

## Art and Industrial Society: The Role of the Toronto Mechanic's Institute in the Promotion of Art, 1831-1883

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Résumé de l'article

Le Toronto Mechanics' Institute (1831-1883) était l'un des principaux établissements offrant à Toronto, au xixe siècle, un endroit où travailler, étudier les arts et exposer. Des artistes et des illustrateurs maintenant célèbres dans les annales des arts canadiens, dont Laura Bell, Mary Cooper, Richard Baigent, William Bengough, Robert Gagen, William Hind, Henry Martin, George Reid, Kivas Tulley, John Tully et E.K. Westmacott, étaient parmi ceux et celles qui enseignaient et exposaient à l'Institut, dont le salon annuel accueillait, au milieu du XIXe siècle, entre 6 000 et 9 000 visiteurs et présentait jusqu'à 700 tableaux et photographies.

Fondé pour favoriser l'apprentissage autonome des travailleurs durant la période qui a précédé la Rébellion du Haut-Canada, le Toronto Mechanics' Institute joua un rôle fort important pour la classe ouvrière de Toronto tout au long du XIXesiècle, tant dans le domaine des arts plastiques que dans celui des beaux-arts. Son influence ne diminua qu'après 1875, lorsque le gouvernement prit des mesures pour favoriser davantage l'enseignement aux adultes. Les procès-verbaux et les rapports annuels de l'Institut sont une mine d'information pour les chercheurs. Ils montrent que, contrairement aux idées reçues, les instituts de ce genre n'étaient pas des établissements de la classe moyenne. Le Toronto Mechanics' Institute, a été le théâtre de nombreux débats vigoureux sur des questions de grande importance sociale et n'a jamais dévié de son orientation ouvrière, malgré les fréquentes recompositions de son conseil d'administration. L'auteure présente quelques constatations puisées dans des archives et apporte quelques précisions théoriques sur les débats que suscite le Toronto Mechanics' Institute. Elle espère ainsi favoriser d'autres travaux de recherche sur ce sujet.

# Art and Industrial Society: The Role of the Toronto Mechanic's Institute in the Promotion of Art, 1831-1883

Ellen L. Ramsay

"Man is a being of mysterious complexity; and he who in subjugating his powers, to menial tasks, overlooks or blinks this fact, commits a sacrilege upon his nature. Whilst there is nothing too low or grovelling for him to stoop to, there is, at the same time, nothing too high to be unattainable by his ambition. While his feet tread the grounds — while his brow fronts the sky — while his hands turn the sod, tug at the oar, or ply the loom, his soul, in its spiritual outgoings, may be roaming among the stars" (Mr. Quentin - a mechanic)

"And now, I will venture to say to those gentlemen, who look upon the working classes as nothing but mere machines, that I know a machine more powerful than that constructed by Watt — and still more important than that made by Arkwright, and capable of attaining much higher perfection... What then is this machine? Must I pronounce it? — Must I adopt language to express it? — it is Man!"

Walter Eales (painter), *Lecture on the Benefits to be Derived from Mechanics' Institutes*, delivered to the Toronto Mechanics' Institute, 1851.

The lords of earth are only great,  
While others clothe and feed them  
But what were all their pride and state  
Should labour cease to heed them?...

We toil, we spin, we delve the mine,  
Sustaining each his neighbour;  
And who can hold a 'right divine'  
To rob us of our labour?

Ellen L. Ramsay, "Art and Industrial Society: The Role of the Toronto Mechanic's Institute in the Promotion of Art, 1831-1883," *Labour/Le Travail*, 43 (Spring 1999), 71-103.

## 72 LABOUR/LE TRAVAIL

The tyrants chains are only strong,  
While slaves submit to wear them,  
And who could bind them on the throng  
Determined not to wear them.

W.L. Mackenzie, *The Constitution (Toronto)*, 27 November 1837, stanzas 1, 2, and 4.

TO THE HISTORIAN, the speeches delivered before the Toronto Mechanics' Institute by Quentin and Eales are a familiar reminder of the relationship between labour and the desire of the working class to break the bonds of its alienation in 19th-century Canada. The stanzas by William Lyon Mackenzie, then, add a necessary political component to the transformation of feeling in the context of the Upper Canadian Rebellion. To the art historian, however, the address by Eales, who is described as a "painter" (sign painter) on the published pamphlet, conjures up an unfamiliar age when instruction in fine art was seen as central to the advancement of the working class in Canada, as opposed to the more middle class "moral" improvement of its citizens.

As Sandford Fleming's design (1850) for the Toronto Mechanics' Institute prize certificate suggests (fig. 1), the vision of the Institute for working-class education could be symbolized by the figure of Atlas carrying his globe over the inscription *Knowledge is Power* (after Francis Bacon), supported by the dual faculties of science and art. These two faculties are then driven forward into the modern age by the railway (beneath the pillar of science) and extended through the industry of mind (beneath the pillar of art) into the modern world. The analogy is completed with the celebration of the material achievements of the industrial age with the construction of the railway bridge (transportation) and the power loom (manufacturing). Fleming's conception of the cosmos, therefore, sets the classical ideals of human knowledge and self-improvement upon the material foundations of industry mediated by the human capacity to reason.

The relationship between art and industrial society has only intermittently received the attention of art historians, despite the fact that this relationship has provided the central dynamic for artistic activity since 1750. The marxist scholar Francis Klingender was perhaps the first art historian to seriously consider the significance of modern industrial society to artistic technique, art patronage, and subject matter in his small volume *Art and the Industrial Revolution* (1947) although here, as Bernard Smith has pointed out, Klingender largely reduced the problem of art and industry to an iconographic matter. Klingender presents the pictorial celebration of the new science and industry through the study of artists such as Joseph Wright of Derby, painter of Richard Arkwright's mill, and its subsequent critique by romantics such as William Blake. Another marxist art historian, Arnold Hauser, tried to locate art in the industrial era across a broad range of humanistic disciplines in his *Social History of Art* series, where he attempted to



Figure 1. Credit: *Metropolitan Toronto Reference Library*, 850 D.

analyze world art under Marx's epochal categories. Similarly, Australian art historian Bernard Smith wrote a volume entitled *Place, Taste and Tradition: A Study of Australian Art Since 1788* (1947) in which he examined art in a colonial context (including colonial-imperial relations) and the development of a "national" school of painters in a post-colonial industrial setting. These volumes of art history provide an example of the work of a generation of art historians who attempted to move beyond the traditional boundaries of their discipline for an art historical study which would link art history to a full array of historical and social science disciplines.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>For secondary sources exploring the relationship between art and industry see Francis D. Klingender, *Art and the Industrial Revolution* (London 1947); Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art* (New York 1951) v. III; and Bernard Smith, *Place, Taste and Tradition* (Melbourne 1947). Other useful references on art and industry include Bernard Smith, ed., *Documents on Art and Taste in Australia*, (Melbourne 1975); and Bernard Smith, *The Death of the Artist as Hero: Essays in History and Culture* (Melbourne 1988), especially, "Art and

Since the 1930s and 1940s, there has been a resurgence of a social history of art with a number of studies focussing on the dynamics of class society on art in the industrial era including the work of T.J. Clark, who has explored the connections between visual art and modernity in France (during the Second Republic) in *The Painting of Modern Life* (1985). Some of this more recent writing emanates from a post-structuralist re-working of the earlier social history of art while other volumes have taken alternative materialist directions. All of the new schools owe their influence to post-war marxism and feminism.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to these intermittent studies, scholarly literature on Canadian art has, until comparatively recently, stood without a substantive historical or political framework within which to deal with the modern period. The influential histories of 19th-century and 20th-century Canadian art employ an episodic and biographical approach within the mainstream context of a colony-to-nation narrative. Here, the two volumes most commonly referred to in university introductory courses, J. Russell Harper's *Painting in Canada* (1966), and Dennis Reid's *The Concise History of Canadian Painting* (1973), explore the development of colonial and post-colonial art under the historical headings of the "French Colony," the "English colony," the "Dominion" or "Confederation," and "National" or "International" culture. This approach has generally suggested that the development of post-conquest Canadian art followed the pattern of early European settlement in the maritime colonies (with reference to concurrent incipient development on the west coast), travelling along the St. Lawrence River to the entrepôts of Québec, Mon-

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Industry: a Systematic Approach," 33-50. A generation of art historians from the 1930s (many of them refugees from fascism) were the first to take consideration of the material conditions of artistic creation. They included marxists Arnold Hauser, Meyer Schapiro, Max Raphael, and slightly later, John Berger. While some took the popular front as their political point of departure, others took alternative materialist directions in their work. For a useful survey of approaches to art history (both traditional and marxist) see Michael Podro, *Critical Historians of Art* (New Haven 1982); Marcia Pointon, *History of Art: A Student's Handbook* (London 1994); and A.L. Rees and Frances Borzello, eds., *The New Art History* (London 1986).

<sup>2</sup>For example see, T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (New York 1984). Clark has also written other volumes along a similar vein including *The Absolute Bourgeois: Artists and Politics in France 1848-1851* (London 1973) and *Image of the People: Gustav Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* (London 1973). Feminist-marxist contributions include, Bridget Elliott and Jo-Ann Wallace, *Women Artists and Writers: Modernist (Im)Positionings* (London 1994), and Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (London 1988). Historians of Canadian working-class culture should note that liberal historian Ramsay Cook has recently cited the art historical tradition of T.J. Clark alongside Barbara Novak as a possible model for a Canadian cultural history in his foreword, "Towards the Discovery of Canadian Cultural History," Loren Lerner and Dr. Mary E. Williamson, eds., *Art and Architecture in Canada: A Bibliography and Guide to the Literature* (Toronto 1991), v.1, xi-xiii.

tréal, and Toronto, and then (during the 1880s) mounted the rails of the Canadian Pacific Railway for a brief interlude to illustrate the scenery of western Canada before returning to concentrate a study of art in the two metropolitan centres of Toronto and Montréal. The intermediary period of expansion includes references to development in the prairies, West, and non-metropolitan contexts.<sup>3</sup>

The accounts of Canadian art have generally followed the main historical schools of thought, accompanied by specific cases of institutional activity, (e.g., the formation of the Royal Canadian Academy in 1879) in the major urban centres where they apparently relate most directly to national developments. Once the organizational infrastructure of an art community is established, the authors turn to a study of the chronological development of art styles accompanied by relevant biography. Bernard Smith calls this the "movement model" where the history of taste, styles, and movements tends to structure the narrative at the expense of later phases and developments which fall outside the prescribed model. Certainly, once a self-declared national school of Canadian art was established in the 1920s (the Group of Seven), there has been less concern with the details of art patronage and public policy. This is particularly true in the period following the establishment of the Canada Council.

