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Gallery

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# ALEX COLVILLE

## The Early Years

Works Directly from the Estate of Alex Colville

Essay by  
Ray Cronin

April 2021



Alex Colville, Canadian war artist, stationed in London, England, 1944

**Alex Colville** (1920-2013) was born in Toronto in 1920 and moved to Nova Scotia in 1929. From 1938 to 1942, Colville attended Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick and graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts. Immediately after completing university in 1942, Colville entered the Canadian army and was appointed an official war artist, travelling overseas in 1944. In 1946 Colville returned to Mount Allison as a teacher, retiring in 1963 in order to devote himself to painting and printmaking full-time.

Over his long career, Colville received numerous honorary degrees and awards including Companion of the Order of Canada, 1982; Governor General's Visual and Media Arts Award, 2003. From 1981 to 1991 he was Chancellor of Acadia University in Wolfville, Nova Scotia.

Alex Colville's paintings, drawings and serigraphs have been exhibited extensively across North America, Europe and Asia including *"Canadian Painting 1939-63"*, Tate Gallery, London, 1963; *"Recent Acquisitions"*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1966; *"Canada '67"*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1967; Art Gallery of Ontario, 1983 (travelling); Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1994-95; National Gallery of Canada, 2000; Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, 2003 (travelling). The Art Gallery of Ontario exhibited a major retrospective *"Alex Colville"* in 2014 which travelled to the National Gallery of Canada in 2015.

Colville's work is in every major public collection in Canada including Art Gallery of Hamilton, Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Art Gallery of Ontario, Montreal Museum of Fine Art, National Gallery of Canada, Vancouver Art Gallery, and Winnipeg Art Gallery. His work is also in numerous international public collections including Centre National d'Art et de Culture Georges Pompidou, Paris; Kestner Gesellschaft, Hanover, Germany; Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris; Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Wallraf-Richartz Museum, Cologne, as well as many international corporate and private collections.

Alex Colville died at his home in Wolfville, Nova Scotia on July 16, 2013. His wife, model and muse, Rhoda Colville, predeceased him on December 29, 2012.

Mira Godard Gallery exclusively represents the Estate of Alex Colville.



Alex Colville stands at easel (far right) during first-year portrait class taught by Stanley Royle, Mount Allison University Archives, Sackville, 1938-1942

## “I Too Will be an Artist”: The Education of Alex Colville

It is a romantic cliché that artists are born, not made. And like any cliché, there is some truth to the assertion: natural talent plays a role in the career of every successful artist. But talent is only part of the equation, perhaps the smallest part. Without work, talent is wasted. Most successful artists have clear origin stories, positions really, about how and when they became a “real” artist. For Colville it was with his first solo show at a public gallery, in 1950, and specifically with the painting ***Nude and Dummy*** (page 9). But there was a long process that led up to that event, longer for Colville, even, than for many of his peers. This exhibition, the first to gather his early work, traces the development and education of one of Canada’s most remarkable artists.

Alex Colville was born in Toronto and spent his earliest years there and in St. Catherines, Ontario. In 1927 his family moved to Amherst, Nova Scotia, where his father went to work at Robb Engineering Works, a company that made structural iron work, including bridges. Almost upon arrival in Nova Scotia, nine-year-old Alex contracted a near-fatal bout of pneumonia. Those were pre-antibiotics days, and his recovery was long and isolated. He spent six lonely months in bed. He filled his time by reading and drawing, inculcating an interest in art that would blossom in coming years. Of that time, he noted: *“I began to read, really for the first time, and I did quite a few drawings, simply because I was alone and had to find something to do. The drawings I made were all of machines, without exception. I drew cars, boats, airplanes, things like that.”*

That interest in drawing—and in machines—was never to leave him. In the 1930s Mount Allison University ran an extension service that saw art classes offered to students in communities around Sackville, including Amherst. From ninth grade Colville studied painting, drawing, and sculpture under Sarah Hart, a native of Saint John, New Brunswick, who had studied at New York's Cooper Union. Through this program Colville came to the attention of his most important early mentor (and the only living artist he ever credited as such): Stanley Royle, head of Mount Allison's Fine Arts Department.



