

## Science on a Salad Plate? Thinking About the Representation of Natural History in the Canadian Historic Dinner Service Project

Keri Cronin

Volume 31, numéro 1-2, 2008

Natural Science in the New World: The Descriptive Enterprise

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/019757ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/019757ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

CSTHA/AHSTC

ISSN

0829-2507 (imprimé)

1918-7750 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Cronin, K. (2008). Science on a Salad Plate? Thinking About the Representation of Natural History in the Canadian Historic Dinner Service Project. *Scientia Canadensis*, 31(1-2), 113–130. <https://doi.org/10.7202/019757ar>

Résumé de l'article

L'année 1897 marque le 400<sup>e</sup> anniversaire de la 'découverte' du Canada par Jean Cabot, événement que la Women's Art Association of Canada commémore par la production du « Canadian State Dinner Service », un service de table de porcelaine peint à la main. Ce projet très en vue est une célébration non seulement de la nation, mais aussi de l'histoire naturelle du pays par l'attention portée à la flore et à la faune du Canada. Ainsi, les femmes sélectionnées pour produire les pièces individuelles du projet reçoivent du matériel visuel de référence, incluant des photographies, des textes d'histoire naturelle et des illustrations telles que celles produites par l'artiste W.H. Bartlett pour l'ouvrage *Canadian Scenery* paru au début du siècle. Le présent article explore cette réinterprétation visuelle de l'histoire naturelle du Canada afin de soulever des questions sur la manière dont la recontextualisation du matériel scientifique façonne les discours sur la nation et la nature dans le 'Nouveau Monde'.

# Science on a Salad Plate?: Thinking About the Representation of Natural History in the Canadian Historic Dinner Service Project <sup>1</sup>

Keri Cronin

Brock University

**Abstract:** The Women’s Art Association of Canada marked the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of John Cabot’s “discovery” of Canada (celebrated in 1897) through the production of the “Canadian Historic Dinner Service.” The high-profile project, which resulted in a set of hand-painted porcelain dinnerware, was a celebration not only of nation-building, but also of the natural history of the country. Visual reference material provided to the women selected to create the individual pieces included photographs, natural history texts, and illustrations that W.H. Bartlett produced for *Canadian Scenery* earlier in the century. This article explores this visual reinterpretation of Canada’s natural history in order to raise questions about how a recontextualization of scientific material shapes narratives of nation and nature in the ‘New World’.

**Résumé :** L’année 1897 marque le 400<sup>e</sup> anniversaire de la ‘découverte’ du Canada par Jean Cabot, événement que la Women’s Art Association of Canada commémore par la production du « Canadian State Dinner Service », un service de table de porcelaine peint à la main. Ce projet très en vue est une célébration non seulement de la nation, mais aussi de l’histoire naturelle du pays par l’attention portée à la flore et à la faune du Canada. Ainsi, les femmes sélectionnées pour produire les pièces individuelles du projet reçoivent du matériel visuel de référence, incluant des photographies, des textes d’histoire naturelle et des illustrations telles que celles produites par l’artiste W.H. Bartlett pour l’ouvrage *Canadian Scenery* paru au début du siècle. Le présent article explore cette réinterprétation visuelle de l’histoire naturelle du Canada afin de soulever des questions sur la manière dont la recontextualisation du matériel scientifique façonne les discours sur la nation et la nature dans le ‘Nouveau Monde’.

---

1. I would like to thank Scott Cronin, Victoria Dickenson, Laurie Morrison, and the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions on earlier versions of this paper.

The year 1897 marked the 400th anniversary of John Cabot's arrival upon the shores of what we now know as Canada, and a number of celebrations across the country commemorated the occasion that year. The following discussion focuses on one particular celebratory project—a unique artistic endeavour that the Women's Art Association of Canada (WAAC) undertook. To celebrate the occasion, the members of WAAC produced a hand-painted dinner service, a set of over 200 fine china pieces.<sup>2</sup> This project came to be known as the “Canadian Historic Dinner Service,” and featured various scenes of Canada's natural and cultural history.<sup>3</sup> This blend of natural history, the decorative arts and celebrations of nation-building at the end of the 19th century provides an interesting point of departure for considerations regarding the relationship between art and science in Canadian historical context. My goal here is not to offer a detailed reading of each of the pieces in the Canadian Historic Dinner Service. Rather, in this article, I will consider the collection as a whole and, in particular, focus on the practice of recontextualizing natural history images and the blending of fine art practices with scientific inquiry. As the following discussion demonstrates, reconsideration of projects such as the Canadian Historic Dinner Service open up new avenues for thinking about the ways in which Victorian Canadians envisioned science, art and natural history as essential elements in defining a sense of national identity.

The subject matter painted on the cups, saucers, plates and bowls that comprised the Canadian Historic Dinner Service drew upon various aspects of Canada's natural and cultural history. WAAC gave the artists involved in this project strict guidelines and a “reference collection” of image material to work from in order to ensure accurate portrayal of the different species and landscapes represented in the project. The completed project was put on display—first in Toronto and then in all the other cities across Canada that were home to branches of the WAAC.

