

The Place of Art in the Study of History

by EVA MAJOR MAROTHY

While archives have been attempting to define what kind of records they should collect and how they should describe them to meet the needs of future historians, one area of potential records has been largely ignored or has been relegated as non-essential among textual records. Instead of looking at works of art as undiscovered sources of historical information, archivists have dismissed them as belonging merely to the sphere of aesthetic enjoyment, to be placed on the walls of an art gallery—or, from time to time, of an archives—and then forgotten. There has not been enough debate as to how these records might yield their information and how they have been used by historians and others. Although they have been discussed at conferences, not enough has been published about them in comparison to other media. Jim Burant has been the most active in the crusade to have works of art validated as archival documents, while Terry Cook, Hugh Taylor, and Greg Spurgeon have also made important contributions.¹

In fairness, the other large repository of information that archives frequently copy, the library, has also been myopic when it comes to visual material. Librarians index texts but not illustrations. We know what people have read but not what they looked at. Therefore, while the influence of text has been strongly documented and is cumulative, that of its visual counterpart has been ignored. It is only recently that this attitude has been challenged in the library field.²

The power of visual materials, however, is just as significant as, and perhaps more than, that of written information. Freud believed that thinking in images, which is older than thinking in words, more closely approximates unconscious processes.³

People are sexually aroused by pictures and sculptures; they break pictures and sculptures; they mutilate them, kiss them, cry before them, and go on journeys to them; they are calmed by them, stirred by them, and incited to revolt.⁴

We are familiar with the power of images used in advertising and in the media. The strongest proof of the power of images is that they have been censored. One

Canadian example dates from 1938, when the Art Gallery of Hamilton refused to hang Leonard Hutchinson's woodcut entitled *Lock-out* (see **Illustration 1**), which depicted a striking worker.⁵ The French painter Edouard Manet's *Execution of Maximilian* (ca. 1868-9), shows the executing soldiers wearing uniforms ambiguous enough to make them look French and thus suggesting that France was in fact executing the puppet governor whom they set up in Mexico in 1864 and then abandoned. The painting was banned from the 1869 Salon and was never seen publicly during the artist's lifetime. The lithograph that Manet proposed to publish after the painting was also proscribed.⁶

Illustration 1



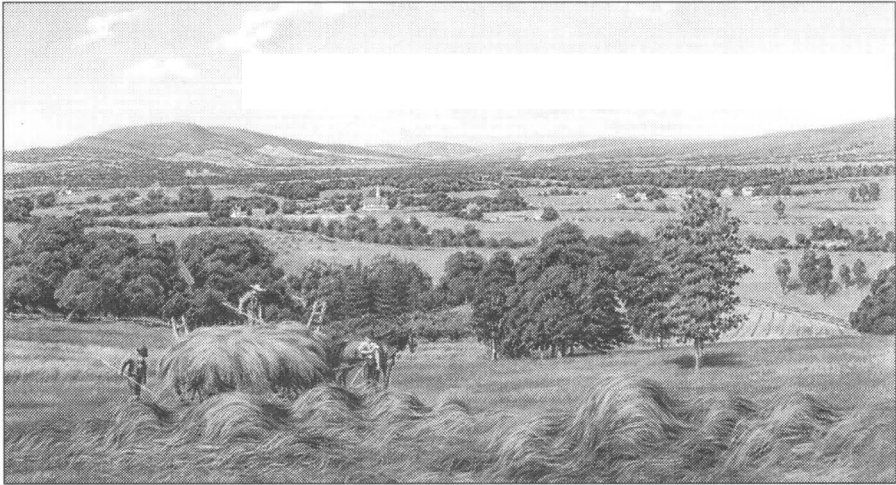
Leonard Hutchinson (1896-1980). *Lock-out*, ca. 1937, woodcut, 25.2 x 22.1 cm (image), courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. R.A. Hutchinson.

When governments want to inform and influence the population they are more likely to turn to posters and visual material for impact than to text, as the poster campaigns of the two World Wars illustrate. And yet not many archives actively collect such posters, much less describe them in a way that researchers could make use of them.

