Document généré le 23 avr. 2024 05:23

Urban History Review
Revue d'histoire urbaine

URBAN HISTORY REVIEW
REVUE D'HISTOIRE URBAINE

The Urban Prairie, The Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon, October 29/93-January 2/94, Winnipeg Art Gallery, April 9-June 19/94, Dunlop Art Gallery, Regina, September 17 to October 23/94, Edmonton Art Gallery, November 19/94-January 15/95, Glenbow, Calgary, February 11-April 9/95, accompanied by catalogue of the same name, Mendel Art Gallery and Fifth House Limited, 1993.

Nancy Shaw

Volume 24, numéro 1, october 1995

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1019231ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.7202/1019231ar

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (imprimé)
1918-5138 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer ce compte rendu

Shaw, N. (1995). Compte rendu de [The Urban Prairie, The Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon, October 29/93-January 2/94, Winnipeg Art Gallery, April 9-June 19/94, Dunlop Art Gallery, Regina, September 17 to October 23/94, Edmonton Art Gallery, November 19/94-January 15/95, Glenbow, Calgary, February 11-April 9/95, accompanied by catalogue of the same name, Mendel Art Gallery and Fifth House Limited, 1993.] *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, *24*(1), 53–54. https://doi.org/10.7202/1019231ar

All Rights Reserved © Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine, 1995

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

https://www.erudit.org/fr/

Exhibit Review

Nancy Shaw

The Urban Prairie, The Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon, October 29/93–January 2/94, Winnipeg Art Gallery, April 9–June 19/94, Dunlop Art Gallery, Regina, September 17 to October 23/94, Edmonton Art Gallery, November 19/94–January 15/95, Glenbow, Calgary, February 11–April 9/95, accompanied by catalogue of the same name, Mendel Art Gallery and Fifth House Limited, 1993).

With unforeseen fluidity, global and local transactions increasingly transform city life, displacing economic, cultural, and administrative allegiances to the nation state. In the process, once great industrial capitals, such as Montreal and Paris, have become tourist centres designed to attract scholars and vacationers alike in order to boost flailing civic economies. At the same time, formerly peripheral cities like Vancouver and Seattle are now burgeoning agglomerations of high tech industry, international finance, and relaxed and cosmopolitan lifestyles.

Amid such rapid change, it is not surprising that so many recent museum exhibitions dwell on the city. Notable among them is *The Urban Prairie* curated by Dan Ring of the Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon. This exhibition is unique in that it not only provides a history of urban development on the Prairies—a much neglected subject—but also challenges fundamental assumptions about Canadian national identity. Conceived as a federation built on diversity, Canada is organized according to territorial regions—distinct geo-political entities identified by the material resources they yield toward the harmonious functioning of the country. The Prairies, then, are commonly imagined in nationalist representations of Canada as an agriculturally productive region with a culture that echoes its flat, fertile land and big sky. By suggesting that a distinct urban culture has developed on the Prairies over the past century, this exhibition supplements well-known representations that situate the region as rural and agrarian.

The Urban Prairies overall curatorial premise follows a familiar narrative of modernization whereby urban development is initiated with railway building and attains maturity in the post World War II period. To query this deeply ingrained image of the region, Ring employs an impressive array of visual materials depicting the development of Prairie cities between 1880 and 1960. Although it appears as a typical art-historical survey in its chronological organization—covering almost a century through six distinct periods of civic development—the show's roughly 300 paintings, photographs and popular paraphernalia (posters, postcards and advertising) are arranged to form a social history, rather than to simply track stylistic developments in fine art.

Appropriately, the exhibition's first section "The Cities of the Rail" is comprised of promotional and documentary materials illustrating settlements built and also those disrupted by the coming of the transcontinental railroad. Canadian Pacific Railway posters such as "Traversing the Great Wheat Region of the Canadian Northwest," (1883) promoted free homes and fertile lands to attract immigrants. Several photographs by Montreal-based William Notman, official CPR photographer and a pioneer of commercial and experimental photography in North America, document settlements initiated or transformed by the railroad. Included are a static depiction of a Blackfoot reserve, and stark images of the settlements which became Calgary, Brandon, Winnipeg and Medicine Hat.

