

Press release

New exhibition

From June 20, 2024 to January 5, 2025

Helen McNicoll.

An impressionist Journey

A celebration of light!



Parc des Champs-de-Bataille
Québec (Québec) G1R 5H3

418 643-2150
1 866 220-2150

mnbaq.org

Press Contact

Linda Tremblay
Media Relations Officer

418 644-6460, ext. 5532
linda.tremblay@mnbaq.org

Québec City, Wednesday, June 19, 2024 ✕ “Painter of the sun,” “A painter who spreads sunlight on her canvases,” and “A painter who addresses the senses” are but some of the laudatory comments that qualify artist **Helen McNicoll (1879-1915)** and her work, which is featured this summer in an exhibition at the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec (MNBAQ). The MNBAQ is proud to present the first Québec retrospective in a century of the Canadian impressionist painter’s work. From **June 20, 2024 to January 5, 2025**, visitors can discover an artist whose destiny was at once incredible and fleeting, a little-known but utterly fascinating artist noteworthy for her outstanding mastery of light and atmospheric effects.

The *Helen McNicoll. An Impressionist Journey* exhibition has been conceived through the prism of travel and the effervescence of a period and by examining the themes of independence, friendship, and women’s

freedom. The retrospective exhibition assembles more than 65 paintings, of which 25 come from the remarkable collection of philanthropist and art lover Pierre Lassonde, and the remainder from 15 institutional and private collections and also includes sketches, a watercolour, and photographs presented in a refined setting. It invites visitors on a voyage and, above all, to experience an adventure bathed in vibrant, shimmering colours.

The exhibition also highlights the work of a free painter who pushed the boundaries as an independent professional woman at a time when women were often confined to the domestic sphere, thereby contributing to the recognition on the world stage of Québec and Canadian art. The splendidly luminous exhibition reveals a major timeless, indeed essential, body of work.

A remarkable destiny



Born in Toronto in the late 19th century, Helen McNicoll grew up in Montréal in a well-to-do environment. Her parents were recent British immigrants to Canada who encouraged artistic practice. Scarlet fever rendered her deaf at the age of 2 and her parents encouraged her from childhood to develop her artistic and musical creativity despite her handicap.

The McNicoll family's wealth meant that she could paint freely without having to worry about selling her works or teaching to support herself. Moreover, family relationships afforded her contact with Montréal's leading art collectors at the time.

At the Art Association of Montréal McNicoll studied with William Brymner (1855-1925), who encouraged his students to travel in Europe to further their training. She made London, then a prosperous art centre, her base, where she undoubtedly discovered more progressive work than what was being done in Canada.

Helen McNicoll, who was noteworthy for her love of travel and the discovery of new spaces, undoubtedly perceived her relationship to the world and her artistic output linked to fledgling tourism at the turn of the 20th century.

Her European travels put McNicoll in direct contact with the innovative styles teeming in these artistic communities and gave her a special

understanding of the development of impressionism and post-impressionism. Stimulated by all these influences, McNicoll painted landscapes focusing on rural life and genre scenes. She developed a fresh, brilliant style that became her own distinct language.

The artist also played a significant role in bridging North American and European art. She was celebrated in her lifetime for the high quality of her light-bathed rural or seaside landscapes and intimate scenes in which feminine subjects predominate.



Helen McNicoll's brief but prolific career was shaped by the presentation of scores of works at exhibitions in Canada and England for which she received awards for her mastery of light and her unique pictorial representation. In addition to the other awards, she was elected in 1913 to the Royal Society of British Artists and, in 1914, was one of the rare women elected as associate members of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts.

Travel as a way of life



Helen McNicoll settled in London. She travelled in England and Europe and frequently to Canada. She led a cosmopolitan life but at that time many artists withdrew from urban centres, especially during the summer, to paint outdoors in the countryside or in villages in order to explore landscapes.

McNicoll's research focused on the effects of light and atmosphere, sustained by her numerous trips south of Paris, to Normandy and Brittany, Belgium, the Mediterranean, and Italy, including Venice, and to artists' colonies, where she spontaneously refined her palette.

