

A NEW CLASS OF ART

The Artist's Print in Canadian Art
1877-1920

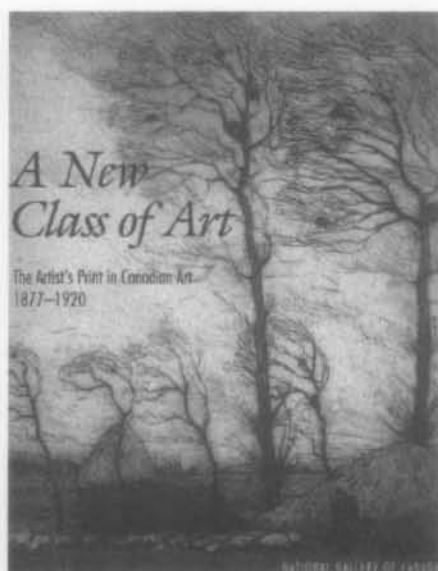
Rosemarie L. TOVELL

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ART: l'estampe originale au Canada de
1877 à 1920*)

Rosemarie Tovell's catalogue, *A New Class of Art: The Artist's Print in Canada 1877-1920* closes a significant gap in our knowledge of Canadian prints by bridging the void between Mary Allodi's groundbreaking *Printmaking in Canada: The Earliest Views and Portraits*, which deals with the period up to 1850, and my own *Images of the Land: Canadian Block Prints 1919-1945*. Tovell's book is comprehensive and detailed and she has established the foundation upon which all 20th-century Canadian printmaking rests. This is a prodigious work which has resulted from over two decades researching Canadian print history. Tovell has provided a pioneer study by ferreting out these rare prints, many long forgotten. In the process she has both built and augmented the National Gallery of Canada's permanent collection. This is particularly important for the 19th century prints which were printed in very limited editions and often discarded in their day due to their lack of success and



public indifference. The National Gallery collection has supplied 86 of the 132 prints in the book and the associated exhibition. This demonstrates both Tovell's dedication and the initiative of previous Gallery curators and associates who in 1909 began the national print collection with such foresight. It is now the premier collection of Canadian prints.

Beginning with "Breaking the Ground," Tovell explores the short-lived etching "revival" of the 1880's and its disappointing aftermath. Chapter Two, "In the Mainstream," tracks Canadians' achievement within the international print movement. The full revival in Canada, which occurred after 1900 in Toronto, is documented in "Erecting the Frame." The final chapter, "Completing the Structure"

traces the extension of the movement after 1910 to the rest of Canada and the creation of the artist's print.

Tovell sets the stage with the March 1885 international exhibition of etchings in Toronto, the first presentation of its kind ever held in Canada. Organized by the Association of Canadian Etchers (ACE), which had been established the previous year, it included 53 Americans, 24 Europeans and 10 Canadians (7 ACE members). This exhibition of original artists' prints was an anomaly, as throughout the nineteenth century public interest lay in reproductions of paintings or illustrations produced by printers and tied to the publishing industry. Remarkably, Tovell has located many of the prints from this exhibition. No instruction was available in Canada and most of the Canadian artists were self-taught printmakers; only W.J. Thomson and A.D. Patterson had some training. Artists produced only a few prints and most gave up quickly. Tovell exposes the tentative nature of this so called "revival," which was not sustained and was more in the nature of a "flash-in-the-pan." By 1890 ACE had folded.

The ACE exhibition did help to spawn a more sophisticated group of collectors of international prints but they did not support Canadian printmakers. For example, from 1882 W. Scott and Sons in Montréal began selling prints by international painter-

etchers. Tovell provides a detailed backdrop to this modest "revival," including the role of collectors as well as illustration and commercial printing companies such as The Toronto Engraving Company (later renamed Brigden's Ltd.). She also provides extensive historical detail about who made the prints and what they produced.

