

EDUCATING THE EYE, HAND, AND HEART AT ST. ANN'S ACADEMY:

*A Case Study of Art Education for Girls in Nineteenth-Century Victoria*¹

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THE ART STUDIO was considered a sacred place by all the students. Those who took lessons went to the studio. Those who did not seldom entered the place: untrained hands could mar and untrained eyes could fail to appreciate. Nevertheless, the art department was a source of pride to all at St. Ann's. It was considered an integral part of the school.²

In a "Retrospective of St. Ann's Academy" published in the *Victoria Daily Colonist* (hereafter *Colonist*) on 28 May 1872, Sr. Mary Lucy (Sister of St. Ann [ssa])³ reflects on the centrality of art in the life of the school. She remarked, "I believe that two or three of our Sisters could have had very successful art careers, possibly even becoming quite famous if they had so desired that life instead of the one of dedication and service that they chose instead."⁴ These speculations, while accurate in their acknowledgment of artistic abilities, slide over the more complex relationship between women and art in the nineteenth century. In this article we argue that, within the gendered and class-based society

¹ This study, supported by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada grant (#410-99-0333), is part of a larger group of studies that seeks to portray and understand art education in a variety of institutions in nineteenth-century Canada. See, for example, F. Graeme Chalmers, "Art Education in a Manly Environment: Educating the Sons of the Establishment in a 19th-Century Boys' School," *Studies in Art Education* 42, 2 (2001): 113-30. This project would not have been possible without the generous assistance of the Sisters of St. Ann's (ssa) archivists, Sr. Margaret Cantwell ssa, Ms. Mickey King in Victoria, and Louise Prieur, who assisted us in the archives in Lachine.

² Patricia Dickinson, ssa, *Reminiscences of St. Ann's* (Victoria: Sisters of St. Ann, 1973), 25-6.

³ Née Céline Fortin, 1846-1926. In Victoria the religious names of French-Canadian sisters were often anglicized (i.e., Mary [not Marie], Lucy [not Lucie]), and we have generally adopted this pattern throughout this article.

⁴ From an unidentified article in the *Victoria Daily Colonist* (hereafter *Colonist*). Found in the Brabant Scrapbook, Archives of the Sisters of St. Ann, Victoria, n.d., n.p. Sr. M. Lucy (née Celina Fortin) was educated by the Soeurs de Ste-Anne in Napierville, Quebec. She herself specialized in music and "fancy work."

of nineteenth-century British Columbia, it was precisely this life of dedication and service that enabled these women to pursue an artistic identity. In turn, art served St. Ann's by cultivating a distinctive religious identity and promoting the school through the development of this



Illustration 1: *The Immaculate Conception* (after Murillo). Oil painting, Sister Mary Osithe, SSA 1904. Courtesy of the Sisters of St. Ann, Victoria.

genteel female accomplishment. In the *Colonist* account, Sr. Lucy's words are visually underscored in a photograph that depicts her posing beside a copy of Murillo's *Immaculate Conception*, painted in 1904 by Sr. M. Osithe SSA,⁵ one of the aforementioned sisters who taught art at St. Ann's from 1897 until 1939. Sr. Osithe's impressive painting, depicting the spotless Virgin Mary lifted towards heaven on a billowing cloud of cherubs, took pride of place in one of the reception rooms at the academy, where it had been installed on Sr. M. Osithe's return from a year of artistic training at Lachine (near Montreal), the motherhouse of the Soeurs de Ste-Anne.

This prominently displayed copy of a popular Roman Catholic devotional image, communicating both piety and artistic proficiency, would have particular significance for the Sisters of St. Ann who, in the moral and intellectual tutelage of young girls, modelled themselves after Mary's mother.

Marta Danylewycz credits the 1854 proclamation of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of Mary with the rise of nineteenth-century Marian devotion, which was designed to inculcate in women a desire for purity and perfection. The unique status accorded to Mary provided an example "of the reward awaiting those who abided by God's will." Danylewycz credits the work of Marian societies, such as the Children

⁵ Née Elizabeth Laboissière, 1867-1941.

of Mary (introduced to Canada in 1841), with increasing membership in such women's religious congregations as the Montreal-based Congregation of Notre-Dame and the Sisters of St. Ann.⁶

Shortly after the institution of St. Ann's School for Young Ladies in Victoria, students like fourteen-year-old Cecilia McQuade,⁷ daughter of an Irish settler and ship outfitter, produced needlework canvases of saints and decorative subjects. One surviving canvas, still waiting to be worked, is of the Immaculate Conception surrounded by a decorative floral border. Linked with Sr. M. Osithe's painting, and resonating across a span of half a century, Cecilia's unfinished work calls attention to the constitutive function of the visual arts in the formation of both student and institutional identity: *training the heart through the education of the hand and eye.*

Charting the history of art education at St. Ann's Academy poses many difficulties. Elizabeth Smyth has called attention to the double marginalization of religious women in relation to the history of education in Canada, both with regard to their sex and to the hagio-



Illustration 2: *The Immaculate Conception.* Canvas prepared for needlework, Archives of the Sisters of St. Ann, Victoria.

⁶ Marta Danylewycz, *Taking the Veil: An Alternative to Marriage, Motherhood, and Spinsterhood in Quebec, 1840-1920* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1987), 42. In the Constitution *Ineffabilis Deus* of 8 December 1854, Pope Pius IX pronounced and defined that the Blessed Virgin Mary "in the first instance of her conception, by a singular privilege and grace granted by God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the human race, was preserved exempt from all stain of original sin." It is therefore not surprising that the Sisters of St. Ann, Mary's mother, should, as educators of young women, have a particular devotion to, and give an honoured, visible, and public place to, a large oil painting of the Immaculate Conception. Also see *Catholic Encyclopedia* <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07674d.htm>>.

⁷ Cecilia McQuade (1849-1927) and her sibling Anna both joined the Sisters of St. Ann. Cecilia was professed in 1870 as Sister M. Charles and became the Western Provincial from 1914 to 1917.

graphical enclosures of the religious institutions themselves.⁸ Although concerted efforts have been made to rectify this by retrieving neglected histories of Canadian religious women, both Roman Catholic and Protestant,⁹ there have been few in-depth analyses pertaining to art education. The educational initiatives of the Sisters of St. Ann/Soeurs de Ste-Anne in both British Columbia and Quebec have been well documented,¹⁰ and the history of the Art Department at St. Ann's Academy in Victoria is celebrated in both larger works and internal publications,¹¹ but no study has critically analyzed this aspect of curriculum. Such a study is important to a comprehensive assessment of pedagogy since an institution's underlying values are often most transparent in the arts.

Certainly the Sisters of St. Ann, more than most other Canadian congregations of religious women, have celebrated (in both Lachine and Victoria) the presence of art within their community and have charted the development of a "School of Painting" within the congregation.¹² The sisters' own records present art as a somewhat autonomous field, a dynastic legacy that moves from the initiatives of Sr. M. Arsène through the artistic prowess of Sr. M. Hélène-de-la-Croix in Lachine to its transmission to the west via Sr. M. Osithe.¹³ The sisters infuse their historical accounts of art education in both Quebec and British Columbia with a hagiographic understanding in which determination and perseverance overcome trial. For example, the accounts begin with the tenacity of Sr. M. Arsène, who joined the community in 1862 and

⁸ See, for example: Elizabeth Smyth, "Much Exertion of the Voice and Great Application of the Mind: Teacher Education within the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Toronto, Canada, 1851-1920," *Historical Studies in Education* 6, 3 (1994): 97-113; Elizabeth Smyth, *History of Education Research* 23, 3 (1994): 97-8; and Elizabeth Smyth and Linda Wicks, eds., *Wisdom Raises Her Voice: The Sisters of St. Joseph of Toronto Celebrate 150 Years: An Oral History* (Toronto: Sisters of St. Joseph of Toronto, 2001). The work of Protestant women is discussed in Ruth Compton Brouwer, *New Women for God: Canadian Presbyterian Women and India Missions, 1876-1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990); and Myra Rutherdale, *Women and the White Man's God: Gender and Race in the Canadian Mission Field* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2002).

⁹ For example, see Jacqueline Gresko, "Gender and Mission: The Founding Generations of the Sisters of St. Ann and the Oblates of Mary Immaculate in British Columbia" (Ph.D. diss., University of British Columbia, 1999); and Michelene Dumont with Nadia Fahmy-Eid, *Les Couventines: L'Éducation des filles dans les pensionnats de religieuses, 1840-1960* (Montréal: Boréal, 1986).

