

Krieghoff, Cornelius: Stereo Canada

by Jerry Pethick

In 1979, on my return to Canada after living other places for eighteen years, I made a work for an exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery called *The Eskimo/Krieghoff Proximity Device: A Cultural Osmosis*. The sculpture and wall pieces evolved out of a four-year period in which I attempted to portray Canada in terms of an interference pattern—like how light from two sources creates a holographic image. The sources most significant in helping me see Canada at the time were native culture and European culture,



ABOVE: Jerry Pethick *Cornelius and Ernst Approach Toronto from Frozen Lake Ontario* 1979 Etched mirror and diffraction foil, enamelled steel, glass, silicon 76.2 x 111.8 cm Courtesy the artist

RIGHT: Cornelius Krieghoff *On Lake Laurent* 1863 Oil on canvas 36.2 x 54.0 cm Photo Carlo Catenazzi Courtesy The Thomson Collection (P-C-746)





Cornelius Krieghoff *Sillery Cove, Quebec* ca. 1864 Oil on canvas 93.2 x 116.0 cm Photo Carlo Catenazzi Courtesy The Thomson Collection (P-C-585)

especially between 1840 and 1930. This period seemed to allow the freedom to utilize the mythic proportions of the Inuit, representing the infusion of native influences on Canadian society and Cornelius Krieghoff's vision, part of the European presence.

In my researches, the last work to complete and balance the effort was a book entitled *Cornelius Krieghoff* by Hughes de Jouvancourt. (For the exhibition, I modelled the appearance of my glass book on it.) What was particularly satisfying was that it fit the idea of a European tradition established in a colony through a single source, the printed word, a history first written then printed. This first scant reading of de Jouvancourt's book

allowed me to continue in my belief that facts sometimes impede imagination. It remains among the handful of books that open the life and times of Krieghoff. Their authors form our vision of him and fire the tangents of our thinking. Thanks Hughes de Jouvancourt, Marius Barbeau, J. Russell Harper, Raymond Vézina, Eugene McNamara, and now Dennis Reid, for the Krieghoff plot.

BILINGUAL VISION

As a habit, walking on thin ice seems a necessity for an artist if you are going where you haven't trod before. I think the infatuation with this thin ice encourages one to make the kind of

suppositions that caused Cornelius and Ernst, his brother, to first arrive in Toronto by walking across frozen Lake Ontario. This is 1841, when in our memory, it must have been colder, wilder. It was a great adventure travelling with his brother across a huge body of water to the small, growing outpost of England, Toronto. The town's few hundred buildings mostly stretched up from the lake, north along Yonge Street. The crossing, in glaring sun, made the watchful journey of thirty-five miles interminable.

Imagined pictures feed the lives of our thoughts and send us along paths not yet discovered. Take the word "herbarium" in de Jouvancourt's book on Krieghoff. It presents a picture of



Cornelius Krieghoff *The Woodcutter* 1857 Oil on canvas 28.2 x 23.3 cm Photo Carlo Catenazzi Courtesy The Thomson Collection (P-C-727)

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a scholarly collection of plants, not just a few pulled species stuck on pages, but a real collection and some classification. The interest ties into Krieghoff's curiosity about the outdoor environment of the native hunter-gatherers whom he was able to accompany on short journeys while painting. Keeping an eye out for new specimens, he would be given medicinal information, one assumes, that would help him to classify the plants and mosses. To visually research the specific plants that each of his paintings show could be a productive investigation. In the opinion of one of his friends, the auctioneer John Budden, Krieghoff's collections surpassed all others in Quebec. As a close friend, Budden watched the collections grow, then saw them transported to Europe. Likely he was also present on some outings when specimens were found.

It's important not to miss Budden's acclamation of his friend. It gives a clear indication of Krieghoff as an informed and intelligent person. Not only gifted as a visual artist, with an innate curiosity, he also had the sensibility and manners to socialize with a broad spectrum of society. The facility for language that his European upbringing gave him must have helped his response to native languages. That he could communicate in other languages would have made his presence more acceptable to people,

Cornelius Krieghoff *Head of a Habitant* ca. 1855 Oil on canvas 33.5 x 25.6 cm Photo Brian Merrett Mrs. J.H.R. Molson Bequest, 1910 Courtesy Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (1910.307)



letting him share in all the various aspects of their way of life.

Krieghoff seems a person who wanted to fully experience his environment. Another friend, Christopher O'Connor, mentions that he was a great conversationalist and could discuss up-to-date issues concerning art, music, writing and philosophy.

THE ARTIST

Placing Cornelius Krieghoff in the historical spectrum of European painting has little significance because his leading vision is for another cultural circumstance. Leaving Europe at 22, with an innate curiosity and desire to envelope his senses in art, music and cultural history, he was prepared for his North American adventures in several ways.

