

J.W. BEATTY AT ROSEDALE PUBLIC SCHOOL

In 1908 the Canadian painter J.W. Beatty (1869-1941) was commissioned by the Rosedale League for School Art to produce a mural for the kindergarten/assembly room of Rosedale Public School in Toronto (fig.1).¹ Completed in 1910, the room was described a few years later by the Toronto Star as "the most beautiful schoolroom in Canada."² The mural is composed of three panels presenting school children in a number of clearly pleasant seasonal activities within landscape settings. In *Spring* (fig. 2) children and a teacher attend the annual picnic in the nearby Don Valley; in *Summer* (fig. 3) children and adults take a rest during the harvesting of the grain. *Autumn* shows a young girl walking with an older woman between pumpkins and sheaves of corn (fig. 4), while to the right a boy of the same age offers a bouquet of fall flowers to two senior members of his community (fig. 5).

The production of such a mural in Toronto in 1908 is not remarkable in itself, given the strong interest in such decoration there at this time.³ However, the patronage and subject matter of this particular mural merit further discussion, since they clearly exhibit the influence of an idealistic social development,

fig. 1 J.W. Beatty, R.C.A., Mural Decorations in Rosedale Public School, *List of Reproductions of Works of Art* (Department of Education, Ontario), Educational Pamphlets, No. 5, Toronto, 1914, p.8. (Photo: Marilyn McKay)

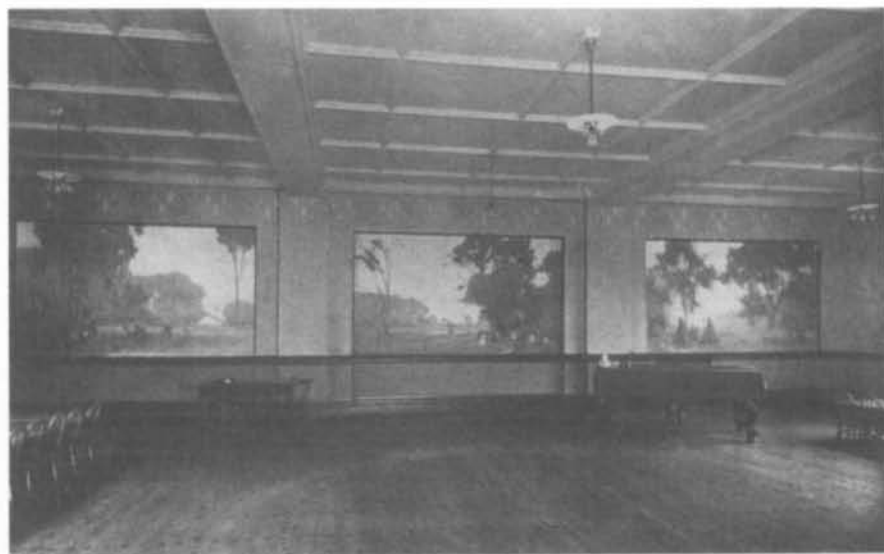




fig. 2 J.W. Beatty, Detail of Spring, 1908-1910, Oil on panel, 226 × 360 cm, Toronto, Records, Archives and Museums Toronto Board of Education. (Photo: Tom Hill)



fig. 3 J.W. Beatty, Detail of Summer, 1908-1910, Oil on panel, 226 × 360 cm, Toronto, Records, Archives and Museums Toronto Board of Education. (Photo: Tom Hill)

commonly referred to as “the school beautiful movement.” This *movement* arose in Great Britain under the leadership of John Ruskin (1819-1900) in the second half of the nineteenth century. Ruskin maintained that the physical surroundings of the classroom had a strong unconscious effect on the student.⁴ At the same time, he believed that artists should act as God’s spokesmen or prophets, directing the viewer toward the delight and wonder of God’s creations.⁵ Thus a closer relationship would be established between God and man, and concomitantly, a closer understanding of the Christian morality that God would have man uphold. Consequently, if images of nature were placed in schools attended by children from all socio-economic classes, the moral standards of the nation could be raised. For Ruskin, “Education does not mean teaching people to know what they do not know,” but rather, “[it] means teaching them to behave as they do not behave.”⁶ To this end, educators should avoid representations of both the machinery and commercial enterprises associated with Britain’s recently arrived industrial age (which Ruskin saw as destructive to nature) as well as scenes which expressed “coarse delight in mere pain and crisis of danger.”⁷ In Ruskin’s scheme, children would look at images of God’s creations “depicted in a realistic style without unnecessary ornament.”⁸

