

Exhibition Reviews

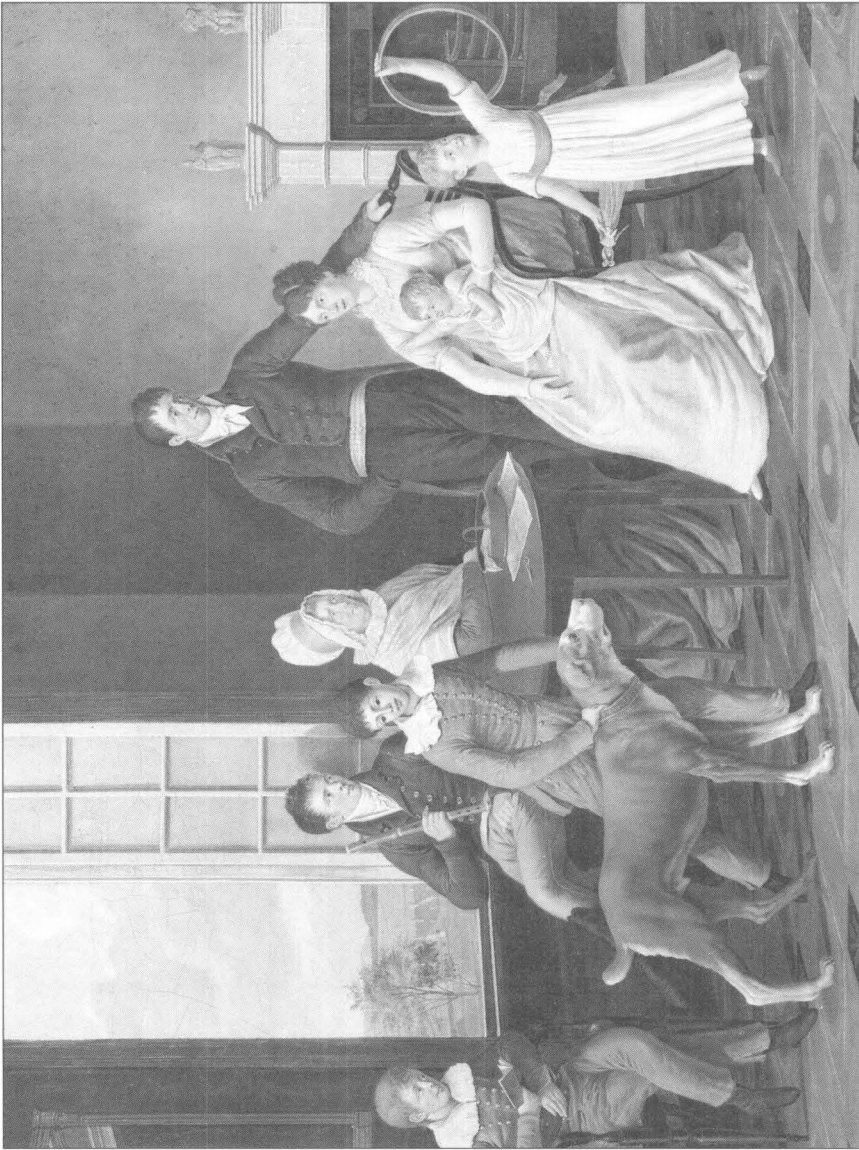
Berczy. NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA. (Rosemarie L. Tovell, exhibition organizer). Mounted at the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. 8 November 1991 - 5 January 1992. 328 p. catalogue.

This exhibition represents the first attempt to bring together, in a comprehensive manner, the European and Canadian aspects of the work of William Berczy (1744-1813). Organized under the auspices of the National Gallery, **Berczy** draws on the scholarly and curatorial skills of Mary Macaulay Allodi (of the Royal Ontario Museum) and art historian Beate Stock. The result is a display of almost all of Berczy's work found in private and ecclesiastical collections, museums, galleries and archives in North American and Europe. The exhibit consists of over 60 paintings, supplemented by a number of formal studies, engravings, architectural drawings and sketches from Berczy's notebooks.

