

SHORT NOTES / NOTES BRÈVES

PAUL PEEL'S *AFTER THE BATH*¹

The sensuously painted faithful depiction of natural objects has traditionally been held in high regard by western society. In recent years many art historians have shown a marked renewal of interest in its nineteenth-century manifestations, that have come to be popularly labelled "academic."² That century's art as a whole is due for a reappraisal and academic art may yet be accorded equal validity with the work of those more experimental painters we now value so highly.

The ideals of drawing and finish that governed academic painting were those to which the London, Ontario painter, Paul Peel (1860 - 1892) whole-heartedly subscribed. Behind his work lay a profound knowledge of anatomy, acute powers of observation, and patiently developed skills acquired through serious study under Thomas Eakins in Philadelphia, Jean-Léon Gérôme and Benjamin Constant in Paris.³ Nevertheless, Peel was not bound to a rigidly limited style and technique, the bane of more than one academic painter. Continuous development throughout his brief career can be observed: a distinct transition from the meticulous, lucid style of *The Spinner* 1881 (Fig. 1), to a looser, atmospheric handling, as in the 1892 *Self-Portrait* (Fig. 2) *After the Bath* (Fig. 6) is closest in treatment to this latter picture, exhibiting generally moderate contrasts and soft-edged forms.

Although Peel occasionally worked in the more usual Canadian tradition of landscape painting, his numerous French and Canadian views are now largely unknown. Today it is Peel's mastery of the figure that attracts most viewers and of all his works *After the Bath* remains the most famous.

Of the six known versions of *After the Bath* the foremost is that now owned by the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto. It is the one exhibited by Peel in the Paris Salon of 1890 for which he received a Third Class medal. When it is realized that such an honour had not until that time been bestowed upon any other Canadian (although the Toronto portraitist Wyly Grier won a similar prize the same year as Peel) it is clear that it was no small accomplishment. It was certainly not the case, as Robert Harris acidly claimed, that every able artist living in Paris achieved as much.⁴ Peel had his first painting accepted for the Salon in 1883⁵ but it



Fig. 1. Paul PEEL, *The Spinner*, 1881, oil on canvas, 47-1/4" x 36",
Coll. The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Montreal.
(Photo: M.M.F.A.)



Fig. 2. Paul PEEL, *Self-Portrait*, 1892, oil on canvas, 18" x 15",
Coll. The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, (Photo: N.G.C.)



Fig. 6. Paul PEEL, *After the Bath*, 1890, oil on canvas,
58" x 43-1/2", Coll. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto,
(Photo: A.G.O.)



Fig. 3. Paul PEEL, *The Modest Model*, 1889, oil on canvas, 58-1/4" x 45-1/2", Coll. The Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts, Columbus, Ohio. (Photo: C.G.F.A.)



Fig. 7. Paul PEEL, *After the Bath*, 1891, oil on canvas, 34-1/4" x 26-1/4", Present whereabouts unknown. (Photo: A.G.O.)

was not until 1889 that he received so much as an Honourable Mention (for *Que la vie Est Amère*, now known as *The Modest Model* (Fig. 3) and for which *The Tired Model* in the A.G.O. is a preliminary work). The award of a medal the following year was a significant milestone in Peel's career, and in the history of art in general, for it represented the first important international recognition of a Canadian painter.

After the Bath was unequivocally acclaimed by the Parisian critic Armand Dayot as "à coup sûr une des plus intéressantes toiles du Salon," and Ludovic Baschet chose to reproduce it in his *Catalogue Illustré*.⁶ Such critical success was almost certain to attract purchasers and soon afterward the painting was bought by the Hungarian government for their national collection. It remained in Hungary until a monetary crisis in the early 1920's necessitated its resale, this time to Canadians James Colerick (a London art dealer) and Henry Pocock (his client).⁷ The painting was owned by C. H. Carlisle of Toronto briefly in 1929,⁸ but within a year it came to rest in the collection of R. S. McLaughlin, the Oshawa automobile manufacturer. Over the next forty years *After the Bath* was rarely seen by the public. It was, however, exhibited four times at the Canadian National Exhibition in Toronto (1930, '39, '48, and '59) and once, in 1942, in London Ontario.⁹ Upon McLaughlin's death it was left to the Ontario Government and in 1972 the Art Gallery of Ontario was given custody of the painting, thus making it once again available to public view.