The importance of visual documentation has been realized since at least the sixteenth century, when Martin Frobisher took along the artist John White on his expedition, recognizing the inadequacy of verbal description with regard to the extraordinary occurrences, people, and animals he would encounter. In the latter part of the twentieth century there has been a marked movement towards the use

and creation of visual information by both scientists and people in the humanities.⁷ Visual dictionaries are being published, recognizing the unique ability of such communication. The information gathering and processing capabilities of the computer are also leading to more pictorial communication. Virtual Reality is the ultimate concept available leading us to a mode of communication in which the visual component becomes paramount. The Hypertext concept will link visual or “non-verbal text” and textual information, leading to a fundamentally different method of research, controlled by the reader and not by a linear text.⁸ Because pictures are being used more and more, pictorial communication is being analysed in much the

Illustration 2



W.G.R. Hind (1833-1889). Haying in Sussex New Brunswick, oil on commercial board, 27.5 x 41.1 cm, National Archives of Canada c-10 3003

same way that linguists have been focusing on language.⁹ Archives will have to move in the same direction in order to remain useful for preserving the record of these developments.

In Canadian archives what has come to be called “documentary art” has been given a place because the “informational value” of such works is very high. It would certainly be impossible to imagine Canadian history without the print and watercolour land- and townscapes created by the military artists, the drawings by explorers and settlers, the portraits of our leaders and of our ancestors. These images are essential for establishing the scenes of the historical events. Art galleries cannot be relied upon to collect such material, because their mandate is to show the development of art, not the iconography which the work of art also contains. Archives, on the other hand, want to differentiate between “documentary” and “regular” works of art, to define the “uneasy dichotomy” that exists, as Hugh Taylor said, between these categories.¹⁰ These components, however, cannot be neatly separated— as the painting by W.G.R. Hind, *Haying in Sussex New Brunswick* (see **Illustration 2**), owned by the National Archives, illustrates. On the one hand, the painting is a scrupulously observed depiction of the area around

Sussex, showing Trinity Anglican Church and the rest of the Sussex settlement, with the smoke of the Intercolonial Railway in the background and the harvesting scene painted with minute brushstrokes and intense attention to detail. Among many types of study the painting can be used for architectural, agricultural, and labour history or for historical geography. It is also, however, an important work of art in the career of Hind, resulting from a style and philosophical outlook that originated with the contemporary Pre-Raphaelite movement in England.

This leads to the problem of how such works should be collected in archives. In the past they have been acquired in one of two main ways: through the acquisition of artists' fonds and through individual selection because the work is related to subject matter that the rest of the holdings also documents, and thus complements and extends the collection. A recently completed thesis concerning the acquisition of artists' papers raised many important issues, but defined the works of art among an artist's papers as secondary material and contended that finished works of art had no place in an archives.¹¹ Surely this is the result of becoming too rigorous in selection criteria. Some examples of the finished works of an artist should be collected along with the papers, sketchbooks, notebooks, and preparatory drawings, in order to make the holdings more complete. Doing so would facilitate studying the career of an artist; normally the finished works are dispersed and unavailable for comparative study unless an exhibition brings them together.

The second method of acquisition is similar to the manner in which manuscript curators acquire: as single items to constitute collections centred around a certain subject. While this process goes against the grain of archival philosophy, it must be stressed that such philosophy was set up with textual documents in mind, and did not include visual documents. This "archival fault" is as inherent to the nature of works of art as it is to letters: they leave their originator for some other owner. Archives certainly acquire single items, such as letters, because they complete an already existing fonds. By collecting the sketches and paintings of documentary artists, such as the military topographers, an archives reconstitutes the *fonds* and the career of such artists. In the process it makes available the visual information contained in the works, which can enhance and complete the study of textual records. It is important to realize the difference between visual and textual research. Visual research can consist of looking for a single image, such as a portrait of someone or, and more importantly, examining a large quantity of material from which generalizations can be made.¹² This is why subject collections are so important. The reconstitution of artists' collections also provides information about the provenance of the works which greatly adds to their historical interest. For example, the exhibition organized by the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, *Discerning Tastes: Montreal Collectors 1880-1920*, explored the European art collections of late nineteenth-century Montreal families.¹³ By exploring their art selection and thus their tastes, the exhibition presented a new perspective on businessmen such as George Drummond and William van Horne.

