

Déjà Vu

An exhibition

*of 19th-century Quebec painting raises provocative questions about
the distinct society*

by François-Marc Gagnon

A MAJOR EXHIBITION of historical Quebec art is currently travelling across Canada. Entitled *La Peinture au Québec 1820-1850 : nouveaux regards, nouvelles perspectives*, this huge show — it contains 270 works by seventy artists — was launched by the Musée du Québec in Quebec City, and its trajectory includes Ottawa (where it was on show this spring), Vancouver, Halifax and Montreal. The itinerary sounds familiar in these days of constitutional debates, but it is not only the itinerary that should ring a bell. *La Peinture au Québec* raises one of the most fundamental issues in the current constitutional controversy: the distinct character of Quebec society, vividly portrayed in its art of the past. This is not to suggest that those responsible for the exhibition — a team of curators under the direction of Mario Béland — were politically motivated (worse even, manipulated) in their organising of the show. Their aim was plainly scholarly, as the very authoritative catalogue they produced amply demonstrates. The “new outlook” and the “new perspectives” mentioned in the exhibition’s subtitle allude to their social art-history approach, as well as to a host of discoveries they made while preparing the show. In the process they have substantially reinterpreted most



Théophile Hamel
Autoportrait au paysage ca. 1841-43
Oil on canvas
48 x 40 in.

Photo: Pierre Soulard
Collection: Société du Musée du Séminaire de Québec



Joseph Légaré
Paysage au monument à Wolfe ca. 1840
 Oil on canvas
 52 x 69 in.
 Courtesy: Musée du Québec

of the better-known pictures presented here, such as Théophile Hamel's *Autoportrait au paysage* or Antoine Plamondon's *Sœur Sainte-Anne*. As well, they present a host of minor discoveries ranging from new dates and attributions to archival documents appealing to connoisseurs of Quebec art. Most importantly, this team of curators proposes a portrait of a whole society in a period of great political upheaval and soul-searching not so different from our own.

For me, one painting in the show epitomises this: Joseph Légaré's *Paysage au monument à Wolfe* (ca. 1840). One of the results of this exhibition has been a revised view of Légaré's status, largely because of the curators' discovery of the artist's innumerable sources. This strange

painting, representing an Indian giving honour to a statue of General Wolfe in a dramatic landscape of forest and mountains, is a case in point. The peculiar subject matter of this painting has already been at the centre of many debates among Quebec art historians. But Didier Prioul, one of the curators of the show, has discovered an important source for the composition that had escaped everyone's attention until now. The Indian in the painting is copied from the figure of Vulcan from an engraving by Jacques Danzel after the famous François Boucher painting, *Vulcain présentant à Vénus des armes pour Énée*. On one level, one can understand the painting as an homage to the British Crown following the failure of the Rebellions of 1837, a rather

surprising about-face for a man like Légaré who was imprisoned for his vocal participation. But not an impossible one. As Prioul notes, when Légaré exhibited the painting in Quebec for the first time in 1848, he also exhibited his copy — much praised by both the English and the French press — of a portrait of Queen Victoria by American painter Thomas Sully.

Perhaps, though, there is a hidden message in the painting. If Légaré had been curious about the mythology illustrated in the Boucher painting, he would have known that it was only by seducing Vulcan with her beauty that Venus was able to get weapons for her son Aeneas. For many French Canadians of the time, the publication of the Durham Report in 1839, which recommended the union of the two

