

Daniel Fowler at Kingston

Daniel Fowler of Amherst Island 1810-1894. An exhibition held at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston, 14 January–25 February 1979, and circulated to Victoria, Halifax, Ottawa, and Toronto, March–November 1979, by the National Museums of Canada.

Catalogue: Frances K. Smith, *Daniel Fowler of Amherst Island 1810-1894*, Kingston, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1979. 192 pp., 99 illus., \$9.00.

In 1843 Daniel Fowler, a young watercolour artist of upper-middle-class English background, arrived with his family at Amherst Island, a small island off Kingston. Fowler immediately set about the business of becoming a prosperous farmer, and it was only after visits to England in 1857 and 1859 that he decided to develop his interest in art while continuing to farm on his beloved island. Soon Fowler was recognized as the most important watercolour artist in Canada. He was a founding member of the Ontario Society of Artists in 1872 and a charter member of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts in 1880. His most important single honour was the award of a bronze medal and diploma for *Hollyhocks* (cat. no. 48) at the International Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia in 1876. Fowler's was the first international award to be received by a Canadian artist, and was the only one to be won by a Canadian at the Centennial Exhibition. He was a prolific artist who continued to paint up to his death in 1894. The Agnes Etherington Art Centre maintains an inventory of Fowler's work, and the present exhibition has been selected from the over 800 drawings which have so far been recorded by the Art Centre's recently retired curator and author of the catalogue, Frances K. Smith.

Frances Smith's catalogue represents the most comprehensive examination of Fowler's work to date, and will be a pivotal document for future Fowler studies. Major sections of the catalogue include a chronology of the artist, an introduction, entries of works in the exhibition, Fowler's *Autobiography* or *Recollections of an Artist*, a selected bibliography, and an appendix of

exhibitions from 1836 to 1894 in which Fowler showed his works. The *Autobiography*, which was written at the end of the artist's life in 1893 and 1894, is published here for the first time, and is taken directly from the manuscript, with missing sections filled in from an early typescript. Smith has inserted descriptive subtitles at well selected places within the text. The divisions which result are convenient to the reader, and also serve to distinguish gracefully between the two sources used.

This is a most attractive catalogue. Fowler's works in the exhibition are all illustrated, and the *Autobiography* is presented on a lightly coloured brown paper which sets off the narrative from the catalogue proper. The format is generally agreeable, but I must ask what the reader is expected to gain from a section heading that appears at the bottom of a page, well after the section has begun. Placed there, it can not inaugurate a section, and some sections – such as the Chronology and (especially) the Appendix, which comprise lists – appear inconceivably disjointed. A last, and equally minor, suggestion for improvement of the format of an almost superb catalogue would incorporate the record of Fowler's activity in provincial exhibitions within the main list. A reading of the *Recollections* proves that the provincial exhibitions remained important to the artist, and the more systematic ordering would better mirror entries which are found in the Chronology. Also, most works shown in the present exhibition have been grouped according to subject matter rather than by chronological considerations. Consequently, it would have proven useful if these watercolours had been cross-referenced, where possible, to works identified in the various exhibitions listed in the Appendix.

In Notes on the Publication, Smith places a special importance on Fowler's *Autobiography* by stating that her own Introduction assumes a reading of the artist's account. I would add that an appreciation of many entries which appear in the Chronology rests upon the same assumption. Smith rightly insists of those who would comprehend Fowler and his work that they pay sufficient attention to his writings. And indeed the reader who does follow the author's lead is well



FIGURE 1. Daniel Fowler, *Chiavenna*, 1834. Collection Dr. and Mrs. H.J. Hoffman. Cat. no. 28 (Photo: Agnes Etherington Art Centre).

rewarded. One need not shudder at the thought of reading the 'recollections' of an aged artist, because Fowler's extensive reading and also his writings in the genres of literary criticism and editorials raise his *Autobiography* far above the usual level of such things. It also becomes quickly apparent to even the most casual reader that Fowler's upper-middle-class cultural background provided him with many strings to his bow, which will please readers of many different primary interests. The reader will often wish that more information about incidents and personalities who appear in the *Autobiography* had been provided in footnotes, but the editor has left this task to be accomplished later by social and literary historians and other specialists of the period.

Admittedly the *Autobiography* may in some ways be disappointing to the serious student whose interests are limited to Canadian art history. Of its ninety-seven pages, no more than twenty-seven consider the period from Fowler's first return visit to England in 1857, and some of these pages are concerned with matters other than art. Moreover, Fowler must have drastically restricted the scope of this project after a near-fatal accident early in 1894, the year of his death. Apart from brief references scattered through earlier sections, the almost twenty-year-long period of Fowler's life beginning in 1876 is compressed in the last four pages, which were written after his accident; and much of that section is understandably taken up with his success at the International Centennial Exhibition.

Smith is of course intimately familiar with what Fowler's *Autobiography* has to offer, and her awareness has determined her handling of the Introduction. This section complements the *Autobiography*, and it is not long before the reader is immersed in Daniel Fowler as artist in Canada. To a certain extent the introduction of the reader to Fowler's Canadian period is reflected in the organization of works shown in the exhibition. We are first led to consider two impressive groups of works, comprising Canadian dead-game pieces and still-life paintings of flowers (cat. nos. 48-59). Smith,

however, soon asserts rightly that Fowler made his greatest contribution to Canadian art in the nineteenth century as a painter in watercolour of the Canadian landscape scene. It is within this context that the author examines the various English influences on Fowler's artistic development – influences which date from the decade of the 1830s up to 1843, and from the two visits to England at the end of the 1850s (cat. nos. 4-47). That English and continental subject matters remained important to Fowler throughout his artistic career is made evident by the judicious juxtaposition of works like *In Knole Park, Kent*, executed in 1836 (cat. no. 10), and a watercolour on the same subject, dating to 1892 (cat. no. 11). Other examples of Fowler's dependence on subject matters and compositions developed early in his career include catalogue numbers 25 (1834) and 26 (1872), 44 (1837) and 45 (1876), and 46 (1837) and 47 (1883).