As noted in Ring's essay in the 160-page exhibition catalogue, there were few painted representations of urban development during this period even though rail magnate and arts patron William Van Horne gave free railway passes to many artists. Instead, the paintings of this period focused on the natural landscape which was thought to be more attractive to the hearty and adventurous settlers and tourists of these largely uncharted territories.

Ring argues that from the 1880s until the 1920s photography was the predominant method used to represent the city. He adds that during the first two decades of the 20th century, photography was employed by civic boosters, rather than the agents of railway building because it allowed for the mass production and distribution of images to promote Prairie cities. Ring suggests that photographic panoramas such as "Panoramic View of Old Edmonton," (1909) printed by Harly Press Ltd. and Edgar Rossie's "McCallum and Hill Development of Lakeview from the Perspective of Reginas Legislative Building," (c. 1910) presented encompassing and exaggerated views in order to attract commerce and industry.

The third section of this exhibition concentrates on the influence of the City Beautiful Movement on Prairie cities. Planners and architects influenced by this movement looked to classical schemes of monumental, axial planning to counter what they saw as the detrimental effects of industrialization. British expatriate Thomas Mawson's plan for Calgary published as the pamphlet *Calgary, Past, Present and Future* (1912) is an example of the attempt to impose grand tree-lined boulevards and beaux-arts style architecture on the burgeoning regional city. However, Mawson's plans were never realized as a result of the outbreak of World War I. Moreover, this imperious design for Calgary was based on principles intended to lend order and authority to already well-established 19th century British and European capital cities. For Calgary, a frontier city of barely 44,000 people at the time, Mawson's vision appears as a gargantuan and fantastical projection of the fading values of empire.

During the Depression, images of urban unrest, poverty and unemployment overtook those promoting views of Prairie cities. In this section, photographs of the Regina Riot and the "On To Ottawa Trek" are reminders of the events that led to the establishment of organized regional resistance and the local emergence of political parties like the Canadian Commonwealth Federation and Social Credit. Although evident in the period's photography, it is predominantly in the painting of the Depression that a sense of regional identity is asserted as a way to resist the disruptive forces of modernization. Margaret Shelton's "Calgary," (1939) a rendering of stoic labour, and Stanley Brunst's somber "Untitled (rail tunnel, Saskatoon)," (1939) are typical paintings evoking the tensions between modernization and the cultural specificity of the region.

The concluding two sections of the exhibition emphasize how wartime and post-war prosperity negated regionalist depictions of place. Scenes of war are predominant in paintings and are concentrated on the business of mobilization. For example, Henry G. Gyde's, "Edmonton," (1943) is a heroic portrait of soldiers leaving the city for war duty. In the post-War period, according to Ring, as the city increasingly became the subject of mass media representations, it faded as an object of description for fine art. In paintings influenced by the principles of high Modernism such as Roy Kiyooka's "City, My City," (1955) emphasizing colour and plane, and Marion Nicholl's attention to geometry and surface in "The City – Sunday," (1960) the urban is presented as site for experience and expression. Works such as these are evidence of the Prairie cities' cultural modernity—their ability to acquire and support a sophisticated and cosmopolitan artistic scene complemented by the accouterments of popular culture and mass media (television, movies, magazines, architecture etc.). At the same time, regionalists' emphasis on the specificities of place began to appear as passé and parochial.

The Urban Prairie exhibition is a timely historical overview. It dispels national myths that situate the region as rural and agrarian by showing how urbanization catalyzed the growth of the Prairies. This analysis is important at a time when some cities are becoming museums in themselves, while others are transformed by the interactions of local and global forces that often bypass national affiliations. In this way, *The Urban Prairie* exhibition is provocative in its gentle prodding of the symbols and forces of Canadian national identity.