

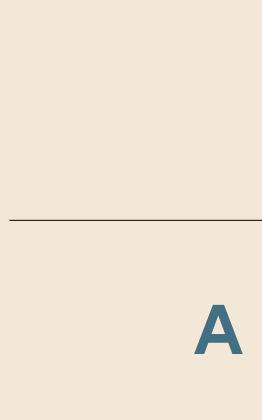
MAY 15, 2026

A TRANSATLANTIC SENSATION THE IMPRESSIONISM OF HELEN MCNICOLL

Now on at the National Gallery of Canada.



Helen McNicoll, *By the Lake*, 1912, Pierre Lassonde Collection.



In 2017, the Art Canada Institute published *Helen McNicoll: Life & Work* by Samantha Burton. At the time, the Impressionist painter was largely overlooked. Our goal was to reawaken interest in her art—and we were successful. Since our publication, McNicoll's work has been featured in numerous exhibitions, most recently *Helen McNicoll: An Impressionist Journey*, created by the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec and adapted for the National Gallery of Canada by curator Katerina Atanassova. This new exhibition brings together ninety-six of McNicoll's works—the largest number ever assembled—and includes paintings never before seen by the public. It also places her in the context of the British Impressionist tradition and includes pieces by Dorothea Sharp, with whom she lived and worked until her death.

Although McNicoll spent much of her career in Europe, she continued to visit Canada regularly, occasionally painting scenes of her home country. She also routinely sent pieces back for exhibitions in Toronto and Montreal. These works exposed Canadians to the new trends in post-1900 Impressionism. By the time McNicoll died in 1915, when she was just thirty-five years old, she had helped advance the Impressionist movement in Canada. Open until October 12, *Helen McNicoll: An Impressionist Journey*—the most ambitious survey of her work in more than a century—offers an intimate, multifaceted view of the artist's life and creative process.

Sara Angel
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

[Learn more about the exhibition](#)

A PIONEER OF CANADIAN IMPRESSIONISM

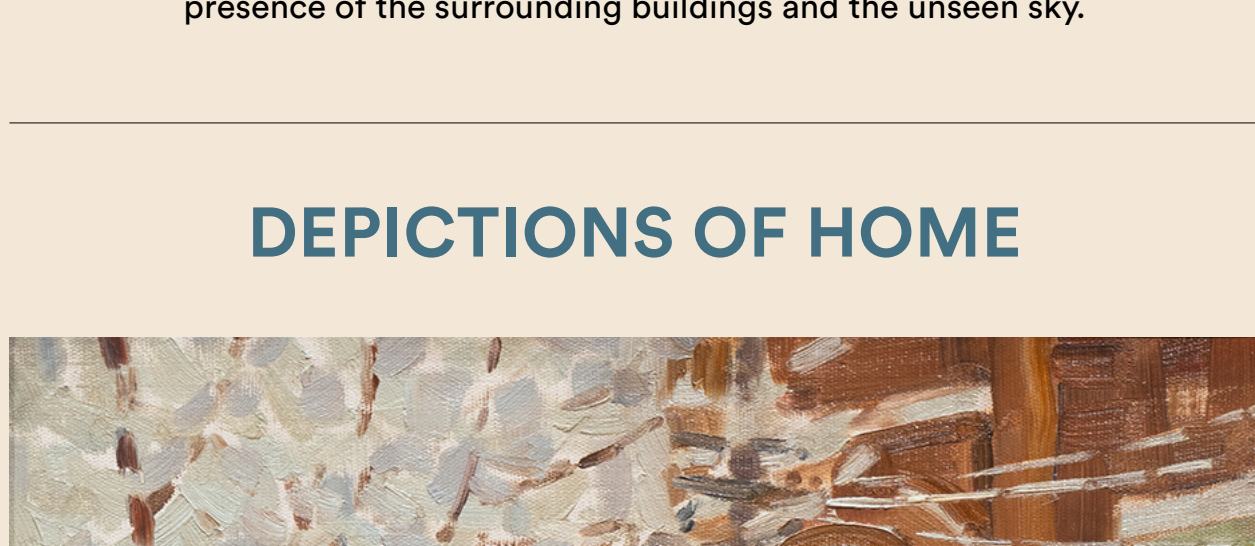


Helen McNicoll, *A Welcome Breeze*, c.1909, Balsillie Collection.

Born in Toronto, Helen McNicoll (1879–1915) moved to Montreal with her family and received her first training as an artist from William Brymner, one of the country's foremost instructors at the time. Despite losing her hearing as a toddler, she had little difficulty absorbing his lessons. Brymner is said to have encouraged her to paint directly in nature, and it's clear she took that advice to heart. Many of her greatest works, such as *A Welcome Breeze*, c.1909, depict idyllic outdoor views. Though spare in its details, the painting so effectively captures the scene that you can almost hear the wind and feel the warmth of the sun.

[Learn more in ACI's
Helen McNicoll: Life & Work](#)

THE EUROPEAN CONNECTION



Helen McNicoll, *Footbridge in Venice*, c.1910, Pierre Lassonde Collection.

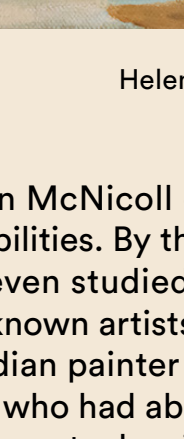
McNicoll first ventured across the Atlantic in 1902, with plans to study at the Slade School of Art in London. She ended up spending much of her life in Europe, and it was there that she developed her affinity for Impressionism. She produced many turning works during this time, including the c.1910 painting *Footbridge in Venice*. This piece signals her growing confidence as she began tackling more complex subjects—in this case, the shimmering water of Venice's world-famous canals. With simple, measured brush strokes, she deftly captures the dazzling, reflective surface, while her careful use of colour suggests the presence of the surrounding buildings and the unseen sky.

