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Marc-Aurèle de Foy
SUZOR-COTÉ
(1869-1937)

RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITION
October 13 - 27, 2018



Still Life with Lilies | 1894

GALERIE ERIC KLINKHOFF

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FOREWORD



Arthabaska, The Artist's Studio | 1918

I admit to a lifelong fascination with the work of Marc-Aurèle de Foy Suzor-Coté. This may have begun randomly enough, perhaps even as a bizarre reaction to such a noble sounding name. By the time that I realized that I had been duped and that an ambitious and confident young man had aggrandized his birth name (from Aurèle Côté), I was completely in awe of the art itself. I had come to marvel at the strength and originality of Suzor-Coté's personal brand of Impressionism. Such genius, one who painted in oil and pastel and also sculpted brilliantly! He even had a stupendous singing voice, a talent that was greatly appreciated by my opera-loving father.

From my admiration for the oeuvre of Suzor-Coté sprung, in 1977, the Suzor-Coté Retrospective Exhibition at the Walter Klinkhoff Gallery. This influenced a tribute at the Musée Laurier (1987) and subsequently, according to its wonderful catalogue, a major Retrospective at the Musée National des beaux-arts du Québec (2002). That Walter Klinkhoff Gallery show was the fourth in an annual series of educational non-selling exhibitions, rarities for commercial galleries whose existence is dependent on the commerce of the art world. Thirty-one years later, I am proud to present a second exhibit devoted to this Canadian master. I am much indebted to the private and corporate owners of these works. Visitors to the gallery will also be grateful for the public – spiritedness that is evidenced by such willingness to share these treasures.

It should also be noted that it has taken the work of an enthusiastic team to organize this Suzor-Coté Retrospective Exhibition. The efforts of Johanne Boisjoli, the gallery Manager, must be singled out. Her 37 years of experience have been an incredible asset for the realization of this challenge. Mostly though, we have all been inspired by the urging of my mother, Gertrude Klinkhoff, to offer the best possible show and experience. Her vivid memory and attention to detail continue to amaze. Finally, many thanks are due to Michèle Grandbois whose many years of experience have been the foundation for the original essay that follows. Her intelligent presentation is a worthy accompaniment to the masterpieces in this exhibition.

Eric Klinkhoff
September 2018

From one exhibition to the next with Suzor-Coté¹

MICHÈLE GRANDBOIS

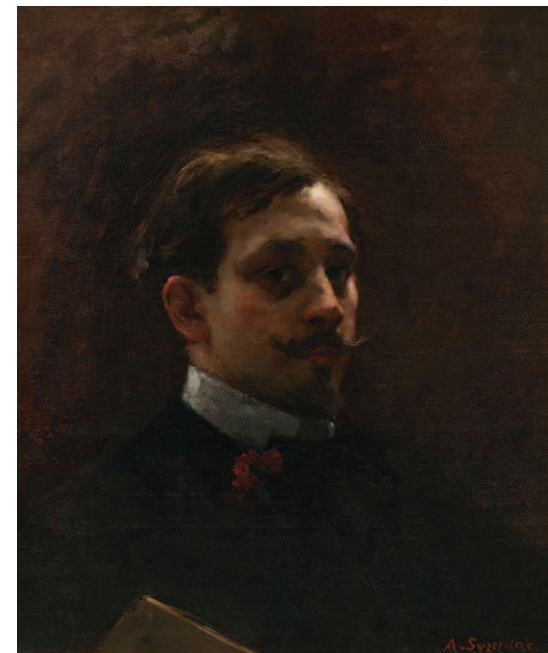
From early in his career, Marc Aurèle de Foy Suzor-Coté maintained a productive relationship with the art market. Having no personal fortune and no inclination towards teaching, the artist had to count on the sale of his works and a well-filled order book to maintain his livelihood. The man was charming, brilliant in society and gifted with the attitude of an ambitious and determined entrepreneur. He was also prodigiously talented and a workaholic. However, all these qualities joined together would not have been sufficient to insure his success. Certainly, his relationships with the upper spheres of politics, in Ottawa with Canadian Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier and in Quebec with Provincial Under Secretary Charles-Joseph Simard, were beneficial in as much as they related to the Canadian Art context which was then in the process of defining its national identity. However, it would be wrong to underestimate the role played by the art market in his achieving success. Not only did Suzor-Coté take part in its growth at the turn of the last century but, like no one else among his French Canadian colleagues, he took advantage of the visibility provided by the private art gallery to promote his art sales.

