VALENTINE, William (Whitehaven, England 1798-1849 Halifax, N.S.)

William Valentine was among the most important professional artists working in the pre-confederation Maritimes colonies of British North America; and unfortunately, like so many artists of this period our knowledge of his life and work is still fragmentary. Yet enough can be pieced together to trace his professional activities and hence, his significance for early Canadian art.

Valentine came Halifax in 1818, establishing himself in the trade as house painter and decorator, in partnership with a Mr. Bell: by May 1824 he was in business on his own, advertising himself as a “painter and glazier”. Harry Piers remembers Valentine’s work as a decorative painter in his own family home as elaborate with colourful motifs along the corners and borders of the room, all painted in freehand. This appears to have been Valentine’s bread and butter work. At the same time, Valentine also advertised himself as a portrait and landscape painter as early as January 1819; in October 1821 he placed a notice for his drawing school in the Acadian Recorder. As a painter he was said to be self-taught yet the earliest known oil portraits, such as the portrait pair of 1827 in the NGC collection show him to be an artist with some artistic training.

In September 1826 Valentine travelled by sea to Boston for unknown purposes and he is next heard of in Halifax in May 1827 when he announced the opening of his business on new premises; the precise date of his return to Halifax has not been found. Boston was the most important artistic centre within reach of Maritime artists, and it could be that Valentine went to Boston in connection with his ambitions as an artist. As evidence for this supposition one should note that it was only after this Boston trip, that the first known oil portraits have been identified. From 1827 on, Valentine seems to have specialized in portraiture, and established himself as one of the most accomplished in the region. While most of Valentine’s commissions came from Halifax, his work caused him to travel extensively throughout Nova Scotia (Windsor and Liverpool) as well as Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island and apparently, Saint John, New Brunswick as shall be explained below. Valentine was also active with Halifax’s Mechanic Institute and in 1836, he travelled to London in order to make copies of portraits by Sir Thomas Lawrence, John Jackson and Thomas Phillips hanging in the rooms of the Royal Society. Valentine’s copies eventually were hung in the Mechanic’s Institute. (Piers does not make it clear whether Valentine’s work in London was the result of a commission or whether it was a form of study, but later writers has taken this as evidence that Valentine studied with Lawrence).

Upon his return to Halifax, it would seem that Valentine placed a notice which advertised himself strictly as a portrait painter, with the rates charged for different portrait types in oil. Within a few years, Valentine was branching out into a new form of art - photography. In late 1841 Valentine travelled to Paris to study apparently with Daguerre and returned home via the United States (probably Boston) where he purchased the equipment. In January 1842, he
announced this new line of business as well as his continuing interest in portrait painting. A second notice announced the opening a Daguerreotype studio in Saint John, New Brunswick in association with “Mr. J.C. Clow,” a miniature painter.

Please cite in the following manner:


Endnotes:

1. The most thorough examination of Valentine by Harry Piers in his article “Artists in Nova Scotia”, Nova Scotia Historical Society, vol. 18, 1914. Piers devotes most (pp. 126-137) of his documented article to William Valentine. Another important source is J. Russell Harper, Early Painters and Engravers in Canada, University of Toronto Press, 1970. See also Jim Burant, “Art in Halifax: Exhibitions and Criticisms in 1830 and 1831”, RACAR, VIII:2, pp. 119-136. Piers offers a cataloguing of known works by Valentine and since that date, while some have disappeared within private collections, only a handful more have come to light (For example, the three canvases in the National Gallery’s collection).

2. Piers cites a notice that Valentine placed in the Nova Scotian on 17 May 1824, giving his new address (where he would remain until his death) and advertising himself as a “painter and glazier”.

3. By Joseph Howe in his memorial to his friend William Valentine written in 1874 and cited by Piers, pp. 133.

4. Piers and Donald MacKay give the date as 1842 whereas Harper dates the photographic studio opening to 1844.

5. Donald MacKay, “Artists and Their Pictures”, Canadian Antiques Collector, VII:1, (Jan-Feb 1972), p.85. MacKay paraphrases the two advertisements but does not cite specific journals or dates.