

**Marcelle Ferron, *Le Droit d'être rebelle : Correspondance de Marcelle Ferron avec Jacques, Madeleine, Paul et Thérèse Ferron, textes choisis et présentés par Babalou Hamelin*, Montréal, Les Éditions du Boréal, 2016, 621 pp. 7 b/w illus., \$ 34.95 paper ISBN 9782764624562**

**Ray Ellenwood**

Volume 42, Number 1, 2017

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1040849ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1040849ar>

[See table of contents](#)

**Publisher(s)**

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

**ISSN**

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

**Cite this review**

Ellenwood, R. (2017). Review of [Marcelle Ferron, *Le Droit d'être rebelle : Correspondance de Marcelle Ferron avec Jacques, Madeleine, Paul et Thérèse Ferron, textes choisis et présentés par Babalou Hamelin*, Montréal, Les Éditions du Boréal, 2016, 621 pp. 7 b/w illus., \$ 34.95 paper ISBN 9782764624562]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 42(1), 95–97.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1040849ar>

it becomes clear that the previous ones were mere steps leading up to this final pitch to the jury about the construction of liberal subjectivities in the early twentieth-century city. There is a nice critique of pictorialism here, positioning it within the larger context of photography in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as within the broader development of the modern city. Sekula defined photography as “modernity run riot,” and in this final chapter and in the conclusion, Bassnett foregrounds the fundamental link between modernity and photography, no matter the latter’s purpose.

In the end, the author makes a strong case not just about the role of photography in shaping a modern Toronto, but in shaping its modern citizens as well. And she has bigger ambitions which she begins to fulfill with this book: to convince the reader that photography, the modern city, and modern subjectivity are entwined in ways that need to be carefully examined not only across a variety of photographic genres by photographic historians, but also by historians who are trying to better understand modernity itself. ¶

Jill Delaney is a Senior Archivist, Photography, Library and Archives Canada.  
—jill.delaney@canada.ca

1. Classic works on this subject include, Victor Burgin, “Looking at Photographs,” in *Thinking Photography*, ed. Victor Burgin (London, 1982); Martha Rosler, “In, Around and Afterthoughts (On Documentary Photography),” in *Three Works* (Halifax, 1981); John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation* (London, 1988); Abigail Solomon-Godeau, “Who Is Speaking Thus. Some Questions about Documentary Photography,” in *Photography at the Dock* (Minneapolis, 1991); and James R. Ryan, *Picturing Empire: Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire* (Chicago, 1997).

2. The edited volume by Carol Payne and Andrea Kunard provides a good cross-section of recent Canadian approaches: Carol Payne and Andrea Kunard, eds., *The Cultural Work of Photography in Canada* (Montreal and Kingston, 2011); see also, for example, Carol Williams, *Framing the West: Race, Gender and the Photographic Frontier in the Pacific Northwest* (Oxford, 2003); Martha Langford, *Scissors, Paper, Stone: Expression of Memory in Contemporary Photographic Art* (Montreal and Kingston, 2007); and Penny Cousineau-Levine, *Faking Death. Canadian Art Photography and the Canadian Imagination* (Montreal and Kingston, 2003).

Marcelle Ferron  
*Le Droit d’être rebelle: Correspondance de Marcelle Ferron avec Jacques, Madeleine, Paul et Thérèse Ferron, textes choisis et présentés par Babalou Hamelin*

Montréal, Les Éditions du Boréal, 2016

621 pp. 7 b/w illus.

\$ 34.95 paper ISBN 9782764624562

Ray Ellenwood

Ma vie est un fouillis, un gargantuesque désordre où la seule continuité a été ma peinture.

—Marcelle Ferron

Marcelle Ferron is a major figure in the history of modern Canadian abstract art, and before discussing this exchange of letters with her brothers and sisters, selected and edited by her daughter, it might be useful to take a very quick look at her remarkable career.

