

Two Looks at the Art Press

The Art Press: Two Centuries of Art Magazines. An exhibition organized by the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, and held at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, 10 February–25 March 1979

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The Editors

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FIGURE 4. Frederick G. Todd. View of installation (Photo: McCord Museum).

While many of the photographs in the exhibition are early views of works and are interesting in themselves – such as the Garden City Press at Ste.-Anne-de-Bellevue, which shows an industrial building in a garden setting, with tennis courts and a boulevard leading to ideal workers' housing – a few modern photographs show some of his works as they are now – the fulfilment of the plans. They provide convincing evidence of foresight and technical skill. None are more impressive in this respect than the modern views of Wascana Park showing the great parliamentary

building 'floating' above trees, and the huge pond in a woodland setting (Fig. 3). Comparing them with the bleak scenes of 1911, none could fail to appreciate the quality and extent of Todd's imagination.

The plans and drawings in the exhibition show Todd's way of creating spaces and hiding roads and other ugly items, related to parks and living spaces, by trees; they show his fundamental natural and romantic approach but they are not impressive drawings. Since parks are largely visual experiences – megasculpture – plans are inadequate to describe them. The drawings in the exhibition give the impression of being instructions to planters, or skimpy illustrations for reports for people interested in areas used. They are poor pictures of imaginative intention.

Todd was fortunate in being an articulate writer and the organizer of the exhibition is to be complimented upon his selection and courage in using so much text, particularly as every word of it is in two languages. The idea of presenting a good deal of the text on horizontal surfaces provided by the tops of numerous pedestals so as not to overburden the wall compositions of drawings and photographs, themselves discretely labeled for precise information, is brilliant (Fig. 4). One wonders whether the grave markers which Todd sank in the grass of the Memorial Park Cemetery to avoid the clutter of tombstones may have suggested it.

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Related publications: Trevor Fawcett and Clive Phillpot, eds., *The Art Press: Two Centuries of Art Magazines.* London, The Art Book Company, 1976. (Art Documents, No. 1) 63 pp., 9 illus., \$29.95 (cloth), \$9.95 (paper). Karen McKenzie and Mary F. Williamson, eds., *The Art and Pictorial Press in Canada: Two Centuries of Art Magazines.* Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1979. 71 pp., 13 illus., \$7.50 (paper).

Art history, like any science, could scarcely exist without periodical publications. Journals provide the principal means for spreading scholarship, activities,

and opinion. The art press, fairly well taken for granted, has now been promoted to a subject worthy of study in its own right. To adapt McLuhan's tired aphorism, the medium has become the message.

Two separate ventures made up the exhibition under review. *The Art Press* is a critical outline of the development of the art periodical in Europe and, to a lesser extent, America. The show was organized in 1976 by Anthony Burton of the Victoria and Albert Museum's library, with assistance from the Art Book Company of London. Toronto's was its first showing since then. Canadian content was supplied by the Art Gallery of Ontario, which supplemented the exhibition with *The Art and Pictorial Press in Canada*. Each section was accompanied by a collection of essays on art periodicals rather than by a catalogue.

The Art Press was presented by means of photostatic reproductions of periodicals mounted on free-standing screens and accompanied by concise commentary. A selection of original periodicals culled from the E.P. Taylor Reference Library of the Art Gallery of Ontario

and other Toronto collections filled adjacent display cases. To judge from the number of visitors who afterwards presented themselves in the gallery's library, the show had definite public appeal: it certainly stimulated a desire to see the periodicals as a whole, since paper size and quality, colour and different type font are among the variables that permit one to evaluate the effectiveness of design. It may also have served as an historical survey for designers interested in period style and its possible extension into current publications. Still and all, it may be doubted that standards of craftsmanship as defined by the period up to 1939 can now be generally met.

The companion publication, *The Art Press: Two Centuries of Art Magazines*, was published 'for the Art Libraries Society on the occasion of the International Conference on Art Periodicals and the exhibition,' which indicates well enough that catalogue and exhibition soon go their separate ways. Actually it seems that most of the essays in *The Art Press* have little relation to the exhibition beyond their topic, whose treatment oscillates between anthological and some very specialized, even speculative comments.

The three essays (of seven) most directly linked to the show dealt with the evolution of art magazines (Anthony Burton), various approaches to scholarship (Trevor Fawcett), and the magazines of modern art movements (Clive Phillpot). Burton discusses such phenomena as the influence of various intellectual and artistic movements, from romanticism to Art Nouveau, upon the journals; the ways in which periodicals reflected political ideologies in the early part of our century; and the development of museum publications in America. Trevor Fawcett's essay (one of his two contributions) highlights the development of scholarship through periodicals. Morelli, Riegl, and Wickhoff come to life as influential editors and contributors. Fawcett also touches on real problems faced by periodical publishers. Paramount is the need for 'maintaining a balance between the presentation of research and the claims of public education (and the avoidance of mere showmanship),' a situation as poignant today as in years past. The Phillpot essay concentrates on the relationship between early-twentieth-century journals and new art movements, stressing the development of modern typography and graphic design in such notable examples as *De Stijl* and *l'Esprit Nouveau*. This section worked well in the exhibition, but the published paper lacked meaning with its single illustration.

