

As a major exhibition reveals, the work of **Ozias Leduc** lifts the material world into the realms of the spirit by Robert Fulford

A crucial book in Canadian culture, *Painting in Canada*, by J. Russell Harper, contains this sentence: "Ozias Leduc lived hidden away in the little village of Saint-Hilaire, virtually an unknown recluse." Embedded in a work of great authority, that quotation can serve as a useful reminder that even the best historians sometimes go wildly wrong. It demonstrates, in fact, just how many mistakes a scholar can stuff into fifteen words. Harper was an inspiring teacher who helped invent Canadian art as a field of academic study, but when he wrote that sentence in 1966, and repeated it eleven years later in a revised edition of his book, he surrendered to a romantic myth that never had more than a fleeting connection with reality. The myth has a peculiar adhesive power, however, and to this moment it shrouds in obscurity one of the remarkable artists of Canadian history.

The truth — laid before us in a major retrospective now on tour — is that Ozias Leduc (1864–1955) was never hidden away, certainly wasn't unknown and was about as reclusive as Charlie Pachter. Even applying the term "little village" to his home town gives a deceptive impression. It sounds remote and secluded, but in fact Saint-Hilaire was a twenty-minute train ride from Montreal, a ride Leduc often took.

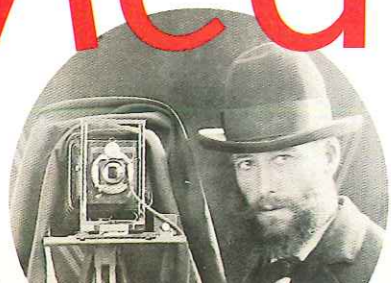
Far from being isolated, he was as engaged in life as anyone could want to be, and more so than most painters. He often exhibited his work in Montreal, to considerable praise. In 1897 he studied in Paris for six months, exposing himself to the emerging movements of Post-Impressionism, Art Nouveau and Symbolism. His many friends ranged from priests to poets. He illustrated books and, in 1918, helped create the short-lived Montreal magazine, *Le Nigog*, dedicated to a universal art. Articles about him often depict a saintly character, but he wasn't above envy: he thought, for example, that he deserved some of the attention that was lavished on James Wilson Morrice, whose name he once spelled "More-ice" in a letter.

Leduc was a church artist who pursued his profession with entrepreneurial zeal — he ran ads in religious magazines and won commissions as far away as Nova Scotia and New York City. Over his lifetime he decorated thirty-one churches and, in the 1920s, he simultaneously juggled assignments in three different places: the Bishop's private chapel in Sherbrooke, the Art Nouveau baptistery for Notre-Dame in Montreal and Sainte-Geneviève in Pierrefonds.

In Saint-Hilaire, he kept busy as village councilor and school-board member: the

Transcendental

Meditations



My Portrait 1899
Oil on paper mounted on wood
13 x 11 in.
Collection: National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

Opposite:
Self-portrait ca. 1899
Printed from glass negative
Collection: Bibliothèque nationale du Québec

exhibition includes his design for a bookplate to be pasted in Saint-Hilaire's textbooks. An amateur geologist, he sometimes led tours of the four-hundred-metre-high Mont Saint-Hilaire, which is famous not only as a subject of his work but also for its peculiar mineralogical riches in titanium, zirconium and rare earths. One of the photographs incorporated in the exhibition — along with furniture from his studios and reproductions of paintings he studied — shows Leduc studying a rock through a magnifying glass. He was eager to use new technology, which at the time included photography. While most of his self-portraits are in charcoal or oil, one of the best is a photograph in which Leduc stands beside his camera, his eyes as searching as a lens.

His career stretched over six decades, moved in several directions, and deserves more attention than it receives today. In English Canada he's seldom exhibited and little collected, and in Quebec he's still treated (by everyone but art scholars) as a marginal figure, always being rediscovered by someone or other. Last September *Le Devoir* carried a front-page story, "Le secret d'Ozias Leduc," which turned out to be about the Sherbrooke chapel, a project so far from being secret that it's been mentioned by everyone who has written at length on him in the past fifty years. Leduc remains poorly represented in the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, where Morrice is unavoidable, and most years you could visit the Musée du Québec without even learning that he existed. Much of his work is scattered in small-town churches, and not always well maintained. Even in the Saint-Hilaire church, there are water stains on Leduc's murals.

