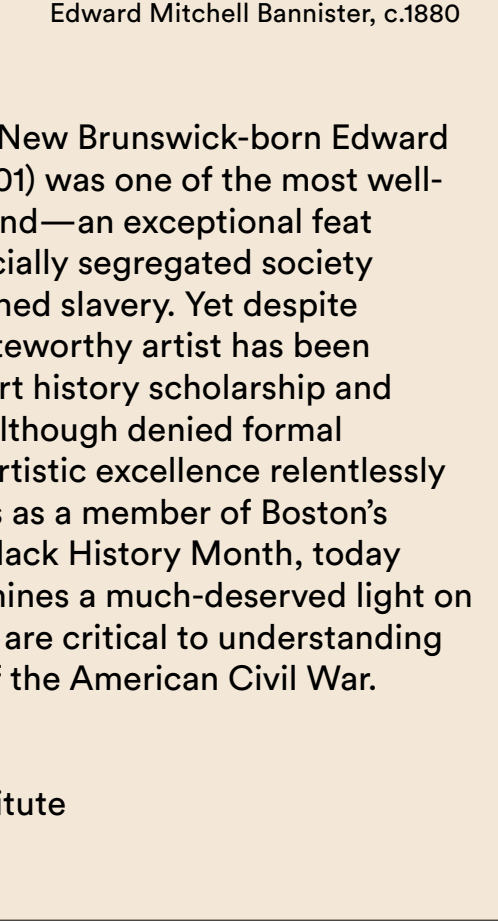


ARTIST & ABOLITIONIST EDWARD MITCHELL BANNISTER

ACI's new online exhibition explores the life and work of this Canadian-born Black painter, who achieved international recognition while fighting against slavery and racial segregation



Edward Mitchell Bannister, *People Near Boat*, 1893



Edward Mitchell Bannister, c.1880



In the late nineteenth century, New Brunswick-born Edward Mitchell Bannister (c.1828–1901) was one of the most well-known painters in Rhode Island—an exceptional feat for a Black man living in a racially segregated society that had only recently abolished slavery. Yet despite his accomplishments, this noteworthy artist has been long overlooked by Canadian art history scholarship and excluded from major museums. Although denied formal training because of his race, Bannister pursued artistic excellence relentlessly while fighting for the rights of African Americans as a member of Boston's abolition movement. Marking the beginning of Black History Month, today ACI launches our new [online exhibition](#), which shines a much-deserved light on a distinguished Canadian talent whose paintings are critical to understanding Black culture in the decades following the end of the American Civil War.

Sara Angel

Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

UNTITLED (RHODE ISLAND SEASCAPE)

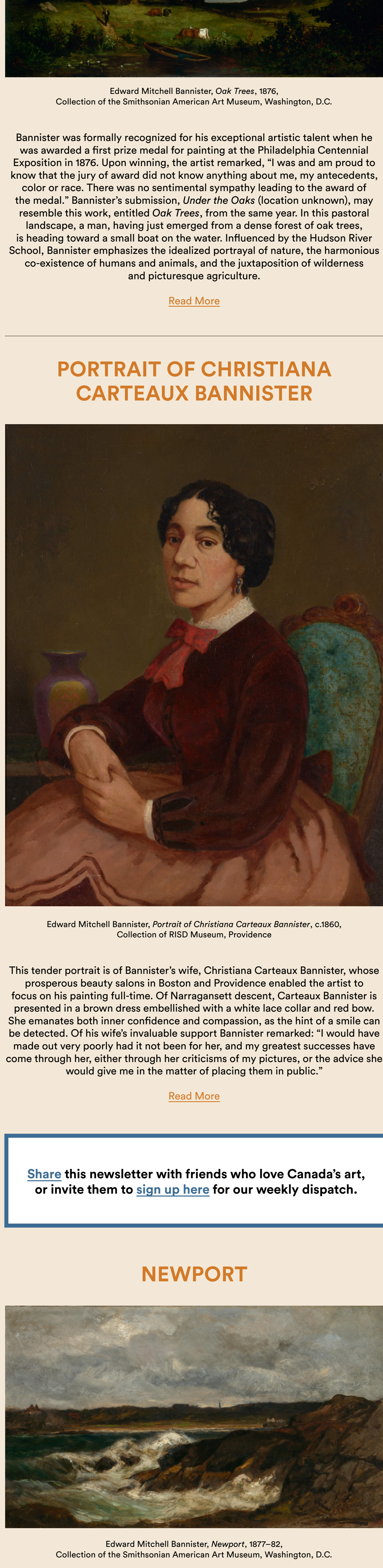


Edward Mitchell Bannister, *Untitled (Rhode Island Seascape)*, c.1856, Collection of Kenkeleba House, New York

