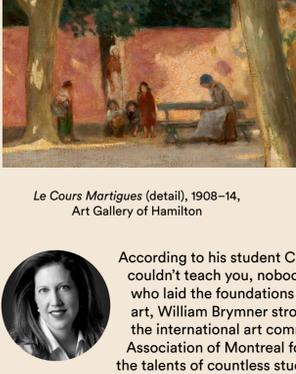


PUTTING CANADA ON THE MAP THE PIONEERING WILLIAM BRYMNER

This week we publish *William Brymner: Life & Work* by Jocelyn Anderson, the story of what it meant to be a painter in the wake of Confederation and the teacher to those who would forge a national school of art.



Le Cours Martigues (detail), 1908–14,
Art Gallery of Hamilton



William Brymner, c.1910,
photographer unknown

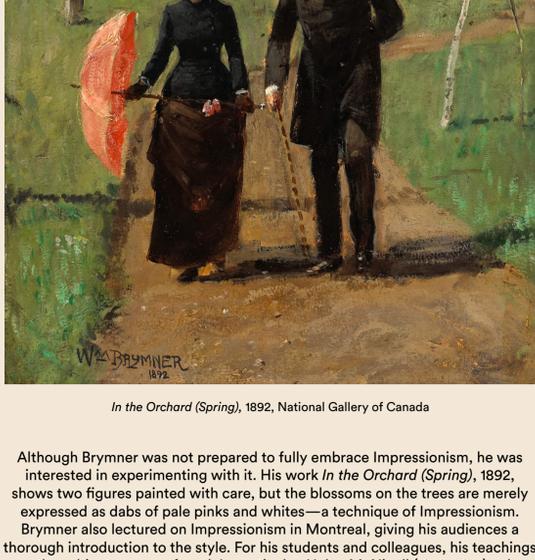


According to his student Clarence Gagnon, “If Brymner couldn’t teach you, nobody could.” A man ahead of his time who laid the foundations for early twentieth-century Canadian art, William Brymner strove to ensure that it was part of the international art community. While teaching at the Art Association of Montreal for more than thirty years, he fostered the talents of countless students—many of whom would go on to be this country’s greatest artists, including Edwin Holgate, A.Y. Jackson, Prudence Heward, Anne Savage, and Helen McNicoll. Without him, the Canadian Impressionist movement would not have taken root, and the ground-breaking Beaver Hall Group would not have had such a progressive stance on gender. In the following excerpts from *William Brymner: Life & Work* we share some of the artist’s most important works and the reasons why he mattered.

Sara Angel

Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

MASTER OF LIGHT

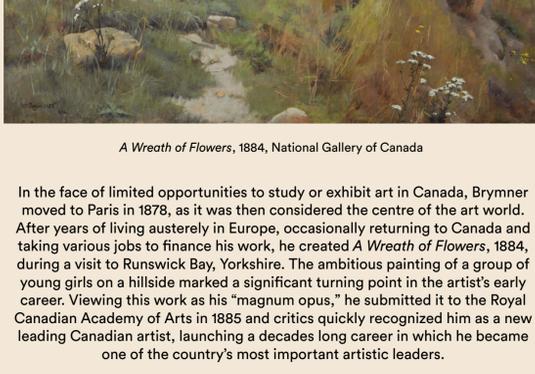


In the Orchard (Spring), 1892, National Gallery of Canada

Although Brymner was not prepared to fully embrace Impressionism, he was interested in experimenting with it. His work *In the Orchard (Spring)*, 1892, shows two figures painted with care, but the blossoms on the trees are merely expressed as dabs of pale pinks and whites—a technique of Impressionism. Brymner also lectured on Impressionism in Montreal, giving his audiences a thorough introduction to the style. For his students and colleagues, his teachings on the subject were profound. In particular, Helen McNicoll (1879–1915), who studied with Brymner at the Art Association of Montreal in the late 1890s and early 1900s, was drawn to the style, and she became one of the most admired artists in the Canadian Impressionist movement.

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ASCENT TO GREATNESS

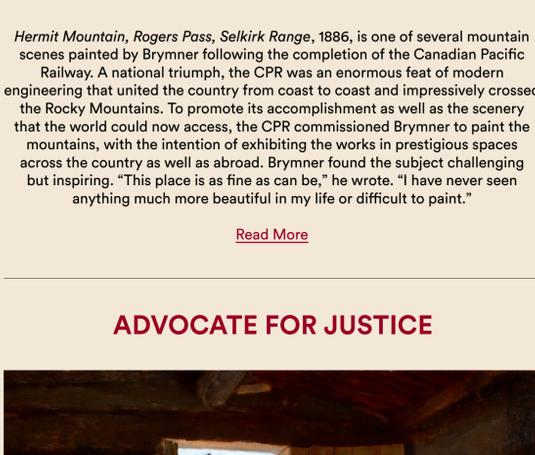


A Wreath of Flowers, 1884, National Gallery of Canada

In the face of limited opportunities to study or exhibit art in Canada, Brymner moved to Paris in 1878, as it was then considered the centre of the art world. After years of living austere in Europe, occasionally returning to Canada and taking various jobs to finance his work, he created *A Wreath of Flowers*, 1884, during a visit to Runswick Bay, Yorkshire. The ambitious painting of a group of young girls on a hillside marked a significant turning point in the artist’s early career. Viewing this work as his “magnum opus,” he submitted it to the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts in 1885 and critics quickly recognized him as a new leading Canadian artist, launching a decades long career in which he became one of the country’s most important artistic leaders.

