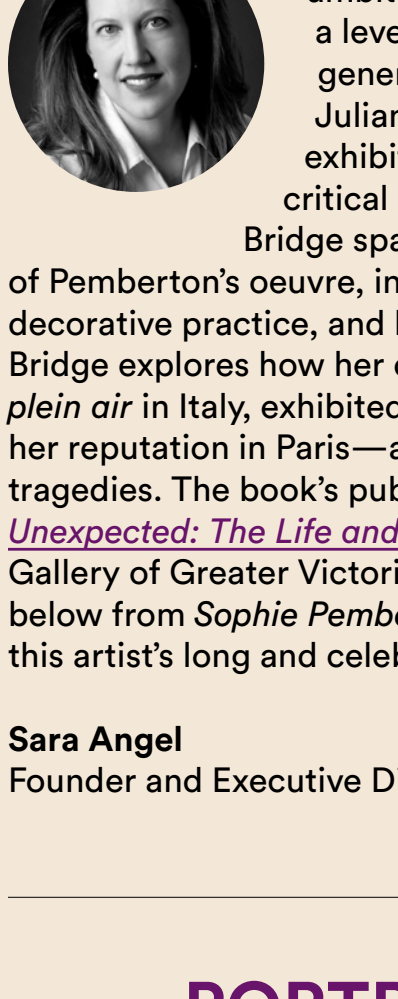


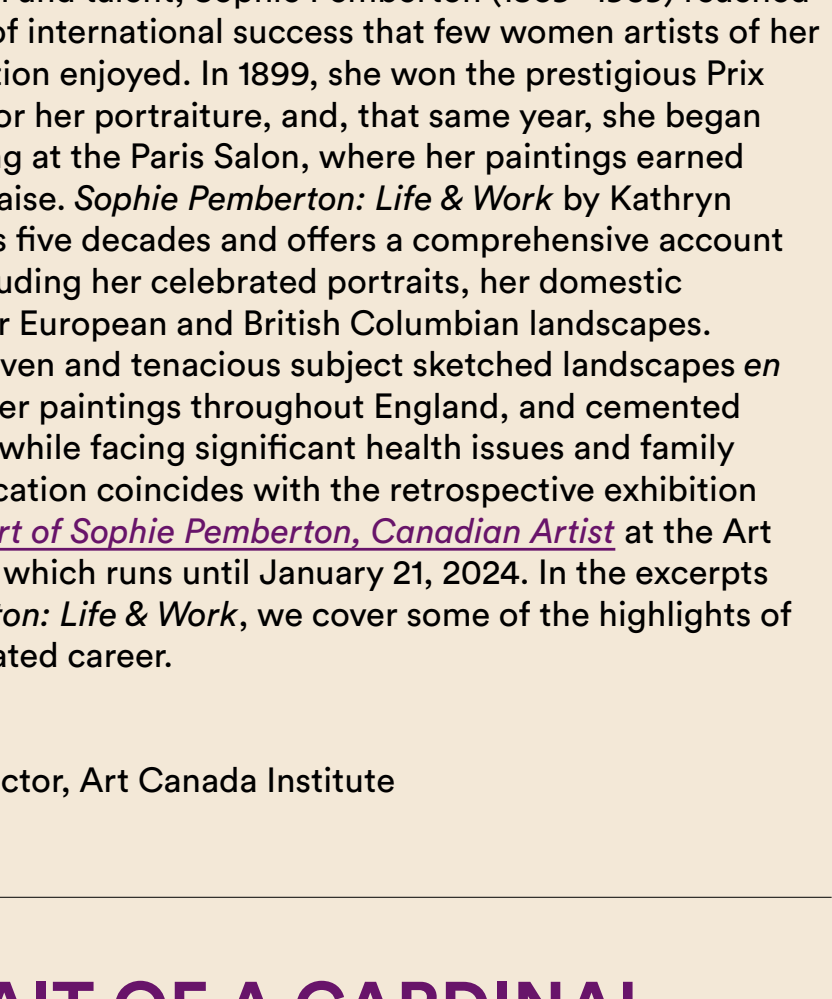
NOVEMBER 3, 2023

CELEBRATING BRITISH COLUMBIA'S FIRST INTERNATIONALLY ACCLAIMED WOMAN ARTIST THE GROUNDBREAKING SOPHIE PEMBERTON

Today, the Art Canada Institute celebrates the publication of *Sophie Pemberton: Life & Work* by Kathryn Bridge, which explores the Victoria, B.C.-born artist's trailblazing international career. The significance of Pemberton's role in Canadian art has only recently begun to be reassessed, despite the acclaim she received during her lifetime for her realist portraits and modern, Impressionist-influenced canvases.



