

BY A LADY

Celebrating Three Centuries of Art by
Canadian Women

Maria TIPPETT

Viking Penguin, Toronto, 1992

240 pp., 43 col., 97 b/w illus., \$60.00

While Garland Publishing, New York is promising a dictionary of twentieth-century North American women artists that will include numerous Canadians, most compilations of biographical notes on women artists include few Canadians.¹ Maria Tippet's recent publication, *By a Lady: Celebrating Three Centuries of Art by Canadian Women*, attempts to move these lesser-known women from the margins into the centre of an art-historical discourse. However, the book does not live up to Whitney Chadwick's recent attempt to make a comprehensive survey of European and North American women artists in *Women, Art and Society*, 1990. Unlike Tippet, Chadwick understands and acknowledges that it has become difficult, if not impossible, to compile large and sweeping generalizations about women artists and their production. Neither does Tippet's book honestly present itself as a dictionary of women artists, such as occurs with Charlotte Rubinstein's *American Women Artists: From Early Indian Times to the Present* (1982).

Upon first looking at Tippet's book, it seemed that it might put the names of a number of women practising art in Canada "out there" thus enticing professionals and graduate students to search further for material and thesis topics. A close examination of the work yields a different

BY A LADY



*Celebrating Three Centuries
of Art by Canadian Women*

MARIA TIPPETT

response and raises questions that are of the utmost importance to feminists in art history. Even if one wants a readable and so-called accessible book, the structure, organization and presentation should address the relationship between the book and the many art-historical discourses that make up our practice today. Tippet fails to do this and her work is not a feminist intervention into art history.

Maira Gatens' *Feminism and Philosophy: Perspectives on Difference and Equality*, 1991, suggests that: "To fail to take note of the value-laden character of any particular theory is implicitly to perpetuate the values that have been constructed by a culture that devalues women and those aspects of life with which they have been especially associated, for example, nature and reproduction" (p.2). Tippet colludes with a culture that devalues women even while she attempts to secure their place in an established and exclusive discipline. Her feminism is a "conspiracy theory" kind of feminism that simplistically assumes

women's subjugation results from male dominance. This practice begins with her discussion of seventeenth-century French nuns who made religious art. Her superficial formal analysis of Sister Marie Barbier's *Infant Jesus* (c. 1690) seeks to reconfirm a traditional valuing of art as mimetics. According to Tippet, "While the Christ figure might be off-centred, the size of the head disproportionate to the rest of the body, the extended arms and open palms rendered with no knowledge of classical perspective" (p.4), it is a "dramatic representation" of the figure in a "manner similar to" the ex-voto. This "back-handed" compliment devalues the ex-voto, does not offer any insight into women producers and the ex-voto, indicates no understanding of the role of the ex-voto in new-world French culture and provides no analysis of the relationship between culture and religion. In *Plotting Women: Gender and Representation in Mexico* (1989), Jean Franco suggests that the public behavior of sixteenth and seventeenth-century Spanish-speaking nuns in Mexico took on its "particular character because of the Church's mapping of knowledge and gender under the particular stresses of the colonial situation" (p.xvii). Surely concerns and issues such as imperialism and religion, women and cloisters, art and culture inform the society of the French-speaking nun. The relationship of the votive image to popular culture, the politics of production of devotional art made by women, as well as the viewing audience (were they nuns or lay people?) are as significant questions as the statement that *Infant Jesus* is by the hand of "a little-trained artist" or the information that Sister Barbier (1663-1739) "had been

saved from an attempted rape by the intervention of the Virgin" (p.4). There is scant reference to ecclesiastical embroidery although it was an important form of art production, and this is despite the impact of Roszika Parker's *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (1984) on art-historical discourse. The implication in this brief discussion of art prior to the English conquest is that all French women artists were religious artists. In addition, without exploration or explanation, this implies that English women artists were secular.

According to Tippet, nineteenth-century English women artists often copied better-known pictures. However, this information is provided without reference to the practice of copying in the wider artistic community. Tippet seems to think that women artists copied because they were not formally trained, or as a way of obtaining training; but copying was an established cultural practice of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The question remains: how did women like Amelia Frederica Dyneley (1830-1860) experience themselves as artists within the already established cultural practice of copying? Then it is made clear that "not every woman artist in British North America during the first half of the 1800s was the product of such rudimentary art instruction" (p.7-8); some were formally trained and even exhibited in European academies.

