

Anne Whitelaw, Brian Foss, and Sandra Paikowsky, eds., *The Visual Arts in Canada: The Twentieth Century*. Toronto, Oxford University Press, 2010, 496 pp., 185 colour illus., hardcover \$85, soft cover \$60 (available August 2011), ISBN: 9780195434590

Clive Robertson

Volume 36, Number 1, 2011

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1066755ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1066755ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Robertson, C. (2011). Review of [Anne Whitelaw, Brian Foss, and Sandra Paikowsky, eds., *The Visual Arts in Canada: The Twentieth Century*. Toronto, Oxford University Press, 2010, 496 pp., 185 colour illus., hardcover \$85, soft cover \$60 (available August 2011), ISBN: 9780195434590]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 36(1), 68–70.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1066755ar>

suggesting bright yellow, blue, and red printed linen or cotton. There is a printed poem describing the elaborate use of ribbons in the period for decorating hats and there are details from Hogarth's work showing the use of ribbon cockades.

The catalogue provides the reader with glimpses of the billets themselves for those interested in this aspect of material culture. The ink handwriting, as to be expected from the century, is quite exquisite, expressing the pride of being literate. The billets record basic information about the child including the gender, date of deposit, clothing worn when received, and a token. Some of the billets have letters of intent from the mothers attached to them, although these are few and perhaps penned by a hireling or friend, according to Styles.

Some of the tokens, such as rings, bracelets, locks of hair, etc., are permanently on display in the Foundling Museum and not included in the catalogue due to its focus on fabric. The fact

that the Foundling Hospital kept meticulous records for hundreds of years is testimony to the earnestness of the patrons and governors, including Hogarth and Handel, who considered the hospital to be a worthwhile charity. Today the Foundling Museum helps to fill a gap in the history of everyday life in England from the early eighteenth century to the 1950s.

Threads of Feeling is an abundantly illustrated small volume, leaving the reader with the desire to pursue the subject further, especially the specialist in eighteenth and nineteenth century art and design. The catalogue is small but proportional to the size of the exhibition, and it is therefore hoped that John Styles will be incorporating more of his discoveries from the Foundling textiles into one of his forthcoming books.

ELLEN L. RAMSAY
York University

Anne Whitelaw, Brian Foss, and Sandra Paikowsky, eds., *The Visual Arts in Canada: The Twentieth Century*. Toronto, Oxford University Press, 2010, 496 pp., 185 colour illus., hardcover \$85, soft cover \$60 (available August 2011), ISBN: 9780195434590.

A recurring challenge faces all survey projects—be they books, exhibitions, archives, or any media products that claim a national scope and, in this case, a large timeframe like the twentieth century. How many projects and producers (meaning artists, curators, critics or historians, dealers, and key patrons) who over the years have received acclaim for their contributions might we reasonably expect to make an appearance in an updated survey text? Is there any point in suggesting that those who produced the history of art are sitting periodically watching the serial drama of the writing of the history of art? The hypothetical audience numbers are dizzying. With the topic being the twentieth century, knowledge-holders could include any living recognized practitioners 85 years or younger, which in effect means anyone working in the 1940s to the present day.

The editors of the *The Visual Arts in Canada* are fully aware of the messiness and tensions of a historiography that treads in and out of a space of post-representational politics. Some of the chapter authors openly engage in discussions of “missing histories.”¹ A self-announced achievement appearing in the introduction states that this book “offers the most comprehensive survey ever published of the richness of Canadian art production and reception during this period” (p. xiii). Thus a big topic—resisting while furthering the construction of an art history that represents the nation state—connects with a big publisher, Ox-

ford University Press. With subsequent revised editions, this OUP book will be in print for a long time.

The book opens with a reflective introduction underlining that each author was given “complete freedom” to define the “methodological underpinnings” of their chapters with a mix of chronological approaches and analyses “configured along the lines of ethnology or social activism” (p. xiv). Without naming which chapters default, the old synthesis habits of our disciplinary practices are clearly evident, and I say this sympathetically. Representations of what the introduction refers to as “notions of group, regional, and national identity” (p. xiv) lead us to a familiar road movie approach to survey synthesis writing where the chapter narrative names exemplary artists, exhibitions, et cetera, as it accelerates or swerves from one region and timeframe to another. You can almost hear the scoring pings on the pinball machine counter. What tilts this machine is when the unexpected as opposed to the expected exclusions become too many, too obvious, or too visible. For example, given that it has been a hub of artistic innovation and organization as well as an exporter of arts administrators and policy bureaucrats, it is hard to understand why Quebec City in particular keeps being short-changed within written national art history surveys.