Late-nineteenth century notions about both “art” and “science” informed the production of the Canadian Historic Dinner Service, yet the project fits neatly into neither category. These are challenging images to categorize; creative licence was not given to the professional artists

---

2. The history of the Canadian Historic Dinner Service is traced by Marie Elwood in a special virtual exhibition of the pieces produced by the Canadian Museum of Civilization. Visitors to the virtual exhibition can examine digital images of the individual pieces in the dinner service and read about the background to the project, <http://www.civilization.ca/hist/cadeau/cahis01e.html>, Canadian Museum of Civilization (accessed 30 October 2008).

3. Keith A. McLeod, “‘The Splendid Gift’: Lady Aberdeen and Mary Ella Dignam,” *Antique Showcase* 33, 7 (1998): 50.

working on the project and, to further complicate matters, the WAAC wanted these images to be scientifically accurate without direct observation of botanical and zoological specimens. In other words, these images do not fit into ideas about creative expression that we have come to expect from art in the modern era, nor do they fit neatly into the discourses of natural history where there has traditionally been emphasis on collecting, preserving and directly observing plant and animal species.

Invariably, the writings to date on the Canadian Historic Dinner Service zero in on two important events related to this project. The first is the aforementioned occasion of the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Cabot's voyage, and the second event is the presentation of the dinner set to Lady Aberdeen in 1898. Lady Aberdeen played a founding role in the formation of the National Council of Women of Canada, an organization with which the WAAC had a formal affiliation, and, as such, was a suitable recipient of this set. The inspiration for and presentation of the set, then, celebrated colonial exploration and imperial rule of the country. Considering that WAAC created this project a mere 30 years after Canada's confederation, this is not at all surprising.<sup>4</sup>

My interest in this project, however, goes beyond the occasions of its inspiration and presentation. I am interested in further investigating the subject matter represented within the paintings on the individual pieces of the dinner service. Two distinct themes emerge when considering the individual pieces of the Canadian Historic Dinner Service: 1) historic buildings and settlements and 2) Canadian flora and fauna. At first glance, then, this set appears to replicate long-held assumptions about the separation of "civilization" (the human-built structures included as part of the decorative program symbolize this) and "nature" (scenes of plants and animals in which human presence is conspicuously absent symbolize this in the Dinner Service). I want to make the case, however, that in this project images of nature are "denaturalized" by the representational strategies used. These are not merely aesthetically-pleasing representations of species found in this land—in this context they celebrate colonial and imperial histories. These images, in other words, are as informed by ideas about the building of a nation from a decidedly European perspective as the images of the forts and garrisons included in the dinner service are.

---

4. Phillip Buckner has convincingly argued that in the years following Canada's confederation, sentiments of "Imperial enthusiasm" harmoniously co-existed alongside rhetoric of Canadian national identity. See Phillip Buckner, "Creation of the Dominion of Canada, 1860-1901," in *Canada and the British Empire*, ed. Phillip Buckner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 66-86.

In recent years historians of science such as Bernard Lightman and Anne Secord have convincingly argued the need for a broader understanding of what constitutes scientific knowledge. Specifically there has been a focus on ideas about science and natural history intersected with the day-to-day lives of citizens, or so called “popular science.” This methodological perspective offers alternatives to “top down” ways of writing the history of science by “experts,” which have tended to focus almost exclusively on academic science produced in the context of laboratories and universities.<sup>5</sup> Lightman’s work, in particular, is useful in terms of interrogating the visual culture of science that exists outside of textbook and laboratory settings as he has identified three distinct uses of images in the popularization of science at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: the ornamental, the rhetorical and the authoritative.<sup>6</sup> Lightman classifies scientific images focused on the “beauty of nature” as an ornamental use of visual culture.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, instances where the purpose of imagery is to convince viewers of a specific way of thinking constitutes a rhetorical use of images.<sup>8</sup> Lastly, Lightman’s model classifies images used as a means of conveying a sense of expertise on the part of the artist as an “authoritative” use of visual culture.

The objects which comprise the Canadian Historic Dinner Service—porcelain plates, cups and saucers—are objects we typically associate with domestic décor and, as such, this project would appear, at least at first glance, to have taken an “ornamental” approach in its depiction of natural history. However, when considering the project as a whole, the images take on a “rhetorical” quality in that through selection of subject matter and formal qualities, the project makes a claim about the centrality of Euro-scientific discourse in the invention of the Canadian nation state. Three separate but inter-connected means are used to achieve this goal: the inclusion of such standardized scientific conventions as Linnean taxonomy; the use of a “reference” collection which included written and

---

5. See, for instance, Roger Cooter and Stephen Pumfrey, “Separate Spheres and Public Spaces: Reflections on the History of Science Popularization and Science in Popular Culture,” *History of Science* 32, 97 (1994): 237-268; Bernard Lightman, “‘The Voices of Nature’: Popularizing Victorian Science,” in *Victorian Science in Context*, ed. Bernard Lightman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 187-211; Anne Secord, “Science in the Pub: Artisan Botanists in Early Nineteenth-Century Lancashire,” *History of Science* 32, 3 (1994): 269-315.