Since the major art surveys were written, there has been a growth in exploring thematic approaches to Canadian art in addition to the now numerous monographs emanating from the public art galleries.<sup>4</sup> Where it might commonly be assumed

<sup>3</sup>See J. Russell Harper, *Painting in Canada*, 2nd ed. (Toronto 1977), and Dennis Reid, *The Concise History of Canadian Painting*, 2nd ed. (Toronto 1988). There is also a survey of Canadian art by Barry Lord entitled *A History of Painting in Canada, Towards a People's Art* (Toronto 1974) which helps to fill a crucial gap in early native and Inuit art.

<sup>4</sup>For examples of useful thematic studies see Mario Béland, *Painting in Quebec 1820-1850* (Québec 1992); Bernard Ostry, *The Cultural Connection: An Essay on Culture and Government Policy in Canada* (Toronto 1978); Dennis Reid, *Lucius R. O'Brien, Visions of Victorian Canada* (Toronto 1990); Dennis Reid, *Our Own Country Canada: Being an Account of the National Aspirations of the Principle Landscape Artists in Montreal and Toronto, 1860-1890* (Ottawa 1979); Maria Tippett, *By a Lady: Three Hundred Centuries of Art by Canadian Women* (Toronto 1990); George Woodcock, *Strange Bedfellows: The State and the Arts in Canada* (Vancouver 1985). Of particular note is a recent valuable bibliography of Canadian art compiled by Loren Lerner and Dr. Mary E. Williamson, eds., entitled *Art and Architecture in Canada: A Bibliography and Guide to the Literature to 1981*. Useful dissertations include Linda Lee Jessup, "Canadian Artists, Railways, the State and the Business of Becoming a National Art," PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 1992; and J. Craig Stirling, "The Development of Art Institutions in Quebec and Ontario (1876-1914) and the South Kensington Influence," PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1989. A recent article of note is Elizabeth Mully, "Lucius R. O'Brien: A Victorian in North America," *The Journal of Canadian Art History*, 14 (1991), 74-82. In the related area of literature see Frank Watt, "Radicalism in English Canadian Literature Since Confederation," PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 1957.

that the early art institutions (the Art Association of Montréal, the Ontario Society of Artists, and the Royal Canadian Academy) stood for the promotion of the fine arts as a discrete aesthetic endeavour, in fact the promotion of Canada's art institutions in the 19th century also took "design for manufacturing" as a principal tenet of their public charter, along with the "creation of schools of art and design" as the vehicle with which to carry out these aims.<sup>5</sup> A survey of their charters highlights the fact that the promotional effort of these institutions was framed in the belief that fine art was the highest expression of good design and that the arts in a growing industrial society would have to develop, at least from a legal viewpoint, upon a practical foundation. Given the legal structure of the day, the new arts organizations were incorporated under the various departments and boards of agriculture, arts and manufactures, with charters tailored to both fine art and design aims. Even the nation's showcase for the arts, the National Gallery of Canada, stated its objectives were "the encouragement of Design, as applied to Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, Engraving and the Industrial Arts, and the promotion and support of Education, leading to the production of beautiful and excellent work in manufactures...."<sup>6</sup>

This commitment to both fine art and design must be understood within the context of 19th-century civil life and the utilitarian demands the parliamentary arena placed on the arts. The dependence of art upon the legislative promotion of design and manufacturing echoed concurrent developments in other countries. Those individuals who were active in the development of the fine arts, however, did not limit themselves to the constitutional component of their stated aims in the statute books of the day. Quite to the contrary, they worked to enlarge the role of their institutions. For example, in 1865, contributors to the *Journal of the Board of Arts and Manufactures for Upper Canada* referred to passages by the founders of the Department of Art and Science scheme at South Kensington:

The true connection between science and art has never been sufficiently recognized. Leonardo da Vinci is only known as a painter, but he was equally great as a scientific man. He was one of the early practical reformers of science, and wrote thirteen volumes on

<sup>5</sup>For volumes and articles which make reference to, or explore, the design charters see Ellen L. Ramsay, "Art Education: The Making or Unmaking of Artists?," in Jean M. Guiot and Joseph G. Green, eds., *From Orchestras to Apartheid* (Toronto 1990); Ellen L. Ramsay, "The Promotion of the Fine Arts in Canada, 1880-1924: The Development of Art Patronage and the Formation of Public Policy", PhD thesis, University College London, 1988; Dennis Reid, *Our Own Country Canada*; J. Craig Stirling, "The Development of Art Institutions"; Foster Vernon, "The Development of Adult Education in Ontario 1790-1900", EdD thesis, University of Toronto, 1969; and Doreen Walker, "Instruction Pour Etablir les Manufactures: A Key Document in the Art History of New France," *The Journal of Canadian Art History*, II, (Summer 1975), 1-15.

<sup>6</sup>Act to incorporate the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts, Dominion of Canada, *Statutes*, 45 Vict. Cap. 122, 1882, s.1.

pneumatics and hydraulics, which gave the earlier indication of that system of inductive philosophy with which the name Bacon is associated. His great contemporary and rival Michael Angelo [sic], was also thoroughly acquainted with all the then known sciences, especially those of geometry and mechanics.<sup>7</sup>

This linking of art with science amongst the art promoters was common enough in 19th-century Canada, and by tracing its lineage from the European enlightenment, suggests an internationalism which was present in the period. These small but significant discoveries in the archives have helped alter our perception of early art growth and suggest new pathways into the study of post-conquest art in Canada.

Until recently only passing reference has been made in historical scholarship to the 19th century charters of art. For example a footnote appears in H. Clare Pentland's valuable volume *Labour and Capital in Canada 1650-1860* (1981), and brief excerpts on the development of drawing classes at the Toronto Mechanics' Institute from the diaries of James Lesslie are reproduced in Edith Firth's volume *The Town of York 1815-1834* (1966). A short but valuable study is included in Foster Vernon's doctoral dissertation, "The Development of Adult Education in Ontario 1790-1900," in which art and design classes are discussed in the broader context of education provisions. Vernon's study includes significant sections interrelating the art activity of the Ontario Society of Artists with the Department of Education and mechanics' institutes in Ontario under a series of sub-headings on education. From the art historian's viewpoint, however, the pathways between the early voluntary societies and institutions and the promotion of art remain relatively unexplored.<sup>8</sup>

The purpose of this article, therefore, is to provide just such pathways through the minute books and annual reports of the Toronto Mechanics' Institute. While these sources are necessarily limited in the information they may offer, they nonetheless provide us with some useful notes about the daily activities of many

<sup>7</sup> Archives of Ontario (hereafter AO), *Journal of the Board of Arts and Manufactures*, August 1865, p. 210.

<sup>8</sup> Nancy Geddes Poole has provided one of the best civic art studies which includes references to a local mechanics' institute in her volume, *The ART of London, 1830-1980* (London 1984), 17-18, 20, 23-25, 27-28, 31-32, 89-90, 209, and page notes on 56, 95, and 177. Examples of brief references to art activities at mechanics' institutes occur in Jim Burant, "Art in Halifax: Exhibitions and Criticism in 1830 and 1831," *RACAR* VIII (1981) 122-3; Edith Firth, ed., *The Town of York, 1815-1834: a Collection of Documents of Early Toronto* (Toronto 1960), 324-5, 334-6, 347-9; Carol D. Lowney, "The Society of Artists and Amateurs, 1834: Toronto's First Art Exhibition and its Antecedents," *RACAR* VIII (1981) 100; Ellen L. Ramsay, "Art Education," 129-134; Ellen L. Ramsay, "The Promotion of the Fine Arts in Canada, 1880-1924, 25-26, 29, 34, 42-43, 47-48; Dennis Reid, *A Concise History*, 27, 29, 35; Dennis Reid, *Our Own Country Canada*, 198, 208, 222. While J. Russell Harper does not have any references to mechanics' institutes in his index to *Painting in Canada*, scholars will nonetheless discover references on pages 103 and 145.



prominent artists and art patrons. The "promotion of art", a 19th-century expression, seems apt here because it describes so much of the activity related to the art of the period. Unlike Europe, Canada did not have a centuries-old tradition of art supported by an aristocracy or landed gentry (although the Family Compact and its allies might have wished to erect such a system). Therefore, every attempt to establish the fine arts bore the imprint of the new industrial society. The earliest attempts to promote art would be situated within the context of a growing body of voluntary associations for the arts which often had to justify their intended aims with more utilitarian goals in order to gain legislative support. In the case of the Toronto Mechanics' Institute, the impetus for the promotion of art had much more radical origins. The story is, therefore, necessarily complex, reflecting the relationship between private and public provisions for art in 19th-century Canada and involving the needs of a nascent working class.

*The Toronto Mechanics' Institute in the Context of the Rebellion*

The early promotion of the Toronto Mechanics' Institute involved individuals who were prominent in the city's early civil development, the Rebellion, and the reform movement. Indeed, the impetus and politics of those promoting the Institute cannot be understood without direct reference to the profound transformations distinguishing Toronto society between 1831 and 1883, including the development of a self-conscious working class within a newly industrialized community. In particular, it may be recalled from the substantial body of scholarship on the period that this was an era in which the very basis of civil society was being constructed and fought over around the very complex issues of political and educational representation (that is, the creation of responsible government and the election of local school trustees amongst other basic components of democratic civil life). For many decades the participants in the Rebellion and their elected leadership formed the vanguard of the reform movement calling for the establishment of a "free school" system which would serve the needs of the growing working-class population. This call would include the idea that a mechanics' institute would well serve the working population in Toronto.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup>For valuable volumes on the period see, Eugene Forsey, *Trade Unions in Canada, 1812-1902* (Toronto 1982); Leo A. Johnson, *History of the County of Ontario, 1615-1875* (Whitby 1973); Gregory S. Kealey, *Toronto Workers Respond to Industrial Capitalism, 1867-1892*, (Toronto 1980); Gregory S. Kealey and Bryan Palmer, *Dreaming of What Might Be: The Knights of Labor in Ontario, 1880-1900* (Cambridge 1982); Greg Keilty, ed., *1837: Revolution in the Canadas, as told by William Lyon Mackenzie* (Toronto 1974); Charles Lipton, *The Trade Union Movement of Canada, 1827-1959*, 3rd ed. (Toronto 1978); Harold A. Logan, *The History of Trade-Union Organization in Canada*, (Chicago 1928); Bryan D. Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict: Skilled Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Hamilton, Ontario, 1860-191*, (Montréal 1979); Bryan D. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: The Rise and Reconstitution of Canadian Labour, 1800-1980* (Toronto 1983); H. Clark Pentland,