If archives are wary about accepting works of art as historical evidence, historians and professionals in other fields are not. Encouragement to use art as evidence is coming from historians as a way to widen their scope. Historical journals such as the *American Historical Review* regularly publish reviews of art books, in addition

to articles examining visual documents. A recent article by a sociologist on Stalinist posters argued that the visual propaganda of the period studied was quite different from the textual, and therefore studying only the latter presents an inadequate picture.¹⁴ In particular, Theodore K. Rabb, Professor of History at Princeton and co-editor of the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, has been urging historians to venture into the visual arts. He wrote in 1973

The historian must come to see painting, sculpture, architecture and music as a vital expression of a period's feelings. He must seek out this rich and suggestive evidence and use it as a part of his work, not as something distinct and implicitly less significant. And he may realize that by looking at an artist's work, he can come to appreciate those feelings of an age that go beyond thoughts and words.¹⁵

Instead of looking for the differences between art history and history, Rabb pointed out their similarities and concluded that historians should become familiar with the special technique for interpreting allusive evidence which is what distinguishes art history from other types of history.

The call for historians to make use of art has not gone unanswered. A full issue of the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* was dedicated to this interaction and was later published under the title *Art and History: Images and Their Meaning*. In it historians and art historians both analyzed works of art and drew historical conclusions.¹⁶ A random search will reveal a large number of historical publications that are not just illustrated, but in which the authors have used visual material as their evidence. Lisa Tickner's *The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign 1907-14* examines the images of women and concludes that the visual record is likely the only relic of the strongly verbal and anecdotal culture of misogyny that prevailed in late Victorian and Edwardian times. Peter Gay, in his study of nineteenth-century sexuality, *The Bourgeois Experience*, made extensive use of contemporary paintings and sculptures to elicit ideas about the subject that the paucity of written documents had denied him.¹⁷ A recent article in German has the intriguing title "Cultural Monuments as Historical Documents."¹⁸ Canadian cultural historian Jonathan Bordo has recently re-examined the paintings of the Group of Seven in a new light.¹⁹ He suggests that the Group's definition of wilderness, a land without human presence, has become the Canadian definition of wilderness and subsequently the policy of our national parks, with the result that the presence of native people who have occupied this wilderness has been ignored. Literary historian Ian MacLaren's focus has been the comparison not only of the manuscripts with the published texts, but also of the drawings and watercolours with the engraved illustrations and the texts, of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century explorers in Canada. Works of art are the most significant records for costume historians. Scholars in other disciplines have also been looking at works of art: paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould recently wrote an essay for an exhibition of the nineteenth century American landscape artist Frederick Edwin Church, biologists are looking at illustrations of animals in order to trace their evolution, social historians are scrutinizing paintings of dwellings and of interior scenes to learn about the family unit and the family in society, and historical geographers are examining landscape paintings.²⁰

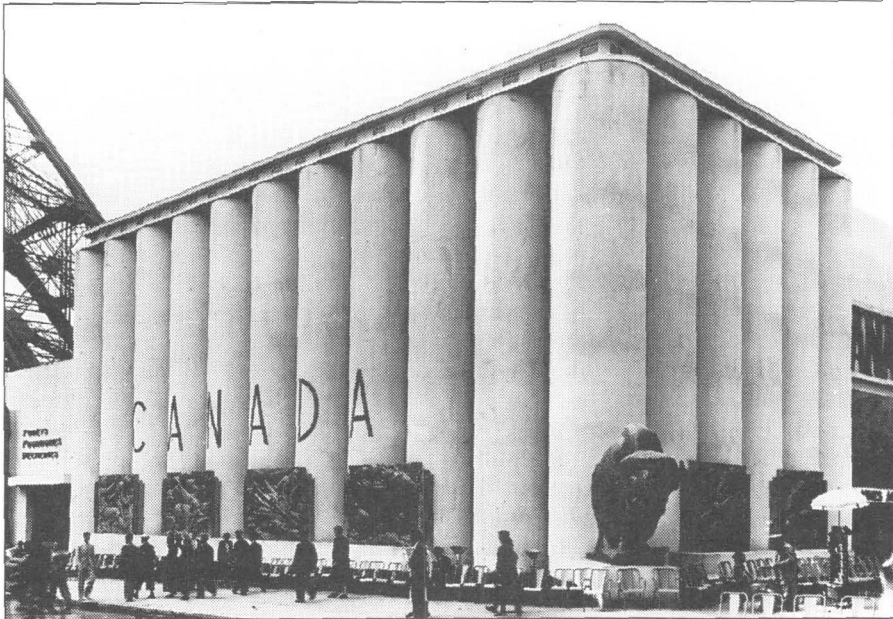
Art historians are also looking at works of art from different perspectives. Such major art institutions as the Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities has been inviting historians to study their art collection. They realize that there is no longer consensus among historians as to what to study and how to study it, so that histories have begun to replace *History* with a capital *H*.