Canadian activity is contrasted with the International revival which began in France in the 1850's and was fostered by Whistler. Unlike Canadian artists, the French had the support of professional printers and publishers as well as critics, all of whom promoted etching. Etching was introduced into Britain in the late 1850's by Whistler and promoted by his brother-in-law, Seymour Hayden. Important books by Phillip Hamerton also advanced the practice: *Etching and Etchers*, 1868 and *The Etcher's Handbook*, 1871.

The American revival got rolling a decade later. Societies dedicated to etching were soon established in New York, Philadelphia and Boston. These were supported by critics and writers such as Sylvester Koehler (who founded the *American Art Review*) and such publishers as Frederick Keppel and Hermann Wunderlich. Master printers were available to artists and in 1885 a curator of prints was named at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Printmaking flourished in America with such support. Large editions were

produced and many prints found their way into the Canadian market.

Limited circumstances in Canada did not prevent Canadians abroad from having a vital and successful connection with the international revival. James Barnsley and T. Mower Martin used Kimmel and Voigt in New York to print some of their etchings, although only a limited number were produced. In contrast, John Hammond who trained in America and Europe, had a sizeable production of about two dozen etchings. After studies in France, Elizabeth Forbes settled in Britain where she produced some of the finest Canadian drypoints. Her sensitive, expressive line, delicately nuanced tone and superior draughtsmanship established her international reputation. In London, Homer Watson produced a closely observed and elaborately detailed print of his own painting *Pioneer Mill*, 1890 which became the most popular 19th-century Canadian print.

In the early 20th-century, a few Canadians made important contributions to the revival in the United States. Charles White in New York provided etchings for his articles in *Harper's Monthly* magazine. He set a standard for quality etchings, created a distinctly American idiom for urban and industrial subjects and taught etching at the Art Students' League. John Cotton, trained as a commercial lithographer, became a charter mem-

ber of the Chicago Society of Etchers and forged important links for Canadians. In 1911 he studied in London and became a master printmaker in all the intaglio techniques. David Milne started etching in New York in 1909 and quickly reached his stride, producing sophisticated images with his characteristic economy and delicacy of line.

Canadian artists in Paris were inspired by the ongoing vitality of the etching revival. Canadian-born painter-etcher Donald Shaw MacLaughlan was considered the premier etcher after Whistler's death in 1903. Clarence Gagnon studied with him and between 1906 and 1907 he helped MacLaughlan pull restrikes from Rembrandt etching plates. Gagnon's etchings captured picturesque European images with fine line, increasingly intensified from light to dark through repeated immersion in acid and softened with carefully modulated plate tone. His success is demonstrated by the fact that he had dealers across Europe and sold prints to such major collections as the Victoria and Albert Museum. As well, there were articles on his prints in the most prestigious journals and he was the only North American included in Thomas Simpson's important book, *Modern Etchings and their Collectors*, 1919. Frank Armington studied etching with Maurice Achener and taught his wife Caroline to etch. They joined art

societies in Paris and the United States, exhibiting in the Parisian Salons as well as in London, Liverpool and Montréal.

Foreign instruction was an important factor in the 20th century revival of Canadian etching. Artists such as Lewis Smith, Dorothy Stevens and Ivan Neilson studied in Europe and subsequently became influential printers in Canada. Lewis Smith trained with Frank Armington and Luke Taylor and he later encouraged printmaking at home when he became the Principal of the Victoria School of Art and Design in Halifax. After studies in London and Paris, Dorothy Stevens returned to Toronto to become an active printmaker and mentor; Ivan Neilson worked with Ernest Lumsden in Scotland and subsequently taught etching at the École des Beaux-Arts in Quebec City.

Tovell traces the very limited involvement of Canadian artists in the lithography revival. James Wilson Morrice made one lithograph, *Near Dordrecht*, 1898, an atmospheric, quick and sketchy landscape. James Kerr Lawson's lithotints, painted directly on the stone with a brush, were highly praised by critics. These were the first artist's lithographs to be shown in Canada.

