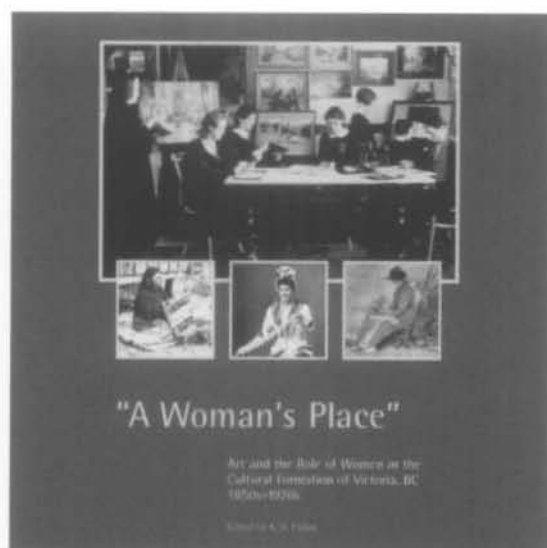




"A WOMAN'S PLACE"

**Art and the Role of Women in the Cultural Formation
of Victoria, BC 1850s-1920s**

K.A. FINLAY (ed.)

University of Victoria: Maltwood Art Museum and Gallery, 2004
129p., illus., exhibition catalogue

Since the 1976 opening of the much discussed exhibition, *Women Artists 1550-1950*, in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the publication and re-publication of Anne Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin's accompanying catalogue, numerous exhibitions have featured female artists. One of the most exciting of these was the Liverpool exhibition *Women's Works* (1988) organised by Jane Sellars. Sellars selected about seventy works of art by women artists from the permanent collections of the National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside – a conglomerate of a major public gallery, the Walker Art Gallery, and two private collections, the Lady Lever Art Gallery and Sudley Art Gallery. The result was a comprehensive analysis of about one hundred and fifty years of exhibiting and

collecting of women's art in one location. This kind of examination provides insightful material about a relatively cohesive body of work and, in addition, offers a relatively precise picture of what exactly was purchased and displayed during specific time periods. As Sellars contends, "although only 13 paintings by women were bought between 1877 and 1900, as a group they present an outstandingly good representation of the kind of art activity in which women were engaged at the time" (p.15).

Women's works are generally under-represented in large public collections and in exhibitions mounted in their space; and in the case of the Merseyside collection they account for 2.7% of their holdings. The production of women artists continues to circulate on the edges of art historical and museum literature and now forms one narrative concerning a number of under-represented or absent cultural groups. Moira Simpson, for example, in *Making Representations: Museums in the Post-Colonial Era* (1996), examines the challenges faced by traditional western museums and the growth of new museums established by diverse groups – such as Native Americans, African Americans and Aborigines, that have been ignored or marginalized by mainstream museums. In their recent collection of essays, *Singular Women: Writing the Artist* (2003), Kristen Frederickson and Sarah E. Webb highlight the large unanswerable question – how to write about women artists in a "theoretical climate of poststructuralist scepticism about individuality, originality and hierarchical privileging" (p.1).

A recent exhibition at the Maltwood Art Museum and Gallery in Victoria provides an outstanding example of how a thoughtful curator might provide a viewing experience and a written text that explores the cultural productions of women while, at the same time, situating the art practices within the complicated terrain of difference in the areas of ethnicity, race, and gender. With the assistance of a community arts program, Karen Finlay curated "*A Woman's Place: Art and the Role of Women in the Cultural Formation of Victoria, BC 1850s-1920s*," and edited the highly informative catalogue that accompanied the exhibition.¹ Like Jane Sellars's Liverpool project, the Victoria venture worked with collections already present in four historic sites in the city: Carr House, Craigflower Schoolhouse and Manor, Helmcken House, and Point Ellice House; but also examined other collections and archives throughout Vancouver Island. The goals of the project are clearly delineated: "to shed light" on women's art practices in one locale (p.1), to reject the art and craft hierarchy (p.7), and to designate the selected time frame as relevant and meaningful. These goals add to the value of the story presented in the catalogue as well as in a viewing of the exhibition. In her eloquent introduction, Finlay contends that, in the 1930s Canada "witnessed the first critical mass of professional women artists, which, in a sense, demarcates the end of our story. The research here has focused, instead, on the art-learning and art-making of earlier women who enjoyed few of the supports of an artistic career" (p.4).

