

Women and the Artistic Field: Cultural Production in the Canadian Context

This special issue of the *Journal of Canadian Art History* brings together a selection of papers stemming from the 2012 Montreal conference of the Canadian Women Artists History Initiative (CWAHI). In Canada, as elsewhere, the study of women's contributions to visual and material culture has increased dramatically over recent decades; moreover, consideration of women's art has broadened the range of issues, objects and practitioners open to art-historical inquiry. The 2012 CWAHI conference asked participants to consider this expanded terrain and the state of research on it. What aspects of previous scholarship on women and art in Canada are still vital today? What new approaches are emerging? And what remains to be achieved?

With 54 papers and 195 participants, the responses to these questions encompassed a far greater wealth of ideas than a journal special issue can accommodate. The most complete record of the conference as an historical event is to be found in videos available on the CWAHI website (cwahi.concordia.ca). A number of presentations have also been expanded for publication elsewhere,¹ and these give a sense of the breadth of topics discussed and the approaches employed, which ranged from methodological inquiry to statistical investigation. Thus, for example, Kristy Holmes asked us to think critically about whether the project of developing a specifically *Canadian* approach to feminist art history is one still worth pursuing, while Joyce Zemans updated her classic accounting of the institutional status of women and the arts in Canada.² Given these resources, this *JCAH/AHAC* special issue aims not to document the 2012 conference but, rather, to bring together a group of papers that enables consideration of its guiding questions through one particular perspective: that of the "artistic field."

The term references the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. For Bourdieu, the artistic field is a profoundly social and relational arena of forces and possibilities: a terrain of positions and position-takings marked by struggles over the boundaries of the field itself and control of the material and symbolic resources that circulate within it.³ The current special issue is divided into two groups of papers, each of which addresses the concept

of an artistic field. The first group – including articles by Andrew Nurse, Kirk Niergarth, Erin Morton and Anithe de Carvalho – analyses different aspects of the artistic field in Canada: its historical emergence, its rules and norms, the position of individual women artists within it, and its strategic deployment by governments and public history makers. The second grouping – with papers by Samantha Burton, Carolyn MacHardy, Patricia Sheppard, Elaine C. Paterson, and Catherine MacKenzie – works to turn readers’ attention to the dialogically complementary issue of Canada in the artistic field. Whether explicitly or implicitly, these articles ask us to situate a concern for Canadian experience within larger fields of cultural production – notably those produced within the context of empire or related to its evangelical urge. Taken together, the papers’ engagement with these larger familial, political, socio-economic and devotional contexts push at the geographic and conceptual boundaries that have characterized histories of “Canadian” art.

The Artistic Field in Canada

The issue’s most extended consideration of the notion of an artistic field and its implications for Canadian women’s art history, comes in its opening article. Here, historian Andrew Nurse introduces Bourdieu’s formulation, marrying it to a more explicit consideration of gender than is present in the sociologist’s own writing. Through the lens of an artistic field, Nurse recasts well-known facts about Emily Carr to enable a more socially grounded analysis of her gendered position as a woman artist than has hitherto been available. For Nurse, Carr’s understanding and navigation of her gendered identity are not reducible to her personality, nor even to the fact of her being “a woman in a man’s world”; rather, they are the complex result of the encounter between Carr’s individual dispositions and an emerging artistic field in which an ideology of aesthetic autonomy sat in precarious and confusing relation to larger social practices of discrimination.

To be able to recognize the rules of the artistic field is, for an art historian, to possess a significant tool for cultural analysis. If Nurse’s essay enriches our understanding of Carr’s gendered identity, his discussion of the field itself also implicitly enables us to think anew about the construction of value within the arts. This project is further taken up in the section’s second essay. Here, Kirk Niergarth self-reflexively investigates the pathways open to the art historian wishing to write about one of the Canadian artworld’s many “minor female figures” – in this case, the New Brunswick painter Julia Crawford. Navigating between two of feminist art history’s better-known techniques, Niergarth neither celebrates Crawford’s artistic agency nor critiques the

patriarchal structures that limited her opportunity. Rather, he sets out to examine Crawford's marginal art-historical status in light of her relation to what Bourdieu might call the *doxa* of the artistic field – in other words, the rules of the game. How, Niergarth asks, was value attributed in the New Brunswick artworld of the day, and how did Crawford's own choices situate her in relation to those determinations?

