

Exhibition Reviews

Lucius R. O'Brien: Visions of Victorian Canada. ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO. Mounted at the National Gallery of Canada. 21 December 1990 - 10 February 1991. 192 p. catalogue.

Walking into the Special Exhibition Galleries of the National Gallery of Canada, where the Lucius R. O'Brien retrospective was exhibited, was a bit like walking into a landscape picture-book of gigantic, panoramic screen format. Here were paintings that might have been found in the homes of Canadian financial barons who lived during the last years of Queen Victoria's reign. This very large retrospective exhibition, entitled "Lucius R. O'Brien, Visions of Victorian Canada" was shown in Toronto, Vancouver, Quebec City and Ottawa. It was assembled and catalogued by Dennis Reid, the curator of Canadian Art at the Art Gallery of Ontario.

The idea for "Lucius R. O'Brien, Visions of Victorian Canada," came to Reid after another exhibition which he organized: "Our Own Country Canada, 'Being an account of the National Aspirations of the Principal Landscape Artists in Montreal and Toronto, 1860-1890'" (Ottawa: National Gallery, 1979). Reid found that O'Brien had emerged as the major figure among the sixteen artists presented, and therefore merited an exhibition of his own. Reid's selection of eighty-eight works in the "Lucius R. O'Brien, Visions of Victorian Canada" exhibition — eighteen oils, supplemented by four sketchbooks, notations, studies and sixty fresh, brilliantly executed watercolours—bears out the high quality that Reid discovered in his initial research.

Reid's catalogue essays give us a detailed account of O'Brien's life, his work and the contribution he made to the evolution of Canadian painting and cultural life. Lucius Richard O'Brien was born on 15 August 1832 in his family's Regency cottage, called The Woods, which was situated a little less than a kilometre west of Shanty Bay, near the north shore of Lake Simcoe, Kempenfelt Bay, Upper Canada. In 1844, his family moved to Toronto, where O'Brien enrolled in Upper Canada College until 1847, at which time he is purported to have entered an architect's office. According to Reid, O'Brien was educated mostly at home. "His talent was a gift."

Reid states that O'Brien's artistic career was divided into five distinct phases: 1850-69, 1870-79, 1879-86, 1886-88 and 1888-98. In his first phase, O'Brien worked in the topographic-picturesque tradition prevalent at the time. There were only three works

from this period in the exhibition, but these show the direction in which O'Brien was heading. The diminutive sketch, *Making a Portage on the Sever, Aug. 1853* (cat. no. 3a), displays the young O'Brien's draftsmanship, attention to detail and solid understanding of form. His use of shading and cross-hatching is exquisite, and commendable for one so young and so little trained. The watercolour, *In the Garden at The Woods 1870* (cat. no. 4), documents the second phase; executed one year after a long absence from any kind of artistic endeavour, it is a Constable-like, photographically detailed depiction of an overwhelming arborescent garden. Although a man and a child are present in the picture, their scale is so small that they are rendered insignificant by the power of the landscape.

O'Brien's third career phase, which was graced with commissions from Queen Victoria, beautifully displayed at the National Gallery on imperial crimson walls, was very well represented in the exhibition. This segment of the exhibition, a celebration of Quebec City, includes the Queen's pictures, both oils, *View from the King's Bastion, Québec 1881* (cat. no. 33) and *Québec from Point Lévis 1881* (cat. no. 34), as well as many smaller oils, watercolours and notebook sketches. Displayed in very handsome, well-crafted cases, the book *Picturesque Canada: the Country as It was and Is*, was lavishly illustrated by wood and steel engravings of O'Brien's. Quebec, with its prosperous harbour and industry, was O'Brien's favourite venue at the time and the summer residence of the Governor-General and his blue-blooded relatives. It becomes quite sublime in O'Brien's careful handling. The Quebec landscape overpowers people, yet in O'Brien's Quebec, man is in harmony with nature and always present, whether he is standing among the majestic rocks or gazing at the waterfalls, the sea, the architecture or the tall ships coming into port. It was at this stage of O'Brien's career that the Governor-General, the Marquis of Lorne, appointed him President of the newly-fledged Canadian Academy of Arts, which became the Royal Academy of Arts (RCA) in 1880. O'Brien occupied the position until 1890, and from 1880-84 he was Artistic Director of *Picturesque Canada*.

