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H. MABEL MAY (1877-1971)
THE MONTREAL YEARS: 1909-1938

Karen Antaki

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Abstract

H. Mabel May (1877-1971)

The Montreal Years: 1909-1938

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This thesis examines the work produced by the Montreal painter Henrietta Mabel May (1877-1971) from 1909 until 1938, and the context within which her art developed. May was among a small number of Canadian women artists of the early decades of the twentieth century whose non-traditional commitment to their craft transcended academic principles, winning critical respect and contributing to the emergence of a Canadian modernism. The work she produced during this period affords us a compelling re-view of the appropriation of new pictorial vocabularies in Montreal, and consequently assumes a new significance.

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There are many individuals whose support I wish to acknowledge here. First and foremost, my thanks go to my thesis advisor, Sandra Paikowsky, whose perceptive comments and keen judgement were invaluable in the writing of this thesis. I am also indebted to the members of the artist's family, Mr. and Mrs. Jack May, and Mr and Mrs. Hugh Rhodes in Vancouver; Mrs. Dorothy Atchison May in Montreal, and Mr. and Mrs. John Jalbert of Waterloo, for their enthusiatic response and the important information they provided, without which this study could not have been realized.

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INTRODUCTION

Henrietta Mabel May (1877-1971) was among Canada's first professional women artists. Her career spanned important socio-political developments and her work reflected a generation's assimilation of new visual vocabularies. This thesis will examine the work produced by May from 1909 until 1938, with special emphasis on the teens and twenties, for its unique reflection of 'modern' pictorial concerns as interpreted by a Canadian woman artist. What may in retrospect appear to have been a conventional and tardy exploration of international trends was, within its context, a telling consolidation of formal reevaluations. Once referred to as 'one of the leading women painters in Canada,' Mabel May's accomplishment is acknowledged by her representation in a large number of national and international public, private and corporate collections.[1] During the 1930's a career as educator took precedence and in 1938 May moved to Ottawa to begin her appointment as Supervisor of Children's Art Classes at the National Gallery of Canada.

It is not a coincidence that women artists such as May made important strides during the early decades of the twentieth century. In retrospect we can understand the interconnectedness of an emerging modern attitude and lived experience, although we must acknowledge that historical equations are sometimes too simplistic. For the first time ever, artists who were women were no longer mere witnesses to progressive events: they were also participants, contributors, and interpreters. In their work expression and experience are intertwined.

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[1] Collections are listed in **Appendix A**

At the beginning of the century, a more liberal and sophisticated mentality within the Montreal art milieu was an important factor in the advancement of local artists generally. At the same time, a socio-cultural revolution was taking place which aimed, among other things, at redescribing the role of women in the community and workplace. Mabel May's early career path coincided with the beginnings of the suffragette movement in Canada. In 1913, following years of debate, and largely through the efforts of the anglophone community, the Montreal Suffrage Association was founded. While the movement itself would only gather momentum and become a driving force in Quebec during WW1, change was quick to follow. Women joined the work force at an unprecedented rate, although men did continue to dominate professional areas,[2] a fact which would ironically bode well for females desirous of a career in the arts.[3]

Social class and economics were important factors in the passage of female artists of the period. The nineteenth-century equation made between femininity and the 'upper' class had essentially restricted women to the "social duties in the drawing room in ways that were radically opposed to the public, professional sphere in which artistic activity was pursued." [4] Yet by the early twentieth century, wealth and social standing were no longer a handicap but

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[2] Despite initially menial employment which generally consisted of lesser paying factory work or else was related to traditional women's tasks such as nursing and teaching, the concept of 'the working woman' would create havoc especially (and ironically) among intellectuals and in business. When women finally accessed the domain of the office it would merely serve to underscore male status by casting women in the essentially subservient role of secretary/helper, a reiteration and duplication of their domestic classification.

[3] Elsa Honig Fine, A History of Women Painters and Sculptors from the Renaissance to the Twentieth Century,(New Jersey: Allan Held & Schran,1978) :145 In Fine's view "since art was of so little importance in early 20th century industrialized society, it entered the women's sphere until it became big business."

[4] Griselda Pollock, "Women, Art and Ideology: Questions for Feminist Art Historians," Women's Art Journal (Spring/Summer 1983) 43

rather an advantage for women pursuing an art career, providing the freedom to travel, and the means for education and materials. A comfortable background would not preclude Canadian artists such as Mabel May, Sarah Robertson (1891-1948), Anne Savage (1896-1971) and Prudence Heward (1896-1947) from setting career sights and attaining professional goals.[5] In the early decades of the twentieth century, talent and drive among women in Canada acquired value for the very first time. Financial rewards became both tangible compensation and a symbolic measure of recognition and achievement. This aspect is evident early on in the 'critical' discourse which surrounded the Montreal Art Association's Spring Exhibitions and Student Shows, where sales by women were both encouraged and applauded.

Internationally, women artists had become more active in Europe from the 1870s forward.[6] However, meaningful and widespread recognition of their contributions and achievements would lurk on the horizon for some time, despite the fact that an exhibition entitled Une exposition retrospective d'art feminin was held at the Hotel du Lyceum in France in 1906, an indication of the growing awareness of the need for visible acknowledgement of the historical presence of women artists. Quite unfortunately any impact of this show on Canadian artists is unknown, although the winds of change were present in the very fact that in steadily increasing numbers women were making art, showing art, and learning about art- all of which would have been meaningless without

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[5] For further information on women artist's in Canada see Dorothy Farr and Natalie Luckyj, From Women's Eyes Women Painters in Canada, (Kingston: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1975)

[6] By the twentieth century, and despite the fact that few women were 'officially' associated with such avant garde movements as Fauvism and the group Die Brucke, female artists were not ignored as evidenced in their participation in Der Blaue Reiter exhibitions and their involvement with Russia's pre-W W 1 avant-garde for example Because a wealth of information has been written over the past fifteen years on the contributions and changing status of women artists in the past and recent past, a discussion is not of necessity here

an attendant serious and committed attitude, uncommon until this time. Women in Canada were now venturing beyond the local boundaries and safe havens of private instruction in search of a more worldly education abroad, in keeping with contemporary ideology which held that foreign travel was now for women, as it had been for men, the true measure of an artist. [7]

Whether at home or abroad female artists not only had to confront new visual ideas but also had to grapple with a legacy of the nineteenth century: the erroneous notion that art by women was primarily an emotive exercise, centering on home and hearth with special attention to mothers and children. The idea that one aesthetic standard could exist, a criterion of form, remained generally elusive. Yet for a number of Canadian women artists of the early twentieth century such as Helen McNicoll (1879-1915), Mabel May, Emily Carr (1871-1945), and Emily Coonan (1885-1971) among others, the struggle with new vocabularies was both a visible and a successful one in terms of transcending an entrenched 'feminine' aesthetic. That is not to say that thematic work would cease in any great haste as a dominant mode of expression. Most work shown by women at the Art Association's Spring Exhibitions until about 1920, for example, continued to either story-tell or focus on psychological themes, avoiding images considered appropriate to 'modernity' such as the unpopulated landscape, or the solemn subject. Mabel May as well would continue to be drawn to the contextual image throughout the teens although, as the first part of this study will demonstrate, not exclusively.

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[7] Some periodicals published in the early part of the twentieth century showed support for the serious formationof women artists by providing information on accomodation and instruction abroad, and details such as where and how to obtain models. In 1904, Clive Holland wrote sympathetically of the English female art student's desire to study abroad noting that: "English schools of painting (with few exceptions) do not appear to encourage individuality, and more particularly the individuality of women."

Mabel May's formative years, (1905-1914) corresponded to a surge of innovation in the arts on the international stage. In Canada a modern attitude which allowed for change to occur was, to a great extent, the result of both a decline in private patronage and first-hand exposure to new trends through travel and education abroad. Changing mores at the turn of the century further advanced the cause of modern art by restating the importance of the artist/maker and introducing the modern concept of art as creative activity. The genesis of 'modernism' in Canada was a romantic and Whistlerian 'art for art's sake' aesthetic first evidenced in the work of James Wilson Morrice (1865-1924), and to a lesser extent in that of Maurice Cullen (1866-1934) as well as in the work of others of the Canadian Art Club. These artists were associated with, and advocates in Canada of what had become academic or second-generation international Impressionism and Post Impressionism , Morrice being the first Canadian painter to make painting its own proper subject.

Similarly for May the beginnings of a modern approach and reference were found in an art for art's sake aesthetic, a relinquishing of Victorian principles and a visible exploration of international attitudes. In this regard, and beyond the question of content, perhaps the most important consideration regarding May's evolving career is her work as a living testimonial to an increasingly more open attitude among a newer generation of Canadian artists, many of whom were women, regarding the assimilation of pictorial innovations.

For Mabel May the years 1910-1920 demonstrate serious questing and quite original work despite her attraction to generally conformist subject matter. This period signals the start of her interest in the inhabited locale: the parks and thoroughfares of the city, the industrial areas and docks. These sites of lived experience, whether populated or not, became for May during this time frame, both visual sources and vehicles for the exploration of a variety of pictorial

problems, now more serious and compelling. At the same time, an interest in a luminous, lyrical surface emerged, attaching to an early passion for colour and its combinations. May's chromatic choices and applications quite swiftly ran the gamut from impressionism to expressionism and, with her interest in the poetics of paint and prosaic yet spirited place, afford her earlier work its own unique character.

By 1920, landscape had become her primary focus, allowing the formal aspects of artmaking to take precedence. This subsequently placed her within the local progressive milieu, essentially a sub-set of the 'modernist-inspired' nationalism of the Group of Seven, a modernism influenced by Post-Impressionism and Art Nouveau, which in the end would not withstand the insistence of their own political/mystical agenda. May's mature work, produced from the thirties on, demonstrates her attempt at reconciling a newer generation's purist philosophy of form with an increasingly personal, expressive impulse. It recalls the Group's challenge to resolve international formalism with a 'pan-Canadian' nationalism and its symbology.

While an initial reading of the landscapes she produced during the twenties and thirties, might suggest that Mabel May had too easily adopted Group of Seven mannerisms, approaching what John Lyman often described as an obsession with the 'fetish of the subject', this study will reveal another possibility: that the focus on landscape alone (or practically so) helped foster a more formalist approach, which at the same time hinted at personal meaning. In addition, a parallel exists not only between Mabel May's subject and formal concerns and those of the Group, but also between her painting ambitions and their own.

Yet while her landscapes of the mid-twenties do resemble most closely those of the Group of Seven in formal concerns and execution, her vision of the

natural scene differed significantly for a long time from theirs in its continued inclusion of humanity whether actual or implied. In this, her affinities lie with other Quebecers such as Albert Robinson (1881-1956), Clarence Gagnon (1881-1942), Sarah Robertson, Prudence Heward, Anne Savage, Emily Coonan, Nora Collyer (1898-1979) Kathleen Morris (1893-), Ethel Seath (1878-1963) and Mabel Lockerby (1887-) with whom she shared the painting places of Charlevoix County and the Laurentians. Despite the fact that these artists did appropriate elements of a Pre-Cambrian idiom to varying degrees, their work was equally informed by the landscape tradition of Quebec "where traces [were] found on the environment of a different and older culture", and which tempered, to a great extent, the New World emphasis.[8] Mabel May's inspiration would, also, be found for a time in the country places of her province, although the expansive vistas of universal space, devoid of regional or national characteristics, did eventually replace her landscapes conveying human occupation.

Once described as "the Emily Carr of Montreal,"[9] some of May's most meaningful works were produced during the late twenties, a relatively late stage in her career, and demonstrate the resolve and sophistication of a seasoned hand through the formal and symbolic articulation of a sentient nature. In these works, the empty landscape becomes both analogue to inner states of being and reflective of a spiritual presence as occurred with Northern Romantic painting. In the final analysis, it is Mabel May's own intuited sense of formal dynamics, untainted by political aesthetics, which sets her apart from her

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[8] For an excellent analysis see Francois-Marc Gagnon, "Painting in Quebec in the Thirties," Journal of Canadian Art History, 3(Fall 1976): 2-20

[9] Toronto Star, 18 February 1950

contemporaries in the Group, and for this, her work may justifiably be described as having been created 'in a different voice.'

CHAPTER ONE
THE FORMATIVE YEARS

(i) Background

While Mabel May's birth date is generally given as 1884 in Canadian art publications, Henrietta Mabel May was in fact born on September 11, 1877, in Pointe St. Charles, an area in south central Montreal.[10] 'Henry' as she was called by her own generation of family and friends, was the fifth child and second daughter of ten children born to Edward May (1840-1916) and Evelyn Henrietta Walker May (1847-1930).[11] Because the details of May's early biography have not been discussed elsewhere, it is perhaps worthwhile stating them in this context. Edward May had emigrated to Canada from Cornwall County, England in 1858 bringing with him his widowed mother Ann.[12] Their first known address appears in 1859 as 7 Emigrants Shed in Pointe St. Charles, an area inhabited mainly by workers of the Grand Trunk Railway. The railway was expanding rapidly at the time and may have been recruiting in the British Isles. Lovell's Directory lists Edward May as a fitter at the Grand Trunk Railway and as a Mechanic for the Canadian National Railway.[13] Evelyn Henrietta

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[10] 'Descendant's chart' provided by Loise and Hugh Rhodes, Mabel May's niece and nephew-in-law, Vancouver; and information derived from telephone interview with the present Rector of Grace Church in Verdun, March 1991

[11] The May family consisted of Frederick Frank (b 1869), Evelyn Emma (b 1871) , George Arthur (b 1873), Edward Alfred (b.1875), Henrietta Mabel, Charles Wallace (b.1880); Lilian Ruby (b.1882); Frank Randolph (b.1885), Victoria Maude (b.1887) and Stanley Walker May.

[12] "I suspect that Ann May came to Canada as a widow with an eighteen year old son about 1858." Hugh Rhodes in correspondence with the author, 3 March 1991

[13] Quite soon after Ann May moved to Grand Trunk Street, near Seigneures in Pointe St Charles, and in 1867-8 resided at 537 Wellington Street, Lovell's Directory, Montreal. "She might

Walker's parents, Francis Ger(r)ard Walker (1808-1881) a fitter at Grand Trunk (see 1861 census) and Ann Mary (1810-1887) were natives of Bedfordshire, England, who married in 1834 and had four children.[14]

The marriage of Edward May and Evelyn Henrietta Walker took place at St Stephen's Church, Westmount on December 27, 1866. Baptismal records from Grace Church on Fortune Street in Verdun, which became the family parish,[15] chart the family's moving patterns, and by extension, its changing fortunes. The young May family appears to have lived in Pointe St. Charles until about 1880, first on Grand Trunk, then on Magdalen Street and at 21 Congregation Lane in 1871 and 1872 respectively, and in 1878-9 at 180 Congregation (now de la Congrégation). The family moved to nearby Verdun sometime between 1880 and 1882. By Mabel May's twenty-third birthday, in 1900, the family had symbolically and literally crossed the tracks, moving into what would become their family home for the next fifty years: the house at 434 Elm Street in Westmount. (Fig.2).

A successful entrepreneur, the quintessential self-made man, Edward May swiftly rose from the working classes to become a prosperous real-estate developer. By the end of the century the family's property holdings in the still-developing area of Verdun were quite significant and included a number of commercial ventures such as what would eventually become the Canadian Tire hardware store on Wellington Street. May Street in Verdun, which now runs

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have married Fred Williams (Tea Inspector G.T.R. Magdalen) in 1867-8 Since an Ann Williams is shown on Edward May's Dec. 1868 marriage certificate." Mr. Hugh Rhodes, Vancouver.

[14] Emily Walker (married Charles Stuart Corner); Francis Walker (married Rabeca Haywood); Evelyn Henrietta (married Edward May); and M J. Walker.

[15] Mabel May was baptised 18 August1878 at Grace Church. "Non-Catholic Baptisms 1876-1900 " Archives Nationales du Quebec, Montreal.

parallel to the Bonaventure expressway, was so-named for the family's considerable real property. Edward May was also mayor of Verdun in 1902 and 1903. From her ambitious father, 'Henry', inherited an extroverted, forthright nature and a keen sense of life-direction.[16] Mabel May was also a generous individual and a "very gentle woman" [17] as Louis Muhlstock remembers, an opinion generally shared by those who knew her.

Mabel May attended primary school both in Montreal and in Moncton where the family resided for a short time (exact dates unknown). An easier financial situation allowed young Mabel to explore her interest in artmaking which was then considered a fashionable activity for young women. A significant number of females of privilege in Montreal were at one time or another art students in private studios. By her early teens, Mabel May's fondness for drawing led her to take up painting,[18] but not surprisingly, none of the portraits and landscapes she is known to have produced then have survived.

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[16] Interview with Mrs. Dorothy Atchison May, niece-in-law, Montreal, 20 March 1991

[17] Interview with Louis Muhlstock, Montreal, April 1991.

[18] Colin S. MacDonald, A Dictionary of Canadian Artists, 4 (Ottawa: Canadian Paperbacks,1974). 1156.

(ii) The Art Association of Montreal

> Henry as she was called- was the leader in the beginning. She was a brilliant figure at the Gallery. She painted with such vigour and strength- gay, rhythmic colour using the impressionist's technique of scintillating colour. She spent some time in France and came back radiant - she loved life - painted in the landscapes of the Eastern Townships where she built up her singing happy pictures.[19]

As noted, Mabel May's interest in art had shown rather early in life. Yet, for reasons unknown, it was not until she was well into her twenties that she entered the School of the Art Association of Montreal, then situated on Phillips Square. In all likelihood she began her studies with the artist Alberta Cleland (1876-1919), a former student of Brymner's, in 1902.[20] From 1909 until her departure in 1912, May's formal art training was pursued under the inspiring guidance of William Brymner.[21]

As is generally acknowledged, the Art Association of Montreal (incorporated in 1860), despite its reputation as a 'gentleman's club,' played a vital role in shaping the careers and ambitions of young artists during the first part of the century. Graduates of its school were living proof of the calibre of its instruction and the annual report of 1905 boasted that "letters from students who

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19 Anne Savage, "Henrietta Mabel May," Anne Savage Archives, Concordia University, File 6, #2.21.

20 According to the Art Association annual reports as well as newspaper citations, Alberta Cleland appears to have been the one woman educator at the AAM during this period. Given that the records of the Art Association were destroyed this cannot be completely verified.

21 Sources are at odds regarding Mabel May's enrolment in the classes of the Art Association. MacDonald: "she entered the classes of William Brymner at the MMFA in 1909 when she was twenty five." However Mabel May turned twenty-five in 1902, and her age in 1909 was actually 32; In a questionnaire for Who's Who in American Art filled in by May herself, August 6, 1946, mention is only made of the years with Brymner, In The Gazette , 31 July 1971, her dates at the Association are given as 1902-1912

have gone to continue their studies in Paris and elsewhere, show that they at once take a very good place in the different schools they have chosen to attend."[22]

An important point and worth mentioning was that, as a result of William Brymner's well known serious regard for his female pupils, the Art Association school became an exception in Canada, to the then general rule discussed by Germaine Greer that "as soon as art schools opened their doors to women, the modern phenomenon of the women being the student body while the men are the painters emerged.[23] History has shown us otherwise. It was from this generation of Art Association students that an unprecedented and roughly equal number of successful men and women artists emerged, including Mabel May, Emily Coonan, Kathleen Moir Morris, Mabel Lockerby, Jeanne de Crevecoeur, Sarah Robertson, Lilias Torrance, Clarence Gagnon, Edwin Holgate, Randolph Hewton, Adrien Hebert, John Johnstone, A.Y. Jackson, William Clapp and slightly later Prudence Heward and Anne Savage.

At the Art Association, the now legendary Brymner fulfilled the role of teacher/mentor to a number of women artists. [24] In relation to the Brymner phenomenon, and possibly of even greater importance in terms of supporting the establishment of a modern female presence in the Montreal art community, was the slightly later influence of A.Y. Jackson. Not only, as will be seen, did he

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[22] Art Association of Montreal, Annual Report (1904-05), p 7.

[23] Germaine Greer, The Obstacle Race, (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1979), p 316

[24] It may not be so very far-fetched to link, in part, Brymner's own experience as a student of Tony Robert-Fleury and Carolus Duran with his later influence on young artists at the AAM, for he must certainly, if inadvertantly have assimilated certain elements of the late 19th century 'charisma of the studio' For an interesting analysis of the pull of the 19th century studio see Greer, The Obstacle Race, p. 319: "A whole book could be written about the hundreds of women who joined the Robert-Fleury fan club at the Academie Julien: they came from all over the world, as far away as the USA, Canada and even Australia [for too many] . it was an arid path which led nowhere."

as propagandist for the Group of Seven lay the foundation for a loud and a timely debate about Art, he was also partially responsible for drawing women artists into the magic circle of group associates and, by extension, into the limelight.

Brymner was director of the Art Association classes for thirty-five years, from 1886 until his resignation in 1921. He was instrumental in bringing the School into the twentieth century, boosting enrolment and attendance records and providing the students with a more serious course of instruction. At Brymner's appointment just two classes were available to art 'enthusiasts': drawing from the antique and from life. Attendance at the studios generally hovered around ten pupils. At the time of his resignation enrolment figures exceeded one hundred pupils and curriculum had expanded considerably.

By 1908, accounts in The Gazette, The Witness and The Montreal Daily Star could announce, not without some pride, that the course of instruction at the Association was "an adaptation of that of the French atelier."[24] Other than the standard drawing and painting classes offered and taught by Cleland (Elementary Drawing class) and Brymner (Elementary Drawing and Painting classes), an outdoor sketching class in oils was held twice a year in the spring and fall, with instructors such as Edmond Dyonnet, Brymner and Maurice Cullen, at sites such as Beaupré, Glen Sutton, Carillon, Ste. Adele and Phillipsburg. In addition, a 'special interest' class was offered at a slightly higher fee ($25.00 per course or $15.00 for a single term instead of the usual $6.00 or $4.00 per month) and varied from year to year: for example in 1904-05 it consisted of an Illustration Class given by W.M. Barnes, and in 1906-07 a Modelling Class given by W.R. MacPherson. In the advanced life class a nude

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[24] "Art Association Classes, 28th Year of Instruction opens on October 1," The Gazette, 20 August 1908.

model posed five mornings and a draped model two afternoons a week and in the drawing class students worked from the antique and from life. Upon entering the school each student was "placed in the class for which he or she is fitted, and advancement thereafter [was] regulated by the judgement of the instructors.[25]

As noted, dissemination of new art forms was the result of increased first hand exposure through travel and was very much dependant on the accessible and informative visual image. The Reading Room at the AAM provided interested individuals with both local and imported periodicals and books including The Art Journal, The Burlington, The Connoisseur, The Magazine of Art, and The Studio (London); Gazette des Beaux Arts (Paris); Masters in Art (Boston); Brush and Pencil (Chicago); The Art Interchange, Harper's, Hyde's Weekly Art News, New York Life, Scribner's Magazine, (New York) and many others. While most were disposed of in due time, others were bound and added to the Library. Catalogues such as Figaro Illustré and Blackburn's Academy and New Gallery Notes and reports from American museums such as the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and the Metropolitan Museum of Arts were also available, as were acquisitions of contemporary publications such as The Great French Painters and the Evolution of French Painting from 1830 to the Present Day, (London, 1903) acquired 1906, Manet and the Post-Impressionists, (London, 1905) acquired in 1910, The Nation's Pictures, A Selection from the Finest Modern Paintings in the Public Galleries of Great Britain (2 vols. 1902) and Exhibition of

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[25] "Art Association Classes," The Montreal Daily Star, 20 August 1908

Contemporary German Art (Chicago,1909) which were acquired in 1910 as well.[26]

There were student exhibitions and a lecture programme at the Art Association. Mabel May's early interest in Velasquez was in all likelihood spurred by a discussion on the artist given by the New York critic Royal Cortissoz in January, 1911.[27] By the 1880s, the Association had established its regular spring exhibition, which would become an important showcase for contemporary Canadian painting and sculpture. As early as the first decade of the new century, women such as Laura Muntz (1860-1930) and Helen McNicoll were regular participants in the Spring Exhibitions and their example to younger female artists may have been important: Laura Muntz for her ambition (within a certain context); McNicoll for her exploration of new styles. As well, Loan Exhibitions which included both modern and historical European art 'masterpieces' regularly took place during the fall and winter. Often drawn from private collections, these exhibitions allowed students and visitors the unique opportunity of viewing important local acquisitions, especially significant because of modern examples. Montreal collectors such as Sir William Van Horne, E.B. Greenshields, Sir George A. Drummond and Lord Strathcona, to name just a few, generously lent paintings by artists such as John Constable, Harold Knight, Honore Daumier, Edouard Manet, Claude Monet, Adolphe Monticelli, Camille Pissarro, Pierre Auguste Renoir, and others too numerous to

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[26] Art Association of Montreal, Annual Reports ,1904-1917.

[27] Other lectures included for example in March 1905: "Venice in the Age of Titian" by C.W.Colby; and "A Sketch of the History of French Art" by Prof. James Mavor given in December 1909. This lecture programme however usually consisted of non visual-art topics such as a talk by Stephen Leacock entitled "American Humour" given in November 1906 and "The Switzerland of Canada" presented in January 1909 by A V. Wheeler.

mention here, from 1895 onwards.[28] Mabel May could in all probability have become acquainted with 'modern' art prior to her joining the Art Association classes. Of special significance, as will be demonstrated in a later discussion, was the impact of compositions by Renoir such as his Les Soeurs exhibited 1897 and 1914, Eugene Boudin's La Touque, Low Tide, exhibited 1904, as well as Monticelli's Fete Champetre, Sunset, shown in the loan exhibitions of 1887, 1895, 1898 and 1912.[29]

Yet it was ultimately in working with Brymner, who is known to have "expounded the worth of the Impressionists"[30] as early as 1902, that Mabel May's serious attitude to art was fostered and her individual voice found. As has been often described, Brymner's philosophy as an educator centered on hard work, discipline and traditional teaching methods. He emphasised good draughtsmanship as 'the foundation of all the graphic and plastic arts,' observation of and fidelity to nature, and felt that his primary responsibility as an educator was to teach his students ' to look at nature intelligently.' Perhaps his greatest lesson however, was his stressing of the importance of originality. "It is only by digging deeply for yourself and laying your own foundation that your work can have character of its own....Be yourself!"[31] Anne Savage would later recall that William Brymner had

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[28] For an analysis of Montreal collectors and works shown by international artists at the turn of the century, see Janet Brooke, Discerning Tastes Montreal Collectors 1880-1920. Exhibition catalogue. (Montreal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1989).

[29] May has stated that her early influences were Constable, Velasquez, Monticelli and Renoir.

[30] Robert Pilot, "Recollections of an Art Student," Sun Life Review 15 (April 1958) .5

[31] "Views of Art Teaching A Very Interesting Lecture by Mr. William Brymner," The Gazette, 26 March 1895.

