

**J. Russell Harper, *Krieghoff*. Toronto, Buffalo, and London,
University of Toronto Press, 1979. 204 pp., 166 illus., \$29.95**

David Wistow

Volume 7, numéro 1-2, 1980

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1076888ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1076888ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (imprimé)

1918-4778 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Wistow, D. (1980). Compte rendu de [J. Russell Harper, *Krieghoff*. Toronto, Buffalo, and London, University of Toronto Press, 1979. 204 pp., 166 illus., \$29.95]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 7(1-2), 127-128. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1076888ar>

J. RUSSELL HARPER *Krieghoff*. Toronto, Buffalo, and London, University of Toronto Press, 1979. 204 pp., 166 illus., \$29.95.

J. Russell Harper has recently added this important monograph to his already numerous studies of Canadian art. The result of many years of meticulous research, the work provides new insights into the œuvre of one of Canada's most popular painters and complements general art historical studies of the period. The author's fluid prose and excellent documentation result in a worthy successor to Marius Barbeau's *Cornelius Krieghoff: Pioneer Painter of North America* (Toronto, 1934). The book is well designed and copiously illustrated with many works never before reproduced.

Harper's *Cornelius Krieghoff: The Habitant Farm* (Masterpieces in the National Gallery of Canada, No. 9, Ottawa, 1977) forms the basis for the present study, which traces chronologically the painter's life and artistic output (Fig. 2). The first of five chapters corrects many misconceptions concerning Krieghoff's early life. Harper has examined original family documents (fully footnoted at the end of the book) which establish proper birth, marriage, and death dates, Christian names, and occupations of those in the immediate Krieghoff household. The text in this section is both lively and rich in detail. Unfortunately Harper has been unable to verify the artist's youthful travels in Europe or his probable training at the Düsseldorf Academy which was closest to the Krieghoff family home, Schloss Mainberg. The author supports this assumption by drawing comparisons between popular Düsseldorf Academy subject matter, i.e. genre painting, and Krieghoff's later artistic preoccupations in Canada. Harper's argument, however, might have profited from a more judicious choice of examples, for André Achenbach's *The Old Academy in Düsseldorf* leads the reader to believe that the depiction of urban life was favoured at this German art school whereas rural subjects clearly dominate Krieghoff's work. A more complete examination of possible influences on the young painter would have been beneficial.



FIGURE 2. Krieghoff, *The Blacksmith's Shop*. From Harper.

As the Düsseldorf period is fundamental to an understanding of Krieghoff's art, it truly warrants more intense scrutiny than is evident here.

In chapter II Harper describes with real *éclat* the colourful society of Montreal and Longueuil, quoting frequently and to good effect from many contemporary accounts. Krieghoff, the *bon vivant*, is aptly conveyed: his wit, his gift for languages, his European education and extensive travels. Above all, Harper stresses the practical aspect of Krieghoff's personality. The artist joined Montreal's Shakespeare Club, a debating society, not only because of his interest in literature but also as a means of acquainting himself with potential patrons. He participated actively in painting exhibitions with an eye to the local market and even auctioned off his works in large blocks which was, according to the author, an unusual and even risky procedure. Following a prevalent American practice, Krieghoff had several of his more popular canvases engraved, resulting in additional revenue and a more widespread reputation. Perhaps the most convincing example of Krieghoff's pragmatism was his willingness to paint subjects which appealed to the well-to-do and to repeat these images endlessly if the market warranted it: *Bilking the Toll* is known today in twenty-three different versions.

Less adequately treated here are the sources for many of Krieghoff's

paintings. In some instances the artist copied European works directly; for example, his *Card Players* is based on an engraving after Sir David Wilkie. In other cases, however, such as the *Officer's Trophy Room*, Krieghoff only loosely modelled his composition after a European painting which, interestingly, he had previously copied. A discussion of the frequency and specific usage of these works by other artists throughout Krieghoff's career might have more fully clarified a significant aspect of his œuvre. Summarily treated in this chapter is Krieghoff's debt to seventeenth-century Dutch landscape painting, in particular with reference to his winter scenes. Harper's single paragraph on the influence of this tradition is insufficient to explain the roots of Krieghoff's most frequently portrayed subject. The argument remains incomplete and lacking in precise visual comparisons. The existence of a Krieghoff copy after Hendrick van Avercamp (1585-1663) is mentioned in the text, but, curiously, is not illustrated.

Chapter III, entitled *Fulfillment, Quebec City 1853-63* is the most extensive in the monograph and reveals Harper at his best. Descriptions of the painter's friends, their winter outings by sleigh, and boisterous evenings around the fire are all brilliantly conveyed. Harper's detailed analysis of Krieghoff's artistic output during the decade reveals the artist's remarkable eclecti-

cism. He painted portraits, still-lives, animals, and episodes from Victorian literature, although his main preoccupation remained the life of the Quebec *habitant* and to a lesser degree the Canadian Indian. His humorous, sometimes lightly satirical tone, as in *The Baker's Mishap*, displays the artist's inherent sympathy for the local inhabitants. The author fails to comment upon Krieghoff's ability to convey these amusing and believable narratives through careful manipulation of stance, gesture, and facial expression, as well as by the convincing orchestration of large numbers of figures. Closer examination of the paintings would have revealed Krieghoff's constant repetition of motifs (such as the young boy carrying a water bucket) and his commonly employed compositional devices. In many paintings the *habitant* homestead is placed diagonally to one side with a distant view into a landscape at the other. Small trees and arrangements of rocks and ice are invariably used to fill the lower corners. It appears that Krieghoff established formulas early in his career which provided the basis for much of his subsequent work.