As a chronological tool, it's interesting to look at the time-gap between when he settles into North America and then the effects of subsequent trips to Europe on his work. Being born in 1815 places him prior to most of the artists whom we now regard as responsible for transforming vision and visual representation in the late nineteenth century. His exact contemporary in France was Jean-François Millet and he overlapped Corot, Courbet and Daumier. In England, he comes after Constable and Turner, but well before Rossetti and Burne-Jones. In Germany, the country of his childhood, his years in Dusseldorf place him in a spot central to the developing industrial economy—after Caspar-David Friedrich (1774–1840), but before Lovis Corinth.

Krieghoff's three visits to Europe after first leaving in 1835–36 were in 1844, 1854 and 1863. A copying permit for the Louvre, dated October 1844, provides a pivotal reference point, an opportunity to pile on all manner of suppositions about his career—like an opportunity to see Delacroix's Moroccan work. Though younger than Eugène Delacroix, Krieghoff was probably

encouraged by Delacroix's work, in particular that stemming from his 1832 visit to Morocco when Delacroix's palette brightened and became a brilliant force in the transformation of painting. Initially hiding behind the representation of the exotic, this effervescence of ordinary vision was not easily accepted in the sombre times preceding Impressionism. If indeed these Delacroix were in the Louvre, they would have encouraged Krieghoff to respond to the profusion of colour in the northern autumn forests of Canada.



Cornelius Krieghoff *The Narrows on Lake St. Charles* 1859 Oil on canvas 36.0 x 53.0 cm Photo Carlo Catenazzi Courtesy The Thomson Collection (P-C-703)

The story lingering throughout the reference books on Krieghoff adheres to the idea of the difficulty that Europeans had with the vividness of the colours of the autumnal scene of North America. The sheer brilliance of much of the reds and yellows would mostly have existed only in Delacroix's romantic colour-feast visions of North Africa.

There is a tendency to think that Krieghoff painted earlier than he did because of the image in his work of an idyllic

environment. It harks back to an imagined era of a pure wilderness and First Nations peoples, untainted by European hostilities, perceptions and technology—a kind of untrammelled perfection. But that period was long before Krieghoff's recordings. Even the Rideau Canal and lock system was completed between 1826 and 1832, which immediately altered the river system from Ottawa to Kingston. The idea of an unspoiled wilderness had to be maintained by travelling and hunting other smaller lakes



LEFT: Cornelius Krieghoff *The Artist at Niagara* 1858 Oil on canvas 38.2 x 51.5 cm
Photo Carlo Catenazzi Gift Charles and Lois Thomson, in memory of Mr. and Mrs. H. Dewar Thomson, 1998 Courtesy Art Gallery of Ontario (98/20)

ABOVE: Cornelius Krieghoff *Taking Shelter from the Storm* 1857 Oil on canvas 33.3 x 46.0 cm
Photo Carlo Catenazzi Courtesy The Thomson Collection (P-C-616)

“As he drifted back to the cities, we begin to feel
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and rivers that still provided a traditional way of life for the nomads whom Krieghoff found so fascinating and so commercially acceptable as subjects for his paintings.

Paul Kane's journeys and paintings, for instance, attempt to search for the vanishing way of life of the First Nations peoples. Or rather, they try to capture that idealized state as it was largely imagined by white consciousness where the noble savage myth hangs like a shroud. Time was running out for everyone. Even though Kane was raised in Toronto, his work reflects European tradition, certainly the romanticism absorbed as a student. This influence somewhat nullifies the validity of the visual record of his great journey to the West, but not the journey itself. The realization was already there that the native peoples' environment was fast being eroded and destroyed. Krieghoff had already

been present, with the United States Army, at the Indian Wars in Florida, during the suppression of the Seminole Wars. He was familiar with the hostility shown toward native culture generally in North America.

OUTSIDE OBSERVER

One wonders if Krieghoff understood that loss when he became enamoured of the lifestyle of his wife's people, the French Canadians. Habitants are portrayed in his work as a strong independent society, living a simple, fun-loving life strewn with the hardships of survival. Somewhat idealized, yet honestly portrayed, the work raises the question of why paintings of Montreal and Quebec's francophone society are not in evidence: the merchants of Montreal and Quebec don't seem to be often

represented nor do the functionaries of the government. I suspect that Krieghoff, the recorder of the habitant, was seen as a common man by high society. There is a wonderful photograph of him, a curling club portrait that shows his aloofness. He is more gaunt than his colleagues, more solemnly dressed, but he has a solid and calm cosmopolitan air.