Sophie Pemberton in her Gonzales studio after her return from France, 1901, photographer unknown.



Sophie Pemberton, *Spring*, 1902, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria.



At the turn of the twentieth century, propelled by extraordinary ambition and talent, Sophie Pemberton (1869–1959) reached a level of international success that few women artists of her generation enjoyed. In 1899, she won the prestigious Prix Julian for her portraiture, and, that same year, she began exhibiting at the Paris Salon, where her paintings earned critical praise. *Sophie Pemberton: Life & Work* by Kathryn Bridge spans five decades and offers a comprehensive account of Pemberton's oeuvre, including her celebrated portraits, her domestic decorative practice, and her European and British Columbian landscapes. Bridge explores how her driven and tenacious subject sketched landscapes *en plein air* in Italy, exhibited her paintings throughout England, and cemented her reputation in Paris—all while facing significant health issues and family tragedies. The book's publication coincides with the retrospective exhibition *Unexpected: The Life and Art of Sophie Pemberton, Canadian Artist* at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, which runs until January 21, 2024. In the excerpts below from *Sophie Pemberton: Life & Work*, we cover some of the highlights of this artist's long and celebrated career.

Sara Angel

Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

PORTRAIT OF A CARDINAL AND MANSI – AN ITALIAN



Sophie Pemberton, *Portrait of a Cardinal*, 1890, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria.

Sophie Pemberton, *Mansi – An Italian*, 1892, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria.

Pemberton decided to become a professional portrait painter when she was in her early twenties. To achieve that goal, she studied in three art schools in London, each of which followed a rigorous academic syllabus. In life drawing classes, she created *Portrait of a Cardinal*, 1890 (left), skillfully using shading to lend volume and indicate the play of light on the live model. Pemberton also enrolled in oil painting classes, where she learned to work in an academic realist style, creating a sense of naturalism through the use of smooth transitions and soft brushstrokes—elements on display in *Mansi – An Italian*, 1892 (right).

The subject's face is illuminated and her eyes and lips are animated, while a shadow delineates the soft curve of her jaw. Her clothing, by contrast, recedes into the background.