¹⁰ Edith Down, ssa, *A Century of Service, 1858-1958: A History of the Sisters of St. Ann and Their Contribution to Education in British Columbia, the Yukon and Alaska*, 2nd. ed. (Victoria: Sisters of St. Ann, 1999); Augustine Prevost, ssa (preface by Michelene Dumont), *L'Éducation hier et aujourd'hui, 1850-1985* (Montreal: Editions du Meridien, 1986).

¹¹ Down, *Century of Service*.

¹² These recorded accounts all stem from a master narrative, a handwritten history of drawing at Ste-Anne's by Sr. M. Hélène-de-la-Croix (History, ssa Archives, Lachine).

¹³ *Ibid.*

persisted in giving lessons in art despite the poverty of the congregation and the expense of the lessons (\$2.50/hour). Miraculously, however, the receipts often equalled and sometimes surpassed the expenditures!¹³

We are not so much challenging the existence of a dynastic legacy as questioning its usefulness for critical analysis. To date the available material on art and art education at St. Ann's Academy has followed a biographically driven template, where pedagogical initiatives culminate in discussion of the artistic achievements of the teachers themselves – reaching perfection in influence and artistic production in the work of Sr. M. Osithe. Correspondingly, in Victoria the SSA Archives, the Academy Museum, and the SSA community residences are rich in examples of the sisters' own artistic production but contain few examples of student work. To us as "outsiders," these semi-official histories are particularly interesting for the ways in which artistic achievement sometimes seemed to escape the humility demanded in other areas of religious service,¹⁴ a slippage that may indicate the utility of art beyond a strictly educational framework. In addition, despite the seamless teleological narrative in existing histories, the archives yielded a complex interplay of conflicting voices both within and without the religious community, revealing, for example, disparities between official histories and lived experiences, institutional visions and individual ambitions, and ecclesiastical control and congregational autonomy.

In contrast to the work of the internal biographers and uncritical external studies, such as Alya Lepine's recent "The St. Ann's Academy Art Studio,"¹⁵ we seek to investigate the "political" role of art education at St. Ann's Academy and ask the following questions: How did art education at St. Ann's Academy function in the articulation and formation of various identities, public and private, among the student body, the religious community and the individuals within it, as well as within the institution itself? How did art help to negotiate the dynamic patterns of dependence and interdependence between the sisters and ecclesiastical authority, competition with other educational institutions, and governmental legislation and control? And, finally, how did the sisters at St. Ann's Academy respond to the shifting societal and religious conceptions of the pedagogical role of art education in relation to gender and class?

¹⁴ For example, one Australian convent school prohibited artistic pursuits. See Christine Tringham Jack, "A Moulding Haven: Competing Educational Discourses in an Australian Preparatory School of the Society of the Sacred Heart, 1944-65," *Historical Studies in Education* 10 (1998): 116-39. Jack writes that for the Sisters of the Sacred Heart, giving up pursuits in art and music was a means of fulfilling their vows of poverty.

¹⁵ Alya Lepine, "The St. Ann's Academy Art Studio," *British Columbia Historical News* 35, 4 (2002): 15-17.

The history of art education at St. Ann's in Victoria is discussed in reference to three distinct periods: (1) the teaching of art from the inception of the school in 1858, with the arrival of four pioneer sisters, to the colony's entry into Canadian Confederation in 1871; (2) the expansion of the art program under Sr. M. Sophie from 1872 to 1896, a time of institutional recognition and confidence; and (3) the hey-day of the art studio at the academy under Sr. M. Osithe (from 1896 to the 1930s), which coincided with the need for specialization within an increasingly competitive sphere of public education and private schooling. While tracing the pedagogical shifts of art education within the school, we examine the ways in which art and art instruction at St. Ann's provided a malleable palimpsest within which both institutional and student identities were constituted and negotiated.

TEACHING OF ART AT ST. ANN'S
VICTORIA, FROM 1858 TO 1871

The Early History of the Sisters of St. Ann

The schools of the Sisters of St. Ann had their beginning in a school established by Suzanne Pineault in Vaudreuil, near Montreal. In 1839 Esther Blondin became director of the school. Later, as Sr. Marie-Anne, Blondin founded the Sisters of St. Ann. The bishop of Montreal approved the foundation in 1848, and the first group of five sisters, which included Suzanne Pineault, was professed in 1850. The school run by Pineault and Blondin was highly influenced by the Sisters of Notre Dame, whose schools both women had attended. Like the Congregation of Notre Dame de Montréal, founded in the seventeenth century by Marguerite Bourgeoys, the Sisters of St. Ann were an uncloistered community of women bound only by simple vows and dedicated to the instruction of children.

As in the Congregation of Notre Dame, the Sisters of St. Ann educated both working-class and upper-class girls in different institutions. Fee-paying girls from wealthier families helped to finance the sisters' other charitable ventures. The first two schools founded by the Sisters of St. Ann – a mission school at the parish of Ste-Genevieve in Montreal in 1850 and a boarding school in the motherhouse at St-Jacques in 1853 – had already established this pattern of class-based education. The curriculum laid out by Mother Marie Anne was identical in both schools, with the exception of music, drawing, painting, and needlework, which were only offered to the fee-paying girls at St-Jacques. This distinction,

therefore, not only had financial implications but also conformed to the class prejudices and social expectations of the period. This was the complex model, complete with tensions between the “practical” and the “genteel,” the “cloister” and the “world,” that the Sisters of St. Ann brought to the West Coast.¹⁶

Art at St. Ann's, Victoria

In 1858 four Sisters of St. Ann and a lay helper arrived in Victoria. The first St. Ann's Convent School in Victoria opened on 5 June, two days after the sisters arrived. Although instruction in drawing was advertised in the first prospectus as a paid extra (at \$1.50 per month), initially, the sisters were unable to offer it.¹⁷ However, as the advertisement submitted to the *Colonist* by Bishop Demers stated, they hoped “ere long ... [to] have teachers fully qualified to teach the same.”¹⁸ Music was taught the following year. But drawing was withdrawn from the school's advertisement in 1859. It is likely that Sr. M. Praxedes Marceau, who was later to direct the New Westminster Convent, fulfilled the role of drawing teacher when she arrived from Quebec in 1863. Community historian Edith Down, SSA, reports that Sr. Mary Praxedes “had the gift of imparting her skill to others whether in music, art or delicate needlework.”¹⁹ Evidence that drawing was taught in 1863/64 can be found in the *Colonist*, where it was announced that first and second drawing prizes were awarded to five students at the end of the school year.²⁰

The speedy arrival of Sr. M. Praxedes was likely spurred by increasing competition for fee-paying students, the result of the opening of the Anglican girls' school, Angela College, in 1860. When attracting the upper classes, it might seem that the sisters were at a considerable disadvantage as most of the early settlers were either Anglican or Presbyterian. Nevertheless, St. Ann's attracted a significant number of prominent non-Catholic families, including the Helmckens, the Douglasses, and the McKenzies. In fact, the first prospectus clearly stated: “Difference in Religion is no obstacle to admission into the Institution”; as long as good

¹⁶ Louise Roy, *La Correspondance de Mere Marie Anne* (Lachine: Editions Ste-Anne, 1975): 48-9. Marta Danylewycz, in *Taking the Veil*, discusses the impact of the 1840s arrival in Montreal of an elite French sisterhood: the Religious of the Sacred Heart. In an effort to compete for fee-paying students, the Notre Dame Sisters (the mentor congregation to the Sisters of St. Ann) became increasingly concerned with “image and recognition” (p. 77).

¹⁷ Down, *Century of Service*, 137.

¹⁸ “Opening of the School for Young Ladies by the Sisters of St. Ann,” *Colonist*, 1 January 1859, 3.

¹⁹ Down, *Century of Service*, mentions Sr. M. Praxedes Marceau imparting her skill in art, (p. 62).

²⁰ “The Convent School Examination,” *Colonist*, 22 July 1864, 3.

order was maintained, pupils would be left “without any interference to follow their own profession.”²¹ In the 1858/59 school year, thirty of fifty-six girls were Roman Catholic. However, over the next fifty years, the percentage of non-Roman Catholic girls declined to only 127 of the 446 girls enrolled at the end of the century.²² At Angela College instruction in painting and drawing was offered for an extra fee of two dollars per month.²³ Not to be outdone, the sisters placed a prominent front-page advertisement in the *Colonist* in August 1863 indicating that their course of studies had expanded to include *both* drawing *and* painting for extra charges of five dollars and nine dollars per quarter.²⁴

Class and Accomplishments

In accordance with the times and the demographic requirements of the young colony, St. Ann’s School facilitated a “classed education,” which offered educational opportunities with respect to the social standing that students were expected to occupy in later life. As Barman and others, demonstrate, at this time “education was perceived as having two prime functions: preparation to maintain existing place within the social order, and inculcation of religious beliefs.”²⁵ Initially, a class line was drawn between boarders and poorer day students and orphans. As has been noted, the monies accrued by the boarding schools run by religious congregations typically subsidized the sisters’ operational budgets and expanding mission activities. In the case of the Congregation of Notre Dame, this subsidy was up to 75 per cent of their total annual revenues. Similarly, the fees charged by the Sisters of St. Ann financed their other charitable works, such as instruction and housekeeping in Native residential schools, homes for orphans, and work in health care.²⁶ The teaching of drawing and music as “extras” ensured the exclusivity and distinctiveness of two classes of education appropriate to the spheres of society from which the students came, and where they were expected

²¹ *Opening of the School by the Sisters of St. Ann. Also Called the Sisters of Charity, in Victoria V.I., Dec. 2, 1858* (Victoria: Bishop Demers, 1858).

