

Discerning Taste:

Montreal Collectors 1880-1920

Janet M. BROOKE

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Janet Brooke's catalogue presents a valuable and original contribution to art historical studies of nineteenth – and early twentieth-century art, and more specifically to the study of patronage in Montréal at the turn of the century. However, the installation and arrangement of the exhibition left high expectations unfulfilled. In fact, the layout of the "Montreal Collectors" exhibition created a kind of confusion that made the catalogue an indispensable item. Some minor works, such as the Doré landscape, were given ample space in the largest room of the exhibition. Some of the more extraordinary pictures such as those by Degas, Whistler and Turner were hung in cramped quarters in one of the smaller rooms off the main stairway. Conversely, at the "Ernest Cormier et l'Université de Montréal" exhibition at the Canadian Centre for Architecture, the visitor was visually introduced to the architect's work, not only his university buildings and working methods, but also his atelier, and private life. Along with plans, elevations and drawings, his drafting instruments and a portion of his library were on display, all in an ample setting which helped establish the idea that this was a show of considerable importance.

At the Montreal Museum, landscape and marine paintings, covering a wide range of periods, from the English romantics down through the Barbizon group to the Impressionists, made a clear statement about the uniqueness of Montréal collections between 1880 and 1920. It was, for example, extraordinary to find that at the turn of the century there were no less than four major J.M.W. Turner paintings in Montréal collections.



On the whole, the catalogue entries for Turner's *Mercury and Argus*, the *Dogana and Madonna della Salute, Venice*, *Port Ruysdael* and *Helvoetsluys: The "City of Utrecht," 4*, *Going to Sea* are improvements over the entries found in the revised edition of the Turner catalogue raisonné by Martin Butlin and Evelyn Joll.¹ It would have been preferable, however, to cite this revised and improved edition, rather than that of 1977. Some of the most useful enhancements to Butlin and Joll are Janet Brooke's listings of the prices paid for the Montréal Turners at various times in the past. The Montréal collectors bought these paintings in the 1880's and '90's, at what must have seemed to be considerably high prices. Nevertheless, when these works were sold in the first decades of this century, there were again substantial price increases.² It is intriguing that the price of Turner's paintings continued their unabated climb through the periods associated with mid-century realism and the high points of the development of Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, or, more correctly, throughout the long and

ubiquitous developments of High Victorian art in England.³

The *Montreal Collectors* catalogue offers other valuable additions to the bibliographic entries found in Butlin and Joll. These include the listings of local newspaper articles from the *Gazette*, the *Star* and the *Herald*, covering the 1901, 1912 and 1915 exhibitions of the Turners at the *Art Association of Montreal*, as well as critical coverage of exhibitions of these works in New York and Ottawa. The additions to the bibliographic entries, however, are not limited to new citations from Montréal newspapers. For example, in the literature for *Port Ruysdael*, Janet Brooke includes new citations of an article by Kenyon Cox from *Burlington Magazine* (XVI, 306, 1909-10) and a piece by Andrew Taylor from *The Times* (30 July, 1927). Unfortunately, however, the *Montreal Collectors* bibliography for *Port Ruysdael* excludes A. M. Hind's *Turner's Golden Visions* (London, 1925, p. 217). In the *Montreal Collectors* bibliography for *Helvoetsluys*, recent references that could not have been cited in Butlin and Joll are included: Andrew Wilton, *J.M.W. Turner: His Life and Art* (New York, 1979, no. P345), and John Walker, *Joseph Mallord William Turner* (New York, 1983, pl. 21).

Janet Brooke's catalogue has also added items, not found in Butlin and Joll, to the "provenance" and exhibition history of Turner's *Mercury and Argus*. The painting was passed on to Margaret Charlotte Smith, Baroness Strathcona in 1914 (by descent), from the collection of Sir Donald Alexander Smith, 1st Baron Strathcona and Mount Royal, and thence, in 1927 (by descent) to Donald Sterling Palmer, 3rd Baron Strathcona, in London. *Mercury and Argus* seems to have remained in London until 1951, when it went to the National Gallery of Canada.

When Turner's *Mercury and Argus* was exhibited at the Montreal Art Association in 1888, Ruskin's discussion of the painting in *Modern Painters* was "published almost in its

entirety" in the *Montréal Daily Witness*. This wonderfully innocent and naive piece states that *Mercury and Argus* was "the greatest and most instructive work [in the exhibition]" and marked "Turner's genius at its culminating point." The Montréal critic was certain the "conscientious student" could "sit down before" the painting "with the first volume of Ruskin's *Modern Painters* in his hand... and learn things not before possible to be learned in this city." The writer seemed to have considered both Turner's paintings and Ruskin's *Modern Painters* as contemporary works. It is especially refreshing to find that both are valued in this very direct and appreciative manner. News and particularly new ideas about art traveled slowly in nineteenth-century North America.⁴ While the interest in Ruskin in Montréal in 1888 might be seen as provincial and backward today, the thoroughness of this spirit of inquiry was free of many of the whims, fads and fashions associated with each new decade since World War II.