Ruskin’s ideas quickly led to the formation of societies in England whose purpose was to introduce art and nature into the classroom. Octavia Hill, a



fig. 4 J.W. Beatty, *Detail of Autumn*, 1908-1910, Oil on panel, 226 × 360 cm, Toronto, Records, Archives and Museums Toronto Board of Education. (Photo: Tom Hill)



fig. 5 J.W. Beatty, *Detail of Autumn*, 1908-1910, Oil on panel, 226 × 360 cm, Toronto, Records, Archives and Museums Toronto Board of Education. (Photo: Tom Hill)

pupil and friend of Ruskin, formed the Kyrle Society in 1877, while Mary Christie founded the Art for Schools Association in 1883 with Ruskin as President.⁹ Almost simultaneously Ruskin's theories were taken up by American educators. By 1892 the Boston Public School Art League was founded to assist in the installation of art in schoolrooms; by 1914 there were at least forty such organizations throughout the United States.¹⁰ Many books on the subject soon appeared, including Walter Gilman Page's *Interior Decoration of Schoolhouses*,¹¹ and journals such as *The School Review* which frequently published articles on the educational function of nature images in the classroom. In 1899 the American educators, S. Burrage and H.T. Bailey, wrote that "Life is painful enough at first hand without reflecting its sorrows and sufferings from school-room walls. We want our children ... to live just as long as possible with the sunshine and the flowers, with the birds and the cherubs."¹² F.B. Dressler, in the United States Bureau of Education's *Bulletin* of 1910, stressed that "the assembly room is the place in the school where artistic and even lavish decoration [should be] the rule, for the assembly room has retained some of the religious atmosphere of those [churches of] bygone days."¹³

In Canada, Ruskin's reputation was well established by 1880. Excerpts from *Modern Painters*, a text in which Ruskin clearly sets out the relationship between artistic representations of nature, Christian morality, and the viewer,

had been published in Toronto in 1879. It prompted a local reviewer to describe its author as “the most captivating of modern writers” who has taken “the artistic and critical world by storm.”¹⁴ In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Canadians in a variety of fields promoted Ruskin’s philosophy. For example, in *The Methodist Magazine and Review* of September 1899 the Reverend Hillis expounded on Ruskin’s belief “that there is some power in nature that will transform a seed into a golden sheaf and a babe into a sage or seer.”¹⁵

Ruskin’s more specific views on the role of nature in education may have influenced Canadian educators as early as 1867. In that year a Halifax teaching guide echoed Ruskin’s thought when it stated: “What constitutes the beautiful in any object is the evidence it furnishes of the perfection and excellence of the Great Creator. . . . The [pupil’s] mind . . . must be taught to observe and study the beautiful in nature and in art.”¹⁶ In an article entitled “Pretty Schoolrooms” in *The Canada School Journal* of December 1878, readers were told that: “little ones . . . speak out the longing for the beautiful when they gather from their gardens the morning bouquet for teacher’s desk.”¹⁷

Canadian educators soon openly adopted Ruskin’s views. In 1891 A.H. Morrison outlined the relationship between morals and Ruskin’s art in *The Canada Educational Monthly and School Magazine*.¹⁸ At the Dominion Educational Association Convention of 1904, held in Winnipeg, Miss E.E. Rankin of Regina stated that: “Our first and chief aim [as teachers] is to lead to an appreciation of Beauty in observing order and harmony in the material world. From nature and art [the pupil] receives new inspiration and has a deeper reverence for the God of nature. Vice becomes more and more repellant because of its ugliness. ‘In true art,’ Ruskin says, ‘the hand, the head and the heart of man go together.’”¹⁹ Eight years later Ida Hillman wrote in *The School*, a Toronto educational journal: “a child’s mental health and spiritual happiness [are] more dependent on the atmosphere in which he lives than on the material digested from books. The primary object of school decoration is the creation of a congenial atmosphere for the unfolding of every faculty — and especially for the development of taste — which Ruskin takes as the measure of the status of man.”²⁰ In the same journal Philip Ortiz mirrored Ruskin’s thoughts when he wrote: “It is an undeniable fact that the classroom itself has a considerable part in [the pupil’s] education; it affects his conduct; it gives him a standard by which he continues to be influenced long after he has left school; for culture is often due more to surroundings than to books. Art should supply the student with an antidote, as it were, against the poisonous influences of the materialistic tendencies of the present day.”²¹

