

INTRODUCTION

In 1999 the Mount Royal Club, situated at the corner of Sherbrooke and Stanley Streets in Montreal celebrated its one hundredth anniversary. (fig.1) From its beginnings, the Mount Royal club catered to the wealthy and socially prominent of Montreal and has been synonymous with a secluded circle of power, wealth and achievement by which the life of the city, the province and even at times, the country was influenced and shaped.¹

When the Mount Royal Club was founded in 1899, it has been estimated that almost one-half of the wealth of the nation and one-third of the railways, banks and industries were owned or controlled by fifty men in Canada, most of who lived in Montreal. The concentration of wealth prevalent in the city, particularly in Montreal's Square Mile, during this period surpassed any other city in Canada. This was a mixture of money made by early entrepreneurs in the fur trade and later in the railroads and the Bank of Montreal, who had either created great fortunes and economic empires from small beginnings, or who were first generation successors to businesses they had inherited or managed. These businesses included marine transportation, as well as the sugar, flour milling and lumber industries.² A large percentage of these men became the founders, directors and guarantors of the Mount Royal Club. Individually and collectively, they formed an exclusive upper stratum of society in Montreal in the century's early decades and exerted their power and control through groups such as the

¹ H.Heward Stikeman, *The Mount Royal Club 1899-1999* (Montreal, Quebec: Price, Patterson Ltd., 1999), 11.

² *Ibid.*, 14, 84.

Board of Trade, the Bank of Montreal and the Canadian Pacific Railway.³ This entrepreneurial class enjoyed a social status and standard of living in Montreal that was far beyond the comprehension of the average person living and working in the city. These powerful and wealthy families did their best to separate themselves in their homes, clubs and institutions.

In *City below the Hill*, author Herbert Ames in his 1897 study “below and above the hill” clearly portrays the radical polarization between the two classes in Montreal at the turn of the century.⁴ Above the hill on the slope of Mount Royal, stood the mansions of the English, as well as those of some Francophone commercial, financial and manufacturing elite; while in the industrial sector below were the slums where unemployment, disease, poverty and dilapidated houses were the norm. This social dichotomy within Montreal society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is made manifest by comparing the cost of the clubhouse and the wages of the “servants” working in the Mount Royal Club. (See Appendix A.) The minutes of the Executive Meeting of the Club dated 12 February 1906 reveal that the total cost of the clubhouse with its interior decoration and furnishings amounted to \$229,919. (See Appendix B.) In today’s purchasing power this amount would be approximately four million dollars.⁵

³ Robert Sweeny, “Building for Power: The Maxwell Practice and the Montreal Business Community” in *The Architecture of Edward and W.S. Maxwell* (Montreal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts 1991), 35.

Both the banks and the railways were well represented in the Mount Royal Club. In particular, the presence of the CPR was strong from the outset. The railway’s senior executives were staunch supporters of the Club and, into the 1970s, there was always a table in the dining room known as “the CPR table” where any member of the railroad was always welcome. Stikeman, 84.

⁴ Herbert Ames, *City Below the Hill* (Toronto: (University of Toronto Press, 1897, 1972), 103.

⁵ “What is it Worth Today?” <http://www.eh.net/hmit/ppowerusd.com> (accessed 29 October, 2004).

These same minutes reveal that the Club Steward's salary was \$125 a month.⁶ A further investigation in the classified section of the *Daily Star* reveals an advertisement for the sale of a three-storey house on Mountain Street near Sherbrooke Street with a kitchen extension and two bathrooms at the cost of \$15,000 and a four-room furnished flat on Overdale Avenue, between Mackay and Mountain Streets one block south of Dorchester Boulevard (now René-Levesque), "with a high situation and bracing mountain air" for rent at a cost of \$25 per month.⁷

The Mount Royal Club, whose founding members represented the Anglo-Protestant establishment in the city, functioned as a private men's club and operated along the same lines as similar institutions in London, England and such American cities as New York, Boston and Philadelphia. Other such clubs in Montreal at the turn of the century included: the St. James Club, Montreal's oldest club, formed in 1857; the Engineers Club, founded in 1902, which recruited exclusively from this profession; the University Club, founded in 1907 to create a meeting place for university graduates in Montreal; and Le Club St. Denis for French-Canadian members founded in 1874. French and English institutions were separated between the eastern and western parts of the city, and the positioning of Le Club St. Denis on Sherbrooke Street East, while the other clubs were in the central part of the city, illustrated the cultural and linguistic dichotomy existing in Montreal at that time.⁸

⁶ Mount Royal Club Minute Book, 12 February, 1906, 221.