Praise for light and women's work

The artist was often on the move and captured her ever-changing environment remarkably. In Brittany, she painted village market scenes in honey tones. In Venice, her attention focused on the scintillating water of the canals. The hot sand and blue sky of European beaches afforded a backdrop suited to women and girls wearing dazzling white dresses.

This ode to travel and the mastery of light also enabled her to examine the themes of female independence, risk-taking, sisterhood, and freedom for

women in the stimulating context of the English suffragettes' fight for the right to vote.

Her favourite subjects were scenes of everyday life, although her interpretation differed from that of the impressionists by focusing more closely on women's labour and the intimate lives of women at the turn of the 20th century.



Exhibition highlights

The exhibition comprises six separate areas embellished, in the middle, with central structures, one of which recalls the shape of a compass and its cardinal points to evoke travel. It presents all the key elements of McNicoll's artistic career: *Light and Shadow*, *The Children's Playground*, *Sketchbook*, *Women at Work*, *The Water's Edge*, *Life en plein air*, *Lighting the Studio*, and *On the Boulevard*.

The retrospective assembles the artist's finest paintings, including such major works as *Sunny September* (1913), *In the Shade of a Tree* (1915), *Picking Berries* (1913), *Stubble Fields* (circa 1912), *The Chintz Sofa* (1913), *Evening Street Scene* (circa 1910) and *Montreal in Winter* (1911).

Sunny September (1913) is a magnificent fall scene that quickly established McNicoll's renown with art critics and key art market stakeholders. This luminous fall day envelops the viewer.

In the Shade of a Tree (1915), from the MNBAQ's collection, reveals scenes of women and children that McNicoll cherished and forges links with the outstanding work of impressionist artists Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morisot.

Picking Berries (1913) examines the importance that McNicoll attached to outdoor painting and composition but also the context of feminine collaboration essential to the development of her career since this work is reflected in a painting by Dorothea Sharp with whom her friendly and professional relationship was fundamental.

McNicoll produced several works devoted to fields or haystacks following the example of works by Claude Monet. *Stubble Fields* (circa 1912) is an eloquent example. The artist put into practice in this painting several new

theories of colour circulating in impressionist and post-impressionist circles since the late 19th century.



With *The Chintz Sofa* (1913), McNicoll briefly abandoned her sunny landscapes for interior scenes. In the painting, it is possibly Dorothea Sharp sitting on the elegant chintz sofa in the living room of the workshop that she shared with McNicoll in London. In light of the suffragettes' struggles in the early 20th century, art historians have proposed a feminist interpretation of this scene that supports Sharp's involvement in the Society of Women Artists.



Evening Street Scene (circa 1910) proposes an evening scene that is unique in McNicoll's output. The electric light replaces the sun, thereby conferring on the painting a very modern note that emphasizes the artist's interest in scenes of everyday life, as do her numerous market scenes, and for all manner of effects of light and atmosphere.

Montreal in Winter (1911) also reveals the importance of McNicoll's travels between Canada and Europe and her interest in the snowy landscapes of her homeland. The painting reflects works by Canadian impressionists Maurice Cullen, James Wilson Morrice, Clarence Gagnon, and Marc-Aurèle de Foy Suzor-Coté, among others.

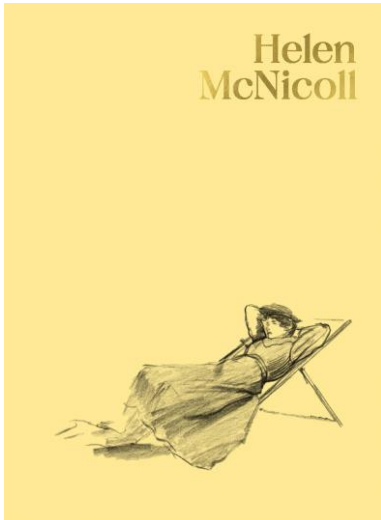


The catalogue is the perfect complement to the exhibition

To celebrate the luminous work of Helen McNicoll, her remarkable destiny, and her contribution to the history of Québec, Canadian, and international art, a catalogue has been published to accompany the retrospective organized by the MNBAQ.