Texts published for newly formed nature study courses quoted Ruskin when they pointed out that the study of nature should be as concerned with morality as it was with science. “The Moral aspects of Science Teaching,” published in 1889 in Toronto’s *The Educational Journal*, stated that: “Ruskin is nothing if not emphatic. Rightly pursued, the study of Natural History, as it is found in field and wood, in plant and flower, in insect and animal life . . .

points directly to Nature's God."²² In *The Nature Study Course* published in Toronto in 1905 for use in Toronto schools, John Dearness wrote, "According to Ruskin all other efforts in education are futile till you have taught your people to love fields, birds, and flowers."²³ The *Ontario Teacher's Nature Study Manual*, published by the Ministry of Education for Ontario in 1915, declared: "Nor is it a mistake to cultivate the more sentimental love of nature [over the scientific one] which belongs to the artist and the poet. John Ruskin emphasizes this value."²⁴

By 1896 the Ontario Department of Education had become officially involved in the installation of nature images in classrooms. That year James L. Hughes (1846-1935), Inspector of Toronto Schools, encouraged the teachers and the mothers of students at Rosedale Public School to form a League for School Art.²⁵ By 1916 there were nine such "clubs" in Toronto schools.²⁶ Their position had been given official sanction within the provincial government's educational system in 1898 when Hughes formed the Central School Art League. As well, the Ontario Department of Education established an advisory board, composed of members of the Ontario Society of Artists, which school art leagues could approach for advice on art purchases for the classroom. The following year the board published *School Art Leagues*. Using Ruskin's language it clearly stated that art in the classroom, and in particular mural decoration, would cultivate not only the powers of observation of the eye, but also of the mind.²⁷

Writing in *Schoolroom Decoration* of 1900, published by the Ontario Department of Education, J.G. Hodgins stated: "Only the best pictures – as Ruskin says – should be given a place." The publication seriously suggested that the monotony of undecorated classrooms was an important factor in the school drop-out rate. Students might have completed their education, it was proposed, if the school room walls had not been "bare of anything that would create an active desire for the beautiful, or artistic, or which would produce a refining and elevating influence upon the minds of the young."²⁸ By 1914 the Department of Education in Ontario had produced a pamphlet for use in its schools in which reproductions of well-known works of art were suggested as appropriate viewing material for schoolchildren. Those considered particularly suitable for kindergarten rooms were sunny landscapes in which children and/or animals took part in familiar, pastoral or rural activities.²⁹

In 1908 the Ontario Department of Education's advisory board was approached by the Rosedale League for School Art for assistance in the furnishing of its kindergarten room with a mural. The League's decision to award the commission to Beatty could be accounted for quite simply: Beatty was a well-known Toronto painter with a declared interest in mural decoration; he had been a member of the Ontario Society of Artists since 1901; and he was also a close friend and former pupil of George Agnew Reid, who, in 1908, was chairman of the advisory board.³⁰ However, another factor should be considered which may account more specifically for Beatty's presence at Rosedale. Toronto muralists, including Beatty, aspired to the production of historical

murals. While most of the artists worked in figural representation, Beatty did not. His work before 1908 was involved with the landscape; moreover, he adopted the bright colours of an impressionist's palette and the decorative linearity of art nouveau.³¹ Thus both Beatty's style and subject matter would have strongly appealed to a patron steeped in Ruskin.

