
BOOK REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS

The Buildings of Samuel Maclure: In Search of Appropriate Form.

Martin SEGGER

Sono Nis Press, Victoria, B.C., 1986

253 pp. & 15 pp. catalogue raisonné; approx. 200 illus., many in colour. \$39.95

Statues of Parliament Hill: An Illustrated History / Statues de la Colline du Parlement: Histoire Illustrée

Terry Gail GUERNSEY

Visual Arts Programme of the National Capital Commission, Ottawa / Hull, 1986. 156 pp., approx. 200 illus., \$5.95

These two handsomely designed and well-produced books, appearing at about the same time last year, represent two major contributions to the literature of Canadian art history. Both are solidly professional. Both present all sorts of new data from primary sources. Both present what amount to breakthroughs to new levels of writing on architecture and sculpture in Canada. No one interested in Canadian art can afford to overlook them, even though neither was put out by one of the better-known Canadian publishers (which may, or may not, tell us something about the current state of scholarly publishing in Canada).

Segger's book is not the first on Maclure, nor on architecture and architects of British Columbia. But in this reviewer's opinion it is the best. It just may be the best book ever published on architecture in Canada. Guernsey's book is, to this reviewer's knowledge, the only serious work on its subject, even though it appears under the aegis of an organization which more frequently publishes tourist guides than scholarly works. It is incomparably the best book

ever written on sculpture in Canada. So these two books are *events*.

Two very well-known architects worked in British Columbia during the early decades of this century. One, Francis Mawson Rattenbury, had a flamboyant personal life capped by what amounted to public adultery, flight into exile, and murder which resulted in one of the most famous trials in the history of British jurisprudence. He designed public buildings all over the province—courthouses, banks, railway hotels, and, of course, its Parliament Buildings, all in unoriginal ways; he was world-famous in Victoria and Vancouver, if nowhere else. The other, Samuel Maclure, had an exemplary private life and a sober, respectable architectural practice, but, with few exceptions, was limited to working out appropriate formulae for large houses commissioned by a very limited number of upper-middle-class clients, most of them in Victoria, a few in Vancouver and odd places up-Island. Not the easiest subject to write a book about, let alone an interesting one. Nonetheless, Segger has accomplished this feat by analyzing how Maclure rose to the challenge of creating an "appropriate form" for the function his houses had to perform in and for the society (in the broad as well as the narrow sense of that word) which commissioned them.

The society for which Maclure worked in Victoria was peculiar in all senses. In some ways it still is, as Segger knows better than anybody from having written his excellent guidebook to Victoria architecture exploring the social function of Victoria's buildings from earliest times to the 1970's. At one time, extraordinary as the notion strikes anyone acquainted with the present city, Victoria was a roaring boom town, the

San Francisco of the Canadian West, both towns being in fact founded in the same year. Fortunes were made on a grand scale in those early days. They brought into being a very comfortably off upper-middle class, composed partly of immigrants from Canada and the United States, but its flavour provided mainly by a large contingent from the British Isles: adventurers, remittance men, and everything in between. Then came the railroad. The C.P.R. did not terminate in Victoria, as planned at first, nor, as things turned out, ever. It ended at Gastown, hurriedly renamed Vancouver (like the island on which Victoria is located, a source of endless later confusions). By the 1890's it was evident that Vancouver was the coming city in the Canadian West. Those with get-up-and-go got up and went there. Those without, stayed put, to lead a leisurely life in gracious houses set on wide grounds (a couple of acres usually) containing servants' quarters, tennis courts, and similar amenities (private ballrooms were common). In the early 1900's a Lilliputian society had congealed around the axes of these *rentiers*, the Anglican church, and personnel of the British Navy at Esquimalt. Here time stood still; it was like living in an eighteenth-century English novel. Not the most promising environment for architectural innovation of any sort. What the situation called for was an ever-increasing refinement of a particular kind of house with a very specialized social function. That is what Maclure spent a lifetime working out. Segger has not only made the process coherent, he has also made it intensely interesting.

Maclure came out of the same architectural matrix as Frank Lloyd Wright. Though Maclure was born in British Columbia and spent all his professional life there, he studied for a year in Philadelphia as a youth and always kept abreast of his

times, among other ways by corresponding with Wright (or, as they would put it in Victoria, Wright had correspondence with him). But their later work necessarily diverged. From designing early spacious houses in refined Tudor styles, Wright went on to design the Midway Gardens, the Imperial Hotel and the Guggenheim Museum—but that story is familiar. Maclure continued doing the same thing essentially (except for a few essays in a modified kind of colonial-classical styling) all his life: subtly altering, developing, perfecting—but I leave it to Segger to tell this story, and he tells it superbly. It is hard to praise this book too highly. Twenty years of research have gone into it, and they show. This is a landmark book in Canadian art-historical writing.

