

AUGUST 4, 2023

A CLOSE LOOK AT A CANADIAN MASTERPIECE THE ICONIC ALEX COLVILLE PAINTING TO PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND, 1965

*Few images of summer are as spellbinding as Alex Colville's 1965 painting *To Prince Edward Island*. Here's our in-depth look at a Canadian classic.*



Photo-lithograph based on Alex Colville's painting *To Prince Edward Island*, 1965, held in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.



Few scenes of summer are as familiar as *To Prince Edward Island*, which depicts a passenger looking out from the M.V. *Abegweit*, the iconic ferry that shepherded travellers from New Brunswick to Prince Edward Island before the 1997 opening of the Confederation Bridge. The work, which Alex Colville (1920–2013) first realized as a painting, now housed at the National Gallery of Canada, and then later as a limited-edition photo-lithograph, is emblematic of his signature style, which he developed in the years following his time serving in Europe and his 1944 appointment as an official war artist. The richly detailed yet enigmatic composition raises questions of observation and interpersonal relationships, and is characteristic of Colville's embrace of the female subject. As we move deeper into the season, we're taking a long look at this iconic Canadian work and its enduring legacy.

Sara Angel

Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

INSPIRED BY COLVILLE



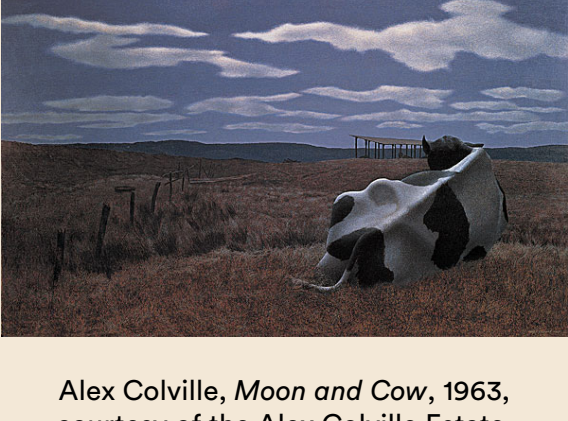
Jin-me Yoon, *Long View, #1*, 2017, Collection of the artist.



Still from the Wes Anderson film *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012), courtesy of IMDb.

Colville's distinctive works have served as an inspiration to many, influencing not just the art world but also broader popular culture. The iconic binoculars in *To Prince Edward Island* have been referenced by numerous creatives, including in Canadian artist Jin-me Yoon's 2017 work *Long View, #1* (left) and Wes Anderson's 2012 film *Moonrise Kingdom* (right). Ray Cronin, author of *Alex Colville: Life & Work*, describes *Colville's expansive influence* as evidence of the effectiveness of the artist's strategy: "even as he concentrated on creating images drawn from his specific surroundings and experience, he was able to evoke a universal language of myth and metaphor that reverberates throughout our culture."

CLOUDS AND SKY



Alex Colville, *Moon and Cow*, 1963, courtesy of the Alex Colville Estate.

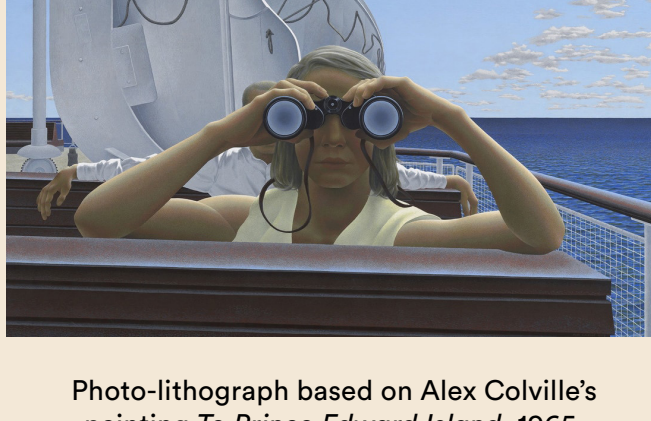
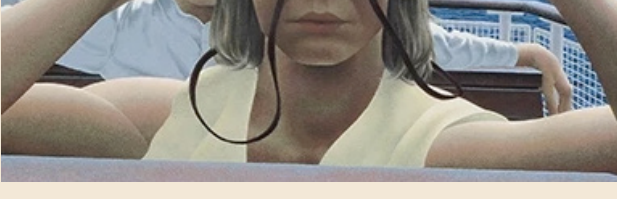


Photo-lithograph based on Alex Colville's painting *To Prince Edward Island*, 1965, courtesy of MutualArt.

Two years before painting *To Prince Edward Island*, Colville created *Moon and Cow*, 1963. In both works, the horizon line allots half the canvas to a sky filled with hazy, stacked cloud formations. Colville's body of work demonstrates a lifelong interest in depicting his rural Maritimes environs, dating back to his early days as an art student. At Mount Allison University he was mentored by faculty including Stanley Royle (1888–1961), an English Post-Impressionist landscape painter.

DYNAMICS OF THE GAZE



Detail of photo-lithograph based on Alex Colville's painting *To Prince Edward Island*, 1965, courtesy of MutualArt.