When *Ozias Leduc: An Art of Love and Reverie*

was installed at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts last winter, three paintings at the top of the museum's grand staircase announced the show's didactic ambitions. On the left was *Mystic Painting*, a vigorous and highly decorative religious work by Napoléon Bourassa (1827-1916), a major figure in nineteenth-century Quebec. On the right, looking much more familiar to the contemporary eye, was *Translucency*, a glowing abstraction by Paul-Émile Borduas (1905-1960). And there, in between, was a superb Impressionist work, *Green Apples*, by Ozias Leduc, in which we gaze upward through the cascading branches of an apple tree toward a pink-orange twilight sky. Painted in 1914-15, *Green Apples* was the most admired painting at the Art Association of Montreal 1915 spring salon. A.Y. Jackson called it "the most interesting thing in the show," and suggested that if Leduc joined a group that stimulated him, "he would be the foremost among us..." *Green Apples* was the first Leduc purchased by the National Gallery.

Laurier Lacroix, the guest curator of the show and an art-history professor at the University of Quebec at Montreal, set up that introductory triptych to make a point about history: Leduc was the bridge Quebec art crossed as it moved from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. But the quality of his paintings made him much more than a

transitional figure. This exhibition, the largest gathering ever of his work, attempts to illuminate the development of secular and religious Quebec culture while giving Leduc the place in Canadian art history he deserves. For the citizens of the secularized world of the 1990s who saw it in Montreal — or will see it at the Musée du Québec in Quebec City from June 12 to September 15 or at the Art Gallery of Ontario from October 18 to January 15 — *Ozias Leduc: An Art of Love and Reverie* works as an immersion course in the life of another era, an almost forgotten time when every assumption was different and everything in art that we now take for granted was strange and new.

The exhibition is an act of love by Lacroix, who has made Leduc the focus of his scholarship. Lacroix first heard of him from his Canadian art-history teacher, J. Russell Harper, while working on an art-history BA at Sir George Williams University (now Concordia) in Montreal in the late sixties. Soon Lacroix realized he had found his destiny, or at least a large part of it. He was so enraptured that, for an undergraduate paper in Harper's class, he visited every Leduc church in Quebec and photographed most of them. When he moved on to the University of Montreal, he wrote his MA thesis on the chapel in Sherbrooke. In 1978, he organized *Ozias Leduc the Draughtsman*, which toured from Rimouski to Victoria with a catalogue containing seven essays. That publication announced the beginning of a new period in Leduc studies, a period that culminates with *An Art of Love and Reverie*.

Laurier Lacroix is among those French Canadians who can say precisely what year their ancestors came to New France (1672) and where they came from (central-west France). He grew up as the last of nine children in Sainte-Justine on the south shore of the St. Lawrence, in hard-scrabble country near the Maine border. His father raised cows, corn and wheat, without much success. Born in 1947, Lacroix was raised as a pre-Vatican II Catholic. Today he retains his interest in Catholic history, but not the faith. "Like a lot of Quebecers, I let it go in the early 1960s. But I think it's essential that we understand that tradition, even if we don't share it."

From the beginning, Lacroix resisted the idea of two Leducs, the good (secular) and the not-so-good (religious) — the modernist who made contact with the avant-garde and the clerical traditionalist who looked backward. Of the church work, Lacroix says, "People felt that he had to do it for a living, his bread and butter — he wouldn't have done it of his own free will." In fact, when Leduc obtained a religious commission he elaborately researched the iconography of the paintings. In his letters to church authorities, he frequently pleaded for more time to work on a project, so that he could do it justice.

Lacroix decided that the secular and religious art emerged from similar impulses, and that both had high artistic value. In *An Art of Love and Reverie*, he has assembled preparatory drawings and paintings for the church work, and hung a handsome charcoal-and-oil mural, *The Martyrdom of Saint Barnabas* (1911), which was made for a church and saved when



Green Apples 1914-15
Oil on canvas
25 x 37 in.

Collection: National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

the church was destroyed. He has also included Leduc stained glass and a twelve-minute video that shows his religious decorations in place. But the attempt to unite the two Leducs isn't entirely persuasive. The religious work never seems as intense and personal as the array of portraits, landscapes and still-life paintings. If we mentally withdraw the religious art from the exhibition, Leduc remains a painter of commanding talent. If the secular work is withdrawn, he becomes a relatively minor figure.

Even so, it's vital to know that Leduc painted as a believer whose art, secular or religious, expressed his faith. He never left the church and apparently never considered doing so — an idea hard to grasp by a generation that has forgotten how deeply the church once affected even the most sophisticated Quebec culture. He came to see faith, science and art as interconnected elements of existence that he could

bring together in his work, an idea he drew from the historical air he breathed in his youth. He came of age when Catholic intellectuals were influenced by Leo XIII, who devoted his papacy (1878-1903) to reconciling Christianity with the new world created by science. Leo XIII opened a bracing new era in Catholic thought when he officially endorsed the Aristotelian philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas and installed, at the core of Catholicism, the conviction that faith and reason are not enemies but two realms that coexist in harmony.

