

MAURICE CULLEN

(1866-1934)

Retrospective Exhibition

November 1 - 15, 2025



A Bend in the Caché River, 1924
Cullen Inventory no. 1107

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FOREWORD



Maurice Cullen, Sketching at - 25C
Saint-Jovite, Quebec, 1925

An early initiative of mine at the Walter Klinkhoff Gallery was to organize a retrospective exhibition of the work of Maurice Cullen (1866–1934). I thoroughly enjoyed that brief experience of working as an art curator, rather than an art dealer. The predominant memory that I retain from that show over 50 years ago is one of being completely overwhelmed by the strength and originality that was evident in a concentrated display of Cullen paintings. Looking back, I wonder why I was so awestruck. By then, I had already viewed many Cullen works, albeit individually and not in a large grouping. I had interviewed William Watson, who had met the artist in 1908 and who had proceeded after the First World War to collaborate with Cullen on annual shows. I had often come across J.W. Morrice's contemporary quote that Cullen "is the one painter in Canada who gets at the guts of things". Also, in the foreword to the catalogue of that 1974 show, my father, Walter Klinkhoff, had recollected that A.Y. Jackson had spoken for the Group of Seven when he wrote that "Cullen was a hero to us all". I had even discussed Cullen with artists who acknowledged his crucial mentoring, in particular members of the Beaver Hall Group, including Nora Collyer, Kathleen Morris, Lilius Torrance Newton, and Edwin Holgate. Nevertheless, I was unprepared for the effect on me that such a show would generate. The current display includes works from that show as well as others that have never before been on public view. It is conceivable that it will captivate visitors to the same extent that it impressed me.

Another recollection that I have from that initial retrospective is of the willingness of the owners of the paintings to lend them and share them with others. Over the years, I have always been grateful to the owners of the works that I have borrowed. Without their trust and sense of public spirit, such exhibitions would not be possible.

Eric Klinkhoff
October 2025

INTRODUCTION



We are fortunate in this country to have ample opportunities to read about our great Canadian artists. The more recent biographies and exhibition catalogues are especially handsome and beautifully illustrated. These books are great tools for research and they augment the study of the paintings that adorn museum and gallery walls. We can get a sense of how the artists influenced their own and succeeding generations. Occasionally, however, our knowledge can be enriched by the personal and contemporary accounts of people who knew the artists well. In the case of Maurice Cullen (1866-1934), these books date back almost one hundred years, and they are rare. I am therefore pleased to provide on the following pages excerpts from the 1931 volume, *Maurice Cullen, R.C.A.: A Record of Struggle and Achievement*. The writer, William R. Watson, O.B.E., was a legendary Canadian art dealer and the artist's champion. It is to Watson's great credit that Cullen and his family were able to enjoy a modest level of financial security during the last ten years of the artist's life. I am grateful to the descendants of Mr. Watson for their enthusiastic permission to reprint these paragraphs. I would only add that the art gallery owner's punctuation and spelling are very much of his era, and I have not modernized them.

Finally, I draw the reader's attention to the other section of this catalogue and to excerpts from the book, *Ateliers: Études sur vingt-deux peintres et sculpteurs canadiens*, authored by Jean Chauvin and published by Louis Carrier et Compagnie, in a limited edition, in 1928. Jean Chauvin had been a perceptive visitor the previous year to Cullen's new studio in Chambly.



Eric Klinkhoff is the originator and sole owner of the Maurice Cullen Inventory, as per the Superior Court of Quebec.

MAURICE CULLEN (1866-1934)

William R. Watson, 1931



Your first impressions on meeting Cullen would be memorable, for you would realize that you had met a man of uncommon personality. Physically of medium height, broad-shouldered and muscular, with a ruddy complexion that told of a life spent largely out-of-doors, his quiet poise and manner of speech, his calm contemplative blue-grey eyes, would reveal a deep spiritual quality – the inner peace of a man in harmony with his environment and the world.

Questioning his philosophy of life, you would have found it akin to that of Emerson or Thoreau, and especially in a love of Nature reaching to the heights of worship. You might describe him as a transcendental pantheist, and he would admit how profound and all-embracing this love of Nature was. "One justification for life,"



View of Quebec from Levis, 1904
Cullen Inventory no. 1000

he would say, "is the love of beauty." Perhaps even better than by conversation, you would understand the artist through his art. Seeing one of his finished pictures, and studying it, you would appreciate it beyond the depth of words.

And how, you might have supposed, did the artist obtain these stirring winter motifs, in the cold and through the snow? But a pair of snowshoes on the wall, with signs of frequent use, would be an open clue. Cullen has never been a drawing-room painter of the snow, but tramping out in wintry weather, has met his landscapes zestfully face to face. For every finished picture there is the original out-door sketch, and even on occasion he would take an entire canvas with him to complete out-of-doors on the spot.