> exerted a strong influence on all who studied under him. He possessed that rare gift in a teacher- never to impose his way on his pupils- "Work out your own salvation in fear and trembling" he would admonish us and leave us to struggle on. Consequently from a small nucleus, individuals of different types were able to develop their own mode of expression.[32]

The Art Association also provided deserving students with scholarships and prizes. In retrospect we can better understand the significance of these financial rewards as a means of, if not ensuring, then certainly encouraging a contemporary profile of women artists as 'non amateurs', providing a serious motivating dimension and thereby freeing art made by women from the realm of the 'genteel' and the drawing room. Mabel May was twice the recipient of the Art Association two year scholarship, the first time in 1910 (shared with Adrien Hebert) for a Time Drawing Male Nude and again the following year for a drawing of the same subject. In 1910 she also won third prize for composition.[33] These scholarships also extended beyond those offered at the Art Association proper for their students, including among others the Jessie Dow prize[34] first offered in 1906-1907 and won by Mabel May three times, in 1914, 1915 and 1918 ; the Women's Art Society scholarship and special prize for women's work which was also won by May in 1919, and beginning in 1906-07, a scholarship presented by the Art Student's League in New York to the Art Association

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[32] Anne Savage, "Some Women Painters of Canada," transcript, Anne Savage Archives, File 5, #2 20

[33] "Scholarship Awarded in Art Association Schools," The Montreal Daily Star , 16 May 1910.

[34] The Jessie Dow Prize consisted of an annual prize of two hundred dollars for the best oil in the Spring Exhibition (portraits excepted) and one of one hundred dollars for best watercolour. Interestingly Jackson, in a letter to Eric Brown in 1921 regarding wise government purchases in the past years would comment: We don't want it to degenerate into anything like the absurd Jessie Dow prize standard which has never yet been awarded to what a competent outside critic would class even as the second or third best work in the show." National Gallery of Canada, Archives, RCA General, File 7 2, vol 1

School. In 1914, the Royal Canadian Academy established a travelling scholarship, the first recipient being not only a Montrealer but to add to the novelty a woman as well- Emily Coonan. In addition and of equal significance was the fact that women of means and vision now played an unprecedented and quite tangible role in the promotion of both art and women artists during the early twentieth century, a fact which was not only noted but also applauded by the press:

> In the matter of awarding prizes which is some tangible evidence of appreciation the ladies of Montreal have led the way. In fact barring the coveted honor of purchase by the Board of Trustees of the National Gallery of Canada... and the purchase by art lovers for private galleries there are no other prizes to encourage native talent... The prizes awarded thus far for exhibits have all been donated by women or bodies composed of women.[35]

(iii) Early influences/early work

An understanding of the pictorial eclecticism common to Montreal artists during May's formative years is important in order to appreciate her later production. While an academic legacy remained firm and was in full evidence at the Spring and RCA annual showings, the modern French school was gaining a measure of influence at a relatively rapid rate. In February 1906, twenty years after the New York Impressionist exhibition, the 29th Loan Exhibition at the Art Association was borrowed from Durand-Ruel, and aptly entitled Some French Impressionists. Despite its tardiness, it served as a cogent introduction to artists such as Manet, Degas, Monet, Renoir, Picasso and

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35 "Women Award Prizes for Art Lead in Showing Tangible Appreciation by Native Artists" The Gazette ,16 April 1914

Sisley.[36] The impact of the exhibition was enormous especially on younger artists so far steeped in an academic mode [37] yet three years would elapse before the next exhibition of "the ultra modern French School". In January 1909, amidst a great deal of fanfare, over three hundred works were shipped over by the French government to the Art Association. Both Renoir and Manet were represented with paintings such as Jeunes filles lisant and The Thames at Charing Cross respectively, which appear to have left a powerful and lasting impression on Mabel May. Press clippings suggest that the viewing audience was utterly dazzled by the light effects of the show. The "violent blues and flaming yellows and every combination of color that is vivid" [38] would compel many visitors to return several times "as the interest and significance of the collection [grew] upon them." The critic for The Montreal Daily Star declared:

> The large number of the 320 canvases on view have been painted by the most advanced group of Parisian enthusiasts with not only a message to deliver concerning the visible world, but with almost startling means of expression....The impressionists...succeeded in imparting to their work an undeniable brilliancy of tone and vibrating light, which was impossible under the old methods...the influence of their movement is now admittedly great.[39]

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[36] "The Pictures of the French Impressionists were perhaps the most interesting and gave the members the opportunity, not often met with, of seeing the work of the founders of the School, and some of their more distinguished followers."Art Association of Montreal, Annual Report,1905-06, p.4

[37] It was a 'decisive factor' in the choice of a painting career for John Lyman for example. As noted by Louise Dompierre, "what struck [Lyman] most about the Impressionists was their particular treatment of light " John Lyman 1886-1967 . Exhibition catalogue.(Kingston: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1986). 23.

[38] The Witness,30 January1909, Art Association Scrapbook #5: 1903-1929, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Archives.

[39] "French Government Art Exhibition Aims and Methods of Present Generation of Artists Shown to Canadians Five Hundred Exhibits," The Montreal Daily Star, 30 January 1909.

Comparisons, often naive, between the 'modern' French school and progressive Canadian art would swiftly follow. At the 1909 Spring Exhibition a significant number of works by local artists afforded the public and the press an opportunity for "judging the development of Canadian art as compared with the modern French school."[40] Generally speaking, lavish colour and an iridescent palette became a superficial yet consistent criterion of pictorial avant-gardism. As 'early' as 1908, in a review of the 24th annual Spring Exhibition, the Gazette critic noted: "The main note of the exhibition is a riotous energy of the polychromatic. The dazzling color note of the ultra modern French school is alarmingly struck this year in many of the cleverest canvases."[41] It is not surprising then, within this context, that student artists such as Mabel May rather rapidly appropriated a dramatic palette. One might recall as an example that A.Y. Jackson's vividly painted Early Spring and Edge of the Maplewood were shown at the Association in 1910.

However it would be incorrect to suggest that the French school was either unanimously accepted or May's earliest influence. Regarding the latter, and possibly in common with many Canadian artists, aesthetic roots were ultimately Anglo-French, as was manifested in the New English Art Club. Furthermore, 'impressionism' in any guise was not only adopted rather late by Canadians but more importantly, its popularity remained limited and shaky well into the twentieth century.

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40 "Spring Art Exhibition Many Interesting Works From Quebec and Ontario," The Witness, 26 March 1909.

41 "Exhibition of Art Some Brilliant Canvases Dazzle Eye In 24th Spring Exhibit At the Gallery," The Gazette, 23 March1908.

During the late fall of 1909 an exhibition of contemporary British art was presented at the Art Association in a possible effort at striking an aesthetic balance. For the Toronto Globe the exhibition evinced a " totally different atmosphere... You feel at once the fundamental difference which separates English from French...(yet the show demonstrated)... something of the influence of the magical colour work of the art of modern France."[42] The exhibition included works by artists of the British 'impressionists' such as John Lavery (1856-1941), Harold Knight (1874-1961), and members of the New English Art Club such as Henry Scott Tuke (1858-1929) and Edward Stott (1859-1918), the last appearing, in retrospect, to have been as influential as Renoir on Mabel May's developing work. Stott's poetic English naturalism, and his rich tonalist works of a kind of rural arcadia may have informed several of her earlier compositions such as The Daisy Field exhibited 1912 at the Art Association. Later, Winter, Montreal bears a striking resemblance to his The Team of 1903 (Pym's Gallery, London) in its subdued atmospherics and moody presentation. A genteel English plein-air-ism in the work of several Britons was also in evidence in work by Canadian women artists such as Helen McNicoll's In a Surrey Orchard, and In the Farmyard and Emily Coonan's The Duck Pond of roughly that same period.

In 1910 Mabel May made her exhibiting debut with paintings shown in both the Royal Canadian Academy Exhibition and the 26th annual Spring Show, (April 4 to 30). The latter set an unprecedented attendance record, with the number of visitors exceeding nine thousand, thus indicating a growing interest in art among the general public, an interest which remained constant at least until the outbreak of the First World War. Critical attention that year

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[42] C.L.S. "British Pictures Seen in Montreal," The Globe (Toronto), 23 November 1909.

indicated a sense of being on the threshold of new beginnings and The Daily Herald described the work of the younger artists as holding "promise for the future."[43] While Mabel May's contributions did elicit a degree of attention, mention was confined to pictorial specifics and she was far outdistanced in critical acclaim by her schoolchum Emily Coonan who was "bid(ding) fair to become one of the chief topics of th' exhibition with her charming canvas Evelina, 1830." [44]

An interesting parallel exists between May's humble beginnings in the area of Pointe St. Charles, and her later career achievements and those of her contemporary at the Art Association, Emily Coonan. Both artists attained a degree of success largely predicated on their early family life, their association with William Brymner and their own determination. Their career paths criss-crossed for well over a decade; and one might venture that despite a common experiential ground, a charting of the development of their work would reveal two very distinct versions of early modern tendencies. Yet while May's later family security and standing would allow her the psychological and financial freedom to flourish, Coonan, probably the better artist of the two who was for a time well on course towards the appropriation of an international modernism, would eventually disappear from view, her career ending abruptly and mysteriously.[45]

The work produced by Mabel May at the Art Association and, as previously mentioned, in common with that of the majority of her female contemporaries, showed a particular penchant for the 'gentler' subject. Among

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[43] "26th Spring Exhibition," The Herald , 7 April1910.

[44] The Montreal Daily Star ,5 April1910, Art Association Scrapbooks

[45] For further information see Karen Antaki, Sandra Paikowsky, Emily Coonan (1885-1971). Exhibition catalogue. (Montreal. Concordia Art Gallery, 1987)

these images , a prize composition, now lost, described as "a clever and breezy study of children and women on the sands"[46] (possibly entitled On the Beach and exhibited in the 1911 Spring exhibition). It was included in the student show in the Fall of 1910, and was "worthy of strong commendation" placing her "easily first in her class."[47] All signs indicate that May's early pictures were inspired by artists such as Constable and Whistler. When Market Street, nd (unlocated), was shown in 1950 as one of her earliest works, it was described as: "influenced by the European school though not yet aware of Impressionism, it is a good painting that suggests Constable." May's affinity to Constable is not surprising given Brymner's high regard for the British painter. He also introduced his pupils to Velasquez and those Canadian artists he most admired, such as Morrice and Cullen. Yet evidence of the influence of the British school predates Mabel May's studies with Brymner. Her earliest known work, begun in 1901 is, not surprisingly, a portrait study of her younger sister Lilian Ruby. While it demonstrates the naivete and slightly awkward approach typical of a relatively untutored hand, Lilian is also an insightful rendition of personality, no doubt facilitated by the artist's familiarity with the sitter. For obvious reasons, sisters were generally quite popular as models, chosen as much for their accessibility as for their casual attitude. Siblings also allowed for certain creative liberties to be taken with their likenesses, and afforded the artist a certain dominance which could not as readily occur with friends or relative strangers.

Lilian brings to mind both in approach and subject, Emily Coonan's Eva and Daisy. Yet May's Lilian engages a psychological dimension largely

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46 "The Fine Arts" The Montreal Daily Star , 13 May, 1911.

47 Ibid.

ignored in Coonan's picture where the sisters are costumed and thereby also 'disguised'. While a sense of the decorative does exist in May's earlier figures they are nonetheless far from being anonymous, eloquently suggesting not only the sitters' identities through the inclusion of familiar objects, but also evoking a sense of connection with the artist/viewer in their straightforward gaze. The fact that Lilian was not exhibited until 1950 as part of the Dominion Gallery's farewell exhibition for Mabel May might suggest its personal and intimate meaning for Mabel May. As well, she herself may have felt it was too 'immature' to exhibit during her formative years. The painting would be shown a second time at the Gallery of the Golden Key in Vancouver in 1971, presumably as a significant start within the context of a retrospective. For the reviewer of the Vancouver Sun it was, "... one of the most exquisite (works) in the show, ... a portrait of her sister Lillian in a silvery white dress with a rose at her waist- romantic , almost Whistlerish, outstanding for its handling of light."[48]

Among the many images of this period is a portrait of May's youngest sister Victoria Maude, 'Queenie', painted around 1905, which recalls Whistler especially in its tonal play and the uncluttered organization of the canvas. Once again this is compatible with the relaxed pose of the sitter; the sister as informal subject, almost found-object. The easy story-book flow of line also almost anticipates certain later landscapes such as Farmhouse, Ste.Marguerite , 1923, which are both lyrical and stylized.

As previously mentioned, the curriculum at the school of the Art Association included outdoor sketching classes at various spots. These trips were undoubtedly important for the role they played in shaping May's technical ability and scope as a painter and would also play a part in bringing women

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[48] Joan Lowndes, "Artist has Remarkably Strong Hand," The Vancouver Sun, 7 June, 1971.

artists into the twentieth century by removing them from the confines of the studio and its 'mechanical methods' and introducing them to what would become a dominant generational focus on landscape painting. An additional dividend was the casual evening discussion which followed the day's painting. As Sylvia Antoniou has written about Cullen's expeditions: "In the evenings after a day's painting, there was a communal meal followed by an informal discussion on methods, person to person criticism, advice on painting, some encouragement and a sharing of painting experiences."[49]

In June 1911, Mabel May travelled to Phillipsburg with William Brymner and a number of women artists including Emily Coonan, Nora Collyer, Nina Owens, and possibly Kathleen Moir Morris.[50] Two small compositions remain as records of this trip: Phillipsburg, 1911 (Fig. 3, McCord Museum) and Portrait of Nina Owens (Fig. 4), a sketch/ pochade seemingly dashed off in so many single strokes. The slightly more finished Phillipsburg 1911 is a tiny yet arresting image which clearly demonstrates Mabel May's talents as a colourist. In its immediacy and abstraction, its fluid brushwork and calligraphic forms references are made to the 'modern' style of the French school. Yet at the same time there continues to be a careful fidelity to imagistic facts, rather than what occurs in impressionism. Stylistically it attaches to a generational interpretation of the French style, a generic impressionism, which would rather rapidly encompass late impressionist 'isms'. There are some affinities within this context with for instance, Emily Carr's Autumn in France and A.Y. Jackson's Hills of Assisi. In many ways it was a proscribed 'look' determined as much by

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[49] Sylvia Antoniou, Maurice Cullen. Exhibition catalogue, (Kingston: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1982) :20

[50] Information relating to this excursion was provided by Monique Nadeau-Saumier, July 1991.

the natural painting setting as by the requisite plein air 'kit' as advertised in the Witness, May 17, 1911 : "The list of colors to be as follows: flake white, yellow ochre, transparent gold ochre, raw sienna, lemon yellow, chrome yellow medium, light red, rose madder, French veronese green (vert emeraude), cobalt blue and ultramarine. Easels, panels, stools etc. As one of many early nature-scapes, Phillipsburg attaches to a traditional reading of 'landscape' painting, an objective replication of a natural scene, the psychic distance between artist and subject being equivalent to the physical distance described. Later on as will be seen, and as occurred with the work of Emily Carr for instance, "the detachment between observer and observed transforms into a relationship of intimacy and, finally, identification."[51]

The year 1911 signaled the advent of the post-impressionist debate in Montreal, apparantly sparked by news of the London exhibition which featured the work of Cezanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh and Matisse,[52] a debate which was to endure, while gaining in ardour, for at least another decade. Still at a relatively safe distance, The Montreal Daily Star rather amiably remarked that "Post Impressionism [was] the very latest turn of the wheel in Paris" and that while "impressionism was considered and is still considered by some...advanced and erratic, ... post impressionism is still more advanced and erratic" adding with uncharacteristic largesse that "it is well sometimes in art...to try and see through the eyes of others." Such was not the common sentiment .

In the next few years Mabel May would explore different facets of a generational Impressionism, including a tentative foray into offshoots such as Fauvism. Fishing Boats in Harbour, Montreal (possibly Fishing Boats, exhibited

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51 Doris Shadbolt. Emily Carr,1871-1945 (Vancouver. Douglas and McIntyre Ltd., 1990):147

52 "The Fine Arts," Montreal Daily Star, 8 March 1911.

RCA in 1913), apart from its brilliance, lucidity and energy, also suggests May's familiarity with more 'modernist' work. Articulated in big sweeps of colour, it hints loudly at Braque's Le Port of 1906 one of his earlier Fauvist images, both in the almost identical configuration of boats in the water, and in the drawing of the forms - the linear arabesques and the strong vertical elements.

It might be useful to now point out that in Canada, as in North America generally, aesthetic changes had come "rolling in" and, as Lyman has postulated, the "revolution was abrupt." [53] The shorthand, often confused, dissemination of new art forms led to the creation of a rather hybrid stylistic melange. Yet a concerted effort was made on occasion to define and differentiate the emerging 'isms', as for example in November 1916, when William Brymner gave a lecture entitled: "Modern 'Isms' in Art: a Comparison" at the Art Association of Montreal. Despite the struggle with new formal theories late Impressionist concerns were present in the work of Canadian artists of the early century in the timid yet visible acknowledgement of illusion, artifice and the painted surface.

Towards the end of May's stay at the Art Association, the number of women exhibiting in the Spring show had increased to forty-five, their contributions nearing the number of entries by men. Reviewers were generous in their praise and for the Standard at least "some of the best work [was] from the studios of our well known women artists."[54] The following year talk was in the air regarding "a new art club for women..[which would]... help elevate the standard of work exhibited." The Star conceded that "the brushing of mind against mind is as necessary and important for women as men and as much

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[53] John Lyman, "Art," The Montrealer, 1 February 1938.

[54] "27th Annual Spring Exhibition," The Standard, 25 March1911.

needed in the field of art as any other field."[55] Yet despite the calibre of work being produced by women and their increased involvement in art, some reviewers continued to be more than a little patronising;

> There is a little coterie of young women artists in our art school which is producing work of much quaintness and originality. It comprises such painters as Miss Coonan, Mrs. Allan, Miss Buller, and Miss May and might well be dubbed "The Art Gallery School". These are all well represented in the present exhibition and their work makes pleasant bits of color about the wall.[56]

Mabel May 'graduated' from the Art Association school in 1912. While her work was presented in the Spring and student exhibitions that year she was nevertheless considered 'hors concours' although she did exhibit some "exceptionally good paintings." May's submissions to the 1912 Spring Exhibition, which included The White Boat, The Daisy Field and Fishing Boats, disclose the artist's early propensity for 'nature' scapes. While The Montreal Daily Star described her work as "characteristic" and The Herald wrote that she showed "pleasing work" and that she was progressing notably, these images, in retrospect, illustrate an enormous leap in terms of thematic development towards a more personalised naturalism. Landscapes by definition they nevertheless have less to do with elemental facts and natural phenomena than with the object within nature, with place, or with the a moody interpretation of atmospheric conditions as seen earlier in Windy Day.

In the case of Henrietta Mabel May and others, the prerequisite trip abroad acted as a sort of finishing school, clearly suggesting the influence of

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55 "The Art Association Moves," The Montreal Daily Star, 6 April 1912

56 "Art Opening a Social Event. 8 Hundred Attended Private View at Art Gallery Last Night," The Montreal Daily Star, 15 March1912

Brymner.[57] In September 1912 Emily Coonan and Mabel May sailed for Europe amidst much fanfare as The Herald proclaimed :

> Miss Coonan is accompanied by Miss May, who is another most promising pupil of Mr. Brymner's. It must be a source of satisfaction to Mr. Brymner to feel that he has launched so many clever young Canadians on the sea of art and it is certainly always a source of pride and gratification to them to feel that they have had such a master in their early years.[58]

Very little information exists concerning Mabel May's itinerary in Europe other than summary reports which appeared sporadically in the daily papers.[59] It is known however that a pied-a-terre was maintained in Paris and that she travelled with a number of other artists including Emily Coonan to northern France, Belgium and Holland. According to a press release prepared by the Dominion Gallery on the occasion of May's farewell exhibition in 1950, an expedition to Northern France took place in August and September of 1912. Sources indicate that while Emily Coonan would return to Montreal in January of 1913, May went on to London, Edinburgh and Glasgow returning home sometime in May of 1913.

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57 Dennis Reid A Concise History of Canadian Painting (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1973):104. "After the turn of the century very few painters -if any- from Toronto found their way to Julien's or the Colarossi. In Montreal, where there was both a culture based on the French tongue and William Brymner, the case was slightly different....[and] Paris continued to exert a pull on young Montrealers that was unknown to most other Canadians."

58 "Art and Artists," The Daily Herald ,31 August 1912.

59 Such as in the Herald 26 October, 1912 and 11 January, 1913. This is unfortunate especially given the historical context.

CHAPTER TWO

1912- 1920: "An artist on her own account"

Mabel May's return to Montreal marks the beginning of her career as a professional artist. While she would maintain her contacts with artists from the Art Association and continue to exhibit regularly at the annual Spring and RCA shows,[60] as well as out of province, she would no longer belong to a 'collective'. The death of Edward May on January 5, 1916 was undoubtedly a difficult experience, yet it would ultimately impart to May a greater sense of self-sufficiency and purpose. The acquiring of her own work place, a studio located at 745 St. Catherine Street West, at the site of the old York Theatre, would further accentuate her sense of independence. Recognition of her status as a professional artist almost immediately followed her return from Europe. The National Gallery of Canada purchased three of her works between 1913 and 1916 and four more later. In 1915 Mabel May was appointed Associate Royal Canadian Academician, a gesture of recognition which symbolically launched her long and prolific career.[61]

It is difficult to determine the impact European art centres had on May as no writings or records by the artist have survived. One assumes that during her travels she would have seen contemporary exhibitions as well as historical

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[60] For a detailed exhibition history see **Appendix B: Exhibitions**

[61] The RCA has historically discriminated against women artists as full academicians and was also slow to accept female associates. For further information see Dorothy Farr and Natalie Luckyj From Women's Eyes (Kingston: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1975) ; and Rebecca Sisler, Passionate Spirits: The History of the Royal Canadian Academy of Art 1880-1980 (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Co. Ltd., 1980)

pieces. She may have visited Roger Fry's Second Post-Impressionist exhibition at the Grafton Galleries as she is known to have been in London at the time. In any event, first hand exposure to 'new art' was certainly made, although true assimilation of the numerous post impressionist directions in Paris would have been virtually impossible. While Paris had been "agog with Cubism"[62] during May's visit, her works of the period merely hint at an understanding of its technical language and the struggle between illusion and representation. Cubism was undoubtedly a difficult concept for artists schooled in the academic mode to grasp, not least of all for its destruction of the notion that painting was essentially a means of re-presenting reality through mimicry and illusionism.

(i) The urban scene

During the teens Mabel May's work demonstrated a concern with local vicinity and prosaic subjects: people and their environments. Whether her sites were occupied, as in the urban views, or empty as in the harbour scenes, they were animated by a subtle yet eloquent 'spirit of place'. Mabel May's rich insight into human behaviour and understanding of mood and nuance were best expressed in her renditions of so-called slices of ordinary life such as Waiting for the Excursion Boat of 1915, which will be discussed further on. Yet she sought her subjects with a formalist's keen eye, selecting suitable images for the exploration of specific pictorial problems. In this she approached the intentionality of Cezanne for example, rather than the sense of spontaneity of

62 Feininger in Paris and the Avant Garde 1900-1925 Exhibition catalogue. (Detroit: The Detroit Institute of Arts, 1980) . 15

the impressionists whose primary interest in light effects also attached to the idea of 'incidental place' and the accidental motif.

As has been mentioned, May's stylistic eclecticism during the early years was consistent with a generational exploration of new vocabularies; 'painting with many brushes' was natural and necessary to the learning of contemporary ideas. What is striking with regard to May however, is her ability to adopt seemingly incongruous styles at the same time and for different ends. One might even venture that subject essentially dictated stylistic choice, indicating a stronger concern with the compatibility of form and content than with the evolution of artifice/ craft. This then is possibly the most remarkable aspect of Mabel May's production before 1920: the notion of mimesis, the mirroring of form and representation; the idea of form as more than visual articulation but also as the symbolic representation of subject matter.

Mabel May returned from Europe in time for the Art Association's 30th Spring Exhibition which was held from March 25 to April 19, 1913. Of the six works she submitted that year at least four were either prepared or produced abroad, including The Market Under the Trees (Fig. 5), depicting a scene in Bruges, which was purchased by the National Gallery trustees, and Dans Les Jardins. Both demonstrate a newly found concern with the depiction of figures within 'landscape;' and the latter work may be one and the same as "a scene in soft sunshine and shadow of a continental square [which] the catalogue following the artist's reticence designated Sketch One."[63] Sketch One was exhibited again the following year at the Spring show, where it won the Jessie

63 "Jessie Dow Prize Award A Suzor Cote, A.R.C.A , and Miss Mabel May Honored," The Gazette, 11 April 1914.

Dow prize, and was purchased for thirty five dollars by Stephen Leacock. [64] Unfortunately it seems to have been lost to a fire some time later. [65]

Cathedral, Bruges , possibly Sketch, Interior , exhibited at the Art Association in 1913 was also painted in Europe. It depicts a church interior and is typical of the often rapidly executed 'pochades' of the day, predecessors of the snapshot and records of interesting spots very often translated into 'finished' works. It is unfortunate that no others have been uncovered, for these little souvenirs are invaluable sources of information regarding travelling itinerary and provide unfiltered insight into the process of artistic evaluation and production.

The Market Under the Trees was shown again in the 35th annual exhibition of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts which opened in Montreal on November 20, 1913. Not only were the women artists "to the fore at this show",[66] but Mabel May's canvas would also receive special mention in The Studio, a British magazine of some importance to anglophone artists in Montreal:

> It was a distinctly creditable exhibition, in that it included many works of individuality and expressiveness, while relatively few appeared to be entirely lacking in significance and sincerity. Its chief interest rested, however, in the further evidence it afforded that a development is in progress which promises to lead presently to the creation of an art especially Canadian in character and feeling.... Among other paintings of which special mention should

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64 It was also the sketch for an oil entitled Luxembourg Garden which was purchased by a Toronto art dealer.

65 "There was a small painting of a public garden scene about 15 x 12 very much in the style of Renoir but I never did know where it came from or what happened to it. My cousin, Dr. Leacock's son, had a bad fire in his house in Rice Lake and many of his things were lost then." Barbara Nimmo, Leacock's niece, in a letter to the author, 8 August, 1990.

66 "Montreal Artists are Well Represented at RCA's Annual Exhibit," The Herald, (Montreal), 22 November 1913

> be made were...Miss H. Mabel May's The Market Under the Trees.[67]

Despite its brevity, this mention was undoubtedly important to May, as it was to the four other women cited: Laura Muntz for her Madonna with Angels, Kathleen Munn who showed A Spanish Dancer, Florence Carlyle with Afternoon, Venice, and Mary Heister Reid with Morning Sunshine.

