FIGURE 3.2
Illustration for “The Rocking Horse Winner”
C.R.1961
New Liberty, December 20, 1947

FIGURE 3.3
Illustration for “Two Russians and a Quarrel”
C.R.1202
The Standard, March 16, 1946

observation of human psychology were fundamental. These same strategies are central to Cahén’s visual storytelling and character studies too.

Third, Cahén employed many different drawing and painting styles and media, and he experimented in printmaking, woodcarving, and ceramics—just as legendary Czech artist Josef Lada made children’s books and theatre shows alongside easel painting, and the Futurists and Dadaists explored advertising, performance, painting, sculpture, and publishing. Unlike the Americans who specialized in one style, Cahén set an example for others that really creative artists did not limit their visual communication to a narrow sliver of media.

Fourth, in the European cartoon and caricature tradition and in German Expressionism, there was an unfinished immediacy to the drawing that deformed the figure in order to express the essence, not the surface appearance. This quality set much of Cahén’s work apart from the bourgeois American illustration exemplified by Jon Whitcomb, Norman Rockwell, and their peers in *The Saturday Evening Post* and in corporate advertising for the likes of Community Silverplate and Westinghouse. Marketing themselves as the “Twelve Famous Artists,” these men had collectively hatched the popular Famous Artists School correspondence courses (launched in 1948 from Westport, Connecticut) that successfully proselytized slick illustration techniques based on traditional academicism among up-and-comers across the continent. Cahén himself thought this approach was formulaic.²¹

To his European roots Cahén added lowbrow American popular culture: comics, animated cartoons, pulp fiction, fashion illustration, and irreverent magazine illustration by Harry Beckhoff and Earl Oliver Hurst, whose influences are visible in Cahén’s panoramic street scenes and flirty young women. His studio mate and early influence in Prague, William Pachner, said that Americana enjoyed huge popularity in Czechoslovakia and that they kept an American flag pinned on their studio wall.²² But Cahén was also known to disparage what he termed “American stuff” or “junk”: standard boy-girl stories and advertising.²³



FIGURE 3.4
Illustration for "So Long Ago"
C.R.1190
The Standard, February 22, 1947



Accordingly, he made his first mark in the early 1940s as a caricaturist of pretty girls—the American staple of advertising, calendar art, and magazine covers. His satirical cover of *Maclean's* for August 1947, a portrait of a blonde bombshell amateur artist painting her face instead of her canvas, a how-to painting manual at her feet, coincided with the announcement of the winner of the much-hyped Miss Canada beauty pageant (Figure 4.4).²⁴ Cahén's pointed depictions of social types conveyed progressive values desired by art directors and publishers without sacrificing the sales appeal of the magazine. Canadians could have the pretty girl—and a laugh at her expense at the same time.

Cahén, a veritable sponge, quickly amalgamated each influence into his own expression. Unlike most illustrators, he did not prepare detailed preliminary sketches—he drew right onto the board (often, the full size 30 x 40 inches) in pencil and then inked and painted over that, to “retain in the completed illustrations the full quality of the initial enthusiasm,” he said.²⁵ Cahén's bodily engagement encouraged the intuitive distortions of the figure that are apt to emerge in fast gestural drawing—distortions that are also native to caricature. Cahén could thus make readers *feel* the message. His cartooning's theatricality transmits something of his own personality as described by those who knew him: witty and jovial, yet with an undercurrent of darkness.²⁶

Cartoon also warps representation in such a way as to make the illustrator's power over constructing meaning more palpable than in “realistic” renderings. Paradoxically, the horror of war was suited to descriptive exaggeration too, not with caricature but with the brutality of Expressionist woodcut, with haunted eyes and protruding ribs rendered in stark highlight and shadow for a series of posters and print ads intended to raise funds for refugees in 1943 (Figure 3.5).²⁷

In 1947 a breakthrough occurred when, for the fledgling *New Liberty*, Cahén combined the humorous and the horrific modes. Work commissioned primarily by Gene Aliman for true crime, documentary, and modern realist literature bespeak horror and violence through scribbled or bold lines or chiaroscuro and ghostlike forms. Cahén distorts anatomy with emaciated appendages, grotesquely large hands and feet, hollowed eyes, twisted limbs, and awkward postures. His impression of a man who dies of a sexual fetish for a gravestone is exemplary of this mode (Figure 3.6).²⁸ This body of outlandish