For example, Fanny Bayfield (c. 1813-1891) "reputedly studied painting with one of the instructors of Queen Victoria" and we learn that she came to Québec with her father, that she married a Captain and that she "passed on her remarkable skills as

a painter of flowers and landscapes to many students" (p.8). We also learn that Mary Love (active 1806-1866) was sent to London to study art by a prosperous father and that most of these early artists came to their art through male members of the family. Harriet Clench (?-1892) may not have been formally trained but she was adept enough to help her more famous husband, Paul Kane, make his paintings of Indian scenes. Her historically rich and thought provoking *A Country Tavern Near Cobourg* (1849) is reproduced and compared stylistically with Kane's pictures. Its content and meaning are ignored; context is not mentioned.

Tippett's research for the first chapter includes archival material that requires a more insightful analysis, and her theoretical roots seem to emanate from Germaine Greer's *The Obstacle Race* (1979). Most art historians concerned with feminist interventions into the discipline consider Greer's work dated and problematic. Greer relies exclusively on that structure which neglects the social conditions surrounding women's art production. Tippett accedes easily to this structure. Her mention of nineteenth-century domestic space emerges without any understanding of the ideology of this gendered space and without a sense of the history of its existence. This is despite excellent work done in this area by British feminists, such as Leonor Davidoff and Catherine Hall's *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (1987) or Lynda Nead's *Myths of Sexuality: Representation of Women in Victorian Britain* (1988). Certainly, given Tippett's extensive interest in British or British-trained artists in

Canada and the impact of British ideologies upon English-speaking Canada, works like these are invaluable.

By the end of her first chapter Tippett establishes two scenarios: first, she adheres to a "conspiracy theory" of feminism and second, she confirms women's status as secondary and leaves the hierarchies in place. The continued reliance upon a monolithic and conspiratorial conception of male domination that can "explain" women's subjugation has been successfully questioned by recent work in psychoanalytic theory. Although there are problems with blind acceptance of the partnership between feminism and psychoanalytic theory, it has opened up new and less simplistic discussions of power relationships.²

In a damning paragraph near the end of her first chapter, Tippett summarizes women's status as secondary, leaves the hierarchies in place, and fails to question how or why this particular discourse exists: "Because art-making was viewed as an adornment, a social accomplishment through which women could either ensure or enhance their social positions, many women with little or no ability took up their brushes and pencils. This not only meant that a great deal of mediocre art was produced but that mediocrity became the norm for most women artists" (p.11). Thus she sets the tone for the apologetic interruption of a canonical European art that continues through to the end of the text when she tells us that whenever women who made art informed by their own experience. "From the late nineteenth-century painters of maternité to the feminists of the 1970's and 1980's, they were considered out of step with, and therefore inferior to,

1970's and 1980's, they were considered out of step with, and therefore inferior to, the prominent male artists of the day" (p.201).

This insistence upon evaluating the work of women artists from the standpoint of an established canon is further reflected in the fact that Tippetts deals almost exclusively with painting. She never, for example, mentions Jana Sterbak's controversial *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic* (1987-88) even though her research might have benefited from analyses of such works. Questions relating to identity, experience, the body, the public and the private were raised by Jessica Bradley in "Jana Sterbak: Objects as Sensations" (*Jana Sterbak*, Mackenzie Art Gallery, Regina, 1989) and by Diana Nemiroff in *Jana Sterbak: States of Being* (National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, 1991). Tippetts does not take advantage of this research. Similarly, she leaves out Jamelie Hassan, whose multi-cultural installations raise significant questions for Canadians, and consequently she misses Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's important catalogue essay "Inscriptions of Truth to Size" done for Hassan's exhibition *Inscriptions* at the Dunlop Art Gallery, Regina in 1990. Neither does she include Marlene Creates whose work on Canadian geography, identity, experience and "mapping" seem indispensable to a discussion of Canadian art. Tippetts's first chapter lays the groundwork for these exclusions as she seems intent on focussing on painting, retaining the hierarchy and avoiding issues.

Similarly, while telling us of inclusions in exhibitions, there is no understanding of the class or the race of the artists; nor is

there any real discussion of critical reception. Tippetts relies almost exclusively on hackneyed and tired explanations of women's absence: "Because women artists generally did not have the advantage of formal training, because they created their work in leisure, not in work time, and because they functioned outside the marketplace, their productions were deemed to be of little or no value" (p.14). Such a point of view is ideologically dangerous in its further ghettoization of women and in its support of a dogmatic and traditional way of viewing art. Did not Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock address issues like this over ten years ago in their landmark book, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*? Then, only a few pages later, Tippetts tells us that "women artists nevertheless turned out a remarkable body of work during the years before and immediately after Confederation" (p.19).

