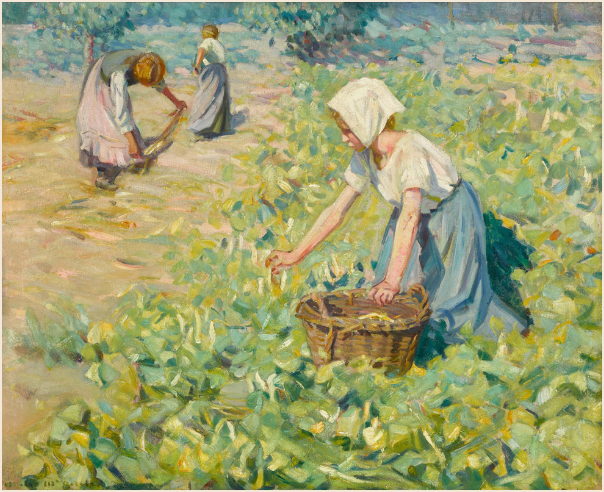
ART CANADA INSTITUTE | INSTITUT DE L'ART CANADIEN

NOVEMBER 15, 2024

FAKE OR FORTUNE? THE AMAZING STORY OF THE NEWLY FOUND IMPRESSIONIST MASTERPIECE THE BEAN HARVEST BY HELEN MCNICOLL

How a British TV show and the Art Canada Institute author Samantha Burton brought a magnificent work to light—one which went on sale at Sotheby's yesterday.



Helen McNicoll, *The Bean Harvest*, 1912, courtesy of Sotheby's (UK).

Samantha Burton

Many treasured artworks, lost from record for various reasons, are still waiting to be rediscovered. Until recently, *The Bean Harvest*, 1912, by famed Toronto-born Impressionist Helen McNicoll (1879–1915) was one such piece. The painting came to the world's attention, after 110 years, through the popular television show *Fake or Fortune?* Yesterday it was auctioned at Sotheby's UK with a reserve of $266,812–444,687 CAD. In late 2023, a retired artist named David Taylor approached the BBC program for help in determining if a painting he bought at a local auction house was by McNicoll or if it was a clever forgery. The show's hosts, international art dealer Philip Mould and journalist Fiona Bruce, used a combination of traditional art historical research and cutting-edge forensics to uncover the truth. To aid their investigation, they enlisted Art Canada Institute author Samantha Burton, a professor at the University of Southern California who wrote *Helen McNicoll: Life & Work*. This week's newsletter shares the details of this remarkable story about McNicoll, art sleuthing, and a newly found and rare Canadian Impressionist painting.

Sara Angel CM, PhD
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

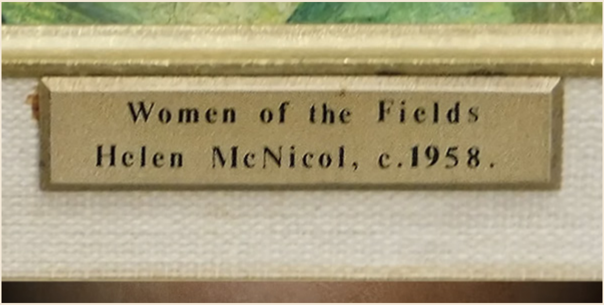
FAKE OR FORTUNE?

David Taylor with the *Fake or Fortune?* team and the McNicoll painting.

While strolling around a local auction, retired English artist David Taylor was mesmerized by a painting of young women at harvest. Although the tranquil outdoor scene of three figures diligently working in a field was tucked away in a corner, it brimmed with light and colour. Painted in an Impressionistic style with lively brushstrokes and vibrant hues, it immediately struck Taylor, who purchased the piece for £2,090 GBP (just under $4,000 CAD). After doing some research on the painting's artist, Helen McNicoll, Taylor wondered if he had inadvertently bought an art treasure. To answer this question, he turned to Philip Mould and Fiona Bruce, hosts of the popular BBC program *Fake or Fortune?*

