



# HELEN MCNICOLL

Life & Work

by Samantha Burton

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# BIOGRAPHY

One of the most notable female artists in Canada, Helen McNicoll (1879–1915) achieved considerable international success during her decade-long career. Deaf from the age of two, McNicoll was esteemed for her sunny Impressionist representations of rural landscapes, intimate child subjects, and modern female figures. She played an important role in popularizing Impressionism in Canada at a time when it was still relatively unknown. Before her early death, she was elected to the Royal Society of British Artists in 1913 and the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts in 1914.

### EARLY PRIVILEGES AND CHALLENGES

Helen Galloway McNicoll skilfully turned her wealth and privilege to her advantage and established herself as a professional artist at a time when this choice was unusual for women. She was born on December 14, 1879, the first child of David McNicoll and Emily Pashley. Her parents, immigrants from Britain, lived briefly in Toronto, where Helen was born, but soon moved to Montreal. There Helen was joined by six siblings—three sisters (Ada, Dollie, and May) and then three brothers (Alex, Ron, and Charles). Although documentation of her life is scarce, her few available letters and sketches suggest that the McNicoll family was close.<sup>1</sup>

The McNicolls belonged to Montreal's Anglophone Protestant elite. Having worked in the railway industry in Scotland and England, David McNicoll joined the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) in the booming 1880s, rising to be vice-president and director by 1906. His work brought his artist daughter into close contact with a circle of prominent families of mainly Scottish descent who lived in grand mansions in the Golden Square Mile at the foot of Mount Royal. This group of industrialists controlled most of Canada's still-young business world: their social and professional network formed the financial foundation of the city in the decades around the turn of the century.

The McNicoll family lived in Westmount in a large house they christened Braeleigh. The home was designed by Edward and William S. Maxwell, known for their work on two prominent Quebec buildings: the Château Frontenac in Quebec City and the Art Association of Montreal building on Sherbrooke Street (now the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts).

The family's position in the community helped McNicoll's career in a number of ways, not least by allowing her to paint freely without worrying about supporting herself by making sales or teaching students. Moreover, her family provided connections to the most prominent art collectors in Montreal at the time—in particular, to William Van Horne (1843–1915), then president of the CPR. The Square Mile set controlled the nascent commercial art world in anglophone Montreal as tightly as it did the business world; francophone art, in contrast, was largely tied to church patronage.

Despite these advantages, McNicoll faced challenges. At the age of two she caught scarlet fever and experienced severe hearing loss. Although she was not listed as deaf in the 1901 census, she lip read and relied on friends and family to help her navigate the social side of the art world, such as networking at exhibitions. She did not attend school but was privately tutored at home.

Sketches she made of students at the Mackay Institution for Protestant Deaf-Mutes (known as the "Oral School") dating from 1899 suggest that McNicoll must have participated in the school's programs or classes in some capacity, though she is not listed in official school records. Kristina Huneault argues that McNicoll's experience at the school would have exposed her to current



Photograph of Helen McNicoll in her studio at St. Ives, c. 1906, photographer unknown, Helen McNicoll artist file, The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa.

debates around deaf culture in North America. Attitudes toward the deaf and understanding of how best to manage disability were changing drastically: lip reading, for example, was newly promoted over sign language as a more effective form of communication and a means of integrating people with hearing loss into mainstream society.<sup>2</sup>



Helen McNicoll, *On the Cliffs*, 1913, oil on canvas, 50.9 x 61 cm, private collection.

Although never mentioned in contemporary reviews of her work, McNicoll's deafness must have influenced her artistic career on many levels, from her decision to study in London rather than Paris, given the language barrier, to the "quiet" and "detached" approach in her art. Huneault and Natalie Luckyj note the sense of distance between the artist and her subjects and also among the subjects in McNicoll's paintings. In works such as *On the Cliffs*, 1913, the figures, absorbed in their inner worlds, do not acknowledge one another, nor do they reciprocate the viewer's gaze.<sup>3</sup>

## MONTREAL BEGINNINGS

Helen McNicoll began her artistic career in Montreal. In the decades before the First World War, art was flourishing in the city, encouraged by better transportation and communication that allowed artists to train and exhibit abroad and become familiar with European trends. The Art Association of Montreal (AAM), founded in 1860, organized its first annual exhibition in 1880 and began offering classes to local artists. By the turn of the century, the market for Canadian art was dominated by a few commercial galleries and by the AAM spring and fall exhibitions.



Photograph of the Art Association of Montreal sculpture room showing plaster copies of antique statues such as the Venus de Milo, the Apollo Belvedere, and the Laocoön group, which students were asked to draw, published in *The Standard*, November 18, 1905, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts archives.

Presumably McNicoll's first drawing lessons were at home: her father sketched during his railway travels, while her mother painted china and wrote poetry. McNicoll began her formal art education at the AAM school, where she was awarded a scholarship for her drawings of plaster casts in 1899. The AAM was at the forefront of arts education in Canada at the turn of the twentieth century. Students followed the academic curriculum long established by prestigious European schools. They learned to draw from reproductions of Old Master paintings and plaster-cast copies of antique sculptures before they moved on to work with nude models. McNicoll's charcoal and pencil *Academy*, 1899-1900, demonstrates the kind of instruction she received in these early years, emphasizing careful attention to the modelling of musculature and a subtle approach to light and shade. The AAM adopted a progressive approach to art education by giving female students equal opportunity to draw directly from the nude.

McNicoll studied with William Brymner (1855-1925) during her time at the AAM. As one of the first Canadian artists to study in Paris, between 1878 and 1880, Brymner provided an important model for ambitious young artists. He returned to Canada full of enthusiasm for the latest trends in French art—including *plein air* Naturalism and Impressionism. As the director of the AAM school for more than three decades, Brymner wielded enormous influence over at least two generations of Canadian artists. He encouraged women students to pursue professional careers, and his impact on McNicoll, as well as many artists associated with the later Beaver Hall Group, was critical.



Helen McNicoll, *Buttercups*, c. 1910, oil on canvas, 40.7 x 46.1 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.



William Brymner, *A Wreath of Flowers*, 1884, oil on canvas, 122.5 x 142.7 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Brymner encouraged his students to travel to Europe for further education. McNicoll followed that advice, and by 1906 she had moved well beyond her teacher's relatively traditional approach. She painted rural landscape and genre subjects, but developed a fresh, bright style based on the principles of classic French Impressionism that was ultimately completely her own. Brymner's *A Wreath of Flowers*, 1884, for example, is a far more restrained image of children in a field of wildflowers than McNicoll's surprisingly modern *Buttercups*, c. 1910.

### A EUROPEAN EDUCATION

Although the Art Association of Montreal was the best in Canada, European art schools still held more prestige, and most young aspiring professional Canadian artists went to Paris or London for further study and experience. McNicoll followed suit, moving to London in 1902. She enrolled at the Slade School of Fine Art, a progressive institution renowned for its equal treatment of women students. The turn of the twentieth century was an exciting time for women artists, as opportunities for exhibition and education expanded considerably following a protracted battle by female artists for equal access to the art world. As early as 1883, artist Charlotte J. Weeks had celebrated the Slade



Photograph of students at the Slade School, June 23, 1905, photographer unknown, Slade Archive Project, Slade School of Fine Art, University College London.

for welcoming men and women students "on precisely the same terms, and giving to both sexes fair and equal opportunities."<sup>4</sup> As such, the school was a popular destination for Canadian women: McNicoll's contemporaries Sophie Pemberton (1869–1959), Sydney Strickland Tully (1860–1911), and Dorothy Stevens (1888–1966) all studied there.

London was a thriving art centre, and McNicoll would have encountered work there that was far more progressive than anything in Canada. Her teachers at the Slade were among the most vocal supporters of modernism in England. With their background in the avant-garde New English Art Club, Henry Tonks (1862–1937), Fred Brown (1851–1941), and Philip Wilson Steer (1860–1942) favoured subjects from modern life and careful attention to atmosphere and light. McNicoll's Slade training can perhaps be glimpsed in her haunting portrait *The Brown Hat*, c. 1906, where a young woman, dressed in dark tones, stares boldly at the viewer in a way that is reminiscent of portraits by the well-regarded British artist Gwen John (1876–1939), a near-contemporary Slade student.

McNicoll left the school with first-class honours after two years and moved on to St. Ives, in the remote southwest region of Cornwall, to attend the Cornish School of Landscape and Sea Painting. When she arrived in 1905, rural and seaside artists' colonies were popular. Thousands of artists fled urban centres, particularly during the summer, to paint *en plein air* in villages across Europe and North America. After the railway connected St. Ives to the rest of Britain in 1877, the town exploded in popularity among artist-tourists coming from countries around the world. Along with myriad quaint subjects to paint, there was the St. Ives Arts Club, a site for socializing and arts criticism that McNicoll attended on at least one occasion. For women artists, rural artists' colonies offered a lifestyle that balanced ladylike respectability and rebellious bohemianism. Outside the strict social norms of London or Montreal, women artists seem to have found more opportunity to participate in the informal networks of the modern art world.



Helen McNicoll, *The Brown Hat*, c. 1906, oil on canvas, 53.5 x 43.5 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. This portrait is unusual for McNicoll in its dark palette and the direct gaze of its sitter.

Although the town newspaper remarked disparagingly that the easels of amateur female painters in St. Ives were “like shells” covering the beach,<sup>5</sup> McNicoll went to the town to work seriously. Her school, founded by Swedish-British artist Julius Olsson (1864–1942) in 1896, was advertised as catering to a clientele of “students adopting painting as a profession.”<sup>6</sup> The studios were located in a converted fish loft overlooking Porthmeor Beach. Photographs of McNicoll at work in St. Ives show her equally rough private studio. McNicoll’s fellow alumna Emily Carr (1871–1945) described Olsson as a harsh teacher and critic: he required students to work outdoors in nearly all weather, demanded they carry heavy equipment, and regularly reduced them to tears with his critiques.

Carr preferred Olsson’s assistant, the British painter Algernon Talmage (1871–1939).<sup>7</sup> McNicoll also formed a close relationship with Talmage; her letters reveal that she admired his work and teaching style and that, for her birthday, he gave her a painting of “yellow sunlight” for much less than its asking price—a gift that caused a stir among her colleagues.<sup>8</sup> Carr recalled that Talmage had encouraged her to find “the sunshine too in the shadows,” a piece of advice that remained with her for the rest of her long career.<sup>9</sup> He must have encouraged McNicoll to look for light and sunshine too. After her time in St. Ives, her work took a sharp turn toward light-filled, airy canvases. Throughout her career, reviewers consistently praised the sunny quality of her paintings.

While in St. Ives, McNicoll met British painter Dorothea Sharp (1874–1955), with whom she would remain close until the end of her life. Sharp was already an established artist: she had studied in London and Paris and exhibited at the Royal Academy of Arts and the Paris Salon, and was a member of the Society of Women Artists. McNicoll and Sharp—“Nellie” and “Dolly” to each other—continued to travel, live, and work together until McNicoll’s early death in 1915.

Close relationships between professional women were common in this period, allowing unmarried women to pursue an independent public life with some measure of respectability. For McNicoll, who must have encountered extra obstacles in public due to her hearing loss, a companion would have been especially important. She was grateful for Sharp’s skill in negotiating with models—particularly children, as she enticed them to pose. As they painted together, these two artists frequently produced comparable subjects in similar styles (as in McNicoll’s *Girl with Parasol*, c. 1913, and Sharp’s *Cornfield in Summertime*, n.d.), and they also modelled for each other (for example, Sharp in McNicoll’s *The Chintz Sofa*, c. 1913). Reviewers commented on this likeness at times, occasionally finding in favour of one painter or the other.



Photograph of Helen McNicoll in her studio at St. Ives, c. 1906, photographer unknown, Helen McNicoll artist file, The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa.



LEFT: Helen McNicoll, *Girl with Parasol*, c. 1913, oil on canvas, 40.6 x 45.7 cm, private collection, Vancouver. RIGHT: Dorothea Sharp, *Cornfield in Summertime*, n.d., oil on canvas, 76 x 91.5 cm, private collection. This is one of many instances in which McNicoll and Sharp tackled the same subject. In some cases, the works are so similar that they have been misattributed by critics to one or the other artist.

## LONDON AND BEYOND

McNicoll led a cosmopolitan life, and in so doing played an important role in the spread of Impressionism from Europe to Canada. She maintained a studio in London from 1908 until her death, using the city as her home base while she travelled throughout England and the continent, usually accompanied by Dorothea Sharp and often by a sister or cousin as well. She made trips to a number of rural artists' colonies in France and England. In one 1913 letter to her father from Runswick Bay, in Yorkshire, McNicoll writes of the unexpected amenities offered by this itinerant lifestyle, noting that their rented rooms at the baker's home meant they were eating "delicious bread and cake."<sup>10</sup> She also mentions that this remote village was something of an artistic hub for Canadians abroad; the family she stayed with was acquainted with her old teacher William Brymner.

McNicoll spent considerable time in France. Although there is some evidence that she worked in Paris briefly—Canadian exhibition reviews from 1909 note that she sent her entries for the annual exhibition season from there—details of this period of her life remain scarce. She opened a studio in Grez-sur-Loing, an artists' colony south of Paris where British, American, and Scandinavian artists congregated. She also worked frequently in Normandy and Brittany, where she painted warm-toned market scenes such as *Market Cart in Brittany*, c. 1910, and *Marketplace*, 1910. Other pictures, including the artist's brilliantly coloured *Footbridge in Venice*, c. 1910, reference trips to Belgium, the Mediterranean, and Italy.



LEFT: Helen McNicoll, *Market Cart in Brittany*, c. 1910, oil on canvas, 61 x 51.3 cm, The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa. RIGHT: Helen McNicoll, *Footbridge in Venice*, c. 1910, oil on canvas, 47 x 41.9 cm, private collection

This extensive travel must have put McNicoll in direct contact with the innovative artistic styles that percolated in these communities—particularly Impressionism. Thirty years past its explosion onto the Paris art scene, the movement had lost much of its revolutionary charge. Its continued popularity throughout Europe was largely due to the influence of artists circulating throughout rural artists' colonies, spreading the movement far and wide. McNicoll was one of the first Canadian painters to achieve success working in this style, seen in her early effort *Landscape with Cows*, c. 1907. By continuing to send her overseas work to exhibitions in Canada, she played an important role in further extending the movement's reach in this country.



Helen McNicoll, *Landscape with Cows*, c. 1907, oil on canvas, 90.5 x 71.1 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. This painting shows a number of the hallmarks of Impressionist style, including the characteristic divided brushstrokes.

**PROFESSIONAL SUCCESS**

Although she would never return to Canada permanently and lived abroad for the remainder of her life, McNicoll made annual trips to Montreal and kept a studio there for several years. It was in Canada that she first saw professional success. In 1906, she made her debut with six paintings at the annual exhibition of the Art Association of Montreal (AAM); in the same year, she also exhibited with the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts (RCA) and the Ontario Society of Artists (OSA).



Helen McNicoll, *Moonlight*, c. 1905, oil on canvas, 71.1 x 83.8 cm, Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton.

Charles Gill, a critic for the Montreal paper *Le Canada*, mentioned her contributions to the AAM show: "Mlle H.G. McNicoll a du talent; ses six envois en attestent."<sup>11</sup> He selected *In the Sun*, date and location unknown, as particularly worthy of note—the first reviewer to bring special attention to McNicoll's sunny canvases. The following year other critics praised her fresh technique and treatment of light. One writer for the *Montreal Standard* singled out *The Little Worker*, c. 1907, at the RCA exhibition, stating that "Miss McNicoll has made great strides since last year, and is now being spoken of as an artist who will undoubtedly come to the front very soon."<sup>12</sup>

The reviewer was prescient: in 1908 McNicoll was awarded the AAM's inaugural Jessie Dow Prize for her canvas *September Evening*, 1908. The \$200 prize, which she shared with fellow Montrealer W.H. Clapp (1879-1954), also a former Brymner student, was given for the "most meritorious oil painting by a Canadian artist." Exhibited alongside two rural child subjects, *The Farmyard*, c. 1908, and *Fishing*, c. 1907, McNicoll's work received a prominent place in the exhibition and enthusiastic notice in the press. A critic for the *Montreal Gazette* said that the competition had been fierce, mentioning that "Miss McNicoll's art has been deepening and broadening during the past few years and her four canvases in this year's exhibition aroused discussion and recognition from the first."<sup>13</sup> The artist would continue to receive praise for landscape and rural subjects, such as *Moonlight*, c. 1905, throughout her career.



Helen McNicoll, *September Evening*, 1908, oil on canvas, 71.8 x 62.2 cm, private collection, Toronto.

By the end of the decade, McNicoll was consistently recognized in Canada as adopting an advanced Impressionist technique; her treatment of light and air and her bold use of colour were frequently praised by critics, and her canvases hung alongside those of other Canadian practitioners of the style, including Clapp, Clarence Gagnon (1881-1942), and Marc-Aurèle de Foy Suzor-Coté (1869-1937). She saw further professional success when *A September Morning*, date and location unknown, was purchased by her father's friend and colleague William Van Horne from the 1909 AAM Spring Exhibition. In 1914, the RCA elected her as an associate member: the highest level a woman could achieve at the time. In addition, the Women's Art Society of Montreal selected *Under the Shadow of the Tent*, 1914, for its annual prize recognizing the best painting by a Canadian woman.

McNicoll's career also blossomed in the competitive British art world. In London she participated in the activities of the Society of Women Artists, where Dorothea Sharp was vice-president. In 1913, she was elected as an associate member of the Royal Society of British Artists (RBA)—a prominent alternative to the prestigious but conservative Royal Academy of Arts in London. Like so many of the institutions with which McNicoll was involved, it was notable for its progressive treatment of women. From the society's

founding in 1824, women were included as associate members and gained full membership privileges in 1902. Around the time of her RBA election, McNicoll increasingly turned her attention to close studies of modern female figures, as seen in *White Sunshade #2*, c. 1912, *The Victorian Dress*, 1914, and *The Chintz Sofa*, c. 1913.



Helen McNicoll, *White Sunshade #2*, c. 1912, oil on canvas, 99.5 x 81.9 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

McNicoll's three contributions to the spring RBA show in the year she was elected, including *Sunny September*, 1913, were noted with praise in London. McNicoll told her father that, of the eight new members, only she and one other were "unknowns." She added that her election had been contested because of the dangerously avant-garde quality of her art: "It was the older members who didn't like my things, one old man said to Dolly, 'If that picture is right then the National Gallery is all wrong.' One nice man said to D., 'It will be a bitter pill for some now that your friend is elected.' I must send some of my older ones there I guess."<sup>14</sup> In Canada, meanwhile, her election was the occasion for national pride: one reviewer for the *Montreal Daily Star* wrote: "Considering there have been only eight elections this year, it is particularly gratifying to Canadians that Miss McNicoll should be one of the chosen."<sup>15</sup> The article was accompanied by photographs of the artist and her studio in London. Even as she helped to increase the visibility of Impressionism in Canada through her transnational career, she also helped to elevate the status of Canadian art and artists abroad through her participation in the British art scene.



Helen McNicoll, *The Farmyard*, c. 1908, oil on canvas, 71 x 85.5 cm, New Brunswick Museum, Saint John. McNicoll donated this painting to the Canadian Patriotic Fund to raise funds for the war effort; it was purchased by the Saint John Art Club in 1915.

There is no evidence that McNicoll tried to sell her work through the private commercial galleries and dealers that dominated the Montreal art market in this period. Possibly, as a woman from a wealthy family, she had the freedom to experiment with advanced styles like Impressionism, which remained controversial in Canada. Two of her works would enter public institutions during her lifetime: *Stubble Fields*, c. 1912, was purchased by the National Gallery of Canada, while *The Farmyard*, c. 1908, was sold to the Saint John Art Club. However, the catalogue for her 1925 memorial exhibition at the Art Association of Montreal shows that many of her works found homes in the collections of Montreal's elite Square Mile set.

### AN EARLY DEATH

McNicoll was in France with Dorothea Sharp, working at Saint Valery-sur-Somme, when the First World War broke out. Her letters to her father excitedly describe the mobilization of the troops, the lack of trustworthy news, and the camaraderie of locals and foreigners. Although she wrote that they "would rather be here than anywhere," the Canadian Pacific Railway would not risk the vice-president's daughter being trapped on the Continent and arranged through its European manager and the French ambassador in London for McNicoll and Sharp to be sent home. McNicoll chronicled her journey through roadblocks and passport checks and mourned her abandoned luggage, talking about rumours of German invasion—"some apparently of the wildest nature."<sup>16</sup> By the time she completed the letter in London, she was already planning another painting trip—this time to Wales.