There is little doubt that the Rosedale League was just such a patron. By this time its teacher members probably had had wide exposure to Ruskin's views through educational journals and conference lectures, as outlined above. In addition, by 1908 the Rosedale kindergarten teacher would have been trained specifically in the philosophy of another educator, Friedrich Froebel (1782-1810), who, although he made no comments on school decoration, formulated theories on the uplifting function of nature which were identical to those of Ruskin. Froebel revolutionized educational thinking in his development of the kindergarten in early nineteenth-century Germany.³²

In 1882 James L. Hughes, Inspector of Toronto Schools *and* organizer of the Toronto School Art Leagues, having observed the Froebel system at work in Boston and in St. Louis, became Canada's leading exponent of Froebelism.³³ In his published text on the Froebel method he wrote: "The business of the school is to reveal to the child the harmony in all of life, and to bring the child to God."³⁴ By 1888 the Froebel kindergarten had become a regular part of the Toronto educational system, and by 1908 all teacher training schools in Ontario required kindergarten teachers to be trained and examined in the Froebel method.³⁵ Throughout this period Canadian educational journals published many articles on the benefits of the Froebel methods, often stressing the importance of nature study to the moral development of the child.

Froebel regarded the school as "a garden of children," each pupil as a plant, the teacher as the gardener, and the aim of the educational process as the demonstration to the pupil of the harmonious relationship that existed between God and the natural world. Thus Froebel boldly supplanted the classical and time-honored educational system of his own culture, which previously placed the highest value on the absorption of quantities of knowledge. His method gave greater regard to the moral development of the individual pupil, a philosophy of education which clearly parallels Ruskin's. Moral development could be achieved in Froebel's system by a variety of "gardening methods," but one of the most important was the observation of beauty in nature. It was the duty of the gardener/teacher to steer the children away from "grotesque or horrible" images. Again, the parallel with Ruskinian thought is clear.

In their employment of the Froebel method, educators in both England and Canada openly acknowledged the relationship between its philosophy and Ruskin's "school beautiful movement." For example, J.A. Hobson, in an 1899 discussion of Ruskin's social reforms, favourably compared Ruskin's emphasis on an education which stresses "the union of head and hand" with Froebel's views.³⁶ In 1882, a Miss Hart, Inspector of Toronto kindergarten, speaking at the Dominion Educational Association's conference in Montréal, explained that as Froebel recognized the primary importance of developing "the divine

spirit” in the kindergarten child through observation of beauty, so did Ruskin understand the necessity of taking measures to preserve “Art intellect” for the nation.³⁷

One can now return to J.W. Beatty’s Rosedale mural with the awareness of the high regard in which contemporary Toronto educators held Ruskin’s “school beautiful” movement. As well and because of the support lent to that movement by the government-sanctioned Froebel method of education, it is no longer possible to read Beatty’s three landscapes as neutral images of school children participating in pleasant seasonal activities. Rather, the viewer should consider that landscape art, like any art, is an ideological practice, maintained by power structures and institutions which support artists and art forms that favour a desired social system. Thus, Beatty’s mural has to be seen as an effort on the part of the Ontario Department of Education to instill in the pupils of Rosedale Public School a Christian morality by means of exposure to what the Department believed to be images of God’s creations.

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Notes

1 See “How We Decorated Our School. I. Rosedale Public School.” *The School*, No. 1 (September 1912): 323-327; *The Link*, vol. 14, No. 3 (1958): 1; D. FARR, *J.W. Beatty 1869-1941*, Exhibition Catalogue (Kingston: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1981), 22-23; figs. 7-9. The murals were moved in 1957 to a hall in the newly constructed Rosedale School building on the same site.

2 *The Toronto Star*, 17 March 1917.

3 The Society of Mural Decorators was formed in Toronto in 1894. See G.A. Reid, W. Cruikshank, and W. Grier to E.J. Lennox, Toronto, March 27, 1895, 3 page typescript in George Agnew Reid Papers, Scrapbook A, 99, Art Gallery of Ontario. For contemporary discussions of Toronto Artists’ involvement in mural decoration, see G.A. REID, “Mural Decoration,” *The Canadian Magazine* (April 1898): 501-508; J.W. BEATTY, “A Canadian Painter and his Work,” *The Canadian Magazine* (April 1906): 546-551.