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LITTLE BOY BLUE

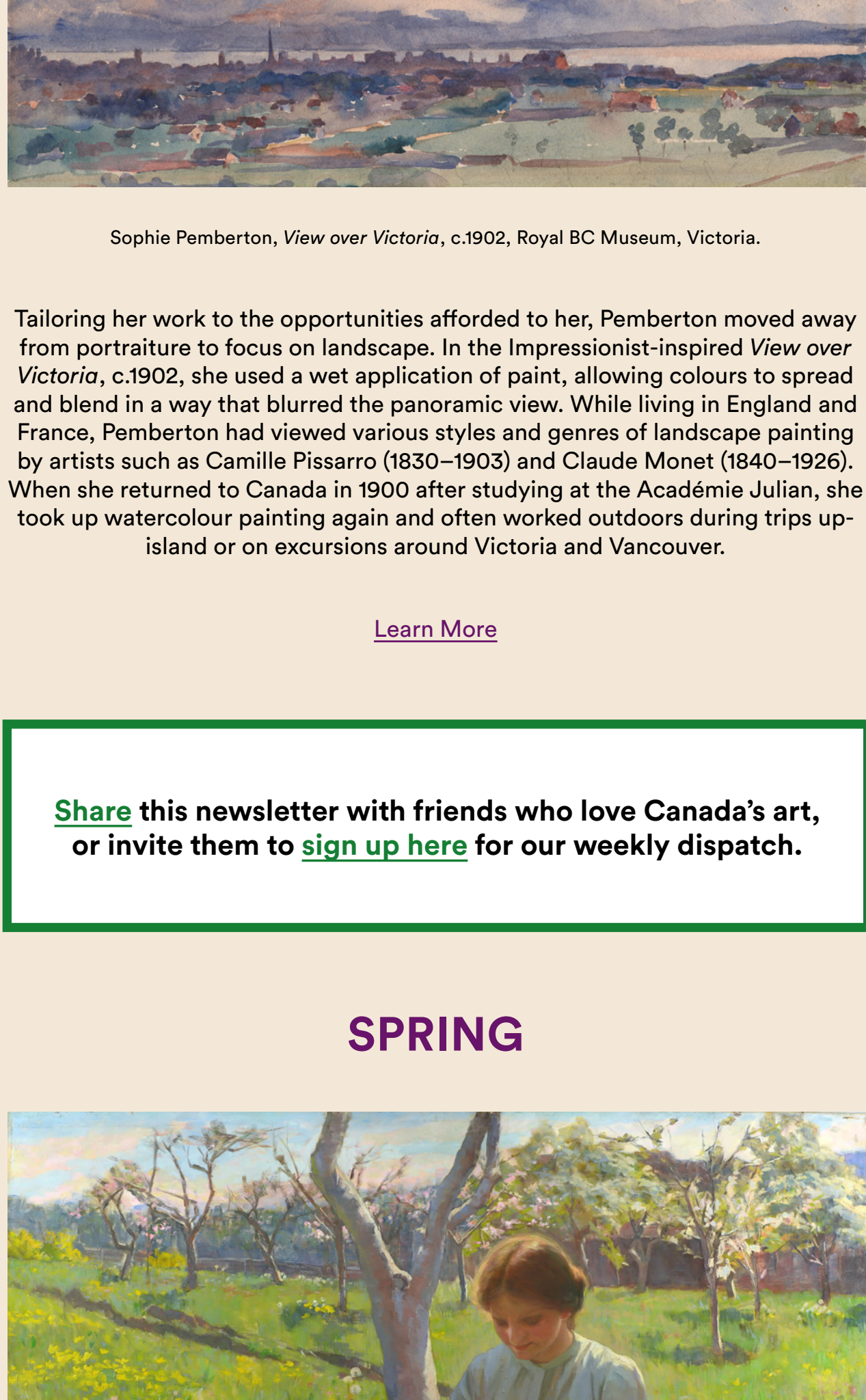


Sophie Pemberton, *Little Boy Blue*, 1897, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria.

This figure study of a young boy gazing directly at the viewer while paused on his way across the fields is disarmingly candid. It also marks the first time that Pemberton introduced elements of Impressionism into her realist style of portraiture. She submitted the painting to the annual exhibition of the Royal Academy of Arts, where it was shown in 1898. The following year, Pemberton retitled it for a French audience as *Un retour de l'École* and submitted it successfully to the Paris Salon. Exhibited frequently since the mid-twentieth century, it has become one of the artist's signature pieces.

