

These young Canadian painters fell under the sway of Impressionism then adapted it to render their cities and towns

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“River of Dreams: Impressionism on the St. Lawrence,” currently on display at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, is a survey of the influence of Impressionism on Quebecois artists. Pictured are canvases by Clarence Gagnon. MCMICHAEL CANADIAN ART COLLECTION

The Canadian painter William Brymner (1855-1925) arrived in Paris in 1878, four years after the First Impressionist Exhibition. Still, he was more interested in the classical French academic tradition than the radical techniques of [Claude Monet](#), Edgar Degas and Camille Pissarro.

Brymner nevertheless appreciated the Impressionists’ “intense love of and respect for nature and determination to give the exact character as they themselves see it of what they paint and its characteristic lighting, movement and surroundings.”

He returned to Canada in 1885 to teach at the Art Association of Montreal, where he encouraged his students to study in Europe. By that point, Impressionism was moving from the margins to the mainstream and many of these students fell under its sway. When these young

painters came back to Canada, they adapted the style they learned in France to paint their cities and towns.

Brymner and many of the artists he taught and socialized with are included in “River of Dreams: Impressionism on the St. Lawrence,” a survey of the influence of Impressionism on Quebecois artists currently on display at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection. The show is the first of its kind in Ontario and many of these canvases have never been shown outside Quebec.

“River of Dreams” begins with the painters’ impressionistic renderings of Montreal city scenes. It moves east along the St. Lawrence River, through the landscapes of Mont-Saint-Hilaire and Arthabaska, the industrial textures of Quebec City, and finally onto the snowy bucolics of Côte-de-Beaupré and Charlevoix.

Ushering the viewer through the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the show demonstrates how artists were trying to make sense of a province and country in the throes of urbanization and modernization.

Moving from the urban to the rural, it also draws several motifs common to all these painters. Chief among these is a thematic and technical occupation with light, whether it’s a street lamp in Montreal or the sun setting over the peneplains of the Laurentians. In their handling of light and its interaction with colour, these artists were as rigorous as opticians and enchanted as romantics.

Here are five canvases of note:



In “Old Houses Montreal” (about 1908, oil on canvas, 61.4 by 86.7 cm), Maurice Cullen uses colour and perspective to draw out social dynamics. The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, gift of the Honourable Marguerite Shaughnessy in memory of her parents. BRIAN MERRETT/MMFA

Old Houses, Montreal (1908)

Maurice Cullen (1866-1934) sailed for Paris in 1888 and his Impressionist-influenced work found success there. In 1896, he returned to Montreal, where he painted, taught and founded the Arts Club of Montreal. While perhaps best known for his landscapes, Cullen made a series of wintry urban scenes between 1899 and 1912.

Among the finest of these is “Old Houses, Montreal.” Cullen here places the viewer close to the grand estate, as if we have stumbled on it while walking down the street. The bleak winter night is rendered in short, loose brush strokes that vignette the house. Soft golden light comes from the windows, marking the value of shelter in the terrible freeze of winter. Outside the house are gathered silhouettes, presumably those of the valets, done in dark blacks.

More than just evoking the feeling of a wintry night, Cullen uses colour and perspective to draw out social dynamics. Who gets to be in the sanctuary of the mansion and who is left on the slushy street?



In Ozias Leduc's "Landscape at Dusk," (1910, oil on panel, 26.4 x 23.8 cm) Ozias Leduc pares an impression down to its most essential elements to bring his viewer closer to nature's spiritual revelations. Pierre Lassonde Collection, Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec. IDRA LABRIE/MNBAQ

Landscape at Dusk (1910)

Ozias Leduc (1864-1955) said his work rendered "a somewhat unreal world but visually precise — the incarnation of the subtle, of magic, of the infinite, of contemplation." Born in Saint-Hilaire, 35 kilometres northeast of Montreal, Leduc was a deeply religious and largely self-taught painter who initially made church decorations. He visited Paris in 1897 where, according to the art historian Laurier Lacroix, he was inspired by the Symbolists and their belief that art could "penetrate the secret of nature, pass beyond appearances and sense the presence of God."

