



108 Helen Galloway McNicoll

ARCA RBA 1879 – 1915

Washerwomen on the Loing / Washing Clothes

oil on canvas, signed and on verso inscribed 59 and variously and stamped with the Artist's Estate stamp and Studio Helen G. McNicoll RBA ARCA, catalogue #46 indistinctly
29 x 34 ½ in, 73.7 x 87.6 cm

PROVENANCE

Emilie McNicoll
By descent to Dollie and May McNicoll
Morris Gallery, Toronto, 1976
Ross Woodman
Masters Gallery Ltd., Calgary
Lillian Mayland McKimm Collection, Calgary
then Vancouver Island

LITERATURE

Postcard from Miss Helen McNicoll (Moret-sur-Loing) to Master Charles McNicoll, 27 Reginald St., Derby, England, July 31, 1908, *A Collection of the McNicoll Family's Postcards*, catalogue #1
Twenty-fifth Spring Exhibition, Art Association of Montreal, 1909, listed page 19
“The Art Gallery,” *Montreal Daily Star*, March 17, 1909, listed page 14
“Spring Art Exhibition,” *Gazette* (Montreal), March 24, 1909, listed page 9
“A Glimpse at the Pictures for the Spring Exhibition,” *Montreal Daily Star*, March 27, 1909, listed page 8
“Twenty-fifth Spring Art Exhibition at Art Gallery,” *Montreal Daily Star*, April 9, 1909, listed page 6
“Pictures That Are Being Talked About,” *Montreal Daily Witness*, April 15, 1909, listed page 3

Thirtieth Annual Exhibition, Royal Canadian Academy of Arts, 1909, listed page 15
“National Art Exhibition,” *Evening Citizen* (Ottawa), May 11, 1909, listed page 5
“More Examples of Canadian Art,” *Evening Journal* (Ottawa), May 19, 1909, listed page 6
Catalogue of Department of Fine Arts, Canadian National Exhibition, 1909, listed page 23, reproduced
“Canadian Art at the Exhibition,” *Toronto Daily Star*, September 7, 1909, listed page 9
Memorial Exhibition of Paintings by the Late Helen McNicoll, RBA, ARCA, Art Association of Montreal, 1925, titled as *Washerwomen on the Loing*, listed page 5
“Memorial Show of Work by Canadian: Sunlight Is Dominant Note in Paintings by Late Helen G. McNicoll, A.R.C.A.,” *Gazette* (Montreal), November 10, 1925, listed page 5
Helen McNicoll Oil Paintings from the Estate, Part Two, Morris Gallery, 1976, titled as *Washing Clothes*, listed and reproduced, unpaginated
James Purdie, “At the Galleries: McNicoll, Eastman,” *Globe and Mail*, February 21, 1976, listed and reproduced page 22

EXHIBITED

Art Association of Montreal, *Twenty-fifth Spring Exhibition*, April 2 – 24, 1909, catalogue #240
Royal Canadian Academy of Arts, Ottawa, *Thirtieth Annual Exhibition*, May 6 – 21, 1909, catalogue #92a
Canadian National Exhibition, Toronto, Department of Fine Arts, August 30 – September 13, 1909, catalogue #140
Art Association of Montreal, *Memorial Exhibition of Paintings by the Late Helen McNicoll*, RBA, ARCA, November 7 – December 6, 1925, catalogue #46
Morris Gallery, Toronto, *McNicoll Inventory*, 1976, catalogue #59
Morris Gallery, Toronto, *Helen McNicoll Oil Paintings from the Estate, Part Two*, February 7 – 21, 1976, catalogue #3

IN *WASHERWOMEN ON THE LOING / WASHING CLOTHES*, Helen McNicoll applies her celebrated skill with light and colour to the theme of women's work. Painted in France, the canvas shows two women performing a mundane chore—laundry. The pair diligently wash clothing by hand on the banks of the river Loing, apparently unaware of the artist or viewer. McNicoll treats the figures and their task with a certain gravity, even as she uses the seemingly quotidian subject matter as an excuse to experiment with a distinctly modern approach to style.

Born in Toronto and raised in Montreal, McNicoll was one among a generation of ambitious Canadian artists who moved to Europe in pursuit of a professional artistic career. After receiving her first training at the Art Association of Montreal, McNicoll enrolled at the Slade School of Fine Art in London. Never content to stay in one place long, she traveled extensively throughout her career to locations such as Cornwall, Venice, Belgium and France. The artist often focused her brush on the labour of the rural girls and women she witnessed while on the move. While this subject matter was common among artists of the period, McNicoll's treatment stands out for its lack of sentimentality.

In *Washerwomen*, for example, McNicoll highlights the physically difficult nature of the work. The women bend over to wash their items on a board, kneeling in three-sided wooden boxes

designed to keep themselves relatively dry. The straw under the legs of the smaller figure presumably granted only slight relief from this uncomfortable position. The glimpse we see of the nearer woman's hands reveals they are rough and red from the long hours spent scrubbing. As a professional working artist herself, perhaps the theme of hard work resonated with McNicoll on a personal level.

While the laundry method portrayed in *Washerwomen* looks old-fashioned to a twenty-first-century eye, McNicoll depicts a surprisingly modern practice. In 1851, as part of an effort to prevent the spread of diseases such as cholera, France mandated that open-air washhouses be constructed in every town and village for women to do their families' laundry. After boiling and soaping the clothes in the washhouse, the women rinsed their laundry in the local river, as seen here. On one hand, village laundries made a private household task alarmingly public: women quite literally “aired the dirty laundry.” But these spaces also afforded an opportunity for women to socialize, share news and build community bonds. McNicoll's canvas *A Welcome Breeze* (1909, private collection)—painted and exhibited the same year as *Washerwomen*—represents the final step in this process. Now back at home, a woman hangs the clean laundry to dry in her backyard.

Washerwomen, like McNicoll's other paintings of women and children working, shows the artist's careful observation of the figure in different settings and poses. Here, the figures ground the balanced composition, drawing our eye before allowing it to wander into the background, across the rippling surface of the river to the village on the opposite shore. The clear shallow water and patches of green plant life allow McNicoll to play with the effects of sunlight on the scene. Capturing these transient effects was a fundamental tenet of the Impressionist approach she adopted while traveling abroad and would ultimately become the most celebrated quality of her oeuvre.

This canvas was painted in a moment of career success, one year after she won the Art Association of Montreal's inaugural Jessie Dow Prize. As such, expectations for her next pictures were high among reviewers. *Washerwomen*, along with several other works, was exhibited at the 1909 annual exhibitions of the Art Association of Montreal, the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts and the Canadian National Exhibition. Several critics noted with interest that her submissions had come directly from France and explicitly praised the modernity of her work. One highlighted the pursuit of sunshine by artists like McNicoll: “Given this play of light, no object is too trivial, too unimportant for the consideration of the painter. Under the artist's brush, a common subject ... vibrates, lives, smiles, and is radiant; revealing to one's surprise the poetry hidden in everything.”¹ With this philosophy, McNicoll convinces the viewer that even laundry can be a thing of beauty.

We thank Samantha Burton, Assistant Professor (Teaching) of Art History at the University of Southern California, for contributing the above essay. In 2017, Burton authored the Art Canada Institute publication *Helen McNicoll: Life & Work*.

1. “Spring Art Exhibition,” *Montreal Gazette*, March 24, 1909, 9.

ESTIMATE: \$250,000 – 350,000