After the Bath is warm in colour as well as expression. Comforting earth tones dominate, ranging from the chocolate umber and rusty sienas of the walls to golden flesh hues, liberally splashed with crimson and yellow on surfaces reflecting the glowing fire. The scarlet in the oriental carpet reaches a brilliant intensity beneath the arched leg of the seated child and the molten gold reflection upon the floor in the left foreground even eclipses in richness the gilded edges of the firescreen that rise above it. Although the motionless figures suggest serenity, it is the picture's pulsing coloration that dominates.¹⁰

In early January 1936 the Toronto *Telegram* made public the existence of what was purported to be a newly-discovered replica of *After the Bath*.¹¹ Only thirty-four by twenty-six inches, it was half the size of the Art Gallery of Ontario version (Fig. 7). Signed in script in the lower right, it was dated 1891. Peel, it should be pointed out, appears to have signed all of his large exhibition pictures with tall, upper case letters. Script is found occasionally on early or on smaller works. Wyly Grier, then President of the Royal Canadian Academy, did not hesitate to certify in writing

the authenticity of the painting for the Mellors Gallery, the Toronto dealer. They explained that Peel had probably produced this replica for his own use, and that it had at some time been sold or given to friends in Paris, only to surface in the summer of 1935. Other stories have been passed on concerning the keen competition to purchase the exhibited picture, suggesting perhaps that disappointed collectors — reputedly including Sarah Bernhardt — might have commissioned a second version. Although documentary evidence in support of any of these stories was never presented, and in spite of an emphatic repudiation by Peel's daughter, Marguerite,¹² the new *After the Bath* soon found a buyer. It then quickly dropped from public view, and can no longer be traced.

From a photograph, the 1891 version appears in general to be tighter, and perhaps more superficial in handling. The edges of the firescreen, of the fireplace and the figures are more sharply defined. There seems an obvious lack of luminosity and transparency to the flesh, surprising in a work of Peel's. The children appear soft, but lack the vitality and unselfconsciousness of those in the Art Gallery of Ontario version. The standing child has had short curls added around its face, while the head of the seated figure has been considerably flattened. Furthermore, it would seem that the firelight, instead of flickering and rebounding from unseen surfaces in the viewer's area as in the Art Gallery of Ontario picture, has been reduced to a steady, even flow comparable to that of a dull electric lamp. These changes can in no way be construed as improvements. The total result is a less animated picture, one that does little more than list the contents of the original, while missing its warmth and spirit. It is difficult to understand why Grier, Curtis Williamson and George Reid, all of whom knew Peel while studying in Paris, should be so totally convinced of the genuineness of the new-found "replica."¹³ None of them, however, were themselves capable of the vibrant effects of firelight on flesh which gave Peel his high reputation.

Marguerite Peel did acknowledge the existence of two preliminary versions of *After the Bath*. One was said to be a small sketch, the other a large canvas.¹⁴ The small panel is now in the possession of a Peel heir in California. An inscription on the back reads "To Mother — May 7th 1890/Paul Peel." It appears that this very briskly painted piece (Fig. 4) was the original rough draft done in the winter of 1889-90, and given as a gift a week after the final (Art Gallery of Ontario) version was safely on display in the Salon at the Palais des Champs-Élysées. The other