⁷ *The Montreal Star*, Montreal, 6 October, 1906.

⁸ John Culleton, ed. *Leacock's Montreal* (Toronto and Montreal: McClelland and Stewart, 1963), 277.

The social and cultural history of the Mount Royal Club's early years sets an overall context for this study of the art and architecture of this exclusive club. It is my intention to demonstrate that the architecture of the building reflected a society both privileged and guarded and that the Club's collection of paintings acquired between the years 1899-1920 represents a visual representation of the members' taste at the beginning of the twentieth century in Montreal. This study will differ from that of H. Heward Stikeman's commemorative book published on the occasion of the Club's centenary in 1999. While the author has provided an excellent overview of the history of the Club, it does not take into account art historical issues nor does the author analyze in depth the social and cultural relationships which provide the context for the creation of the Mount Royal Club. Furthermore, only a cursory examination is given to the history and intentions of the Club's art collection.

This thesis will cover the period just prior to the construction of the new building on Sherbrooke Street in 1904-1906, and will conclude with the years following World War I. This period, especially before World War I, and before the introduction of income tax, has been identified as Montreal's "Golden Age." It was a propitious time in the city's cultural, social and economic history and has come to be known as "a glorious era whose end came with the 1920s."⁹ Chapter One will present an overview of the social, cultural and economic climate prevailing in Montreal during this period. I will focus on the Mount Royal Club's genesis and original growth, the establishment of the Club in the John Abbott House in 1899 and an account of the fire that completely destroyed the building in 1904 and created the subsequent need for a new building. A brief description

⁹ Isabelle Gournay and France Vanlaethem, eds. *Montreal Metropolis: 1880-1930* (Toronto: Stoddard Publishing, 1998), 10.

of gentlemen's clubs and a survey of The Mount Royal Club's founding members along with their social, cultural and business interests will follow.

The second chapter will focus primarily on the new building, the circumstances surrounding the commissioning of the noted American architectural firm, McKim, Mead and White of New York, and the links with other buildings they designed in New York; in particular, the other private clubs built by this firm. The discussion of the architecture will focus on its place within the Beaux-Arts style and its relationship to classicism and the Italian Renaissance palazzo. The debate that prevailed during this period over hiring American architects, rather than their Canadian counterparts, to execute major commissions, will serve as a background to the architectural discussion.

An analysis of the Mount Royal Club's collection of paintings from 1899 until 1920 forms the basis for the third chapter. The discussion will examine the Club's acquisition process and analyze the collection as occupying a middle position between that of a public and a private collection. While some paintings will then be examined, the collection, for the most part, will be considered as a totality, with the main focus on the collecting activities and the tastes of the Club's membership. I will also discuss the Club members' links to the Art Association of Montreal.

The social and cultural context of the Mount Royal Club and its location within the Square Mile is fundamental to the discussion of the architecture and art collection of this Club. For the purpose of this study, the discussion of social class and its power and privilege will rely on the theories of French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, as developed in his *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, 1984 and *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, 1993. For Bourdieu, class is always

“constructed” and is distinguished in terms of differences in economic, cultural and social capital and habitus and lifestyle.¹⁰ His theories on habitus will be used to support the claim that through their habitus people absorb a certain set of internalized dispositions that incline them to act and react in certain ways, and is the end product of what is generally termed socialization or enculturation.¹¹ This theoretical framework will help to explain the social homogeneity, the common culture and the sense of entitlement that prevailed within private clubs such as the Mount Royal Club at the turn of the century. It will assist in explaining how this habitus of power and privilege contributed to the design and construction of a major Montreal landmark and to the creation of a small collection of Canadian and European art.

¹⁰ David Swartz, *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 157.

¹¹ Gary Stevens, *The Favoured Circle: The Social Foundations of Architectural Distinction* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1998), 57.