

PUBLICATION NOTICES / NOTES DE LECTURE

Sybil Jacobson—Painting in the West

Mary B. ALEXANDER

HMS Press, Toronto, 1984

80 pp., 1 colour, 16 b/w illus., \$6.95

Since the emergence of the women's movement in the seventies there has been an abundance of feminist literature, and the field of art history has not remained untouched by its ideologies. In Canada this new consciousness has been reflected in a variety of exhibitions and publications.¹ Mary B. Alexander's monograph *Sybil Jacobson—Painting in the West*, 1984, is one such work.

A painting by the artist in the possession of Alexander's family may well have instigated the author's investigation of Sybil Jacobson (1881-1953). Overcoming the many difficulties of initial research (much of the material was either inaccurate or lacking), Alexander presents the story of Jacobson's life and her determination to gain acceptance and recognition in the art world.

Alexander's "Introduction" contains information relevant to an understanding of Jacobson's early education and its correlation to her artistic production. Jacobson studied at the Hastings and St. Leonards Municipal School of Science and Art, London, where she won first prize in oil colour; the Lambeth School of Science and Art; and then for three years at the Royal Academy Schools, where she worked under various artists such as John Singer Sargent, Sir Alma Tamed, Sir George Clausen, Ernest Crofts, and Sir Frank Dicksee. We also learn that Jacobson spent several years studying in Paris during the early part of the twentieth century. Whether she attended such schools as the Académie Julian

or Académie Colarossi is unknown.²

The succeeding chapters, "The Early Years," "Rural Saskatchewan," "Moose Jaw," "Winnipeg," "British Columbia," and "Sybil Jacobson's Last Years," are biographical. Alexander recounts events concerning the artist's youth, her two marriages, motherhood, her struggle for financial stability, and her attempt for recognition. Works such as *Reverie*³ (n.d., Nutana Collegiate Memorial Art Gallery), *Supplication* (n.d., Norman MacKenzie Art Gallery), *The Black Shawl* (n.d., private collection), *Down by the Creek* (n.d., Moose Jaw Art Museum), and *Stoney Creek* (n.d., Moose Jaw Art Museum) were all well received by the public. Her paintings were shown on several occasions at the British Columbia Artists' Exhibition, the Vancouver Art Gallery, and, in 1926, at the Memorial Art Gallery, Saskatoon. Alexander also lists present locations for some of Jacobson's works (Nutana Collegiate Memorial Art Gallery, Saskatoon; The Norman MacKenzie Art Gallery, University of Regina; and the Moose Jaw Art Museum), all in Saskatchewan.

The author also touches upon international events and changes which she feels are germane to our understanding of the times and the artist's life: the Industrial Revolution in Britain and its fringe benefits in the form of the newly rich, who collected art as a status symbol; the opening of art galleries; the acceptance of women in art schools and the avant-garde of the twentieth century. Against this greater scheme of events, Jacobson is represented as the New Woman, independent and capable, and this is where the author's interpretation of Jacobson becomes problematic. An understanding of Sybil Jacobson's life does not

constitute a comprehension of her work; art is not necessarily autobiographical.⁴

Alexander's review, superficial and at times contradictory, does, however, become more focused with the study of Jacobson's landscapes.⁵ The influences felt in her work range from realistic portrayals to an impressionistic use of the brush and palette. Jacobson's art, which includes portraiture, landscape, and still life, is a precarious balance between the linear and the painterly. Her several years in Paris during the early twentieth century had no apparent influence on her chosen academic style, despite the fact that during that period Paris was host to many retrospectives of key figures in the history of post-impressionism and that Cubism was the current *avant-garde*.⁶ Alexander titillates the reader's curiosity with these brief mentions of Cubism and the *avant-garde*, leaving us to wonder if Jacobson would have been a "modernist" by association.

Sybil Jacobson, upon her arrival in Saskatchewan from England in 1912, was "the best trained female painter" in the province. The author acknowledges this fact readily, but, unfortunately, does not pursue Jacobson's status in the contemporary Canadian art world. By the time Jacobson had arrived in Vancouver, British Columbia, in 1936, women were already established in the arts domain: Sophia Theresa Pemberton (1869-1959) had an active career in Victoria and abroad by 1897, Hannah Maynard (1834-1918) was a professional photographer in Victoria at the turn of the century; yet there is no mention of these women's achievements, and only minor reference is made to Emily Carr, in regard to Carr's use of colour. A synopsis of women's role in the arts in Western Canada would have been beneficial in situating Jacobson in relation to other female painters of her time, if only

by comparison. Alexander points out that Jacobson was a founding member of the Women's Art Association of Saskatchewan; however, she does not elaborate upon the subject. The author stresses Jacobson's life and neglects to focus on the more salient aspects of the artist's career.

