

CANADIAN WATERCOLOURS AND
DRAWINGS IN THE ROYAL ONTARIO
MUSEUM

Mary Allodi

2 vols.

The Royal Ontario Museum, (1974)

\$30.00

A PEOPLE'S ART: PRIMITIVE, NAÏVE,
PROVINCIAL, AND FOLK PAINTING
IN CANADA

J. Russell Harper

Univ. of Toronto Press, (1974) \$22.50

The deluxe book is one convention of a more elegant age that is still with us, though it serves a very different purpose than that originally intended by early publishers of the genre. Today it is not so much the mark of intelligent patronage by a discerning aristocracy as the vehicle by which scholarly publication is made palatable, and therefore possible, in a popular market. Russell Harper's *A People's Art* is a handsomely presented book (by the Univ. of Toronto Press's incomparable designer, Allan Fleming) in the large format (more than a foot square) that has become popular in recent years, while Mary Allodi's *Canadian Watercolours in the Royal Ontario Museum* is an equally sumptuous work (by the ROM's John Grant), slightly smaller in format (because oblong) but heftier as it consists of two volumes in a suitably sturdy slipcase (weighing in at more than seven pounds). Art historians whose subject matter has broad appeal, or whose material is given popular appeal by very attractive presentation, may be genuinely grateful when lavish and yet sympathetic publishing makes it possible to do justice to a subject through the medium that is pejoratively known as "the coffee-table book".

Yet there are pitfalls inherent to this mode of publication. On the one hand, to judge by some other recent books, the temptation is evidently enormous to hurry into print with certain titles that fall into the area that publishers call "picture books". It frequently happens that even well-written, well-documented

and well-illustrated books are issued in a way that is painfully haphazard as regards design and layout, reproduction, or even editorial matter (including things like annotation, bibliographies and indices). On the other hand, the very high standards of workmanship required in the more distinguished examples of the illustrated book (complicated by such expensive and technically exacting reproduction processes as duotone, photogravure and colour) lead to prolonged periods "in press", costly production delays, and critical time lags between the awakening of keen public awareness of the area of study and final presentation of the publication. (Univ. of Toronto Press has had more than its share of such problems for various reasons, and Russell Harper's book is a case in point: publication of the volume followed by nearly a year the public presentation of the same material in the traveling exhibition of "People's Art: Naïve Art in Canada" in 1973.

In the case of the less happily conceived works, the results may be disastrous. For, in search of popular sales some publishers virtually pander to what they take to be a market trend and are utterly indiscriminating as regards the quality or importance of a work; they rush to bring out books that are indifferent, or outright bad, on a subject that is suddenly perceived to be popular. The results may properly be called "disastrous" because the Canadian market is frankly a limited one: a book that sells a few thousand copies is reckoned a best-seller, but few books can be published profitably (or even on a break-even basis) in such short press-runs, especially books that are as expensive to produce as these large-scale, heavily illustrated works on special paper, with durable bindings, etc. It is therefore a common observation that one bad book may, in a very real sense, drive out another that is good when, by chance, two on related subjects appear simultaneously. Thus, at

Christmas 1974, there was a spate of books on collecting Canadiana, especially furniture: apart from those on clearly separate aspects of the subject (one on Québec furnishings and another on Ontario), there were two general works, one with a scholarly thrust but still attractively presented and universally readable, the other entirely popular in intention and of questionable value; the lesser of the two inevitably affected the sales (i.e. the economic success) of the other. One hears with concern that a work of scholarship on church architecture that has been in preparation for half a dozen years faces a formidable challenge from at least three related works reportedly under preparation for the coming season: we may be as well churched by Christmas 1975 as we were well furnished in 1974. Unhappily, if the industry is unwilling, or unable, to exercise its critical responsibilities, the spiralling costs of paper, printing, and so on, will eventually take their own grim toll.

In the meanwhile, a book like Harper's may maintain standards of relevance and intelligence in an area that is serious yet within general readership, while Allodi's contribution sets new standards of usefulness among reference works in the Canadian field. As both are models of presentation, in general, but have short texts, one only wishes that there were more to them by way of critical matter, and more of them as types of Canadian art history.

Though short, Russell Harper's generally polished text is far the longest and most perceptive that has appeared on the subject of "primitive" art in Canada. It places emphasis on the broad milieu (cultural, social and economic) and the physical context (spatial and geographic) of these works of "vernacular" art. (It may be remarked that keen interest in the vernacular architecture of this country has paralleled the growth of interest in comparable painting in recent years and both now enjoy widespread

affection.) What Harper calls the "artistic expression" and "universality of meaning" inherent in such works have long been recognized, but the emphasis on their original setting is new.