The unrest which precipitated the events of 1837 and formed the background to the founding of the Mechanics' Institute resulted from the obvious lack of responsible government and the absence of an accountable civil structure which could provide the basics of health care, education, and housing. In the early 19th century, Toronto was rife with stories of overcrowded jails housing the city's homeless, unemployed, and infirm. Workers from the countryside and new immigrant populations gravitated to the city in the hope of securing work, but were often unable to find accommodation and adequate relief. The conditions were exacerbated by the lack of proper sustenance and facilities for hygiene, and in 1832 a cholera epidemic threw the city into chaos. Training for workers outside the apprenticeship system was almost non-existent and many workers were left with little recourse for acquiring new skills and fell into the ranks of the labouring poor. Such was the poverty and instability of employment that many of the working class were unable to afford families in this period. Those individuals who led the call for parliamentary and civil reform faced an intransigent Tory Family Compact, whose governing authority was in part sustained by growing connections to the Church of England and its vast land reserves. Taxation was regressive, and the ruling elite saw it in their financial interest to hang on to their semi-feudal controls, rather than move to a more representative system which would serve the broader part of the population. The vote at this time was only given to that portion of the male population which owned land and so over one-half of the male population was disenfranchised and remained so throughout the century.<sup>10</sup>

The rebellion organizers, for their part, forged a well-developed plan for responsible government (indeed, outright sovereignty) with a constitution and related documents to assist in the civil development of Toronto and Upper Canada and to meet the needs of 19th-century realities. They presented a progressive program which would provide broader representation and greater powers to elected representatives in the Legislative Council, and a system of elected township commissioners with school trustees who could advance their proposals for a free

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*Labour and Capital in Canada, 1650-1860* (Toronto 1981) and Stanley Ryerson, *Unequal Union: Confederation and the Roots of Conflict in the Canadas, 1815-1873*. Useful articles include Allan Greer, "1837-38: Rebellion Reconsidered," *Canadian Historical Review*, 76 (March 1995), 1-18; Bryan D. Palmer, "Upper Canada," *Canadian History: A Reader's Guide*, vol.1, M. Brook Taylor, (Toronto 1994), 184-236; Edward Royle, "Mechanics' Institutes and the Working Classes, 1840-1860," *The Historical Journal*, 14 (1971), 305-321; and Frank Watt, "The National Policy, the Workingman, and Proletarian Ideas in Victorian Canada," *Canadian Historical Review*, 40 (1959), 1-26. Useful dissertations and theses on the period include, W.L. Davis, "A History of the Early Labour Movement in London, Ontario," MA thesis, University of Western Ontario, 1947; Darryl Jean-Guy Newbury, "No Atheist, Eunuch or Woman: Male Associational Culture and Working-Class Identity in Industrializing Ontario, 1840-1880," MA thesis, Queen's University, 1992.

<sup>10</sup>Leo A. Johnson, *History of the County of Ontario*, 151.

school system. These would assist the valiant efforts of those workers and farmers who had been founding their own local schools.

The constitution of the Reformers (clause 7) included a call for full recognition of native peoples as citizens as well as the abolition of slavery and the assistance of those (in the United States and elsewhere) who were fleeing the slave system. The campaign that they launched around the political issue of the Family Compact and the clergy land reserves then focused on issues of religious as well as civil freedom. The Church of England at the time was threatening to establish itself as a state church and while the majority of reformers supported a secular state and secular civil structure, it was recognized that there was active discrimination against other religious groups and denominations which were not associated with the Church of England. On all fronts, then, the local oligarchy and its allies opposed secularization as well as the relinquishment of political control.<sup>11</sup>

The Reformers had broad recognition for their struggle amongst the population and were able to draw upon support of patriots in Quebec, republicans in the United States, and early chartist and working men's associations in Britain, as well as Irish radicals. Their campaign began with the formation of local elected councils (provisional forms of elected government), the drafting of a written constitution which would lay the foundation for a responsible government with the separation of church and state, a series of petitions to the existing Legislative Assembly and the British parliament on a range of related issues, and voluntary enlistment of a provisional civilian army of 1,500 (unarmed) volunteers. The local councils then elected a working leadership and provisional government, and encouraged volunteers to run for elected office in the existing legislature and local councils. Petitions with 8,000 and 10,000 signatures respectively went forward in 1828 and 1831 calling for secularization of the Clergy Land Reserves and the end of political privilege for the Family Compact. This was organized at a time when York had a population of 20,000 and a periphery township population of perhaps 30,000 more. When the parliamentary side of the struggle seemed not to bring about results, a mass demonstration (known as the "1837 Rebellion") involving at least 800 people went ahead in the face of violent armed opposition by the minority land-holding class. While hundreds of "labourers and yeomen" were arrested and detained, a petition signed by 30,000 citizens was sent forward demanding their release. Indeed, a majority of those detained (over 500) on trumped-up charges were released due to the absence of proof or witnesses. The Tory minority was engaged

<sup>11</sup>For more information on Mackenzie and the anti-slavery movement in Canada see Ryerson, *Unequal Union*, 104, 110, 327-331. Ryerson includes a discussion of the connections between the anti-slavery movement in Canada and the abolitionist movement in the United States and England, 110, 327-331. Also see Greg Keilty, ed., *1837*, 65 on Mackenzie's views of slavery including his banning of the annual Mummer's parade in 1834. On secularism see Ryerson, *Unequal Union*, 282, 294-305, and Keilty, ed., *1837*, 70-2.

in all-out war to defend its privilege. Yet despite the arrest, deportation and murder of Rebellion participants, the uprising linked segments of the Toronto working class and the reformers, eventually forcing through a series of bills and, finally, acts of parliament, by the late 1840s and 1850s.<sup>12</sup>

Education, then, was part of the mast-head of reforms that the movement carried into mid-century. For the Reformers, the school question was a matter of "free schools" to support the efforts of settlers who had made heroic efforts to set up their own community schools with teachers paid for by the parents in the community. Members of the Family Compact, for their part, opposed the creation of a free school system because they were already served by their own private schools and opposed the extension of education, especially if they would have to contribute to it financially. During the 1840s there began a momentum on the legislative front for a common school system and the basic mechanics of taxation, terms of local trustees, and training of teachers began to be discussed. The Family Compact would continue to wage war against this new secular education for two decades and managed to delay the establishment of the University of Toronto and its science classes for twenty years.<sup>13</sup> It was in the climate of the Reform movement of the 1820s (the early period of agitation) and the 1830s (the period leading up to the Rebellion) that the Mechanics' Institute was formed in Toronto. A leading figure in the founding of the Institute was Rebellion leader William Lyon Mackenzie (1795-1861), a publisher and printer who emphasized politics, education, and poetry throughout his life. In keeping with the character of the institution he was to found, Mackenzie was a self-educated printer who acquired his early intellectual skills in an apprentices' library and local scientific and literary society in Dundee, Scotland. While his early writings in Canada indicate he had been an avid reader

<sup>12</sup>Ryerson, *Unequal Union*, 111-118 and 282. For a study with an emphasis on labour's role in the struggle for responsible government in the Canadas see Lipton, *The Trade Union Movement of Canada*, 11-16. The international dimension of the struggle is mentioned in both Ryerson, 63-5, and Lipton, 11-16.

<sup>13</sup>The Family Compact continued its opposition to the University even after the establishment of the University of Toronto and tried to inject religion into its curriculum and administration. It will be remembered that this was the great period of secularization in education accompanied by the growth of natural science, manufacturing, and industry. Those trying to resist secularization were seen to be holding back the modern era, not only in terms of curtailing the growth of democratic education but also the development of a modern economy. The Family Compact delayed the teaching of science at the University of Toronto until 1843, although the university was still two decades ahead of Oxford and Cambridge according to Ryerson. Harvard established its school of science in 1849. In Canada, a Natural History Society had been founded in Montréal in 1827 and William Logan was engaged on his geological surveys in Canada between 1842 and 1869. It should be noted that the Toronto Mechanics' Institute was a leader in secular education with its emphasis on science in its classes and lecture topics and preceded the classes at the university by many years. For further information see Ryerson, *Unequal Union*, 282, 302-305.

of Joseph Hume, Adam Smith, and Thomas Jefferson, amongst many other authors, during his youth in Scotland, Mackenzie's practical political experience was gained within the reform community. His writings addressed broad concerns that education, in its most wide-ranging forms, would be used as a means to improve the conditions of life for those involved in long hours of manual labour ("apprentices, mechanics, labourers and others"). As such Mackenzie linked struggles for education to the campaign for the shorter working day, the transcendence of "superstition" and "bigotry" (including national hatred) amongst the working class, the reform of class-society (a society which Mackenzie describes as divided into "oppressed and oppressors"), and the overcoming of the "servile" character that such a society fostered. In addition, Mackenzie developed a critique of the factory system and the role of the clergy and religion in education (including technical education), and advocated American-style National Free Schools administered by local government.<sup>14</sup> He then used his skills as a printer and journalist to launch a campaign against the erection of the newly proposed university upon the religious privilege of the Church of England. As Mackenzie explained, he was protesting "against binding down our projected university to the dogmas of any sect whether of Oxford, Edinburgh, Rome or Moscow."<sup>15</sup>

Another major proponent of the Toronto Mechanics' Institute who also played an active part in the Rebellion was Dr. John Rolph (1793-1870). Dr. Rolph served as an early founding member of the Mechanics' Institute (1831) and held office as President in 1836. James Lesslie, an immigrant from Dundee, Scotland and a family friend of the Mackenzies, assisted by a watchmaker, Joseph Bates, called for the first meeting of the Mechanics' Institute in January 1831. Lesslie served as treasurer

<sup>14</sup>See William Lyon MacKenzie, *Catechism of Education* (York 1830).

<sup>15</sup>Charles Lindsey, *The Life and Times of William Lyon Mackenzie and the Rebellion of 1837-38* (Toronto 1862). It was typical of those involved in the leadership of the Rebellion that they had long and established reputations as public figures and after a series of struggles had repeatedly encountered the intransigence of the Family Compact. In the eyes of the Rebellion leaders, this Tory elite was holding back the natural development of democratic government and domestic civil life. These individuals were therefore at the forefront of a popular movement in Canada, a far cry from a band of "American subversives" or "British Revolutionaries" that the Family Compact tried to brand them. For an account of these matters see Leo A. Johnson, *History of the County of Ontario*, 98. For the best sources on Mackenzie see his own writings, *Catechism of Education*; *Mackenzie's Own Narrative of the Late Rebellion, with Illustrations and Notes, Critical and Explanatory Exhibiting the Only True Account of What Took Place at the Memorable Siege of Toronto, In the Month of December, 1837* (Toronto 1838) [note that the editorial comments and notes in this edition are by an opponent of Mackenzie]; and *The Legislative Black List of Upper Canada or, Official Corruption and Hypocrisy Unmasked* (York 1828). The role of early printers and the radical press in Toronto (including journeymen printers and typographical unions) is worthy of mention as Mackenzie and other leading reformers were printers, see Logan, *The History of Trade Union Organization in Canada*, 7-9.

in 1831, and again between 1834 and 1836.<sup>16</sup> Egerton Ryerson (1803-1882) also joined the membership of the Mechanics' Institute later in its history, and he had assisted with parallel educational aims throughout the early reform movement.<sup>17</sup> Other Reformers active in the early Toronto Mechanics' Institute included Dr. Charles Duncombe (1792-1867), a leading member of the 1837 Rising in London (Ontario), and Dr. William Warren Baldwin (1775-1844), a moderate reform figurehead who served as President of the Toronto Mechanics' Institute in 1832, 1834, and 1837.

