

Looking After the “Old Masters” in Ottawa
Catalogue of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, European and American Painting, Sculpture, and Decorative Arts, Volume 1: 1300-1800 / 2 volumes: one volume of text (xx 364 p.), one volume of plates (277 p.)

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Looking After the "Old Masters" *in Ottawa*

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plates (277 p.)

General Editors: Myron Laskin, Jr. and Michael Pantazzi

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This publication represents the first fruit of a project that will eventually document the complete holdings of the National Gallery of Canada. That the "Old Masters" of the collection—the paintings, sculptures, and decorative arts dating from the fourteenth through the eighteenth centuries—are the first to receive the full scholarly apparatus seen here is both significant and appropriate. One of the major battles that the National Gallery has had to fight over the years has been for a collection with historical breadth. Only the tenacious commitment of a handful of individuals has ensured that the Gallery has been developed as a national collection in the broadest sense, that is, a collection making available to the Canadian public not only a survey of its own national art but also a full panorama of European works of the post-medieval period. The idea that the Canadian government would spend large sums of money on art, and moreover on art not directly (on the face of it) related to the specific history of Canada, has met with serious opposition at every step of the Gallery's history, and the fight is by no means over. A touching statement by Vincent Massey, one of the key figures in the major expansion of the collection, sums it up. Written in the 1950s when he

was Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Gallery, at the beginning of a groundswell of buying that was forcefully to interject the concept of quality into the holdings, it reflects the type of basic argument that, even then, still had to be made:

It is the intangibles which give a nation not only its essential character but its vitality as well. What may seem unimportant or even irrelevant under the pressure of daily life may well be the thing which endures, which may give a community its power to survive.¹

If the concept of the development of a broad collection—and the reality of the expenditure of money to support that concept—was difficult to establish, equally difficult in its own way has been the idea of documenting the collection in full with complete scholarly apparatus. The guiding force behind this first complete catalogue of the Gallery's "Old Master" holdings was Myron Laskin, Jr., for many years Curator of European Art at the Gallery, now Curator of Paintings at the J. Paul

¹ Included within the 1951 *Report of the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences*, quoted by Jean Sutherland Boggs, *The National Gallery of Canada* (London and Toronto, 1971), 43.

Getty Museum, and an instrumental figure in the complex labours that attended the purchase of many of the impressive acquisitions that the Gallery has made in recent years. Laskin was assisted in this project by a number of the Gallery's curatorial staff, who also took on the job of seeing the catalogue through the last stages of production. Michael Pantazzi, who shares the title of general editor, and Catherine Johnston, who played a major role in the Baroque entries, deserve particular mention.

But it would be skewing the picture not to note the contribution of two individuals whose efforts were crucial in preparing the ground for this catalogue. First in order of priority is Jean Sutherland Boggs, Director of the Gallery from 1966 to 1976, whose vision was fundamental in developing the Gallery as a representative collection. Almost immediately on taking up her post, Boggs instituted the system of complete curatorial files that was the starting point for this publication. The input of R. H. Hubbard, Chief Curator of the Gallery from 1947 to 1978, should also be mentioned. Hubbard authored a number of early, partial catalogues and provided a line of continuity in the compiling of information for a full catalogue that embraced the tenures of a number of directors.

The catalogue we are given here supersedes two earlier surveys of the "Old Master" holdings done in 1957 and 1971—the work of Hubbard and Boggs respectively—both of them representing partial coverage of the collection and neither making claim to completeness in terms of documentation.² Hubbard's 1957 catalogue, although less "scientific" than the current work, bears a certain family resemblance to it. There is a brief life of the artist, followed by a description of the work, ending with a fairly generous list of bibliographic citations. While the 1957 catalogue makes little attempt to deal with the iconography of the pieces, there is a seriousness of tone and a clear attempt to insert "our" works into the mainline scholarly traditions to which they belong.

Boggs's 1971 volume is a much different affair. I would judge it the most successful presentation of the National Gallery and its collection to date—and I include the volume under review here—for its lively engagement with the material and its presentation of the works from a personal point of view—that of a scholar who wants to make these pieces accessible to a broad public. It is not meant as a catalogue but rather as a look at the Gallery as a whole, stressing the idea of the collec-

tion as an historical overview and thus giving prominent coverage to works before 1800. Boggs begins with a detailed history of the Gallery, organized in terms of the tenures of its directors, followed by a presentation of significant works, principally in the form of colour plates and single pages of facing text. This coffee-table format has in fact been used for very sensitive, considered analyses of both the styles and subjects of the works.

