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Drawing Out Illustration History in Canada

Jaleen Grove

Cette historiographie critique documente la réception des illustrateurs canadiens anglophones par l'histoire de l'art, la *cultural theory*, la politique culturelle et les collections institutionnelles, de la fin du dix-neuvième siècle au présent. Nous montrons que la préservation de la culture visuelle canadienne a été biaisée en faveur d'un agenda culturel nationaliste qui a mis à l'écart la majorité de la culture visuelle populaire illustrée et qui, par ailleurs, a négligé l'héritage culturel états-unien en faveur des liens avec la Grande-Bretagne. En outre, à cause du manque d'espace pour des archives et des expositions, d'importantes collections d'illustration attendent urgemment un foyer, et les archives existantes sont incapables de gérer les fonds existants. Avec une méthodologie guidée par la pratique, nous proposons un centre de recherche idéal pour l'histoire graphique canadienne qui serait opéré sur un modèle d'affaires autarcique.

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1. Randall Speller, "Hidden Collections: The Invisible World of English Canadian Book Illustration and Design," *ARLIS: Essays In The History Of Art Librarianship In Canada* (Ottawa, 2006), n.p.

2. Patricia Demers et al., *Expert Panel Report on The Future Now: Canada's Libraries, Archives, and Public Memory*, Royal Society of Canada (Ottawa, 2014), 11.

In 2006, the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) librarian Randall Speller wrote a brief historiography of illustration in Canada. Like many others commenting on the field since 1966, as this article will document, he found, "The field [of Canadian illustration studies] is still in infancy. Basic reference tools do not as yet exist."¹ Nine years later, the situation has yet to be rectified.

Illustration was the most ubiquitous form of colour imagery in European-language countries prior to 1940. As the 2014 Gustave Doré exhibition at the National Gallery of Canada demonstrated, early illustrators established the majority of popular culture tropes used in games, television, film, toys, advertising, and science, and in enduring print forms such as comics, magazines, and books. In universities and museums, interest in illustration studies and illustration history has been expanding exponentially with the establishment of devoted illustration research groups and journals (described below). The time is now ripe for the establishment of a dedicated centre for studying and preserving Canadian illustration history. But this important moment coincides with the November 2014 Royal Society of Canada Expert Panel Report, *The Future Now: Canada's Libraries, Archives, and Public Memory*, which warns of an "air of crisis" concerning "vanishing and undervalued national, cultural resources" and emphasizes "the urgency of the present moment when disregard or neglect must be challenged and countered."²

More hopefully, the report also suggests the opportunity (and necessity) of "re-imagining and re-locating" repositories of public memory.³ Canada's historic neglect of the history of illustration, however, threatens its chances of survival in any re-imagined re-location. Part of the problem is that the extent of this systemic neglect is little known, which permits the current structure to perpetuate marginalization. I will therefore probe the absence of illustration documentation in some detail, examining illustration's past and present reception in Canada. I will also comment on current international trends in illustration studies to give context for my concerns and recommendations. Then, from the perspective of practice-led research with the lessons of history in mind, I will start "re-imagining" the archive, the first stage of the design process for the shape, location, and self-funding apparatus of a future research centre.

In this endeavour I am guided by the sizable literature stemming from the sociology of art, from theories of nationalism, and from practice-led methodology. In the sociological discourse and in historiographies of art, Howard S. Becker, Janet Wolff, Pierre Bourdieu, Larry Shiner, and others have shown how

Who Will Win The
Fight Between
Landlord & Tenant?

MY FIRST SEVEN DAYS
OF TV

BY ROBERT THOMAS ALLEN

MACLEAN'S

JANUARY 15 1954 CANADA'S NATIONAL MAGAZINE 15 CENTS



Figure 1. James Hill, cover illustration, *Maclean's*, 15 February 1954.
Rogers Communications (Photo by the author, from a copy in the New York Public Library).