Learn more about Helen McNicoll

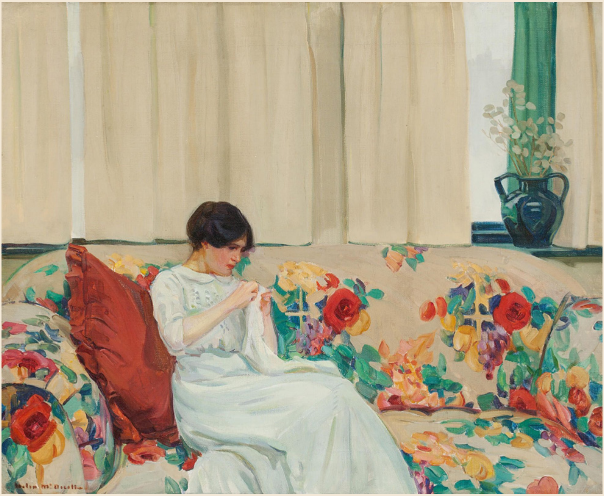
IS IT AN AUTHENTIC HELEN MCNICOLL?



Label on the painting that included a misspelling of the artist’s name and the wrong date.

David Taylor began his investigation after looking at the plaque on the painting’s frame (above) which stated that it was by Helen McNicol [*sic*]. But he was far from certain about what he had in his hands, especially since the metallic panel featured a telltale sign of forgery: the wrong date (1958, decades after the artist’s passing in 1915) and a misspelling of the artist’s surname. Determined to uncover the truth, Taylor contacted the Canadian auction house Heffel, only to find they had no records of a work called *Women of the Fields* by McNicoll. With few clues about the painting’s history, Taylor turned to the *Fake or Fortune?* team, who enlisted ACI author Samantha Burton for her expert opinion. She responded that technical analyses, exhibition history, and provenance would be necessary to confirm whether the painting was a genuine McNicoll.

HELEN MCNICOLL AND HER MARKET TODAY

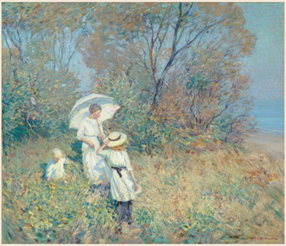


Helen McNicoll, *The Chintz Sofa*, c.1913, collection of Pierre Lassonde.

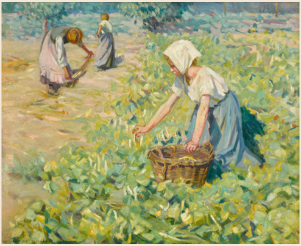
Today, the market for Helen McNicoll paintings is stronger than ever, fuelled by a resurgence of interest in her life and works. Born in Toronto on December 14, 1879, and raised in Montreal, McNicoll came from a wealthy family who introduced her to Quebec's art world. She studied art in Montreal and later in London, England, where she ultimately settled. Captivated by Europe's artistic pulse, she journeyed frequently to France, painting breezy scenes that captured the beauty of reflective moments in the rural outdoors. McNicoll died from diabetes in 1915 when she was just 35, leaving behind a legacy of roughly 300 documented artworks. This scarcity has made her artworks exceptionally valuable. Last year, her painting *The Chintz Sofa*, c.1913 (above), sold for more than $800,000 CAD. With her art being featured in major exhibitions, like *Helen McNicoll: An Impressionist Journey*, now on at the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec (and soon opening at the Art Gallery of Hamilton), there has never been a better time to own a McNicoll.

Learn more about *The Chintz Sofa*, c.1913

CLUE 1: AN INVESTIGATION OF ARTISTIC STYLE



Helen McNicoll, *Sunny September*, 1913, collection of Pierre Lassonde.



Helen McNicoll, *The Bean Harvest*, 1912, courtesy of Sotheby's (UK).

To authenticate Taylor's painting, then called *Women of the Fields*, the *Fake or Fortune?* team started by comparing the work to the well-known McNicoll painting *Sunny September*, 1913 (above left). Both pictures, they discovered, contain the same short and swift impressionistic brushstrokes applied with thick layers of paint to create a shimmering atmosphere. Upon closer inspection, they discovered that the figures in both paintings were created with whites and touches of creamy yellows, enhancing the luminous presence of the white paint. They also noticed that the figures are turned away from the viewer and are fully absorbed in the world around them, conveying a sense of quiet detachment—another McNicoll hallmark.