One of Pierre Bourdieu's primary observations about the artistic field is that "it is contained within the field of power, while possessing a relative autonomy with respect to it."⁴ The last two articles in this section take up the relation of the artistic field to that larger field of power by examining how federal and provincial governments have mobilized artistic production, either directly or at arm's length. In her essay on the self-taught Nova Scotia painter Maud Lewis, Erin Morton examines the historical intersection between accounts of Lewis's art and the economic fortunes of Nova Scotians under the conditions of late capitalism. Morton concludes that public history makers – from the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation to the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia – instrumentalized Lewis's colourful paintings in their attempts to deflect public attention away from poverty in Nova Scotia, and its complex connections to the modernizing strategies of the post-war period.

In a related vein, Anithe de Carvalho explores the motivations that underpinned federal and provincial funding of one of Quebec's most significant instances of feminist public art: Francine Larivée's *La chambre nuptiale*. While conventional understandings of Larivée's installation have positioned it within an avant-garde lineage and emphasized its critique of established social norms, de Carvalho draws a convincing profile of the utility of Larivée's project to the political mainstream. Policy-makers eager to quell soaring levels of social disaffection amongst youth funded the work on the basis of the summer employment opportunities it would provide, while the political architects of a new Quebec saw the work's potential to contribute to a reconstructed collective identity and an expanded sense of stake-holding amongst all Quebecers.

Canada in the Artistic Field

For Bourdieu, fields are necessarily sites of dispute, and among the things under contestation are the very boundaries and definitions of the fields themselves. From feminist theory's reluctant embrace of the term "women," to feminist art-history's struggles over who is to count as an "artist," the challenges to discourse posed by the inclusion of women are matters of inherent interest for the Canadian Women Artists History Initiative, and they fit well with Bourdieu's own injunction to scholarly self-reflexivity.⁵ In the

second section of this special issue, the papers assembled draw attention to the first of the Initiative's defining terms: its Canadianness.

How should the field of "Canadian Art History" be delimited? As readers of the *Journal of Canadian Art History* are amply aware, the disciplinary approach to Canadian art has been shaped by the profound nationalism of two key periods in its history: the 1920s, when the outlines of its master narrative were established, and the 1960s and 70s, when this narrative was institutionally cemented through the publication of major survey texts and the inauguration of graduate programs of study. Both the appeal of these moments and their negative consequences have been addressed by Canadian historian Katie Pickles, who observes that, "in countries moving on from a British imperial past to construct national identities, emphasizing uniqueness was politically astute and the machinery of the state encouraged national-focused research . . . Such a climate made it possible for the postcolonial promise of abandoning restrictive histories to be hijacked by nation-building projects that are easily critiqued."⁶ With charges of nationalist parochialism now being supplemented by pressures to adapt to a globalizing world, Canadian art historians, like their historian counterparts, are being challenged to rethink the boundaries of their field.

If the prospect of change is in the air, however, its advent is not assured; nor are its outlines clear. As Bourdieu observes, any cultural field is one in which forces of social reproduction contend with those of change. For innovation and new research to occur, they must already "exist in a potential state at the heart of the system of already realized possibles, like *structural lacunae* which appear to wait for and call for fulfilment."⁷ In the case of Canadian art history, even a cursory examination reveals how inadequate the international border is as a frame for our field of study. Is "Canadian" to be taken as signifying art produced on what is now (but certainly was not always) Canadian soil? If so, what is to be made of the production of women who left Canada to pursue their careers in America, Europe or even further afield? Yet if "Canadian" is taken to signify art produced by those of Canadian birth or citizenship, what becomes of the production of the many women who travelled here only briefly, but whose observations are some of our most important visual documents of the nation's early history? Indeed, even within that apparently most securely located contingent of women – those born *and* working within the geographic confines of Canada – there is dissent, notably amongst the many indigenous and Quebecois women for whom "Canadian" is not a primary field of identification.

Collectively, the essays in the second half of this issue deepen our appreciation of the ramifications of such cursory observations. The section opens with an article by Samantha Burton exploring the transnational

identity of the painter Elizabeth Armstrong Forbes. As one of the most talented and successful of the Canadian-born women artists who went to Europe for training at the end of the nineteenth century, Forbes has been curiously absent from the many exhibitions and publications dedicated to individual Canadian women artists since the 1980s. As someone who never returned to live in her homeland and who, indeed, strategically adopted the tropes of British identity in the latter part of her career, it is likely that she has not seemed “Canadian” enough. And yet, as Burton so effectively demonstrates, Forbes’s career and visual production open up new methodological possibilities for those attuned to the transnational potentials of contemporary scholarship on the “British World.”

