

---

H-France Review Vol. 22 (December 2022), No. 198

François-Marc Gagnon, Alexandre Turgeon, Donald Kuspit, and Clarence Epstein, *Québec. Un tableau d'Adam Miller*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019. Preface by Salvatore Guerrero. ix+82 pp. \$39.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0773557277.

Review by Leslie Choquette, Institut français, Assumption University.

Published in 2019, *Québec. Un tableau d'Adam Miller*, is a French translation of the book produced for the unveiling of Miller's monumental history painting, *Quebec*, in Montreal in 2017. [1] Both painting and book were commissioned by Salvatore Guerrero, a Montreal-based entrepreneur, philanthropist, and art patron, to highlight Quebec's contribution to Canada on the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Canadian Confederation. Guerrero came to the project through his love of art and his fascination with Montreal's, Quebec's, and Canada's history. 2017, he notes in the book's preface, was also the 375<sup>th</sup> anniversary of French Montreal, the fiftieth anniversary of Expo '67, and the thirty-fifth anniversary of Canada's repatriated Constitution with its new Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Guerrero attributes his interest in history to his personal experience of cultural diversity. He and his sister, the children of recent Italian immigrants to Montreal, learned English in school and married French and English speakers, respectively. He raised his own children in French during a time of rising Quebec nationalism, his son having been born on the day of the first sovereignty referendum in 1980. Guerrero has high aspirations for *Quebec*, which was exhibited in 2017 at the McCord Museum of Canadian History in Montreal and the *Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec* in Quebec City. Although the painting still does not have a permanent home, he envisions it as a piece of public art capable of bridging divides, whether the "two solitudes" between French and English Canadians [2] or the even older and bloodier gulf separating Indigenous peoples from European settlers.

The book consists of three thematic essays on the painting and an interview with the artist, Adam Miller. The first essay by François-Marc Gagnon, late founding director of the Gail and Stephen A. Jarislowky Institute for Studies in Canadian Art at Concordia University, considers Adam Miller and history painting. Guerrero selected Miller, an American with no prior knowledge of Quebec or Canada, for the commission because he wanted a grand history painting in the Western tradition, combining realism and myth to convey a universal message. A figurative painter inspired by Baroque and Mannerist art, Miller fit the bill. Art historian Donald Kuspit, author of the third essay in this collection, refers to him as "a New Old Master" (p. 41).

Measuring nine by ten feet, *Quebec* draws inspiration from several iconic history paintings. Viewers will see echoes of Eugène Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* (1830) and Pierre-Paul Prud'hon's *Justice and Divine Vengeance Pursuing Crime* (1808) in two allegorical figures in the foreground. [3] The young woman holding the Quebec flag evokes both Delacroix's Liberty and

the militant waif at her side. According to Miller, she symbolizes Quebecers as orphans abandoned during the British Conquest of 1763. Above and to her right, a woman in white inspired by Prud'hon's Justice gestures accusingly at the protagonists of the October Crisis, in which terrorists from the *Front de libération du Québec* (FLQ) took hostages, leading Pierre Trudeau to declare martial law.

Miller represents time spatially through his use of perspective. Distant history appears in miniature in the sky, accompanied by snowy owls and Canada geese, symbols of Quebec and Canada respectively. Contemporary history occupies the foreground along with allegorical figures and the painter himself, portrayed as an allegory of Confusion, an outsider “confused and confounded by the whole thing” (pp. 31-32). This layered construction may have been inspired by an immense though unfinished history painting by Quebec artist Napoléon Bourassa, *Apotheosis of Christopher Columbus* (1905-1912).