Locally, the showing of The Market Under the Trees elicited unprecedented appreciation for Mabel May's art work, it being described as "well worth attention" and The Telegraph wrote "not only is it rich in coloring but it is full of glow and life. Miss May has remarkable talent."[68] The Herald referred to her as "one of our most promising young artists" [69] and The Gazette stated: "Miss H. Mabel May's work abounds in promise both pictures (ie Winter, Montreal & Market) being noticeable for their unhesitating frankness and soundness of execution."[70]

The Market Under the Trees introduces May's thematic and pictorial concerns of the period in its depiction of quotidien life. An accomplished piece, skillfully executed, it is theatrical in its bazaar-like atmosphere. Strong formal contrasts animate the surface and add a touch of drama to the otherwise mundane subject of marketing. While it does point to stylistic change in the more fluid arrangement of mass, it retains the sombre palette and traditional references of her academic work, this despite the somewhat intense, non-naturalistic patches of colour- citron and cerise- and the patterned configuration

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[67] H.M.L., "Studio-Talk," The Studio, 61, (London, 1914)

[68] C.L S., "The Annual Academy Results in Collection of Very Fine Exhibits," The Telegraph 21 November 1913.

[69] Agnes Chelsey, "Pictures worth Seeing," The Herald , (Montreal) 2 December 1913

[70] "To Promote Art in Minor Centres" The Gazette, 9 December,1913.

of shadow and light. An emphasis on the 'ensemble' and a palette consisting of resonant blacks, greens and ochres cut with sheets of brilliant light, illustrate her admiration for Spanish painting, and that of Velazquez in particular.

The Market Under the Trees in its depiction of an occupied urban landscape has 'local' precedents in like subjects by Brymner, Cullen and Morrice. One thinks of Morrice's The Citadel, Quebec, c.1900 which depicts a covered market and vendors in winter, or his Barbershop of c.1905, as well as works by Brymner. At the same time, while The Market is not impressionist in mood or execution it nevertheless references so-called 'conventional' Impressionists such as Degas in the strong, sure modelling of the figures and Manet's emphasis on the live urban scene as in his Music in the Tuileries Gardens, of 1862.

Mabel May's return to Montreal in 1913 also coincided with the opening of two landmark avant-garde exhibitions in New York: the New York Armory Show, which included works not only by Rodin, Van Gogh and Gauguin, but also Matisse, Picasso and Kandinsky; and the Exhibition of Contemporary Scandinavian Artists at the Albright Art Gallery, Buffalo, which showed paintings by Edvard Munch, Gustaf Fjaestad, Otto Hasselbom, and Harald Sohlberg.[71] This is important for many reasons, not least of which was the resulting charged climate in Montreal within which May would exhibit and create her first works as a 'professional.'

The controversy which had followed the opening of the Armory Show on February 17, 1913 in New York was loudly echoed at home by critics such as S. Morgan Powell, a reviewer for the Montreal Daily Star and the academician

71 The exhibition opened in New York at the American Art Galleries in December 1912. It then travelled to Buffalo, Toledo, Chicago and Boston and was accompanied by a catalogue. Christian Brinton, "Exhibition of Contemporary Scandinavian Art", (NY: The American Art Galleries and Redfield Brothers, inc., 1912)

Edmond Dyonnet. Both delivered scathing attacks on "freaks" such as Matisse and the Post-Impressionists in an effort to curb the budding interest in 'modern art.'[72] Local artists such as John Lyman (whose unpopular solo exhibition was held at the Art Association in May of that year), Randolph Hewton, and the still informal group (of Seven) in Toronto would also not escape the Montreal writers' open hostility. In his review of the 1913 Spring Exhibition (March 29th) Morgan-Powell shouted:

> Post-impressionism is a fad, an inartistic fetish for the amusement of bad draughtsmen, incompetent colourists, and others who find themselves unqualified to paint pictures. It was founded by a couple of Montmartre cranks, Van Gogh and Gauguin. Neither of these men painted until too old to learn even the elements of art. These two men were crazy in their ideas, but they were at least sincere in their craziness. The general opinion in sane art circles, both in Paris and London, is that their disciples are not.... There is not a single example of Post-Impressionist work in the Spring Exhibition that reveals any skill in drawing, any feeling for composition, any sense of colour value.[73]

In contrast, as well as in character, was Brymner's comment on Lyman's art: "If a man wants to paint a woman with green hair and red eyes he jolly well can!" [74] It might be useful to keep in mind that just as artists had to grapple with new vocabularies, so too did the critics. A parallel evolution, though once removed, which similarly required at the very least a willingness to accept change and an open mind. A true development of a "responsive, informed practice of art criticism" would only occur after 1920 when, as Natalie Luckyj has described,

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72 "London is laughing today at the latest freak of Matisse." S. Morgan-Powell, "Art and the Post Impressionists," The Montreal Daily Star, 29 March 1913.

73 Ibid

74 Anne McDougall, Anne Savage, Story of a Canadian Painter (Montreal: Harvest House, 1977): 37

"there were knowledgeable critics like Graham McInnes, Walter Abell, Bertram Brooker, John Lyman ...[yet even then] ... too often, the task of reviewing art exhibitions fell to the uninformed and the conservative, whose ignorance and personal bias are easily detected." [75]

Such was the context within which Mabel May produced her first post-Continental works such as Immigrants, Bonaventure Station, (Fig.6), the railway terminal then known as the Grand Trunk Terminal, and Winter, Montreal, which enlarged upon her interest in sourcing urban life as subject matter. Immigrants, Bonaventure Station which depicts a group of immigrants, life's possessions in hand, might possibly allude to her own family history, as well as to the importance of Montreal as the major Canadian point of entry for travellers to this country. Yet despite a sense of connection with the personages, achieved through a kind of gestural empathy, other more pictorial motivations are clearly at play. Shown as The Station at the Art Association's Spring Exhibition of 1914, it became an instant success. J.D. Logan in his review for The Herald stated:

> The artist who seems to show sheer gifts for painting is Miss. H. Mabel May. "The Station" (272) is an extraordinarily fine piece of pure and dramatic painting. It shows a locomotive and train just arrived at a terminal station and a throng of passengers, evidently emmigrants, issuing from the platform to the station. The way she has handled the pigmentation in black, green and yellow, the suggested movement of hurrying people, and suffusion of a cold grey atmosphere are masterly. The whole picture is distinctly artistic.[76]

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75 Natalie Luckyj Expressions of Will: The Art of Prudence Heward. Exhibition catalogue. (Kingston. Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1986) :39.

76 J D. Logan, The Herald (Montreal), 4 April 1914.

A first reading might situate this painting within a nineteenth century realist genre, midway between Daumier's social commentary (two different versions of Un wagon de troisieme classe were in the collection of Sir George A. Drummond at the beginning of the century), and the more anecdotal renditions of the railway by English artists such as Solomon, Frith and Egg. [77] There are also obvious and more modern references to, for example, Monet's Gare St. Lazare series, which May would certainly have known, not only in subject matter and style but in the similar equation made between the locomotive and contemporaneity/modernity. There is kinship as well in this context to certain Britons who "insisted upon the pictorial possibilities of the metropolis," such as Alexander Jamieson (1873-1939), Sydney Starr (1857-1925), whose A City Atlas, is in the NGC, and whose Paddington Station, 1886 is a Whistlerian interpretation of a station scene. As well, William Kennedy (1859-1918) whose works formed part of the Loan Exhibition of English Art which took place at the Art Association in 1909 and who "in a splendid piece of summary naturalism (conveyed) the bustle of passengers disembarking from a train": Stirling Station, 1887.[78]

Immigrants, Bonaventure Station clearly demonstrates a new interest in the articulation of interior environment. As discussed by Esther Trepanier, the advent of French Impressionism in this country precipitated major thematic transformations.[79] Urban views became significant to a number of Quebec artists among them Morrice, Cullen, Marc-Aurele de Foy Suzor-Cote (1869-

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77 For further information see Linda Nochlin, Realism, (Middlesex. Penguin Books,1971)

78 For an excellent analysis see Kenneth McConkey, British Impressionism, (Oxford. Phaidon Press,1989)

79 See Esther Trepanier, "La ville comme lieu de la modernite: sa representation dans la peinture quebecoise 1919-39." (Masters Thesis, Universite du Quebec a Montreal, 1983)

1937) and Mabel May. City views were generally selected not for their narrative appeal or as records of modernity, but much more practically for their pictorial novelty: a smoky, dusty modern metropolis. In 1914, the year May's Immigrants, Bonaventure Station was first shown, the thirty-first Spring Exhibition featured several scenes of barges and factories including Charles Simpson's Sunshine and Shadow, and Suzor-Cote's Les Fumeés with its factories and smoking chimneys set against a natural sunset. This interest did not neglect the importance of 'atmosphere', both formal and moody: it was essentially a transposition of those tenets held by 'impressionists' of the Canadian Art Club who stressed a focus on light and atmosphere and whose works included Cullen's Winter Evening, Quebec, c.1905 described by Dennis Reid as "a paean to atmosphere."[80] Immigrants, Bonaventure Station demonstrates an affinity in this respect to contemporary works by J.E.H. MacDonald and Lawren Harris which depict the gasworks area of Toronto where they sketched in 1911-12. Tracks and Trains and Gasworks, despite their outdoor setting are essentially concerned with (un)natural atmospheric conditions and views: billowing fumes which envelop and make indistinct the factories and surround.

Moving farther afield, May's canvas and several other works of that period suggest a sympathetic understanding of the American Ash Can artists such as Sloan, Glackens, and Henri. One thinks of George Luks' urban atmospherics as seen in Roundhouses at Highbridge, 1909-10 for example. For the Eight, subject matter which focussed on the pictorial merits of the local scene simultaneously emphasised "life over art." For May, there existed an equivalent in her stressing of lived experience. A shared interest in public

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80 Dennis Reid, A Concise History of Canadian Painting, (Toronto, 1973): 125

places included, at this time at least, a portrayal of the hustle, bustle and activity of modern living, including the physical fact of journeying. Similarities would extend to May's smudgy smoky palette and subdued atmospheric conditions. Having relatives in New York, Mabel May could have visited the Exhibition of the Eight held at the Macbeth Gallery in February 1908. Slightly later, May's scenes of the Montreal harbour would recall in subject Henri, Sloan, and Lawson.[81]

Immigrants, Bonaventure Station was the first in a series of station scenes produced between 1914 and the early twenties, among them outdoor station images such as Station Scene exhibited in the RCA show of 1918 (Fig.7) a fluid composition probably depicting the Westmount train station. Despite the commonality of subject, these views differed in setting, in their lack of site specificity and semi-picturesqueness, ultimately accentuating a (sub)urban environment. May's focus as illustrated in those compositions, would shift from the phenomenon of modern living, to an interest in the evocation of a sense of place: the look, sound, smell and mood, that is, the memory, of a familiar setting. Pictorial confidence in these 'later' images allowed for a freer delineation of form as well as a less structured composition and, by extension, a more casual reading. The theme of the railway station would culminate with two known works: Going to the Station, 1918, and Train Shunting, 1922. Going to the Station would win for May her third Jessie Dow prize, and was acclaimed in the press. [82] In its depiction of "a crowd edging a

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[81] For further information see Barbara Rose, American Art Since 1900 (New York, 1975)

[82] "Two Artists Honoured. Jessie Dow Prize for Wm Brymner R.C.A. and H. Mabel May. A.R.C.A.," The Gazette, 25 April 1918 and The Herald, 5 April 1918

street, watching soldiers march by"[83] and its human presence, it reiterates the concern with lived experience seen in her first railway image.

(ii) Urban naturalism

As told, Mabel May had begun to be noticed by the Montreal art milieu upon her return to Canada but she would not remain a mere local success for very long. On February 7, 1914, at the Second Annual Exhibition of Little Pictures, held at the Art Galleries of the Public Reference Library, corner of College and St. George streets, May was introduced to Toronto. While the reviewer for Saturday Night would only mention a few of artists in his discussion of the exhibition, Mabel May was among them.

> Last year about this time....a little group of Toronto artists and some lay-associates, notably George H. Locke, the Public Librarian of Toronto, took on themselves the responsibility of giving an exhibition of small pictures of a sort suitable for the average home....There are about two hundred and eighty pictures....Among the new-comers it is pleasant to see such excellent work by Arthur Lismer, F. Hans Johnston, and Miss H. Mabel May, who makes her first bow to Toronto art-lovers with a series of very beautiful sketches.[84]

That same year she also submitted two oils to the "keynote Academy show of the decade"[85] : Street Scene, Montreal and Watching The Regatta . The 36th annual RCA show boasted a "stunning lineup," and demonstrated "not only a great variety of styles, but a genuinely vital impulse" (Saturday Night)

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83 Ibid. The Gazette

84 Hector Charlesworth, "The Little Picture Show," Saturday Night, 14 February,1914, p.21

85 Rebecca Sisler, Passionate Spirits: The History of the RCA . p.92.

as well as having "strength and variety and quality, but, above all, strength" (The Globe). The exhibition included the work of a significant number of women artists, among them Helen McNicoll, the Des Clayes sisters, Mary Heister Reid and Florence McGillvray. Yet it was likely the introduction to works by more progressive artists such as Arthur Lismer, J.E.H. MacDonald, and Lawren Harris as well as the newly-elected Associate A.Y. Jackson, who showed his striking Red Maple , "a dashing piece of impressionism,"[86] which made the largest impact and may even have determined her formal direction from then on.

Street Scene, Montreal c.1914 (Fig. 8, NGC), is a soft-edged, quiet painting reminiscent of May's stylistic roots, which scarcely forecasts the dramatic changes ahead. An emphasis on elemental mood and atmospheric tonalities creates an emotive environment. Lyricism is achieved through the tonal play and a subtly textured surface. A sensation of the enveloping, humid winter air is echoed in the fluid arrangement of form and the painterly execution. In its city subject as well as its treatment of the painting surface, Street Scene, Montreal is ultimately a thinner version of the paintings of Canada's first impressionists. It bears a resemblance to Cullen's Cab Stand, Dominion Square, c1912 or St. James Cathedral, Dominion Square, Montreal, c1916 and to Morrice's Holton House, 1909 (MMFA) or Street in Winter..., c1905 (AGO). Interestingly, Cullen's The Blizzard, Craig Street of 1912 (exhibited CNE 1912, RCA 1912) is strangely reminiscent of Edward Stott's The Team, 1903, not only in its depiction of plodding horses, phantom-like in their ghostly silhouettes, but also in its gentle yet elusive mood, and both seem to have informed May's composition.

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[86] Ibid.

In marked contrast to Street Scene, Montreal is Watching the Regatta, (NGC) the earliest in a series depicting gracious suburban summertimes. Others included Sails in the Wind, Pointe Claire , Yacht Racing, 1914 (Fig.9), and Waiting for the Excursion Boat (Fig.10) "a good example of color in crowds " [87] which probably depicts the St. Helen's Island Ferry. Despite the figures' "Daumier-like strength," there is a fluidity to the forms which mimics the easy mood. This series of 'urban nature', for lack of a better term, obviously references the Impressionists and especially Renoir whose works were often of figures in the open air- an important theme for British artists as well. Yet these images ultimately convey a late nineteenth century French style both in visual language and in the not so subtle suggestion of the genre and mood of 'la fete champetre.'

In its radiance and breezy suggestion of hot sunshine on water, as well as in its slightly fiercer 'touch' (possibly related to a difference in support, i.e. wood not canvas) The Regatta differs quite radically from Street Scene, Montreal. It does, however, share an emphasis on atmosphere, in this case brilliant cast light which prompts a sharper, rythmical reading as opposed to the 'felt' ensemble of the fluid winter scene. In its subject it recalls Morrice's The Yacht Race which was exhibited at the Spring show of 1909, and in its simplicity of composition and clean, clear palette it suggests the 'impressionist' work of May's contemporary, Helen McNicoll.

It is ironic yet seemly that Mabel May's lighthearted images emerged in conjunction with the grim unfolding world events. The recent buoyant mood among artists was swiftly dashed with the outbreak of World War I, when art

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[87] "Royal Canadian Academy of Arts Open Galleries," The Herald, 19 November 1915

became a commodity most could ill afford. The Royal Canadian Academy organized the Patriotic Fund Exhibition to not only provide aid to the country's war effort but also to counter the lagging spirits and sense of futility among artists. Its success was enormous. A total of eighty three works were donated by academicians and associates, the OSA and the Canadian Art Club and the sum raised by July exceeded ten thousand dollars. The collection toured nine cities opening on December 30, 1914 in Toronto where it remained on display for one week, and then travelling to Winnipeg, Edmonton, Halifax, Saint John, Quebec, and Montreal. It opened with a private view to members and others at the Art Association on Monday evening March 15, at the end of the month it left for Ottawa, then Hamilton and London, and finally closed in Toronto.

While some works were painted especially for this occasion, others were selected by the artists themselves from among their best work.[88] Mabel May contributed Canal Scene, Venice , a work suggesting that she had been in Italy the previous year, though it is possible that photographs may have been a source.[89]

On November 15, 1915, Henrietta Mabel May was elected Associate of the Royal Canadian Academy. This was a richly deserved honour, still rarely bestowed on women artists and May was the first of only three women of her circle to be so recognized. Kathleen Moir Morris (elected ARCA in 1929) and Lilias Torrance Newton (elected ARCA 1923, RCA 1937) were the others. That

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88 The reviewer for the Star noted "Naturally the standard varies, but the collection reveals a wide variety of styles, a broad catholicity of taste, and a steady trend on the part of Canadian painters to devote their abilities to their native land." The Montreal Daily Star, 16 March, 1915

89 May would also contribute work to the "Exhibition and Sale of Paintings held in Ottawa in aid of the Canadian National Committee on Refugees" following the second World War donating Summer Landscape Fifty Seven artists donated 102 works and 25 of them were Montrealers who sent 50 pictures. Robert Ayre, "Substantial Aid for Refugees Through Generosity of Artists," The Standard, 19 October 1940. p.35

same year she would also win the Special Prize offered by the Women's Art Society for Canadian Women Artist's work.

Two works were submitted by May to the now significant 37th RCA Exhibition: Knitting (also known as In the Park) , 1915 (Fig.11), for which she was awarded the Jessie Dow Prize and Waiting for the Excursion Boat , 1915. Knitting, continues Mabel May's interest in figuration begun as mentioned earlier with 'portraits' of family and friends. However, during the teens, an interest in small groupings within a landscape emerged parallelled by a more painterly and less premeditated approach. On one level, a new awareness of the act of painting and its effects, would inevitably distance the subject by making visible the artist's presence instead. On another level the pictorial remoteness of the subject(s) underlines and is consistent with the stillness and kind of distant constancy of the situation described: women knitting socks very likely for the Canadian war effort. The women's isolation, compositionally as well as psychologically, their focus on their work is appropriate here. However in another example also related to the war effort, George Reid's 1917 (exhibited CNE 1917) the fact becomes disturbing. Women are enclosed in what appears to be someone's home, some bent over sewing machines, others mending clothing in corners, disconnected as they are absorbed in the busy-ness of work.

The general passivity in May's earlier images of women, a passivity illustrated in their demeanour as well as in their activities is a point to be explored more fully at a later time. Certainly a part of this tendency may be a reflection of lived experience and a lingering late Victorian attitude. Yet there is a possibility (albeit unsubstantiated in any way) that it may have been an intentional course. In her essay "Women, Art, and Power", Linda Nochlin addresses the discourses of gender difference focussing on visual images

which "represent women in situations involving power- most usually its lack"[90] an examination which may have significance here. Most definitly there exists an underlying element to May's compositions which may or may not reflect a new and critical subtext, as in The Garden, c.1912 and later Indian Woman, Oka. It is tempting to draw a parallel between the possible social implications of these canvases and suffrage activity of the day. However, this will remain conjecture as no evidence exists to support the view (other than probabilities given May's character) that she painted both the seen and the observed. In any event, there is a new and compelling element to these works which can be partially attributed to the artist's emotional presence. That said, and despite the larger context in terms of iconographical discourse, it should be stated that Mabel May, in keeping with national conservatism and in common with most Canadian female artists, would not venture into the kind of statements about 'modern woman,' that were becoming increasingly popular in the United States at this time.

Knitting is an elaboration of a canvas entitled Four Sisters and Friend, painted around 1911. Yet despite its almost identical subject, a centralised composition of women seated on the grass, it is strikingly different in formal concerns. Gone are the raw, rustic colours and dramatic contrasts, the shrill yellow patches and crimson spots within a sombre overall colour scheme also seen in Market Under the Trees. By 1915, May is exploring the dappled light effects and broad brushmarks of the Impressionists as well as striving towards the design of unified composition, and a mosaic of colour. Despite the casual mood and spontaneous articulation, the composition is nevertheless a studied rendition of leisure, not a 'snapshot'. In its uncropped, centralised configuration

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[90] Linda Nochlin, Women , Art, and Power and other Essays, (New York, 1988)

it is closer to 'tamer' impressionist works such as Berthe Morisot's (1841-1895) The Artist's Sister, Mme. Pontillon, Seated on the Grass of 1873.

While Knitting shares pictorial concerns and 'locale' with several works by contemporaries including Edwin Holgate's The Lookout, Mount Royal of the same year,[91] Robert Harris' View Across the Park c.1916, Albert Robinson's Montreal Fruit Seller 1919, and Maurice Cullen's Montreal Scene c.1920, it is more akin to the poesie of for instance Henri Beau's (1863-1949) Paysage (Fig.12).

The views of the 'idle lifestyle' which May portrayed during these early years have many impressionist precedents. One thinks of Renoir of course, James Guthrie (1859-1930) and John Lavery. On the other hand, Untitled (Fig.13) very possibly The Garden which had been exhibited at the Spring Show of the Art Association in 1914, is also a fanciful and at the same time a literal rendition of class differences of the day. A domestic theme in its focus on mothers and daughters, it nevertheless extends beyond family and sentiment to engage the more serious issue of social inegality. It depicts a mother and her young daughters wandering through a lush garden. Outside the fence, a poor woman and her child look on; the psychological separation described is enormous. A potentially sombre effect is tempered and lightened by a fluid poetic quality which is reminiscent of the work of Stott and Philip Wilson Steer (1860-1942). At the same time, its painterliness and portrayal of figures within 'urban nature' hint at the German impressionist Max Lieberman. Most of all, The Garden reflects the fresh palette and pictorial vocabulary of Renoir, especially if compared to his La balancoire, of 1876 (Jeu de Paume, Paris). However, while

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[91] Edwin Holgate and Mabel May established a lifelong friendship while both students at the AAM

The Garden illustrates an interest in the brilliant palette, dappled light effects, and cohesive surface of impressionism, it continues to hint at Victorian genre. Evidence of the artist's touch/presence is consistent with the involving and emotive nature of the subject matter. This continued importance of sentiment is not modern. The lacey, lyrical trees, common to May at the time, have a ghostlike background presence and combine with other formal elements to create an ethreal and evanescent environment, compatible with the implication of the ungraspable,or: fantasy. By mid-decade Mabel May is clearly captivated by the pictorial possibilities of light and atmosphere as well as the constructive role of negative/empty space. At the Spring show of 1916 May exhibited six works among them The White House, four other landscapes and a portrait. The critic for The Gazette recognized that: "Miss H. Mabel May A.R.C.A. shows work which indicates that the painting of sunlight is the chief problem she has set herself to solve. There is a greater sense of abandon in her work this year, less raw color and more tone."[92]

That fall, at the RCA exhibition May participated with four landscapes, among them Boats on the St. Lawrence (NGC), and Lowtide (Fig.14). On this occasion she would be one of three artists singled out by H. Mortimer Lamb in his review for The Studio. He noted that:

> Miss May's progress in craftsmanship during the past year has been remarkable, and she has now attained a mastery that enables her to give fuller expression to her genuine artistic ability. Her paintings usually of landscapes in which figures are introduced, have never lacked character; but her recent work has become more arresting because of qualities of light and atmosphere that it did not possess formerly. The Boats on the St. Lawrence, one of four

92 "Younger Artists Well Represented," The Gazette, 3 April, 1916

> canvases in this exhibition, has been purchased by the Canadian Government, and is characterized by a luminous opalescence.[93]

May's Lowtide of 1916, is remarkably similar in subject to Coonan's Children by the Water c.1912 although treatment and palette differ considerably.[94] In Lowtide space, light and painterly dynamics are the principal motives. The children are distanced and dotted along the jagged and remote shoreline, isolated and woven into the reflective surface. In marked contrast, Coonan's figures exist as one interactive configuration, richly coloured and patterned and set against a shallow backdrop. While Coonan's rendition tells of her interest in intense chromatics and post-impressionistic flattening of space, for Mabel May, Impressionism's luminous surfaces and harmonies of hue are paramount. In addition, Lowtide illustrates May's attraction to the exploration of vacant areas of space, intervals which set a precedent for her expansive landscapes of slightly later. The observation was made in another review of the 38th RCA:

> An artist who has made a very remarkable advance is Miss H. Mabel May, of Westmount, who last year was elected A.R.C.A. Miss May has caught an almost scintillating quality of light in the atmosphere of her Boats on the St. Lawrence. Lowtide with children playing in the pools of water left among the rocks and sands has an effect of space and shows the artist broadening in her range and becoming more sure and confident in her technique.[95]

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93 H. Mortimer Lamb, "The 38th Exhibition of the Royal Canadian Academy", The Studio,(London, 1916)

94 Although the theme of wading was a fairly common one, as exemplified by WH Clapp's The Waders exhibited AAM 1909 and others, it is possible that they are in fact different renditions of the same event

95 E.B. "Over Three Hundred Pictures Displayed at the Art Gallery," The Herald, 17 November 1916.

The influence of Philip Wilson Steer is suggested again in the expansive evocation of mood. The Ermine Sea may have been a source of inspiration, especially the subject itself, the space and mood, although Lowtide's formal articulation has more to do with the French Impressionists' painterliness than Steer's interest in Japanese composition seen here. By 1918 May's reputation seems to have been established as a painter of sunlight and atmosphere. Following the Spring Exhibition that year, to cite an example, The Gazette noted that Mabel May "besides a portrait of Miss Darrell Morrissey, has landscapes which show her growing skill as a painter of sunlight."[96]

Yet that is not to say that Mabel May, especially in the work featuring children, would necessarily abandon an interest in anecdote, a joie de vivre atmosphere and the 'picturesque', even as style and subject evolved. The Pink Balloon, of 1918 (Fig. 15) and The Baby and His Dog, 1921 demonstrate a sentimentality compatible with the overall spattered and painterly execution, as well as the subject matter; in both cases her nephew Jack May, whom she helped raise. The dabs of gentle pastels in The Pink Balloon which depicts a bustle of children and adults around the balloon seller in Westmount Park conform to the mood and demonstrate a marked contrast to a more formalist's interpretation of a similar topic: Emily Coonan and her The Green Balloon, in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada. Coonan's centralised, focussed and reductive composition compels one's solemn attention, whereas May's rendition is essentially a visual quotation of the scene itself . Although in The Pink Balloon a restless surface has begun to be consolidated, the many elements depicted as well as the manner of application ultimately distract from the compositional idea.

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96 "Spring Exhibition at Art Gallery," The Gazette, 4 May 1918

(iii) Figuration/portraiture

While portraits of friends and family would continue to be of some importance to May throughout her lengthy career, these studies would not become her main focus, as they did for Lilias Torrance Newton and others. An increase in portraiture may have naturally occurred in later life when her involvement as an educator limited other painting opportunities. The last known work by Mabel May painted at the age of eighty is in fact a study of her grand-niece Alison.