Impressionistic techniques were one way of doing this. As Anne Beauchemin notes in the catalogue for "River of Dreams," to render an initial impression of nature is to "occasion a meeting of the external and internal worlds." In "Landscape at Dusk," the Saint-Hilaire landscape is simplified to gradations of colour. By paring an impression down to its most essential elements — indeed by approaching abstraction — Leduc brings his viewer closer to nature's spiritual revelations.

The Thaw, March Evening in Arthabaska (1913)

Painting en plein air, **Marc-Aurèle de Foy Suzor-Coté** (1869-1937) said, "is like being alone in a chapel." He mastered the technique in Paris, where he spent the better part of a decade, and used it to render his native Quebec when he returned in 1908. Suzor-Coté took his hometown of Arthabaska (now Victoriaville) as his subject.

"The Thaw, March Evening in Arthabaska" is a scene of both beauty and torment. The sun is falling, the snow is puddling and the season is dying along with the days. Tomorrow and the promise of spring, however, are suggested by the hint of leaves emerging on the trees. Suzor-Coté offers a scene of in-betweens and limitations, like the fence in the background demarcating the fields, a stalemate in the push-and-pull between winter and spring.



In "The Ferry, Quebec" (1907 oil on canvas, 62 x 81.7 cm), James Wilson Morrice rubbed his colours to make them appear flat and gave his picture a half-finished look to "synthesize a fleeting moment in time." NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA

The Ferry, Quebec (1907)

James Wilson Morrice (1865—1924) went to France in 1889 and, while he never permanently returned to Canada, he visited frequently. As Katerina Atanassova notes in the exhibition catalogue, one excursion to Quebec City in 1897 was a "turning point in Morrice's career in refining his handling of tonal gradation of light and atmosphere."

He revisited the Quebec City studies a decade later, resulting in "The Ferry, Quebec," one of the great Canadian paintings. Morrice rubbed his colours to make them appear flat and gave his picture a half-finished look to "synthesize a fleeting moment in time." The simplicity of Morrice's form belies the intricacy of his subject: a globally linked system of trade. He suggests movement beneath the canvases' surface but, for the most part, this is a strangely placid scene. Like the ferry beginning to cross the St. Lawrence, we are moving inexorably through the 20th century toward a new Canada.



In “Early Spring Morning in the Laurentian Wilds” (1923, oil on canvas, 74.4 x 94 cm), Clarence Gagnon demonstrates a precise but highly emotional understanding of colour and its interaction with light and shadow. The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, A. Sidney Dawes Fund. JULIE CIOT/MMFA

Early Spring Morning in the Laurentian Wilds (1923)

After studying under William Brymner, **Clarence Gagnon** (1881-1942) moved to Paris in 1904, but he maintained that the influence of his Canada was indelible. “Over there, I paint only Canadian subjects, I dream only of Canada.”

Each time Gagnon visited Quebec, he would take photographs and sketches of its rural areas back to Europe, finishing them in his studio there. It was a process of transferring: from country to country, from experience to memory. He adopted a palette of high-key colours as the 20th century progressed, making these scenes more vivid as nostalgia does to old memories.

Gagnon’s painting “Early Spring Morning in the Laurentian Wilds” demonstrates this precise but highly emotional understanding of colour and its interaction with light and shadow. The ridges here build on one another, drawing the viewer’s eyes upward to the snowy culminating peak.

Gagnon's expressive palette sets him apart from many of the other painters included in the show. He renders the mountain range in cool, desaturated blues, soft beiges and reddish browns, the colours subtly shifting as the sunlight moves across them. Only someone with deep knowledge of the land can so beautifully capture its essence.

"River of Dreams: Impressionism on the St. Lawrence is at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, 10365 Islington Ave., Kleinburg, Ont., until Jan. 12, 2025. See mcmichael.com for information.