In 1915 McNicoll's career was suddenly cut short when she developed complications from diabetes and died, in Swanage, England, at the age of thirty-five. By then she had amassed an impressive exhibition record of more than seventy works in both Canada and Britain. Several reviews of the 1915 exhibition season in Canada mentioned her death, mourning the loss of a promising artist. *Saturday Night* stated that "none who saw her recent works can doubt that had she been spared she would have added materially to her own laurels and the reputation abroad of Canadian art."<sup>17</sup>

Critical notice of her work continued after her death into the 1920s: in one 1922 review of the Art Association of Montreal's Spring Exhibition, the writer paired McNicoll with Tom Thomson (1877–1917), whose work had also been included posthumously: "These examples add much to the interest of the exhibition, but ... leave one with a pang of regret that these painters should have passed on."<sup>18</sup> In 1925, the AAM organized a memorial exhibition of 150 of her paintings, celebrating a prolific career cut short in its prime.



Photograph of Helen McNicoll adjusting model's hair, n.d., photographer likely Dorothea Sharp, Helen McNicoll artist file, The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa. Difficult conditions could not deter McNicoll from her work; the back of this photograph reads: "It's so hot that I've put a handkerchief round my neck. It's about 90 in the shade."



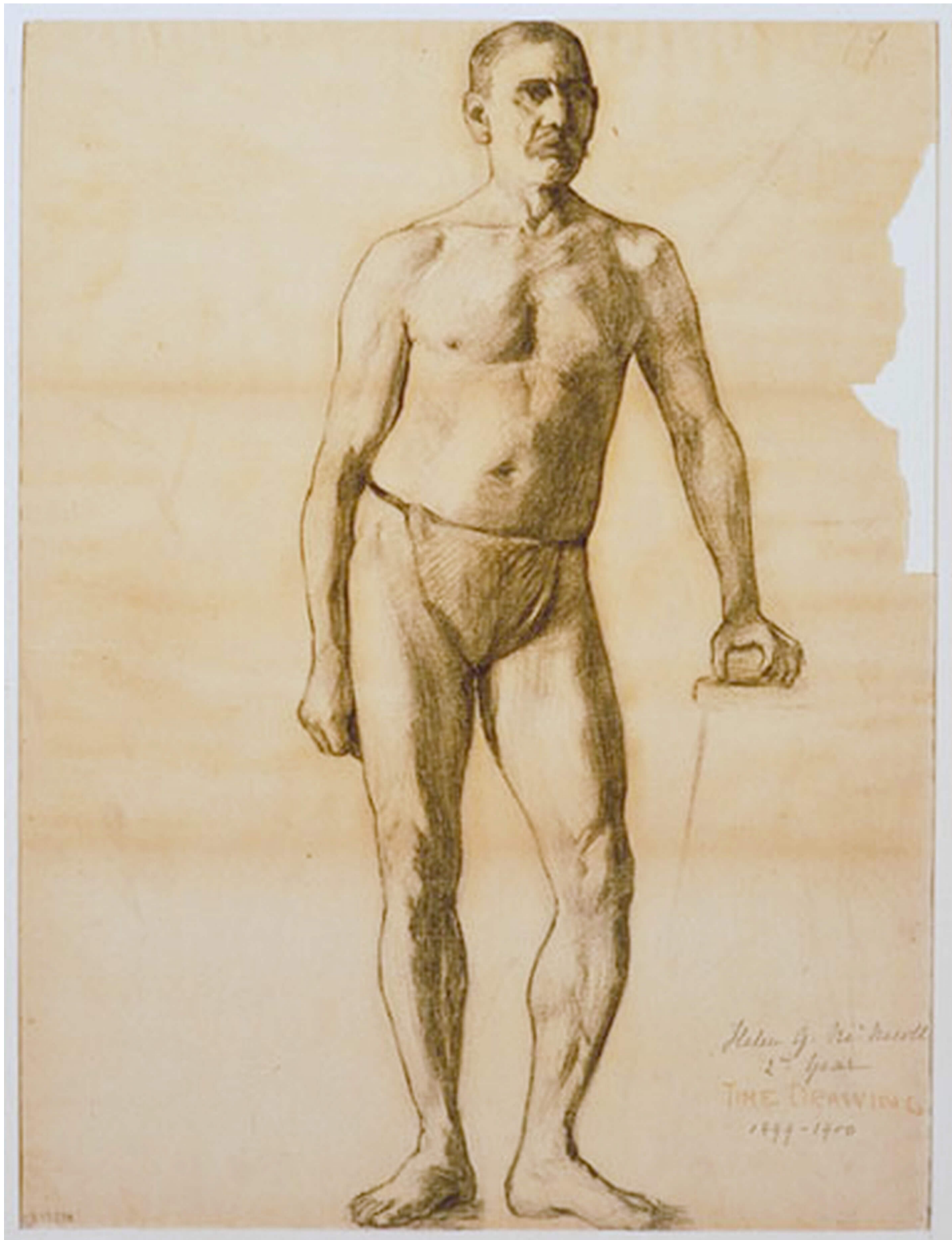
Robert Harris, *Helen McNicoll*, 1910, oil on canvas, 77.3 x 61.5 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.



# KEY WORKS

Helen McNicoll had a short but prolific career. At the time of her death in 1915, she had exhibited over seventy works in Canada and England; her memorial exhibition featured nearly 150 paintings and sketches. Though primarily known today for her representations of modern women and carefree children, she also painted landscapes and rural genre scenes. Her bright Impressionist images appeal strongly to the senses, even as they convey a sense of quiet and detachment.

## ACADEMY 1899–1900



Helen McNicoll, *Academy*, 1899-1900  
Charcoal and pencil on paper, 61.8 x 47.4 cm  
Montreal Museum of Fine Arts

This charcoal drawing demonstrates McNicoll's skill in using light and shade to model the body, with careful attention to the musculature of the legs and chest. An inscription in the bottom corner labels it a "time drawing," indicating that the sketch was the product of a timed exercise in which the model held a sequence of short poses while students attempted to capture his changing appearance. This pose shows the model's weight being supported by his right leg as his left hand leans on a support, creating the ideal S-curve of classical contrapposto. By these means McNicoll translated a real human body (most likely a working-class professional model) into the classical ideal—except for his prominent mustache.

McNicoll produced this sketch while she was a student at the school of the Art Association of Montreal (AAM); the inscription records that she was in her second year. During her first year she had been awarded a scholarship for her skilled drawings of plaster casts. This sketch shows the kind of work expected of students training in the traditional academic curriculum modelled after the program at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Students began by copying reproductions of works by Old Masters and sketching plaster casts. Only after they had perfected their technique did they move on to "life study": drawing nude models to obtain a thorough understanding of anatomy and the way the body moved. However, this crucial exercise was thought to be dangerous for respectable women artists, and it was only at the end of the nineteenth century that they won admission to life classes. The AAM was relatively progressive in allowing female students access to nude study of both female and male models, although the men were draped.

While at the AAM, McNicoll studied with William Brymner (1855–1925), one of the foremost artists and teachers in Canada at the time. His support for young women artists and his interest in *plein air* painting and Impressionism must have had an important influence on McNicoll's future work. After four years, she left Montreal in 1902 to enroll at the Slade School of Fine Art, in London, England—another school known for its progressive attitude to women's art education—where she again worked with male and female models. Although McNicoll would turn away from a strictly academic style toward Impressionism, paintings such as *The Apple Gatherer*, c. 1911, and *Under the Shadow of the Tent*, 1914, provide a glimpse of her early study of the body and the subtleties of its movement.



Helen McNicoll, *Sketch of Female Nudes from Dessin [sic] Sketchbook*, c. 1902, soft blue-green paper cover sketchbook, six pages, with graphite, charcoal drawings on wove paper, each page: 32 x 24 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. McNicoll's sketchbooks from the period include many life drawings of male and female subjects in a variety of poses.

## COTTAGE, EVENING C. 1905



Helen McNicoll, *Cottage, Evening*, c. 1905  
Oil on canvas, 56 x 45.5 cm  
The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa, Ontario

*Cottage, Evening* portrays a small rustic dwelling, bathed in warm tones from the setting sun, as viewed from a secluded back lane. Although there are no figures, the glowing firelight emanating from the window makes the cottage appear welcoming and homey, while the path in the foreground leads the viewer into the scene. This painting reveals McNicoll's engagement with rural themes, a subject she returned to frequently. It is also characteristic of her earliest works, including *Village Street*, 1904, and *The Rendezvous*, 1904, which are often set in villages and seaside towns but lack a lively human presence.

Although the loose brushwork of the greenery shows some engagement with Impressionist principles, *Cottage, Evening* is not yet the study of light and air for which McNicoll would soon become known. The painting was likely completed during or just after her time at the Cornish School of Landscape and Sea Painting in St. Ives, Cornwall, and it shows the influence of the Naturalist style and *plein air* technique in which the school specialized. When Emily Carr (1871–1945) attended the school a few years before McNicoll, she complained that her teacher, the Swedish-British artist Julius Olsson (1864–1942), commanded her to paint outdoors: "Go out *there*' (he pointed to the glaring sands), 'out to bright sunlight –PAINT!'"<sup>1</sup> Carr had no patience for the sunlight, but McNicoll evidently took his lessons to heart.

*Cottage, Evening* also shows some lingering influence of the Hague School, a Dutch artistic movement that was popular in *fin de siècle* Montreal. Records show that the McNicoll family owned at least two works by Jan Weissenbruch (1824–1903), and in 1912 McNicoll saw paintings by Jozef Israëls (1824–1911) in an exhibit in London. This art was characterized by a *plein air* approach to rural genre scenes and a dark, gloomy palette. While the darker tones of McNicoll's sunset scene evoke this tradition, the contrast of the whitewashed cottage walls and the bright burst of orange light emerging from the window hint at the artist's future turn to a more colourful palette.



Helen McNicoll, *Village Street*, 1904, oil on canvas, 45.8 x 36 cm, private collection.

## THE LITTLE WORKER C. 1907



Helen McNicoll, *The Little Worker*, c. 1907

Oil on canvas, 61 x 51.3 cm

Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto

*The Little Worker* shows a young girl on a hillside, walking with a metal pail, her arm outstretched to balance the weight of her burden. She is alone in the landscape but for a trio of accompanying chickens; a fence and shed are only just visible at the top of the canvas. The perspective McNicoll adopts is surprisingly modern: the viewer, situated at the bottom of the hill, looks up at the girl as the landscape rises sharply, creating a relatively shallow sense of space in which both the viewer and the girl are immersed. McNicoll used this striking visual strategy in a number of works, including *The Humble Dwelling*, c. 1907.

Nina Lübbren has argued that this sense of immersion was a common characteristic in works produced in rural artists' colonies across Europe around the turn of the century.<sup>1</sup> It originated with the French Barbizon painters and reverses traditional landscape imagery that positions the viewer overlooking an uninterrupted vista. McNicoll's luminous treatment of the sunny field in *The Little Worker* accentuates this sense of immersion. The field grasses appear to ripple in the breeze, and the bright yellow-green tones stimulate the viewer's senses. We can almost feel the warmth of the sun, smell the scent of the hay, and hear the rustle of the pasture.

McNicoll's formal choices also give us a sense of the girl's hard work, reminding us of the distance she has travelled and the uphill trek she faces after her chores. Natalie Luckyj has argued that although peasant subjects were popular, McNicoll's unsentimental approach is unusual in that it neither glamorizes nor dramatizes the scene.<sup>2</sup> The girl is fully dressed, with heavy shoes, and shown in full concentration on her task, oblivious to the viewer's gaze. *The Little Worker* is one of several images that depict young girls at work in the countryside, including *Gathering Flowers*, c. 1911, and *Picking Berries*, 1910. They make the point that the carefree world represented in many of McNicoll's other child paintings—*Picking Flowers*, c. 1912, for example—was hardly a universal experience.

*The Little Worker* was one of the first paintings to attract critical notice after McNicoll began exhibiting at the annual shows of the Art Association of Montreal, the Ontario Society of Artists, and the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts in 1906. A writer for the *Montreal Gazette* singled it out as "a pretty child study, in which the sunlight is well managed,"<sup>3</sup> while the *Montreal Standard* praised "the excellent manner in which the lights have been handled."<sup>4</sup>



Helen McNicoll, *Gathering Flowers*, c. 1911, oil on canvas, 76.2 x 63.5 cm, private collection, Toronto.

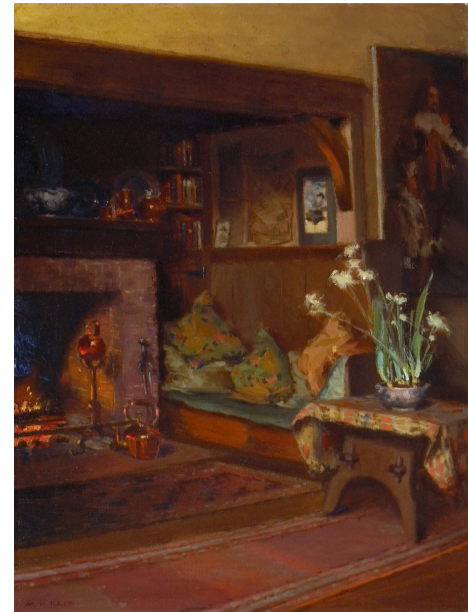
## INTERIOR C. 1910



Helen McNicoll, *Interior*, c. 1910  
Oil on canvas, 55.9 x 45.9 cm  
Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto

This small painting situates the viewer alone in a bedroom—an intimate, usually private space. According to Victorian and Edwardian understandings of “separate spheres,” in which the private was associated with the feminine, and the public with the masculine, the painting could easily be read as a feminized space. But *Interior* can be counted among a number of images by McNicoll that present a more complicated understanding of domesticity and femininity. For all the intimacy the space evokes, we have no indication of the identity of the person who occupies it. There are no clues on the dresser or the mantle, and we cannot see the pictures on the wall. Kristina Huneault has listed the signs of the human body that normally reside in the space: the footprints on the carpet, the pillow tossed aside on the bed, the robe draped on the rocking chair. “The body has absented itself from an environment where all the signs point to its presence,” she writes, “and there is a gap between expectation and its fulfillment.”<sup>1</sup>

In *Interior*, McNicoll shows her ability to capture the fleeting effects of sunshine and light indoors. The sun filters in through the translucent sheer curtains of the window, diffusing the scene with a light that shimmers across the varied textures of the room: the gold metal of the lamp sconces and fireplace surround, the polished wood of the dresser, the pure white fabrics of the pillows and throws. A diagonal streak of lemon-yellow paint creates a beam of sunlight that cuts across the floor, revealing the artist’s virtuoso ability to capture different kinds of light. These highlights encourage the eye to engage in a playful exploration of the pictorial space. McNicoll used this same strategy in several other works, as did many of her contemporaries. *A Fireside*, painted by Mary Hiester Reid (1854–1921) in the same year as *Interior*, takes a similarly intimate approach to the everyday private living space of women.



Mary Hiester Reid, *A Fireside*, c. 1910, oil on canvas, 61.2 x 46 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

## MARKETPLACE 1910



Helen McNicoll, *Marketplace*, 1910

Oil on canvas, 63.8 x 77.3 cm

The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa, Ontario

In *Marketplace*, McNicoll's loosely and colourfully painted fruits and vegetables evoke the touches, tastes, and smells of a fall day at the market. The bright tones at the centre—pumpkins?—indicate the ripeness of the produce. The warm sun glints off the white buildings opposite, while the stand itself remains in the shade. This pictorial play of light and heat is echoed textually, perhaps humorously: a French shop sign in the background reads "Eclairage Chauffage"—"lighting, heating."

In the middle ground, an interested shopper surveys the items available, while a busy saleswoman watches over her wares. McNicoll's usual detached approach prevails. The viewer is given no detail in the figures, no clear narrative, and is positioned backstage, amid the mess on the cobblestones. The final impression is of a transient moment of everyday life captured for posterity by the artist. As such, it conforms to the goals of the Impressionist style McNicoll had embraced.

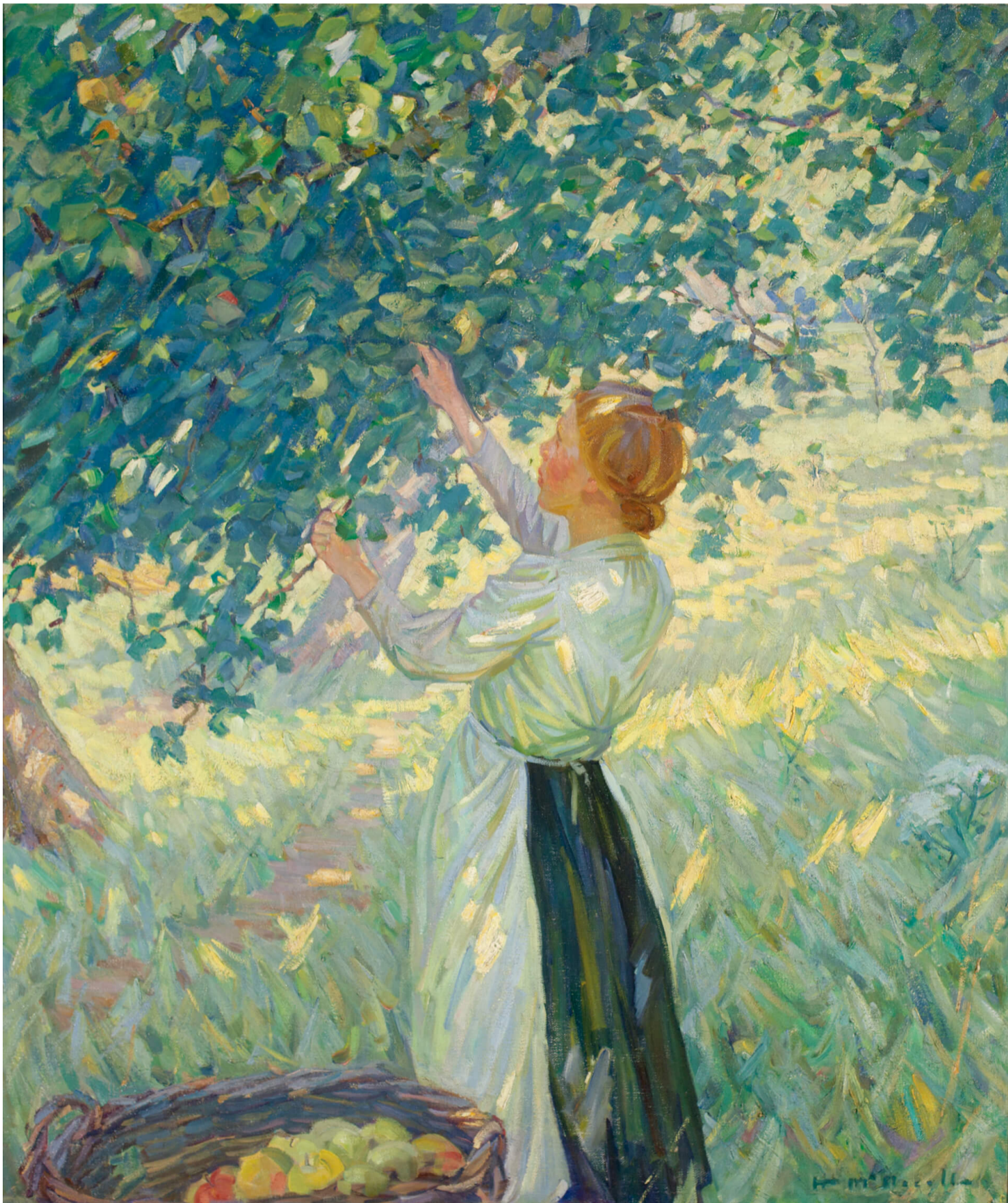
However, the crowd of people makes *Marketplace* different from the majority of McNicoll's images, which have one or two figures at most; very few of her canvases depict urban subjects. This was typical both of female Impressionists, who were more restricted in their access to city streets and spaces than were their male colleagues, and of Canadian Impressionists, who for the most part showed little interest in the preferred urban scenes of their French peers.