The tribute rendered this fall by the Galerie Eric Klinkhoff is an echo to the profitable association sustained between Suzor-Coté and William Scott, his dealer. This was soon after the W. Scott & Sons shop on Montreal's Notre-Dame street had, in the mid-1880s, introduced an *Art Exhibition* section to its picture framing and public auction activities². This new policy of diffusion, which had been very successful in the great capitals of Europe, opened the way to the development of a specialized and international art market in Canada, with its expert art dealers, its connoisseurs and collectors, many of whom at the time were among the leaders of the Art Association of Montreal³. Suzor-Coté was part of the cohort of artists that first obtained entry to the great solo exhibitions held by W. Scott & Sons : the 1901 exhibition launched his career, those of 1907 and 1912 confirmed his progress as a top-notch Canadian painter.

As early as 1895, W. Scott & Sons' clients had admired a work by Suzor-Coté displayed in the store window. It was a still life showing a half upset basket of strawberries such as in *Strawberries* (exhibition no. 3). The composition had made an "unforgettable" impression on the journalist Robertine Barry who reported that, at first glance, she had thought that "someone, entering to buy a painting, had set it there, and that by an unhappy mishap it had fallen to the ground.

The illusion was complete; it was highly realistic and in writing about it my mouth still waters⁴."

Suzor-Coté was by then well established in the trade with a few participations in the *Spring Exhibitions* of the Art Association of Montreal to his credit and principally a participation in the famous Salon des artistes français in Paris (May 1894). Aurèle Côté, son of a notary in Arthabaskaville, had aspired to this from the very first days of his stay for studies in the French capital (1891-1894). He was well aware that acceptance by the Salon was an absolute necessity for him to be recognized by the official system. The challenge was awesome. The hesitation is still discernible by the look on his face as seen in his first *Self Portrait* (exhibition no.1), painted a few months after his arrival in Paris. It is also evident in the distribution of the light on his head, on the immaculate neckpiece and on the buttonhole to the left of the vest. Nothing is more opposed to this informal touch of the early days than the trompe-l'oeil *Still life with Lilies* (exhibition no. 2) painted three years later, in 1894, after his return to Canada. Light is now majestic and the curved line undulates among the white petals, the covers and pages of the books, the pitcher and background ornaments, creating a movement that is even felt in the painter's signature, from then known as "Suzor-Coté"⁵.



Self Portrait | c. 1891

The exceptional illusionist quality achieved by the still life, the same that will impress Robertine Barry the following year, had been the lead to commercial success for many painters such as Edouard Manet and Henri Fantin-Latour, notably. A growing middle class art clientele was dotting on it. Suzor-Coté successfully exploited this resource until the beginning of the 1910s and he used it as well in his genre scenes.

Suzor-Coté had just reached his thirties when W. Scott & Sons presented his first solo exhibition in the fall of 1901. For this event, the artist travelled from Paris where he had undertaken a second stage of art training in 1897. Sixty-five works made the trip, mostly oils and pastels, of which a third were views of the Chevreuse Valley at Cernay and Senlis. Since 1892, the artist had been sending scenes of this area to the annual exhibitions of the Art Association of Montreal and the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts. Visitors at W. Scott & Sons were faced for the first time with more than twenty works related to the valley, many with atmospheric and luminous variations caught at different times of the day. **Morning on the Edge of the Pond, Cernay** (exhibition no. 5) is a fine example, with its effects from the stunning heat felt when the sun reaches its zenith. Suzor-Coté had caught this same feeling in a pastel version⁶. The observations are rendered in a fashion that leaves no doubt about the naturalistic character of the two works. Rather than showing the painted version at the Exposition universelle de Paris in 1900, the artist chose the drawn version, which tells us a lot about the



Sleeping Girl | c. 1904



Thaw, Nicolet River, Arthabaska | 1912

importance he accorded to the pastel technique, which the academic practice had brought to the summit of virtuosity.