²² This total number includes 54 kindergarten students and 18 “Indian” students at the Songhees School.

²³ “Opening of the School by the Sisters of St. Ann, also Called Sisters of Charity, in Victoria, V.I., Dec. 2, 1858,” *Colonist*, 30 August 1860, 3 and 31 August 1861, 3.

²⁴ *Colonist*, 26 August 1863, 1. Advertisements were typically placed on page 3. Also, it should be noted that the day school closed in 1860, thus making St. Ann’s a more exclusive institution.

²⁵ Jean Barman, “The Emergence of Educational Structures in Nineteenth-Century British Columbia,” in *Children, Teachers and Schools in the History of British Columbia*, ed. Jean Barman and Mona Gleason (Calgary: Detselig Enterprises, 2003), 16.

²⁶ Michelene Dumont, *Girls’ Schooling in Quebec, 1639–1960*, trans. Carol Elise Cochrane, (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1990), 11; and Down, *Century of Service*.

to remain. This approach reproduced the dual pedagogical model of the Soeurs de Ste-Anne's first mission at Ste-Genevieve and their boarding school at the motherhouse at St-Jacques, Quebec City, where accomplishments such as drawing, painting, needlework, and languages were reserved for the boarders only. Repetition and replication of prior teaching models and organizational patterns ensured congregational consistency and uniformity. This pattern is characteristic of the history of the art departments in both St-Jacques/Lachine and Victoria, where, for "young ladies," instruction in art was clearly a marker of social difference.

As the early advertisements for the school make clear, drawing and painting were perceived as one of those "higher departments of a finished education" that enhanced the "good moral and domestic education" (i.e., education for motherhood) provided by the sisters.²⁷ Alongside music and modern languages, instruction in drawing and painting was designed to equip prospective "young ladies" with the requisite womanly "accomplishments" demanded by the upper class, with the tacit understanding that these arts-related skills were to be confined to the private sphere.²⁸ As Dumont notes, it was the assumption of boarding school education, and indeed the aim of women's education in general, "that the educated would not have to work."²⁹

For the Sisters of St. Ann, the aim of a "finishing school," elaborated in the 1863 prospectus, was to nourish in students' minds "those principles of virtue and morality which alone can make education profitable."³⁰ Virtue and morality notwithstanding, these educational opportunities provided the necessary competitive edge to entice the upper class of Victoria, largely comprised of British settlers who could afford to purchase land, to send their daughters to St. Anne's.³¹

Angela College, the Church of England school, aimed to form "the habits and character of an English lady ... in this our distant home." With a number of French Canadian sisters, St. Ann's was not nearly as "English" as Angela College but, nevertheless, attracted a variety of students – Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish – drawn from

²⁷ "Opening of the School for Young Ladies by the Sisters of St. Ann," *Colonist*, 1 January 1859, 3; and replicated in the first prospectus.

²⁸ Marjorie Theobald, "Mere Accomplishments: Melbourne's Early Ladies Schools Reconsidered," in *Women Who Taught: Perspectives on the History of Women and Teaching*, ed. Alison Prentice and Marjorie R. Theobald (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 73-4.

²⁹ Dumont, *Girls' Schooling in Quebec*, 16.

³⁰ "St. Ann's School for Young Ladies," *Colonist*, 29 August 1863, 1.

³¹ Richard Mackie, "The Colonization of Vancouver Island, 1849-1858," *BC Studies* 96 (1992/93): 3-40. The general Roman Catholic histories of western Canada all remark on the competitive imperative for attracting students.

among Victoria's "leading families" and from among those en route to the gold fields. To some it may have represented an accessible alternative to a Continental finishing school. Governor Douglas's girls attended St. Ann's for a short time in 1858 but were obliged to leave, along with eleven other upper-class girls, when the sisters would not allow their attendance at the theatre and balls. These moral scruples were influenced by the writings of Archbishop Fénelon, whose treatise *The Education of a Daughter* was instrumental in the pedagogical program of the famed St. Cyr, a seventeenth-century French finishing school run by Madame de Maintenon for the daughters of nobles.³² Fénelon associated female vanity, frivolity, and luxury – in clothing and entertainment – with the corruption and decline of the aristocracy in France. He advocated instruction in domestic economy and the ethics of hard work to promote diligence and industry. The Sisters of St. Ann, unlike their Anglican peers, instituted a no-nonsense, and mandatory, practical domestic education alongside the "extras." The practical domestic art of darning, for example, is not listed in the Angela College prospectus.³³

In addition to those students attracted from the prominent social orbits of the West Coast, St. Ann's also included the daughters of California and Cariboo miners.³⁴ The high ratio of three men to one woman in British Columbia translated into a narrowing of social options for women, who were pressured into early marriages, generally characterized by a large age discrepancy. For girls wishing to use these social discrepancies to their advantage, a private school education with instruction in genteel accomplishments may have offered the possibility for social mobility.

Tensions between Leisure Activities and Artistic Ambition

In contrast to the impressions given by the prospectus, actual archival evidence of students' artistic accomplishments during this formative decade for the school is largely dominated by artefacts of fancy and wool work. In July 1865, reports in the *Colonist* gave attention to large framed needlework pictures exhibited as part of the school's annual closing exercises. Singled out for praise were *Pheasant and Flowers* by

³² In an interview Sr. Edith Down, ssa historian, stressed the influence of St. Cyr and Bishop Fénelon in the pedagogy of St. Ann's.

³³ Carolyn C. Longee, "Noblesse, Domesticity and Social Reform: The Education of Girls by Fénelon and St. Cyr," *History of Education Quarterly* 14 (Spring, 1974): 87–113; and Archbishop Fénelon, *The Education of a Daughter* (Baltimore: John Murphy and Co., 1873).

³⁴ *The Jubilee of St. Ann's*, (Victoria: Victoria Times, 1908), 40; and "St. Ann's Convent and Young Ladies Academy," *BC Orphans' Friend* 6 (March, 1904): 6.

Miss Cameron, *St. Patrick* by Miss Anna McQuade, and *King David Playing on His Harp* by Miss Galley. The *St. Patrick* is preserved in the SSA archives in Victoria.³⁵ The emphasis on drawing and needlework (as genteel pursuits) rather than on serious artistic engagement such as painting is reinforced in newspaper accounts that find in these works evidence of the girls' "leisure hours" being "rationally employed."³⁶ Bishop Demers's 1865 end-of-year speech echoed these sentiments. According to Demers, the primary role of education was to teach obedience, curb tempers, and regulate conduct in order to prepare girls for their eventual position within the home.³⁷ Demers's somewhat belittling comments, which consign these works to mere exercises in industry, seem strange considering the ambitiousness of the projects. These projects tackle complex figurative compositions and demonstrate modelling in light and shade, emulating religious masterpieces in both subject and scale (average of 68 by 100 centimetres). These works are even more astonishing when we consider that, in the nineteenth century, subjects suitable for the female sensibility were typically confined to landscape painting and still life floral arrangements.³⁸ As Marjorie R. Theobald has remarked, the teaching of "accomplishments" was not incompatible with teaching excellence.³⁹ And certainly at St. Ann's, art provided more than a mere mechanical facility. Coupled with preparing students for lives as homemakers, art was to inspire students towards spiritual awareness and contemplation of the religious life. And it was this life that provided an opportunity for a few to excel artistically.

It is not surprising, then, that some gifted students opted for the religious life as their vocational calling. Both Cecilia and Anna McQuade, whose artistic abilities are evident from schoolgirl examples in the Victoria SSA Archives, took vows. However, while the *Necrologies* refer to both sisters' contribution in musical accomplishments, art is not mentioned. Another initially talented student, Emily Henderson, a boarding student from Philadelphia who received drawing prizes in 1870 and in 1872 and who was commended for a coloured-crayon drawing entitled *Ship at Sea*, was professed as a Sister of St. Ann in 1877.⁴⁰

³⁵ "Exhibitions of Work," *Colonist*, 20 July 1865, 3; "At St. Ann's Convent," *Colonist*, 21 July 1865, 3.