*Marketplace* is one of several canvases McNicoll painted of rural market towns in Brittany and Normandy, including *Market in Brittany*, c. 1913, and *In the Market, Montreuil*, c. 1912. Although the details of her time in France are uncertain, it appears that she worked there on several occasions. Canadian exhibition reviews note with some pride that her paintings for the 1909-10 exhibition seasons were sent directly from France. Perhaps surprisingly, there is little evidence that she spent significant time in Paris, the undisputed capital of the art world at the time. Instead, McNicoll opted for locations on the northern coast and the south of France and worked at Grez-sur-Loing, an artists' colony southeast of Paris that was popular with American and Scandinavian Impressionist artists.



Helen McNicoll, *Market in Brittany*, c. 1913, oil on canvas, 81.3 x 66 cm, private collection.

## THE APPLE GATHERER C. 1911



Helen McNicoll, *The Apple Gatherer*, c. 1911  
Oil on canvas, 106.8 x 92.2 cm  
Art Gallery of Hamilton

Among the largest of McNicoll's canvases, *The Apple Gatherer* joins *The Little Worker*, c. 1907, as a representation of rural female labour that neither romanticizes nor pities its subject. The central figure reaches to pluck an apple; one hand pulls a branch out of the way as the other stretches into the tree. The target apple itself is just a hint of red, hidden among the green and yellow brushstrokes that make up the leaves. The woman, wearing a long apron, is in the midst of her labour: her pose, arms in the air, back curved uncomfortably, would have been hard to sustain and will make her body ache at the end of the day. (Perhaps this was true of the model's labour as well.) She has been at her work for a while, as her basket is nearly full and her cheeks are flushed with sunburn.

Peasant subjects were popular in the later nineteenth century, especially with a middle-class, urban audience that felt nostalgic for the pre-industrial age. This imagery also helped to shape the contemporary understanding that the physical appearance of the body revealed a person's social class. While not as political in intent as other artists who took up the subject of rural labour—Gustave Courbet (1819–1877) or Jean-François Millet (1814–1875), for example—McNicoll's unsentimental images of rural female labour participate in this discourse. In *The Gleaner*, c. 1908, for example, although the woman is young and pretty, her hair is tied up in a messy bun, her face and neck are sunburnt, and her rough hand is clenched around the heavy bundle of hay. Contemporaries would have read these characteristics as signs of difference from the middle-class, white, feminine ideal represented in other McNicoll paintings (*In the Shadow of the Tree*, c. 1914, for example).



LEFT: Helen McNicoll, *The Gleaner*, c. 1908, oil on canvas, 76.3 x 63.8 cm, private collection. RIGHT: Mary Cassatt, *Young Women Picking Fruit*, 1891, oil on canvas, 131.4 x 90.2 cm, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh. Cassatt's painting may be a study for the now-lost mural.

McNicoll's labouring rural subjects were well received by critics in Canada, who compared her art favourably to that of her French peers. "Her work is characterized by simplicity of composition and breadth of treatment, allied with undoubted strength and an eye for the poetic in common objects," said one reviewer of the 1909 exhibition submissions: "Her work is exceedingly promising, and seems to indicate that later on she may be able to do for the habitant types of French Canada something of what Millet did for the peasantry of France."<sup>1</sup> When *The Apple Gatherer* was exhibited in the Spring Exhibition of the Art Association of Montreal in 1911, critic William R. Watson described it as one of the "delightfully sunshiney pictures of which Miss McNicoll is now an almost perfect master."<sup>2</sup>



McNicoll returned to the subject of orchards on a number of occasions, including in *The Orchard*, n.d., and *Apple Time*, n.d. Natalie Luckyj proposes that these works may have been inspired by McNicoll's time painting with British artist and teacher Algernon Talmage (1871–1939) in St. Ives—a teacher who encouraged his students to paint *en plein air* and held classes in a local orchard.<sup>3</sup> The subject was also popular with Impressionist artists—French landscapist Camille Pissarro (1830–1903) tackled it, as did American Mary Cassatt (1844–1926). Cassatt's mural for the Women's Building of the 1893 Chicago World's Fair portrayed a group of women picking fruit as an allegory for modern woman, imbuing the subject with the feminist theme "Young Women Plucking the Fruits of Knowledge or Science."

## PICKING FLOWERS C. 1912



Helen McNicoll, *Picking Flowers*, c. 1912  
Oil on canvas, 94 x 78.8 cm  
Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto

McNicoll portrayed the spontaneous and carefree world of children on many occasions, painting them in rural settings, in domestic spaces, and on the beach. *Picking Flowers* is a charming representation of young girlhood. The image depicts two children on a well-maintained garden path; the lead girl stops to pluck a flower from the blooming white bushes to her side. Her cheeks flushed against her sunlit blonde hair and bright white smock, she leans in for the perfect blossom to match the one already in her hand. As she focuses intently on her task, a younger child advances behind her, looking none too steady on her feet.

The painting is a particularly good example of McNicoll's "detached" approach to her subjects, the children acknowledging neither one another nor the artist as they play. It also shows her evolving Impressionist style: the sharp diagonal composition and steep recession of the path flatten the space, as do the divided brushstrokes used to represent the tree leaves. McNicoll's modernist visual strategies contribute to the sense that her young subjects are absorbed in a private world to which the adult viewer has been admitted for only a moment.



Helen McNicoll, *Sketch for "Picking Flowers"*, c. 1912, oil on canvas on laminated paperboard, 25.5 x 20.3 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

McNicoll was not the only artist interested in modern, white, middle-class children as artistic subjects in this period. Others included Berthe Morisot (1841–1895) and Laura Muntz Lyall (1860–1930). Beginning in the late eighteenth century, childhood was conceptually reimaged as a distinct phase of life, and children as pure and innocent creatures who should be sheltered from the concerns of the "real world." Art historians such as Anne Higonnet have shown that visual culture played an important role in helping to reshape understandings of ideal childhood.<sup>1</sup> McNicoll's images of girls at work suggest, however, that this freedom to enjoy childhood was not available to all children equally.



Photograph of Dorothea Sharp and a child model, date unknown, photograph by Helen McNicoll, Helen McNicoll artist file, The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa.

The theme of children picking flowers seems to have had special appeal for McNicoll: preparatory sketches exist for this painting, and a similar work, *Gathering Flowers*, c. 1911, repeats the subject closely, though with some differences. Moreover, McNicoll's companion Dorothea Sharp (1874–1955) painted a version of the scene, *Picking Daffodils*, 1913. Photographs show the artists working together in the countryside: in one, Sharp stands at a canvas while a girl poses in the distance; a second canvas waits for McNicoll to return to her paintbrush.



# HELEN MCNICOLL

Life & Work by Samantha Burton

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McNicoll's deafness may have presented an obstacle to finding and retaining good models. One letter from Yorkshire finds the artist complaining to her father that they have had no luck in finding models, even in neighbouring villages.<sup>2</sup> Luckily, Sharp was well known to her colleagues for her ability to attract child models, "mostly the daughters of fishermen ... who loved to dress up in the pretty frocks from the children's wardrobe she always carried with her."<sup>3</sup>

## STUBBLE FIELDS C. 1912



Helen McNicoll, *Stubble Fields*, c. 1912  
Oil on canvas, 73.7 x 89.7 cm  
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

*Stubble Fields* is one of several hayfield scenes by McNicoll, the others including *Reaping Time*, c. 1909, and several simply entitled *Haystacks*. These harvest scenes are often represented as glowing in the warm sun, with small figures working the fields. McNicoll returned to this theme frequently, suggesting that she may have seen the famed series by Claude Monet (1840–1926)—possibly at the major Impressionist exhibition organized by Paul Durand-Ruel in London in 1905. McNicoll’s Impressionist brushwork is put to good use in these canvases, the loose quality of the strokes giving a strong sense of the hay’s texture. The brilliant yellow and purple tones of *Stubble Fields* also show an awareness of late nineteenth-century colour theory popular in Impressionist and Post-Impressionist circles. McNicoll’s exploitation of these complementary colours to produce luminous effects puts her in league with artists like Monet, Gustave Caillebotte (1848–1894), and Georges Seurat (1859–1891).

When *Stubble Fields* was exhibited at the annual exhibition of the Art Association of Montreal in 1912, the reviewer for the *Montreal Daily Star* proclaimed that McNicoll's "work is extremely good this year, 'Stubble Fields' being especially worthy of admiration."<sup>1</sup> Others agreed: that same year, *Stubble Fields* became the first of two works sold to public institutions during her lifetime (the other being the *The Farmyard*, c. 1908, purchased by the Saint John Art Club from the Canadian Patriotic Fund in 1915). After its exhibition at the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts, Eric Brown purchased it for the National Gallery of Canada.



Claude Monet, *Haystacks, End of Summer, Morning*, 1890-91, oil on canvas, 60.5 x 100.8 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Monet repeated the subject twenty-five times to show the impact of changing light and weather on the viewer's perception.

Although McNicoll is best known today for her images of women and children, during her life she was recognized primarily as a landscape painter. Reviewers of her public exhibitions praised her skill at capturing the land, while early Canadian art historians categorized her as a painter of that genre.<sup>2</sup> Her preferred subjects included picturesque rural pastures, quaint river scenes, and sunny beaches. They are not the uninhabited, wild landscapes of the Group of Seven, but worked-on, lived-in, and eminently human landscapes.

## THE CHINTZ SOFA C. 1913



Helen McNicoll, *The Chintz Sofa*, c. 1913  
Oil on canvas, 81.3 x 99.1 cm  
Private collection, Thornhill, Ontario

*The Chintz Sofa* depicts the London studio McNicoll shared with her partner, British artist Dorothea Sharp (1874–1955), who poses in the painting. Although the image appears at first glance to show a scene of quiet, feminine domesticity, Natalie Luckyj suggests that the figure in *The Chintz Sofa* could be seen as a suffragette working on a piece of memorabilia for the women's rights movement.<sup>1</sup> In 1913, the suffrage campaign was at the height of its militant phase. Press reports on the violent protests and civil disobedience following the dismissal of the Reform Bill would have run alongside news of McNicoll's election to the Royal Society of British Artists (RBA).

In the art world, too, women fought for equal access. Even when elected to established societies like the RBA, women remained in a tenuous position and sometimes opted to join or form alternative exhibiting societies like the Society of Women Artists (SWA). The SWA was established in 1856 with the explicit

goal of enabling women's access to the male-dominated art world, and Sharp was the association's vice-president when she modelled for her partner's canvas. Although there is no firm evidence of McNicoll's or Sharp's political beliefs, it is appealing, in light of their active participation in women's organizations, to view *The Chintz Sofa* as an engagement with a wider world of feminist interventions rather than as a depiction of a woman quietly embroidering in the parlour.

The artist's studio was a fashionable subject in American Impressionism—in works by William Merritt Chase (1849–1916), for example. The studio also provides the setting for at least three other McNicoll works—a second painting called *The Chintz Sofa* #2, c. 1913, and two canvases completed around 1914, both entitled *The Victorian Dress*. McNicoll and Sharp's studio was located at 91 Ashworth Mansions, in the posh Maida Vale neighbourhood of London. From a photograph of Sharp wearing a painting smock (presumably taken by McNicoll), we know that the studio was a large space.



William Merritt Chase, *Studio Interior*, c. 1882, oil on canvas, 71.2 x 101.9 cm, Brooklyn Museum, New York.

At the turn of the century, the studio was not limited to artistic production but doubled as a site for exhibitions and networking. Writing to her father, McNicoll describes holding a show at the studio a week before the annual elections of the RBA in 1913. She notes that fifty-seven people attended, including many members of the society, and that Sharp used the space to network on her behalf.<sup>2</sup> These efforts were successful, and McNicoll was elected to membership. On that occasion, a photograph of the studio accompanied an article about the artist and her accomplishment in the *Montreal Daily Star*.<sup>3</sup>

## SUNNY SEPTEMBER 1913



Helen McNicoll, *Sunny September*, 1913

Oil on canvas, 92 x 107.5 cm

Collection Pierre Lassonde

*Sunny September* is a pleasant scene of a woman and children who appear to be sightseeing. Their clean white dresses suggest they are not local but middle-class tourists enjoying the view. In the Edwardian period, tourism was a relatively recent form of leisure, and daytripping scenes were popular subjects for French and American Impressionists. McNicoll's beach scenes join those of artists such as Claude Monet (1840–1926) and Childe Hassam (1859–1935) in portraying a modern theme—one she repeats in *On the Cliffs*, 1913, and other beach and seaside views. Somewhat unusually, McNicoll's subject in *Sunny September* isn't the undisturbed natural vista traditionally sought by sightseers but the tourists themselves in the act of looking.

*Sunny September* is also significant because it reveals McNicoll's skill in representing sunlight—the quality reviewers of her work have praised most consistently. Her obituary in the *Montreal Gazette* notes her “skill in depicting sunlight and shadow,” concluding that “strong sunlight especially appealed to her.”<sup>1</sup> Recent critics have also celebrated her depictions of “brilliant sunlight,”<sup>2</sup> her “happy colour harmonies,”<sup>3</sup>

and “her concern with rendering the effects of bright sunlight.”<sup>4</sup> In this image of three figures standing on a grassy hill looking out over the beach, the artist represents the effects of sunshine on a variety of surfaces: the shadows accenting bright white dresses, the sunburnt cheeks of the main figure, the alternately green-dappled and yellow-bleached grasses, and the hazy meeting of blue sky and sea.

As in many of McNicoll's paintings, the senses are evoked in *Sunny September*: the viewer imagines the warmth of the sun, the smell of the ocean, and the rustling sound of the long grasses. In the words of Canadian critic Hector Charlesworth: “You can snuff the pleasant breeze in this work.”<sup>5</sup> Yet as so often with McNicoll, there is a sense of detachment too: the figures don't engage with each other, nor do they connect with the viewer. Kristina Huneault has suggested that this frequent feature of McNicoll's work was a result, perhaps, of her loss of hearing as a child.<sup>6</sup>

This canvas was exhibited at the Royal Society of British Artists when McNicoll was elected to that prestigious institution and received positive notice in the Toronto, Montreal, and London press. *The Studio* included a reproduction in an article that cited McNicoll's work alongside that of A.Y. Jackson (1882–1974), Laura Muntz Lyall (1860–1930), and fellow Canadian Impressionists Marc-Aurèle de Foy Suzor-Coté (1869–1937) and Clarence Gagnon (1881–1942). The writer hails them as exciting evidence of a “distinctively Canadian art.”<sup>7</sup>



LEFT: Helen McNicoll, *On the Beach*, c. 1910, oil on canvas, 41 x 46 cm, private collection. McNicoll produced at least two versions of this painting, as well as many other beach-themed works. RIGHT: Claude Monet, *Cliff Walk at Pourville*, 1882, oil on canvas, 66.5 x 82.3 cm, Art Institute of Chicago.



## IN THE SHADOW OF THE TREE C. 1914



Helen McNicoll, *In the Shadow of the Tree*, c. 1914  
Oil on canvas, 100.3 x 81.7 cm  
Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, Quebec City

McNicoll is best known today as a painter of women and children. She is frequently compared to Impressionists such as Berthe Morisot (1841–1895) and Mary Cassatt (1844–1926), famous for their own representations of motherhood. As a young woman, McNicoll kept a scrapbook with many images of maternity. But although she painted several combinations of young women and children, such as *Minding Baby*, c. 1911, where an older girl supervises her younger siblings, few of her works can be described as representations of motherhood.<sup>1</sup> *In the Shadow of the Tree* is one possible exception, though this detached maternal relationship does not resemble Cassatt's more physically intimate images, as in *Mother About to Wash Her Sleepy Child*, 1880. Rather than focusing her exclusive attention on the child, the mother (or sister or nanny?) reads a book, lost in her own world as the baby sleeps. Her hand rests on the side of the carriage, not quite touching the child.

This moment of repose is a good example of the tranquil figure studies of modern women taken up by McNicoll in the later years of her career, including *Beneath the Trees*, c. 1910, *The Chintz Sofa*, c. 1913, and *The Victorian Dress*, 1914. These works, frequently featuring women reading and sewing, belong to a long artistic tradition that record women inhabiting their own inner worlds while quietly performing domestic tasks or leisure activities. They are reminiscent, for example, of the Dutch Golden Age work of Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675), in which moral virtue is conferred on women pictured alone in domestic spaces.



LEFT: Helen McNicoll, *Minding Baby*, c. 1911, oil on canvas, 50.8 x 61 cm, private collection. RIGHT: Mary Cassatt, *Mother About to Wash Her Sleepy Child*, 1880, oil on canvas, 100.33 x 65.72 cm, Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Scholars such as Rozsika Parker 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, an escape from the drudgery of housework and child-rearing.<sup>2</sup> In *Minding Baby*, c. 1911, the older girls, focused on their sewing, have not noticed that the child in the carriage is awake.

## UNDER THE SHADOW OF THE TENT 1914



Helen McNicoll, *Under the Shadow of the Tent*, 1914

Oil on canvas, 83.5 x 101.2 cm

Montreal Museum of Fine Arts

McNicoll painted this canvas in the south of France. One of the women in the tent perches on a folding stool while the second sits on the sand. The painting seems consistent with McNicoll's interest in the sights and spaces of modern tourism: a bag of snacks lies on the blanket, and a hat lies discarded on the sand. But both figures are focused on artistic activities: the seated woman is wearing a painting smock as she looks in her box of painting materials, while the other is browsing through a sketchbook. The women, absorbed in their work, do not acknowledge each other or the viewer. The painting's relatively large size supports the idea that women's artistic activity is important.

*Under the Shadow of the Tent* is also an image of female partnership and friendship, especially when viewed in the context of other paintings produced by McNicoll and Dorothea Sharp (1874–1955), all clearly sketched at the same session. They include McNicoll's *In the Tent*, 1914, and Sharp's *A Day by the Sea* and *Painting on the Beach*, both 1914. Another version by Sharp, *Marcella Smith at the Beach, The Languedoc, South of France*, 1914, identifies the model who is painting as another artist, Marcella Smith (1887–1963), who would become Sharp's lifelong companion after McNicoll's death. Together, the works speak powerfully to a network of women who worked, travelled, and lived together in an atmosphere of mutual support and creativity.

This Impressionist painting was well received in both England and Canada. When it was exhibited at the Royal Society of British Artists, critics celebrated it as a "very easy and sure piece of painting."<sup>1</sup> In 1914, when it won the Women's Art Society of Montreal prize for best painting by a Canadian woman at the Spring Exhibition of the Art Association of Montreal, the local press praised it as a "fluently painted and well observed canvas"<sup>2</sup> whose brushwork shows "freedom and confidence."<sup>3</sup> Like McNicoll's other beach scenes, *Under the Shadow of the Tent* is filled with bright sunlight as McNicoll uses pure whites, yellows, and blues to evoke the feeling of a clear, warm summer day at the seaside.



Dorothea Sharp, *A Day by the Sea*, 1914, oil on canvas, 76.2 x 96.5 cm, private collection.

## THE VICTORIAN DRESS 1914



Helen McNicoll, *The Victorian Dress*, 1914  
Oil on canvas, 108.8 x 94.5 cm  
McCord Museum, Montreal

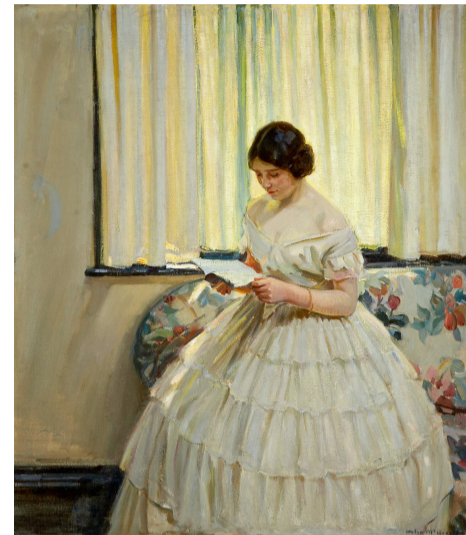
*The Victorian Dress* is one of two paintings with the same subject and title that McNicoll produced at the height of her career. Both images are set in the London studio she shared with Dorothea Sharp (1874–1955) where she also painted *The Chintz Sofa*, c. 1913. Although the dress images are different in composition and colouring, they both reveal an interest in the performance of white, middle-class femininity through fashion.

The painting shows a single female figure standing against the studio wall; a hanging mirror reflects the model's back but little else. The woman wears a colourful salmon-pink-and-mauve striped shawl, draped over a white dress with a full skirt of tiered ruffles. This set of paintings was made on the eve of the First World War, yet the silhouette here was *en vogue* around the mid-nineteenth century, as were the sloped shoulders and tiny waist of the dress seen in the second image.

