





31 Alexander Colville

PC CC 1920 – 2013

August

acrylic polymer emulsion on board, on verso signed, titled, dated 1964 and inscribed *Acrylic Polymer Emulsion (used as binder in gesso paint and for final protective layer)/E 7484/7/5*
17 ½ × 34 ½ in, 44.5 × 87.6 cm

PROVENANCE

Collection of the Artist
Acquired directly from the Artist by Lady Jean Brinckman (née Southam), 1966
By descent to the present Private Estate, Ontario

LITERATURE

Modern Realism and Surrealism, American Federation of Arts, 1965, listed
Statements: 18 Canadian Artists, MacKenzie Art Gallery, 1967, reproduced page 35
Alex Colville, Kestner-Gesellschaft, 1969, listed page 22 and reproduced page 27
Alex Colville, Marlborough Fine Art, 1970, listed page 10 and reproduced page 24
David Burnett, *Colville*, Art Gallery of Ontario, 1983, reproduced page 142

EXHIBITED

American Federation of Arts, New York, *Modern Realism and Surrealism*, September 1965 – September 1966, catalogue #3

MacKenzie Art Gallery, Regina, *Statements: 18 Canadian Artists*, November 16 – December 17, 1967
Kestner-Gesellschaft, Hannover, *Alex Colville*, November 20, 1969 – January 10, 1970, catalogue #15
Marlborough Fine Art, London, *Alex Colville*, January 16 – February 1970, catalogue #13
Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, *Alex Colville: A Retrospective*, July 22 – September 18, 1983, traveling in 1983 – 1984 to the Museum Ludwig, Cologne; Dalhousie University Art Gallery, Halifax; Staatliche Kunsthalle Berlin; Montreal Museum of Fine Arts; and Vancouver Art Gallery, catalogue #31

MAJOR PAINTINGS BY well-known artists have both an internal and an external history. We can readily appreciate the intricacies and the overall sense of balance, harmony and contentment in Alex Colville’s *August*. At the same time, thanks to our possession of correspondence between the artist and Lady Jean Brinckman (who purchased the work in 1966 as a wedding gift for her daughter) as well as from Wolfgang Fischer, his art dealer in the 1960s, and various art galleries internationally where the work was shown, we know more about the biography of this painting than usual. The question is where and to what effects these histories intersect and shape our understanding of the work.

August is presented from an unusual, low angle, as if we are lying in the grass and flowers in the foreground, looking up at the young girl who is mostly turned away from us and walking out of the frame to the right. Only a relative could identify her as the Colvilles’ daughter, Ann (Colville confirms this in a descriptive letter to Lady Brinckman). Forming an intricate background

to this action in an otherwise still scene are the regular, even “proper” frame buildings in the village of Port Williams, near Wolfville, Nova Scotia. Between the girl and these structures stands the metal framework of a bridge, its black upright structures creating a diaphanous and methodically complex web of lines and carefully plotted geometries, always a fascination for Colville. The artist used bridges in many of his works to suggest both passageways and, as in this case, a separation or barrier. Tying the floral foreground to the deep space of the image is a line of delicately painted mature trees. In his characteristically laconic yet descriptive way, Colville’s title tells us that we are in August here. That prompt can evoke both the sound of the doubtless plentiful insects and the smells of late-summer grass, dry between the flowers.

Colville’s national and international fame was dramatically on the rise in the 1960s. He designed Canada’s abidingly popular coin set for the 1967 Centennial. In 1966, he represented the country at the prestigious *Venice Biennale*. No wonder, then, that the eventual buyer of *August* wrote to him to commission a specific painting. In a letter of response in August 1966, Colville patiently and decorously explained that he rarely accepted commissions (the Centennial coins notwithstanding), that “the conception of one of my paintings usually has to emerge out of my experience.”¹ Hence we see the inclusion of family members and familiar surroundings, features that guarantee the authenticity of Colville’s paintings. We might ask, then, is it the visual complexity—the collaboration of organic and geometrical forms, both natural and human—that attracts Colville to the scene he depicted in *August*, or did he heighten these effects with the inclusion of the geometric aspects of the half-concealed bridge? Characteristically, the image ends up being complex yet readily accessible. It is quietly sophisticated.

A number of detailed, hand-written letters from the artist to Lady Brinckman, along with the exhibition and gallery labels on the reverse of the painting and further correspondence between Colville’s dealer at the time (Fischer, the director of Marlborough Fine Art [London, New York] and a close associate of the artist), remind us that pictures of this quality by artists of renown exist in a complex commercial world as well as in the intimacy of a collector’s home.

The painting has an extensive exhibition history. We learn in one letter from the artist to Lady Brinckman that he was becoming increasingly frustrated when he tried to reclaim the painting from the American Federation of Arts in New York, which handled it as a part of *Modern Realism and Surrealism*, the touring exhibition in New York State in 1965 – 1966. The labels on the back of the painting trace its subsequent travels and exhibition history, including its appearance in a Centennial exhibition at the MacKenzie Art Gallery, University of Regina, in 1967; its trip to the Kestner-Gesellschaft, Hannover, Germany, in 1969 – 1970; Colville’s first solo show in London, in early 1970; and the 1983 – 1984 retrospective that began at the Art Gallery of Ontario and toured extensively. Forty years later, *August* has emerged again, still inside the stable confines of Colville’s self-made and beautiful frame.



Lady Jean Brinckman (née Southam), circa 1930
Courtesy of Lady Jean Brinckman Family Archives

We thank Mark A. Cheetham, author of *Alex Colville: The Observer Observed*, for contributing the above essay. He is a professor of art history at the University of Toronto and a freelance curator and art writer.

1. Colville to Lady Jean Brinckman, August 31, 1966, Lady Jean Brinckman Family Archives.

A file of original letters from the artist to Lady Brinckman is included with this lot.

ESTIMATE: \$500,000 – 700,000