6. Bernard Lightman, “Depicting Nature, Defining Roles: The Gender Politics of Victorian Illustration,” in *Figuring It Out: Science, Gender and Visual Culture*, ed. Ann B. Shteir and Bernard Lightman (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2006), 216.

7. *Ibid.*, 219.

8. *Ibid.*, 223-224.

visual texts considered to be authoritative sources of knowledge about the natural history of North America; and the decision to place images of Canadian flora and fauna in the same visual narrative as historic Canadian landscapes and settlements recognized for their significance in building a settler society. The images found within the Canadian Historic Dinner Service stop short of having an “authoritative” function as the paintings found on the surfaces of the porcelain were, for the most part, recontextualized images drawn from other sources. J.J. Audubon’s *Birds of America* and Nathaniel P. Willis’s *Canadian Scenery* are typical representatives of the “reference collection” that the women involved in the Canadian Historic Dinner Service used.

Reconsideration of the Canadian Historic Dinner Service opens up yet another way of thinking about the circulation of scientific information in 19<sup>th</sup> century Canadian society. These are not intended as didactic images for teaching amateurs and enthusiasts about the natural history of Canada. Rather, the reappropriated images symbolize not only the seemingly endless abundance of natural resources found within Canada’s borders, but also discourses of Empire and of Canadian national identity at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### **The Women’s Art Association of Canada**

The Women’s Art Association of Canada (WAAC) was one of a number of groups formed to promote the role of women in the arts at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As was the case in Europe and in the United States, women in Canada who wanted to study, make, sell and exhibit art struggled to gain admittance into established art societies and academies. For instance, Charlotte Schreiber (1834-1922) was the only woman to be granted membership in the Royal Canadian Academy of Art (RCA) between the years 1880 and 1933.<sup>9</sup> Further, women were often restricted in terms of the ways in which they could participate in these types of associations. In her history on women artists in Canada, *By a Lady*, historian Maria Tippett notes that even though Schreiber was a member of the RCA, she could not attend meetings nor serve on the RCA council.<sup>10</sup> It was in the midst of this socio-political climate that groups such as the WAAC came into existence.

---

9. Maria Tippett, *By a Lady: Celebrating Three Centuries of Art by Canadian Women* (Toronto: Viking Press, 1992), 39. The RCA was formed in 1880.

10. *Ibid.*

In 1887 Mary E. Dignam (1860-1938) established the WAAC. Dignam also served as the Association's first President.<sup>11</sup> In 1894 the WAAC began to expand, incorporating other groups formed to promote the role of women in the arts in Canada and, as such, was truly national in scope.<sup>12</sup> Dignam was well-qualified to be at the helm of the WAAC; she, like many other Canadians who aspired to become professional artists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, travelled out of country to receive art education. Dignam studied at the Art Students' League in New York, and then travelled to Paris and to Holland to receive further training.<sup>13</sup> She exhibited paintings in a number of significant venues, including the Royal Canadian Academy, the National Academy of Design in New York, and also had work included in the 1886 Colonial Exhibition in London and the 1893 Chicago Exposition.<sup>14</sup> As a result of her international training and exhibition record, Dignam was well-connected with artists from other countries and was well aware of projects and initiatives being undertaken to promote the role of women in the arts outside of Canada's borders. This approach could also be found in the mandate and activities of the WAAC; as Tippett notes, the "Association became a vehicle through which its members could publicize their work across Canada and, through their participation in international fairs and expositions, around the world."<sup>15</sup>

While the idea of a dinner service as a means to celebrate the history of Canada may, at first, seem a little unusual, the Women's Art Association of Canada were by no means the first to use this medium in this way. For instance, in 1879 the wife of the President of the United States, Mrs. Rutherford Hayes, worked with American artist Theodore Davis to come up with the plans for a set of fine china commemorating the flora and fauna of America.<sup>16</sup> This set, which became affectionately known as the "White House Dinner Service," gained significant popularity due to the production of duplicate sets as well as the buzz this project generated in the press.<sup>17</sup> In terms of presenting natural history on the delicate surfaces of a dinner service—comprised of objects that are typically associated

---

11. Tippett, 40. The original name of the WAAC was the Women's Art Club. The organization changed its name once it became formally affiliated with the National Council of Women in the 1890s.

12. Ibid.

13. National Council of Women of Canada, *Women of Canada: Their Life and Work* (s.l., s.n., 1900), 223.

14. Ibid.

15. Tippett, 40.

16. Marie Elwood, "Canadian Historic Dinner Service", Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC), <http://www.civilization.ca/cmcc/exhibitions/hist/cadeau/caint00e.shtml> (accessed 31 October, 2008).