In Chapter Three, "Erecting the Frame," Tovell documents the establishment and purpose of various art societies in Toronto, which culminated in 1903 with the formation of the

Graphic Arts Club (GAC). Contrary to its name, the Club did not initially promote prints, but rather drawings and watercolours by its members who were primarily illustrators. Neither the GAC nor the annual Canadian National Exhibition (CNE) is known to have exhibited prints prior to 1910. However, some members of the GAC such as Owen Staples, Thomas Greene, J.W. Beatty and Edgar Laur, did begin to make etchings and drypoints. The purchase of an etching press by the GAC in 1910 stimulated this activity. Only the Canadian Art Club exhibited a few prints before 1910.

After that date, the situation changed rapidly with the deliberate organization of art societies and exhibits that fostered the re-emergence of etching. From 1910, the GAC began to prepare exhibits for the CNE. These included examples by their members and other Canadians, alongside those by expatriates Gagnon and the Armingtons so that the CNE did become a regular outlet for Canadian-made prints. A major exhibition in 1912, *The Fifth Loan Exhibition* at the Art Museum of Toronto (AMT) included 1000 items, 700 of which were original artists' prints. International prints were drawn from 30 local private collections and included works by Brangwyn, Zorn and Sloan. Canadians were well-represented with Thomson showing 33 prints, Gagnon 22 and Stevens 18.

The National Gallery of Canada made its first Canadian print purchase in 1909: 21 etchings by Gagnon. From then on, the National Gallery steadily built its collection and by 1920 owned approximately 1000 prints - 200 Canadian and 800 international. The Gallery organized regular print shows and in 1917 began a programme of travelling print exhibitions. By 1921 the Gallery had a separate Prints and Drawings Department run by its own Curator Henry P. Rossiter.

1914 marked an important change with two exhibitions of prints exclusively by Canadian artists: one at Toronto's Arts and Letters Club, *Some Canadian Etchers* and the other at the Art Museum of Toronto, *A Collection of Etchings by Toronto Etchers with Original Plates Showing Methods and Processes*. Between 1914 and 1917, the AMT held annual exhibitions which were the catalyst for etching across Canada, drawing entries from Ottawa, Quebec City, Winnipeg, Halifax and from some expatriate Canadian artists. These exhibitions were accompanied by extremely popular demonstrations of printing techniques. By 1917 it was clear that small groups of printmakers were becoming established in Halifax, Montréal and Winnipeg.

"Completing the Structure," the final chapter of Tovell's catalogue, deals with activities outside of Toronto, the establishment of the Society of Canadian Painter-Etchers and the

Canadian War Memorials Fund. In Quebec City, Ivan Neilson installed his etching press from Scotland but because of the lack of other printmakers in the city, he maintained close contact with Toronto. His dramatic river scenes evoked the atmosphere and clamour of an industrial St. Lawrence River. Ethel Seath was the first Montréal artist to exhibit etching at the 1907 Royal Canadian Academy Show and the 1908 Art Association of Montreal *Spring Exhibition*. Unfortunately, none of her etchings are extant. Charles Simpson, probably self-taught, passed on his knowledge to other artists, including Herbert Raine. Raine's prints combined areas of concentrated activity with blank white space. At the Art Association of Montreal, a print room was established in 1918 and prints were donated to the collection. Also in Montréal, the dealer James Morgan carried Gagnon etchings.

In Halifax, however, there was no interest or support for prints despite the enthusiasm of Lewis Smith, who in 1910 acquired a press and held exhibitions and the example of Lismer's fine etchings from 1916 to 1919. Only one etcher emerged: Gyrth Russell, who produced delicate colour aquatints.

By comparison, Winnipeg was a vital centre for printmaking. The third largest city in Canada, it had the prosperity and resources to support a vibrant emerging arts community.