The work, which hinges principally on the notion of travel, focuses on most of McNicoll's works exhibited, including those from Pierre Lassonde's impressive collection. Edited by the MNBAQ and 5 Continents Editions, the 160-page bilingual (English and French) catalogue is accompanied by four essays, each of which sheds light on a facet of the artist's work.

The introductory text by **Anne-Marie Bouchard** examines McNicoll’s work in the context of the mobility of women artists in the early 20th century. It broaches transatlantic travel, American and European destinations, artistic networks, and the social implications of travel. **Samantha Burton** provides a biographical overview of the artist that retraces the development of the artist’s career with particular emphasis on the importance of her transnational travel. **Julie Nash** also focuses on the notion of mobility by closely examining McNicoll’s outdoor paintings undertaken throughout her travels, including the practice centred on painting small plein-air oil sketches. Lastly, **Caroline Shields** and **Valerie Moscato** also examine the artist’s work methods through a thorough examination of her pictorial technique to attempt to grasp how she began and completed her large canvases, a still unknown aspect of her art.



Credits

The exhibition *Helen McNicoll. An Impressionist Journey* was organized by the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec. *The Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec is a state corporation funded by the Gouvernement du Québec.*

Québec 

Collaborators

Anne-Marie BOUCHARD

Content contributor

Julie NASH

Manager of scholarly content and didactic texts

Maude LÉVESQUE

Project leader, MNBAQ

Loïc LEFEBVRE

Design, MNBAQ

Philippe LEGRIS

Graphic Design, MNBAQ

Management

Marie-Hélène AUDET

Head of Mediation, MNBAQ

Yasmée FAUCHER

Head of Museography, MNBAQ

Catherine GAUMOND

Head of Collections, MNBAQ



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Helen McNicoll. An Impressionist Journey
Pierre Lassonde Pavilion of the MNBAQ
From June 20, 2024 to January 5, 2025

INFORMATION: 418 643-2150 or 1 866 220-2150

PRESS CONTACTS:

Linda Tremblay

Media Relations Officer, MNBAQ

418 262-4681

linda.tremblay@mnbaq.org

Montréal

Rosemonde Gingras

Rosemonde Communications

514 458-8355

rosemonde@rosemondcommunications.com

Page 1 – Photo: Helen McNicoll, *On the Beach*, 1912. Oil on canvas, 63.5 × 76.8 cm. Pierre Lassonde Collection / Photo: MNBAQ, Idra Labrie

Page 2 – Photo: Helen McNicoll, *Garden*, 1913. Oil on canvas, 63.5 × 76.2 cm. Pierre Lassonde Collection / Photo: MNBAQ, Louis Hébert

Page 3 – Photos from top to bottom: Helen McNicoll, *Fruit Vendor*, 1910. Oil on canvas, 61 × 50.8 cm. Pierre Lassonde Collection / Photo: AGO // Helen McNicoll, *Venice*, 1910. Oil on canvas, 22.8 × 28 cm. Pierre Lassonde Collection / Photo: MNBAQ, Louis Hébert

Page 4 – Photos from top to bottom: Helen McNicoll, *Sunny September*, 1913. Oil on canvas, 87 × 103,5 cm. Pierre Lassonde Collection / Photo: MNBAQ, Idra Labrie // Helen McNicoll, *In the Shade of a Tree*, c. 1915. Oil on canvas, 100 × 81.5 cm. MNBAQ, purchase (1951.140) / Photo: MNBAQ, Jean-Guy Kérouac // Helen McNicoll, *Picking Berries*, 1913. Oil on canvas, 102.4 × 86.9 cm. Pierre Lassonde Collection / Photo: MNBAQ, Idra Labrie

Page 5 – Photos from top to bottom: Helen McNicoll, *The Chintz Sofa*, 1913. Oil on canvas, 81.3 × 99.1 cm. Pierre Lassonde Collection / Photo: AGO // Helen McNicoll, *Evening Street Scene*, 1910. Oil on canvas, 47.7 × 40.6 cm. Pierre Lassonde Collection / Photo: MNBAQ, Louis Hébert // Helen McNicoll, *Montreal Winter*, 1910. Oil on canvas, 18 × 14 cm. Pierre Lassonde Collection / Photo: MNBAQ, Louis Hébert