*The Records of the Toronto Mechanics' Institute*

The records of the Toronto Mechanics' Institute, unfortunately, remain mostly in the form of minute books and annual reports. This means that there are no membership lists or enrolment lists for art classes at the Institute. As such the records are limited and difficult to interpret in a meaningful way. The private papers of officers assist to a small degree in the recovery of the history. For the purpose of this article, however, recovering the activities of the Mechanics' Institute in the arena of art has meant only a modest beginning with the study of the minute books, the annual reports, and the James Lesslie Papers helping to record the art activities and artist-names for posterity.<sup>18</sup>

While the minute books and annual reports of the Toronto Mechanics' Institute conceal the very lively debates that occurred there, they do demonstrate that the Institute's history (from its founding in 1831 to its dissolution in 1883) was inscribed with the political conflicts of the day. This was a period when the nature of class society in Toronto was challenged by those involved in the establishment of the structures of civil society, especially the trades unions.<sup>19</sup> While the Institute had its origins in the Reform climate of the 1820s, the intentions of its founders

<sup>16</sup>AO, James Lesslie Papers, "Memorandum from the Notes of the Late James Lesslie 1880," p.4.

<sup>17</sup>For more information on Egerton Ryerson and the school movement see Harvey J. Graff, "Respected and Profitable Labour: Literacy, Jobs and the Working Class in the Nineteenth Century," in Gregory S. Kealey and Peter Warrian, eds., *Essays in Canadian Working Class History* (Toronto 1976), 58-82, and Harvey J. Graff, *The Literacy Myth: Literacy and Social Structure in the Nineteenth Century City* (New York 1979). On the issue of secularization and education with reference to Ryerson, see Ryerson, *Unequal Union*, 112, 304, and, on the school bills, 283-284.

<sup>18</sup>Bryan Palmer has commented on the limits of the primary sources in his own study of the Hamilton Mechanics' Institute in *A Culture in Conflict*, 50.

<sup>19</sup>As Gregory Kealey, Peter Warrian, and others have pointed out, the years from 1850 to the mid 1890s mark a transitional period in class struggle militancy. For more see Kealey and Warrian, eds., *Essays in Canadian Working Class History*, 8-12. See also Lipton, *The Trade Union Movement of Canada*, 28-55; Logan, *The History of Trade Union Organization in Canada*, 1-42.

were often tempered by the problems of class society. The debates about provisions for "mechanics" at the Board meetings were always measured against the actual participation of mechanics in the affairs of the Institute and their attendance in the classes. The composition of the Board reflected a diverse range of political views within the early workers' movement. The balance of power, constantly changing, would depend on a great many factors, including objective concerns difficult to gauge outside the formal record of votes at meetings. Much of the important activity of the Mechanics' Institute occurred outside the Board and committee meetings in the less formal realm of the Institute community:

From this viewpoint, then, it is clear that the documents of the Mechanics' Institute can only provide us with a bare outline of the role of the Institute in the promotion of art in Toronto. As an untapped source, nevertheless, the existing documents fill an important gap in the art history of the period and can provide us with valuable information about a significant institution in early urban life, a place where artists found employment as teachers, a space to exhibit, and an environment of instruction. When this information is related to that of other institutions and activities in the city, including the agricultural and industrial fairs (later, exhibitions), the Department of Education, the Toronto Normal School, the Toronto Free Library, and the Ontario Society of Artists, it provides missing pieces that begin to complete the jigsaw puzzle that make up the arts community. What follows is an attempt to reconstruct a small portion of the role the Institute played in the promotion of art in the nineteenth century.

*The Toronto Mechanics' Institute, the Nascent Working Class,  
and the Promotion of Art in Toronto*

To emphasize the importance of the Mechanics' Institute in the promotion of art in 19th-century Toronto, one needs only look at the list of artists who found a home there by the second half of the century. Among those listed in the minute books and annual reports of the Institute are Richard Baigent, Laura Bell, William Bengough, Mary Cooper, Robert Gagen, William Hind, Henry Martin, George Reid, Kivas Tulley, John Tully, and E.K. Westmacott. In addition to this roll-call of civic artists, one might add the names of art patrons G.W. Allan, W.H. Howland, and J.H. Morse, who were also associated with the affairs of the Institute during the 19th century. If we consider that in 1865 and 1866 the Mechanics' Institute Exhibition attracted 6,000 and 9,000 visitors respectively, with approximately 500 paintings and photographs on display, we begin to understand the scope of the art activity at the Mechanics' Institute.<sup>20</sup>

In order to understand the role of the Mechanics' Institute in the promotion of art and to assess the success of its endeavours, it is important to know for whom the art classes and exhibitions were intended. "Mechanics" — those for whom the

<sup>20</sup>Metro Toronto Reference Library, Baldwin Room (hereafter MTRL BR), Toronto Mechanics' Institute, Annual Report, 1869.

Institute was founded — were defined broadly to include most skilled workers (including carpenters, wheelwrights, shoemakers, and masons), as well as those specifically engaged in the mechanical arts (boiler-makers, etc).<sup>21</sup> For Mackenzie and others involved in the founding of the Institute in the 1830s, the new facility was intended to address the needs of these skilled workers, providing them with much needed classes in reading and writing as well as technical skills, and including the more refined activities of classical studies and art. If workers were to be the backbone of the new community, and that community was not to be the narrow class society of the Family Compact and its followers, then agricultural and industrial workers required an educational and civil structure upon which to build democratic sovereignty and responsible government. These aims, then, as set out by the founders, were to go through a variety of revisions as the Board underwent changes (dramatic ones after the Rebellion), and members would have to keep abreast of legislative changes and other provisions as public efforts began to supersede voluntary efforts.

While the Family Compact and other members of Toronto's elite received their art education in private denominational schools, the growing number of skilled workers entering Toronto went without provisions during long periods of unemployment (especially in the winter). The efforts of the Reform leaders and the Institute founders on behalf of these workers were situated in a very difficult and politically sectarian climate. The founding members of the Mechanics' Institute, for instance, consisted of 42 merchants, small manufacturers, and professionals, and a mere three mechanics.<sup>22</sup> The under-representation of active mechanics amongst the officers was to remain a concern throughout the century, despite valiant efforts by various board officers to address the problem. While the minute books give a rather dry account of the debates of the day, it is still possible for the scholar to discern lively discussions of these issues. As late as 1876, the officers of the Mechanics' Institute were still tackling the question through a series of motions at a very lengthy annual meeting. Here it was adopted:

That whereas there are at the present time, only some forty mechanics who are members of the Institute, a fact which is greatly to be deplored. And whereas this result has been brought about by a variety of causes not necessary here to mention; and whereas it is desirable that an effort should be made to induce the young Mechanics of the city to become members, and take an interest in its usefulness and prosperity...

Be it therefore resolved, that it be an instruction to the incoming Committee, to take steps to secure a Prize List, for an Exhibition of Arts and Manufactures...of the works of

<sup>21</sup> Johnson, *History of the County of Ontario*, 153.

<sup>22</sup> On the struggle for the ten-hour working day (known as the Ten-Hour Movement), see Ryerson, *Unequal Union*, 104, and Lipton, *The Trade Union Movement of Canada*, 5-8. On the early years at the Institute see the James Lesslie Papers and Samuel Thompson, *Reminiscences of a Canadian Pioneer* (Toronto 1968), 272-279.



*Journeyman and Apprentices*, who are, or shall become members of the Institute...<sup>23</sup> [my italics]

This motion was followed by constitutional amendments which opened male categories of membership and activity to women and reduced entrance fees from five to four dollars. Even more dramatically, at the same meeting, William Edwards (an active member of the Institute for 30 years; president for 1 year, recording secretary for 8 years, and treasurer for 1 year) presented a motion that "one-half at least of the Board of Directors, shall be engaged in manufacturing art, or as operative mechanics." This proved controversial and, when the meeting reconvened, following an adjournment, the motion was defeated 46 to 16.<sup>24</sup>

The Institute stated that its purpose was for the dissemination of "useful knowledge" through the establishment of a library, lectures, classes, and exhibitions (hallmark activities of the mechanics' institute movement throughout the 19th century), and the James Lesslie Papers indicate that during its first year of operation drawing classes were also briefly established. Far from being peripheral to the Institute's activity, art classes were central to its educational aims although they took many years to establish on a regular basis. The plans for the extension of evening classes which began in 1831-2 and again in 1840 were tied to the Ten-Hour Movement and achieved an ideological boost in the early 1840s when city shopkeepers agreed to implement early closing at 7 p.m. for the purpose of allowing their employees recreation (fig. 2). The Board of the Institute arranged late hours for both the library and classes, although the classes failed to convene at this time for a variety of reasons. Nevertheless, in planning for art classes, as early as 1831-2, the officers of the Institute articulated a formalized commitment to art and science in the early 19th century. Knowledge of art was understood to mean a full range of activity from basic copywork for the elementary plan of the mechanic, through the more complex designs of mechanical and technical drawing for design and drafting.

<sup>23</sup>MTRL BR, Toronto Mechanics' Institute, Annual Report, 1876. Italics added.

<sup>24</sup>MTRL BR, Toronto Mechanics' Institute, Annual Report, 1876. The argument that the Board and the membership of the Toronto Mechanics' Institute should be drawn primarily from the working class was made for many years. For more sources see the 1877 Prize Essays of the Institute published under the competition title, *Mechanics' Institutes and the Best Means of Improving Them*. Thomas Davison's first prize essay suggests that the Board be composed of six employers and six employees regardless of occupation (p.11). Richard Lewis' second prize essay argues that "bona fide working men and women" [my emphasis] should be associated with the management of any department, especially those "introduced for their benefit and pleasure." (p.1) These attempts to address the working-class orientation of the Institute echoed the mechanics' institute movement as a whole. In a different context, see Edward Royle's comments on the membership of the English mechanics' institutes in "Mechanics' Institutes and the Working Classes, 1840-1860," *The Historical Journal*, 14 (1971), 309-314. I would like to thank Dr. Ian McKay for drawing my attention to the two prize essays.