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UN LIVRE OUVERT

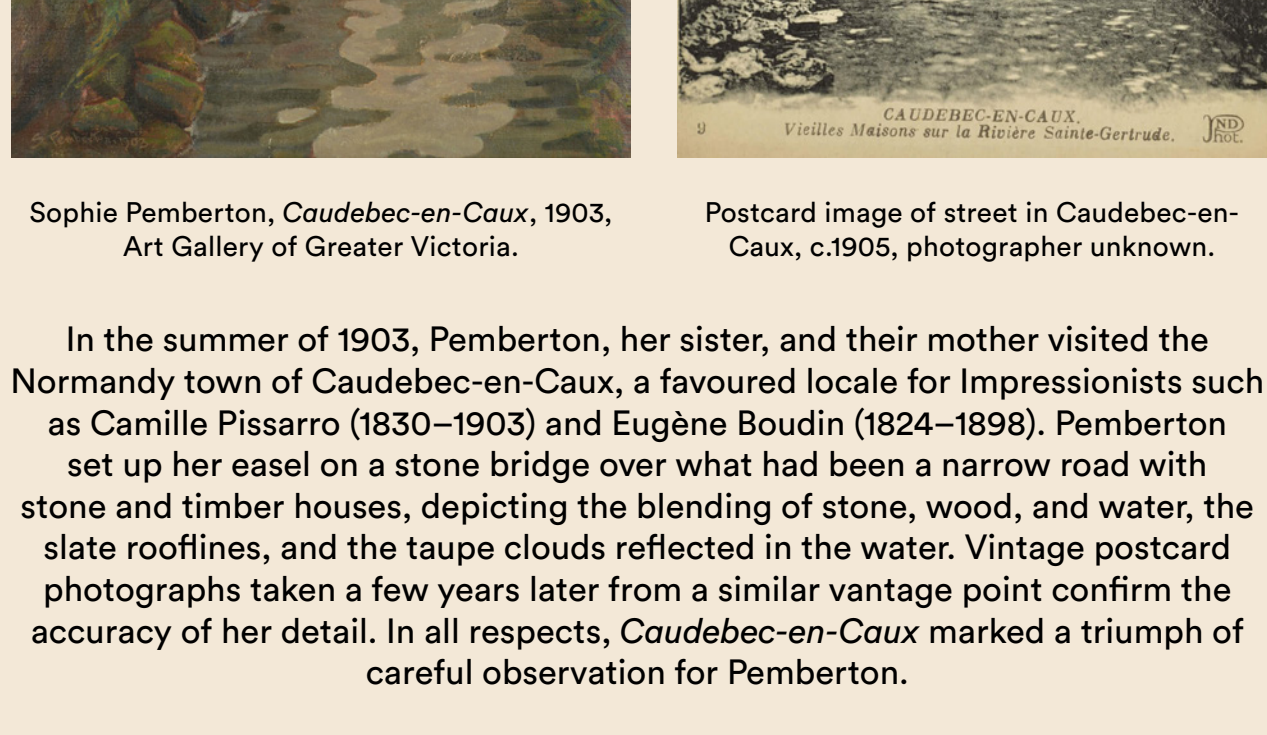


Sophie Pemberton, *Un Livre Ouvert*, 1900, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria.

While in Victoria in the summer of 1900, Pemberton sketched two acquaintances, Ethel Vantreight and Ellie Paddon, experimenting with different poses until she found one that appeared natural and intimate. *Un Livre Ouvert*, 1900, the large painting that resulted from those sketches, positions the woman on the left in the classic S shape as she holds a book on her lap and rests an outstretched leg on an ottoman. The second woman, shown in frontal view, nestles against her companion's shoulder, suggesting easy familiarity. Pemberton shipped the piece to London, where it was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1901 with the title *Interested*. The *Victoria Daily Times* proudly reported the positive reception that followed: "Miss Sophia Pemberton has distinguished herself in London... her picture 'Interested' was highly praised by critics."

