

Exhibitions

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Exhibitions of archival documents have become a prominent part of the work of archival institutions. And other cultural agencies such as museums and libraries often borrow documents from archives for inclusion in their own exhibitions. Many exhibitions, such as The Painted Past: Selected Paintings From the Picture Division of the Public Archives of Canada, which is reviewed below, are ambitious scholarly projects accompanied by carefully researched publications. Thus, they warrant study as one of the important scholarly activities archivists undertake. This section of Archivaria, under the direction of Jeanne L'Espérance of the Public Archives, will attempt to provide regular reviews of exhibitions of archival documents in order to advance discussion of the roles, varieties, methods of preparation, strengths, weaknesses, and potential of such exhibitions.*

The Painted Past: Selected Paintings From the Picture Division of the Public Archives of Canada. SYLVIA A. ANTONIOU, LYDIA FOY, MARTHA MARLEAU, DOUGLAS E. SCHOENHERR, DIANE TARDIF-CÔTÉ. Mounted at the Public Archives of Canada, Ottawa, 2-31 October 1984. Catalogue No. SA2-148/1984, published by the Ministry of Supply and Services, 1984. ISBN 0-662-53158-2.

Just as textual documents provide the written record of the past, paintings, drawings, watercolours, and prints present the visual image. Before the invention of the camera, people in Canada, as elsewhere, were dependent on the artist to portray the land, its inhabitants, their customs, their day-to-day life, as well as significant historical events. Today these pictorial records give us a vivid image of the past. *The Painted Past*, an exhibition of forty paintings from the PAC collection, was featured at the Open House at the Public Archives of Canada, 13-14 October 1984. A total of more than 6000 persons viewed the exhibition during October 1984. The simple presentation emphasized the rich colour and artistic content of the paintings; each was a statement about Canada's past, fixed as to place and time. A carefully researched and informative catalogue provides an extensive text on each painting, as well as black and white reproductions of each. This review will assess the importance of documentary art as a source for the historian, and consider what place visual sources have in an institution such as the PAC.

The paintings which make up *The Painted Past* are a mere fraction of the more than one thousand in the PAC collection. In addition, there are many thousands of watercolours, drawings, and prints, each of which has reference to some aspect of Canada's past. Their historical content justifies their place in the PAC, where both

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archivist and researcher can readily consult related national collections, whether manuscript, microfilm, maps, or published works. Various inventories, lists, and reference guides facilitate access to the holdings of the Picture Division. As well, selected works have been photographed and arranged as slide sets, which, together with text, are available on loan. *The Painted Past* will remain accessible both as a catalogue and as a slide set.

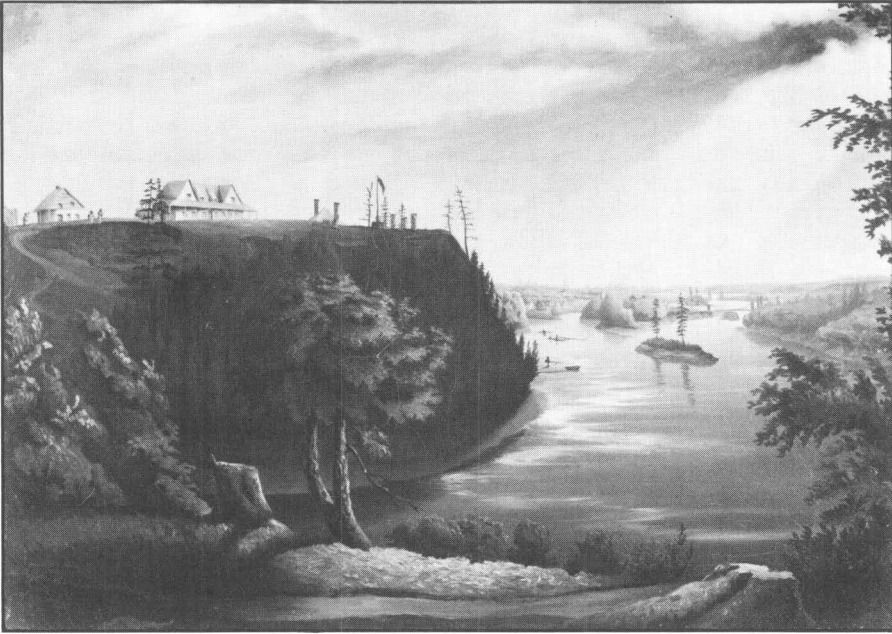
Documentary art, says Douglas Schoenherr of the Picture Division in the introduction to the exhibition catalogue, "may be defined as works of art which have been collected primarily for their subject matter." (p. 1) Their value as historical documents lies in their pictorial content, or iconography. Each picture is both a work of art having aesthetic appeal and a document containing historical evidence.