In the exhibition there was a combination of works that clearly related to the art-historical developments of the nineteenth century, while others appeared to be somehow outside the mainstream developments. Among the paintings in this latter group were the landscapes of Jacob and Matthijs Maris, Léon Augustin Lhermitte, and Alexandre Gabriel Decamps.

Matthijs Maris, a relatively minor Hague School painter, and "an embittered, solitary individual who on the one hand deplored his financial dependence on the market place and yet on the other seems to have coveted the popular and critical success enjoyed by others, including his brother, who, ... helped support him throughout much of his life," receives more attention than Delacroix in the *Montreal Collectors* catalogue. It is interesting that "before 1920, no fewer than fourteen paintings by Matthijs Maris, as well as several of his watercolours, were owned by Montreal collectors." The English and Scottish collectors who

bought his work seem to have been devotees of the aesthetic movement and were attracted to his dream-like, Pre-Raphaelisque subjects. The fact that "before the end of World War I many major collectors in Great Britain, Canada and the United States considered [Matthijs] Maris one of Europe's greatest living painters" raises the question as to why "major collectors" were deceived, if in fact they were, in their evaluation of his work. Could it have been that the price of his contemporary pictures, compared with that of the other principal Barbizon (Millet) or Symbolist (Carrière) painters of the period, played an important role in this evaluation?

If the size rather than the overall quality of the collection, was an important factor, and the money available for buying art would permit only one or two examples of the more highly prized works of Millet, Breton or Carrière, would it have been customary to fill it out with the more readily available and less expensive works of minor Barbizon or Symbolist painters? Did the knowledgeable collector consider Matthijs Maris's pictures celebrating the virtues of peasant life, to be equal to those of Millet or the more sentimental Jules Breton? How would such a collector rank Matthijs's nebulous views, such as *The Enchanted Castle*, or his portraits of young women in pseudo-medieval costume in relation to Eugène Carrière's mysterious and misty views of Venice, or the dreamy medievalized female subjects of Burne-Jones?

Other questions are raised by Léon Lhermitte's *The Ruins of Château-Thierry*. At first it might appear to be another Barbizon School work. Is this rustic landscape, with the ruined castle of the counts of Champagne, a pastoral idealization of this largely agricultural region between Rheims and Paris, or is it a nostalgic tribute to a place associated with dramatic events in the history of France? It was in Champagne that the struggles of Joan of Arc

took place which led to the crowning of Charles VIII at Rheims, and the consequent banishment of the English from France. Lhermitte's *The Ruins of Château-Thierry* is a strange and fascinating picture which seems to have few direct connections with the central figures of the Barbizon School. The painting does not have the tonal contrasts of Théodore Rousseau, nor the muted and limpid shimmer of Daubigny. Corot executed a number of views of Château-Thierry between 1855 and 1865, but he tended to concentrate on the picturesque topography of the town.⁵

Lhermitte, on the other hand, focuses on the ruined chateau in his 1872-73 painting. While Lhermitte's work cannot be easily related to any of the Barbizon artists, the treatment of the subject indicates a development in the 1860's and '70's that leads to Symbolism or Post-Impressionism. This kind of late Barbizon School painting is slightly confusing. It retains some of the characteristics of the style associated with the landscape artists who painted the Forest of Fontainebleau in the 1840's, but it has nothing of the brightness and other plein-air qualities of the later developments of Impressionism. It seems to have missed a step in the evolutionary process of nineteenth-century landscape painting, and is more closely linked with the types of subjective themes that are usually thought to have followed Impressionism.

Such landscapes appear to be chronologically out of place, leaving Janet Brooke unable to relate Lhermitte to "any particular school or group." At the same time she rightfully dismisses the idea put forth in the Cleveland Museum of Art catalogue (*The Realist Tradition: French Painting and Drawing 1830-1900*) that the artist might, like other "Barbizon and Naturalist painters," be linked with the "realist tradition." The notion that Lhermitte's "style was more firmly under the sway of ... Nicolas Poussin" when he painted *The*

Ruins of Château-Thierry is not clearly demonstrated by the picture. Stylistically, I would place Lhermitte's painting closer to Corot than to Poussin. Perhaps this idea concerning the direct influence of Poussin comes from a nineteenth-century source. Before the advent of Impressionist aesthetics, with its emphasis on the unheroic and commonplace, any landscape of merit, particularly in France, was considered to be in the great landscape tradition of Claude or Poussin.