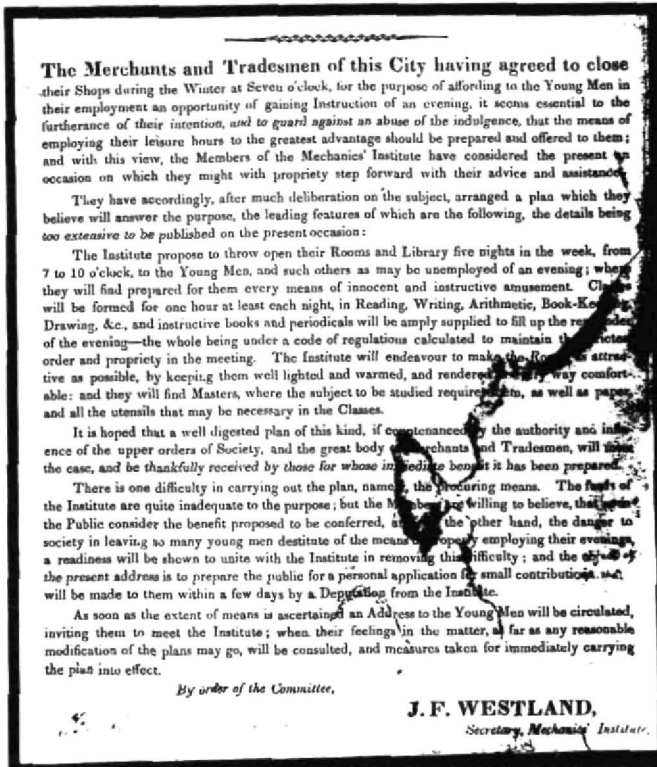


Figure 2. Credit: *Metropolitan Toronto Reference Library*, 840 M2.

Also envisioned was ornamental drawing for the decorative arts, leading to the fine arts of landscape, still-life, and portraiture.<sup>25</sup>

Exhibitions of art were also primary to the aims of the Toronto Mechanics' Institute as the Board sought to augment the activities of the peripatetic provincial agricultural fairs with a permanent annual exhibition in Toronto. The first permanent annual exhibition was held in 1848 (fig. 3) and was the forerunner of the Toronto Industrial Exhibition in 1879 (later called the Canadian National Exhibition). Here again "art" was an all-embracing term including the objects of agricultural and mechanical manufacture, as well as fine art. In 1848, the Board requested "specimens of Art; new inventions and improvements; and samples of Manufactures in general...[to be donated, and to involve]...Mechanics and operatives of every description, students of the 'Fine Arts'."<sup>26</sup> While the Exhibition Committee

<sup>25</sup>On these early promotional efforts see the James Lesslie Papers, "Memorandum from the Notes of J. Lesslie 1880," p. 4. For more on the early drawing classes see Foster Vernon, "The Development of Adult Education in Ontario," 23.

<sup>26</sup>MTRL BR, Toronto Mechanics' Institute, Minutes, 29 August, 1848.

**TORONTO**  
**MECHANICS' INSTITUTE,**  
INCORPORATED BY ACT OF PARLIAMENT.

**Under the Patronage of his Excellency the Governor General.**

**EXHIBITION!**

**An Exhibition of Specimens of Art, New Inventions and Improvements, and samples of Manufactures in general, by Mechanics, Artisans and others, resident in Canada, will be held in the**

**HALL OF THE INSTITUTE,**  
COMMENCING ON  
**Monday, 16th of October,**  
AND BE CONTINUED  
**FOR TWO WEEKS.**

**The principal design of this Exhibition is, to bring the productions of skilful Mechanics and Artisans before the public; that genius and enterprise may be fostered and patronized; and also to encourage a laudable emulation on the part of the Mechanic or Artisan, to excel in their respective professions.**

Mechanics and Operatives of every description, Students of the Fine Arts, and Ladies, are respectfully invited to furnish specimens; so as to make the Exhibition creditable not only to this rising City, but to the Province; and also to encourage it by their presence, and by recommending it to their friends, that it may not result in a pecuniary loss to the Institute.

It is requested that all Articles intended for Exhibition be sent to the Society's Rooms, on the Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday previous to the days of Exhibition, where a competent person will be in attendance to receive and register the same.

ADMISSION. The charge for admission (to persons not furnishing specimens) will be—for single Tickets, 75c. for the Season, 1s. 3d.; Children half price. Tickets to be had of any member of the Committee, or at the Door.

The Rooms will be open from Ten o'Clock A.M. to Ten P.M., each day.

**Refreshments may be obtained at the Rooms.**  
BY ORDER OF THE COMMITTEE.

**WM. EDWARDS,**  
RECORDING SECRETARY

Toronto Mechanics' Institute.  
 September 6th. 1855.  
 Brown's Printing Establishment, Yonge Street, Toronto.

Figure 3. Credit: *Metropolitan Toronto Reference Library*, 848 E3.

reports often recorded the want of mechanical specimens throughout the century, the fine art contributions were plentiful and possessed “considerable merit along with the specimens of ‘ladies’ ornamental work.” From this viewpoint, the exhibitions would appear to be providing an outlet that was otherwise lacking in Toronto.<sup>27</sup>

The presentations by the Mechanics’ Institute Exhibition Committee indicate that the quantity of fine art objects increased each year until, by the mid-1860s, they exceeded the objects of manufacture. In fact, the abundance of fine art objects started to become a concern to the Committee lest it appear that the manufactured objects were insufficient to meet the Institute’s charter. If the purpose of the exhibitions was to include a display of objects for the improvement of mechanical and agricultural manufactures (especially to support the Institute’s requests for legislative support), then the profusion of fine art could not satisfy this criteria on its own, nor would the abundance of fine art satisfy those who would define the

<sup>27</sup> MTRL BR, Toronto Mechanics’ Institute, Annual Report, 1852.

Institute as a “popular educational agency” in mostly mechanical terms. At one point the exhibition’s Committee of Management, upon assessing the overall conditions, decided that it might not be proper to *continue the exhibitions on an annual basis “unless they can be more varied in their several features from year to year, as has been the case so far.”*<sup>28</sup>

By the mid-century, the exhibitions at the Mechanics’ Institute were becoming known for the display of the fine arts rather than the manufacturing arts. Dramatic changes occurred as a result of the fine art emphasis of the exhibitions. In 1869 the Institute held its first exhibition under the title of “Art Exhibition,” solely displaying the fine arts. The purpose for this change was both practical and financial: “Encouraged by the success of previous exhibitions, your Directors, hoping to stimulate a taste for, and to gratify the lovers of, the Fine Arts, and also to realize some findings there for the advancement of the other and more proper objects of the Institute, inaugurated an exclusively Fine Arts Exhibition.” The number of contributions to this exhibit, over 700 paintings and photographs by both professional and amateur artists, supplemented by a few old masters lent from local private collectors, exceeded expectations.<sup>29</sup>

From the perspective of artists in Toronto, therefore, the annual exhibition filled a role in the promotion of art not met by other institutions. In the early 19th century, Ontario artists had regularly relied on the local travelling agricultural fairs for exhibition of their work. Once the Toronto Mechanics’ Institute began holding its annual exhibitions, these exhibitions became the major venue of the year until the Ontario Society of Artists was formed in 1872 and the first Toronto Industrial Exhibition was held in 1879. The list of artists associated with the Institute was considerable and, had records listed occupations of members before 1865, we might have a clearer idea of just how many mechanics in Toronto were also aspiring artists. The role of women and women-artists in the history of the Institute is of particular interest, and it appears their presence grew from the 1860s as indicated by the formation of a Women’s Committee for the exhibition. The role of women at the Institute was to reflect the growing presence of women in the community in all spheres of life.

*The Legal Existence of the Toronto Mechanics’ Institute  
and the Promotion of Art in Ontario*

Historians of the working class usually reflect on the difficulties mechanics’ institutes had in establishing enrolments in their classes. This has emerged from the discussions of the institute officers themselves as recorded in the minute books of the day. Such evidence leads toward a corollary argument, reflecting on the reasons for the “failure” of the mechanics’ institutes and to speculation on the “low” attendance at classes. The reasons given for the latter usually reflect those given in

<sup>28</sup>MTRL BR, Toronto Mechanics’ Institute, Annual Report, 1867.

<sup>29</sup>MTRL BR, Toronto Mechanics’ Institute, Annual Report, 1869.

the day including the low level of basic education, the length of the working day, and the low appeal of the classes.

It is possible, however, to see the history of the mechanics' institutes not solely from the eyes of the participants of the day but in the larger context of 19th-century civil life. Edward Royle, for instance, concurs with Frederick Engels in the *Conditions of the Working Class* (1844) that the reasons for the poor attendance at the institutes may have included the exclusion of party politics and controversial religion from the Institute classes, lectures, and libraries; and, certainly, by mid-century, due to the fact that workers may have been identifying more with their trade, temperance, and political societies, mechanics had other forums they could gravitate toward (Engels for his part suggested that the Manchester Mechanics' Institute was in danger of being written out of history by the middle class precisely because of its working-class nature). Gordon Selman suggests that attendance may have reflected local conditions of employment, and certainly in the case of the Vancouver (Moodyville) Mechanics' Institute this appeared to be the case. These would all seem plausible explanations for poor attendance and would indicate the importance of examining the large range of activities drawing working-class attention.<sup>30</sup>

Furthermore, it might be important to note that many institutions in 19th-century civil life experienced difficulties in establishing attendance and noted so in their minute books. In the case of Toronto, the Society of Artists and Amateurs (est. 1834), the Toronto Society of Arts (est. 1847), the Toronto Normal School (est. 1857), and the Ontario Society of Artists (est. 1874) all expressed similar concerns as did the Sabbath Schools and the common school evening classes. This may partly explain the introduction of compulsory attendance at public schools in the latter part of the century. The concerns regarding attendance, then, were not remarkable in themselves and when one considers the boom and slump pattern of the capitalist economy in the 19th century, these facilities seem to have managed quite well. In the case of the mechanics' institute movement, the institutes did very well indeed. In Ontario alone there were 300 institutes by the end of the century and the movement was able to generate mechanics' institutes from Halifax to Victoria by the turn of the 20th century.<sup>31</sup> One may confidently say that the Toronto Mechanics' Institute educated thousands of workers through its classes, libraries, exhibitions, and lectures on philosophy, mechanics, history, and literature, and the movement

<sup>30</sup>Edward Royle, "Mechanics' Institutes and the Working Classes," 306; Gordon Selman, "Mechanics' Institutes in British Columbia," *Continuous Learning*, 10 (May-June 1971), 126-130.