What the current publication has going for it is completeness. Some 266 works are discussed in detail in terms of physical condition, subject matter, style, attribution, dating, and provenance. Inscriptions are transcribed in full. Preparatory drawings connected with the works are included where known. To be noted is the conscientious, even if unequal, engagement with iconography, traditionally not a major focus of gallery catalogues. Separate listings at the end of each entry give details of exhibitions and provenance. A great deal of work has gone into the full compilations of the literature citations. Each entry is headed by a small but very clear photograph of the work under discussion. There are ample cross-references to take one from, say, Bicci, to the full entry under Neri di Bicci, or from Agnolo di Cosimo to Bronzino. The layout of the two volumes allows the material to be approached in several different ways but is not without its confusions. The text volume is laid out in straight alphabetical order, anonymous works slotted in under the country of origin (e.g., "Italian, 17th century"). The separate plate volume, on the other hand, is laid out according to schools, with the works arranged chronologically within each school. This means that without the figure number from the text in hand, one must thumb through the plates to locate the work within another order system. Given this dual organization, it would have been helpful to include page references to the entries of the text volume in the captions to the plates, but this has not been done. Decorative arts are included in separate sections in both the plate and the text volumes. The photographs are exclusively black and white and, while serviceable, tend to be unpleasantly flat in tonality. There are seven separate indexes, including an iconographic index, an index of locations of related works, and an index of attributions changed since the 1957 catalogue. Drawings and graphics are not included here; they will be dealt with in a separate volume. For its high standards of scholarship, its eminently reasonable attitude towards attribution—in short, for its seriousness—it deserves high marks. Errors and omissions will almost certainly emerge as scholars bring

2 E. H. Hubbard, ed., *The National Gallery of Canada: Catalogue of Paintings and Sculpture*, Vol. 1: *Older Schools* (Ottawa and Toronto, 1957); Boggs, *National Gallery of Canada*.

the expertise of their individual specialties to an examination of the separate entries. Even now, I suspect, there is a "Corrected Edition" kept close at hand in the curatorial offices of the Gallery into which slips and omissions are being inserted. For the first time, however, the entire collection of "Old Masters" is made available for perusal, allowing this much undernoted collection finally to receive attention by a large scholarly audience.

One of the things that the catalogue makes possible is a look at the overall pattern of the collecting of old masters at Ottawa. There is, admittedly, a quirkiness to the holdings. The collecting of old masters was officially inaugurated in 1907 with the purchase of the Gainsborough portrait of a West Indian slave who became an accomplished critic and friend of the arts, a work that stands out as a curiosity in the Gainsborough oeuvre. The physical state of a number of the works presents problems: a flawed Bernini bust, an unfinished Andrea Sacchi portrait, a heavily overpainted Andrea del Sarto, school pieces (e.g., the enigmatic Botticelli) whose relationship to known masters remains problematical. Directors and trustees have felt perhaps unduly comfortable buying portraits, of which there is a notable preponderance and which represent a safe bet that steers clear of the dangers of God and libido. But as a collection begun as late as 1907, that has not benefited in any major way from the gifts of individual collectors (the contrast here to the National Gallery of Art in Washington is striking) and that has consistently been subject to severe financial constraints, it holds together as a very respectable entity, studded with a number of surprisingly good things. Collecting at Ottawa falls into roughly three stages. The first period of collecting began in 1907 with the purchase of the Gainsborough and ran to the late 1940s. It was a period of casual, tentative buying, characterized by the dawning conviction that the collection should comprise a broad span of representative works. The second period, from 1948 to 1966, produced more focussed buying and more scholarly attention to the collection. Its highlight was the purchase between 1953 and 1956 of 12 paintings from the collection of the Prince of Liechtenstein. The Liechtenstein pieces immediately raised the tone of the enterprise, giving the Gallery, among other pieces, a fine early Rembrandt, traditionally identified as the *Toilet of Esther*, the important oil by Rubens after Caravaggio's *Deposition*, and the Gallery's finest pre-Renaissance work, a panel depicting Saint Catherine from a dismembered polyptych by Simone Martini. These years saw the first interest in making sculpture a part of the Gallery's holdings. In 1966, when Boggs took on the directorship, the Gallery entered its present

phase of collecting, in which the key words have been consolidation and coherence. This has been a time of cool assessment of the collection with an eye to filling gaps and hard decisions regarding tradeoffs between quality and representation. A wide-ranging intelligence marks the acquisitions, from the clamorous, room-filling Jacob Jordaens secular feast, *As the Old Sing, So the Young Pipe* (bought at auction from an English private collection in 1969), to the tiny, exquisite Bernard van Orley half-length *Madonna and Child* from a dismembered diptych (bought from a private European collection in 1984). The publication of this catalogue and the installation of the collection in a new setting are bringing the third period to a close. Again there will be a rethinking and reassessment of the "how to do right by the old masters" mandate.

