On Art, Collecting, and the Weather: An Essay Series in Three Parts

By Laura Ritchie

Part Three: Agnes Etherington Art Centre

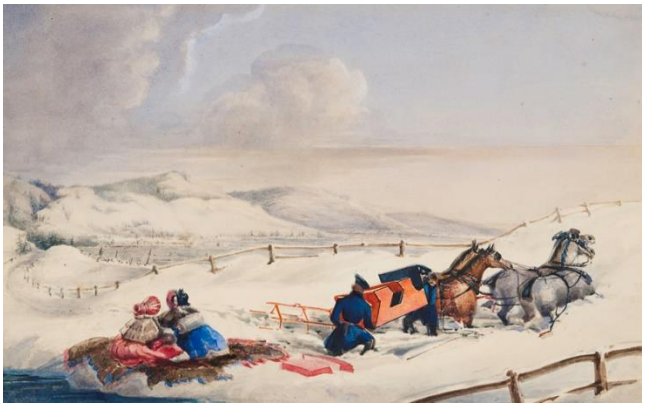
The Weather Collection project was in full swing at the beginning of 2023. With artist Lisa Hirmer's exhibition open at University of Lethbridge Art Gallery (ULAG) and scheduled to travel to MSVU Art Gallery in Halifax afterwards, and with several iterations of the online Weather Stories events already launched and recorded, it was clear that conversations about the weather were easy to cultivate. Visits to the Beaverbrook Art Gallery (BAG) and ULAG collections solidified the utility of storage vaults and databases in weaving topical climate connections. As spring approached, Lisa and I committed to visiting one more major collection—the Agnes Etherington Art Centre (AEAC) in Kingston, ON, on the campus of Queen's University.

At the end of 2022, AEAC had launched an online program in anticipation of exhibition space closures leading up to the construction of new facilities. *Collection Count + Care* used the opportunity of storage move preparations to catalogue and reconsider the collection's contents. A reflection on the legacy of collecting, and a prompt to create conversations between objects, the program invited visiting artists and curators to create videos reflecting on connections between small selections, e.g. 2 or 3, of artworks. The project asked: What stories does this collection tell? The program offered a perfect framework for a Weather Collection collaboration, and in April 2023, Lisa and I travelled to Kingston to record a video for *Collection Count + Care 2.0*. We then asked: What weather stories does this collection tell?

Just as in Lethbridge, we started by combing the searchable online database to create a list of interesting objects that AEAC staff could pull for us. AEAC holds over 17,000 works of art and culture, and it was a delight to wade through the records. At first, I searched for key weather terms in artwork titles. Following an established trend, I then looked for ice, for rivers, for big mountains and CP Rail landscapes. My interest was particularly peaked as numerous artworks by women came back in search results—a consequence of working with such a large collection—and I was enticed by entries of works by women that didn't include images (a suggestion that they had perhaps not been touched in a while.) Examples by Mary Hiester Reid, Florence McGillivray, and a new name to me, K. Stannus Robertson. Having talked a bit about collections as systems (much like the weather itself), I was curious about how women were represented within the historical collection and what that said about its whole. In discussion with Lisa, this concept translated into a curiosity about figures represented within weatherscapes—landscape artworks featuring big weather clues—and what that said about their whole.

On April 13, we met in the AEAC Vault with Chief Curator, Alicia Boutillier, and Exhibitions and Commissions Manager (and former Collections Assistant), Leah Cox, to start our deep dive on the hunt for items from our very long list. One small work, Richard Levinge's *Scene on the 5th March, St. John, N.B.*, 1835, hit on the recurring ice theme and a preoccupation I had with the St. John River area of New Brunswick, where I was working at the time from my rural cottage on the river's bank. I was born and raised in Saint John, and being so familiar with it, I gravitated to this picture of a horse-drawn carriage overturned in the snow. This year, the high on March 5th was 4 degrees Celsius, and I wondered if the snowy scene depicted some indication of climate differences in the area over time. In the composition, two skirted figures sit patiently on the bank of an open body of water while two uniformed figures try to

right the carriage. The horses struggle through chest-high snow. I couldn't remember a March that snowy, and the image prompted me to ask older family members from the area for weather stories: did they recall Lily Lake—site of the city's major urban park and most popular artist and tourist attraction of the 19th century—being snow covered in March? We talked about the weather, and while the feedback suggested that the March snowy-ness wasn't unusual in our time and thus the image wasn't offering extraordinary insight into climate change, it was, however, very successful in prompting conversation.