In the casual composition and sombre tonalities of Lhermitte's *The Ruins of Château-Thierry* there is little of Poussin's geometrical organization of architectural and landscape forms, nor his bright, even light and prevailing clarity of construction. While the composition with the peasant woman walking along the road leading directly into the middle foreground, and the centrally located ruin in the middle ground is faintly reminiscent of Poussin, it appears to be more directly related to such classical works of Corot as *View Near Volterra* (1838, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.). The "clear division of the landscape into foreground, middle ground, and panoramic distances" and the "distinct horizon line punctuated in the far distance by a looming ruin" may be a "Poussinist device," but it is Poussin transformed by Corot in the 1850's and '60's. At this time, while still painting very tangible subjects in the Barbizon manner, Corot begins to introduce elements of the more theatrical and dream-like landscapes of his late period. This is particularly evident in the portrayal of the wispy silhouettes of the stately trees and the solidly painted bridge and architecture in the 1850-60 picture, *Grez-sur-Long, Bridge and Church*, formerly in the Montréal collection of W. R. Elmenhorst. In Corot's painting of *La Rochelle*, formerly in the Greenshields collection, a lone figure, wrapped in a shawl and using a walking stick, makes her way along a road toward the distant

town. In contrast to *Grez-sur-Long* and other works painted in the 1850's, this more lyrical picture does not have the firm brush work, nor the thick solid masses of paint that help render a sense of physical presence to the natural scenery and architectural features.

The only clear line of development that can be seen in the collected works exhibited begins with the naturalism of Constable, which is inherited by Daubigny and the Barbizon School, and then reaches its fullest maturity in the landscapes of Monet and the Impressionists. To this line of development one can add Delacroix's *Christ on the Sea of Galilee* and Cezanne's *Roadway in Provence*, both from the Van Horne collection.

There are always problems in finding a proper place for the quasi-visionary landscapes of artists like Lhermitte and Corot, because they are seldom seen as early indications of modern art's retreat from reality. In the 1860's and '70's there was never a unified and well organized rejection of the realist principles of Courbet or the naturalist developments of Impressionism. This place of honour is usually reserved for van Gogh, Gauguin and the generation of Post-Impressionist artists. On the whole, the late nineteenth-century Montréal collectors, like other North American collectors of this period, did not purchase, and most likely did not know, the work of the Post-Impressionists. Nevertheless, in addition to the Romantic, Realist and Impressionist works collected in Montréal, there are a few of those seemingly unclassifiable late romantic subjects that point the way to the early developments of Symbolist art and the Aesthetic movement in England. Certain members of the Aesthetic movement are readily identifiable, such as Albert Moore and George Fredrick Watts. But other English "modernists" collected in Montréal, such as Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema and Frederic Lord Leighton have been associated with the later developments of

academic neo-classicism, or what has been defined as a peculiarly English “pseudo-Hellenistic Classicism.” Along with this strange segment of late Victorian English art, there are the late Pre-Raphaelites or post-Pre-Raphaelites such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Sir Edward Burne-Jones. It is unfortunate that these pictures, discussed and reproduced in the catalogue, could not be seen in the exhibition.

Among the catalogue entries of the paintings from England and the United States that could not be brought to Montréal, were Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s *Pandora* and Sir Edward Burne-Jones’s *Day and Night*, those mysterious works clearly associated with the Aesthetic movement and the development of Symbolist art in France. I wondered if these pictures might have given a much clearer idea of what was considered to be “modern art” by these late nineteenth-century collectors, than the seemingly old-fashioned and somewhat perplexing landscape, *Saint Martin’s Summer* by Sir John Everett Millais. The catalogue raises other questions. Is *Saint Martin’s Summer* important because it is the only work by a Pre-Raphaelite in the exhibition, and does it occupy a place of importance in the overall development of Millais’s landscape subjects? *Chill October* (1870) was his “first major landscape” and *Saint Martin’s Summer* his fourth. Since his first pure landscapes were painted during the period associated with the development of Impressionism in France, do they relate to the Impressionist development, or are they closely allied to Millais’s earlier Pre-Raphaelite works?

To the uninitiated, *Saint Martin’s Summer*, which is praised in the *Montreal Collectors* catalogue as “one of the most important of the Pre-Raphaelite paintings to come to Montreal,” might appear to be nothing more than an uninspired English interpretation of the French Barbizon manner. The picture’s “minutely painted detail” supposedly “shows that in his late work, Millais painted simul-

taneously in two distinct styles, one reserved for his more ‘public’ paintings, the other for pure landscape.” In the latter landscape style “his aesthetic is virtually unchanged from his Pre-Raphaelite youth.”