What, then, of the catalogue's mandate? The editors made a decision regarding the nature of a catalogue that deserves to be examined. There are catalogues that can be dipped into and read at almost any point with stimulation and pleasure. This is not one of them. Two examples of this kind, very different but equally forceful, are provided by Angelica Rudenstein and John Shearman. Rudenstein has made herself the master of a particular genre of catalogue in which issues of technique and artistic imagination are raised to a poetic level of discourse and combined with an active engagement with the published literature.³ Much closer in subject matter to the present work, and thus easier to compare, is Shearman's catalogue of the Early Italian pictures in the English royal collection, where clipped, authoritative judgments of style and iconography put discussions of the works on a new footing.⁴ The editors of the National Gallery's publication have chosen to write an impersonal catalogue with a unified—I would say almost bureaucratic—tone rather than go for the conviction and excitement that comes from the voice of the involved individual. This is a catalogue in which facts are marshalled in as neutral and unbiased a way as is humanly possible, but not one from which it is easy to extract the significance of works. Let me give a few examples.

The polychromed terra cotta relief, known as the "Madonna of Verona" (after a version still *in situ* in Verona), of the half-length Virgin pressing the Christ child to her body, is an intriguing work, almost certainly deriving from a lost Donatello original. Although referred to in passing in the

3 Angelica Zander Rudenstein, *The Guggenheim Museum Collection, Paintings 1880-1945*, 2 vols. (New York, 1976); Peggy Guggenheim Collection, *Venice* (New York, 1985).

4 John Shearman, *The Early Italian Pictures in the Collection of Her Majesty the Queen* (Cambridge and London, 1983).

literature, the Ottawa version makes its first published appearance in this catalogue. It is one of a number of known examples in North America (another is in the Metropolitan Museum in New York), out of some 16 known versions in a variety of materials. The Ottawa version has a slightly repellent aspect due to a heavy layer of overpaint. But it is a work of high quality and distinct historical importance that presents a poignant image of the Christ child as sacrificial victim. It was picked up by North Italian painters, in particular Bellini and Mantegna, and became the inspiration for some of Mantegna's most moving compositions on the theme. The Gallery's acquisition of the piece in 1968 represented an intelligent choice of a significant object to fill a well-defined historical slot. The known versions of the piece have a number of variations that allow them to be separated into two distinct groups that correspond to two categories of mid-fifteenth-century popular devotion: outdoor street shrines and indoor devotional objects intended for private meditations. A further chapter of fifteenth-century artistic practice to which the piece gives testimony is the collaboration between painters and sculptors, particularly to be noted in the category of terra cotta reproductions, as Ulrich Middeldorf has pointed out.⁵ The short catalogue entry conscientiously records the lineage of the Ottawa piece and the large number of variations. But what we have here is a difficult piece that needs a leap of historical imagination to become a living part of fifteenth-century artistic and social currents instead of an art-historical curiosity. This is a catalogue that rarely makes that kind of leap.⁶

It could be argued that the Donatello-reprisal relief is not a work that speaks up and demands enthusiastic attention. The Gallery's Lorenzo Lotto, on the other hand, stands as one of the foremost Lottos in North America. It is a superb autograph piece from Lotto's very rich middle period, painted in about 1521.⁷ It is a work that has not received a great deal of attention, being tucked away first in a convent *in clausura* in Bergamo, passing into a variety of small private collections in

Bergamo, then into a private collection in Florence, and from there making its way, without much fanfare, into the collection at Ottawa in 1975. The function of Roch and Sebastian as major plague saints is certainly an important theme here—noted in the literature, as the catalogue indicates. But the work is revolutionary in its rethinking of the traditional Virgin and Child with Saints format and compresses into a relatively modest format numerous aspects of the Christological drama. The brilliantly ecstatic poses for both Saint Roch and Saint Sebastian, the pointed identification between Sebastian and Christ (the suggestion is to a moment in the Passion sequence, and in particular the Flagellation), and the reworking of the *sacra conversazione* typology make the painting a work of major importance in early sixteenth-century artistic production. We would be hard put to understand this from the catalogue entry.

