

Exhibitions

The Prat Exhibition — Three Talented Sisters. PUBLIC ARCHIVES OF NOVA SCOTIA. Mounted at the Public Archives of Nova Scotia, Halifax. 29 October 1986 — 15 March 1987. 37 p. catalogue.

The Chase Exhibit room at the Public Archives of Nova Scotia is easily one of the best exhibit spaces in the City of Halifax. With its generous proportions, excellent lighting, and sturdy exhibit cases it is wonderfully flexible, accommodating and attractive.

The Prat Exhibition — Three Talented Sisters makes excellent use of this space. The paintings on the walls, arranged chronologically, give a good sense of Annie Prat's work. The balance of paintings to case display is effective and the bindery exhibit an interesting addition. The layout of the exhibition is clear and informative and gives a good overview of the activities of the sisters, expressing their cultural diversity and suggesting to the viewer the various influences contributing to their lives and their work.

The press release which announced the official opening of this admirable exhibition stated that "This exhibit is a collection of watercolours, leatherwork, bookbinding and poetry by three sisters from the Annapolis Valley who operated a bookbindery in New York City from 1899–c.1903." The cover of the exhibition's accompanying catalogue and poster repeated this information as well as reproducing photographs of the sisters: Annie Louise Prat 1861–1960, painter/poet; Minnie Sophia Prat 1868–1901, bookbinder; May Rosina Prat 1872–1965, leatherworker.

What does this information tell us? One seemingly incredible fact after another. Three *young, unmarried women* from *Nova Scotia* (what is more, not from Halifax, but the *Annapolis Valley*) operated a *successful bookbinding studio* in *New York City* from *1899 to c. 1903*.

What prepared the Prat sisters for such an undertaking, and how they spent their lives, is set out in two catalogue essays — one by the exhibition's organizers, Margaret Campbell, Photo and Picture Archivist, and Darlene Brine, Archival Assistant, and the other by Charles Harry Star, the son of one of the sisters. Full descriptive labels accompany the watercolours, fine leatherwork, bookbinding and poetry as well as the memorabilia, the photographs, letters, poetry, and drawings of and by family members, relatives and friends — among them poets Sir Charles G.D. Roberts and Bliss Carman and the artist William Hind — who lived and visited in and around Wolfville, Nova Scotia. It was from Wolfville that the sisters ventured forth, Annie to study painting at the

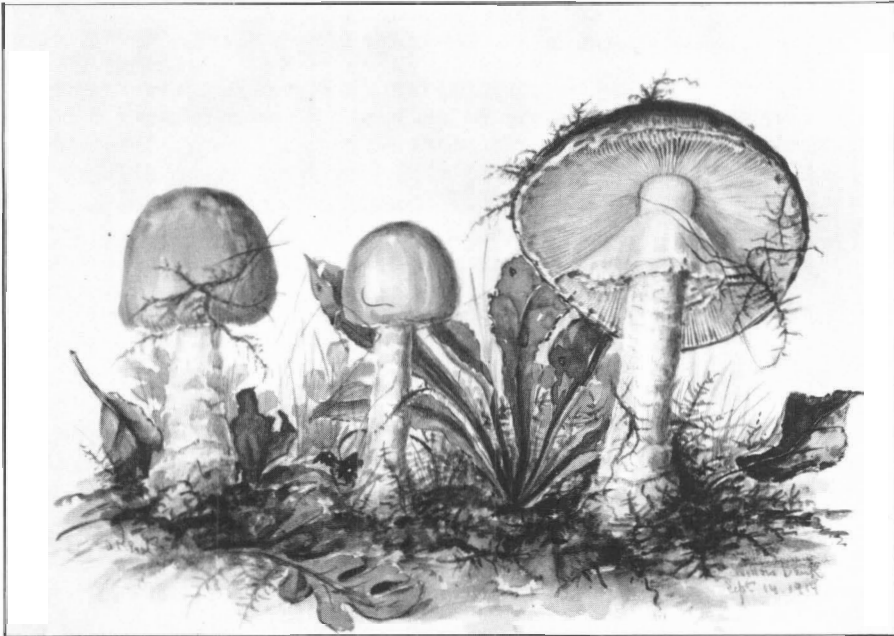


Minnie S. Prat at the Elephant Bindery, New York City, c. 1899. Unknown photographer. Courtesy: Public Archives of Nova Scotia, N-4444.

School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Minnie to New York City to apprentice with Evelyn Nordhoff (North America's first fully qualified woman bookbinder) to be followed by May. There they set up their bookbinding studio, The Primrose Bindery, in Le Boutillier Studios, 37 West 22nd Street, in 1899. Annie exhibited her miniatures there on occasion.

