

Ellen Easton McLeod, *In Good Hands: The Women of the Canadian Handicrafts Guild*. Montreal, Kingston, London, Ithaca, Carleton University by McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999, 361 pp., 43 black-and-white illus.

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Book Reviews

Comptes-rendus de livres

Ellen Easton McLeod, *In Good Hands: The Women of the Canadian Handicrafts Guild*. Montreal, Kingston, London, Ithaca, Carleton University by McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999, 361 pp., 43 black-and-white illus.

Two obstacles conspired to prevent Ellen Easton McLeod's *In Good Hands: The Women of the Canadian Handicrafts Guild* from being published prior to 1999: the perception of the Canadian Handicrafts Guild as an outmoded amateur organization, and the lack of academic attention paid to the field of Canadian craft history. As a result of the early founding date (1905) and the traditional terms of the Guild's charter, critics in the early 1960s were scathing in their assessment of the Guild as "the province of the adult educator or the leisure time dilettante and preserve of archaic custom".¹ The efforts of the women who founded the Guild were dismissed in light of the drive to professionalize craft in Canada according to modernism's rules. It is only recently that important work such as McLeod's 1995 Master's thesis on the Guild has been taken seriously inside art history. That her thesis has been turned into an exceptional book published by an academic press bodes well for future interest in the field of craft history.

In Good Hands began with the discovery in 1986 of a complete archive of writings, notes and minutes from the Canadian Handicrafts Guild dating back to the 1890s and tracing the formative period prior to its charter. McLeod's history of the Guild integrates social and cultural concerns resulting from her analysis of this material. Key to her study are the roles played by Victorian women in organizing the crafts in Canada, and their untroubled romanticization of popular Canadian "others", primarily French and Native populations. Throughout the book McLeod is careful to balance her critiques of the Guild women with thoughtful attempts to situate their own social positions as privileged women.

The original founders of the Canadian Handicrafts Guild, Alice Peck and May Phillips, were "privileged Montreal women" (p. 1). McLeod's introduction critiques the master narrative of western art which previously excluded the work of women such as Peck and Phillips, with their focus on the decorative arts. She provides the reader with backgrounds on Peck and Phillips in order to establish the sense of *noblesse oblige* that drove them to provide opportunities for Canadian craftspeople. Alice Peck was an upper-middle-class mother of seven who had been schooled in England and owned a summer home at Métis beach on the lower St Lawrence. Mary (May) Phillips was a professional artist who had spent five years studying and working in New York City before returning to Montreal as principal of the School of Art and Applied Design. Both women, described as "recently enfranchised fin-de-siècle club women", were active in the National Council of Women of Canada and the Women's Art

Association of Canada (p. 1). Peck and Phillips had been instrumental in masterminding the Handicrafts Committee of the Women's Art Association, Montreal branch. What becomes clear from McLeod's introduction and first chapter is the struggle faced by Victorian women, despite their social standing, to have their interests validated on the male-dominated cultural scene. Although this is not a new revelation in art history, nor is McLeod's introduction particularly groundbreaking, her linkage of these difficulties within the field of craft offers one of the first histories to do so in the Canadian context.

The craft field referred to in *In Good Hands* is distinctly anglophone Canadian, drawing heavily upon William Morris and the British Arts and Crafts. While McLeod provides the reader with important linkages between Canadian, British and American arts and crafts leaders and philosophies relevant to the Canadian Handicrafts Guild, she does not postulate that alternative craft philosophies, including francophone, continental European and Native, may have influenced those of the arts and crafts movement. Instead, McLeod provides this definition of the term "crafts":

Original objects created with care, skill and technique, crafts require a specialized knowledge of tools and materials. They are usually functional and/or ornamental and aesthetically pleasing. Their design is often unique, but can be informed by tradition, iconography, or a particular style. Reverence for materials is key. The visual/tactile senses are paramount. Crafts are personal, involving hands, minds, hearts and real time. They imply love for the creative processes of planning, designing, and making and they impart the joy of doing something well (p. 51).

Although undertaking a definition of crafts is difficult in any context, McLeod's attempt reflects a definition appropriate to the historical Canadian Handicrafts Guild rather than a contemporary one. Considering the backlash against the Guild experienced in the 1960s which revolved around what was perceived as the Guild's traditional, quixotic views of craft, McLeod's definition reinforces the problematic romanticization of craft as "joy in making", disavowing current conceptual concerns. While McLeod's definition is limiting, it does, however, call attention to the terms in which the arts and crafts movement was important for Canadian women at the turn of the century. She relates Peck and Phillips' conscious choice of the word "handicrafts" for the Guild's title to William Morris's usage of the term, and McLeod makes clear that craft groups based on Morris's ideals provided role models for the Montreal women.

