

THE MURALS IN THE TORONTO MUNICIPAL BUILDINGS: GEORGE REID'S DEBT TO PUVIS DE CHAVANNES

The art of mural painting was ignored by most Canadian artists in the nineteenth century, with the exception of a small number of Québec artists who created murals for church interiors.¹ One painter who did try to promote murals in public buildings was the Toronto artist George Agnew Reid (1860-1947). Reid gathered together a group of artists who tried to encourage government officials and public institutions to provide them with commissions. Although the campaign achieved only limited success, a few examples of the group's work survive in private and public buildings. George Reid's first major murals were the panels he executed for the Toronto Municipal Buildings from 1897 to 1899, entitled *Hail to the Pioneers*.

Reid began his career as an artist with portrait commissions from clients in his native town of Wingham, Ontario. Then, in the 1880's and early 1890's, he concentrated on genre paintings which drew many admirers and established his reputation. Reid was a major figure in the art community of Toronto, acting as President of the Ontario Society of Artists (1897-1901), President of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts (1906-1909), and Principal of the Ontario College of Art (until 1913, the Central Ontario School of Art and Design) from 1909 to 1929. Although George Reid's name has usually been associated with his well-known anecdotal paintings of country life, his work was more varied and included mural painting, book illustration, landscape painting, architecture, and poster design. After 1890, he directed his attention especially to the study and promotion of mural painting in Canada.

Reid's interest in murals was not nurtured at home but rather developed out of his travels and study in the United States and France. After two and a half years of training at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia (October 1882-April 1885), Reid returned to Toronto and

then spent over a year in France to "finish" his art education. It was during this period, from June 1888 to October 1889, that Reid was introduced to the works of the great French muralists.

In Paris, Reid enrolled in the Académie Julian under the popular teacher Benjamin Constant (1845-1902). For costume and life classes he also attended the Académie Colarossi. Although Benjamin Constant is primarily known for his scenes of Oriental subjects and portraits, in 1888 he painted some decorative panels for the Sorbonne.² He was also chosen among the participants in the project to decorate the interior of the Hôtel de Ville in Paris.³ In the year 1889 this commission was one of the main topics of conversation in Paris art circles. The municipal government selected over ninety artists to decorate the wall spaces in the principal rooms and halls of the Hôtel de Ville with scenes commemorating the history and development of Paris. Reid was obviously impressed by this vast project in which so many artists were to co-operate, since he saved the newspaper clipping from *Le Rappel* announcing the commission.⁴ Reid later referred to the influence this event had on young art students at the time:

The allotment of spaces for the decoration of the walls and ceilings of the Hotel de Ville in Paris to 90 artists in 1889, besides the general encouragement of monumental painting and sculpture in France at that time, inspired many foreign Art Students then studying in Paris, some Canadians among the number.⁵

As a result of the widespread destruction of buildings during its various social upheavals and revolutions, France underwent extensive rebuilding in the nineteenth century. The Hôtel de Ville project was typical of the commissions granted by the government to artists to decorate the new structures with appropriate scenes relating to the glory of France. In their study of the patronage of the arts in France in that period, Harrison C. White and Cynthia A. White comment that "nineteenth-century France exhibited the most widespread, comprehensive government involvement with art of any state."⁶ George Reid may have observed this and wondered why the Canadian government could not be encouraged in a similar pursuit.

While in Paris Reid would probably have taken note of earlier examples of murals in that city, for example, Paul Delaroche's (1797-1856) hemicycle in the École des Beaux-Arts, completed in 1841, as well as the decorations from the 1850's; Thomas Couture's (1815-1879) decorations in the

chapel of Saint-Eustache, Paris, begun 1851; Eugène Delacroix's (1798-1863) ceiling painting for the Apollo Gallery of the Louvre, 1850-51, and his murals in the church of Saint-Sulpice (1849-1861). Other mural paintings available in Paris for Reid to see were those by Paul Baudry (1828-1886) in the Paris Opera, 1864-74, and the Panthéon murals undertaken by a number of artists, the most celebrated being Puvis de Chavannes, Jean-Paul Laurens, and Baudry. While Reid was still in Paris in 1889, the mural painting by Puvis de Chavannes (1824-1898) in the Sorbonne was officially unveiled on August 7th. This work impressed Reid as a student, and he was to revisit it on a later trip to Paris in 1896.⁷ Reid himself maintained that the idea of proposing a scheme of mural decoration in Canada took form in his mind after his year of study in France.⁸

During his year in France and on a previous trip to Europe, Reid visited England where he saw the murals by Sir Frederick Leighton in the South Kensington Museum, executed between 1878 and 1886. He had also probably seen Ford Madox Brown's decorations in the Manchester City Hall (1878-1893), since Reid praised both commissions in his article on "Mural Decoration" of January 1898.⁹ In England, however, there was not the government support and public encouragement for mural art that there was in France at that same time.

Inspired by his experience in Europe, upon his return to Toronto in November 1889 Reid set about to promote mural painting in Canada. The event which strengthened the artist's determination to proceed with a scheme to decorate public buildings was the World's Columbian Exhibition at Chicago in 1893. At this fair many of the buildings were decorated with murals by the leading American artists. Reid visited the exhibition¹⁰ where his painting *Foreclosure of the Mortgage* was included among Canadian entries and for which he was awarded a bronze medal. In the aftermath of the fair's success, two other major American mural commissions came about: the decoration of the Boston Public Library in 1895 and Washington's Library of Congress project for 112 murals in that same year were of great interest to George Reid. Greatly impressed by the combined efforts of architects, sculptors, and artists in the decoration of the fair's buildings, Reid wished to initiate similar mural projects in Toronto.

