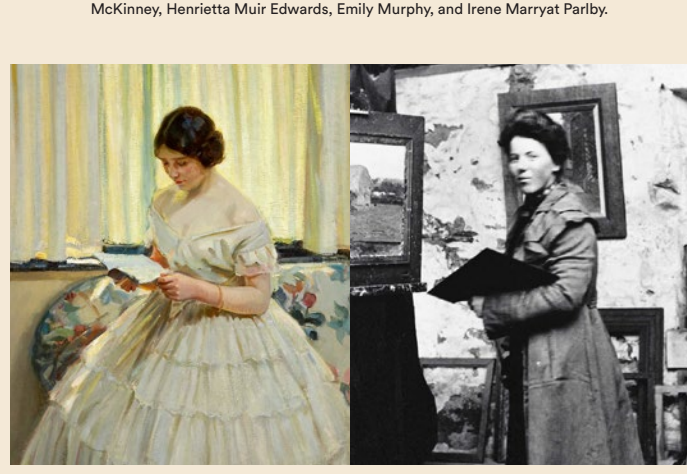


HELEN MCNICOLL'S
RADICAL LIGHT

*Suffragette sister and famed Canadian Impressionist,
the Montreal-born painter's art offers an insightful commentary
on early twentieth-century women*

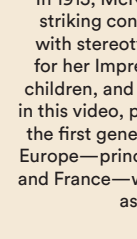


Newspaper clipping of the "Famous Five." From left to right: Nellie McClung, Louise Crummy McKinney, Henrietta Muir Edwards, Emily Murphy, and Irene Marryat Parby.



Helen McNicoll, *The Victorian Dress*, c.1914, Art Gallery of Hamilton

Photograph of Helen McNicoll in her studio at St. Ives, c.1906

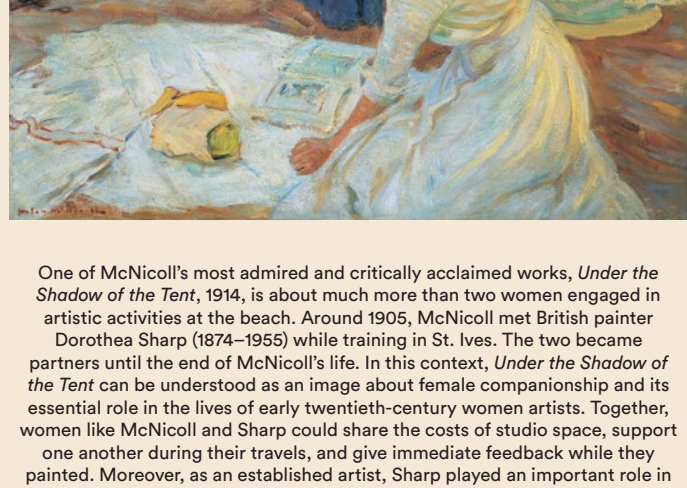


Yesterday marked the 93-year anniversary of the start of the fight for women to legally be recognized as persons when, on August 27, 1927, the "Famous Five" suffragists (Nellie McClung, Emily Murphy, Irene Marryat Parby, Louise Crummy McKinney, and Henrietta Muir Edwards) petitioned the Supreme Court. Their cause, which began years earlier, intersects with the career of one of Canada's most notable female artists: Helen McNicoll (1879–1915), a trailblazer who worked at a critical moment in the history of women's rights.

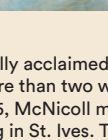
McNicoll's works look sunny and charming, a fact that often overshadows their call for social justice and a more progressive world. With a salute to the Famous Five and all pioneering women, we're sharing highlights from [Helen McNicoll: Life & Work](#) by Samantha Burton.

Sara Angel
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

A STRIKING CONTRAST



ACI ART TALKS



ACI author
SAMANTHA BURTON
on Canadian artist

HELEN
MCNICOLL

In 1915, McNicoll's obituary in *Saturday Night* remarked that she "afforded a striking contrast to the prevailing type of feminine painter." Uncomfortable with stereotypically "ladylike" or "domestic" subjects, McNicoll is esteemed for her Impressionist representations of rural landscapes, intimate scenes of children, and modern female figures. However, as Samantha Burton points out in this video, paintings by McNicoll beg to be interpreted in a fresh light. Part of the first generation of Canadian artists to study abroad, McNicoll remained in Europe—principally England (at the height of the British suffragette movement) and France—where she was as equally engaged in techniques of Impressionism as issues of female independence, until her early death.