³⁶ "St. Ann's School Yearly Examination," *Colonist*, 20 July 1865, 3.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ See F. Graeme Chalmers, *Women in the Nineteenth-Century Art World: Schools of Art and Design for Women in London and Philadelphia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998).

³⁹ Theobald, "Mere Accomplishments," 88.

⁴⁰ "St. Ann's Convent School," *Colonist*, 21 July 1870, 3; "Examination at St. Ann's Convent," *Colonist*, 24 July 1872, 3.

MIDDLE YEARS 1872-96

As Sr. M. Florence, Emily Henderson was assigned to the art studio in Victoria to assist Sr. M. Sophie in 1882-83 as mistress of perspective drawing and in 1884-87 as second mistress of drawing, after which she was transferred to Nanaimo. Sr. Florence's *Necrology*, read to the sisters on each anniversary of her death, merely states that "the young aspirant gave promise of being a valued object" because of her cultured training, but "she did not live up to them except in a strong work ethic."⁴¹ This terse epitaph of short-lived artistic promise seems to suppress the complex interplay of internal hierarchies, personal ambitions, and institutional restrictions that each sister had to negotiate and that, as we shall see, might result in obedience or resistance, opportunities afforded or denied. In later periods other BC girls educated by the Sisters of St. Ann at New Westminster and Kamloops (Maud Coubeaux, Sarah Ryan, and Blanche Simard) became Sisters of St. Ann and specialized in art. As Sr. M. Berthilda, Coubeaux was known for her beautiful paintings on liturgical vestments and her Christmas tableaus; Ryan, as Sr. Xavier Marie, taught art in various SSA schools; and Simard, as Sr. M. Seraphina, created beautiful china paintings and calligraphy.

In Victoria, while other private schools had floundered (most notably Angela College, whose facilities were eventually purchased by the Sisters of St. Ann), St. Ann's extended its scholastic influence and reputation. In 1871, the same year that British Columbia entered Confederation, the foundation stone of St. Ann's new premises on Humboldt Street was laid, signifying the sisters' firm position and overwhelming success on the Island. For the next period of St. Ann's history, enterprising sisters negotiated the cultural as well as the institutional constraints and contingencies with respect to art education.

*New Emphasis on Drawing
for National Progress*

In 1872, shortly after the opening of the new building, St. Ann's Academy issued a revised prospectus in which drawing and painting were offered for an extra cost of six and nine dollars per quarter.⁴² Significantly, the same year also brought the establishment of a free and secular public school system in Victoria, which recommended instruction in linear drawing (closely associated with geometry and arithmetic) as part of its

⁴¹ *Necrology of the Sisters of St. Ann 1850-1930* (Lachine: St. Ann's Press, 1930), 178.

⁴² Day scholar tuition for the first class is listed at twelve dollars per quarter. SSA Archives (Victoria) s35-1-6.

core curriculum. The perceived practical applications, especially for the education of boys, were primarily concerned with raising the quality of industrial manufacturing and design. For example, the *BC Public Schools Report*⁴³ for 1875 quoted an unknown “eminent authority,” who stated:

Almost everything that is well made now is made from a drawing. In the construction of buildings, ships, machinery, bridges, fortifications, nothing is done without drawings. It is not enough that there be draughtsman to make the drawings; the workmen who are to construct the objects required should be able, without help, to interpret the drawings given for their guidance. This they cannot do without instruction ... The workman who lacks this knowledge and this ability ... must work under the constant supervision of another, doing less and inferior work and receiving inferior wages.

But the Sisters of St. Ann were not educating working-class boys, and the benefits of industrial drawing were not germane to their mandate of raising “young women through a good education [physical, intellectual, moral and religious, and preparing girls] ... for service in the family or the church according to her vocation and above all for eternal life.”⁴⁴ “Art,” therefore, remained an important staple for senior girls acquiring a finished education, but there is evidence that “linear” drawing, as practised in the public schools, was also introduced at this time – if sporadically – into regular classroom instruction, particularly in the elementary grades. In the teaching manual for classroom instructors referred to above, “Drawing” is listed twenty-first out of twenty-two subjects to be covered.

Instructions written under the section “Drawing and Music” state that “the Superior will decide herself the degree and length of time that students should devote to these two arts.” This flexibility may have had pedagogical motivations, but it almost certainly allowed each superior to work within the skill sets of her teaching staff. Some elementary teachers did not have the necessary skill. Even as late as 1899, Sr. M. Irene (Malbeuf), general prefect of studies, issued a letter of encouragement to classroom teachers who had complained of the difficulty of providing examples of linear drawing for submission to the 1900 World Fair in Paris.⁴⁵

⁴³ *British Columbia Public Schools Report* (Victoria: Queen’s Printer, 1875), 15-16.

⁴⁴ As stated in an updated edition of the Constitution and Customs of the Sisters of St. Ann, printed and distributed in 1872.

⁴⁵ Prevost, *L’Education hier et aujourd’hui*, 118.

In “Drawing,” as in “Art,” St. Ann’s Academy embraced the pedagogical models formulated in the motherhouse at Lachine. With the increased competition between nations and the perceived correlation between drawing and manufacturing proficiency, not to mention the benefits to social order and decorum (there was a “correct” way to draw and students were expected to follow the rules), in 1876 drawing was rendered compulsory for girls and boys in grade schools in Quebec. Although listed alongside music as an optional subject from 1875, linear drawing was not a compulsory subject in elementary schools in British Columbia until 1900. However, it is likely that the curriculum followed by St. Ann’s in Victoria duplicated the eastern program of studies. Walter Smith’s Massachusetts drawing texts were officially adopted in Quebec in 1877 and were also recommended for use in British Columbia.⁴⁶ In Quebec such adoption met with considerable resistance from the Roman Catholic Committee of the Council of Public Instruction, which requested and was denied the use of an alternative book published by the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

Although there are no texts in the SSA Archives to indicate adherence to a particular course, the Congregation of Notre-Dame issued a linear drawing instruction manual in 1878 and then, in response to external prescriptions of “drawing-for-all,” produced a revised edition “registered according to the Act of Parliament in 1879.” Considering that there was, in effect, an injunction against the use of Protestant texts, it is reasonable to suppose that the sisters utilized these or similar manuals published by the Christian Brothers. Based on the work of Walter Smith,⁴⁷ but formulated as a series of catechism-like questions posed and answers recited, these texts introduced students to the “Art of tracing the contour of objects, and delineating figures through their basic features.” Beginning with points and straight lines, parallel and perpendicular, students were to progress through more complex geometrical forms, reciting definitions to surfaces, triangles, and quadrilaterals. In response to the question, “A quoi sert cette etude?” the students replied, “Cette etude sert a former l’oeil, a exercer la main, a developper l’intelligence.”⁴⁸ Indeed, drawing was found to be an exercise in bodily comportment. The “correct” position of feet, the incline of the back, and the angle of the shoulders were to be observed as indicated in the manual. For

⁴⁶ See F. Graeme Chalmers, *A Nineteenth-Century Government Drawing Master: The Walter Smith Reader* (Reston, VA: National Art Education Association, 2000).

⁴⁷ *Definitions geometriques appliquéés au dessin lineaire* (Montreal: Congrégation de Notre-Dame, 1978), 3.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

boys, mastery of this art was connected with perspective, architecture, painting, sculpture, and printing – all of which were considered to be part of a useful preparation for work in manual professions.

Another Quebec drawing manual, used in the 1870s, proclaimed that “linear drawing aids the carpenter, the mechanic, the metal and industrial worker. Practically, it sharpens the eye, develops hand coordination and expands the mind, enabling one to make accurate judgments of dimensions and distances.”⁴⁹ According to C.H.S. Lefevre in his report for the Roman Catholic Committee for Public Instruction, for girls, the practical applications “particular to her sex” were limited to “tracing geometric patterns” for “the making of clothes for their children.”⁵⁰ In England, Earl Granville, who gave his name to the original site of Vancouver, recommended a drawing lesson or two for servant girls because exercises in drawing both horizontal and perpendicular lines were thought to assist them to correctly set a table.⁵¹ But the girls at St. Ann’s were not servants. At St. Ann’s the moral and civilizing benefits of drawing in cultivating “taste” and developing “habits of order and propriety” were thought eminently suitable for the education of *young ladies*.⁵²

With respect to the “Fine Arts,” this period is dominated by Sr. M. Sophie (née Antoinette Labelle), who was sent to Victoria in 1871 to teach painting and drawing despite her own protestations that she lacked qualifications.⁵³ She is the first sister to be assigned specifically to this task in the annual teaching assignments, or “Petites Elections,” in Victoria, which nominated her as first mistress of drawing. Such assignments were seen as exercises in obedience rather than individual preference. Despite her initial reluctance, Sr. M. Sophie expanded the range of media taught at St. Ann’s. The exhibitions of work covered by the *Colonist* single out coloured-crayon drawings for the first time, directing particular attention to the work of Miss E. Henderson (mentioned previously) and a piece by Miss M. Collins entitled *Lap Dogs*. According to the report, these were “Exceedingly natural and artistically drawn.”⁵⁴ The range of media taught can also be gauged by the works on display at the annual commencement ceremonies duly reported in the *Colonist*.

