

Lucius R. O'Brien

Visions of Victorian Canada

Dennis REID

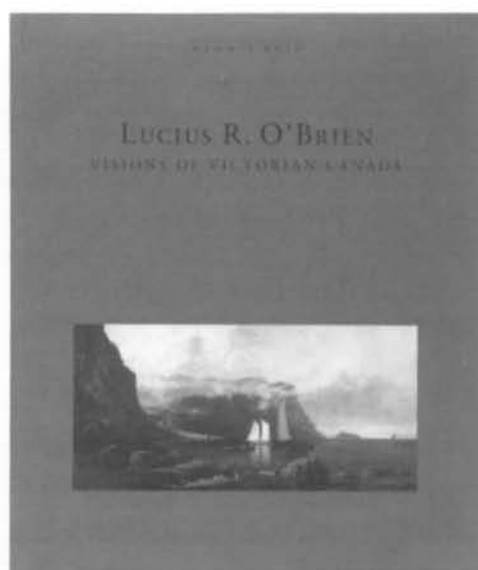
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Lucius O'Brien (1832-1899) has the notoriety of being first President and co-founder of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts (est. 1880) and one of Canada's premier landscape painters of the nineteenth century. In spite of his prominence, few studies have elaborated on the artist's work in any detail and few have given more than perfunctory notice to O'Brien's activity as an art promoter.

Lucius R. O'Brien: Visions of Victorian Canada is a monograph resulting from information on the artist accumulated over a period of fifteen years by Dennis Reid, Curator of Canadian Historical Art at the Art Gallery of Ontario. The exhibition at the Gallery was fueled by a renewed interest in Victorian studies within the museum community and it has toured to galleries outside Toronto over the past year. Reid's purpose is to present a study of national identity premised on the belief that social being is developed by a sense of place. (p.xi) It is within this context that he presents the first fully documented study of Lucius O'Brien's life and work.

The structure of the catalogue reflects the historical research which Reid has used to examine the artist's life. Information on O'Brien's professional / promotional activity is integrated with his artistic output and the contemporary reception of the day. The artist's life is divided into five phases based on these three determining activities: the artist's early development from 1832 to 1869; his activity with the Ontario Society of Artists and the emerging vocabulary of national landscape, 1870-1879; O'Brien's involvement with Canada's



foremost national art association, the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts, and his contributions to an imperial landscape tradition, 1880-1886; travels to the West where the artist begins pursuing an increasingly personal vision of landscape, 1886-1889; and, the artist in maturity during the rise of modernism in Toronto, 1890-1899.

This catalogue makes significant contributions to Canadian art history. Here we have the first historical account of O'Brien's life and work during the Victorian era. Reid has done masterful work in piecing together a history from the fragments of documentation to be found in exhibition records, nineteenth-century art journalism, newspaper accounts and records in parish and city directories. This information contributes to O'Brien's stature in civic and national art affairs. The sources are profusely recorded in the endnotes and the artist's life is outlined in a chronology at the end of the text for quick reference; these will be welcomed by scholars of Canadian art. In addition, for the first time O'Brien's oeuvre has been brought together in a single volume

enhancing our appreciation of his artistic creativity. Towards this end Reid has reproduced 88 paintings and pencil sketches by the artist from diverse sources. While watercolour paintings and pencil sketches are notoriously difficult to illustrate in black and white, this volume does much to retain the integrity of paint and virtuosity of line in O'Brien's work.

In reading the catalogue essay one is struck by how dependent the artist's activities were on the stage of development in art and society during the Victorian era. The integration of daily activities (administrative and artistic) seems to have both delimited the creative expressions of the artist while increasing new opportunities for patronage. The absence of a viable commercial gallery structure no doubt increased the significance of associational activity in establishing patronage. Not surprisingly, the mature artist shifts his activity from associational duties to an extended phase of concentrating on painting from 1886 to 1889 under the generous hospitality of the C.P.R..

This volume is a welcome addition to the field of Canadian historical art and is an example of the exhibition catalogue at its most scholarly. The author presents his material in a clear and lucid manner and has provided an accurate and detailed account of the artist's life and work. This catalogue will serve as the standard reference on O'Brien for years to come and is recommended reading for scholars of English-Canadian art.

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