In order to set up a formal basis for the promotion of mural painting in Canada, under the leadership of George Reid, seven artists organized themselves into the Society of Mural Decorators in February 1894.¹¹ Besides Reid, they included William Cruikshank (1849-1922), Wyly Grier

(1862-1957), Frederick Challener (1869-1959), Curtis Williamson (1867-1944), Sidney Strickland Tully (1860-1911), and Harriet Ford (1859-1938).¹²

After an unsuccessful attempt to have a mural scheme accepted for Toronto's Union Station, the Society turned its attention to the decoration of the new Toronto Municipal Buildings comprising a city hall and court house. A formal proposal was sent to the architect of the building, E.J. Lennox, on March 26, 1895, citing the examples of the Chicago exhibition murals and the decorations of the Panthéon, the Sorbonne, and the Hôtel de Ville in Paris.¹³ The artists even submitted sketches for the proposed murals in the new building's Council Chamber. However, after much negotiation, the Society's plans were rejected by the City Council, which pleaded lack of funds.¹⁴ This was a blow to the Society of Mural Decorators and after some discussion the discouraged members called a halt to their activities. However, George Reid, the driving force behind the group, was unwilling to let the plan rest. In a surprise move, he offered to undertake two murals in a different part of the building, free of charge, and on December 15, 1897, the City Council accepted his offer.¹⁵

For over fourteen months Reid worked on the decorations for the two panels and four spandrel spaces over the interior entrance to the hall of the Municipal Buildings, and they were formally presented to the city on May 16, 1899. The murals were painted on canvas in his studio and then fixed to the walls of the building with a thick medium of white lead, oil, and resin, the accepted technique for mural decoration known as "toile marouflée" in France and the United States at the end of the nineteenth century.

The murals executed by George Reid are still located inside the main entrance hall of the old Toronto Municipal Buildings on the corner of Bay and Queen streets. On the east side of the three wide entrance arches is the mural, seven by fourteen feet, depicting *The Arrival of the Pioneers* (fig. 1). The mural on the west side of the entrance measures seven by seventeen feet across and depicts the early settlers surveying the land and chopping down trees in a scene entitled *Staking a Pioneer Farm* (fig. 2). Names of early Canadian pioneers who played a notable role in the development of Toronto and Ontario are printed in decorative borders around each mural.¹⁶

In the spandrels between the arches Reid painted four winged female figures all similarly clad in flowing white dresses with swirling pink shawls

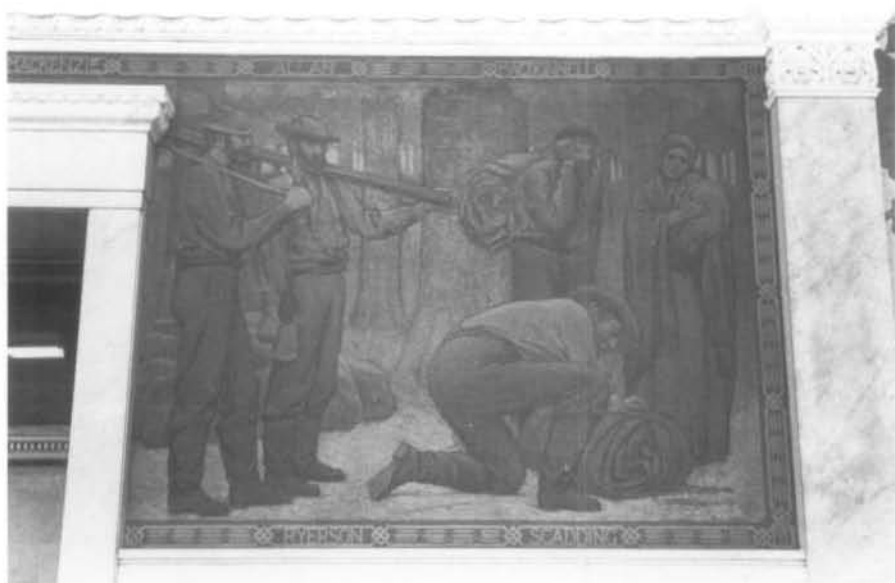


fig.1 George Reid, *Arrival of the Pioneers*, 1899, oil on canvas, entrance hall, east side, Toronto Municipal Buildings.

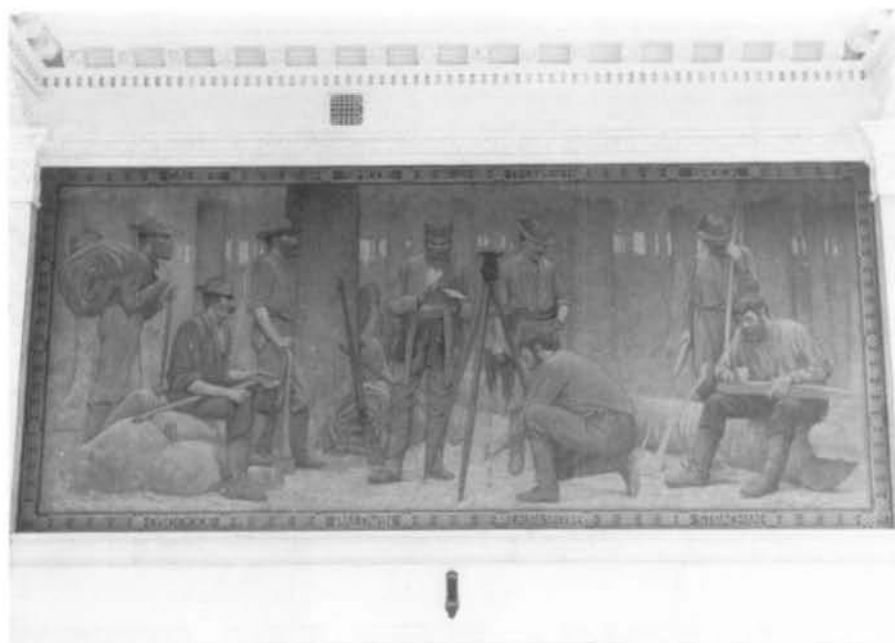


fig.2 George Reid, *Staking a Pioneer Farm*, 1899, oil on canvas, entrance hall, west side, Toronto Municipal Buildings.



