

# Exhibition Reviews

**Made in London.** IVEY WEST GALLERY, LONDON REGIONAL ART & HISTORICAL MUSEUMS. London, Ontario. 10 May - 31 August 1997.

Ontario's municipalities are currently undergoing extraordinary changes in response to the siren call of privatization of the economy and globalization of trade. The London Regional Art & Historical Museum's recent and relevant exhibition *Made in London* addressed the historical roots of London's sustained industrial growth by presenting information on attitudes and actions of its city leaders: "Municipal leaders, many of whom were industrialists, linked the community's growth and prosperity with the presence of factories. Tax breaks and bonuses were offered to manufacturers to entice them to locate in different communities. London was fairly successful in keeping the factories it had and luring new ones here" (Michael Baker, curator, introductory panel). A succinct description of the political environment at both entrances to the gallery provided context for products on display: "The growth of industry in London ... was greatly stimulated by the creation, in 1879, of a system of tariffs designed to protect Canadian manufactured goods against foreign imports. This coincided with the opening of the Canadian West beginning in the 1880s. Canadian manufacturers ... began to develop distribution networks moving goods east and west to take advantage of these new markets. A great many ... London products headed for the Canadian prairies in the late nineteenth century" (ibid.).

*Made in London* documented, through surviving artifacts and photographs, over forty of London's companies, principally from the period 1880-1920 when five thousand new immigrants were entering the city every year. Products were arranged in discrete displays in a large inverted L-shaped space. The entrance gallery suggested a street motif starting with Henry Hines' photo of *Made in London* ca. 1917, followed by glass-fronted cabinets containing shelves of colourful cigar boxes and packing products on the right, crowds of workers in a large display of company photographs on the left, and a title wall tableau at the far end of the long gallery comprising a John Campbell and Sons

buckboard wagon (ca. 1900) laden with bags, barrels, boxes, and a milk can. However, a row of domestic appliances confused the street scape suggestion, although they showed some of the products that London manufactured: a 1904 McClary parlour stove, a McClary North-West elevated oven (ca. 1890), a London and Petrolia Barrel Company barrel churn (ca. 1900), a Glass Brothers Crockery dash churn (ca. 1890), and a Wortman and Ward Vollmar's washing machine (ca. 1900).

The exhibition highlighted three phases of London's industrial development. The first phase, beginning before 1850, saw factories developing to meet the needs of immigrant farmers for basic tools and simple furnishings. A small box stove (ca. 1851) from the Murray Anderson Foundry, an 1865 fanning mill built by James M. Cousins, Pumps, Windmills, Hay Cutters, and a single furrow plow (ca. 1870) were examples of "products that required little more than the ability to construct moulds and cast ... the metal" (*ibid.*). The second phase was illustrated by products of industries such as flour mills and tanneries, which developed to process farm produce into marketable commodities. The brewing factories such as Carling's (est. 1875), the biscuit and candy factories such as McCormick's (est. 1858) and Perrin's, along with the product packing factories such as Sir Adam Beck's box factory and Somerville's (est. 1883), developed during this period and were represented by boxes, tins, lithographs, and company photographs. A display of butter crocks, Bristol ware teapots, soda bottles, and slant-top jugs produced by London Crockery Co., later Glass Brothers, from 1886 to 1897, illustrated the supplying of basic retail needs by London manufacturers. The third phase, when London manufacturers began to cater to the greater affluence of the city, was well illustrated by an abundance of luxury items: cigar boxes, fine furniture, a parlour organ, electric ranges, a radio, and a television. Manufacturers of these items were, in their day, the largest employers in London. The London Furniture Company (est. 1870s), for example, employed 140 workers a decade later and in 1912, the cigar-making industry, located in twenty factories, employed two thousand workers and made eighty million cigars annually.

The display arrangement of these products had both positive and negative aspects. There was no story-line, no sequence of events, nor a sense of London's overall development, but the juxtapositions allowed interesting comparisons and, judging by the visitors' comments, were successful. For example, the extraordinary difference in size between two unconnected items, a walnut and flint glass cabinet made in 1854 by Henry Coombs, cabinetmaker, for his sister's marriage into one of London's premier families and the 1851 box stove, built one city block away only three years earlier, indicated the vast discrepancies in wealth between London's citizens. Elsewhere the McClary electric stoves built in 1922 and 1940 suggested that women's work in the home was being increasingly de-emphasized. The early stately model had a decorative grandeur that was lacking in the later smaller, unembellished, and merely functional appliance.

The most striking aspect of the exhibit was its silence. The subject demanded noise: sounds of manufacturing, vendors' calls, workers complaining, even the occasional cries of an injured worker. The exhibit was a little too elegant for its subject matter. The only concession to living and working conditions was the placement of products on small rectangles of bare boards, and the rare inclusion of archival materials such as an 1870 apprenticeship indenture from the J.J. Talman Regional Collection, D.B. Weldon Library, University of Western Ontario, and a page from the *London Echo*, 1914, which showed through captioned photographs the manufacturing process for Sherlock-Manning pianos. The exhibition would have been better-grounded and enlivened by the inclusion of archival records, both written and sound, posters, and advertising copy. It contained both too few details about manufacturing processes and too many disparate items. More information on existing working conditions would also have been interesting.

The stated focus on the 1880-1920 time period was disturbed by the inclusion of photographs of employees and of East London industries from the 1940s and 1950s, and of electrical, entertainment, and packaging products from the 1930s-1950s. While these artifacts allowed visitors to connect a part of the present industrial base of London with its past, they detracted from the exhibition's focus and impact.

The most popular section, the collection of original company photographs at the plants or, until the late 1920s, at the annual picnics, drew a warm response from visitors. They not only identified individuals, but commented on the lack of ethnic variety in London's history, and on observed class differences. I was entranced by three items on display: a painting of South London, ca. 1904, by McClary stove designer, John Munnoch, and two lithographs of the Perrin Plant and the Carling Plant, both ca. 1885. The painting showed a residential part of London close to its original natural state. More verdant than a Constable, it made me ache to think what Ontario has lost. The lithographs showed something quite different. Primitive in style, with distortions of perspective and size, conveying a promise of middle-class affluence (depicted in model housing to the right of the Perrin factory) and peace and order (suggested by small, sedate, well-dressed citizens strolling near a large fountain in the Carling factory grounds) and in harmony with the natural world (a lush Springbank Park to the left of the Perrin factory), they emphasized the domination of the factory in Southwestern Ontario culture. Delightfully comical in their seriousness, these lithographs are a match for any socialist propaganda.

This exhibition would have benefited from more cooperation between London's rich archival depositories and the museum. Archival resources, mined for information about workers' lives, production methods, and uses of the products, would have strengthened the exhibition and increased its relevance.

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