

# Oscar Cahen

RESEARCH COLLOQUIUM II

PROGRAMME

April 26, 2014



- 12:00 Doors open ..... Opening remarks
- 12:15 Lunch and conversation ..... **The Art of the Ephemeral:**  
Mass-Print Media's Impact  
on European Modernism
- 12:55 Michael Cahén, Jaleen Grove ..... **Creativity Behind Barbed  
Wire:** The Lost Years of  
Canadian Internment
- 1:00 Sara Angel ..... **A Crown of Thorns:**  
Religious Iconography in  
the Art of Oscar Cahén
- 1:30 Paula Draper ..... **Shapes, Colours, Feelings:**  
Exploring Oscar Cahén  
With Children
- 2:00 Cy Strom ..... **In Oscar's Orbit:**  
The Early Work of Harold Town
- 2:30 Break ..... **Stimulating Minds:**  
Oscar Cahén and Canadian  
Graphic Design, 1940-1956
- 3:00 Bernadette Wycks ..... **Oscar Cahén, Model Emigré:**  
Identity and Nationhood in  
Canadian Art, 1940-1956
- 3:15 Gerta Moray ..... Closing remarks
- 3:45 Jaleen Grove
- 4:15 Jessica Poon
- 4:45 Jeffrey Spalding
- 5:00 Tours and reception
- 6:00 Doors close



## Sara Angel

### The Art of the Ephemeral:

#### Mass-Print Media's Impact on European Modernism

This presentation provides insight into the atmosphere in which Oscar Cahén came of age as an artist and illustrator. In the wake of the First World War, Europe saw an explosion in mass-print media as graphic design in the modern style gained widespread acceptance and application throughout France, Germany, Spain, and the Soviet Union. As the booming post-war economy established a greater need for visually compelling advertising, packaging, and publishing, innovations in printing technology, photography, and the emergence of the Bauhaus school and other similar academies of design, closed the gap between high and low culture.

Angel's presentation will address how the unprecedented deluge of illustrated newspapers, magazines and other mass-print media that appeared on European streets from 1925 to 1940 impacted artists including George Grosz, John Heartfield, Pablo Picasso, Josep Renau, El Lissitzky, and Max Ernst, and radically transformed the cultural landscape. Angel will discuss in more detail the print cultures of Dresden and Prague during the 1930s, when Oscar Cahén lived in those cities.

*Sara Angel holds a Trudeau Doctoral Scholarship and is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Toronto. Also the founding director of the Art Canada Institute/Institut de l'art Canadien, dedicated to the education and promotion of Canadian art history, Angel has been a guest lecturer at Harvard University, the University of Toronto, Ryerson University, the Royal Ontario Museum, the Art Gallery of Ontario, and the National Gallery of Canada. She has published in the Journal for Canadian Art History, Leonardo: The Journal of the International Society for the Arts, Sciences and Technology, Maclean's, Canadian Art, The Walrus, and The Globe and Mail.*



**Paula J. Draper**  
**Creativity Behind Barbed Wire:**  
The Lost Years of Canadian Internment

This talk will address the context of internment in the life of Oscar Cahén.

Between July 1940 and December 1944, some 2280 men, mostly Jewish refugees from Austria and Germany, were interned in Canada in camps spread between New Brunswick, Quebec and Ontario. They had been evacuated from Britain in the panic that followed Germany's push to the English Channel. Among them were teenagers and sixty year olds, orthodox Jews and Jews only by Nazi racial definition - including yeshiva students, businessmen, academics, labourers, scientists, and artists including twenty-four year old Oscar Cahén.

Cahén spent 18 months in internment, most of them in Camp N in Sherbrooke, Quebec where a military observer noted "strictness arbitrarily applied . . . rude and appalling language and indulgence in antisemitic remarks [which] are particularly objectionable". Yet camp life, despite its tedium and the petty tyrannies of the administration, was an educational experience on many levels. Many of the internees were still young men. They were thrown together with a remarkable collection of artists, intellectuals and political activists.