fig.3 George Reid, spandrel decoration, **Fortune**, 1899, oil on canvas, Toronto Municipal Buildings.

about their shoulders (fig. 3). They symbolize "Discovery," "Fame," "Fortune," and "Adventure." Each allegorical figure holds up one arm to support a banner which bears the title of the murals: *"Hail to the Pioneers / Their Names and Deeds / Remembered and Forgotten / We Honour Here."* All the murals are signed at the bottom, "G.A. Reid 1899. 29."¹⁷

In these completed murals, as well as in the early sketches proposed by the Society of Mural Decorators for the Municipal Buildings, the artists' debt to French mural painting is evident. The major American mural projects strengthened their commitment to mural art and provided inspiration, but it was the work of the French muralists, especially Puvis de Chavannes, which offered Reid and his colleagues models for their own work. American muralists also revered Puvis, who was asked to paint a series of murals for the staircase of the Boston Public Library (1891-96).¹⁸ At the time of this commission Puvis's work was frequently referred to and illustrated in Canadian periodicals.¹⁹ In his article on mural decoration of 1898, George Reid states: "Of the living painters, Puvis de Chavannes is

regarded by the French as their great decorator, and by a large part of the world as the prophet of modern decoration."²⁰ Other Canadian artists, such as Henri Beau and Ozias Leduc, also came under Puvis's influence,²¹ and one of the latter's works was exhibited in Montréal in 1890. This was a reduced version (executed 1884-89) of his mural in the Lyons Museum, France.²²

Reid acknowledged Puvis de Chavannes as a source of inspiration to him, and as a student in Paris in 1889 he had the opportunity to see at first hand Puvis's murals executed in that city. The series of murals by Puvis in the Musée de Picardie was installed by 1896, when Reid returned to France and made a special trip to see the Amiens cycle for the first time.²³ On that trip he was able to renew his acquaintance with Puvis's murals in the Panthéon and Sorbonne and to see the complete series of mural paintings in the Hôtel de Ville. Thus he was able to draw on these examples when he began to formulate ideas for the Toronto City Hall plan.

George Reid's choice of suitable subjects for the Municipal Buildings was based on the example of the French muralists who interpreted historical themes, as well as on mythological and allegorical subjects for their decorations. In the Paris Hôtel de Ville, the murals depict scenes of daily life in the city and its political history, for example, *La Reception de Louis XVI à l'Hôtel de Ville*, or *Les Enrôlements volontaires sur le terre-plein au Pont-Neuf en 1792*. Then there are more allegorical subjects, such as Puvis de Chavannes's *Été* and *Hiver* in the Zodiac Salon and *Victor Hugo offrant sa lyre à la Ville de Paris*, for the grand staircase ceiling.

In Reid's murals, the spectator sees a depiction of Toronto's beginnings and pioneer history. This was a fitting subject for a city hall and court house, which in most small towns or cities in Canada are the dominant landmarks. Reid had intended to complete the decoration of the hall panels with more scenes of early contacts with the Indians, pioneers clearing and cultivating the land and building log houses. He made a series of small oil sketches for twenty scenes, each designed for a specific wall surface in the main entrance of the Municipal Buildings.²⁴ Unfortunately, a parsimonious City Council again blocked Reid's plans to continue the murals, and the panels remain blank. If he had been allowed to carry out his proposals, his completed murals would have presented a more impressive display as part of a large mural cycle arranged around the entrance hall.

Similar themes of settling and cultivating the land appear in Puvis de Chavannes's mural painted for the Amiens Museum, entitled *Ave Picardia*

Nutrix (1865) commemorating the fertility of Picardy. Puvis illustrates the activities of the inhabitants as they gather the harvest of the land and rivers. The building of a house, the gathering of the produce, the mothers with their children in Puvis's mural are all images found in *Hail to the Pioneers* and in Reid's proposals for a continuation of the cycle of the Municipal Buildings. Similarly, Reid portrays the co-operative efforts of the people who are labouring to render the land productive. Puvis de Chavannes declared that the construction of a building in the background of *Ave Picardia Nutrix* represented the more universal theme of "civilization on the march" ("une civilisation grandissante").²⁵ In the same way, George Reid's depiction of the settlers building log houses in the hinterland takes on a broader significance. The Canadian pioneers were settling a land that had been regarded by the mother country as uncivilized, and their log houses symbolized "civilization on the march" in the North American frontier.

The earlier, unsuccessful proposals for the Municipal Buildings' Council Chamber by Wyly Grier, William Cruikshank, Frederick Challener, and Reid suggest that the members of the Society of Mural Decorators relied on Puvis's example in their first proposal as well. Since neither Cruikshank nor Grier pursued careers as muralists, it may be surmised that it was Reid who provided the direction for the first City Hall sketches and who encouraged the others to look to Puvis for inspiration. The title of the mural proposal, *Industry, Integrity, Intelligence* (fig. 4) recalls the abstract titles of Puvis's allegorical scenes symbolizing the virtues of Paris, *Le Patriotisme*, *L'Intrépidité*, *La Générosité* on the ceiling of the grand staircase in the Paris Hôtel de Ville. *La Renommée* and *L'Industrie* graced the cornerpieces of the ceiling. In the same way, Grier, Reid, and Cruikshank's work symbolizing the motto of the city of Toronto stressed the virtues of industry, integrity, and intelligence. These were appropriate references for a Council Chamber where municipal decisions were made. The emphasis on moral principles was common in French and American subjects for mural decorations which, as a public art, were intended to be uplifting to the viewer.

