

## Quebec Impressionism, from bustling cities to bucolic villages

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By: Kate Taylor

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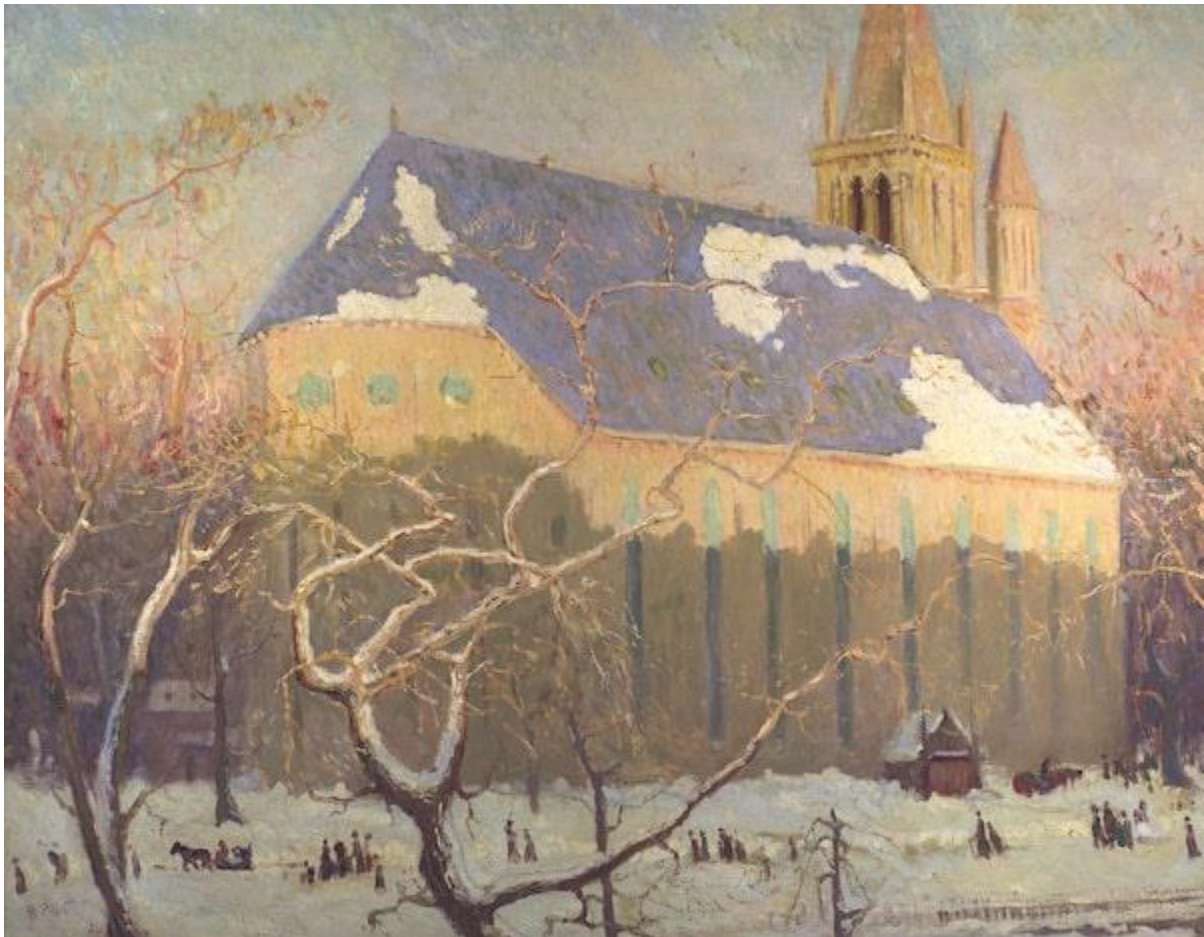


Clarence Alphonse Gagnon (1881–1942), *The Wayside Cross, Autumn*, 1916, oil on canvas. NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA

The McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Kleinburg, Ont., makes a surprising claim for its current show of Quebec Impressionism, calling it the first of its kind in English Canada. Really? No one outside Quebec has ever devoted a show to the best of Quebec painting from the late 19th and early 20th century?

Artists such as Clarence Gagnon, Marc-Aurèle de Foy Suzor-Coté, James Wilson Morrice, Maurice Cullen and Robert Pilot are certainly well-known in English Canada, regular presences at auctions and in major public collections. They are particularly familiar in Ontario, from the Thomson collection at the Art Gallery of Ontario or the Blair Laing gift of Morrice paintings at the National Gallery of Canada. But they are also known outside central Canada, well

represented in the collections of the Beaverbrook Art Gallery in Fredericton and the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, for example.