Tracing the development of Berczy's career as an artist, the works displayed follow a rough chronological order. The viewer is first introduced to the artist's early studies and commissioned portraits, produced mainly in Florence and Bern. After Berczy and his family settled in British North America in 1794, he continued to specialize in the popular field of portraiture. Collectively, these portraits reveal significant elements regarding the role of art in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century colonial society in the Canadas. In particular, they document how representations of the prominent were used to gain the attention and influence of those in authority. Berczy painted colonial officials, for example, hoping to secure their support for his land claim petitions. At the same time, members of the commercial elite (such as fur traders and office holders William McGillivray, James McGill and Roderick Mackenzie) commissioned likenesses of themselves and their families as evidence of their status and to commemorate their successes. These paintings also provide clues about the social values of the time, the group portrait of the family of prosperous merchant John William Woolsey especially conveying the hierarchical and patriarchal nature of perceived family roles. In another portrait, John Mackenzie, the son of Roderick Mackenzie by his aboriginal wife (who, like the wives of many fur traders, remained in 'Indian country' with her daughters after her spouse's return to civilization), is portrayed in Scottish costume, emphasizing his paternal traditions while erasing his maternal heritage.



Joseph Brant, 1807. Artist: William Berczy.



The Woolsey Family/La famille Woolsey, 1809. Artist: William Berczy.

Several large-scale religious and historical paintings are displayed separately from the portraits. The works of Berczy's son, William Bent Berczy, and his daughter-in-law, Amélie Panet, precede these monumental paintings, and thereby cause a measure of confusion for the viewer. While the accompanying catalogue explains the curatorial need for the inclusion of this material by Berczy's family members, its placement two-thirds of the way through the show works against the biographical focus which serves to hold the rest of the exhibit together.

Like the name gracing the exhibition title, the greatly enlarged reproduction of a self-portrait which serves as the show's opening image is an attempt to impose authorial order on what is to follow. In a sense, this approach is justified, as it is clearly the diverse experiences of Berczy himself that are reflected in this collection, from his days as a portraitist catering to members of the Hapsburg monarchy, to his return to artistic life in the Canadas after a failed venture as a land colonizer. This overriding attention to Berczy as creator can, however, limit the range of questions asked, as the documentary value of the painted image is also found in its relationship to larger issues of cultural and social history. The informative and meticulously documented catalogue accompanying the exhibition goes some way towards placing Berczy in this larger context. Stock and Allodi firmly situate him within art historical traditions, while Peter N. Moogk's essay examines the seamier side of the artist's activities as a land and settlement promoter, a career which straddled his European and Canadian experiences.

Berczy also provides interesting insights into the way in which individual images gain added currency, taking on a life beyond the confines of the exhibition itself. The full-length portrait of renowned eighteenth-century Mohawk leader Thayendanegea (Joseph Brant), enlarged to enormous proportions, hangs on the outside of the National Gallery; serving as an advertisement, it also appears in bus shelters across the National Capital Region. Clearly, the image of the 'indian,' here depicted in the guise of the 'noble savage' by Berczy's dramatic pose of Brant sporting his bright red blanket like a Roman toga, continues to hold a certain fascination.

On another level, choices such as this represent artistic value judgements on the part of exhibit organizers. *Joseph Brant*, displayed alongside *The Woolsey Family*, serves as a major component of the exhibition's argument that "After 1804, Berczy created some of the masterpieces of early Canadian art." The very mounting of this exhibit and the publication of its catalogue are themselves documents of the attempt to establish both the authority of this claim and Berczy's recognition within the world of Canadian art history. Yet the nature of "early Canadian art" and Berczy's contribution to it remain elusive, even after a viewing of this exhibition. There is no evident Berczy 'tradition,' and no evidence of an exchange or creative borrowing between Berczy and his artistic contemporaries. Part of the answer, in terms of social and cultural context, may lie, after all, in Berczy's own biography, as he transferred and adapted skills and values learned in Europe to his new British North American environment. As a portrait painter, he was able to continue his trade by finding some willing clients, and expanding his repertoire to include historical and religious subjects. If William Berczy's place in some cultural tradition called 'Canadian art' remains ambiguous, this exhibition has nevertheless provided a thorough and well-documented exploration of the artist's life and work.

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