McMann’s publication skirts the strength of these artists’ contribution to Canadian visual culture.

A couple of further searches for fine artists whose contributions sit squarely within the Canadian art canon show McMann at her best. Neither James Hoch, a nineteenth-century watercolourist, nor Henry Nesbitt McEvoy, a turn-of-the century painter in oils, is well known, but both are recorded with useful biographical sources. Similarly, McMann’s entry on Robert Clow Todd, one of Canada’s earliest painters, directly refers to the unsurpassed texts of Robert Hubbard and Russell Harper. McMann also thoroughly documents Paraskeva Clark, whose paintings of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s are commanding increasing attention. Still, there are the odd lapses, including the surprising absence of an entry for the Toronto-based sculptor Kosso Eloul.

Finally, McMann’s Biographical Index of Artists in Canada, like any index, would be much more useful if it were available on line. A virtual database would allow a researcher to access McMann’s information in more ways than by the artist’s name and could accommodate regular updates to reflect an ever-expanding list of Canadian artists. (ANNA HUDSON)

Alan Blum. The Imaginative Structure of the City
McGill-Queen’s University Press. 330. $44.95

In many respects, Alan Blum’s The Imaginative Structure of the City can be read as a reprise of the conception of the modern city elaborated in the wake of Ferdinand Tönnies’s influential Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft (1887). In the sociological perspectives of Tönnies’s immediate successors, Max Weber and Georg Simmel, the city as an object of sociological investigation emerged at the interstices of processes of economic rationalization (Gesellschaft) and forms of customary association thought to at once pre-date and survive within those processes (Gemeinschaft). While both Weber and Simmel evinced a sober awareness of the dominant role assumed by economic rationality in the metropolitan context, both also followed Tönnies in insisting on the perdurance, within this context, of forms of symbolic exchange that elude that rationality.

In the second sentence of the book’s introduction, Blum directly invokes Weber’s sociology of the city as the source for his own conception of the city as engaged in a ‘struggle with its two-sided character as an organization ruled by its self-understanding as a division of labor and by its need and desire for communality.’ He then goes on in the book’s first chapter to suggest that one can discern an interpretive dilemma in Weber’s approach to the city as both a ‘marketplace’ and a ‘political-administrative unity.’ This dilemma, reminiscent of Martin Heidegger’s description of the
‘hermeneutical circle,’ does not arise from any difficulty in entering the interpretive enterprise. Rather, it arises from the fact of our having always already entered it, for the immemorial status of that entry militates against the possibility of its ever being fully absorbed by critical reflection. As Blum puts it: ‘The relationship between the same and the other [constitutive of the civic arena] is not first a relationship between the inquirer and the “external” world but a movement within inquiry itself... That is, Weber has some kind of knowledge of what the city is that he needs and desires to ground. Weber begins with his result (say, common-sense knowledge), and will end by seeking to recollect this beginning.’ The Imaginative Structure of the City is therefore as much a book about the grounds for social inquiry as it is one about the city as a possible object of such inquiry. Better, it is one in which the dilemmas associated with the former are imbricated in the antinomies associated with the latter.

But why should the city serve as the privileged locus for the dilemmas Blum associates with social inquiry? The answer lies in Blum’s conception of what a city is. For him the city is not in the first instance an aggregate of built form and attendant infrastructure, or a geographical territory animated by dense occupation and intensified economic activity, nor even a juridico-political corporation. Though Blum concedes that it is also all those things, the city is for him above all else the symbolic matrix for any negotiation of our collective self-understanding. In this negotiation, which Blum describes as ‘a free space of meaning,’ the singularity of our individual experiences plays an essential role, that of ensuring the link between commonsensical and critical understandings of the shared situation.

Blum’s modus operandi is therefore one that begins with phenomenological description of typical experiences, only then to situate the grounds for this typicality in mechanisms of symbolic exchange. ‘Nighttime’ and ‘The Scene,’ the book’s fifth and sixth chapters, are particularly successful applications of this method. Both capture dimensions of late metropolitan experience that, while everywhere palpable, elude any quantitative measure. What is more, they reveal the extent to which these dimensions of social experience are the objects of a process of collective negotiation that is only partly conscious, since the laws of symbolization that determine this negotiation also determine critical reflection on it.

If the merely partial character of this understanding marks a point of frustration for theoretical inquiry into the city, it also secures that ‘indeterminacy’ thanks to which alone, on Blum’s account, typical forms of urban experience remain available for renewal. As Blum puts it in the final sentences of his book: ‘The city is the place where the end of collective life is taken up as a question releasing experimentation and resistance... the city serves as a locus of collectivization for its civilization, attracting not only creative souls, but predators, automatons, and barbarians, that is, all who hope to “find a niche.”’ Blum’s The Imaginative Structure of the City therefore
implies complicity between the city dweller and the sociologist, for
the spirit of experimentation and resistance that animates the former is seen as
providing the foundation for those forms of critical inquiry practised by the
latter. (ANDREW PAYNE)

David Franklin. Treasures of the National Gallery of Canada
Yale University Press. 288. US $60.00

Treasures of the National Gallery of Canada is certainly the ‘handsomely
produced volume’ described on the inside of its dust jacket. The resplendent
cover image depicts one of the most important Canadian paintings in
the gallery’s collection, Lucius O’ Brien’s Sunrise on the Saguenay (1880),
which, in its shimmering luminosity, rivals Turner. Interestingly, the
painting is not shown in its entirety; rather, a detail is magnified and
overprinted with the book’s title – both practices beloved of graphic
designers but generally frowned upon in the museum world (and in theory
at the NGC). They’re believed to undermine the integrity of the art work –
the visual equivalent of altering a quotation’s original meaning.

The beautiful cover reproduction is matched by the large, indeed
lushious, images inside. It’s a great pleasure to reacquaint oneself with old
favourites from Bronzino’s Portrait of a Man (c. 1550–55) to Tom Thomson’s
The Jack Pine (1916–17) to Fernand Léger’s The Mechanic (1920). It’s at least
as exciting to discover previously little known pieces, Canadian F.M.
Knowles’s Are you ready, lads? (1891) or Samuel Palmer’s glorious Oak Trees,
Lullingstone Park (1828). Overall the reproductions are of excellent quality,
with a few exceptions – Corot’s The Bridge at Narni (1826), famous for its
precociously light palette, appears far too dark. Following the recent trend
that makes galleries as much the destination as the art they contain, Moshe
Safdie’s building is showcased at the outset in a series of gorgeous exterior
and interior shots. A standout among them is the frontispiece depicting the
rotunda ceiling. The kaleidoscopic patterns formed by the architecture and
triangular floating battens evoke the geometric abstract art of Islam,
beautiful, if surprisingly un-Canadian. Is this a conscious rival to the
lustrous neo-Byzantine mosaics of Toronto’s Royal Ontario Museum?

Following director Pierre Théberge’s preface outlining a succinct history
of the gallery, the catalogue proper is divided into seven discrete sections
of varying length: ‘Canadian Art to 1945’ (twenty-three entries); ‘Asian Art’
(three entries – a recent collecting priority?); ‘European Art to 1945’ (thirty-five entries); ‘Canadian and International Art since 1945’ (forty entries);
‘Inuit Art’ (five entries); ‘Photography’ (fifteen entries), and ‘Canadian
Museum of Contemporary Photography’ (five entries). Within each section
the works are presented chronologically across two pages, text on the left,
image on the right. They average four to five hundred words and follow a