⁴⁹ *Petit trait: Theorie et pratique de l'art du dessin lineaire* (Ste-Anne de la Pocatiere: F.H. Proulx, 1870), 4.

⁵⁰ C.H.S. Lefevre, *Le dessin: L'ecole primaire. Rapport presente a l'honorable secretaire de la province par C.H.S. Lefevre* (Quebec: Charles Francois Langlois, 1892).

⁵¹ Chalmers, *Nineteenth-Century Government Drawing Master*.

⁵² Lefevre, *Le dessin*.

⁵³ *Necrologies*, 58.

⁵⁴ “Examination at St. Ann’s Convent,” *Colonist*, 24 July 1872, 3.

Pencil and coloured crayons as well as watercolour are in evidence from 1876⁵⁵ and etchings in 1879.⁵⁶ In 1880 Sr. M. Sophie was also instructed to teach waxwork, perhaps as a result of the admiration for the “masterpieces” in wax, including a *Child Reclining under a Bower* exhibited the previous year at the sisters’ orphans’ bazaar.⁵⁷ Most significantly, prizes for painting as well as drawing are recorded in the *Colonist* for the first time in July 1884.⁵⁸

From a subsequent article in 1887, it is clear that this new branch consisted of *oil painting*, a medium generally reserved for male students.⁵⁹ Outside the academy, watercolour was considered the more accepted painting medium for women, given their sensibilities.

It is difficult to determine the quality of student work at this time. The favourable reception of student work in the *Colonist* is filtered through the gendered expectations of the viewing audience. Works on display are thus “beautiful specimens”⁶⁰ and are seen as an evidential indicator of the level of taste and industry to which each student had aspired. Even as late as 1919, in an account of the art studio, art’s usefulness is confined to the realm of domesticity: “A young lady pupil was still at work on a piece of colouring

which was lovely. Among the first who are striving after beauty in this little room, will one achieve the realization of her ideals? Perhaps not, but homes will be happier and more refined because of their efforts

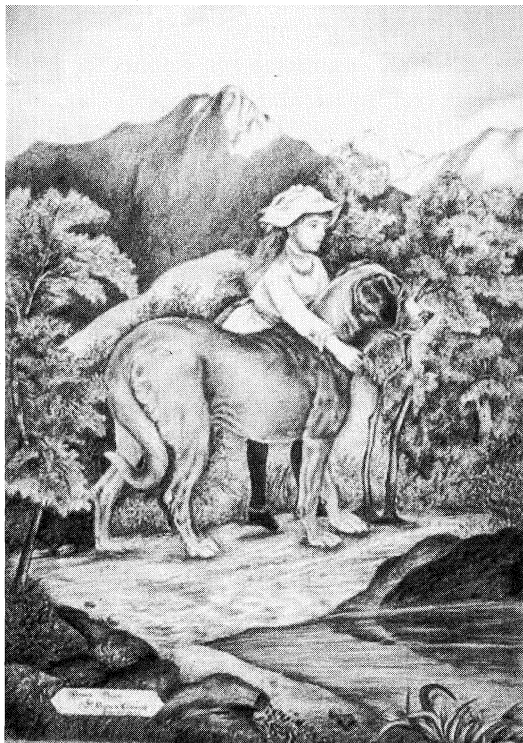


Illustration 3: *Girl and her Dog*. Pencil drawing, Annie Shaw, age 15, 1886. Archives of the Sisters of St. Ann, Victoria.

⁵⁵ “St. Ann’s Convent School,” *Colonist*, 10 July 1873, 3.

⁵⁶ “St. Ann’s Convent School,” *Colonist*, 16 July 1879, 3.

⁵⁷ “The Fair,” *Colonist*, 6 November 1879, 3.

⁵⁸ “St. Ann’s Convent School,” *Colonist*, 3 July 1884, 3.

⁵⁹ “St. Ann’s Convent: The Stately Edifice Rapidly Approaching Completion,” *Colonist*, 20 January 1887, 3.

⁶⁰ “St. Ann’s Convent School,” *Colonist*, 16 July 1879, 3.

[and the influence of an accomplished teacher].”⁶¹ Several examples of student work survive from this period, including a large-scale pencil sketch of a girl and her dog by Annie Shaw (aged fifteen), who attended St. Ann’s for eleven years; several smaller landscapes in pencil by Sarah Ellen Lewis,

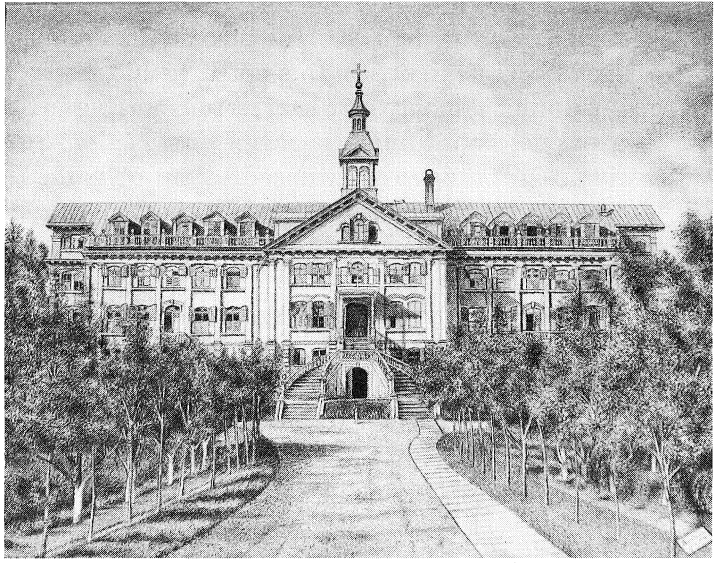


Illustration 4: *St. Ann's Academy, Victoria*. Pencil drawing, Alberta Gerrie, 1894. Courtesy of the Sisters of St. Ann, Victoria.

who attended from 1891 until 1896; and a large pencil sketch of the academy drawn by Alberta Gerrie in 1894. Also in the SSA Archives is a photocopy of a lost painting by Emma Sehl, who received prizes for drawing in 1891 and for both painting and drawing in 1892 and 1893. What is interesting about these works is the shift in subject matter from religious icons of the Renaissance masters of earlier years to more “domesticated” landscape and genre scenes as revealed in popular Victorian prints. Significantly, at the close of the 1888/89 school year, Miss K. Baldwin, who won a prize for drawing, read her essay on the “Beauties of Nature.”⁶²

The “Accounts Receivable” of the boarders at the school record a surge in enrolment for drawing, undoubtedly attributed to Sr. M. Sophie’s arrival. Since fees were recorded as lump sum payments at the beginning of each year, exact totals for students taking drawing from year to year cannot be calculated. In addition, as no day student accounts exist prior to 1897, it is difficult to ascertain whether instruction in drawing and painting were accessible to the less affluent “pensionnaires.” Despite these limitations, the accounts are significant in that they do show which boarding students commenced drawing later in the year, indicating shifting trends in student interest or enthusiasm

⁶¹ “Maria Larson, St. Ann’s Convent, Sunday 12 October, 1919,” Brabant Scrapbook, Archives of the Sisters of St. Ann, 103.

⁶² “St. Ann’s Convent Midsummer Examinations,” *Colonist*, 23 June 1889, 4.

for this “extra” branch of the curriculum. From 1872 to 1875, once school had begun, eight students opted to add instruction in drawing and painting. Among these later recruits was Susan Suckley, whose mother was descended from the Skagit First Nation. Susan entered St. Ann’s in 1869 at the age of fourteen. According to the boarders’ *Accounts*, she began drawing in 1874 at one dollar per month and excelled in painting, for which she apparently won many awards. Her qualifications enabled her to secure a teaching post in Hope, British Columbia. In order to accommodate the swelling numbers of students, ex-pupil Sr. M. Florence served in 1882 as mistress of perspective drawing while Sr. M. Pierre offered instruction in wax work. Sr. M. Sophie worked alone the following year, but from 1884 to 1887 she was rejoined by Sr. M. Florence. Again the boarders’ *Accounts* record an increase in student enrolment in art, with three new recruits in the 1883–84 school year. In a 1922 letter to Sr. M. Theodore, Emma Chismore, who won prizes in the 1883–84 school year, speaks of her “beloved teacher Sister Mary Sophie.” In it she writes that Sr. Sophie “created a love of art within me, so that my life has been richer by an appreciation ... of the fine arts of painting and sculpture”⁶³ – this despite the fact that, according to her *Necrology*, Sr. M. Sophie “lacked qualifications.”

