

and Philadelphia) styles that had taken hold in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. I would have liked Cook to probe a bit more why the American styles, even newer ones, persisted in strength while the Scots dominated the cabinetmaking trade. Did this result from American émigrés playing the role of tastemakers in a culturally stratified society or from the structure of the trade, in which American masters controlled skilled immigrant craftsmen?

These small interpretive points aside, the major drawback of this volume is the poor quality of the illustrations. Given that artifacts and maps carry much of the argument's proof, the publisher should have paid particular attention to the production of a clearly illustrated volume. The contrast between the sharp images in the Churchill and McDonald article and the Cook volume is considerable. The poor printing also detracts from the effectiveness of the period maps, many of which are reproduced in small, murky format. In establishing the parameters of a region, it is essential to have clear informative maps that quickly orient the reader.

Nevertheless Cook's volume is an important contribution to North American furniture history. The wide range of furniture and the interpretive angle deployed, especially in Chapter 5, link Cook's work to that of other scholars of American regional furniture.³ American furniture historians will also find Cook's comments on the popularity of the chair-table form in northern New England, the upper Hudson Valley, and the St John Valley helpful in light of the large number of surviving examples. Her explanation of the prevalent Scottish drawer arrangement in chests of drawers (an upper drawer consisting of a single tall drawer, to accommodate a tall hat or bonnet, flanked by a pair of shorter drawers on each side) should also be of interest to scholars of New England furniture since many upper sections of high chest and case of drawers made in that region feature a similar drawer configuration. The interpretive thrust and the myriad details will make Cook's volume an essential addition to any serious furniture historian's library.

NOTES

1. Jean Palardy, *Les meubles anciens du Canada français* (1963; reprint, Montreal: Cercle du livre de France, 1971); Howard Pain, *The Heritage of Upper Canada Furniture* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1978); Donald Webster, *English-Canadian Furniture of the Georgian Period* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1979); and Donald Webster, *Rococo to Rustique: Early French-Canadian Furniture in the Royal Ontario Museum* (Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum, 2000).
2. Edwin Churchill and Sheila McDonald, "Reflections of Their World: The Furniture of the Upper St John River Valley, 1820-1930," in *Perspectives on American Furniture*, ed. Gerald Ward (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988), 63-91.
3. For examples of work on New England, see Robert Trent, *Hearts and Crowns* (New Haven: New Haven Colony Historical Society, 1977); Robert St George, *The Wrought Covenant: Source Material for the Study of Craftsmen and Community in Southeastern New England, 1620-1700* (Brockton, Mass.: Brockton Art Center, 1979); Luke Beckerdite and William Hosley, eds., *American Furniture 1995* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1995); and Edward Cooke, Jr., *Making Furniture in Pre-Industrial America: The Social Economy of Newtown and Woodbury, Connecticut* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

Robert J. Belton, *Sights of Resistance: Approaches to Canadian Visual Culture*

RHONA RICHMAN KENNEALLY

Belton, Robert J. *Sights of Resistance: Approaches to Canadian Visual Culture*. University of Calgary Press, 2001. 398 pp., 100+ illus., accompanying CD-ROM, cloth, \$59.95, ISBN 1-55283-011-4.

In the last several years, a variety of publications have appeared that introduce students to key

components of visual culture, and, especially, that address and develop the interstices of discourse relevant to visual cultural production in the domains of communication, cultural and media theory, art history, film studies and material culture. Such works reflect a cross-disciplinarity that can truly enrich the study of what were once discrete fields,

and offer ideological, methodological and historical points of departure and convergence that lend themselves well to hybridization.

Of these texts, Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright's *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2001) may be considered exemplary. Suited to an undergraduate audience, and covering a variety of visual media including photographs, posters, drawings, installations, virtual and digital works, movies, television, and advertising, it summarizes and contextualises significant texts, applies them in clear, informative and often entertaining ways, is organized into accessible, pertinent and thought-provoking topics, and offers suggested readings that guide students to the primary sources themselves. In short, *Practices of Looking* is an exciting entrée into the critical issues concerning visual theorists today, exploring, as it does, debates on gender, authenticity, representation, the virtual world, the impact of digitization, and other pivotal matters.

It is within this frame of reference that Robert J. Belton's *Sights of Resistance: Approaches to Canadian Visual Culture* seems highly ambitious. Not only does this work commit itself to exploring the main objectives of visual culture studies *per se*, but must also, to some extent, introduce its audience to Canadian visual works, many of which are less familiar than the examples that Sturken and Cartwright have at hand. Given such an agenda, Belton's book, despite certain limitations, is to be acknowledged as contributing in important ways to existing Canadian works on the topic.