Not only the titles, but the actual type of work represented in the three scenes by Cruikshank, Reid, and Grier bears a relation to the activities of the figures in the Amiens mural by Puvis, entitled *Le Travail* (fig. 5), which Reid reproduced in his article on "Mural Decoration," January 1898. The men hammering at the anvil and pouring the molten metal in

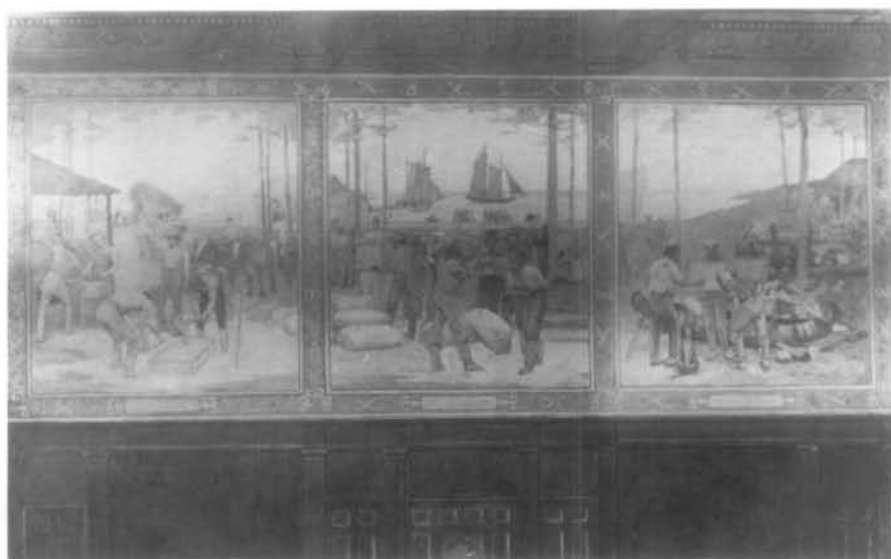


fig.4 Cruikshank, Grier, Reid (left to right), studies for *Industry, Integrity, and Intelligence*. (George Reid papers, Scrapbook A, p. 200, gift of Mrs. George Reid, 1957, Edward P. Taylor Reference Library, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.)



fig.5 Pierre Puvis de Chavannes (1824-1898), *Le Travail*, c.1863, oil on canvas, 1.085 x 1.480 m., National Gallery of Art, Widener Collection 1942. (Photo: National Gallery of Art, Washington.)



fig. 6 Pierre Puvis de Chavannes (1824-1898), *Ludus Pro Patria*, 1888-89, 33.3 x 134.3 cm., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of Mrs. Harry Payne Bingham, 1958. (Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.)

Industry recall the forgers in *Le Travail*. As well, the cart with oxen and the family group in the middle ground of *Integrity* have their counterparts in Puvis's mural. The motif of the house under construction at the right of Grier's sketch, *Intelligence*, is reminiscent of Puvis's similar background scene in *Ave Picardia Nutrix*. Puvis's use of a border of devices to serve as a transition from the wall to the painting in the Amiens murals has also been borrowed by Reid and his colleagues in their use of wide bands with bound laurel leaves and ribbons inframing each scene. Reid repeated this idea of a decorative unifying border in his *Hail to the Pioneers*.

In another mural by Puvis located in the Amiens Musuem, *Ludus Pro Patria* (fig. 6), the main themes relate to those Reid introduced in his pioneer murals. Louise d'Argencourt, in her study²⁶ of Puvis's murals, concludes that the three main ideas proposed in *Ludus Pro Patria* are: work, family, and fatherland, the traditional values of the French middle class and common themes in French nineteenth-century painting. In Reid's series, the efforts of the pioneers to explore, to clear the land, and to build upon it well represent the theme of work. The father, mother, and child illustrated in the east mural correspond to the family groupings so typical of Puvis de Chavannes's paintings and especially evident in *Ludus Pro Patria* on the right side. Finally, Puvis's young javelin throwers who stand ready to defend their fatherland have in Reid's mural become the pioneers who face the hardships and danger of an unknown land.

Of all the early proposals for the Municipal Buildings by the Society of Mural Decorators, the ones which most closely relate in subject to Puvis de Chavannes's themes are those Reid and Grier executed for panels flank-



fig. 7 George Reid, *Study for Science*. (George Reid Papers, Scrapbook A, p. 200, gift of Mrs. George Reid, 1957, Edward P. Taylor Reference Library, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.)

ing the entrance door to the Council Chamber. Entitled *Science and Art*, the former (fig. 7) by Reid depicts learned men with beards, the fathers of science from Antiquity, giving instruction to students or working out the principles of science. Certain devices suggest scientific knowledge and research: the globe, the books the figures are consulting, the mortar and pestle, and the human skull. The horizontal frieze-like arrangement of groups is carried over into Grier's mural of *Art* (fig. 8) in which the figures display objects associated with the arts of music, poetry, sculpture, and architecture.

Allegories of Science and Art were traditional subjects for painters and sculptors, and were popular among the late nineteenth-century muralists, both French and American. The mural for the Sorbonne by Puvis de Chavannes, unveiled in 1889, is appropriately an allegory on Literature, Science, and Art. The figures dressed in robes of classical Antiquity hold objects to symbolize the discipline they represent; the old instruct the young in a similar juxtaposition of the generations, as we see in Reid's mural of *Science*. In the later murals for the Boston Public Library, another institution of learning, Puvis again chose to represent the individual Sciences, such as Philosophy, Physics, and Astronomy, as well as Poetry.