Despite the significant expansion of the art department in both technical innovation and numerical enrolment, Sr. M. Sophie’s *Necrology*, like that of Sr. M. Florence, is sparing with praise. It states: “Though very conscious of her limitations, Sister [Sophie] did her best.” Calling her works “attempts” and “not masterpieces,” the *Necrology* recounts the fate of a “beloved” altarpiece of St. Ann, St. Joachim, and Mary by Sr. M. Sophie, which had hung over the main altar but was discreetly criticized and eventually replaced in 1902 with a painting by Sr. M. Hélène-de-la-Croix. The discarded altarpiece was later found in the attic, rolled up in newspaper that had irreparably welded itself to the surface of the painting.⁶⁴ According to official history, Sr. M. Sophie’s contribution to the art department at St. Ann’s is an illustration of perseverance in the face of mediocre ability. However, a translated excerpt from a letter from Sr. M. de L’Ange-Gardien on 7 March 1893 offers an alternative perspective:

My dear sister, you have by now heard talk of the painting of St. Ann that my Sister M. Sophie made, which now presides over the main altar. Ah, well. It is not beautiful – but all the same, it is quite amazing

⁶³ ssa Archives, Victoria.

⁶⁴ *Necrologies*, 58.

for a sister who has never had a single lesson in oil painting – who has only painted two times and moreover, who without any previous success before her has succeeded in making a painting of 12 feet in height with nothing but a tiny ordinary image of St. Ann as a model ... If my Sister M. Sophie had even half the advantages that Sister M. Hélène-de-la-Croix has had, she would be a great artist.⁶⁵

So while Sr. M. Hélène-de-la-Croix and the sisters at Lachine were benefiting from the regular instruction of professional artists such as William Raphael (from 1879) and Edmond Dyonnet in (1893–94), in Victoria the untrained Sr. Sophie experimented without instruction in new media in order to pass on these skills to her students as well as to furnish the walls of the convent. Several of her crayon portraits of clerics Modeste Demers, Charles John Seghers, and John Nicholas Lemmens, which in her *Necrology* are noted (begrudgingly) for their “ingenuity, composition and colour tones,” were still found lining the main hall of the school in 1972.⁶⁶ According to Henri Giroux in his 1886 account of the history of the Sisters of St. Ann, the presence of such “venerable and majestic images” before the eyes of the pupils had a purifying and sanctifying effect on the soul. He wrote, “The children breathe the air of virtue with these examples always under their eyes”; together with imparted wisdom and a tranquil environment, the paintings “enable[d] them to meditate at their ease on their endowment of sanctification. These are the elements of which their soul is nourished each day.”⁶⁷ According to Father Giroux, the rich visual images adorning chapel, school, and convent functioned as catalysts for spiritual contemplation or as moral lenses that focus the eyes of the soul.

Spirituality, Domestic Duty, and Art

The subtle interplay of vision and spirituality can be found not only in the visual exemplars that adorned the convent walls but also throughout the rhetoric of the teaching mission itself. Article 6 of the *Rule Book*⁶⁸ exhorts students as follows: “During class [the pupils] will choose as their model the Blessed Virgin receiving lessons from her glorious mother Ste-Anne. With what simplicity, humility and modesty did she not listen to the instructions of her glorious mother.” Likewise, classroom mistresses were

⁶⁵ ssa Archives, Lachine.

⁶⁶ Jack and Maureen Ralph, “Hidden Treasures of St. Ann’s Academy,” *Colonist*, 28 May 1972, 3. At the motherhouse in Lachine, well-known visiting artists William Raphael and Edmond Dyonnet provided instruction in art for members of the religious community.

⁶⁷ Henri Giroux, *La communauté des sœurs de Ste-Anne* (Montreal: Wilson and Crowley, 1886).

⁶⁸ Handwritten, no date.



Illustration 5: *St. Ann Instructing Mary*. Frontispiece to: *Manuel de Sainte-Anne: règlement prières à l'usage des dames de la Congrégation de Sainte-Anne*. Montreal: Beauchemin & Valois, 1872.

“to emulate Ste-Anne holding ever before their students the image of the Child Jesus.” In the medieval French church, images of Mary, aged somewhere between eight and ten, with her mother, Ann, were commonplace. Ann, with book or scroll, was pictured as educator and transmitter of the faith. The Sisters of St. Ann chose a similar image for their prayer book.

Significantly, tucked into the handwritten notes for a graduation speech given in June 1897 by Mother M. Ann of Jesus (Rowan) is a reproduction of *The Presentation* depicting Sts. Ann and Joachim presenting Mary for instruction in the Temple. Models of sacred instruction served as visual exemplars and a reminder to the sisters of the sanctity of their vocation. “Copying” is thus theologically significant in art and life. Each girl is to be moulded into the image of the Virgin Mary, whose painted presence becomes a mirror of perfection. Indeed, this visionary exemplar of her immaculate person is made manifest in the large oil painting of the Assumption by Sr. M. Osithe (see Figure 1) that hung in the

reception hall of the school from 1904. Each girl is thus a work of art in process or, as then Sr. (later Mother) M. Ann of Jesus asserted in an address for the examinations of 1878, a stone monument into which is chiselled and inscribed lines of “loveliness.” If unyielding, the girl is left with a “rough uncarved surface.” Suffering, through self-sacrifice and devotion, is the source of the most beautiful and the subject of Christian art. And it is suffering, not whimsical pleasures or self-amusement, that inscribes the girls with an unfading beauty. Life and art are thus linked by the cultivation of a discerning eye that can distinguish “between those beauties that fade with time and those that endure.”⁶⁹ The dangers of extending this metaphoric link too far are quickly circumvented. “Our aspirations in no way tend to celebrity. We simply ask that (like the master sculptors of the past) it may be given us to trace on our monument the unfading garland of a life well spent which the destroying blast of

⁶⁹ Sister Mary Ann of Jesus SSA, Handwritten Address 1878, SSA Archives Victoria S35-1.01.

time cannot touch.⁷⁰ Art instruction is thus elevated according to its development of moral rectitude and spiritual discernment and not according to artistic excellence in its own right.

Nineteen years later, in an address to the senior graduating students of 1897, Mother M. Ann of Jesus again reiterated these precepts. She traced the history of Christian art from the catacombs to Michelangelo and emphasized art's ability to both delight the eye and awaken the soul. As Mother M. Ann of Jesus asserts, "Education is supposed to fit, not unfit us, for the domestic duties of Home."⁷¹ The force of this comment was undoubtedly tied to the increased agitation for women's suffrage in Victoria, to which a full issue of the *Colonist* had been dedicated in May 1895. French bishop and author François Fénelon (1651-1715) had identified the indiscretion of women (their natural inclinations towards luxury and decadence) as having pernicious effects on society as a whole. This indiscretion was caused primarily by an indulgent education that gave rise to inappropriate aspirations. The proper education of girls was thus of national import and was to prepare them for the demands of the domestic sphere by instilling the primary virtues of industry and duty.⁷² According to Fénelon, it was women's necessary subordination in society (a submission instituted by God to curb their natural rebellious nature), rather than intellectual deficiency, that was the determining factor in limiting a woman's education.⁷³ Henri Giroux, echoing these sentiments in his 1886 *History of the Sisters of St. Ann*, reflected on the sisters' mandate as one that "nourishes their [pupils'] minds according to their sex."⁷⁴ So, while acknowledging the diverse gifts of students, Mother M. Ann of Jesus discouraged them from worldly aspiration and exhorted them to practise duty and self-control in order to become "a painting that will stand criticism in the art gallery of the Eternal."⁷⁵ This was a speech well timed for the arrival of Sr. M. Osithe, whose paintings became a particular source of pride and distinction for the community itself.

Gendering the Arts

As we have seen, gender determined the cultural framework through which students' work was evaluated and construed. In June 1892, having noted the high order of merit due the students, the *Colonist* framed

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Longee, "Noblesse, Domesticity, and Social Reform."

⁷³ Ibid., 98.

⁷⁴ Giroux, *La communauté des sœurs de Ste-Anne*.