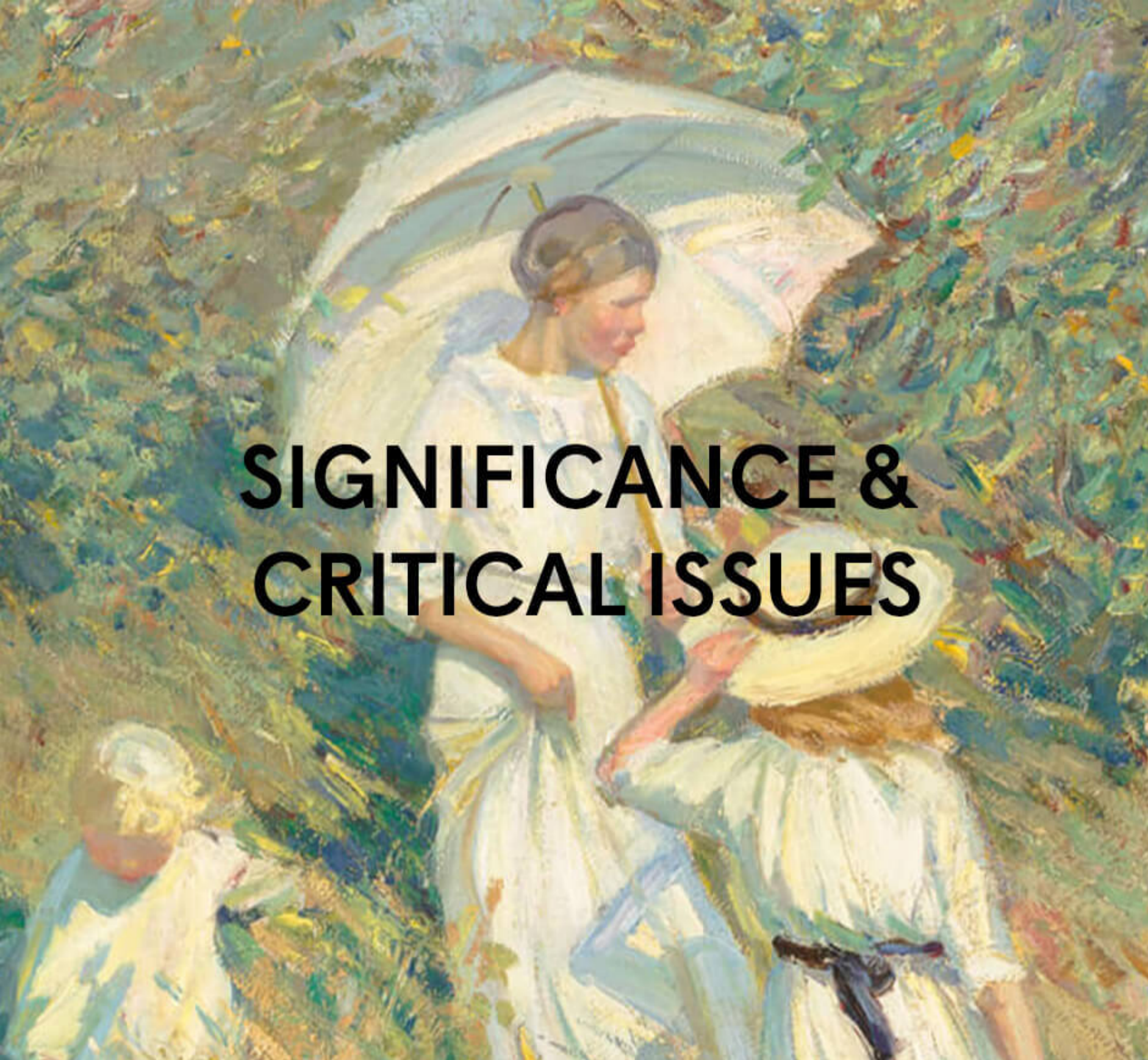
Skirts of this shape became popular following the invention of the cage crinoline in the 1850s, which, being light and flexible, allowed women to be both fashionable and physically mobile. Caricaturists in London and Paris loved to mock the frivolity of women in crinolines, picturing them stuck in doorways or falling off omnibuses. Many of these caricatures reveal contemporary anxieties about the physical occupation of public space by women newly enabled by the crinoline.

The shawl, likely cashmere, is as old-fashioned as the dress. The cashmere shawl was made in Kashmir from the fifteenth century on, and when the East India Company began to import them in the eighteenth century, they became fashionable accessories in England and France. Popularized by the Empress Josephine in France, they were frequently used in a ritual exchange of goods before marriage. In the first half of the nineteenth century, before cheap, factory-made imitations transformed the market, the cashmere shawl was a signifier of wealth and status, a luxury object displayed on the female body.

*The Victorian Dress* is an ambiguous comment on the ensemble and the woman who wears it. McNicoll clad her many other representations of female figures in modern dress. Perhaps this painting is 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. McNicoll may be suggesting that femininity is a performance, an identity you "put on," just like a costume.



Helen McNicoll, *The Victorian Dress*, c. 1914, oil on canvas, 107.1 x 91.7 cm, Art Gallery of Hamilton.



# **SIGNIFICANCE & CRITICAL ISSUES**

**Helen McNicoll, one of Canada's foremost Impressionist artists, achieved considerable success in Canada and England during her short career. Part of the last generation of Canadian artists who commonly trained and worked abroad, she played an important role in linking the art worlds across the Atlantic. She lived at an exciting moment for women artists as they experienced new levels of professional acceptance. Although she is known today for her sunny representations of women and children, her paintings often engage with domesticity and femininity in complex ways.**

## CONNECTIONS BETWEEN CANADA AND ABROAD

Helen 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 at the turn of the twentieth century. She was one of a number of Canadian artists who studied abroad in the decades between Confederation and the First World War. If earlier generations of artists had been limited by the distance across the Atlantic, significant innovations in communication and transportation after the 1870s meant that the art worlds of North America and Europe were more tightly linked than ever before. Artists such as Emily Carr (1871–1945)

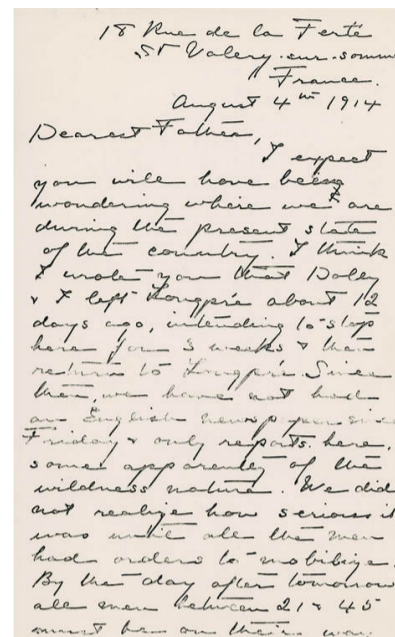
documented their steamship and railway travels in sketchbooks, while McNicoll described her travel in letters home to her family. Going abroad was thought to be a necessary step in the professionalization of young Canadian artists: although Montreal and Toronto were quickly growing in stature, they continued to trail European cities as centres for art education and exhibition.

After training at the best schools in Paris and London, many Canadian artists, such as James Wilson Morrice (1865–1924) and William Blair Bruce (1859–1906), remained abroad to pursue their careers. Although McNicoll never returned to Montreal permanently, she exhibited annually at the Art Association of Montreal (AAM), the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts (RCA), and other Canadian institutions, and her foreign achievements were reported in the local press. As such, she was one of many expatriate artists who played a role in the transmission of international styles and subject matter to Canada. McNicoll was especially important in helping to extend the reach of Impressionism in Canada at a time when the movement was neither critically nor popularly successful.

McNicoll studied in London rather than Paris, the established capital of the art world, probably because of her family background and the common language that, with her loss of hearing, made it a natural destination for her. The British capital may also have been an attractive option for women artists going abroad to study: Paris had a reputation of bohemian “wickedness” unsuitable for respectable middle- and upper-class women living away from their parents. Other Canadian women who went to England in this period include Frances Jones Bannerman (1855–1940), Sophie Pemberton (1869–1959), and Mary Bell Eastlake (1864–1951). There are few records of artists of colour or French-Canadian artists studying there in this period.



LEFT: Emily Carr, “Liverpool,” from *Sister and I from Victoria to London, 1910–11*, watercolour and ink on paper, 23.4 x 18.6 cm, Emily Carr fonds, Royal British Columbia Museum and Archives, Victoria. RIGHT: First page of McNicoll’s letter from France describing the outbreak of the First World War and the mobilization of French troops. Letter from H. McNicoll to D. McNicoll, August 4, 1914, Helen McNicoll artist file, The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa.





LEFT: Helen McNicoll, *The Blue Sea (On the Beach at St. Malo)*, c. 1914, oil on canvas, 51.4 x 61 cm, private collection. RIGHT: Lawren Harris, *North Shore, Lake Superior*, 1926, oil on canvas, 102.2 x 128.3 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. With works before and after the First World War, McNicoll and Harris show different approaches to the seascape genre.

McNicoll and her generation of Canadian artists were, however, the last to consistently study abroad. When war broke out in 1914, European travel for pleasure and study became all but impossible. After the war, a strong nationalist preference emerged for subjects and styles that were uniquely Canadian, as exemplified by the works of the Group of Seven. Impressionist canvases, such as McNicoll's *The Blue Sea (On the Beach at St. Malo)*, c. 1914, were viewed as too European and old-fashioned in comparison to the modernist Canadian landscapes of artists like Lawren Harris, and fell out of favour. Nevertheless, as today's art world becomes increasingly globalized, McNicoll and her peers provide an important model for understanding contemporary transnational artistic networks.

### WOMEN'S ACCESS TO THE ART WORLD

Any discussion of McNicoll must acknowledge the role that gender played in the production of her work. She was active at a key moment for professional women artists. In the later nineteenth century, women artists in Europe and North America initiated a dramatic and sustained fight for access to education and exhibition opportunities on the same level as their male peers. Although women students continued to be barred from entry to the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris until 1897, a number of competing art schools emerged to cater to serious female students; first among them was the Slade School of Fine Art in London, which McNicoll attended from 1902 to 1904. But even as women artists made gains on the educational front, other doors remained closed to them until long after McNicoll's death: it wasn't until 1933, for example, that Marion Long (1882–1970) became the first female artist elected to full membership of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts since Lady Charlotte Schreiber in 1880.

In response to these exclusions, women created their own opportunities. McNicoll was a member of the Society of Women Artists (SWA) in London, and her partner, Dorothea Sharp (1874–1955), served as its vice-president. Originally established in 1856 as the Society of Female Artists, it sought to gain access for women to the male-dominated art world. McNicoll's letters reveal why she found membership in a women's-only society appealing. Following her election as an associate member of the Royal Society of British Artists (RBA) in 1913, she describes one experience at a "stormy meeting" when British artist and suffrage activist Ethel Wright (1866–1939) complained about the way her paintings had been hung in an exhibition:

She and Dolly [Dorothea Sharp] and I were the only women there ... [and she] protested [that] the hangers were "ratters" and the hanging was a disgrace. You never saw so many angry and helpless looking men—when one who tried hard to keep her out of the society, moved that if she did not apologize she should resign. And she did resign, then and there. It was too bad because although her work was rather extreme it was interesting and helped to brighten the show.<sup>1</sup>

As women, McNicoll, Sharp, and Wright were acutely aware of their precarious position in the association. Alternatives like the SWA provided a strong network of patronage and professional support when traditional institutions failed to do so; in Canada, the Women's Art Association served this need after 1890. At the Art Association of Montreal (AAM), the Women's Art Society promoted the work of women artists like McNicoll, who won their prize for *Under the Shadow of the Tent* in 1914.

Deborah Cherry and Janice Helland have shown that informal personal relationships also helped to bolster a woman artist's professional career.<sup>2</sup> McNicoll's close relationship with Dorothea Sharp was one among many fostered by Canadian women in this period: Florence Carlyle (1864–1923), for example, lived and worked with Judith Hastings (dates unknown), and Harriet Ford (1859–1938) with Edith Hayes (1860–1948). In Canada, the partnership between Frances Loring (1887–1968) and Florence Wyle (1881–1968) became the core of an important circle of artists in Toronto through the 1920s, while the women of the Beaver Hall Group in Montreal formed a tight network that blurred the lines between personal and professional.<sup>3</sup>

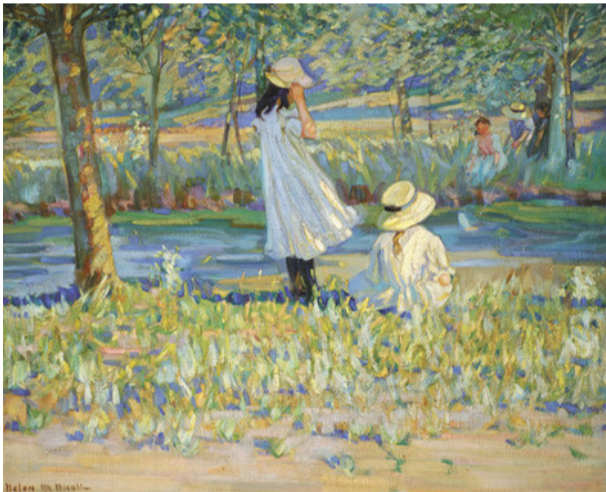


Ethel Wright, *Dame Christabel Pankhurst*, 1909, oil on canvas, 160 x 94 cm, National Portrait Gallery, London. Pankhurst was a key figure in the suffrage movement in the years just before the First World War.



Helen McNicoll's studio in St. Ives, Cornwall, c. 1906, photographer unknown, Helen McNicoll artist file, The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa. McNicoll rented a studio in a converted fisherman's loft in St. Ives, where she met Dorothea Sharp.

For an expatriate like McNicoll, fostering these relationships would have been especially important for success in a new country. 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. The pair frequently painted similar subjects, as seen in McNicoll's *Watching the Boat* and Sharp's *Two Girls by a Lake*, both c. 1912. Given McNicoll's hearing loss, Sharp must also have provided important help in navigating the more practical parts of artmaking: hiring models, renting lodgings, and purchasing supplies. It also appears that Sharp played an important role in encouraging McNicoll to exhibit her work publicly in Montreal and London and to join formal professional associations. Letters show that Sharp advocated strongly for McNicoll before her election to the RBA. "Dolly worked very hard," McNicoll wrote to her father. "She went around amongst the members and brought them up to my pictures[;] if they didn't like them, she went after others."<sup>4</sup> In return, McNicoll opened doors in Canada for Sharp, who exhibited at the AAM on at least one occasion.



LEFT : Helen McNicoll, *Watching the Boat*, c. 1912, oil on canvas, 64.1 x 76.8 cm, private collection, Vancouver. RIGHT : Dorothea Sharp, *Two Girls by a Lake*, c. 1912, oil on canvas, 47 x 76 cm, private collection.

Perhaps the greatest challenge for women was in being acknowledged as "professional" artists. Although women—especially women of high social standing like McNicoll—had long been encouraged to draw and paint as a demonstration of their refinement, they had difficulty in rising above the status of amateur in the eyes of art historians and curators.<sup>5</sup> McNicoll does not seem to have suffered from this perception; she exhibited widely and sold her work to public institutions and private collectors. Indeed, her obituary emphasized her professionalism, saying that "Miss McNicoll was no amateur—there are few painters in the Dominion who take their art as seriously as she did."<sup>6</sup>



Helen McNicoll, *Beneath the Trees*, c. 1910, oil on canvas, 60 x 49.5 cm, McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg.

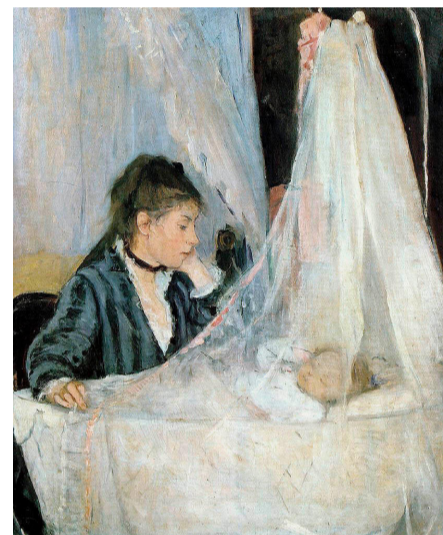
However, McNicoll's reputation after her death seems to have been affected by this issue. When histories of Canadian art began to be written in the 1920s, McNicoll was omitted, as were most of her female colleagues. In a new nationalist narrative, wild, open landscapes were given precedence over quiet domestic scenes such as McNicoll's *Beneath the Trees*, c. 1910. Not until the late twentieth century did McNicoll and her peers begin to see some recognition as practising professionals, largely due to the efforts of feminist art historians and curators who have attempted to recuperate their work. Still, research on Canadian women artists in the years before the First World War continues to lag far behind that on their female peers in France, England, and the United States.

### FEMININITY, DOMESTICITY, AND SEPARATE SPHERES

Gender is equally important to consider when examining McNicoll's chosen subject matter. Today, McNicoll is known primarily as a painter of gentle Impressionist scenes of women and children. Critics and art historians compare her to other Impressionist women artists, especially Berthe Morisot (1841–1895) and Mary Cassatt (1844–1926)—the link between McNicoll and Cassatt was made by a reviewer for the Montreal newspaper *Le Devoir* as early as 1913.<sup>7</sup> For these female artists, the Impressionist interest in the transient qualities of everyday modern life is evident in their efforts to capture scenes from contemporary bourgeois life in the private parlours and gardens of the home rather than in the public spaces of the modern city.



Helen McNicoll, *Study of a Child*, c. 1900, oil on canvas, 61 x 50.8 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.



Berthe Morisot, *The Cradle*, 1872, oil on canvas, 56 x 46 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Griselda Pollock and other scholars have argued that women Impressionists did not paint domestic scenes because they were biologically inclined to "feminine" subjects but because they were limited to them by the social standards of the day.<sup>8</sup> In the latter nineteenth century, the theory of "separate spheres" held that middle-class women were affiliated with the private sphere of the home, while men were associated with the sphere of public life. It would have been inappropriate for McNicoll to paint scenes of modern Parisian life similar to those by her fellow Canadian Impressionist James Wilson Morrice (1865–1924). Rather, women artists painted subjects from their lives, often using their friends, mothers, sisters, and children as models.



LEFT: James Wilson Morrice, *A Wet Night on the Boulevard Saint Germain, Paris*, c. 1895-96, oil on canvas, mounted on wood-pulp board, 22.9 x 19.1 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. RIGHT: Photograph of a page from McNicoll's scrapbook, c. 1900, private collection, Acton.

It is clear that these subjects held interest for McNicoll. A scrapbook she kept includes images of women and children alongside reproductions by prominent women artists including Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun (1755-1842) and American illustrator Jessie Willcox Smith (1863-1935). A number of McNicoll's paintings would take up these same subjects, showing women in domestic settings and performing "feminine" activities such as sewing and reading. McNicoll also played an important role in shaping public understandings of modern childhood through images such as *Cherry Time*, c. 1912. In this painting, as in her idyllic representations of carefree young girls picking flowers or playing on the beach, she contributes to a body of imagery that Anne Higonnet has argued both reflects and helps to construct the idea of childhood as a special and separate phase of life.<sup>9</sup> It should, however, be acknowledged that these understandings of separate spheres and ideal childhood were specific to white, middle- and upper-class families. McNicoll's own images of rural working women and children highlight the limits of these discourses.



Helen McNicoll, *Cherry Time*, c. 1912, oil on canvas, 81.7 x 66.4 cm, McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg.

