

# Real Personality Captured

By JOAN FORSEY

For those interested in Canadian art and history, there has already been one exciting discovery this year — the revelation of the real portrait of Marguerite Bourgeoys, foundress of the Order of the Congregation of Notre Dame.

A painting of Mother Bourgeoys, long thought to be authentic, disappeared under the hands of an artist-restorer to reveal the real portrait, painted in 1700 by Pierre LeBer.

The same thing now promises to be done for the personality of Marguerite Bourgeoys, Montreal's first school-teacher, the foundress of the first secular (i.e., unclaustrated) sisterhood on the North American continent, and a woman declared blessed in 1950, and now in the process of canonization.

"Her biographers, including those of the 19th century, don't, I feel, succeed in capturing her personality," says Sister Saint Miriam of the Temple, who is writing a biography of the foundress and has been engaged in research for the past eight years.

What happened to her portrait has also happened to her personality, Sister Saint Mi-

riam believes. "I'm trying to recreate an image that has been distorted, or certainly dimmed, with time," she said in an interview.

Sister Saint Miriam, an English teacher at Marianopolis College, wrote a play about Marguerite Bourgeoys a number of years ago, called "The Constant Heart." It has been produced in most places where the Congregation of Notre Dame is established.

## History Differed

While writing it, she recalls, she "had the feeling that the Marguerite Bourgeoys who existed was far different from the person given us by her biographers. I tried to give the play along the lines of the person she must have been in order to do the things she did." That Marguerite Bourgeoys was a compassionate

person had been obscured by her biographers; the foundress of the order had become almost dehumanized over the years.

So had the real Marguerite Bourgeoys become lost in the portrait. The original portrait had been painted after her death at the age of 80. The portrait which has been accepted as the work of Pierre LeBer for almost a century was that of a much younger woman, prettified to agree with the conceptions of later artists.

Doubts on its authenticity, shared by those doing research into the period in which Mother Bourgeoys lived in Old Ville-Marie (1653-1700), led the Order to embark on an investigation.

The painting was brought to New York last autumn to be examined by Edward O. Kor-

any, an artist-restorer who has done some of the largest and most demanding restoration projects in the United States. X-rays confirmed that the original had been tampered with. This spring, after countless layers of paint and white lead had been removed, the original work was revealed.

## Personality Hidden

Much to Sister Saint Miriam's surprise, Mr. Korany chose the word "compassionate" to describe the face of the foundress that had so long been hidden. It was the word that Sister Saint Miriam earlier had chosen to describe the personality which had been hidden for an equally long time.

"It has been a very exciting year," says Sister Saint Miriam, "for there has been not only the discovery of the original portrait, but also there have been at least six major discoveries that tell more about the life of Marguerite Bourgeoys."

Sister Saint Miriam's research, apart from that in Montreal, Ottawa and Quebec City, has taken her to Troyes, France, birthplace of Marguerite Bourgeoys, to Paris, and to Nantes, from where Marguerite Bourgeoys and colonists set out for Canada in 1633.

An archivist in Troyes has made about six major discoveries pertaining to the life of the foundress, Sister Saint Miriam says. These include documents which give a new insight into the founding of the Montreal community, inventories of property, etc.

To capture the personality of the foundress is one of Sister Saint Miriam's aims in writing the biography. Another is to build up the Order's archives, which were destroyed by fire in 1883. Some work had been done on restoration of the archives, but very little because means of reproduction of documents were limited at the time.

Another aim is to write a biography in which she uses nothing that is not warranted by document or "tested tradition." "If I were just to recreate an image I might do it imaginatively," she explains, "but I want it to be factual."

In her research Sister Saint Miriam has managed to recover photostatic copies of most of the documents that were burnt in the 1883 fire. All these documents will be placed later in the Marguerite Bourgeoys Centre at the Mother House (Atwater and Sherbrooke) and will be available to those wishing to do research either on Marguerite Bourgeoys or the times in which she lived.



The restored portrait of Marguerite Bourgeoys, foundress of the Order of the Congregation of Notre Dame, left, painted by Pierre LeBer in 1700. At right,

the portrait in the process of restoration, in which LeBer's work of left emerges from layers of paint and white lead applied by later artists.