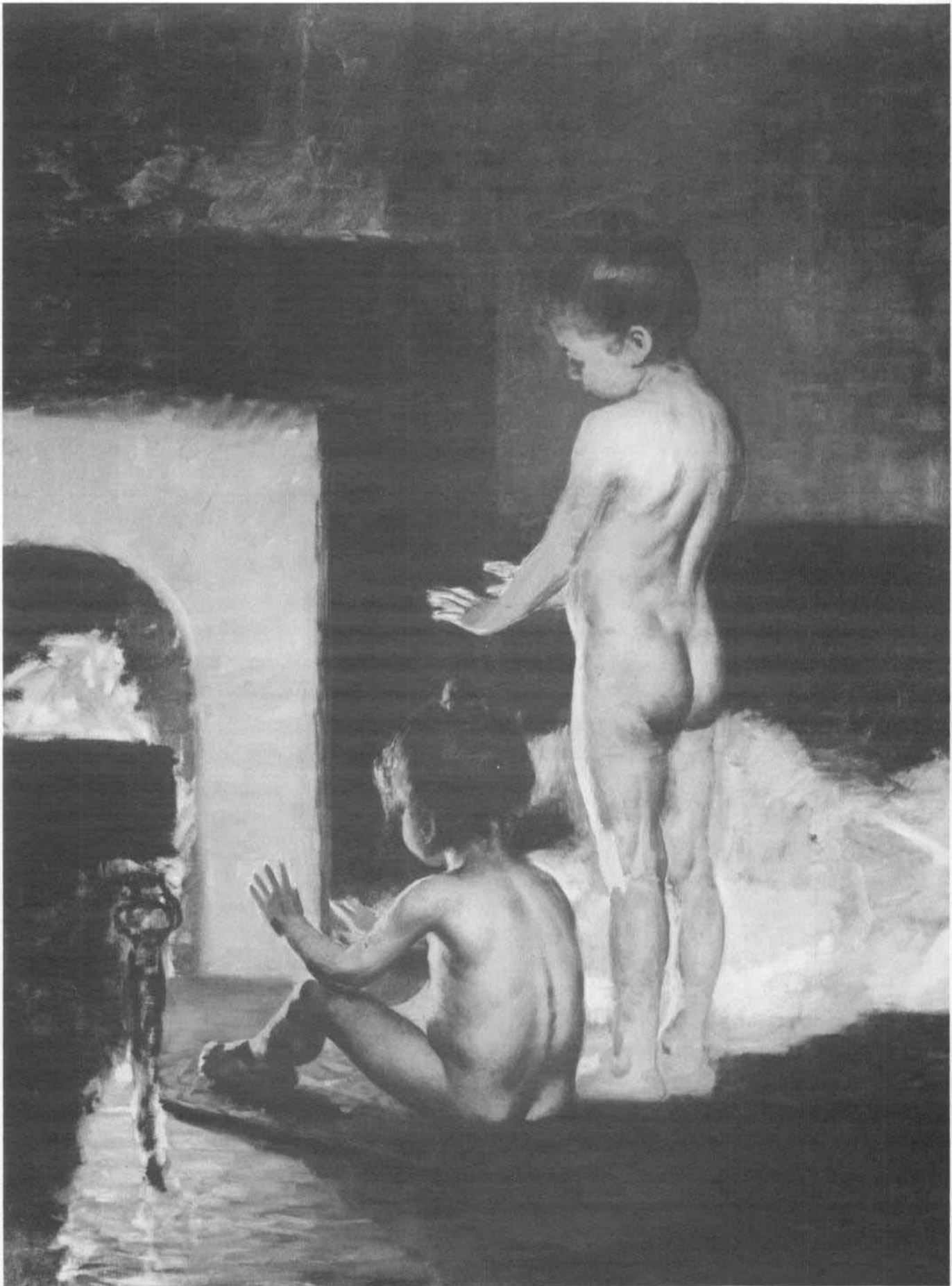


Fig. 5. Paul PEEL, *After the Bath*, 1890, oil on canvas, 64-3/4" x 47-1/2", Coll. Mr and Mrs Jules Loeb, Toronto. (Photo: N.G.C.)