### “A STRIKING CONTRAST”

At a closer look, McNicoll's work seems somewhat uncomfortable with stereotypically “feminine” or “domestic” subjects, and her obituary in *Saturday Night* notes that she “afforded a striking contrast to the prevailing type of feminine painter.”<sup>10</sup> Kristina Huneault argues that traditional understandings of femininity and the private sphere fall apart in places in McNicoll's paintings—for example, *In the Shadow of the Tree*, c. 1914, with the lack of touch between the woman and the child; in *Interior*, c. 1910, with the absence of the presumed woman in the domestic space; and in both versions of *The Victorian Dress*, c. 1914, with the unfashionable gown. “There is something faint but perceptible about these initial examples,” she writes, “that lends credence to the idea that femininity does not reside straightforwardly in the world that McNicoll envisions.”<sup>11</sup>

Huneault suggests that McNicoll's early hearing loss might account in part for the feeling of silence and detachment that is evident in many of her works. Figures do not engage with one another, nor do they connect with the viewer by returning our gaze. Women and children seem locked in their own interior worlds. Alternatively, we might read McNicoll's subtle discomfort with traditional representations of femininity through the lens of queer studies. Although there is no firm evidence of the exact nature of McNicoll's relationship with Dorothea Sharp, it seems clear, at the very least, that she chose to pursue a life that did not include heterosexual marriage and children of her own, opting instead for the lifelong companionship of another woman.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps the most overt example of this discomfort with the traditional discourse of white, bourgeois femininity is McNicoll's *The Open Door*, c. 1913. Painted in the same year as her election to the prestigious Royal Society of British Artists, the image depicts a solitary woman, clad entirely in white, sewing a white cloth against the backdrop of an open door. The use of the same shades of white, grey, silver, and beige on the dress, cloth, wall, table, mirror, and floor make it difficult to tell where one object ends and the next one begins, creating the impression that everything in the room—including the woman—fits naturally into the space. But *The Open Door* also contains signs that indicate the artist's unease with this natural domesticity, most clearly



Helen McNicoll, *The Open Door*, c. 1913, oil on canvas, 76.2 x 63.5 cm, private collection.

through the door leading to the outside world, the strangeness of the mirror that doesn't reflect anything, the uncertainty of what the woman is sewing, and the peculiarity of the woman's standing position.<sup>13</sup> The title of the work further suggests a world of opportunity: the woman's coat and hat hang on the door, ready to be worn. All told, the painting serves as a metaphor for women's increased access to the art world and the gap between the life expected of a white woman of McNicoll's class and the life she actually lived.

### A LEGACY FORGOTTEN

The critical acclaim McNicoll experienced during her lifetime did not extend through much of the twentieth century. Perhaps some of the critical and popular neglect of McNicoll and her European-trained peers was because, as expatriates, they were seen as insufficiently Canadian to warrant notice in histories of the nation's art. Amid the dominance of the Group of Seven and the celebration of a Canadian school of painting, McNicoll faded from public view. In 1926 the inaugural exhibition of the Art Gallery of Toronto (now Art Gallery of Ontario), though featuring only three women artists, included three of McNicoll's canvases: *Reading*, *Sewing*, and *Children Playing in the Forest*, dates and locations unknown. She received scant critical or public attention in the following years, however, and her work has been mostly excluded from surveys of the history of Canadian art and has remained largely absent from public collections. On the occasion of McNicoll's memorial show at the Art Association of Montreal in 1925, one writer concluded that works on view "show her rather as an English painter."<sup>14</sup>



Northwest view of the 1999 Helen McNicoll exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. The left wall includes *Sunny September* and *On the Cliffs*, both 1913. On the right wall is the painting and sketch of *Picking Flowers*, both c. 1912.

The first hints of a revival appeared in the mid-1970s, when the celebration of International Women's Year in 1975 led to the recuperation of female artists in Canada and around the world. That same year, McNicoll's work was included in a major show, *From Women's Eyes: Women Painters in Canada*, curated by Natalie Luckyj and Dorothy Farr at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre in Kingston, Ontario. Also in the mid-1970s, at the Morris Gallery in Toronto, a large number of McNicoll's works, most of which had remained in family and private collections, were exhibited for the first time since the artist's 1925 memorial exhibition. McNicoll also received some notice from scholars interested in Impressionism in Canada, and her work appeared in a number of catalogues and shows through the 1980s and 1990s.

In 1999, *Helen McNicoll: A Canadian Impressionist*, a major exhibition curated by Luckyj at the Art Gallery of Ontario, restored McNicoll to public attention. Luckyj's exhibition catalogue introduced the artist to a wider audience and set

the stage for further study of her work. In the years since, her paintings have been purchased and exhibited by major institutions and have reached new prices at auction. McNicoll now takes her place as one of Canada's foremost artists.



Helen McNicoll, *The Chintz Sofa #2*, c. 1913, oil on canvas, 81.3 x 99 cm, private collection. A number of McNicoll's works, such as *The Chintz Sofa #2*, show modern women taking seriously the work of art making.



# STYLE & TECHNIQUE

After Helen McNicoll's death in 1915, *Saturday Night* proclaimed that she was "one of the most profoundly original and technically accomplished of Canadian artists."<sup>1</sup> Educated at the Art Association of Montreal and the Slade School of Fine Art in London in the traditional academic curriculum, McNicoll quickly moved on to paint *en plein air* in a bright and airy Impressionist style. Impressionism was controversial in Canada long after its emergence in France, and McNicoll became a key player in popularizing it in this country.

## EARLY EDUCATION

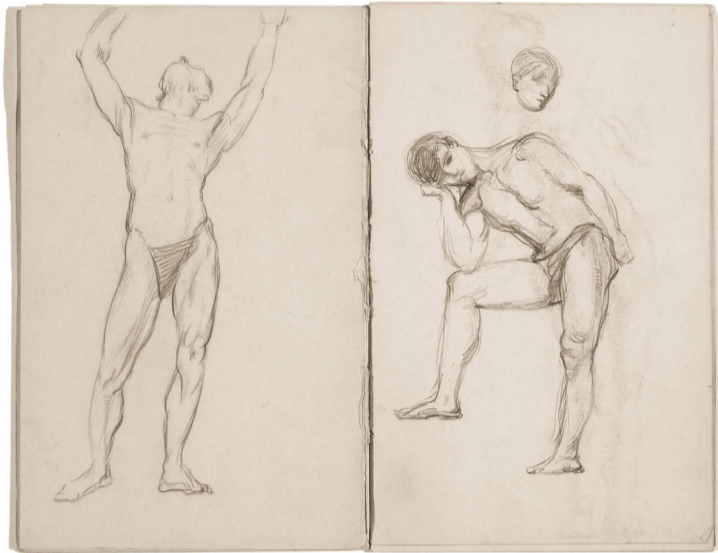
Helen McNicoll's oeuvre demonstrates an impressive breadth in subject matter and an assured mastery of technique. McNicoll began her formal art education at the Art Association of Montreal (AAM) in 1899. The institution's school, acknowledged as the best in Canada and directed by William Brymner (1855–1925), was at the centre of a burgeoning Montreal art scene. Brymner had trained in Paris at the well-regarded Académie Julian and transmitted his European education to a new generation of Canadian students.



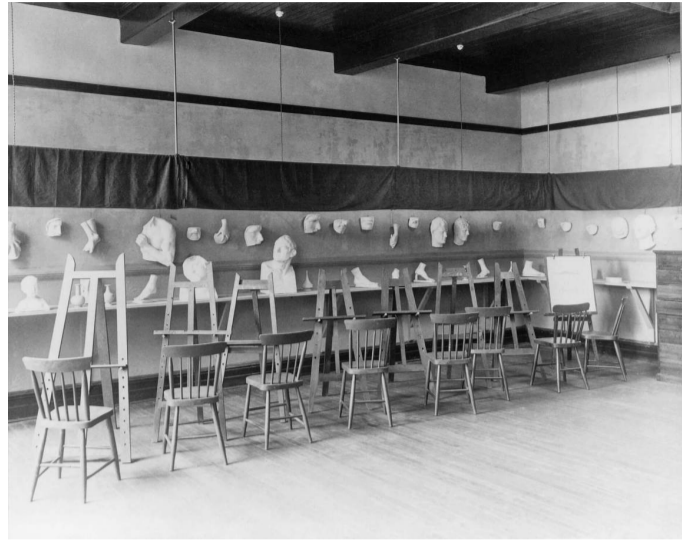
LEFT: Helen McNicoll, *Wm. Brymner*, 1901, graphite on paper, 17.5 x 12.4 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. RIGHT: William Brymner, *Helen McNicoll*, 1901, graphite on paper, 21.9 x 15.1 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

The AAM school followed a traditional academic curriculum modelled on those in prestigious institutions such as the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris and the Royal Academy of Arts in London. McNicoll and her fellow students attended classes in painting and illustration as well as lectures in anatomy and art history. They were encouraged to copy paintings in the AAM's galleries and to draw one another and their professors. McNicoll's sketchbook from the period includes likenesses of Brymner and his assistant teacher Alberta Cleland (1876–1960).

The foundation of the AAM curriculum was drawing. Students began by drawing isolated parts and more complex groupings from plaster casts of antique sculptures and reproductions of Old Master paintings. Only after they gained a level of mastery were they permitted to draw from live nude models. Skill in depicting the anatomy, pose, proportion, and movement of the body was believed to be the necessary foundation of painting. McNicoll had ample practice in nude studies both at the AAM and at the Slade School of Fine Art in London. Drawings in her sketchbook from the period show careful attention to the musculature, motion, and balance of the human body.



Helen McNicoll, "Sketch of Male Nudes" from *Large Sketchbook*, c. 1902, twenty-three loose folios from bound sketchbook, with graphite and conte on laid paper, each page: 20.3 x 13 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.



Photograph of the Art Association of Montreal's plaster cast room, c. 1893, photographer unknown. Students at the AAM had to master drawing from plaster-cast sculptures before they were permitted to draw from life.

### PLEIN AIR NATURALISM

As a student at the AAM, McNicoll had the opportunity to attend outdoor sketching classes, where Brymner's European experience was again evident. In France he became familiar with painting *en plein air*, which, by the 1870s, was popular because of the expanding Naturalist movement. *Plein air* Naturalism featured rural genre scenes and landscapes, frequently combining an academic approach to the figure with a modern treatment of light and colour. The peasant subjects of Jules Bastien-Lepage (1848-1884) and other artists were enormously influential and extremely popular with contemporary audiences. In Canada, the Naturalist trend was most visible in the works of the Dutch Hague School, which were prominently featured on the walls of the AAM galleries and in the homes of private collectors, including the McNicoll family. The influence of this school is strong in McNicoll's early works, such as *River Landscape*, n.d., and *Cottage, Evening*, c. 1905.



LEFT: Jules Bastien-Lepage, *Les Foins*, 1877, oil on canvas, 160 x 195 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris. RIGHT: Helen McNicoll, *River Landscape*, n.d., oil on canvas, 45.7 x 60.8 cm, The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa.

When he took his students into the countryside to paint directly from nature, Brymner advised them to use the inhabited landscape as their subject, carefully observe the effects of light and air, and strive for an unaffected, natural approach in their brushwork and surface "finish." McNicoll continued to work *en plein air* for the rest of her career, producing sketches outdoors which she then finished in a studio. She would have benefitted in this practice from the relatively recent invention of portable oil paint tubes; we see a typical paintbox in *Under the Shadow of the Tent*, 1914. While she apparently had a camera, she does not seem to have used it as an artistic tool, preferring to sketch directly from nature. These *plein air* lessons continued to influence McNicoll's work long after she left Montreal; one critic praised paintings such as *A Welcome Breeze*, c. 1909, as possessing "a quality of open-air sunshine, disarming all thoughts of labour in the studio, and ... reaching the distinctive height of art concealing art."<sup>2</sup>



Helen McNicoll, *A Welcome Breeze*, c. 1909, oil on canvas, 50.8 x 61 cm, private collection.



William Brymner, *One Summer's Day*, 1884, oil on wood, 26.7 x 37.5 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

McNicoll left Montreal in 1902 to attend the prestigious Slade School of Fine Art in London. Known as an avant-garde alternative to the old-fashioned Royal Academy of Arts and as a woman-friendly institution, the Slade was home to a number of prominent teachers and students who would shape the modern art scene in England in the first years of the twentieth century. Included among them were teachers such as Henry Tonks (1862–1937), Fred Brown (1851–1941), and Philip Wilson Steer (1860–1942) and students such as Wyndham Lewis (1882–1957), William Orpen (1878–1931), and Augustus and Gwen John (1878–1961 and 1876–1939). The Slade, together with the access it provided to the galleries, museums, and studios in London, gave McNicoll the opportunity to engage with modern artistic practice on a level not yet available in Montreal.

England also offered new possibilities for *plein air* practice. McNicoll left London for the remote southwest village of St. Ives in 1905, where she attended the Cornish School of Landscape and Sea Painting. Run by Swedish-British artist Julius Olsson (1864–1942), the school was a popular destination for students who wanted to paint seriously in a rural setting. Olsson was himself primarily a marine painter whose favourite subject was the waves crashing on the rocky coast. He was known for pushing *plein air* practice to its limits. He allowed his students to work in the converted fish loft that served as the school's studio during thunderstorms, but forced them to paint on the beach in bright sunlight at all other times. Olsson's assistant Algernon Talmage (1871–1939) was also a strong proponent of the *plein air* technique, asking students to paint in sunny fields and orchards. McNicoll's numerous images of seaside and rural landscapes—*An English Beach*, c. 1910, *The Orchard*, n.d, and *Reaping Time*, c. 1909, for example—were clearly influenced by her time working outdoors with Olsson and Talmage in St. Ives.



Helen McNicoll, *An English Beach*, c. 1910, oil on canvas, 36 x 46 cm, private collection.

St. Ives was one among a number of rural villages across Europe that catered to painters looking to escape urban centres. Whether in England, France, or further afield, they could generally expect to find friendly colleagues, quaint subjects, and a ready-made infrastructure for painting in these “artists’ colonies”; the colonies were also relatively inexpensive and appealingly bohemian. It was common for artists to travel from village to village: McNicoll worked in several across England and on the Continent, including Grez-sur-Loing in France. It was largely through this network that *plein air* Naturalism, and later Impressionism, spread across Europe. While McNicoll's work is clearly influenced by Brymner, Olsson, and Talmage, she eventually pushed further into a more fully realized Impressionist style than did any of her early teachers.



Algernon Talmage, *Corn Stooks*, 1899, oil on canvas, 33 x 44 cm, Bushey Museum and Art Gallery, U.K.



Helen McNicoll, *Reaping Time*, c. 1909, oil on canvas, 63 x 76.8 cm, private collection.

### THE ORIGINS OF IMPRESSIONISM

McNicoll was one of only a small number of Canadian artists to fully adopt Impressionism as a style. This movement originated in Paris in the 1860s when a group of young artists who were dissatisfied with the traditional Salon came together to organize their own exhibiting opportunities. Key figures associated with Impressionism in its first years included Claude Monet (1840–1926), Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841–1919), Edgar Degas (1834–1917), Gustave Caillebotte (1848–1894), Camille Pissarro (1830–1903), Mary Cassatt (1844–1926), and Berthe Morisot (1841–1895). Monet's *Impression–Sunrise*, 1872, gave the movement its name when a critic referred to it disparagingly in his review of the first official group exhibition in 1874.

There were eight exhibitions in total, the last in 1886. Impressionism was not immediately popular. Many of the artists were initially rejected for their innovative approaches: their paintings were small in scale, while monumental pictures dominated the walls of the Salon; their subjects, scenes taken from everyday modern life, were considered unworthy of high art; and their stylistic choices—a

flattened sense of perspective, bright daubs of pure colour, divided brushstrokes, and a loose finish—frequently resulted in the amused confusion of critics and popular audiences. These features are well illustrated in the compressed space and sharp cropping of Caillebotte's *On the Pont de l'Europe*, 1876–77, for example, and the quick brushwork of Renoir's *The Swing*, 1876. Working more than thirty years after Impressionism's start, McNicoll would adopt all of these strategies in paintings such as *Tea Time*, c. 1911.



Claude Monet, *Impression–Sunrise*, 1872, oil on canvas, 48 x 63 cm, Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris.



Gustave Caillebotte, *On the Pont de l'Europe*, 1876–77, oil on canvas, 105.7 x 130.8 cm, Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth.

The Impressionist movement emerged at a moment of immense change in France. Paris had been irrevocably transformed—politically, socially, and physically—by the successive upheavals of the Revolution of 1848, the rebuilding of Paris by Napoleon III and Baron Haussmann through the 1850s and 1860s, the Franco-Prussian War in 1870–71, and the Paris Commune of 1871. In subject and style, the movement took inspiration from French poet and critic Charles Baudelaire, who urged artists to seek out modernity in their work, which he defined as “the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable.”<sup>3</sup>



Helen McNicoll, *Tea Time*, c. 1911, oil on canvas, 63 x 52 cm, private collection.



Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *The Swing*, 1876, oil on canvas, 92 x 73 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Above all, Impressionist painting is characterized by this sense of transience. Although individually different in many respects, the early Impressionists were united by an effort to capture for posterity the world as seen by a single individual at a single moment in time: to paint what they saw rather than what they knew. This fundamental emphasis on individual perception, and especially on the subjective effects of light and air, was clearly handed down to McNicoll and is apparent in the sketchy brushwork and purple shadows of *The Avenue*, c. 1912.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Impressionism had spread far outside Paris. Natalie Luckyj suggests that McNicoll may have seen works by the French Impressionists at a large exhibition of some three hundred paintings organized by French art dealer Paul Durand-Ruel at the Grafton Galleries in London in 1905.<sup>4</sup> In 1910, McNicoll likely attended another important exhibition: Roger Fry's *Manet and the Post-Impressionists*, often credited with introducing modern French painting to England. By the end of the nineteenth century,

Impressionism had been diluted and combined with the *plein air* Naturalism of the rural artists' colony circuit to become the foremost international style.

Unlike many of her peers, however, McNicoll maintained a strong attachment to the fundamental principles of "pure" Impressionism and pushed the style further than any other Canadian artist.



Helen McNicoll, *The Avenue*, c. 1912, oil on canvas, 97.1 x 79.4 cm, private collection. Although close to four decades separate this work from Claude Monet's *Boulevard des Capucines*, 1873-74, they share a similar approach to perspective, brushwork, and colour.



Claude Monet, *Boulevard des Capucines*, 1873-74, oil on canvas, 80.3 x 60.3 cm, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City.

### IMPRESSIONISM IN CANADA

Impressionism only gained currency in Canada almost three decades after its introduction in Paris. Instead, Hague School and Barbizon landscape works dominated the Canadian art market at the end of the nineteenth century.

Gradually, however, a small number of collectors in Montreal showed an interest in modern French painting. In 1909, William Van Horne (1843-1915) purchased McNicoll's *A September Morning* (date and location unknown) adding it to canvases he owned by Renoir, Cassatt, and other Impressionists.<sup>5</sup>

Montreal was the primary centre of Impressionism in Canada. In 1892, W. Scott and Sons Gallery sponsored the first exhibition of eight French Impressionist works, and others followed, including a show of Cassatt's delicate, Japanese-inspired etchings of modern women and children at the Art Association of Montreal (AAM) in 1907. It is tempting to imagine that McNicoll might have seen the show and taken inspiration from it. William Brymner was a leading proponent of Impressionism in its early years in Canada. Although he never fully adopted Impressionism in his own work, he encouraged Montrealers to open their minds to this trend. As he explained in a public lecture in 1897: "Impressionism is the modern manifestation of the eternal fight between the living and the felt ... between the work of men who see and think for themselves and those who inherit their eyes and thoughts all ready-made."<sup>6</sup> Brymner's lecture, with its emphasis on careful observation and individual perception, provides a glimpse into what McNicoll and her contemporaries learned about modern art at the AAM.

Beginning in the 1890s, a small group of Montreal artists led by Maurice Cullen (1866–1934) and James Wilson Morrice (1865–1924), both of whom had worked with Brymner in France, tried to import Impressionism to Canada. Cullen's scenes of light reflected on snow, such as *The Ice Harvest*, c. 1913, come close to a "native" Canadian Impressionism, though there was little cohesiveness among Canadian practitioners. Few painters fully adopted the style as McNicoll did. With some exceptions, scenes of modern urban life were much less popular in Canada than in France and the United States, and landscape and rural genre scenes continued to dominate. McNicoll's own work, in paintings such as *Midsummer*, c. 1909, follows this trend.



Mary Cassatt, *Maternal Caress*, 1890–91, colour drypoint and aquatint on cream laid paper, 43.5 x 30.3 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington. Cassatt's series of ten Japanese-inspired prints tackles the themes of domesticity and femininity that also interested McNicoll.



W.H. Clapp, *Morning in Spain*, 1907, oil on canvas, 73.9 x 92.6 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.



Helen McNicoll, *Midsummer*, c. 1909, oil on canvas, 61.8 x 72.2 cm, Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax.