Richard George Augustus Levinge (British, 1811-1844), *Scene on 5th March, St. John, N.B.*, 1835, watercolour on paper, 24.3 x 38.5 cm. Collection of the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Purchase, Chancellor Richardson Memorial Fund, 1974. 17-016.

I hit on the theme of marine disaster in selecting John Dickson's *Titanic* (from series *Ten Small Nautical Disasters),* 1996-1997. The tiny, wall mounted ship-in-a-bottle sculpture looked appealing from the reference image—little did I know it would also spark an environmental investigation.

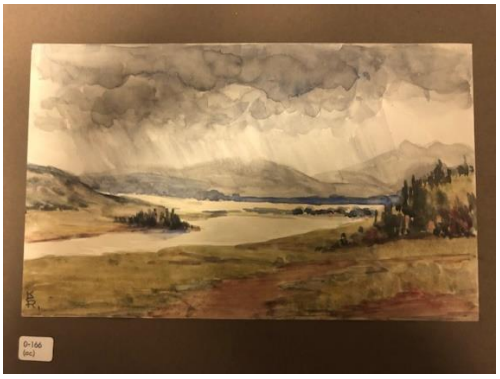
John Dickson (Canadian, b. 1961), *Titanic (from series Ten Small Nautical Disasters)*, 1996-1997, Wine bottle, water, sand, cork, magnets and mixed media, 12.7 x 33.0 x 10.2 cm. Collection of the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Purchased with matching funds from the Canada Council Acquisition Assistance Fund and the Chancellor Richardson Memorial Fund, 2003. 46-010.

We got a great shock when we opened the work's storage box and bubble wrap to find that the water from within the bottle was gone. We opened another work from the series—*Pearl Harbour*—and it too was waterless: the tiny ships were coated in white sand, like chicken breaded for a fryer. *Titanic*'s more

pebbly, dark sand was still wet, condensation lining the glass bottle walls, with the ship figure itself completely buried. This, to me, was collection climate action at its finest: where had the water gone? Had it evaporated? Leaked? Why weren't the boxes wet? How long have they been here like this? As Leah made a record of the condition, and we wondered at the possibilities (and I danced in excitement at the perfect serendipity of seeing an encapsulated environmental crisis that wasn't strictly metaphorical), we discussed the observable facts: the artist is local to Kingston, and easy to consult about the intended storage and display conditions of the work. The AEAC's curator of Contemporary Art Sunny Kerr had recently included the works in an exhibition, and he could be consulted on their most recent state. In the moment, there was a flurry of excitement about the novel occurrence.

In the aftermath, however, it turned out to be not much of an event. By email, later, Alicia assured me that everything was fine with the works, that they get drained of water and refilled each time they are re-installed. It was a non-issue. It strikes me that, in the face of the material situation, we didn't know what we didn't know. Without the accompanying written record on hand to tell us about this object's natural state changes, we assumed catastrophe. A visual record alone can be misleading. The full story requires multiple perspectives.

I love the mysteries held in collections caused by a lack of recorded perspectives. Objects can tell us much about themselves, but notations and anecdote help expand that knowledge. Take, for instance, a set of works that we pulled by an artist listed on records as "Robertson, K. Stannus (Lady)". The notation "By a Lady" is one often used to credit works held in collections by anonymous women artists. When I see it, I get curious. In this case, when Robertson's name came up on a search for 'Storm' titled works, I immediately wondered if the associated works were by someone whose sex needed to be pronounced, or if (as it turns out) it was simply the wife of a British knight.



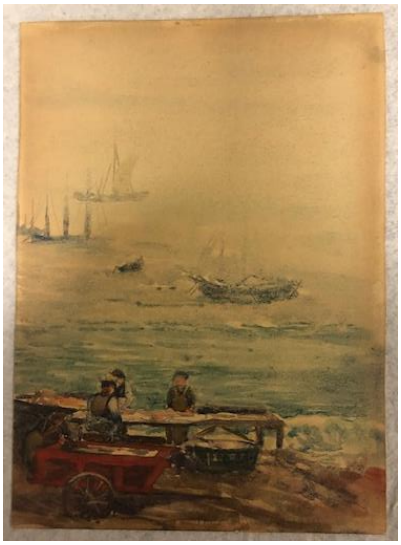
Lady Kathleen (Stannus) Robertson (British, 1874-1939), *Ghost River, The Thunder Storm,* 1924, watercolour, paper, mounted/board, 15.60 x 25.20 cm. Collection of the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Gift of Sir Robert Robertson, R-052ac.