*Quebec* expresses the historical vision of its patron, the more so since the artist was a complete neophyte in Canadian history. The second essay, by historian Alexandre Turgeon, analyzes this vision, focusing on the myths and interpretations conveyed. The distant history in the sky begins with explorer Jacques Cartier and Donnacona, the Iroquoian chief whom he kidnapped, and ends with historian priest Lionel Groulx (1878-1967), whose works exemplify the conservative ideology of *survivance*. Jesuit missionaries and *filles du roi* (young women sent to the colony to boost its French population) dominate the representation of New France, which also features Samuel de Champlain and the Battle of Long Sault, a bloody French-Iroquois encounter mythologized by Groulx. The British Conquest is portrayed through the battlefield deaths of generals Montcalm and Wolfe (the latter evoking Benjamin West's famous 1770 painting) and the smallpox-infected blankets used against Indigenous rebels during Pontiac's Revolt. For the nineteenth century, Miller paints Métis leader Louis Riel and the Red River Rebellion he led in 1870, Riel's adversary and executioner Sir John Macdonald, and Sir Wilfrid Laurier, Canada's first French-Canadian prime minister.

The omissions are conspicuous. The Patriot Rebellion of 1837-1838 is nowhere to be seen, and when asked by journalist Jean-François Nadeau why he omitted Patriot leader Jean-Louis Papineau, Miller admitted to not knowing who he was.[4] Confederation itself does not appear in a painting intended to commemorate its anniversary, despite the well-known precedent of Robert Harris' *Fathers of Confederation* (1884). There is no hint of Canada's involvement in two world wars.

The foreground of the painting depicts twenty-five individuals and two events: the October Crisis of 1970, and the Oka Crisis of 1990, when Mohawk activists blocked roads and bridges in support of an Indigenous land claim. All twenty-five individuals were involved in politics after 1960, and sixteen were still alive in 2017 (three have died since). Nineteen served as prime ministers or premiers. None came from an immigrant community, perhaps because no “ethnics” have yet reached the pinnacle of elected office in Quebec. In this conception of contemporary history, politics is the only domain that counts.

As Turgeon points out, *Quebec* illustrates one of the most powerful myths in Quebec today: that of the Quiet Revolution sweeping away the Great Darkness in an almost magical transition from obscurantism to modernity, so that Quebec's real history seems to begin in 1960. Yet in Miller's presentist vision, conflict involving French, English, and Indigenous peoples remains the essence

of contemporary politics, just as it was in the distant past. Rivals Pierre Trudeau and René Lévesque occupy the center of the canvas, Lévesque isolated and imploring, Trudeau bearing a maple sapling and heading a conga line of elected leaders of Quebec and Canada, from Jean Lesage and Brian Mulroney to Philippe Couillard and Justin Trudeau.

The third essay, by American art historian Donald Kuspit, is the least useful. A tendentious critique of modern art and defense of postmodern mythic realism, it situates Adam Miller flatteringly in art history but never mentions the painting in question. However, Kuspit, a foremost practitioner of psychoanalytic art criticism, has since published a detailed analysis of *Quebec*, of which more later.

The book concludes with an interview with Adam Miller by art historian Clarence Epstein of Concordia University, who served as a consultant to Guerrero on the *Quebec* project. Miller insists that he remained completely neutral while working on *Quebec*, analyzing the situation objectively without embracing the viewpoint of any of his protagonists. This comment echoes what Guerrero told Montreal columnist Bill Brownstein about the conversations he and Epstein had with Miller: “We kind of built a story for him about how intertwined Quebec and Canada were, and it was quite neutral, Guerrero recalls.”<sup>[5]</sup> While none of the essays directly challenge this polite fiction, several statements by Guerrero and Miller suggest otherwise. In his preface, Guerrero describes Canada as “our country” and Quebec as “our province” (pp. ix, xi). Miller, likewise, aims to “to depict the history of an entire province – which at one time had been a nation” (dépeindre l’histoire d’une province entière, qui a été à un certain moment une nation) (p. 59).

