



Fig. 1. George Berthon, *Elizabeth Campbell Mason*, 1887, oil on canvas, 35" x 27".
Private Collection, Montreal. [See Paikowsky article, p. 85]

A PORTRAIT BY GEORGE BERTHON

The history of nineteenth century Canadian painting is still an enigma. The mystery could be solved by increased publication of written material and by more exhibitions pertaining to the period; however, first the paintings must be found. The locating of little-known pictures is one of the most difficult problems faced by the researcher, especially one studying the works of a single artist. A great number of nineteenth century Canadian paintings are still to be found in the homes of private individuals who own a limited number of art works, consider them as family heirlooms and rarely publicize their existence. Discovery of such isolated paintings may be the result of a methodical process or, as in the case of the work discussed here, pure chance.

The portrait of *Elizabeth Campbell Mason* by George Théodore Berthon (Fig. 1) is in a small family collection owned by the grand-daughter of the sitter. No mention of the portrait is cited in William Colgate's lengthy article on the artist¹ and the owner believes the work was never loaned for public showing.

George Berthon (1802-1891) was established in Toronto by the early eighteen-forties² and quickly gained prominence as the leading portraitist of the city's aristocracy.³ His numerous formal portraits, notably those of the Robinson family remain as tributes to his neoclassic Victorian style. However a complete examination of Berthon's contribution has yet to be accomplished, especially one dealing with works from the last decade of his career, of which the Mason portrait is a prime example.

The painting of Elizabeth Mason (1845-1920) signed lower right "Berthon/1887" exemplifies his later style when the bright colouration and sharp outline found in his earlier portraits of the Robinson women⁴ had been replaced by subdued tones and a more painterly brushstroke. The blue and gold pattern of her grey silk dress is juxtaposed against a red drapery of similar intensity. Small patches of darker blue emerge at the base of the clouded background increasing the spatial depth. While Berthon continues his traditional use of props such as the chair and voluminous curtain, the delicate facial highlighting and softer rendering of shadowed areas create a striking contrast with the more brilliant illumination and highly delineated forms of the Robinson portraits. Mrs. Mason's pose and carriage is characteristic of Berthon's portrayal of elegance and self-assurance in his subjects. His sensitivity to her inner

nature, apparent in the portrayal of her eyes and mouth, allows for the depiction of a distinct personality, one not masked by Victorian sentiment. In Berthon's account book of payments received for commissions,⁵ an entry dated December 1887 notes receipt of seventy-five dollars from "Mrs. Mason".

Two half-length portraits of J. Herbert Mason, the sitter's husband and founder of the Canada Permanent Corporation were also painted by Berthon.⁶ One, in the same family collection, is neither signed nor dated but stylistic traits would indicate Berthon's authorship. Mr. Mason's portrait is smaller in scale and differs in background images although the use of similar light, colour and fluid brushstroke would suggest that both works were painted in the same period.⁷

The portrait of Elizabeth Mason is one example of the many little-known pictures found in family collections. Berthon's account book supplies the names of numerous individuals whose portraits could probably be found in similar private holdings.⁸ Only with the investigation of these unpublicized paintings will there be a truer understanding of Berthon's artistic development in particular and the nature of nineteenth century Canadian painting in general.

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Notes:

¹ The most complete biography of Berthon is to be found in William Colgate, "George Théodore Berthon," *Ontario Historical Society's 'Papers and Records'*, XXIV (1942), pp. 85-103.

² Various dates have been proposed for Berthon's arrival in Toronto. J. Russell Harper, *Early Painters and Engravers in Canada* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1970), pp. 30-1 states he came to Toronto in 1837, then travelled to England returning in 1844; Colgate p. 85 dates his arrival 1841 while Frederick Challener (notes in the possession of the Art Gallery of Ontario) writes that he arrived in 1844 with Hoppner Meyer; Harper p. 222, dates Meyer's arrival as c. 1841.

³ See Colgate for a lengthy listing of portraits of public officials, members of the judiciary and private individuals by Berthon.

⁴ Two important portraits of members of the Robinson family are *Three Robinson Sisters* c. 1846 and *Portrait of Lady Robinson with her Daughter Mary* 1847, both in the Art Gallery of Ontario.

⁵ Berthon's ledger, *Monies Received* began in May 1866 and is located in the Art Gallery of Ontario. Colgate, p. 97 states that none of Berthon's account books are extant.

⁶ Mason (1827-1911) founded the Canada Permanent in 1855 and the company possesses a small half-length portrait inscribed "Berthon/1880." The style is similar to that of his earlier works. No mention of either portrait of J. Herbert Mason is found in Colgate's article. A portrait of Mason by Sir Edmund Wylie Grier dated 1900 is in Havergal College, Toronto.

⁷ Payments from "H. Mason, Esq." of \$20., \$60. and \$60. are recorded for May 13, 1879 and October 2 and April 1, 1889 respectively. It is difficult to determine to which paintings these latter payments refer.

⁸ Colgate p. 102, records a portrait of Frederick Mason, son of J. Herbert. The present whereabouts of the painting is unknown and there is no reference to the work in Berthon's ledger.