Leduc extended that idea to encompass art, and was later encouraged by the work of Jacques Maritain, the neo-Thomist philosopher, who inspired artists as different as the French painter Georges Rouault and the Toronto novelist Morley Callaghan. Maritain confirmed Leduc's belief in creative intuition and in wisdom heightened by the



Phrenology 1892
Oil on wood panel
13 x 11 in.

The Lavalin Collection of the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal
Photo: Richard-Max Tremblay



The Young Student 1894
Oil on canvas
14 x 18 in.

Collection: National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

experience of the senses. His feathery surfaces, meticulous lines, soft light and Chardinesque compositions were acts of both piety and love.

That specifically Catholic synthesis lay behind some of the fifteen or so still-life paintings he made in the 1890s, a series so much admired by a few collectors that over the years at least five fakes have appeared on the market. The still life was a relatively mundane genre, an arena for virtuoso painting. Leduc's works demonstrated virtuosity, but also illustrated his meditations — or "reverie," as Lacroix's title says — on the mysteries to be found in physical objects.

One of his most-reproduced paintings, *Phrenology* (1892), can be read as a way of making those mysteries visible. In childhood he was fascinated by phrenology, the analysis of character through the study of the contours of the skull, which was the early nineteenth century's attempt to invent neurology. For many years he kept a phrenologically diagrammed plaster head in his studio. In *Phrenology*, he places that head on top of an anatomy book in English, with some drawings and a pair of drawing compasses — each of them an object connected to both science and art. Behind them he depicts a reproduction that hung in his studio for many years: *Sabrina*, a mythological work from 1843 by the British artist W.E. Frost. In a glass holding paintbrushes, the prism of the water produces a rainbow, a metaphor for art (or something very like it) spontaneously occurring through divine grace in nature.

In this Leduc painting and in others, books are more than props. Books were close to the centre of his own life, and he clearly liked to depict his subjects in the act of reading. In *The*

Young Student (1894), the boy approaches the printed material before him with an air of humility. Leduc found something wonderfully mysterious, perhaps sacred, in the act of reading, and he loved to dwell on his subjects' absorbed expressions. His readers exist simultaneously in mundane space and in the imagined space created by the content of the book: he hints at what hides behind the face of the reader.

In 1894, he placed a book at the centre of his most delicate and precise trompe-l'oeil painting, *Still Life with Open Book*. In the foreground an art book is opened to a reproduction of a detail from *Virgin and Child with Saint John the Baptist* by Sandro Botticelli, and in the background we can glimpse a version of *The Presentation in the Temple* by Rubens. Around the art book we can see rolled parchment, other books, a magazine, part of a violin, a stick of resin. The themes are obvious — the arts, faith, publishing and scholarship — but the central issue Leduc addresses remains elusive. Of the several explanations advanced by scholars, I favour the idea that he depicts the artist's (and, by extension, the publisher's or scholar's) role as a link between our immediate, physical world and the unseen world of the spirit.

Another kind of spirit infuses *Erato (Muse in the Forest)* which he painted around 1906, not long after his marriage to his cousin, Marie-Louise, the widow of Leduc's former teacher, Luigi Capello. Here, as the new century gets under way, Leduc incorporates the Symbolism absorbed through his study in Paris and his later examinations of art magazines. *Erato* (the muse of poetry) is represented by an ecstatic female nude, glowing with a golden light that seems to



Erato (Muse in the Forest) ca. 1906
Oil on cardboard
11 x 9 in.
Collection: National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

come from within her rather than from the sun. What's interesting is that Leduc brings Symbolism home, right to his doorstep: comparison with other paintings shows that the nude is standing at the foot of Mont Saint-Hilaire — a place that (according to local legend) was inhabited by a variety of spirits.

Leduc never exhibited *Erato (Muse in the Forest)*, correctly sensing that nudes were not likely to be altogether acceptable in pious Montreal; today, however, it is among his most admired works, and appeared last year in the major Symbolist show at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. It vividly illustrates something he once wrote, as much to himself as to other artists: "Express the world which sleeps within you. What you so strongly feel, make others feel it too. You will thus create a blaze of love around you."