It remains for historians of “Canadian Art” to assess the potential benefits and risks of resituating our field so firmly back within the orbit of the imperial centre. In the meantime, however, it is clear that Burton’s terminology corresponds to an historical dynamic of central concern to women in Canada, whose relation to the wider “British World” also underwrites the next three essays in this collection. Articles by Patricia Sheppard and Carolyn MacHardy examine two albums compiled by British aristocrats: Lady Caroline Bucknall-Estcourt, who accompanied her husband on military and diplomatic postings in Ontario, Quebec and New Brunswick in the 1830s and 1840s, and Ishbel, Lady Aberdeen, who, together with her husband, purchased property in the Okanagan in the 1890s. Both articles explore the ways in which the Empire’s North American terrain – whether conceived as battlefield or as playground – afforded British women the occasion to record highly personal narratives of family events and concerns. Lady Aberdeen also figures in the contribution by Elaine C. Paterson, who details the transnational social networks that bound Irish and Canadian women in the context of the international Home Arts and Industries movement. As vicereine of both nations, Lady Aberdeen was only the most prominent figure in a more widespread network of professional, creative and activist relationships that connected the two countries. Skillfully tracing the threads of this network through exquisite objects of home manufacture, Paterson investigates materials such as lace and woven textiles to ask what they can tell us about the transnational intersections of identity and the migration of women’s ideas along what she calls the “intimate frontiers of Empire.”

In the final essay of the issue Catherine MacKenzie broadens the field of geographic inquiry still further, marshalling extensive archival research to outline the existence of a hitherto unknown group of Canadian women artists who worked as missionaries in China. Marrying their artistic pursuits

with the evangelical community's need for visually appealing material, their artworks reached tens of thousands. MacKenzie's work requires us to consider women's participation in ideological currents that surpassed national boundaries in pursuit of a larger aim. In tracing these points of intersection between the artistic and the religious fields, MacKenzie further opens a door towards a richer geographic understanding of the artistic field itself.

Women's Art History in the Canadian Context

Some familiar feminist issues and paradigms continue to enrich the research into Canadian women's art histories in this issue, including the dialogical encounter of private and public space, the importance of biographical research and the foregrounding of craft and other forms of once-marginalized cultural production. Yet in its address to the artistic field the issue also sets out alternatives to some of the traditions of feminist art history in Canada and seeks to expand its purview into the wider world. As organizers of the Canadian Women Artists History Initiative, we wish to thank the contributors – and indeed all of the conference participants – for making this kind of critical exploration possible.

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NOTES

- 1 See: Laurier LACROIX, "L'art des Huronnes vu par le frère Gabriel Sagard en 1623–1624," *Les cahiers des dix* 66 (2012): 323–38; Alena BUIS and Sarah E.K. SMITH, "Sanaugait in Nunavut," *Journal of Modern Craft* 6:2 (2013): 187–204; Mora Dianne O'NEILL, *On a Path to Learning: Early Nova Scotian Women Artists* (Halifax: AGNS, 2012); Andrea TERRY, "Gender, Canadian Nationhood and 'Keeping House': The Cultural Bureaucratization of Dundurn Castle in Hamilton, Ontario, 1900–1960s," *Gender & History* 25:1 (April 2013): 47–64; Maggie ATKINSON, "Outsider Art: Tracing the Avante-garde in Alma Rumball's Visionary Images," *Newfoundland Quarterly* 105:4 (Spring 2013): 22–25; and Jennifer SALAHUB, "Marion Nicoll's Crafty Path: The Road Not Taken," in *Marion Nicoll: Silence and Alchemy*, ed. Ann Davis, Elizabeth Herbert, Jennifer Salahub and Christine Sowiak (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2013).
- 2 See: Kristy HOLMES, "Feminist Art History in Canada: A 'Limited Pursuit'?" in *Negotiations in a Vacant Lot: Studying the Visual in Canada*, ed. Lynda Jessup, Erin Morton and Kirsty Robertson (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, forthcoming 2014) and Joyce ZEMANS and Amy WALLACE, "Where are the Women? Updating the Account!" *RACAR* 38:1 (Spring 2013): 1–29.

- 3 See Pierre BOURDIEU, “The Author’s Point of View: Some General Properties of Fields of Cultural Production,” in *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 214–78, and *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).
- 4 BOURDIEU, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 37.
- 5 See David L. SWARTZ, “Metaprinciples for Sociological Research in a Bourdieusian Perspective,” in *Bourdieu and Historical Analysis*, ed. Philip S. Gorski (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 23–24.
- 6 Katie PICKLES, “Transnational Intentions and Cultural Cringe: History Beyond National Boundaries,” in *Contesting Clio’s Craft: New Directions and Debates in Canadian History*, ed. Christopher Dummit and Michael Dawson (University of London: Institute for the Study of the Americas, 2009), 142.
- 7 BOURDIEU, *The Rules of Art*, 235.