One of the curious omissions in books on Krieghoff is information about his knowledge of the Quebec painters, Antoine Plamondon, Théophile Hamel and Joseph Légaré and whether they met or related professionally with each other. The latter seems unlikely. In the period when Krieghoff is in Quebec City, he seems to be more involved with the English garrisons and with friends who were related to that social structure.

Initially, Krieghoff developed as a painter when he lived with

his wife Émilie within her family network near Longueuil. The intimate recording and meshing of his own life with the people he was painting gives a look at a historical social structure that is mutually dependent on shared labour for climatic survival. If needs for fuel, water and food were met, time to socialize and have fun could be found. These were the aspects of his life that established a sense of belonging—to a society that was his own.

As he drifted back to the cities, both with Émilie and on his own, attempting to make money for his family's needs, we begin to feel that he is an observer, an artist outside the social fabric.

In spending time thinking about Krieghoff, it emerges rather strongly that he was constantly making symbolic crossings, even though woven from social and visual descriptions. These crossings, touched off by the polarities that created his life,

illuminate the spectrum of his work. The seemingly erratic course of his life, while always grounded in the visual and bound by a largely continuous body of work, demanded a flexible and exhaustively creative head for economics to fund the financially tenuous life of an artist in North America in the mid-1800s.

In the early part of Krieghoff's career, the first edition of the artist's lithographs was published under the patronage of the British governor Lord Elgin. It was Elgin who also commissioned Krieghoff to paint Chief Tanaghte. The figure appears stiff and Krieghoff paints him from an extremely low viewpoint, so the figure towers above the horizon. Possibly it was painted outdoors, but more likely it was done in the studio or even based on a photograph. My first take on the work imagined several sessions of painting the chief in ceremonial dress, meticulously rendered to show his social standing. But then I wondered if Krieghoff might have painted it looking in a mirror (like Velázquez's *Las Meninas*), this gaze of Chief Tanaghte directed away from the viewer onto Krieghoff the painter.

VERTICAL HISTORY

If one returns to the books written about Krieghoff, tenuous threads appear stronger as one pays attention to his work as an evolving social document. It allows us to see, for instance, the change from an initial romantic notion of place to a serious attempt to delineate native culture as it was seen by a European outside the French/English historical dichotomy. Gradually, the romantic notion of the "red man" at ease in the wilderness is replaced by images of the white man at leisure there. The fishing and hunting is no longer in the "wilderness" so much as in the "great outdoors." It is shown as a pleasurable pastime, far from living off the land. The other change of perception one notes is that the paintings present the inclusion of the painter-recorder, like in a late painting of Krieghoff admiring an autumn scene. Sometimes he is in the picture, sometimes in the title. It remains, however, a question as to whether Krieghoff chose the titles or whether someone else did.

From, say, the completion of the Rideau Canal system in 1832, there is a technological and industrial presence in the paintings. We see the image of what the early settlers built: the log rafts, pasture lands, log booms, forts, villages and, in the later paintings, cities in the distance. You also see linked paintings viewed from opposite Quebec City where the surrounding countryside shows the advance of modern society in the distance, yet is central to the paintings. The distance of the industrial images in the picture plane in some of the later paintings is similar to Seurat's inclusion of distant factories or bridges of a few decades later, or to Turner's earlier engagement with the forces of technology portrayed within a spectacular Nature. The awareness that nature is being changed is present in most works.

Looking over Krieghoff's shoulder we see a realist's recording of a romantic vision, but one whose flexibility and adaptability came from an awareness of the furious change to society.

THE REDS

In 1986, a clear and dry autumn day, my wife, Margaret, and I travelled with our friend Lyle from Toronto to Ottawa along Highway 7 that winds its way through the Canadian Shield. It had been many years since I had seen the autumn colours, and it was truly astounding how diverse and bright they were. It seemed then that to comprehend this particularly luminous fall was only

just possible and that the ability to convey such a sight would be almost incomprehensible. Krieghoff was a painter of well-observed autumnal scenes, and the variety of reds he employed was nearly infinite. Maples alone have such a broad spectrum, you would need hundreds of reds to differentiate them. The memory can see infinite shades of imagined red and a painter's palette, in some systematic way, can certainly produce a large number, but

the profusion within a single tree makes the task a tedious slavery to documentation. Such translation is a meticulous, maulstick-supported endeavour by the artist. On those long, dark nineteenth-century winter nights, the recollection of the profusion of reds covering the landscape would have been blurred under the brilliant white of fallen snow. It's then that Krieghoff would have painted them. ■



Cornelius Krieghoff *Winter Scene, Blizzard* 1856 Oil on canvas 33.6 x 46.1 cm Photo Carlo Catenazzi Courtesy The Thomson Collection (P-C-632)