Learn more about *Sunny September*, 1913

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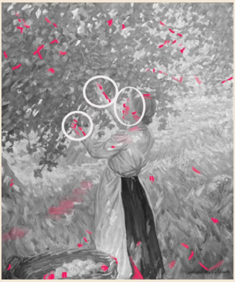
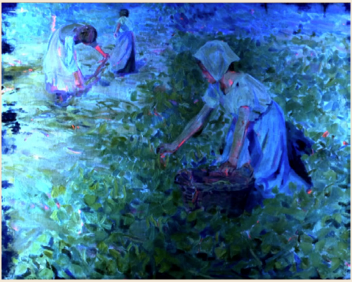
CLUE 2: SCIENTIFIC EXAMINATIONS



View of Helen McNicoll's *The Apple Gatherer*, c.1911, revealing Red Lake paint in specific locations (the figure's face, the tree's foliage, and the grass).



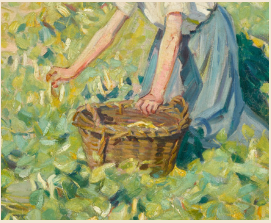
View of *The Bean Harvest* revealing the Red Lake paint used in the same locations as in *The Apple Gatherer*.

The *Fake or Fortune?* team then investigated technical parallels between *Women of the Fields* and a known McNicoll artwork. To do this, they consulted Aviva Burnstock, the head of the department of art conservation and technology at the Courtauld Institute in London, to forensically examine the work. She did so, comparing it to McNicoll's *The Apple Gatherer*, 1911 (above left). Looking for clues about McNicoll's artistic techniques and materials, the forensic analysis revealed the use of a Red Lake paint within both pictures that was precisely applied to the figures' faces and the foliage. Further analysis revealed that both canvases showed a matching thread count: eight vertical by ten horizontal threads per square centimetre. These minute details were valuable additions to the team's growing dossier, illuminating McNicoll's unique approaches.

Learn more about *The Apple Gatherer*, c.1911

CLUE 3: FRENCH BEANS

French beans seed packet.

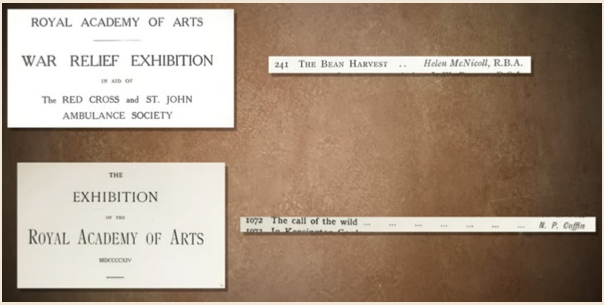


Detail of Helen McNicoll's *The Bean Harvest*, 1912, possibly of French beans.

As the *Fake or Fortune?* team investigated the painting labelled *Women of the Fields*, they wondered if the work might have once been titled something else.

McNicoll's titles were often straightforward descriptions of the scenes she painted, so The *Fake or Fortune?* team looked more closely at what was going on in the piece—specifically, at what was being harvested. To uncover the figures' activity, Fiona Bruce consulted a leading horticulturalist, who identified the plants as French beans—a crop grown in northern France, a region McNicoll travelled to frequently. Could French beans be the clue to unlock the painting's identity and help the team locate it in exhibition catalogues?

CLUE 4: IN THE CATALOGUES



ROYAL ACADEMY OF ARTS

WAR RELIEF EXHIBITION

IN AID OF

The RED CROSS and ST. JOHN
AMBULANCE SOCIETY

241 THE BEAN HARVEST .. *Helen McNicoll*, R.B.A.

THE

EXHIBITION

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MDCCCCXIV

1072 The call of the wild ... ... *N. P. Coffin*

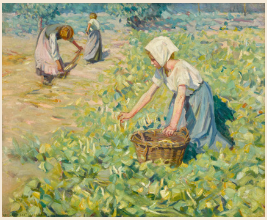
McNicoll exhibited *The Bean Harvest* in 1915, shortly before her death, at the Royal Academy of Arts. Norma P. Coffin, whose surname is listed in the painting's provenance, exhibited at the Royal Academy the previous year.