Kathleen Robertson was the daughter of sculptor and lecturer in Applied Art at South Kensington and Manchester, Hugh Hutton Stannus (1840-1908). Wife of British Government Chemist Sir Robert Robertson FRS (1869-1949), we know that she accompanied her husband to the British Society for the Advancement of Science meeting in Toronto, Ontario, in 1924 and on his journey to Vancouver and back that year. Sir Robertson's gift to the AEAC collection includes over 60 works on paper by Lady Robertson documenting the scenes she saw across the country. They are of mountains, rivers, and villages. Lots of sky. It's unlikely that many of these works have ever been exhibited. Leah told us that the "R" accession numbers associated with them (and which we could see noted on the object itself) refence preparatory

work done in the 1970s for a deaccession project, demarking these items as potentially destined to have their permanent collection status revoked.

The relegation of artwork by women artists who were considered 'hobbyists' to lower class collections (or to storage holdings where they will never be photographed or prepared for exhibition) is not uncommon. That topographical drawings or travel recordings by women in the years when Canada as a nation-state was still young are disregarded as a part of the country's art history is, however, still surprising to me. Why do we discount the daily experience of women in our national image? Couldn't women's record of the weather (among everything else captured in their sketchbooks and watercolours) be useful in understanding where we've been and where we are going?

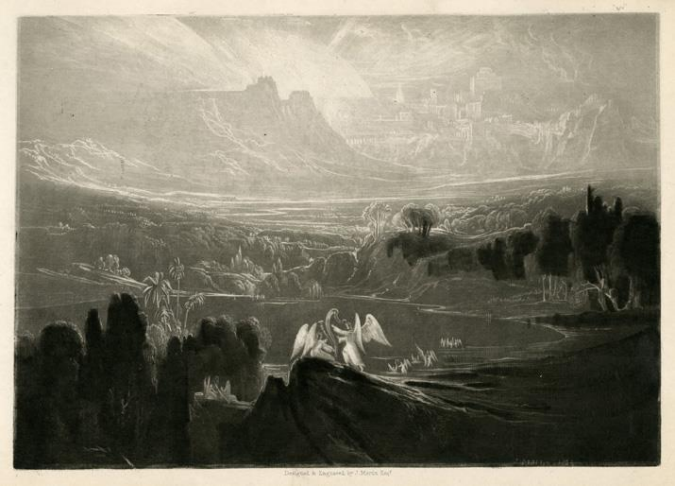
Florence McGillivray's *Fog: Cleaning Herrings, Whitby, England*, 1919, is a tiny watercolour painting on paper. It is a small piece of big collection. Its backside also bears the dreaded R—a pencil notation that indicates someone decided long ago it may not have been relevant to keep in the main collection. Interest in this artist's work is growing today, however, as we make room for women in Canada's art historical canon. For Lisa and me, interest was sparked in the object's materiality—the paper surface is dotted with evidence of the precipitation in the air on the day of its making. Another verso note suggests an alternative title, '*At Work in the Mist*.' This could be a reference to the seaside figures, or to the artist herself.



Florence Helena McGillivray (Canadian, 1864-1938), *Fog: Cleaning Herrings, Whitby, England*, 1919, watercolour on paper, 23.8 x 16.8 cm. Collection of the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Gift of the Gordon Conn Trust, 1964. 07-033.