Page 6 – Photo: Helen McNicoll, *The Gleaner*, c. 1908. Oil on canvas, 101 × 82 cm. Samuel and Esther Sarick Collection / Photo: AGO

Page 9 – Photo: Dorothea Sharp, *Helen McNicoll adjusting model's hair*, n.d. / Photo: Courtesy of The Robert McLaughlin Gallery Archives

Page 10 – Photo: Helen McNicoll, *The Brown Hat*, c. 1906. Oil on canvas, 53.5 × 43.5 cm. Art Gallery of Ontario, gift of the Estate of R. Fraser Elliot, 2006 (2006/88) / Photo: AGO

Page 11 – Photo: Helen McNicoll, *Picking Flowers*, c. 1912. Oil on canvas, 94 × 78.8 cm. Art Gallery of Ontario, gift of R. Fraser Elliott, Toronto, in memory of Betty Ann Elliott, 1992 (92/102) / Photo: AGO // Helen McNicoll, *The Avenue*, 1912. Oil on canvas, 97 × 79 cm. Pierre Lassonde Collection / Photo: AGO

Helen McNicoll: Timeline



December 14, 1879

Helen Galloway McNicoll is born in Toronto, Ontario, to parents who had recently immigrated to Canada from the United Kingdom.

1881-1882

McNicoll becomes deaf after a bout of scarlet fever.

May 1885

At the age of five, McNicoll experiences her first transatlantic journey when she travels to England and back with her mother and younger siblings. Around this time, the family relocates to Montréal as David McNicoll moves up the ranks at the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR).

June – September 1898

McNicoll travels to the Great Britain with her mother and siblings once again. She purchases two sketchbooks from a London supplier of artists' materials. Shortly after returning home, she enrolls at the school of the Art Association of Montreal, and drawings of fellow students and her instructors appear in the sketchbooks.

February 1899

McNicoll visits the Mystic Oral School in Mystic, Connecticut, an institution in favour of teaching lip-reading over sign language for the Deaf. She draws some of the students in her sketchbook.

July 27, 1902

After completing four years of study at the Art Association of Montreal under William Brymner, and alongside other young artists, McNicoll journeys to England with her mother and sister.

October 2, 1902

McNicoll begins classes at the progressive Slade School of Fine Art, University College, London. She studies drawing and painting from the antique and life, as well as composition. Her address is 6 Gordon Square, close to where the first Bloomsbury Group meetings would take place at the residence of sisters Vanessa Bell and Virginia Woolf (née Stephen).

Summer 1903

In between terms at the Slade, McNicoll travels to the coastal British town of Broadstairs with her sister and a London-based cousin.

September – October 1904

McNicoll briefly returns to Montréal, her first trip home since she moved abroad on her own to pursue her professional training.

Fall 1905

McNicoll relocates to St. Ives, Cornwall, to attend the Cornish School of Landscape, Figure and Sea Painting founded by Julius Olsson, and meets her lifelong partner, Dorothea Sharp. McNicoll’s sketchbook from this time lists her address as a “Harbour Studio,” similar to the converted fish lofts used during lessons.

February 24 – March 24, 1906

McNicoll shows two paintings at the annual exhibition of the Ontario Society of Artists — her first professional exhibition. The next month, her work, including *The Brown Hat*, appears on Québec soil for the first time at the Art Association of Montreal’s annual exhibition. She regularly sends paintings back home to Canada in the following years, soon showing at the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts (RCA) and Canadian National Exhibition.

Summer 1906

By this time, McNicoll’s father has become the vice president of the CPR. The company launches two luxurious transatlantic passenger steamships, on which McNicoll will travel for the rest of her life.

October 18, 1907

McNicoll departs Liverpool for Montréal on the CPR’s *Empress of Ireland*, returning home for the first time since enrolling at St. Ives. She later returns to England, undertaking regular trips to the artists’ colonies of England and France, often in the company of Dorothea Sharp.