McNicoll belonged to a second generation of Canadian Impressionists that included Clarence Gagnon (1881–1942) and Marc-Aurèle de Foy Suzor-Coté (1869–1937), both fellow Montrealers, and W.H. Clapp (1879–1954), with whom she shared the inaugural Jessie Dow Prize at the 1908 AAM Spring Exhibition. The winning canvases, McNicoll's *September Evening*, 1908, and Clapp's *Morning in Spain*, 1907, are both clearly inspired by Impressionism. Many of these artists trained with Brymner and went abroad within a few years of each other. Reviews of the AAM Spring Exhibitions through the first decade of the twentieth century refer to these artists' loyalty to the "New Painting" and the "French Method." In a characteristic review from 1909, a critic wrote that "Miss McNicoll has for some time past been studying on the continent, and she has certainly caught the spirit of the modern French Impressionist school."<sup>7</sup>

Though the reception of Impressionism in Canada was frequently ambivalent and sometimes overtly negative, McNicoll's work was almost unanimously well received. Some critics objected to her representation of water as rigid and unnatural—*Fishing*, c. 1907, for example, drew this criticism—but reviewers were generally supportive of her efforts, saying that she avoided the "extreme effects and extravagant technique" of some of her peers.<sup>8</sup> Her gender may partially explain this positive reaction: Norma Broude and Tamar Garb have noted that Impressionism was coded as a feminine style and that women Impressionists received positive notice for their soft, pretty treatments of everyday subjects, even as their male colleagues received criticism for those same qualities.<sup>9</sup>



Helen McNicoll, *Fishing*, c. 1907, oil on canvas, 87.6 x 101 cm, private collection.

Impressionism had a short life in Canada. When McNicoll was receiving positive notice for her canvases, the movement was already nearly forty years old in France, and the established avant-garde movement was Cubism. By the time Impressionism was widely accepted by the public in Canada, artists such as Emily Carr (1871–1945), Emily Coonan (1885–1971), and the Group of Seven had moved on to Post-Impressionist styles. McNicoll's own brief career neatly mirrors the short burst of attention given to Impressionism in Canada in its day.



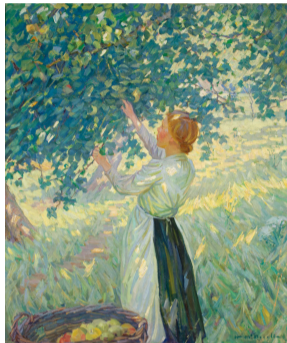
# WHERE TO SEE

Helen McNicoll's works are found in several public and private collections across Canada. The most significant public collections are at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, and The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa. The Robert McLaughlin Gallery also has an excellent artist file on Helen McNicoll containing many original photographs and documents, including the ones published in this book. Although these institutions hold the works listed below, they may not always be on view.

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## ART GALLERY OF HAMILTON

123 King Street West  
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada  
905-527-6610  
artgalleryofhamilton.com



**Helen McNicoll, *The Apple Gatherer*, c. 1911**

Oil on canvas  
106.8 x 92.2 cm



**Helen McNicoll, *The Victorian Dress*, c. 1914**

Oil on canvas  
107.1 x 91.7 cm

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## ART GALLERY OF NOVA SCOTIA

1723 Hollis Street  
Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada  
902-424-5280  
artgalleryofnovascotia.ca



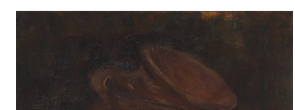
**Helen McNicoll, *Midsummer*, c. 1909**

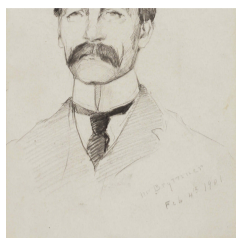
Oil on canvas  
61.8 x 72.2 cm

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## ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO

317 Dundas Street West  
Toronto, Ontario, Canada  
1-877-225-4246 or 416-979-6648  
ago.net





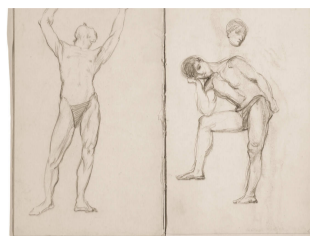
**Helen McNicoll,  
*Wm. Brymner*, 1901**

Graphite on paper  
17.5 x 12.4 cm



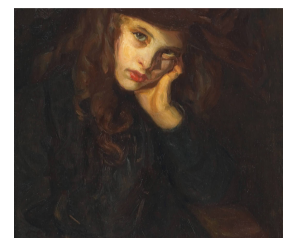
**Helen McNicoll, *Sketch of Female Nudes from Dessin [sic] Sketchbook*, c. 1902**

Graphite and charcoal  
on wove paper  
Each page: 32 x 24 cm



**Helen McNicoll,  
*"Sketch of Male Nudes"*  
from *Large Sketchbook*,  
c. 1902**

Graphite and conte on  
laid paper  
Each page:  
20.3 x 13 cm



**Helen McNicoll, *The Brown Hat*, c. 1906**

Oil on canvas  
53.5 x 43.5 cm



**Helen McNicoll,  
*Landscape with Cows*,  
c. 1907**

Oil on canvas  
90.5 x 71.1 cm



**Helen McNicoll, *The Little Worker*, c. 1907**

Oil on canvas  
61 x 51.3 cm



**Helen McNicoll,  
*Interior*, c. 1910**

Oil on canvas  
55.9 x 45.9 cm



**Helen McNicoll, *Picking Flowers*, c. 1912**

Oil on canvas  
94 x 78.8 cm



**Helen McNicoll, *Sketch for "Picking Flowers"*, c. 1912**

Oil on canvas on  
laminated paperboard  
25.5 x 20.3 cm



**Helen McNicoll, *White Sunshade #2*, c. 1912**

Oil on canvas  
99.5 x 81.9 cm

## BEAVERBROOK ART GALLERY

703 Queen Street  
Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada  
506-458-2028  
beaverbrookartgallery.org



**Helen McNicoll, *Moonlight*,  
c. 1905**

Oil on canvas  
71.1 x 83.8 cm

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## MCCORD MUSEUM

690 Sherbrooke Street West  
Montreal, Quebec, Canada  
514-861-6701  
[musee-mccord.qc.ca/en](http://musee-mccord.qc.ca/en)



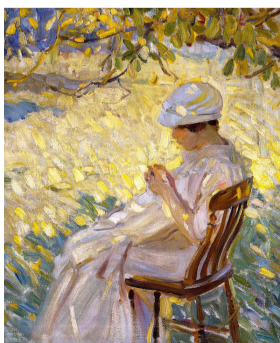
**Helen McNicoll, *The Victorian Dress*, 1914**

Oil on canvas  
108.8 x 94.5 cm

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## MCMICHAEL CANADIAN ART COLLECTION

10365 Islington Avenue  
Kleinburg, Ontario, Canada  
1-888-213-1121 or 905-893-1121  
[mcmichael.com](http://mcmichael.com)



**Helen McNicoll, *Beneath the***



**Helen McNicoll, *Cherry Time*,**

**Trees, c. 1910**

Oil on canvas  
60 x 49.5 cm

**c. 1912**

Oil on canvas  
81.7 x 66.4 cm

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**MONTREAL MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS**

1380 Sherbrooke Street West  
Jean-Noël Desmarais Pavilion  
Montreal, Quebec, Canada  
514-285-2000  
[mbam.qc.ca/en](http://mbam.qc.ca/en)



**Helen McNicoll, *Academy, 1899-1900***  
Charcoal and pencil on paper  
61.8 x 47.4 cm



**Helen McNicoll, *Study of a Child, c. 1900***  
Oil on canvas  
61 x 50.8 cm



**Helen McNicoll, *Under the Shadow of the Tent, 1914***  
Oil on canvas  
83.5 x 101.2 cm

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**MUSÉE NATIONAL DES BEAUX-ARTS DU QUÉBEC**

179 Grande Allée Ouest  
Quebec City, Quebec, Canada  
418-643-2150  
[mnbaq.org/en](http://mnbaq.org/en)



**Helen McNicoll, *In the Shadow of the Tree, c. 1914***  
Oil on canvas  
100.3 x 81.7 cm

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**NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA**

380 Sussex Drive  
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada  
1-800-319-2787 or 613-990-1985

gallery.ca



**Helen McNicoll, *Buttercups*,  
c. 1910**

Oil on canvas  
40.7 x 46.1 cm



**Helen McNicoll, *Stubble Fields*,  
c. 1912**

Oil on canvas  
73.7 x 89.7 cm

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## NEW BRUNSWICK MUSEUM

1 Market Square  
Saint John, New Brunswick, Canada  
506-643-2300  
nbm-mnb.ca



**Helen McNicoll, *The Farmyard*,  
c. 1908**

Oil on canvas  
71 x 85.5 cm

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## THE ROBERT MCLAUGHLIN GALLERY

72 Queen Street  
Oshawa, Ontario, Canada  
905-576-3000  
rmg.on.ca



**Helen McNicoll, *Cottage, Evening*,  
c. 1905**



**Helen McNicoll, *Market  
Cart in Brittany*, c. 1910**  
Oil on canvas



**Helen McNicoll, *Marketplace*, 1910**  
Oil on canvas



**Helen McNicoll, *River  
Landscape*, n.d.**  
Oil on canvas



Oil on canvas  
56 x 45.5 cm

61 x 51.3 cm

63.8 x 77. 3 cm

45.7 x 60.8 cm

## NOTES

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1. A small number of letters from Helen McNicoll to her family are held at The Robert McLaughlin Gallery in Oshawa, Ontario, while her early sketchbooks and scrapbooks belong to private collections.
2. Kristina Huneault, "Impressions of Difference: The Painted Canvases of Helen McNicoll," *Art History* 27, no. 2 (April 2004): 226 and 228.
3. Natalie Luckyj, *Helen McNicoll: A Canadian Impressionist* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1999), 46.
4. Charlotte J. Weeks, "Women at Work: The Slade Girls," *Magazine of Art* 6 (1883): 325.
5. Quoted in Michael Jacobs, *The Good and Simple Life: Artist Colonies in Europe and America* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1985), 151.
6. Quoted in Marion Whybrow, *St. Ives: Portrait of an Art Colony* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Antique Collectors' Club, 1994), 58.
7. Emily Carr, *Growing Pains: The Autobiography of Emily Carr* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2005), 204-16.
8. Letter from Helen McNicoll to David McNicoll, date unknown, possibly early 1907. The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa, ON.
9. Carr, *Growing Pains*, 223.
10. Letter from Helen McNicoll to David McNicoll, July 20, 1913. The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa, ON.
11. "Miss H.G. McNicoll has talent; her six entries attest to it." Charles Gill, "Le salon," *Le Canada*, April 3, 1906, 4.
12. "The Royal Canadian Academy of Arts," *Montreal Standard*, April 1, 1907, 15.
13. "Award Art Prizes," *Montreal Gazette*, March 31, 1908, 9.
14. Letter from Helen McNicoll to David McNicoll, March 19, 1913. The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa, ON.
15. "Miss McNicoll now a Member of Royal Art Society," *Montreal Daily Star*, April 2, 1913, 2.
16. Letter from Helen McNicoll to David McNicoll, August 4, 1914. The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa, ON.
17. "A Loss to Canadian Art," *Saturday Night* 28 (July 10, 1915): 3.

18. "Exhibits Drawn from a Wide Area," *Montreal Gazette*, March 22, 1922, 5.

#### KEY WORKS: COTTAGE, EVENING

1. Emily Carr, *Growing Pains: The Autobiography of Emily Carr* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2005), 214.

#### KEY WORKS: THE LITTLE WORKER

1. Nina Lübbren, *Rural Artists' Colonies in Europe, 1870-1910* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 98-112.

2. Natalie Luckyj, *Helen McNicoll: A Canadian Impressionist* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1999), 50.

3. "New Art Displayed," *Montreal Gazette*, April 1, 1907, 10.

4. "Royal Canadian Academy of Exhibits," *Montreal Standard*, April 1, 1907, 11.

#### KEY WORKS: INTERIOR

1. Kristina Huneault, "Impressions of Difference: The Painted Canvases of Helen McNicoll," *Art History* 27, no. 2 (April 2004): 241.

#### KEY WORKS: THE APPLE GATHERER

1. "Pictures That Are Being Talked About," *Montreal Daily Witness*, April 15, 1909, 3.

2. William R. Watson, "Artists' Work of High Order," *Montreal Gazette*, March 10, 1911, 7.

3. Natalie Luckyj, *Helen McNicoll: A Canadian Impressionist* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1999), 42.

#### KEY WORKS: PICKING FLOWERS

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3. Marion Whybrow, *St. Ives, 1883-1993: Portrait of an Art Colony* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Antique Collectors' Club, 1994), 100.

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2. For example, Albert H. Robson, *Canadian Landscape Painters* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1932), 162.

**KEY WORKS: THE CHINTZ SOFA**

1. Natalie Luckyj, *Helen McNicoll: A Canadian Impressionist* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1999), 63.
2. Helen McNicoll to David McNicoll, March 19, 1913. The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa, ON.
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4. Carol Lowrey, "'Into Line with the Progress of Art': The Impressionist Tradition in Canadian Painting, 1885-1920," in *Visions of Light and Air: Canadian Impressionism, 1885-1920*, ed. Carol Lowrey, 15-39 (New York: Americas Society Art Gallery, 1995), 35.
5. Hector Charlesworth, "The R.C.A. Exhibition," *Saturday Night*, November 28, 1914, 4.
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5. On professionalism and historical Canadian women artists, see the essays in Kristina Huneault and Janice Anderson, eds., *Rethinking Professionalism: Essays on Women and Art in Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press), 2012.
6. "A Loss to Canadian Art," *Saturday Night* 28 (July 10, 1915): 3.
7. Henri Fabien, "L'Académie royale," *Le Devoir*, December 6, 1913, 2.
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10. "A Loss to Canadian Art," *Saturday Night* 28: 3.
11. Kristina Huneault, "Impressions of Difference: The Painted Canvases of Helen McNicoll," *Art History* 27, no. 2 (April 2004): 222.
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## GLOSSARY

### **academic tradition**

Associated with the Royal Academies of Art established in France and England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries respectively, the academic tradition emphasized drawing, painting, and sculpture in a style highly influenced by ancient classical art. Subject matter for painting was hierarchically ranked, with history painting of religious, mythological, allegorical, and historical figures holding the position of greatest importance, followed, in order, by genre painting, portraiture, still lifes, and landscapes.

### **Art Association of Montreal (AAM)**

Founded in 1860 as an offshoot of the Montreal Society of Artists (itself dating to 1847), the Art Association of Montreal became the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts in 1947. The MMFA is now a major international museum, with more than 760,000 visitors annually.

### **artists' colonies**

Communities where artists congregated to live, work, collaborate, and critique each other's work in an atmosphere of creative freedom. They were especially popular in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Europe and on both the east and west coasts in the United States as artists moved from cities to rural villages during the summer months. A few artists' colonies developed into permanent settlements where artists' supplies were readily available and classes and instruction were offered.

### **Bannerman, Frances Jones (Canadian, 1855–1940)**

An oil painter, watercolourist, and poet, Bannerman was one of the earliest North Americans to work in the Impressionist style. She became the first woman to be elected an associate member of the Royal Canadian Academy in 1882. At the Paris Salon in 1883, Bannerman contributed *Le Jardin d'hiver*, a rare early representation of Canadian subject matter to be shown at the exhibition. Later in life the artist developed rheumatoid arthritis and turned her focus to poetry.

### **Barbizon**

A village on the edge of the forest of Fontainebleau near Paris and, from the 1830s to the 1870s, a gathering place for French landscape painters who rejected the academic style in favour of realism. This informal group, later known as the Barbizon school, emphasized painting *en plein air*, in and directly from nature, setting the path for Impressionism. Major artists of the group include Théodore Rousseau, Jean-François Millet, and Camille Corot.

### **Bastien-Lepage, Jules (French, 1848–1884)**

A leading French Naturalist painter, Bastien-Lepage was especially known for his rural scenes and portraits of famous performers. He studied with Alexandre Cabanel at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris 1867 and was awarded the prestigious Legion of Honour in 1879 for his *Portrait of Sarah Bernhardt*.

**Beaver Hall Group**

Formed in 1920, this Montreal-based group of nineteen modern artists was concerned with pictorial representations of cityscapes, landscapes, and portraits. French modernism and the distinctly Canadian perspective of the Group of Seven influenced the Beaver Hall Group, also known as the Beaver Hall Hill Group. Members included Edwin Holgate, Sarah Robertson, and Anne Savage.

**Brown, Eric (British/Canadian, 1877–1939)**

As the first director of the National Gallery of Canada, Brown held the position from 1912 until his death. Earlier, he had been curator of the gallery's collection, at the invitation of Sir Edmund Walker, a banker and major patron of the arts. Brown was a passionate builder of the gallery's collections, both international and Canadian, and travelled often to Europe to make contacts with artists and dealers.

**Brown, Frederick (British, 1851–1941)**

A British oil painter and art teacher, Brown energetically opposed the Royal Academy of Arts's conservatism in both his own style and his teaching methods. He became a founding member of the New English Art Club in 1886. He was influenced by James McNeill Whistler, the rustic Naturalism of Jules Bastien-Lepage, and Impressionism. Brown served as principal of the Westminster School of Art from 1877 to 1892 and taught at the Slade School of Fine Art from 1893 to 1918.

**Bruce, William Blair (Canadian, 1859–1906)**

Regarded as one of Canada's first Impressionist painters, Bruce studied at the Académie Julian in Paris and spent time at the artists' colonies in Barbizon, Giverny, and Grez-sur-Loing, France. Two Canadian scholarships for artists are named in his honour, offering an opportunity to paint on the island of Gotland, Sweden, where he established an artist estate with his wife, the sculptor Carolina Benedicks-Bruce. A bequest of Bruce's works by his wife and father to the City of Hamilton, Ontario, became the basis of the Art Gallery of Hamilton.

**Brymner, William (Scottish/Canadian, 1855–1925)**

A painter and influential teacher who contributed greatly to the development of painting in Canada, Brymner instructed at the Art Association of Montreal. Several of his students, including A.Y. Jackson, Edwin Holgate, and Prudence Heward, became prominent figures in Canadian art.

**Caillebotte, Gustave (French, 1848–1894)**

A major nineteenth-century French painter, collector, and promoter of Impressionist art. Caillebotte's painting debut was in the second Impressionist exhibition of 1876, where he displayed images depicting the urban working class. Originally a lawyer, Caillebotte often painted interior scenes of upper-class everyday life and cityscapes, with a focus on perspective and composition.

**Carlyle, Florence (Canadian, 1864–1923)**

Major Canadian landscape and figure painter. Carlyle is known for her nuanced and Tonalist-inspired depictions of women. She studied in France with the encouragement of Paul Peel, later moved to New York, travelled extensively

throughout Europe, and finally settled in England in 1912. Her work can be found in the collections of the Art Gallery of Ontario, the National Gallery of Canada, the Parliament Buildings, and the Woodstock Art Gallery.

**Carr, Emily (Canadian, 1871–1945)**

A pre-eminent B.C.-based artist and writer, Carr is renowned today for her bold and vibrant images of both the Northwest Coast landscape and its Native peoples. Educated in California, England, and France, she was influenced by a variety of modern art movements but ultimately developed a unique aesthetic style. She was one of the first West Coast artists to achieve national recognition. (See *Emily Carr: Life & Work* by Lisa Baldissera.)

**Cassatt, Mary (American, 1844–1926)**

Cassatt painted figurative work, often featuring women and children. Her paintings were shown regularly at the Salon in Paris. She was the only American painter officially associated with the French Impressionists.

**Chase, William Merritt (American, 1849–1916)**

American Impressionist painter influenced by both the Old Masters and Édouard Manet. Chase was known as a charismatic art teacher who taught, among others, Georgia O’Keeffe and Edward Hopper at the Art Students League in New York. He often painted portraits, domestic scenes, New York City parks, and still lifes. He established the Chase School, now called Parsons School of Design.

**Clapp, W.H. (Canadian, 1879–1954)**

A landscape and figure painter, Clapp was influenced by the emphasis on light effects in Impressionism, the detailed and mottled brushwork of Pointillism, and the bold colours of Fauvism. Born in Montreal to American parents, he studied in Paris and Madrid before settling first in Montreal and then in Oakland, California. Clapp served as curator and director of the Oakland Art Gallery for over thirty years and exhibited often with the California Society of Six.

**Coonan, Emily (Canadian, 1885–1971)**

Portraitist and landscape painter known for her depictions of women in interior settings. Coonan was the only member of the Beaver Hall Group who did not belong to the established Montreal art scene or exhibit widely with them. Her later works show Impressionist and Modernist influences with simplified backgrounds and expressive brushwork prioritized over realistic capture.

**Courbet, Gustave (French, 1819–1877)**

A critical figure in nineteenth-century art, whose paintings—most famously *Burial at Ornans* and *The Painter’s Studio*—helped establish the Realist movement and paved the way for later artists, including the Impressionists, to abandon classical subjects for those they encountered in their daily lives.