After growing up in New Brunswick, Bannister moved to Boston around 1850 and remained there until 1869. This picturesque scene of the Rhode Island seashore is one of his earliest surviving works. A pair of figures stand at the edge of the water, enjoying the gentle rhythm of the rippling tide. Because of Bannister's race, established White artists refused to accept him as their student. Consequently, he studied art independently by visiting museums and interacting with other local artists. The style and composition of this painting suggest the influence of contemporary American artists whose work Bannister may have come across during his visits to the Boston Athenaeum library, notably Fitz Hugh Lane (1804–1865) and John Frederick Kensett (1816–1872).

[Read More](#)

NEWSPAPER BOY

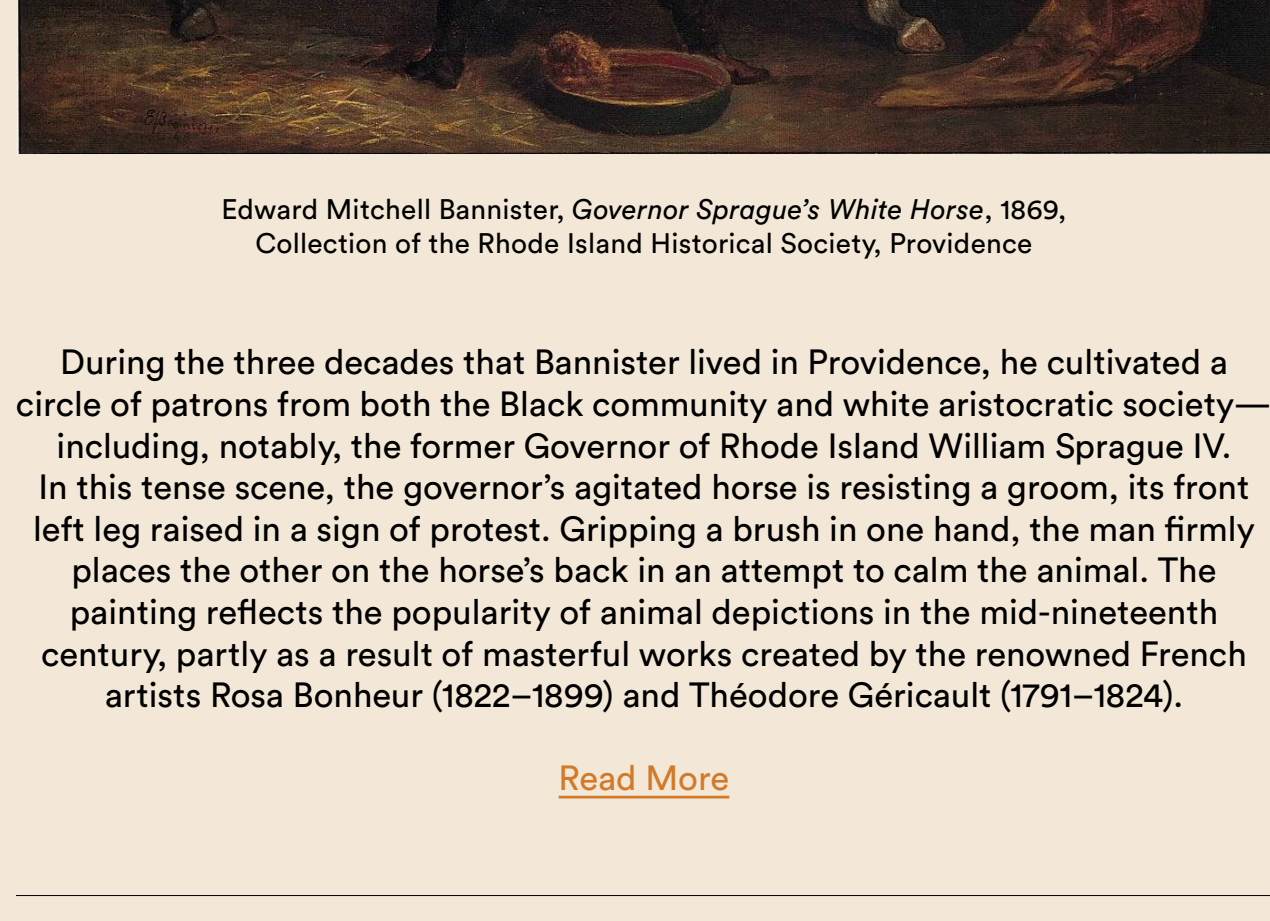


Edward Mitchell Bannister, *Newspaper Boy*, 1869, Collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.