<sup>31</sup>Patrick Keane, "A Study in Early Problems and Policies in Adult Education: the Halifax Mechanics' Institute," *Histoire Sociale/Social History*, 8 (Novembre-November 1975), 257. Keane also provides the founding dates of some of the other mechanics' institutes: St. Johns 1827, Montréal 1828 (re-formed 1840), Victoria 1864. (Author's addition - Québec 1831, Halifax 1832, Vancouver 1869).

as a whole must have educated tens of thousands if not more. The Toronto Mechanics' Institute held its ground as the leading private lecture venue until the final two decades of the century and was the birthplace not only of further voluntary developments such as the Canadian Institute (founded by Sandford Fleming and others), but also paved the way for the development of related public provisions. As Patrick Keane has suggested, whatever the balance of forces on the boards of the mechanics' institutes, the provision for a working-class education opened a "pandora's box" insofar as the middle class and the "status quo" were concerned.<sup>32</sup>

By mid-century, life at the Toronto Mechanics' Institute reflected the uneven nature of organizational development as described by working-class historians. In particular the period reflected the development of an organized working class (including the growth of workers' campaigns, the call for reform, and the development of trades unions), and divergent political visions of the Institute. The changes that took place demonstrated very different notions of progress prevailing at the Mechanics' Institute. One such notion, rooted in the spirit of the early charter of the Institute, held that the Institute was to serve mechanics in the broadest possible way. This did not preclude its use as a recreational centre. Another notion of progress, a more recent and utilitarian one, held that the Mechanics' Institute was primarily an educational facility which would train workers for the workplace. And a third notion, sometimes accompanying the first two, held that the Institute should serve some kind of moral or specifically religious purpose in addition to the more utilitarian aims. (This position usually precluded its use as a recreational centre and was a minority view throughout the history of the Institute). The first notion was represented by individuals such as William Edwards, the second by individuals such as Thomas Ridout, and the third (in part) by Egerton Ryerson. These differing visions and others played themselves out in the meetings and discussions at the Institute.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>32</sup>Patrick Keane, "A Study in Early Problems and Policies in Adult Education," 260.

<sup>33</sup>For useful studies of the notion of progress in 19th-century Canada, see Keane, "A Study in the Early Problems and Policies in Adult Education," 255, and Johnson, *History of the County of Ontario*, 223-252. In a study of the British popular education movement Raymond Williams divided proponents into three kinds, "old humanists," "public educators," and "industrial trainers," linking the educational debates to the various political currents of the day. In particular, Williams suggested there were two sides to the promotional efforts: a progressive one which understood "that men had a natural human right to be educated and that any good society depended on governments accepting this principle as their duty," and, on the other side, "often by those men deeply opposed to democracy" a view that "man's spiritual health depended on a kind of education which was more than a training for some specialized work, a kind variously described as 'liberal,' 'humane' or 'cultural.'" Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Harmondsworth 1975), 161-163. Also see Edward Royle, "Mechanics' Institutes and the Working Classes," 314-321, and Asa Briggs, *The Age of Improvement, 1783-1867* (London 1959) 223-225 (on mechanics' institutes) and 394-402 (on the notion of progress).

While attendance at the exhibitions grew throughout the century, the lower attendance in classes leading to some cancellation of courses brought a response by certain officers. During the late 1860s and early 1870s, some Institute supporters and popular education promoters experimented in using the legislative process to advance their aims with the assistance of their supporters in government. There was one amusing moment in 1872, when some community figures of a moral bent decided to increase working-class participation at the provinces' exhibitions by legislating the closure of competing public attractions. In the amendment to the Agriculture and Arts Act of that year (the Act under which both the Institute and Agriculture and Arts Association fell), there was a subsection included which prohibited horse races on the day of the exhibition — "That hereafter it shall not be lawful to carry on any horse-racing, during the days appointed for holding any exhibition by the agricultural and arts association of Ontario, or by any electoral division society, within five miles of the place holding the same."<sup>34</sup> A penalty of \$50 or up to 30 days' imprisonment was introduced for violating the Act. There is no evidence, however, that this had any impact on attendance at exhibitions, if indeed the Act was enforced.

Rather, the debates at the Mechanics' Institute suggest that while a few individuals on the Board believed that the Institute should become a receptacle for moral teaching, the general tendency of the Board still supported the opening of the facilities to as wide a public as possible including its use for recreational pastimes such as smoking, conversation, and games. During the 1870s, chess-boards and billiard tables were introduced, in addition to a reading room for women.<sup>35</sup> This demonstrated a significantly different attitude to those places in Toronto where "smoking, idle gossip and gaming" were seen as deadly social evils and where women were excluded from intellectual pursuits. Mechanics' Institute officers, therefore, by-and-large, remained committed to the project of adult education for workers even though they expressed divergent viewpoints.

<sup>34</sup>An Act to Amend the Agriculture and Arts Act, Ontario, *Statutes*, 35 Vict. 1872, cap. 32.

<sup>35</sup>Samuel Thompson, *Reminiscences of a Canadian Pioneer*, 276. References to women in the public life of the Institute are available in the minute books and annual reports, most particularly in the sections relating to the Women's Committee of the Exhibitions and the lists of teachers. More work on women in the mechanics' institute movement will reveal that their role was significant and structural as it was for other 19<sup>th</sup>-century institutions. The challenge for the historian is to identify their areas of activity in incidences where the written records exclude their contribution and presence. The revision of the historical records to include women was already underway by women and their supporters in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For instance, the *Catalogue of the First Exhibition of the Society of Artists and Amateurs of Toronto* first published in 1834 was reprinted in 1848 with the addition of a list of women artists who were not identified, or listed only as by "a lady" in the original catalogue. Maria Tippett has discussed some aspects of the exclusion of women artists in her volume, *By a Lady*.

By the late 1860s, the government lay at the crossroads of providing for education, and by 1868 adult education in particular was making inroads in the legislative arena. After a lengthy study of legislative involvement in education, the provincial government placed the mechanics' institutes under the new Agriculture and Arts Association Act, which would consolidate the agricultural societies with the mechanics' institutes, and restore legislative subsidy to some of their activity.<sup>36</sup> The Association would serve as a co-ordinating body for related voluntary organizations involving representatives from the Department of Education, the Mechanics' Institute, and others. John Carling, the Minister of Agriculture responsible for implementing this Act, had been a supporter of the Mechanics' Institute and included a section for the creation of an Association of Mechanics' Institutes. At the 1868 Annual General Meeting of the Toronto Mechanics' Institute, the Board of Directors made it clear that it did not wish to compete with any new government measures but would continue to provide an alternative for adult evening education so long as it was deemed fit. The Board did not believe that its evening classes would compete with any current provisions of the government, suggesting that such instruction was indispensable,

not only to afford a general education and means of improvement for those engaged in the active and industrial pursuits of life, but also a technical education, such as no other educational establishment provided, but which is most necessary to the manufacturing and commercial progress of the country. They do not take the place of the ordinary schools, but when properly constituted they continue this school education...<sup>37</sup>

Thus the Board clarified its activity and commended the restoration of its legislative grant. Increasingly, however, during the late 1860s and early 1870s, Board members were aware that they might be superseded by the new educational bodies. In 1872, the Institute proposed and passed a motion to sell some of its buildings to the government for a proposed College of Technology.<sup>38</sup>

*The Toronto Mechanics' Institute and New Provisions for the Arts:  
The Ontario Society of Artists, the Toronto School of Art,  
and the Toronto Free Public Library*

By the third quarter of the century it became apparent that William Lyon Mackenzie's dream of a new society had not been realized. In its place the working class would form its own political institutions including a trade union movement and press. Popular agitation for reform was now coupled with the more militant demands of an organized working class, not only for the political and industrial

<sup>36</sup>Ontario, *Statutes*, 31 Vict. Cap. 29, 1868, An Act for the encouragement of Agriculture, Horticulture, Arts and Manufactures, ss. 24-25.

<sup>37</sup>MTRL BR, Toronto Mechanics' Institute, Annual Report, 1868.

<sup>38</sup>MTRL BR, Toronto Mechanics' Institute, Annual Report, 1872.



'rights' of labour, but also for the educational and cultural needs of workers. During the 1870s and 1880s, labour newspapers such as the *Ontario Workman* and the *Palladium of Labor* were able to participate in an increasingly political debate about the role of education for the working class in the context of the Nine-Hour Movement and the Knights of Labor.

As Harvey Graff has pointed out, the debates around "the common school system" could lead in a number of different directions. By the latter part of the century, the debates diversified and for the first time since the 1820s and 1830s the possibility of an independent working-class education came under discussion as an alternative to the educational reforms which were developing in the public education context. Between 1872 and 1874, the *Ontario Workman* engaged in a discussion of worker self-education, for the purpose of educating workers to exercise the franchise, and attaining basic literacy skills for everyday use. Phillips Thompson entered the discussion in the 1880s warning readers of the *Palladium of Labor* not to be seduced by class education ("the untruths and half-truths of bourgeois political economy") and warned readers that the compulsory system of state education would teach the working class to read and then give them "dime novels for perusal, having previously given them a taste for such reading," rather than providing them with suitable intellectual stimulation. In the place of pulp fiction, the *Palladium of Labor* urged well-directed and informed "class" reading for relief from strenuous labour.<sup>39</sup>

By the 1870s, the Toronto Mechanics' Institute was no longer the only voluntary body promoting adult education in art and design. While the Ontario Society of Artists (OSA) is often thought of as a fine art institution, its charter included a design component similar to the Mechanics' Institute. In 1877, the Ontario Society of Artists applied for and received its incorporation as a civic body under the Act for the Encouragement of Agriculture, Horticulture, Arts and Manufactures.<sup>40</sup> Its charter specifically placed it alongside the Mechanics' Institute Association as an adult educational facility. The OSA was accountable to the Commissioner of Agriculture and Arts, and its works were accorded status under the Act. The charter of the OSA allowed for the formation of a Canadian art union for the purpose of fund-raising and the promotion of "any objects consistent with the study of art and its practical bearing upon the interests of the Province of Ontario." Accordingly, from 1876 to 1894, the OSA managed the Toronto Industrial Art Union with exhibitions of paintings, drawings, designs, architecture, pastel

<sup>39</sup>For primary sources on working-class self-education see the work of Harvey J. Graff on the *Ontario Workman* and the *Palladium* in "Respected and Profitable Labour," 58-82; and T. Phillips Thompson, *The Politics of Labor* (New York 1887), 17, 58, 83, 151, 161, 171. On the school question see Alison Prentice, *The School Promoters: Education and Social Class in Nineteenth-Century Upper Canada* (Toronto 1977).

<sup>40</sup>Act for the encouragement of Agriculture, Horticulture, Arts and Manufactures, Province of Ontario, *Statutes*, 40 Vict. Cap. 17, 1877 ss. 85-88.

book covers, and stained glass decorations, attracting purchases from George Allan, Sir. John A. Macdonald, Goldwin Smith, James Spooner, and Daniel Wilson. Artists involved with the OSA and with the Toronto Mechanics' Institute included Robert F. Gagen, Marmaduke Matthews, and Charles Millard. The patrons of the OSA also overlapped with those of the Institute and consisted largely of merchants, industrialists, financiers and statesmen, including G.W. Allan, W.H. Howland, and J.H. Morse.<sup>41</sup> The charter of the OSA explicitly granted a mandate to improve practical education in the province towards the advancement of art and design. This was to be carried out by the formation of a school of art and design (1876) under the auspices of the OSA.

