

# John M. Lyle

## Toward A Canadian Architecture

by Timothy Morawetz



**A**walk down the main street of any number of Canadian towns and cities may take you past a John Lyle building. Many street corner bank branches were designed by Lyle during his illustrious fifty year career. The life and work of John Lyle has finally been well documented in an exhibition, mounted by the Agnes Etherington Arts Centre, which recently completed a 15 month national tour. The guest curator of the show, architectural historian Geoffrey Hunt, was also the author of the exhibition catalogue *John M. Lyle: Toward a Canadian Architecture/creer une architecture canadienne* recently published by the Art Centre.

John M. Lyle was a strong proponent of a Canadian architecture. Born in 1872 in Ireland, but raised in Hamilton, Ontario, he spent four years studying at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Here, he acquired his love and mastery of the Beaux-Arts style which was to influence his work for the next thirty years. After a decade of practice in New York City, primarily as a renderer with several large firms, he eventually established his own office in Toronto.

Lyle had a varied practice, including commissions for houses, commercial buildings and, of course, banks, which were to become the mainstay of his architectural firm. In 1907 he prepared plans for the Royal Alexandra Theatre, while in 1915, work began on Union Station, Toronto, in which he participated in the design process.

Lyle continued to build houses and banks during the twenties, culminating in the design for the Head Office, Bank of Nova Scotia, Halifax, in 1929. This building is perhaps the climax of his development of a Canadian iconography; a system of ornament and decoration based on Canadian sources including native flora and fauna, Indian motifs, plus images depicting local industrial activities and historical events. This, in combination with a shift in emphasis from the traditional Beaux-Arts to a more modern treatment, based on flattened, planar facades, constituted a novel approach to Canadian building. Lyle's work incorporated a new language of ornament to express the political and artistic climate of the country.

The later works of his career, including 'Highfields', a residence he designed for himself, show the final phase of Lyle's development. Much of the ornament has been stripped away to leave a sparse, crisp building which concentrated primarily on geometry and asymmetrical massing in keeping with the International Style. However, Lyle felt that a degree of ornament must still be incorporated, for "without symbolism in the form of fresh, vital contemporary decoration, the public's interest in architecture is bound to wane, if not die altogether." John Lyle passed away suddenly in December of 1945 at the age of seventy-four, after a long and fruitful career.

The impact of John Lyle extended far beyond the many buildings he actually designed. He was also a teacher, offering evening classes at Atelier Lyle two nights per week in a room above a Chinese laundry in Yorkville. The aim of this class was to provide a better knowledge of the principles of building design than was to be obtained in the average architectural office at the time. Lyle became a promoter of Canadian art and architecture, witnessed by the numerous exhibitions he organized. Finally, he was a sought-after lecturer and critic. Lyle's design work often extended throughout the building to encompass furnishings and other household accessories. He was truly a talented and thorough designer, as capable of creating fireplace fittings as he was of planning grand avenues for Canada's growing cities.





Bank of Nova Scotia Archives

Perspective Rendering, Bank of Nova Scotia, Halifax (John M. Lyle, Architect)

# Canadian Decorative Forms

## John M. Lyle

*John Lyle's struggle to achieve a meaningful architecture in the midst of lingering Victorian historicism and the emergence of a hostile modernism is still noteworthy today. In light of current architectural dilemmas, his work has become an important point of discussion. The following text is from an address delivered by Lyle at the Twenty-Fifth Annual Meeting of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada in February, 1932. It was reprinted in the RAIC Journal of March, 1932.*

Before showing you the slides on the screen, I should like to make a few general remarks on present day Canadian architecture. Is there such a thing? Has it any national characteristic, or is it merely a repetition of historical forms and ornament, or of the prevailing mode of Paris, London or New York? What road will it travel? Towards a modernism based on international forms and ornament or on Canadian forms and ornament — or is it to remain a dead thing chained to the moss-grown chariot of Rome or to the mystic spirit of the middle ages?

Let us be honest and admit that we have no architecture that can be claimed or recognized as Canadian. It is true, however, that we have in the early French-Canadian houses a certain individual note, principally in the extreme bell casting of the roof. The parentage, however is Norman and lacks the variety that one can see any day on the road from Cherbourg to Cabourg.

The early houses of English Canada are simply American Colonial carried across the border by the United Empire Loyalists. There is a certain local note in the two-coloured brick architecture of Ontario of the middle nineteenth century.