⁷⁵ Sister Mary Ann of Jesus, 1878, op.cit.

success within the parameters of the following cultural expectations: “the training afforded by this excellent institution is one calculated to lay the foundations of a noble womanhood in the years to come.”⁷⁶ Even in June of 1893, the *Colonist*, reporting on the closing exercises for the year, moved fluidly from the students outfitted in “white dresses with gay ribbons” to walls “prettily decorated with paintings, fancy work and needlework,” equating personal adornment with the work of “industrious hands.” All considerations of skill or serious ambitions were subsumed under patronizing adjectives domesticating the function of student work to ornament.⁷⁷ This attention to appearance had not changed from observations made almost thirty years earlier when the girls of St. Ann’s were seen as “all tastefully dressed in white trimmed with blue present[ing] a picture of neatness.”⁷⁸

In 1888 the Sisters of St. Ann received papal approval as a religious community, and the following year the convent in Victoria was made a provincial house and novitiate for British Columbia, Alaska, and the Yukon. Under Mother M. Ann of Jesus, provincial superior from 1881 to 1901, St. Ann’s Academy experienced “a time of institutional dignity, vigor and lively competition.” Through “silent warfare, [the school worked] to maintain its rank among the rapidly increasing and improving schools within the city.”⁷⁹ Judicious advertising at this time increased enrolment by nearly 50 per cent.⁸⁰ In 1892 St. Ann’s was accorded the title “Academy” and the first medals and diplomas were conferred on “Academic” graduates.⁸¹ In conjunction with this prestigious status, the third prospectus, issued in 1892, advertised drawing (crayon work) and oil painting at two dollars and five dollars per month, respectively, and wax work at twenty dollars per term. By 1892 the academy enrolled forty boarders and 300 day students.

ART STUDIO AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

Due to the sudden death of Sr. M. Rose-de-Lima (Roy), who had briefly replaced Sr. M. Sophie in 1896, Sr. M. Osithe arrived in Victoria in 1897 and worked in the capacity of mistress of painting and drawing,

⁷⁶ “The Holidays Are Here,” *Colonist*, 25 June 1892, 6.

⁷⁷ “Commencement Exercises,” *Colonist*, 30 June 1893, 3.

⁷⁸ *Colonist*, 20 July 1865, 3.

⁷⁹ “Pioneers of St. Ann’s Academy,” *BC Orphans’ Friend* 5:9 (August, 1908): 14.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

with assistance the following year from Sr. M. Gerard Magella (Eyck). Although the rehearsed history asserts the success of her appointment, “despite all that needed to be organized,”⁸² there is evidence of significant growth prior to her arrival. The increased enrolment of students, as well as the number of students awarded prizes in drawing and painting, suggests continued and growing interest in these extras under the tutelage of the berated Sr. M. Sophie.⁸³ In addition, in 1895 the boarders’ Accounts Payable began to record direct purchases from the school of such art supplies as crayons, pencils, and drawing books.⁸⁴ This suggests not only a well stocked studio but also sufficient expansion to warrant such an enterprise.

With the arrival of Sr. M. Osithe, a shift in emphasis had certainly taken place. In 1898 the *Colonist* noted that crayon work, oil, water-colours, and now china painting, were taught in the art department. The reporter remarked: “The Studios, furnished with plaster cast models, copies of paintings by the masters and presided over by a skilled artist, will account for the very successful aid given to pupils in developing their aesthetic taste.”⁸⁵ In December of the same year, the artwork on display prompted unsolicited praise.⁸⁶

The direction of these new art initiatives can be attributed in part to the changing face of education in Victoria. The high profile that St. Ann’s enjoyed in the media was under strain from a burgeoning of new institutions. Up to the 1890s, the *Colonist* overwhelmingly favoured reports on St. Ann’s Academy. This may be due in part to the paper’s original ties with Roman Catholic Bishop Demers who, until 1862, owned the only printing press in Victoria. But immigration initiatives, begun in 1896, saw the population of British Columbia triple between 1901 and 1911. Public schools were newly established to meet the influx of the labouring classes while the small minority of elites favoured private education.⁸⁷ Consequently, the *Colonist*’s previous attention to St. Ann’s gave way to a more judicial coverage of a wider variety of private and public schools. In addition, the first normal school in British Columbia was established in 1901, questioning the teacher training provided at St. Ann’s Novitiate. “Accountability,” therefore, became an important

⁸² Sisters of St. Ann, *The Necrology of the Sisters of St. Anne: 1938-1943*. (Lachine: Sisters of St. Anne, 1944, 297.

⁸³ *Colonist*, 1890-95.

⁸⁴ Boarders’ Accounts Receivable.

⁸⁵ “St. Ann’s Academy,” *Colonist*, 30 June 1898, 5.

⁸⁶ “St. Ann’s Academy,” *Colonist*, 14 December 1898, 3.

⁸⁷ Jean Barman, “Marching to Different Drummers: Public Education and Private Schools in BC, 1900-1950,” *BC Historical News* 14, 1 (1980): 2.

issue. Perhaps in response to the need to meet outside standards, Sr. M. Irene, general prefect of studies in Quebec from 1896 to 1914, worked to develop instructional proficiency in each subject by instituting yearly scholastic retreats for academic subjects as well as for music and drawing. Sr. M. Osithe benefited from this new initiative, spending a year at Lachine under the tutelage of S. M. de-la-Croix in 1903-04 and producing numerous large oil paintings, including the famed copy of Murillo's *Immaculate Conception*. In contrast, an artist such as Laura Muntz (1860-1930), who remained "in the world," stated that one of the regrets of her life had "been the small amount of time that she [was] able to give to big creative work, to things that are allegorical." But in the convent, as a sister of St. Ann, Mary Osithe was freed from many domestic responsibilities and was not only able but encouraged to pursue "big" allegorical works.⁸⁸

New initiatives in the art program, as well as the introduction of a commercial program to teach stenography (in advance of public school implementation), were not simply fortuitous but, rather, were calculated strategies to meet increased competition for paying students. A tract published in 1904 by the Methodists, who aspired to start their own girls' school in Toronto, remarks that parents who sent their daughters to the schools of other denominations did so for "social considerations" and "aesthetic motives." Such parents expected drawing and painting to be taught as necessary social refinements.⁸⁹

Specialization and adaptability to cultural trends were the means by which the academy stayed competitive in the shifting social climate of prewar British Columbia. Mother M. Ann of Jesus allowed this "modernization" on the condition that results would justify requests.⁹⁰ According to Sr. M. Theodore, author and community historian, for the art department this response to cultural trends meant a full set of casts, a modern course in oil and china painting, and a modern kiln.⁹¹ Indeed, the 1907 prospectus boasts a highly sophisticated art department. Drawing, including instruction in charcoal, crayon, and pyrography, is

⁸⁸ Newton McTavish, "Laura Muntz and Her Art" *The Canadian Magazine* 28, 5 (1911): 423, quoted in Elizabeth Mulley, "Madonna/Mother/Death/and Child: Laura Muntz and the Representation of Maternity," *Canadian Art Review/Revue d'art canadienne* 25, 1 and 2 (1998): 84-93.

⁸⁹ Rev. W.H. Hicks and H.H. Fudger, Esq., "A Methodist School for Girls in Toronto: Do We Need It? What Should It Be?" Addresses given at the annual meeting of the Victoria Women's Educational Association in Annesley Hall, 23 March 1904.

⁹⁰ "Pioneers of St. Ann's Academy," *BC Orphans' Friend* 5,9 (August 1908), 14.

⁹¹ Sister Mary Theodore, ssa, *Pioneer Nuns in British Columbia* (Victoria: Sisters of St. Ann, 1931), 135.

offered at two dollars per month. The course of instruction for “artistic drawing” encompasses drawing from the antique, drawing from life, and drawing from still life as well as perspective and composition. Painting is also offered in both watercolour and pastel at three dollars per month, and oil or china painting is offered at five dollars per month. In addition, private lessons were available on an hourly basis at one dollar per month. Moreover, these higher branches of a finished education were supported by the establishment of St. Luke’s Art Society, which, like St. Cecilia’s Circle in music, encouraged the girls to become aware of the names, birthplaces, and works of the great European masters. A photograph of the studio, which displays the heights of artistic achievement attained, accompanied this impressive program of instruction. The picture is crowded with easels displaying select works in progress as well as a wall covered with framed works of portraiture, landscape, and religious subjects. Many of the works are identifiable as those of Sr. M. Osithe rather than those of her students. The improvements to the art program were duly promoted by a large advertisement on the front page of the August 1907 *BC Orphans’ Friend*, a BC Roman Catholic journal,⁹² and an extensive editorial in the *Colonist* on 18 August the same year. Having established that St. Ann’s was the oldest private educational institution in British Columbia, the reporter concluded: “It is safe to say that in no school on the coast is womanly culture more thoroughly taught.”⁹³ A similar promotional campaign in 1908 again stressed the academy’s long history, and the art department was described as “embodying the principles that form the basis of the instruction in the best schools of Europe.”⁹⁴ In addition, the notice offered a further allure by indicating the availability of private lessons for married ladies. It is apparent from these “judicious” advertisements that the art program was utilized as a drawing card for newly arrived upper-class émigrés. By 1910, however, the heyday of the studio was over. With vocational opportunities in stenography and other commercial fields increasing for women, the art department retreated from the spotlight.⁹⁵

At the same time, elementary classroom instruction in drawing at St. Ann’s seems to have complied with provincial dictates. From 1900 Sr. M. Osithe taught drawing to novices and, in the summers, to sisters

⁹² “St. Ann’s Academy,” *BC Orphans’ Friend* 4, 4 (August, 1907), 1.

