

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

By Laura Ritchie

Part One: Beaverbrook Art Gallery

This past summer of 2023, I was perpetually sick. Last summer, after contracting COVID during my summer vacation, I played hard, publicly: no longer afraid of close contact, I rocked my immunity at bars and festivals, dancing in crowds and revelling in social hugs. This year, in response to my complaints—sniffling and tired and bloated from antibiotics—my mother reminds me of reassurance a pediatrician once gave to her: immune systems are cyclical, some seasons you catch everything, some seasons you are impenetrable.

As I suffered the season of catching every proximate bug and infection, I wondered about systems and patterns, and thought a lot about the weather. In particular, the way it dominates our preoccupation in some eras more than others. For the past year, the Weather Collection project has pushed the climate crisis to the front of my thinking, exactly as it was meant to.

Since early Fall, 2022, in conversation with artist Lisa Hirmer and University of Lethbridge Art Gallery Director/Curator Josie Mills, I've been mining public art gallery collections for images and ideas about where the weather shows up in or intersects with contemporary institutions. In the three-part essay series that follows, I will account for visits to the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton, University of Lethbridge Art Gallery, Lethbridge, and the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston, and the conversations and concepts that popped up along the way.

Part One: The Beaverbrook

The world felt like it was opening up in September, 2022. People were starting to travel again, and professional colleagues planned gatherings. Keen to move, I agreed to meet artist Lisa Hirmer and University of Lethbridge Art Gallery Director/Curator Josie Mills in Fredericton, New Brunswick to visit the Beaverbrook Art Gallery (BAG) and talk with them about the burgeoning Weather Collection project. An online initiative funded by the Canada Council for the Art's Digital Now program, the project was imagined as a way to activate Lisa's thought prompt: what does it mean to make and collect art in the context of the climate crisis?

With the seemingly novel luxury of meeting in person, we endeavored to define how our institutions, BAG, ULAG, and MSVU Art Gallery (of which I was the Director at the time) could contribute to a collaborative goal of making and sharing weather stories. Using art gallery permanent collections as a site of interrogation was central to the project plan, and the Beaverbrook—with its world-renowned collection of historical British and European art—seemed like a great place to start. Having held the post of Registrar at the Beaverbrook over a decade ago, I am instilled with a deep connection to the institution and a love of collections in general.

Days before our October 2022 visit to the Beaverbrook, I attended another professional conference (the Arts Atlantic Symposium, hosted by ArtsLink NB) in Saint John, New Brunswick. While the weather wasn't a main subject, the topical themes were there: questions of access and equity, climate anxiety, and artistic practice in seemingly regular states of emergency. Of particular interest was a presentation given by the New Brunswick College of Craft and Design about regenerative design, a systems thinking

approach that centers on replenishing resources rather than sustaining or extracting them. In thinking through the development of their studio practice curriculum, NBCCD invited listeners to consider cycles of extraction, moving beyond sustainability, and how natural organisms can exemplify growth and progress that is less harmful.

A key message that I heard at the conference: thinking about regeneration is regenerative. This resonated with me where weather conversations were top of mind. One finds that talking about the weather is easy and draws out more banter about the weather, no? It was *thinking* about the climate crisis and how to prompt conversations about it that started this entire weather and collections project.

I took these ideas and questions about regeneration into our Fredericton chats. Discussions on fungi and zombies ensued—though HBO's *The Last of Us* had not yet aired, the pandemic-appropriate trope of barely avoidable, highly contagious, and pseudo-intelligent society-wrecking disease had been catching on long before Sony's video game of the same name launched in 2013. As such, new recommended readings on mushrooms and capitalism emerged: Anna Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, Merlin Sheldrake's *The Entangled Life*, to name a few. Thinking about the more-than-human world through a new lens prompted thinking differently about those other life-of-their-own entities, art museum collections, and *Active Collections* (Eds. Elizabeth Wood, Rainey Tisdale, and Trevor Jones), a critical exploration of the "practical, yet radical, ways that museums can better manage their collections to actively advance their missions," was added to the reading list.