Despite Peck and Phillips' socially advantaged backgrounds, their efforts to further the cause of crafts in Canada was dependent on the support they received from men. McLeod does

an excellent job conveying to the reader the limitations faced by Victorian women in Canada. For example, by the 1890s the two women were active members of the Art Association of Montreal, but were denied voting privileges, and their handicrafts exhibitions that ran from 1905 to 1935 in the Art Association of Montreal's Art Gallery were never acknowledged in the official Association minutes. Operating under the Napoleonic Code in effect in Québec, political, business and administrative opportunities, especially for married women, were severely hampered. McLeod cites Kathleen McCarthy's theory of the "separatist strategy" to explain how Peck and Phillips operated in spite of these restrictions, gaining the respect and support of men who would later promote the Guild within legal and political circles.² Peck and Phillips strategically convinced Lord Strathcona in 1900 to open their first handicraft exhibition, which took place in an exhibition space lent to them by the department store owner James Morgan; their initiatives followed Chief Justice Sir Melbourne Tait's "trusted advice" on establishing an independent craft organization, while Peck and Phillips encouraged William Lighthall and Edward Phillips to operate as intermediaries for the legal transfer of property and business, and to help pass the Guild's charter in Parliament.

These relations with men were essential in establishing the Canadian Handicrafts Guild as an independent organization in May 1906, "probably the first women's organization in Canada to be incorporated by Parliament" (p. 132). McLeod analyses how this helped Peck and Phillips to separate their Handicrafts Committee from the direction of Toronto-based Mary Dignam, president of the Women's Art Association of Canada. McLeod recounts how tensions developed between Dignam on the one hand, and Peck and Phillips on the other, as well as between Toronto and Montreal, during the establishment of the Guild which, unlike the Association, "knew [its] affairs should be conducted in a businesslike manner to receive the good 'opinion of men who are accustomed to look at the economic value of any movement'" (p. 114).

McLeod credits Peck and Phillips with wanting to "put [the Guild's] relationship with the craftspeople on a professional level" (p. 152). They were also pioneers in the inclusiveness of their vision. The Canadian Handicrafts Guild was the first to promote contemporary Native and French Canadian crafts within formal gallery spaces, to acknowledge formally the names of all craftspeople involved in the exhibitions, and to offer commercial opportunities through their store, "Our Handicrafts Store", to all craftspeople regardless of race, class or gender. That said, McLeod is careful to balance her accolades for the Guild with the realities of the patronizing attitudes of Peck and Phillips toward the craft traditions of the "others" they so admired. The strongest portion of *In Good Hands* is perhaps that in which McLeod adeptly explains how the advances made by the Guild,

in particular Alice Lighthall's 1933 Indian Committee which fought for the preservation of traditional craft instruction on reserves, contrasted with the elite position of the women involved: "They were unaware that, by appropriating another's culture for one's own, they were invoking the authority of the dominant culture's power over the 'other'" (p. 203).

McLeod ends her formal history of the Guild in 1936 when Alice Peck and May Phillips retired from the organization. By that point the Guild had witnessed several events which contributed to its future marginalization on the Canadian art scene: the interest of men, particularly Québec and Federal government officials including Oscar Bériau and Marius Barbeau, in undertaking craft projects which benefited from government funding; financial difficulties resulting from World War One and the Great Depression; and Guild President Wilfrid Bovey's decision to reorganize the Guild into provincial branches and to eliminate the successful Art Association of Montreal annual exhibitions.³ McLeod concludes the book by bringing the reader up to date on the current situation of the Guild, which changed its name to the Canadian Guild of Crafts in 1967, deaccessioned its permanent collection in 1970, and amalgamated with the Canadian Craftsmen's Association into the Canadian Crafts Council (now the Canadian Crafts Federation) in 1974.

In Good Hands: The Women of the Canadian Handicrafts Guild makes important contributions to the fields of Canadian craft history and women's studies, and also provides relevant information on the British imperialist approach to the crafts of Canada's "others" from the period of the 1890s to the late 1930s. There are frustrating moments in the text when one is left to wonder about McLeod's vernacular definition of craft, the status of francophone Québec's craft theories during this period, and how the Guild managed to secure affiliate agencies for Canadian goods in the United States. Despite these limitations, McLeod has turned what could have been a dry history of a little-known craft organization into a captivating story that incorporates important analyses of Canadian social and cultural history.

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Notes

- 1 Anita Aarons, "An Absent Minded Attitude," *Architecture Canada*, 505, 44/10 (October 1967), 22.
- 2 Kathleen D. McCarthy, *Women's Culture* (Chicago and London, 1991). According to McCarthy's theory of the "separatist strategy", women were given the opportunity to operate within the professional arena by adapting to patriarchal imperatives, particularly male business models.
- 3 Wilfrid Bovey was President of the Canadian Handicrafts Guild from 1931 to 1936.