



140 Kathleen Moir Morris

AAM ARCA BHG 1893 – 1986

March

oil on canvas, signed and on verso titled and inscribed with the artist's address on the exhibition label and variously, circa 1947
20 × 24 in, 50.8 × 61 cm

PROVENANCE

A Distinguished Private Collection, Vancouver

LITERATURE

Canadian Group of Painters, Art Gallery of Toronto, 1950, listed, unpaginated (possibly)

EXHIBITED

Art Association of Montreal, *Spring Exhibition*, 1947, titled as *March in the Laurentians* (possibly)
Art Gallery of Toronto, *Canadian Group of Painters*, November 10 – December 17, 1950, catalogue #63 (possibly)

KATHLEEN MOIR MORRIS considered herself a “winter painter,” and from the 1920s until the 1950s, she was well known in Montreal and Toronto for her snowy cityscapes and rural villages. In the *Montreal Standard* on June 10, 1939, the year she had a solo exhibition at the Art Association of Montreal (AAM), Richard H. Haviland wrote an article on Morris entitled “Landscape Painter: Noted for Winter Scenes.” Trained at the AAM school from 1907 until 1917, Morris learned modernist techniques from teachers

such as William Brymner and Impressionist landscape painter Maurice Cullen, alongside other important Canadian artists including Prudence Heward and Anne Savage.¹

While the AAM (now the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts) was frequently accused of discouraging local artists from experimenting stylistically, in 1927 it acquired its first works by modern Montreal artists, including Morris's *After “Grand Mass”*, *Berthier-en-Haut* (1927).² Although Morris was not an official member of the Beaver Hall Group, she was friends with many of its members, and she has frequently been written about and exhibited in dialogue with them.

March (circa 1947) is a characteristic Morris painting in its snowy scene that includes nature, architecture, a diminutive human subject and horses. Morris was known during her lifetime as a lover of animals, and she supported the SPCA.³ The style is also characteristic of Morris's work in the Impressionistic face of the driver, in its realistic animals, colourful buildings, and thickly applied paint that evokes melting snow on a spring day in Canada. Her quick brush-strokes capture the impression of both movement and atmospheric effects.

Morris was born in Montreal, and she frequently painted urban scenes, as in *Saint Cecile Street, Montreal* (after 1933, McMichael Canadian Art Collection) and *Looking Up Belmont Street towards Saint James Cathedral* (circa 1936, Power Corporation of Canada Art Collection). She also painted the Byward Market in Ottawa, where she lived from 1922 or 1923 until 1929. That same year she was elected as an associate member of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts, becoming a full member in 1940.

Morris also depicted scenes of horses and humans in Quebec City, for example *Woodcarts*, *Saint Roch Market*, *Quebec City* (circa 1925, private collection). As one art historian has observed, by the 1930s, horse-drawn carriages were a rare presence in Canada, so Morris's many paintings that portray this mode of transportation are deliberately nostalgic for an earlier time.⁴ Nonetheless, she did sometimes depict automobiles, for instance in *Cab Stand*, *Dominion Square, Montreal* (1928).

Although Morris was a landscape painter, she departed from her contemporaries the Group of Seven due to her inclusion of human subjects and her choice to depict cityscapes. Morris became a member of the Canadian Group of Painters in 1939; this group had been formed by both Montreal and Toronto artists in 1933 because of the lack of exhibition space for experimental (that is, modernist) painters, according to Anne Savage in 1960.⁵ By joining the Canadian Group of Painters, Morris became part of a like-minded collective and had increased opportunities to exhibit her work, both nationally and internationally.

Before 1933, Morris, along with members of both the Beaver Hall Group and the Group of Seven, was fortified by the patronage of Eric Brown, director of the National Gallery of Canada. In 1924, following the *Spring Exhibition* at the AAM, the National Gallery purchased Morris's painting *Waiting*, a depiction of several horse-drawn sleighs outside a church.⁶ Morris also received positive reinforcement when her works were included in the Canadian Section of the British Empire Exhibitions at Wembley Park, London, first in 1924 and subsequently in 1925.⁷

The 1924 iteration of the British Empire Exhibition toured in three other cities in the UK until March 1925.⁸ Morris's work was singled out by British critics, for instance in London's *Morning Post*, which remarked: “Some of the group are strong in clever women painters, like Miss Kathleen Morris and Miss H. Mabel May.”⁹ In 1925, Morris was also invited, along with several female members of the Beaver Hall Group (which had disbanded in the early 1920s), to exhibit in the *First Pan-American Exhibition of Oil Paintings*, in Los Angeles.¹⁰ Her painting *Going to Church* was included in the show *Pintura Canadense Contemporanea*, in Rio de Janeiro, from 1944 until 1945.

Morris did not date her paintings, so it can be difficult to determine with certainty when a work was created. It appears that Morris may have produced two paintings entitled *March*, as well as one entitled *March in the Laurentians*, which was exhibited in the AAM's *Spring Exhibition* in 1947. Three years later, in 1950, a work entitled *March* was exhibited at the Canadian Group of Painters show at the Art Gallery of Toronto (now the Art Gallery of Ontario). In 1951, a painting entitled *March* was again included in the Canadian Group of Painters show.¹¹ It is possible that, based on the title and the similar price listed, the same painting was included in both exhibitions.

Our painting is clearly not a cityscape in Montreal, Ottawa or Quebec City. It is very possibly a depiction of the Laurentians. What makes this particular work exciting is that it has not been on offer for half a century. *March*, along with Morris's other winter scenes, provides a glimpse into Canada's past—one that is steeped in nostalgia, but one that nevertheless provides insights into how Canadians lived in the early decades of the twentieth century.

We thank Julia Skelly for contributing the above essay. Skelly received a PhD from Queen's University, and she teaches in the Department of Art History at Concordia University.

1. Barbara Meadowcroft, *Painting Friends: The Beaver Hall Women Painters* (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1999), 46.
2. Jacques Des Rochers, “Defining the Beaver Hall Group Today,” in *1920s Modernism in Montreal: The Beaver Hall Group*, ed. Jacques Des Rochers and Brian Foss (Montreal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, in assoc. with Black Dog Publishing, 2015), 80.
3. Meadowcroft, *Painting Friends*, 86.
4. *Ibid.*, 128.
5. Jacques Des Rochers, “The Beaver Hall Group: A Much Anticipated Re-reading,” in *1920s Modernism in Montreal*, 28.
6. Jacques Des Rochers, “Setting the Stage: The Emergence of the Beaver Hall Group,” in *1920s Modernism in Montreal*, 52.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Des Rochers, “Defining the Beaver Hall Group,” 96.
9. Quoted in *ibid.*, 90.
10. *Ibid.*, 100.
11. Frances K. Smith, *Kathleen Moir Morris* (Kingston: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1983), 34–35.

ESTIMATE: \$50,000 – 70,000