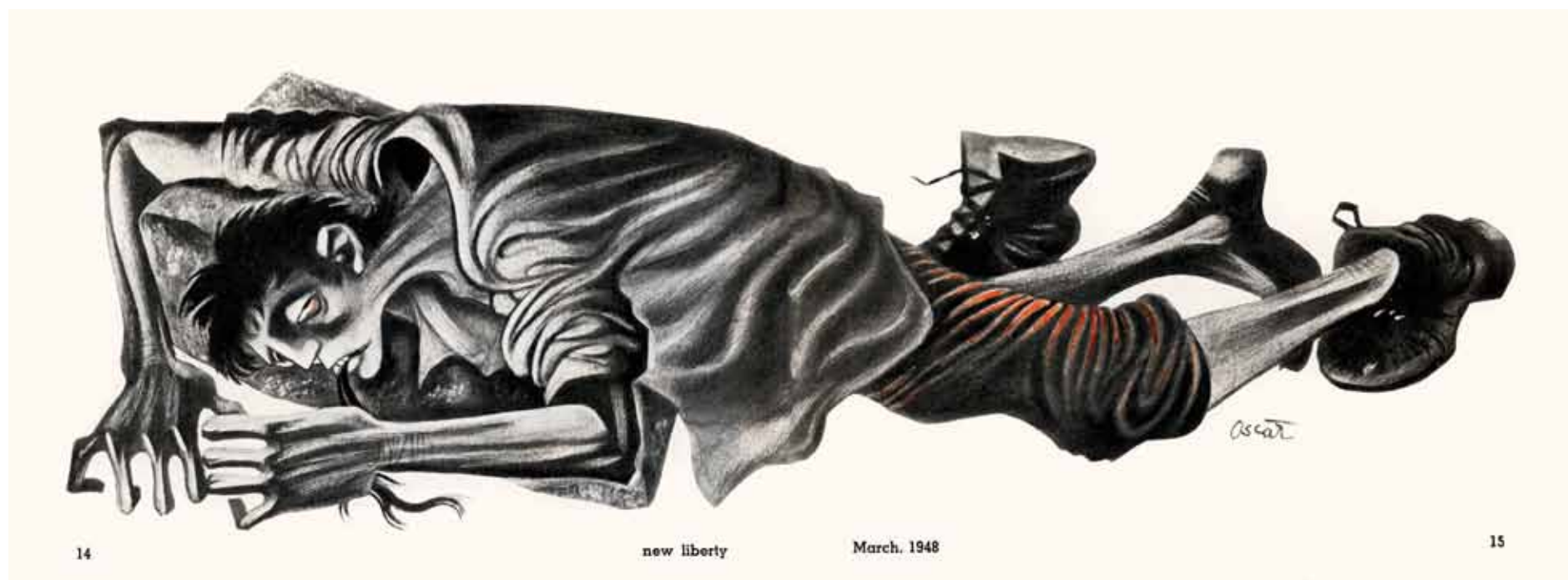
FIGURE 3.5
Greek War Relief Fund poster
1943
C.R.843



work must be considered as part of the larger sphere of vulgar modernism.

Hoberman identified vulgar modernism as developing “between 1940 and 1960 in such peripheral corners of the ‘culture industry’ as animated cartoons, comic books, early morning TV, and certain Dean Martin/Jerry Lewis comedies.”²⁹ Vulgar modernism is, Hoberman writes, “the vulgar equivalent of modernism itself . . . a popular, ironic, somewhat dehumanized mode reflexively concerned with the specific properties of its medium or the conditions of its making.” Among his examples are the animated cartoons of Tex Avery and the spoofs of advertising and entertainment industry figures by cartoonist Bill Elder for *MAD* magazine (launched 1952). Jenkins extends the discussion to Basil Wolverton, famous for his nauseating ugly-girl comics character Lena the Hyena (it won a much-ballyhooed contest juried by Salvador Dali and others for a guest appearance in Al Capp's blockbuster strip *L'il Abner* in 1946), and to the 1940s comic book character Plastic Man.

FIGURE 3.6
Illustration for "The Gravestone"
C.R.1031
New Liberty, March 1948



The previous image [Figure 3.6] appeared as a double-page spread in the printed edition.

FIGURE 3.7
Illustration for
“The Crippled Killer”
C.R.1096
New Liberty
December 1948



FIGURE 3.8
Illustration for “The Pirate”
C.R.273
New Liberty
February 14, 1948



To this list we should also add the horror and crime comics and pulp magazines, with their grisly covers of severed heads and sexual assaults. Where Hoberman dismisses animated cartoons and comics as “peripheral” to fine art production, Jenkins argues that popular art does not need to be negatively measured against high modernism. Rather, the popular arts have their own genesis, values, and contingencies—not to mention an influence that is anything but peripheral.³⁰ In fact, vulgar modernism is easily traceable to European precedents such as *Simplicissimus* that revelled in the carnivalesque and in formal experimentation. Cahén’s personal vulgar modernist touchstone was *Der Simpl* and its cohort of queer, disgusting, lowbrow, smartass, explicit, stylistically shape-shifting and body-stretching cartoons.

Cahén’s work for *New Liberty* contained references to comics that were coming under attack from concerned authorities and parents everywhere.³¹ His manner of exaggerating a hunched shoulder and a raised knee in “The Crippled Killer” (Figure 3.7) recalls the elasticity of animation dating back to pioneer Winsor McCay’s grossly warping flesh, replayed in Plastic Man’s stretchy doings.³² His inking of high-contrast cascades of fabric folds, as in “The Pirate” (Figure 3.8), was reminiscent of the likes of *Terry and the Pirates*, a noirish adventure comic strip he was known to admire (a Sunday page was preserved among his papers).³³ He also illustrated crime episodes and a pin-up for a Canadian pulp fiction magazine, *Caravan*³⁴ (Figure 3.9).

Unlike his American peers, however, Cahén interjects high-art references: for O. Henry’s popular fable “Gift of the Magi” (Figure 5.4), he adopts a Post-Impressionistic painterly approach to show a room with simplified furniture that abuses the rules of geometric perspective, ragged dry-brush marks illuminating the highlights.³⁵ Further confusing high and low art was his use of his goony styles to illustrate “The World’s Great Short Stories”—excerpts of literary works by James Joyce, John Steinbeck, D.H. Lawrence, Mark Twain, O. Henry, Stephen Leacock, and James Reaney.