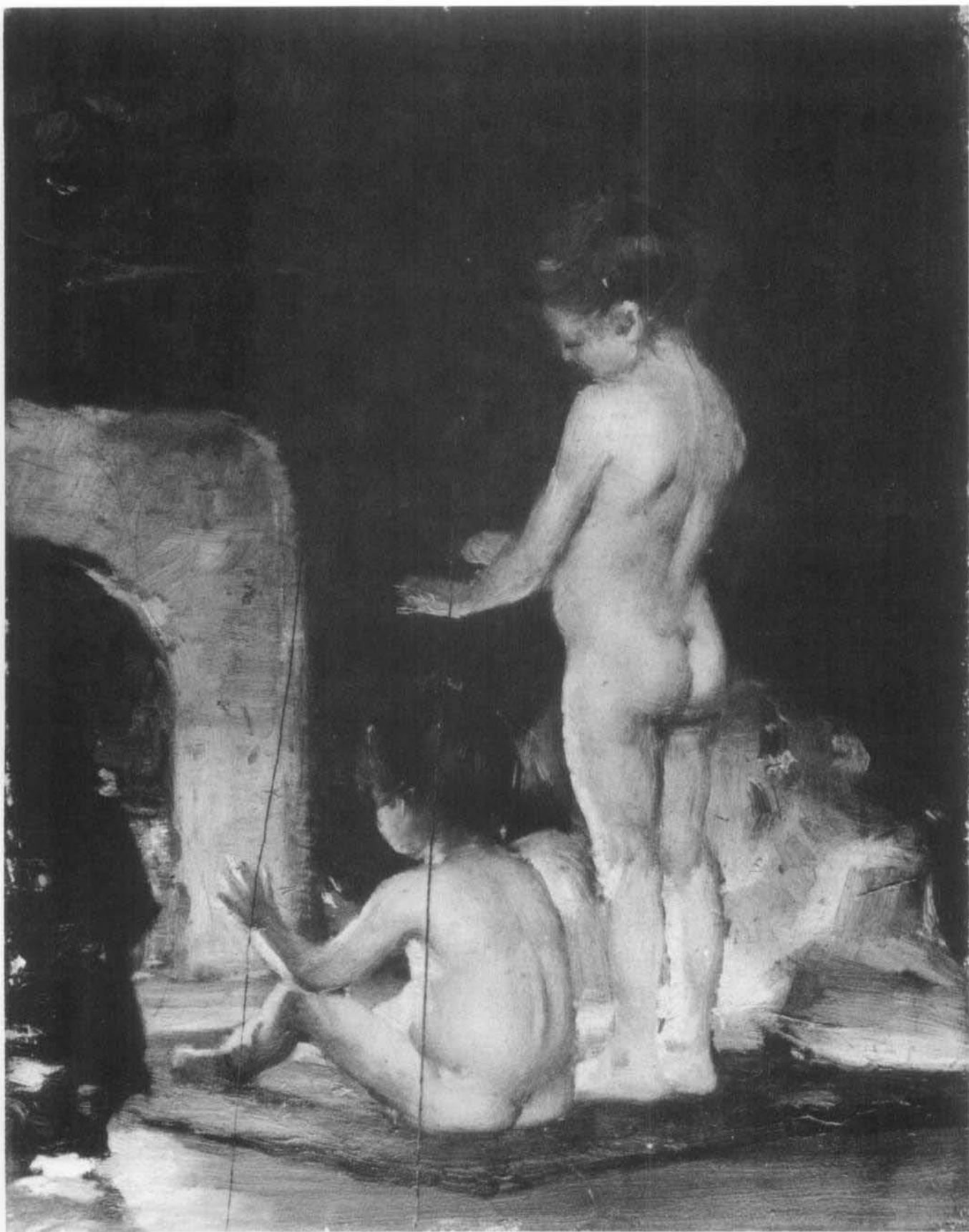


Fig. 4. Paul PEEL, *After the Bath*, 1890, oil on panel, 14" x 11", Coll. Miss Patricia Brooks-Hammond, Laguna Beach, California.

preliminary painting, apparently an unfinished first attempt, is now in the Jules Loeb collection in Toronto (Fig. 5). It is little more than a monochromatic underpainting, with elementary tones and forms merely blocked in. This is particularly noticeable in the standing figure. Marguerite stated that her mother convinced Peel that the grand dimensions spoiled the intimate nature of the subject, and so, without finishing this work, he commenced a smaller version.¹⁵

Peel's basic ideas remained consistent. Two children, centrally located, one seated, the other standing, dry themselves before a roaring fire which is placed on the left side of the picture, partially cut off by the frame. Above the mantle is the vague shape of a mirror or picture, indeterminate in the gloom, while to the right the obscure mass of a light-coloured blanket rests upon an oriental carpet. Only a tiny mat is shown in the Loeb version, as in the sketch, resulting in a somewhat tight, uncomfortable feeling. No slippers break the emptiness of the lower right space, as they do in the later pictures. The angular mantle was eventually softened in line and tone and the low, rectangular table on the left in the sketch and the Loeb version was likewise replaced by a more graceful, curvilinear firescreen. The bold geometry so obvious in the dark, broad bands of fireplace and wainscotting gives compositional strength but nevertheless creates an unduly rigid feeling in the Loeb picture. The freer lines and less distinct background form reverted to in the Art Gallery of Ontario version are the result of the artist's discerning self-criticism. One finds that the fundamentally sound conceptions seen in the initial pictures were substantially improved in the prize-winner of 1890.