The Three Sisters , c.1915 (Fig.16, Beaverbrook Art Gallery) was possibly painted on Campobello Island, off the coast of New Brunswick and Maine, and portrays the Calder sisters, Helen, Louise and Pearl. In its luminosity and pictorial unity, The Three Sisters is an almost purist rendition of French Impressionism. Contour lines have been abandoned for feathery strokes and repetitive features which construct and create a rhythmic and harmonious composition. There is a greater emphasis on shallow space with figures drawn closer to the viewer's eye. While there are obvious references here to Brymner's The Vaughan Sisters of 1910 both in subject and disposition of figures, (although Brymner's rendition continues in an academic portrait manner), it is again the painting of Renoir which most obviously informs this work, especially in its overall atmosphere of youth. The Three Sisters recalls paintings such as Jeunes filles au bord de la mer of 1894 or Dans la prairie ou la cuiellette des fleurs or Jeunes filles lisant which had formed part of l'Exposition d'art francais shown at the Art Association of Montreal in 1909.

Placed within a local and contemporary context The Three Sisters provides interesting information. Consider for instance, Charles de Belle's The

Last Flowers , an alarmingly sentimental depiction of youth, and in contrast, Emily Coonan's The Orphans, (Fig.17) both exhibited in the 38th RCA exhibition and placed side by side in the catalogue for the show. Coonan's image is an essentially formalist rendition of the emotive subject of homeless children which sources Vuillard's Little Girls Walking of c.1891, for example, in the use of patterning, economy of form, degree of abstraction, and repetitive design elements. The Three Sisters shares a general lyricism with Coonan's work; yet May's canvas relies on the poetics of paint, the textured, animated surface, while The Orphans achieves its lyricism through the patterning rythm of the composition, depicting a row of almost identical uniformed little girls, marching across the canvas left to right, their bobbing heads topped off in black-banded 'pancake' hats.

It is significant that within a short span of about two years, and within this context of portraiture, rather radical formal innovations occurred. While outdoor scenes would dominate in May's oeuvre from the early teens onwards, one or two interiors and portraits have survived which point to other influences. In Doris and Ruth , c.1916, (Fig.18) an intimate interior with two of her nieces, references are clearly made to both Whistler and James Wilson Morrice in the painting's tonal harmony, introspective and reserved mood, and simplicity. The composition evokes a sense of quietude which is articulated formally in the mellow hues, the languid pose of the sitters, the subdued light and the play of shadow. One would not be incorrect in drawing a parallel here as well between her work and that of Mary Cassatt's Five O'clock Tea of 1880 (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) especially the similarity found in the patterned background, gentle colour and mood. However there is one particularly important difference, a dissimilarity in the disposition of the figures which symbolises a broader attitude of the period. While Cassatt's women avert their gaze and are essentially on

view, the girls in May's depiction are not only watched but are also watchful, telling something about both changing attitudes and, more importantly, aesthetic preoccupations. Here May's work attaches to a Post Impressionist attitude in which subject has superceded story.

The overall patterning of Doris and Ruth and the equal emphasis given to figure and background is not a formalist's approach as would occur later in Montreal, but rather points again to the influence of Vuillard adding an element of frivolity and artifice to avoid an overally solemn interpretation. If Mabel May's intention was to express a sense of serenity and cohesion, a composition at once compelling and reticent, she successfully illustrated here and in other similar works Vuillard's view that "the subject matter of a painting should be subject to the ideas which the artist wishes to express."

The dignified presence of Doris and Ruth seen in the sitters themselves, would be reiterated in later figurative works of the twenties such as Indian Women, (unlocated) which portrays a group of women with a baby by a lake and another lost painting depicting Jacques Cartier and Quebec natives. [97] The latter may possibly be Early Settlers to the Bank of the St. Lawrence which was exhibited at the Art Association in 1924. This group also included Indian Woman, Oka, (exhibited at the Roberts Gallery in 1951) (Fig.19, Art Gallery of Hamilton) dated 1917 but which appears more likely to have been painted in 1927. [98]

In Indian Woman, Oka the figure occupies a prominent position in the foreground. However the structure beyond assumes an equal significance and is clearly an extension of self: her home. Here a formal correspondence exists

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[97]Interview with Paul Kastel, Kastel Gallery, Montreal, Spring 1991.

[98]According to the AGH worksheets the date remains questionable and unresolved.

between the architectural component and the figure which adds to the psychological monumentality of the subject. In addition, the solidity and architectural articulation of form and direct gaze of the figure combine to create a compelling presence and intense psychic connection. One should recall that this is in marked contrast to Group of Seven habit.

As mentioned earlier, there is an intensity here, a strength in composition and a seriousness in approach and execution, which is assertive and at the same time sensitive. Would it be so far fetched to speak about a sympathetic observation, to suggest it being about the appropriation of 'power,' or a recognition of the lack described by Nochlin: a formal and psychological (re) assertion of Presence?

Indian Woman, Oka employs an elemental palette consistent with the strong, emotive drawing and which also hints rather loudly at an interest in Gauguin whose ideas "had pervaded the thought of a whole generation." May's use of colour, while still mostly 'imitative', is also pitched and laid down in larger areas. There is an expressive dimension here which is also representative, approaching symbolism and which would continue being evident in later works such as Summertime also known as Girls with Shears (Musee du Quebec). Interestingly, her landscapes of the period would vacillate between the use of colour for expressive/'sensational' ends (as with Matisse via Morrice) and as symbolic agent of spiritual concerns. In evidence as well, is an attempt at the flattening of space, that denial of depth which demonstrates the artist's new concerns with a 'designed' picture space.

(iv) The cityscape

Mabel May's interest from 1913 to 1920 in depicting figures within an urban/suburban setting was balanced by an equal attraction to the uninhabited city scene, the difference being not only the emptying of the canvas but also the site specificity of the painting. While May's peopled scenes had depicted an urban naturalism, attention to geographical or architectural detail was absent and the emphasis placed rather on 'environment.' With its focus on physical setting and architectural structures, the urban landscape, like the summary naturescapes of the twenties, allowed for formal experimentation and even abstraction. These stylised views which would include representations of industrial sites and harbour scenes, anticipated the later landscapes in which the picture's surface became a salient concern.

Perhaps the term 'urban landscape' is quite an apt description here for these views are treated less as cityscape than as undulating topography. In, for example, View From My Studio (Fig.20, MMFA), the overlapping, sloping, white-capped rooftops, while creating a quasi-cubist, additive composition, nevertheless retain an organic element in the rhythmic drawing and suggestion of growth. This is reiterated in the shapes of the flattened forms and soft-edged outlines that create an organic silhouette. As Dorothy Farr has explained, an interest in the urban image had been present in Canada since the eighteenth century. By the early twentieth century, regardless of stylistic allegiance, "the urban view, stylishly painted, became an acceptable and desirable subject."[99] It would become, for a time, the representation of modernity; one thinks for example of F.M. Bell-Smith's Lights of a City Street (The Robert Simpson Company, Toronto) for example, painted as early as 1884. That is not surprising

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99 Dorothy Farr. Urban Images Canadian Painting. Exhibition catalogue. (Kingston: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1990), p.9

when one considers on a very basic level the changing face of Canada, in both the architectural landscape and socio-cultural fabric. To the urban dweller and artist, (the Group of Sever notwithstanding), this was the novel scene, a landscape of factories, commercial structures, and many storied apartment buildings.

Yet despite the multiple references which attach to idea of the modern metropolis, Mabel May's interest was mainly in the architectural elements, as many surviving sketches demonstrate, representing a concern with form rather than meaning. Absent from her city vistas are the icons of modernity, the 'skyscrapers' and other architectural signs of industrialization. In contrast one might point to Toronto artist Robert Gagen's Temples of Commerce for its quite literal description of a progressive city. Furthermore, there is not the subjectively solemn undercurrent of, to cite one example, the Ash Can School. On the contrary, while her views do retain an intimate and personal dimension, they are abstracted and distanced enough, both physically and emotionally to have become 'motifs.' Unlike works by Kathleen Morris, such as The Peanut Vendor, Maison Calvet, St. Paul Street or Nuns with Children for example, or Prudence Heward's McGill Grounds, Winter, May's urban views depict the city as concept and image; her focus is not on city life, but the environment within which life goes on. Unseen are Morris' children, sleighs, and animals which animate yet detract from the formal statement. With May, a psychological presence is implied but not described.

There are a number of views from her studio window in this series such as View from my Window and Overlooking Dominion Square, 1917, Snowy Day, 1918 (Fig.21) which depicts the corner of Mackay and St. Catherine Streets, and Falling Snow , with its row of buildings on St. Catherine Street west. There are other known city scenes which were painted in situ so to speak

including the sun lit Mother House from Mount Royal. These urban views all share an obvious concern with design elements, a Post-Impressionist flattening of form, unusual compositions and illusionistic space which sets May apart from Cullen, for example, with whom her very slightly earlier work had had such marked affinities. The view from the studio window has many historical precedents; one thinks of Matisse or closer to home Morrice and later Goodridge Roberts (1904-1974) among others. In fact as Dorothy Farr has stated, "For many urban dwellers, the city is seen from the inside looking out through a window or door. This is particularly true during the long winter months in Canada. For many urban dwellers, it is the preferred view."[100]

A suggestion of James Wilson Morrice may be found in works such as Overlooking Dominion Square and Snowy Day, not only in thematic emphasis (see Morrice's numerous paintings of the river embankment Quai des Grands Augustins as seen from his third floor studio in Paris, c.1904-05), but also in the softness, flattened surface and pattern effects. There exists a possibility that Mabel May was personally acquainted with Morrice [101] although this has not been proven. In any event May would have had many an opportunity to become familiar with his painting, as a student and later, as Morrice exhibited quite regularly at the Art Association and with the RCA.[102]

May's studio views also have affinities to Lawren Harris' patterning and decorative emphasis seen in compositions such as A Side Street of 1919 where the houses are seen through a screen of trees, the boughs echoed by

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[100] Ibid., p.102

[101] Mrs. Mary May, niece-in-law, Vancouver, in correspondence with the author, April 1991.

[102] Morrice showed regularly at the AAM between 1888 and 1916: (1903 (2ce); 1906,1907,1909, 1910 (2ce), 1911, 1912, 1913 (2ce), 1914 (2ce), and in 1916.

their shadows and creating patterns across the facades. Harris was the single artist in the Group of Seven to show an interest in the urban scene. However, like May he generally remained psychically removed from his subjects.

May's views suggest a psychological detachment, a physical/formal distancing from human activity as had evolved in Realist and Impressionist interpretations of the city vista. A sense of indifference to the details of human stirrings is suggested through the bird's eye view- the abandonment of the 'sympathetic' horizontal view. This pictorial strategy would be more fully explored in her landscapes of the early twenties onwards, becoming more pronounced with her adaptation of an increasingly higher vantage point.

(v) The Industrial Landscape: Harbour Scenes

In the early decades of the twentieth-century Montreal was one of the largest port cities in Canada, its harbour the heart and centre of new commercial activity, the main artery of the industrial age. New modern structures were being designed and built on the docks- hangars, grain elevators etc.- which would soon capture the attention of local artists for their 'significant form'.[103] In 1912 the reviewer for The Witness in discussing the work of Cullen's New Grain Elevator, Montreal remarked that it "shows what possibilities for artistic work have been lying... in our harbor, which Montrealers have been proud of mainly because of its utility, not suspecting the beauty lurking there with those with eyes to see." [104]

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[103] See Trepanier "La ville comme lieu de la modernite," p.103, and Rosemary Donegan, Industrial Images. (Hamilton: Hamilton Art Gallery, 1987)

[104] "Princess Patricia's Work Shown at Spring Exhibition of Art Association," The Montreal Daily Witness, 15 March 1912.

Mabel May was one of the first artists in Montreal to focus on images of the waterfront. With the exception of painters such as A.Y. Jackson and Albert H. Robinson who "haunted the harbor, the docks, the grain elevators and the boats," [105] as well as John Johnstone and slightly later in the twenties Adrien Hebert and Marc-Aurele Fortin, few Quebec painters made the port their subject. This would be especially true prior to 1920. Later artists such as Ernst Neumann, Pegi Nicol MacLeod, Frederick Taylor, Fritz Brandtner, Marion Scott and Jack Beder, would explore the pictorial possibilities of the old port and Montreal's waterways. It may be that a pass was required to frequent the docks for long periods of time which may have been a problem for artists. In any event Mabel May did not seem to encounter any difficulties on sketching outings, and may have accompanied her friend Robinson whose cousin, Robert Aiken, was harbor paymaster.

The limited popularity of the harbour and surround was probably linked, as discussed by Esther Trepanier[106] to a 'hierarchy of genres' especially as one approaches the era of the Group of Seven and the obvious relationship this had to the saleability of the work. Suddenly, subject matter, so important to nineteenth century artists would regain its value in the twenties and thirties in the merging of urban views and landscape where urban scenes were often 'naturalised', framed by trees or separated by water.

There is no Canadian movement equivalent to American Scene painting, and Montreal views of the new industrial age were limited to sites of trade and traffic, the Lachine canal, covered bridges, the harbour, and railway tracks and subjects such as grain elevators. Mabel May herself is known to have produced

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[105] Thomas R Lee, Albert H. Robinson, the Painter's Painter (Montreal. private printing1956)

[106] Esther Trepanier, " La ville comme lieu de la modernite".

a number of rural industrial images such as Red Silo, c.1925, Grain Elevators, Outskirts Lachine and River Front, Montreal . For Quebecers these were more important symbols of the modern era than skyscrapers and commercial architecture.

Yet for Mabel May, unlike others such as Adrien Hebert for example, dock scenes were not equated with the commotion and activity of work. And unlike Robinson who in his Freighter of 1919 makes clear his interest in the boat as subject, May's interest is in the dock as site, and in the symbolic architectural elements it would provide for investigation. Port scenes such as On the Docks, Montreal, 1917 (Fig. 22, Agnes Etherington Art Centre) and Scene du Port de Montreal, c.1930 (Fig. 23, Lavalin) are always unoccupied, devoid of horses and humans unlike works by Adrien Hebert such as, Montreal Harbour, (Fig 24). While human activity is implied in May's work, it is never described. Can this be interpreted as a comment on the very nature of 'presence' in an industrial age, with the attached and attendant connotations of invisibility = absence/alienation?

The earliest work by May of this genre is probably Grain Elevators, Canal Scene (unlocated) which was exhibited at the Spring Exhibition in 1915. Two years later she painted On the Docks, Montreal. These works provide a striking contrast to not only the picturesque, 'fete champetre' quality of the Regatta series of roughly the same period, but also to the closer precedents of, for example, Boats on the St. Lawrence completed a mere year earlier with its fictive and picturesque elements. They are reminiscent of work by Maurice Cullen and recall in mood and structure A.Y. Jackson's Canal du Loing near Episy of 1909 which was shown at the Spring Show of 1912 as well as A.H. Robinsons The Thames at Westminister, of 1911. Yet May's focus rests ultimately on describing a natural place, despite the lack of pictorial specificity

or narrative content. Devoid of human presence, the gently rocking rowboats, nevertheless tell of absence and presence, as though the occupants were somewhere on the periphery. By contrast, On the Docks although also devoid of figurative content, goes further, implying a physical presence but a psychological absence, through the monumentalising of structure.

In On the Docks, Montreal there is a move towards simplification, a reductiveness seen in the capping of the rooftops and in the evidence of architectural skeleton. Both structure and composition have departed quite radically from such figurative works as The Three Sisters of just a couple of years earlier. A 'superficial' interest in a cubist vocabulary is suggested especially in the articulation of shadows in the water, which are laid down in square patches of colour and overlayed forms. It also relates to Mabel May's own work in the different medium of watercolour, for example The Water Mill, with its Cezannesque background. Despite its subject, On the Docks maintains a sense of harmony and the clarity of earlier landscapes such as Phillipsburg, bringing a a sense of the organic to the industrial worksite. An almost invisible brush reinforces the pseudo-cubist approach yet as in other port scenes it does not erase the work's tactile appearance. From her palette, a fluid mixture of earthy mossy tones and fresh pastels, a sensory naturalism is evoked. Scene du Port de Montreal attains an even more stunning luminosity all the more remarkable for its subject. The blue/green water and sky are not only faithful to the facts of appearance, but also create an engaging sense of the decorative, wholly inappropriate, yet completely pictorially correct. As well, the organic element seems now to extend to a kind of anthropomorphism with the distant outstretched arms of the bridge.

Castles of Industry, c1933, (Fig.25, Bank of Montreal) with its title which references ancient kingdoms, may be a more pointed commentary on

hierarchical work structures in contemporary life. Formal relationships, flat, shallow composition and careful articulation of pictorial structures both parallel and symbolize the alienating, isolating and overpowering structures of urban industry/life. Ultimately, Mabel May's scenes of the Montreal port differ quite significantly in form and technique from her different views of 'waterfronts' such as Watching the Regatta or Yacht Racing, underlining the fact that for her, the interrelatedness of subject and approach was a continuous concern.

(vi) Artist for the Canadian War Memorials

Mabel May's interest in both figuration and work sites as explored in the harbour views brought her to the attention of Eric Brown, Director of the National Gallery of Canada, who was, in 1918, in the process of selecting artists to record the war effort on the home front. The First World War had stimulated a long dormant sense of identity and nationalism in Canada which contributed to a new desire for modern public imagery.[107] Not only was this the first time that public art patronage in Canada had been directed exclusively towards Canadian artists. It also signaled a first in terms of the participation of women artists in such a grand national effort. Florence Wyle and Frances Loring were chosen in 1918 to create sculptures "saluting the Canadian munition workers"[108] and Mabel May was selected to record in paint the contributions of women munition workers. They were the only women artists so involved.

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[107] Maria Tippett, Art at the Service of War:Canada, Art, and the Great War, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984)

[108] See Natalie Luckyj, Visions and Victories 1C Canadian Women Artists 1914-1945, (London: London Regional Art Gallery, 1983)

At the helm of the War Memorials effort were Eric Brown and Sir Edmund Walker under the distant directorship of Lord Beaverbrook, (Sir Max Aitken) a Canadian residing in England. While Brown's responsibity was to select artists and approve commissions, Sir Edmund Walker was to ensure the artists' access to industrial and military sites of war-related activity, like Royal Air Force bases and factories administered by the Imperial Munitions Board. Artists soon became caught up in the patriotic mood and were inspired to demonstrate that they, "Canada's artists, could do as well painting munition factories as her soldiers had done fighting." [109] Although some did continue to regard painting the home front as a less 'glorious' endeavor, Eric Brown firmly believed and constantly shared his view that the home front offered a richer (and safer) range of pictorial possibilities than did the front lines. From a historical stand point he felt that "future Canadians would look back upon the cutting of lumber...with more interest than upon "a no-man's land nocturne"[110] and that themes of the home front also possessed a heroic quality of their own. "Men, women, and girls laboured day and night like Trojans" in Montreal munition factories; young women workers offered "a beauty of subject worthy of fifth century Greece;" the Toronto flying schools "were an epic in themselves." Even recruits could be portrayed as "future heroes of world famous activities."[111] Mabel May's sketches of munitions plants were "sufficiently striking in design and explanatory of various munitions processes to be worthy of enlarging." [112] That

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[109] Tippett, Art at the Service of War, Canada, Art and the Great War , p51.

[110] Ibid .

[111] Brown , "Painting the War at Home," typescript, nd, pp1-2 3-5, Brown to Walker, 14 December, 17 October, to Manly MacDonald, 4 Sept 1918 National Gallery of Canada, Archives, as cited in Tippett, Art at the Service of War

[112] Brown to Walker, December 4, 1918, NGC, Archives, Correspondence re Canadian War Records, File 5 42-M

said, it is interesting to note that an element of the 'picturesque' was also deemed important in order for the works to appeal as art to future generations.

Eric Brown initially approached Mabel May on behalf of the Canadian war records project on September 4, 1918. His letter from Ottawa to her asked:

> As you may know the Canadian War Records is getting work done in Canada now, and several artists are working on some of the most interesting subjects connected with the war.... I have wondered whether you have seen anything of womens work in munition factories or aeroplane works that has struck you as a good subject for a picture. I remember work of yours which should make such a subject easy and interesting to you, and I should be very glad if you would let me know what you think of the matter or if it was worthwhile coming up here about it, to come and discuss the matter any time convenient to you.
> The way to manage the matter would be to decide on your subject or subjects and their size, which should not be small, six feet or so, and then suggest a price which would cover your studies and the finished picture. I would then formally commission the picture and you would go ahead.
> I think you must have seen some things that were interesting in connection with girls work of various kinds and I should be very glad to hear from you on the subject .[113]

This letter suggests that Mabel May was not only venturing down to the docks by this time but also possibly to factories and industrial plants. It is very probable that Brown is referring to works produced by May for the patriotic fund/ war effort; unfortunately no paintings or records dealing with this have been located to date. Mabel May's response in person (following a quick telephone call from Montreal) shows her enthusiasm for the project and correspondence with Eric Brown demonstrates her gratification at being selected, as well as the tremendous challenge which the situation must have provided.

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[113] Ibid., Brown to May, September 4, 1918

By September 18,1918, a letter of confirmation from Sir Edmund Walker and a photostat permit from the Imperial Munitions Board "to go where you will in search of your material for recording woman's war work in munition factories" [114] had been forwarded to her. Interestingly, the C. P. R. Angus shops (Montreal) would be a chosen site for Mabel May as they were at some point for Adrien Hebert who "penetrated the hell of the Angus shops to portray the worker of the industrial era. He observed the labors of the coal and transport workers." While Mabel May experienced some difficulty in getting access to the Northern Electric Plant as had Albert Robinson at the Vickers munitions plant, [115] overall matters proceeded smoothly in the factories themselves. In fact the novel experience of working in situ and not in the isolation of their studios was very likely an enriching one for the artists, an experience which was begun earlier and reiterated in the later plein-air excursions.

On Sept. 25, 1918, May wrote to Brown from her studio at 745 St. Catherine Street to acknowledge receipt of the permit from the Imperial Munition Board adding that "the Northern Electric plant is busy making shells, and, after much red tape, I have got started there. It is all desperately interesting."[116] Quite soon thereafter, Eric Brown augmented the remuneration arrangement, putting her on a par with other artists commissioned by the war memorials who received a salary of $250 per month for full time work. For Mabel May, the new arrangement was not only satisfactory but sounded

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[114] Ibid.

[115] Robinson "I cannot get into those works to save my boots " Tippett, Art at the Service of War, p 56

[116] May to Brown, 25 September 1918, NGC, Archives, Correspondence re Canadian War Records, File 5.42-M

"princely" and she promised to "work hard to live up to it."[117] In her letter written to him on October 5, 1918 she continued that she was "going to the C.P.R. shops next week and hope to find some good material there." [118]

By November 14, 1918, Mabel May had produced enough material at the munitions factory to show, despite the fact that as she explained "while the Epidemic ...(flu)... was raging here I couldn't get to the factory so I made a few cartoons for the picture." [119] Eric Brown was impressed. On December 4 he wrote to Sir Edmund Walker stating that:

> ... although I expected something good I had not imagined it would be as good as it is. It is very remarkable. I am very sorry you were unable to see it. Apart from pencil sketches, Miss May has done twenty or thirty small colour studies for composition which promise very good results in the finished pictures.[120]

Brown proposed the sum of $750 to contract the first painting and noted with "your concurrence I will definitely commission the first picture at this price."[121] Walker agreed and by one month later Mabel May had commenced work on her large canvas: "I have started on my big picture- the canvas is 6 ft x 7ft and looked enormous when it first arrived- however it looks much smaller since it is covered with paint-It is most interesting painting on such a large canvas and I am enjoying it immensely."[122] Interestingly, May was never to be quite comfortable with this large format, as late as September 1919 she wrote to

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[117] Ibid., May to Brown, 3 October 1918.

[118] Ibid., May to Brown, 5 October 1918.

[119] Ibid., May to Brown, 14 November 1918

[120] Ibid., Brown to Walker, 4 December 1918

[121] Ibid

[122] Ibid., May to Brown, 5 January 1919

Brown "I have wondered often since it has left my studio if it would have been better smaller."[123]

In March 1919 the canvas was nearing completion and arrangements were being made for Brown's approval. Evidently it was garnered and, on June 10, May wrote from the family's summer house at Hudson Heights, just outside of Montreal that her work was at Johnson's Art Galleries where a travelling case was under construction. The painting then travelled to Ottawa for re-stretching and was finally sent on to Toronto. By July 9th, 1919 it had been delivered to the Canadian Bank of Commerce in Toronto for storage, followed the next day by three sketches, and the commission was completed. The Exhibition of Canadian War Memorials opened January 5, 1923 at the National Gallery of Canada. In all forty-one British and Canadian artists showed 128 works, Of those, a mere six were women artists, and again just three Canadian: Wyle, Loring and May.[124]

The three studies and a large canvas now form part of the Canadian War Museum collection. All three are representations, or rather interpretations, of women at work in a local munitions factory. Study One and Study Two, are essentially quite similar renditions of the subject, varying only slightly in formal articulation. Consistent with their nature they are sketch-like in their economical rendering of form and sweeping brushstrokes. The figures are placed against a sombre backdrop; dimly silhouetted they are drawn into the also indistinct foreground. The subdued mood is alleviated by a wash of yellow light.

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123 Ibid., May to Brown, 19 September 1919

124 Exhibition catalogue for the Canadian War Memorials. (Ottawa: The National Gallery of Canada, 1923). The British women artists consisted of Flora Lion and Laura Knight both painters and Clare Sheridan a sculptor As well, of the forty-one artists, seventeen were Canadian.

Women Making Shells (Fig. 26) depicts one aspect of a nation's preparation for war. As a part of a sea of labourers at a munitions factory, the women in the foreground are bent quietly over their various tasks. Placed beneath the sweeping pulleys and the belt drives which carried steam power throughout the factory, they are also visually worked into surface harmonics through an easy formal repetition and the use of an almost monochromatic palette. Yet despite the lack of expression on the women's faces, and the summary approach to the figures, May's canvas domesticates and provides a sense of humanity through the variety of poses and the interaction of the figures, to an otherwise psychologically horrific activity. This is in contrast to a photograph in the Public Archives of Canada which depicts row upon row of uniformed women labouring robot-like in isolation despite their proximity to one another beneath the criss-crossing belt drives at a munitions factory in Verdun (Fig.27). May's painting is evocative and dignified. Women Making Shells has a painterliness in the built-up "pebbly" surface, with pigment in impasto applied beside smoothly painted areas. The gestural almost expressionistic swirls around the light fixtures are reminiscent of Van Gogh and in a way are a distant echo of the sound and fury of the battlefield. Perhaps the generalized and blurred features of May's women are a quotation of the faceless, voiceless anonymous soldier and the mind-numbing activity that is war.

In the years following the war, Mabel May continued to exhibit regularly with the Royal Canadian Academy, at the Art Association of Montreal, and with the Ontario Society of Artists and was represented in important loan exhibitions organized by the National Gallery of Canada such as the Exhibition of Paintings by Canadian Artists sent to the first Saint John Art Club and Halifax.