Artists put on exhibitions, musicians performed concerts and major theatrical productions were staged in both English and German. There were music appreciation groups, debating clubs and newspapers. Internees spent endless hours playing chess and card games, writing diaries, poems and short stories. Politics were hotly debated, as was religion.

*Dr. Paula Draper is an historian, writer, and consultant who specializes in memory history, the Holocaust, and Canadian Jewish history. She has taught at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, The University of Toronto, and York University, and served as Vice-President of the Association for Canadian Jewish Studies for nine years. Her doctoral thesis, "The Accidental Immigrants: Canada and the Interned Refugees" (U of T, 1983), told the story of German and Austrian Jewish refugees interned in Canada 1940 - 1944. Dr. Draper contributed the text to the 2012 website and exhibit Enemy Aliens: The Internment of Jewish Refugees in Canada, 1940-1943, which toured to Quebec in 2014.*

Religious observance was permitted and Jewish holidays were celebrated. Schools were organized and provided academic, religious and technical training. In Camp N alone there were seven different educational programs operating simultaneously. Formally and informally, internment was a learning experience.



*and there I saw many refugee coming from the camp and they were all*



## Cy Strom

### A Crown of Thorns:

#### Religious Iconography in the Art of Oscar Cahén

The son of a secular Jewish father and a Christian mother, Oscar Cahén had his identity as a Jew fixed by the Nazi experience in Europe and by his confinement in a Canadian refugee camp. Although Cahén apparently never practiced the Jewish religion, he married the daughter of a Montreal synagogue cantor.

Like many of his forebears and colleagues in the German Expressionist movement and abstract painting, Cahén saw a spiritual dimension in his art. Art director A.S. Furnival recalled: "He wanted to paint Christ on the cross and he had a very large collection of paintings on the subject. His favourites were early German . . ." Cahén produced several graphic works and paintings portraying sufferers and worshippers. They include a

notable series of passion and crucifixion scenes, many of them focusing directly on the face of the suffering Christ. One of these, the powerful oil painting *Christus*, hung on Cahén's studio wall.

Notable among Jewish artists who have created works of Christian iconography is Marc Chagall, whose crucifixion paintings, however, appear to be making a point almost entirely about his fellow Jews. And Oscar Cahén? Although it seems evident in Cahén's religious imagery that he acquired his conceptual apparatus via the New Testament or in a Christian cultural milieu and that he was influenced by artists such as the deeply Catholic Georges Rouault, still we have no reason to assume that Cahén thought of Christ's effigy as the Face of God. Rather, we may be able to identify

