Paraskeva Clark

Panya Clark Espinal

Paraskeva Clark, *Memories of Childhood: Public Bath*, 1944

In *Russian Bath*, Paraskeva Clark carries us up into the ethereal arches of a traditional Russian bathhouse, or *banya*, to look down on a scene of women bathing. Two tall, flaring columns splay dramatically upward and away from each other, flanked at their bases by women filling their buckets at water faucets. A row of four deeply chamfered windows allow airy light to pour into the busy room. Diminutive, generalized female figures flex and bend in a lively gestural dance. There is a perspectival disjuncture between the architecture and its inhabitants, easily missed in the alluring variety of the human interactions taking place below.

This watercolour sketch is the second of four *banya*-themed works made by my grandmother, Paraskeva Clark, over a protracted forty-year period. The series arises from her memories, depicting her young life in St. Petersburg at a time when regular visits to the communal bathhouse were of practical necessity for working-class families such as hers. Although daily life there involved many struggles, Paraskeva retained fond memories of these years after her 1931 move to Toronto, among them her recollections of going to the bathhouse with her mother. As is revealed in interviews conducted toward the end of her life, in her soul and mind St. Petersburg was the place she felt she fundamentally belonged. In revisiting this scene of social intimacy over the decades, she was both paying homage to a way of life that she had left behind and grappling with her longing for reconnection. Paraskeva left the city in 1923 and she never returned.

In the years to come, she sent packages and letters to her loved ones back home. Her mother had died before her departure, but her father continued to communicate with her until his death in 1939. During the Second World War, Paraskeva contributed in every way she could to aid her homeland, wishing most of all that she had been able to work alongside the women there, especially at the time of the Nazis' 1941 to 1944 Siege of Leningrad (the Soviets' name for St. Petersburg). Compassion for the Russian people was heightened among Canadians at this time, and Leningrad's liberation in 1944 was cause for celebration.

It was at this time that Paraskeva made *Memories of Childhood: Public Bath*, and it is the gentlest, most humorous, and most tenderly depicted of her *banya* works. In it she shifts to a more intimate, closer-to-ground-level vantage point, allowing us to exchange direct glances with two women in the foreground, and to more closely discern the interactions between the other figures. Here, we are privy to an intimate gathering of old and young, women and children, tending to themselves and to each other in a soothing atmosphere. A standing woman at centre stage cradles her baby in the crook of her right arm, wrangling her small daughter with her left. Resisting her mother's control, the girl cheekily stares at the buttocks of a woman bent forward to the right, who smiles pleasantly over her shoulder in our direction. This woman, we conjecture, could be Paraskeva herself.

Sadly, by the time the war was over, Paraskeva's connection with her Russian relatives—her brother, sister, and others—was completely lost. Letters sent in 1948 generated no response. Cold War tension between the USSR and the Western Allies created an atmosphere that only deepened the rupture between

Paraskeva Clark and her son Ben at their Lonsdale Road apartment, Toronto, 1933

Paraskeva's patriotism and her position within the capitalist establishment of Toronto as the wife of Philip Clark, a successful chartered accountant. Her garden and her family life became her focus, with three grandchildren arriving in the 1960s.

In 1965, around the time I was born, Paraskeva painted *Leningrad Memories: Public Bath*, her fourth and final *banya* painting. She was sixty-seven years old. This time, she retains the composition of the 1944 version but portrays the scene in oil and on a larger scale. The colour scheme is reminiscent of the 1936 watercolour—pink, fleshy figures stand out against a grey-blue room. The figures, however, are rendered with a raw impatience that gives the scene an edgier feel. The young girl looks up at her mother, portraying a more wholesome but less humorous dynamic. To the right, Paraskeva leans forward, her foot up on a wooden bench. Light pouring in the window now slices through the steamy atmosphere, crossing Paraskeva's torso and framing her upper body in a trapezoidal corner. She is still smiling but her awareness seems more attuned to us than to her busy companions.

This is the version of the Russian bath that I have come to live with. The work was never exhibited while Paraskeva was alive. Around 1968, she turned the painting over to Anne Proulx, a friend and supporter who acted as her ad hoc art dealer. When the painting did not sell, Proulx bought it from Paraskeva and added it to her personal collection. After Proulx's death, her son dispersed parts of the collection. In 1998, my husband presented the painting to me as a gift. *Leningrad Memories: Public Bath* had found its way back home, and to those who remember the artist in the fullness and complexity of her lived reality.

Panya Clark Espinal is a Toronto-based artist. She recently completed an MA in Criticism and Curatorial Practice at the Ontario College of Art and Design University, Toronto. Her work has been exhibited in solo and group exhibitions across Canada and internationally, showing at the Vancouver Art Gallery; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto; and the Canadian embassy in Tokyo.