

A woman's work

On Oct. 17, the winner of the Toronto Book Awards will be announced. Established in 1974, the prize honours authors who have written books that are evocative of Toronto. Over five weeks, we will run excerpts from the books shortlisted for the award. Today, in our second instalment, the radical women of bohemian art in *And Beauty Answers: The Life of Frances Loring and Florence Wyle* by Elspeth Cameron.

When Florence joined Frances in Toronto in 1912, there were only a handful of Canadian sculptors, and only one of them — Winnifred Kingsford — was a woman. She was currently in the midst of a five-year stint in Paris studying with Émile Bourdelle. She sculpted lamps and vases — anything that would sell.

For Torontonians at the time, lamps and vases were hardly sculpture. Public sculpture was monumental and nothing else. Great men and pivotal points of history were idealized on high pedestals meant to inspire. Subjects arose not because of considered value, but because interested groups with sufficient funds commissioned them. The results were random. The few public sculptures in Toronto in 1911 were clustered together in Queen's Park, around the pink sandstone parliament buildings of Upper Canada: Robert Reid's Canadian Volunteer Monument (1870), lauding the defence of Canada's frontier in 1866; a monument to Conservative journalist George Brown (1884) by British sculptor Charles Bell Birch; statues of Christian educator Egerton Ryerson (1887) and Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald (1894) by Hamilton M. MacCarthy. A decade later they would be joined inevitably by a bronze copy of a British sculpture of Queen Victoria (1903), whose values impressed the city of Toronto for decades to come. Elsewhere in the city, David R. Stevenson, a Scottish sculptor, had immortalized poet Robert Burns (1902) in the Allan Gardens on Sherbourne Street.

Among these early British and Canadian sculptors, the mainly self-taught Walter Allward stood

out. Four of his sculptures monumentalized important moments in Canadian history for Queen's Park: the North-West Rebellion Memorial (1895); his tribute to Upper Canada Governor John Graves Simcoe (1903) and Ontario's Premier, Sir Oliver Mowat (1905); and his John Sandfield MacDonald (1909), prime minister (as premiers were then known) of Ontario, 1867-'71. He had also created several busts that went to the Normal School, the War of 1812 Memorial (1906) in Portland Square, and — just before Frances and Florence arrived in Toronto — he had won the plum commission to erect the South African War Memorial (1910) to the Boer War on University Avenue north of Queen Street.

On arriving in Toronto, Frances stayed with her father in the Queen's Hotel, site of today's Royal York, which was built on its ruins in the 1920s. The Queen's Hotel symbolized 20th-century progress. For \$3 a day (a working man's salary was \$20 weekly for 60 hours' labour), its modern amenities included the first hot air furnace, the first elevator, the first electric bells and the first baths with hot running water in a Toronto hotel.

There, where "all famous Victorian visitors stayed — from Jenny Lind to General Sherman, and the Prince of Wales," Frank Loring lectured his daughter on the bright future she would enjoy in this magnificent country.

Frank Loring held that every aspect of life in Canada was sitting in readiness, waiting to be discovered and exploited by those with enterprise and a disposition to take



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Frances Loring with New York Mounted Policeman, a whimsical — if not satirical — treatment of the sculptural convention of "great men on horseback."

risks and work hard.

Something must have been said about Florence. According to a friend to whom they recounted the story, Frank was persuaded to install her in Frances's studio partly because he and his wife knew and liked Florence and still thought her a steady influence on their impulsive Frances, and partly because Florence was ill. Without support from her disapproving father, Florence had no money for the medical expenses her bouts of bronchitis, tonsillitis and pneumonia incurred. Mainly because of this, Frank Loring agreed to help her out along with his daughter.

After a short stint in the studio on Adelaide Street West, the two of them set up a studio above a carpenter's shop at 114½ Lombard Street, on the corner of Church and Lombard Streets. It was one of Toronto's most disreputable

neighbourhoods, but Florence and Frances did not care. The rampant drunkenness that sparked the diatribe against alcohol in *Of Toronto the Good* was apparent everywhere. Many of the city's over 300 taverns — and the prostitutes and hangers-on associated with them — were right nearby. Occasionally, someone would appear at the door downstairs, asking to speak with "Rose." Walking in the streets on Toronto's cedar plank sidewalks meant propositions. "You damn fool!" was Florence's usual reply. They soon had two dogs.

The studio itself charmed them: Light flooded in from several large, deep-set windows, a great fireplace dominated one side of the spacious room. The other walls — supported by hand-hewn rafters — had ample space for shelves of books and small sculptures. There they set to work — hard.

Frances and Florence were not in tune with Toronto's religious fervour. Both of them had abandoned any pretence of Christian belief or practice. St. James Cathedral and the Methodist Church nearby were ideal places to walk their dogs, but attendance at services was out of the question. As students of the arts, they knew that art in the service of Christianity had long since passed its zenith. As Bohemians from the Village, they had been exposed to many exciting, radical ideas about a newly burgeoning free society in which women might appropriate a more powerful position.

■ Excerpt from *And Beauty Answers: The Life of Frances Loring and Florence Wyle* by Elspeth Cameron. © 2007 Elspeth Cameron. Edited for length, with permission of Cormorant Books Inc.

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