Harper points out that works of "High or classical art . . . have been appreciated primarily as aesthetic objects and enjoyed in isolation from the world that gave them birth." So much more the pity: high and vernacular art must be seen as equally specific responses under given conditions, even though both embody general kinds of experiences at more or less inspired levels. This emphasis on a degree of specificity, in regional styles and local subject matter, is also new in Canadian art history. Enthusiasm is not a conspicuous virtue of Canadians, but that of Harper for his subject is both obvious and appropriate. Bashful admiration of the vernacular (whether in painting, architecture or speech) would be a contradiction in terms: none of these is for the faint-hearted. At the same time, Harper's text is studded with unique, pointed comments and citations, including a number on high art, which lend substance to the enthusiasm.

The classification of vernacular art into four separate areas by Harper is helpful in theory. In ascending order (rather like the eighteenth-century academic convention that ranked still life below landscape, landscape below portraiture, and all of these as inferior to history painting), he distinguishes among the naïve (of "child-like utter simplicity"), the primitive ("lack[ing] the technical knowledge of the trained painter"), the provincial (characterized by "stylistic inspiration from a centre elsewhere"), and the folk manifestations ("ethnic" and "traditional" in character.)

Finally, it is the spirit in which Harper approaches his subject that may be most helpful (even if it is sometimes uncritical in the academic sense): this at-

titude is open, positive and comprehensive. Whatever variety of art, Harper sees in such works a true reflection of the diversity of this land, "a love of country in myriad communities on the part of many peoples from many backgrounds, each speaking in his own tongue", and begs us to "open our minds" so that "these diverse parts can be blended into a strong and real Canada".

A few quirks may be mentioned. The notes are not at the bottom of the page, nor at the end of the chapter, but quite separate from the text, following the plates — a common but not very helpful practice. There are no plate references to the specific works that are cited in the text. There are other works that are referred to but not illustrated; it would have been useful to include small text figures for these. There are a number of typographic errors (for example, pp. 6, 10, 106), including several on one page. One might question the attribution of two very different works to one hand (nos. 4 and 7) and the dating of at least one picture seems erratic (no. 9).

It is one strength of *A People's Art* that very disparate works are brought together. These are thematically arranged in nine groups ("The First Canadians", "The Rising Towns and Villages", "The Sporting Life", etc.). But it is a weakness that in certain combinations works are incongruously juxtaposed. The most serious shortcoming, however, is the fact that the commentary on the plates sometimes consists of rather heterogeneous information that is not strictly relevant to the image, and there is only sparing visual analysis. Penetrating description and significant interpretation are needed to train the eye and inform the mind of students of all ages, general readers included.

Both the brief chapters and the short picture captions might have been enriched by a broader perspective. A few succinct comparisons would have been

helpful: for example, Thomas Davies' Canadian work along the St Lawrence and the same artist's work in the Caribbean or Mediterranean; William Richards versus the much better known Peter Rindisbacher; Pierre LeBer and the limners of New England; Sister Marie Barbier and painters of the American South-West; the ex-voto paintings of New France and the persistence of similar traditions elsewhere; Mrs J. R. Leggett's "Memorial to A. Martin" and English or American memorials in stitchery and paint; Richard Coates' emblematic banners for the Davidites, or Children of Peace (a Quaker splinter group), and Samuel Hicks' symbolic paintings of the Quaker concept of peace in the New World to the South; and so on. Some such comparisons are drawn, but more often than not they are very general. Yet, as Canadians move further into the present period of self-awareness and into an appreciation of our peculiarly polyglot cultural heritage, we need to remind ourselves that there is a still broader context than that regional one which Harper conveys so well.

Turning to Mary Allodi's *Canadian Watercolours and Drawings in the Royal Ontario Museum*, one is tempted to describe the work as monumental. In the first place, there are 2220 entries in these two substantial volumes that, taken together, are the size of a metropolitan telephone directory. Secondly, the amount of work represented by the volumes has been colossal: it has been in progress more than a decade. Thirdly, it surveys the whole range of the major collection of pre-Confederation watercolours in this country, illustrating many of the most important pieces acquired up to the end of 1972.

The work is a revelation in terms of the variety and quality of material that it makes available to those interested in Canadian art. The regional distribution of such items may surprise some readers, for there are pieces that would be of

interest in every province in the country. Moreover, the calibre of certain items can hardly be matched locally in either private or public collections. W. R. Best's lithographs of St John's are well known in Newfoundland, for example, but those handsome prints are stiff and wooden compared to the fresh and lively watercolour of St Thomas's Church and the city, as viewed from Government House, which is reproduced here. Astonishing numbers of things of this sort occur throughout the catalogue and indicate the national character of the collection. Sigmund Samuel, who added the Canadiana Gallery to the Royal Ontario Museum in order to house the splendid collections that he gave to the ROM, sought out such material in the United Kingdom in the period 1914-39, and as a result the British topographers are especially well represented. But occasionally a native-born Canadian of stature, like Alicia Killaly, leaps from the page. A great deal of useful information is compressed into the thumbnail sketches of the artists and into the still shorter notes that accompany some of the entries, for which one is most grateful.