Belton has many intentions in this book. He wastes no time, for example, in distinguishing his strategies from those utilized by other scholars in the field. Studies of Canadian visual culture by critics such as Dennis Reid and J. Russell Harper centre attention on what Belton classifies as the "current critical phenomenon called the death of the author" while other historians such as Harold Kalman, Michael Bird and Terry Kobayashi keep their foci on specific areas — architecture; folk art, and so on. Belton's aim is to broaden his perspective, to encompass a "broad sample of most aspects of Canadian visual culture" to include commercial art and printmaking, for example, as well as the traditional realm of painting or photography. In addition, he articulates a commitment to avoiding "textbook closure," the sense that one book contains sufficient material to appear to have "everything one needs to know, as well as how to know it." Moreover, this text sets out to overwrite a residual approach to studying art history that rests on the development of a student's abilities in "art

appreciation," with a new strategy aimed at achieving visual literacy, the ability to "read" visual information in the absence of verbal cues..." Such intentions are consistent with evolving methodologies, for example, postmodern observations offered by such interpreters as Jean-Francois Lyotard, which validate attempts to acknowledge the complexities of cultural production, rather than endorse methods to reduce or simplify analytical criteria to facilitate understanding. It comes as no surprise, then, that the resulting work weighs in at almost four hundred pages of hard copy, plus a compact disc.

The format of *Sights of Resistance* lends itself to the ordered and systematic presentation of material. Two introductory chapters set forth the book's themes and explore the notion of "visual poetics," the term essentially defined as the inter-relationship between three main categories — form, content, and context. A chapter containing a survey of Canadian visual culture follows, beginning with prehistoric times until roughly 2000. Two timelines comprise the subsequent chapter, one targeting "important moments in Canadian history" and the second narrowing its sphere to "important moments in Canadian visual culture." The bulk of the book is devoted to the fifth chapter, which consists of case studies. Here, a black and white version of each subject (painting, building, etc.) appears on a right-hand page, and, on the opposite page, several paragraphs of text bring different elements of that subject to the reader's attention. Some of these entries are wholly written by Belton, others are partially or even exclusively devoted to quoting other critics' interpretations. A selection of coloured images is embedded within the chapter, each one a colour duplicate of a black and white version to be found elsewhere. In the first three chapters, words in bold type inform the reader that their definition may be sought in the glossary of the CD-ROM included with the book. The CD itself reproduces the text of the book page by page, the key difference being that the words which were in bold in the book, along with additional ones situated within case study entries, are here hot-linked directly to the glossary: clicking on them brings up a sub-page with their definition, one which almost always, itself, contains words linked to their own definitions. (Is such duplication justified, or would the CD have been sufficiently useful in itself?)

This ordered approach is both highly welcome, and, unfortunately, to some extent disadvantageous. Its chief asset is prioritizing connectedness as a means of exploring contextuality. For example, a case study entry that arouses particular attention

can be metaphorically inserted, by the zealous reader, back into the survey and the timelines; bolded words become points of entry into discussions of ideas and theories applicable to visual culture; and definitions allude to other keywords or concepts and stimulate navigation toward primary discursive sources. On the other hand, such fluidity has its down side, and can lead to the confusion often encountered on the Internet, when hotlinks break down into a maze of clicking that can be more confusing than elucidating. To be fair, the conceptualisation of this work as a textbook — such that its use might be guided by a course instructor — builds in, to some extent, a bumper-like mechanism to help overcome such unwieldiness. In addition, the proliferation of words in bold font, in the first few chapters of the book, is distracting. Perhaps the case studies, in which there are no bolded terms, ought to have been a model throughout the book itself: since the text is reproduced in its entirety in the CD, it would be simple enough to turn to the digital version to discover and access the definitions.

Finally, this fragmented orientation — survey, timelines, case studies, glossary — makes reconstitution of the individual morsels of knowledge, such as could be applied to one image, for example, a challenge perhaps readily embraced by a student-reader comfortable with exploring on his or her own. But such analytical gymnastics might prove daunting to the student who is less proficient at working independently, or is familiar with a more integrated or linear approach to visual culture studies. This is especially true because some of the writing is rather cryptic. For example, Belton attributes the selection of particular imagery for a poster promoting “Canada’s New Army” by Eric Aldwinckle as follows: “Unless he were trying to avoid too explicit a reference to a bit of Catholic hagiography because of conscription sentiments, Aldwinckle’s metaphor collapses into catachresis.” A decoding process of four keywords — “reference,” “hagiography,” “sentiments” and “catachresis” — is a necessary first step before a novice could even begin to understand this sentence and Belton’s meaning.

In striving to achieve its multiple goals, *Sights of Resistance* makes distinct inroads. It would be difficult to argue that the work imposes one rigid, didactic reading on the works it references. The engagement is clearly open-ended, and would lend itself well to class discussions precisely because of the multivalenced readings that are encouraged by the book’s structure and scope. The case studies, in particular, embrace the works being investigated within the wide realm of visual culture writing.

For example, one study focuses on a 1931 photolithograph, entitled “Resorts in the Rockies,” which depicts the Banff Springs Hotel, an RCMP agent, and a bobbed, pant-suited woman who looks like she is leaning against the Mountie’s bended leg. This artifact prompts three quotations from secondary sources selected by Belton. The first is E. J. Hart’s *The Selling of Canada*, which explores the CPR’s role in the establishment of Canadian tourism and alludes to the hotel’s “baronial” style. The second, by José Knighton, comes from an article on “eco-porn” that compares landscape photography to pornography; it concludes with a reference to the overlaps between the two as indicative of “the depth of our cultural sickness.” The third (Kate Linker’s “Representation and Sexuality”) talks about Freud, Lacan and Berger and highlights the power of the masculine gaze. Thus are three components of the litho brought to the reader’s attention, juxtaposed for purposes of similarity and contrast, and representative of three distinct forays into visual culture analysis.