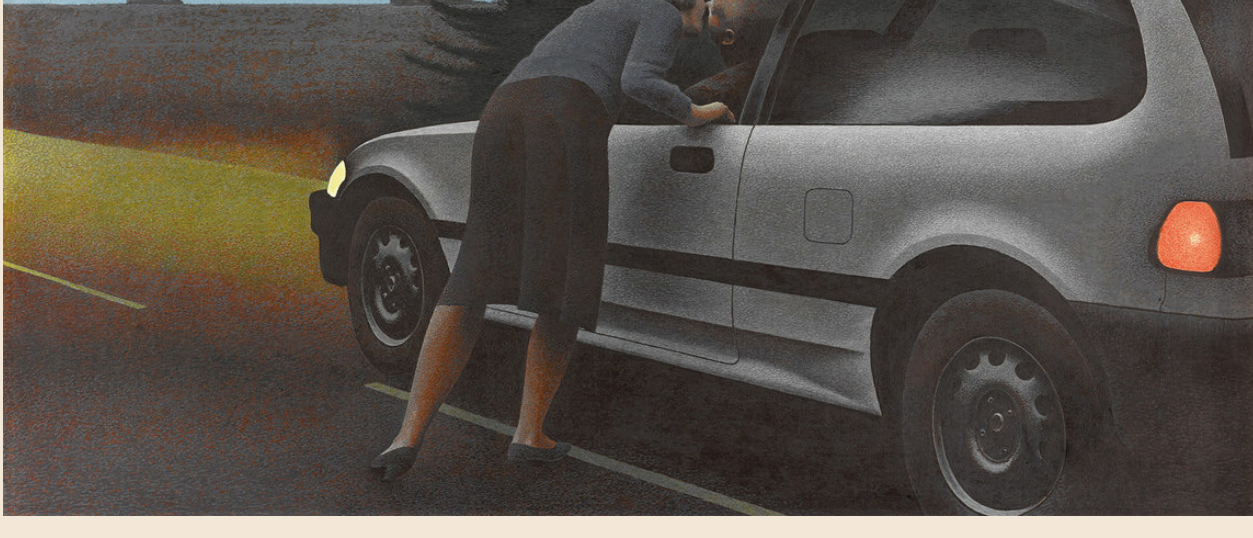


Still from Alfred Hitchcock's film *Rear Window* (1954), courtesy of Hitchcock Master.

At the centre of the composition, pictured straight-on and filling the frame, the female subject confronts the viewer through her binoculars. In its close-up framing, sense of mystery, and focus on the complex dynamics of the gaze, *To Prince Edward Island* brings to mind Alfred Hitchcock's celebrated thriller *Rear Window* (1954) (right), in which observation similarly generates uncertainty and unease. Elaborating on the theme of perception in Colville's painting, Ray Cronin, author of *Alex Colville: Life & Work*, writes, "In this picture the artist observes the woman in her act of watching, and we, as viewers, are the observed even as we look at the painting and try to make sense of it."

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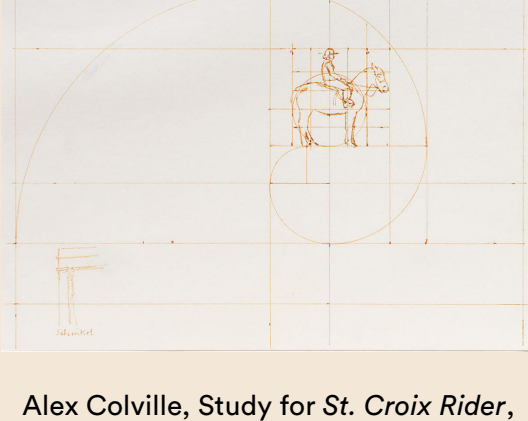
INTIMACY AND DISTANCE



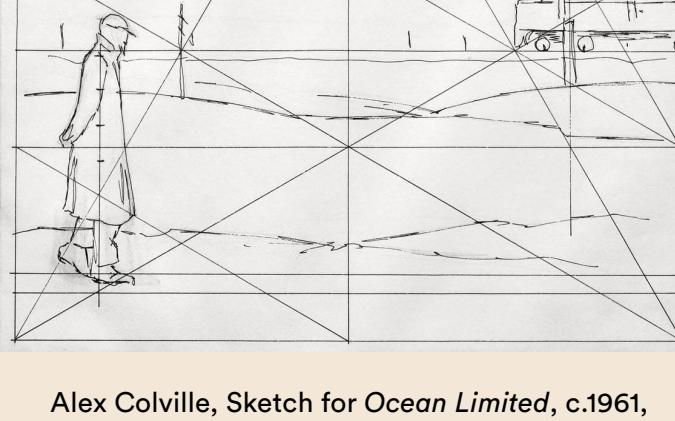
Alex Colville, *Kiss with Honda*, 1989, private collection.

In *To Prince Edward Island*, the woman looking out obscures a man sitting behind her, his face hidden by her body. In this regard the painting, like many of Colville's works, addresses the theme of relationships *between men and women*, particularly married couples. Such pieces, including *Kiss with Honda*, 1989, seemingly invite viewers into the intimate moments depicted, while simultaneously maintaining the atmosphere of voyeuristic distance and unease that pervades Colville's body of work. In this painting we see Colville and his wife, Rhoda, both of their faces obscured. Much like in *To Prince Edward Island*, *Kiss with Honda* evokes a sense of simultaneous closeness and separation between two people.

GEOMETRY FIRST



Alex Colville, *Study for St. Croix Rider*, December 30–31, 1996, private collection.



Alex Colville, *Sketch for Ocean Limited*, c.1961, Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax.

The flat perspective of *To Prince Edward Island* yields a strong horizon line, while the defined outlines of the benches and rails contribute to the overall anatomy and structure of the composition. This interplay of shapes and lines were meticulously constructed; Colville saw geometric principles as forming the underlying structure of his works and used preparatory sketches, such as the ones pictured here, to create precise justifications for every object in view. His scenes were also rooted in close observation: while creating *To Prince Edward Island*, Colville returned to the ferry countless times to take measurements for a composition of organization and balance.

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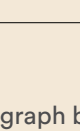
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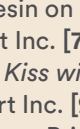
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