

**Canada in the Nineteenth Century:
The Bert and Barbara Stitt Family
Collection /
Le Canada au dix-neuvième siècle:
Collection de la famille Bert et Barbara
Stitt**

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Art Gallery of Hamilton, 1984

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Canadians have become accustomed to marking events of the recent history of the country in relation to the spectacularly successful Expo 67 in Montréal; it was a birthday that in many respects marked a coming of age for Canada, albeit a belated coming of age. The National Gallery of Canada marked the occasion with the exhibition *A Pageant of Canada: The European Contribution to the Iconography of Canadian History*. The colonial nature of the enterprise was underlined by both the membership of the Committee of Honour, which included the Ambassadors of France and Great Britain and eight Lords and Ladies, and the selection of Dr. Roy Strong, then Keeper of the National Portrait Gallery of Great Britain, as the exhibition organizer and author of the catalogue.

The centenary of Confederation was also marked by the public sale in Canada by Sothebys, the international auctioneers, of one of the great private collections of Canada, The Reford Collection. This event provided the opportunity for new collectors to start important collections and for institutions to seek the fine examples required to take their collections to new heights of quality and completion. For a few years the competition was rather heated and the Stitts were part of it. They made their first two purchases, a pair of water-colours by W.G.R. Hind, from the Reford sale in October, 1967.

The Art Gallery of Hamilton needed

neither Lords nor Ladies to show its pageant of Canada. The gallery had patrons in the Stitts who, like the great collectors of the thirties and forties, Sigmund Samuel, Arthur Doughty, Ward Pitfield, and W.H. Coverdale, followed only their passion. Less than twenty years after starting to collect, the Bert and Barbara Stitt Family Collection formed the basis of an extraordinary and ongoing gift to the Art Gallery of Hamilton: some three hundred eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century paintings, drawings, and water-colours, "the most significant gift since the Gallery's inception seventy years ago."

It would have been natural for the Stitts to have considered other principal collections of Canadiana, such as the Public Archives of Canada (which absorbed nearly all of the over two thousand items in the W.H. Coverdale Collection of Canadiana in 1970) and the The Sigmund Samuel Collection, Royal Ontario Museum, as the natural repository for their collection. Wisely, they did not, and so a major Ontario art gallery has entered the company of the important collections of nineteenth-century documentary Canadian art. This marked a coming of age for an art which has until now mostly been of interest to museums and archives. It was not until the National Gallery of Canada acquired the Thomas Davies water-colours in 1954, and subsequently its share of the W.H. Coverdale Collection of Canadiana in 1970, that it showed any real interest in this material beyond including it in exhibitions like *Everyman's Canada* (1962), substantially drawn from the collections of the McCord Museum.

The Stitt Family Collection is typical of its kind: it "includes work of both historical and aesthetic merit, representing the impressions and observations of a wide range of artists, amateur or professional, from the British military officers stationed in this

country, through the visitors and immigrants, to native born Canadians": William Armstrong (1822-1914), James Duncan (1806-81), Daniel Fowler (1810-94), "Washington" F. Friend (c. 1820-91), George Heriot (1759-1839), W.G.R. Hind (1833-89), Frances Anne Hopkins (1838-1918), Paul Kane (1810-71), Francis Hoppner Meyer (active c. 1832-62), W.H.E. Napier (1829-94), Lucius O'Brien (1832-99), Richard Short (active 1759-64), Homer Watson (1855-1936), and others, for a total of thirty-nine artists. The highlight for me is the group of five pencil drawings attributed to Richard Short for the Halifax, Belle-Ile-en-Mer, and Quebec images so widely known through the engravings published in the early 1760's.

