

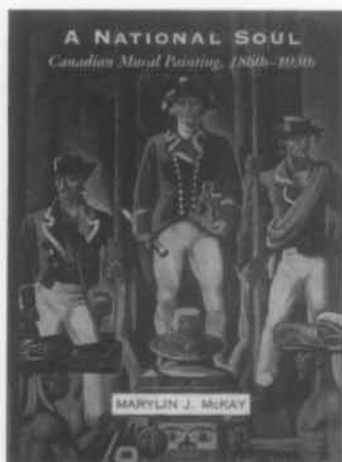
A NATIONAL SOUL

**Canadian Mural Painting,
1860s – 1930s**

Marylin J. MCKAY

McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002

320 p., 8 col., 62 b/w illus., \$65



Marylin McKay's much-needed book on mural painting in Canada responds to an absence of literature on the history of mural art in this country. The book is not a survey of Canadian mural production as one might expect and is not, therefore, organized for easy reference by artist, subject, year, theme, or location.

McKay broadly sifts her selective review of seventy-odd years of public and private mural paintings into thematic groupings, richly evoked by such chapter headings as: "Commercial Mural Paintings: 'The Glorification of Man's Handiwork';" "The 'Disappearing' Native in English Canadian Mural Paintings: 'But He is Gone and I Am Here';" and "Progress, Patriarchy, and Public Library Murals: 'Whilst a Sweet-faced Woman Finds the Books'." All ten chapters promise a close examination of the ideological underpinnings of mural commissions. The murals McKay lists in each chapter expediently

corroborate what she believes to be their defining ideology. "From approximately the 1830s to the 1930s," writes McKay, "the hegemonic population of modern Western nation-states – enfranchised, middle-class, Christian men – supported the production of thousands of mural paintings that were generally designed to glorify the contemporary features of modern Western nation-states: popular sovereignty, the material progress of capitalism, distinct cultural identity..., Christianity, and patriarchy" (p.193).

If all mural paintings completed during Canada's post-Confederation moment are the product of the authoritative ideology of the modern Western nation-state, then perhaps there is no need for elaboration of specific examples. Yet, one is left wishing for more discussion of the images. Only in Chapter Five – "Catholic Church Mural Paintings: 'Reflections of Our Community's Soul'" – is there a deeper examination of the artists' visual language. Here, McKay neatly summarizes discussions of the "ultramontane aesthetic," described as a response to the clerico-nationalist ideology of Quebec prior to World War II, and identified in the work of (for example) Ozias Leduc. McKay concludes that francophone mural painting for the Catholic Church ultimately supported the very same values of the modern Western nation-state seen in Anglophone Protestant church mural paintings, or any other Canadian mural paintings for that matter, produced between the 1860s and 1930s. The ultramontane aesthetic, in other words, was but evidence of a tell-tale glorification of a distinct society, the leadership of men, and a rationalization of the negative aspects of modern industrialization and urbanization that shaped – as a result of bulldoggish capitalism – post-Confederation mural art. The argument is very lean.

McKay approaches the history of mural painting as a phenomenon of the economic progress of Western society. How can one argue with her suggestion that murals – whether in the private homes of the *nouveau riche* like the automobile magnate R. Samuel McLaughlin or the new public venues of private wealth (banks, stock exchanges, cruise ships, hotels and theatres, etc.) – are the excrescences of "the aristocracy of modern life?" (p.64). She's right, I think, but one feels a lingering concern for the absence of any close discussion of the images and the contexts of their execution. A case in point is J.E.H. and Thoreau MacDonald's designs for the Concourse Building in Toronto, discussed in Chapter Three: "Commercial Mural Paintings: 'The Glorification of Man's Handiwork'." She cites the Concourse Building as a monument to entrepreneurial triumph in which images of a Canadian arcadia and industry intermingle in the interior and exterior decoration. What was J.E.H. MacDonald

thinking when he designed Thunderbirds for the exterior top of the building? Did he, as McKay suggests, invoke the Thunderbird's support for the bloody business of Western capital gain? I'm anxious to know more about what appears to be an extraordinary appropriation of Aboriginal symbols, particularly in the context of design history.

