

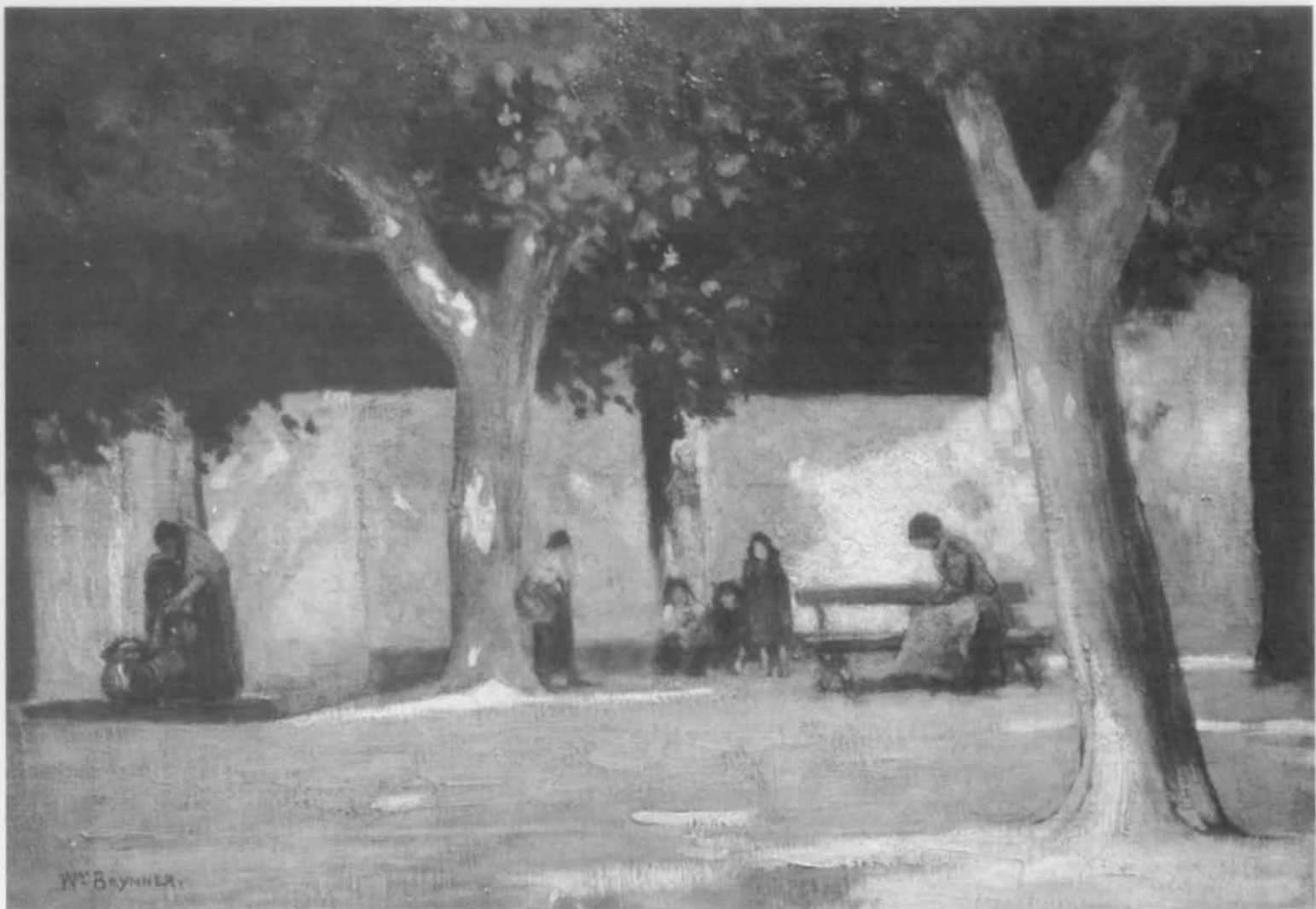


Fig. 1. William Brymner, *Summer Landscape Martiques*, n.d., oil on canvas, 18½" x 26¾".
Coll. Art Gallery of Hamilton, Hamilton, Ontario (Photo: Lloyd Bloom, Hamilton, Ontario).