**Cubism**

A radical style of painting developed by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque in Paris between 1907 and 1914, defined by the representation of numerous perspectives at once. Cubism is considered crucial to the history of modern art

for its enormous international impact; famous practitioners also include Juan Gris and Francis Picabia.

**Cullen, Maurice (Canadian, 1866–1934)**

Like many Canadian painters of his generation, Maurice Cullen received his early art education in Montreal, then moved to Paris to continue his studies at the Académie Julian, the Académie Colarossi, and the Paris École des Beaux-Arts. He was influenced by Impressionism and his landscapes, in turn, influenced a younger generation of Canadian painters, including the Group of Seven. His winter landscapes and snowy urban scenes are considered his most impressive achievement.

**Degas, Edgar (French, 1834–1917)**

A painter, sculptor, printmaker, and draftsman, aligned with but separate from the Impressionist movement, frequently departing from its norms: Degas was not interested in changing atmospheric effects and rarely painted outdoors. Characteristic subjects include the ballet, theatre, cafés, and women at their toilette.

**Dutch Golden Age**

Period of the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic that saw rapid economic growth based on trade, shipbuilding, advancements in energy technology, colonization, and the predominance of Protestantism. The arts and several other fields flourished as the population boomed, wages grew, and patronage increased. The nation became one of the world's wealthiest, with Amsterdam positioned as the arts capital. Notable figures of this era include philosopher Baruch Spinoza and painters Johannes Vermeer and Rembrandt van Rijn.

**Eastlake, Mary Bell (Canadian, 1864–1951)**

A painter, jewellery maker, and watercolourist, Eastlake was born in Ontario and later studied with William Merritt Chase in New York and at the Académie Colarossi in Paris. From about 1893 to 1939, Eastlake lived in England, where she designed and produced jewellery with her husband. She exhibited widely with many art associations in Canada and held a solo exhibition at the Art Gallery of Toronto (now the Art Gallery of Ontario) in 1927.

***en plein air***

French for “open air,” used to describe the practice of painting or sketching outdoors to observe nature and in particular the changing effects of light.

**Ford, Harriet (Canadian, 1859–1938)**

A painter, muralist, writer, and jewellery maker, Ford studied at the Central Ontario School of Art in Toronto in 1881, then travelled to England and France to continue her art education at the Royal Academy of Arts and Académie Colarossi. She was a founding member of the Society of Mural Decorators. Ford co-edited the magazine *Tarot* (1896) which was dedicated to the Arts and Crafts Movement.

**Gagnon, Clarence (Canadian, 1881–1942)**

Although he travelled and lived in Europe periodically throughout his career, Clarence Gagnon is best known for his paintings of the people and landscapes

of his native Quebec, and particularly the Charlevoix region. A virtuosic colourist, Gagnon created highly original winter scenes in vivid hues and generous play between light and dark. He is also known for illustrating books such as *Maria Chapdelaine* by Louis Hémon (1913) and *Le grand silence blanc* by L.F. Rouquette (1928).

### **Golden Square Mile (or Square Mile)**

Historically a prosperous area of Montreal, developed between 1840 and 1930 at the base of Mount Royal, northwest of the current downtown core.

Populated predominantly by Scottish Anglophones and the upper class, the area was renowned for its Victorian and Art Deco architecture and lavish estates in various styles, including Neoclassical and Romanesque. After the Second World War, many of these buildings were repurposed or demolished.

### **Group of Seven**

A progressive and nationalistic school of landscape painting in Canada, active between 1920 (the year of the group's first exhibition, at the Art Gallery of Toronto, now the Art Gallery of Ontario) and 1933. Founding members were the artists Franklin Carmichael, Lawren Harris, A.Y. Jackson, Frank Johnston, Arthur Lismer, J.E.H. MacDonald, and Frederick Varley.

### **Hague School**

A group of Dutch Realist painters active in The Hague, on the northwest coast of the Netherlands, from around 1860 to 1890. They were influenced by France's Barbizon school, which also reacted against the academic style of idealizing nature. The Hague School style is characterized by sombre tones used to depict everyday scenes of fishermen, farmers, windmills, and seascapes. The group led to the formation of the Amsterdam Impressionists, and included Jozef Israëls and Jacob Maris.

### **Harris, Lawren (Canadian, 1885–1970)**

A founding member of the Group of Seven in Toronto in 1920, Harris was widely considered its unofficial leader. His landscape-painting style, unlike that of the other members of the Group, evolved into pure abstraction. The Group of Seven broke up in 1933, and when the Canadian Group of Painters was formed in 1933, Harris was elected its first president.

### **Hassam, Childe (American, 1859–1935)**

Oil painter, watercolourist, and illustrator regarded as a leading figure of American Impressionism. Hassam depicted both the growing urban landscapes and quiet rural scenes of his modernizing country, favouring the influence of William Morris Hunt and the tradition of painting *en plein air*. His well-known "flag series" depicts the American flag strung along city streets, such as Fifth Avenue in New York, during the First World War.

### **Hayes, Edith (British, 1860–1948)**

Painter and wood engraver born in Portsmouth, England. Hayes studied at the Royal Academy of Arts and painted, travelled, and exhibited throughout Europe, including in Paris in 1889 and Italy in 1892. Hayes was an original member of the St. Ives Arts Club, based in Cornwall, England.

**Hiester Reid, Mary (American/Canadian, 1854–1921)**

Born in Pennsylvania, Hiester Reid immigrated to Toronto with her husband, George Agnew Reid. Perhaps best known for her floral paintings, Hiester Reid worked in oil on canvas and sometimes watercolour. She was an elected member of the Ontario Society of Artists and an associate member of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts. She exhibited in Canada and the United States and was collected by major institutions and private collectors. After her death, she became the first woman artist to receive a solo show at the Art Gallery of Toronto (now the Art Gallery of Ontario).

**Impressionism**

A highly influential art movement that originated in France in the 1860s and is associated with the emergence of modern urban European society. Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, and other Impressionists rejected the subjects and formal rigours of academic art in favour of scenes of nature and daily life and the careful rendering of atmospheric effects. They often painted outdoors.

**Israëls, Jozef (Dutch, 1824–1911)**

Leading painter and etcher from the Hague School of Dutch Realist artists. Israëls studied the rigid academic style under Horace Vernet and Paul Delaroche in Paris, but turned to scenes of everyday life rather than historical subjects. He favoured Dutch rural workers and peasants, depicting them indoors and outdoors, working or at leisure, with attention to atmospheric light. In 1895, Israëls served on the committee to organize the first Venice Biennale.

**Jackson, A.Y. (Canadian, 1882–1974)**

A founding member of the Group of Seven and an important voice in the formation of a distinctively Canadian artistic tradition. A Montreal native, Jackson studied painting in Paris before moving to Toronto in 1913; his northern landscapes are characterized by the bold brushstrokes and vivid colours of his Impressionist and Post-Impressionist influences.

**John, Augustus (Welsh, 1878–1961)**

Regarded as the first British Post-Impressionist artist, John was a painter and draftsman recognized for his skilled figure drawings and portraits. He studied at the Slade School of Fine Art in London from 1894 to 1899 and subsequently lived an itinerant artist's life during which he depicted Romany encampments in Wales, Dorset, and Ireland. During the First World War, John worked for the Canadian government as a war artist. He is the younger brother of painter Gwen John.

**John, Gwen (Welsh, 1876–1939)**

A painter recognized for her sensitive depictions of often-solitary women. From 1895 to 1898, she studied at the Slade School of Fine Art in London, then travelled to Paris to study under James McNeill Whistler. In 1904, John became a model and lover of Auguste Rodin. She was the older sister of painter Augustus John, though her reputation grew to match her brother's only after her death.

**Lewis, Wyndham (British, 1882–1957)**

A painter, writer, cultural critic, and co-founder of the Vorticist movement, which sought to relate art to the abstract geometric forms of industry. After studying in Paris, Lewis became influenced by Cubism and Expressionism. He was an editor of the journal *Blast*, which harshly attacked Victorian values in the years just prior to the First World War. He is also known for his writing and controversial support of fascism after the war.

**Long, Marion (Canadian, 1882–1970)**

A portrait painter commissioned to depict many high-ranking Canadian and military figures. Long studied with George Reid at the Ontario College of Art and William Merritt Chase at the Art Students League in New York. In 1933, she became the first woman to be elected as a full member to the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts since Lady Charlotte Schreiber in 1880.

**Lyll, Laura Muntz (Canadian, 1860–1930)**

A painter specializing in evocative portraits of motherhood and childhood and one of the first women artists in Canada to receive international attention. Lyll trained with J.W.L. Forster in Hamilton and at the Académie Colarossi in Paris. Her works convey intimate and sympathetic family scenes with a rich sense of colour and light.

**Maxwell, Edward and William S. (Canadian, 1867–1923 and 1874–1952)**

Born in Montreal, the brothers Edward and William S. Maxwell became partners in the former's architectural firm in 1902 and left behind an urban legacy. The Maxwell buildings include Château Frontenac in Quebec City, the Saskatchewan Legislative Building in Regina, and the Art Association of Montreal, now the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

**Millet, Jean-François (French, 1814–1875)**

Born into a peasant family, Millet was one of the founders of the Barbizon school, a group known for painting *en plein air* and favouring landscapes as subject matter. He is prominently recognized for empathetic depictions of rural labourers and peasants created just as the Industrial Revolution was causing mass migrations from the countryside to urban centres such as Paris. Millet was awarded the Legion of Honour in 1868 and was an inspiration for Vincent van Gogh.

**modernism**

A movement extending from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century in all the arts, modernism rejected academic traditions in favour of innovative styles developed in response to contemporary industrialized society. Beginning in painting with the Realist movement led by Gustave Courbet, it progressed through Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Fauvism, and Cubism and on to abstraction. By the 1960s, anti-authoritarian postmodernist styles such as Pop art, Conceptual art, and Neo-Expressionism blurred the distinction between high art and mass culture.

**Monet, Claude (French, 1840–1926)**

A founder of the Impressionist movement in France. Monet's landscapes and

seascapes are among the canonical works of Western art. Introduced to *plein air* painting as a teenager, Monet returned to it throughout his life as a means of exploring the atmospheric effects and perceptual phenomena that so interested him as an artist.

**Morisot, Berthe (French, 1841–1895)**

A painter and printmaker who found success at the Paris Salons before becoming involved, in the late 1860s, with the fledgling Impressionist movement. She became one of its most significant figures, best known for paintings of domestic life.

**Morrice, James Wilson (Canadian, 1865–1924)**

One of Canada's first modernist painters and first artists to gain international recognition, during his lifetime Morrice was nonetheless more celebrated in Europe than he was at home. He is best known for richly coloured landscapes that show the influence of James McNeill Whistler and Post-Impressionism.

**Naturalism**

Naturalism was a development within the realist art of the nineteenth century that sought to show the forces and effects of nature in human life, rejecting the idealized classical subjects preferred by the academy. Naturalism favoured an accurate documentation of the real life of people in the streets and at work or at leisure, showing even the ugly, painful sides of existence.

**New English Art Club**

Formed in London, England, in 1886 as a rejection of the conservative style of the Royal Academy of Arts. The New English Art Club was composed of a group of artists influenced by Impressionism, with early members including James McNeill Whistler, Walter Sickert, Philip Steer, and John Singer Sargent. The club still exists today to promote painting from the direct observation of nature and the human figure.

**Olsson, Julius (British, 1864–1942)**

A painter and teacher at the Cornish School of Landscape, Figure and Sea Painting in St. Ives, Cornwall and of Swedish descent, Olsson was part of the *plein air* British Impressionist movement that discovered the picturesque Cornish fishing village and seacoast in the late nineteenth century. St. Ives became a famous artists' colony that by the 1930s was attracting such avant-garde residents as Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth.

**Ontario Society of Artists (OSA)**

Canada's oldest extant professional artists' association, formed in 1872 by seven artists from various disciplines. Its first annual exhibition was held in 1873. The OSA eventually played an important role in the founding of OCAD University and the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto.

**Orpen, William (British/Irish, 1878–1931)**

Portrait painter known for being a child prodigy and official British war artist during the First World War. At age eleven, Orpen attended Dublin's School of Art and, at seventeen, entered the Slade School of Fine Art in London, where

he trained with Henry Tonks and gained the attention of John Singer Sargent. Orpen depicted many of the senior military and political officials of his time.

### **Paris Salon**

Beginning in 1667, the Paris Salon was a juried annual or biennial exhibition held at the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture (later the Académie des Beaux-Arts). It became the major marker of prominence for artists, especially between 1748 and 1890, and was known for its crammed display of paintings, covering the walls from floor to ceiling. Through exposure and the connections to patrons and commissions, artists' careers could be made by their inclusion in the Salon.

### **Pemberton, Sophie (Canadian, 1869–1959)**

A landscape and portrait painter first trained in San Francisco and London and then at the Académie Julian in Paris, where she became the first Canadian and the first woman to win a prestigious Prix Julian. Pemberton participated in the Louisiana Purchase Exhibition and showed her work at the Paris Salon and the Royal Academy of Arts.

### **Pissarro, Camille (Danish/French, 1830–1903)**

An influential art teacher and innovator who was largely self-taught, Pissarro was born in Saint Thomas (now in the U.S. Virgin Islands) and moved to Paris in 1855. He participated in all eight Impressionist exhibitions, but in the 1880s his style tended to Post-Impressionism, and he explored the technique of Pointillism.

### **Post-Impressionism**

A term coined by the British art critic Roger Fry in 1910 to describe painting produced originally in France between about 1880 and 1905 in response to Impressionism's artistic advances and limitations. Central figures include Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin, and Vincent van Gogh.

### **Renoir, Pierre-Auguste (French, 1841–1919)**

One of the foremost figures of the Impressionist movement. Renoir's prints, paintings, and sculptures often depict scenes of leisure and domestic ease. He left the Impressionists in 1878 to participate again in the Paris Salon, the city's officially sanctioned annual art exhibition.

### **Royal Academy of Arts**

Established in 1768, the Royal Academy of Arts in London was a central art institution that, along with the Paris Salon, could exert tremendous influence on an artist's career. By the mid-nineteenth century, European avant-garde movements such as Impressionism began to diminish the power held by the Royal Academy and similar institutions.

### **Royal Canadian Academy of Arts (RCA)**

An organization of professional artists and architects, modelled after national academies long present in Europe, such as the Royal Academy of Arts in the U.K. (founded in 1768) and the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture in Paris (founded in 1648). The RCA was founded in 1880 by the Ontario Society of Artists and the Art Association of Montreal.

**Royal Society of British Artists**

Established in 1823 by a group of artists as an alternative to the Royal Academy in London. The society's membership consists of sculptors, painters, architects, and printmakers. Its first gallery was designed by John Nash and built on Suffolk Street, London. Prominent past members include James McNeill Whistler, Barbara Tate, and Philip de László.

**Seurat, Georges (French, 1859–1891)**

An influential painter, Seurat was a pioneer of the Neo-Impressionist movement, departing from Impressionism's relative spontaneity and practising more formal structure and symbolic content. Along with Paul Signac, he developed Pointillism, a technique adopted by other painters such as Camille Pissarro, Piet Mondrian, and Wassily Kandinsky.

**Sharp, Dorothea (British, 1874–1955)**

A British Impressionist painter known for her depictions of children at play in various landscapes. Sharp studied in Paris, where she was influenced by Claude Monet. From 1908 to 1912, she served as vice-president of the Society of Women Artists. She exhibited with many art associations and travelled extensively in Europe with Canadian artist Helen McNicoll.

**Slade School of Fine Art**

Established at University College London, England, in 1871 through a bequest by philanthropist Felix Slade, the school was envisioned as a place where fine art would be studied within a wider liberal arts environment. The Slade boasts many prominent past teachers and students, including Henry Tonks, Lucian Freud, Augustus John, and Dora Carrington. The school still operates today.

**Smith, Jessie Willcox (American, 1863–1935)**

A leading female illustrator of American children's books, popular magazines, and advertisements. Smith studied with the eminent Thomas Eakins at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. She contributed drawings to an edition of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *Evangeline* in 1897.

**Smith, Marcella (British, 1887–1963)**

Oil painter and watercolourist known for her landscapes, townscapes, and flower studies. Smith studied at the Philadelphia School of Design and at Académie Colarossi in Paris. In 1921, she moved to London to live with fellow artist Dorothea Sharp. From 1949 to 1963, Smith served as vice-president of the Society of Women Artists.

**Society of Women Artists**

A British society established in 1857 to promote and fight for the exhibition of works by women artists, whose abilities were doubted by influential critics such as John Ruskin. The society was also a reaction to the Royal Academy of Arts, which was a dominating force in the art scene but did not admit women art students to its school until 1860 (and then only in a limited capacity).

**Steer, Philip Wilson (British, 1860–1942)**

A leading British Impressionist painter and art teacher. Steer trained at the

Académie Julian and at the École des Beaux-Arts with Alexandre Cabanel, where he was also influenced by Édouard Manet and James McNeill Whistler. Steer was a founding member of the New English Art Club and taught at the Slade School of Fine Art from 1893 to 1930.

**Stevens, Dorothy (Canadian, 1888–1966)**

Renowned Canadian portrait painter, etcher, and printmaker. Stevens studied at the Slade School of Fine Art at age fifteen, under Philip Wilson Steer and Henry Tonks. In 1919, she was commissioned by the Canadian War Memorials Fund to produce prints depicting factory workers of the First World War. Her works can be found in the collections of the Art Gallery of Ontario and the National Gallery of Canada.

**Suzor-Coté, Marc-Aurèle de Foy (Canadian, 1869–1937)**

A remarkably versatile artist, Suzor-Coté was a successful sculptor, painter, illustrator, and church decorator. In 1890 he left rural Quebec to study art in Paris and remained there for eighteen years, painting rural landscapes in an Impressionist style.

**Talmage, Algernon (British, 1871–1939)**

British Impressionist painter, etcher, and portraitist. Talmage was an official war artist for the Canadian government alongside Augustus John during the First World War. He was an early influence on Emily Carr as a teacher at the Cornish School of Landscape, Figure and Sea Painting in St. Ives, England, encouraging the development of her forest paintings.

**Thomson, Tom (Canadian, 1877–1917)**

A seminal figure in the creation of a national school of painting, whose bold vision of Algonquin Park—aligned stylistically with Post-Impressionism and Art Nouveau—has come to symbolize both the Canadian landscape and Canadian landscape painting. Thomson and the members of what would in 1920 become the Group of Seven profoundly influenced one another's work. (See *Tom Thomson: Life & Work* by David P. Silcox.)

**Tonks, Henry (British, 1862–1937)**

Surgeon, draftsman, and influential British Impressionist painter and teacher. During the First World War, Tonks worked with various Red Cross factions and hospitals to create striking pastel and pen-and-ink portraits of injured soldiers. Tonks taught at the Slade School of Fine Art beginning in 1892, working with pupils like Augustus John, Gwen John, Wyndham Lewis, and Dorothy Stevens.

**Tully, Sydney Strickland (Canadian, 1860–1911)**

Oil painter known for her portraits, landscapes, and genre scenes. Tully studied extensively with numerous leading painters at the Central Ontario School of Art (now OCAD University), Slade School of Fine Art, Académie Julian, Académie Colarossi, and the Long Island School of Art. Tully's *The Twilight of Life* became the first painting by a Canadian artist acquired by the Art Gallery of Toronto (now the Art Gallery of Ontario) in 1911.

**Van Horne, William (Canadian, 1843–1915)**

Major railway entrepreneur, industrialist, and capitalist. Van Horne was

appointed general manager of the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1882 to oversee its proper construction and became president in 1888. He viewed the railway as a communications system similar to telegraph technology, which his company also developed. As an amateur architect, Van Horne helped design the Banff Springs hotel and Château Frontenac. He also painted in his leisure time and was an important collector of art and Japanese porcelain.

**Vermeer, Johannes (Dutch, 1632–1675)**

A major figure in seventeenth-century Dutch art, whose technically masterful and evocative paintings are among the most celebrated in Western art history. He is best known for genre scenes—such as *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher*—that display meticulous construction and attention to light.

**Vigée-Lebrun, Elisabeth (French, 1755–1842)**

Official portraitist of Queen Marie Antoinette, beginning in 1778. Vigée-Lebrun was an exceptional woman painter of her time, at the intervention of the monarchy becoming one of only four women accepted into the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture. She continued to prosper after fleeing revolutionary France, working and painting members of royal families across Europe and exhibiting regularly at the Paris Salon.