The author's failure to discuss Krieghoff as a landscape painter is the most notable omission in the whole monograph. Throughout his entire life, the artist demonstrated his keen awareness of the natural world. Even in his genre paintings the landscape serves as more than a stereotypical backdrop to the narrative. An examination of the many colour reproductions in the books is indication enough that Krieghoff was especially sensitive to seasonal changes, weather conditions, and time of day. His rendering of skies in particular, with their infinite variation in hue and cloud formation, is convincing evidence of Krieghoff's ability as a landscape painter. In the artist's later works, such as *Tracking the Moose on Lake Famine South of Quebec* or *Lake St. Charles, Quebec*, the figures are so reduced in scale as to be inconsequential, for the real focus of the artist's attention is obviously the glowing sunset and dramatic, billowing clouds overhead. Disappointingly, pure landscapes as a group receive scant acknowledgement in the monograph. The single statement that 'by the end of the decade Krieghoff was taking more

interest in the painting of landscape for its own sake' is a gross underestimation of Krieghoff's contribution to Canadian landscape painting in the nineteenth-century.

The artist's final years are succinctly depicted in Chapter iv. To the end Harper's prose retains its exceptional readability. The fact that works by the artist are continuing to set Canadian auction records may have prompted Harper to include a final chapter entitled 'Misattributions Deceptions and Forgeries.' Of particular interest is Harper's discussion of nineteenth-century imitators of Krieghoff, such as Martin Somerville, George Hughes, and Zacharie Vincent, and the numerous problems their work presents to contemporary scholars. Harper's expertise and real sympathy for Krieghoff's art is best communicated in this discussion of connoisseurship. His anecdotes concerning twentieth-century forgeries make for fascinating reading. Also included in the chapter is a useful description of Krieghoff's painting practices and various signatures. Harper concedes that his study does not present the definitive list of the artist's problematical watercolours. Although this section is useful we await a further publication on the subject.

The book concludes with a section entitled 'Krieghoff's work: A Summary,' not by definition a *catalogue raisonné*, but an incomplete list of the artist's work. Nevertheless it is a valuable addition to Krieghoff scholarship.

In conclusion, Krieghoff's uniqueness as a genre painter in Canada has been firmly established by Harper in a prose both lively and detailed, reminiscent of the artist's works themselves. Although suggested additions to the text might have provided a more complete study of Krieghoff's oeuvre, this publication has made a highly significant contribution to Canadian art history.

DAVID WISTOW
Art Gallery of Ontario

BERNARD GENEST *Massicotte et son temps*. Montréal, Boréal Express, 1979. 240 p., 123 illus., \$12.50.

L'ouvrage que nous présente Bernard Genest est le produit d'une recherche pour un mémoire de

maîtrise en arts et traditions populaires à l'Université Laval. Préfacé par Jean Simard, l'ouvrage se divise en cinq chapitres suivis d'un catalogue regroupant plus de mille œuvres d'Edmond-Joseph Massicotte (1875-1929).

Ce volume abondamment illustré, très sobre dans sa présentation et son format, constitue la première publication de la collection « Iconographie de la vie québécoise » des éditions Boréal Express. Le directeur de la collection, Jean Simard, en définit l'orientation en ces termes :

...les ouvrages qui paraîtront ici auront comme trait commun d'allier étroitement les sources iconographiques et littéraires, voire orales ou figurées, de manière à ce que les unes s'appuient sur les autres comme des témoignages distincts mais toujours complémentaires sur la connaissance de la vie quotidienne... Une autre caractéristique commune consistera... à critiquer les documents d'apparence « photographique » produits par les illustrateurs de la vie québécoise en interrogeant la position, les intentions, les choix et les méthodes des artistes, le contexte social, culturel et idéologique dans lequel ils baignent, les goûts et les réseaux de la clientèle, sans oublier la « volonté artistique » elle-même... (p. 12)

Les buts de cette collection nous apparaissent intéressants et comblent une lacune dans les maisons d'éditions québécoises. En effet, autant l'étude iconographique ne peut être abordée sans l'apport de l'histoire, autant l'histoire des attitudes collectives serait incomplète sans une étude iconographique. Ceci dit, il ne faut pas se méprendre et montrer une série de reproductions l'une à la suite des autres, sans étude de fond.

Au premier chapitre, Bernard Genest brosse une biographie d'Edmond-Joseph Massicotte. Ce court texte donne une bonne chronologie des étapes importantes de la carrière de l'artiste.

Au deuxième chapitre, intitulé « La recherche de la vérité », l'auteur affirme qu'un souci de vérité préoccupe toute l'œuvre de Massicotte. Plus loin, il ajoute : « Sa vision personnelle de la vie à la campagne est peut-être édulcorée, mais on ne saurait conclure sans analyse serrée au manque de franchise » (p. 57). On s'attend donc à ce que l'ethnographe qu'est Genest analyse, date et explique les divers éléments des œuvres de Massicotte.