In the same year, as a result of a desire to develop the administration of public education in the province, Egerton Ryerson's position as Chief-Superintendent of Education was replaced by a new Minister of Education to be held by Liberal Member of Parliament, Adam Crooks. Crooks began to standardize the teaching system in the province and oversaw the incorporation of private educational facilities into the public educational system under a new provincial mandate. The Ontario Society of Artists had its School of Art and Design placed under the auspices of the Ontario government where it could receive public funding and an opportunity to expand its facilities. This was accomplished in 1880 under the new ministerial arrangements. At this point, the Ontario Society of Artists, the Schools of Art and Design, the Mechanics' Institutes, and the Association of Mechanics' Institutes were all placed under the supervision of the Minister of Education instead of the Commissioner of Agriculture and Arts.<sup>42</sup>

The Toronto School of Art and Design offered classes closely resembling those of the Mechanics' Institute and similar to those offered under comparable systems in the United States, France, Germany, and England, ranging from elementary design and flat copy work, to perspective, with oil and water colour technique in the most advanced stages. Teachers at the school included many who had gained their first teaching experience at the Toronto Mechanics' Institute. For example, in the 1880-1881 term, Marmaduke Matthews taught morning elementary design classes, while Richard Baigent, Robert Harris, Henri Perré and E.K. Westmacott instructed the elementary, flat copy, antique, perspective and design classes. The evening classes in the same year were taught by OSA founder member John Fraser, along with Richard Baigent, Henri Perré, and William Revell. Charlotte Schreiber taught evening oil painting, and Marmaduke Matthews taught water colour painting. At this time, while private art commissions were still insufficient in numbers

<sup>41</sup>AO, Ontario Society of Artists' Papers, *Toronto Industrial Art Union 1887, Under the Management of the Ontario Society of Artists*.

<sup>42</sup>An Act to amend the Agriculture and Arts Act, Ontario, *Statutes*, 43 Vict. Cap. 5, 1880 s.1; Ontario, Department of Education, *Report of the Minister of Education for the Years 1880 and 1881*.

to support full-time vocational fine artists, art and design instruction offered a suitable alternative or supplementary income.

The debates around the new government provision for classes reflected those of the earlier Mechanics' Institute with respect to the relative significance of a general education including fine art and practical education. In the 1880-1881 Report to the Ontario legislature, Adam Crooks stated:

The advantages of art instruction in increasing the values of the industrial products of Ontario can scarcely be over-estimated, and especially in the improved skill and capacity of all the mechanical and artisan classes.<sup>43</sup>

The records of the new Toronto School of Art and Design (later the Ontario School of Art and Design, and the Ontario College of Art) indicate that its officers felt there were difficulties in establishing desired attendance figures. The fundamental problem of a lack of recreational time amongst the working class was cited as a major cause. The School went through periods of difficulty and supporters mounted a defence along similar lines as the Mechanics' Institute, stating that their school was meeting the needs of the new industry and manufacturing. As one letter to the Editor, published in the *Hamilton Spectator*, noted:

I can imagine but one reason (for the reduction in the grant) and, assuming it to be the true one, I shall devote this letter to an exposition of the great and fatal error on which it is based. I fancy it to be the idea that Schools of Art and Design are intended chiefly for the instruction in the painting of pictures. Nothing can be more erroneous, though, even were their benefit confined to that narrow sphere, they would deserve state support...I assert that these schools are absolutely essential to the artisan, and that the "poorer classes"...are much more interested in them than the members of the higher grades in society.<sup>44</sup>

While the attendance figures in the classes of the Mechanics' Institute are not available in any systematic way (apart from some brief accounts in the annual reports), the records of the Ontario School of Art do give us a clearer picture of attendance, which may shed some light on these years, assuming there was some intersection of students. It is worth noting that in 1880-1881 the number of artisans and mechanics specifically described as such and enrolled in evening classes at the Ontario School of Art was fifteen out of eighty students. The remaining students were described as teachers, architects, designers (44) and "gentlemen" (21). How many of the gentlemen and designers were members of the working class is unknown. ('gentlemen' could include yeomen as well as those of more independent means.) The *day* classes, offered at higher fees, attracted 83 pupils in the 1880-1881

<sup>43</sup>AO, Department of Education, *Report of the Minister of Education for the Years 1880 and 1881*.

<sup>44</sup>AO, Department of Education, "Ontario School of Art," (miscellaneous article), *Hamilton Spectator*, 20 February 1880.

term, none of whom were recorded as mechanics or artisans. Again, this is a very inexact measure of the class background of the students and we might assume that an art school would attract less working-class students than a mechanics' institute.<sup>45</sup>

Neither the Toronto Mechanics' Institute nor the Ontario School of Art could claim high attendance in their classes. However, by the late 1870s efforts for the promotion of art and design were no longer solely in the domain of these institutions, and public education began to grow rapidly. The most apparent sign of the role public provisions were to play was in 1879 when the Toronto Mechanics' Institute made overtures to the City of Toronto for amalgamation with the city's classes. Although the School Board did not adopt the motion, the Institute's interest encouraged School Trustees to open their own evening classes. These classes were so successful and widely attended that they immediately planned for enlargement the following year. Indeed, many of the Institute members welcomed the new public provisions and were involved in their creation.<sup>46</sup>

With the implementation of public evening classes through the provincial school system, the officers at the Toronto Mechanics' Institute expressed a desire to devise a new system of instruction at the Institute more exclusively focused on the higher branches of mathematics, architectural, and mechanical drawing so that it would not be duplicating public provisions. Within a year, however, economic considerations over-ruled the possibility for the Mechanics' Institute's classes, and public provisions wholly superseded their efforts. In an historic meeting of the Mechanics' Institute in 1881, the Board acknowledged that "it was not deemed politic to continue the classes so long carried on by the Institute..."<sup>47</sup>

In addition to the development of new public provisions for art in Toronto, a campaign was launched for a public library system, based on a rates levy, progressing from public meetings in 1881 to a petition signed by 1,900 people and presented to City Hall in 1882, and on into legislation within the year.<sup>48</sup> With the call for a public library system well underway, members of the Mechanics' Institute convened a special meeting (advertised in the paper on 29 March 1883) to discuss the transference of the Institute's property to the newly-formed Toronto Free Public Library. At this meeting, the Board announced that the public library could provide

<sup>45</sup>AO, Department of Education, *Report of the Minister of Education for the Years 1880 and 1881*.

<sup>46</sup>AO, Department of Education, *Report of the Minister of Education for the Years 1880 and 1881*. This was a protracted process involving an assessment of various facilities in the province including the Mechanics' Institute by Dr. Samuel Passmore May, the Superintendent of Ontario Art Schools and Mechanics' Institutes. See Otto Klotz, *A Review of the Special Report by the Minister of Education on the Mechanics' Institutes* (Toronto 1881), 5-7. Klotz was president of the Preston Mechanics' Institute at the time.

<sup>47</sup>AO, Department of Education, *Report of the Minister of Education for the years 1880 and 1881*, Report for 1881.

<sup>48</sup>AO, Department of Education, *Report of the Minister of Education for the years 1880 and 1881*, Report for 1881.

a greater facility for the working class and welcomed the "transfer [of] all real property to the City of Toronto Public Library" through a unanimous vote of its membership, thus ending its 53-year history.<sup>49</sup>

Thus private and public provisions for art and design in 19th-century Toronto became interrelated in their aims and history. Although the process developed unevenly, with public provisions charging ahead at one moment and then retreating or lying dormant in another (the total process being protracted over an entire century), art education largely became a government responsibility financed through taxation. Not by coincidence, the first Toronto Public Library was housed in the Adélaidé and Church Street building of the Toronto Mechanics' Institute. Here, some members of the Institute (George D'Arcy Boulton, John Hallam, John Taylor, and Daniel Wilson) continued their efforts as educational promoters on the first Public Library Board, and continued the debates about the role of art education.

In contrast to these new public provisions, the annual Exhibition of the Mechanics' Institute was superseded by an extension of *private* provisions. This was to have significant ramifications for fine art exhibition in Canada for many years. In 1878, representatives from the Toronto Electoral District Society, the Ontario Society of Artists, the Toronto Mechanics' Institute, the Horticultural Society, the Manufacturers' Association, and the Poultry Association, gathered to inaugurate the first meeting for the joint management of a permanent annual exhibition of agriculture, horticulture, arts and manufactures.<sup>50</sup> The result was the formation of the Toronto Industrial Exhibition. In addition to transmitting practical knowledge, the exhibitions were to serve under populist ideology as "citizen's institutions" like their European counterparts:

Industrial Exhibitions, the exponents of civilization, industry, social advancement and national prosperity, have wielded their influence for several centuries...

It is to England and France that the world is most indebted for the inauguration of industrial competitive exhibitions. In the 17th century the Society of Arts in London and the Government of France aided and supported the advancement of exhibitions for arts and manufactures...

With a just appreciation of these facts, a few of our prominent citizens considered that we are now in a position for the establishment of a permanent Industrial Exhibition...<sup>51</sup>

<sup>49</sup>Enacted July 1, 1883; Alan M. Thomas, "The Colour of a Great City," *A Paper Presented in Celebration of the 150th Anniversary of the Toronto Mechanics' Institute*, 13 November 1980 (no publisher cited), Robarts Library, University of Toronto.

<sup>50</sup>V. M. Roberts, ed., *The Trail of the Canadian National Exhibition: An Illustrated Historical Souvenir* (Toronto 1925), 36.

<sup>51</sup>CNE Archives, Agricultural and Industrial Exhibitions Association of Toronto, *The Authorized Catalogue of the First Annual Exhibition, 1879; Catalogue of the Department of Fine Arts, 1879-1961*.

This exhibition would resemble the Mechanics' Institute Exhibition in its aims, although its organizational principle was larger in scale involving the six local associations in the management of the fairs.