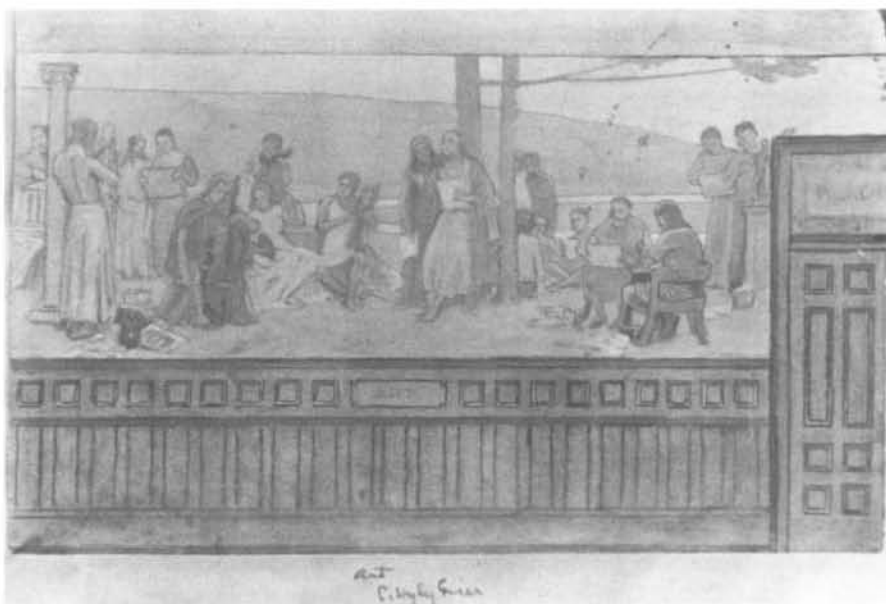


fig.8 E. Wyly Grier, *Study for Art*. (George Reid papers, Scrapbook A, p. 201, gift of Mrs. George Reid, 1957, Edward P. Taylor Reference Library, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.)

As in the Sorbonne mural, Puvis drew his figures from Antiquity and the origins of Western education.

Not only in his choice of subject did Reid look to Puvis de Chavannes, but he also followed the French artist's example in the composition of his mural and his use of light and colour. Puvis's mural decorations were characterized by simplification of forms, flat colour tonalities, lack of modelling in the figures (hence an emphasis on the silhouette), and, above all, the desire to subordinate the mural painting to its architectural surroundings. These principles were absorbed by Reid and many of Puvis's North American followers.

In discussing the appropriate treatment for a mural, George Reid states:

Aesthetically, the mural must harmonize in colour scheme and line with its setting; and it must successfully cover its space with a well-balanced and unobtrusive composition which, no matter how extended in length, must present unity. Technically it, of necessity, must be light in weight. That is, it must have light, not heavy, impasto; so that the picture will appear to rest easily on the surface of the wall



fig.9 Entrance to Main Hall, Toronto Municipal Buildings, showing George Reid's murals in situ.

and not leave the observer in doubt as to whether or not the wall can bear its mass. Moreover, it should take the light evenly from any point of view.²⁷

With these principles in mind, Reid sought to harmonize his murals with the interior architecture of the Toronto city hall and court house. The two panels are situated between the horizontal band of the cornice and the dado of the wall (fig. 9). The dado of streaked yellow marble surmounted by a wide border of white marble, is carried around the hall interior, leaving a continuous band of wall space suitable for a sequence of murals.

In his two murals Reid emphasized the horizontality of this wall space by creating a series of horizontal bands within the composition. The standing figures in the west mural (fig. 2) are of equal height and are arranged in an almost equidistant rhythm and on the same plane across the mural. This imaginary height line comes just below the base of the pilaster capitals at either end of the murals and may be traced in the east mural (fig. 1) along the heads of the upright figures to the top of the door lintel. The boots of the sitting and crouching men on the west side are at approximately the same level and form another horizontal band. (This is less obvious in the east panel.) This horizontality is further stressed by the ribbon

of daylight seen through the trees in the background of the paintings, and also by the border of leaves stretching along the top. This composition of forms placed in a horizontal band suited the site of the murals: an entrance hall which is a place of passage. People entering continue quickly to their destination. Therefore, the mural is not viewed from the front as a unit, but rather the spectator sees one figure after another as he passes by.

This rhythmic succession of groups of figures positioned in a horizontal format across the canvas was a characteristic feature of Puvis's murals. As Jacques Foucart points out in his introduction to the Puvis de Chavannes exhibition of 1977:

Puvis's *Childhood of Saint Geneviève*, *The Provisioning of Paris*, *The Inspiring Muses* (Boston), and *The Sacred Grove* (Lyons) yield their secret in the way they unfold laterally—unhurried and majestic, like slow-motion film, where movement is suggested by figures which succeed each other, recur, musically echo one another, move and yet remain motionless figures which carry a beautiful and assured poetry.²⁸

In the architectural composition of the Toronto Municipal Buildings' interior, the horizontal elements are broken by the series of pilasters in each bay of the hall, by the tall vertical door surrounds, and by the free-standing columns in the centre of the hall. In a similar way, the horizontal bands in the mural are interrupted by the vertical lines of the upright figures and by the trees, like columns themselves, which repeat the vertical of the pilasters flanking the murals.

In both murals the intersection of the horizontal and vertical lines forms a grid-like structure and gives a feeling of rigidity to the composition. The horizontal and vertical grid is interrupted by diagonal elements such as the lines of the tripod legs, the position of the guns against the tree in the west mural, and the axe and logs carried by the men in the east mural. The intersection of opposing lines on the surface of the painting increases the sense of flatness and the decorative pattern that Reid wished to achieve. The only suggestion of depth is in the movement toward the Indian, and this progression backward is arrested by the screen of trees in the background. To achieve the desired flatness, Reid has minimized the background setting of his murals. The figures dominate the composition, and the trees and landscape behind are not interesting in themselves. They define the composition and act simply as supporting elements in the structure of the paintings.

As George Reid had noted, a mural "should take the light evenly from any point of view." In *Hail to the Pioneers*, the light does not focus on one area but falls evenly across the canvas, casting small, hardly noticeable shadows. Unlike an easel painting, there is no obvious focus of attention; no one area is highlighted. Dark outlines or contrasts of solid colour are used to define the forms. The patches of light in the distance between the trees serve to bring the background forward to create a two-dimensional effect. In the city hall entrance, natural light comes from a row of windows reaching to the ceiling opposite the mural. They provide a certain amount of daylight to the hall, but the distance across the hall is such that no direct light falls on the murals. To diminish reflections and accent the recessive quality caused by the oil paint, Reid mixed wax and turpentine with the oil colour, as was the French custom.