**Stanley Royle** In the Potato Fields, Ecclesfield, Early Evening  
1913 gouache 18 x 28 inches Private Collection

Royle, from Sheffield in the United Kingdom, had come to Canada in 1931 to teach at the Nova Scotia College of Art in Halifax (Sheffield plays an outsized role in Atlantic Canadian art history, providing three heads of art programs: Royle, and the NSCA's Arthur Lismer and Elizabeth Styring Nutt). He joined the Mount Allison faculty in 1935 and taught there for ten years. Royle successfully encouraged Colville to consider art as a profession. Colville was planning on studying law and politics and had been accepted into Dalhousie University with an entrance scholarship. However, Royle was able to secure an equivalent scholarship for Colville to come to Mount Allison and he started there in September 1938 in a class of ten students. Colville went to art school intending to succeed:

*As clearly as I can recall, when I went to art school my chief concern was whether I was good enough to be a success; I wondered if there would be any student who would be 'better' than I was. The first few weeks led me to believe that I was the biggest frog in a very small pool.<sup>2</sup>*

“Big frog” or not, Colville knew that he had to work hard to achieve any success, and he built on the work he had been doing for the previous four years. Each summer, for instance, Royle led classes in painting, often at Peggy’s Cove, classes attended by many adult artists, as well as by Royle’s more ambitious students on their summer vacations. *“I approached it [art] as a job which satisfied me (in fact, as the only kind of job which did) and I hoped very much to be good at it,”* he recalled. *“I was not working in order to release some chunk of emotion locked in my chest and pounding to be let out.”*<sup>3</sup> Instead, Colville agreed with the French intellectual Andre Malraux who held that the impulse to be an artist comes from contemplating other art, not nature. Said Colville, *“I too, as he [Malraux] puts it, will be an artist.”*<sup>4</sup>

Growing up in Amherst, Colville’s access to art to contemplate was limited. Like many artists from rural or isolated communities, his main access to art was from magazines and books, and, for the lucky few, from dedicated teachers early on. *“In my case the other art was the ads in the Saturday Evening Post and the work of the man who was to be my teacher, Stanley Royle.”*<sup>5</sup>

Royle painted in a post-impressionist style, using pure strokes of colour much as a pointillist would. Colville described his early relationship with Royle as being akin to being an apprentice: *“I followed the directions of my teacher as an apprentice carpenter would, without any worries about killing some sensitive inner plant of my own.”*<sup>6</sup>

Just a year later, in nocturnes such as ***Train at Night***, 1939 (page 31) and ***Night Scene***, 1939 (page 27) we see a new confidence in his paint handling and composition. The use of reflected light in the pools in the foreground of ***Night Scene***, the swirling smoke or fog in ***Train at Night***, all show how he was working towards his own voice. The onrushing train, its lights piercing the dark, would reappear fifteen years later in ***Horse and Train***, 1954.



Horse and Train 1954  
casein tempera on hardboard 16 x 21 inches  
Collection: Art Gallery of Hamilton



Being a “big frog” had its advantages: Colville usually worked alone in the painting studio at the Owens Art Gallery, next door to the room that Royle used as his studio. As one historian noted, “the privacy of this luxurious arrangement was no doubt an important factor in Colville’s rapid development as an artist.”<sup>7</sup> The luxury of the arrangement is clear in Colville’s painting ***Cast of Venus de Milo, Owens Art Gallery***, 1939 (page 25), showing the interior of the gallery where he worked.

His summer trips to various painting locations in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick with Royle’s group resulted in many paintings, including ***Peggy’s Cove, Grass*** (page 33) and ***Peggy’s Cove, Shoreline*** (page 35), both of 1940. “*In the summers I painted nothing but landscapes, doing this naturally in a style like Mr. Royle’s,*” he recalled in 1951. An adaptation of the “divisionist” style of small strokes of colour, laid side by side to create new colours by optical blending, was to become, in Colville’s hands, his signature approach, visible in all of his work from the 1940s to his last works. Here the painting style is, indeed, reminiscent of “Mr. Royle’s,” with its active surface built up of larger strokes than Colville would use in later years. The palette, which seems muted when compared to Royle’s post-impressionism, is, however, reflective of Colville’s mature production.

In his last year at Mount Allison Colville started to paint more figures, an early example of which is ***Portrait***, 1941 (page 39). This painting of a model in the Owens Art Gallery studio is notable for the strong modeling of the figure, the expressive treatment of the figure’s face and hands, and the assured drawing overall. The figure has the sculptural solidity of later Colville figures, though perhaps lacking the element of otherness or detachment that came to mark the work of the later Colville.