Nineteenth-century British artist Frances Hopkins is singled out as a "professional, not an amateur, artist."³ Her impressive picture of an elite man being transported by aboriginal and Meti canoeists, *Shooting the Rapids* (c.1879) is reproduced in colour (the book's strength lies with its reproductions); but we are only told that she was a visitor to Canada and that she exhibited in London (p.19). Mary McKie's *A Micmac Indian of Nova Scotia* (c.1840-46) is one of a number of pictures of non-whites but there are no questions raised about representation and colonization. Twentieth-century Toronto painter Henrietta Shore (1880-1963) used "bold and energetic brushwork" and pure, bright colours in "her choice of a 'common' subject," *Negro Woman and Two Children*

(c.1918) (p.51); Henrietta Mabel May (1884-1971) made a strong and uncompromising portrait, *Indian Woman, Oka, 1917* (1917) that Tippet calls "an impersonal rendering of the native woman" (p.54); and Prudence Heward (1896-1947) made a sensuous, poignant painting of a black woman, *Dark Girl* (1935), who Tippet sees as "round-shouldered, heavy-breasted, dour-faced" (p.92). Tippet's 1990's prose differs very little from a 1930's viewer's comments about another of Heward's pictures. An Ottawa critic in 1938 thought Heward's woman a "hideous, fat, naked negress, with thighs like a prize fighter and a loose leering face."⁴ The painting requires a more sensitive analysis and a discussion that addresses issues of class and race. Tippet's cultural isolationism removes these pictures from their social surroundings and the reader is left without a context and certainly without an understanding of content or meaning.

At the beginning of Chapter Two, Tippet introduces the women artists' societies that flourished after the mid-nineteenth century. The prototypes for these societies can be found in Britain and their cultural significance requires discussion. For example, the Glasgow Society of Lady Artists, founded in 1882 and supported by established male and female Glaswegian artists, offered women members a space in which to work and an exhibiting organization. Grace Wilson Melvin (1892-1977), who is not in Tippet's book, studied and taught at the Glasgow School of Art and was a member of the society before she moved to Vancouver where she was Head of Design at the Vancouver School of Art

from 1927 to 1952.⁵ We could question what the social effects of the societies were in their particular historical contexts. Melvin's experience might have given us some insight into the societies and women's relationship to them in Britain and in Canada.

Tippet remains committed to searches for influences and short stylistic analyses, ignoring the groundwork laid for her by other art historians. Frances Bannerman's (1855-1940) competent picture *The Conservatory* (1883) is "not a particularly imaginative work"; it is compared with Manet's *In the Conservatory* (Salon of 1881), and considered part of the "intimate world of the reading woman" (p.30). Again, this is put forth without reference to or an understanding of the art historical work done on this period about these kinds of domestic pictures made by women. Although she repeatedly refers to the influence that women like Cassatt and Morisot might have had on Canadian women artists, Tippet ignores Griselda Pollock's "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity" (*Vision and Difference*, 1988), Janet Wolff's "The Culture of Separate Spheres: The Role of Culture in Nineteenth-Century Public and Private Life" (*The Culture of Capital: Art, Power and the Nineteenth-Century Middle Class*, 1988) and, perhaps more significantly, Pamela Gerrish Nunn's seminal work, *Victorian Women Artists* (1987).

Tippet claims that women artists were restricted in their attempts at landscape painting: they did not climb mountains or "bushwhack through the densely forested landscape of northern Ontario or Quebec to find wilderness scenes there" (p.34).

Instead, Canadian women remained "content, for the most part, with the maternité theme" (p.35), the implication being that this kind of domestic painting, even when interesting and technically proficient, was not as significant as landscape painting. Tippettt secures her complicity with the dominant discourse even when she discusses women's activities in artistic organizations and in lobbying the government for funding (p.37-38). Teaching art, memberships in professional organizations and exhibiting are all cited without elaboration upon the connection with society and culture. One of the most interesting collaborative projects mentioned, the Canadian State Dinner Service made by sixteen women artists in the late nineteenth century, provides an unprecedented possibility for opening up a more-than-painting-and-sculpture discussion, but Tippettt immediately slips back into canvas and paint (p.41-42).

Her discussion about art between the wars finds women artists participating as artists and critics in cultural production, but there is scant reference to their reception. We are left wanting more discussion of exhibitions and reviews, and less about who influenced whom. This part of the book attests to the influence of the Group of Seven without any serious analyses of women's work. Yvonne McKague Housser's (b.1898) *Silver Mine, Cobalt* (1930) shows the "extent to which the Group prescribed how to interpret northern Ontario" (p.72). But we learn nothing about the workers in the picture who are dwarfed by the horizontal buildings jutting into a cloud-filled sky. Nor does Tippettt suggest why this Group-influ-

enced painting is not a landscape but a picture about work in a harsh human-made environment. Instead the camaraderie of swigging gin before deciding to "build a still life of a Lawren Harris painting" precludes meaningful discussion. Tippettt quotes McKague Housser as saying, "I was influenced [by the Group] but I don't think influenced to the extent that I, in any way, copied them" (p.73). The content of Irène Sénécal's (1901-1978) *Port-au-Persil, vue du sud* (1936) is similar to McKague Housser's, but this painting is singled out as not having been influenced by the Group.