In 1947, discouraged by her studies at the École des Beaux-Arts in Quebec City, Ferron moved to Montreal, met Paul-Émile Borduas, and began to frequent the group of painters, writers, dancer/choreographers, photographers, and designers who were dubbed *les automatistes* by journalists at the time. In 1948, she signed their well-known manifesto, *Refus global*, with its call for social and artistic liberation through generous spontaneity and its demonstration of how surrealist automatism could be expressed in non-figurative art. The publication was a moment of euphoria, the culmination of several years of groundbreaking creative activity, and was met by a strong negative reaction by church and state due to its anti-clerical tone. The energy continued for a few years of debate and demonstration, before the group began to disperse as some of them, such as Thérèse Renaud, Jean Paul and Françoise Riopelle, and Fernand Leduc, made their way to Paris and New York. Marcelle Ferron would follow, arriving in Paris in 1953, but before then, like other women signatories of *Refus global*, she



had married and started a family.

While Riopelle’s career took off very quickly in Paris (by the mid-1950s he was a rising star, internationally acclaimed, selling well), Ferron needed a few years to be recognized, as her painting became bolder and more assured, with its characteristic broad, sweeping strokes of a palette knife that sometimes seemed larger than the artist herself. But by 1957, she was presenting solo exhibitions in increasingly important galleries in Paris, and was showing with the likes of Riopelle, Borduas, and Sam Francis in group exhibitions on two continents. In 1961 her work was included at the Sixth Bienal de Sao Paulo, and in March of 1962 she was preparing for major exhibitions in Milan, Copenhagen, and Spoleto. Soon she was getting more and more shows and commissions in Montreal and had begun experimenting with new techniques for an old medium: stained glass. Those experiments would solidify the second period of her career, when she moved back to Montreal and began work on some magnificent architectural installations of stained glass for such public buildings as Montreal’s Champ de Mars subway station and the court-house in Granby. The Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal held a major retrospective of her work in the spring of 1970, and another in 2000, shortly before her death. By the end of her life she had become a much-loved, outspoken public figure, and her funeral drew enough people to fill the large Saint-Viateur church in Outremont.

Of course, such a hurried overview of a life is only the tip of an iceberg of personal details, capping a mass of incidents that are basic to the equilibrium of the structure, though largely unseen. Babalou Hamelin's selection of letters exchanged by Marcelle Ferron with her brothers and sisters affords us a glimpse of that sub-stratum, much as a personal journal or an autobiography might do, but with a special quality that comes from the dynamics of an exchange between extraordinary people. To my knowledge, there is no artistic family in Canadian history quite like the closely knit and brilliant Ferron clan. Jacques, Marcelle's brother, was a medical doctor, as was their brother Paul, who also sometimes acted as Marcelle's business manager. Jacques Ferron's practice sustained his real career as a writer of plays, tales, novels, and essays. Always an activist for Quebec autonomy, he was also, with Paul, one of the founders of the Rhinoceros Party. Madeleine was the author of a novel and three collections of tales, as well as a memoir on the mother of the family, who died young of tuberculosis and became, years later, a figure of controversy between Jacques and Madeleine. Madeleine also co-authored an essay on the Beauce written with her husband, Robert Cliche, a well-known lawyer and political activist in Quebec, and an eternal gadfly to Jacques. Thérèse was developing a reputation as a journalist, notably with *Le Magazine Mclean*, at the time of her early death.

Several editions of Jacques Ferron's letters have already been published, including *Laisse courir ta plume* (Lanctot 1998), an edition of early letters to his sisters, showing a very feisty young Marcelle, and *Une famille extraordinaire* (Leméac 2012), with correspondence between Jacques, Madeleine, and Robert Cliche from 1946 to 1960. These are people who write combatively and with sharp wit tempered by deep affection, encouraging

and berating each other in turn. *Le droit d'être rebelle* (note how the rebel is singular and feminine) presents letters written over a long period, from 1944 to 1985, and in her contributions Marcelle shows she can hold her own among the published authors in her family. In fact, early reviews of this book seem to have discussed it mainly as a literary publication, with one commentator, Jérémy Laniel, cited on the publisher's website, insisting that it reads like an epistolary novel. The first two hundred pages especially are a very candid account of three complicated sisters going through marriage, pregnancy, childbirth, and all that follows, good and bad. But the book is also fascinating reading for art lovers because it reveals so much not only about the progress of a woman artist's career, but about what was going on behind the scenes. Babalou Hamelin explains in her preface that, for editorial and personal reasons, the letters are selected (from many deposited pell-mell in a wooden trunk kept by Marcelle, as well as others found in public and private archives), and that she has occasionally deleted passages. One can understand why, given the complex and raw emotional situations involved.