In fact, the production values of the entire catalogue, beginning with its weak binding, are quite inconsistent with its subject: it is awkward to hold and to scan, uniformly unattractive for the price, and is best considered a type of professional literature intended to acquaint librarians and art historians alike with the nature of their sources. One would have liked to see some firm editorial decision as to the uniformity of contributions, whose tone varies instead from a relaxed oral manner to the relentlessly 'referential' mode. To be fair, dealing adequately with the different issues



FIGURE 1. *The Art and Pictorial Press in Canada*. View of installation (Photo: Art Gallery of Ontario).

would require an entirely different format and length of exposition, so we should be thankful to have this digest already at hand.

Since 'it was unthinkable' that visitors 'should leave the show with the impression that periodicals have played an insignificant role in the documentation of art and pictorial information in this country,' the Art Gallery of Ontario organized *The Art and Pictorial Press in Canada* as a sister exhibition (Figs. 1, 2). The title alone is a tacit admission that a specialized art press is a relatively recent phenomenon in Canada, while illustration and discussion relating to art have been around for quite some time. In this sense, the checklists appended to each section of the catalogue (sorely missed from *The Art Press*, where an 'Index to Periodicals' serves as index to the entire volume) are worth their proverbial weight in gold. We have for the first time some relative sense of chronology and distribution within all types of Canadian periodicals, and the necessarily close focus of the Toronto exhibition is best summed up by Karen McKenzie:

Not until 1943 and *Canadian Art* [now *Artscanada*] can one speak, in Canada, of a national art periodical which has continued to publish (as some 19th-century efforts did not). *Vie des Arts*, the first Canadian journal to cover the international art scene, appeared in 1956. And not until the advent in 1974 of both the *Journal of Canadian Art History* and *RACAR* can one speak of scholarly, non-commercial journals. The study of art history in Canada is a comparatively recent phenomenon, a situation which has surely had an effect on the publication of art periodicals. For the beginnings of the art press in Canada, one must look instead to a different sort of magazine: the general review, the illustrated weekly, and the family magazines of the last century; and the popular magazines and journals of social commentary in the first half of this century.' (p. 25)

A generous selection of magazines was displayed under a series of categories with little comment. One



FIGURE 2. *The Art and Pictorial Press in Canada*. Montage of magazines, used as a display panel and as the cover of the publication (Photo: Art Gallery of Ontario).

section showed some nineteenth-century illustrated magazines (most were not art magazines at all, such as the *British American Cultivator* and the *Canadian Illustrated News*); another had 40 titles from Québec (Fig. 3; why isolate one province? – the division was geographical, not linguistic); others presented specialty magazines: 13 artists' journals, 6 publications of museums and art galleries, 11 on photography, and 17 on architecture. Finally, a catch-all section unexplicably titled 'An alternative space' showed 38 titles, including such diverse publications as *RACAR*, *Artmagazine* (a glossy journal of contemporary art), *Canadian Forum* (a general-interest magazine), and *The Beaver* (a publication on northern affairs). This selection underscored the basic confusion of the exhibition. By displaying the art and pictorial presses side by side, the organizers ensured ample representation but lost coherency.

Both exhibitions can only beg the question of why a given place becomes a centre of publishing activity at a certain moment or why one journal survives when others fail. This is no function of the number of periodicals published, but rather of the conditions that facilitate their appearance, and their succession. Hans Brill's essay (in *The Art Press*) on Fin de Siècle publication estimates that, of the 5,000 to 10,000 periodicals having serious interest in the visual arts over the last two hundred years, some 1000 were published in Paris alone between 1850 and 1900!

Some of these undoubtedly had interest only to a limited number of readers, so it might be recalled that the Victoria and Albert catalogue discusses in the main those periodicals which have somehow gained international stature – the great periodicals which formed the points of reference for their day, and for any informed discussion thereafter. While they may have treated national art, they did so at a level which reflects then-existing international attitudes to culture, attitudes which have at least diversified since, and more

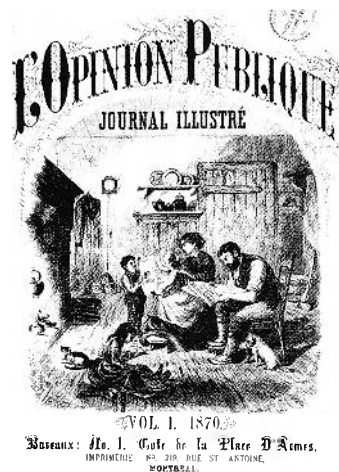


FIGURE 3. *L'Opinion Publique*, Vol. 1, 1870. Metropolitan Toronto Library Board (Photo: Metropolitan Toronto Library Board).