4 J. EVANS (ed.), *The Lamp of Beauty. Writings on Art by John Ruskin* (London: Phaidon Press, 1959), 316-322.

5 EVANS, 317, n. 4.

6 J. RUSKIN, *The Crown of Wild Olive* (New York: A.L. Burt, 1890), 142.

7 R.L. HERBERT (ed.), *Art Criticism of John Ruskin* (Gloucester, Mass.: P. Smith, 1969), 421-423.

8 EVANS, 23, n. 4.

9 E.T. COOK, *The Life of John Ruskin* (London: G. Allen, 1912), 368-369.

10 The response of Boston educators to Ruskin is described in *School Art Leagues* (Toronto: Education Department of Ontario, 1899), 7-9.

11 W.G. PAGE, *Interior Decoration of School-houses*, prepared for U.S. Bureau of Education (Boston, 1896).

- 12 S. BURRAGE and H.T. BAILEY, *School Sanitation and Decoration* (Boston/New York/Chicago: D.C. Heath & Co., 1899), 100-107.
- 13 F.B. DRESSLAR, *American Schoolhouses*, prepared for U.S. Bureau of Education (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1910), Bulletin No. 5, 35.
- 14 *Ruskin on Painting* (Toronto: Hart & Rawlinson, 1879); reviewed in *Rose Belford's Monthly and National Review*, No. 3 (July 1879): 106-107.
- 15 Rev. N.D. HILLIS, "John Ruskin's Message to the Twentieth Century," *Methodist Magazine and Review* (Sept. 1899): 227-231.
- 16 Rev. Alexander FORRESTER, *The Teacher's Text Book* (Halifax: A. & W. Mackinlay, 1867), 168.
- 17 "Pretty Schoolrooms," *The Canada School Journal*, Vol. III, No. 19 (Dec. 1878): 148.
- 18 A. H. MORRISON, "The Morals of Ruskin's Art," *The Canada Educational Monthly and School Magazine*, XIII (Aug.-Sept. 1891): 245-251.
- 19 E.E. RANKIN, *Minutes of the Proceedings of the Dominion Educational Association. Winnipeg 1904* (Toronto: Dominion Education Association, 1905), 272.
- 20 Ida HILLMAN, "The Art of School Decoration," *The School* (Sept. 1912): 22-27.
- 21 P. ORTIZ, "School Room Decoration," *The School* (Dec. 1913): 211.
- 22 "The Moral Aspects of Science Teaching," *The Educational Journal*, Vol. III, No. 6 (July 1, 1889): n.p.
- 23 J. DEARNESS, *The Nature Study Course* (Toronto: Copp, Clark, 1905), 4.
- 24 *Nature Study: Ontario Teachers' Manuals* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1915), 26.
- 25 *School Art Leagues*, 3; G.A. REID, "School Decoration and Picture Study," *The School* (April, 1914): 479-482.
- 26 L. BURGOYNE, *A History of the Home and School Movement in Ontario* (Toronto: Charters Publishing Co., n.d.), 3.
- 27 *School Art Leagues*, 7.
- 28 J.G. HODGINS, *School Room Decoration*, prepared for the Education Department of Ontario (Toronto: Warwick Brothers and Rutter, 1900), 5.
- 29 *List of Reproductions of Works of Art*, prepared for the Education Department of Ontario (Toronto: L.K. Cameron, 1914), Educational Pamphlet 5.
- 30 For Beatty's career, see FARR, above, n. 1. For membership of the advisory board, see M.M. MINER, G.A. REID: *Canadian Artist* (Toronto, 1946), 94.
- 31 For examples of landscapes painted by Beatty by 1908, see FARR, above, n. 1.
- 32 Froebel's theories and a history of his influence on education in the United States and Canada are outlined in B.E. CORBETT, *The Public School Kindergarten in Ontario 1883-1967* (Ph.D diss., University of Toronto, 1968).
- 33 CORBETT, 96 and 211.
- 34 Quoted in CORBETT, 119.
- 35 *Syllabus of Studies and Regulations for the Normal Schools at Hamilton, Ottawa, Peterborough, Stratford and Toronto*, prepared for the Education Department of Ontario (Toronto: The King's Printer, 1908), Circular 23, 19.
- 36 J.A. HOBSON, *John Ruskin: Social Reformer* (London: J. Nisbet, 1899), 233.
- 37 C.C. HART, *Addresses and Proceedings of the Dominion Educational Association, Montreal, 1882* (Toronto: Dominion Education Association, 1883), 278.