After rigorous research in exhibition catalogues, the *Fake or Fortune?* team made an extraordinary discovery. A painting recorded as *The Bean Harvest* by McNicoll was exhibited in Canada and England five times between 1912 and 1915. Among the showings, it appeared in the Royal Academy of Arts' 1915 *War Relief Exhibition*, one of McNicoll's final shows. Interestingly, Norma Pine-Coffin, whose family is listed in the painting's provenance, was noted in a Royal Academy catalogue as an exhibiting artist a year prior, suggesting that she and McNicoll may have met and that the painting was passed on to Pine-Coffin. The *Fake or Fortune?* team now asked, Could *Women of the Fields* be the lost McNicoll masterpiece, *The Bean Harvest*?

Read more about McNicoll's exhibition history

A LOST MASTERPIECE UNVEILED TO A CELEBRATED COLLECTOR

Art collector Pierre Lassonde.



The Bean Harvest, once called *Women of the Fields*, 1912.

With all the evidence in hand, *Women of the Fields* was ready for the expert opinion of scholar Samantha Burton and Pierre Lassonde, a Canadian businessman, philanthropist, and the world's most prominent collector of McNicoll's work. After considering the case made by the *Fake or Fortune?* team, Burton was convinced that the painting was both by Helen McNicoll and was the long-lost work *The Bean Harvest*. Lassonde participated in the *Fake or Fortune?* episode, where he expressed his interest in the work and noted that it was of the highest calibre. Thanks to the scholarship of Samantha Burton and the *Fake or Fortune?* team's dedication, a lost McNicoll treasure was found, enriching our understanding of the artist. As Philip Mould said, "discoveries like this one are still possible" in 2024.

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Image Credits: [1, 6, 13] Helen McNicoll, *The Bean Harvest*, 1912. Courtesy of Sotheby's (UK). **[2]** David Taylor with the *Fake or Fortune?* team and his painting. Still from *Fake or Fortune?*, series 12, "Helen McNicoll," directed by Matthew Smith, featuring Fiona Bruce and Philip Mould, aired October 3, 2024, BBC One. **[3]** Label on the painting that included a misspelling of the artist's name and the wrong date. Still from *Fake or Fortune?*, series 12, "Helen McNicoll," directed by Matthew Smith, featuring Fiona Bruce and Philip Mould, aired October 3, 2024, BBC One. **[4]** Helen McNicoll, *The Chintz Sofa*, c.1913, oil on canvas, 81.3 x 99.1 cm. Collection of Pierre Lassonde. Courtesy of Masters Gallery, Calgary. **[5]** Helen McNicoll, *Sunny September*, 1913, oil on canvas, 92 x 107.5 cm. Collection Pierre Lassonde. Courtesy of Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, Quebec City. Photo credit: MNBAQ, Idra Labrie. **[7]** View of Helen McNicoll's *The Apple Gatherer*, c.1911, revealing Red Lake paint in specific locations (the figure's face, the tree's foliage, and the grass). Still from *Fake or Fortune?*, series 12, "Helen McNicoll," directed by Matthew Smith, featuring Fiona Bruce and Philip Mould, aired October 3, 2024, BBC One. **[8]** View of *The Bean Harvest* revealing the Red Lake paint used in the same locations as in *The Apple Gatherer*. Still from F*ake or Fortune?*, series 12, "Helen McNicoll," directed by Matthew Smith, featuring Fiona Bruce and Philip Mould, aired October 3, 2024, BBC One. **[9]** French beans seed packet. Still from *Fake or Fortune?*, series 12, "Helen McNicoll," directed by Matthew Smith, featuring Fiona Bruce and Philip Mould, aired October 3, 2024, BBC One. **[10]** Detail of Helen McNicoll's *The Bean Harvest*, 1912, possibly of French beans. Courtesy of *dArt International* magazine. **[11]** McNicoll exhibited *The Bean Harvest* in 1912, shortly before her death, at the Royal Academy of Arts. Still from *Fake or Fortune?*, series 12, "Helen McNicoll," directed by Matthew Smith, featuring Fiona Bruce and Philip Mould, aired October 3, 2024, BBC One. **[12]** Art collector Pierre Lassonde. Courtesy of Pierre Lassonde.