After moving to Providence from Boston in 1869, Bannister exhibited two portraits that were immediately noted in the local press: this representation of a young newspaper vendor, and a painting of the prominent abolitionist (and Bannister's friend) William Lloyd Garrison. In this subdued portrait, the boy's face is partly cast in shadow, while his visible features express a sense of worry and burden typically reserved for adulthood. In its straightforward approach, this rare surviving portrayal of an African-American subject by Bannister departs from the sentimental images of homeless and working children that prevailed in the mid-nineteenth century.

[Read More](#)

OAK TREES

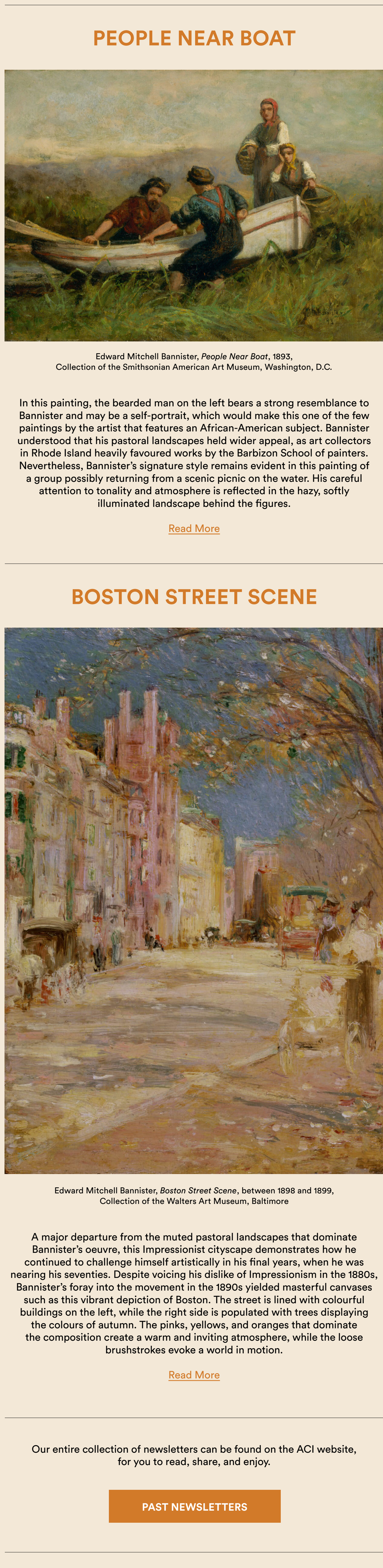


Edward Mitchell Bannister, *Oak Trees*, 1876, Collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.

Bannister was formally recognized for his exceptional artistic talent when he was awarded a first prize medal for painting at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1876. Upon winning, the artist remarked, "I was and am proud to know that the jury of award did not know anything about me, my antecedents, color or race. There was no sentimental sympathy leading to the award of the medal." Bannister's submission, *Under the Oaks* (location unknown), may resemble this work, entitled *Oak Trees*, from the same year. In this pastoral landscape, a man, having just emerged from a dense forest of oak trees, is heading toward a small boat on the water. Influenced by the Hudson River School, Bannister emphasizes the idealized portrayal of nature, the harmonious co-existence of humans and animals, and the juxtaposition of wilderness and picturesque agriculture.

[Read More](#)