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VIEW OVER VICTORIA



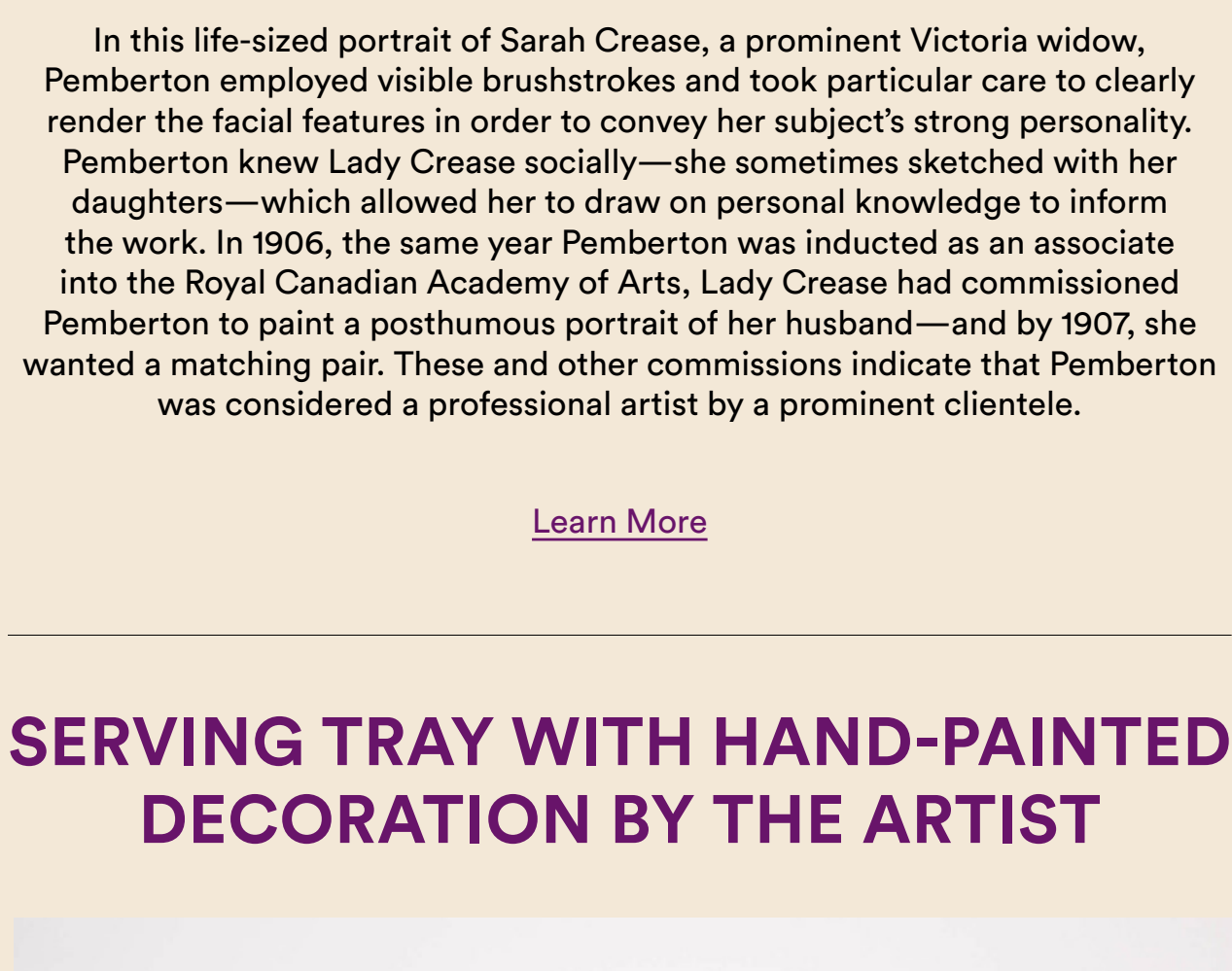
Sophie Pemberton, *View over Victoria*, c.1902, Royal BC Museum, Victoria.

Tailoring her work to the opportunities afforded to her, Pemberton moved away from portraiture to focus on landscape. In the Impressionist-inspired *View over Victoria*, c.1902, she used a wet application of paint, allowing colours to spread and blend in a way that blurred the panoramic view. While living in England and France, Pemberton had