



21 Frederic Marlett Bell-Smith

OSA RCA SCA 1846 – 1923

Lights of a City Street

oil on canvas, signed and dated 1894 and on verso titled on the Hudson's Bay Company Collection label and the exhibition labels

52 ½ x 78 ¾ in, 133.4 x 200 cm

PROVENANCE

Robert Simpson Company, Toronto

Collection of the Hudson's Bay Company, Canada

LITERATURE

18th Exhibition of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts, National Gallery of Canada, 1897, listed

Memorial Exhibition of Paintings by F.M. Bell-Smith, RCA, OSA, Art Gallery of Toronto, 1923, listed, unpaginated

"F.M. Bell Smith" [obituary], circa 1923, OCAD University Archives, mentioned page 1, <https://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/4582/>

The Development of Painting in Canada, 1665 – 1945, Art Gallery of Toronto, 1945, listed page 24

Three Hundred Years of Canadian Art, National Gallery of Canada, 1967, listed page 100, reproduced page 101

100 Years: Evolution of the Ontario College of Art, Art Gallery of Ontario, 1976, listed

J. Russell Harper, *Painting in Canada: A History*, second edition, 1977, reproduced page 242

Roger Boulet, *Frederic Marlett Bell-Smith (1846 – 1923)*, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, 1977, reproduced page 24

Peter Mellen, *Landmarks of Canadian Art*, 1978, reproduced page 137

Edith G. Firth, *Toronto in Art: 150 Years through Artists' Eyes*, 1983, reproduced page 66

Jon Caulfield, "The Imagined Cities of Three Canadian Painters," *Urban History Review*, vol. 20, no. 1, 1991, listed page 13 note 29

Mike Filey, "Fave Painting Tells a Story," *Sunday Sun* (Toronto), January 21, 2001

Mike Filey, *Toronto Sketches 8: "The Way We Were,"* 2004, reproduced page 10

EXHIBITED

National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, *18th Exhibition of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts*, March 9, 1897, catalogue #17

Art Gallery of Toronto, *Memorial Exhibition of Paintings by F.M. Bell-Smith*, RCA, OSA, 1923, catalogue #25

Art Gallery of Toronto, *The Development of Painting in Canada, 1665 – 1945*, January 1945, traveling in 1945 to the Art Association of Montreal; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; and Musée de la province de Québec, Quebec City, catalogue #78

National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, *Three Hundred Years of Canadian Art*, May 12 – September 17, 1967, traveling to the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, October 20 – November 20, 1967, catalogue #161

Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, *100 Years: Evolution of the Ontario College of Art*, November 5, 1976 – January 2, 1977, traveling to the Art Gallery of Hamilton, February 3 – 27, 1977; Rodman Hall Arts Centre, Brock University, St. Catharines, March 4 – 27, 1977; and Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery, March 31 – April 24, 1977, catalogue #12

Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, *Frederic Marlett Bell-Smith (1846 – 1923)*, September 1977, traveling November 1977 – July 1978 to Calgary, Oshawa, Stratford, Kingston, London and Windsor

Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, *Exhibition of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts*, November 14, 1980 – January 4, 1981, label on verso

NEATLY ATTIRED PEDESTRIANS stroll the bustling Toronto intersection of King and Yonge Streets on a rainy evening in Frederic Marlett Bell-Smith's winsome *Lights of a City Street* (1894). Rendered in the "pink and mauve accents" characteristic of the artist's later work,¹ its glistening surfaces are reminiscent of Gustave Caillebotte's *Paris Street; Rainy Day* (1877), in which the famed boulevards of the French capital are similarly animated by umbrella-carrying *flâneurs* and *flâneuses*. The Canadian artist likely encountered Impressionism during continental travels in 1891, but subsequent shifts in his practice are primarily attributable to his French studies with the American expatriate painter Thomas Alexander Harrison (1853 – 1930).² Harrison's foundational contributions to the Impressionist-adjacent style of tonalism have been credited with inspiring Marcel Proust's fictional painter Elstir in *In Search of Lost Time* and, indeed, the novelist's own evocations of place.³

