

JOHN HAMMOND A Wandering Artist

Some lives read like a novel not a biography. Such is the life of artist John Hammond. Born in Montreal in 1843, Hammond spent the better part of a century painting and crisscrossing the globe. In fact, it would be impossible to speak of his art without mentioning the way he lived and some of the places he visited.

According to the tradition very much alive today, Canadian artist went to Europe (and possibly New York) to complete their education. Examples abound in Québec; Lyman, Franchère, Borduas, Morrice, and Suzor-Côté, to name but a few. Compared to Hammond, however, they were sedentary artists.

At age 9, Hammond was already working for his father, a marble cutter. At 11, Hammond knew he wanted to be a painter. When 13, he enlisted in a regiment nicknamed "*Les favoris de ces dames*" to go fight the Fenians, members of the Irish Republic fraternity fighting for Ireland's independence by attacking the British in Canada. A few months later, he left with his older brother for London aboard the "Peruvian". They stayed a while then headed for New Zealand on the sailing ship "Mermaid".

Their journey lasted four months. Of course there was a gold rush in New Zealand where gold supposedly was flowing. From their destination, Christchurch, they had to walk 200 km to the fictitious "El dorado". In 1869, after two years of hard labour and no profit, the adventurous brothers bought their passage home to Montréal. This was but a stopover since they would soon "get itchy feet" once again. Meanwhile Hammond was working for Notman, the famous Montreal photographer. His job was to transform photographs into small paintings by adding colour. The Canadian Geological Survey was looking for young men to do studies on the construction of a rail line from Ontario to the Pacific Ocean. Notman sent Hammond as the assistant to Benjamin Balzly. The two left with three teams headed for the Rocky Mountains. Hammond's team was the only one to reach its goal. The rail line was laid and is used today by Canadian National. Losses and challenges of topographical and climatic nature added to the transportation problem (horses and mules) and the expedition turned into a veritable odyssey, Hammond and his three colleagues reached the Kamloops post in pitiful condition. Cut off from civilisation they were unaware of the Franco-Prussian War and Great Chicago Fire.

Back home in Montréal, Hammond worked at Sandham, Fraser, Weston & Sharpe.

Portraiture and religious art were the main types of painting during this period, so Hammond painted many portraits in Canada and the United States until 1885, when he found his way to Europe again.

On the Continent, Hammond met several artists including the famous Whistler and the son of Jean-François Millet, one on the masters of the Barbizon School. Deeply influenced by Whistler, Hammond exhibited his work at the prestigious Salon de Paris and at London's Royal Academy. He also toured several countries including Italy. There he painted constantly.

Impressionism had emerged in France, but Hammond and several other painters did not pay much attention to shade division or the preponderance of light. Like Whistler, they focused on tonality. Hence the representation of fog and mist, cloud and water, along with other atmospheric subtleties. Such an approach gave an old fashioned look to the work of artists such as Hammond, Dyonnet, Brymner, Franchère and St-Charles.

During the last years of the nineteenth century, Hammond extended his travels in Europe and the United States. He exhibited in New York and several other cities until he ended up in Canton, China. There he barely escaped from the Boxer War.

As some sort of artist-pilgrim, palette in hand, Hammond then toured Japan. He received a commission from the Canadian Pacific to create a mural for the railroad company's London office. The following year, Hammond settled down in St. John, New Brunswick. There he was named director of the Owens Art Institute. Of course the setting and likely the influence of Whistler led to his painting ports, fishing boats and seascapes in misty shades. The port of St. John was to Hammond what Venice was to Whistler.

Although little known in Quebec, Hammond enjoyed a solid reputation in English-speaking milieus in Canada. His contemporaries included Harry Rosenberg and Edward John Russell whose names evoke a generation nearly forgotten. Yet in 1890, at age 47, Hammond became a member of the Royal Canadian Academy of Art. For many years he ran the Owens Art Institute which became a faculty of Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick in 1907. Sackville would remain home until Hammond's death in 1939 at age 96.

John Hammond produced many works including northern landscapes (from the Rockies to the Atlantic seaboard), Asian countrysides, Dutch windmills, French villages and Italy's great cities like Venice and Verona. He painted countries with colour in every sense of the word.

Hammond's landscapes are full of wide spaces. They are studies in the variation of daylight, executed with finesse and delicacy. Water and all that it touches plays an essential role revealed in the exquisite shade gradations and almost evanescent tints. Classicism and love of nature come to mind instantly. Without exaggeration, Hammond may be called the leader of a generation of artists who helped us discover Canada and left us a rich tradition.

Such artists as Hammond, Verner, O'Brien, Fowler, Edson and others cannot be praised enough. If painting existed elsewhere and before the advent of impressionism, it is thanks to them.

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