In Chapter Seven, "The 'Disappearing' Native in English Canadian Mural Paintings," McKay broaches the issue of the representation of Aboriginal Canadians in mural paintings of the late nineteenth-century, where they figure as "unwitting witnesses of material progress." The subsequent absence of First Nations figures from mural painting of the early twentieth-century confirms for McKay their obsolescence as members of Canada's snowballing nation-state. We see MacDonald's 1923 mural design for the Royal Canadian Academy of Art's civic mural contest, titled *Friendly Meeting, Early Canada*, as a hateful reiteration of a focus on capitalist economic growth. The author argues "that mural paintings suggested that native people had disappeared because they had not been interested in, or were unable to keep up with, material progress." The "vanishing Indian" myth prevails here. The mural images of First Nations are viewed, in McKay's roughly Marxist analysis, from a distinctly non-Aboriginal perspective. Mural paintings may have been pompous products of material wealth, but society – Canadian society – remains unwaveringly more complex and rich than the thin crust of WASP or Franco-Catholic producers of mural art. How these images shaped Canadian identity asks the question of whose identity constitutes Canada?

Mural art produced in Canada between the 1860s and the 1930s defines for McKay a distinctly "Canadian" period. A nationalist urge, she argues, orders monumental image making in this country from Confederation to the new internationalism of the post-World War II boom. The notion that Canada shrank into a parochial culture is implicit in McKay's chapter "A New Paradigm for Kitsch," when "a unified body of work" glorified the modern nation-state of Canada. This kitsch nationalism underlies, continues McKay, the histories of Canadian art written by J. Russell Harper, Dennis Reid, and Charles Hill. The author's argument here becomes elaborate, for she considers the evolution of distinctly Canadian landscape and historical subjects by a white, enfranchised, Christian (English and French) middle class to be perfectly fitting to the canon of (Euro-) Canadian art established by Harper, Reid, and Hill in the 1960s and 70s. Their conscious rejection of mural painting within the historical canon of Canadian art is the result of the narrow lens through which they constructed a national art history: "these scholars wanted to illustrate their books with

art that glorified the salient features of Canada as a modern nation-state. Logically, then, they could have included the mural paintings that had been produced from the 1860s to the 1930s as a means of evoking nationalistic sentiment” (p.7). Does McKay wish to inscribe mural painting into a demonstrably flawed or (more accurately) preliminary history of Canadian art?

McKay ascribes the “conscious rejection” of mural painting in Canada by Harper, Reid and Hill to their reliance on a modernist paradigm of aesthetic progress that necessarily marginalizes representational art as anti-modern. I’m never sure what writers mean when they describe representational painting as anti-modern, especially when populism and cultural progress were so closely bound in Canada after World War I, just as they were in much of Western Europe. McKay clearly locates Canadian mural painting produced between the 1860s and 1930s within an international (European-based) Mural Movement. Furthermore, McKay’s frustration with the focus set by Harper, Reid, and Hill on painting produced in central Canada is complicated by her admission that Ontario – especially Toronto – provides the richest history of mural production in Canada. “The emphasis throughout this book is on mural painting installed in Toronto buildings. Apart from Catholic Church muralists in Quebec, Toronto mural painters were more active than mural painters in other parts of Canada: “As early as 1895, they also formed professional associations for the promotion of mural painting” (p.14). One cannot help but feel that the book accidentally reaffirms “an Art for a Nation,” to recall Hill’s provocatively titled 1995 publication, *The Group of Seven: Art for a Nation*, that describes the Toronto-based Group’s struggle to define Canadian art.

McKay’s book, *A National Soul: Canadian Mural Painting, 1860s – 1930s*, demands our attention, despite the problems of setting mural painting apart as a discreet area of Canada’s visual culture. She certainly makes me rethink Canada’s art history, and the false divisions between easel and mural painting, the decorative arts and architecture, and advertising, that ever obscure the “big picture.”

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