**Weissenbruch, Jan (Dutch, 1824–1903)**

Leading member of the Hague School, best known for his watercolour paintings of landscapes, beaches, and cityscapes of Dutch life. Weissenbruch trained with Johannes Low and the scenery painter Bart van Hove, travelling abroad only to visit Paris and the village of Barbizon.

**Women's Art Association of Canada**

This association, founded in 1887 by Mary Dignam, who was also the association's first president, was inspired by the Art Students League in New York. Today it is a non-profit organization of approximately two hundred members that provides scholarships to women in various fields of fine art and crafts.

**Women's Art Society of Montreal**

Founded in 1894 by Mary Martha Phillips and Mary Alice Skelton, the society advocated for women artists who had difficulty obtaining public showings of their work. Originally a branch of the Women's Art Association, incorporated in Toronto in 1892, it became independent in 1907. The society supported soldiers during and after the First World War through fundraising efforts and establishing the Soldiers' Fund to aid disabled veterans. It continues to promote women's rights in the arts today.

**Wyle, Florence (American/Canadian, 1881–1968)**

Prominent sculptor and designer who, together with her partner Frances Loring, shaped the landscape of Canadian sculpture. Influenced by classical Greek sculpture, Wyle specialized in anatomy and depicted women in various poses, from undertaking manual labour to the erotic. Wyle was a co-founder of the Sculptors Society of Canada and the first woman sculptor awarded full membership to the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts.



Until very recently, Helen McNicoll's work had received little critical or popular notice. Although she exhibited widely in her lifetime to positive reviews in both Canada and England, during much of the twentieth century she was ignored. The efforts of feminist art historians and curators in recent decades have begun to bring much-needed attention once again to this important Canadian artist.

An impressionistic oil painting of a forest path. The scene is filled with tall, slender trees whose trunks are rendered in dark, vertical strokes. The ground is a mix of light and dark patches, suggesting dappled sunlight and shadows. Several figures are visible: a person in a white dress and hat in the distance, and others in darker clothing further back. The overall style is soft and painterly, with visible brushstrokes.

# SOURCES & RESOURCES

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|-------------|---|
| <b>1974</b> | <i>Helen McNicoll: Oil Paintings from the Estate</i> , Morris Gallery, Toronto. |
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| <b>1975–76</b> | <i>From Women's Eyes: Women Painters in Canada</i> , Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston. |
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| <b>1995</b> | <i>Visions of Light and Air: Canadian Impressionism, 1885-1920</i> , Americas Society Art Gallery, New York. |
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| <b>1999</b> | <i>Helen McNicoll: A Canadian Impressionist</i> , Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. |
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## CRITICAL INTERPRETATIONS

The most complete and accessible study of Helen McNicoll's life and work is the exhibition catalogue for the 1999 show at the Art Gallery of Ontario, written by curator Natalie Luckyj. An important academic article by Kristina Huneault examines in depth the intersections among McNicoll's gender, deafness, and Impressionist style. Until recently, McNicoll has not been included in surveys of Canadian art. She has fared better in studies of Canadian women artists and Canadian Impressionism.

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Front cover of *Helen McNicoll: A Canadian Impressionist* by Natalie Luckyj, featuring a detail of McNicoll's *Picking Flowers*, c. 1912.



Front cover of *Independent Spirit: Early Canadian Women Artists* by A.K. Prakash, featuring McNicoll's *In the Tent*, 1914.



### ARCHIVES AND OTHER RESOURCES

Although McNicoll's scrapbook and sketchbooks remain in private collections, a small archive of material relating to the artist can be found at The Robert McLaughlin Gallery in Oshawa, Ontario, including a few of her letters to her father and a small number of photographs.

The Canadian Women Artists History Initiative, founded at Montreal's Concordia University in 2007, is an ongoing project to bring together scholars working on issues relating to historical Canadian women artists. Their documentation centre is an important collection of primary source materials relating to a large number of artists, including McNicoll. Their website includes a database of key artists (including biographies and bibliographies) and a collection of scanned periodical reviews.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### SAMANTHA BURTON

Samantha Burton is a lecturer in the Department of Art History at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, where she held a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Postdoctoral Fellowship from 2013 to 2015. She received her PhD from McGill University in 2012, where she was awarded the McGill Arts Insights Award for best dissertation in the humanities and the Canadian Studies Network national dissertation prize. She is currently completing a book manuscript about Canadian women artists who lived and worked in Britain in the decades just before the First World War. She has published several articles based on this research, including essays about Emily Carr's time in a London boarding house and about Elizabeth Armstrong Forbes's medievalist illustration work. She is especially interested in how Canadian women artists' travel affected their understandings of race and national identity in the context of the British Empire. Burton has also published on French artist J.J.J. Tissot's representations of his London plant conservatory—part of a larger ongoing research project on the visual culture of the conservatory in nineteenth-century Britain and North America.



**"A decade ago, I was drawn to Helen McNicoll's bright paintings of sunny beaches and sightseeing tourists, so modern in their own way. Today, it is her always-complicated representations of independent female figures that bring me back. McNicoll's quietly innovative approach made her a leading artist in her own day in both Canada and England; after many years of neglect, it's thrilling to see her work reaching new audiences."**



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#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

##### From the Author

Many thanks to the Art Canada Institute and its stellar team for the opportunity to make Helen McNicoll's wonderful body of work available to a new audience. Thanks especially to Sara Angel for her enthusiastic encouragement along the way. It has been a true privilege and pleasure to work so closely with Rosemary Shipton and Kendra Ward on this project. Their editorial suggestions improved this manuscript immeasurably. A particularly warm thanks to Eva Lu, whose tireless image research made this book possible.

This book has also benefitted from the advice, comments, and generous support of my doctoral and postdoctoral supervisors, Charmaine Nelson and Kate Flint, as well as many other friends, colleagues, and mentors at McGill and USC. I am especially grateful to Kristina Huneault, whose own work on McNicoll has been an inspiration.

##### From the Art Canada Institute

The Art Canada Institute gratefully acknowledges the generosity of the six children of Betty-Ann McNicoll-Elliott and R. Fraser Elliott and Sandra L. Simpson, the Title Sponsors of this book.

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The ACI gratefully acknowledges the support and assistance of the Art Gallery of Hamilton (Christine Braun); Art Gallery of Nova Scotia (Shannon Parker); Art Gallery of Ontario (Amy Furness, Tracy Mallon-Jensen, Marilyn Nazar, Donald Rance); Beaverbrook Art Gallery (Sarah Dick, Clinton Gillespie); Bonhams (Peter Rees); Bridgeman Images (Nancy Glowinski, Addie Warner); Bushey Museum and Art Gallery (John Gerry, Patrick Forsyth, Patricia Wollard); Carnegie Museum of Art (Bryan Conley, Laurel Mitchell); Christie's (Emily Lin, Louise Simpson); Firefly Books (Parisa Michailidis); Heffel Fine Art Auction House (Molly Tonken); Kimbell Art Museum (Shelly Treadgill); Los Angeles County

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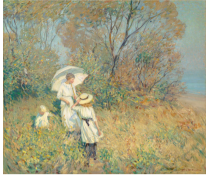
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Biography: Helen McNicoll in her studio at St. Ives, c. 1906. (See below for details.)



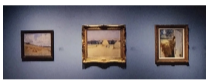
Key Works: Helen McNicoll, *Marketplace*, 1910. (See below for details.)



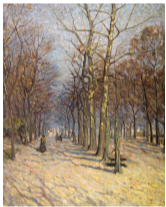
Significance & Critical Issues: Helen McNicoll, *Sunny September*, 1913. (See below for details.)



Style & Technique: Helen McNicoll, *Stubble Fields*, c. 1912. (See below for details.)



Where to See: North view of the 1999 Helen McNicoll exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Courtesy of the Art Gallery of Ontario.



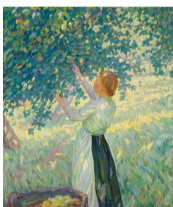
Sources & Resources: Helen McNicoll, *The Avenue*, c. 1912. (See below for details.)

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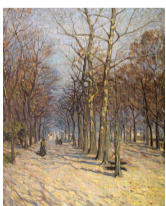
## Credits for Works by Helen McNicoll



*Academy*, 1899-1900. Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, gift of the artist (Dr.1919.214).



*The Apple Gatherer*, c. 1911. Art Gallery of Hamilton, gift of G.C. Mutch, Esq., in memory of his mother, Annie Elizabeth Mutch, 1957 (57.87.0).



*The Avenue*, c. 1912. Private collection. Courtesy of Heffel Fine Art Auction House.



*Beneath the Trees*, c. 1910. McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg (1995.30.1).



*The Blue Sea (On the Beach at St. Malo)*, c. 1914. Private collection. Courtesy of Heffel Fine Art and Auction House.



*The Brown Hat*, c. 1906. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, gift from the Estate of R. Fraser Elliott, 2006 (2006/88).



*Buttercups*, c. 1910. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, bequest of Sylva Gelber, Ottawa, 2005 (41709).



*Cherry Time*, c. 1912. McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg (1995.30.3).



*The Chintz Sofa*, c. 1913. Private collection, Thornhill, Ontario. Courtesy of Masters Gallery, Calgary.



*The Chintz Sofa #2*, c. 1913, private collection.



*Cottage, Evening*, c. 1905. The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa, gift of Beverley Elliot, 1983 (#1983MH98).



Dorothea Sharp and a child model, date unknown, photograph by Helen McNicoll. Helen McNicoll artist file, The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa.



*An English Beach*, c. 1910. Private collection.



*The Farmyard*, c. 1908. New Brunswick Museum, Saint John, Saint John Art Club Collection, 1995 (1995.26.26).



*Fishing*, c. 1907. Private collection. Courtesy of the Art Gallery of Ontario.



*Footbridge in Venice*, c. 1910. Private collection. Courtesy of Heffel Fine Art Auction House.



*Gathering Flowers*, c. 1911. Private collection. Courtesy of the Art Gallery of Ontario.



*Girl with Parasol*, c. 1913. Private collection, Vancouver. Courtesy of Heffel Fine Art Auction House.



*The Gleaner*, c. 1908. Private collection. Courtesy of the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.



*Interior*, c. 1910. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, purchase, 1976 (75/100).



*In the Shadow of the Tree*, c. 1914. Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, Quebec City (1951.140).



*Landscape with Cows*, c. 1907. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, gift of Mrs. R. Fraser Elliott, 1977 (77/7).



*The Little Worker*, c. 1907. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, purchase, 1983 (83/238).



*Market Cart in Brittany*, c. 1910. The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa, gift of M. Sharf, 1983 (1983MH49).



*Market in Brittany*, c. 1913. Private collection. Courtesy of Heffel Fine Art and Auction House.



*Marketplace*, 1910. The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa, gift of M. Sharf, 1983 (1983MH48).



*Midsummer*, c. 1909. Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax (1925.3).



*Minding Baby*, c. 1911. Private collection. Courtesy of the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.



*Moonlight*, c. 1905. Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton, gift of Lord Beaverbrook (1959.140).



*On the Beach*, c. 1910. Private collection.



*On the Cliffs*, 1913. Private collection. Courtesy of the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.



*The Open Door*, c. 1913. Private collection. Courtesy of the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.



*Picking Flowers*, c. 1912. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, gift of R. Fraser Elliott, Toronto, in memory of Betty Ann Elliott, 1992 (92/102).



*Reaping Time*, c. 1909. Private collection. Courtesy of Heffel Fine Art Auction House.



*River Landscape*, n.d. The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa, gift of Beverley Elliot, 1983 (1983MH96).



*September Evening*, 1908. Private collection, Toronto. Courtesy of Heffel Fine Art Auction House.



*Sketch for "Picking Flowers,"* c. 1912. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, gift of Helen McNicoll Dubeau, Acton, Ontario, 1994 (94/796).



*Sketch of Female Nudes from Dessin [sic] Sketchbook*, c. 1902. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, gift of Jane and John McNicoll, 2002 (2002/9438).



*"Sketch of Male Nudes" from Large Sketchbook*, c. 1902. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, gift of Jane and John McNicoll, 2002 (2002/9440).



*Stubble Fields*, c. 1912. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa (360).



*Study of a Child*, c. 1900. Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, gift of Mr. and Mrs. David McNicoll (1915.121).



*Sunny September*, 1913. Collection Pierre Lassonde. Courtesy of Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, Québec City. Photo credit: Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, Idra Labrie.



*Tea Time*, c. 1911. Private collection. Courtesy of Heffel Fine Art Auction House.



*Under the Shadow of the Tent*, 1914. Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (1915.122).



*The Victorian Dress*, 1914. McCord Museum, Montreal (M976.134).



*The Victorian Dress*, c. 1914. Art Gallery of Hamilton, gift of A. Sidney Dawes, Esq., M.C., 1958 (58.87.Q).



*Village Street*, 1904. Private collection. Courtesy of the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.



*Watching the Boat*, c. 1912. Private collection, Vancouver. Courtesy of Heffel Fine Art and Auction House.



*A Welcome Breeze*, c. 1909. Private collection. Courtesy of Heffel Fine Art Auction House.



*White Sunshade #2*, c. 1912. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, gift of the Estate of Budd Sugarman, 2006 (2006/87).



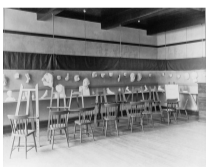
*Wm. Brymner*, 1901. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, gift of R. Fraser Elliott, 1976 (76/30).

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## Credits for Photographs and Works by Other Artists



Art Association of Montreal sculpture room, November 18, 1905. Montreal Museum of Fine Arts archives. Photo credit: The Gazette/Southam. Courtesy of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.



Art Association of Montreal plaster cast room, c. 1893, photographer unknown. Montreal Museum of Fine Arts archives.



*Boulevard des Capucines*, 1873-74, by Claude Monet. Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, purchase: the Kenneth A. and Helen F. Spencer Foundation Acquisition Fund (F72-35). Photo credit: Jamison Miller.



*Cliff Walk at Pourville*, 1882, by Claude Monet. Art Institute of Chicago (1933.443).



*Cornfield in Summertime*, n.d., by Dorothea Sharp. Private collection. © The copyright holder.



*Corn Stooks*, 1899, by Algernon Talmage. Bushey Museum and Art Gallery, U.K. (1992.39.33).



*The Cradle*, 1872, by Berthe Morisot. Musée d'Orsay, Paris, acquired by the National Museums for the Louvre Museum in 1930 (RF 2849). © RMN-Grand Palais (Musée d'Orsay) / DR.



*Dame Christabel Pankhurst*, 1909, by Ethel Wright. National Portrait Gallery, London, bequeathed by Elizabeth Ruth Dugdale Weir, 2010 (6921).



*A Day by the Sea*, 1914, by Dorothea Sharp. Private collection. Courtesy of Christie's. © The copyright holder.



*A Fireside*, c. 1910, by Mary Hiester Reid. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, purchase, 1987 (87/174).



*Les Foins*, 1877, by Jules Bastien-Lepage. Musée d'Orsay, Paris, acquired from the heirs of the artist by the state for the Luxembourg Museum in 1885 (RF 2748). © RMN-Grand Palais (Musée d'Orsay) / Hervé Lewandowski.



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Front cover of *Independent Spirit: Early Canadian Women Artists*, by A.K. Prakash. Courtesy of the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Photo credit: Ian Lefebvre.



*Haystacks, End of Summer, Morning*, 1890-91, by Claude Monet. Musée d'Orsay, Paris, acquired with the funds of an anonymous Canadian donation by the National Museums for the Jeu de Paume in 1975 (RF1975-3).



*Helen McNicoll*, 1901, by William Brymner. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto gift of Mr. R. Fraser Elliott, 1976 (76/29).



*Helen McNicoll*, 1910, by Robert Harris. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, gift of Vivian and David Campbell, Toronto, 1981 (81/222).



Helen McNicoll's studio in St. Ives, Cornwall, c. 1906, photographer unknown. Helen McNicoll artist file, The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa.



Helen McNicoll adjusting model's hair, date unknown, photographer likely Dorothea Sharp. Helen McNicoll artist file, The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa.



Helen McNicoll in her studio at St. Ives, c. 1906, photographer unknown. Helen McNicoll artist file, The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa.



Helen McNicoll in her studio at St. Ives, c. 1906, photographer unknown. Helen McNicoll artist file, The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa.



Helen McNicoll's studio in St. Ives, Cornwall, c. 1906, photographer unknown. Helen McNicoll artist file, The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa.



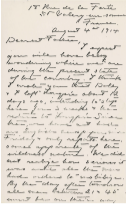
*Impression—Sunrise*, 1872, by Claude Monet. Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris.



"Liverpool," from *Sister and I from Victoria to London, 1910–11*, by Emily Carr. Emily Carr fonds, Royal British Columbia Museum and Archives, Victoria (PDP06069).



*Maternal Caress*, 1890–91, by Mary Cassatt. National Gallery of Art, Washington, Chester Dale Collection (1963.10.255).



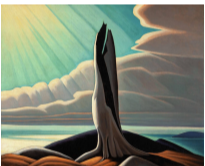
McNicoll's letter from France, 1914. Helen McNicoll artist file, The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa.



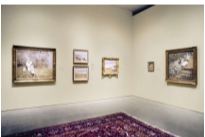
*Morning in Spain*, 1907, by W.H. Clapp. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa (85).



*Mother About to Wash Her Sleepy Child*, 1880, by Mary Cassatt. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Mrs. Fred Hathaway Bixby Bequest (M.62.8.14). Photo credit: Museum Associates/LACMA.



*North Shore, Lake Superior*, 1926, by Lawren S. Harris. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa (3708). © Family of Lawren S. Harris.



Northwest view of the 1999 Helen McNicoll exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Courtesy of the Art Gallery of Ontario.



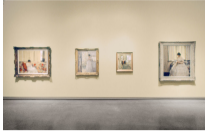
*One Summer's Day*, 1884, by William Brymner. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa (14633).



*On the Pont de l'Europe*, 1876-77, by Gustave Caillebotte. Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth (AP 1982.01).



Page from McNicoll's scrapbook, c. 1900, private collection, Acton. Courtesy of the Art Gallery of Ontario.



South view of *Helen McNicoll: A Canadian Impressionist* at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Courtesy of the Art Gallery of Ontario.



*Studio Interior*, c. 1882, by William Merritt Chase. Brooklyn Museum, New York, gift of Mrs. Carll H. de Silver in memory of her husband (13.50).



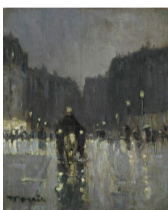
Students at the Slade School, June 23, 1905, photographer unknown. Slade Archive Project, Slade School of Fine Art, University College London.



*The Swing*, 1876, by Pierre-Auguste Renoir. Musée d'Orsay, Paris, accepted by the state as a legacy of Gustave Caillebotte in 1894 (RF 2738, LUX 375). © Musée d'Orsay, dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Patrice Schmidt.



*Two Girls by a Lake*, c. 1912, by Dorothea Sharp. Private collection. © The copyright holder.



*A Wet Night on the Boulevard Saint Germain, Paris*, c. 1895-96, by James Wilson Morrice. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, gift of G. Blair Laing, Toronto, 1989 (30465).



*A Wreath of Flowers*, 1884, by William Brymner. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Royal Canadian Academy of Arts diploma work, deposited by the artist, Ottawa, 1886 (19).



*Young Women Picking Fruit*, 1891, by Mary Cassatt. Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Patrons Art Fund (22.8). Courtesy of Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh.

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ISBN 978-1-4871-0152-7

Art Canada Institute  
Massey College, University of Toronto  
4 Devonshire Place  
Toronto, ON M5S 2E1

## **Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication**

Burton, Samantha, 1979-, author  
Helen McNicoll : life & work / Samantha Burton.

Includes bibliographical references.

Contents: Biography – Key works – Significance & critical issues – Style & technique – Sources & resources – Where to see.

Electronic monograph in HTML, PDF and mobile formats.  
ISBN 978-1-4871-0152-7 (HTML).–ISBN 978-1-4871-0153-4  
(PDF).–ISBN 978-1-4871-0154-1 (MOBILE)

1. McNicoll, Helen, 1879-1915. 2. McNicoll, Helen, 1879-1915–  
Criticism and interpretation. 3. Painters–Canada–Biography.  
I. McNicoll, Helen, 1879-1915. Paintings. Selections II. Art Canada  
Institute, issuing body III. Title.

ND249.M323B87 2017                      759.11                      C2017-906511-4