Erato (Muse in the Forest) is also an introduction to the landscape paintings that followed, in which Mont Saint-Hilaire, absent the nude figure, is imbued with elements of mystery. *Golden Snow* (1916) is an expertly painted and deeply felt tribute to the topography he lived with and studied, but it also implies an idealized version of the act of ascension — a reference, probably, to the fact that Mont Saint-Hilaire was a pilgrimage site during the nineteenth century, with the fourteen Stations of the Cross leading to a chapel at the summit, topped by a thirty-metre cross.

A more fascinating work, *Day's End* (1913), depicts a deep quarry seen from below. *Day's End* looks at first glance like a routine landscape, but under scrutiny reveals itself as a bundle of complexities. The only exit to safe ground above is a dangerous-looking rope ladder; in the right foreground are some tools, close to the picture plane. Leduc makes us puzzle over the scale, heightening the mystery, and sends a wisp of blue smoke across the bottom of the quarry. These paintings seem to confirm Lacroix's view that the period 1912–21 was the richest in Leduc's career.

If those who see *An Art of Love and Reverie* find it hard to reconcile Leduc the church artist and Leduc the secular painter, they should know that this is not a new problem. Even in his most active days, he sometimes baffled secular admirers. A critic, having fallen in love with Leduc as a modernist landscape painter, would arrive at his studio and find him finishing a crucifixion. As late as 1941, Leduc was moving back and forth between radically contradictory approaches to art. That year he produced both *Mater Amabilis*, a formulaic and sentimentally folkloric painting in which the Virgin and Child appear before a mother and her child in a Quebec cottage, and *Dark Landscape*, a modernist work on the brink of abstraction. Both were purchased by the same priest in Trois Rivières.

In the past, critics have resolved these apparent contradictions by depicting Leduc as a folk hero, and ignoring his sophisticated knowledge in order to emphasize his authenticity and originality. In Leduc's day, conservative Catholic intellectuals yearned for a patriotic art rooted in rural

Quebec. They knew the painter likeliest to deliver would be someone who sprang directly from the soil — if possible, a hermit. Over the years, artists and critics used that image of Leduc to further whatever cause obsessed them, passing it along like a baton in a relay race.

Even those who embraced the outside world, rebelling against what they saw as a narrow, priest-ridden culture, helped to perpetuate the myth. By coincidence, the leader of the modernists, Paul-Émile Borduas, was also from Saint-Hilaire. For a long while, Leduc's Saint-Hilaire church decorations were the only art Borduas knew at first hand. In the fifties he wrote: "I have remained faithful throughout my life to those first impressions. Believe it or not, everything pictorial that I have admired since has been in accord with them."

Born in 1905, Borduas was Leduc's boyish admirer, then his pupil, then his apprentice. In 1922, Borduas went to Sherbrooke to help with the Bishop's chapel. A year later, Leduc encouraged him to study at the École des Beaux-Arts in Montreal. Borduas planned to be a church decorator like his teacher; it was only when the Depression dried up commissions that he turned to teaching in Montreal, then to the painting and ideas that eventually made him the leader of the Automatistes. In 1948, with his manifesto, *Refus global*, Borduas became the centre of a socio-political upheaval that anticipated the Quiet Revolution.

When it became clear that the same village had produced two of Quebec's leading artists, it seemed natural — human belief in progress being what it is — to assume that the first was only a prelude to the second. People who grew up when Borduas was a towering figure assumed, without seeing much of Leduc's art, that he was merely a stage on the way to Borduas and abstraction. In the public mind and journalistic imagination, pupil eclipsed teacher — though this process helped make the teacher better known. His association with Borduas was the best thing that happened to Leduc's late reputation, and also the worst.

Borduas wrote about Leduc twice, for *Canadian Art* in 1953 and for a Leduc issue of *Arts et Pensée* in 1954. Those pieces are ostensibly written in praise of Leduc, but they have a curious effect. The more Borduas praises him, the grander and more gracious Borduas seems — and the humbler Leduc appears. Borduas pays tribute to Leduc's generosity as a teacher: "...when it became evident that I might stand for some values contrary to his hopes, no opposition, no resistance was felt: his precious and steady sympathy did not change." Yet he depicts him — once more — as an isolated and mysterious figure, "matured, nobody knows how, at Saint-Hilaire at the foot of his mountain." Little is said about his encounters with modernism in any form, and nothing about the intellectual side of his nature. Between the lines, Borduas seems to say: how amazing it is that a giant like me was taught by this noble rustic. If it does nothing else, *An Art of Love and Reverie* will make that kind of condescension impossible and put permanently to rest the myth of an untutored primitive. ■