When Ferron went to Paris in 1953, she brought her three young daughters with her, having separated from her husband, René Hamelin. Her early letters from Paris are full of details about the complexities of finding places to live and time to work, given her limited budget based mainly on a small and precarious allowance from Hamelin. She seems to be managing career, family, and even love life reasonably well until she is forced to contest first a trumped-up charge of sedition that almost gets her expelled from France, and then the efforts of her husband to divorce her and take custody of the children. To her despair, she loses the custody battle and writes to Borduas (then in Paris) from Montreal (where she had gone for the trial) in December 1957:

Je viens de perdre mon procès. J'ai été accusée d'athéisme et tout a été dit. Douze ans de ma vie ont été balayés.

Inutile de te dire que l'on ne m'accorde pas un sou de pension... me voilà dans la rue avec comme tout moyen d'existence ma maudite peinture.

Donc, je retourne en France—je ne veux pas crever dans ce maudit pays que je hais. (368)

Over the next half-dozen years she works herself into exhaustion, longs for her children, fears they are unhappy in Canada, and goes through moments of suicidal depression. But she can still write, in October 1962:

Reçu des intérêts vis-à-vis de ma peinture très réconfortants—entre autres, le directeur de Sao Paulo qui m'écrit que je suis le peintre qui l'intéresse le plus dans la peinture canadienne. (462, italics in the original)

This was also the year when the French critic Charles Delloye organized a large exhibition in Spoleto including twenty-five French-Canadian artists, as well as a smaller but important exhibition in Rome devoted to Automatist painters. Ferron reports on this with great enthusiasm, but even this sense of excitement is qualified with her statement in a letter around the same time: "...le monde actuel accepte, mais que par apparence, qu'une femme peintre puisse exister. Il faudrait être tout et ce n'est pas humainement possible" (462). She carries on, however, and in 1965 Jacques Ferron receives a sudden announcement from the sister whom he had called, since her teens, "La vieille folle:"

... pour moi, la seule chance de pouvoir survivre économiquement pour pouvoir travailler, ce sera un travail d'équipe avec architectes, ingénieurs. Je fonce là-dedans—en plus du verre. (C'est très excitant de travailler ainsi = hier j'ai dû choisir 8 couleurs sur 3 000 et le tout en transparence—j'ai l'impression de pousser toute mon énergie dans mes yeux.)

Je mets à point une nouvelle technique pour murale opaque—si je réussis, je travaillerai avec des architectes d'ici

parmi les plus fous. Tout ça pour te dire que je n'en suis pas à la compromission.

Excuse l'écriture, mais je suis dans mon lit—il est 6 h ½ a.m. J'ai au fond une vie austère—entrecoupée d'excès—vivre seule, faire face à une finance toujours mitée n'est pas de tout repos. Insécurité totale qui me pousse et me stimule—c'est un vice de construction comme d'autres sont avares. Je suis dépourvue de toute possibilité de possession. J'ai une mentalité de pauvre. (519)

She eventually did return to painting on canvas, when her life was more secure after her return to Montreal in 1966.