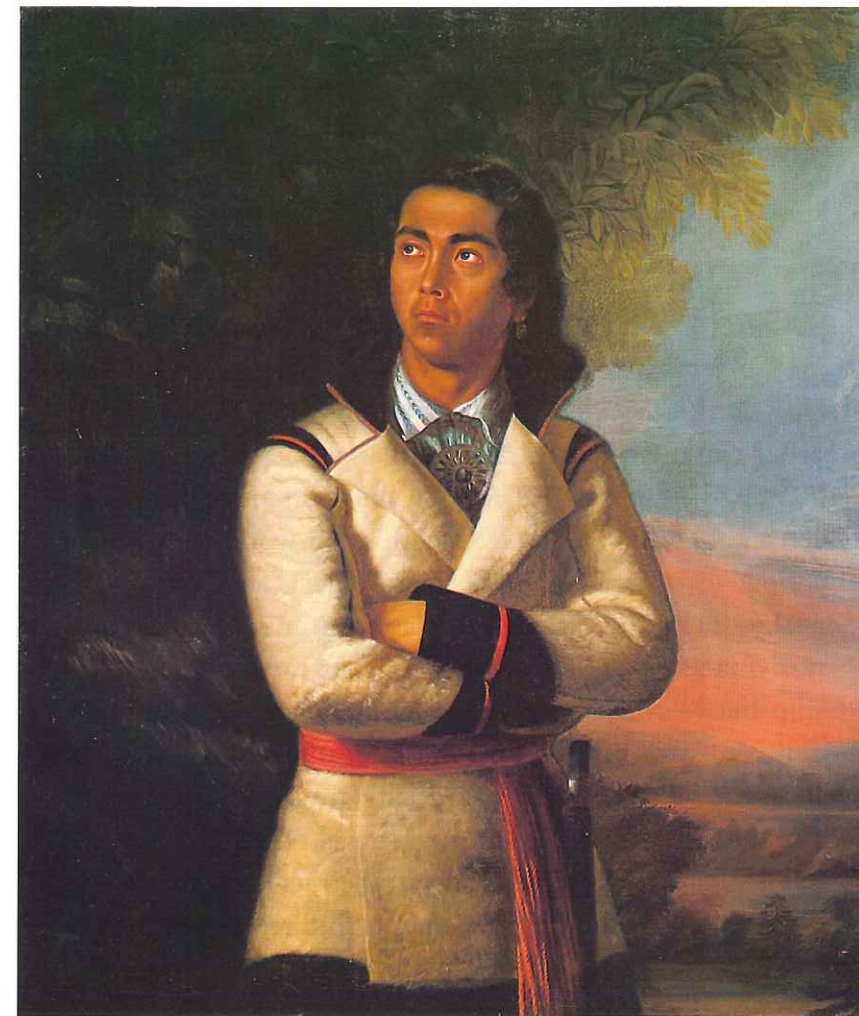
Canadas and, for all practical purposes, the end of French Canada as a distinct nation, was proof of the deceitfulness of the English colonial administration. After the Rebellions, they renewed their allegiance to the English Crown in the hope that the same Crown would recognise them as a nation. Even the 1838 visit of Lord Durham — a man who had a reputation for being liberal and open-minded — seemed for a while to have encouraged these hopes. But all this was shattered when the content of the famous Report became known. The French Canadians felt duped by the English seductress, convinced that, like Vulcan, they had surrendered their arms too soon. A long history of

parliamentary debates followed. We are still discussing these issues today.

Yet why, to express the homage of French Canada to its victor of 1759, would Légaré have painted an Indian? When Légaré painted his *Paysage*, the prevalent pessimism surrounding the future of the French-Canadian nation found an echo in the even more dire prognosis for the Huron nation, and it was not uncommon to compare the beleaguered fates of these two cultures. Two years before Légaré painted *Paysage*, Antoine Plamondon produced his portrait of Zacharie Vincent, titled *Le dernier des Hurons* (1838), a painting that is also in this show, on loan from a Toronto private collection. Writing at the time, an

anonymous reviewer of the painting in *Le Canadien* lamented that "Here we see the last descendant of a noble and brave nation which has disappeared under our very eyes like the beaver from our rivers, like the moose from our forest, and as we ourselves perhaps will disappear at the hands of a more powerful nation." It was Plamondon's painting that inspired the much-read Quebec poet and historian François-Xavier Garneau to write *Le dernier des Hurons*, first published in *Le Canadien* in 1840, the same year in which Légaré created *Paysage*. Garneau's poem imagines a day when the conquest of the white man will be as forgotten as an old statue of General Wolfe in the middle of the woods, a day when the Indians will come back as if by magic from the forests. Garneau wanted to express, as he said, "l'espèce de plaisir de vengeance" (a certain pleasure of revenge).

For Garneau, Plamondon and Légaré, the Indian served simply as exotic fauna, a symbol of the vanishing French-Canadian nation. One may well ask what the Hurons of the Village-des-Hurons near Loretteville, where Zacharie Vincent used to live, would have thought of being used in this way. Whatever your politics, this is an exhibition not to be missed. One cannot look at these paintings without marvelling at the society that has produced all these often bold and ambitious works, a society flourishing before the city of Vancouver was born, that had already been around for two hundred years by the end of the period encompassed by this exhibition. We are used to discussing our constitutional affairs in terms of equality, as if we shared the same history and the same values. But the relative recentness of culture in the rest of Canada and its deep root in the past in Quebec produces a profound estrangement between us as Canadians. *La Peinture au Québec 1820-1850* brings major milestones from our cultural history freshly into view. These are the real things. For Canadians — now more than ever wrestling to make sense of our history — they are well worth looking at. ■



Antoine Plamondon
Zacharie Vincent 1838
 Oil on canvas
 45 x 38 in.
 Courtesy: Art Gallery of Ontario