Later Tippettt acknowledges that "many women artists commented indirectly on social and political injustice" (p.97); then she willingly attributes Marion Scott's (b.1906) powerful painting *Tenants* (c.1940) as being indebted to Bauhaus painter (Tippettt calls him a Surrealist) Oscar Schlemmer. This picture of lonely figures climbing stairs in unison certainly contains meaning that is more significant than "being like" Schlemmer's *Bauhaus Stairs*. Elizabeth Cann's *The Soldier's Wife* (c.1941), a sober reminder of Canada's participation in World War II and of the people left behind to wait, is called decorative and academic. What were women's social interests and significances in this abandoned situation?

By the late 1940's women artists in Canada were moving more into Tippettt's mainstream, exhibiting widely and starting to explore abstraction. Tippettt's history of art after World War II is the story of abstraction and the women who contributed to this movement. Rita Letendre, Lise Gervais, Marcelle Ferron, Dorothy

Knowles, among others, played significant roles, but the structure of discussion remains fixed: a simplistic reiteration of style, influence, and loyalties and changing alliances. Daphne Odjig (b.1919) makes an appearance in this section, turning to "native Indian motifs to express the reality of life on the reserve" (p.137). What is the reality of life on the reserve? How is her art received by her own people? Is it received in the art community as representative of abstraction or of indigenous art? Were there other cultures and histories existing in Canada during the 40's, the 50's and the early 60's? In Tippet's world of women artists, their work parallels the work of the better-known men, always trailing a little behind but eventually, if they study with the right people and frequent the right circles, they can catch up.

Some artists, white and non-white, continued to make representational art: Mimi Parent (b.1934) and Jeanne Rhéaume (b.1915), for example, made pictures that "differ little from those of women artists who had worked in a similar style more than a generation earlier, such as the Parisian painter Suzanne Valadon" (p.142). Sybil Andrews (b.1898) "blended the theme of labour with the Vorticist, Futurist and Art Deco styles" (p.142). Louise Scott's work might "suggest the effort of an untrained artist" but she can, according to Tippet, rest securely in an artistic tradition going back to the "Dutch painters of the seventeenth century and to medieval artists before them" (p.145). Although Scott's hauntingly beautiful and enigmatic *La Saint-Jean-Baptiste* (1965) is reproduced in colour, Tippet's discussion leaves us feeling that, while some content

and meaning might be read into the colour, the costume, the space, and the fleur-de-lys, it is mostly a decorative work. We can safely assume that Tippet has no interest in the writings of Bryson, Fried or Alpers.

Her final chapter, "The Feminist Revolution in Art," sounds promising and opens with Thérèse Joyce-Gagnon's *Les demoiselles de Banff* (1990). At the beginning of the chapter she mentions conceptual art, process art, body art and video, and then cites Mary Pratt as the first example of this dramatic and exciting move into a new era in women's art. Christiane Pflug is one of Canada's "most brilliant painters" (p.158). Joyce Wieland has "remarkable talent and versatility" (p.161), and she is given credit for raising "public awareness of the traditional craft of quilt-making to the level of high art." However, we are left wondering why the cultural history of this art is missing from the rest of the book and why we do not hear more about Wieland as a film-maker (p.162).

The proliferation of new galleries, exhibitions and associations for women artists is mentioned but not analyzed. Tippet explains that women moved into this new era wanting to "transform the image of their sex from passive, submissive and sexually available" (p.168). However, she continues to focus on two-dimensional work, albeit choosing disturbing images such as Susan Scott's *A Recurring Image: I often thought of killing him* (1983) or role-reversal images such as Wieland's *Artist on Fire* (1983), which graces the book's jacket cover. As seductive as it may be to move woman from a passive and submissive

position into one of aggression and dominance, this simple exchange of power does not address the issue of power relations. It leaves the structure intact, ready to employ power either to the advantage or the disadvantage of the designated actors.