17. Ibid.

with luxury, opulence and festivity rather than the pursuit of knowledge about science and technology—members of the WAAC were following a path already made famous by such producers of fine porcelain as Royal Copenhagen.<sup>18</sup> The Canadian Historic Dinner Service, then, mirrored the structure of the WAAC in that it drew upon Canadian subject matter while, at the same time, participated in a broader, international movements within the art world.

Members of the WAAC began discussing the dinner service project at meetings held in 1896. Members in attendance at these meetings believed that the project could address two related goals, namely to use artwork as a means of solidifying ideals of Canadian nationhood and of the British Empire, as well as the opportunity to showcase the work of women artists in Canada. On Wednesday, the 8<sup>th</sup> of January 1896, Mr. O.A. Howland, an Ontario M.P.P., addressed the WAAC. Mr. Howland was particularly interested in showcasing WAAC artwork in the upcoming Canadian Historical Exhibition.<sup>19</sup> At this meeting the membership of the WAAC decided that an exhibition of china painting—“decorated with Canadian scenery and animals”—be part of this display.<sup>20</sup> The suggestion of this specific project at this specific meeting was not a coincidence. Howland’s address to the WAAC in January 1896 suggested patriotic connections between the china painting project and the image of Canada as at once its own nation and as part of the British Empire. Howland’s address to the WAAC made multiple references to the “war scare” which was prevalent in the minds of many early that year as tensions between Britain and the United States of America over the Venezuelan Boundary Crisis appeared to be reaching a boiling point. At one point during the address he passionately argued the need of art and cultural endeavours during times of political conflict.

A threatening cloud, scarcely visible a month ago, has suddenly rolled over the whole sky, lately so peaceful and promising. Is this a reason for relaxing our efforts...? On the contrary, it emphasizes the utility of our enterprise, and calls upon us to devote ourselves to it with still more united zeal and energy. Against the dark cloud which overspreads our land let the figure of Canada arise, radiant with the brightness of youth and hopes, a fair and beautiful form, strong in every line, the calm light of determination in her eyes. Let us assist to make our

---

18. Royal Copenhagen became known for the blend of art and science found within their *Flora Danica* services. See Anne Secord, “Botany on a Plate: Pleasure and the Power of Pictures in Promoting Early Nineteenth-Century Scientific Knowledge,” *Isis* 93, 1 (2002): 34.

19. The Canadian Historical Exhibition was originally scheduled to take place in Toronto in July 1897, however it was not held until 1899.

20. “Tributes to Women,” *The Globe*, 10 January 1896, 10.



neighboring nation recognize that Canada exists, a nation with a history of which she is proud, a constitution which she treasures, and a fidelity to her traditions from which she can never be moved.<sup>21</sup>

The promotion of a project such as the Canadian Historic Dinner Service as part of a meeting which included this politically-charged address is significant as it underscores the interconnectedness of artistic endeavours and political ideals.

### **Producing the Dinner Service**

As the president of the WAAC, Dignam had hoped that she might receive government patronage for the project.<sup>22</sup> Dignam was not deterred when the legislative committee overseeing the celebrations of Cabot's anniversary rejected this proposal. She was determined to see the project come to fruition and set about organizing the funding of it through the WAAC. The WAAC held a competition to determine which members would receive the honour of participating in the Canadian Historic Dinner Service Project. Dignam selected sixteen artists from various locations across the country, and assigned each various components of the Canadian Historic Dinner Service project to work on.

The sixteen women who worked on the Canadian Historic Dinner service were: Lily Osman Adams (1865-1945), Jane Bertram (??-c.1940), M. Louise Couen (unknown), Alice M. Egan (1872-1972), Clara Elizabeth Galbreath (1864-1941), Justina Harrison (unknown), Juliet Howson (1873-??), Margaret Irvine (unknown), Alice Judd (??-1943), Anna Lucy Kelley (1849-1920), Martha Logan (1863-1937), Margaret McClung (??-1952), Hattie Proctor (unknown), M. Roberts (unknown), Phoebe Amelia Watson (1858-1947), and Elizabeth Whitney (unknown).<sup>23</sup>

Historian Marie Elwood has painstakingly combed through archival records and WAAC files to compile biographical data on the sixteen women involved in the Canadian Historic Dinner Service project. Her research reveals that the majority of the women involved in this endeavour were affiliated with a wide range of artistic institutions and represented a diverse cross-section of women artists in Canada during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. For instance, Clara Elizabeth Galbreath, who painted a dozen soup plates for the Canadian Historic Dinner Service, served as Vice-President of the Art Students' League of Hamilton. Likewise, Elizabeth Whitney, who was responsible for 24 pieces in the Canadian Historic

---

21. "Tributes to Women," *The Globe*, 10 January 1896, 10.