CHAPTER THREE
Old Ties and New Directions

The end of the war symbolised new beginnings for the anglophone art community in Montreal - a rekindling of friendships and a regrouping of forces. The charged patriotic climate was reflected in the artists' new awareness of being Canadian and wanting to express the nation's mood in paint. The search for new creative ways of expression became a compelling quest representing a new attitude and a new era. Artists gathered together to form the Group of Seven which became official in Toronto in 1920; and the more casual Beaver Hall Group which had been formed in Montreal the previous year. Mabel May had ties to both and during the following years, independantly and as a result of these connections she would find her own artistic centre.

(i) Affiliation with the Group of Seven and international exposure

The late teens and the turn of the decade had fostered the emergence of a personal, then national sense of self. The new 'flowering of Canadian modernism' which followed the First World War was largely due, as is generally acknowledged, to the efforts and work of the members of the Group of Seven. In many ways support from that quarter would also very much further the cause of women artists, helping to establish their reputations internationally. This was especially true during the early twenties and largely through the influence of A.Y. Jackson, the popularizer. Jackson as an individual was especially charismatic, perhaps even more than William Brymner had been during May's

formative years. His self-imposed mission to reveal Canada to Canadians, gave him the role of propagandist for the Group and by extension, their associates. As will be demonstrated in this section, the support he provided was both psychological and tangible. From the twenties onwards, Jackson's place on a number of international juries would help secure the presence of women artists in cross-border exhibitions of importance.[125]

At home, women in the twenties were gaining a measure of recognition unseen before and were swiftly assuming a more autonomous and dominant role in the art community. Just as the Group had changed "the image of the male artist from Victorian dandy in the studio to the man in the canoe,"[126] so too did their affiliation with the Group help expand and adjust the role and image of women artists of the day. No longer bystanders, they became linked to a new ideology centering on the specific and the sought out, implying activity and journeying both geographical and psychological. That said, the Group extended invitations would continue to be taken as meant, as gestures of respect and testimonials to the calibre of work being produced. The Group of Seven's first American tour of 1923 which opened at the Kansas City Art Institute and travelled throughout the States, included selected works from Emily Coonan and Lilias Torrance Newton and would set the precedent for future invitations to women artists. The following year the second American tour opened at the Worcester Art Gallery and again featured the work of Coonan and Newton.

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[125]For an excellent analysis of cross-border exhibitions of the period see Christine Boyanoski . Permeable Border: Art of Canada and the United States 1920-1940 Exhibition catalogue. (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1989)

[126] Sandra Paikowsky, "Landscape Painting in Canada," in Profiles of Canada, ed. Kenneth Pryke & Walter Soderlund, (Toronto Copp, Clarke, Pitman Ltd , 1992), p.351.

In 1928, the year which marked Mabel May's first showing with the Group of Seven at the Art Gallery of Toronto, Jackson wrote to Sarah Robertson from the Studio Building in order to ensure the participation of a number of women artists:

> I hope you are all going to have something for our show here. Will probably have Edlington collect about Jan. 26th. If you do anything you like better than your academy things before then send them in. We want two of Prue's too. Two of Henry's. I don't think Lili has anything nor has Randolph...When you boil the Academy down there is not much left of real significance. Well spur all your gang on Sarah.[127]

Nine women including May were to exhibit with the Group in this show: Prudence Heward, Bess Housser, Mabel Lockerby, Yvonne McKague, Doris Heustis Mills, Kathleen Munn, Pegi Nicol and Sarah Robertson. Following the opening, Jackson in his typically breezy manner sent salutations and compliments via Sarah Robertson, commenting that her canvas "looks very well in the Women's Art along with Prue's and one of Henry's. Miss Bertram said it saved their lives to have them." [128]

In 1930, when Toronto's Saturday Night rather tardily exclaimed that the invitees to the Group of Seven exhibition "showed similar modern tendencies" (as the Group), Mabel May was once again one of nine invited artists, including Emily Carr who was exhibiting with the Group for the first time. Jackson's feeling towards May's work was generally positive. Following the Canadian National Exhibition 1929, Jackson wrote to Robertson:

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127 A Y Jackson to Sarah Robertson, 6 January, 1928, Jackson letters, File 1, National Gallery of Canada, Archives

128 Ibid , Jackson to Robertson, 29 December1928.

> The CNE over. Not much of a show. British weak junk. Danish not very thrilling. The Canadian section better hung than usual. But a mixed lot. Lil's self portrait looks very fine. Henry's "Autumn Landscape." Prue's "Girl on a Hill". Lismer's "Cathedral Mountain" the outstanding things.[129]

While it would be incorrect to describe the relationship between Mabel May and Jackson as being close, they were nevertheless well acquainted; his correspondence with Sarah Robertson almost always included a salutation or message to 'Henry' and 'Prue' Heward. Within this context, a few letters have survived from Jackson to May which demonstrate the seriousness with which he regarded his relationship with his women friends who were artists, the responsibility he felt towards the evolution and reception of their work, as well as the closeness they had developed as a group during the twenties :

> Dear Henry,
> You will notice the change of address. I left Toronto in March. The studio building changed hands and I did not like the new owners. The building is no longer a center of Canadian art- and more like an apartment house. When I was told I had to go down to the basement, when I had to stretch a canvas, I thiought it my time to get out. In moving, I came across an old Laurentian sketch of yours. If I remember right, I was going to try to sell it, but at the time sales were a rare event. The Art Gallery of Toronto have been forming a collection of sketches by artists who have canvases in this permanent collection and so I took the liberty of sending it on to them for their approval. I still believe the Canadian art movement which developed in the early twenties is of great importance and the finest collection of the period is in the Art Gallery of Toronto. I gave them a Sarah Robertson and an Andre Bieler....
> I saw Anne the other day and Lilias in her palatial studio on the top floor of the Linton, and Edwin and I spoke to Robinson on the phone. She recently had an exhibition at the National Gallery. I went to the opening, and have been laid up ever since. We are pretty well scattered these days, but will still keep going.
> I hope this finds you well and getting some painting done.[130]

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[129] Ibid., Jackson to Robertson, 9 September 1929

[130] Jackson to May, 20 June 1955, Mr and Mrs. Jack May, Vancouver.

Eric Brown, was a staunch supporter of Canadian Group of Seven 'modernism' and would join Jackson in equally strong support of women artists. With A.Y. Jackson he would ensure the inclusion of a significant number of women artists, May among them, in the 1924 and 1925 British Empire Exhibitions held at Wembley, England.[133] With this new-found sense of collectivity, a strong appreciation of loyalties emerged and as Natalie Luckyj has pointed out, "'It is not surprising then, in the 1932-33 controversy concerning the National Gallery's open support for Canadian modernism, to find women artists assuming leadership in the circulation of a counter petition in support of Brown and the National Gallery."[131]

The controversy surrounding the Wembley selections has been well documented; yet an important additional consequence which would ultimately shape the attitude of ambitious Canadian artists was the joining of these so-called modernists in a common cause, imbuing them with a vitalizing spirit which would last a decade at least and would not diminish in ardour. One side of this mutual support is demonstrated quite succintly in a letter from Jackson to Sarah Robertson in 1926: "Eric is having a hard time in Ottawa. Whole gang of bone heads writing to the papers about the pictures they purchased. I sent a letter to help him but I don't know if it has been published."[132]

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133 Thirty women artists in all participated in the 1924 Wembley Exhibition among them: Florence Carlyle, Emily Coonan, Mabel Lockerby, Laura Muntz Lyall, Kathleen Morris, Lilias Torrance Newton, Sarah Robertson and Anne Savage. In 1925 there were 23 women artists showing, including Prudence Heward, Mabel Lockerby, Kathleen Morris, Lilias Torrance Newton, Sarah Robertson, Anne Savage, Ethel Seath.

131 Natalie Luckyj, Visions and Victories: 10 Canadian Women Artists 1914-1945, p. 15

132 Jackson to Robertson, from St. Fidele, 16 March 1926, Jackson Letters, National Gallery of Canada, Archives

Mabel May submitted landscapes to each Wembley exhibition, although she does not seem to have taken an active part in the arguments regarding the relationship between landscape as subject and modernism as style. In 1924, Old House in the Laurentians (unlocated) and Late Winter in the Laurentians (unlocated) were shown and did not go unnoticed. The Morning Post (London) declared "most of the names are entirely new to us...Some of the groups are strong in clever women painters, like Miss Kathleen Morris and Miss H. Mabel May."[133] The Saturday Review, London, continued

> With Canada...we can sincerely acclaim a vigorous and original art. Two modes of feeling emerge strongly; a fine decorative sense and a passionate preoccupation with the stress of growth....In the second group, which emphasizes the turmoil of earth with, on occasion, something of Van Gogh's manner, I should place H. Mabel May's "Old House in the Laurentians" (EE.2) and her "Late Winter in the Laurentians" (EE.41).[134]

By mid-decade May's work would form part of all major exhibitions showcasing contemporary Canadian art In January 1926 the Special Canadian National Exhibition opened in Ottawa. It included close to two hundred works selected from the past year's exhibitions deemed to be representative of the best work of the year. The question of national identity was an important factor as stated quite clearly by Brown in the preface for the exhibition catalogue:

> It is a truism that nothing expresses the customs, manners and ideals of a country more clearly than does its art. If national tendencies incline towards sentimentality or superstition, towards great deeds or high idealism, these characteristics will certainly appear in her art, while climate, seasons, and physical geography contribute hardly less importantly. So art becomes an index of

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133 "Palace of Arts, Colonial Painting," The Morning Post (London), April 22nd, 1924 as cited in Press Comments on the Canadian Section of Fine Arts Ottawa National Gallery of Canada, 1924-25

134 "The Palace of Arts, Wembley," The Saturday Review,(London), 7 June 1924 as cited in Press Comments

> nationality.....It is particularly interesting to study Canadian art with this in mind. Has it progressed sufficiently in individuality and quality to be expressive of anything in particular and again is there anything in Canadian country or nationality sufficiently definite and characteristic for art to express? I believe that the answer to both questions may fairly be said to be in the affirmative.[135]

May's Late Winter in the Laurentians, was cited as an "important contribution to the Canadian School." She was subsequently a regular participant in the National Gallery Exhibitions of Canadian Art from 1926 onwards, consistently showing landscapes in keeping with generational taste. The First Annual Exhibition of Canadian Art would compel non-local critics to become "optimistic about the future of art in Canada." The reviewer for the Science Monitor in Boston described it as "new World art" stating: "Not only are the scenes characteristically Canadian but for the most part that indefinable something called "atmosphere" belongs to this northland and could never be confused with that of Italy, England, or even of the United States."[136] Mabel May was among a mere twenty artists singled out in this review and only two others were women, Mabel Lockerby and Kathleen Morris.

In 1925-26 the First Pan American Exhibition of Oil Paintings was held at the Los Angeles Museum and it is useful to recall that invitations were usually extended in the case of international and pan-American shows, and quotas generally set In the case of the First Pan-American exhibition, the number set was twenty-five.[137] May's inclusion as an artist and especially as a woman

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135 Eric Brown, preface to the Special Exhibition of Canadian Art, (Ottawa. National Gallery of Canada, 1926), p 3

136 "Canadian National Exhibition," Science Monitor (Boston), February 1926

137 Others included the Philadelphia Sesquicentennial , where the Group of Seven was directly approached, the Baltimore Pan-American in 1931; the College Art Association's International Exhibition in1933, and the Great Lakes Exhibition, which originated in Buffalo in 1938 See Boyanoski, Permeable Border, p 6.

artist becomes more significant within this context and her canvas, Winter Landscape was, again, a typical choice.

Vincent Massey, an active supporter of the arts, was well acquainted with Mabel May and, during the thirties, she was invited to gatherings at his residence. According to a family source, Massey "was very fond of paintings, and, I believe of her work." [138] Massey had been appointed first Canadian representative to the United States in 1927 and in that capacity played a vital role in the introduction of Canadian art and artists to the general population in the U.S. In 1930 he was instrumental in the organization of An Exhibition of Paintings by Contemporary Canadian Artists held under the auspices of the American Federation of Arts (AFA) which toured Baltimore, Madison, Davenport, Memphis, Montclair, and Amherst, after opening at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington. It aimed mainly at creating, as stated in the exhibition catalogue, "the opportunity for better acquaintance with the excellent work which our neighbors across the Canadian border are doing." Mabel May was among thirteen women artists included in a total of thirty three; the others were Emily Carr, Prudence Heward, Bess Housser, Marion Huestis, Mabel Lockerby, Florence H. McGillivray,Yvonne McKague, Kathleen Morris, Lilias Torrance Newton, Pegi Nicol, Sarah Robertson and Anne Savage. Although the official opening had to be postponed due to American President W.H. Taft's death, the delay would not mar the largely enthusiastic reception Jackson's sentiments surfaced during the preparation for the Washington show and were typically biased if not wholly predictable. He wrote to Robertson that "if it were all up to your two, it would be a real show. Also Prue's two. The Kathleen Morris looks

[138] Mrs. Rhodes, Vancouver, in correspondence with the author, 27 March 1991.

fine too, and Henry's Snowflakes, though I would like to break the glass."[139] May's Snowflakes, (unlocated) was mentioned in a less informal, (more objective) context in Ada Rainey's glowing review in the Washington Post:

> The Canadian paintings are among the most original seen in the Gallery in years...[the artists]...have responded to the call of this land of the far North and much of the expanse... ofthe stinging cold, the vivid colors of the trees in autumn, the sturdy life of the people is expressed ....It really is a new art.
> There is surely no dearth of color in the North as can be seen by these paintings, even the snow yields its quota of blended color and brilliant reflected light as the "Snowflakes" of Mabel May and "Winter at Rosebank, Lake Ontario". The former is delightfully simplified, the latter scintillating with brilliancy.[140]

Leila Mechlin reiterated this view, adding:

> In practically all [the works in the exhibition] the source of inspiration is Canada itself, the dominant note of which is the north....[produced] in the modern manner, which is interpretive rather than literal. [There is]... extreme simplification in composition and elimination of detail....Obviously nature in the Northland is rugged and severe. Strength and endurance are its dominant characteristics, and it is these that one finds reflected in the art of these Canadian painters. Their simplifications emphasize structural forms and evidence beauty in their rythmic lines. In many of these pictures one comes face to face with the immutable and realizes the littleness of man as measured by the eternal.[141]

Critical reaction to the 'School of Seven' in the United States, was generally positive and deliberately extended to female artists associated with the Group of Seven. Ironically, public reaction at home remained typically divided. An example of the persistent presence of a hostile faction much

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[139] Jackson to Robertson,13 February 1930, Jackson Letters, NGC, Archives.

[140] Ada Rainey."Art and Artists in Capital; Pictures Show Canadian Art of High Order, Daring Work Done By Men of North in Painting Country," Washington Post, 9 March, 1930.

[141] Leila Mechlin, "Canadian Artists Work is Exhibited," The Sunday Star, (Washington), 9 March , 1930

aggravated by the stubborn link with national identity, is in evidence in a critique by Morgan-Powell of the Washington exhibition:

> The outstanding feature [is] the monotony of the pictures shown. Most of them appear to be done in the same style, and a casual observer might be excused for thinking that most came from the same brush. These lumpy hills and mountains, these startlingly bumpy rocks, these tortured, twisted and blasted tree stumps, these incredibly brilliant brilliant lakes and amazingly substantial snows, they do not seem to belong to Canada . And as a matter of fact , they do not belong to Canada. They are the exclusive property of the School of Seven.[142]

Yet generally speaking other local reviewers were less acrimonious towards the Group of Seven, (except Hector Charlesworth writing for Saturday Night) and eventually, as Christine Boyanoski has concluded "The Group's proselytizing paid off to the extent that Canadian painting became rather narrowly associated on both sides of the border with northern wilderness landscapes executed in a particular style."[143] That said, it is still significant that the Group's associates in Quebec, including women such as Mabel May, were treated more benignly, possibly regarded as a lesser evil so to speak. Painters such as Edwin Holgate, Albert Robinson, Randolph Hewton, Clarence Gagnon, Lilias Torrance Newton, Sarah Robertson, Anne Savage and Mabel May were considered to be"... distinctly, though less aggressively, associated with the Canadian movement"[144] and Housser considered them "less militant" :

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[142] S. Morgan-Powell, "The School of Seven," The Montreal Daily Star, 8 May 1930

[143] Boyanoski, Permeable Border

[144] "New Member is Added to Group of Seven, Much Discussed Modernistic Artists Give Their Annual Show, Casson is Included, Exhibition of French-Canadian Art Also in the Gallery," Toronto, Mail and Empire, 8 May, 1926.

> These Montreal artists are probably more accomplished technicians than their confreres in Toronto. They keep in closer touch with Europe and are consequently more inf.uenced by the work being done there... They have produced many canvases with a fine Canadian flavor but no philosophic idea of the land and its people caused them to launch a concerted movement such as has been launched in Toronto.[145]

On might note that while the men were venturing into the bays and isles to seek their subjects, titles suggest that women artists who shared a concern with Canadian landscape continued to paint the villages especially those in the Laurentians, and the countryside.

When the Exhibition of French Canadian Art opened in 1926 at the Art Gallery of Toronto in conjunction with the annual Group show, the Toronto Mail and Empire declared:

> Modernism is rampant. The Group of Seven has enlarged the scope of its exhibition by inviting a number of comparatively unknown painters to use a room to show what they are doing....The painters represented are those who have endeavored to interpret their environment in Lower Canada so that the exhibit belongs to Quebec in every sense....People who find the group of Seven just a little too much for their eyes and their tempers should not leave the gallery without visiting the French-Canadian Exhibition.[146]

Towards the end of the decade, women artists were becoming recognized as important contributors to both the development of Canadian art and its reception beyond the nation's borders. In The Yearbook of the Arts in Canada published in 1928-29 two sections were devoted to their work with Frederick B.Housser stating "the modern movement in painting has taken firm hold in Canada" and "much distinctive work is being done in the country by women." [147] Not only were women artists gaining the respect due them, but

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[145] F.B Housser,"What Canadian Artists Are Doing," The Maple Leaf ,1927.

[146] Mail and Empire,(Toronto), 8 May 1926

[147] F.B Housser, The Yearbook of Canadian Art, 1928.

their presence was becoming more visible in important exchange and travelling exhibitions.

During the twenties, cross-border exhibitions were not limited to the United States. In 1927 an exhibition of Canadian art entitled Exposition d'art canadien was organized and held in Paris at the Musee du Jeu de Paume. Eighteen women were represented including Prudence Heward, Kathleen Morris, Lilias Torrance Newton, Sarah Robertson, Anne Savage, Ethel Seath and Mabel May with three canvases: Le lac, Sur les collines and Le village (The Village, NGC). May would also participate in the Exhibition of Contemporary Canadian Painting organized by the Carnegie Corporation of New York for "circulation in the Southern Dominions of the British Empire" showing Ripening Fields.

In 1937 the Exhibition of Paintings, Drawings and Sculptures by Artists of the British Empire Overseas, (otherwise known as the Coronation Exhibition) which opened in London at the Royal Institute Galleries, included May's work as did the exhibition A Century of Canadian Art held at the Tate Gallery in London the following year. The latter was meant to broaden the earlier focus by overseas exhibitions on contemporary art by offering a show of Canadian art of all periods. Mabel May was represented by Birch Trees, Autumn, (Fig.28, AGO), with a striking similarity to such Jackson images as Quebec Village, Winter, and The Laurentians, Autumn, demonstrating her continuing contribution to "...the formation of a native tradition." [148]

While May did not participate in the Great Lakes Exhibition (Buffalo, 1938-39) or the Golden Gate International Exposition of Contemporary Art (San

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148 Evan Charteris, foreword to A Century of Canadian Art (London . Tate Gallery, 1938)

Francisco, 1939), she did show in the RCA exhibition at the New York World's Fair (May June 1939), and the Exhibition of the Canadian Group of Painters also at the New York World's Fair that same year (August September). Slightly later other international exhibitions would include Pintura Canadense Contemporanea at the Museo Nacional de Belas Artes, Rio de Janeiro, in 1944, and the Canadian Women Artists Exhibition of 1947, held at the Riverside Museum in New York.

(ii) The Beaver Hall Group

Mabel May was an original member of the Beaver Hall Group arranging, with Randolph Hewton, Edwin Holgate and Lilias Torrance Newton to convert several old rooms at 305 Beaver Hall Hill into studio spaces overlooking St. Patrick's Cathedral. The spirit of the short-lived group, formed in the fall of 1919, was remembered by Edwin Holgate in a recorded discussion with Frances K. Smith in 1968:

> We had no officers...we had no manifesto, we had nobody to do battle with, the battle had been pretty well won by the Group of Seven for their ideas, and ours were quite similar attitudes, and the dust had all subsided. But it was a question of getting studios, working space, and keeping the prices down, because none of us was flush. And this was one way of cooperating, grouping together and taking over a house... instead of little bits of individual driblets here and there scattered around. And there was a certain cohesion that automatically develops in case like that, when a number of people get working together. There's a bonhomie that spreads through the building.[149]

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[149] Recorded discussion between Edwin Holgate and Frances K. Smith, 21 Sept. 1968, as cited in Kathleen Moir Morris Exhibition catalogue. (Kingston: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1983),p 12.

By January 1920 the complex was ready for serious art activity. The top floor provided studio space for a succession of artists while an area below served as meeting and exhibition space. An excitement and sense of the new pervaded the place contributing to a sense of comraderie and shared adventure. Anne Savage would later relate that "many a day we enjoyed looking into the hidden garden and green fountain- Exhibitions were held here and there was great talks in little nooks."[150]

Following the opening of the group's inaugural exhibition on January 17,1921, The Gazette announced that its members were "not secessionists" and continued "This group does not promise anything extreme. To draw on Shakespeare the text of this new group might be 'This above all: To thine own self be true'."[151] All of the women participants had formerly been students of Brymner's and shared a certain philosophy of form and a foundation of friendship. They were Mabel May, Prudence Heward, Lilias Newton, Mabel Lockerby, Kay Morris, Nora Collyer, Anne Savage and later Sarah Robertson- "A spark had been kindled and in 1931- fifteen years later when the Group of Seven disbanded and the Canadian Group of Painters was formed- the members of the Beaver Hall Group were included in the larger organization."[152]

The talent and commitment of the women artists in the Beaver Hall Group is generally acknowledged. They brought with them a shared interest in their local environment, a propensity for subject matter drawn from the city they lived

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[150]Ann Savage, Ann Savage Archives, Concordia University, File 5, #2 20.

[151] "Public Proof of Artistic Faith Nineteen Painters Represented in "Beaver Hall Group's Exhibition," The Gazette, 18 January, 1920

[152]Ann Savage, Ann Savage Archives. File 5, # 2.20.

in, their families, and the countryside they visited. They painted "for pleasure but not lightly, for they were devotees of a chosen vocation.... "[153]

By the end of 1921, the Group fell into financial difficulty which brought the project to a sudden halt. However it is known that Mabel May continued to share a studio at Beaver Hall Hill with Lilias Torrance Newton during the mid-twenties. Newton's portrait of Jack May completed when he was about nine or ten provides a reliable date (c.1927) as "it was painted during the time she shared a studio with Aunt Mame on Beaver Hill." [154] This Portrait of Jack May was exhibited by Newton in an exhibition at the AAM in December 1927, at the same time as Mabel May's Winter Landscape.

(iii) Landscape painting

Despite a propensity shared by the members of the Beaver Hall Group for painting Montreal and its environs, the years 1920-21 mark a significant change in subject for Mabel May who, despite several years at least of landscape painting, exhibited Sunshine in the group's inaugural exhibition described as "un superbe paysage largement brosse."[155] It depicted girls in a field with chickens, and from this point until the 1930s, figures and cityscapes were replaced almost exclusively by the rural scene.

Some intimations of cosmic nature are present in May's early landscapes, however she did not immediately focus on the expansive vistas of

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[153] Nora McCullough, The Beaver Hall Hill Group, Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1966

[154] Mary L May in correspondence with the author 26 April1991

[155] "Le groupe Beaver Hall," La Presse, 20 January, 1921.

a no-man's land, but rather on the country homes and farmhouses attached to the idea of landscape and, as mentioned earlier, on country 'place'. This new direction was a predictable consequence of renewed contact with Jackson et al. and the much more frequent painting excursions to areas such as New England and the Lower St. Lawrence. As well, in the Eastern Townships, Nora Collyer's chalet at Foster and summer house on the edge of Lake Memphremagog and Prudence Heward's cottage near Knowlton became regular meeting places for artists such as May, Savage, Robertson, Coonan, Seath, Lockerby and others. May's many views of Knowlton were very likely painted during her frequent visits to the cottage.

Friendships developed over a decade earlier were rekindled during these trips, and helped maintain Mays' sense of direction and vitality. At the same time, continued interchange among these artists and the local sites they frequented helped them preserve a regional pictorial legacy in their own work which shadowed the pre-cultural topography of the Group of Seven- as Francois-Marc Gagnon has described "the Anglo-Saxon ...romantic vision of Nature still to be tamed and transformed and resisting conquest with all its latent, unexploited energy."[156] By contrast, in Quebec the French imagistic heritage was of a cultivated, inhabited landscape which was also temporal to a degree, and obviously shared by many anglophone artists in Quebec.

While Mabel May's most frequent travelling companions were Sarah Robertson, Nora Collyer and Lilias Newton she is also known to have travelled with other artists such as A.Y. Jackson, Clarence Gagnon and Edwin Holgate. [157] In 1924 she travelled with Newton to join Jackson and Gagnon at Baie St.

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156 Francois-Marc Gagnon, "Painting in Quebec in the Thirties," The Journal of Canadian Art History, :4

157 P.D untitled, Saturday Night, (Toronto), 17 April 1951.

Paul, the inherent picturesqueness of its own geography as well as its popularity making it a typical example of 'cultured nature.' Baie St. Paul, in Charlevoix County was frequented in the early part of the century by artists such as Hutchison, who may have been a country neighbor at Hudson Heights, Jackson, Arthur Lismer (1885-1969), Albert Robinson, Paul Caron (1874-1941), Randolph Hewton (1888-1960), Kathleen Daly, George Pepper (1903-1962), Edwin Holgate (1892-1977), Robert Pilot, Sarah Robertson, Rita Mount (1888-1971) and others. [158] In a letter to J.E.H. MacDonald written from Baie St. Paul in January 1924, Jackson wrote: "Mr. and Mrs. Newton, Mabel May and Holgate are expecting to come here next week and with the Gagnons, Baie St. Paul will be for the time the liveliest art centre in Canada."[159]

Many images by May of the period have survived such as Winter Near Baie St. Paul, (Fig.29) and Snowed in Baie St. Paul, which bear a close resemblance to similar pictures by Holgate and Robinson, indicating that Charlevoix County was visited by May on several if not very many occasions. A photograph of Jackson and Newton at Baie St. Paul was probably taken much later by May, as they are shown in more modern clothing and it is summer, (Fig.30) .[160]

As noted earlier, Mabel May had demonstrated a relatively early interest in landscape. In 1917, on the occasion of the Spring Exhibition, the Gazette

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158 See Victoria A Baker with the collaboration of Richard Dube, Francois Tremblay, Images de Charlevoix 1784-1950 / Scenes of Charlevoix 1784-1950 (Montreal: The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1981), pp.25-27.

