

# Review: Steam: Impressionist Painting Across the Atlantic. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, 5 November 2022–ongoing.

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STEAM POWER REVOLUTIONISED travel during the nineteenth century, bridging physical, ideological, and even artistic distances. The Art Gallery of Ontario's new exhibition, 'Steam: Impressionist Painting Across the Atlantic', highlights the ways steam travel shaped Impressionist artists' work, practices, and their interactions with the world around them on both local and international scales. Local steam railways in Europe provided Impressionist artists with opportunities to escape the confines of city life and find inspiration in rural and suburban settings. Meanwhile, affordable international steam travel allowed Canadian artists to travel to Europe for an artistic education and bring the styles they learned, including Impressionism, back to North America.

The exhibition features a collection of twenty-one paintings spanning the late Victorian and Edwardian periods (c. 1870-1915). It includes the works of eminent Impressionists such as Pierre-Auguste Renoir and Claude Monet, alongside pieces by Canadian Impressionists like William Blair Bruce and Mary Hiester Reid. Although the exhibition is advertised as a collection of French, English, and Canadian artists, it also features the works of American Impressionist Eric Carlsen and Belgian artist Théo van Rysselberghe. Most of the paintings on display are landscapes, but there are also a few striking portraits and still life studies.

The exhibition begins with introductory text presented in English, French, and Anishinaabemowin, the language of the Anishinaabe people of the Toronto region. The inclusion of Anishinaabemowin alongside Canada's two official languages underscores the Art Gallery of Ontario's dedication to pursuing reconciliation with Canada's Indigenous peoples. Short wall text (in English only) accompanies thirteen of the twenty-one paintings on display, commenting on artistic style or providing insights into the artist and their work.

One of the exhibition's main themes is how steam travel allowed artists to escape increasingly congested and polluted urban centres. William Blair Bruce's *Landscape with Poppies* (1887) and George Clausen's *Haying* (1882) depict the charming rural

scenes that artists encountered while touring the European countryside. Similarly, van Rysselberghe's *Landscape with Houses* (1894) and Monet's *Étretat, L'Aiguille and the Porte d'Aval* (1885-86) depict the seaside towns that were popular day trip destinations for urban populaces. Other paintings highlight the steam-powered modes of transportation which made these day trips possible: Monet's *Wooden Bridge* (1872) shows a steamship approaching the harbour, while Alfred Sisley's *Saint-Mammes, Grey Weather* (c. 1884) features a railway bridge.

The exhibition also considers how travel influenced the media Impressionist artists used in their work. As steam made travel more accessible to Impressionist artists, their materials adapted to reflect their newfound mobility.<sup>1</sup> Paul Peel's *Luxembourg Gardens, Paris* (1890) is an excellent example of this phenomenon. As the exhibit explains, the piece was painted on a 'small and durable wood panel [which] allowed the artist to easily leave his studio' and was less susceptible to damage during travel.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, Monet's *Étretat, L'Aiguille and the Porte d'Aval* (1885-85) demonstrates how artists could be inspired by the materials they encountered during their travels. The piece, which depicts the town's coastline and impressive rock formations, is painted on a wooden door from a wardrobe in Monet's hotel. The exhibit speculates that perhaps Monet chose this unusual medium because 'the curved lines of the cliffs echo the panel's shape.'<sup>3</sup>

The exhibition's most significant contribution lies in its emphasis on Canadian Impressionists, as it places their work in dialogue with more prominent European Impressionists. As Paul Duval explains, Canadian Impressionism has often been dismissed as a 'secondary movement' that was not nearly as influential as its European counterpart.<sup>4</sup> The exhibition illustrates how Canadian Impressionists were influenced by their exposure to Impressionism in Europe, and how they adapted this style to suit Canadian artistic preferences. William Blair Bruce's paintings effectively demonstrate how Canadian Impressionists replicated and altered Impressionist styles. For example,

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<sup>1</sup> Anthea Callen, *The Art of Impressionism: Painting Technique & the Making of Modernity* (Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 4-5.

<sup>2</sup> 'Steam: Impressionist Painting Across the Atlantic', Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, 5 November 2022–ongoing.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Duval, *Canadian Impressionism* (McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1990), p. 13.

Blair Bruce's *Landscape with Poppies* (1887), with its rural European setting, vibrant colours, and thick brush strokes, mirrors paintings like Dutch artist van Rysselberghe's *Landscape with Houses* (1894), which hangs nearby. Meanwhile, Blair Bruce's *Portrait of the Artist's Wife Caroline* (1890) differs significantly from French artist Henriette Tirman's portrait of a young girl, entitled *The Little Ardennaise* (c. 1915). Although the two works are separated by another painting, the contrast between them is clear. While Tirman's portrait is light and uses bright colours, Blair Bruce's painting employs a more muted colour palette and plays with shadows.

