

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*

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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

existence of a large community of artists who fell outside the parameters defined by the Group and their works. This being said, McKay assembles her argument to elevate her subject, Canadian mural painting, beyond the categories of kitsch and quaint, into the realm of serious study:

It is, therefore, unreasonable to regard the work of Thompson and the Group of Seven as an "art for a nation," the title under which the National Gallery exhibited the group's work as late as 1995. Rather, it ought to be seen as a regional expression of nationally held values. As such, it posits the presence of other regional artistic expressions of nationally held general values, such as the murals painted from the 1860s to the 1930s. [12]

The idea that murals were commissioned to express or illustrate "regionally held values" is key to an appreciation of the author's approach to the subject. In contrast to more traditional art historical analyses that place emphasis upon the intrinsic aesthetic and cultural value of art, McKay is part of a growing number of art historians who place even greater value upon the analysis of the social context in which art works are created and given meaning. Not only does this approach validate the importance of mural painting in Canada, but it also allows the reader to appreciate more fully both the explicit and implied symbolism associated with these works.

The ten chapters that make up this fascinating study provide a broad stroke introduction to a long ignored subject. The first chapter establishes the foundation for the study by discussing the European origins and general characteristics of the modern mural movement in the 1830s. As in the case of earlier murals that were commissioned by ecclesiastical or aristocratic patrons, the modern, European-based mural movement was intended to promote the values of its patrons. However, the Industrial Revolution had given rise to a new urban, bourgeois, and, capitalist elite. The interests of this new moneyed class, and by extension the underlying message of the murals they commissioned, were closely tied to the rise of the modern nation state.

It is at this point that McKay introduces the underlying thesis of her analysis. The key to understanding the modern mural movement lay with two notions. The first is that the mural, set within a complimentary architectural framework, was essentially intended for the edification of the general public. Designed to function within an architectural setting, considered by many art critics of the time as the highest form of art, the mural was elevated to the status of social commentary. More than

simply decoration, a mural was intended to convey a moral message that would encourage or inspire the viewer to support the values espoused by the new leading classes. These principles were, to quote the author: "Christianity, patriarchy, popular sovereignty, cultural identity and the material progress of capitalism." [16] The interpretation of the thematic and symbolic meaning of the murals discussed in the work generally illustrates how these principles provided the inspiration behind mural painting in Canada into the 1960s.

The association of the murals with an architectural context provides the thematic basis for most of the chapters of the book. Thus, one finds chapters dealing with a variety of settings: civic, commercial, Protestant church, Catholic church, private and libraries. Of these, the chapters dealing with civic, commercial and library themes are some of the most intriguing. In the chapter entitled *Civic Mural Painting*, McKay again expands the field of study by discussing the international character of the movement in England, France, and the United States in order to compare and contrast the more affluent and developed mural movement in each of those countries with developments in Canada. The selective use of foreign experience by Canadian proponents of civic mural painting, sometimes to the detriment of the truth, underscores the degree to which art movements and tastes are cultivated by their proponents.

However, at times it would appear to be the paucity of Canadian sources, particularly critical works not based in Toronto, which led her to look further afield for an intellectual foundation for her work. Indeed, McKay admits that the civic mural record is comparatively weak in certain parts of Canada, most notably Atlantic Canada, Alberta, and Saskatchewan. In the case of the former, the economic decline of the Atlantic provinces coincided with the rise of the mural movement in Canada after the 1870s. Economics, as much as taste, appears to have played a significant role in the production of murals, particularly for civic settings. [28]

Mural painting in a civic or commercial setting provides the author with some of her best material. Citing examples from libraries, legislatures, banks, and schools, the author not only provides the reader with a national perspective, but provides a convincing series of arguments to illustrate the intellectual, social and political underpinnings of the movement. Even more important is the gradual introduction of contemporary and regional themes that, by the early 1900s, were introduced into mural projects in lieu of classical or other imagery. This trend in Canada followed similar trends elsewhere.

Two chapters of particular note deal with the representation of the "Disappearing Native" in English Canadian murals, and the Catholic Church. The latter is of interest because it demonstrates the author's ability to weave a wide variety of contextual information into her arguments, while enriching our understanding of the relationship between mural painting and the patrons who commissioned the work. Although the title of the chapter is somewhat deceptive, McKay deals almost exclusively with the French Canadian Church. Here the relationship between ideology, artistic style, and subject matter in church murals is examined lucidly. The discussion of Ozias Leduc's extensive murals, inspired as they were by a fervent form of ultramontane Catholicism and an interest in contemporary life and landscape, provides ample evidence of how mural painters and their patrons sought to use their work as powerful visual instruments of instruction and inspiration. As McKay states:

This fusion of French Canadian religion, history, and contemporary life in Leduc's murals, as in those of other French Canadian nationalistic muralists clearly demonstrates that these artists saw these elements as mutually supportive and necessary to the survival of the "nation" of French Canada. [107]

Just as Roman Catholic muralists sought to validate and support a world view in their work, the historical narrative found in many English Canadian murals illustrated an equally strong sense of the progress of Canadian society imported from Europe. The great foil in all of these historical murals is the native Canadian, whose presence, even in the form of the noble savage, is intended to contrast with the progressive dynamism of European settlers. McKay uses compositional analysis as well as contemporary art and historical texts to demonstrate that the historical mural

programs found in many locations illustrate the prevailing view that European colonists secured their place in Canada as a result of their industry.

Thus one finds an interesting progression, a sort of Canadian manifest destiny, that became a formula in historical mural painting. The progression from a wild and untamed landscape, where native Canadians were prominent, to the productive and civilized society, where they were not, was typical of this formula. As such many murals bore witness to the widely held belief that white Canadians were morally superior and had rightfully inherited the land from earlier peoples who had "disappeared as a result of their lack of interest in, or inability to function within, material progress." [155]

In these chapters, as well as her feminist interpretation of library murals, McKay's work demonstrates how the murals painted in the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries in Canada provide insight into the character of Canadian society during that formative period of our history. This highly public art illustrates a spirit whose characteristics are not homogenous, but diverse, quite often already anchored by regional or ethnic history. The author succeeds in demonstrating that the many murals painted mirror the attitudes and principles of Canadian society at that time, albeit in a highly sanitized form.

All in all, this work is an admirable study that attempts to redress the historical imbalance in the interpretation of Canadian painting by calling attention to the rich body of murals painted prior to the 1960s. The comprehensive bibliography and separate table of murals discussed in the work will provide fertile ground for further study. The table also draws attention to the large number of murals that have been destroyed with the passage of time. One can hope that *A National Soul* will not only spur further study in the field, but also contribute to a greater appreciation and preservation of those murals that have survived to this day.