
George Heriot at Kingston

George Heriot: Painter of the Canadas. An exhibition held at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston, 12 November–31 December 1978; circulated to Ottawa, Montreal, Windsor, and Toronto, January–July 1979, by the National Programme of the National Gallery of Canada.

Catalogue: Gerald Finley, *George Heriot: Painter of the Canadas*, Kingston, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1978. 72 pp., 44 illus., \$3.00.

Related Publication: Gerald Finley, *George Heriot, 1759-1839*, Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada (in press).

In the past several years the Agnes Etherington Art Centre has made a practice of mounting historical exhibitions to balance its contemporary art programme. One thinks of, for example, Dorothy Farr's show in 1977 of works by Horatio Walker (1858-1938), and the even more recent exhibition, organized by W. Martha E. Cooke, of works by the watercolour artist James Pattison Cockburn for an 1831 guidebook, *Quebec and Its Environs*. In January, another important exhibition – this one devoted to Daniel Fowler (1810-94) – was shown and is at present being circulated to museums throughout Canada. Further, the catalogues to these exhibitions take their place with ease on the shelves of all who are interested in Canadian art history.

The record shows the Etherington to be highly conscious that the work of Canadian historical artists is only now being properly and systematically explored in depth. Gerald Finley, guest curator for the George Heriot exhibition, is Professor in the History of Art at Queen's University, and has been collecting information on Heriot for some time in anticipation of a full-length study of that artist. That the present exhibition should emanate from Kingston comes as no surprise.

George Heriot was one of many British officers and civilian officials who came to British North America

after the Treaties of Paris in 1763 and 1783. He was born at Haddington, Scotland, in 1759 and ten years later was sent to receive a classical education at the Royal High School, Edinburgh. In Edinburgh George decided on a career as an artist, which led him to London in 1777 expecting to enter the Royal Academy Schools as a student. Once in London, however, his plans changed radically so that almost immediately he went to the West Indies where he stayed for four years. There he was able to express himself in the arts by composing *A Descriptive Poem in the West Indies, 1781*, and also by painting watercolours. These efforts represent pursuits that are characteristic of the eighteenth-century British gentleman-connoisseur, and it is within this societal-cultural structure (which precluded almost wholly the considerations of most professional artists, writers, and scholars) that Heriot's artistic activities in both the visual and literary spheres continued until his death in 1839.

On his return to Britain, Heriot entered the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich as a gentleman cadet but did not take a commission. At Woolwich his art was influenced by Paul Sandby, the Academy's drawing master and one of the most important topographical watercolour painters of the day. And it is with the 1780s that Heriot's long career as an amateur artist can be studied. By 1792 Heriot was in Quebec on the civilian staff of the Ordnance Department, a minor post. On a leave of absence in 1796 and 1797, Heriot returned to London, where he exhibited three watercolours at the annual Royal Academy exhibition, and met William Pitt, then Prime Minister, who helped secure for him the important post of Deputy Postmaster General of British North America. This appointment required Heriot to inspect the post offices of Upper and Lower Canada, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia, and on his frequent travels Heriot took with him his sketchbook and collected materials for two books which were published in London. *The History of Canada from the First Discovery* appeared in 1804, and *Travel Through the Canadas* came out in 1807, on Heriot's brief visit to England in 1806-07. In 1816,

under pressure from administrators of the colonial government, Heriot resigned and returned to England in retirement. For the next twenty years the pattern of Heriot's artistic interests continued as before with numerous trips through the British Isles and on the Continent, and the publication in 1824 of *A Picturesque Tour Made in 1817 and 1820 through the Pyrenean Mountains*. Through this whole period, Heriot continued to work prolifically in watercolour, and as late as 1838 he executed a remarkable series of marine scenes at the close of a vocation bridging sixty years.

To present the varied and complex career of someone like Heriot intelligibly and attractively in an exhibition and its catalogue is no easy task. Gerald Finley makes this apparent in the first important section of the catalogue, the Chronology, which includes not only the broad facts of Heriot's life but also the structure of the catalogue and exhibition. Sections I, II, III, and VII are straightforward enough in their dealings of the Heriot family genealogy, George's life in Edinburgh, his stays in the West Indies and then in London, and finally his life in England after 1816. There are few unjustified surprises in these sections. For example, the chief events of Heriot's life from 1816 to 1839, as they are listed in the Chronology, are seen in Section VII of the exhibition as a goodly number of works executed by Heriot on his various travels in Britain and on the Continent. But Sections IV, V, and VI, which consider Heriot in Canada, are not as clear or well organized. For instance, Section VI of the Chronology, where Heriot's official travels in the Canadas, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia are listed, prepares the viewer for watercolours made on those trips. However, that section of the exhibition and the catalogue displays artifacts, such as the original art work for the Isaac Brock stamp of 1969. By now the viewer has become familiar with this practice through Sections I and II, and the Supplementary Material attached to the following sections. To find Heriot's watercolours made on his official trips one must return to Section IV with its promise of 'the Changing Vision of Canadian Landscape (1793-1816).' Unfortunately, despite the ambitious title, there are no works by Heriot included here which date from later than 1808. Likewise, the title to Section V would have us believe that from 1797 to 1816 all life in the Canadas worth documenting happened within Quebec City and the nearby Huron settlement at Jeune Lorette. And again no work by Heriot from the decade of the 1810s is presented.