It is true that Millais’s pure landscapes of the 1870’s seem to be in a class of their own when compared to the portraits of society ladies and anecdotal historical subjects of the same period. I would not go so far as Allen Staley, who believes that the landscapes Millais painted from 1870 until the end of his life “have nothing to do with Pre-Raphaelitism, but belong to the sphere of late Victorian popular and sentimental painting.”⁶ Among the pictures completed after 1870 there is at least one that shows Millais successfully reverting to his earlier method of masterfully combining the figure and the landscape: the 1873 *Winter Fuel*. It combines a breadth of vision with an attention to detail, and has something of the emotional power and extraordinary technique that is found in Millais’s earlier painting.

Even though Ruskin considered Millais as Turner’s direct descendant, the Pre-Raphaelite painter’s principal contributions were made with his figural and narrative works and not with his later landscapes. In fact, it may have been Ruskin’s insistence on this connection with Turner that caused Millais to resist treating pure landscape subjects early in his career. When Millais does return to landscape painting in the 1870’s, Ruskin again expresses dissatisfaction over the artist’s wasted talent. Ruskin believed Millais could have occupied “the attention of that part of the French and English public whose fancy is at present caught only by Gustave Doré.” This was paralleled, interestingly enough, at the *Montreal Collectors* exhibition where Doré’s *Scene in Ross-Shire* [c.1879] was hung almost directly opposite Millais’s *Saint Martin’s Summer*.⁷

The nineteenth-century critics and art public had much stronger opinions about the

perceived quality of a work of art than is the case today. It is quite shocking to read, for instance, what was said about the now famous paintings by Turner and Whistler. Many times these criticisms were quite biased and incorrect. Nevertheless, these artists prevailed, and their work was collected and valued, in spite of the adverse criticism in the journals and newspapers of the day. Understanding the taste and contribution of important collectors of the past is indeed a complex affair. Many times they made significant decisions about the quality of an artist's work which did not correspond to public taste, as defined by art critics writing for newspapers and periodicals. At other times the decisions of enlightened collectors seem to have been entirely wrong. Occasional lapses into bad taste, or a desire to obtain the equivalents of modern masters at a reduced price, make them all the more human. Today, only a few important private collections have remained intact. It is a pleasure to visit these collections, for unlike the great state museums where seemingly only the best examples of the most important artists are perfunctorily assembled, something very personal is reflected in the collections of private museums.

Considering the importance of the former Montréal collections, it is strange that none treated in the exhibition would immortalize themselves with their own private museum. The Wallace Collection in London, the Lady Lever Art Gallery in Port Sunlight and the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C. offer some interesting insights into the taste of collectors at the turn of the century. Fortunately this benevolent tradition has not completely bypassed Montréal. The building, acquisitions and direction of the Canadian Centre for Architecture exhibit the kind of discerning and individual taste that one associates with the great philanthropists and private collectors of the past.

The *Discerning Tastes: Montreal Collectors 1880-1920* catalogue is well written and all the entries are flawlessly researched. It clearly indicates an ambitious undertaking not fully realized. I look forward to Janet Brooke's next exhibition, in which, hopefully, she will have the necessary support to make the show as comprehensive and meaningful as the catalogue.

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Notes

1 Martin BUTLIN and Evelyn JOLL, *The Paintings of J.M.W. Turner* (New Haven & London, 1984).

2 For example, the *Dogana and Madonna della Salute, Venice* sold at Christie's in 1870 for £2,560. In 1927 the estate of the Montréal collector James Ross sold it at the same London auction house for 30,000 gns. Janet BROOKE, *Discerning Tastes: Montreal Collectors 1880-1920*, (Montréal: The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1989), Plate 57, 156.

3 The painting of *Port Ruysdael*, in the Sir George Drummond collection from c.1901 to 1919, sold at Christie, Manson & Woods in 1863 for £1,995 and just before it entered the Drummond collection, in 1899, it was auctioned again at Christie's for £5,040. When the Drummond estate sold it at Christie's in 1919 it went for £6,720. *Montreal Collectors*, Plate 58, 157.

4 By 1888, the date of this article, the Symbolist movement in France was well underway, sounding the depths of the modern psyche. This new movement struck a resounding blow to the moral and anecdotal art associated with Ruskin's *Modern Painters* and late Victorian painting in general.

5 Corot's *Vue de Château-Thierry* (c.1856-63), Robaut 1020, and *Château Thierry*, Robaut 1287, both general views of the town from different vantage points, are reproduced in Julius MEIER-GRAEFE, *Corot*, (Berlin: B. Cassirer und Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1930), plates LXXIX and XCV.

6 Allen STALEY, *The Pre-Raphaelite Landscape* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 57.

7 John RUSKIN, *Works*, XXIX (London: Allen, 1903-12), 161.