A Visit to Martiques Summer 1908: Impressions by William Brymner

William Brymner, Edwardian master of the School of the Art Association of Montreal, is referred to by his chroniclers as a dedicated teacher. It was undoubtedly one of his greatest pleasures to get away from the school to paint and one of his chief regrets when he had to return.¹ In summer holidays he lived in the neighbourhood of Montreal, or travelled to the far reaches of the St. Lawrence River Valley, to the east and west coasts of Canada, to the British Isles or to favourite haunts in Northern Europe and the Mediterranean. In 1908 he chose Martiques, a fishing village in the south of France. His impressions of this visit are recorded in manuscript papers held in a private collection.² They are an excellent example of the truth about William Brymner: that he was as clever at creating literary impressions of his experiences as he was at creating images in paint and watercolour.

Keenly observant, he had a sardonic wit and considerable ability as a raconteur. His edited perceptions of that summer of 1908 follow, together with some comments about the work which resulted from his visit.

Grand Café du Soleil
Martiques, 20 July, 1908

Martiques is a fishing village, or rather a town, for it has seven thousand inhabitants, on a salt water lake called Etang de Berre. It is situated at the entrance to a sort of strait leading from the lake to the Mediterranean, three miles away . . . The inhabitants have had *messieurs les peintres* with them for so many generations that they, or their works, have long ceased to be objects of curiosity to them. You are for this reason, left in peace but treated at the same time with great respect, which speaks well for the character of the painters who have frequented the place for the last fifty or more years. Besides this freedom from annoyance . . . you are so sure of getting sunlight day after day that you can count on going on with the same subject for nearly as many days as you like at the same

hour and know that you will have practically the same effect to work from . . .

Most villages much frequented by artists are associated with some man's name whose work has made them known. In the case of Martiques the man is Ziem. He lived in (the town) for a great many years and much of his work was done here. He used its canals and houses and boats to paint scenes from Constantinople and Venice. He even went so far as to put up a small mosque with minaret and all complete, which still stands in his garden. He also kept a gondola, I am told, in the water opposite his house. He thus avoided the necessity of travel and painted quietly at home . . . which reminds me that J. D. Watson, at one time a well-known English illustrator, only needed a fisherman's boots before him in order to make a drawing of a fisherman in any position desired.

All this is not as absurd as it sounds. Ziem had drawings and studies of Constantinople and Venice and in painting his pictures he only required to refer to the facts of nature, such as how a light, colour, or shadow is reflected in water. He would find that the reflection of an object in light is darker than the light itself and that the reflection of a shadow is lighter than the shadow reflected and whatever other modifications it undergoes, as well at Martiques as at Constantinople or Venice. Away from the place too, an artist is less hampered by small facts and is able sometimes better to realise his impressions as a whole. Delacroix makes the remark in his Journal that he does not understand how a man can paint landscape in the country. You can't see a tower when standing at its base you only see some of the stones. However, in making sketches and studies you don't worry about such things but try to find a place that will stay quiet while you paint it and where you are not too bothered by the curious . . .³

. . . (One of the artists) was Mr. Roberti, who had got this year a third medal in the Salon. He is doing impressionist yoke-of-egg looking landscapes. He changes his subject every hour, as an effect, he says, can last no longer. Mr. Amiel does not like the impressionists so explains that Mr. Roberti's medal was got for figure work and not landscape. Mr. Casimir Raymond is further along and is painting watercolour of a very watery kind. He is still, at ten o'clock, working on what he began at half past six in the

morning to the indignation of the true painters who work only in oil and not longer at a time than the effect lasts . . . (why should he change) every hour forsooth? Why should he change till his work's done? . . . Mr. Ducres, who is said to be very rich and therefore merely an amateur . . . paints everything in light purples, even a black boat . . . Mr. Olivier has had a certain success lately with his picture in Paris. His successes were painted on mill board with blue lines appearing here and there around his buildings, so he continues to paint on mill board with blue lines appearing here and there . . .⁴

. . . There then is over there a young lady of Toulon (who) won a scholarship from that town which takes her to *Ecole des Beaux Arts* in Paris. She is alone and professional and paints in oils while two charming young ladies from Marseilles paint in watercolours and are amateurs. This you know for the mother of one of them is with them. This is well for them, as when a girl working at literature or art in France is without a mother or other protector, it is considered by gentlemen generally that they can say anything to her that should not be said to a young girl . . .

. . . Mr. Dragon from Toulon . . . draws his subject with a camera claire, to save time he says, but really we all know (it is) because he could not do it otherwise.