Undeniably, a great deal of ground is covered here. An investigation of the glossary alone unveils copious references, and laudable attempts at comprehensiveness and breadth. Deceptively simple terms, such as “material” and even “architecture” are allocated space. So, too, are more complex or obscure phrases, such as “commodity fetishism,” “metonymic skid” (a term coined by Roland Barthes), and “Visigoths in tweed,” a “derogatory synonym for the cultural left coined for use in the popular media by Dinesh D’Souza” (“cultural left” and “media” have their own links). Footnotes and a bibliography ought not be overlooked by course instructors, either.

It seems almost petty to point to aspects of Belton’s oeuvre that do not quite live up to the inclusive and expansive exercise undertaken here, but a few make their presence felt. First, this book was clearly conceived as an art history work, first and foremost. The first two words of the first sentence are “Art historians,” who are mentioned as decrying the absence of a “comprehensive guide to Canadian art.” A few pages later he refers to what he is attempting to achieve as an innovative version of “writing art history.” The effect of these declarations is to place *Sights of Resistance* squarely within the domain of one discipline, despite the author’s declared interdisciplinary motives. Well and good, if the course is situated in an art history department. Problematic, and necessitating qualification and justification, if it is selected for use in a studio, architecture, design or other department that engages visual culture. In addition, certain assumptions associated with long-standing historical

paradigms seem tacitly sanctioned here. For example, the glossary entry on "popular culture," rather than defining the term, instructs the reader to go to "high art" in the glossary and ultimately frames the two as oppositions, even as Belton argues that contemporary approaches to visual culture are "gradually reducing the traditional academic separation" between the two. "Art" and "craft" are similarly differentiated in the chapter on visual poetics. And the case studies consist mostly of what would be classified as artworks, with only

a minority inclusion of artifacts associated with everyday life. It would have been nice, too, to see architecture depicted in plan, or interiors shown (only about three interiors make their way into the book), rather than the conventional exterior views.

Sights of Resistance, then, is to be recognized as a welcome expansion of the Canadian cultural repertoire. One looks forward to a time when students exposed to this book, themselves, appropriate its messages and contribute their own critical narratives to a receptive audience.

Marylin J. McKay, *A National Soul: Canadian Mural Painting, 1860s–1930s*

DAVID W. MONAGHAN

McKay, Marylin J. *A National Soul: Canadian Mural Painting, 1860s–1930s*. Montreal–Kingston: McGill–Queens Press, 2002. xxiv, 304 pp., 62 illus., 8 colour plates, cloth, \$65, ISBN 0-7735-2290-5.

In *A National Soul: Canadian Mural Painting, 1860s–1930s*, Marylin McKay successfully provides the reader with an overview of the international and local origins, development, and role of mural painting in Canadian society from the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries. In doing so, she addresses a historical imbalance in the interpretation of Canadian painting that has placed primary emphasis upon traditional landscapes prior to 1950. The author provides the reader with an analysis rich in both social and artistic context resulting in an art historical study that often places equal emphasis on both art and history.

McKay's emphasis upon contextual analysis is evident at the outset of her study as she sets out to explain why the history of Canadian mural painting has been ignored for so long. Our understanding and appreciation of mural painting was a victim of twentieth century art historians' bias towards traditional easel painting and their disdain for murals as a subject worthy of academic study and analysis. Given the enraptured fixation with modernist and avant-garde painting on the part of mid-twentieth-century art critics, there was an equally strong rejection of art forms that appealed to, or were produced for, mass consumption. McKay demonstrates how leading critics' views, such as those expressed by Clement Greenberg, resulted in the outright dismissal of anything that did not

appear to have a lineal connection with the introduction of abstraction into contemporary art. In keeping with Greenberg's highly influential opinion, by mid-century such popular and representational works as mural paintings were dismissed as "kitsch" by most critics and art historians, both in Canada and abroad.

While the overtly representative and frequently traditional style employed by muralists in their works may have hindered acceptance by the more established art community in the mid-1950s, their content also did not fit into prevailing art trends in Canada. The subject matter of many murals was often local or regional in character. This ran counter to what McKay sees as the art establishment's interest in promoting their own form of pan-Canadian nationalist modern art. The Group of Seven's modernist northern landscapes, promoted by the group's members and their apologists, neatly addressed the Torontonians' desire for a uniquely Canadian and modern art form. Both the group and their supporters conveniently forgot that their "pan-national" landscapes more often than not depicted scenes typical of Ontario and were not necessarily representative of the topography or flora found in other parts of the country.

Fueled in part by the influence of Toronto critics and wealthy patrons, as well as a desire to promote a "national" school of art, the National Gallery of Canada actively embarked upon a collection and exhibition plan that elevated the Group of Seven and Tom Thompson's work to an almost iconographic status. This mythic status belied both the regional character of the works as well as the