Cahén’s exaggeration is not always grotesque—swirling lines, playful textures, cutesy children, and buxom lasses in turn play on giddy glee, sentiment, affection, and sexual attraction, albeit with a manic undertone at times. The illustration for James Reaney’s shocking story of a wronged teen who sends her fetus to the father in a gift box



FIGURE 3.9
Back cover illustration
C.R.1134
Caravan Magazine
June 1948

FIGURE 3.10
Illustration for
"The Box Social"
C.R.1970
New Liberty, July 19, 1947

FIGURE 3.11
Illustration for "The Mariposa
Bank Mystery"
C.R.1708
New Liberty, January 10, 1948



deliberately misleads with a confection of innocent, feminine linework³⁶ (Figure 3.10). Other drawings ridicule: swollen bosoms and protruding rumps provoke disbelief and an element of laughter, funny for excerpts of Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* but subversive in more serious subjects, like giggling at a funeral.³⁷ In a true story about a policeman shot in the line of duty, the oversized hands of the victim and his superhero cape and near-levitation at the bullet's impact are inappropriately comic³⁸ (Figure 3.13). Given that contemporary pulp fiction took care to maintain the Mountie's aura of upright, handsome invincibility,³⁹ such offhand treatment is distinctly subversive. It calls attention to the hyperbole of the supposedly true-crime account, accentuating the "medium's essential tawdriness" and, to borrow Hoberman's words, playing on its artificiality.⁴⁰

Vulgar modernism in all its forms may be summed up as *clever*, whether through imaginative distortions of form, visual puns, or satire. By contrast, Andrew Loomis, author of the most comprehensive illustration manual of the period, recommended that advertising and story illustration reflect stereotypical ideals based on academic draftsmanship, using posed professional models to foster the consumer's easy recognition of and identification with depicted "types"—as most mass magazine illustration did.⁴¹ Playing with form and expectation and contradicting the text challenged the viewer and opened up interpretive latitude. By introducing images both unsettling and hilarious, using many different techniques and media, and frequently allowing the medium to draw attention to its own specificity (messy bleeding ink, flat patterns, scratchboard, crude brushmarks), Cahén made illustrations noticeable and demanding. He broke the tacit rule that the mass magazine was an organ of salesmanship, leisure, common values, and, above all, a unified agreement on the nature of reality.

Cahén's vulgar modernism is *modern* simply because the accuracies and deformations of his drawings create reverberations between recognition and strangeness, attraction and revulsion, fondness and mockery, seriousness and triviality, reality and representation, as they delight and disturb readers. This dialogue fulfills his goal of stimulating minds—and it was no surprise that not all audiences were ready for the break in representation from conventional reality. In response to a

FIGURE 3.12
Illustration for "The Treasure Hunt"
C.R.1191
New Liberty, December 6, 1947



FIGURE 3.13
Illustration for "The Cop Slayers"
C.R.1032
New Liberty, January 1949

scene for a Steinbeck story, where Oscar—as he signed his illustrations—portrayed a character who seems to have two elbows in one arm⁴² (Figure 3.12), an irate reader complained, "I think that drawing by Oscar of the two men in the swamp was one of the most revolting things I've ever seen. There are so many nice things in this world. Why depict the ugly and grotesque? . . . It wasn't even well drawn."⁴³

The art directors disagreed with her about Cahén's drawing acumen in a printed rebuttal.⁴⁴ This exchange pointed to a crisis of representation just as Surrealism and abstraction were entering the Canadian public sphere, as seen also in animator Norman McLaren's



Boogie Doodle (1941), Alfred Pellán's paintings, or, more accessibly, in Disney's *Fantasia* (1940). Someone else complained, "Why persist in using those crude, unattractive drawings by Oscar . . . ? At the present rate of progress . . . we shall have Dali-like art glaring at us as we read some of the world's great short stories."⁴⁵ And another: "The drawings for 'Babies for Export' defy description. They resemble the doodlings of a surrealist the morning after"⁴⁶ (Figures 3.15 and 3.16).

Yet another reader suggested that Oscar's outer expression must correspond to a troubled inner state: "Do you keep your illustrator Oscar in a padded cell?"⁴⁷ Because the illustrations were so "ghoulish," someone else demanded, what does Oscar look like?⁴⁸ In response, Cahén submitted a Basil Wolverton-esque sketch of himself looking in a mirror, where a fanged and blemished, hairy, grinning caricature looks back⁴⁹ (Figure 3.17). But instead of reflecting life, the mirror has a life

of its own—one that is eerily capable of showing us a potentially “real” reality inside, not just the exterior mask. Essentially it asks, What is real? (See Dault, “Boys with Brushes,” in this volume.)

The question of who this “ghoulish” Cahén really was came at an important historical juncture, in 1947, as Canada recovered from the war and strained to admit thousands of refugees. With much fanfare and debate, Canada began widening immigration to people other than those who were predominantly British, American, and French. Cahén received his Canadian citizenship that same year. Given his traumatic background simply because he was marked out as a Jew, the mirror seems to ask whether he is in fact the ghoulish undesirable foreigner who just doesn’t get or respect Canadian ways—one of Europe’s mentally fragile displaced persons (DPs). When Cahén created illustrations for a journalistic article that described DPs that way, he drew frail, unsmiling, wraith-like figures using a technique he called “monoetching”: scratching into wax like a needle into skin, then filling the abrasions with gouache, as though inflicting and then swabbing wounds⁵⁰ (Figure 3.14).