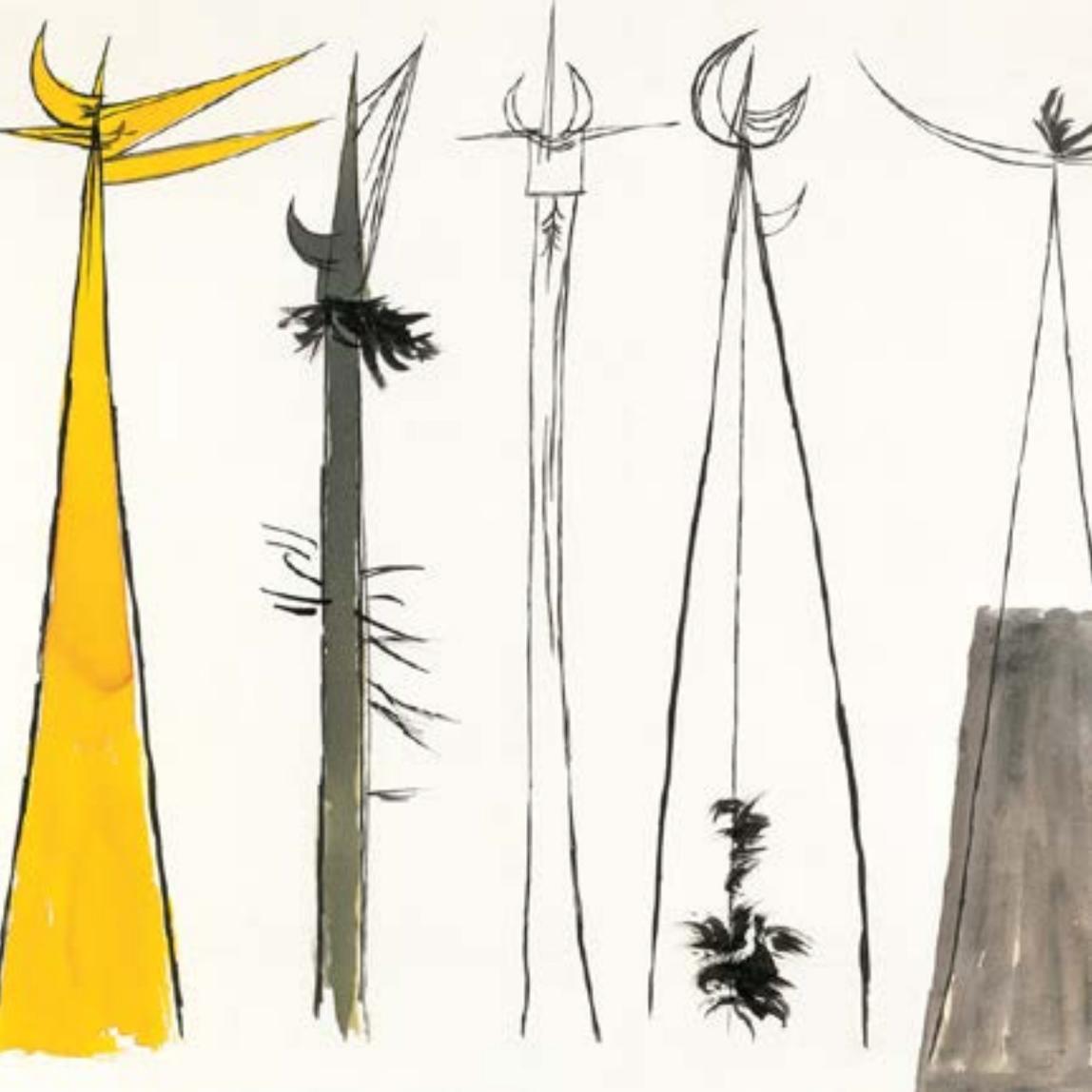


in these works the Jewish face of Christ. Fleeting, half-hidden signs and traces tempt us to track a complex identity for Cahén and to seek out Jewish as well as Christian meanings in his religious works.

Amidst the iconographic features in these works is another set of gestures, or signs – slashes, scythes, tufts and spikes. Cahén made widespread use of these in his representational religious works and often in other works, and he retained them in his abstract works. In his notebooks Cahén equates abstraction at times with the quest for a purer aestheticism; however, he also links abstraction with feeling and with

meaning – the meanings that the artist instills in the work and the meanings that the work impresses upon the observer. In that light we may be able to see these slashes and other gestural signs evolving into a repertoire of glyphs that reassemble into elusive images awaiting interpretation: floral, zoomorphic, plantlike or anthropomorphic; at once creatures and chimeras, material and immaterial. As signs, these gestures of pen and brush are polysemous. As identifiers, they are unstable, fixed as half-recognized images and at the same time un-fixed – as open to interpretation as Oscar Cahén's religious imagery, and perhaps his own identity.

*Cy Strom has a BA from the University of Toronto and MA and MPhil degrees from Columbia University in European history of the 16th and 17th centuries. He works as an editor and has published in academic and other areas. He has interests and some expertise in painting and the graphic arts, in cultural studies, and in modern and ancient languages and literatures. He is intrigued by Oscar Cahén's iconography and the cultural associations it evokes.*



## Bernadette Wycks

### Shapes, Colours, Feelings:

#### Exploring Oscar Cahén With Children

In the Walnut Studios Blank Canvases Program, Toronto artist educators explored the abstract expressionist paintings of Oscar Cahén in Toronto Public Schools, during the fall and winter of 2013/14. Inspired by Cahén's courage in living his unique life to the fullest, students were introduced to

the idea of abstract thinking, by playing and learning in workshops focused on shape, colour theory and composition. The talk will share images and stories of how children used colour and shape as a way to express feelings, and describe personal views in abstract ways.