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CANADIAN VISION



Hermit Mountain, Rogers Pass, Selkirk Range, 1886, Glenbow Museum

Hermit Mountain, Rogers Pass, Selkirk Range, 1886, is one of several mountain scenes painted by Brymner following the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway. A national triumph, the CPR was an enormous feat of modern engineering that united the country from coast to coast and impressively crossed the Rocky Mountains. To promote its accomplishment as well as the scenery that the world could now access, the CPR commissioned Brymner to paint the mountains, with the intention of exhibiting the works in prestigious spaces across the country as well as abroad. Brymner found the subject challenging but inspiring. “This place is as fine as can be,” he wrote. “I have never seen anything much more beautiful in my life or difficult to paint.”

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ADVOCATE FOR JUSTICE

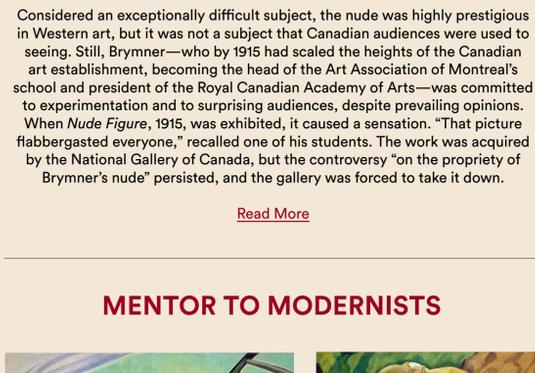


Giving Out Rations to the Blackfoot Indians, NWT, 1886, Art Gallery of Hamilton

During his first trip to Western Canada, Brymner stayed on the Siksika Nation Reserve near Gleichen (now in Alberta), and there he painted this haunting image of Indigenous people lining up to receive flour rations from the Canadian government. Unlike many other nineteenth-century artists who idealized or stereotyped First Nations peoples, Brymner saw the suffering on the reserve and took it as his subject. In a speech made in July 1886, the Siksika leader Isapo-Muxika (Crowfoot) spoke of the risks of starvation as a result of the government’s food rationing, declaring that “he and his chiefs feared for their children, that food would not be given them.” With this work, Brymner demanded his audience recognize the violence of colonialism.

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UNAFRAID OF CONTROVERSY



Nude Figure, 1915, National Gallery of Canada

Considered an exceptionally difficult subject, the nude was highly prestigious in Western art, but it was not a subject that Canadian audiences were used to seeing. Still, Brymner—who by 1915 had scaled the heights of the Canadian art establishment, becoming the head of the Art Association of Montreal’s school and president of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts—was committed to experimentation and to surprising audiences, despite prevailing opinions. When *Nude Figure*, 1915, was exhibited, it caused a sensation. “That picture flabbergasted everyone,” recalled one of his students. The work was acquired by the National Gallery of Canada, but the controversy “on the propriety of Brymner’s nude” persisted, and the gallery was forced to take it down.

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MENTOR TO MODERNISTS



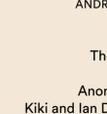
Anne Savage, *The Plough*, 1931–33, Montreal
Museum of Fine Arts



Edwin Holgate, *The Bathers*, 1937,
Montreal Museum of Fine Arts

A teacher for over thirty years, Brymner taught dozens of students, and several went on to become the leaders of modernism in Canadian painting in the interwar era. Many, including Anne Savage (1896–1971) and Edwin Holgate (1892–1977), were associated with the Beaver Hall Group, one of the most important artist groups in Montreal. Brymner’s conviction that students must pursue their own visions encouraged them to embrace radically different subjects, from modern landscapes approaching abstraction to dramatic avant-garde figure paintings, a contrast apparent in these works. As Savage later recalled, “He possessed that rare gift in a teacher—never to impose his own way on his pupils.”

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About the Author of *William Brymner: Life & Work*

Dr. Jocelyn Anderson is an art historian whose research focuses on modern Canadian art and on art and the British Empire. She teaches Canadian art at the University of Toronto Mississauga and has also taught at the Courtauld Institute of Art, Birkbeck, and the University of East Anglia. Commenting on why she wanted to write *William Brymner: Life & Work*, Anderson remarks, “I am fascinated with William Brymner because he was a highly creative artist and an inspiring art teacher who laid a foundation for modern art in Montreal, while earlier in his career he had witnessed the violence of colonialism in Western Canada. I am convinced that all these aspects of Brymner’s life are fundamental to understanding his significance for Canadian art history.”

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