DEPICTIONS OF HOME



Helen McNicoll, *Montreal in Winter*, 1911, Pierre Lassonde Collection.

While McNicoll spent much of her career in Europe, Canada was often on her mind. Even when surrounded by the stunning scenery of England, France, and Italy, she occasionally painted scenes of home, including *Montreal in Winter*, 1911. This piece underscores her versatility as well. She breaks from her habit of portraying languid summer scenes and focuses instead on her wintery hometown. We see heavy boots sinking into snow and the laboured steps of the people wearing them. We see a tree, its branches sagging with ice. Every detail is a testament to McNicoll's keen sense of observation and her appreciation of the nuances of the places she chose to paint.



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A DISTINCTIVE STYLE



Helen McNicoll, *By the Lake*, 1912, Pierre Lassonde Collection.

When McNicoll created *By the Lake* in 1912, she was nearing the height of her abilities. By that point, she had spent years honing her skills in Europe and had even studied with British Impressionist Algernon Talmage at St. Ives, a well-known artists' colony in southwestern England. She was no longer a naive Canadian painter learning the ins and outs of European Impressionism but an artist who had absorbed the style and made it her own. She favoured restraint over spectacle, simplicity over vibrancy, and quiet over noise, as seen in this measured depiction of young girls wading through the shallows of a lake, with pigtailed in their hair and subtle ripples around their ankles.

A MASTER OF LIGHT AND SHADOW



Helen McNicoll, *The Open Door*, c.1913, Samuel and Esther Sarick Collection.

While McNicoll spent the bulk of her career painting in England, she sent much of her work back to Canada for exhibition. One piece that likely made the long steamship trip across the Atlantic was *The Open Door*, c.1913. While many of her best-known works depict sunny outdoor scenes, she was also adept at portraying life indoors, and this image brings together those two specialties. In a single painting, she masterfully captures both the cool calm of the indoors using subdued blues and shades of grey and the warm glow of the outside world using bright yellows and oranges. The central figure, a woman who appears to be sewing, floats between the two realms, illuminated by the sun streaming through the doorway but casting a shadow on the floor inside.

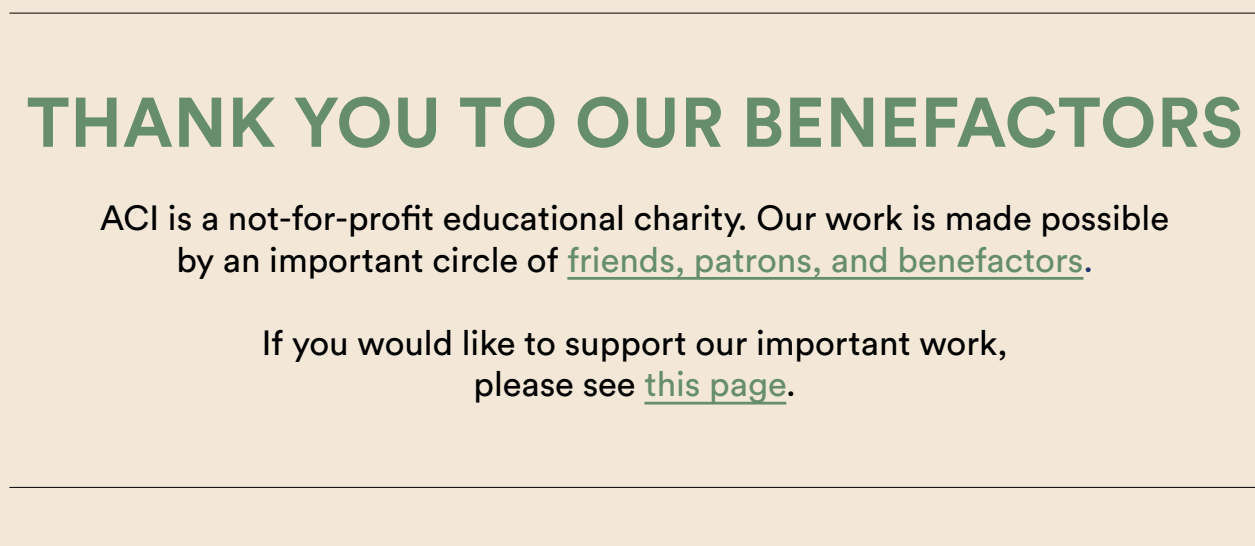
GLIMPSES OF A LIFE



Helen McNicoll, *The Chintz Sofa*, 1913, Pierre Lassonde Collection.

In many of McNicoll's paintings, the human subjects cannot be easily identified. That was not always the case, however. *The Chintz Sofa*, 1913, which shows a woman seated on a sofa in McNicoll's West London home and studio, is slightly more detailed than many of her other works—to the point that we can clearly see the features of the woman's face. Some scholars have suggested the subject is British artist Dorothea Sharp, McNicoll's lifelong companion, whose work is also included in the exhibition.

A LIFE CUT SHORT



Helen McNicoll, *In the Shadow of the Tree*, 1915, Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, Québec City.

In the Shadow of the Tree, 1915, painted shortly before McNicoll passed away, was one of her last pieces. While many of her earlier works focused on women and children, this was one of her few depictions of motherhood and an indication that even years into her career, she was still challenging herself with new subjects. It's difficult not to wonder what more she might have achieved had her life not been cut short. Nevertheless, her appreciation for the subtleties of the world around her and the immense skill with which she could bring those subtleties to life with a paintbrush granted her the kind of immortality that only the greatest artists achieve.

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