159 A Y. Jackson, A Painter's Country: The Autobiography of A.Y. Jackson, (Toronto, 1958):61

160 "Probably Aunt Meme took the small photo of AY Jackson and Lilias Newton at Baie St. Paul around 1924." Mary L May 26 April 1991.

critic singled out her naturescapes as illustrative of her pictorial development. "Mabel H. May continues to show advancement with her landscapes and is especially successful with Autumn in the Mountains, Trees, Autumn and View Across the Canal."[161] Mabel May's first depictions of rural places are of the family's country home at Hudson Heights, Quebec. Of special interest is the fact that Mabel May "had a lot of input into the design of the house and it was written up in a magazine such as Better Homes and Gardens."[162] One of the many versions of The White House (Summer Home Hudson Heights) c.1916 was first exhibited in 1916 at the 33rd annual Spring show. While it utilises the rich palette which had been consistent in May's work and would become her hallmark, colour is here nevertheless residually naturalistic, and not yet a pictorial determinant. May retains a fidelity to nature as well in the realistic use of light and cast shadow, and in the compositional idea, as is demonstrated in comparison to the photograph of the house. The mosaic-like articulation of form of an earlier Impressionist phase, has been replaced by a much stronger design element which emphasises the centralised composition. In its iconic presence, the white house recalls Indian Woman, Oka for instance; in fact several works of the genre do so. To cite another example, Farm House Ste. Marguerite which was exhibited at the Art Association Spring show of 1923 similarly presents the house as a prominent part of the composition, centered and framed by surrounding trees. In its roundhand, illustrative articulation of form it is also reminiscent of the early portrait of Queenie. In fact these works may almost be described as house portraits, and as such are very much in keeping with William Brymner's advocacy of getting to know one's subject well. Interestingly,

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161 The Gazette, 23 March 1917

162 Mrs Rhodes to the author, March 1991

Mabel May did not often share the predilliction of many of her contemporaries in Quebec, including Jackson, of placing a centralised house at the end of a winding road which cuts into the canvas.

Several later versions of the summer home at Hudson Heights were painted, such as Summer Cottage, Hudson Heights, c1925 which provide a striking contrast to the White House in stylistic references and emotional content. Specificity and an accurate representation of the house's features are here replaced by a much more distorted interpretation, painted as much from memory and the inner image as from actuality. While The White House evokes a sense of balance and self-containment the later renditions of the mid-twenties onwards are charged with a spontaneous energy and expressionism.

The many landscapes produced by Mabel May during the twenties provide interesting information when placed in context with those by contemporaries such as Collyer, Savage, Seath and Robertson. The illustration of villages, cottages and barns did continue to be seen in her compositions of the early twenties such as Hudson Heights, P.Q. , or The Thaw at Knowlton, P.Q. However they were secondary to her interest in depicting place and environment: untenanted yet not vacuous space. At the same time, May's generic farmhouses are not 'habitant' homes and would consistently avoid site specificity; in essence thet are a 'reordering' rather than 'replication' of place and in this way differ significantly from Quebecois images. In Collyer's Brill Church Near Foster, 1929, the visually dominant structures lead to the horizon or rather up to the church in the middle distance. Seath's The White Barn, Quebec, the silos, plow and toiling men are cleanly detailed and presented against the backdrop of mountain. In contrast, May's Autumn in the Laurentians, n.d., or Autumn, which shows dwellings that are edged along the outer periphery, or are dotted in a pattern of coin like tree tops, oval shaped

clouds and bands of foliage across the surface, are essentially different. Perhaps May's work has more of an affinity to Jackson's articulation of the Quebec landscape where "undulating landscape ...is the central subject of the painting. Quite often the buildings were seen from behind, as if turning their backs on the viewer."[163] Furthermore, compositions such as In the Laurentians (Fig.31, NGC) or River in Winter, c.1921, Canadian Winter, and many others, in their stress on a natural aesthetic and the 'beyond' are in marked contrast to, for example, Coonan's centralised settings such as Old House where focus is on the iconic presence and formal delineation of the motif. However they do share with Coonan an attention to the dynamic of form to form, that is, the activity which unfolds within the pictorial framework. Yet for Mabel May design emphasis does not guarantee visual 'autonomy;' rather it contributes to a tempo which continues and extends beyond the picture proper, engaging imagination and evoking a flight of fancy.

At the same time, May's work does not attach to the parochial poesie of, for example, Morris' images of Quebec province such as Church at St. Sauveur or Robertson's humanised yet abstracted compositions such as Ice-cutting, Lake of Two Mountains, (Fig.32) with its stylized configuration of ice-cutters, horses and ice patches in a winter landscape, or Joseph and Marie Louise. Perhaps of the work of all her female contemporaries May's landscapes come closest to some of those by Anne Savage which display the same opening space, uncontained, unending at picture's edge as in Ploughed Field and the stylized, expressive trees seen in House at Dorval .

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[163] Gagnon, "Painting in Quebec in the Thirties," : 4

As has already been discussed, nationalism, modernism and the avant-garde in Canada had rather quickly become synonymous with the Pre-Cambrian landscapes of the Group of Seven. Nationalism linked up with aesthetics ultimately limiting the artist's selection of 'meaningful' subject matter. Ironically this 'limiting' iconographical focus would allow May to concentrate on more salient pictorial concerns, despite the fact that as Dorothy Farr and Natalie Luckyj have argued:

> Many women of the period succumbed to the proselytizing of the Group of Seven, and like Mabel May, abandoned their own inclinations for a genteel imitation of muscle-bound Group-of-Sevenism. The switch was generally detrimental. But in an age where a critic's most complimentary epithet was 'virile', the confusion was understandable.[164]

From 1920 onwards, May's works did focus almost exclusively on landscape painting; yet while this was indeed a predictable evolution it would not completely impede the development of a personal mode of expression. Rather, one might argue that a number of May's landscapes would appropriate the idea and methods of landscape painting towards a more relevant realization of "meaningful expression."

In many ways the Group of Seven's focus on nature as subject matter was a means of 'laying claim' to their national identity. In doing so they would not only produce a visual record of the land, the "vegetation and light and color of a region" but also, and not necessarily as a subtext, would represent the unfolding yet constant spirit of 'place' and as Gussow has written, "once a place is claimed, the difference is in us and in our memory, not in the place."[165] The

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164 Farr and Luckyj, From Women's Eyes, p 4

165 Alan Gussow, as cited in Heather Anderson, "Awareness of the Natural Landscape,"University of Oregon, 1984

idea of landscape as a 'place possessed' has significant connotations in May's production, a fact which will be discussed further on in this essay and which separates her work from that of her Quebec co-painters.

The fact of landscape painting, its less studied and more rapid execution did encourage May to explore new approaches; to summarize, abstract and seek out "significant form." As such it signaled a turn towards stylisation and simplification, a post-impressionist decorative and designed surface, which nevertheless left room for the expression of "a wide variety of moods."

May's continued focus during the twenties on country structures-cottages, barns, grain elevators and silos, such as Red Silo, and Landscape with Farm -reveals the artist's underlying interest in architectural form. It would also appear that this interest extended to mural painting and while no large-scale, 'official' work exists to support this view, it is known that her family home on Elm Street in Westmount boasted a grand wall-to-wall painting which apparently left quite an impression on all visitors. This interest in 'house painting' was shared by fellow artist Sarah Robertson who is known to have painted privately commissioned domestic mural scenes in Westmount homes. Also it is useful to remember that large-scale painting was new to May until the war commission work.

Related to the above is the fact that in 1922 Mabel May entered the mural decoration contest designed by the Royal Canadian Academy to"encourage and develop the art of mural decoration in Canada" and as part of its promotion of architecture as "mother of the arts." The theme given was the early settlement

of Canada and May's Early Settlers to the Bank of the St. Lawrence (exhibited RCA 1924, now lost) was probably painted on this occasion.[166]

Mabel May submitted four landscapes to the 1921 Spring Exhibition: Winter Sketch, Canal Bank, Late Afternoon, In the Laurentian Mountain, and Autumn. The National Gallery version of In the Laurentians, c.1920, employs a heavy impasto and an overall and pliant application of pigment, a broad loose treatment which would give over to the constructed and more contained landscapes. Morgan-Powell's criticism was mild but pointed, stating simply that "broad treatment which tends to lose itself is found in the work of Miss H. Mabel May and Mr. A.H. Robinson."[167] May's "typical landscapes boldly brushed in"[168] also demonstrate a renewed interest in colour. Critics found her works "increasingly vivid in color, color often being considered above form. In the Laurentian Mountains [In the Laurentians] is the most effective of her works."[169]

Following the Spring Exhibition of 1921, the Herald declared "Miss H. Mabel May A.R.C.A. shows Autumn in a riot of color...."[170] While Morgan Powell had described her work as "pleasing" and "sound in coloring,"[171] in 1922 May's palette would rapidly and dramatically move into the tantalizing realm of artifice,

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166 Sixty panels in all were submitted May and Ann Savage were the two women among the six finalists who consisted also of T.G. Greene, JEH MacDonald, Stanley Turner and FH Varley. It is unknown if any other women participated although of the seven jurors only one was a woman

167 S Morgan-Powell, "Portraits are Feature of the Art Exhibition Succesful Efforts to Break Away From Conventional Form are Shown," The Montreal DailyStar, 5 April 1921

168 "Exhibits Drawn from Wide Area Growing Importance of Spring Art Exhibitions More Generally Recognized," The Gazette, 21 March 1922.

169 "Fewer Pictures Higher Standards 38th Annual Exhibition of the Art Association of Montreal," The Montreal DailyStar, 1 April, 1921.

170 "Spring Exhibition at the Art Galleries," The Herald, 4 April 1921

171 S Morgan Powell, "A Final Glance Around the Art Exhibition," The Montreal Daily Star, 12 April 1922.

eventually demonstrating a penchant for shrill, opulent colour: varying combinations of viridian, citron and jade foliage intercut with mixtures of red, purple and blue. By 1923, when, on the occasion of the 40th Spring show, S. Morgan-Powell launched into his attack on the marginals, May's March and Farm House Ste. Marguerite were included:

> There are still some canvases sadly splashed with crude colors clashingly dissonant. They hurt the eye, but since they also afford an object lesson on what to avoid, it may be that they serve a purpose...Mabel H. May A.R.C.A. still believes in vehemence of treatment, it is clear from her two little canvases (;49+150)[172]

Just as May's palette became less naturalistic at this time, so too did the articulation of space as in the literal/horizontal emphasis of In the Laurentians, 1921 donated to the AGO by A.Y. Jackson. [173] In the Laurentians (AGO) and later Birch Trees, Autumn, (AGO) demonstrate an interest in the closer view, with some affinities to the Group of Seven "screen of trees" and its emphasis on the (inaccessible) 'beyond.' These views would not totally be abandoned by May, yet at the same time were paralleled by an increasing interest in the panoramic view, a less hieratic and more dramatic perspective. Such 'moving into nature' would at first be instigated by the requisite road, winding slowly into the hills; later this means of entering the picture is largely replaced by emotive means of involvement; compelling infinite space with psycho/spiritual implications. The preference for this type of vantage point in the realization of

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[172] S. Morgan Powell, "Spring Exhibition at Art Gallery is Along Normal Lines," The Montreal DailyStar 21 April 1923.

[173] Jackson to May, July 16 1955 ."The Art Gallery of Toronto have sent me this enclosed form for you to sign and fill in- The last section about canvas and paint you can ignore. Size about 9" x 12", I think you painted it the year your hotel burnt down, probably in March as the snow looks deep, the only important thing is to have your signature." Document in the possession of Mr. and Mrs. Jack May, Vancouver

landscapes was not uncommon during this period and is seen in the work of such painters as Lawren Harris, Edwin Holgate, Andre Bieler, and Franklin Carmichael.

The beginnings of May's expansive image space may be seen in In the Laurentians, (NGC) or later in The Village, (NGC), and Village by the River Comeau, and The Valley (Fig. 33) where several dwellings are grouped and submerged in the middle distance. These works essentially continue the artist's interest in tilted perspective, the 'bird's-eye' view of the images painted from her studio and reiterate the decorative, overlapping tops of roofs, a synaesthetic interpretation which echoes visually the very fact of shingling, creating a parallel psychological image and recalling May's interest in correspondences. In these images may be seen rolling hills, sloping rooftops, and cut-out clouds which have much to do with the propensity for patterning of the period- a poetic yet at the same time unidealised vision of nature. Pigment is now applied in larger patches within broader areas, with bands of colour and summarized form suggestive of Denis and Marquet, and resulting in a much flatter, more decorative design.[174]

With the emphasis on landscape, Mabel May's sympathetic understanding of the modern French school becomes clearer. Summer Landscape, Knowlton, Quebec of 1927, is reminiscent of Gauguin in its planar juxtaposition and Fauvism generally in, for example, the raggedy delineation of trees in a continuous coloured outline: "Mabel May connut aussi en France la peinture de Cezanne, de Gauguin et de Van Gogh. Cezanne la fortement remuee ...comme dans ses fonds de paysages "Lake in the Eastern

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[174] Design had become a catchword for modernity so much so that when M O Hammond cited the women who had "felt the influence of the modern movement" (H Mabel May, Kathleen M. Morris, Emily Coonan and Lilias Torrance Newton, of Montreal and Florence McGillivray, of Ottawa), the criteria seems to have their emphasis on design elements

Townships," "Homes in the Shade," "Sunny Village, Knowlton."[175] Cezanne's influence may be seen in the c1921 River in Winter (later renamed Winter Snow) especially in the articulation of the background mountains and in the tonal dynamics of blue, grey, mauve and sepia. Yet Mabel May would not abandon the decorative design elements which Cezanne had rejected. Within this context, tilted perspective and the distancing of elements reinforce the idea of distortion "for the sake of pictorial harmony" and a cohesive surface which is made to work.

> Miss May handles broadly and with directness her scenes, producing pictures that have strong decorative values and a feeling for elemental things. The pictures lack the grace that is supposed to adhere in work by women artists but that is because Miss May is interested in form and rhythm....[in] perspective rather than in the more extenal manifestations of nature. There is a sweep to most of her landscapes and skillful arrangement of mass and colour. There is a suggestion of the best qualities of AY Jackson in the winter landscapes, yet they are individual to a degree."[176]

At the same time, certain images closely resemble the rural views of A.Y. Jackson as the following critic noted:

> La couleur est abondante dans la peinture de Mabel May; la chaleur des tons, celle des avrils tardifs ramenent l'artiste plus pres de nous, c'est-a-dire de Jackson qu'elle suit a trop peu de distance. Il me parait impossible que deux peintres puissent se ressembler a ce point sans que l'un deux n'ait eu a abdiquer une part de sa personnalite. Mais, encore une fois, les toiles de Mabel May, meme la, sont parfois tres belles, commes surfaces peintes, charger de matiere onctueuse, riche et brillante.[177]

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[175] Le Canada, Feb 10, 1950

[176] E.W H. "H Mabel May A.R C.A , Exhibits some Vigorous Landscapes in Show," Ottawa Evening Citizen, January1939

[177] Le Canada, 10 February 1950

In fact, throughout the course of the 1920s the struggle between a regional emphasis and that of the Group was not invisible. And while May's landscapes did not consistently attach to a regionalist interpretation, eventually the balance would tip in favour of the Group's romantic vision of a pre-cultural nature, especially that of Jackson and Harris.

A new pictorial licence had begun to emerge in May's work during the first few years of the decade; a propensity for pictorial exaggeration seen in more expressionistic, gestural and 'disquieting' tendencies which became more pitched in time. 'Sketches' which form the basis for several of her paintings such as Knowlton, Winter Landscape, c.1922 (Fig.34) and Knowlton Snow Scene, c.1922 (Fig. 35) best illustrate this tendency, demonstrating a striving towards the reductive and "simple silhouette" of Jackson and the Group. By the mid-twenties Mabel May's new interpretation of the landscape was in evidence in works such as Winter Landscape (Fig. 36), The Village, Winter, (Fig. 37) and Canadian Winter, (Fig. 38, Toronto Dominion Bank).

In December 1925, an exhibition entitled Contemporary Canadian Artists was held at Chowne Art Galleries on McGill College Avenue at the same time as the RCA exhibition(AAM), which included works by Torrance Newton, Robertson, Jackson, Harris and Robinson. Mabel May exhibited Old House in the Laurentians and Melting Snow. Her work was described as"inclined towards violent colour in a glimpse of open water winding between snow covered banks, but has well suggested a thaw in a bit of hillside scenery entitled 'Old House in the Laurentians'."[178]

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178 "Showing Works by Canadian Artists: Jackson, Robinson, Holgate, Mabel May and Regina Seiden Represented," The Gazette, 5 December,1925

> There is a notable contrast between the larger pictures by Canadian painters such as those which are to be seen in the Academy exhibition, and their smaller pictures which are being shown at the Chowne Gallery on McGill College Avenue. The smaller works have a simplicity and directness which are often missing in larger and more developed paintings.... Twelve painters are represented, mostly people of progressive or even experimental ideas....The largest and most striking picture is Mabel May's Melting Snow which is good in parts, but the snow in the foreground is not quite convincing.[179]

While Mabel May's forms are reductive and dramatic in their simplicity, her colour is pitched, elaborate, eccentric. S. Morgan-Powell stated: "Mabel May still prefers to experiment in crude colors that glare" but then, too, he referred to Charles W. Jeffrey's canvas as demonstrative of "bilious colour."[180]

By the mid twenties, Mabel May's natural forms had become imbued with gestural meaning. In The Village, Winter and Winter Landscape trees are the metaphor for human emotion especially in the latter work where a single leafless tree tells of some damage done while a row of sentinel homes beyond maintain a silent vigil. It is especially through the semi-outstretched boughs/arms that expression is conveyed, a curious yet appropriate example of the psychology of gesture. In these images, the trees are not only weird and wonderful; they demonstrate a nascent interest in anthropomorphic content, albeit subdued- contorted trees as psychic state, or an inclination towards the pathetic fallacy of 19th-century tradition. As early as 1922, the reviewer for the Herald observed that:

> One of the most interesting and personal pictures is Winter by H. Mabel May A.R.C.A. A bare tree is silhouetted against a winter sky under which stretch the roofs of the city. The arrangement is

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179 H.P B "A Little Exhibition by Canadian Painters," The Montreal Daily Star , 7 December1925

180 "Academy Exhibition Canvases that Have Attracted Attention," The Montreal Daily Star, 16 December, 1925

> unusual and the color particularly fine. This artist is undoubtedly at the present time producing some of the best things she has done.[181]

This tentative probing into the inner landscape would metamorphize in the thirties into a more profound understanding and interpretation of cosmic symbolism. In her mature works, May, like Emily Carr would evoke a sense of serenity, lyricism and simplicity. Forms correspond and mirror each other in what might be described as a yin/yang manner. However, seen as a body of work, the paintings produced between c. 1925 and the late thirties do continue to vacillate between what may be "symbolic meaning and mood."[182]

(iv) Spirit of Place: an aspect of the later landscapes

What distinguishes Mabel May's landscapes of the late twenties from those painted during the early part of the decade, is the downplay of human references. The concurrent persistence of an inhabited landscape would nevertheless contain traces of occupation/domestication, houses/fields, whose purpose was often expressive rather than literal.

The first known work to demonstrate not just a heightened expressive dimension, but also to emphasise empty yet emotionally charged space is Melting Snow, Knowlton of around 1925, (Fig.39, NGC). It formed part of the Willingdon Arts Competition held in Ottawa, in 1929, an important exhibition which was initiated by the Governor General in order to encourage the arts and letters in Canada. Melting Snow won honourable mention and became one of the thirty "most interesting" works which were then exhibited at the National

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181 "Canadian School is Well Represented at the Art Exhibition," The Herald, 25 March 1922

182 Heather Anderson, "Awareness of the Natural Landscape," p 121.

Gallery in a show "well divided between modern and academic tendencies".[183] While Prudence Heward's Girl on a Hill was the clear winner in critical attention, Mabel May's Melting Snow was praised along with George Pepper's Street in Hull, Pegi Nicol's My Western Canada, Mabel Lockerby's Marie et Minou, and Charles Comfort's Louise for strong design and character.

Melting Snow is similar to Lawren Harris' Pic Island of 1922-23 which had not been exhibited at this time, but may have been seen informally in Harris' studio as May was well-acquainted with Lawren and later Bess Harris. Yet in contrast, Melting Snow still (although barely) retains traces of human activity in the stylized gate posts and road. Mabel May's moving towards so-called 'pre-culturalism' may be regarded as a progression from realism to a personal symbolism. Like Harris she addressed the conflict between the material and inner or spiritualist worlds. For Lawren Harris, art making was a creative activity which became important for a spiritual dimension which was formally articulated in a new and dramatic treatment of space and light.

The view that landscape was a manifestation "of infinity and divinity" was shared in varying ways by the Group of Seven, though the tendency towards mysticism was strongest in Lawren Harris, who was a keen theosophist as was Arthur Lismer. J.E.H. MacDonald was drawn to the American Transcendentalists, and Fred Varley was attracted to Buddhism. In common was a belief in the significance of a spiritual dimension. This has important links to the theology of a religious group which Mabel May, joined in the thirties as described by a family member: "During the thirties, May and her sister Lilian became interested in a small religious group- not ... incompatible with their Anglican upbringing." [184] Mabel May joined "I Am: The Foundation of St.

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[183] The Morning Citizen, (Ottawa), 4 May 1929

Germaine" [185] sometime in the late thirties yet it is almost certain that her spiritual beliefs had been formed long before and that she would nave shared with Harris a view which was in keeping with Thomas Carlyle's assertion that "in all true works of art wilt thou discern eternity looking through time, the godlike rendered visible."[186]

It is not strange that spiritual matters became important to artists during the economically and socially difficult years of the Depression. In May's case, her mother's death in 1930 may also have been a factor. The I Am foundation was established in 1939 in Montreal, although it had been founded in Chicago in c.1930. Grounded in holistic/karmic theology it emphasised the importance of cosmic balance, called for a vegetarian diet and a course of study, including extensive readings from certain 'fundamental books'. As with theosophical thought, colours were charged with spiritual significance. Days of the week were symbolised by the different energies of specific colours and certain combinations were highly significant. For instance: red with black was deemed to be an ominous mixture, representative and attractive to disease of mind/ spirit/ body;[187] blue would equate power and spirit, and was especially potent in relationship with violet. "The importance of this interest is that the group felt that some colours had negative effects. Consequently, my aunt avoided strong

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184 Mrs Rhodes to the author, 27 March 1991.

185 "I AM" the Resurrection and the Life of God's Great Divine Plan fulfilled for all beloved mankind."The sanctuary was located until 1970 on Greene Avenue then moved to 4444 Ste. Catherine and from 1983 to 1990 was situated on Sherbrooke street in Westmount. Chapters were established across Canada and Mabel May became involved with the Vancouver Chapter in her later years

186 Lawren Harris "Theosophy and Art, " The Canadian Theosophist 14,(July 15, 1926):86.

187 Interview with Mrs. Charlebois, secretary treasurer "I Am", September 1991.

darks like black and red- to some degree."[188] Melting Snow would occupy a place of honour in the exhibition of May's work held at the Vancouver Art Gallery in May 1939[189] and was described as illustrating "the breadth of her conceptions and the skill with which she realizes them. Some may consider it too elemental yet it conveys well the atmosphere and the graceful grandeur of the scene."[190] The Vancouver Art Gallery Bulletin stated: "Miss Mabel May is one of Canada's leading contemporary woman painters... It should prove a very interesting exhibition."[191] It is highly likely that Mabel May attended the opening of the 1939 exhibition which may also have afforded the opportunity of renewing her acquaintance with Carr. They had first met following the opening of The Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art in 1926:

> After the opening Emily went to Montreal for an overnight visit, mostly to see the the Group of Seven paintings in the Royal Canadian Academy show. While there she...found time to... and meet three women painters- Anne Savage, Mabel May and Sarah Robertson- and visit the studio of Edwin Holgate....[192]

Three years following their initial meeting both women formed part of the same Group of Seven Exhibition (1930) and possibly Carr's two solo exhibitions in Toronto in 1936 and 1937 provided an opportunity for them to meet again. Emily Carr did invite May for a visit to Victoria, but again dates and details are elusive.

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188 Loise Rhodes in correspondence with the author, 27 March, 1991.

189 The exhibition was organized with the help of Mabel May's brother and sister then living on the west coast, Mrs. A.M White and Mr. F.R. May.

190 E W H , 1939

191 Vancouver Art Gallery Bulletin 6, no 10, June 1939

192 Paula Blanchard, The Life of Emily Carr, Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1987, p.180.

Lowtide (Fig.40, U. of Lethbridge Art Gallery) completed in 1938 was probably painted during one of several trips out west to visit her family. It clearly references the work of Emily Carr, indicating their renewed contact by this time. It belongs to a grouping of works which depict a cosmic nature, such as Seascape in Winter, nd . In Lowtide May has completely emptied her canvas of all traces of human occupation, although on another level traces remain in the subtle yet dramatic references to the inner landscape mentioned earlier. Lowtide shares the concerns of the Northern romantics in its revelation of a sense of cosmic sentience, a spiritual dimension in the approach to and articulation of light, the formal reductiveness, the remoteness and the sense of no place/every place.

It is useful to remember that from about 1936 onwards, May no longer resided in Quebec, as she had moved to Ottawa, although she probably still summered at Hudson Heights. This very likely affected her work, at the most basic level in terms of subject matter, and probably psychologically as well. But perhaps the most obvious factor was time, or rather its lack, limited as it was to her role as educator. During the 1940s, prior to her move to Vancouver, May continued to travel into nature, the Gatineau Valley or the Laurentians, to paint. Yet while an amount of inventiveness was retained, her work did become somewhat conventional. Works such as Quiet Lake Gatineau County tend to repeat her own earlier formulas and those of the Group. Yet while subject matter did become slightly redundant, her pure enjoyment of her craft and involvement in art-making was in evidence in the expressionistic handling of her materials.

CHAPTER FOUR

Towards a Teaching Profession

(i) The Atelier and the Canadian Group of Painters

By the beginning of the decade, Mabel May's career was established and recognition had been achieved. That is not to say that her involvement with and commitment to her work was in any way diminished; rather the opposite was true for by the 1930s Mabel May had become quite prolific. A relative recalls the stacks of paintings which filled the dining and living rooms at 434 Elm during the 1930s.[193] It is unfortunate, at least in terms of this study, that a large number of unsold canvases dating from this period were given to her brother Alfred May, himself a painter, to use. Henrietta "had given him material and old canvas during the 30s when times were hard."[194]

On September 7, 1930, just four days prior to May's fifty-third birthday, her mother died at their summer home at Hudson Heights. Other misfortunes would follow, the most serious probably being the acute financial changes brought about by the Depression. Both Mabel and her sister Lilian with whom she shared the house at 434 Elm St. were forced to seek out employment in order to make ends meet. Evidence suggests that May would be forced to give up her studio due to financial constraints.

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[193] Mrs Barbara Ross, Montreal, to the author, 21 March 1991.