Even before we set foot in the museum, let alone the exhibition spaces and storage vaults, my brain was full of perspectives from which to interrogate what was going on with the Beaverbrook collection. As we walked through, I didn't take notes. I got excited. We talked about how things were displayed, about shipping, carbon footprints, and spatial needs, about interpretive materials and about the tradition of landscape painting in Canada. As other elements of the Weather Collections project started to take shape (such as how writing about observations might be fruitful, and how simply continuing to have these conversations was essential,) my interest in chipping away at climate clues in historical paintings solidified.

A museum that collects and exhibits historical artworks is typically an environmentally careful place. The climate within has been specifically tuned by Western museum standards such that the objects' material deterioration is minimized. We call this kind of approach to stopping physical harm to the work before it happens 'preventative conservation'. Often it means temperature and humidity in a room are fixed to accommodate the objects' needs, with little consideration of staff and visitor comfort. It may mean visitors' proximity and movements are surveilled and pre-emptively influenced by wayfinding and visual cues demarking how it is OK to behave. And predominantly, it means that most of a collection is housed in secure, out of view locations. In these storage vaults, such as at the Beaverbrook, gilded frames line aluminum racks, a compacted "salon" hang configuration that suggests both the tradition of collecting and the magnitude of the hoard.

The Beaverbrook collection includes several landscapes—or weatherscapes—that stand out when you look around, asking where the weather is. In storage, an unframed oil on canvas after George Morland (British, 1763-1804) catches the eye because of its condition: *Sheltering from a Storm*, 1795, has significant paint losses, abrasions, flaking, and soiled spots on its paint surface.



After George Morland (British, 1763-1804), *Sheltering from a Storm*, 1795, oil on canvas, 48.3 x 53.3 cm. Collection of the Beaverbrook Art Gallery. Gift of the Second Beaverbrook Foundation, 1959.147.

This genre painting was composed at the height of Romanticism, not too long after Edmund Burke suggested that sublime art was that which has the capacity to disturb the viewer, to make them feel their biggest feelings. Stressful landscape scenes—threatening weather, in particular, would exemplify this. While Morland's composition isn't stirring the greatest possible emotion, the relationship between the natural world and one's feelings is clear. Here, a travelling family is stopped under a tree, bracing for a brewing storm. A downed branch in the foreground suggests a big wind, and rolling dark clouds in the background are foreboding. All the family members react: a child hides his face in his father's lap; mother assuages her fear by kneeling in prayer. What may be an older sister sits annoyed behind them, frustrated by the delay. Perhaps Morland hasn't mastered the depiction of emotion in facial expressions, but the body language in this scene tracks: this environment is tense. Even the dog is cowering.

This painting's object history indicates it has never been exhibited at the Beaverbrook. Its condition certainly would keep it from use today. But notation on file suggests it is because it is not an authentic

Morland (despite a matching signature in the lower right quadrant) that it has never been exhibited. This weather story has a story.

I love this about collections. I went down a rabbit hole trying to understand why the Morland signature didn't hold up in 1959 when the work was added to the Gallery's collection. And why maintain its place in the collection if its attribution isn't clear? Fodder for future knowledge, I hope. Such is the life of an object in a museum collection.

Take for instance another prime weather story: George Chambers' *The Crew of HMS 'Terror' Saving the Boats and Provisions on the night of 15th March 1837, 1838*. I can't think about climate change without thinking about polar ice caps, icebergs, and ice floes. This painting, regularly on display in the Beaverbrook's nearly permanent installation of international works, depicts misadventure in the Arctic, and at once exemplifies both the importance of exploration in 19th century Britain and the similarly colonial capacity of museums to over-write objects' life stories.



George Chambers (British, 1803-1840), *The Crew of HMS 'Terror' Saving the Boats and Provisions on the night of 15th March 1837, 1838*, oil on canvas, 60.3 x 83.8 cm. Collection of the Beaverbrook Art Gallery. Purchased with a Minister of Communications Cultural Property grant and funds from the Friends of the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, 1981.04.

HMS Terror, the subject of Chambers' image, was a British ship, built strong to withstand explosions. Launched in 1813, after testing its strength in the War of 1812 against the United States, the Terror's

utility turned to exploration, and in 1836 it sailed to the Arctic under the command of George Back. We know the *Terror* for its more famous journey alongside HMS *Erebus* through the North-West Passage under Sir John Franklin in 1845, where it was last seen afloat. It is understood that both ships, trapped in the ice, were abandoned in 1848 and all 129 men aboard perished. Despite many messages left by crew over the years, and the discovery of the ships' wrecks in 2014 and 2016, the exact events of the marine disaster remain a mystery.

