

AUDIO 1

Helen McNicoll

The Open Door

around 1913

oil on canvas

Lent by Samuel & Esther Sarick

Audio description of the work

First, a moment to discuss the painting techniques which are hallmarks of these impressionist works that will be described in this exhibition. Impressionism is an art movement that was first named in France in the 1870s. Artists took their subject matter from contemporary life, and instead of using a highly realistic style of painting, artists created an 'impression' of what they saw through light and colour. In each of the audio described paintings the directionality of light is evident. The artists' techniques vary but can include thick layers of paint, visible brushstrokes such as cross hatching and the layering of colours.

This work is 76 by 63 cm and in portrait orientation. The work is framed by a gold-coloured wood frame which is 8 cm wide and embellished with ornate carved curlicues.

In *The Open Door*, a vibrantly painted thicket, viewed through a door which sits opened, takes up much of the left half of the painting. A white woman stands just inside the door on the right, focused on her sewing held in her hands. The colours in this piece are muted bluish greys with the exception of the brilliant bright yellows of the foliage, which is one the painting's focal points.

The woman is slim, young and dark haired with her hair pulled back and worn up. She wears a collared, white floor-length dress cinched at the waist with the sleeves folded to her elbows. Her back is to the door and her slightly raised shoulders are curled forward. Her mouth has fallen slightly open as she focuses on a small swatch of gauzy white fabric or lace. She holds the cloth up for examination close to her face, the tail end of which falls to her waist. Inside the door to her right is a dresser with a mirror that has a gold candlestick and silver metal kettle on it. Out the door, the lush tangle of bushes and a tree glistens with the daylight that filters inside and highlights the woman's right shoulder, collar, knuckles and skirt. Leaves are indicated with a cross-hatched texture that fill the entire outdoor view. On the far left, on the back of the open door, hang a coat and hat. The woman's short shadow is cast against the wooden floor.

This work is paired with a Cassatt painting which hangs to its left and is called *Young Girl at a Window*. It features a young elegantly dressed woman sitting with her back to a window opened to the Paris skyline.

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End of Audio Description.

Exhibition label text:

In this painting, and in Cassatt's *Young Girl at a Window* nearby, a woman in a white dress sits or stands near an open window or door but does not look out. On the edge, so close to the outside, they turn instead to the mental space of their inner worlds. These works speak to the experiences of in-betweenness that both artists shared throughout their lives. As foreigners in Europe and as women striving for success in the male-dominated art world, the artists' experience is reflected in the positioning of their painted subjects. McNicoll's title asks us what it means to stand next to an open door and not walk out.

End of Exhibition label text.

AUDIO 2

Mary Cassatt

Francoise in Green, Sewing

1908–1909

oil on Canvas

Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, Montgomery, Alabama, Gift of the Ida Belle Young Art Acquisition Fund

2009.0006

Audio description of the work

Nearby other works in which young working-class children are dressed and posed as upper-class children, this painting captures a fair-skinned white girl of about 10 seated, opulently dressed, and engaged with her sewing pastime.

This work is 81 by 65 cm and hung in portrait orientation. The work is framed by a gold-coloured wood frame which is 12 cm wide and embellished with carved decorative reliefs.

The girl has fine brown hair parted at the side and falling over her shoulder in loose ringlets. Her hair is held back with a red bow over her left ear. She looks down at her fingers, a hands-length from her face, as they presumably thread a needle. Her top is a cape or shawl-like lacy construction that appears through the painting technique to be like frothy foamy water with layers of bright white peeping through blues, greys and muted white brushstrokes. Her green skirt fills the bottom third of the painting, thick brushstrokes cascade its four vertically striped tiers down towards the observer in a symphony of greens. Sunlight spills into the scene from the left above the girl's shoulder, highlighting the skirt and giving it a satiny glow. Her temple, cheek, shoulder and arm are also lit, giving them a smooth appearance in contrast to the blurred edges of the painting technique. The light also touches the back and arm of the padded, wide, King Louis the 16th style wooden chair she sits on. The chair back is a brownish grey fabric and has a lightly sketched floral pattern set in a decoratively carved thick wood frame. Behind her on the left is a bright green drape, and to the far right past her shoulder is the edge of a wall. Between them, a glimpse into another room with a muted yellow patterned rug, a chair back, and a section of mantelpiece against a far wall.

The artist's signature is in dark blue at the bottom right of the work.

End of Audio Description.

Exhibition label text:

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Cassatt hired this young girl, Françoise, as a model from the rural village near her home at Château Beaufresne, located north of Paris. The artist dressed her in fashionable Parisian clothes and posed her in a sophisticated interior, completely absorbed in her task of needle-threading. Cassatt's interest was not in making a portrait; rather, she delights in showing the colour and texture of the model's very full skirt and blouse. The quick strokes made with a loaded brush create a believable pattern. The shades of green repeated in the drapery behind her and the lacy shawl that catches the light form a harmonious and balanced composition. Although this picture expertly captures the inward-looking child, it is really about Cassatt's craft as an artist.

End of Exhibition label text.