*A graduate of Emily Carr University, Bernadette Wycks has been immersed in the world where social change meets art through education, festivals and large-scale puppetry for over ten years. Wycks has recently facilitated art and theatre programs, field trips and shows – and worked as Program Manager – at ArtHeart Community Art Centre in Regent Park, Creative Works Studio in Riverdale, Clay & Paper Theatre in Dufferin Grove Park, and Harbourfront Centre. She is currently an artist educator at Walnut Studios in Toronto.*



## Gerta Moray

### In Oscar's Orbit:

#### The Early Work of Harold Town

In the 1950s, an intense interaction emerged between Painters Eleven members Oscar Cahén and Harold Town, as they experimented with graphic media and new themes. The senior by eight years, one can imagine the magnetism that Cahén must have exerted on his younger colleague at the time of their meeting in 1947. Cahén was a consummate figurative draftsman, highly acclaimed in the field of illustration, where he and Town competed for the same clientele. An immigrant, Cahén also brought with him European training and experience, and an acquaintance with pre-World War II European abstraction.

Cahén's intellectualism and expressed contempt for the conservatism of

Canada's art circles would have reinforced Town's similar attitudes and encouraged his search for wider horizons in art. Both men admired the graphic arts of Japan and China and acknowledged the spell of Picasso. Within Painters Eleven a distinct sub-group formed that comprised Cahén, Town, Walter Yarwood and Kaz Nakamura. They met frequently through work and at the home of another European-trained artist, Albert Franck. Soon after the first Painters Eleven group show in February 1954, Cahén, Town and Nakamura held their own three-person show, Drawings and Graphics 1947-1954, at the Eglinton Gallery.

Cahén and Town began an exciting interaction in experimental graphic work in 1952-53, when Cahén furnished Town with a press and both made prints on the same stone. Cahén also introduced Town to the use of resist to create transparent layers when working with water colour and ink. Together they confronted the problem of combining abstract line drawing with broader colour areas.

In oil painting their styles remained highly distinct, as Town pursued active cursive lines as the vectors of his compositions, and Cahén pushed his idiosyncratic colour palette to ever greater intensity.

*Gerta Moray is Professor Emerita at the University of Guelph. She holds an M.A. in History (Oxford), a Postgraduate Diploma in Art History (Courtauld), and a Ph.D. (Toronto). Her publications include the award-winning Unsettling Encounters: First Nations Imagery in the Art of Emily Carr, (UBC Press and University of Washington Press, 2006) and numerous articles in journals, monographs and exhibition catalogues, on artists including Emily Carr, Suzy Lake, Mary Pratt, Mary Kavanagh, Natalka Husar and Margaret Priest.*

Cahén explored mainly the symbolism of organic forms, while Town was intent on urban and mechanical themes. Yet an increasing osmosis was occurring by 1954-5, as Town learned from Cahén's colour planes and Cahén tested out Town's kinetic and entropic premises.

Despite Cahén's untimely death in 1956, his legacy for Town was enduring. His example of independence from the dominant art trends of the USA, and the high value he set on the graphic arts as parallel media for experiment, set a pattern that Town followed for the rest of his career.





## Jaleen Grove Stimulating Minds:

### Oscar Cahén and Canadian Graphic Design, 1940-1956

Using primary sources, and examples of styles, techniques, and concepts that were new to North Americans, my presentation documents Oscar Cahén's reception among his peers in the design and publishing community and among the public.

Before he came to Canada in 1940, Cahén had been producing and exhibiting paintings and illustrations for several years, and he had taught at the prestigious Rotter School of Graphic Art in Prague. He was also well traveled, having lived or stayed in Copenhagen, Stockholm, Prague, Paris, Berlin, Dresden, London, and places in Italy; and he had studied in at least three of those cities.