Robert Pilot (1898–1967), *St. Patrick's Church, Montreal*, oil on canvas. HEFFEL FINE ART AUCTION HOUSE

Still, nobody has a treasure trove like the one that belongs to the Musée national des beaux-arts in Quebec City. And right now, that institution has had to shutter some of its galleries to accommodate the expansion that will build a new wing devoted to the art of Jean-Paul Riopelle.

So, to mark the 150th anniversary of Impressionism's birth in Paris, McMichael director Sarah Milroy and former Beaux Arts curator Anne-Marie Bouchard have put their heads together and come up with *River of Dreams: Impressionism on the St. Lawrence*. It's a show built around the Quebec City collection, much of which has not been seen outside Quebec, with key loans from corporate and private collections in the province and a few from other Canadian institutions too.

Certainly, the breadth of this exhibition – about 150 lovely paintings – justifies the big claim.

The curators weren't romanticizing when they picked that subtitle, *Impressionism on the St. Lawrence*: Rather cleverly, the displays move down the river, from Montreal toward the Atlantic, using geography as the key organizing principle. That allows each section to

concentrate on a handful of artists: with a particular emphasis on Cullen and Pilot and the rediscovered Henrietta Mabel May in Montreal; Cullen and Suzor-Coté in Arthabaska, Pilot and Morrice in Quebec City, William Brymner and Morrice in the Côte de Beaupré, and Gagnon in Charlevoix.



H. Mabel May (1877–1971), *Knitting*, 1915, oil on panel, Pierre Lassonde Collection. ALAN KLINKHOFF GALLERY, TORONTO & MONTREAL

So, the visitor begins with the strong contrast between Suzor-Coté's two views of Montreal's industrial port under billowing smog with Cullen's romantic depiction of Dominion Square under snow (on loan from the Beaverbrook). They progress to Pilot's sunset view of St. Patrick's Church and a remarkable series of his vivid oil sketches of the city, mainly on loan from private collections, as well as several of May's social scenes, including one deceptively placid painting of women knitting socks – for the soldiers of the First World War.

And then the show moves outside the city, to Suzor-Coté's portraits of the Mohawk residents of Kahnawake, their identities now lost to us, their deep faces rendered intelligently with neither

romanticism nor stereotype by the artist. (In a signature Milroy touch, the show also includes a display of the beaded purses, pin cushions and little souvenir canoes that Kahnawake women would have taken into Montreal to sell.)

In Arthabaska, viewers are treated to Suzor-Coté's utterly modern painting of the Northern Lights, depicted as white fans across a dark sky. Morrice's much-loved view of the ferry crossing the river at Quebec City from the National Gallery's collection is matched with a whole series of the same subject by both Morrice and Pilot. And the show ends with Gagnon's charming views of the area around Baie-Saint-Paul dating to the 1910s and '20s.

In the Beaupré region, views of haymaking by Morrice and Brymner are then juxtaposed with contemporaneous photographs by the American photographer Edith Watson. On the one hand, the painted and photographed images are sometimes direct matches, revealing that these paintings, which feel so romantic today, were actually quite observational.

On the other hand, the painters often edited out the most obvious sign of approaching modernity: the telegraph lines that were already in place in the 19th century. Only Gagnon truly celebrates the arrival of technology with *The Train, Winter of 1914*. The tension displayed at the start of this exhibition between picturesque Montreal and industrial Montreal holds true throughout.

Outside the bustling city, there are dozens of seductive rural scenes here, whose luminous landscapes and nostalgic villages appeal so deeply to the settler. Quebec was settled earlier than Ontario, and its artists turned to pretty villages as much as stunning landscapes.

In displaying *Early Spring Morning in the Laurentian Wilds*, one of the few mountain landscapes, the curators note that Gagnon knew nothing of the mysterious land beyond the fertile valley, the territory that belonged to Indigenous nations. If Quebec artists concentrated on their own settlements, Ontario artists looked mainly at the landscape itself: With little white settlement to interrupt it, the artists of the Group of Seven easily fell prey to the fallacy of the empty land.

The Quebec artists who brought Impressionism home from travels to France in the late 19th century were a large influence on the Group formed in 1920, particularly through A.Y. Jackson, the one member who was originally a Quebecker. And there are certainly moments here that make you ache for the disruption that is to come, paintings such as the fussy woodland scenes of Brymner or Ozias Leduc's *Green Apples*, work closer to France's earlier Barbizon school than Impressionism.

Impressionism is a word that sells tickets, and in an era where the canon is expanding, it is no longer reserved for a handful of French artists painting in the 1870s and 1880s. The [Canada and Impressionism](#) show of 2022 at the National Gallery of Canada really stretched the definition of Impressionism; this tightly focused collection is a more convincing argument for looking outside France.

*River of Dreams continues at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Kleinburg, Ont., to Jan. 12.*