

View of Toronto, 1855: a great work for a lady



Toronto from the Don River, 1855

*I*n Mary Hastings Meyer's remarkable, three-by-five foot painting of Toronto, a bright blue-green Don River meanders through the lower Don Valley, past grazing cows, toward Gooderham & Worts' windmill tower in the distance (far left). By 1855, the windmill no longer had its sails and distilling had replaced milling as its industrial purpose in life. Seen from the Lake and waterfront town site, the windmill tower was still a major landmark; but seen from the north, it was reduced in size and importance.

Perhaps that's why Alderman William Gooderham voted against purchasing this particular painting in April 1855, despite Aldermen Romain and Smith's desire to secure such "a beautiful painting and accurate view of our city executed in a masterly manner by one of our Townswomen" for the City. Or, perhaps more likely, the conservative Victorian businessman had little use for spending taxpayers' money on fripperies like art. Fortunately, two years later, when Gooderham was no longer on Council, the City voted to purchase the painting for £50 and to hang it in the cupolaed City Hall at Front and Jarvis Street so beautifully depicted in the painting.



Cupolas of City Hall (left) and St. Lawrence Hall (centre) bathed in golden summer light

Certainly a reporter for the *Daily Colonist* of June 22, 1855 would have supported Aldermen Romain and Smith's positive assessment of the painting:

There is now on exhibition in Mr. Pell's Picture Gallery, a view of Toronto, on a canvass some where about 5 feet by 3 feet by Mrs. Hoppner Meyer. The view is taken from the road in the North Eastern part of the City, leading to the Don and Danforth Road – and gives an extended range of the City from East to West. In the immediate foreground is the river Don fully brought out to view. The City with its spires and turrets is relieved by the Bay and the Lake in the distance, on which, a steamer and some sailing craft are represented. This is a great work for a lady.

It was, of course, a “great work” for any painter, both in size and accomplishment. Sadly, not much seems to be known about Mary Hastings Meyer (née Fitzgerald). She married fellow artist, Hoppner Francis Meyer, who specialized in miniature portraits. They lived on Adelaide Street West in 1853, the same year Mrs. Meyer exhibited as an “amateur” at the Upper Canada Provincial Exhibition and won prizes for her depictions of animals and other unspecified subjects. Then she clearly followed her husband when he returned to England around 1862, because she is known to have exhibited flower paintings in London between 1868 and 1885. Flowers and animals – genre subjects regarded as suitable for Victorian female painters.

Whether Meyer painted any other bold views like her 1855 portrait of Toronto remains unknown. But we are lucky that she at least once painted her native city

from a most unusual point-of-view – the North – capturing backyards and frame houses, as well as the Gooderham & Worts windmill and other early landmarks.



Detail of windmill tower (left) to Little Trinity Church (right) with Privat's Hotel on the Peninsula (later Island) beyond

Many thanks to Pamela Wachna for sharing information about Mary Hastings Meyer and her splendid *Toronto from the Don River, 1855.*, which remains in the City of Toronto Art Collection. See also Edith Firth's 1984 ***Toronto in Art.***

Please send your comments or questions to Manager of Heritage Services, Sally Gibson, sg@thedistillerydistrict.com.

For more about the history of the Distillery District, visit www.distilleryheritage.com