This book brings together new essays by twenty scholars known for past writings on topics they return to here. The contents of *The Visual Arts in Canada* are as follows. Anne Whitelaw's “Art Institutions in the Twentieth Century” (chapter 1) opens the book with Laurier Lacroix's “Writing Art History in the Twentieth Century” (chapter 20) closing it. There are seven chapters specifically dedicated to a history of painting and related themes by Brian Foss (chapter 2), Charles C. Hill (chapter 3), Gerta

Moray (chapter 4), Sandra Paikowsky (chapter 7), François-Marc Gagnon (chapter 8), Joyce Zemans (chapter 9), Diana Nemiroff (chapter 11). Because of the historical timeframe there are two further chapters that incorporate painting by Lora Senechal Carney, “Modern Art, the Local, and the Global c.1930–50” (chapter 6), and Johanne Sloan, “The New Figuration: From Pop to Postmodernism” (chapter 13). There are two chapters similarly dedicated to sculpture, before 1960 by Christine Boyanoski (chapter 12) and after 1960 by William Wood (chapter 15). There is one chapter on design by Alan C. Elder (chapter 5), one on photography covering the whole of the twentieth century by Martha Langford (chapter 14), one on video by Christine Ross (chapter 19), and one on Conceptual Art by Jayne Wark (chapter 16). There are three chapters on aboriginal production: “A Culture in Transition: Inuit Art in the Twentieth Century” by Ingo Hessel (chapter 10), “Aboriginal Modernities: First Nations Art c.1880–1970” by Ruth B. Phillips (chapter 17), and “Contemporary First Nations Art since 1970: Individual Practices and Collective Activism” by Lee-Ann Martin (chapter 18). The book itself is designed in a somewhat retro style and format that allows for 8 x 10 inch illustrations. Its addenda include a list of resources, providing the names and addresses of museums, galleries, artist-run centres, and related institutions, plus a somewhat space-hogging picture index, and a contents index. For study purposes, *The Visual Arts in Canada* also needed a much deeper bibliography, which is the norm within the OUP History of Art series.

Three basic questions to ask about any general survey art history book are, who is it for, how does add to existing literature, and what is its use as a text book? Though this is a scholarly book commissioned by a scholarly publisher, it is not a part of the Oxford University Press History of Art series. (Ruth B. Phillips is the only Canadian art historian to have broken through that glass ceiling with her book *Native North American Art* [1998], co-written with Janet Catherine Berlo.) *The Visual Arts in Canada* is a trade book published by Oxford University Press Canada. Referring to the OUP website, we find that “this comprehensive, unique volume will sell to the general trade (in particular stores specializing in art books and books on Canada), libraries, and art gallery gift shops. It will also be adopted as a textbook for first- and second-year courses.” This description can be compared to a volume appearing in the same series later this year, the 3rd edition of Dennis Reid’s *A Concise History of Canadian Painting*: “Those in the field of art history—curators, professors, and students alike—will look to this new edition for the latest research on Canadian painting since 1980 to supplement the Second Edition. As well, those with a perennial interest in the visual arts, as well as readers looking for a concise and accessible overview of Canadian painting, will find this volume a valuable source of information.” There is not much

difference between these two identifications of projected readership, but it is interesting that the educational needs bar is not set very high.

A simple answer to the question, How does *The Visual Arts in Canada* add to existing literature? is that there was a sizeable hole that apparently needed filling. This new book does go some distance to address a sentiment swirling in the early 1990s, if not before. Writing for *Canadian Art*, artist/critic Ken Lum suggested that as a production community we need to overcome “the complete absence of any book that critically and theoretically addresses in an historically comprehensive manner developments in Canadian art in the last thirty years” (Lum was referring back to Dennis Reid’s *A Concise History of Painting*, 1983). *The Visual Arts in Canada* does in incremental ways add to new research (and some of the book’s authors can be said to “own” the research topics that they write about). It is also true that parts of this book constitute a pastiche of stories, where rather than revealing a plethora of debates, claims, and counterclaims, the synthesis flattens out the tension of tellings as if all has been decided, and can be wrapped and shipped. Topics as various as the significance and reverberations of the 1941 Kingston Conference, the impacts on artists and institutions by the Canada Council, the status of the Art Bank collection, and the continuous challenges by various actors and agencies to the hegemony of the National Gallery of Canada are somewhat simplified here. Similarly, the stability of the Emma Lake story, the application of imported terms pop, minimalist, or conceptual to best describe the particularities of art production by individuals and/or groups in Canada, and the confused recognitions paid to the prolonged effects of artist-run culture are insufficiently rendered by the book’s overall mode of interrogation. The question, What alternative practices within the country have had an effect on production outside of the country? is never posed. Cultural theory warns against the factual certainties that art history scholarship is often expected to deliver. Perhaps I am missing a basic strategy that could well be that a less complicated narrative is necessary to avoid confusion for the general reader or undergraduate student desirous of connoisseur-like knowledge more than argument.