You may imagine the difficulties: miles of tramping through snow with sketch-box, canvas and easel, freezing fingers, stiffened paints, and other physical obstacles that would have daunted many a man of less endurance and will. And what could be the inspiration other than what Conrad has called "the obscure inner necessity to create"? There was little encouragement, and for most of his work, the only reward was the joy of accomplishment. The public seemed strangely indifferent to Canadian art, and especially to paintings of the northern winter. Occasionally a discriminating buyer was to be found, among them the late Dr. William Gardner and Sir William Van Horne. "And somehow," Cullen says, "I was able to live just one step ahead of the wolf." Offers of commercial work, so tempting at the time, were steadfastly refused, for that beckoning star we call our "ideal" glimmered in another direction. For Cullen there could be no alternative but to be free to interpret the beauty of the land he loves so well. So, despite the difficulties of the way, he resolved to continue the painting of Canadian landscapes to the satisfaction of his own spirit. And as Cullen thought and worked in these "early days", so he continues with undiminished ardor and enthusiasm to-day.



What encouragement might he expect in Canada? Very little, it seemed. Nevertheless Cullen courageously settled down to interpret



Near Chicoutimi, Quebec, c. 1926
Cullen Inventory no. 1518

the beauty of his homeland, especially in its winter aspects. He commenced with a few urban scenes such as "The St. Lawrence Market at Night" (Lady Van Horne), "Montreal Harbor" (Quebec Government), "The Blizzard: Craig Street" and some ice-cutting scenes in the vicinity of Longueuil. This might be called the "city period" of his art; but it was not long before Cullen ventured farther afield. He visited the reaches of the lower St. Lawrence, the impressive country about Beaupré, and then, the most important influence of his art, he discovered the scenic beauty of the Laurentians. These mountains became almost an obsession, and he visited them in all seasons. It may be said that Cullen was the first Canadian artist to venture for subjects into the solitude of the woods, by frozen streams and lakes, and to be present with his easel at the thrilling break-up of northern streams in the spring. Some of these pictures attest their early date. As an example, the Toronto Art Gallery possesses a picture painted entirely out-of-doors in winter. It is a scene down the lower St. Lawrence, and bears the date 1897.



Pont Neuf, Paris, c. 1902
Cullen Inventory no. 156



There is no doubt that in his paintings of the Laurentians, Cullen has achieved greatest power. His art is an epic to their peculiar beauty, which winter, with such deft obliteration of detail, so wonderfully reveals. Already his pictures are traditional, and certain views are spoken of as being "like a Cullen". It is said that Turner discovered sunsets to Englishmen, but Cullen has certainly discovered the Laurentians for us. His revelations are based on understanding and enthusiasm, for he has assimilated the spirit of the place. He knows so well the geology of the mountains, with their characteristic rounded glacial forms, and his technique holds the power of expressing their bulk and weight, so that you are aware of immense solidity and three dimensions in space. You feel that his trees do not merely touch the surface of the earth,

but are deep-rooted in the soil; and spruce, with their stalwart vertical strength, are his favorite trees. Sometimes a leaning birch is introduced with its swift diagonal line across the canvas; a certain characteristic of the country as well as a compositional line. Then again Cullen has made a long and special study of ice-formation and ice-color, as seen in varied lights and conditions. There is the steel-blue of mid-winter ice, verdian, jade, and even golden-amber of the flooded ice along the marge of mountain streams. In the painting of these subtle variations Cullen is seen as a consummate colorist. Autumn is certainly a test for the gamut and richness of an artist's palette. There is always danger of mere garishness with yellows and vermillion in a treble key; but Cullen has essayed this seemingly impossible feat. His autumn landscapes are not quite as convincing as his painting of the snow. Here enters personal predilection, for it is useless to deny his preference for the winter. But Cullen has gone forth to the encounter, often with singular success in a burst of opulent color. With his usual reverence before nature, Cullen becomes excessively modest. The following is an extract from a letter written at La Conception, whither he had gone to paint some autumn landscapes. "I am getting a few sketches which may prove useful, but before the maple in its fall dress I feel pretty weak, and it seems impossible to paint." But when he returned he painted the picture, "Autumn Gold" (private collection), and there has probably never been a better autumn landscape painted in Canada.

Excerpts - William R. Watson, Maurice Cullen, R.C.A.: *A Record of Struggle and Achievement*, The Ryerson Press, Toronto, 1931, p. 5-7, p. 16-17, p. 27-31.





Venetian Boats, 1901
Cullen Inventory no. 104

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