The costumes of all these people are very varied. Mr. Roberti is dressed from head to foot in blue jeans, Olivier in khaki, while (a) Mr. Clement, who is walking about over there in search of the subject he never finds, is dressed in most immaculate white. All three suits have jackets buttoned up to the throat and what are known as *la hussard* trousers, very wide at the tip and tapering to the ankle where a strap and buckle hold them tight. (In addition) there are sporting costumes, very English, knickerbockers as for golf. Nearly everyone is so much in earnest and works so hard that you would really suppose they were all engaged in some serious occupation.

At present the only known work of Brymner's "serious occupation" at Martiques is now owned by the Art Gallery of Hamilton, Ontario. *Summer Landscape, Martiques*,⁵ (Fig. 1) an oil on canvas may well be the same work as another from this visit, titled *Mid-Day Le cours Martiques*,

well documented and reviewed, but its location, medium and measurements not known. *Summer Landscape* does not seem to have been reviewed or shown between 1908 and 1916. However in 1916 at the Thirty-Third Annual Spring Exhibition of the Art Association of Montreal, *Mid-Day Le Cours Martiques* was shown and was reported in the Montreal Star under the following heading:

SPRING PICTURES POORER THAN FOR
SOMETIME IN THE PAST

*Brymner has never exhibited any picture which is more pleasing than Mid-Day Le Cours Martiques. It is a brilliant handling of sunlight and shadows and overhanging trees, the pink tinted wall, the vehement splashes of sunlight and the spaces of grateful shade are done with a certainty and authority that convince.*⁶

B.K. Sandwell reporting on the same exhibition deplored the whole show saying he regretted the fact that "practically without exception the pictures appear to have been painted while the artists were sane and sober . . . Where oh where are the Lymans, the Jacksons, the Hewtons . . . and the rest of the clan who used to assault our unprotected eyes . . . does an artist cease to be a cubist when he ceases to be a cub?" With Brymner he was more gentle: "*Mid-Day Le Cours Martiques* is an excellent example of this painter's latest treatment of high sunlight and rich shadow . . ."

Confusion concerning *Mid-Day Le Cours Martiques* is increased by the fact that we do not know the medium and that a watercolour titled *Le Cours Martiques* was shown in the Twenty-Fifth Spring Exhibition of the Art Association of Montreal in 1909. At this time the art critic of the Montreal Star considered Brymner's watercolour to be "redolent of the quaintness and sunlight of southern France."⁸ In 1910 at the Twenty-Sixth Spring Exhibition, a watercolour titled *At Martiques* was shown. It was in good company with works by Lyman, Morrice, Watson and A.Y. Jackson, the latter exhibiting for the first time with the Art Association of Montreal.⁹ Perhaps either, or both, of these watercolours were studies for *Summer Landscape* (or *Mid-Day Le Cours Martiques*) to be painted later.

Summer Landscape is a fine example of Brymner's best work in the early

1900's. Strong, fresh and filled with colour it is one of the few paintings by this artist which shows some influence from James Wilson Morrice, Brymner's close friend and on occasion in those years, one of the ten or so to be seen around Benscoon Quai at Etang de Berre, Martiques.¹⁰

JANET BRAIDE
MONTREAL, QUEBEC.

Notes:

¹ Brymner, William to Clarence Gagnon, 24th October, 1906. One of many references which recur throughout Brymner's correspondence.

² Manuscript, July 1908, private collection. This article is an excerpt from the larger unpublished manuscript.

³ Often Brymner would join as many as ten painters sitting in the shade of the Benscoon Quai and in a letter of July 25th, 1908, he describes them. Mr. Amiel, sixty-five years old and a retired banker had once had business with a Mr. "Oorquhart" from Montreal. Amiel and his wife had settled in Martiques and he was "like a boy in spirits" and worked "with the greatest enthusiasm."

⁴ Visits are made "from one camp to another". Olivier asks Amiel "Who is that young man who paints everything green? I paint red; you paint blue, M. Ducre purple and Roberti yellow and still each painting seems to look like the thing. Well Well!"

⁵ Oil on canvas, n.d., signed lower left: Wm. Brymner, 18½ x 26¾ Art Gallery of Hamilton, Ontario: 66.43.22

⁶ *Montreal Star*, March 24th, 1916.

⁷ *Scrapbook*, the Art Association of Montreal, 1903-1929, April 1st, 1916, p. 251.

⁸ *Montreal Star*, March 27th, 1909.

⁹ Art Association of Montreal; *Exhibition Catalogue* #6, p. 95.

¹⁰ National Gallery of Canada for the Bath Festival; *James Wilson Morrice 1865-1924*, Exhibition Catalogue, Chronology, p. 13.