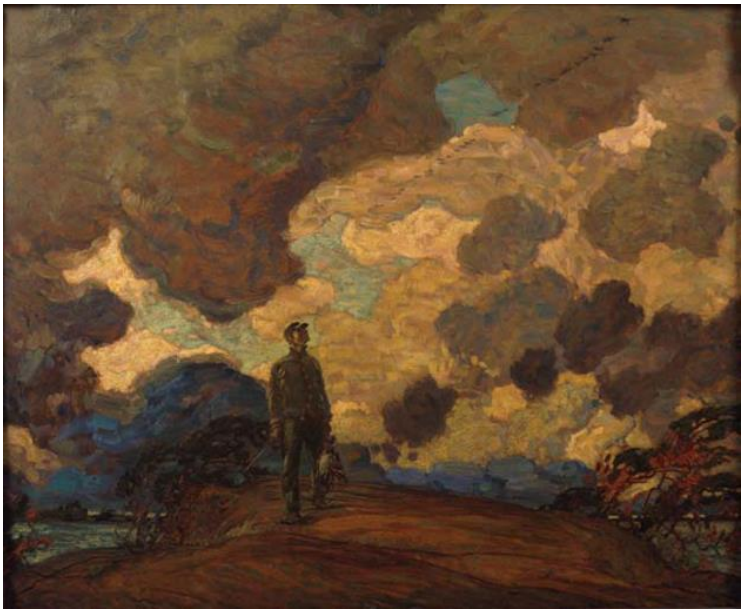
This work, we decided, would be among the three works we filmed for the *Collection Count + Care* video the next day. We approached the video the way we approached the Weather Collection project as a whole: an opportunity to talk to each other about what we observe, about the connections that artworks prompt in our thinking about our human relationship to the environment and the more-than human world. So, without speaking notes or too much of a plan, Lisa and I filmed a conversation about McGillivray's work, as well as, "*Heaven – the Rivers of Bliss etc." (Milton's 'Paradise Lost', Book II)*, 1827-

1840, by John Martin (British, 1789-1854), and, "*Wild Ducks"*, 1917, by J. E. H. MacDonald (Canadian, 1873-1932).



John Martin (British, 1789-1854), *Heaven – the Rivers of Bliss etc. (Milton's 'Paradise Lost', Book II)*, 1827-1840, engraving and mezzotint on paper, 14.4 x 20.5 cm. Collection of the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Bequest of Adam Shortt, 1969. 12-047.052.

Martin's mezzotint was a prompt for talking about Edmund Burke's notion of the Sublime, the artist having been recognized as one of those typifying the sublime in Romantic landscape compositions. That Milton's epic poem is about the fall of mankind lent well to our thinking about states of crisis. MacDonald's rare example of a Group of Seven artist centering a human figure in a composition afforded us a discussion on scale and what comes up in the face of something greater than oneself (something such as weather, or the landscape).



J. E. H. MacDonald (Canadian, 1873-1932), *Wild Ducks*, 1917, oil on pressed board, 121.9 x 149.9 cm. Collection of the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Presented by Queen's University Art Foundation in Appreciation of Robert Melville Smith, 1943. 00-096.

Wild Ducks got us talking about wilderness, the nation-state, the Canadian national identity project wrapped up in our art history, and how so many Canadian art museum collections reflect that project because of the popularity of the Group of Seven. We agreed that constructed landscapes are fraught with meaning. Before the record button was clicked off, Lisa and I reiterated that this conversation has been rambling—our topics in the segment are all over the map. Like weather conversations, the touch points for thinking about the climate crisis are myriad. It was a perfect way to end our visit and our tour of collections.

A Final Thought about Collections

When we left Kingston, and I anticipated a summer of writing about what I had seen in collections over the previous seven months, I found it hard to shake some of my long-held understandings of what a museum collection is supposed to be. As a Western art museum professional and former registrar, I came up in the "in perpetuity" era of collections care—that we who are entrusted with public collections are obligated to keep its objects safe, forever—and I still use that language all the time. I do it without skipping a beat, as though towing that line evidences my commitment to collections care. But I think we know better, today, that it is connection with, and knowledge of, the meaning held in objects that is more usefully preserved, and that knowledge comes from a lot of underappreciated places. That it is precisely the conversations we have about the objects and their makers that regenerates our cultures. If we acknowledge that connection can't happen in a vacuum, perhaps we should be problematizing the sitting-in-the-dark-ness of so many accessioned objects?

Sitting in the dark, protected from the elements (or agents of deterioration), collections objects are like people trying to hide from the weather. It makes sense when there is a tornado: go to the basement, be still, lock it down. But in everyday life, it's going to rain, the wind will come up, and the sun will blare. If we hide indoors, we may miss connecting with the natural world. Similarly, if we hide from the beacon our weather offers about the climate emergency, we may miss living as it could be: participating in the amelioration, or reversal, of a great and ongoing violence against our world. Either way, we must keep talking to each other—about art, about collections, and, of course, about the weather.