

# PORTRAITS OF WOMEN: THE CANADIAN HOME FROM THE VICTORIAN ERA TO THE BEGINNING OF THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

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This exhibition presents portraits of Canadian women in the context of the home, and what it meant at different times in Canada, from the Victorian era to the twenty-first century. The term “home” is defined by the *Webster’s Dictionary* as the place where a person or family lives; the place where one was born or reared; or a place thought of as home, a place where one likes to be.<sup>1</sup> These various meanings will be explored through this exhibition to reveal how deeply they are connected to social, economic and political situations. At the same time, these photographs of Canadian homes also reflect the place of women in society, and how it evolved through time, from the end of the nineteenth century, when women’s primary role was to take care of the household, to the beginning of the twenty-first century, represented by the conceptual photographs of a contemporary artist.

During the Victorian era (1837-1901), women’s activities were confined mostly to the private sphere, and strongly connected to the home. The house was the reflection of a family’s status and respectability in society. With the commercial emergence of photography, more and more men and women became amateur photographers, like James Ballantyne and his daughter Isa May. The Second World War (1939-1945) changed the lives of many Canadians, having a drastic effect on women’s life in society. They started working to sustain their families, while their husbands went off to war. The exhibition ends with Lisa Klapstock’s conceptual photographs

entitled *Living Room*, creating a private space in a semi-public sphere, thus challenging the private/public and woman/man dualisms.



Bedroom, Mrs. Gemmill's Residence, May 1899.

William James Topley (1845-1930)

Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

[http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam\\_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec\\_nbr=3365567&rec\\_nbr\\_list=3365567](http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3365567&rec_nbr_list=3365567).

This photograph is from a series of images taken by the prolific Canadian photographer William James Topley (1845-1930) of the Gemmill residence in Ottawa, Ontario. During the Victorian era (1837-1901) the household was a reflection of the wife, domesticity and motherhood being her main occupations.<sup>2</sup> Women were responsible for the care of the home, and had to ensure that it was a welcoming and comforting environment for their husband and children.<sup>3</sup> This photograph represents a typical Victorian bedroom, with floral wallpaper, small pictures and paintings on the walls, a massive bed for the husband and wife with a smaller bed on the side for young children. The empty chair in the foreground and the shawl placed on it indicate the presence of a woman, which makes this photograph an indirect portrait of Mrs. Gemmill. Just by looking at the bedroom, it is clear that she fulfilled her responsibilities as a mother and wife, by having children, which were seen as a woman's vocation, and a respectable home, representing "marital stability and domestic virtue."<sup>4</sup>



Miss Ogilvie, Montreal, QC, 1882. February 7, 1882.

Notman & Sandham

Silver salts on paper mounted on paper - Albumen process.

15 x 10 cm.

McCord Museum, Montreal.

<http://www.mccord-museum.qc.ca/en/collection/artifacts/II-63755>>.

This studio photograph depicts Emily Helen Ogilvie (1857-?), daughter of senator Hon. A. W. Ogilvie from Montreal, seventeen years before the photographs of her residence were taken by William James Topley. In 1883 she married John Alexander Gemmill (1846-?), heir of the Gemmills of Templehouse. E. H. Ogilvie was also the Secretary of the Missionary Society, St. Andrew's Church, Ottawa, for several years.<sup>5</sup> She is shown here wearing a typical Victorian dress, characterized by a very small waist, high neck, and a long skirt fuller at the back and flatter at the front.<sup>6</sup>



Alice Steele in the Kitchen, March 1901.

James or May Ballantyne

Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

<[http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam\\_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayEcopies&lang=eng&rec\\_nbr=3265159](http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayEcopies&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3265159)>.