Various art societies and associations as well as the Winnipeg Museum of Art held exhibitions. Cyril Barraud, an experienced painter-etcher who had studied and exhibited in London, set up a press in 1913 upon his arrival in Winnipeg. He taught Walter Phillips and George Fawcett worked on his press. Barraud produced carefully crafted images with expressive line and dramatic contrasts of plate tone. Phillips' early etchings show his mastery of sensitive expressive line, strong draughtsmanship and tonal contrasts. With these and later printmakers including LeMoine FitzGerald, Winnipeg would become a leading centre for prints.

In Toronto in 1912, the Graphic Arts Club was revitalized and renamed the Society of Graphic Art (SGA) with intentions of having a national membership and of touring exhibitions across Canada. Because the SGA did not particularly focus on printmaking, painter-etchers felt an increasing need for a separate society devoted exclusively to their concerns. Thus in 1918 the Society of Canadian Painter-Etchers was formed with officers W.J. Thomson, W.W. Alexander and Fred Haines. The two societies collaborated closely, membership often overlapped, and they organized the 1918 CNE exhibition which toured Canada.

By 1917, C. Barraud, G. Russell and C. Armington were contributing prints to the Canadian War Memorials

Fund (CWMF) to document the Canadian role in the First World War. In 1918 artists in Canada began to record the war effort on the home front: Lismer produced 16 lithographs of the Halifax harbour; C.W. Jefferys did lithographs of training camps; and Dorothy Stevens' etchings showed women at work in munitions and ship-building. Tovell considers this CWMF work a high-point in Canadian art as it "demonstrated that printmaking had become an integral aspect of Canadian art" (p.151).

Tovell's catalogue is a pioneering work on the period 1877-1920 and reflects exemplary and comprehensive scholarship. Information is meticulously detailed with extensive endnotes and their precision corrects previous assumptions. For example, John Hammond's encounter with Whistler was likely "no more than an afternoon's duration" while Whistler was on a sketching trip and would not have allowed for what previous scholars have speculated was an opportunity to etch.

There are minor flaws in this catalogue, some of which may have been eliminated by closer and more careful editing. The dense detail is at times difficult to follow and sometimes distracts from the main thesis. The discussion of numerous exhibitions and the constant rise and demise of societies is complicated and makes for monotonous reading, particularly in

"Erecting the Frame." It would have been helpful to have an appendix with a detailed chronology of events as well as a separate exhibition listing, noting participants, locations, etc. Some information is simply not clear, requiring rereading and searching about in the text. For example, in the discussion of T. Mower Martin on page 45, there are eleven "known" etchings but then we are told he "would prove to be one of Canada's most prolific 19th-century painter-etchers, producing at least 18 subjects dating from 1884 and 1885." We are also told in the section on the second *Black and White* exhibition in Montréal in 1888 that the "Canadian artist is nowhere in sight," but then that the "lone Canadian participant in the show was Henry Sandham" (p.51). This is simply confusing; the information would have been more usefully stated at the beginning of this section, rather than as an afterthought at the end. More importantly, it would have clearly drawn attention to the fact that Canadian painter-etchers were already being relegated to the sidelines in Canada by 1888. Some of the information in "The Influence of Foreign Instruction" (p.88), concerning the reasons for changes in education in Britain should have gone in the "Introduction" with its discussion of British art schools; there is too much information here that is tangential to the main thrust of the argument. Similarly it does not make sense, in

"Completing the Structure," to include Quebec City and Ontario in one section.

Some relevant information is missing. In the "Prologue," it would be useful to be reminded about the date of the invention of the printing press. In the "Introduction" we are told that the first datable artist's print is 1877 but not the name of the artist. Perhaps it came up later in the text but I missed it. Etchings made by women "amateurs" for the Upper Canada Provincial Exhibitions in the 1850's (p.35) is discussed in the section "Artist's Etching in Canada, before 1880." It is not safe to assume that women are necessarily amateurs, particularly in the absence of the prints. This is a fascinating bit of history worth uncovering for these could be the earliest artist etchings in Canada, apart from those by Elizabeth Simcoe from the 1790's which were printed in Britain.