22. McLeod, 49.

23. Elwood, "Canadian Historic Dinner Service," CMC.

Dinner Service (12 cheese plates and 12 game plates), was an instructor at the Montreal School of Applied Art and Design, and Phoebe Amelia Watson was curator of the Homer Watson Art Gallery, an institution dedicated to the life and work of her brother, Homer Watson. Many of the women selected to work on this project frequently had work included in the Ontario Society of Artists (OSA) and Royal Canadian Academy (RCA) exhibitions. In addition Lily Osman Adams, who trained under such well-known artists as Lucius O'Brien, exhibited her work at the Canadian National Exhibition, Elizabeth Whitney exhibited at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition (1876), and Martha Logan had some of her artwork exhibited in Art Association of Montreal exhibitions.<sup>24</sup>

The subject matter painted on the cups, saucers, plates and bowls that comprised the Canadian Historic Dinner Service drew upon various aspects of the natural and cultural history of Canada. The WAAC gave the artists involved in this project strict guidelines as to what to paint, and told the artists to depict a variety of species in order to suggest the natural abundance and variety of Canadian flora and fauna. The WAAC provided the artists with a "reference collection" of image material to work from in order to ensure a sense of accurate portrayal of the different species and landscapes represented in the project.

The individual species painted on the individual pieces in the Canadian Historic Dinner service ranged from Canada geese to brook trout and from wild strawberries to the dogtooth violet.<sup>25</sup> In an 1897 article about the Canadian Historic Dinner Service, Dignam described the guidelines she gave to the artists:

The fruit, flowers and ferns gave a larger field for each artist than she had ever taken for herself, inasmuch as it necessitated in each case 24 varieties. The same was demanded in connection with the fish, game and song birds of Canada. Twenty-four distinct varieties of each, properly named, are represented. All of these decorations necessitating accurate botanical and scientific representation, not much freedom for convention or fancy could be given.<sup>26</sup>

Attention to scientific detail and the task of providing accurate labelling of the species reference the WAAC's desire that the Canadian Historic Dinner service be grounded in the scientific discourse of the day. In other words, the depictions of plants, animals and historic landscapes in this project served more than a mere decorative function and are part of the

---

24. Elwood, "Canadian Historic Dinner Service," CMC.

25. Elizabeth Collard, *Nineteenth-Century Pottery and Porcelain in Canada*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1984), 320-21.

26. Mary Dignam, "Ceramic Art and the W.A.A. Of Canada," *The Saturday Globe*, 4 December 1897, 1.

enthusiastic pursuit of natural history by both professionals and amateurs in North American and Europe during the nineteenth century. These representations reference the desire to portray Canada as a nation with both a rich natural history and a future founded upon scientific endeavours and explorations.

The artists working on this project did not base their images on scenes and species they had directly studied. In this way, the resulting images are antithetical to one of the basic principals of natural history illustration—direct and careful observation. However, these visual representations of Canadian natural history remain valuable for what they can tell us about the position of science in the collective imagination of a young nation in its formative, post-confederation years. The artists were provided with a reference collection of books, photographs and other types of images featuring Canadian historical landscapes and representations of flora and fauna thought to be particularly “Canadian.”

One of the sources of this reference material was a two volume publication entitled *Canadian Scenery*.<sup>27</sup> Nathaniel P. Willis wrote the text for this book, but it is the illustrations that most historians agree is the lasting legacy of this publication.<sup>28</sup> A young Englishman named William Bartlett completed the illustrations for *Canadian Scenery* based on sketches of his travels in Canada during the 1830s.<sup>29</sup> Research done on the history of Canadian earthenware by Elizabeth Collard reveals that the illustrated works of Bartlett served as source material for several pottery and porcelain services both within Canada and in Britain. Collard argues that Bartlett’s images were such popular source material because “they presented the rawness of a new country in the softer tone that the Victorians frequently preferred.”<sup>30</sup>

Indeed, Bartlett painted views of such historic landscapes as Kingston, Montreal, Niagara Falls and the St. Lawrence River in a manner that evokes traditional picturesque aesthetics, and these images seem especially suited for a project such as this one. The genteel sensibilities associated with a fine china dinner service seem somehow especially suited to peaceful and nostalgic imagery in which human and nonhuman species peacefully coexist. In Bartlett’s images and, again in the reinterpretation of these scenes by the artists of the Women’s Art Association of Canada, there is a sense of harmony. The human figures in

---

27. *Canadian Scenery* was published in 1842.

28. Elizabeth Collard, *The Potter’s View of Canada* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1983), 44.

29. Brian Harding and Ellen Harding, “Looking Forward; Looking Back: American and Canadian Scenery in the 1830s,” *British Journal of Canadian Studies* 8, 2 (1993): 163-179.