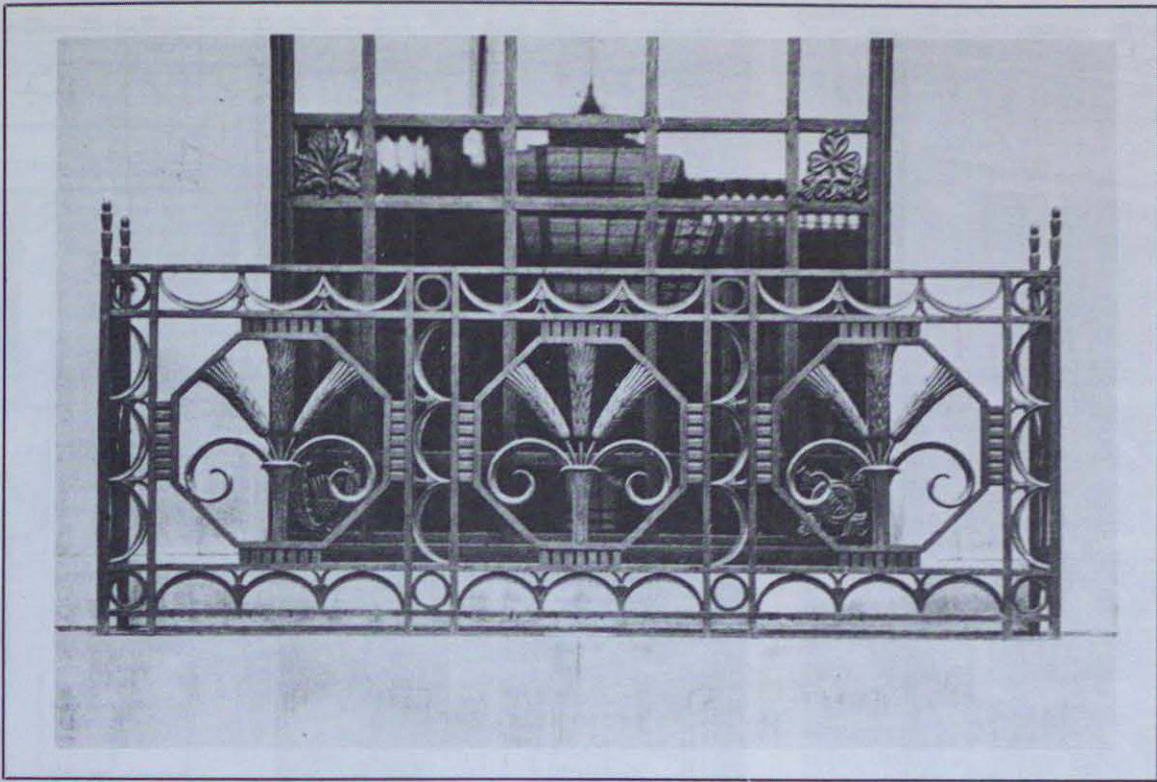
When we come to examine our more serious architecture, we look in vain for a distinctly national note. It is true that we have a number of buildings of distinction to the credit of our profession, and a few that are personal and can be classed as the work of the

inspired traditionalist, but we look in vain among the great mass of building for a Canadian note.

Nineteenth century eclecticism still has architectural Canada by the throat — the Gothic architects are copying the mouldings and ornament of the twelfth century, and the classic architects go even farther back to five hundred years before Christ. Surely the slavish copying of mouldings and decorative forms that died five hundred or a thousand years ago will not lead us anywhere. It is not architecture but archeology, and I am firmly convinced that future generations will regard the great mass of Canadian work as merely interesting specimens of craftsmanship, and not as creative works of art. I think that we need to be jolted out of a too-complacent attitude towards our work. We need a tonic and I see signs that a few of us have been at the bottle — some take it in moderation, others have been more reckless, while others again claim that it is more nauseating than castor-oil.

This new medicine is called "Modernism", and it seems to make the old young, and the young frantic — everybody has their own pet interpretation of what "Modernism" in architecture terms means. Some think of it in terms of geometry, others again stress the importance of efficiency — then functionalism has its devotees, and again there are the designers that claim that because we live in a machine age that architecture should look like machinery. They all seem to forget, however, the essential that differentiates architecture from mere building or engineering, namely — beauty, without which attribute no style or vogue can hope to last. The extreme modernist is, in my opinion, equally at fault with the extreme traditionalist, in that he is trying to tie up architecture to a definite set of formulas. Surely you must keep it free if you wish to keep it alive. If, however, you look at the modern movement as a new spirit of design and a release from the historical styles of the past, then I see a germ of greatness which offers rewards to the skilful designer. Particularly should this new movement make a strong appeal to Canadians as it offers a new field in the use of Canadian decorative forms.





R.A.I.C. Journal



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Details from the Bank of Nova Scotia, Calgary and Halifax, and the Dominion Bank, Toronto (John M. Lyle, Architect).



R.A.I.C. Journal





Bronze entrance doors,  
Dominion Bank, Toronto  
(John M. Lyle, Architect).