In keeping with her deployment of "conspiracy theory" feminism, Tippet tells us that: "Despite the innovative work that these artists produced throughout the 1970s and 1980s Canadian women artists continued to be pursued by the old stereotypes: as amateurs, at best as part-time professionals" (p.187). In the book's "Afterword," Tippet comments that: "For whatever reason, women simply could not win the approval their work deserved" (p.201). She lacks the most simplistic understanding of Foucault, of feminism and psychoanalytic theory, of Roland Barthes, of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak or of any of the new and exciting theories and methods that are becoming part of art-historical discourse.

Maira Gatens writes of the dangers of feminists trusting the "apparent neutrality of the theory being used" and suggests that to accept the value system implicit in any particular theory is to perpetuate the same subjugation over and over again. Tippet, by writing about women as they partake of the dominant cultural discourse, has ensured their complicity in their own domination and has left no openings for questioning or subversion. The issues surrounding women and the production of art are elucidated in the work of many contemporary Canadian artists not included in Tippet's book. Mary Scott, for example, analyzes the relationship between practice and theory, and the extent to which French

psychoanalytic theory may assist with this analysis. Kati Campbell searches for a reconsideration of *maternité*. Jamelie Hassan explores issues of post-coloniality, race, gender and class, the meeting of cultures and the differences or equalities of those spaces. These artists, and others like them, create work that asks questions about the construction of the body in culture and what this might mean for contemporary theorists and art practitioners. The relationships between the discourses of power that surround the physical body, and that same human body as it performs in society, elude Tippet.

Tippet avoids theory. However, this avoidance simply reiterates the dominant discourse and concedes, by default, to power as it exists and has always existed. This kind of historical and critical writing provides a space for the disenfranchised and thus ensures their continued existence. Tippet exhibits the naiveté often associated with the concept of accessibility: what does this mean? Does it mean to be able to be reached and used? Has this position not always been inhabited by the marginalized? *By a Lady* fails to expand our understanding of women in history, just as it fails to provide a forum for contemporary artists. Although Tippet is most committed to historical art, it is in that arena that her project fails most dramatically. Any historical discussion requires a thorough understanding of the society and culture in which art was produced and the conditions under which women artists worked and lived. This in turn requires painstaking archival work and a commitment to scholarship, both of which are absent from Tippet's book.

Thus, to abandon theory in this history is to abandon women artists forever to play in the margins and to abandon us forever to admonish the femininity of our forebearers. To accept the femininity of female artists is to accept the epistemological dualities that underlie philosophies of dominance; in accepting this dualized epistemology, one is also bound to accept its ramifications in socio-political theory. On the other hand, to deny women artists femininity, is to deny the experience of women and their practice as it might be located in this experience. The art historian is a problematized functionary in an academic system. If, from this position, one is unable to attend to problems of time, space and thought, and radicalize and re-epistemologize our discourses from the past, then we must abandon "feminine" female artists in history. This will leave these women in the margins and turn us into critics who only address contemporary issues that lend themselves more easily to contemporary debates. This sets women artists adrift in an ever-expanding but different margin. Feminist interventions into art history are honour-bound to re-write philosophy and to explore the problems faced by the woman artist within her society, whether that be historical or contemporary. Pictures can be read "against the grain" and the positions of women artists can be shifted. Tippet only continues the discourse she criticizes and lends credence to the people from whom she claims difference.

JANICE HELLAND
Department of Art History
Concordia University
Montréal, Québec

Notes

1 Chris PETTEYS, *Dictionary of Women Artists: An International Dictionary of Women Artists Born before 1900* is useful for information about women artists. The forthcoming Garland dictionary will include women born before 1955.

2 See, for example, Juliet MITCHELL, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), or more recently and more art historical, Griselda POLLOCK, "Woman as Sign: Psychoanalytic Readings" in *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988). For concerns and questions about feminism and psychoanalytic theory see Michele BARRETT, *Women's Oppression Today: The Marxist/Feminist Encounter* (London: Verso, 2nd edition, 1988).

3 Tippet is obviously unaware of Pamela Gerrish Nunn's suggestion that, "In studying female artists it is important, if the authentic range of artists is to be suggested, that the amateur - or, rather, the non-professional - artist is considered. Important, too, is the artist who does not become famous, for her art is probably more instructive as to the dominant modes and trends of the time in which she was operating than is the art of the 'great' artists," *Victorian Women Artists* (London: The Women's Press, 1987), 126.

4 Natalie LUCKYJ, "Introduction," *Expressions of Will: The Art of Prudence Heward* (Kingston: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1986), 47.

5 Grace Melvin was commissioned by the Royal Canadian Engineers to design and illuminate their National Books of Remembrance for both wars; see *A Centenary Exhibition to Celebrate the Founding of the Glasgow Society of Lady Artists in 1882* (Glasgow: Collins Gallery, 1982), 36.