This haunting engraving of pain had personal resonance. Beatrice Fischer and Colin Gravenor, Cahén’s first Canadian friends in 1942, recalled how traumatized he was on release from two years in crowded internment camps under armed guard.⁵¹ Meanwhile, the records of social agencies document how his father had become “paranoid and delusional” and been institutionalized as a ward of the state of Connecticut since 1942.⁵² For unknown reasons and to the surprise of social agents, in May 1948 Cahén decided to allow him possibly to be deported back to Europe rather than pay his medical bills and bring him to Canada—in accordance with his father’s questionable wishes but not his mother’s (she had arrived in Toronto in 1947).⁵³ This decision to break up the family permanently must have been a torment to him. Unsurprisingly, a 1951 news story described Cahén’s personal paintings as “ghostly, ghastly, grisly studies in blues and grays” that, “if left pent-up [would] torment him to the point of nervous breakdown”⁵⁴—the aforementioned lost painting of Jesus likely belongs to this series (Figure 6.15). Pointedly, surviving paintings of the late 1940s portray ghoulish suffering and haunted-looking family groups. Is Oscar a ghoul? The pictures—these mirrors—want the truth.

FIGURE 3.14
Illustration for “We Don’t Understand Our DPs”
C.R.308
The Standard, January 6, 1951
33.0 × 40.6 cm (13.0 × 16.0 in.)



Although he had such personal experiences within him, Cahén answers the reader’s question in the *New Liberty* cartoon with deflecting humour. He does not deny his possible ghoulishness but makes himself lovable with vulgar self-mockery and the ridiculous. He, the illustrator whose job it is to mirror society, strategically reflects the mirror’s gaze, the question, and the attack on his person and his art back to the reader (and himself), who is forced to reconsider how, or even whether, representation is reality. Truth is indistinct, caught by, yet fractured between, reflections and gazes.

Questioning the nature of reality versus perception in art is the theme of a *Maclean’s* cover image of 1951 by Cahén in which a *plein-air* artist doggedly interprets a Cubist world into an academic landscape⁵⁵ (Figures 3.19 and 3.20). Cahén was no longer painting suffering—at least, not overtly. He was busy developing his abstract painting and providing *New Liberty* (under art director Keith Scott since mid-1950) and *Maclean’s* (where Gene Aliman had moved) with milder illustrations, trading vulgar modernism for vivid character studies. But as the Cubist

FIGURE 3.15
Illustration for "Babies for Export"
C.R.1128
New Liberty, December 27, 1947