Yet another *After the Bath* is recorded, one owned at the turn of the century by Frank M. Gray of Toronto. It was exhibited in 1903 at the Canadian National Exhibition (cat. no. 108) and unfortunately nothing more is known. Gray, an avid collector of Paul Peel's works, bought five paintings at the Peel auction of October 1890.¹⁶ He should therefore have had sufficient knowledge of the artist's style to have avoided buying a fake. There is a possibility that this could be the 1891 version, which created such a stir in the mid 1930's. Alternatively, it might have been a clever reproduction, lithographed on canvas.¹⁷

The sixth-known *After the Bath* is an outright copy by John P. Hunt (1856-1932) a London Ontario genre and landscape painter who with Peel briefly studied under W. L. Judson about 1876, shortly before Peel left London for Philadelphia. The copy was commissioned by Henry Pocock while the original painting was in Pocock's possession between 1922 and

1929.¹⁸ One might wonder at a possible connection with the sudden appearance a few years later of the supposed 1891 "replica," but for the fact that it is unlikely Hunt would have altered the copy to such an extent. Pocock would probably have wanted an exact duplicate in any case. The present whereabouts of this painting, like the 1891 and the Gray versions, remains a mystery.

For the every-day nineteenth-century lover of pictures the works of Paul Peel had great attraction, as evidenced by their wide distribution in reproduction and the consistent applause in newspaper reviews. The human warmth of the subjects, the hyper-sentimental tendency of the age, and the emotional appeal of children common at any time, assured their popularity. To-day's more sophisticated viewers are, however, more likely to praise the general competence of the figure rendering, the lushness of the colouring, or the gentle lyricism, all of which are laudable Peel qualities well demonstrated in *After the Bath*. That it was a favourite of the artist himself is beyond question, for it appears in radiant miniature in a compendium of selected works that he painted on a large wooden display palette now in the National Gallery of Canada (Fig. 8, upper left hand corner).

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Notes:

¹ This article follows the author's *catalogue raisonné* of Paul Peel's work prepared under the supervision of Dennis Reid, Curator of Post-Confederation Art at the National Gallery of Canada, in partial fulfilment of a Carleton University Master's degree requirements. The programme is run by the Institute of Canadian Studies in conjunction with the National Gallery of Canada. Sincere thanks are due the owners of the pictures illustrated for their kind cooperation.

² See particularly Albert BOIME, *The Academy and French Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Phaidon, 1971).

³ Henri-Lucien DOUCET and Jules LEFEBVRE were amongst Peel's lesser masters (see "Works of Paul Peel," *Evening Post* (Chicago) 24 Jan. 1895).

⁴ M. WILLIAMSON, *Robert Harris: An Unconventional Biography* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1970), p. 147. Peel's medal, now in the London Art Gallery, was cast in gold, but as A.Y. Jackson has pointed out, in a letter to the National Gallery of Canada, 15 February 1930, it would have been in bronze if the artist had not chosen to pay the difference in order to have it cast in the more expensive metal.

⁵ *La Première Notion*, no. 1852.

⁶ A. DAYOT, *Le Salon de 1890* (Paris: Goupil, 1890), p. 38 and L. BASCHET, ed., *Salon de 1890 Catalogue Illustré* (Paris: 1890), p. 73.

⁷ See "Canada to Regain Painting," *Globe* (Toronto), 27 Nov. 1922.

⁸ "Paul Peel's Masterpiece 'After the Bath' Bought by Toronto Man," *Star* (Toronto), 21 Dec. 1929.

⁹ "Milestones," an exhibition sponsored by the Western Art League.