The Scott & Sons solo exhibition of 1907 underlined, or rather celebrated, the definitive return home of the artist. Montreal connoisseurs discovered, alongside familiar types and known processes, the history paintings and plaster modeling practised by Suzor-Coté to study the movements of people in his paintings. These new explorations had produced an iconography of historical figures, native people in the forests, farmers and other representatives of rural life, in line with the trend of safeguarding French Canadian traditions that were endangered by modernisation. Without doubt, the most astonishing feature of this group was the new esthetic established with its qualities related to the unfinished state of the free study painted from life. The fine and smooth manner that had served the mimetic illusion gave way to a thicker paste that Suzor-Coté applied on some paintings with multiple small coloured touches, derived from impressionist painting. The amalgam of processes and themes pleased the critics who declared having seen “the most marvellously varied collection that a painter had ever presented in Canada, revealing an eclectic artist of the best kind”⁷. The eclectic label was for a long time attached to Suzor-Coté’s reputation, leaving a doubt on the true cohesion of his artistic thought. This prejudice would last until the 2002 retrospective and the rigorous analysis of its curator⁸ before the art world

realized that it had too easily separated the painter from the sculptor, deeply invested in the exploration of matter. The new textures gave life, even “modeled” the coloured surface through the touches of a brush, a spatula or a paint brush. The pictorial production of the following years, inspired by the wintery light of the Arthabaskan scenery, highlighted the qualities of this rough treatment, quite suited to capture the effects of snow in the forest, in the fields, on the village roads and on the thawing rivers. The last exhibition at W. Scott & Sons, in 1912, presented a few examples of this technique that built Suzor-Coté’s reputation and projected him to the top rank of Canadian modernist artists. As early as 1909, the National Gallery of Canada had sanctioned his contribution as an exceptional painter of snow scene by buying *Habitations sur la colline*⁹.

In 1912, the Notre-Dame street exhibition featured the astonishing and sumptuous **Place Viger Square** (exhibition no.7). This painting’s unexpected presence at the Galerie Eric Klinkhoff in 2018 is even more exceptional in that the work seems to have been kept hidden from the public eye since that first and unique public showing in a gallery more than a century ago. This work was very surprising to



Place Viger Square | 1912

the art lovers of the period – even as it surprises us still today. Although, while in Paris, Suzor-Coté had been acquainted with urban scenes popularized by impressionist painters and depicted as well by his compatriots, James Wilson Morrice and Clarence Gagnon, the theme of the city was not favoured by our artist, either in France or in Canada.

The major exception was the painting that won the Jessie Dow prize of the *Spring Exhibition* at the Art Association of Montreal, in 1914. This painting, *Les Fumées, port de Montréal*¹⁰, is a large composition that enhances the effects of the wintery atmospheric light affected by water vapour, smoke and the fog that screens the city.

As well, and for the first time, the painter took notice of an urban scene by portraying the chateau-style elegant hotel set in the heart of the city, the movement of the sleighs approaching it and its snow covered park. The whole scene is steeped in twilight. Suzor-Coté would have painted this scene in the short period between his return from Europe in February 1912 and the opening of the W. Scott & Sons exhibition a month later. A commissioned painting or a personal choice? At the beginning of the 1910s, the imposing Canadian Pacific building had ceased the railroad activities that characterized it since its construction (1896-1898) in order to concentrate exclusively on the hotel trade. The answer is found in the celebration of colour that magnifies the depicted subject by means of a “mosaic” of vibrant chromatic touches. The warm light projected through the aligned windows of the monumental hotel invites the viewer into the interior’s comforting warmth, while outside, the cold dominates the park, spotted with a few shrubs and leafless trees.

Place Viger Square is indeed a well conceived assembly of forms and sections, executed in the studio; it has little in common with a work painted on the spot. Suzor-Coté does not cross the limits that Claude Monet and Camille Pissarro had set aside some thirty years earlier, when installing their easels in the countryside and in the city to register the fleeting instant of their visual sensation in the final painting. Yes, Suzor-Coté did adopt the impressionist technique of the fragmented touch but more for the purpose of satisfying his painting experimentations, while not abandoning the contours of the form, the expressive details of a face or the perception of space in favor of an instantaneous impression. Notwithstanding what could be perceived about his depiction in 1919 of **The Snow Storm** (exhibition no. 14) where the subject determined an unusual dissolution of the forms, it was a boundary that Suzor-Coté never transgressed.

