Exhibition Reviews

Images d'Épinal. CANADIAN MUSEUM OF CIVILIZATION. Hull, Quebec. 31 January – 27 April 1997.

Look at a typical telephone pole in the downtown core of a large Canadian city. It is likely plastered with layers of printed things, strategically situated to catch the attention of passers-by: sexy promotional posters for a concert, CD release or blockbuster film; hastily-penned directions to the nearest garage sale or rental unit; slick computer-generated notices of a political demonstration, a self-help workshop, or a 10K run. This transitory palimpsest of everyday imagery is not often preserved in the collections of museums or archives. It may be ephemeral and ordinary, but it does constitute a finite glimpse of contemporary life: work, culture, values, leisure, economy, politics. *Images d'Épinal* (Images of Épinal), a recent exhibition at the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Hull, Québec, traced the history of popular, mass-produced print imagery in France. In so doing, it celebrated the ephemeral and ordinary, carefully removing printed sheets from the proverbial telephone pole and installing them, matted and framed, on museum walls.

Épinal, a town on the Moselle River in the Vosges region of northeast France, was the centre of a flourishing print-making industry in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The earliest image-makers at Épinal produced items such as decorative wallpaper, tarot and playing cards, and paper clock faces. Next came religious imagery, including illustrated *Cantiques spirituels* (hymns sung to familiar melodies), and images of saints that were affixed to the walls of peasants' houses to safeguard homes and livestock. Épinal, however, reached its ascendant position in the annals of European print history in the person of Jean-Charles Pellerin (1756-1836), a savvy businessman who expanded his fledgling print shop, the *Fabrique de Pellerin*, into the country's leading manufacturer of printed images.

Pellerin, a one-time clockmaker and wine merchant who dabbled in local politics, was particularly astute in identifying and targeting untapped areas of

consumer desire. He thus enlarged the repertoire of common Épinal imagery by printing new items, including fairy tales ("Tom Thumb" or "Puss in Boots," for example), games, moral homilies (such as "The Ages or Man" or "The Great Devil Money"), and legends. During the reign of Napoleon, the *Fabrique de Pellerin* issued heroic scenes of critical battles and events, and sheets of paper armies and toy soldiers that became the ubiquitous playthings of French children. This creation of a children's market was Pellerin's greatest stroke of genius. Subsequent generations of the Pellerin family furthered the company's fortunes. They modernized the shop's technology, streamlined production, and continued to innovate: paper dolls, toy theatres, colouring books, articulated marionettes, and sheets of ABCs were among the new products. By the 1850s and 1860s, with the rise of lithography, the *Fabrique de Pellerin* employed more than 100 workers and produced between five and six million images annually.

As Denis Martin, Curator of Prints and Drawings (Early and Modern Art) at the Musée du Québec, wrote in the exhibition catalogue, the goal of *Images d'Épinal* was to "allow North Americans to rediscover the little-known history of this industry." The exhibition was composed of 170 images borrowed from the Musée départemental d'art ancien et contemporain in Épinal and opened with an introduction to the location and history of Épinal, a timeline of the print industry in France, and an explanation of the techniques and mechanics of print-making. The actual prints were installed in distinct thematic groups ("Heavenly and Secular Deities," "The Napoleonic Era," "Tales and Anecdotes," and "Recreational Games," for example) which roughly parallel the chronological expansion and increasing complexity of the Épinal print industry. The texts which introduced each thematic group were clear and succinct. *Images d'Épinal* was laid out with the logic and precision of Pellerin's toy armies.

The design of the exhibition was playful and upbeat, in keeping with its aim to appeal to the whole family. Extended texts were printed on brightly-coloured hanging banners decorated with an elaborate carved column found on one of the cut-out theatre sets. There were larger-than-life games and puppet performances for children. Well-known melodies such as "Alouette" and "Au clair de la lune" played in the background. Grand cut-out toy soldiers stood on guard throughout.

Martin, however, avoided excessive frivolity by grounding the exhibition in a solid didacticism. In the area devoted to an explanation of the print-making process, for example, visitors could see an original drawing, carved wood block, and final colour copy of "Good St. Lazybones! Protectress of Idle Women!" An interactive display demonstrated how the successive, skillful application of the four available colours—yellow, red, blue, and brown—transforms a black-and-white woodcut into an arresting coloured image. The resulting prints were sold by peddlers in the towns and countryside of France.

Martin illustrated this dissemination process by including an image of these nomadic entrepreneurs hawking their wares to a motley crowd, copies of the passports issued to them, and typical examples of the religious prints they sold. A large reproduction of "The Kitchen of a French Post House," a 1771 engraving by Matthew Darley from the collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario, showed the interior of a contemporary inn with six Épinal prints installed over the fireplace. Martin thus addressed issues of process, distribution, and reception in a simple yet effective manner.