On first impression, the Municipal Buildings' murals appear grey and bland, partly due to their yellowing over time and a lack of cleaning since 1929. However, it was Reid's intention to use neutral shades that would not compete with the surrounding architecture. The greyish-white marble and the grey sandstone arches of the interior set the tone for the coolness of the colours in the murals. There are no areas of high intensity, no bright, vivid hues to attract the eye to one area of the painting. Typical of High Victorian architecture, the Toronto Municipal Buildings are alive with a variety of colours and contrasts of materials. Reid picked up the pink tones in his murals from the rosy marble of the hexagonal bases of the columns in the hall and from the pink tesserae in the mosaic patterns of the floor. The sienna shade of the ground in the landscape matches the yellow striations of the dado's marble. He repeated the more vibrant, golden tones of the freestanding columns and the floor's running-leaf mosaic in the decorative border of the murals. The grey-brown sandstone of the arched entrance is repeated in the grey-browns of the clothing, boots, and trees in the murals.

To ensure that the tones of the painting harmonized with the colour scheme of the interior architecture Reid worked with samples of the building's stone propped up against his canvas (fig.10). This close attention to the building's material and his working method reflect the influence of Puvis de Chavannes, who had requested that examples of the stone from the staircase of the Boston Public Library be sent to him in France while he was preparing the series of murals for Boston.²⁹

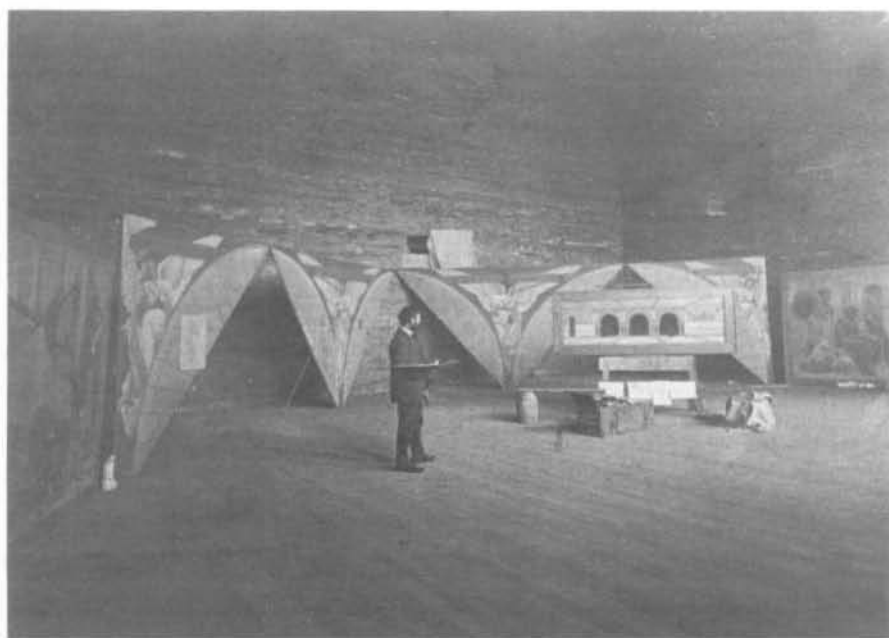


fig. 10 George Reid in his studio at work on the Toronto Municipal Buildings' murals, c.1898-99.

Reid's use of colour and light was guided, likewise, by the example of Puvis de Chavannes. The pale tonalities of Puvis's murals caused a sensation in his day. His intention to employ subtle shades which blended with the overall tones of the architecture recalled the quiet tones of traditional *buon fresco*. His deliberate use of white, chalky tones sometimes gave his figures, with their lack of modelling, an unreal, phantom-like appearance, especially in his later murals. Placed against a darker background, the forms became as flat as paper cut-outs in such works as *Le Bois sacré cher aux Arts et aux Muses* (Lyons), *Les Muses inspiratrices* (Boston), or the earlier *Le Repos* (Amiens). The critic Hilton Kramer expressed Puvis de Chavannes's aims:

For him, the art of painting consisted in filtering out all chromatic contrasts to a point where every tone enjoyed an equal visual weight and the surface of the picture became a flat, continuous, unbroken plane bathed in an unearthly light.³⁰

In *Hail to the Pioneers* George Reid did not emulate the delicate, ethereal quality of Puvis's forms. Rather, he relied on dark, earthy colours more appropriate to the Canadian bush frontier. In his mural study for

Science (1896-97) (fig. 7), Reid came closer to the colour tonalities of Puvis de Chavannes. In this early proposal for the Council Chamber entrance, the scene is derived from Classical times, and the tones suggest the cool colours of ancient fresco. The pale, soft hues of blue, rose-pink, and yellow are applied in a more varied and wider range of tones than Reid employed in the Pioneer murals.

In determining his composition, Reid also looked to the great French muralist for inspiration. In *Hail to the Pioneers*, the figures have been divided into groups of twos and threes which succeed one another in the foreground of the composition. The mural by Puvis de Chavannes *Ludus Pro Patria*, 1882, at the Amiens Museum (fig. 6), is a good example of this arrangement of forms in a horizontal sequence along the front plane of the work. The placement of standing vertical figures and straight trees against horizontal bands of landscape was a key element in Puvis's compositions, even more obvious in later murals such as *Inter Artes et Naturam* (Rouen, 1888-91) or *Les Muses inspiratrices* (Boston), where the horizon line of the land is an absolutely straight band running across the background. The trees in *Ludus Pro Patria* also help to divide the mural into three groupings. The left side of this mural is reserved for the domestic activities carried out by the women, the javelin throwers take up the central section, and the family groups are placed on the right side. Another example of Puvis's work, *Le Bois sacré* (1889), in the Sorbonne, is similarly divided into three, both thematically and physically. In his city hall murals George Reid also followed this division of the composition into groups of forms, emphasized by the positioning of trees in the background. Each figure is an isolated form held within a rigid structure, which gives a static quality to the work and recalls another familiar feature of the murals by Puvis de Chavannes.