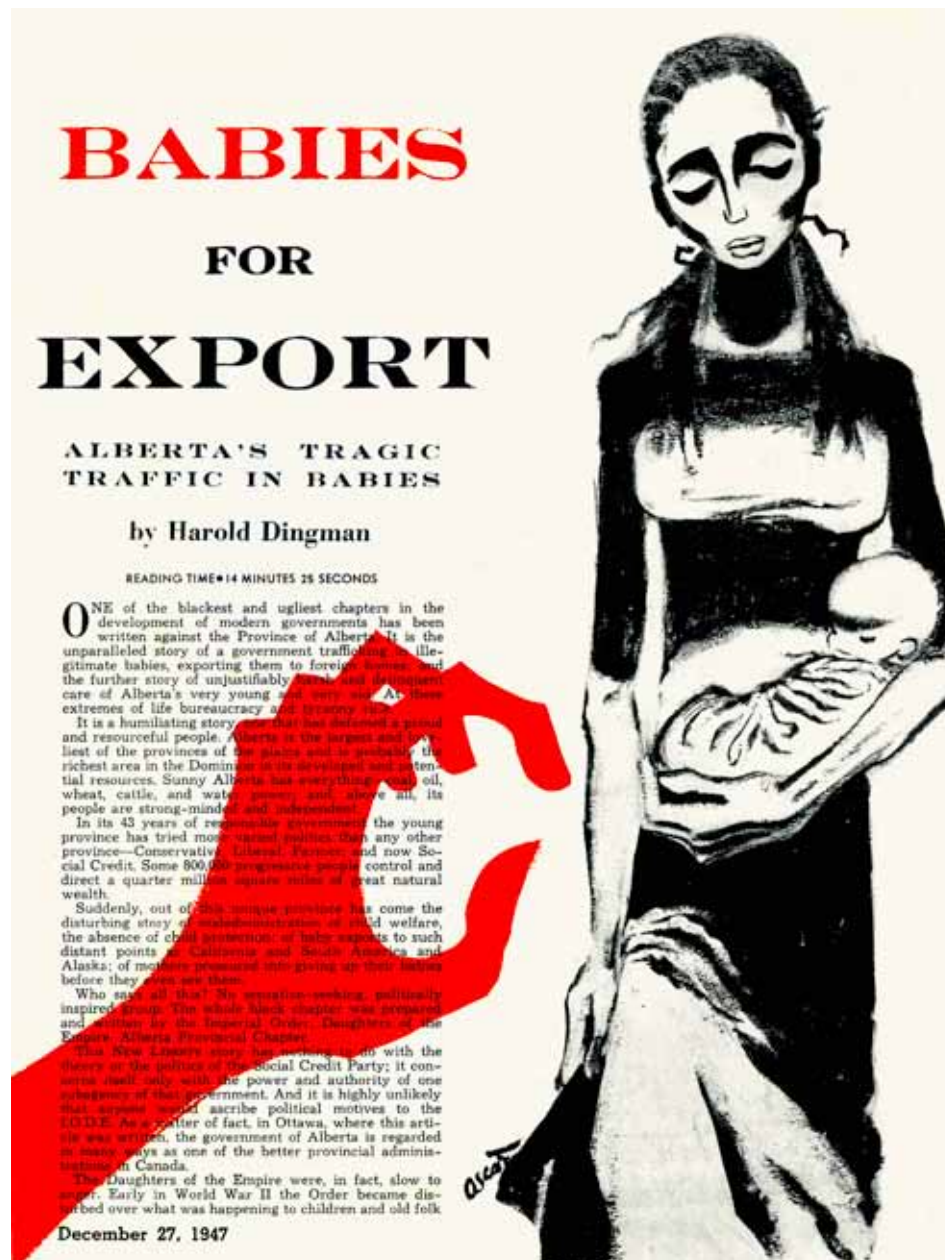


FIGURE 3.16
Letter to the editor
C.F.005
New Liberty
February 14, 1948

Doodling Surrealist?

Sir:
What do you feed your Art Director before he chooses the illustrations? I imagine it must be green cheese and lobsters. The drawings for Babies For Export (NEW LIBERTY, Dec. 27) defy description. They resemble the doodlings of a surrealist the morning after.

(MRS) G. H. SNIDER
Powell River, B.C.

FIGURE 3.17
Letter to the editor and
illustration ("Ghoulish")
C.F.008, 2489
New Liberty, June 1949

GHOULISH

Sir:
The Oscar who illustrates many of Liberty stories—I have never seen such ghoulish illustrations anywhere. I would like to see how he portrays a self-portrait.

C. Mildred Robson
Toronto, Ont.



FIGURE 3.18
Praying Family
1948
C.R.171
Oil on canvas board
60.3 × 50.8 cm
(23.8 × 20.0 in.)



cover shows, vulgar modernism's stakes in visual experimentation, satire, caricature, and inquiry into the artist's subjectivity remained central to his oeuvre.

Hoberman feels that vulgar modernism became co-opted into the culture industry,⁵⁶ while Jenkins argues that it was never outside it. He writes: "Containment within commercial culture worked to mute any overt political statements [practitioners] might have made."⁵⁷ The case is different in Canada because the editorial feeling following the Massey Commission and among designers was that Canadian publishing should privilege cultural development. Development meant experimentation, even if it confronted polite standards of taste. By keeping a fair balance, art directors were careful not to alienate the conservative audience catered to by the Famous Artists School. They hired Jack Bush, Rex Woods, Mabel McDermott, and others who followed this path, while the frequent inclusion of offbeat, humorous, mannered, and satirical work by Oscar Cahén, Harold Town, Ed McNally, Duncan Macpherson, Bruce Johnson, Ghitta Caiserman, and Mike Mitchell allowed them to break with the homogeneity established by leading American periodicals.

Of this batch of more experimental and comic illustrators, Cahén was by far the most versatile and the most often published—and, politically, the most relevant. In 1952, five years after the 1947 opening of immigration (the minimum residency requirement before immigrants could apply for citizenship), a wave of newspaper coverage began to profile those who, like Cahén, were referred to as New Canadians, euphemistically meaning those who were not of British or Anglo-American stock.⁵⁸ Despite fears that New Canadians might bring ghoulish ways or mental instability with them, immigrants actually enjoyed considerable popularity in terms of media reception and politics. During the Cold War, Eastern European and Korean refugees in particular validated capitalist democracy, and their tales of escape from behind the Iron Curtain made them suitable heroes.⁵⁹ They were given a helping hand by societies that received supportive photo-ops publicizing their charity, and City Hall held a welcoming ceremony every Tuesday night, with officials even competing with each other for the honour of shaking the newcomers' hands. Almost always, New Canadians were positively celebrated with news pictures of pretty young women.⁶⁰



FIGURE 3.19
Proofsheet for *Maclean's* cover
C.R.001
Maclean's, October 15, 1951



FIGURE 3.20
Illustration for *Maclean's* cover
October 15, 1951
C.R.001
Watercolour and ink on
illustration board
58.9 × 53.6 cm (23.2 × 21.1 in.)

FIGURE 3.21

Illustration for "Rendezvous in Riga, Part 2"

C.R.542

Maclean's, May 1, 1950

Watercolour and gouache on illustration board

44.5 × 65.1 cm (17.5 × 25.6 in.)



FIGURE 3.22
Illustration for "The Chrysalis"
C.R.463
New Liberty, July 1951
Ink and watercolour on illustration board
61.0 × 101.6 cm (24.0 × 40.0 in.)



FIGURE 3.23

Illustration for "The Bolshevik and the Wicked Witch"

C.R.547

Maclean's, April 1, 1953

Watercolour, gouache, and graphite pencil on illustration board

50.5 × 101.6 cm (19.9 × 40.0 in.)



The previous image [Figure 3.23] appeared as a double-page spread in the printed edition.

FIGURE 3.24
Unidentified illustration
(Woman in a Brown Coat)
Undated
C.R.1103
Dimensions unknown



The Standard and *Maclean's* welcomed New Canadians as well, and newcomers used magazines such as *Chatelaine* to learn English and Canadian customs.⁶¹ Aware of this important growing demographic, the magazines printed stories that mirrored Canada's multiculturalism and McCarthy-era interest in Eastern Europe in particular. In about a quarter of the ninety-eight covers and stories that he illustrated for *Maclean's* between 1947 and 1957, Cahén provided a reflection of these trends: "An Ikon for Irena," "The Bolshevik and the Wicked Witch" (Figure 3.23), and "The Baffling Case of Miss Shopishnok's Cigarette Lighter" are just a few.⁶² Cartoonish is how audiences at midcentury thought of these humorous, loosely drawn narratives, as evidenced by an illustration for the story "A Little Matter of Dowry" (an Italian-Canadian tale) that was admitted to the Cartoon and Caricature section of the Toronto Art Directors' Club competition.⁶³ Cahén's vulgar excesses were now tempered into playfulness, informing character rather than debasing it. His diversity of media and styles underscored the multiple ethnic origins of readers in Canada, and the cartoony feel disarmed otherwise touchy immigration subjects.