*Le droit d'être rebelle* can be seen within the context of several publications such as the 2014 BBC series, *The Story of Women and Art*, with its account of the difficulties for women artists through the ages, notably for Georgia O'Keeffe in the New York scene of the 1920s; or *Joan Mitchell, Lady Painter* (Knopf 2011), by Patricia Albers, with its argument that, a generation later, Mitchell had trouble emerging from the shadow of her male abstract-expressionist friends in New York, and of her famous lover, Riopelle, in France. Marcelle Ferron was not alone in her struggles, but her rebellion against physical, financial, societal, and moralizing constraints seems particularly remarkable. When Manon Barbeau's film *Les enfants de Refus global* gave journalists an excuse to accuse the Automatist "revolutionaries" of caring more about their liberty than their children, Marcelle Ferron's three daughters were quick to set the record straight in solidarity with their mother, through an open letter published in *Voir* (March–April 1998). Behind that response lies the reality disclosed in the letters of *Le droit d'être rebelle*. ¶

Professor emeritus of York University, Ray Ellenwood has written a book and several articles on Montreal's Automatist movement, and has translated the group's manifesto, *Refus global*, and other Automatist texts.  
—rayellen@yorku.ca

Gregory T. Clark  
*Art in a Time of War: The Master of Morgan 453 and Manuscript Illumination in Paris during the English Occupation (1419–1435)*

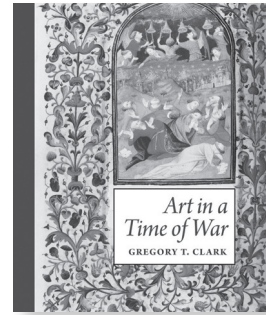
Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2016

xxviii, 388 pp. 253 colour illus.  
\$125 cloth ISBN 9780888441973

Jamie Kemp

Gregory T. Clark's *Art in a Time of War: The Master of Morgan 453 and Manuscript Illumination in Paris during the English Occupation (1419–1435)* is an impressive new analysis and catalogue of illuminators of French Books of Hours in the first half of the fifteenth century. It is a new addition to the Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies' "Studies and Texts" series. In this book, Clark presents the first comprehensive study of the Master of Morgan 453, a manuscript painter active in Paris and Amiens during the English occupation of Paris (1419–35) and up to 1450. By presenting a stylistic analysis of six Books of Hours attributed to the Master of Morgan 453 in the context of Parisian illumination and its Netherlandish influences, Clark maps the complex history and output of a Master painter he describes as "probably the most eccentric and inventive illuminator to work in Paris, perhaps even in France, between the demise of the Limbourg brothers and the rise of Jean Fouquet" (296).

The identification and study of the Master of Morgan 453 began in 1968 when Millard Meiss isolated a series of miniatures produced by a painter with a distinctive Netherlandish aesthetic in a Book of Hours attributed to the Boucicaut Master (Morgan 1000, ca. 1415–20).<sup>1</sup> After this initial identification, Meiss expanded the list of manuscripts attributed to the painter, at that time named the Master of Morgan 1000, to include two other Books of Hours, specifically the Hours of Charlotte of Savoy (Morgan 1004, now dated ca. 1415–25) and Morgan 453 (now



dated ca. 1425–30). Over a decade later in 1982, John T. Plummer, then Curator of Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts at the Morgan Library, extended the painter's body of work further to include another Book of Hours, Morgan 1004 (now dated ca. 1415–25). He also refined Meiss's discussion of the artist's style by highlighting the shifting, "protean" qualities of his work. He renamed the artist the Master of Morgan 453 after the manuscript that contains the largest number of miniatures by this painter (13).<sup>2</sup>

Gregory T. Clark entered the story of the Master of Morgan 453 as Plummer's PhD student at Princeton (begun 1981, completed 1988) and as eventual Assistant Curator of the Morgan Library (1983–89). Clark's doctoral dissertation continued the project begun by Meiss and Plummer by further defining the character and style of the Master of Morgan 453 and attributing to him the frontispiece of the Brussels *Grandes chroniques* (Royal Library of Belgium, Ms. 1, ca. 1415–20) (296). During this time, Clark also began to collaborate on what would eventually become the website "Beyond Use: A Digital Database of Variant Readings in Late Medieval Books of Hours," which expanded and digitized Plummer's hand-written recordings of calendars, litanies, and prayers (the "Obscure" and the "O intemerata") for the purposes of identifying French *Horae*.<sup>3</sup>

After a career of publishing many articles and several books on fifteenth-century manuscript illumination in France and northern Europe,