Calling Quebec a province, while factually accurate, is a political statement at odds with Quebec nomenclature. Quebec’s Legislative Assembly became the *Assemblée nationale* in 1968 and the *Archives de la Province de Québec*, the *Archives nationales* in 1969; Quebec’s provincial parks were renamed national parks in 2001; today a billboard welcomes drivers approaching Quebec City to “*la capitale nationale*.” Miller’s suggestion that Quebec has ceased to be a nation is bizarre. A colony can be a nation, but a province cannot?

Gagnon’s essay comes closest to exposing the painting’s political agenda when he discusses its symbolic dimension. The vase of wilted irises the color of the Quebec flag (symbolizing faith and hope in the language of flowers) is surrounded by scattered coins, identified by Miller as “economic fallout of near separation from Canada” (p. 6). But only Kuspit’s later article lays bare *Quebec*’s federalist premise. Describing the two main antagonists he writes: “Both men are upright and righteous, but Trudeau stands above Lévesque, as though in victorious triumph [...] Trudeau is clearly a more successful, blessed leader than Lévesque.”<sup>[6]</sup> Lucien Bouchard’s proximity to Trudeau, which Turgeon finds surprising, is explained thus: “Miller pictures him close to Trudeau, placing his right arm on Trudeau’s right shoulder, implying that Trudeau was right [...] Bouchard raises his left arm over Trudeau’s left shoulder, and his left hand to the sky, echoing Trudeau’s. His glance follows Trudeau’s heavenward, indicating they are now in accord, have the same faith in Canada. Troubled--and troublesome--Quebec no longer rejects Canada, but identifies with it, as Bouchard does with Trudeau, belatedly.”<sup>[7]</sup>

Whether or not Miller intended this reading, it completely misconstrues Lucien Bouchard’s position on the 1995 sovereignty referendum, which he came to regret only because it failed. (He had advocated for a two-step process in which Quebecers would first authorize negotiations then

vote on any proposed agreement.) In any case, the painting's not-so-hidden political stance probably explains why Guerrera's dream to see it displayed in a public institution, ideally Quebec's National Assembly, remains unfulfilled. I doubt that the situation will change with the publication of this book.

#### LIST OF ESSAYS

Salvatore Guerrera, "Préface"

François-Marc Gagnon, "Note sur Adam Miller et sur l'Histoire en tableau"

Alexandre Turgeon, "Une histoire du Québec dans l'ombre de la Révolution tranquille"

Donald Kuspit, "La Nouvelle Objectivité"

Clarence Epstein, "Entrevue avec Adam Miller"

#### NOTES

[1] François-Marc Gagnon, Alexandre Turgeon, Donald Kuspit, and Clarence Epstein, *Quebec, a painting by Adam Miller* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017).

[2] The expression was coined by Hugh McLennan in his novel, *Two Solitudes* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1945).

[3] *Quebec* is reproduced on pp. 20-21, with identifying numbers and a corresponding list of historical figures portrayed by Miller. While the numbers are helpful, the details of the painting are small and difficult to see. I recommend consulting the digital reproduction on the artist's website: <https://www.adammillerart.com/gallery/project-one-mjdmc>

[4] Jean-François Nadeau, "Le Québec raconté dans une fresque," *Le Devoir*, 13 June 2017 <https://www.ledevoir.com/culture/arts-visuels/501077/fresque-sur-l-histoire-du-quebec>

[5] Bill Brownstein, "450 years of Quebec history depicted in one painting," *Montreal Gazette*, 31 October 2017 <https://montrealgazette.com/entertainment/local-arts/brownstein-450-years-of-quebec-history-depicted-in-one-painting>

[6] Donald Kuspit, "The Troubled Grandeur of Quebec: Adam Miller's History Painting," *Noah Becker's Whitehot Magazine of Contemporary Art*, July 2019 <https://whitehotmagazine.com/articles/adam-miller-s-history-painting/4346>

[7] *Ibid.*

Leslie Choquette  
Assumption University  
lchoquet@assumption.edu

---

Copyright © 2022 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172