The paintings chosen cover the years 1710-1919 and are representative of various regions of Canada from Nova Scotia to British Columbia. The artists include both amateurs and professionals: Europeans who have never seen Canada; visitors to Canada, some of whom became permanent residents; military artists; an established French-Canadian artist; and others whose names remain unknown. Various historical interests are represented. The "school" of great men is sustained in portraits of John A. Macdonald, Robert Borden, and others, that of the common man in paintings of the habitant, the voyageur, the prairie homesteader, and the Indian. Landscape and topographical views depict cities such as Halifax and Victoria as well as villages and isolated settlements across the country. Other paintings reflect military or cultural conflict: the trauma of 1759 as Canada moved from French to British rule; and the conflict between Indian and government as immigration moved westward.

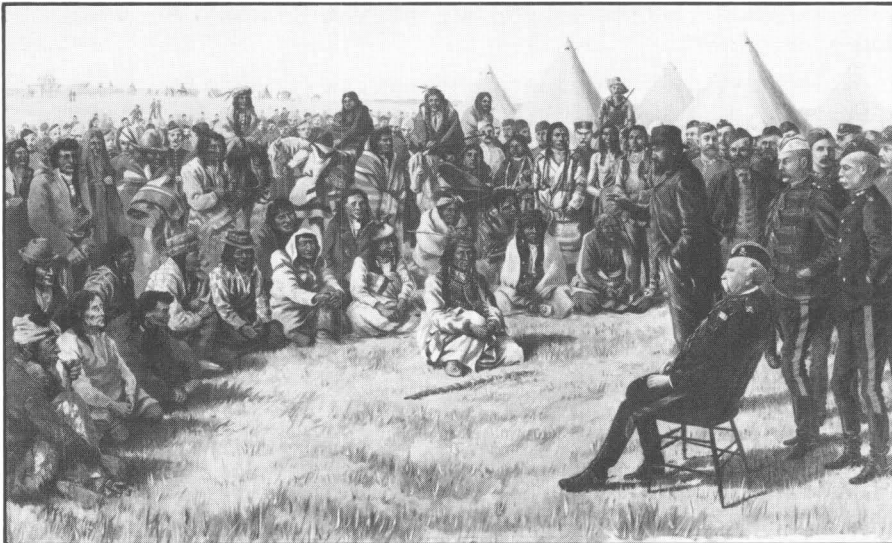
Before the historian can make use of documentary art as evidence, he must first establish its reliability, objectivity, and historical accuracy. By considering the origin of each painting, by whom it was painted, and the date of its execution, he establishes its authenticity as a painting. He then evaluates its credibility as a true picture of the event or scene portrayed. Here, as in assessing other documentary evidence, he must consider two subjective viewpoints: that of the artist and that of the viewer. Why did the artist paint a particular canvas and under what conditions? Was it commissioned, painted for sale, or painted for pleasure? Again, was it painted from life, memory, a copy, or reconstructed from imagination? Each of these factors affect his decision as to the historical accuracy of a particular work.

The personal or professional viewpoint of the artist must also be taken into account. He may have exaggerated some details of the painting or embellished others; he may have altered the perspective or added new figures, factors which do not necessarily diminish the work as a documentary source. Comparison with written sources, primary or secondary, can further establish the accuracy of the pictorial representation. Once historical criticism has been applied, the historian is in a position to accept or reject a given work of art for his particular purpose. He may be seeking confirmation of some detail in his narrative; he may be comparing early views of cities with early maps; he may be researching details of costume, architecture, or family life for a particular project. *The Painted Past* might well fill each of these needs.

The paintings in the exhibition are divided into five groups, each focusing on a particular theme: the fall of Quebec (Catalogue Nos. 1-7); landscapes and topographical views (Nos. 8-21); habitants and voyageurs (Nos. 22-26); portraits of distinguished



Catalogue No. 11. *Edmund Willoughby Sewell (1800-1890), View of Barrack Hill and the Ottawa River at Bytown (Ottawa), c. 1843-1859; oil on canvas. Courtesy: Picture Division, Public Archives of Canada, Negative No.: C-11047.*



Catalogue No. 39. *Robert William Rutherford (1857-1933), The Surrender of Poundmaker to Major-General Middleton at Battleford, Saskatchewan, on May 26, 1885, 1887; oil on canvas. Courtesy: Picture Division, Public Archives of Canada, Negative No.: C-2769.*

Canadians (Nos. 27-31); and Canada's native people (Nos. 32-40). Dominic Serres's two paintings of Quebec (Nos. 6 and 7) illustrate the richness of pictorial records as an historical source. These are derived from on-the-spot drawings by British naval officer Richard Short and provide a graphic view of the damage done by the British bombardment of 1759. The church of Notre-Dame-de-la-Victoire in Lower Town stands partially demolished among the ruins, confirming the written record of heavier bombardment of the more exposed river level. Architectural detail in both pictures, the location of buildings, even the type of paving stones in the street are shown. Distortion of perspective and the addition of various persons and animals in the foreground do not reduce the reliability of these paintings. Although the original drawings by Short have never come to light, Serres's work may be considered a rare and accurate representation of Quebec at the time of the Conquest.

By contrast, *The Death of General Wolfe* (No. 4) by Alonzo Chappel, an American artist, has little validity as an historical document. Painted in 1857, almost one hundred years after Wolfe's death, it was engraved and published to meet a market demand in the United States for "Death-of-Wolfe" scenes. Even Benjamin West's well-known depiction of Wolfe's death is a pictorial reconstruction and, once engraved, was accepted popularly as historical truth.