The Gallery's Bernardino Luini, *The Christ Child and the Infant John the Baptist with a Lamb*, a purchase of 1927, gives witness to an important Leonardo da Vinci iconographic invention of which only faint traces appear in Leonardo's surviving production. The panel shows the nude Baptist and the nude Christ child, with the sacrificial lamb between them. Drawing on earlier Florentine interest in the infant Baptist, the Leonardo invention in its Luini rendition creates a non-narrative idea of the passage from Old to New Testament. The Christ child, pulling on the sacrificial lamb, draws the lineage of the prophets forward into present time. Few collections can have a Leonardo. In this instance the Luini, with its recording of one version of an important Leonardo invention, is a prime candidate for an expanded treatment that would illuminate its larger significance.

Where individual scholars have engaged with the pieces of the collection the entries move in the direction of a larger vision. The marble bust of Pope Urban VIII by Gian Lorenzo Bernini, a piece that is one of the star turns of the collection, is given quite a long entry in which the important contributions of Rudolf Wittkower, sifting through the various Bernini engagements with the physiognomy of Urban VIII, combined with Irving Lavin's analysis of nuances of presentation give a richness to the discussion that is worthy of the piece. The long and thoughtful entry on Piero di Cosimo's *Vulcan and Aeolus*, a fortunate early purchase of 1937, uses the work of Erwin Panofsky and other scholars for a valuable overview of the kind of look that late fifteenth-century Florence cast at primitive man. Thanks to the researches of Ann Sutherland Harris, the Andrea

5 Ulrich Middeldorf, "Some Florentine Painted Madonna Reliefs," in Wendy Stedman Sheard and John T. Paoletti, eds., *Collaboration in Italian Renaissance Art* (New Haven and London, 1978), 77-97.

6 It should be noted that the date "c. 1450" given in the catalogue is misleading as it refers to the lost Donatello original and not to this piece, which could reasonably be dated anywhere from the middle of the fifteenth century to about the end of the sixteenth.

7 I am drawing in my discussion here on the excellent master's thesis done at the University of British Columbia, Department of Fine Arts, by Randi Klebanoff, "Lorenzo Lotto and the Surgeon's Painting: A Private Commission in the Venetian Provinces" (September 1986).

Sacchi portrait bears the title of a specific individual, Cardinal Lelio Biscia, one of Sacchi's major patrons. Terisio Pignatti's unravelling of the confusion between Canaletto and early Bellotto gives to the discussion of Bellotto's *Arsenale* and *Piazzetta* the fascination of a detective story. The work of Michael Jaffé and others on Jordaens has made possible the serious attempt at deciphering reflected in the *As the Old Sing, So the Young Pipe* entry. Creighton Gilbert's attention to the excellent Bartolomeo Veneto *Portrait of a Young Lady* has given bite to the informed entry on this work. The short but concentrated paragraph on the meaning of Hans Baldung's *Eve, the Serpent, and Death* successfully encapsulates the tantalizing ambiguities that scholars of recent years have seen in this painting.

Curiously, it is the minor works that seem to fare best in the catalogue, where the problems of connoisseurship and of giving substance to a lesser master have called forth some sensitive assessments. Among the entries to be cited in this context are Bernardo Cavallino's *Vision of St. Dominic*, with its celebration of Dominican promotion of rosary devotions; the very lovely anonymous fifteenth-century panel, *The Madonna of the Flowering Pea*, catalogued here as German, with a highly creditable tentative attribution to Stefan Lochner;

and Philip James de Loutherbourg's *A Midsummer's Afternoon with a Methodist Preacher*, an interesting example of the eighteenth-century British moralizing genre.

Is this the definitive National Gallery "Old Masters" catalogue? No. But it is unlikely to be superseded for some time. Let us not underestimate the marshalling of curatorial and administrative resources that a publication of this kind represents. Crucial to such projects is the administrative support of a Boggs and the scholarly commitment of a Laskin, a combination not always easy to achieve. The Gallery has to get on with the next stage of this project, the publication of the first volume in the Canadian series. With a new group of younger Canadian scholars actively committed to deepening and broadening the level of discussion of the art of this country, the first full Canadian catalogue is eagerly awaited, its audience of scholars and graduate students ready for the unveiling. One hopes that with this substantial production standing as an indisputable display of credentials, the next publication in the series will have the courage to move away from the faceless, official tone of the work under review here and give to its material the force that comes from an individual sensibility engaging with the material—right or wrong.

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