

PUBLICATION NOTICE / NOTE DE LECTURE

The Watercolors of David Milne

Gwendolyn OWENS

Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art,
Cornell University, Ithaca, New York,
1984

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The Watercolors of David Milne is an exhibition worth remarking upon for two reasons: the institution which has organized it is American; and a presentation of Milne's watercolours in a well-chosen survey is needed. When (since it does not happen often) an American institution initiates an exhibition of Canadian historical art, the event deserves applause. In the same way that Canada is preoccupied (and properly so) with researching and reconstituting fresh histories of its art, the United States is likewise preoccupied with its own national art. Doubtless, fresh histories are needed on both sides of the border. But there is a price to be paid for such self-absorption if it leads to the kind of provincialism which overlooks or minimizes events in the neighbouring jurisdiction, and the price to be paid is greatest if the object of investigation is an artist like David Milne, who belonged as much to one country as the other. (Milne lived in the United States from 1903, when he left Ontario to go to art school in New York City, until 1929, when he returned to Ontario to stay until his death in 1953.) The historian who misunderstands this, who fails to comprehend that locational shifts inform sensibilities in unexpected and complex ways, puts himself or herself at serious risk.

Gwendolyn Owens, who organized and wrote the catalogue for the exhibition for the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University, cannot be accused of

provincialism. She conceived of the exhibition as a contribution to Cornell's Canadian Arts Festival – in itself a notable oddity – which also brought to the University work by Michael Snow and Irene Whittome. Moreover, before settling on the topic, she canvassed curators in both countries about the kind of exhibition that would be most appropriate under the circumstances. Finally, she let herself be guided by a precedent, for in 1922 Milne had exhibited at Cornell at the invitation of Christian Midjo, a painter on the University faculty whom Milne had met sometime earlier in the Adirondacks. Apart from an exhibition which Milne had mounted himself in 1916 in New York City, it was his first one-man show.

There are forty watercolours in the present exhibition, a number that complements the intimate scale of Milne's work and its sparse, laconic style. Many more than this and the chance of overwhelming the delicate balance of individual works would be unnecessarily exaggerated. The selection of paintings is equally judicious. From each period of Milne's stylistic development there are examples of representative work – cityscapes (from New York and Toronto), landscapes and still-water reflections (from upper New York State and Ontario), commissioned work dealing with the aftermath of World War I (from France and England), domestic interiors, still lifes, and, from the 1940's, religious fantasy paintings. Among them are paintings which rank with Milne's best in any medium: *Evening Interior*, 1914; *Sunburst over the Catskills*, 1917 (a gift to the Museum of Modern Art and carefully chosen, one supposes, by donor Douglas Duncan, who was Milne's dealer from 1938 on); *Ice Box and Kitchen Shelves*, 1920; *Snow in Bethlehem*, 1941;

and *Radio No. 3*, 1946.

The exhibition encourages reconsideration of the major interruption from 1925 to 1937 in Milne's use of watercolour. In the early years of his career he favoured the medium because it afforded a better opportunity for his work to be exhibited in New York, Philadelphia and elsewhere. After 1937 he favoured it as an antidote to the slow mechanics of colour drypoint. In the interim, however, he set watercolour entirely to the side.

The hiatus of a dozen years, and the break in style that is evident with the resumption of Milne's work in watercolour, is registered in the exhibition by *Black House No. 1*, 1925, and *The Cross-Chute*, 1938. The former is as linear, colouristically dense and dry in texture (much of Milne's work in watercolour up to 1925 looks deceptively like oil) as the latter is loosely drawn, transparent and fluid. Milne himself, an inveterate theorizer on the subject of his own art, was conscious of the redirection in his work and was anxious to justify it. Shortly before he executed *The Cross-Chute*, he wrote to Carl Schaefer: "I am surprised that watercolor hasn't been used more by the modernists. It is so direct . . . so powerful, even brutal, that it would seem to be an ideal medium . . . because it is faster and painting is the instantaneous art – in contrast to, say, music, where the time element comes in."

The fully illustrated catalogue essay by Gwendolyn Owens is matter-of-fact. It offers an accurate chronology of Milne's movements and succinct formal analyses of most of his paintings. But it asks few questions of its material and offers up few conclusions. Those interested, for example, in an account of the various reasons for Milne's eschewal of watercolour for such a long period of time will have to consult Rosemarie Tovell's excellent pages on the

subject in *Reflections in a Quiet Pool: The Prints of David Milne*, 1980 (pp. 71-75).

One might also expect to learn more about the 1922 exhibition, but it receives only a scant paragraph in the catalogue essay. It would be helpful to know, for example, what records Cornell retains of the exhibition. Was it one of several art exhibitions held around the same time at the University? If so, what artists' work was included in the other exhibitions? Also, have Christian Midjo's papers survived? If they have, are there letters from Milne among them? And so on. Even if the answers to the questions are negative, it would be valuable to have that information. But quite apart from these documentary concerns one wants to know more about this exhibition simply as a matter of curiosity. It is not without poignancy, after all, that of the three one-man exhibitions that Milne's work has been given in the United States two are the result of the hospitality of Cornell University.

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