This raises another interesting issue. It seems printmaking is indeed a democratic art in which women sometimes have had equal status with men. In Britain, they were allowed to be full members of the Royal Society of Painter-Etchers but were not admitted into the Royal Academy, which exhibited painting and sculpture. Etching was considered an appropriate activity for women, who were known as "Lady Etchers" and led to exhibitions devoted to women such as *The Work of the*

Women Etchers of America at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston in 1887, which included 388 prints by twenty-two artists.

It is not clear from Tovell's essay exactly what the situation was for women in Canada. Her text suggests that no women were included in any of the early printmakers' groups. Nor were they included in any print exhibitions in Canada in the 19th century and their involvement until 1920 was minimal, apart from that of Caroline Armington and Dorothy Stevens. Were they granted entry into the societies or allowed to exhibit? It would appear that prior to 1910 they were not. Canadian women clearly fared better internationally. Elizabeth Forbes in Britain produced extraordinarily fine drypoints and etchings, gaining an international reputation which has been sustained through her inclusion in 20th-century publications on British printmaking. Tovell considers her the finest Canadian painter-etcher of the nineteenth century.

The design of the catalogue is handsome and the layout is logical and clear. The overall structure of the book in four main sections works well. The link of image to text is excellent as the illustration and the relevant discussion usually occur on the same page. The cream paper conveys the historical look of the prints and the reproductions are clear, of good size and high quality. The many photographs of the artists is

of great benefit. The reproduction of all the prints in the exhibition provides an excellent historical framework to expand upon as new prints come to light. It would, however, have been helpful to have the medium cited in the captions as not all are etchings; some are drypoints and it requires much flipping back and forth to check the medium. Tovell's detailed comments on print methods are illuminating and evocative. In discussing Wyatt Eaton's prints we are told that "plate tone is used in a painterly manner to complement and accentuate the drawing. A favourite technique is to strengthen the dark, densely etched portions of the subject by juxtaposing them with an unmarked, cleanly wiped area of the plate"(p.59).

Overall the prints in this book are conservative and reflect 19th-century pictorial conventions. The images are generally illustrative and descriptive, conveying a quiet naturalism. Canadian prints of the 19th century are often stiff and formal and lack the impression of spontaneity and expressive gesture of European prints of the time. W.J. Thomson's etchings, such as *Niagara River, Queenston*, 1886 stand out because of his light touch and impressionistic rendering.

Artists who had the advantage of foreign instruction and the opportunity to see a wide variety of prints, produced high-quality work. Gagnon's etchings are notable for their delicacy

and clarity; *En Novembre*, 1904-1905, with its animated line and careful plate tone is richly atmospheric. The economy and expressive line in Elizabeth Forbes' *Dorothy No 2*, c.1883-1884 gives the work a very modern feel.

As the 20th century progressed, Canadian etchings became more expressive. The vivacity of Dorothy Stevens' line in *The Gamine*, c.1912, the lyrical line and atmosphere of T.G. Greene's *The Fisherman*, c.1911, S.H. Maw's precise, detailed delineation of Ely Cathedral in 1913 and Herbert Raine's richly atmospheric *Evening, the Canal, Montreal*, 1915, all demonstrate the increased sophistication of early 20th-century Canadian painter-etchers. As the rest of Canada began to become involved, we see the refined etchings by Cyril Barraud and Walter Phillips in Winnipeg and the evocative prints of Ivan Neilson from Quebec City. The wartime images of Lismer's ships in Halifax harbour and Dorothy Stevens' industrial scenes are powerful images. But none of these artists sought inspiration from contemporary *avant-garde* styles such as Cubism and Expressionism as did some American and European artists. They remained tied to a more conservative naturalism with its direct and literal transcription of the world.

Tovell has done a mammoth job in gathering so much detailed information on this unknown chapter of Canadian print history. This work will

remain the standard text and essential reference for years to come.

PATRICIA AINSLIE
Vice-President of Collections
Glenbow Museum, Calgary