"Olga" is a story about the Doukhobor community that had been admitted to Canada as refugees at the turn of the eighteenth century and subsequently split into moderate and radical groups⁶⁴ (Figures 3.25 and 3.26). The radical Sons of Freedom sect made headlines with arson and nude protests; Cahén's illustration depicts such diehards creating a stir. When ethnic minority stories featured a young woman (usually a love interest in magazine fiction), Cahén drew her with a sensuousness in keeping with the editorial preference for introducing New Canadians through the unthreatening figure of a fetching girl. In this story, lovely Olga speaks as an interlocutor who condemns the radicals and puts a respectable face on the majority moderate Doukhobors.⁶⁵

Cahén's humorous drawings are touched by the cartoon distortion he experimented with in *New Liberty*, using laughter to ridicule but also to endear. Such playfulness acknowledged the hazard that immigrants represented for some Anglo-Canadians and disarmed it: the sympathetic, sexy portrayal of Olga and the caricaturish treatment of the nude protesters defused their strangeness while preserving their difference. Because representation was both like and unlike reality, Cahén's accessible and challenging styles opened up the imagination

of Canadians to reconsider the identity of the new cultural mosaic of postwar Canada. His diversity of techniques mirrored the diversity of cultures and opinions represented in the magazines, setting Canada's new self-image as a land of many peoples, open to doing things differently from publishers south of the border.

Around 1950 Oscar Cahén stopped painting suffering souls and turned to forms that were stripped of overt narrative. What does vulgar modernism portend for his turn to abstraction? The beating from readers that he weathered in *New Liberty* surely prepared him for later reviewers who thought his abstracts "screw-ball"⁶⁶ or compared them to a "melted Parcheesi board"⁶⁷ (comments notable for being popular culture references). Conversely, the Toronto Art Directors Club featured three of Cahén's *New Liberty* illustrations in its 1950 annual, rewarding one depicting a hanged man's feet with an Award for Distinctive Merit. Like a Halloween masquerade, vulgar modernism provided a marginal but socially sanctioned space in popular culture to confront social taboos and to shift identities, and it represented a crucial step toward Cahén's challenging of the Canadian art status quo.

FIGURE 3.25
Cover illustration for "Olga"
C.R.101
Maclean's, December 8, 1956



FIGURE 3.26
Illustration for "Olga"
C.R.464
Maclean's, December 8, 1956
40.6 × 99.1 cm (16.0 × 39.0 in.)



But where tragedy could be handled grotesquely in a pulpy magazine and come off as ironic or entertaining, treating post-traumatic psychology head on in “serious” gallery art was presumably a hard sell: the eyeless, blue Jesus may have never been shown and was likely destroyed. Yet its overt horror, developed in tandem with the New Liberty crime stories, is sublimated into subsequent abstract paintings: coming on the heels of the ghoul cartoon of June 1949, and probably after this Jesus too, it is little wonder that one of Cahén’s first abstract canvases is *Masque*, 1950 (Figure 3.27), dark and foreboding with a barricade of fang-like triangles stretched across the surface, the title alone cueing us to read two vacant round sockets as eyeholes. Like the ghoul in the mirror, whom does the mask of abstracted resemblances hide, and whom does it reveal? The traumatized refugee who will disrupt Canadian society or the confident actor who will bring Canada into the future? Cahén irritably retorted, when asked what his abstracts mean, “Why don’t you go out and ask a bird what his song means? I’m not interested in telling a story . . . when I paint, I set down the pushing and pulling of my emotions.”⁶⁸ That struggle is visible in the taut lines, jostling shapes, angry angles, and conflicting colours that characterize his canvases, mirroring an inner turmoil. His ability to express those feelings so viscerally began in illustration; canvases such as *Traumoebe*, 1956 (Figure 3.28), with its violent colour and slashes of black paint describing an organic form, are extensions of the twisted anatomy and departures in taste pioneered in *New Liberty*. Cahén’s paintings, like his most vulgar illustrations, want you to recoil and be fascinated at the same time—in short, to be stimulated.

FIGURE 3.27

Masque

1950

C.R.181

Oil on Masonite

76.2 × 50.8 cm (30.0 × 20.0 in.)



FIGURE 3.28
Traumoeba
1956
C.R.036
Oil on Masonite
91.4 × 121.9 cm (36.0 × 48.0 in.)