The exhibition and the catalogue acknowledge the difficulties always present in research on the historically marginalized – especially the lack of archival documents to support the investigation of often anonymous objects. Finlay deftly negotiates her way through a brief but cogent discussion of the social construction of gender “that has amplified the role of men and limited the role of women,” and the conterminous problem of how to “recover ‘lost’ women artists without turning them into heroines (or eccentrics), that is, without losing sight of their intense negotiation with societal ‘norms’.” (p.5). This problem plagues feminist art historical writing, which is most frequently caught between the individualising of the genius artist so prevalent in modernism, and the “death of the author” mandate of postmodernism. Feminism owes much of its theoretical framework to postmodernism but functions uneasily within what remain masculinist trends in postmodernism. Rosemary Betterton has summarised the long-familiar debate: “At one extreme is the recognition that the traditional gendered notion of the artist in western cultural theory has to be deconstructed, taken apart. At the other, the need to retain a sense of identity, a place from which to speak or act as women, individually or collectively, in order to contest and to transform culturally given meanings.”² This quotation describes part of the fraught arena in which the champions of women’s art endeavour to research and write. Another equally troubled and difficult area is that of inclusion – who precisely constitutes the unstable category “woman”? Once again, Finlay clearly names the problems and then proceeds to openly acknowledge the desires and the limitations of the Victoria project.

Victoria as a British city in a colonised area was itself, like “woman,” an “unstable category.” Part settler culture and part native, even those designations were erratic, inconsistent and changing. The settler culture included the expected British demographic but also included diasporic groups; by 1858 Victoria’s population included a substantial Jewish community, Black settlers from California, and Chinese immigrants. In addition, the Native population was composed of heterogeneous groups from the west coast area. However, while desire informs research projects, it cannot always obtain results and pragmatism must enter the endeavour at some point. Finlay discusses ethnicity and class, then acknowledges the limitations of her projects: “We managed to assemble a small selection of First Nations artefacts from the Victoria area, but we have been singularly unsuccessful in illuminating the artistic production of, for example, women of the early Chinese community” (p.6).

The exhibition successfully strikes a harmonious balance between the display of anonymous craft and the inclusion of the most famous of Victoria’s female artists, Emily Carr. It is cleverly orchestrated to include the expected pieces by Carr but to also display rarely-seen work that conflates the terms craftsperson, designer, artist (for example, her *Eagle Rug*) and work that addresses absence (for

example, her picture *Salish Woman Weaving*, 1909). And rather than highlighting Carr's contribution, the exhibition gives equal or greater space to, for example, British-born Eleanor Hill Fellows (1831-1926), whose drawing *Group of Indian Curiosities* (1867) elegantly documents "an array of First Nation artefacts, including several items of basketry" (p.41-2). British-born Sarah Lindley Crease (1826-1922) also plays a significant role in the exhibition and in the catalogue. Crease "grew up in a very cultured milieu" (p.43), studied art, and most fortunately has a well-documented archive. An engraving after one of her watercolours of Yates Street was published in a nineteenth-century travel book as well as in the *Illustrated London News*, thereby attesting to the dissemination of her art beyond Vancouver Island.

As might be expected in any discussion of Victoria during this period, Hannah Maynard's photography also plays a major role. Although her work has been published elsewhere, this study of Maynard is one of the most thorough available to readers and promises to encourage more research on this unusual and prolific artist. A number of her photographs are included in the exhibition and in the catalogue, and these document certain problems and issues that link to the broader concerns of the project itself. For example, the reproduction of *Chan Sui in Native Chinese Costume*, c.1900, provides an opportunity to examine Chinese participation in the area; *Mrs. Carlo [Petronilla] Bossi*, c.1890, presents evidence about women's art practice by showing a late-nineteenth century Italian immigrant standing before her painting easel. *Mrs. Dennis Reginald Harris, née Martha Douglas*, c.1880, captures an English settler participating in the dressing-up so popular at the time in Britain and in English-speaking colonies: "fêtes and theatricals involving historic pageantry were common forms of entertainment" (p.94). Martha Harris is dressed as a lace maker and she is holding a length of handmade lace. The photograph can be directly linked to the late-nineteenth century British revival of cottage crafts and also offers an opportunity to discuss lace making in Victoria which, inspired by Harris, was taught at a lace club in Victoria.