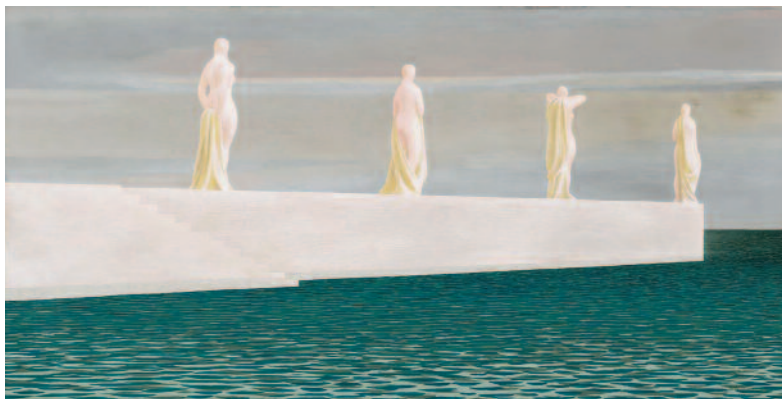
That element would be provided by his experiences of the next four years, when he spent 1942-1946 as a soldier and then as an official war artist.

Colville spent his first two years in the army training for combat. He entered as an enlisted man, rose to Sergeant, and was commissioned Lieutenant in 1943. In 1944 he was summoned to London where he was made a Captain and an official war artist. In a stroke he went from having done no artwork for two years to painting and drawing every day. What’s more, he often did so in the company of other war artists, most of whom were much more experienced than he was. War has been described as vast stretches of tedium punctuated by seconds of terror. Colville tended to depict the tedium—the day-to-day life of the common soldier, whose advocate, in a way, he felt himself to be. But a landscape with dead bodies and ruined homes cannot be pastoral, and a quiet scene of camaraderie between soldiers in between bouts of shelling can hardly be described as mundane. The threat of violence was

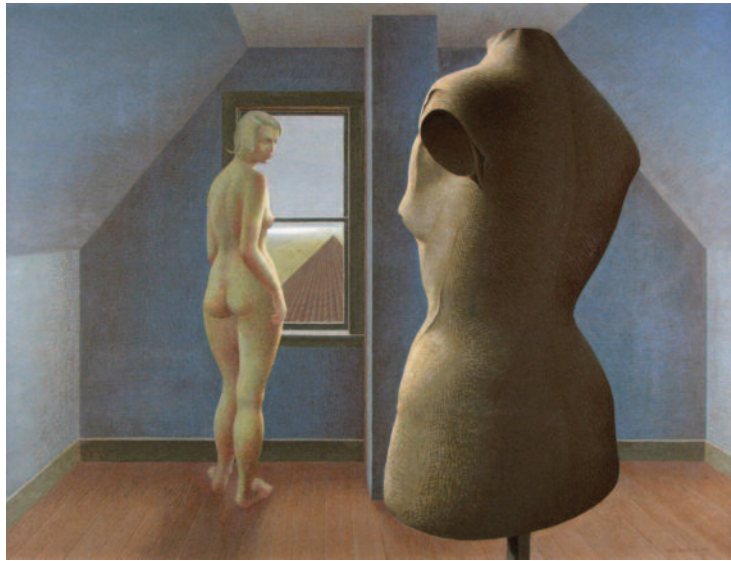
always present, usually implied, and sometimes blatant, as in his chilling paintings from the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.

Colville returned from the war “*somewhat overwhelmed*” by the experience of seeing great art in Europe, and processing what he described as “*the (to me) new ideas which I got from the other war artists; we all spent a lot of time looking at each other’s work.*”<sup>8</sup> In the few years immediately post-war, Colville struggled to define his own style, moving through landscapes to figuration, before arriving at the symbolically freighted quotidian imagery that would mark the remainder of his career. For a few years in the early 1950s he made almost surrealist paintings, which were seen as part of the larger “magic realism” trend in North America, and which led to his showing in New York. These paintings of female figures in undefined landscapes owe much to his interest in the sculptures of Henry Moore, who combined figures and landscapes into massive forms. For instance, the drawing ***Six Figures on Beach***, 1951 (page 61) is reminiscent of ***Four Figures on Wharf***, 1952, which features similarly draped nude women in a seascape.

***Woman with Arch***, 1948 (page 57), with its ambiguous architectural setting, is another work that veers towards surrealism, while ***Nude and Cat on Bed***, 1947 (page 51) is part of a series of painted nudes in stark, almost featureless, interiors that Colville made throughout the late 1940s and early 1950s. ***Reclining Nude, Rear View***, 1946 (page 53) and ***Woman Standing***, 1946 (page 47) are part of this series, and one sees hints of where these drawings were heading in such works as ***Coastal Figure***, 1951 and ***Nude and Dummy***, 1950.