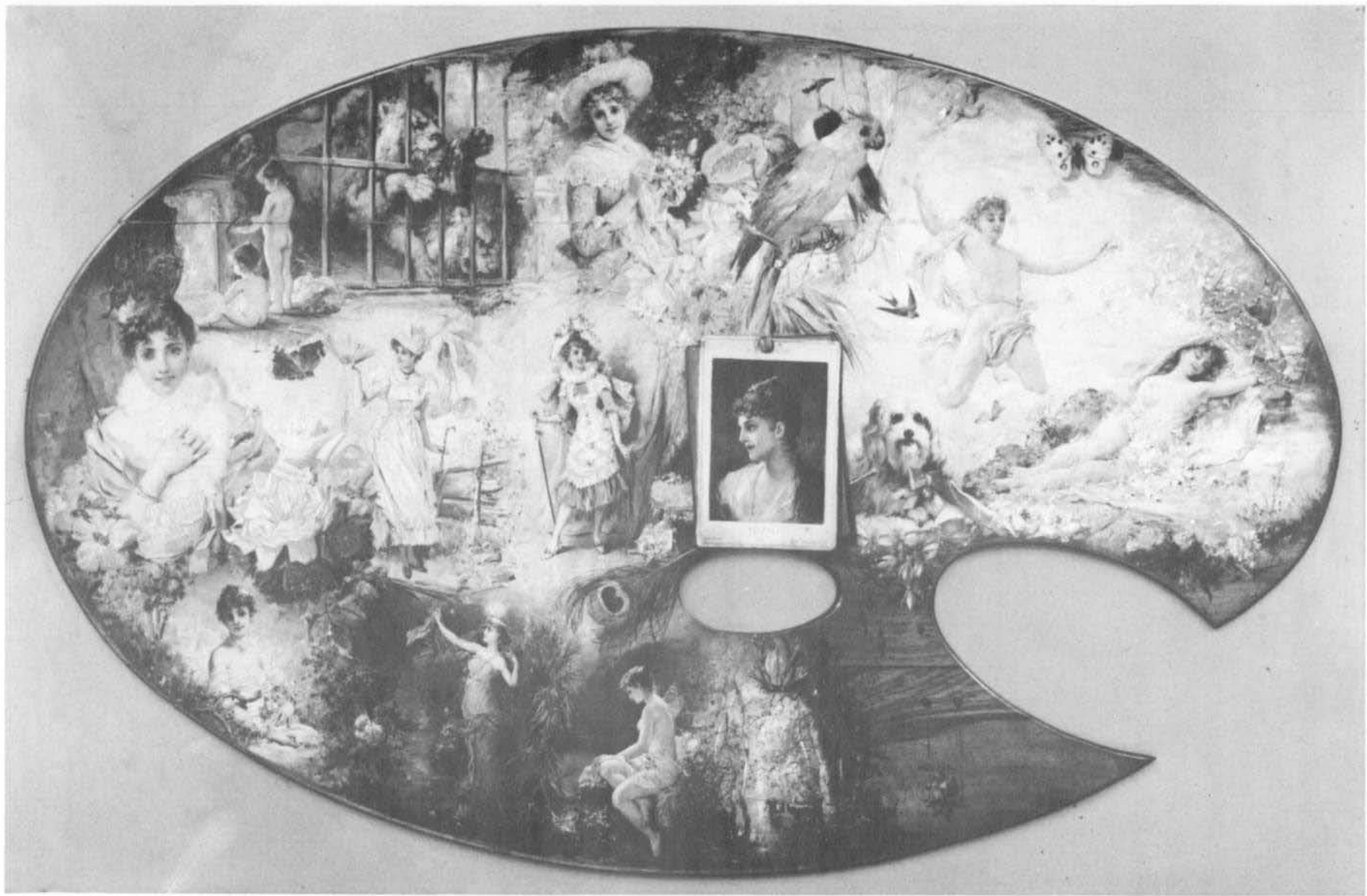


Fig. 8. Paul PEEL, *The Painter's Palette*, c.1891, oil on panel, 28" x 43-5/8" (irregular), Coll. The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.
(Photo: N.G.C.)

¹⁰ Starting in his youth and extending to his untimely death, a special love of children often led Peel to paint their activities. The birth of Peel's own children, Robert and Marguerite, in 1886 and 1888 respectively, no doubt intensified that interest. Marguerite apparently posed for some of the late paintings but would have been too young for *After the Bath*.

¹¹ "Paul Peel Twice Painted Famous 'After the Bath', Canvas Now in Toronto," *Telegram* (Toronto), 4 Jan. 1936.

¹² "Paul Peel's Daughter Spurns 'After the Bath' Endorsed by Sir Wyly," *Mail & Empire* (Toronto), 5 Mar. 1936.

¹³ "Grier Repeats Stand," *Star* (Toronto), 6 Mar. 1936.

¹⁴ See note 12.

¹⁵ "Relates History of Famed Canvas," *Mail & Empire* (Toronto), 14 Nov. 1936.

¹⁶ "What Toronto Paid For Life Work of Canada's Great Artist," *Telegram* (Toronto), 7 Mar. 1923.

¹⁷ One coloured reproduction, attempting to pass as a painting, complete with fake impasto and cracks recently appeared on the Montreal art market. Christie, Manson & Woods (Canada) Ltd., 23 Oct. 1975, lot 77 (withdrawn). It is reproduced in the catalogue of the sale.

¹⁸ "After the Bath Sale Is Now in Dispute," *Star* (Toronto), 18 Dec. 1930.