This leads to the question of how well might this book serve as a course text. Speaking for common but not all university education habits, the preferred method of selecting texts is to assemble essays from many different sources into a course pack. Maybe this is a habit that works its way down from graduate teaching. Many chapters in this book can usefully be extracted in this way. Books in their entirety—I have used David Hopkins’ *After Modern Art 1945–2000*, an OUP book, annually since its publication—provide their own challenges in deciding the degree to which arguments and priorities need modifying or undoing. The national biases and medium or movement/ten-

gency hierarchies typical of past late-modern and contemporary art texts published (in the English language) mainly from the UK or the USA similarly require an inventive pedagogical reworking. When it comes to Canadian materials, my argument for not using most survey texts is the same argument I used to respond to Ken Lum's appeal.² The richness and diversity of art writing in Canada is captured by domestic books—be they monographs, edited collections, or media-specific titles published by small art presses—along with catalogue essays and the vast volume of magazine and journal texts. Yes, this literature is not easily accessible to the general reader or the undergraduate student. However, whenever teachers/professors compile course packs or their equivalents we are temporarily at least creating numerous mock-ups of what *The Visual Arts in Canada* attempts, with less maneuvering room, to be.

Given the new edition of the Reid book on the history of painting in Canada in the same Oxford series, this book could have compressed some of the attention paid to painting. It also could have set the chronological frame to begin in 1960. Both adjustments would then have allowed comprehensive space to provide, as the editors claim, readers “with broad exposure to media, themes, and critical approaches” (p. xiv). They also would have further helped “draw attention to work by artists who have in the past often seen their reputations eclipsed because they fell outside of the usual boundaries of the Canadian canon” (p. xiv), something the book begins to address but does not complete.

As we are barely a generation into Canadian art historians who wrote their doctoral theses on Canadian topics, Laurier Lacroix's essay, “Writing Canadian Art History in the Twentieth Century,” is a welcome inclusion in the book. Tracing art writing before and after 1970 and naming where courses on the history of art in Canada were taught in the period prior to the 1960s, Lacroix's essay carefully gives acknowledgement to the many participants and approaches employed. The sociology of art influence on art history is acknowledged, though other disciplinary and interdisciplinary hotspots within the humanities, including approaches prior to the domestic appearance of cultural studies, are not. Starting in the 1970s, there are many critics not named in Lacroix's essay who bridged the gap while the discipline of art history slowly transitioned into the various social and cultural histories incorporating issues and new voices writing on class, gender, race, and sexuality that now appear commonplace. In this regard I would have made mention of the singular work of the late Marxist art historian Kenneth Coutts-Smith, whose last manuscript has been sitting in a box unpublished for decades.

Despite the growth of the discipline, art historians have never been the sole authors of art history in Canada. Cultural critics like M. Nourbese Philip, Richard Fung, and Monika Kim Gagnon, and Aboriginal scholars like Lee-Ann Martin (included in this book) have produced essays and books on art and gender, race, and sexuality that continues to effect the popular academic study of art production and policy.

Editing a book of this ambition can be a thankless task. I agree with the editors who write, “[E]diting a book of essays is not necessarily easier than writing a monograph” (p. xii). (Disclosure: I am one of the commissioned chapter writers who failed to make the deadline.) There is, as I have suggested, many other deserving critics and some art historians whose work one might have expected to see in this volume; that in itself suggests the opportunity for further books with a different orientation.

In summary, *The Visual Arts in Canada* is a project that in its representational stirrings is both brave and necessarily foolhardy. For *RACAR* and other knowledgeable readers, this book succeeds as a useful historiographic case study whose choices and contents are well worth arguing with and about. This all-too-brief review mirrors the dilemmas faced when editing such a book. There is now too much art history and not enough book space, and therefore William Lyon Mackenzie King's oft-cited complaint that Canada is a country with too much geography and not enough history can be overturned. A conjunctural history of who and what produced art in Canada in the twentieth century requires at least the footnoted inclusion of important debates and dust-ups. This omission and the book's desire to function well for very different reader needs can only serve to haunt the otherwise admirable efforts that combined to produce this scholarly study.

CLIVE ROBERTSON
Queen's University

Notes

- ¹ There is some irony to be had in Jayne Wark's accurate observation about “Canada's almost complete absence from histories of Conceptual Art” (p. 331). Wark's critique of Conceptual Art being constantly reproduced via “a select coterie of American and Western European artists” (p. 332) collapses in on itself when the same approach is mobilized to identify what decentring work was done in the name of conceptualism in Canada.
- ² Clive Robertson, “Simple Pasts and Future Perfects,” *FUSE* 25, 4 (2002).