In Canada, Cahén had an immediate personal impact on the graphic arts scenes of Montreal and Toronto—and

vicariously across the country as people saw his work on the covers of *The Standard*, *Magazine Digest*, *Maclean's*, and other national periodicals. He worked only about three years for employers such as Rapid, Grip and Batten, where he was highest paid staff artist, before relying solely on freelance for his family's livelihood. When the Toronto Art Directors Club began giving annual awards in 1949, Cahén was a steady winner.

Canadian design critics and professionals were receptive to Cahén's innovations but many Canadian magazine consumers initially felt his work was inexcusably "grotesque" and "surreal." I discuss why, in this period, art directors and publishers were willing to risk offending their audience, and I examine the range

of subjects Cahén was typically asked to illustrate. My survey of Cahén's illustration finds that not only did he represent an alternative to American standards just as the Massey Commission was being planned, composed, and released, he was adept at handling multicultural subjects at a time when

publishers were reaching out to the ethnic diversity of Canada. I suggest that Oscar Cahén played a seminal role not just in expanding the range of acceptable expression in Canadian visual culture, but also in expanding the inclusivity and acceptability of social diversity.

*A practicing artist with a BFA (Emily Carr University 1999), and an MA in Communication and Culture (Ryerson and York 2006), Jaleen Grove has published several articles and monographs on illustrators and illustration. The recipient of a SSHRC Doctoral Fellowship in support of her dissertation on Canadian illustrators, Grove has just completed her Ph.D. in Art History and Criticism (State University of New York at Stony Brook). Grove is Assistant Editor for the Journal of Illustration, and for the forthcoming A History of Illustration. She became Scholar in Residence for the Visual Literacy Foundation of Canada in 2013.*





## Jessica Poon

### Oscar Cahén, Model Emigré:

#### Identity and Nationhood in Canadian Art, 1940-1956

For Canadian art critics and writers in the 1940s and 1950s, Oscar Cahén was a model emigré. The Danish-born, German-Jewish artist who arrived in Canada in 1940 as a prisoner of war, attained refugee status shortly after, and gained citizenship six years later was often credited by contemporary critics as a pioneer of Canadian illustration as well as Canadian abstract painting. It was Cahén who, during an urgent, critical moment for Canadian national and cultural identity in the face of mounting influences from American publications and other mass-media, provided a unique aesthetic style for Canada to claim as its own.

Yet there was also a strategic evasiveness, among such authors as Donald Buchanan and Pearl McCarthy,

regarding Cahén's own identity as a German-Jewish refugee and his traumatic path through enemy alien internment camps to become one of Canada's leading illustrators. An awareness of the presence of anti-German as well as antisemitic sentiment in postwar Canada almost certainly plagued critics who were not only keen to claim Cahén as the embodiment of Canadian artistic excellence but also apprehensive about the role of an immigrant in fostering a shared national identity. This ambivalence towards the successful artist's ethnic and cultural identity complicates Cahén's recognition as a Canadian talent, and reveals the complexities surrounding the issue of Canadian sovereignty and nationhood during the years immediately following World War II.

This presentation will investigate how Oscar Cahén's rise to success from his position as an emigré makes visible the ambiguities regarding Canadian cultural identity during and after the war. What Cahén's fellow refugee Eric Koch calls "Canada's relaxed attitude toward its nationhood" (Koch 258) I will elucidate further as an atmosphere of uncertainty and a process of transition from the colonial and regional toward the modern and cosmopolitan. I argue that the enthusiastic affirmation of Cahén's identity as a Canadian artist is indicative of broader transformations of the definition of Canadian nationalism not only in art and culture, as marked by government initiatives like the Massey Report, but also in politics and foreign

relations, evident in Canada's involvement in the United Nations. Propelling Canada's artistic nationalism out of the regionalist geographies of landscape and into the international aesthetics of abstraction, and launching its illustration out of the shadow of America's presence in media, Cahén's ground-breaking works contributed in no small way to the shifting of Canadian identity.