30. Collard, *The Potter’s View of Canada*, 44-45.

the landscapes are small in scale, but they are not threatened by the nonhuman world—they have successfully tamed the wilds of Canada into productive and peaceful settlement according to European colonial standards. Scientific endeavours, of course, played no small part in this process. As Suzanne Zeller has argued in her ground-breaking study, *Inventing Canada: Early Victorian Science and the Idea of a Transcontinental Nation*, “science provided nineteenth-century colonists... with not only the practical means to dominate their physical surroundings but also an ideological framework within which to comprehend the experience of doing so.”<sup>31</sup> Representations of science—whether individual species or evidence of human ingenuity and engineering—are prominent in the Canadian Historic Dinner Service. These representations of scientific knowledge mark the occasion of the anniversary of Cabot’s arrival on Canadian shores, and, as such, a decidedly colonial interpretation of Canadian history emerges as the dominant visual narrative in the Canadian Historic Dinner Service.

The majority of the pieces in the Canadian Historic Dinner Service focus on the flora and fauna of Canada. The game plates—12 painted by Alice Egan and 12 painted by Elizabeth Whitney—feature a range of game birds including the Mallard, the Wood Duck, and the Canada Grouse. Egan and Whitney decorated the rim of each game plate with representations of plants and insects found in the game bird’s native environment. The two dozen cheese plates that Hattie Proctor and Elizabeth Whitney painted also featured avian species. Proctor and Whitney each painted one dozen of these plates, and the species depicted on these ranged from the Snow Bunting to the Yellow-Bellied Woodpecker. Jane Bertram, Juliet Howson and Anna Kelley each painted one dozen cup and saucer sets, which featured wild flowers found in Canada such as the Wild Rose, the Dandelion and White Trillium. Images relating to the study of natural history recur throughout the Canadian Historic Dinner Service, but it is on the fish and salad plates, in particular, that focus is on the classification and study of the nonhuman world. The 24 fish plates that Lily Adams and M. Louise Couen painted all featured a different kind of piscine species found in Canadian waters, each carefully labelled according to Linnaean taxonomy. Likewise, M. Roberts and Justina Harrison both painted salad plates featuring various types of ferns, and each of these artists used binomial nomenclature to identify the specific species they painted (see fig. 1).<sup>32</sup>

---

31. Suzanne Zeller, *Inventing Canada: Early Victorian Science and the Idea of a Transcontinental Nation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 6.

32. McLeod, 50.

Figure 1. Salad plate, *Adiantum pedatum*, painted by M. Roberts.



Source: Haddo House, National Trust for Scotland, Edinburgh, 79.4046.24i.

### **Imagined Communities**

That the artists paid close attention the reference collection and included precise depictions and labelling of Canadian flora and fauna in the Canadian Historic Dinner Service project indicates the degree to which the WAAC and the individual artists involved in the project attributed the importance of science and natural history to the settling of Canada. The depictions of Canadian flora and fauna in this project (as opposed to, say, portraits of explorers or politicians that had helped settle this country) provided the appearance of a unified visual representation of “Canadian-ness” that people like Mary Dignam and M.P.P. Howland could count on

receiving enthusiastic support from those who viewed the completed set of painted dishes. The WAAC artists selected the images included in the Canadian Historic Dinner Service because they reaffirmed a sense of what Benedict Anderson has termed “imagined community” in the context of late 19<sup>th</sup> century Canada.<sup>33</sup> The Canadian Historic Dinner Service presented a visual narrative of a modern nation that could trace its heritage and attribute its success to European (primarily British) military efforts, colonial settlements, and imperial systems of understanding and classifying the nonhuman world. The process of image selection that went into the planning and execution of the Canadian Historic Dinner Service necessarily excluded imagery that did not contribute to this narrative.

The material objects under investigation are significant here as the promotion of ceramic arts in Canada was a particular goal of the Women’s Art Association of Canada. In an article entitled “Ceramic Art and the Women’s Art Association of Canada,” Dignam presented a detailed case for the promotion of ceramic arts in Canada and argued that the fostering of a strong tradition of ceramic arts in Canada would not only provide economic benefit to those involved in teaching and production, but would put Canada on equal footing, artistically speaking with other great nations.<sup>34</sup> “At first thought people are apt to look upon china painting as a pretty and harmless means of being amused,” Dignam wrote in 1897.<sup>35</sup> She continued:

The importance of developing ceramic art in a country may be realized when one considers its scope, the history of its development, and its intimate connection with everyday life. Great fortunes have been spent in making collections of beautiful ceramic productions of various peoples, which are expressive of their culture and characteristic of epochs since the beginning of history.<sup>36</sup>

Dignam saw the production of the Canadian Historic Dinner Service as a perfect opportunity to raise the profile of women’s art production in Canada, although it is interesting to note that she did not give the artists much room for individual creativity within this project. Further, it is important to point out that while some women were certainly involved in scientific endeavour at this time, *these* women were not.<sup>37</sup> While the

---

33. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

34. Dignam, 1.

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*

37. For discussion of women and science see such studies as: Londa Schiebinger, *Nature’s Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993); Ann B. Shteir, *Cultivating Women, Cultivating Science: Flora’s Daughters and Botany in England, 1760-1860* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Suzanne

specific circumstances of each individual artist involved in the Canadian Historic Dinner service varied, in general these sixteen women gained both a sense of professional identity and a source of income from their position as artists in Canada in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The mandate of this project, however, did not encourage individual creativity and instead dictated that the artists involved copy scientific imagery from the “resource collection” with as much accuracy as possible.