The spatial juxtaposition of Canadian and European works also demonstrates how geography influenced interpretations of Impressionism. Katerina Atanassova argues that the boundaries between urban and rural life were much more malleable in Canada than in Europe, and Canadian Impressionists reflected this reality in their paintings.<sup>5</sup> J.E.H. MacDonald's *Morning after Snow, High Park* (1912), for instance, depicts a couple walking through a serene, wintry scene. High Park was located within the limits of the bustling metropolis of Toronto, meaning Torontonians were less reliant on steam travel to escape the confines of the city than their European counterparts. This painting stands in stark contrast with the work exhibited below it: Canadian artist Paul Peel's *Luxembourg Gardens, Paris* (1890). Like High Park, Luxembourg Gardens was a natural retreat within a bustling city, but in Peel's painting, the leafy trees and plants are surrounded by stone and man-made structures, contrasting the pure, almost untouched nature shown in *Morning after Snow, High Park*. The comparison between these two paintings broadens the viewer's understanding of the relationship between steam power and urbanisation and effectively demonstrates how the Canadian landscape differentiated Canadian Impressionism from its European counterpart.

Despite the exhibition's many strengths, one notable shortcoming is its representation of female Impressionists. Although five of the twenty-one paintings featured in the exhibit are by women Impressionists, only one is accompanied by a longer description explaining the significance of the painting and its connection to the exhibition's themes. These pieces and their contributions to the exhibition deserve more attention. For instance, Mary Hiester Reid's *Chrysanthemums, A Japanese Arrangement*

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<sup>5</sup> Katerina Atanassova, 'Painting Impressionism in Canada: An Introduction', in *Canada and Impressionism: New Horizons, 1880-1930*, ed. Katerina Atanassova (National Gallery of Canada, 2022), pp. 31-43, (p. 35).

(c. 1895) features Japanese influences, including an Edo art print in the painting's background and a Nanking vase with traditional motifs.<sup>6</sup> This piece could have been a catalyst for a discussion of how steam travel also made goods from Asia, and the fashion for *Japonisme*, more accessible to Canadian consumers. The lack of commentary on the works by female artists is a significant drawback and means that visitors are less likely to engage critically with these pieces.

'Steam: Impressionist Painting Across the Atlantic' is a pleasant introduction to Impressionism and effectively demonstrates how steam travel facilitated the spread of this artistic movement to Canada. Ultimately, however, the exhibition does not provide a revolutionary interpretation of Impressionism. Art historians, including Anthea Callen, André Dombrowski, and Robert L. Herbert, have long acknowledged the importance of steam-powered modes of transportation in the facilitation and spread of Impressionism, and the exhibition reinforces this perspective.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the Art Gallery of Ontario has hosted more innovative exhibits on the relationship between steam and Impressionism in the past, such as its 2019 exhibition, 'Impressionism in the Age of Industry: Monet, Pissarro, and More.' This exhibition highlighted the 'destabilizing effects' of steam in the nineteenth century and challenged the association between pastoral landscapes and Impressionism, focusing instead on steam and industry as subjects of Impressionist paintings.<sup>8</sup>

The exhibition's greatest contribution to nineteenth-century studies lies in its emphasis on Canadian Impressionism. Canadian art scholars have often lamented the lack of attention to Canadian Impressionists and have called for greater attention to their works.<sup>9</sup> However, even when Canadian Impressionists are studied, they are

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<sup>6</sup> Andrea Terry, 'Chrysanthemums: A Japanese Arrangement', *Mary Heister Reid: Life & Work* [n.d.]<<https://www.aci-iac.ca/art-books/mary-hiester-reid/key-works/chrysanthemums-a-japanese-arrangement/>> (accessed 16 May 2025).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Callen, *The Art of Impressionism*, pp. 3-5; André Dombrowski, 'Impressionism and the Standardization of Time: Claude Monet at Gare Saint-Lazare', *The Art Bulletin*, 102.2 (2020), pp. 91-120; Robert L. Herbert, *Impressionism: Art, Leisure, and Parisian Society* (Yale University Press, 1988), p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Eschelbacher, 'Impressionism in the Age of Industry: Monet, Pissarro, and More', *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*, 18.2 (Autumn 2019), pp. 195-203 (pp. 195-96, 199).

<sup>9</sup> Atanassova, pp. 31-33, 35.

isolated as a separate and distinct movement from their European counterparts.<sup>10</sup> By displaying Canadian works next to their European predecessors, the Art Gallery of Ontario encourages visitors to draw comparisons, parallels, and contrasts between the works they see on display. Rather than focusing merely on the ways steam allowed Canadian artists to travel to Europe for artistic education, the exhibition urges visitors to reflect on how steam-powered transportation also allowed Canadians to return home, bringing with them the art forms they had learned in Europe, and adapting them to fit Canadian priorities, geographies, and artistic interests.



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<sup>10</sup> Duval, pp. 1-5, 13.