

JAMES WILSON MORRICE (1865-1924)

The Hero of Modern Conception in Canadian Art



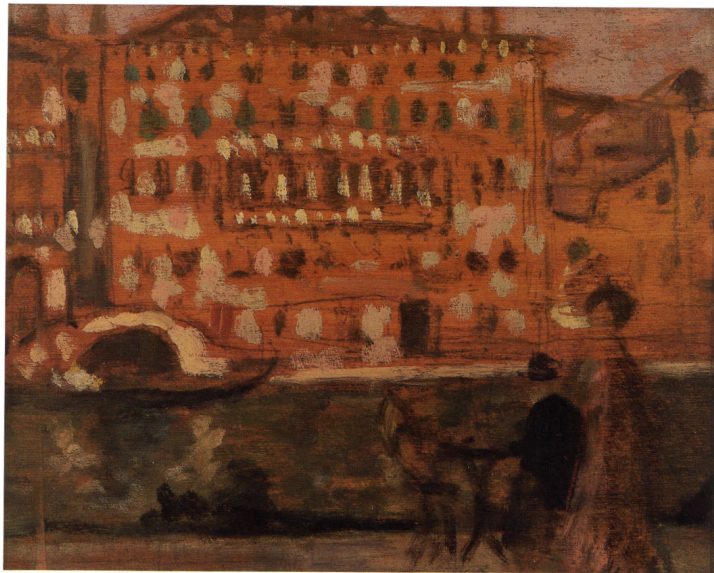
«LA CITADELLE, QUÉBEC» 1897. Oil on panel, 12.4 x 15, 4 cm. Private Collection Musée du Québec—Photo: Patrick Altman

The difficult days for art were over by 1880 in Europe. The fundamental conception of art had been challenged. The results of the great investigations were at everyone's command. Monet had already demonstrated the power of a painting when painted in the key of light. Yet

not all Canadians who had the exposure to these results had the courage to fight against conventional realism. James Wilson Morrice was one who did, and even more significantly, broadened the appeal of painting itself. Everything good in twentieth century Canadian art owes something to Morrice's revolt against the realism

of the art of his own times. He gave the artists of his native land a vision nearer to the experiences of life itself. In this, he was the leader of the modern conception in Canadian art.

Morrice was born in Montreal on August 10, 1865. His father David Morrice was a Scot who immigrated to Canada in 1855 and prospered in busi-



«VENICE» around 1905. Oil on panel, 4 3/8 x 6 in. Private Collection, Montreal

ness imposed order to that of the mystery of distant horizons.

Morrice was a pioneer in the use of a gentle pinkish glow, with associated psychological overtones, in the background of many of his paintings. He was a keen observer who found stimulus by travelling. In his small sketches, one feels the thrill of the discovery of some new effect, which was hitherto unnoticed. One can see what he saw and feel what he felt.

The viewer is overwhelmed by the delicacy of the handling, and the abundance of his imagination. If one understands the modern "carelessness" of art, one prefers these sketches to large finished painting. Morrice considered his small sketches to be full works of art, not mere fragments. With their succinct jottings of dream-like appearances, one finds in them, the most remarkable sensations of gentleness, melancholy and meditation.

Morrice's frequent travel compan-

ion was Matisse. He understood the skill of Matisse and felt an immediate kinship to him when he first saw his work at the exhibition of the Fauves in 1905 at the Salon d'Automne. Contrary to the public opinion of the time, he applauded the art of Matisse. The art of achieving organization in the design of subject-matter by modulation and contrast in colour, as well as by perspective and line.

The inspiration which the skill of Matisse gave to Morrice was the natural extension of his own spiritual realm. Others like Renoir and Manet portrayed a visual imagination that did not serve his needs. He absorbed what he wanted from Matisse but evolved his own art by applying pigments in a manner distinctly his own. Like Vuillard and Bonnard, he developed the deliberate tactic of achieving a balance between excess and insufficiency in painting. He knew when to stop.

He had achieved mastery in sponta-

neous creations by 1905 and was no longer painting as heavily as before.