likely have developed at an unequal pace. All this is a far cry from the current plethora of periodicals serving as a form of 'conversation' between adepts who would otherwise use the telephone or some other form of correspondence. If need be, it serves as a reminder that most 'international' journals today do resemble each other in content and critical stance (see the illuminating 'Periodicals since 1945' by John A. Walker [*The Art Press*], particularly the characterization of tendencies, pp. 45 and 50). Whether of official or parallel nature, today's periodicals illustrate rather different concepts of literacy in visual matters and their expression than was the case. Perhaps this is the equivalent of conglomerates having forced newspapers into a number of defined formats or moulds – or counter-moulds – with a decline in the resulting confusion of the proper notion of things, of value judgments.

As might be expected, the most obvious lesson to be gained from *The Art Press* in general is its short-lived character, whatever the period. In this respect, a 'national journal' is likely to be one surviving long enough to gain general attention and support, with others falling into the category of ephemeral 'interest' publications whose vitality (and interest) depend more upon their timeliness of focus and the energies of their contributors.

This latter mode's most recent incarnation is the 'Canadian Artists' Press,' given sensitive treatment by David Buchan. This development is in some ways disquieting as it may lead to the non-scholarly equivalent of 'publication on demand' – formerly the vanity press – which has now taken on regional, municipal, even 'associative' colourings evidently satisfying some perceived outlet or special interest. In other words, of scholars or artists talking to and for themselves rather than the general educated public. It is doubtful that these can be considered more than a national production anywhere in the world or, in future, that they can

really attract attention in the international community – to which they do not, perhaps, aspire. This thrust is in marked contrast to Sybille Pantazzi's 'partial survey' from Toronto libraries of magazines for the period 1900 to 1940, where one sees the infiltration of recognizable period statement as a result of artists' graphic illustration. Combined with the scarcity of reproductions during that period, the predominance of illustration by members of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts, Ontario Society of Artists, and the Group of Seven doubtless explains the rise of indigenous professional artists whose names now define Canadian art. This phenomenon is a modest version of that discussed in *The Art Press* for the older international periodicals: whatever their perceived value as they were issued, they became reference works – with a mercantile consideration in direct ratio to the number of artists whose names had become famous and the number of original art works they contained between their covers.

For this reason alone, the succession of reproductive techniques and their authors, whether in wood-engraving or lithography, colour half-tones or the now omnipresent photo-mechanical processes, is a virtually inexhaustible resource for anyone studying periodicals

within a sufficiently large developmental sequence to appreciate their true nature. As sources for tomorrow's social historians, they should be looked after to assure a complete range of quality and content rather than a series of stridently sectarian or commercially-viable statements.

The problems indirectly posed by the appearance of *The Art Press* and *The Art and Pictorial Press in Canada* are just as important as the information they contain, whose quantity and nuance can only be summarized rather than reviewed in these pages. Journals are increasingly taken for granted, at least until their disappearance. Few, however, are really missed: the editors of *The Art Press* admit this severe and inevitable historical selection in deeming perhaps 500 to 1000 (a bare 10 per cent) of the production of the last two centuries as 'worth thoroughly investigating,' that is, as having some lasting value. Both publications should be mandatory reading for anyone concerned with a permanent record of the arts, as they provide case studies in the establishment and maintenance of an art press tradition for countries where that tradition is either recent or discontinuous.

THE EDITORS

Les expositions de l'année au Canada *The Year's Exhibitions in Canada* 1979

Cette rubrique est consacrée aux expositions organisées par les musées canadiens, soit à titre individuel soit en collaboration, et elle ne retient que les expositions qui ont donné lieu à la publication d'un catalogue ou d'un feuillet documentaire indiquant la liste des œuvres. Pour les expositions itinérantes (indiquées par un astérisque) nous n'indiquons que les dates où l'exposition fut présentée dans le musée responsable de l'organisation, même si d'autres présentations eurent lieu avant ou après ces dates. Si une exposition a été organisée pour être présentée uniquement dans des institutions autres que celle qui l'a organisée, la date et le lieu de la première présentation sont indiqués sous le nom de l'institution qui en fut responsable. Le titre du catalogue ou du feuillet documentaire n'est indiqué que s'il est différent du titre de l'exposition. Dans la mesure du possible, les informations reçues ont été vérifiées dans les publications elles-mêmes.

The following bibliographic record documents exhibitions originated or co-originated by Canadian institutions, when such exhibitions were accompanied by a catalogue or a handlist (a numerical listing). Circulating exhibitions (indicated by an asterisk) bear the exhibition dates of the originator only, regardless of whether other showing occurred prior to or after those dates. When such exhibitions were intended only for circulation in other institutions, the date and place of first showing is given under the name of the organizer. Unless otherwise indicated, the title of the accompanying publication is that of the exhibition. Information supplied has been verified where possible against the publications themselves.