This photograph, a full-length portrait of Alice Steele, a housemaid in the Ballantyne home, is also a still life of pots and pans. It mirrors genre painting from the mid-nineteenth century, more specifically Lilly Martin Spencer's (1822-1902) numerous paintings of servants and domestic scenes.<sup>7</sup> From family and friends to landscapes and street scenes, James Ballantyne, co-owner of a cooperage factory in Ottawa and active in Canadian politics, photographed relentlessly, becoming one of the most prominent amateur photographers in Canada.<sup>8</sup> He was also one of the original members of the Ottawa Camera Club founded in 1894. His daughter, Isa May Ballantyne (1864-1929), Vice-President of the club from 1898 to 1899, became well known as an amateur photographer as well, a practice that became accessible in the 1880s thanks to the commercial hand-held Kodak camera.<sup>9</sup>



Romhild Girl in Kitchen at 54 Main Street, Residence of James Ballantyne,  
17 March 1907.

James or May Ballantyne

Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

<[http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam\\_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayEcopies&lang=eng&rec\\_nbr=3206985](http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayEcopies&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3206985)>.

This photograph represents another snapshot in the household of the Ballantyne family. The center of attention is a young girl with braided blond hair, working in the kitchen under the supervision of the domestic servant on the right. According to the caption, the girl is from Römhild, a town in the district of Hildburghausen, in Thuringia, Germany. The photograph may have been taken by James or May Ballantyne. However, it is more probable that it was taken by May, because it would have been unusual at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century for a man to be in the kitchen, amongst the servants. May Ballantyne was thus becoming a “family record-keeper,” a traditional role for Victorian women.<sup>10</sup>



National Film Board of Canada, *Mrs. Jack Wright and Her Two Sons Ralph and David Eating Breakfast*, September 1943, Toronto.

Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

<[http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam\\_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayEcopies&lang=eng&rec\\_nbr=3196956](http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayEcopies&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3196956)>.

The *Mrs. Jack Wright* series, produced by the National Film Board of Canada, is meant to illustrate the new Canadian woman that emerged during World War II. In 1942, women gradually started working as part of a program established by the then Prime Minister Mackenzie King to help Canada recover from Depression.<sup>11</sup> Mrs. Wright was part of one of the last categories of women to start working, the first being young unmarried women, and married women without children.<sup>12</sup> Since men were gone to war, women needed to find paid jobs, and take care of the household and children, doing everything on their own. This photograph is a vision of a normal Canadian family despite the war. Even though the father is absent, the system still works. Mrs. Jack Wright is smiling, while her two young sons are enjoying a typical North-American breakfast, milk and corn flakes cereals from Kellogg's.



Mrs. Jack Wright Relaxes With a Book in Her Living Room at the End of the Day,  
September 1943, Toronto.

Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

<[http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam\\_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayEcopies&lang=eng&rec\\_nbr=3196962](http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayEcopies&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3196962)>.

The *Mrs. Jack Wright* series shows the life of a mother going to work in a factory, having breakfast with her two sons, doing the dishes, leaving her children at daycare, going to work in a factory, talking to a neighbour, shopping, or spending a day at the beach. In this photograph, Mrs. Wright is shown enjoying a book after a hard day of work, thus taking the place of the man in the study. The library filled with numerous books behind her, furniture and elegant decorations serve as indicators of her middle or upper class status.



Lisa Klapstock, *Living Room, Floral Side Chair*, 2001.

Plexi glass, lacquered wood frame, 108 x 108 cm.

Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

[http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam\\_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayEcopies&lang=eng&rec\\_nbr=3690183](http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayEcopies&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3690183).

*Floral Side Chair* from the series *Living Room* by Lisa Klapstock, explores the boundaries between the public and private spheres in the back alleys of Toronto.<sup>13</sup> The title indicates the role of the living room in a home, representing the connection between the public and the private, personal realm. In each of the pictures the artist is seated on an abandoned living room chair in the centre of the lower half of the picture. Dressed in a protective white jumpsuit with black boots, with her hair tied at the back, Klapstock looks directly at the viewer, in an almost confrontational way. While she is holding in her right hand the remote control for the camera to take her self-portrait, the artist appears stiff and uncomfortable in this marginal space, as if on guard in a place that is neither public nor private. Furthermore, the text written on the garage door is threatening: “To the cowardly thief who broke in here and stole all my tools, one day you will work hard for something and then lose it all to a thief like yourself, and you will remember this,” indicating the presence of mischief, and necessity of regulatory signs like “No dumping,” in the back alley.