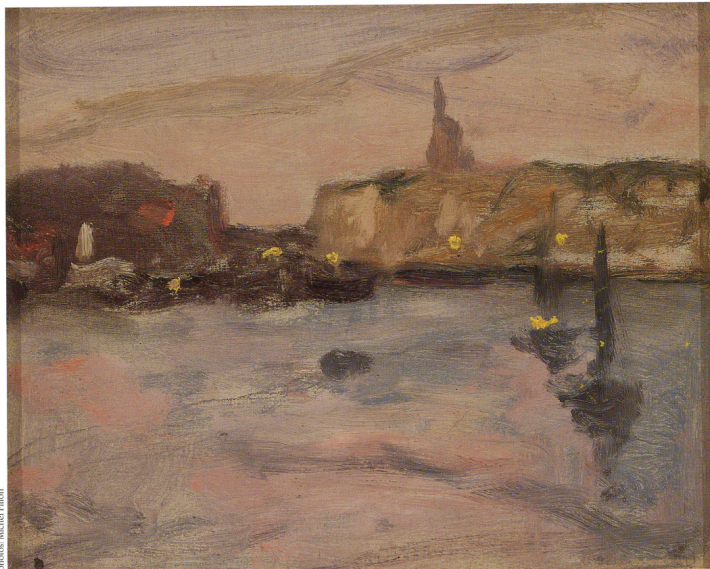
He now covered his canvases with colour and gently achieved his effect by rubbing them with cloth. His paintings of Venice from his first visit in 1896 with Maurice Cullen and his subsequent visits from 1904 to 1906, demonstrate the rapid development of his skill and the self-sufficiency of his art. His work after about 1905 became richer in colour. He continued this evolution during many working visits to Saint-Malo and Concarneau on the Southern coast of Brittany. By 1919 Morrice's art exhibited a broadly calligraphic style. He now expressed the true values of colour while leaving the drawing as spontaneous as possible. He kept some of his canvases for years in his studio, only achieving synthesis in his subject matter after examining them intensely from every angle. His paintings of Cuba and the West Indies, executed from his last trip to there in 1920, are

rare and important treasures in Canadian art. His critics in London and Paris by then acknowledged his work to be as good, if not better, than that of Gauguin and Matisse.

Morrice preferred Europe, Africa and the West Indies for painting. Indeed, in doing so he unwittingly achieved international fame and recognition from the most eminent artists of modern movements in art. Matisse referred to him as the artist with the delicate eye. Prendergast credited him as his mentor in the skill of spontaneous painting. Dunooyer de Segonzac organized a memorial exhibition of his work at the Paris Salon d'Automne, an honour seldom granted to foreign artists.

Although he maintained an apartment in Paris since his arrival from Canada, Morrice travelled restlessly throughout France itself in his unique study of the application of light to his art. By 1922 he was less and less in Paris. In Cannes he met Renoir and Soutine. In Algiers he painted with Albert Marguet, which was perhaps his last work. His health was deteriorating and he is reported to have travelled from Evian-les-Bains on Lake Geneva to Leysons in Switzerland, and from Sicily to Tunis until the winter of 1923.

Morrice the artist, the lawyer, the musician, the traveller, the aristocrat, the friend of acclaimed writers and masters, died in Tunis on January 23, 1924 of complications resulting from a



«MARINE SCENE» around 1905. Oil on panel, 5 1/2 x 6 1/2 in

ness initially in Toronto and later in Montreal. The young James, attempted to satisfy his father's wishes to become a lawyer by obediently pursuing his education in Montreal schools until 1882 and in Toronto where he enrolled in the school of the Law Society of Upper Canada in 1886 and was called to the Ontario Bar in the fall of 1889.

Shortly thereafter, Morrice moved to Paris and lived intermittently from Paris to Venice, and from the Mediterranean to the West Indies. In Paris, where he maintained a studio, he associated with the most accomplished men and women of his times. Among them were, Somerset Maugham, Arnold Bennett, Robert Henri, Maurice Prendergast, Charles Conder, William Glackens, Edward Redfield, Paul Marguet and Henri Matisse. Such friends may have brought out a paradoxical intransigence in Morrice's per-

sonality. At the same time, a fixed income from his family enabled him to brave the storms caused by following the dictates of his unconventional lifestyle, including keeping Léa Cadoret, whom he had met in Paris, as his mistress.

Mostly self-taught, Morrice initially studied under the well-known French artist turned teacher, Henri Harpignies, but was particularly moved by the works of the English painter Bonington, the French Impressionists and James W. Whistler. His independent genius was so unique that, however, Louis Vauxcelles, the leading French critic of the time, wrote in 1907 that after the death of Whistler, Morrice was the first North American painter in Paris to have obtained a great place in the world of art. In Canada his closest friends were Maurice Cullen and William Brymner. Clarence Gagnon and A.Y. Jackson were his disciples.

With all his rare endowments Morrice lacked the skills of illustration, the skills that traditional artists learned in the commercial art school of the day. His vision lay in the idea of painting poetry, a vision that aimed at a poetic expression of the agitation of his own inner life. He expressed himself as much by the choice of his subjects as by the solitude inherent in their treatment.

Morrice's repeated views of the cafés of Paris and the seascapes of Brittany became an expression of his own efforts to paint poetry in the changing reality of motion, on one hand, and the phantasmagoric on the other. The views of cafés allowed him to depict the chaos of an emerging urban life. Cafés permitted him to indulge his taste for wine while witnessing the explosion of human activity in the streets. His seascapes reveal his longing to escape from the city's



«FETE, ST-CLOUD» around 1905. Oil on panel, 5 1/8 x 6 5/8 in. Private Collection, Montreal

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