

Krieghoff caught strength of spirit

Cornelius Krieghoff has never been a favourite artist of mine though I have been fascinated by the stories in his paintings ("Krieghoff's cartoonish habitants a Canadian embarrassment," Nov. 24). From time to time, I make the effort to study his whimsical presentations.

But *Citizen* art critic Paul Gessell seems upset that this 19th century painter didn't have the professional insight and courtesy to meet the demanding requirements of a 20th century Canadian critic.

Mr. Gessell's comments have no other value than to irritate and stir animosity, much more so than any Krieghoff painting could ever. His commentary is based on subjective 20th century sensitivities, incapable of recognizing any other than those of the day.

Political, visual and perceptual correctness, in all its officially sanctioned purity, did not exist, fortunately, in Krieghoff's time. People were too busy surviving the elements. And this, as historical fact, is in itself a reason to review and study the Krieghoff collection. Granted contemporary representa-

tions of "noble savages" and "frollicking Habitants" would be out of place today. But I question seeing them as embarrassments, as bigoted caricature representations.

This abhorrence of Krieghoff is related to the rebirth of the "figurative" in contemporary art. The reaction is more a show of threatened neuroses on the part of 20th century absolutists than it is about good, great or bad art. Figurative and realistic art is problematic to those who have staked their professions and reputations on the hot-sell of cold "isms" and skill-deficient representation. Just as soccer is a threat to baseball and hockey, anything which smacks of universal appeal sends shivers down the spines of the art intelligentsia crowds.

Krieghoff's art is not an arrogant angst or ego-driven art form. It does not dismiss viewers as incidental annoyances. His art speaks romantically, even blissfully. He presents with enormous affection his view of the heroic eloquence and the belligerent delinquencies perpetrated by humans, bent on surviving the impossible.

Picasso represented the graphi-

cally disgusting consequences of war in his *La Guernica*. Krieghoff, in his more innocent, almost naive representation, chooses to focus on the strength of spirit of the Habitants who dared face, and survive, yet another winter. Some painters focus on the expression of endured pain, others, on the almost comical essence of human foibles and survival skills.

Krieghoff was holding up a light to the great strengths of a people who, despite cruel hardships, were hardy survivors. They made music and laughed at the gods and devils of winter and played and danced and yes ... for less selfish reasons than our own, they got drunk. He showed their humanity, their failings and their pleasures as well as the grandeur and intimidating power of the undaunted landscape. He never questioned whether his paintings would be seen by sophisticated know-it-alls or by average Joes.

He simply told his stories and today they still hold true to their birthright: loving renditions of what he saw and felt and had embraced when he married into his Habitant clan.

Krieghoff, at his cut-out illustrative best, painted in a manner born of Germanic-based visual perceptions. And yet, to show his love for this new country and its hardy people, he tainted his work with an romanticism uncharacteristic for that time. That aspect in itself is worthy of study.

His was a love for the land and its people first, a painter's rendition second. Perceptions, when coloured by human emotion, are inadvertently altered from their absolute centre.

This imbalance causes a contrast, which heightens the tension and impact of the resulting art work. Krieghoff has sold the myth and magic and mysticism and elusive qualities of the land of Canada and of its people to the masses of the world. And today, to some it seems, this is a sin.

To critique Krieghoff is, at its best, a laudable and most invigorating exercise; at its worst, a condescending representation of 20th century absolutism imposed upon a time and place and an artist who cannot defend himself.

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