[194] Dorothy May to the author, Spring 1991.

During the 1930s Mabel May's desire to be progressive did not become eroded but rather found a new and perhaps more meaningful direction. Nowhere is this fact better illustrated than in her leading involvement as a founding member of the Atelier School, formed in 1931 following Lyman's return to Canada.[195] The art for arts sake purism and emphasis on formal articulation, without the burden and distraction of psychological meaning and nuance was in marked opposition to the romantic mythologizing of Lawren Harris, Emily Carr and indeed May's own ongoing beliefs. However at this stage in her career it seems irrelevant to question the manner in which she would have reconciled this dichotomy. Rather, it is important to acknowledge that she continued to value change and innovation, lessons learnt from her first mentor, William Brymner. Lyman's now famous credo, "The essential qualities of a work of art lie in the relationships of form to form, and of colour to colour..." was perhaps too ambitious for May to embrace but her support at this stage of continued 'revolution' is testament to her will to be challenged.

May's involvement with the Atelier school marks the beginning of an interest in public teaching. The influence and example of Anne Savage, Lilias Newton and Edwin Holgate (at the Art Association School) and later Fritz Brandtner, Norman Bethune and Marion Scott with the Children's Art Centre, were most definitely at play. Mabel May's evolving interest in art as vehicle for communication may also have been a factor in her involvement with the

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[195]The Atelier originally formed part of the Department of Extra- Mural Relations of McGill University, until its move to new spaces in the same building as the Montreal Reperatory Theatre The representative executive committee and teaching staff consisted of Hazen Sise, chairman; Elizabeth Frost; Col. Wilfred Bovet (representing McGill University); Andre Bieler, Prudence Heward, Randolph J. Hewton, Richard E Bolton, George A C Holt, Kenneth Crowe, John Lyman, Jeannette Meunier, Lilias Newton, Sarah Robinson, Mabel May and Annie Savage. The Atelier not only provided students with models and working space, it also gave them the opportunity to "develop an discuss art without the numbing constraints of drawing from the cast and Beaux-Arts dogma "

Canadian Group of Painters , a third of whom were women,[196] who held, among other things, that artmaking should become a 'common language of expression' not necessarily confined to the art milieu. Ironically, this group's inaugural exhibition would be held outside Canada, in Atlantic City. The formation of the CGP was an important and timely initiative meant to 'revitalize' the local scene, and possibly one of the most central points in print regarding works by members was the fact of the reappropriation of the figure in Canadian art; the emergence of a new humanism which would also be present in the work of Mabel May during the thirties:

> The canvases of the original members of the Group are not the most interesting.... Younger men and women have brought new energy and a new vision. Not only are we moving toward human life, away from the landscape...but in growing up we are beginning to show the effects of the profound disturbances in human affairs which have shaken the world.[197]

By 1930 women artists in Canada were involved on all the front lines of important activity. Ironically, it was at this very moment that circumstances would force them to divide their attention between artmaking and teaching. While it is not the intention of this study to chart the progress of Mabel May as educator, it is nevertheless important just to indicate the nature of this commitment to teaching, for it completes her biography.

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196 The twenty-eight painters who formed the original membership of the Canadian Group of Painters (contd.)
were :Bertram Brooker, Franklin Carmichael, Emily Carr, A.J. Casson, Charles Comfort, LeMoine Fitzgerald, Lawren Harris, Prudence Heward, Randolph Hewton, Edwin Holgate, Bess Housser, A.Y.Jackson, Arthur Lismer, J W.G. MacDonald, Thoreau MacDonald, Mabel May, Yvonne McKague, Isabel McLaughlin, Lilias Newton, Will Ogilvie, George Pepper, Sarah Robertson, Albert Robinson, Anne Savage, Charles Scott, Frederick Varley, William Weston and W.J. Wood.

197 Robert Ayre, "Canadian Group of Painters," The Canadian Forum, 14, no 159, (1939), pp. 98-99

Mabel May first offered private instruction at her studio in Montreal in the early thirties, and then later in Ottawa,[198] where she was engaged by the Elmwood School in Rockliffe and taught drawing, painting and the history of art.[199] May's decision to teach in Ottawa appears to have been made in August of 1936 and a letter to Harry McCurry, Director of the National Gallery outlined her plans: "Lilias Newton and I are motoring to Ottawa on Thursday. Lilias is working on a Portrait and I am hoping to locate a Studio. Do you know of any possible locations? The main thing is the light and a fairly large room or rooms as I hope to have a fairly large class."[200]

(ii) Move to Ottawa

From 1938 until about 1948, Mabel May lived and worked in Ottawa, returning home to Quebec in the summer, and frequently travelling out west to visit displaced family members. During these years she gained considerable recognition as an educator, as did other women such as Anne Savage and Ethel Seath. Numerous letters from former students demonstrate her influence and success. The years spanning 1937-47 witnessed Mabel May's expanding influence as Supervisor of Children's Art Classes in Ottawa. Among her achievements was the formation of advanced art classes and the organization

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198 The Leader Post, 28 September 1951. No evidence has been found to suggest that May was engaged by any public or private schools in Montreal, and it is certain that she did not teach at Miss Edgar's and Miss Cramp's in Westmount as had others.

199 From a questionnaire filled in by the artist for Who's Who In American Art , 6 August 1946, in NGC files; May resided as a boarder at 235 Springfield in Rockliffe at the time, see notation for shipping purposes's in artist's file NGC,Archives ; and from a conversation June 1990 with Dr. Peter Bourke, whose father, Dr.F.S Bourke owned the property at the time

200 Mabel May to Harry McCurry, 24 August,1936, National Gallery of Canada, Archives, H. Mabel May, Correspondence re. Children's Art Classes, File 7.4-C.

of travelling exhibitions to Montreal and elsewhere. The seriousness and imagination with which May regarded her newly found profession was demonstrated in 1937, when having become aware of the Children's Art Centre in Montreal, established the previous year by Fritz Brandtner and Norman Bethune and later run by Brandtner and Marion Scott, May proposed to establish a similar centre in Ottawa independently or under the aegis of the NGC. She wrote to Eric Brown that summer:

> You spoke last winter about a Saturday morning class for children, at the National Gallery. I wonder if you are still contemplating this class. I would love to teach it but if you are not having it I am going to run a class on Saturday morning for children, on the same lines as the Art Centre here in Montreal. I dont think there is room for two classes, so if yours is materializing I don't think I could have one too.[201]

Yet Mabel May did not completely abandon her first profession of painting during the thirties, continuing to exhibit in local Montreal shows, including the RCA and Spring exhibitions. In Ottawa, she became involved with a group called Le Caveau, whose members included Henri Masson and Albert Kingsley. Andre Bieler would also exhibit with the Group, and May developed a friendship with him. It was probably their relationship which led to her becoming a member of the Federation of Canadian Artists. She is known to have attended the Kingston Conference in 1940. On the occasion of one exhibition by Le Caveau, the reviewer for the Ottawa Citizen commented that:

> One of the most exciting art exhibitions of the waning season was opened last night by "Le Caveau" Group at its studios, 78 1/2 Rideau street. Following the policy of including important outside Canadian artists as guest exhibitors, this time Le Caveau does

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201 Ibid , May to Brown, 24 August 1937.

> honour to Andre Bieler OSA, of Kingston....[and]...Mabel May ARCA who is still painting rich and forcible compositions.[202]

(iii) Vancouver and retirement

Mabel May returned to Montreal in 1948. Two years later, in January 1950, the house at 434 Elm, the May family home for half a century or more, was sold. The deed was signed just days before Christmas. Following the transaction Mabel and Lilian stayed with their brother Alfred Edward May and his family on Westminster Street planning "...to get away to Vancouver about the 20th."[203] To Harry McCurry, May wrote of her hopes, and in reading between the lines, of her apprehensions.

> I have enjoyed my two years here in Westmount so much but expect to have more time to paint in Vancouver. However I shall look for a part time teaching appointment as I want to be very busy there too.... It is certainly a strenuous business changing one's home from one part of the country to another, but we are getting a great deal of help and we are very grateful.[204]

Yet, May did not easily give up a lifetime of contacts and friendships. The move was difficult, especially given her advanced age and her letters from her new home to Harry McCurry poignantly illustrate her conflicting emotions:

> I have been living in a very changing world during the last few months...I haven't yet been in touch with any of the artists but as we have been to all of the relatives now I feel I can get into painting again....I am very grateful to you, Harry, for all the assistance you gave me with my work in Ottawa- They were some of the happiest

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202 E.W.H. "Le Caveau Exhibition Features Individual Art of Andre Bieler," Ottawa Citizen, 28 May 1940

203 May to McCurry, 3 January1950, NGC, Archives, H. Mabel May, Miscellaneous Correspondence, File 7.1-M

204 Ibid., May to McCurry.

> years and I loved my work at the Gallery- I only wish I could do something of a like nature here.[205]

However, May had valuable friendships to rediscover on the west coast and she was welcomed by painters such as Lawren Harris and his wife Bess. The move also afforded her the opportunity of getting back to her artwork. Shortly following her arrival, in 1952, the Vancouver Art Gallery held a second exhibition of her work. A letter from Lawren Harris was written to her following the opening and was characteristically encouraging and supportive. "I have wanted to write to you since we hung your exhibition at the Gallery. I wanted to tell you how well I think it looks and what a fine impression all the paintings make. Its a very good show, one of the best ... we have had. "[206]

In Vancouver, Mabel May and her sister Lilian lived for a couple of years with relatives, and she rented a studio in the house next door with one or two regular pupils. However she did not become particularly involved with the art community, but rather lived a rather quiet and secluded life. One of the few letters to have survived from her peers was written to her by Edwin Holgate in December 1970, and demonstrates the valuable constancy of a friendship begun almost three quarters of a century ago,

> I have come across a letter from you - written last June- and feel that it is high time that I replied. I hope that since that time you have improved to the point of getting back at your painting ....And how are you getting on -Henry? steadily improving -I hope. I have not seen Lilias since the opening- we rarely meet.
> ....We are awaiting the new winter without the same enthusiasm as we once exhibited- which- of course is due to age. We really are

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205 Ibid., May to McCurry, 3 May, 1950.

206 Harris to May, 17 Feb , 1952, Mr. and Mrs. Jack May, Vancouver

> doing quite well- and are continuously glad to have come up to these hills instead of remaining in an over-exciting city. Our suffering province is going through a very rough experience- though I don't look as darkly on it as a good many do. Our whole world is changing- and faster than we can assimilate the changes. We look forward to hearing good news from you-Henry-and before too long. Keep well and get those brushes moving.[207]

Henrietta Mabel May died in Vancouver on October 8, 1971.

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207 Edwin Holgate to Mabel May from Morin Heights, Quebec, 2 December, 1970, Mr. and Mrs. May Vancouver.

FIG. 1 Henrietta Mabel May, c1920
Hudson Heights, Quebec

FIG. 2 434 Elm Street, Westmount

FIG. 3 Mabel May
Phillipsburg, 1911, 1911
oil on wood
25.0 x 34.5 cm.
McCord Museum, Montreal

FIG. 4 Mabel May
Portrait of Nina Owens, 1911
oil on board
private collection

FIG. 5 Mabel May
The Market Under the Trees, 1912-13
oil on canvas
61.0 x 76.4 cm.
The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

FIG. 6 Mabel May
Immigrants, Bonaventure Station, 1914
oil on canvas
55.9 x 68.6
Power Corp.

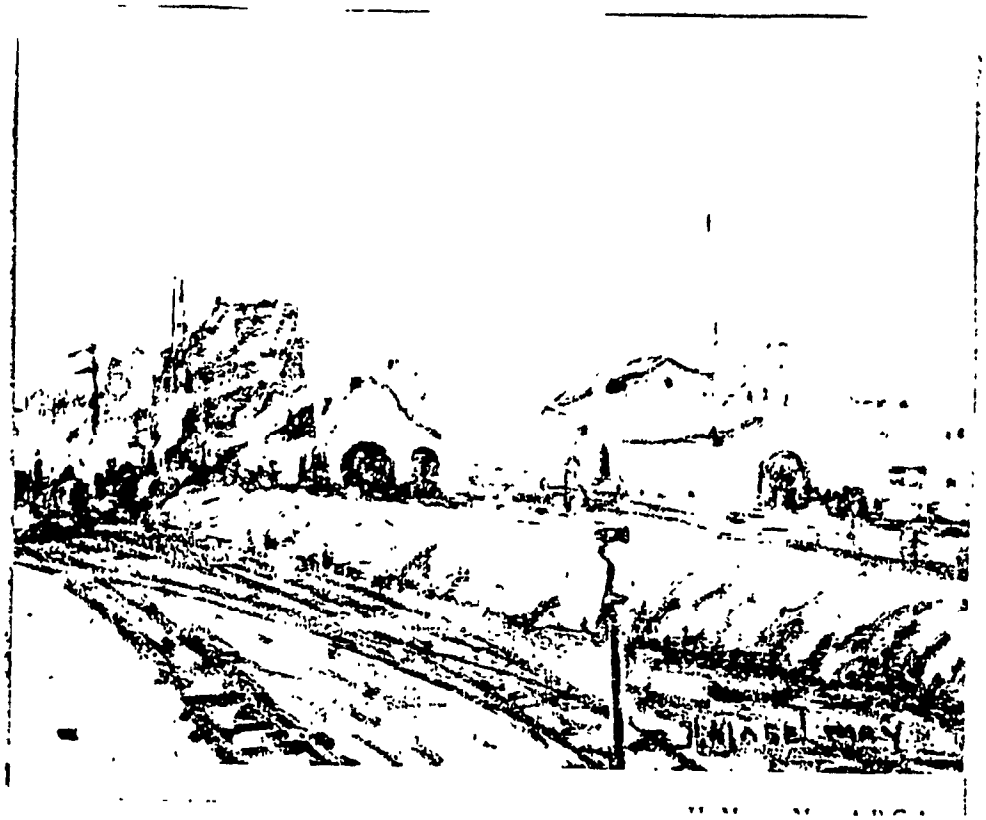

FIG. 7 Mabel May
Station Scene, 1918
oil on canvas
collection unknown

FIG. 8 Mabel May
Street Scene, Montreal, nd.
oil on canvas
60.7 x 73.4 cm.
The National Gallery of Canada

FIG. 9 Mabel May
Yacht Racing, 1914, 1914
oil on panel
22.2 x 26.7
Dominion Gallery, Montreal

FIG. 10 Mabel May
Waiting for the Excursion Boat, c1915
oil on canvas
61.6 x 73.7 cm.
private collection, New York

FIG. 11 Mabel May
Knitting, 1915
oil on canvas
91.4 x 101.6
collection unknown

FIG. 12 Henri Beau
Paysage
oil on canvas
46.8 x 61.4
Confederation Art Gallery, Charlottetown

FIG. 13 Mabel May
untitled (The Garden), c1912
oil on canvas
55.9 x 45.7 cm.
private collection

FIG. 14 Mabel May
Lowtide, 1916
oil on canvas
collection unknown

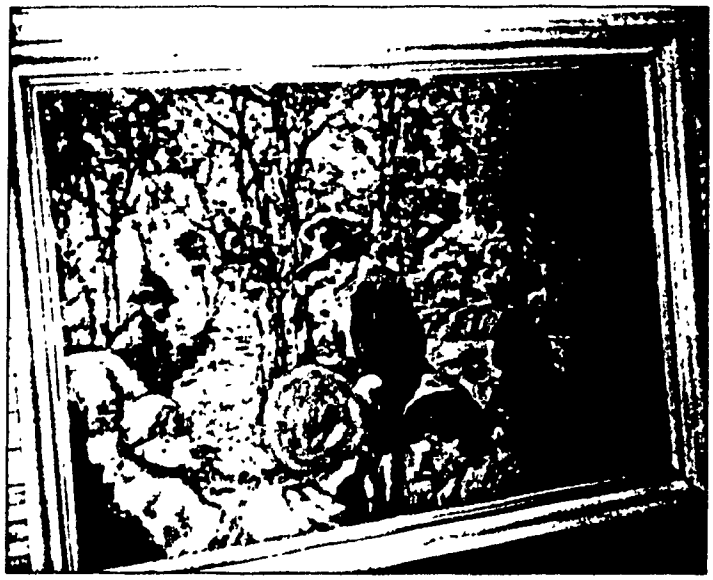

FIG. 15 Mabel May
The Pink Balloon, 1918

FIG. 16 Mabel May
The Three Sisters, c1915
oil on canvas
77.2 x 67.3 cm.
The Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton

FIG. 17 Emily Coonan
The Orphans, c.1916
collection unknown

FIG. 18 Mabel May
Doris and Ruth, 1916
oil on canvas
55.9 x 45.7
private collection

FIG. 19 Mabel May
Indian Woman, Oka, 1917 (?)
oil on canvas
66.4 x 53.9 cm.
Art Gallery of Hamilton

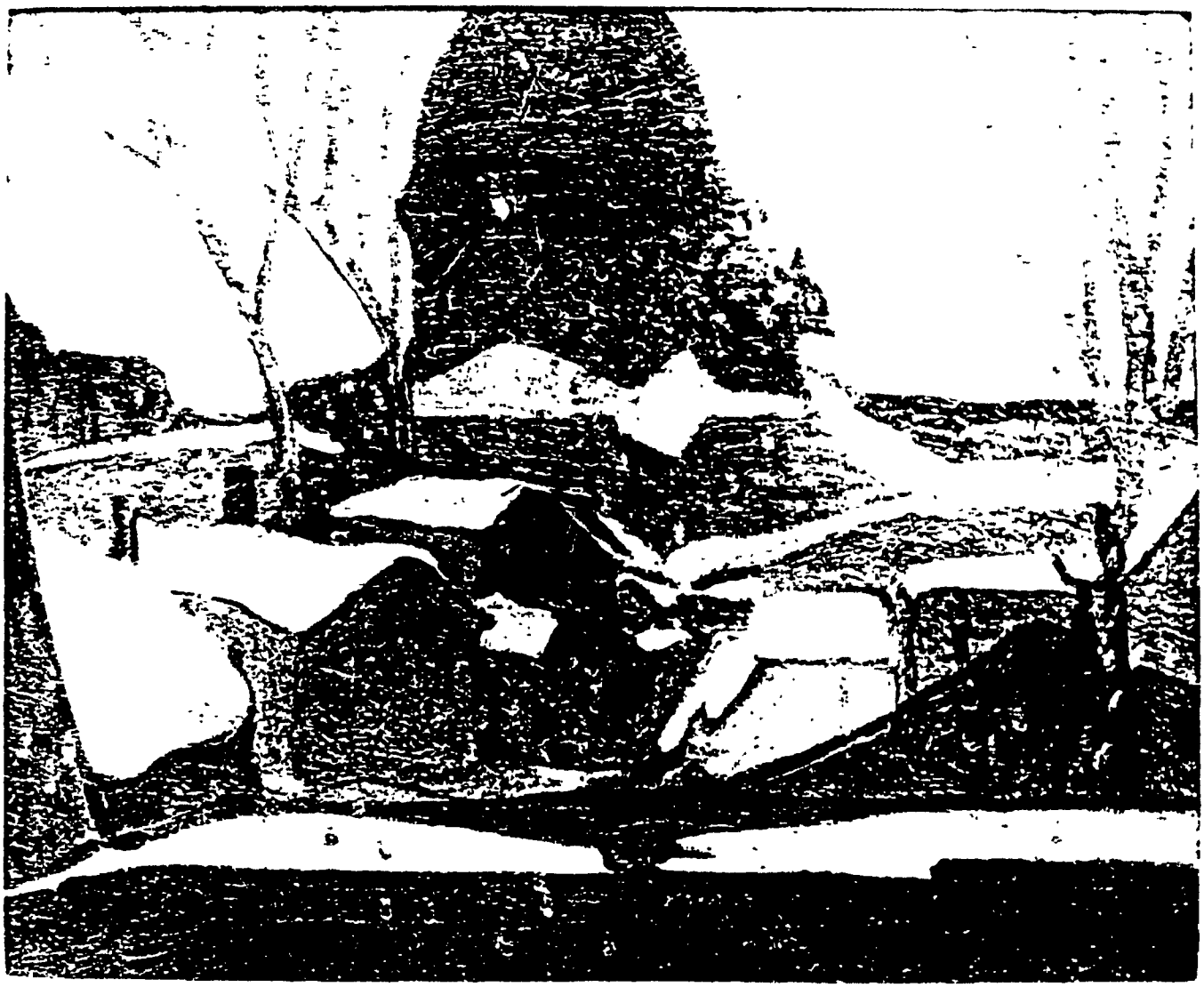

FIG. 20 Mabel May
View From My Studio, 1917
oil on canvas
56.1 x 69.2 cm.
Montreal Museum of Fine Arts

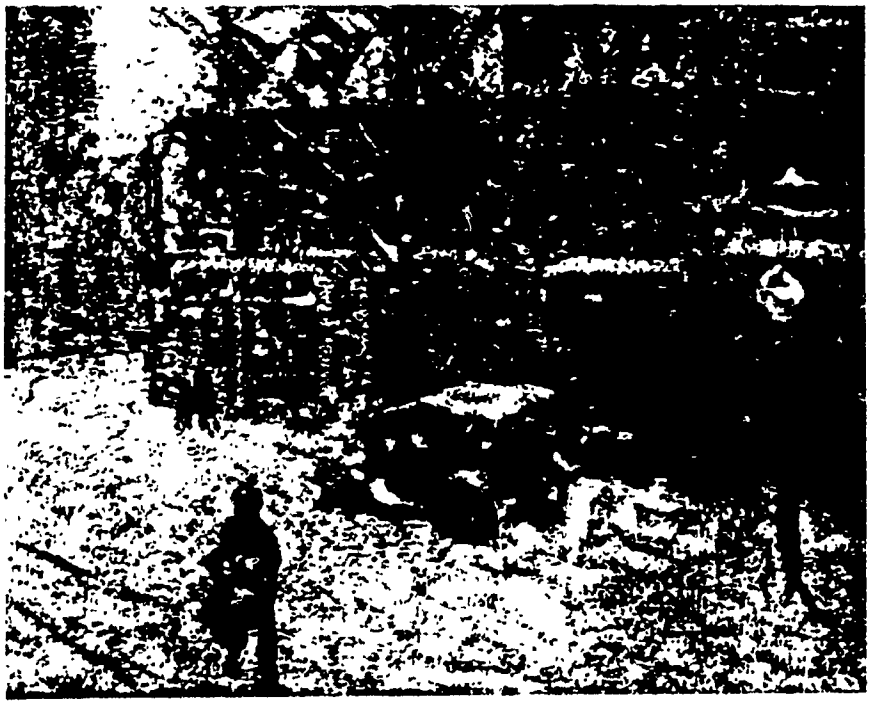

FIG. 21 Mabel May
Snowy Day, 1918
private collection

FIG. 22 Mabel May
On the Docks, Montreal, 1917
oil on canvas
46.2 x 55.6 cm.
Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston

FIG. 23 Scene du Port de Montreal, 1930
oil on canvas
45.0 x 55.50
Lavalin, Montreal

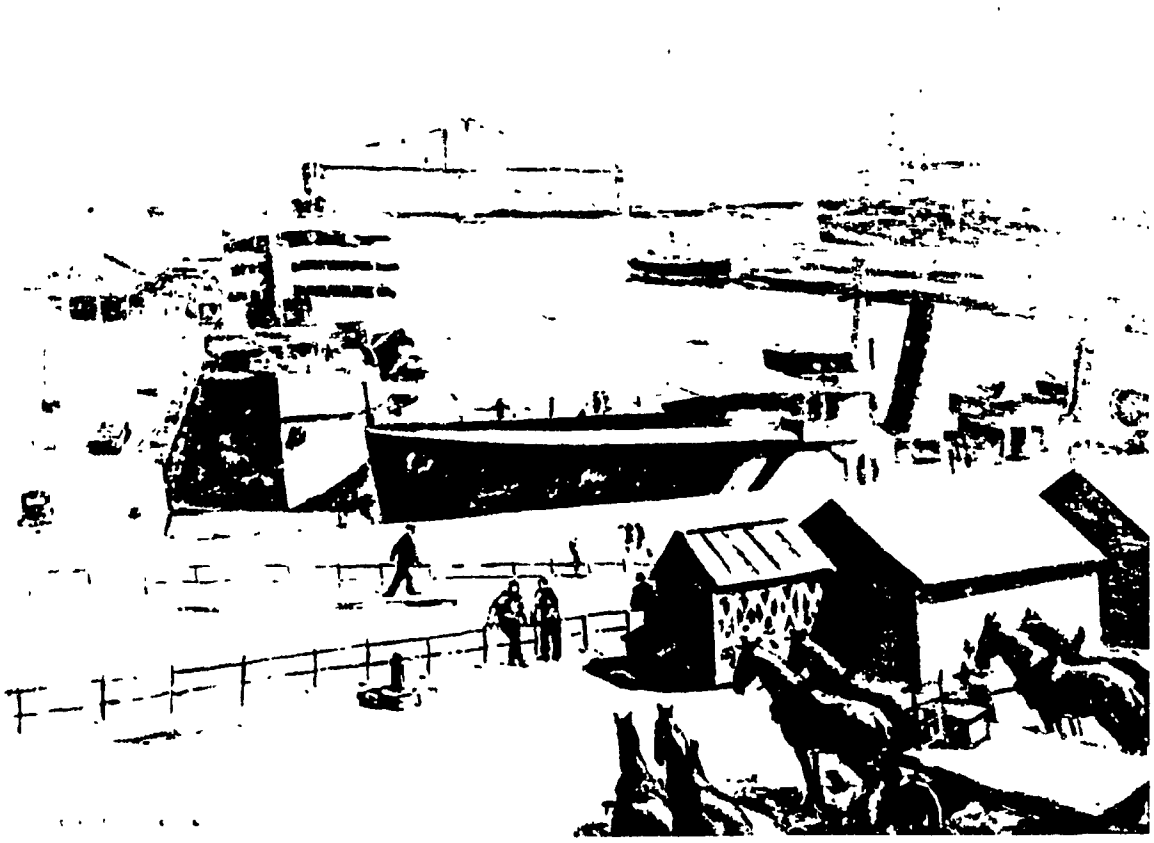

FIG. 24 Adrien Hebert
Montreal Harbour, 1929
58.4 x 86.4

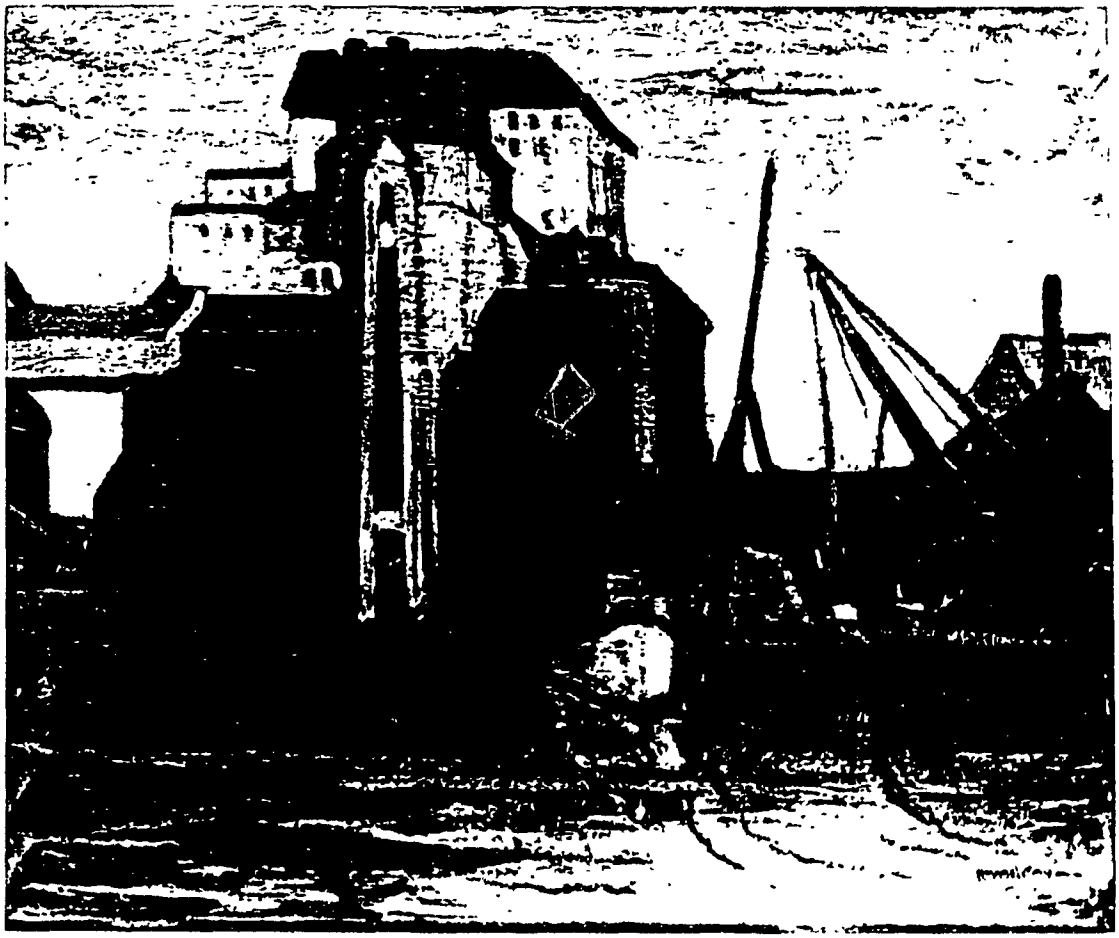

FIG. 25 Mabel May
Castles of Industry, nd
oil on canvas
57.2 x 68.6
Bank of Montreal