Lace, embroidery, hooked rugs, and pottery were all objects displayed at the Island Arts and Crafts Club (later the Island Arts and Crafts Society) that began in 1909 and which modelled itself upon London's Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society formed in 1888. Although arts and crafts in Victoria reflected its British progenitor in many instances, it differed in the attention paid to native artefacts and replications of those artefacts. Emily Carr, for example, displayed "three hooked rugs with First Nations motifs at the annual Island Arts and Crafts Society exhibition" in 1916 (p.111). Finley skilfully organised the catalogue material to address the issues around Carr's appropriation of native imagery while at the same time, she introduced the relationship between art made by First Nations women and tourism. Although Carr advanced the concept of reproducing native art as a way of keeping "Indian designs" alive, Finlay argues that "First Nations women

had been keeping many of these designs alive in their own handicrafts for some time" (p.111). Vancouver Island native women "had traditionally taken an active role in the production and sale of innovative handicrafts to non-Native residents and tourists" (p.111). These works are more difficult to find and, when located, the artist is often unknown, a fact exemplified by the inclusion of Coast Salish baskets in the exhibition. However, a basket made by Salish artist Ellen Roberts (née Ka-hale-ee) suggests that more research might be done in this area.

Two European-trained painters might act as bookends for this exhibition, framing the strengths of the display and suggesting future directions: Margaret Catherine Maclure and Sophia Theresa "Sophie" Pemberton. Margaret Maclure was a founding member of the Island Arts and Crafts Society and is best-remembered for her "ethnographical" portraits of First Nations people. *Two Native Women and a Child* (dated only "19?") is a typically generic representation of "three generations of First Nations women: a grandmother sits wrapped in a blanket smoking a pipe, while a younger woman knits what looks like a 'Cowichan Indian Sweater,' and a child watches" (p.106-7). The picture details the practice of knitting for tourists, giving viewers a glimpse of First Nations' craft making and offering a view of women's lives. Sophie Pemberton, on the other hand, produced highly accomplished visions of Victoria's elite and Victorian womanhood; she had trained in England and France and her paintings appeared regularly in international exhibitions. Both women were part of the settler culture and the story of women artists of Vancouver Island resides between them. Finlay presents a superb picture of the life and work of women in a specific location during a specific time and the result is a "must read" for anyone interested in women's history and art history. The exhibition catalogue, which is outstandingly well-researched, should also provide a springboard for further scholarship. Finally, it provides a glimpse into Canadian art history that will be of interest beyond Canada's borders. It is, in a much broader sense, an examination of variations and differences within settler culture that will resonate meaningfully in this era of transnationalism and globalization, where studies of the local provide evocative discussions that are "unfixed, contested and multiple."³ *"A Woman's Place"* raises questions, stimulates debate and challenges scholars to pick up where Finlay has left off – to learn more about women's art production in Canada. It remains an experience that leaves one wanting more.

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Notes

1 Finlay edited and curated “*A Woman’s Place*” with editorial assistance from Tusa Shea; catalogue entries were written by Finlay, Adrienne Munro and Tusa Shea with contributions by Sherry Cournoyer, Kate Daley, Jane Gates, Jennifer Iredale, Tina Lowery, Olivia Thornburn, and Julia Tugwell. The putting together of the exhibition and the catalogue represents a collaborative project between Finlay and her graduate and undergraduate students.

2 Rosemary BETTERTON, *Intimate Distance: Women, Artists and the Body* (London: Routledge, 1996), 164.

3 Doreen MASSEY, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 5. For further discussion, see also, Rosi BRAIDOTTI, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Chandra TALPADE MOHANTY, “Feminist Encounters: Locating the Politics of Experience,” in *Destabilizing Theory: Contemporary Feminist Debates*, ed. Michèle Barrett and Anne Phillips (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 74–92; or Caren KAPLAN, “Resisting Autobiography: Outlaw Genres and Transnational Feminist Subjects,” in *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women’s Autobiography*, ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 115–38.