PORTRAIT OF CHRISTIANA CARTEAUX BANNISTER



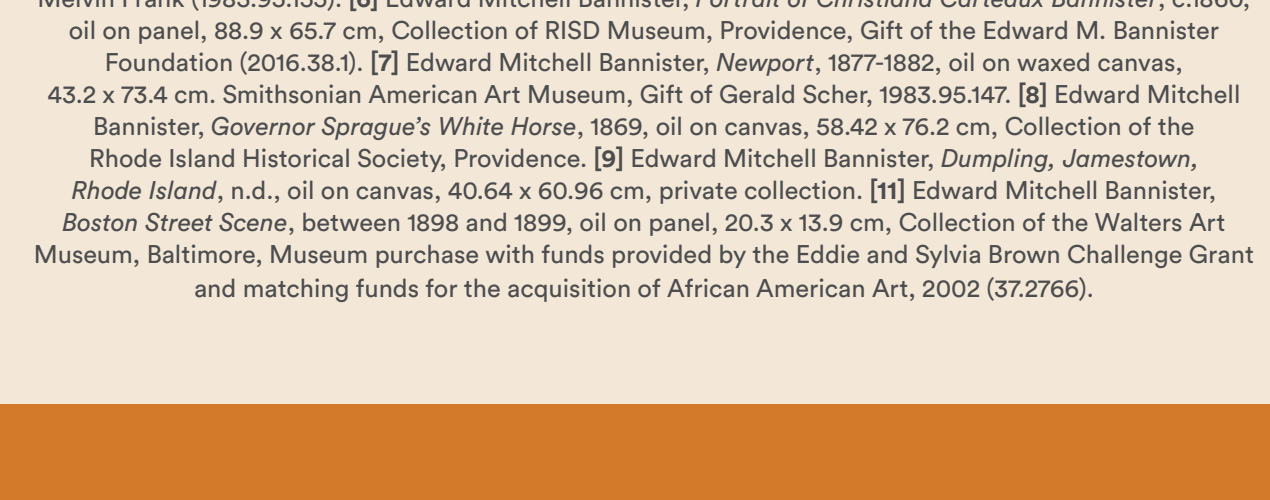
Edward Mitchell Bannister, *Portrait of Christiana Carteaux Bannister*, c.1860, Collection of RISD Museum, Providence

This tender portrait is of Bannister's wife, Christiana Carteaux Bannister, whose prosperous beauty salons in Boston and Providence enabled the artist to focus on his painting full-time. Of Narragansett descent, Carteaux Bannister is presented in a brown dress embellished with a white lace collar and red bow. She emanates both inner confidence and compassion, as the hint of a smile can be detected. Of his wife's invaluable support Bannister remarked: "I would have made out very poorly had it not been for her, and my greatest successes have come through her, either through her criticisms of my pictures, or the advice she would give me in the matter of placing them in public."

[Read More](#)

[Share](#) this newsletter with friends who love Canada's art, or invite them to [sign up here](#) for our weekly dispatch.

NEWPORT



Edward Mitchell Bannister, *Newport*, 1877–82, Collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.

Enjoying financial and artistic success in the 1880s, Bannister purchased a sloop yacht and went on summer sketching trips, sailing between Providence and Newport as well as north to Bar Harbor, Maine. His sketches served as the basis for his popular seascape paintings, including this close-up view of waves crashing into the rocky coastline. Painterly brushstrokes capture the rapid movement of the white waves and the shifting grey clouds overhead, signs of an approaching storm. During the late 1870s and 1880s, Bannister meticulously recorded skies and clouds in different weather conditions, in addition to producing numerous drawings and watercolours of harbours and inland waterways.

[Read More](#)

GOVERNOR SPRAGUE'S WHITE HORSE

Edward Mitchell Bannister, *Governor Sprague's White Horse*, 1869, Collection of the Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence

During the three decades that Bannister lived in Providence, he cultivated a circle of patrons from both the Black community and white aristocratic society—including, notably, the former Governor of Rhode Island William Sprague IV. In this tense scene, the governor's agitated horse is resisting a groom, its front left leg raised in a sign of protest. Gripping a brush in one hand, the man firmly places the other on the horse's back in an attempt to calm the animal. The painting reflects the popularity of animal depictions in the mid-nineteenth century, partly as a result of masterful works created by the renowned French artists Rosa Bonheur (1822–1899) and Théodore Géricault (1791–1824).

[Read More](#)

FORT DUMPLING, JAMESTOWN, RHODE ISLAND

Edward Mitchell Bannister, *Fort Dumpling, Jamestown, Rhode Island*, n.d., private collection

While Bannister's patrons were drawn to the idyllic settings of his landscapes and seascapes, these paintings in fact often allude to the history of the transatlantic slave trade, in which Rhode Island played a leading role. Within this charming painting of figures enjoying the sunny skies and breathtaking seaside views Bannister has inserted a dark symbol: the large ship in the left middle ground resembles a "slaver," lightweight sloops assembled in Rhode Island that were designed to carry 125 to 150 passengers. As an active abolitionist, Bannister may have felt compelled to acknowledge the history of slavery in this region in his paintings. However, his subtle approach suggests an acute awareness that many of his patrons belonged to families that had benefitted economically from the slave trade.