The events of Captain Back's voyage—an unsuccessful mapping expedition cut short by ice damage—however, were well recorded by the surviving crew. Back's first lieutenant, William Smyth, sketched the ship's situations in watercolour drawings: being iced in for over three months, being trapped in an ice floe until Spring, floundering and right-siding only four days later. The most stirring of these occurrences was in March 1837, when a 25-foot wave of ice shovelled the vessel up, forcing the crew to hastily unload lifeboats and stores. This is the scene portrayed in the Beaverbrook's canvas. Or so it seems today.

To commemorate his journey, Captain Back had commissioned this painting from George Chambers, a marine painter of repute who had probably never seen an iceberg. Keep in mind, the search for the North-West passage was the ultimate romantic pursuit at the time of Back's career. Fascination with the Arctic had fueled art and literature well before the Victorian era, and life-threatening challenges in the harshest of climates were a testament to the fortitude of the British Empire. Written record suggests that Back requested a depiction of his time iced-in from September to December 1836 at Cape Comfort, as far into the North-West Passage as he would get on the trip. Chambers relied on Back's voyage log, and Smyth's watercolour sketches, to compose the scene. The result, however, is an image much closer to an event from several months later. Less docile than the sketches of crew-built ice walls from the iced-in days, it shows a more sublimely dangerous terrain of razor-sharp toothy spires.

Comparing studies, early versions, and inspirational source paintings for this work, I struggled to reconcile its title with some of the literature about it and about the events the artist had been commissioned to depict. As it turns out, Beaverbrook staff had long ago retitled the work from its original *HMS Terror iced in off Cape Comfort, 1836*, to accurately reflect the scene depicted, rather than the one it was meant to. What we might never know is whether Back, whose family retained the painting until the 20th century, considered it what he asked for. When I think about weather stories in collections, these are the kind of things that pop up: how a log, or written record can reflect only a particular version of truth. Visual representations get close to what we can imagine, but like any history, they are constructed from within a context and shaped by authorial perspective. What will today's artists leave for future generations to consider about our crisis?

Back inside the Beaverbrook vault, another ice story communicates climate, albeit more subtly. Abraham Van Der Wayen Pieterszen's *The Frozen River Scene*, 1854, painted in the tradition of Dutch Golden Age landscapes, like many 19th century compositions, centers domestic life—familiar town or cottage scenes with domesticated animals, useful tools, and people mid-activity. Here, skaters on the ice convey that it is cold, but not too cold to sit conspiring under a nearly leaf-less tree.



Abraham Van Der Wayen Pieterszen (Dutch, 1817-1880), *The Frozen River Scene*, 1854 (oil on panel, 31.1 x 41.6 cm, Gift of the Second Beaverbrook Foundation, 1960.44)

And down the hall, not too far from the *Terror*, another of Beaverbrook's greatest hits centres the weather and its connection to feeling. The malaise associated with weather in James Tissot's *A Passing Storm*, 1876, is relatable.



James Tissot's (French, 1836-1902), *A Passing Storm*, 1876, oil on canvas, 76.8 x 99.7 cm. Collection of the Beaverbrook Art Gallery. Gift of the Sir James Dunn Foundation, 1961.44.

Here, the central figure's repose seems fitting given the tumultuous sky outside. Who doesn't feel like making it a cozy-time-for-tea afternoon when a storm is brewing? A focus on the sky (induced, in part, by the eye-catching ruffles on the woman's garment and extra gleam on the similarly-silver tea set) almost distracts us from the more likely storm-subject of this scene: a lovers' quarrel.

Of course, looking at this parlour scene, climate change isn't the first thing that comes to mind. But like a journey through a museum, the meander from one weather adjacent image to another is enjoyable. And it was, visiting the collection in person. When Josie, Lisa and I walked the Beaverbrook collections installations and visited the vaults, it was easy to point some of these out—a little bit of storm here, an indication of temperature there, a comment on man's relationship to nature on top, etc. It was harder, in hindsight, to narrow down which to explore further. It seems that a cursory summary of findings or points of interest may be like conversations about the weather: ostensibly surface while teeming with meaning. What ultimately pervaded is the sense that there is no shortage of climate subject reminders in art collections. Fortunately, I had two more to visit.