In *Lights of a City Street*, Bell-Smith demonstrates a precocious awareness of the confluence of modern media driving the city's transformation into a burgeoning metropolis. At centre left, the subtle flash of a pantograph striking an overhead wire powers a trolley's blazing headlamp. Like the spangled illumination of James McNeill Whistler's *Nocturne in Black and Gold* (1875), these flickering indications of artificial light here announce the 1892 arrival of electrified public transit to Toronto's Belt Line streetcar route.⁴ Raised further aloft, telephone wires proclaim a more immaterial form of connectivity, while coal gas fuels the distant glimmer of street lights.⁵

Bell-Smith additionally foregrounds two modern media with which he had forged deep personal connections: newspapers and rail. News sellers peddling copies of the *Evening Telegram* allude to Bell-Smith's long career as an illustrator for the *Canadian Illustrated News*, beginning in 1872. Meanwhile, a sign affixed to the grey-blue facade of the Dominion Bank Building at right advertises the Grand Trunk Railway, the world's longest rail line when completed in 1859.⁶ But it is Bell-Smith's association with another railway that is obliquely conjured here.

In 1887, Bell-Smith joined an inaugural cohort of artists granted free passes on the newly completed Canadian Pacific Railway under the sponsorship of then CPR vice-president William Van Horne. A prominent art collector and amateur artist as well as a powerful industrialist, Van Horne hoped to entice potential travelers with artists' images of scenic western landscapes. Other artists given rail passes in 1887 included the renowned Montreal photographer William Notman and



GUSTAVE CAILLEBOTTE
Paris Street; Rainy Day
 oil on canvas, 1877
 83 1/2 x 108 3/4 in, 212.2 x 276.2 cm
 Collection of the Art Institute of Chicago, 1964.336
 Charles H. and Mary F.S. Worcester Collection

Not for sale with this lot



FREDERICK BELL-SMITH
Heart of the Empire
 watercolour on paper, 1909
 22 1/2 x 35 in, 57.2 x 89 cm
 Museum of Vancouver Collection, PA 19

Not for sale with this lot

the president of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts, Lucius O'Brien. After exhibiting his CPR pictures at Pell's "Art Rooms" in Montreal in 1888, Bell-Smith would continue taking sketching trips by rail to the West Coast and Rocky Mountains, making this an annual tradition after 1898.⁷

If Bell-Smith's paintings of Canada's breathtaking western landscapes brought him initial success (and his first National Gallery of Canada sale), the Dickensian accents of *Lights of a City Street* showcase another facet of his protean talent: namely, as an in-demand reciter of the Victorian novelist and other popular authors. In his memoirs of Canadian art, *Ars Longa* (1938), the critic Newton MacTavish affectionately recalled "a never-ending discussion as to whether 'old Bell' "—as Bell-Smith was known to intimates—"was a better reciter than a painter."⁸ In *Lights of a City Street*, Bell-Smith renders Dickensian incident with a photographic exactitude that speaks to his early experience as a photo retoucher.

Dennis Reid attributed the precise rendering of faces in Bell-Smith's painting *The Return from School* (1884) to the artist's "years of experience in the photography business, where composite images were created in the studio from individually shot figures."⁹ The same can be said of the detailed likenesses in *Lights of a City Street*, which include both the artist's son (tipping his hat) and a self-portrait in the act of purchasing a copy of the *Evening Telegram*.¹⁰ According to a plaque affixed to the painting's frame, the police officer depicted alongside these figures would subsequently be employed by Simpson's department store in Toronto, where the beloved picture hung in the Arcadian Court for many years.