The stars of the show, of course, were the prints themselves. The hilarious and highly appealing "Quarrel Over Who Will Wear the Pants and Rule the Household" competed for our attention with "Topsy-Turvy World," which includes images of a pig attacking a butcher and a man fishing for birds. "Saint Blaise and Saint Guérin, Bishops, Pray for the Protection of our Livestock," features elegant frontal portraits of the saints garbed in rich blue, gold, and crimson. The magnificent "Battle of the Pyramids," by renowned Pellerin print-maker François Georgin (1801-1863), evoked the drama of the 21 July 1798 battle between Napoleon's troops and the Mamluk cavalry. In the exhibition's final section, three-dimensional constructions of popular items—stage coach, train locomotive, velocipede, and the Eiffel Tower—attested both to the Épinal print-makers' skill and their constant adaptation to a mutable world.

With the exhibition's spotlight firmly focused on France, regrettably little room was left to develop the tantalizing links between Épinal and North America. As Cornelius Krieghoff's canvas "The Picture Pedlar" (1846) attests, Épinal prints had a ready market in Canada. For me, the exhibition's most compelling print was a Catholic catechism scene loaned by the Musée des Ursulines in Trois-Rivières. Designed by Oblate missionary Father Albert Lacombe in the form of a game, it was published in Épinal in the 1870s and sold thereafter in Montréal. The narrow, vertically-oriented image is divided down the middle: the left path leads to heaven, the right to hell. Significant Biblical events such as the birth of Christ and the founding of the New Testament church are pictured on the left, while ominous vignettes of the seven deadly sins occupy the right. Used for "the rapid and early instruction of the savages," the catechism print is a startling visual document born out of the maelstrom of industry, aesthetics, religion, and Empire.

Despite such potentially controversial images, Martin adopted a relatively apolitical perspective in *Images d'Épinal*. I learned from Leonard Marcus's *An Épinal Album* (Boston 1984) that the prints issued by Pellerin and his successors were subject to the vagaries of changing French politics. In 1816, for example, the newly-restored Royalists raided the Pellerin house and studio, seizing the now-offensive Napoleonic prints and condemning Jean-Charles to jail; in ensuing years, the Pellerins lived with constant censorship and surveillance. Such content was absent from *Images d'Épinal*, perhaps in keeping with Martin's broad didactic goals and the family mandate. Also absent from *Images*

d'Épinal was the identification of the curatorial voice, in real and philosophical terms. I was unable to locate the curator's name, an explicit statement of the show's rationale, or the name of the organizing museum until I found a catalogue at the exit door.

Minor criticisms aside, *Images d'Épinal* remained an informative and engaging show which presented Épinal imagery to novice North Americans with a pleasing balance of instruction and entertainment. *Images d'Épinal* reminds the archival and museum communities of the importance of preserving things ephemeral. The French art critic Champfleury complained in 1869 that "We see fit to preserve Assyrian monuments; but popular images are nowhere to be found...." Often printed on cheap paper and made for everyday use, countless Épinal images over the centuries met an inevitable demise in the gutters and garbage bins of Europe and its colonies. A representative selection, however, has been preserved in the collections of the Musée départemental d'art ancien et contemporain in Épinal, the Bibliothèque nationale, and the Musée national des arts et traditions populaires in Paris, thus allowing us access to this multivalent visual heritage.

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Houghton Hall: The Prime Minister, The Empress and the Heritage. The Reconstruction of the Collection of Sir Robert Walpole. KENWOOD HOUSE. London, England. February to April 1997.

Britain's notorious lack of financial support for its arts and cultural heritage comes as a rude shock for those Canadians who go beyond the role of the awestruck tourist and become involved in the museum world. British heritage is so overwhelmingly rich in comparison, that the paltry government funding which is allotted to the hundreds of museums and historical sites is incomprehensible to North Americans. The National Lottery, instigated in order to raise money for the arts, is seen increasingly as a means by which government can opt out of cultural support altogether. The process by which Lottery funds are applied for is so complicated and restrictive that only museums with huge budgets and political connections can hope to access its wealth.

For those familiar with the Canadian system of donation for tax relief (imperfect as it may be), the lack of an equivalent process in Britain is unfathomable. How can any museum hope to attract gifts without some sort of incentive? That any museum in Britain does, is a testament to the reputations of the museums themselves, but again, smaller institutions lose out against the big names (why give to the local county museum if the British Museum is interested?). The scenario occasionally proceeds as follows: penniless aristocrat with marvellous collection auctions prize pieces to highest (and always for-