The range of disciplines in which these materials will be useful is very broad. the architectural historian especially will find much that is invaluable since the watercolour medium was used more than any other in the period to record the man-made, constructed environment (an environment that has suffered devastating change subsequently in all too many cases).

Following a short, historical foreword by Donald Webster, the Curator of Canadiana at the ROM, Mary Allodi's spare "Introduction" is as straightforward as much of the material: "The early painters of the Canadian scene generally had two intentions: to describe the physical contours of a new and developing land, and to enjoy the exercise of painting what they saw in translucent

washes of colour." One only wishes that something longer and more definitive than any of the slight publications on the subject had been included; considering Mrs Allodi's noted breadth of knowledge in the field, a longer essay would have been a welcome contribution.

The selection and arrangement of the material is a model of its kind. The entries are numbered and grouped alphabetically by artist except for the anonymous works (at the end), which are arranged by province or subject matter. The book is therefore not paginated because it is self-indexing by both catalogue number and artist (or subject) and instead is very sensibly keyed in the lower, outer corner of each page with surnames, or placenames, or subjects, making it extremely easy to use. In fact, the use made of typography, including that in the excellent index, is sophisticated in conception and distinguished in effect. The selection of items illustrated has concentrated, very rightly it seems, on conveying the full range of the collection rather than giving a strictly proportional view of the holdings. Thus, the Armstrong, Cockburn, Duncan, Kane, Smyth and Whitefield entries, which might have swamped the enterprise because of the tremendous number of their work (admittedly among the more valuable baggage on board), are given their due but not permitted to actually upset the boat. the oblong page format accommodates as many as four columns of entries, is suited to the shape of the works, and is filled to varying degrees — by reproductions one to four columns in width — in a way that is consistent with the interest of the work.

The colour reproductions are of exceptional quality. It is worth giving Caesar his due here: the handsome presentation (with so many reproductions, such large plates, so much use of colour, and such fine binding) and the reasonable price (by today's standards) must be due to the enlightened patron-

age of Xerox of Canada, whose grant made possible the publication of the book. Every reader may have his own crack at favourites that have not been illustrated in the colour plates; out of hundreds of likely candidates, this writer could cite W. W. Lyttleton's quite extraordinary panorama of Halifax Harbour, a stunning work of forceful and original character for its period, but not a work that can be adequately conveyed in black and white (even in the three-column reproduction).

The black and white reproductions are sometimes less satisfying. Many are extremely clear, but too many are disappointingly fuzzy. And while the layout is consistent and well thought out in terms of use, there are two bothersome shortcomings in the design. A few of the illustrations are simply too small and, as if to compensate, a couple of these have been bled to the edge of the page with unfortunate results. Then too, while a few cuts of monograms, blind stamps, and watermarks have been included, some details used to enliven pages of catalogue entries are pointless (like the one in the Cockburn section) since they were evidently not photographed again but simply enlarged from fuzzy prints and therefore convey no further information. But these are slight imperfections: few authors fare so well with their publishers.

In fact, the general impression is splendid and although Mary Allodi honours her associates in the list of acknowledgements, clearly the work is her own special triumph. One is grateful that, for a change, Catherine Parr Traill's damning apologia of 1854, "Any shortcomings that may be noticed by our friends, must be excused on the score of the work being wholly Canadian in its execution," simply does not apply.

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PUBLICATIONS FOR REVIEW

Bergeron, Claude, *L'Avenir de la Colline Parlementaire*, Québec, Editions du Pélican, 1974. Pp 150; 31 ills.

Gauthier, Raymonde, *Les Tabernacles Anciens du Québec des XVIIe, XVIIIe et XIXe Siècles*, Québec, Ministère des Affaires Culturelles, 1974. Pp 112, 39 ills. \$1.00

Hill, Charles C., *Canadian Painting in the Thirties*, Ottawa, The National Gallery of Canada, 1975. Pp 223; paper \$12.00

Lord, Barry, *The History of Painting in Canada Toward a People's Art*, Toronto, NC Press, 1974. Pp 256; 230 ills. paper \$6.95, cloth \$11.95.

Noppen, Luc, *Notre-Dame-Des-Victoires à la Place Royale de Québec*, Québec, Ministère des Affaires Culturelles, 1974, Pp 118; 42 ills. \$1.00.