[Watch Here](#)

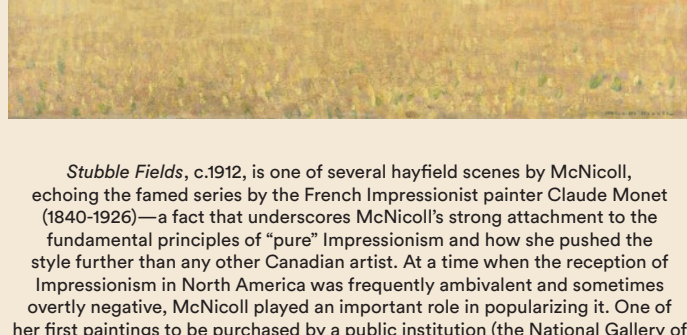
UNDER THE SHADOW OF THE TENT



One of McNicoll's most admired and critically acclaimed works, *Under the Shadow of the Tent*, 1914, is about much more than two women engaged in artistic activities at the beach. Around 1905, McNicoll met British painter Dorothea Sharp (1874–1955) while training in St. Ives. The two became partners until the end of McNicoll's life. In this context, *Under the Shadow of the Tent* can be understood as an image about female companionship and its essential role in the lives of early twentieth-century women artists. Together, women like McNicoll and Sharp could share the costs of studio space, support one another during their travels, and give immediate feedback while they painted. Moreover, as an established artist, Sharp played an important role in encouraging McNicoll to exhibit her work publicly.

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THE CHINTZ SOFA



At first glance *The Chintz Sofa* looks like a quiet scene of bourgeois domestic leisure—until we identify the sitter and what is in her hands. The painting is a depiction of McNicoll's fellow artist and lifelong companion Dorothea Sharp. In their shared bright and spacious studio space Sharp works on a piece of memorabilia for the women's rights movement. The date of the painting is 1913, when the English suffrage campaign was at the height of its militant phase. In the art world too, women fought for equal access and recognition. At the turn of the century, an artist's studio variously functioned as a space for artistic production, exhibitions, and networking—it was a space of professional standing.

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STUBBLE FIELDS



Stubble Fields, c.1912, is one of several hayfield scenes by McNicoll, echoing the famed series by the French Impressionist painter Claude Monet (1840–1926)—a fact that underscores McNicoll's strong attachment to the fundamental principles of "pure" Impressionism and how she pushed the style further than any other Canadian artist. At a time when the reception of Impressionism in North America was frequently ambivalent and sometimes overtly negative, McNicoll played an important role in popularizing it. One of her first paintings to be purchased by a public institution (the National Gallery of Canada), *Stubble Fields* affirms that McNicoll deserves to be seen as a key player in the history of Canadian art and as an important participant in a wider network of transnational artistic exchange in the early twentieth century.

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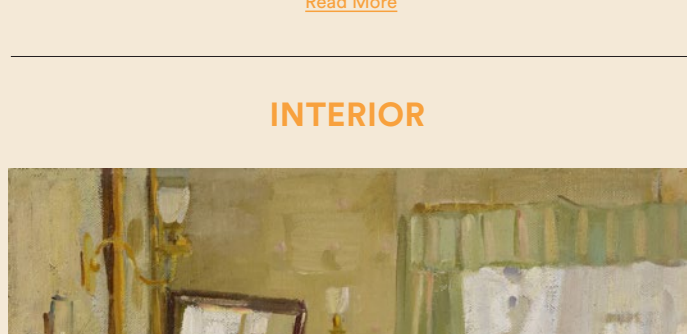
THE LITTLE WORKER



The sunny field of *The Little Worker*, c.1907, suggests that the painting is a bucolic scene of youth. In fact, McNicoll was keenly aware of child labour and that not all girls and boys had equal freedom. In this unsentimental painting a young girl wearing heavy shoes carefully carries a metal pail down a grassy hill with full attention to her work, her arm stretched outward to balance herself. Concentrating on the task at hand, she solemnly casts her gaze downward, away from the bright sun and her vibrant surroundings. Although McNicoll also painted scenes of white, middle- and upper-class children playing in the sun, this is not one of them. Rather, it is part of a series of girls and young women hard at work—a reflection of the imbalanced society in which the painter lived.