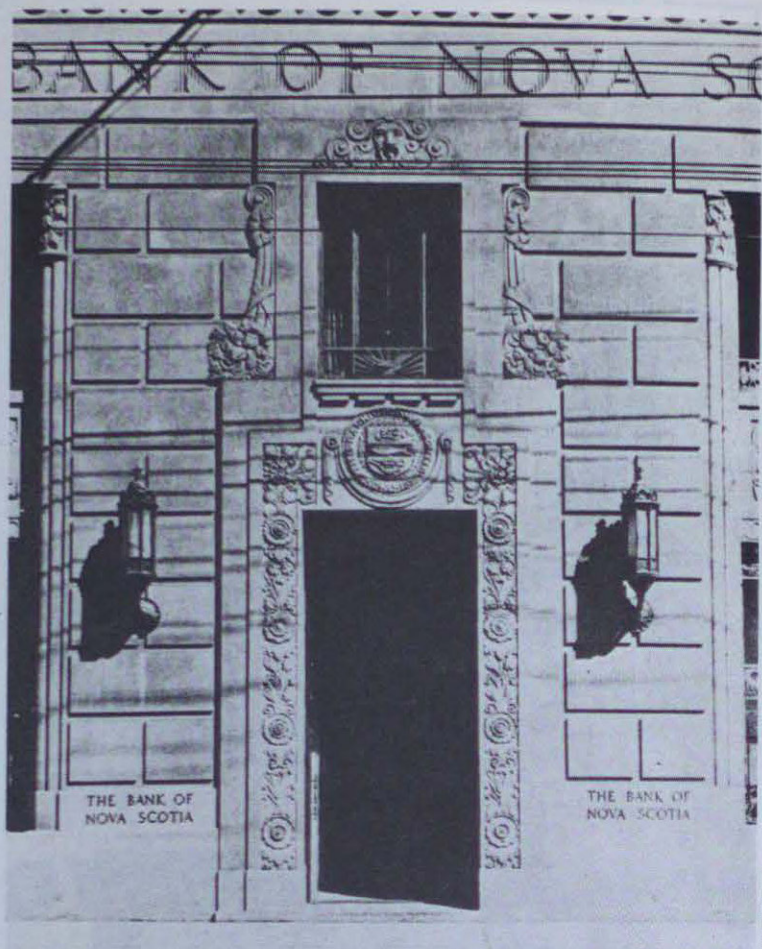
I cannot help feeling that the field of form has been thoroughly explored during the past three thousand years. We can, however, hope for new combinations of old forms and a new language of ornament. This new movement, as I see it, does not mean the abandoning of tradition but rather the adoption of a more critical attitude as to the lessons it can teach as well as the mistakes it can make.

While we may agree with the extreme modernist of the engineering view-point, that certain types of buildings lend themselves to a blocky, bald treatment and the elimination of all ornament, we most certainly do not accept this point of view as the last word in the development of a new architecture. If this conception of architecture was to dominate, we would have no national or distinctive architecture, all architecture would look alike. It would become international and the slab-sided box outlines of Germany and France would be identical with those of Canada and the United States.

There is no question that the modern movement has been responsible for the elimination of much of the meaningless ornament that has disfigured nineteenth century building. We must not forget, however, that without symbolism in the form of fresh, vital, contemporary decoration, the public's interest in architecture is bound to wane if not die altogether.

If all buildings are to be devoid of ornament and lacking in any special motifs that might indicate the character of that particular building, then architecture is deprived of its principal means of expression and becomes a standardized mechanical effort.

Why have we in the United States and Canada always borrowed our ornament from Europe? The plan and construction of many of our buildings is distinctly North American. Why do we have to go to Europe for either our traditional or modern ornament? Simply



Main entrance, Bank of Nova  
Scotia, Halifax (John M.  
Lyle, Architect)

because we have been in a rut for years and as architects have not had the enterprise to search for new decorative forms, nor the courage to use them. Our architectural schools could advance this movement by teaching design in original ornament.

If Canadian architecture is to be a living, vital force, it must satisfy the spirit of our people and of the times in which we live. While we cannot claim, as yet, a distinctive Canadian style, may we not hope that this new freedom for the designer will sweep us along towards a national architecture, for there are present in this modern movement, the same great principles of development that held true in the past. This view-point seemed to us to offer a sound approach to the development of a national note in our architecture, so four years ago we began a search for Canadian forms that would lend themselves to architectural decoration.

We had in mind that "form in art constitutes precisely that element in which the individuality of an artist can make itself distinct from the ordinary realities of nature," or to put it in other words, we have endeavoured to conventionalize the different realistic forms to conform to the desired rhythm or space in which they were to go, mindful always of the material in which they were to be executed.

We are only beginning; it is just four years since we embarked on this new and uncharted sea. We have made many mistakes and it was not without much travail that we were able to get our office staff interested, and kept on the track. I am firmly convinced, however, that we do not need to go to Greece, Rome, England or France for our decorative forms, and that we have here in Canada in our fauna, flora, bird, animal and marine life, a wealth of possible material, as Allan Sims, writing in the English journal *Architectural Design and Construction* says: "Now is the time, when we are being urged to buy British in every other category, for a bold repudiation of our enslavement to foreign sources, whether ancient or modern, in respect of architectural detail."