March 24 – April 11, 1908

McNicoll exhibits five paintings at the Art Association of Montreal’s annual exhibition. She receives the inaugural Jessie Dow Prize (shared with W.H. Clapp) for her painting *September Evening*. The Montréal collector and president of the Canadian Pacific Railway, Sir William Van Horne, soon after purchases his first of three canvases by McNicoll.



Winter 1910

During an extended trip home, McNicoll paints scenes around Montréal. In May, the Canadian artist Robert Harris paints her portrait.



July 1910

McNicoll travels to France and possibly also to Venice, Italy. She paints plein-air studies in oil that she enlarges onto canvas when she returns to her London studio.

March 14, 1912

McNicoll attends the opening of the Art Association of Montreal’s annual exhibition during a trip home to see her family. She exhibits four paintings, including *The Children’s Playground*.

March 1913

When she is elected an associate member of the Royal Society of British Artists (RBA), an announcement and the artist’s photograph appear in many Canadian newspapers. They announce that McNicoll was awarded the maximum of three paintings for spring exhibition of the RBA that year, among them *The Chintz Sofa*.

Summer 1913

McNicoll travels to the south of France with fellow artists Dorothea Sharp and Marcella Smith, believed to be the subjects of *Under the Shadow of the Tent*. This painting is sent to the autumn showing of the Royal Society of British Artists soon after. When exhibited in Canada the next year, it wins the Women’s Art Society of Montreal’s annual prize for the “best painting by a Canadian woman.”

January 26 – February 26 février, 1914

Sunny September and *White Sunshade #2* are shown at the Royal Society of British Artists. By autumn of that year, both works have been sent to Canada and are shown in the annual exhibition of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts. The RCA elects McNicoll as an associate member, the highest level a woman could reach until the 1930s.



April – June 1914

McNicoll travels home to Canada for the last time, although she did not know it would be the final journey. Due to travel restrictions brought on by the First World War, this is likely the last time she sees her Canadian family.

August 1914

McNicoll is travelling in France with Dorothea Sharp when the war breaks out. Her father uses his position and influence at the Canadian Pacific Railway to get the pair safely back to England. She donates paintings to exhibitions in Canada and England designed to raise funds for the war effort, including *The Farmyard*.

October 1914

The Victorian Dress is shown at the Royal Society of British Artists' autumn exhibition. It is the only work she mentions in one of several extant letters. As she writes to her father: "It's called 'The Victorian Dress' but I call it 'the mustard one' on [account] of its colour.

March 1915

McNicoll sends two works to what would be her final showing with the Royal Society of British Artists, including *In the Shadow of the Tree*. It is believed to be the only time this work is exhibited in McNicoll's short lifetime.

June 27, 1915

McNicoll passes away suddenly from complications related to diabetes while working at Swanage, England. The bulk of her paintings remain in her London studio until her family is able to retrieve them. This is also the first and only year McNicoll appeared on an electoral register, though British women would not gain the right to vote until many years later.

November 7 – December 6, 1925

Ten years after her death, McNicoll's legacy is recognized by a memorial exhibition organized by the Art Association of Montreal. Over 140 works are shown, including loans from Montreal private collections and her estate. This was the last retrospective exhibition dedicated to McNicoll on Québec soil — until now.

General Information

OPENING HOURS OF THE MNBAQ*

From June 22 to September 2, 2024

Monday to Sunday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Wednesday until 9 p.m.

From September 3, 2024 to May 31, 2025

Tuesday to Sunday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Wednesday until 9 p.m.

Closed on Mondays, except July 1, September 2, October 14, 2024 and 1 January 2025

** During the construction of the Riopelle Space, only the Pierre Lassonde Pavilion is open.*

ADMISSION*

** Save up by purchasing your ticket on line*

Featured exhibitions

Adults: 24 \$

Seniors (65 and Over): 23 \$

Ages 18 to 30: 15 \$

Ages 13 to 17: 7 \$

Families (2 adults accompanied up to 5 children aged 17 and under): 52 \$

Group rate (15 people or more) for hotels, tour operators and companies: 22 \$

12 years and under: free

Membres: free

Wednesdays from, 5 p.m. to 9 p.m.: half-price

First Sunday of every month: free

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