The context in which their achievement must be set goes far beyond turn-of-the-century Nova Scotia. The sisters were responding to the impact of William Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement, a movement in which it is now being recognized that women played an important part. Anthea Callen's *Women in the Arts and Crafts Movement: 1870-1894* brings much of the history, and the context for this exhibition, to light. In the section on bookbinding Callen notes that "Bookbinding appears to have been one of the most popular crafts, apart from embroidery and illustration, to attract women artists towards the end of the nineteenth century.... The appeal of the craft revival of bookbinding to women was emphasized by the *Art Journal* of 1897.... One of the most renowned of the Arts and Crafts bookbinders who took on students in the craft at his Doves Bindery was T.J. Cobden-Sanderson." Charles Starr tells us that Minnie's teacher Evelyn Nordhoff had herself been apprenticed to Cobden-Sanderson, who was an associate of William Morris at the Doves Bindery.

In other words, the three talented sisters all knew where the best professional training was to be had and went after it. They then set up a professional bindery and flourished — Minnie winning a silver medal at the Paris Exposition of 1900 and a bronze medal at the



Annie L. Prat, "Willow Bank / Sept. 14, 1914" Watercolour. Courtesy: Public Archives of Nova Scotia, N-4447.

Pan American Exposition in Buffalo in 1901. However, Minnie died of typhoid fever in 1901, and by 1903, May and Annie had returned to Nova Scotia.

As we are only now beginning to learn, the fact that three middle-class women were studying and practising the applied arts at a professional level in the early 1900s in New York City turns out not to be incredible after all. Another Nova Scotia woman, Alice Egan Hagen comes to mind — a pioneer artist-potter who studied with the renowned ceramist Adelaide Alsop Robineau of New York City. Craft historian Jean Weir of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design points out that New York City was a mecca then. Along with an active cultural life, it provided an environment where respectable young women could pursue careers or studies in safety. It seems that the Prat women were not so unusual. But as Callen says “the important position and function of women within the history of the movement has been left unnoticed, thus reflecting general patterns within a male-dominated view of history.”

There is an enormous volume of unresearched material on women, and not just in the Arts and Crafts Movement. This splendid exhibition, appropriately dedicated to Nova Scotia’s late, revered archivist, Dr. Phyllis Blakeley, sheds a new light on our history. What is more, it does so by transcending conventional expectations of what an “archival document” must be. Hugh Taylor, another Public Archives of Nova Scotia (PANS) archivist, got it right when he argued in his 1979 presidential address to the Society of American Archivists, “Documentary Art and the Role of the Archivist,” that “textual records have been supplemented and at times even replaced by the whole range of oral and visual media...” and that we now appreciate “visual support of text but as a pattern of

record in its own right capable of making statements far beyond the power of speech and writing. We must now examine more closely these visual media of record."

This PANS exhibition has in fact made statements far beyond the power of speech and writing. I would urge PANS to re-issue the catalogue, its document of record, to include more photographs, to register it with an ISBN number and Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data to ensure that this piece of research becomes firmly locked into history: the history of women, the history of turn-of-the-century Nova Scotia and the history of the international Arts and Crafts Movement.

Mary Sparling

Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery

Industrial Images/Industrial Imagination. ROSEMARY DONEGAN for the Art Gallery of Hamilton. Mounted at the Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B.C. 18 September-8 November 1987. Catalogue to be published.

This exhibition, which originated in the Art Gallery of Hamilton, sets out to examine Canada's industrial past through the eyes of Canadian artists. The exhibit was shown in Vancouver and will be seen in Edmonton, Calgary, Winnipeg, and Halifax in 1988. It consists of paintings, prints, photographs, posters, and a variety of other works, including magazine covers. Most of the works date from the first half of the twentieth century, and are organized in the exhibition according to the regions and areas they depict. The information panels which introduce each section of the exhibition are good. While this geographical arrangement has merit, the physical layout of the Vancouver Art Gallery made it difficult for the viewer to follow the order of some of the displays. It is hoped that this will not be a problem when the exhibit is shown in other venues.

The first half of the twentieth century in Canada was characterized by rapid and widespread changes. Political and economic events especially the two world wars and the Depression radically affected Canadians. "Social history" was made, as women's roles changed, the labour movement grew, and higher education became more common. Technological changes permitted the switch from steam to electricity, along with improvements in virtually every area of manufacturing. The assembly line became commonplace, with its time and motion studies of workers, and small businesses often consolidated into national or international corporations. Both consumer culture and the mass media became well entrenched.

The development of Canada's industrial image was shaped by a number of factors, especially the artistic movements of the times, in particular abstract art, with its often highly charged political intent and new formal language. One can see the influences of Cubism, Expressionism, and Futurism, alongside some social realism and some more uniquely "Canadian" movements. Much of this art and artistic philosophy drew its inspiration from industry, whether from a formulation of the new role of art in the industrial world, or from the forms of this world. Throughout this period, and especially during the war years, government and industry were both active in commissioning promotional materials, ranging from in-house magazine covers to war effort posters, logos, and advertisements. Ms. Donegan notes, in her introductory brochure, that this funding facilitated artists' access to factories, an access which had previously been problematical.