Andrew Oko, a native of Western Canada, was faced with no small task in researching and selecting an exhibition from the entire Collection, as well as in writing a publication in short order. He correctly recognized that the strength of the Collection was in its capacity to reflect not only the artistic life of the country, but also a wider range of the experience of living in the colony of Canada: scenes of ice fishing; Arctic life; homesteading; returning from the ball in the freshly fallen waist-deep winter snow; ladies lifting their petticoats to wade across a shoreline cove; the assembly of tribes on Manitoulin Island to receive their gifts from the Queen (by Paul Kane, although William Armstrong, another artist represented in the Collection, did the same subject); the active social life of the officers stationed in the quiet colonies of Canada; wood-chopping; the costume of the officers and the natives; the architecture and early town planning of Québec, Montréal, Halifax; thirteen tortoises sitting on a log; and, of course, the ubiquitous topography of the waterfalls, Montmorency and Niagara.

Since the late sixties there have been numerous publications of the sort of material that makes up this Collection. We only need to think of the paucity of reference sources at a time when everyone relied upon Spendlove's *The Face of Early Canada* in order to recognize the large body of sound work that has been completed by curators like Mary Allodi at the Royal Ontario Museum and the staff at the Public Archives of Canada.¹ Reliance on that body of published research has made it possible for Oko to prepare a creditable publication in a short time, although it lacks (it did not have that pretence) the quality of breaking new ground. Indeed, simply publishing full catalogue data for the works previously unpublished is a welcome addition to our knowledge and will make it possible to refine our understanding of the relationships these artists had to each other, and their attitudes to the colony that was their subject.

Oko's introductory essay uses the Collection to present an encapsulated, if not encyclopedic, summary of the history of art in the colonies of Canada, almost, but not entirely, excluding the art of French Canada. The essay shows the limitations of the Stitt Family Collection and gives direction to the Art Gallery of Hamilton for future development of this part of its permanent collection. The recent appointment of Ross Fox as curator at the gallery will ensure an opportunity for an informed direction.

While the catalogue data have limitations, the entries are clearly presented in a manner that can serve as a working model. Works not included in the exhibition are listed in appendices, so that we get a sense of the whole Collection and the nature of the decisions that were made in selecting the works to be exhibited. The lack of bibliographical and manuscript source references is an unfortunate oversight in not allowing verification, although the thorough

publications of the Royal Ontario Museum and the Public Archives of Canada can always be used for this purpose. The catalogue is generously, although only partially, illustrated. There is a section of colour plates, but in the copy provided for review the colour was poor. There are some annoying typographical errors in the text: Gilbert Gignac, not Signac (p. 7); *The Painted Past* was published in 1984, not 1964 (note 7, pp. 15 and 25, where, incidentally, on p. 25 my name is mis-spelled in note 13); 1860 and 1862 should be 1760 and 1762 in catalogue entry 89.

This is both an exhibition and a collection catalogue and as such it shows all of the qualities that make art-museum publications marketing nightmares. While published to record a public exhibition, and attractive enough in its own right, it does not reach out to a market that might help the Art Gallery of Hamilton recover its costs. The group of people working in the field who will need the publication to carry out their own work is hardly numerous enough to justify the high cost of publication. For selfish reasons I am glad that the catalogue was published, but I would have had a hard time justifying its presentation in this form. Art museums will need to rethink their approaches to exhibition catalogues in the near future, especially as costs go up, funds decrease, and the pressures for greater access to collections build.

The Hubert and Barbara Stitt Family Collection has strengthened the Art Gallery of Hamilton's permanent collections enormously. The Gallery has met the first challenge of taking intellectual control of the Collection and providing wider public access to it through the publication of this catalogue. The next challenge is to build upon the Collection imaginatively and subject it to rigorous examination in the context of other similar collections in order to

reap the deeper understanding it can bring to the development of art in Canada.

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Note

¹ Research sources include, for example, Mary ALLODI, *Canadian Watercolours and Drawings at the Royal Ontario Museum* (Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum, 1974) and her *Printmaking in Canada: The Earliest Views and Portraits* (Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum, 1980); Martha E. COOKE, *W.H. Coverdale Collection of Canadiana: Paintings, Water-colours and Drawings* (Ottawa: Public Archives of Canada, 1983); and Mary SPARLING, *Great Expectations: The European Vision in Nova Scotia 1749-1848* (Halifax: Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery, 1980).