NOTES

- 1 An earlier version of this essay appeared in *Devil's Artisan: A Journal of the Printing Arts* 79 (Fall/Winter 2016): 3–39.
- 2 Paul Arthur, "Canada: Advertising and Editorial Art," *Graphis* 10, no. 52 (1954): 100–13, 158.
- 3 J. Hoberman coined the term *vulgar modernism* in an eponymously titled article in *Artforum* (February 1982): 71–76; in recent years, communication and culture theorist Henry Jenkins developed it further in "I Like to Sock Myself in the Face: Reconsidering 'Vulgar Modernism,'" in *Funny Pictures: Animation and Comedy in Studio-Era Hollywood*, ed. Daniel Goldmark and Charlie Keil (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011), 153–74.
- 4 A possible exception might be *The Goblin*, which introduced popular American youth-oriented visual culture to Canadians in the 1920s.
- 5 Fraser Sutherland, *The Monthly Epic: A History of Canadian Magazines, 1789–1989* (Markham, ON: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1989), 193–95.
- 6 Oscar Cahén, illustration for D.H. Lawrence, "The Rocking Horse Winner," *New Liberty* (Dec. 20, 1947): 8–10, 41. Since 1942, Cahén had been pioneering a wide range of techniques in the pages of the nationally syndicated newspaper magazine *The Standard*.
- 7 Oscar Cahén, "Editorial Art in Canada in 1953," *6th Annual of Advertising and Editorial Art* (Toronto: Art Directors' Club of Toronto, 1954), 53–55.
- 8 Marg Stewart, email to author, March 16, 2012.
- 9 Marg Stewart, email to author, March 9, 2012.
- 10 Marg Stewart, email to author, March 16, 2012.
- 11 The Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences (known as the Massey Commission) began its deliberations in 1949.
- 12 Canada, "The Press and Periodical Literature," *Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences, 1949–1951* (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1951), 64. See also Harold A. Innis, *The Strategy of Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1952). Examples of anti-American rhetoric targeting popular illustrated print are documented in Jaleen Grove, "A Cultural Trade? Canadian Illustrators at Home and in the United States, 1880–1960" (PhD diss., Stony Brook University, 2014).
- 13 A.S. Furnival, "Notes on Oscar Cahén" [1959], *Northward Journal: A Quarterly of Northern Arts* 18/19 (Nov. 1980).
- 14 Oscar Cahén, "Editorial Art in Canada in 1953."
- 15 Oscar Cahén, quoted in Donald W. Buchanan, "An Illustrator Speaks His Mind: An Interview with Oscar Cahén," *Canadian Art* 8, no. 1 (Autumn 1950): 2–8.
- 16 *The Standard*, c. June 1942. Clipping in The Cahén Archives.
- 17 Fritz Max Cahén's writing for *Der Sturm* and other art-related activity appears in Fritz Max Cahén, *Der Weg nach Versailles: Erinnerungen 1912–1919* (Boppard/Rhein: Harald Boldt, 1963), 1–41, and in Paul Raabe, ed., *The Era of German Expressionism* (Woodstock, NY: The Overlook Press, 1974).
- 18 *Bestand: Matrikel und Schülerlisten*, Archives of the Hochschule für Bildende Künste, Dresden.
- 19 Martina Pachmanová, "The Liberating Power of Exiled Laughter: Gender, Caricature, and the Antifascist Movement in Pre-War Czechoslovakia—The Case of Simplicius," *Umění* 1 (Summer 2003): 44–52.
- 20 Oscar Cahén, "Saison-Beginn," *Der Simpl* (May 8, 1935): 215; "Erster Standpunkt," *Der Simpl* (May 29, 1935): 234; "Ein Gemüt," *Der Simpl* (June 5, 1935): 248.
- 21 Oscar Cahén, "Editorial Art in Canada in 1953."
- 22 William Pachner, interview with Grove (Sept. 29, 2014).
- 23 Furnival, "Notes on Oscar Cahén."
- 24 Oscar Cahén, cover for *Maclean's* (Aug. 1947). Criticism of the Miss Canada pageant can be found in *New Liberty* (Sept. 27, 1947).
- 25 Cahén, quoted in Buchanan, "An Illustrator Speaks His Mind," 8. Lack of sketching is corroborated by Furnival, "Notes on Oscar Cahén."
- 26 Beatrice Fischer, interview with Grove (July 12, 2013; Aug. 12, 2014).
- 27 Greek War Relief [posters and print advertisements], 1943, The Cahén Archives.
- 28 Oscar Cahén, illustration for James Reaney, "The Gravestone," *New Liberty* (Mar. 1948): 14–15.
- 29 Hoberman "Vulgar Modernism," 72.
- 30 Jenkins, "I Like to Sock Myself," 157–58.
- 31 Comic books were criticized in four articles in the *Magazine Digest*: Donald Lang, "Violence in the Comics" (Sept. 1940): 45–48; Clara Savage Littledale, "Parents vs Superman" (June 1941): 49–52; Fred Latimer Hadsel, "Propaganda in the Funnies" (Feb. 1942): 96–98; and Margaret K. Thomas, "Superman Teaches School in Lynn, Mass." (Apr. 1944): 5–7. Cahén was art director of *Magazine Digest* from late 1944 to 1946, and he contributed two comic-strip graphic narratives on humanitarian subjects: "The Indian Problem Today" (May 1945): 61, and "Suffer Little Children" (June 1945): 61. The most lurid comics ceased production in the United States in 1954 after a Senate hearing.
- 32 Oscar Cahén, illustration for J.V. McAree, "The Crippled Killer," *New Liberty* (Dec. 1948): 32–33.