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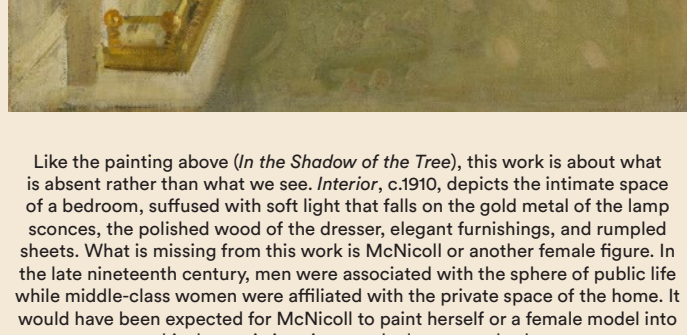
IN THE SHADOW OF THE TREE



The sitter in this work displays a lack of touch—her hand rests on the side of the carriage, not engaged with the infant—making *In the Shadow of the Tree*, c.1914, a painting that sits in opposition to images of mothers and children reared by McNicoll's contemporaries. Rather than focusing her exclusive attention on the child, this mother (or caregiver) reads a book, lost in her own world as the baby sleeps. Scholars have argued that reading and sewing in the nineteenth century were potentially subversive acts for women confined to the private sphere: they could be viewed as exercises of imagination and fantasy, escapes from the drudgery of housework and child-rearing. This aspect of the painting—a woman focusing on her own inner world—is reminiscent of Dutch Golden Age works by Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675), in which moral virtue is conferred on women pictured alone.

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INTERIOR



Like the painting above (*In the Shadow of the Tree*), this work is about what is absent rather than what we see. *Interior*, c.1912, depicts the intimate space of a bedroom, suffused with soft light that falls on the gold metal of the lamp sconces, the polished wood of the dresser, elegant furnishings, and rumpled sheets. This is missing from this work is McNicoll or another female figure. In the late nineteenth century, men were associated with the sphere of public life while middle-class women were affiliated with the private space of the home. It would have been expected for McNicoll to paint herself or a female model into this domestic interior, yet she leaves out both.

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THE VICTORIAN DRESS



Although the model's dress in this painting is a beautiful one, McNicoll presents her subject in clothes from another era. Large full skirts became popular following the invention of the cage crinoline in the 1850s—and weren't worn when this work was painted in 1914. *The Victorian Dress* has been interpreted as a deliberate critique of the heavy expectations associated with the sartorial expression of femininity, especially given the mirror, with its historical connotations of vanity, in the background. As Samantha Burton writes, "McNicoll may be suggesting that femininity is a performance, an identity you 'put on,' just like a costume."

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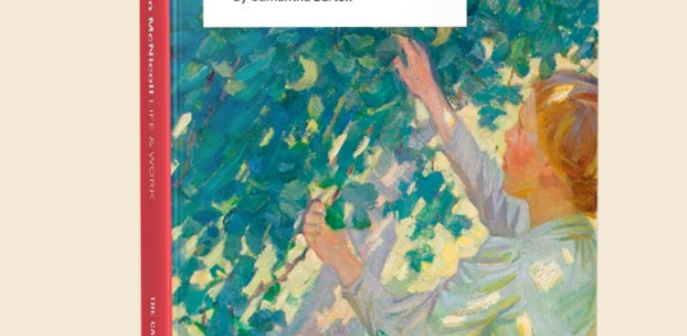
MARKETPLACE



Marketplace, 1910, vividly captures the sensations of a fall day at a rural market in Brittany, France. The scene is vibrant and jovial until one sees that in the background on the left, modest sellers display far fewer goods than those standing in stalls. A French shop sign above them reads "Eclairage Chauffage," meaning "lighting, heating." Through this text, McNicoll emphasizes a class divide and the heat of the sun on those who go about their work, sitting at a distance from the bustle of the painting's central focus. The crowd in *Marketplace* makes this work different from the majority of McNicoll's paintings, which seldom have more than two figures and rarely depict urban subjects.

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Helen McNicoll: Life & Work by Samantha Burton is also available in a print book format. Books can be purchased online at the link below or through your local bookstore.

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