AUDIO 3

Mary Cassatt

Portrait of Madame J (Young Woman in Black)

1883

oil on canvas

Collection of the Maryland State Archives

MSA SC 4680-10-0010

Audio description of the work

This work is one of 5 spotlit paintings in this section of the exhibition which has 5 angled walls, giving each work its own wall. Here, each of three works by McNicoll and two by Cassatt present us with an elegantly dressed woman posed indoors. In three paintings the woman is positioned on or beside a Chintz sofa or chair.

This work is 80 by 64 cm hung and in portrait orientation. The work is framed by a gold-coloured wood frame which is 10 cm wide and embellished with carved rope and ribbon patterns. A slim young white woman sits forward on an upholstered chair in a tasteful interior. She rests her left elbow on the arm of the chair and gazes off to the left, thinking.

The young woman is dressed in a black, long sleeve riding jacket. It has a high collar with a small decorative swatch of white fabric at the left of her neck. Her dark hair is almost completely covered by a short brimmed black hat with feathers and a thin veil which comes down to just under her lips. The veil gives her face a light greyish hue, making her face appear to be bright between the blacks of her outfit. Her lips are rosy and suggest a slight smile. The chair's fabric is pale yellow with a floral pattern in red and dark green. Thick, long brushstrokes create the flowers and leaves of the fabric behind the woman and in a small triangle between her side and the bend of her elbow on the armrest. The wall behind her is a brownish purple of mauve and taupe hues with two horizontal lines of gold chair rail moulding on it. Hung above this and behind the top of her hat is a rectangular artwork. Against a white background it features the shape of an arch in brown and yellow which resembles the shape of a handheld fan when opened.

The artist's signature is in black at the bottom right of the work.

Also on display nearby is a video of a discussion in ASL between artists Rae Rezwel and Peter Owusu-Ansah about the work of McNicoll who was also d/Deaf. This video contains subtitles.

End of Audio Description.

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Exhibition label text:

This sophisticated female figure sits in front of an asymmetrically placed fan. The fan and golden chair rail in the background bisecting her head are unsettling elements that add to the mystery of the unidentified subject. Cassatt skilfully conveys the transparency of the veil over Madame J's face, while the plumes on her black hat seem to meld with the painted fan over her head. Cassatt kept this fan, which was painted by her fellow Impressionist Edgar Degas, in her personal collection for many years.

End of Exhibition label text.

AUDIO 4

Helen McNicoll

Wood Green and Broadstairs

1903

from Gower Sketchbook

graphite and watercolour on wove paper

Art Gallery of Ontario, Gift of Jane and John McNicoll, 2002

2002/9441

Audio description of the work

Displayed on a table and under Plexiglas, this is one of 8 sketchbooks at the centre of the last room in the exhibition. This room displays the two artists' works in their own right. A series of five colour prints on paper by Cassatt are on one wall, and on the others are paintings from McNicoll's travels of landscapes and figures.

The vertically oriented sketchbook is 20 cm tall by 16 cm wide and is open to a small watercolour sketch and life drawings of figures in pencil on both of its off-white pages.

In the right upper half of the top page is the watercolour which is slightly larger than a business card. Two thirds is of a dramatic sky with towering grey clouds and one patch of pastel blue near the top. The lower third is a landscape with still waters on the left and a sandy beach and an escarpment rising on the right. Patches of grey, blue and brown dot the beach and indicate bathers at the shore.

Under the watercolour is a sketch of the rear view of a child holding a pail and walking in the sand wearing a sunhat with a ribboned band. In a sketch to the left, another child, also seen from behind, sways in a swimming dress with horizontal stripes.

To the top left and bottom right of the bottom page are inscriptions. The writing at the top left reads: *Wood Green May 1903*. Under this are three rear view sketches of a barefoot adolescent figure in a skirt. One is standing with their arms in front of them, presumably carrying something. The remaining two sit perched on a ledge, with one facing left with their left knee raised to also rest on the wall.

Writing at the bottom right reads *Broadstairs 1903*. Spaced around the bottom page are 6 walnut sized sketches of scenes that the artist would have seen during a trip to Broadstairs, on the coast of England. Two depict a child in a sun hat playing with a bucket on the beach. Four are of a person in what resembles a long wool bathing dress and beret-shaped swimming cap.

They alternately sit up and recline, leaning on an elbow in the sand, with two sketched as outlines with only a few short strokes of pencil.

Around 60 additional images from all the sketchbooks are shown on a monitor mounted on the wall nearby. The other sketchbooks in the case are opened to show drawings such as: sketches of models, females in the nude and males wearing only loincloths, seaside landscapes and village scenes, pencil portrait sketches, a young boy leaning on a staircase, women beside an easel talking in an art class, and a man standing behind a tripod with a surveyor's instrument called a Survey Transit Telescope.

End of Audio Description.

Exhibition label text:

McNicoll generally devoted each sketchbook to one moment or subject. They served as visual travel diaries, and various captions identifying dates, places, and people allow us to situate the artist at precise moments. In this sketchbook from 1903–1904, we can trace a series of her trips across England, where she visited the coastal towns of Broadstairs and Blackpool as well as the Isle of Wight. In this two-page spread, McNicoll has inscribed “Wood Green May 1903”—a suburb of northern London where members of her extended family lived—and “Broadstairs 1903,” which she visited with her sister and cousin in the summer of 1903.

End of Exhibition label text.