The WAAC organized an exhibition of the entire dinner service in Toronto during the month of July, 1897. Dignam promoted this exhibition as something not to be missed by “all interested in ceramic art.” Dignam also publically praised the artists involved in the project and described their work as “well done and uniform in general design.”<sup>38</sup> After the exhibit of the Canadian Historic Dinner Service closed in Toronto it travelled to all of the cities in Canada which had a branch of the WAAC, in Mary Dignam’s words, it was, at the time, “the largest and most important undertaking in ceramic decoration ever made in this country.”<sup>39</sup> While the WAAC successfully exhibited the completed dinner service in various cities across Canada, Dignam struggled to secure a permanent home for it. Dignam and the WAAC had, at one point, hoped the government of Canada would purchase the complete set. An article reviewing the exhibition of the Canadian Historic Dinner Service in Toronto stated the following: “The association has asked the Dominion government to purchase the set for \$1000, the actual cost, that it may be kept at Government House, Ottawa.”<sup>40</sup> Dignam had hoped that the complete service would be put on display in Ottawa “to mark the first era of ceramics in Canada,” but this was not to be the case.<sup>41</sup> The original idea was that this collection be housed in a public location within the country, one which would mark not only the anniversary of Cabot’s landing and the celebration of Canadian natural history, but also the beginnings of what the Women’s Art Association of Canada hoped would be a trend in Canadian art production and the foundation of European science and technology that had shaped the nation state. The material objects, then, contained very specific ideologies with respect to art, science and the idea of a unified Canadian nation state built on a shared sense of history.

The government eventually purchased the set but not for the reasons Dignam and the WAAC had originally hoped. The Canadian Historic Dinner service ended up being an official gift on behalf of the Canadian

Le-May Sheffield, *Revealing New Worlds: Three Victorian Women Naturalists* (London: Routledge, 2001).

38. “The Historic Dinner Set,” *The Globe*, 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1897, 5.

39. Dignam, 1.

40. “The Historic Dinner Set,” *The Globe*, 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1897, 5.

41. Dignam, 1.

people presented to Lady Aberdeen who had been in Canada with her husband, Lord Aberdeen, the Governor-General of Canada between 1893 and 1898. While in Canada, Lady Aberdeen helped to found a number of organizations dedicated to social reform, including the National Council of Women of Canada (founded in 1893). The WAAC had a formal affiliation with the National Council of Women of Canada, therefore the selection of Lady Aberdeen as the recipient of the Canadian Historic Dinner Service held symbolic meaning.<sup>42</sup>

In 1898, when Lord Aberdeen announced his retirement from the position of Governor General of Canada, the WAAC decided to present the Canadian Historic Dinner Service to Lady Aberdeen as a farewell gift.<sup>43</sup> The WAAC presented the Canadian Historic Dinner Service to Lady Aberdeen with much pomp and circumstance in 1898.<sup>44</sup> In her diary, Lady Aberdeen refers to the presentation as part of a “picturesque ceremony.”

The Women’s Art Ass. painted this last year in honour of the Jubilee & wanted the Govt to purchase it for Government House. It occurred to a few kind people like Senator Allan, the Edgars, Mr. Frost... that this might be given to me by the members of the Senate & House of Commons & at first they were all to be communicated with & the presentation was to be made in the autumn. But they got the money they wanted (\$1000) before the prorogation & so thought it better to give it then. It was presented in the Senate Chamber & the answering was rather an ordeal.<sup>45</sup>

The Canadian Historic Dinner Service received media attention immediately following its completion, primarily because of its association with the Countess of Aberdeen. Very little attention has been paid, however, to the visual and, indeed, very visible (in terms of exhibition and spectacle) ways in which the project presented a very specific view of Canadian history.

### **Images of a Rhetorical Nature**

While porcelain and china dining sets have a long history and have been produced and consumed by many different cultural groups for centuries, in the Victorian era there was a particularly strong association with this type of object and the arts, culture and politics of Britain and other

---

42. Tippet, 42.

43. The complete dinner service is still on display at Haddo House, a property now operated by the National Trust for Scotland. For more information, see <http://www.nts.org.uk/Property/73/>, accessed October 31, 2008.