Still today considered among the first Canadian impressionists alongside Maurice Cullen and James Wilson Morrice, Suzor-Coté kept separate the moment he felt



A Corner of My Village, Arthabaska | c. 1918
Power Corporation of Canada Collection

the sense of the subject and the time he finished the final scene in the studio. To be convinced of this, one has only to compare the sketches and studies painted on site and **A Corner of my Village, Arthabaska** (exhibition no. 11) which replicates Suzor-Coté's Diploma piece at the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts¹¹. The spontaneity of the small works contrasts with the extremely well thought out execution of the 1918 painting. As the work of the painter progressed, the textured surface of the landscape compositions found an echo in the portraits and the nudes and, in a more notable way, in the new versions of his compositions that were aimed at satisfying the market.

After 1912, the visibility of Suzor-Coté declined in the art galleries, while his reputation attained summits on the public scene. As a case in point, the repeated purchases made by the Government of the Province of Quebec¹²; as well there was the retrospective exhibition that the same government sponsored during the painter's lifetime at the École des beaux-arts de Montréal in 1929. While the Watson, Eaton and Stevens galleries acknowledged his contribution from the years 1920s until the 1950s, it was not until the 1960s that a Montreal art

gallery, the Galerie L'Art Vivant and its owner Hugues de Jouvancourt, revived his work in a solo exhibition (1964), followed by a first consistent monograph (1967). The retrospective exhibitions organized by the Walter Klinkhoff Gallery, in 1977, and this one by Walter's son Eric, in 2018, prolong, along with the extension of knowledge of his work, the rich reciprocal relationship between a Quebec artist and his art dealer, a relationship which began with the first solo exhibitions in Canadian private galleries.

Biography

With a Ph.D. in History from Université Laval, Québec, Michèle Grandbois first taught art history before becoming a curator at the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec where she worked for 26 years. As curator (1993–2014), she managed some thirty exhibitions and a number of publications which earned her the Excellence in Research Award of the Canadian Museum Association in 1996 and in 2011. Always inspired by a better understanding and a greater diffusion of art history, Michèle Grandbois now devotes her time to several writing projects about Modern Canadian Art.



Winter, Arthabaska | 1912

Notes

1. I am grateful to Laurier Lacroix for his precious advice. I also thank Nathalie Thibault and Nicole Castonguay of the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec for their faithful support in the research.
2. Hélène Sicotte, “Suzor-Coté chez W. Scott & Sons de Montréal. Du rôle de l'exposition particulière dans la consécration d'une carrière d'artiste”, *Annales d'histoire de l'art canadien/Journal of Canadian Art History*, Vol. 26, 2005, 108–125. See also, by the same author “Le rôle de la vente publique dans l'essor du commerce d'art à Montréal au XIXe siècle. Le cas de W. Scott & Sons ou comment le marchand d'art supplanta l'encanteur.” *Annales d'histoire de l'art canadien / Journal of Canadian Art History*, Vol. 23, 2002, 6–32.
3. A.K. Prakash, *Impressionism in Canada. A Journey of Rediscovery*, Toronto/Stuttgart, A.K. Prakash/Arnoldsche, Publishers, 172–237.
4. *La Patrie*, April 2 1897.
5. Adopted in the months following his arrival in Paris, this new identity adds the mother's name to that of the father of which he has eliminated the circumflex accent.
6. Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec Collection (1986.108).
7. Anonymous, “...”, *The Montreal Herald*, January 4 1908.
8. Laurier Lacroix, *Suzor-Coté. Lumière et matière*, Quebec, Montreal, Ottawa, Musée du Québec, Les Éditions de l'Homme, National Gallery of Canada, 2002, 383 pages.
9. A work acquired through the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts. Collection National Gallery of Canada (127).
10. Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec Collection (1938.18).
11. *Coin de mon village, Arthabaska*, oil on canvas, 62 x 87,5 cm. National Gallery of Canada (1399).
12. Michèle Grandbois, “Suzor-Coté et la collection du Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec”, *Annales d'histoire de l'art canadien/The Journal of Canadian Art History*, Vol. 26, 2005, 146–173.

Translation Monique Nadeau-Saumier.

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