Politics, once the central concern of historical research, has yielded its privileged position to a variety of new areas that incorporate new methods and new kinds of evidence - histories, for example, of attitudes and beliefs, of sex and gender, and of the relation between popular and elite cultures.²¹

A conference of art historians in the fall of 1993 examined "Portraiture and the Problematics of Representation."²² The papers focused on examples from both "high" and "popular culture," examining what portraits reveal about history and historical identity, and the methodological problems raised by the portrait's appropriation as a document. A recent major publication by art historian Francis Haskell, *History and its Images*, is the study of how visual evidence has been used by historians.²³

In exhibitions, works of art are being used not just for their aesthetic value, but for other evidence that they yield. In a display surrounding the recently located Indian artifacts that Benjamin West had used as props in his *Death of Wolfe*, the National Gallery of Canada used eighteen engravings from the holdings of the National Archives. Obviously the Gallery's collection, based on aesthetic

Illustration 3



Jean-Emile Brunet (1892?-1977), *Canadian Pavillion, International Exposition, Paris, France, 1937*, National Archives of Canada, Canadian Government Exhibition Commission Collection, PA-76538

selection, was inadequate in presenting a picture of the eighteenth century meaning of the military hero and of the racial stereotypes that surrounded the depictions of First Peoples. *Opening the Gates of 18th Century Montreal*, an exhibition at the Canadian Centre for Architecture, used works of art in their most documentary role, chronicling the gradual growth of the city of Montreal. Without the maps, drawings, watercolours, and photographs to show the actual construction, the manuscripts and publications would have been quite inadequate in presenting an overview of these developments. The exhibition *Industrial Images* examined the way that visual images created the idea that Canada was becoming an industrial nation after World War I, with posters depicting industrial activities to culminate in the image of Canada as the bread-basket of the world, exemplified by the grain elevator.²⁴ (see **Illustration 3**.)

Art shows, moreover, are not always academic: witness the exhibition of the idyllic landscapes of the eighteenth century British painter Richard Wilson held at the Tate Gallery in London in 1982-83. David Solkin, the Canadian who curated the show, gave a Marxist reinterpretation to Wilson's work, causing an unprecedented reaction in the British national newspapers.²⁵

Archival institutions where visual documentation is actively collected, may not be in the majority, but they do exist. The Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas in Austin has as its aim to acquire "primary research materials relating to modern English and American Literature"; it deliberately collects photographs and works of art by and about the writers whose papers and books it also holds. The Scott Polar Research Institute, the Hoover Archives at Stanford University, the E.K. Brown Military Collection in Rhode Island (which covers military history from the middle ages to the present), the Archives of American Art, the Cabinet des estampes in the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris, and the Département iconographique of the Bibliothèque publique et universitaire in Geneva are some others. In all these cases the criterion of selection is by subject relevance.

One archival institution with an extensive collection of visual documentation is the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine. The guidebook to their visual collections warns that subject matter is not all that counts in a work, and attempts to signal the complexities of using works of art as evidence:

To arrive at an understanding of the subject, the student of pictures, must give due weight to connoisseurship, the history of the fine arts, linguistic knowledge and other skills appropriate to the interpretation of pictures. No collection of pictures can be justified through iconography alone. The discovery of the authorship, date or original setting of a picture must be allowed to influence one's interpretation of its subject.²⁶

I believe that more and more use will be made of visual sources, because scholars need new approaches and new perspectives on all subjects. The archival profession must join in seeing the historical evidence in documents we have previously dismissed as un-archival, and should become a leader in describing these documents in such a way that both their illustrative function and their multi-levelled complexity is signalled to the research community.

