



WILLIAM VON MOLL BERCZY
Self-portrait
 watercolour and gouache on ivory, 1783
 Collection of the Royal Ontario Museum

Not for sale with these lots

WILLIAM VON MOLL BERCZY was one of Canada's finest pre-Confederation artists. His life was shaped by the dueling impulses of European settlement and artistic ambition. Often credited as a co-founder of Toronto, he was known for clearing land, developing agricultural hubs, cutting miles of roads and constructing buildings throughout the Markham region. As an artist, he brought his experience painting European patricians to a nascent Canadian confederation, leaving us with masterpieces such as the portrait *Thayendanegea (Joseph Brant)* (1807) and *The Woolsey Family* (1809, both in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada), among many others. His story is one of tenacious individuality that paints a striking portrait of Canada's emerging formation.

Berczy was born as Johann Albrecht Ulrich Moll in 1744 in the town Wallerstein, now in Bavaria, Germany. His father became a

diplomat in Austria, leading him to attend the Vienna Academy of the Arts and later the University of Jena. According to diaries and letters, he traveled widely across Europe to pursue new opportunities and adventures as a diplomat, merchant, and painter of miniature portraits, with extended stays in northern Germany, Poland, Hungary, Turkey and Croatia. Berczy distanced himself from his family, took the new surname Berczy, and in 1780 arrived in Florence to begin a new life as a full-time artist, studying masterworks at the Uffizi and completing portraits and several monumental paintings of Italian and Swiss aristocrats. Seeking even more opportunities for his artistic and entrepreneurial pursuits, Berczy, along with his wife and son, relocated to London in 1790.

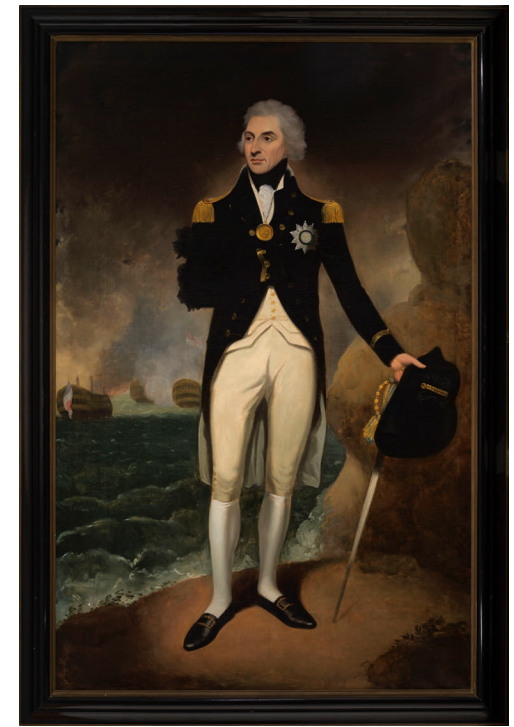
It was in London where Berczy would sign a contract with an English businessman to recruit German settlers to colonize land

in the Genesee area of northern New York state. From the time he and his 135 settlers arrived on the shores of Philadelphia, they encountered countless financial and logistical roadblocks and found themselves in a power struggle with the local British agent. Eventually, Berczy led his group of immigrant families to flee north and ultimately settle 64,000 acres of Upper Canada in the Markham region, north of York, present-day Toronto. Berczy was given a contract to extend Yonge Street from York northward to Lake Simcoe, helping tend the land and construct buildings along the route. Mounting debt, supply shortages and the overworking of his settlers led to the project being left partially incomplete, with a third of his original crew defecting for Newark, present-day Niagara-on-the-Lake.

Despite his vision and ambition, Berczy became embroiled in countless legal appeals seeking reimbursement for his colonizing work, traveling to New York and London to plead his case and seek allyship in hopes of settling his grievances. With little avail, Berczy took refuge between Quebec City and Montreal beginning in 1805 to reprioritize his artistic pursuits, developing a manuscript on the history of Canada, drawing architectural plans, and courting patrons for new painting commissions. Berczy was in the company of the most prominent Montreal artists of the day, including François Baillairgé (1759 – 1830), who was mainly a sculptor and architect; watercolourist George Heriot (1759 – 1839); and portraitist Louis Dulongpré (1759 – 1843). His first large Montreal commission was an architectural one, designing the neoclassical Anglican cathedral Christ Church, influenced by Scottish architect James Gibbs.

The two William Berczy paintings offered here represent the first two monumental paintings he completed in Canada. The paintings were a response to the bittersweet news of the Battle of Trafalgar reaching Quebec in December of 1805. In that battle, 27 British battleships resisted 33 Franco-Spanish ships allied as part of Napoleon's invasion of the United Kingdom. Despite the epic win that solidified the British as a naval superpower, their storied Royal Navy officer, Rear Admiral Lord Horatio Nelson, was shot by a French musketeer and died aboard HMS *Victory*, living long enough to witness the successful outcome of the battle. The news caused a swell of patriotism and inspired a series of "Trafalgar Celebrations" in Quebec City, Montreal and Trois-Rivières. Berczy and his oil paintings are not mentioned in the accounts of these celebrations, but a sketch of a commemorative obelisk he proposed for the festivities was discovered among his notes.

The canvases *Rear Admiral Lord Horatio Nelson* (lot 22) and *Battle of Trafalgar* (lot 23), completed between 1807 and 1808, were commissioned by William McGillivray for the North West Company, the fur trading enterprise based in Montreal. The companion paintings were known to hang together in the dining hall at Fort William, near present-day Thunder Bay. When the NWC merged with the Hudson's Bay Company in 1821, the paintings were moved to the HBC's northern headquarters at York Factory, in northwestern Manitoba. They were relocated to the new headquarters in Winnipeg in 1928, before arriving in Toronto in 1974. Both works were included in the comprehensive traveling retrospective of Berczy's work originating at the National Gallery of Canada in 1991.



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