

### McKay, Marylin J. *Picturing the Land: Narrating Territories in Canadian Landscape Art, 1500-1950.*

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## JACQUELINE MCISAAC

Review of

McKay, Marylin J. 2011. *Picturing the Land: Narrating Territories in Canadian Landscape Art, 1500-1950*. Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Pp. xviii + 366, black and white and colour illustrations, bibliography, index, softcover, ISBN 978-0-7735-3817-7, \$59.95.

Marylin J. McKay's *Picturing the Land: Narrating Territories in Canadian Landscape Art, 1500-1950* is an insightful examination of how Canadians have portrayed their territory. McKay's threefold approach explores the relationship between society, art and the land, arguing that contemporary methods of landscape representation and Western cultural motifs in addition to conventional conceptions of territory influenced how artists, cartographers and amateur painters depicted Canadian scenes. Her approach firmly embeds this art within its social and historical context, inextricably linking anglophone Canadian and francophone Canadian understandings of their territories with how they creatively portrayed them. Reproduced maps, paintings, photographs and engravings offer readers a comprehensive survey of art that represented Canadian land, but McKay's additional use of contemporary art criticism, literature and even mythology successfully places these images within the broader Canadian and, at times, European art scenes.

McKay begins her work by stating that *Picturing the Land* is meant to be a "social history of art" (3), and to this end she is very much successful, largely due to the framework in which she analyzes landscape images. While she takes a roughly chronological approach, she also carefully explains how perspectives of land as territory changed over time, categorizing them under five separate ideologies that influenced artistic renderings of landscape: Nomadic, Arcadian, Edenic, sedentary and universal. McKay argues that these conceptions of territory not only helped characterize how the land was portrayed, but also that these understandings partially dictated the function of the artwork itself. This proves to be an effective way of analyzing and discussing Canadian art between 1500 and 1950 because it highlights the extent to which landscape art reflected social conventions while simultaneously showcasing an array of changing attitudes toward Canadian landscape itself.

From here, McKay moves through Canadian landscape art history, although she organizes her book by subject. Experiences with a new land, agricultural scenes, woodland images, the Group of Seven and a variety of social uses of art as a means of claiming space are all discussed individually, but because McKay consistently shows the relationship between landscape art and understandings of territory, these two concepts work together to show an evolving awareness of the cultural importance of these spaces. Helpful here is her insistence on addressing francophone and anglophone works separately, adding a crucial cultural dimension to her analysis. Believing that failing to distinguish between francophone and anglophone art is a "form of assimilation" (8), McKay devotes an equal amount of time to both groups, accounting for why shared spaces were pictured differently or noting instances of similarity. Her even-handed approach is key, as treating francophone and anglophone art as unique interpretations of the same territory supports her central argument while also emphasizing the fluidity of the land's meaning. Consequently, a more complete depiction of Canada's past art emerges and adds insight into different cultural understandings of space and territory.

McKay includes enough historical detail to contextualize the art she discusses, and she provides an equal measure of artistic analysis. In so doing, she produces a balanced and extremely valuable overview of Canadian landscape art and its surrounding historical context. This balance of social and art history renders this book useful for historians who would like a clearer understanding of the social significance of Canadian landscape art and of the pertinent historical context. This book should almost certainly be recommended for those working in both disciplines of art and history, especially if they are relatively new to either field, since McKay offers a fairly comprehensive account of the historiography and

scholarly discussion around her topic. Making the social history of Canadian landscape art accessible for both social historians and art historians is certainly one of *Picturing the Land*'s best qualities.

Especially valuable is McKay's treatment of the cultural work of Tom Thompson and the Group of Seven. While this is a well-covered topic, McKay discusses the Group's popularity while also offering strong points of criticism against them. She discusses the importance of the relationship between landscape representation and national identity, which, as she points out, could not have occurred without a growing desire for visual representation of Canadian landscapes. Although McKay's examination of the importance of landscape art for various articulations of Canadian nationalism are quite insightful, I would like to have seen more attention given to how the author defines this nationalism. Given the wide historical scope of the work, it would be nearly impossible to have one definition act as a framework, but a more detailed overview of the shape of Canadian nationalism as it evolved would have been helpful.

The quality of the book itself is worth noting. Not only are the images well chosen and carefully reproduced, but the quantity adds clarity and support to McKay's analyses. Containing more than 150 plates of Canadian landscape art, *Picturing the Land* covers an assortment of artistic styles, giving credence to McKay's categorical methodology. More important, however, is how she connects these as pieces of evidence. Her framework of five conceptions of territory allows for a detailed analysis of why the

shape of Canadian landscape art changed and was embedded with new meanings as Canadians altered their understandings of national identity. McKay is careful to note how representative each image is of the broader contemporary Canadian art scene, thereby clarifying and making an argument about the social significance of the landscape piece in question.

Despite *Picturing the Land*'s many positive attributes, a more detailed discussion of the media used by the Canadian artists under study would have been helpful. Suggesting why painting, rather than other kinds of visual representation, was popular among landscape artists would help further establish this work as a bridge between scholars of Canadian history and Canadian art history.

Nevertheless, McKay's work is a significant contribution to the literature on Canadian landscape art because it considers the importance of landscape art to Canadian history, thus creating wider avenues of discussion for scholars of Canadian culture. It is significant that this is the third addition to the McGill-Queen's/Beaverbrook Canadian Foundation Studies in Art History series. The series directly addresses Canada's visual material culture but, until now, has only examined individual artists, and so, McKay's work is a welcome addition, providing a broader viewpoint in a series that has had an otherwise narrow focus. Overall, *Picturing the Land* presents an effective balance between the social history of Canadian art and Canadian art history.

## CYNTHIA BOYD

Review of

Hanson, Marin F. and Patricia Cox Crews. 2009. *American Quilts in the Modern Age, 1870-1940*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.

Pp. 490, black and white and colour illustrations, endnotes, bibliography, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8032-2054-6, \$90.00.

From Log Cabin quilts to Colonial Revival quilts to quilts created from patterns and kits, *American Quilts in the Modern Age, 1870-1940* is truly a quilt reference of grand proportions—both in its physical heft and the quantity of information found between its covers—whose fascinating and highly visual text will be a boon to quilt

historians, folklorists and textile and museum specialists alike.

This work delves much deeper than most quilt histories, for its main focus is an impressive collection of quilts held at the International Quilt Study Center & Museum at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. The editors, Marin F. Hanson