44. Elwood, “Canadian Historic Dinner Service,” CMC.

45. John T. Saywell, ed., *The Canadian Journal of Lady Aberdeen* (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1960), 456.



western European nations. This is significant as there is a symbolic re-creation within the gold-rimmed, rounded borders of the cups, saucers and salad plates that comprise the Canadian Historic Dinner Service of the physical presence of borders, barricades and buildings which signified European demarcation of territory in this country. Further, the lack of representation of First Nations peoples in this project is immediately evident (M. Irvine's Dinner Plate entitled, "St. Regis Indian Village" is the only overt representation of First Nations culture in this project, fig. 2), and in this way the visual culture of the Canadian Historic Dinner Service relates to the dominant patterns of visually representing the landscape of Canada in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>46</sup>

It is important to note, however, that the exclusion of human figures goes beyond the virtual erasure of Aboriginal presence in this case study. In fact, only a small number of the pieces in the Canadian Historic Dinner service include human figures within the composition. The majority of the pieces either depict abandoned-looking human-built structures in the landscape (Clara E. Gallbreath's soup plate featuring a scene entitled "Ruins of the Intendant's Palace, Quebec" is, perhaps, the quintessential example here) or scenes where there is no overt reference to human society at all.

In the Canadian Historic Dinner service, the only time human figures appear is when they are cast in a historic light, a look backward to an earlier period of Canadian history. Should we then read the images of flora and fauna in this project in the same manner? In other words, since the WAAC depicted historic battle sites as old relics from the past (albeit relics upon which the very foundation of Euro-Canadian society is built), are we to interpret the treatment of flora and fauna here in the same way? When viewed as part of the collective project, this can become a dominant way of reading the images of Canada's natural history, and from our vantage point in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is easy to assume that this reading is one which foreshadows some of our current ecological concerns. However, if we accept that the images in the Canadian Historic Dinner Service played a rhetorical role in the celebration of European colonial efforts in establishing Canada as a modern nation, the visual treatment of the nonhuman world in this project becomes less of a lament for a "the wilds" of Canada, and instead situates the exploration of Canada's natural history as an important part of the nation's colonial and imperial past.

---

46. Heather Dawkins, "Paul Kane and the Eye of Power," *Vanguard* 15, 4 (1986): 24-27; François-Marc Gagnon, "Perceiving the Other: French-Canadian and Indian Iconography in the Work of Cornelius Krieghoff," in *Kriehoff: Images of Canada*, ed. Dennis Reid (Vancouver/Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 1999), 207-233.

Figure 2. M. Irvine's Dinner Plate entitled, "St. Regis Indian Village."



Source: Haddo House, National Trust for Scotland, Edinburgh, 79.4042.24d.

Through the conception and execution of the Canadian Historic Dinner Service, the WAAC deliberately presented a very select view of Canadian national identity. The visual consumption of these images as reinterpreted on the surface of porcelain dinnerware, however, necessarily produced a variety of interpretations for the exhibition-going public in 19<sup>th</sup> century Canada. Many who saw these pieces on display in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century would have recognized the pieces as celebrating science and natural history. Others may have marvelled at the technical veracity of the artistic skill on display, perhaps delighting in a sense of recognition of some of the visual references drawn upon in the production of the completed set. Many would have undoubtedly felt a sense of pride when viewing a visual version this select, yet dominant, narrative of national history. Still others may have found the display

nothing more than a visual novelty, one more spectacle to take in within the hustle and bustle of modern life in Canada at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Scholarship in visual culture has emphasized the need to consider the multiplicity of meanings inherent in the production and consumption of all forms of imagery. What this means for this particular case study is that even though the production of the Canadian Historic Dinner Service is as a rhetorical use of imagery—one which portrays a unified, patriotic vision of Canada as seen through the lens of colonial presence and imperial pride—viewers who saw the dinner service on display would have necessarily come to their own individual interpretations about what kinds of meanings the collection of porcelain pieces held for them. In other words, in spite of very clearly defined goals on the part of Mary Dignam and M.P.P. Howland with respect to this project, it is not possible to gage with any degree of certainty what individual responses it generated in the minds of the viewers who saw it on display.

The difficulty that Dignam had in securing a buyer for this collection perhaps foreshadows the critical response to the Canadian Historic Dinner Service in subsequent decades. The marginalization of both women's artistic practices and the so-called "decorative arts" has ensured that these pieces remain relatively obscure in the history of Canadian visual culture. Further, the fact that the women involved in the project drew upon pre-existing sources of visual material instead of producing new imagery based on their own direct observation of Canadian flora and fauna has made this collection, at best, a footnote in the history of natural history in Canada. The Canadian Historic Dinner Service relies heavily on scientific imagery, but remains outside of the realm of professional scientific illustration.

Both the decision to base the illustrative program of the dinner service on themes related to Canada's natural history and the number of times the set was exhibited by the WAAC speak to the sense of curiosity and fascination with the natural world that existed in Canada the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. While we can not ascertain how specific viewer responses to the display of the Canadian Historic Dinner Service aligned with the stated aims of the project, the popularity of the travelling exhibit is evidence of a viewing public willing to engage with this material. Certainly professional science was becoming firmly entrenched in this country during the same time period, but investigations of popular images and material culture produced alongside of formal scholarly studies force us to consider the plurality of forms that encounters with the history of natural history could take in 19<sup>th</sup> century Canada.