Much is done with these watercolours; Smith demonstrates in the earlier works the various stylistic influences of English contemporary artists, especially that of Fowler's teacher for three years, James Duffield Harding. In most of the comparisons cited above, the later works are highly finished in contrast to the earlier works which are sketch-like in quality. But numbers 10 and 11 present us with something else again. In the 1836 work, pencil provides the structure which supports the broad watercolour washes, and spots of gouache form reflective highlights mostly in the water area, a technique which Fowler learned from Harding. But in the 1892 watercolour, pen and brown ink is used instead as an equivalent part of the overall design (the pen work is very free and calligraphic) instead of forming structural outlines for coloured washes. Those paintings by Fowler of the Canadian landscape (cat. nos. 60-85) which are most satisfactory are also those which are most free in terms of line and brushstroke. As Smith notes, in the 1870s Fowler brought his calligraphic tendencies to his brushwork, with short, stabbing, repeated brushstrokes, often achieving dramatic visual results.

There is perhaps one aspect of Fowler's artistic development which should be discussed more clearly in terms of both aesthetic and historical contexts. The most cursory examination of Fowler's œuvre reveals that after his visits to England in 1857 and 1859 an interest in colour took hold at the expense of tonal considerations, which have been attributed to the impact of a Pre-Raphaelite art then gaining wide acceptance in English art circles. As a student of Harding, Fowler had been concerned chiefly with line, tone, and composition. In his *Autobiography* (p. 158), Fowler claimed that Harding should have made him study the colours found in nature, and that because of Harding's failure in this area of Fowler's artistic education, Fowler taught himself all that he knew about the rendering of colour in nature.

Despite Fowler's carping about Harding's teaching techniques, a work like *Chiavenna*, done in 1834 (Fig. 1; cat. no. 28), is one of the most aesthetically pleasing

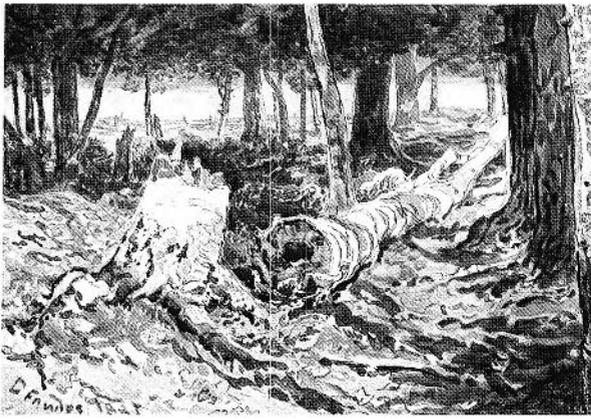


FIGURE 2. Daniel Fowler, *Fallen Birch*, 1881. Kingston, Agnes Etherington Art Centre. Cat. no. 77 (Photo: Agnes Etherington Art Centre).

works in this exhibition, and it reflects Harding in every way possible. In it the qualities which make the medium of watercolour distinctive are well handled, with the paper itself playing an important role in creating an effective image. In contrast to this, many of the Canadian works show little respect for the qualities peculiar to watercolour. One may even say that the medium is handled more like pastel, gouache, or crayon. This makes for some curious visual results, as seen, for example, in *Duck and Partridge*, dated 1889 (Fig. 3; cat. no. 59). There is here and in other works like it, little differentiation of texture between the various forms, with the dead game tending to merge unaccountably with the landscape background.

The transparency of the watercolour medium obviously does not lend itself to rendering successfully the appearance and texture of objects in an illusionistic

manner; these concerns are best left to painting in oils. But the history of watercolour painting during the whole of the nineteenth century was one of growing competition with oil painting and, more often than not, this development occurred much to the detriment of watercolour painting. One characteristic common to much of the watercolour painting of the period was that colours were worked up to intense, fanciful, and sometimes even theatrical levels, while the change from tone to colour was often accompanied by an indiscriminate cluttering of detail. Some of this can be seen in Fowler's finished landscape compositions as well as in his more personal paintings like *Fallen Birch* of 1881 (Fig. 2; cat. no. 77). In this watercolour, heightened with white, the amount of detail and the intense uniform colours work against the solid definition of illusionistic form. Although such works may not be entirely satisfactory as aesthetic objects, they nonetheless complement Fowler's awareness of art historical developments which he shows clearly enough in his *Autobiography* (see, for example, pp. 155-57).

A final word needs to be said about the fine installations at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre and at the National Gallery of Canada. The works were presented as much as possible to reflect the structure of the catalogue, and the ample space allotted to the exhibition in both museums encouraged the viewer to make telling comparisons between different but related works. In short, both hangings were sensitive and perceptive.

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The recently discovered will of Daniel Fowler is introduced by Frances K. Smith on pages 110-12. The exhibition catalogue, designed by Peter Dorn, has been selected as one of the hundred best books of 1979 by the North American Institute of Graphic Arts in New York.



FIGURE 3. Daniel Fowler, *Duck and Partridge*, 1889. Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada. Cat. no. 59 (Photo: National Gallery of Canada).