viewed various styles and genres of landscape painting by artists such as Camille Pissarro (1830–1903) and Claude Monet (1840–1926). When she returned to Canada in 1900 after studying at the Académie Julian, she took up watercolour painting again and often worked outdoors during trips up-island or on excursions around Victoria and Vancouver.

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SPRING

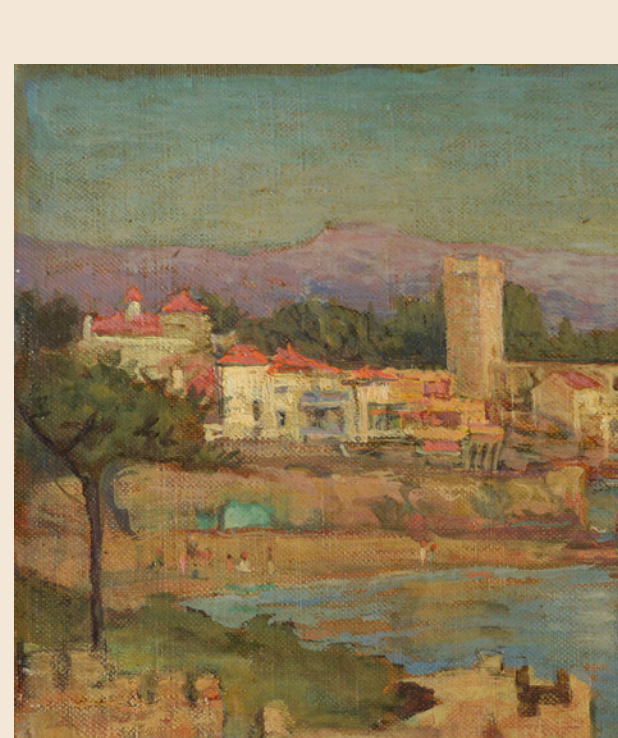


Sophie Pemberton, *Spring*, 1902, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria.