Nor is it the only one to appear in 1986. Canadian art history has been enriched by a second major work appearing at about the same time, on a different subject, but equally a landmark. This is Terry Gail Guernsey's *Statues on Parliament Hill*, a unique work of scholarship not only for Canada but for art-historical writing, universally. What Guernsey has done goes far beyond a mere listing of the thirteen statues to be found on or near Parliament Hill (prime ministers Macdonald, Mackenzie, Laurier, Borden, King, St. Laurent, and Diefenbaker; George-Étienne Cartier; Queen Victoria; Baldwin and Lafontaine; George Brown; D'Arcy McGee; and Albert Harper's "Galahad" memorial), with appropriate data. She has written a biography of the statues, a basically new kind of iconography. For each statue she gives a summary of the facts and circumstances surrounding the commission (much of which has never before been published, all of it richly illustrated with archival photos). She also includes a discussion, again with new archival photos and documentation, of other main

works in the country on the same or related subjects—not just the particular statue of Queen Victoria to the west of the Parliament Buildings, but others found around the country; not just the statue of Sir John A. Macdonald on the Hill, but all other statues and busts of him made for other purposes and occasions by different artists, what made them different, what they tell about the times and the country as well as the man. Since such a rich selection of major figures in Canadian public life is here, the result is a visual history of Canadian politics. There can be few, if any, books that summarize the country's history so succinctly and none that make it so interesting.

The sculptors as such are not neglected. Far from it; their careers are given, with many new details and data, and what is more, with pictures of most of them either at work or on the occasion of public unveilings. You will not find a better account of Canadian sculpture than the one here. But Guernsey's primary concern is what their work meant to the country's life, how it contributed to the country's history, rather than on their personal artistic developments. Such an approach bucks the whole trend of art-historical writing everywhere over the past fifty years toward emphasizing artists over and above any of their particular subjects. To do so took courage. It was also an appropriate, even essential, methodology for the kind of study here undertaken.

For public sculpture is one area, surely, where personal artistic expression ought to be subordinated to public interest. The public—society at large—does not want and should not have inflicted upon it, whatever the artistic sensibilities of Ms. Y or Mr. Z happen to be at a given moment (especially when there is nothing more fickle than artistic sensibilities from year to year; especially when the public, in one way or

another, is paying for the work!). Free to view works in art galleries, yes; encouraged to do so, yes; forced to experience art, willing or not, no! A number of striking instances of the problems and principle involved are cited in this book, notably a series of four statues, to represent prime ministers Meighen, Bennett, Mackenzie King, and Louis St. Laurent, proposed in 1966 by Secretary of State Judy LaMarsh as her department's contribution to the 1967 Centennial. It was Lamarsh's opinion (not Diefenbaker's, though often attributed to him) that the proposals for the Meighen and Bennett statues, by Marcel Braitstein and Elford Bradley Cox, were unacceptable. Guernsey quotes her explanation: 'a decision not intended to reflect on the artistic merit of the works' but 'an assessment of their suitability as official and public portraits;' they were not 'primarily intended as works of art but representations to future generations of the statesmen of the past' (p. 129).

A remarkable feature of *Statues* is the extraordinary amount of totally new information it contains—pictures and documents painstakingly dug out of archives which in some cases had been only very broadly sorted and not indexed at all. The resultant discoveries will transform many accepted ideas about Canadian art—beginning with the proposition that Canadian art is somehow dull. It isn't. It's full of revelations about human nature and sensibilities and politics. Consider, for example, the great role played by Mackenzie King as a patron and mover of public art in Canada, what he did and how he used his masterful grasp of the Canadian political process to do it—but I leave the full account of this and much, much else for readers to discover. They'll find few books have ever been so rewarding.

I have but one criticism, or more exactly regret, about the book: the abbreviation im-

posed upon it by the government practice of printing books in parallel columns of English and French. Isn't it time to reconsider the rationale of this practice, especially when it results in shortening texts? Surely if persons are bilingual they don't need texts in both languages; and if they are not, surely a better practice would be to use the same format, book jacket, and so on, to provide companion editions, one French, one English. Admittedly in some government publications, brevity would be a virtue. But not in this one. I would like to see a new issue of this book presenting something like the full amount of research which obviously (from internal evidence) must have gone into it. Perhaps some major publisher in Canada will seize this opportunity. *Statues* deserves it. In the meantime, both authors deserve our thanks for so greatly enlarging our knowledge and understanding of the breadth and depth of architecture and sculpture in Canada.

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**Construction d'un musée Beaux-Arts /
Montréal 1912 /**

Building a Beaux-Arts Museum

Rosalind M. PEPALL

Montreal Museum of Fine Arts,
Montréal, 1986

186 pp., 65 b/w illus., \$15.00

The ostensible subject of this catalogue to a recent exhibition mounted by the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts is the design and construction of the gallery built in 1912 for the Art Association of Montreal (renamed the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts in 1949). The exhibition and its publication are both a timely and a welcome project. The past decade has witnessed an explosive growth in museum construction and expansion both in Canada and abroad. The well-researched catalogue essay by the exhibition's guest curator, Rosalind M. Pepall, provides a useful historical perspective from which to consider these recent developments.

The catalogue draws upon a thorough review of local period literature and archival material, particularly the extensive archive of the Gallery's architects, Edward and William Maxwell, held by the Canadian Architecture Collection at McGill University. Pepall's catalogue locates and describes the building in the context of local and North American approaches to Beaux-Arts architecture and museum design, and provides a compelling description of the social forces which played so important a role in the selection of the site and the design of the new gallery.

The relevance of Pepall's study is heightened by contemporary events: the exhibition and the publication of the catalogue coincided with the announcement by the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts of what became a highly controversial plan to enter into a joint-development project with Bell