Lisa Klapstock, *Living Room, Beige Cube Chair*, 2002.

Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

<[http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam\\_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayEcopies&lang=eng&rec\\_nbr=3690177](http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayEcopies&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3690177)>.

Lisa Klapstocok explains the series:

“*Living Room* refers to the living environment of the laneway which is alive with plants and trees, and even animals; and is also a place in constant flux. Buildings erode and change, as do the things discarded there—like the furniture. In addition, through photography—the framing of the camera, and the photograph itself—a space / “room” is created. The addition of the living room furniture to this framed space makes it more explicitly a “living room” in terms of our experience with habitation, and draws attention to the private space of a home. And I was very conscious of the separation and distinction between public and private space in making this work. As I was often made to feel like a trespasser in the laneways, I was determined to occupy this public space in an empowered way. Sitting on the discarded furniture and making a record of my inhabitation was a way to insert my presence and literally take my place in the public realm. My presence is made somewhat uneasy by the white protective suit I'm wearing. It's a prophylactic layer between me and the environment.”<sup>14</sup>

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Agnes, ed., *Webster's New World College Dictionary*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1999) 682.

<sup>2</sup> Lynn Abrams, "The Icon," *Ideals of Womanhood in Victorian Britain, History Trails: Victorian Britain, BBC Home*, 6 Dec. 2011

<[http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/trail/victorian\\_britain/women\\_home/ideals\\_womanhood\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/trail/victorian_britain/women_home/ideals_womanhood_01.shtml)>.

<sup>3</sup> Judith Flanders, *Inside the Victorian Home* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003) 16.

<sup>4</sup> Abrams.

<sup>5</sup> J.A. Gemmill, *Note on the Probable Origin of the Scottish Surname of Gemmill or Gemmell with a Genealogical Account of the Family of Gemmill of Templehouse, Scotland* (Montreal: John Lovell and Son, 1898) 28-29.

<sup>6</sup> "Victorian Dress at the V&A," *Victoria and Albert Museum: The World's Greatest Museum of Art and Design*, 6 Dec. 2011 <<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/v/victorian-dress-at-v-and-a/>>.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth L. O'Leary, *At Beck and Call: The Representations of Domestic Servants in Nineteenth-Century American Painting* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996) 66-68.

<sup>8</sup> "Framing Canada: A Photographic Memory," *Library and Archives Canada*, 2 Oct. 2011

<<http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/visionphoto/045003-2500-e.html>>.

<sup>9</sup> Diana Pedersen and Martha Phemister, "Women and Photography in Ontario, 1839-1929: A Case Study of the Interaction of Gender and Technology," *Scientia Canadensis: Canadian Journal of the History of Science, Technology and Medicine*, 9:1 (28) 1985: 12 and 17.

<sup>10</sup> Pedersen and Phemister, 21.

<sup>11</sup> "Canadian Women and the Second World War," *On All Fronts: World War II and the NFB, National Film Board of Canada* (2008) 2 Oct. 2011 <<http://www3.nfb.ca/ww2/home-front/women-and-the-war.htm?article=18789&subtype=articles>>.

<sup>12</sup> "Canadian Women and the Second World War."

<sup>13</sup> Lisa Klapstock, "Lisa Klapstock Interview," *kopenhagen.dk*. 6 Dec. 2011

<[http://www.kopenhagen.dk/fileadmin/oldsite/jylland/lisaklapstock3004\\_0404.htm](http://www.kopenhagen.dk/fileadmin/oldsite/jylland/lisaklapstock3004_0404.htm)>.

<sup>14</sup> Lisa Klapstock, Email to Eliana Stratica Mihail, 20 Jan. 2012.

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