It is obvious that George Reid had studied Puvis's mural *Ludus Pro Patria* in the Amiens Museum, for he borrowed certain forms from this painting. The figure of the bearded man with a staff beside the tree on the right of Reid's study for *Science* is used in the same way as the man with a beard leaning on his staff in Puvis's mural. Both figures turn toward the centre and, with the tree, close off the painting at the right. The group of youths leaning on their javelins, looking toward the protagonist, compare in stance with the pioneers shown standing at the left side of both city hall murals by Reid. In *Arrival of the Pioneers*, the figure of the mother holding her child bears a relation to the pose of a mother and child in *Ludus Pro*

Patria, and it is a frequent motif in other murals by Puvis de Chavannes, such as *Ave Picardia Nutrix*, left side, *Inter Artes et Naturam*, central figure reaching up to the apple tree, and *Sainte Geneviève enfant en prière*. The latter mural suggests another borrowing of a motif by Reid from the French master's repertory. The pose of the Indian looking out from behind the tree in *Hail to the Pioneers*, west side, recalls the ploughman in the background peering out at the praying child, Sainte Geneviève, in Puvis's Panthéon series (mounted in 1877).

The carefully composed structure of the city hall murals was also a feature of Reid's earlier proposal for the panel entitled *Science*, intended to go outside the Council Chamber (fig. 7). Within a similar long rectangular space, Reid has arranged his figures in a horizontal succession across the canvas like a classical frieze. They take up the front plane, and behind them the landscape is composed of simple, flat forms and shapes. The opaque clump of trees in its decorative role denies any sense of perspective and recalls the function of a similar mass of trees in Puvis de Chavannes's *Été* in the Hôtel de Ville, Paris. In *Science*, as in *Hail to the Pioneers*, the standing figures are approximately the same height and form a horizontal line across the painting. At the same time, these vertical figures and the straight lines of the tree trunks challenge the horizontal band of the sky and land mass. The trees also divide the mural vertically into divisions as they do in *Hail to the Pioneers*. This division is more evident if Reid's study of *Science* is taken together with its companion study for *Art* by Grier (fig. 8). The trees in each painting break the overall composition into three sections contained within the limits of the vertical pillar in Grier's mural on the left and the tree on the right of Reid's sketch.

The groups of figures in *Science* are not as sharply divided as they are in the pioneer murals. Reid has positioned the forms across the canvas in such a way that an imaginary line drawn along the height of each figure in succession, following the general outline of the forms, undulates across the painting, and carries over into Grier's panel. This rhythmic motion is further defined in Reid's study by the position of arms, which creates a similar waving line across the canvas. In certain areas, the lines of the drapery also contribute to this internal rhythm and processional movement so typical of Puvis's works.

After completing the Toronto city hall decorations, Reid had little opportunity to continue his mural work in public buildings. However, his study for a proposal for the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa, made in

1904, and the murals he executed at a later date, the Earls court Public Library (1925-26) and Jarvis Collegiate (1928-30), also reveal his debt to Puvis de Chavannes. Puvis's concern for the decorative aspect of painting suited Reid's talents and interest in exploring the decorative quality of his art. For, in addition to his murals, Reid tried his hand at book illustration and furniture design, and he was an active participant in the Arts and Crafts Society of Canada, founded in 1903 to promote the handcrafted arts. Thus, mural decoration offered Reid a way to integrate the arts and to unite painting with architecture. In this aim, inspired by Puvis de Chavannes's example and that of the American muralists, Reid reached a measure of success in his Toronto Municipal Building murals.

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Notes

¹ Napoleon Bourassa (1827-1916) and Ozias Leduc (1864-1955) were two Québec artists most significantly involved with painting murals in churches in the second half of the nineteenth century.

² Emile VEDEL, "The Works of Benjamin Constant," *Magazine of Art*, 23 (1899), p. 471.

³ Constant executed *La Ville de Paris conviant le monde à ses fêtes* in the Salles des Fêtes. René WEISS and Nicolas BOURGEOIS, *L'Hôtel de Ville de Paris* (Grenoble: B. Arthaud, 1931), pp. 71, 109.

⁴ "La décoration picturale de l'Hôtel de Ville," *Le Rappel (Paris)*, 1899, George Reid Papers, Scrapbook A, p. 138, gift of Mrs. George Reid, 1957, Edward P. Taylor Reference Library, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

⁵ G.A. REID, "Note on Mural Painting in Canada, prepared for the information of the Council of the Royal Canadian Academy," (Typescript) December 1917, Scrapbook A, p. 347.

⁶ H.C. WHITE and C.A. WHITE, *Canvases and Careers* (New York, London: John Wiley & Sons, 1965), pp. 16-17.

⁷ On January 18, 1896, the Reids sailed from New York for Gibraltar and spent the winter in Spain. Then they continued on to Paris for April and May, where they spent "many hours studying the Chavannes decorations in the Pantheon, Sorbonne, and l'Hotel de Ville." Muriel MILLER MINER, *G.A. Reid: Canadian Artist* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1946), p. 88.

⁸ G.A. REID, Address before a meeting of the Ontario Society of Artists, March 25, 1897, O.S.A. Minute Book, p. 233, Archives of Ontario, Toronto.

⁹ G.A. REID, "Mural Decoration," *Canadian Architect and Builder*, January 1898, p. 14.

¹⁰ F.E.G., "Art and Artists," *Toronto Saturday Night* 6 (May 20, 1893), p. 14: "Mr. and Mrs. Reid have gone to the World's Fair."