3. *Ibid.*, 10–11.
4. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field Of Cultural Production: Essays On Art And Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York, 1993); Janet Wolff, *The Social Production of Art* (London, 1981); Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley, 1982); Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (Chicago, 2001); Preben Mortensen, *Art in the Social Order: The Making of the Modern Conception of Art* (New York, 1997).
5. See, for just a few examples, Lynda Jessup, "Prospectors, Bushwhackers, Painters: Antimodernism and the Group of Seven," *International Journal of Canadian Studies* 17 (Spring 1998): 193–214; Anne Whitelaw, "'Whiffs of Balsam, Pine, and Spruce': Art Museums and the Production of a Canadian Aesthetic," in *Capital Culture: A Reader on Modernist Legacies, State Institutions, and the Value(s) of Art*, ed. Jody Berland and Shelley Hornstein (Montreal, 2000), 122–37; Scott Watson, "Race, Wilderness, Territory and the Origins of Modern Canadian Landscape Painting," *Semiotext(e)* 6 (1994): 93–104.
6. Angela E. Davis, *Art and Work: A Social History of Labour in the Canadian Graphic Arts Industry to the 1940s* (Montreal and Kingston, 1995), 99.
7. L. Candy, *Practice Based Research: A Guide* (Sydney, Australia, 2006), 1.
8. M. Mäkelä, and N. Nimkulrat, "Reflection and documentation in practice-led design research," Paper presented at the Making Design Matter conference, Helsinki, Finland (29–31 May, 2011), <http://ocs.sfu.ca/nordes/index.php/nordes/2011/paper/view/375>.
9. Chris Rust, Judith Motttram, and Jeremy Till, "Review Of Practice-Led Research In Art, Design & Architecture" (London, 2007).
10. M. Mäkelä, N. Nimkulrat, D.P. Dash, and F.-X. Nsenga, "On Reflecting And Making In Artistic Research," *Journal of Research Practice* 7, 1 (2011), <http://jrp.icaap.org/index.php/jrp/article/view/280/241>.
11. *Ibid.*, 57.
12. I draw here from my work in "A Cultural Trade? Canadian Illustrators at Home and in the United States, 1880–1960," Ph.D. dissertation (Stony Brook, 2014).

the category of "art" is policed and maintained by the collusion of various actors and institutions that stand to benefit from an arbitrary division they have created between "high" and "low" forms.⁴ In Canada, many scholars have shown how received cultural-nationalist assumptions have influenced public collections, arts policy, the popular reception of Canadian art, and anglo-Canadians' resulting self-conception.⁵ The critical historiography I offer below falls in line with this body of work. In particular, I build upon Angela E. Davis's important book *Art and Work*, which traces the origins of the marginalization of illustrators in the divisions of labour that occurred between roughly 1870 and 1940, and I comment on resulting attitudes that have since affected institutional policies and historical lenses. A key point Davis makes—which confirms my own research and my reason for conducting this study—is that the elision of illustrators from "art" has compromised Canadian art history. Davis says (and I agree) that the study of commercial art is integral to the study of fine art, since the makers of both were often one and the same; and in her words, "the graphic arts industry can be thought of as a bridge between commercial and fine art."⁶

My tracing and re-imagining of this bridge's place and use coincides with a swell in practice-led theory and methodology, which provides me with an opportunity to shift the frame of art discourse in ways congenial to the applied arts by leveraging my own professional practice as a designer and illustrator. Practice-led research explores the nature of creative and manual work in order to inform and intervene in practice and profession.⁷ It also aims at an equal partnership between professional practice and academic research.⁸ The invention, implementation, and assessment of practice-led research has been underway for almost two decades in UK-based art and design, but this trend has not been widely pursued in Canada.⁹ In education circles, practice-led research has mainly been discussed in the limited terms of fitting art and design doctoral students into academic conventions.¹⁰ But why not reverse the flow? As outsiders and expert creators, practitioners have perspectives and creative methods that can usefully critique academic discourse and policy. A major study on practice-led methodologies found that "creative practice can disrupt the status quo and allow us to explore new scenarios as well as the ones that exist;" and furthermore, that "If [practitioners who are also academics] are to control their own destiny they need an approach to the creation of knowledge that is relevant to them."¹¹ In bringing a practice-led perspective to bear on entrenched patterns of thought and policy, I am attempting to intervene in the legacy of those patterns and to change them. As a practitioner, then, I offer in the concluding section of this paper a proposal in the form of a design charrette in an effort to bridge theory and practice.

The Past

1919–1960. The neglect of illustration in Canada was fuelled by more than art history's customary downgrading of illustration and commercialism that occurred from roughly 1860 to 1970. Canadian illustration carried the additional burden of being viewed by cultural nationalists as un-Canadian because so much of it was tied to US popular culture.¹² St. George Burgoyne, author of the first sizable survey of Canadian illustrators (1919), observed that