

AS OTHERS SEE US

From the paintings of lakes and mountains by The Group of Seven to the avant-garde staging of Robert Lepage, Canadian culture portrays and promotes Canada to a continent steeped in the arts.

When first-time Canadian novelist Lilian Nattel was ready with her debut manuscript six years ago, Dutch, German and British editions hit the presses at the same time as those for Canada.

Evoking the village life of Torontonians, Nattel's Eastern European forebears, *The River Midnight* rapidly became a literary success in the European Union based on a formula that was both highly personal and distinctively Canadian.

Nattel's work is typical of a wide range of Canadian culture that has proven highly resonant across the Atlantic. Filmmaker Atom Egoyan, multimedia director Robert Lepage, visual artist Jeff Wall and author Margaret Atwood have made waves in Europe with individual, even quirky visions that are resolutely made in Canada.

Such cultural figures are important elements of Canada's global brand, one that garners recognition all over the world but particularly in Europe. On a continent so deeply steeped in the arts, Canada's credibility in the cultural arena strengthens all aspects of our country's international relations.

"Most foreigners have a very positive view of Canada, often based on an image of lakes and mountains," declares Michael Brock, Director General of



Marie-Josée Croze is Celia and David Alpay is Raffi in Atom Egoyan's *Ararat*.

International Cultural Relations for Foreign Affairs Canada (FAC) in Ottawa. "Showcasing our sophisticated, innovative and cutting-edge artistic achievements provides a much deeper understanding of our country."

Europeans are clearly finding a number of intellectually useful resources among Canadian cultural products. Multiculturalism, for example, is a leading social and political concern today in many rapidly changing EU countries. Canada is widely acknowledged as a significant mentor nation on the issue, and the evidence is on view with practically every Canadian urban novel and dance company that reaches Europe.

"Canada is a country where people are consciously trying to develop and accommodate others in a civilized, humane manner," says Harmut Lutz, Chair of North American Studies at the University of Greifswald in Germany and currently a visiting scholar at the University of Ottawa.

Academic exchanges, conferences and educational forums are important means by which Canadian culture becomes known and discussed. There are approximately 2,700 European "Canadianists" and some 108 European universities that feature Canadian Studies programs. Yet ordinary European spectators marvelling at a performance of Quebec's Cirque Éloize also generate awareness and respect.

"It benefits everyone when we're known through our artists, and not just our big stars," comments John Lambert, the Montreal agent who represents Cirque Éloize and others such as the Ronnie Burkett Theatre of Marionettes. "It gives a feeling of who we are."

Lambert can look at the eclectic performers he favours and see the messages communicated through them. "Canada is a young country and we're not so tied to



photo: courtesy of Big Picture Media Corporation

Mark Achbar and Jennifer Abbott's *The Corporation*

traditional definitions of form," he observes. "The kinds of work we produce as Canadians are often mixed form, mixed expression, and make a kind of cocktail which is Canadian."

Lepage, renowned Canadian designer-director of opera, theatre, film and other media, is a model of the form-mixing artist; he's also the winner of some of Europe's most prestigious honours, most recently Denmark's Hans Christian Andersen Award for his play based on Andersen's fairy tale, *The Dryad*.

The Man Booker Prize, one of the most prestigious literary awards in the English-speaking world, has especially smiled on Canada. Twelve books written by Canadians have made its short list and three have won: *The English Patient* by Michael Ondaatje, *The Blind Assassin* by Atwood and *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel.

Such recognition is valuable not only to individual artists, but also to Canada's broader foreign policy, trade and security interests. "Other countries judge us by our culture and values," observes Renetta Siemens, Director of Arts and Cultural Industries Promotion for FAC. "This assessment in turn has an impact on our political, business and security relationships."

Canadian publishing has been a big European story in recent years, making a splash in high-profile settings like the Turin and Belgrade book fairs. Of course, novelists such as Rohinton Mistry and Anne Michaels have an established overseas presence. Yet even Canadian non-fiction on themes like the environment has made remarkable inroads, says Rob Sanders, publisher of Greystone Books in Vancouver. "There is an increasing confidence, a maturing in this non-fiction work."

Sales of cultural products are vital yet often a limited measure of influence. Canadians are proud of their international superstars in popular music, including performers Celine Dion, Shania Twain and Diana Krall. But a distinctive impact by Canadian artists often involves far smaller revenues.

"It's our most artistic filmmakers who travel really well in Europe," observes Cam Haynes, a director of the

Toronto International Film Festival. "They're not the box office successes, they're the critical successes."

Egoyan, whose esoteric work has earned him the title Chevalier des Arts et Lettres from the French government, is an obvious example, although even a relatively big-budget director such as David Cronenberg can bring far more esthetic influence than earnings. Other internationally recognized Canadian filmmakers include Denys Arcand, whose *Les invasions barbares* won an Oscar, and Mark Achbar and Jennifer Abbott, who won a Sundance Documentary Award for *The Corporation*.

Canada's traditional art also plays an important role and still has an iconic value in projecting an image of Canada internationally. The Group of Seven, with their "lakes and mountains" paintings, remain Canada's best-known artists, generally fetching the highest prices on the auction block. Yet a range of contemporary work by artists like Vancouver's Jeff Wall, Lethbridge, Alberta native Janet Cardiff and Montreal's Tom Hopkins, whose work was recently featured at EUROPE'ART 2004 in Geneva, speaks strongly to new generations of Europeans.

Says Olga Korper, the owner of a Toronto art gallery representing such internationally emergent talents as installation artist Angela Grauerholz and photographer Lynne Cohen: "The fact that excellent contemporary art is made in Canada makes us a civilized country, a cultured nation."

A cultured nation—and one that has seized imaginations across the Atlantic. "Our films can be distinctly Canadian," says Haynes, "and also say something significant to Europeans." ♦

Read about Foreign Affairs Canada's Arts and Cultural Industries programming at www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca/arts.

Margaret Atwood

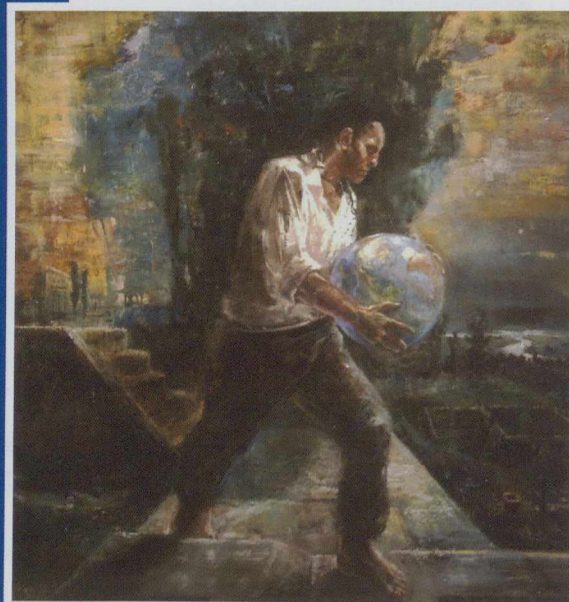


photo: Nigel Dickson

Cirque Éloize's *Nomade*

photo: courtesy of Cirque Éloize

painting: courtesy of Tom Hopkins



Tom Hopkins's *Delicate Balance*: Contemporary work speaks strongly to new generations of Europeans.