⁹³ “Victoria the Beautiful: St. Ann’s Academy,” *Colonist*, 18 August 1907, 3.

⁹⁴ Advertising in *BC Orphans’ Friend* (1908).

⁹⁵ For details on this vocational trend, see Timothy Dunn, “Work, Class and Education: Vocationalism in British Columbia’s Public Schools, 1900–1929” (MA thesis, University of British Columbia, 1978). In 1906 commercial courses were added to the public school curriculum.

who were elementary classroom teachers. David Blair's drawing texts⁹⁶ were initially used to teach a system that combined the rudimentary elements of line, curves, and geometric forms with ornamental design and drawing from nature. Sr. M. Irene, the general prefect of studies from 1896 to 1914, authored a teaching manual for linear and perspective drawing, which was approved in 1910.⁹⁷ In contrast to the manuals used in the public schools, this manual gave particular attention to the "powerful" influence that resulted from the study of beauty and art.⁹⁸ In Sr. M. Irene's notes for a teaching workshop in 1914, it is clear that the linear drawing curriculum was primarily concerned with the visual expression of thought through the basic principles of geometry but *with a view to cultivating taste*. "Taste" was to be achieved through oral explanations and graphic demonstrations that trained the eye to correctly perceive ideal proportions and the underlying order and structure of objects, the benefits of which were linked, as before, with moral development.⁹⁹ According to the *Drawing Syllabus* published by the Sisters of the Congregation of Notre-Dame in 1902, "The ability to appreciate and judge or discuss with knowledge ... objects of beauty is the mark of a civilized nation."¹⁰⁰

At St. Ann's the fine arts would find their practical correlative not in preparation for the world of work but, rather, in "domestic arts," which taught girls to "make beautiful things for the home" for the preservation and augmentation of family life.¹⁰¹ In this respect, it is significant that china painting became the focus of St. Ann's art department, ornamenting "bric-a-brac, toilet-table sets, fern bowls, rose jars, chocolate and tea sets, plaques and vases."¹⁰² As before, for the Sisters of St. Ann, the cultivation of beauty through the fine arts went beyond decorative furnishings for the home and was given a further spiritual significance. In 1910 Janet Erskine Stuart, a member of the Religious of the Sacred Heart, wrote that Roman Catholic girls especially should pursue drawing and painting. She believed that training in art "is of more importance to Catholics than to others" because it is related to the "spiritual life, to faith and devotion," and because taste in art strengthens rather than

⁹⁶ David Blair, *Canadian Drawing Series* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1901-10).

⁹⁷ Prevost, *L'Education hier et aujourd'hui*, 74.

⁹⁸ Notes in S 86-04-06 Archives ssa (Victoria) B86/4.6 13 May 1914. No copy exists of the drawing manual.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ *Congregation of Notre-Dame, Syllabaire du dessin* (Montreal: Imprimerie de l'institution des Sourds-Muets, 1902), v.

¹⁰¹ Dunn, *Work, Class and Education*.

¹⁰² "St. Ann's Academy Exhibits Pictures," *Colonist*, 21 June 1913, 3.

undermines “the principle on which conduct is based.”¹⁰³ Indeed, in his “Address to the Young Ladies of St. Ann’s at the Closing Exercises of the School, June 20th, 1919” a local cleric similarly remarked: “What is sadly needed at present is the cessation of the glorification of materialistic achievements and the instruction of the souls of the rising generation which will lead to more reverence for spiritual things. The spiritual side of life must be secured. There is nothing more precious on earth than the human soul. The expression and revelation of the soul is art; art in its highest form.”¹⁰⁴ The Sisters of St. Ann would have agreed.

CONCLUSION

As has been stated, there was no other school on the BC coast “where womanly culture [was] more thoroughly taught.” The atmosphere created and fostered at St. Ann’s might be compared with the refined gentility of a comfortable late nineteenth-century drawing room. Tea would be served in finely decorated china; manners would be impeccable; French might be spoken. Both decorative and inspirational art works would hang on prettily wallpapered walls. On a side table, beside an exquisite floral arrangement, we would find a prayer book and rosary. And, of course, there would be “fancy” needlework waiting to be picked up, an image of the Virgin on the mantel, and, no doubt, a piano. There might even be a sketchbook. In English Canada, where the Roman Catholic Church has never been the church of the elite, St. Ann’s was something of an anomaly. For Roman Catholic girls in particular, participation in art education at the academy offered an opportunity to climb a rung or two on the social ladder.

“Untrained hands could mar and untrained eyes could fail to appreciate.”¹⁰⁵ The art department at St. Ann’s was indeed a sacred place. It was at once a sphere of exclusivity restricted to the daughters of those whose social position provided them with the means or inclination to purchase a “finished” education. In this respect the Sisters of St. Ann contributed both to society’s definitions of womanly virtue and to the pretensions of an emergent middle class on Canada’s newly colonized West Coast. At the same time, it was the art department that gave the Sisters of St. Ann a measure of institutional autonomy, self-sufficiency, and identity within the vast religious superstructure of late nineteenth-

¹⁰³ Janet Erskine Stuart, *The Education of Catholic Girls* (London: Longmans, 1910), 194.

¹⁰⁴ “Address to the Young Ladies of St. Ann’s Academy,” *BC Orphans’ Friend* 16, 7 (July, 1919):4.

¹⁰⁵ Dickinson, *Reminiscences of St. Ann’s*, 25–6.

century Roman Catholicism in Canada. Through their artistic pursuits, the Sisters of St. Ann generated devotional works that graced the walls of the convent schools with visual exemplars of both piety and artistic excellence – a powerful visual reminder of the spiritual ends to which education was designed and a source of pride and self respect for the Congregation itself – an appropriate metaphor for the quality of their spiritual calling.

By the turn of the century the Sisters of St. Ann in Victoria had fulfilled the mandate expressed in their first prospectus: “To impart to young ladies the benefit of a good moral and domestic education, accompanied with the knowledge of the various branches of elementary training together with those which constitute the higher departments of a finished education.”¹⁰⁶ By cultivating a distinctive spiritual identity within the school while preserving the competitive edge of St. Ann’s within Victoria’s dynamic society, art education played a vital role in achieving this goal.

As teachers within the enclave of religious profession, gifted women such as Sr. M. Osithe were able to expand their artistic ambitions beyond the acceptable domestic “accomplishments” of the late nineteenth-century drawing room. This is not to say that, for Osithe and others, forsaking motherhood for the possibility of developing their artistic ambitions was not without constraints and institutional restrictions, particularly when balanced with the humility demanded by a religious calling. As a sister of St. Ann, she was encouraged to develop her artistic ability as part of her commitment to religion. Nevertheless, as Marta Danylewycz has observed, “From a social perspective, women’s religious communities provided a viable and esteemed alternative to motherhood in a society that seemed



Illustration 6: *The House of Cards*. Oil painting, Sister Mary Osithe, SSA 1904. Courtesy of the Sisters of St. Ann, Victoria.

¹⁰⁶ *Opening of the School by the Sisters of St. Ann, also Called Sisters of Charity, in Victoria, V.I., Dec. 2, 1858* (Victoria: Bishop Demers, 1858).

to value lay women solely as procreative beings. Under the aegis of a vocation, women could reject marriage, pursue lifelong careers, and be part of a community that enjoyed the ability to create its own sense of rank, status, and division of labour.”¹⁰⁷

The teachers of art at St. Ann’s attempted to negotiate institutional demands and attend to shifting cultural expectations as well as external educational directives while constructing their own pedagogical edifice. But theirs was also no earthly “House of Cards,” for art education at St. Ann’s Academy sought to impart the eye with spiritual sensitivity and the hand with moral rectitude, and, in doing so, to educate the heart for eternity.

¹⁰⁷ Danylewycz, *Taking the Veil*, 106.