[Read More](#)

PEOPLE NEAR BOAT

Edward Mitchell Bannister, *People Near Boat*, 1893, Collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.

In this painting, the bearded man on the left bears a strong resemblance to Bannister and may be a self-portrait, which would make this one of the few paintings by the artist that features an African-American subject. Bannister understood that his pastoral landscapes held wider appeal, as art collectors in Rhode Island heavily favoured works by the Barbizon School of painters. Nevertheless, Bannister's signature style remains evident in this painting of a group possibly returning from a scenic picnic on the water. His careful attention to tonality and atmosphere is reflected in the hazy, softly illuminated landscape behind the figures.

[Read More](#)

BOSTON STREET SCENE

Edward Mitchell Bannister, *Boston Street Scene*, between 1898 and 1899, Collection of the Walters Art Museum, Baltimore

A major departure from the muted pastoral landscapes that dominate Bannister's oeuvre, this Impressionist cityscape demonstrates how he continued to challenge himself artistically in his final years, when he was nearing his seventies. Despite voicing his dislike of Impressionism in the 1880s, Bannister's foray into the movement in the 1890s yielded masterful canvases such as this vibrant depiction of Boston. The street is lined with colourful buildings on the left, while the right side is populated with trees displaying the colours of autumn. The pinks, yellows, and oranges that dominate the composition create a warm and inviting atmosphere, while the loose brushstrokes evoke a world in motion.

[Read More](#)

Our entire collection of newsletters can be found on the ACI website, for you to read, share, and enjoy.

[PAST NEWSLETTERS](#)

THANK YOU TO OUR BENEFACTORS

The ACI is a not-for-profit educational charity that receives no government financing or public support. Our work is made possible by an important circle of [friends, patrons, and benefactors](#). If you would like to support our important work, please see [this page](#).

Follow us on social media

Facebook
[artcaninstitute/](#)

Instagram
[@artcaninstitute](#)

Twitter
[@artcaninstitute](#)

Visit us at [aci-iac.ca](#) for more content on Canadian art and artists

[Canadian Online Art Book Project](#)

[Purchase Available Print Books](#)

[Canadian Schools Art Education Program](#)

[Art Lecture Videos](#)

Image Credits: [1, 10] Edward Mitchell Bannister, *People Near Boat*, 1893, oil on canvas, 35.6 x 50.4 cm, Collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC, Gift of Harvey Golden (1983.95.121). [2] Edward Mitchell Bannister, c.1880, photograph by Gwladys L. Hurd, Collection of National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., Gift of Sandra and Jacob Turner (NPG.76.66). [3] Edward Mitchell Bannister, *Untitled (Rhode Island Seascape)*, c.1856, oil on canvas, 45.72 x 55.88 cm, Collection of Kenkeleba House, New York. [4] Edward Mitchell Bannister, *Newspaper Boy*, 1869, oil on canvas, 76.6 x 63.7 cm, Collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC, Gift of Jack Haff and Frederick Weingeroff (1983.95.85). [5] Edward Mitchell Bannister, *Oak Trees*, 1876, oil on canvas, 86 x 153 cm, Collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC, Gift of H. Alan and Melvin Frank (1983.95.155). [6] Edward Mitchell Bannister, *Portrait of Christiana Carteaux Bannister*, c.1860, oil on panel, 88.9 x 65.7 cm, Collection of RISD Museum, Providence, Gift of the Edward M. Bannister Foundation (2016.38.1). [7] Edward Mitchell Bannister, *Newport*, 1877–1882, oil on waxed canvas, 43.2 x 73.4 cm, Collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC, Gift of H. Alan and Melvin Frank (1983.95.155). [8] Edward Mitchell Bannister, *Governor Sprague's White Horse*, 1869, oil on canvas, 58.42 x 76.2 cm, Collection of the Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence. [9] Edward Mitchell Bannister, *Dumpling, Jamestown, Rhode Island*, n.d., oil on canvas, 40.64 x 60.96 cm, private collection. [11] Edward Mitchell Bannister, *Boston Street Scene*, between 1898 and 1899, oil on panel, 20.3 x 13.9 cm, Collection of the Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, Museum purchase with funds provided by the Eddie and Sylvia Brown Challenge Grant and matching funds for the acquisition of African American Art, 2002 (37.2766).