The Industrial Exhibition committees brought together members of the Mechanics' Institute with other prominent figures in civic affairs. These included G.W. Allan, Thomas Davison, Edward Gurney Jr., W.H. Howland, George Lesslie Jr., S.P. May, D.C. Ridout, and John Withrow. The number of women involved in the same activities is uncertain because their names were not recorded. The Fine Arts Committee of the Exhibition included some of the most prominent artists and patrons of the day, many of whom had been involved with both the Institute and the new Schools of Art and Design; F.M. Bell-Smith, Robert Gagen, James Griffiths, Thomas Mower Martin, Marmaduke Matthews, and F. McGillivray Knowles. The first President and founder member of the Royal Canadian Academy, Lucius R. O'Brien, became a key figure on the 1879 Fine Art Committee which selected and supervised the art contributions.<sup>52</sup>

The Toronto Industrial Exhibition therefore adopted and slightly expanded the role of the Mechanics' Institute in the exhibition of art. A survey of the fine art specimens there illustrates that it became an important annual exhibition of art in Toronto displaying the work of major artists of the day. In addition to artist-members of the Fine Arts Committee (above), Exhibition participants included Richard Baigent, William Cresswell, John Colin Forbes, Charlotte Schreiber, Frederick Verner, and Homer Watson. The Exhibition provided a facility for many women artists of the 19th century including Jane Donovan, Caroline Gagen, Sarah Hamilton, Emma Kennedy, Annie Lister, and Helen Taylor, many of whom would be lost to history without the Exhibitions' records. The fine art works alone in 1879 numbered approximately 369 - only 19 less than the 388 exhibited at the annual Canadian Academy of Arts Exhibition a year later.<sup>53</sup> While by no means entirely replicating the Mechanics' Institute Exhibitions, then, there were now other exhibition facilities serving the needs of Toronto artists.

*The Workers' Movement and the Toronto Mechanics' Institute  
at the End of the Century*

As this article suggests, while much of the literature which was contemporaneous with the Mechanics' Institute reflects on the alleged failure of the institution to provide widespread adult education, a more distanced and objective analysis suggests that the Toronto Mechanics' Institute did remarkably well. At a time when

<sup>52</sup>The names have been culled from the annual reports of the Industrial Exhibition Association of Toronto, CNE with thanks to Nancy Hum, CNE Archivist, for assistance with locating the records.

<sup>53</sup>CNE Archives, Agricultural and Industrial Exhibitions Association of Toronto, "The Fine Arts Department," *The Authorized Catalogue for the First Annual Exhibition, 1879*, 44-47; MTRL, Royal Canadian Academy of Arts, *First Annual Exhibition, Ottawa, 1880*.

both public and private provisions for education were still in the early stages of development, the Toronto Mechanics' Institute provided an excellent opportunity for a secular working-class adult education to accompany the adult evening provisions of the common school system. The original aims of the Institute to serve "mechanics" remained central to discussions despite the changing compositions of the Board and committees from its formation in 1831 to its closure in 1883, and served as a model for other efforts of the day. Perhaps ironically, the best evidence of the success of the Institute as a working-class project was the attraction of major civic figures of a rather different political bent to its Board throughout much of its existence. Working-class education, to this extent, was a bipartisan issue: reform-led, but of interest to some Tories. This was a tribute to the success of its founders and their supporters in placing the working class at the centre of the educational agenda. Had the Institute *not* been successful in addressing some aspect of working-class education, these figures, who were also involved in the expanded public school system, the public library scheme, and the Toronto Industrial Exhibition, would have taken their effort elsewhere. As it stands, the Toronto Mechanics' Institute remained a vital proponent of working-class education up to and including its final year of operation despite the concerns of its officers. In 1877, the prize essays of the Toronto Mechanics' Institute were still arguing for the Library to be non-sectarian in religion and politics and for the Institute to serve as an institution "for the education of the working classes." They were also still defending the Institute's role in the self-education of workers, and the emancipation of workers through self-governance. The second prize essay argued once again for a Board to be constituted by at least 50 per cent mechanics. This illustrates a remarkable continuity of thought throughout the life of the Toronto Mechanics' Institute.<sup>54</sup>

Despite the discussion and development of new art provisions in Toronto, the Mechanics' Institute continued its art classes until the closure in 1883. There was even some discussion in the 1870s that the Institute might attempt to secure recognition as the new School of Art and Design in Toronto. Richard Lewis went so far as to propose that the Mechanics' Institutes Association of Ontario might act as the co-ordinating agency for Schools of Art in Ontario.<sup>55</sup> This idea, which would have expanded the role of the mechanics' institutes, was supported by Otto Klotz, President of the Preston Mechanics' Institute, in his Review of the Minister of Education's Report in 1881. Klotz added that many different people were expressing an interest in the institutes at this time including booksellers who were wishing

<sup>54</sup>Thomas Davison, Toronto Mechanics' Institute, 1st Prize Essay, *Mechanics' Institutes and the Best Means of Improving Them*, 1-3; Richard Lewis, 2nd Prize Essay, *Mechanics' Institutes and the Best Means of Improving Them*, opening page and p. 5.

<sup>55</sup>Richard Lewis, 2nd Prize Essay, 14-15, "In France and Prussia and England," it is observed, "wherever art classes are formed, they are crowded by the students for whom they are specially designed — the practical mechanic and designer — and in England they are, to a large extent, self-supporting," 15.

to hold elected office (and were prevented from doing so because of their commercial interest). Klotz specifically defended the art activities at the institutes and suggested that the municipalities might be asked to contribute to them financially. In their defence Klotz wrote,

*Will the public be served better by theorists than by practical men? Are we to have autocracy or oligarchy introduced into our system; or will we in future be allowed to enjoy, as at present, the privileges of self-government.*<sup>56</sup>

The evidence suggests therefore that had the Toronto Mechanics' Institute remained in operation after 1883, it would have continued to serve as an important art centre for teaching, the employment of artists (male and female) as teachers, and for the exhibition of artists' work, among other activities. Certainly its Annual Exhibition would have rivalled the Toronto Industrial Exhibition, the Canadian National Exhibition, and the Royal Canadian Academy Exhibition for many years as well as serving as the Mechanics' Institute's major profit-making event. As we have noted, all of the alternative organizations placed "art for manufacturing" alongside fine art in their charters following the lead of the Mechanics' Institute, and as it turned out, the Toronto Mechanics' Institute was succeeded by other institutions which combined "useful knowledge" with fine art. This only left a vacuum in the city for a public lecture venue.

The Toronto Mechanics' Institute closed its doors at a time when the working class was increasing its role in organized civil life. The art provisions of the Institute, therefore, ended not due to any intrinsic problems at the Institute, but because those active on its Board and other areas of civic life decided that the working class might best be served by the new provisions. It is here that we must note the growth of alternative secular organizing amongst the working class, most notably in the trade union movement and labour press, because these would become important locuses of activity for those dedicated to worker self-advancement. With the industrial unrest of the 1870s and 1880s, there emerged a new political unionism around the struggles of the Knights of Labor, the Trades and Labour Council, and the Trades and Labour Congress. The active and organized section of the working class was the same "mechanical and operative class" that had loomed so large in the life of the Toronto Mechanics' Institute and the issues now revolved not only around industrial unionism but also around the political demands for a nine-hour day, equal pay for women, the ending of child and convict labour, the repeal of anti-combination and sedition laws, as well as the political representation of labour and workers' internationalism.

By 1883, many of the important functions of the Toronto Mechanics' Institute had been taken over by public or private provisions for adult education and art exhibition. The Institute's Adelaide and Church Street building now became the

<sup>56</sup>Otto Klotz, *A Review of the Special Report*, 14.



home for the offices of the Toronto Industrial Exhibition as well as the Toronto Public Library. In this way, the legacy of the Institute carried on under a new administration. However, industrial and commercial growth had greatly altered the face of Toronto since those early founding days and the commercial heart of the city had moved westward. The main buildings for the Toronto Industrial Exhibition rose on military reserve land in their present location and the new Toronto library was ready for relocation to the corner of College and St. George Streets in 1909. Thus the entire geography of the city began to change along with the changing demographics. In 1879, the Mechanics' Institute Board noted that its building was no longer suitably placed to meet the needs of the working class:

In the rapid growth of the City, the artizan and his family have, from motives of economy and health, moved to the outskirts of the City, and the Mechanics' Institute Class Rooms are now far from being conveniently located.<sup>57</sup>

The modern city, as we know it today, had already begun to take shape.

In conclusion, then, the promotion of art in 19th-century Toronto was integrally related to the industrial society in which it was situated. The new mode of production gave shape to the context for the promotion of art through the training of artists, new means of distribution, and exhibition of art. This mode of production also established a full set of social relations, including class relations in which artists and art patrons were brought together in their everyday lives. When Walter Eales addressed the Mechanics' Institute in 1851, he was expressing thoughts of culture, industry, and social class which were central to the ideas of the Mechanics' Institute in those years. It may be seen, therefore, that the promotion of art was more than a mere reflection of these changes. Its members were, in fact, participants in the actual transformation of that society. An early 20th-century manuscript deposited in the Archives of Ontario suggests the decline of the educational work of the English Mechanics' Institutes was related to the "class struggle of 1848" stimulated only again by the government grants of the Department of Arts and Science in 1859.<sup>58</sup> Perhaps we can be more positive in the case of the Toronto Mechanics' Institute and state that the Institute continued to play an important role throughout its existence in the 19th century, as much *due to* the class struggles of the century as *despite* those class struggles. Social and class relations in Toronto rendered continual discussion of the Institute, as witnessed by the drafting, re-drafting and amendment of Institute charters, as well as documentation in the minute books by the recording secretaries of the day. However, this was following the usual pattern of associational life in 19th-century Canada, present in other educational and art organizations. The historical efforts for change, for better or for worse, were located

<sup>57</sup>MTRL BR, Toronto Mechanics' Institute, Annual Report, 1879.

<sup>58</sup>AO, Fraser Alexander Papers, "Mechanics' Institutes," no author, no date (perhaps early 20th century), 4.

in the voluntary bodies of the day and culminated in a combination of further voluntary and state provisions. In revealing this process one may begin to get a glimpse of the real social relations of the day, as well as insights into the nascent city art community.

Much work still needs to be done to recover the history of Canadian mechanics' institutes in the 19th century. This work, however, should not neglect the international dimension of the mechanics' institute movement. Not only was the mechanics' institute movement in Canada a progressive response to the great international events in the aftermath of the American and French revolutions, but it was also one of the first material results of the 19th-century international workers' movement along with the trade unions. Not only did over 300 mechanics' institutes emerge across the Canadian landscape to provide workers an evening school education in science, technology, design, and fine art, as well as access to good libraries, public lectures, and exhibitions, the movement's progenitors attempted to spread this early effort for worker self-education and emancipation throughout the world. The mechanics' institutes, far from being exhausted as a scholarly endeavour for researchers, still offer much material for a more worker-oriented interpretation. This would apply to the American, Australian, English, Indian, Irish, and Scottish movements, as well as the Canadian mechanics' institute movement. Their role, as one aspect of the progressive workers' movement for the extension of the franchise, the abolition of slavery, and for women's rights, was just one expression of the drive for workers' internationalism in the 19th century. This then suggests a challenge for working class scholars: to reclaim the past for the future.

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