During her productive two-year stay in Victoria between 1900 and 1902, Pemberton created a series of sketches, which later became paintings, depicting a young woman dressed in a serviceable skirt and a long-sleeved blue blouse, with a white apron overtop. *Spring*, 1902, is the strongest composition in the series and reveals Pemberton's command of both portraiture and landscape as it blends the figure into an outdoor setting. In this painting, a young woman—likely a household servant—sits in dappled sunlight alongside a bouquet of wildflowers. Pemberton was now working fully in an Impressionistic style, fascinated with the play of light. The background is rendered in loose, imprecise brush strokes—though, in the Canadian style, the figure is delineated more clearly.

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CAUDEBEC-EN-CAUX



Sophie Pemberton, *Caudebec-en-Caux*, 1903, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria.

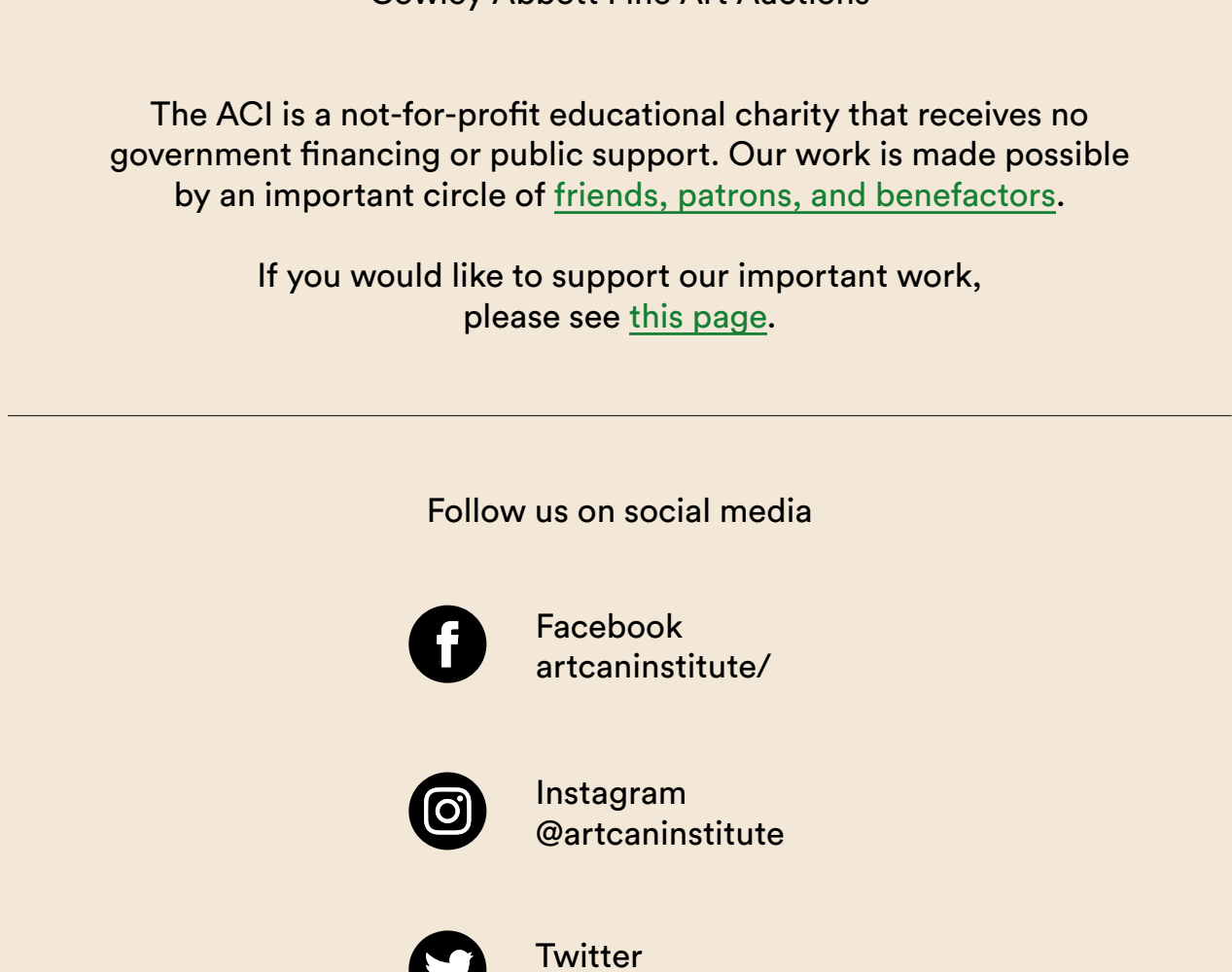


Postcard image of street in Caudebec-en-Caux, c.1905, photographer unknown.

In the summer of 1903, Pemberton, her sister, and their mother visited the Normandy town of Caudebec-en-Caux, a favoured locale for Impressionists such as Camille Pissarro (1830–1903) and Eugène Boudin (1824–1898). Pemberton set up her easel on a stone bridge over what had been a narrow road with stone and timber houses, depicting the blending of stone, wood, and water, the slate rooftops, and the faience clouds reflected in the water. Vintage postcard photographs taken a few years later from a similar vantage point confirm the accuracy of her detail. In all respects, *Caudebec-en-Caux* marked a triumph of careful observation for Pemberton.

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LADY SARAH CREASE



Sophie Pemberton, *Lady Sarah Crease*, 1907, Royal BC Museum, Victoria.

In this life-sized portrait of Sarah Crease, a prominent Victoria widow, Pemberton employed visible brushstrokes and took particular care to clearly render the facial features in order to convey her subject's strong personality. Pemberton knew Lady Crease socially—she sometimes sketched with her daughters—which allowed her to draw on personal knowledge to inform the work. In 1906, the same year Pemberton was inducted as an associate into the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts, Lady Crease had commissioned Pemberton to paint a posthumous portrait of her husband—and by 1907, she wanted a matching pair. These and other commissions indicate that Pemberton was considered a professional artist by a prominent clientele.