¹¹ G.A. REID, W. CRUIKSHANK, and W. GRIER to E.J. LENNOX, Toronto, March 27, 1895, enclosed typescript of 3 pages, George Reid Papers, Scrapbook A, p. 99, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

- 12 Jean GRANT, "Studio and Gallery," *Toronto Saturday Night* 1 (January 8, 1899), p. 9.
- 13 George Reid Papers, Scrapbook A, p. 199.
- 14 For the details of the artists' efforts to place murals in the Toronto City Hall and Court House, see R.M. PEPALL, "The Murals by George A. Reid in the Toronto Municipal Buildings (1897-1899)," M.A. thesis, Concordia University, 1982, Chapter II.
- 15 Sgd. John BLEVINS, City Clerk, to REID, December 16, 1897, 18999 Board of Control Communications, #110, Records and Archives Division, Toronto City Hall.
- 16 The names printed around the murals are: MacKenzie, Allan, MacDonnell, Ryerson, and Scadding on the east side; Galinee, Simcoe, Tecumseh, Brock, Osgoode, Baldwin, Laura Secord, and Strachan on the west panel. In each corner of the border are the letters "YT" which stand for Toronto and its earlier name, York. For the historical background to these names, see R.M. PEPALL, M.A. thesis, 1982, Appendix 1.
- 17 In 1929, Reid cleaned and retouched the murals. City Clerk to Reid, May 7, 1929, thanking the artist for his offer to clean the murals, George Reid Papers, Scrapbook A, p. 383.
- 18 American artists John La Farge and Kenyon Cox both wrote laudatory articles on Puvis de Chavannes in, respectively, *Scribner's Magazine* 28 (December 1900), pp. 674-89, and *Century Magazine* 51 (February 1896), pp. 558-69.
- 19 *Arcadia*, *Canadian Architect and Builder*, *Toronto Saturday Night*, and *The Week* carried references and articles on Puvis in the years 1894 to 1898.
- 20 G.A. REID, "Mural Decoration," *Canadian Magazine*, April 1898, p. 508.
- 21 Laurier LACROIX, "Puvis de Chavannes et le Canada," *Journal of Canadian Art History*, 4 (Spring 1977), pp. 6-12.
- 22 Louise D'ARGENCOURT, M.C. BOUCHER, D. DRUICK, and J. FOUCART, *Puvis de Chavannes*, exh. cat. (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1977), p. 194.
- 23 MINER, p. 88.
- 24 These sketches are in the collection of the London Regional Art Gallery, London, Ontario.
- 25 D'ARGENCOURT et al., p. 61.
- 26 Louise D'ARGENCOURT, "Les Peintures murales de Puvis de Chavannes au Musée de Picardie," doctoral dissertation, Sorbonne, Paris, 1973, p. 139.
- 27 MINER, p. 75.
- 28 D'ARGENCOURT et al., p. 18.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 228.
- 30 Hilton KRAMER, "Rediscovering Puvis de Chavannes," in Richard J. WATTENMAKER, *Puvis de Chavannes and the Modern Tradition*, exh. cat. (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1975), p. 39.

LES PEINTURES MURALES DANS LES TORONTO MUNICIPAL BUILDINGS

L'artiste torontois George A. Reid (1860-1947) s'intéressa très tôt à la peinture murale. Au cours d'un séjour d'études en France du mois de juin 1888 au mois d'octobre 1889, Reid eut l'occasion d'admirer d'importantes murales qui l'incitèrent à favoriser la décoration murale au Canada. Les deux panneaux et quatre tympons qu'il peignit pour les Toronto Municipal Buildings en 1897-1899 furent ses premières peintures murales dans un édifice public.

Intitulées *Salut aux pionniers*, les peintures murales représentent deux scènes où les premiers colons arrivés au pays avec leurs familles arpentent et défrichent leurs terres. Des figures allégoriques qui symbolisent "la découverte", "la renommée", "la richesse" et "l'aventure" décorent les tympons. Reid propose d'autres esquisses sur les rencontres avec les indiens, la construction des cabanes en bois rond et la culture du sol pour parachever la décoration des panneaux de l'entrée du hall intérieur de cet édifice municipal. Ils ne seront jamais réalisés. En compagnie d'autres artistes membres de la Société des peintres muralistes, Reid avait soumis des études de décorations pour la salle du conseil du même édifice, mais cette proposition fut également rejetée par les autorités. Les esquisses, tout comme les peintures murales réalisées, révèlent combien l'artiste a emprunté au peintre français Puvis de Chavannes (1824-1898).

Reid avait particulièrement admiré les murales de cet artiste à la Sorbonne, au Panthéon et à l'Hôtel de Ville de Paris, tout comme celles que Puvis avait peintes pour le Musée de Picardie à Amiens. C'est à ces sources que Reid puisa son inspiration lorsqu'il présenta ses projets de décoration pour les Toronto Municipal Buildings.

Dans le choix des sujets appropriés pour les murs de l'édifice, qui englobait l'Hôtel de Ville et le Palais de Justice, Reid et ses collègues furent guidés par les muralistes français dont l'iconographie s'appuyait sur des thèmes historiques et des figures allégoriques. Les images de Puvis de Chavannes, illustrant la colonisation, la culture du sol et la présence de la famille, sont reprises par Reid dans les deux panneaux exécutés. Les esquisses proposées par la Société des peintres muralistes pour la salle du conseil, intitulées: *Industry, Integrity, Intelligence*, devise de la ville de Toronto, rappellent les thèmes des murales de Puvis pour l'Hôtel de Ville de Paris, soit: *Le patriotisme, L'intrépidité* ou *L'industrie*, et d'autres encore qui devaient symboliser les vertus attribuées à la Ville de Paris.

En plus de s'inspirer de Puvis de Chavannes pour le choix de ses sujets, Reid suivit également l'exemple de l'artiste français pour la composition de ses fresques, l'emploi de la lumière et de la couleur. La simplification des formes, la tonalité des couleurs en aplat, le modelé restreint des figures qui en rehaussait la silhouette, et surtout le souci de subordonner la peinture murale à son environnement architectural sont toutes caractéristiques des décorations murales

de Puvis. George Reid applique fidèlement dans ses propres réalisations les principes observés dans ces murales. Il ira même jusqu'à reprendre certains personnages de Puvis, et comme le maître, il utilisera une bordure décorative pour encadrer ses panneaux en guise de transition entre la peinture murale et le mur.

Traduction: **Monique Nadeau-Saumier**