Of the four portraits in this section, those of Louis XV in coronation regalia (No. 1) and Admiral Sir Charles Saunders (No. 5) were painted from life, while those of George III (No. 2) and James Wolfe (No. 3) were copied. All are considered good likenesses. It is interesting to note that none of the artists in this group ever visited Canada, yet each has contributed significantly to Canadian documentary art. Among the other portraits exhibited (Nos. 27-31), the only twentieth-century work to be included is an oil sketch of Sir Robert Borden (No. 31) painted at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. And only one woman is portrayed, Isabella Clark (No. 30), first wife of Sir John A. Macdonald, in a work painted in 1852.

The topographical views chosen vary as to their historical accuracy. For instance, *View of Montreal from the River* (No. 10) by an unknown artist is believed to be a copy of a Bartlett engraving. W.H. Bartlett's Canadian scenes, with their English skies and imaginary detail added before engraving, are known for their romanticized vision of Canada. Other paintings in this group are more realistic and reward the historian with reliable visual detail on early Canada. In particular, William G.R. Hind's four paintings of rural Manitoba (Nos. 15-18) portray facets of prairie life with photographic clarity. Hind, an Englishman who later settled in Canada, acted as official artist for certain British explorers. *Goderich, Ontario* (No. 13) by William N. Cresswell, another English immigrant, commemorates a specific event, the opening of the Buffalo and Lake Huron Railway in 1858. The winter view of the harbour and the waiting figures on the bluff convey a sense of excitement and anticipation as the physical isolation of the community nears its end. Thirty years later, Edward Roper, an English painter and illustrator, followed the CPR across Canada drawing scenes to include in a published account of his trip. Among these is a unique view of an Indian cemetery overlooking the Fraser River (No. 20). His representation of a Manitoba homestead (No. 21) is less exact in that it was painted after a description given by a pioneer settler. It is reminiscent of Kriehoff in its detail of family and animal life.

Kriehoff's paintings (Nos. 22-24) are a well-known source of domestic detail for nineteenth-century Quebec. Although he is not always topographically accurate, as

shown in *Fort Chambly* (No. 24), he portrays an authentic if stylized view of the everyday life of the habitant. The voyageur, too, was a popular subject for the artist. Frances Anne Hopkins's two paintings of manned canoes (Nos. 25 and 26) were the focal point of the exhibit. An accomplished amateur artist, Hopkins also knew Canada well. With her husband, an official of the Hudson's Bay Company, she had travelled the voyageur route by canoe. Thus her paintings, probably painted later from sketches, may be considered accurate representations of this aspect of Canadian life. At the same time, they are colourful and vigorous works of art.

Perhaps the last group of paintings (Nos. 32-40) yields the most specific historical content. The spectacular paintings of the four Mohawk Kings (Nos. 32-35), commissioned by Queen Anne in 1710, are thought to be among the first full-length oil portraits of North American Indians. Details of clothing, symbolic objects, and background have been reconstructed by the artist, but their regal dress and stance signify the political importance of their visit to England. For the historian they represent a link between the Mohawks in America and the later establishment of their descendants in Canada. Two smaller paintings — of the Micmac Indians of Nova Scotia by an unknown artist (No. 36) and the Ojibway Indians of Georgian Bay by Paul Kane (No. 37) — portray details of Indian family life. Separated by a period of fifty years, these show the increasing influence of the European on the lives of Canada's native people.

Two of the largest canvases in the exhibit document the growing friction between white and Indian as European settlement moved westward. The first of these (No. 38), a pastel, depicts the Blackfoot Chief Crowfoot addressing the Marquis of Lorne in 1881. It is based on a sketch (No. 38a) made by Sydney Prior Hall, a British journalist and a special artist for a London newspaper as well as member of the Governor General's party. The work was later executed in oil. By comparing the three versions with written accounts of the meeting, the historian can assess the artistic evolution of the finished work. Because the purpose of the tour was to assess the West for potential settlement, the atmosphere of the pastel reflects the artist's intent to dispel fears of the Canadian frontier. The second canvas, an oil painting by R.W. Rutherford (No. 39), represents Poundmaker, Chief of the Cree Indians, surrendering to General Middleton on 26 May 1885 following the second Riel Rebellion. Rutherford, a captain in the Royal Canadian Artillery, provided illustrations for the *Canadian Illustrated News*. The painting shows an unyielding Middleton and forebodes the incarceration of Poundmaker and Chief Big Bear for their support of Riel.

The above two works, painted when photography was in its infancy, illustrate the important role played by the artist in recording significant historic events. Whether viewing Quebec in 1759 or Saskatchewan in 1885, the eye of the artist has served as the lens of the camera. Documentary art brings the same sense of immediacy to the past, a sense of time, place, and person. It can be an invaluable tool for the historian, whatever his field, either as a supplement to the written word or as a source in itself. Alongside photographs and other visual records, pictorial sources provide essential research material for the student of Canadian history.

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