Another enterprise led O'Brien to leave Quebec and his native Ontario and enter the fourth phase in his artistic career. For three years, 1886-1889, he painted watercolours and oils of the Canadian Rockies and the West Coast, at the behest of the owners of the newly completed Canadian Pacific Railway. His oils of this period are large and ambitious but it is his watercolours that will remain most memorable because of their clarity and technical skill. According to Reid,

Through the Rocky Mountains, a Pass on the Canadian Highway 1887 (cat. no. 57) was meant to trumpet both national pride in the splendour of this newly accessible part of Canada and the remarkable accomplishment in conquering such terrain, a rich fanfare which was delivered with a still distinctly imperial ring.

The author claims that the last phase of O'Brien's career, the decade of the 1890s, began with his decision to leave the running of the RCA to others, resign from the OSA, and undertake in his painting a similarly rigorous re-evaluation of his position in the artistic scheme of things. Reid asserts that O'Brien had soon embraced the current aesthetic concerns of the day—a greater degree of subjectivity, a deliberate manipulation of colour and form to suit pictorial ends, and a return to oil painting; and at mid-decade [1895], he was linked with the most progressive art forces in Toronto. The last

picture in the exhibition, a watercolour entitled *Night Camp 1898* (cat. no. 88), was painted the year before O'Brien's death. Ninety-one years later, it is still a very inspiring work, captivating, subtle, sublime, looking backwards to somewhat older models, but at the same time forward-looking enough to forecast changes in the twentieth-century art scene in Canada.

It is sad to think that we, the Canadian public, had to wait for nearly a century to examine Lucius R. O'Brien through more than ten paintings. It is a great accomplishment for the Art Gallery of Ontario to have brought together so many works from so many parts of the world. This was the first retrospective exhibition of Lucius O'Brien, and the Art Gallery of Ontario and curator Dennis Reid deserve national recognition for giving us this exhibition and its accompanying catalogue. The research is exhaustive, the criticism perceptive, the archival and art historical scholarship commendable; particularly useful are the sections on O'Brien's contemporaries.

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Personal Thoughts, Private Lives. ASSOCIATION OF MANITOBA MUSEUMS, ASSOCIATION OF MANITOBA ARCHIVISTS. Mounted in Winnipeg, Manitoba. 12 May 1991. No catalogue.

What have women to say about the world around them? Where are the voices of women in Canadian history? Although women today have greater opportunity and means to express themselves, their mothers, grandmothers and great-grandmothers had often to resort to diaries, journals and letters to record their experience in a society in which they were marginalized. "Personal Thoughts, Private Lives" celebrates this personal writing, these expressions of joy and friendship, of pleasure in the routines of everyday life, of sadness and horror at events over which they had little control.

More a display than an exhibition, "Personal Thoughts, Private Lives" is mounted on a standard four-panel display unit. The top half of the unit features photographic reproductions of documents—diaries, journals, letters, autograph books and manuscripts—selected from the Provincial Archives of Manitoba (PAM) and the archives of the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies (CMBS). These reproductions appear under a series of one-line captions, by Cathy MacDonald, designed to encapsulate the ideas in the text of the documents themselves. The lower half of the panels carry oversize colour photographs of writing implements and instruments used in the time periods reflected by the documents—quill-feather pen, inkwell, ball-point pen and floppy disc. The unit is practical, and its designers intend that museums, archives and other institutions who host the display, will supplement it with artifacts and documents from their own collections.

"Personal Thoughts, Private Lives" is the product of a collaboration between the Association of Manitoba Museums (AMM) and the Association of Manitoba Archivists (AMA), and was created by a project committee of seven professionals from around the province. In planning for this project, both the AMM and the AMA had as a primary objective to encourage those who saw the display to recognize and preserve documents and artifacts of their own, which record the lives of ordinary people. To meet this