Notes

- 1 Jim Burant, "The Visual World in the Victorian Age," *Archivaria* 19 (Winter 1984-85), pp. 110-21, and "The Military Artist and the Documentary Art Record," *Archivaria* 26 (Summer 1988), pp. 33-52; Terry Cook, "The Tyranny of the Medium: A Comment on "Total Archives,"" *Archivaria* 9 (Winter 1979-80), pp.141-50; Hugh A. Taylor "Documentary Art and the Role of the Archivist," *American Archivist* 42 (October 1979), pp. 417-28; and Greg Spurgeon, "Pictures and History: the Art Museum and the Visual Arts Archives," *Archivaria* 17 (Winter 1983-84), pp. 60-74.
- 2 A very important paper by Estelle Jussim, "The Research Uses of Visual Information," *Library Trends* 25 (April 1977), pp. 763-78, is a milestone in the discussion of this topic, suggesting that we need to go beyond the "words versus images" debate.
- 3 Lisa Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign 1907-14* (Chicago, 1988), p. 162.
- 4 David Freedberg, *The Power of Images* (Chicago and London, 1989), p. 1.
- 5 Rosemary Donegan, *Industrial Images/Images Industrielles* (Hamilton, 1987), p. 66, note 1.
- 6 Article from *New York Review of Books*.
- 7 Jussim, "Research Uses."
- 8 George P. Landow, *Hypertext: the Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology* (Baltimore and London, 1992), p. 43.
- 9 Stephen R. Ellis, Mary K. Kaiser, and Arthur J. Grunwald, *Pictorial Communication in Virtual and Real Environments* (London, New York, Philadelphia, 1991).
- 10 Taylor, "Documentary Art," p. 425.
- 11 Victoria Kendall Blinkhorn, "The Records of Visual Artists: Appraisal for Acquisition and Selection," (M.A. Thesis, Master of Archival Studies, University of British Columbia), 1988.
- 12 Jussim, "Research Uses," pp. 764-66.
- 13 Janet M. Brooke, *Discerning Tastes: Montreal Collectors 1880-1920* (Montreal, 1989).
- 14 Victoria E. Bonnell, "The Peasant Woman in Stalinist Political Art of the 1930s," *American Historical Review* 97 (February 1993), pp. 55-82.
- 15 Theodore K. Rabb, "The Historian and the Art Historian," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* IV (Summer 1973), p. 107.
- 16 *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* XVII (Summer 1986) and R.I. Rotberg and T.K. Rabb, eds., *Art and History: Images and Meaning in History*.
- 17 Peter Gay, *The Bourgeois Experience: Victoria to Freud*, 2 vols. (New York, 1984).
- 18 H. Boockmann, "Kulturdenkmale als Geschichtsurkunden," *Deutsche Kunst und Denkmalpflege* XLVI/2 (1987), pp. 163-72.
- 19 Jonathan Bordo, "Jack Pine - Wilderness Sublime or the Erasure of the Aboriginal Presence from the Landscape," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 27 (Winter 1992-93), pp. 98-128.
- 20 Franklin Kelley with Stephen Jay Gould, James Anthony Ryan, and Debora Rindge, *Frederick Edwin Church* (Washington, 1989) and Ingo Grumbiel and Gunther G. Selim, "The Geographic Variability of the Plains Bison: a Reconstruction Using the Earliest European Illustrations of Both Subspecies," *Archives of Natural History* 16 (1989), pp. 169-90.
- 21 "Re-Presenting the Past," *The J. Paul Getty Trust Bulletin* 3 (Spring/Summer 1988).
- 22 "Portraiture and the Problematics of Representation," conference held at the Whitworth Art Gallery at the University of Manchester, 24-25 September 1993.
- 23 Francis Haskell, *History and its Images* (New Haven and London, 1993).
- 24 Donegan, *Industrial Images*, p. 80.
- 25 Neil McWilliam and Alex Potts, "The Landscape of Reaction: Richard Wilson (1713-1782) and His Critics," in A.L. Rees and Frances Borzello, eds., *The New Art History* (London, 1986), pp. 106-119.
- 26 William Schupbach, *The Iconographic Collections of the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine* (Berkshire, 1989), p. 4.