- 33 Oscar Cahén, illustration for John Steinbeck, "The Pirate," *New Liberty* (Feb. 14, 1948): 22–23; Furnival, "Notes on Oscar Cahén." Milton Caniff began *Terry and the Pirates* in the 1930s, and in the late 1940s it was drawn by George Wunder and inked by Wally Wood (who went on to *MAD* magazine). The surviving sample by Wunder is in the collection of The Cahén Archives.
- 34 *Caravan Magazine* (June 1946), collection of The Cahén Archives.
- 35 Oscar Cahén, illustration for O. Henry, "Gift of the Magi," *New Liberty* (Dec. 27, 1947): 22–23.
- 36 James Reaney, "The Box Social," *New Liberty* (July 19, 1947): 18–19.
- 37 Oscar Cahén, illustration for Stephen Leacock, "The Mariposa Bank Mystery," *New Liberty* (Jan. 10, 1948): 16–17.
- 38 Oscar Cahén, illustration for J.V. McAree, "The Cop Slayers," *New Liberty* (Jan. 1949): 42–43.
- 39 Carolyn Strange and Tina Loo, *True Crime, True North* (Vancouver: Raincoast Books, 2004), 30–33.
- 40 Hoberman, "Vulgar Modernism," 72, 75.
- 41 Andrew Loomis, *Creative Illustration* (New York: The Viking Press, 1947), 226, 269, 270.
- 42 Oscar Cahén, illustration for John Steinbeck, "The Treasure Hunt," *New Liberty* (Dec. 6, 1947): 8–9, 43, 46–47, 50, 52.
- 43 Mrs. TRB, *New Liberty* (Jan. 3, 1948): 2.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 "Crude and Unattractive," *New Liberty* (Jan. 10, 1948): 4.
- 46 G.H. Snider, "Doodling Surrealist?" *New Liberty* (Feb. 14, 1948): 5, in reference to Oscar Cahén, illustrations for Harold Dingman, "Babies for Export," *New Liberty* (Dec. 27, 1947): 5–7.
- 47 HG, "Doubts Oscar's Sanity," *New Liberty* (July 1948): 3.
- 48 C. Mildred Robson, "Ghoulis," *New Liberty* (June 1949): 1.
- 49 Ibid.
- 50 Oscar Cahén, illustration for Jacqueline Sirois, "We Don't Understand Our DPs," *The Standard Magazine* (Jan. 8, 1951): 9. Cahén himself thought of the wax as flesh: in a monoetching portrayal of Christ (C.R.317), he gouged through the wax into the board and filled it with red gouache to represent Christ's ribcage wound.
- 51 Beatrice Fischer, interview (July 12, 2013; Aug. 12, 2014); Colin Gravenor, cited in Dick Hersey, letter to Stan Furnival (Dec. 4, 1956), The Cahén Archives.
- 52 Freda S. Statneko, United Service for New Americans, to Gershon Pomerantz, United Jewish Refugee and War Relief Agencies (Sept. 11, 1945). Folder for Eugenie Cahén, Ontario Jewish Archives.
- 53 Solomon Grand, executive director of the Canadian Jewish Congress, letter to Freda S. Statneko, United Service for New Americans (May 4, 1948). Folder for Eugenie Cahén, Ontario Jewish Archives.
- 54 McKenzie Porter, "Volcano with a Paint Brush," *The Standard Magazine* (Apr. 7, 1951): 18.
- 55 Oscar Cahén, illustration for *Maclean's* (Oct. 15, 1951). This image was likely Cahén's response to a controversy some months before when conservative members of the Ontario Society of Artists loudly resigned in protest over the rising number of modern artists entering their ranks.
- Cahén marks the illustration with "nmosa," probably standing for "non-member of the osa."
- 56 Hoberman, "Vulgar Modernism," 76.
- 57 Jenkins, "I Like to Sock Myself," 172.
- 58 A search for the term *New Canadian* in the *Toronto Daily Star* shows the phrase more than doubled in frequency over the years 1952–56 compared with 1942–51.
- 59 For example, "New Canadians Recall Baltic Invasion, Warn Free World of Danger of Communist Influence," *Toronto Daily Star* (June 13, 1955), 3.
- 60 "First Weekly Reception for New Canadians Welcomes 300 Who've Received Citizenship," *Toronto Daily Star* (Apr. 25, 1956), 3.
- 61 Valerie J. Korinek, "Roughing It in Suburbia: Reading *Chatelaine* Magazine, 1950–1969" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 1996), 88; later published as *Roughing It in the Suburbs: Reading Chatelaine Magazine in the Fifties and Sixties* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000).
- 62 Richard Wilcox, "An Ikona for Irena," *Maclean's* (Aug. 1, 1952): 18–19, 23–24; John Norman Harris, "The Bolshevik and the Wicked Witch," *Maclean's* (Apr. 1, 1953): 18–19, 58; Max Shulman, "The Baffling Case of Miss Shopishnok's Cigarette Lighter," *Maclean's* (Feb. 15, 1955): 22–23, 55–56.
- 63 Oscar Cahén, illustration for Samuel F. Ciulla, "A Little Matter of Dowry," *Weekend Picture Magazine* (Oct. 18, 1952): 24–25; "Cartoon and Caricature," *Fifth Annual of Advertising Art*, Toronto Art Directors Club (1953), 120.
- 64 Oscar Cahén, illustrations for John Cornish, "Olga," *Maclean's* (Dec. 8, 1956): 25–30.
- 65 This is not to say that the story fairly or accurately represents the Doukhobor community.
- 66 Hugh Thomson, "Hart House Gallery Shows Abstract Art," *Toronto Daily Star*, Oct. 28, 1954, 4.
- 67 George Elliott, "The Search for Vitality in Canadian Art," *Canadian Art* (Spring 1955): 97.
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If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.

—African proverb

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