

Painting in Quebec The Older Traditions

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PAINTING IN QUEBEC THE OLDER TRADITIONS

Sous le titre qu'on vient de lire, M. Robert Ayre, critique d'art au *Montreal Star* et codirecteur de la revue *Canadian Art*, a prononcé le 14 juin une conférence devant les membres du Conseil national des Humanités, qui s'est réuni à Montréal; c'était la première partie d'un symposium sur la peinture au Canada; on en trouvera plus loin des extraits. La seconde partie portait sur la peinture contemporaine; c'est M. Jacques de Tonnancour qui l'a présentée; la *Vie des Arts* en publiera des extraits importants dans sa prochaine livraison. Nous prions M. Ayres et M. de Tonnancour d'accepter nos plus vifs remerciements pour avoir autorisé la publication de certains passages de leurs conférences.

Portrait de Zacharie VINCENT, par lui-même.
Cliché Inventaire des oeuvres d'art

One of the most important of the native painters was François Baillairgé, who was born in Quebec in 1759 and died in Quebec in 1830. Another was François Malepart Beau-court, the son of a painter, who was born at Laprairie in 1740 and died in Montreal. He is better known to most of us because of the Negro Slave with the pineapple which belongs to McGill University. In subject and treatment, it is a refreshing departure from the religious and family conventions.

Another, and this is even startling, is the self portrait by Zacharie Vincent, the Huron Chief who was born at Lorette in 1812 and died in Quebec in 1886. The chief was a self-taught painter¹ who ground his own pigments and he can't be compared with such accomplished men as Antoine Plamondon (1804-1895) and his student Théophile Hamel (1817-1870). But these studied in Europe and their portraits are in the smooth, conventional, flattering European tradition of their time. Maybe I'm being a little romantic, influenced by the costume, the tomahawk, and the bows and arrows carried by the Chief's small son, but apart these appurtenances, I think that Zacharie Vincent's picture is so real, so free of studio trappings and tricks, so compelling in his directness, that it shows up the others for what they are and stands alone, as something indigenous, surely one of the first truly Canadian paintings.

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Like the other topographers, Bartlett can give us an accurate likeness of streets and buildings, and his drawings are of documentary value, as well as good to look at, but like the other visitors he is still looking at the Canadian scene through European spectacles.

1. En réalité, Zacharie Vincent a été l'élève d'Antoine Plamondon de 1837 à 1840 environ. Il a posé devant son maître pour *le Dernier Huron*, tableau inspiré à l'artiste par un poème de François-Xavier Garneau. Acquis par Lord Durham, il est aujourd'hui à Londres. G.M.

An exception is Lieut. Thomas Davies, who was one of the earliest soldier artists to come to British North America — born in 1737, he was in Halifax in 1757. He does not seem to have found the Canadian sun too strong for his eyes; he was able to get along without his spectacles and to see Canada plain, with a fresh, innocent gaze. He was an amateur, with some of the primness of the 18th Century amateur. I remember describing him as a barber when I first saw one of his views of Niagara some years ago, with himself in the foreground, neatly turned out under a three-cornered hat; he was so painstaking, so precise, in his grooming of the landscape, making sure that every pebble and every mullein leaf was in its proper place and fastidiously combing the water into tidy strands. He was a sensitive individual, reacting directly to his environment, not according to formula, and he was able to combine his attention to detail with a wide perspective; he brought in the Canadian sky and the Canadian light. While other

topographers used monochrome or mild tints, Davies came out in sparkling color which, in the opinion of Kathleen Fenwick, of the National Gallery, imparts to his scenes « a brilliance, breadth and clarity that was not to be until more than a century and a half later associated again with the Canadian landscape with the advent of the Group of Seven ».

... We must not forget, it seems to me, that languages changes. The new idiom may not be immediately comprehensible, especially to those who are set in their ways. But new worlds need new words. It takes new shapes in art to express new shapes in living. We may preserve the old forms for our edification and delight, but art does not stop, any more than life stops. It does not remain fixed in one place forever. And so we go on, leaving behind us the old traditions that have served their day and making new traditions according to our needs.

Musée de la Province — Portrait de Marguerite Mailhot (Montréal, 1735 — Oka, vers 1806), épouse d'Eustache Trottier dit Desrivières. Toile par François BAILLAIRGÉ, 1782