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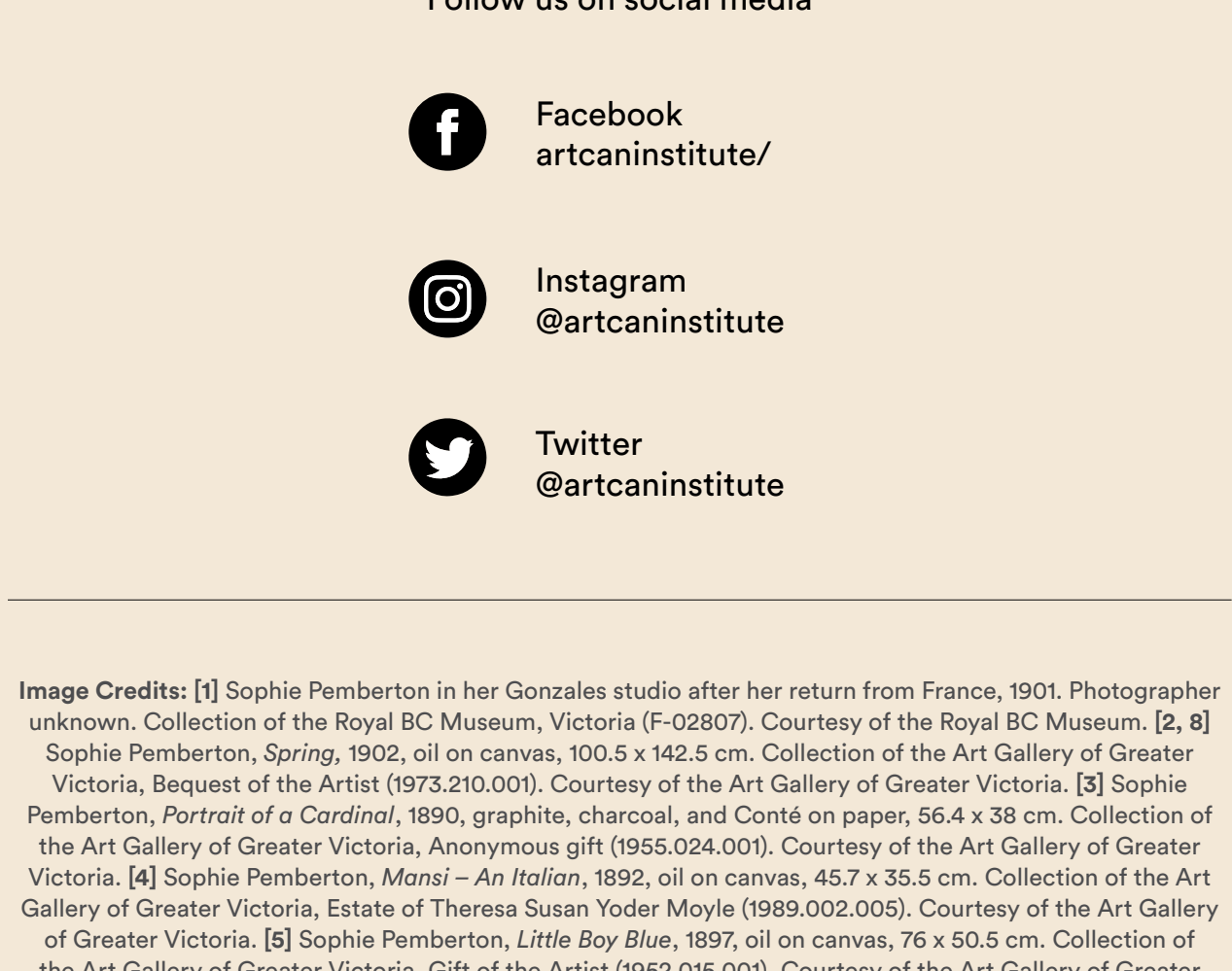
SERVING TRAY WITH HAND-PAINTED DECORATION BY THE ARTIST

Sophie Pemberton, *Serving tray with hand-painted decoration by the artist*, 1921, Royal BC Museum, Victoria.

This wooden serving tray is one of many that Pemberton hand-painted and lacquered from about 1920 onwards, using her own designs inspired by Flemish and Dutch painters, especially Geertje Pieters (1636–1712) and Jan van Kessel the Elder (1626–1679). In 1917, following a series of family tragedies and a serious accident, Pemberton was drawn to painting small pieces rather than her usual large canvases. Encouraged by her neighbour Victoria Sackville-West, she began to explore domestic décor, hand-painting and lacquering everything from inkstands, bookends, and tea caddies to screens, writing desks, and chairs. The trays proved to be the most popular: she received many commissions for them and donated others to charity.

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LA NAPOULE BAY



Sophie Pemberton, *La Napoule Bay*, 1926, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria.

In January 1920, at the age of fifty, Pemberton married Horace Deane-Drummond, a widower with tea estates in Asia and few pretensions about art. The couple embarked on a world tour, during which Pemberton occasionally accepted portrait commissions and painted landscapes such as *La Napoule Bay*, 1926. While the standard interpretation has been that she ceased to be a serious artist after her marriage, it was Pemberton's change in surname that contributed to her loss of public profile: *La Napoule Bay*, which sold through a private gallery, was signed "S.D. Drummond." However, Pemberton never relinquished her professional identity, listing her occupation as "artist" when she returned to Canada in 1949, at the age of eighty.

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About the Author of *Sophie Pemberton: Life & Work*

Dr. Kathryn Bridge is Curator of History and Art (Emerita) at the Royal BC Museum, Victoria. She retired in 2017 after an extensive career in which she variously served as archivist, historian, and curator. In 2023, she curated *Unexpected: The Life and Art of Sophie Pemberton, Canadian Artist* at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria. Bridge notes, "I was intrigued by the gaps in what was written about Sophie Pemberton... [She] lived half her life in England, painted extensively overseas, and had work exhibited internationally before [Emily] Carr, yet these years have been little researched, understood, or contextualized. Pemberton needed a full life story to bring her out of the shadows. And so, in late 2017, I began."

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