This presentation will confront, for the first time, Canada's ambivalence towards Oscar Cahén's cultural identity, his emigré status, and his European background in order to locate the significance of this unique artist and his role in the postwar reformation of ideas about Canadian nationhood, identity, and art.

*Jessica Poon is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of British Columbia Department of Art History, Visual Art, and Theory, and is completing her dissertation on the Painters Eleven and Postwar Canadian Abstraction as a Killam Doctoral Fellow. She earned a BA in Art History at Barnard College, Columbia University.*





## Jeffrey Spalding Closing Remarks

Jeffrey Spalding is an artist, educator, author and museum professional. He has taught at Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Banff Centre, University of Lethbridge, Florida State University and York University among others. Since the 1970s he has held senior positions as curator and director of major art museums including Glenbow Museum, Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, University of Lethbridge and Appleton Museum of Art (Florida).

Spalding has originated over 200 exhibitions of modern and contemporary art, many with publications, including on Christopher Pratt (National Gallery of Canada), Max Ernst (Phoenix Art Museum), Jean Paul Riopelle (Montreal Museum of Fine Art and The Hermitage). Spalding also writes a regular column for *Galleries West* magazine, and he is Artistic Director and Chief Curator of the new Contemporary Calgary.

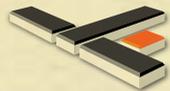
There, he is currently organizing exhibitions for artist John Clark (1943-1989)(summer 2014), and painter Kim Dorland (October 2014).

Jeffrey Spalding's own art has been collected by the principal art museums across Canada. He made important contributions to the early history of video and conceptual art and was identified as one of the principal forces behind the resurgence of new image painting in the mid-1970s and romantic landscape painting in the 1980s. Spalding also served as President of the Royal Academy of Arts. In recognition of his contributions he was presented with the Alberta College of Art and Design Board of Governors Award of Excellence, and received the Order of Canada in 2007, and the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal in 2013.

## Images

- 1 ... *Traumoeba* (FAO 036) [detail], oil on canvas, 1956. Private Collection.
- 2 ... Photo of Oscar Cahén, ca. 1951. The Cahén Archives.
- 4 ... Untitled (IMM 084) [detail], watercolour and gouache, 1939. The Cahén Archives.
- 6 ... Illustration (IG 1136 ) [detail], for “Mail,” *Maclean’s*, mechanical print, 1950. The Cahén Archives.
- 9 ... *Refugees* (GFA 081) [detail], ink on illustration board, ca. 1950. Private Collection.
- 10 ... *Crucifixion* (GFA 1144) [detail], watercolour and ink, ca. 1948. The Cahén Archives.
- 12 ... Untitled (GFA 302) [detail], oil pastel or litho crayon on paper, ca. 1948. The Cahén Archives.
- 14 ... Untitled (FAMM 030) [detail], ink and watercolour on illustration board, ca. 1951. Private Collection.
- 16 ... Untitled (GFA 093) [detail], monotype, ca. 1953. Private Collection.
- 19 ... Untitled (FAMM 262) [detail], gouache, ink, monoprint, ca. 1954. Collection of The British Museum.
- 20 ... Illustration (IG 509A) [detail], for “A Cage for the Birdman,” ink, *Maclean’s*, 1954. The Cahén Archives.
- 23 ... Illustration (IMM 454) [detail], for “Hayaqws and the Cross,” ink, *Weekend*, 1951. Private Collection.
- 24 ... Untitled (FAO 384) [detail], oil on canvas, 1955. Private Collection.
- 27 ... Untitled (GFA 053) [detail], mixed media on paper, ca. 1953. The Cahén Archives.
- 28 ... Untitled (FAO 022) [detail], mixed media on paper, 1951. Private Collection.
- 31 ... Illustration (IWC 142) [detail], watercolour and ink, for cover of *Maclean’s*, 1952. The Cahén Archives.
- 32 ... Illustration [detail], for cover of *The Standard*, mechanical print, 1948. The Cahén Archives.

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