The individualized faces in the crowd of *Lights of a City Street* simultaneously recall the profession of Bell-Smith's father as a miniaturist.¹¹ It was the imperiled status of that art form in the wake of photography's increasing popularity that had led the family to immigrate to Canada in the mid-1860s. Ironically, this move would only bring Bell-Smith Jr. further into the orbit of the new medium. Soon after disembarking in Montreal in 1867, the UK-born artist found employment as a photo retoucher in the studio of James Inglis, subsequently relocating to Hamilton, Ontario, to join a new Inglis studio in that city. *Lights of a City Street* dexterously balances photographic detail with the subtle atmospheric effects of watercolour—Bell-Smith's first choice of medium, and one that he would continue to employ in his coveted cityscapes of Paris and London, such as *Heart of the Empire* (1909).

Bell-Smith is widely recognized for his professional service. A founding member of the Society of Canadian Artists in the year of his arrival in Canada, and of the Western Art League in 1881, he participated in the creation of the Royal Canadian Academy, of which he was listed as an associate member in 1880. A respected teacher, Bell-Smith lectured at the Ontario School of Art in Toronto (1877–78), was director of fine arts of Alma College in St. Thomas (1881–90) and later Drawing Master to Central Public Schools in London, Ontario (1882–88), and completed his pedagogical career as principal of the Western Branch of the Toronto Art School (1888–91). Most consequential of all, however, was Bell-Smith's early advocacy of a "distinctly Canadian Art" as president of the Ontario Society of Artists in a 1905 letter addressed to Governor General Earl Grey.¹²

Lights of a City Street anticipates Bell-Smith's vision of a national art. One of Canada's most important urban landscapes,



detail

its hopeful depiction of the amenities of modern life and of the media of news and rail binding a fledgling nation stands in sharp contrast to more anxious images of modernity, such as the forbidding skyscrapers of Robert F. Gagen's *Temples of Commerce* (1914), painted two decades later. Mobilizing the cutting-edge resources of tonalism and composite photography, Bell-Smith portrays an entrepreneurial and up-to-date metropolis confident in its own future prosperity.

We thank Adam Lauder for contributing the above essay. Lauder is an art historian based in Toronto and an adjunct professor at the Ontario College of Art and Design University.

1. J. Russell Harper, *Painting in Canada: A History*, 2nd ed. (1966; repr., Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 191.

2. See Roger Boulet, "Frederic Marlett Bell-Smith," in *Frederic Marlett Bell-Smith (1846–1923)* (Victoria: Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, 1977), exhibition catalogue, 23.

3. See David Adams Cleveland, "Landscape, Memory, Sensation: Alexander Harrison, Tonalist Painter and Model for Marcel Proust," *Magazine Antiques*, Nov.–Dec. 2010, 142–49.

4. See Louis H. Pursley, *Street Railways of Toronto, 1861–1921* (Los Angeles: Electronic Railway Publications, 1958).

5. See Christopher Andreae, "The Age of Industry," in *Toronto: A Short Illustrated History of Its First 12,000 Years*, ed. Ronald F. Williamson (Toronto: Lorimer, 2008), 77.

6. *Ibid.*, 75.

7. See Boulet, "Frederic Marlett Bell-Smith," 18–21, 29.

8. Newton MacTavish, *Ars Longa* (Toronto: Ontario Publishing, 1938), 130.

9. Dennis Reid, "The Return from School," *Canadian Art*, Spring 2013, 66. See also Eva Major-Marothy, "The Wrong Commemoration: Frederic Marlett Bell-Smith's Paintings of the State Funeral of Sir John Thompson," in *Public Art in Canada: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Annie Gérin and James S. McLean (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 35.

10. See Edith G. Firth, *Toronto in Art: 150 Years through Artists' Eyes* (Toronto: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1983), 66.

11. See Boulet, "Frederic Marlett Bell-Smith," 16.

12. Bell-Smith quoted in Boulet, "Frederic Marlett Bell-Smith," 31.

ESTIMATE: \$100,000 – 150,000