Alexander has chosen not to include footnotes, creating difficulty for further study on Jacobson. The selected bibliography concentrates on American and European readings, with only passing mention of general Canadian art-historical texts and writings on Emily Carr. Alexander seems to imply that her own approach is a novel one, disregarding the fact that Canadian literature concerning women in the arts is by now copious. There is also a notable lack of dates for, and illustrations of, the paintings referred to in the text and those mentioned only in passing. There are seventeen illustrations, of which three are photographs of the artist, while only one of the works is reproduced in colour. The limited number of plates hinders the reader's understanding of Jacobson's oeuvre. A *catalogue raisonné* of Jacobson's work, including chronology and location, would have been an asset for further analysis of Jacobson's contribution and place in the artistic community at large.

Alexander's monograph *Sybil Jacobson—Painting in the West* is to be commended for bringing to general attention a hitherto unknown Canadian painter. Although not a scholarly work, Alexander's publication will familiarize the reader with the life of Jacobson and will possibly stimulate further study for a more complete survey of her artistic achievements.

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Notes

¹ Not all of these publications, books, monographs, catalogues, and articles are of art-historical relevance, yet they contribute to an awareness of women painters in Canada's art world. A few examples of the literature on Canadian women painters, listed by date of publication: J. MURRAY, *Sparkling Water: Mary Wrinch and her Contemporaries* (Toronto, 1971); D. FARR and N. LUCKYJ, *From Women's Eyes: Women Painters in Canada* (Kingston, Ont.: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1975); N. TUELE, *Sophia Theresa Pemberton* (Victoria, B.C.: Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, 1978); C. WILKS, *The Magic Box—The Eccentric Genius of Hannah Maynard* (Toronto: Exile Books Ltd., 1980); N. LUCKYJ, *Visions and Victories: 10 Canadian Women Artists 1915-1945* (London, Ont.: London Regional Art Gallery, 1983).

² Albert BOIME, *The Academy and French Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Phaidon, 1971). The Académie Julian was established in 1868 by Rodolphe Julian (1839-1907). This Académie was to become very popular with such Canadian artists as Florence Carlyle and Sophia Pemberton. The Académie Julian opened its doors to women in 1880 and was considered one of the best institutions in France where a woman could receive artistic training.

³ The works cited are all undated.

⁴ Rosalind E. KRAUS, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), approached this subject in her essay entitled "In the Name of Picasso." She refutes Rubin's notion that the changes in Picasso's art were a direct reaction to his personal life, and goes on to substantiate her position against art as autobiography.

⁵ Alexander attributes Jacobson's landscape style to the influences of the Barbizon School. She stresses this relationship unduly and does not consider Jacobson's work on its own merit.

⁶ Retrospective exhibitions in Paris during the early 1900's were numerous: Van Gogh, 1901; Cézanne, 1904, 1905, 1907; Signac, 1904; Gauguin, 1905; Ethnograph, Trocadero, 1906, 1907; Matisse, 1909. These retrospective exhibitions proved to be influential on the up-and-coming younger artists of the avant-garde.

Expressions of Will: The Art of Prudence Heward

Natalie LUCKYJ

Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University, Kingston, and the McMichael Canadian Collection, Kleinburg, 1986. 128 pp., 4 colour, 79 b/w illus., paper, \$10.00.

The fact that this exhibition catalogue is the first monograph on Montréal painter Prudence Heward (1896-1947) is sufficient to make it an important work. It is also, however, a solid and competent product by Carleton University instructor Natalie Luckyj, and lays the necessary groundwork for future, more in-depth publications. Two shortcomings do mar this book's general success: a structural problem in the catalogue text and a lack of interpretive writing on the paintings.

Prudence Heward is certainly a fascinating subject. An integral part of the inter-War painting scene in Montréal presided over by John Lyman, she was active in the Beaver Hall Hill group, the Canadian Group of Painters, and the Contemporary Arts Society. But she was also a "lady," born to a wealthy Montréal family, which hindered her somewhat in the art world. Luckyj points out, for example, that during her studies in Paris, Heward felt obliged to stay at a respectable hotel on the Right Bank, rather than joining other art students on the bohemian Left Bank. Heward's subjects and her attitude toward them were unusual. Portraits of women, of nude women, and of nude black women are some of her strongest works, all with a powerful sense of inner personality. But these works remain enigmatic. In her introduction, Luckyj laments the difficulty of researching Prudence Heward's life and thoughts since so many of her colleagues are now