FIG. 26 Mabel May
Women Making Shells, 1918
oil on canvas
213 x 183 cm.
Canadian War Museum, Ottawa

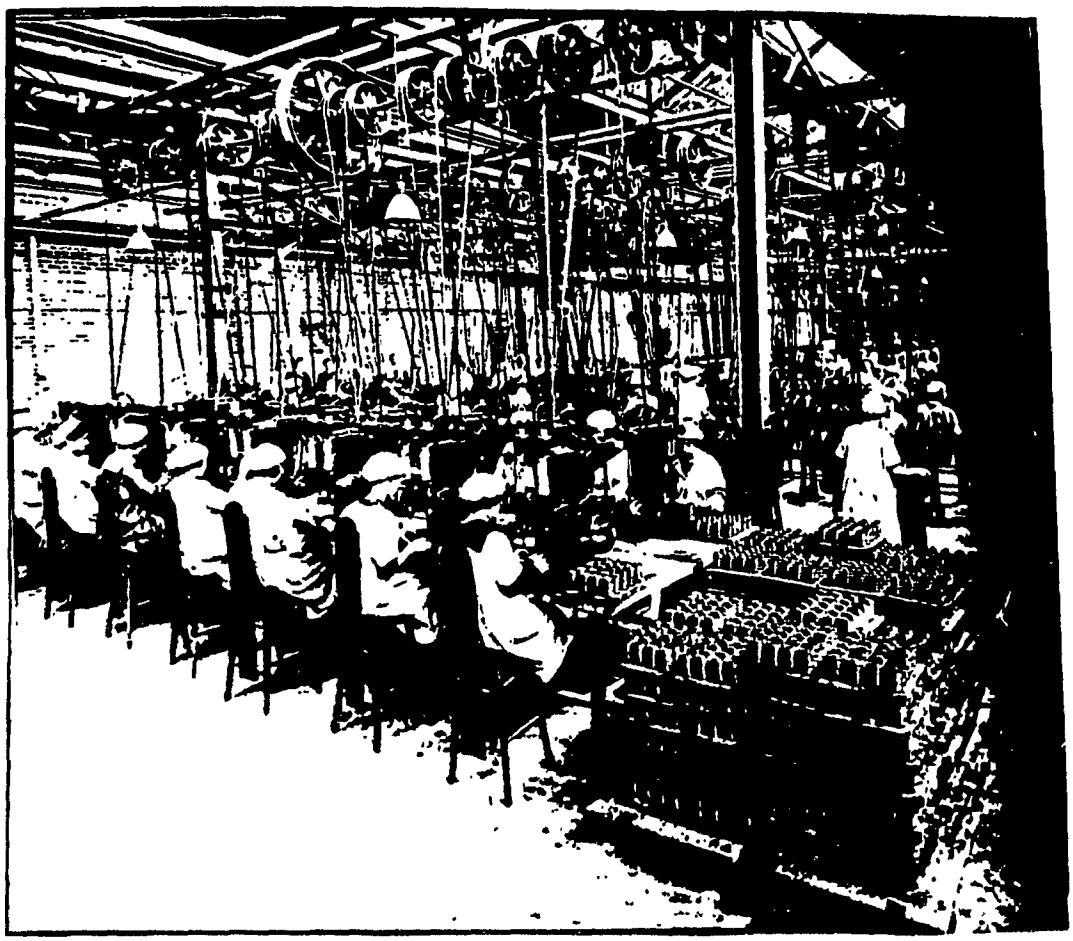

FIG. 27 Women workers in a munitions factory, Verdun during WW1.

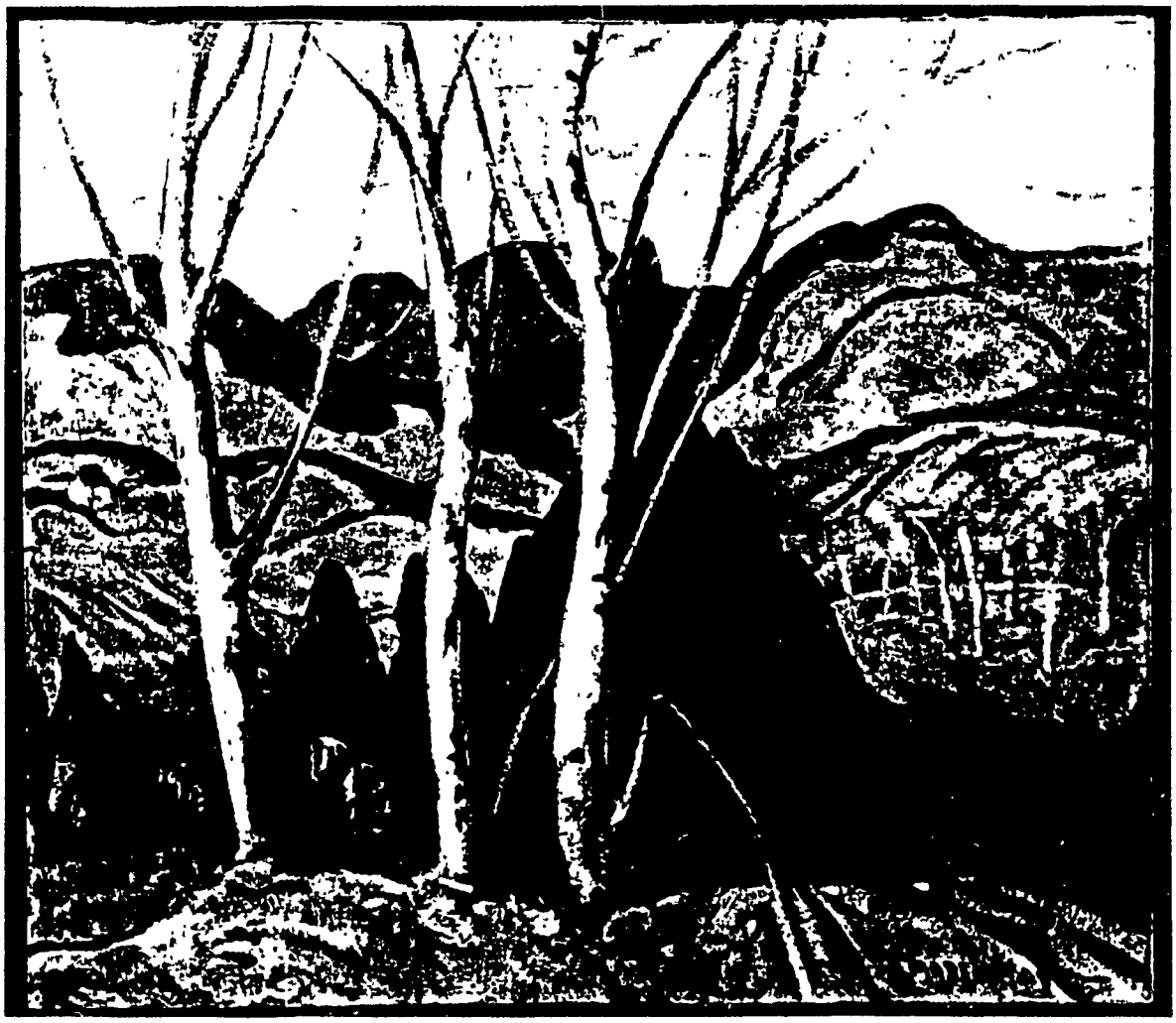

FIG. 28 Birch Trees, Autumn, c1929
oil on canvas
66.5 x 76.7
Art Gallery of Ontario

FIG. 29 Mabel May
Winter Near Baie Saint Paul, c1927
oil on canvas
collection unknown

FIG. 30 A.Y. Jackson and Lilias Torrance Newton
photograph taken by Mabel May,
Baie Saint Paul, Quebec , nd.

FIG. 31 Mabel May
In the Laurentians, nd
oil on canvas
56.2 x 69.0
The National Gallery of Canada

FIG. 32 Sarah Robertson
Ice-Cutting, Lake of Two Mountains, c1927

FIG. 33 The Valley (Happy Valley)
oil on canvas
55.9 x 68.6
collection unknown

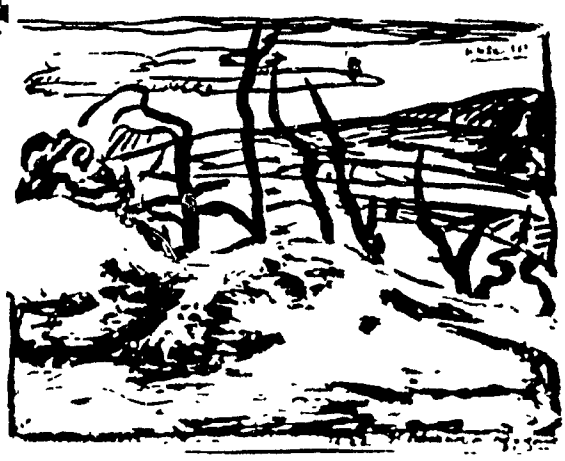

FIG. 34 Mabel May
Knowlton, Winter Landscape, c1922
ink on paper

FIG. 35 Knowlton, Snow Scene, c1922
ink on paper
private collection, Vancouver

FIG. 36 Mabel May
Winter Landscape, c1926
oil on canvas
collection unknown

FIG. 37 Mabel May
The Village, Winter, 1927
oil on canvas
collection unknown

FIG. 38 Mabel May
Canadian Winter, nd
oil on canvas
72.1 x 101.9
Toronto Dominion Bank

FIG. 39 Mabel May
Melting Snow, Knowlton, c1925
oil on canvas
91.4 x 102.2
The National Gallery of Canada

FIG. 40 Mabel May
Lowtide, c1938 (Lowtide, Lower St. Lawrence)
oil on canvas
56.5 x 66.5
University of Lethbridge Art Gallery

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APPENDIX A

Collections

Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston

Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Victoria

Art Gallery of Hamilton, Hamilton

Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto

Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton

Canadian War Museum, Ottawa

Dunlop Art Gallery, Regina

Edmonton Art Gallery, Edmonton

McCord Museum, Montreal

Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Montreal

Musee du Quebec, Quebec

National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa

University of Lethbridge Art Gallery

Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver

Numerous corporate and private collections

APPENDIX B

Exhibitions

1910 Art Association of Montreal, (AAM)
248. Moonlight
249. Study of a Head
250. Study of a Head

1910 Royal Canadian Academy Exhibition
138. Composition, sketch
139. sketch

1911 AAM
211. On the Beach
212. Study in Grey
213. Portrait

1912 29th Annual Spring Exhibition, AAM
263. The White Boat
264. The Daisy Field
265. The Dredge
266. Fishing Boats
267. Sketch
268. Windy Day
269. At Cartierville

1913 30th Annual Spring Exhibition,
278. Portrait
279. The Market (The Market Under the Trees, Bruges)
280. Dans les jardins
281. Autumn
282. Sketch, Autumn Trees
283. Sketch, interior wc

1913 Canadian National Exhibition, Toronto
320. The Market

1913 Royal Canadian Academy Exhibition
206. Winter, Montreal
207 Fishing Boats
208. The Market Under the Trees
209. Cloud Effects

1914 Second Exhibition of Little Pictures, Toronto, Feb.7-28

1914 Patriotic Fund Exhibition, March 15-31 (Montreal)
33. Canal Scene, Venice

1914 31st Annual Spring Exhibition,
March 26-April 25
272. The Station
273. The Garden
274. On the Seine
275. Over the Teacups
276. Sketch wc (for Luxembourg Gardens)*
277-8. Sketch wc
* Jessie Dow Prize

1914 Canadian National Exhibition
300. The Garden

1914 Thirty Sixth Annual R.C.A. Exhibition
137. Watching the Regatta
138. Street Scene, Montreal

1915 32nd annual Spring Exhibition,
242. The Story
243. Watching the Regatta
244. Grain Elevators, Canal Scene

1915 Thirty Seventh Annual RCA Exhibition
151. Knitting*
152. Waiting for the Excursion Boat
* Jessie Dow Prize

1915 Canadian National Exhibition,
206. Watching the Regatta
207. Grain Elevators (Canal Scene)

1916 33rd Annual Spring Exhibition,
193. A Warm October Day
194. Spring Afternoon
195. Edge of the Lake
196. The White House
197. Winter
198. Doris and Ruth

1916 Thirty eighth annual RCA Exhibition
160. Low tide
161. Boats on the St. Lawrence
162. After the Bath
163. Winter 1918A-120

1916 Canadian National Exhibition
389. Knitting

1917 34th Annual Spring Exhibition,
228. Autumn in the Mountains
229. Clearing After Rain
230. Trees, Autumn
231. Across the Canal
232. Sketch
233. Sketch

1917 Canadian National Exhibition
185. Lowtide
186. Autumn in the Mountains

1918 35th Annual Spring Exhibition,
228. Sunny Afternoon
229. Portrait Miss Darrell Morrisey
230. Going to the Station*
231. Blue Barges
232. The Canal
233. The Pier
*Jessie Dow Prize

1918 A Joint Exhibition of the Royal Canadian Academy of the Arts and the Ontario Society of Artists, Art Museum of Toronto, April 4
117. The Ferry
118. In the Bay
119. In the Canal

1918N 40th Annual RCA Exhibition
127. Windy Day
128. Station Scene
129. Harbour de Grace
130. Sketch

1918-1920 Saint John Art Club Loan Exhibition, Halifax
25. The Market Under the Trees

1919 36th Annual Spring Exhibition
200. The Ferry
201. Saturday Afternoon
202. Sunny Afternoon
203. Landing, Peake's Island
204-5 Sketch (es)

1919 Canadian National Exhibition
118. Windy Day

119. Station Scene

1919 41st annual RCA Exhibition
115. Snowy Day
116. Landing, Peak's Island

1920 42nd annual RCA Exhibition
175. The Pink Balloon
176. Resting
177. The Wharf
178. Landscape

1920 Inaugural exhibition Beaver Hall Group

1921 38th Annual Spring Exhibition
171. Autumn
172. In the Laurentian Mountains
173. Canal Bank, Late Afternoon
174. Winter sketch

1921 43rd Annual RCA
105. Early Spring
106. In the Laurentians
107. Canal Bank, Late Afternoon

1922 39th Annual Spring Exhibition
191. Summer Afternoon
192. Winter
193. Early Spring
194. Knowlton, early Spring

1922 Canadian National Exhibition
280. Canal Bank, Late Afternoon
281. Winter Landscape

1922 44th Annual RCA
141. The Sunlit Valley S6-62
142. Train Shunting
143. The Winter Glow
144. The Creek

1922 Public Loan Exhibition of Paintings and Etchings from the National Gallery of Canada, Victoria School of Art and Design
12. Boats on the St. Lawrence

1923 Exhibition of Canadian War Memorials, National Gallery of Canada, January 5 to March 31
43. Women Making Shells

1923 40th Annual Spring Exhibition,
149. March
150. Farm House, Ste. Marguerite

1923 Canadian National Exhibition, Toronto
208. March in the Laurentians
209. Old House, Ste. Marguerite

1923 45 th annual RCA
116. Landscape
117. Early Autumn wc
240. Early Settlers on the Banks of the St. Lawrence. Mural decorative painting competition.

1924 41st Annual Spring Exhibition
224. Early Settlers to the Bank of the St. Laurence
(240 RCA)

1924 46th annual RCA
141. The Road to the Lake
142. Sunny September

1924 British Empire Exhibition, Canadian Section of Fine Arts, Wembley, England
2. Old House in the Laurentians (Gallery EE)
41. Late Winter in the Laurentians (Gallery EE)

1925 42nd Annual Spring Exhibition
179. Autumn Trees
180. Melting Snow, Knowlton
181. Early Spring

1925 British Empire Exhibition, Canadian Section of Fine Arts, Wembley, England
43. The Lake (Gallery EE)
37. Among the Hills (Gallery FF)

1925 Contemporary Canadian Artists, Chowne Art Dealer, Montreal
Old House in the Laurentians

1925 47th annual RCA
152. Ripening Fields
153. The Village (NGC)
154. Early Spring

1926 First Annual Exhibition Of Canadian Art, NGC, Ottawa
115. The Village
116. Late Winter in the Laurentians

1926 43rd Annual Spring Exhibition.
84. Winter in the Hills
85. Pine Trees
86. Winter Agternoon
87. The Lake

1926 First Pan-American Exhibition of Oil Paintings, Los Angeles
233. Winter Landscape/ Paysage Invernal

1926 48th annual RCA
92 Winter Landscape
93. Sail Boats
94. Maples, Autumn

1927 Second Annual Exhibition of Canadian Art, NGC, Ottawa
152. Winter in the Hills
153. Winter Landscape
154. Sail Boats

1927 Exposition d'art Canadien, Musée du Jeu de Paume, Paris
131. Le lac
132. Sur les collines
133. Le village (NGC)

1927 49th annual RCA
146. Melting Snow 1928-108
147. Autumn Trees
148. The Village, Winter
149. The Bridge

1928 Third Annual Exhibition of Canadian Art, NGC, Ottawa
103. The Village, Winter

1928 Willingdon Arts Competition , Ottawa
Melting Snow, Knowlton

1928 50th Annual RCA
109. Snowflakes F9-144

1928 Canadian Paintings by The Group of Seven Exhibition
(as invited contributor)
79. The Open Stream

1929 Fourth Annual Exhibition of Canadian Art, NGC, Ottawa
105. Melting Snow
106. Snowflakes
107. The Open Stream

1929 Canadian National Exhibition
450. Birch Trees, Autumn

1929 51st Annual RCA
141. The Bay
142. Autumn, Laurentian Mountains
143. Winter Landscape
144. Summer

1929 RCA S7 Calgary
106. Old House, Ile Perrot
107. Autumn

1930 An Exhibition of Paintings by Contemporary Canadian Artists, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, and tour
40. Snowflakes

1930 An Exhibition of The Group of Seven (as invited contributor)
101. Red Barns
101a. From My Studio Window
102. Summer Landscape

1930 Fifth Annual Exhibition of Canadian Art, NGC, Ottawa
105. Autumn, Laurentian Mountains
106. Winter Landscape
107. Summer

1930 Canadian National Exhibition
128. Summer Landscape
129. From my Studio Window

1931 52nd Annual RCA
188. Wenonah
189. The Farm
189a. Barns, Winter

1931 An Exhibition of The Group of Seven (as invited contributor)
125. The Barns

1931 Sixth Annual Exhibition of Canadian Art, NGC, Ottawa
186. Baie St. Paul, Winter
187. In the Bay

1931 British Empire Trade Fair, Buenos Aires
Melting Snow, Knowlton

1932 Seventh Annual Exhibition of Canadian Art, NGC
178. Wenonah
179. The Farm

1932 53rd Annual RCA
133. The Hillside Farm
134. Ile Perrot, Quebec

1933 Eighth Annual Exhibition of Canadian Art, NGC
178. Ile Perrot, P.Q.

1933 Opening Exhibition of Paintings from Canadian National Gallery, Winnipeg Art Gallery
37. In the Laurentians

1933 Paintings by the Canadian Group of Painters, Heinz Art Salon, Atlantic City

1933 An Exhibition of Paintings by The Canadian Group of Painters, Art Gallery of Toronto, (November)
46. In the Bay
47. Autumn in the Laurentians
48. The Young Squaw

1933 54th Annual RCA
132. A Laurentian Village
133. Happy Valley

1934 Canadian Group of Painters, AAM

1934 Spring Exhibition
212. Late Winter
213. A Village Street
214. The Sunlit Valley

1935 56th Annual RCA
179. A Village Street
180. The River Road

1935 Spring Exhibition
211. Castle of Industry
212. Melting Snow
213. Early Spring
214. Study in Rose and Green

1936 An Exhibition of Paintings by The Canadian Group of Painters, AGT
62. Melting Snow
63. Green and Rose

1936 Exhibition of Contemporary Canadian Painting, Carnegie Corp. N.Y.
61. Ripening Fields

1936 57th Annual RCA
137. Winter Sunshine

1936 Spring Exhibition
284 High Water
285. Melting Snow
286. Ski Trails
287. Autumn

1937-38 Canadian Group of Painters, AGT and AAM

1937 Exhibition of Paintings, Drawings and Sculpture by Artists of the British Empire Overseas, (Coronation Exhibition), Royal Institute Galleries, London

1937 58th Annual RCA
148. The Lake

1937 Spring Exhibition
187. Beyond the Shadows
188. Winter Landscape

1938 59th Annual RCA
152. Birch Trees

1938 A Century of Canadian Art, The Tate Gallery, London
151. Birch Trees, Autumn
152. Quebec Village, Winter
153. The Laurentians, Autumn

1939 Exhibition of Paintings by H. Mabel May, ARCA, James Wilson & Co., Ottawa. (list unavailable)

1939 Spring Exhibition AAM
220. Blue and Silver
221. The Farm
222. Old House by the Roadside

1939 Art Association of Montreal Special Summer Show, April/July
Knowlton in Winter

1939 Exhibition of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts, New York World Fair, May-June
F11 New York
49. Old House by the Roadside

1939 Exhibition of the Canadian Group of Painters, New York World Fair, August-September
Birch Trees, Autumn

1940 61st Annual RCA
109. Mountain Slope

1940 Exhibition and Sale of Paintings in Aid of the Canadian National Committee on Refugees, N.G.C., October
65. Summer Landscape

1940 Andre Bieler et Le Groupe 'Le Caveau', Ottawa
42. Memories
43. Winter Landscape
44. Sketch

1941 58th Annual Spring Exhibition
133. Early June

1941 Canadian National Exhibition, Toronto
House on a Hill

1941 RCA Travelling exhibit
35. Mountain Side

1942-3 Canadian Group of Painters, A.G.T. and A.A.M.
36. Hilltop

1943 Spring Exhibition
133. In the Garden
134. The Lake

1944 Pintura Canadense Contemporanea, Rio De Janeiro, Museo Nacional de Belas Artes

1945 The Development of Painting in Canada, The Art Gallery of Ontario and touring
164. Birch Trees, Autumn, c.1929

1947-48 Canadian Group of Painters, A.G.T. and A.A.M.
66. Early Spring

1947 Canadian Women Artists, Riverside Museum, New York.

50. Ripening Fields

1947 68th Annual RCA
116. The Farm

1949 Fifty Years of Painting in Canada, Art Gallery of Toronto
59. Birch Trees, Autumn

1949 70th Annual RCA
60. The Blue Cape

1950 Special Sale of Paintings by H. Mabel May , ARCA, the Dominion Gallery, Montreal

1951 Mabel May, The Roberts Gallery, Toronto

1952 Mabel May Exhibition, Vancouver Art Gallery

1952 73rd Annual RCA
62. Head of a Young Girl
63. Ripening Fields

1955 Exhibition of Paintings by Old and New Masters, University of New Brunswick, Bonar Law-Bennett Library, Fredericton
25. The Three Sisters

1960 CNE, Canadian Cancer Society Exhibition
Indian Woman, Oka

1964 Stratford Festival, Stratford, June - September
Indian Woman, Oka

1966 The Beaver Hall Hill Group, The National Gallery of Canada and touring
9. The Village
10. Melting Snow

1966 Fred Landon Branch Library,London Public Library and Art Museum,London

1966 Terminal Towers Opening, Hamilton
Indian Woman, Oka

1967 Spring Exhibition
41. The Pink Balloon

1971 Mabel May, ARCA, Gallery of the Golden Key, Vancouver
37 works

1972 Canadian Painting: Yesterday and Today, Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton and touring
12. The Three Sisters

1974 From Macamic to Montreal / Chez Arthur et Caillou le pierre, Man and His World, organized by the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts
Street Scene, Montreal,

1975 From Women's Eyes: Women Painters in Canada, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston
37. The Regatta
38. The Village

1976 Through Canadian Eyes: Trends and Influences in Canadian Art 1815-1965, Glenbow Alberta Institute
81. The Three Sisters, c.1915

1980 L'Art des Cantons de l'est/1800 -1950, Université de Sherbrooke, Centre culturel, Galerie d'Art
38. La fonte des neiges, Knowlton (Melting Snow, Knowlton)

1984 British Columbia Women Artists 1885-1985, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria and touring
11. Portrait of Mrs. Lee, c 1934

1984-85 Lethbridge Legacy: A Lethbridge Heritage Exhibition, Southern Alberta Art Gallery
Lowtide, Lower St. Lawrence, 1939

1985 Canadian Historical Art From the Permanent Collections of the University of Lethbridge, Southern Alberta Art Gallery
Lowtide, Lower St. Lawrence, 1939

1991 Artists of the Beaver Hall Group, Kaspar Gallery, Toronto October-November