The exhibition in Kingston was attractively presented. Large didactic panels with the titles of the sections and with scenes reproduced on them, as in the catalogue to introduce each section, directed the viewer organically through the exhibition. The National Gallery unfortunately did not install the essential panels between the various thematic sections, or appear to pay more than casual attention to the catalogue while hanging the show. Indeed the exhibition in Ottawa suggested that recognition was given only to the



FIGURE 1. George Heriot, *Falls of Montmorency in Winter*, ca. 1795. Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada. Cat. no. 50 (Photo: National Gallery of Canada).

configuration of pre-existing wall surfaces. Consequently the weaknesses inherent in Finley's structuring of the catalogue were glaring in the Ottawa presentation of the exhibition.

The catalogue is bilingual, and the text comprises very short, general introductions to each of the seven sections. Of the 146 works listed, fewer than 30 entries contain textual information in addition to what is found in the introductions. Finley states in his preface that he has purposely not clogged the catalogue with topographical description, extensive notes, and footnotes, but too often what is left is only the bare facts of the individual work — title, medium, date, size, and so on. This exhibition represents really the first comprehensive effort to unearth information on Heriot, and one expects such an exhibition to raise more questions than can be answered at the moment. But the obvious ones should have been addressed in the catalogue. It is in fact the exhibition itself and allied with it the impressively comprehensive list of lenders in the catalogue which display most convincingly Finley's knowledge of Heriot.

Much of what one asks of the catalogue will in fact be answered when *George Heriot, 1759-1839*, No. 5 in the National Gallery of Canada's Canadian Artists Series, is finally published. At the time of writing this review it has yet to appear, but Dennis Reid, the former editor of the series, kindly offered for review purposes the galley proofs (complete with their 1978 publication date). It will become plain that the National Gallery publication was meant to accompany the exhibition, and in reaching an understanding and appreciation of Heriot's watercolours the small monograph on Heriot is more important than the exhibition catalogue. What is less evident is why Finley did not do for the Etherington an exhibition catalogue of stature equal to the bulk of their publications when he had the materials at hand to do so. Moreover, stringing out work rather than concentrating it does little to satisfy the curious historian and the adventurous spectator.

In the National Gallery essay Professor Finley begins with a short history of topographical landscape paint-

ing in England, and shows how during the second half of the eighteenth century 'pure' topographical work was increasingly modified in response to the new aesthetic interests of the Picturesque. It was within this consciously artistic mode that Heriot and Sandby worked out their landscapes, but while acknowledging Sandby's influence on Heriot, Finley suggests wisely that Heriot was looking at the work of other artists as well. This is undoubtedly true, not only for the 1780s but also for Heriot's visits in the 1790s and in the next decade. But these are thorny problems, and must be worked out in Finley's full-length study of Heriot.

The theme of *George Heriot, 1759-1839* is the discovery of how Heriot accommodated his landscape art in Canada to the visual experience of a landscape radically different from that found in southern England. Finley's concern is new in the literature – and highly important – because it puts on the shelf previous categorical methodologies (e.g., 'British Army Topographers in Eastern Canada') which, with their inherent limitations, have done little to encourage the discovery of what is new, and therefore Canadian, in the works of these artists. Heriot and others like him came to Canada armed with the aesthetics of the Picturesque, and, as Finley points out, it would be

incorrect to consider Heriot's watercolours, especially those executed after 1800, simply as views of particular places of service primarily to the social historian. Through careful formal analysis of specific works of art, Finley shows how Heriot gradually rejected his earlier linear and graphic means of expression, as seen in *Falls of Montmorency in Winter* (Fig. 1; cat. no. 50) in favour of one that is more painterly and abstract (Fig. 2; no. 37 in *George Heriot, 1759-1839*). Heriot's change of representation reflects his attempts to convey expressively his perception of the wilderness topography, but both modes fit comfortably under the large umbrella of the Picturesque, a mode of seeing which is expressed also in Heriot's writings.

In conclusion, the exhibition, its catalogue documentation, and the small monograph to be published by the National Gallery together place Heriot for the first time within a proper historical and aesthetic context. We must now look forward to Finley's forthcoming large study, *George Heriot, Postmaster Painter of the Canadas*, and to serious studies of other watercolour artists in Canada.

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FIGURE 2. George Heriot, *Falls of La Puce*, 1812. Ottawa, Public Archives of Canada. *George Heriot, 1759-1839*, plate 37 (Photo: Public Archives of Canada).