Four Figures on Wharf 1952  
casein tempera on card, mounted on masonite 17 x 31 inches  
Collection: National Gallery of Canada



Nude and Dummy 1950  
glazed gum arabic emulsion on board 30 x 39 inches  
Collection: New Brunswick Museum, Saint John



Coastal Figure 1951  
glazed tempera on board 25 1/4 x 55 inches  
Private Collection

Colville's mature paintings capture moments, and, perhaps more importantly, convey that those moments are important. "*An artist must conceive as well as perceive if he is to present the full implications of his subject,*"<sup>9</sup> Colville wrote. The importance of these moments, an importance the specificity of which is rarely apparent to the viewer, is what adds weight to these images, what gives them the sense of foreboding or even menace that so many viewers find in them. Whether depicting moments of stillness and repose, gestures of protection or nurturing, or seemingly simple actions such as walking, riding a bicycle, or driving, there is always a sense of drama lurking at the edges.

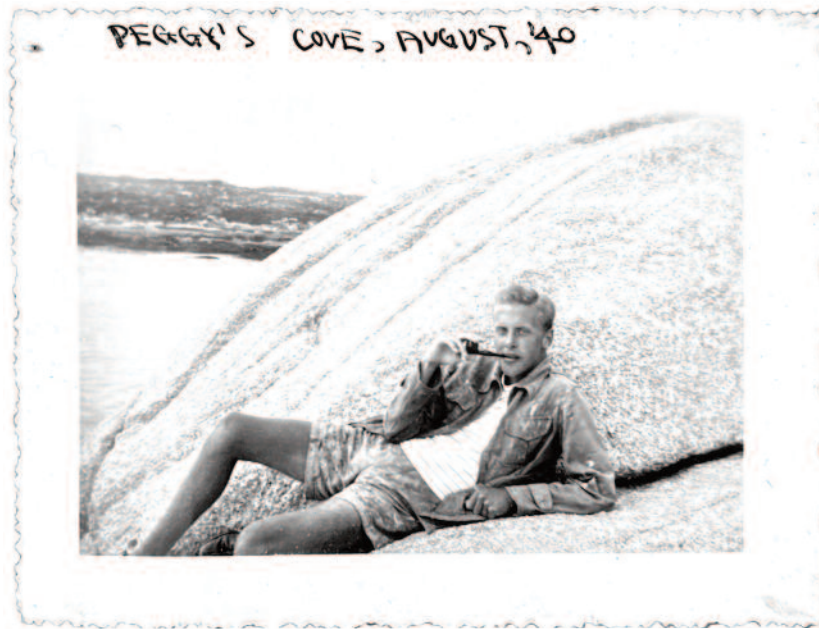
The gifted student, passing through the crucible of the war, emerged as a committed artist with an unflinching focus on his own path. His decision to be an artist, made in response to what little art he had experienced in Amherst and then at Mount Allison, was only reinforced by the great works he saw in London and other European cities.

After the war he turned to philosophy to make sense of his experiences, reading Existentialists such as Camus, Sartre, and Hannah Arendt. "*The question in my mind at the end of the war was, What does this mean?*" he wrote. "*There were questions not only of what to think, but of what to do.*"<sup>10</sup> In his work he asked this question repeatedly; one learns more from questions than from answers, after all. "*I have been for many years, many decades, interested in the concept of creatures who, while living, are thinking about life.*"<sup>11</sup> Colville set out to be an artist, a process from which there was no graduation, but a constant honing of his skill, conviction, and clarity of inquiry.

His thinking, which is also his painting, deepened and broadened over time, but nonetheless remained rooted in the interests and drives of that solitary boy in his sick bed in Amherst, who made the seemingly implausible decision that he, too, would be an artist.

Ray Cronin 2020

**Ray Cronin** is a writer and curator living in Nova Scotia. The founding curator of the Sobey Art Award, Cronin is the former Director and CEO of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia and the current Editor-in-Chief of *Billie: Visual Culture Atlantic*. He is the author of nine books on Canadian art including two on the life and work of Alex Colville.



Age 20, Peggy's Cove, N.S. August 1940



Age 18, with his parents  
David and Florence. c. 1938



Age 11, near the family cottage in  
Tidnish, N.S. c. 1931



## Colour Plates

**Back Street Amherst**

1936

oil on board

12 x 18 1/8 inches





**Birch Trees**

1938

oil on board

11 3/4 x 9 inches



**Robb Engineering Co.**

1938

oil on board

13 3/8 x 18 1/8 inches



**Still Life with Mirror**

1938

oil on board

16 x 20 inches



**Winter, Amherst**

1938

oil on board

13 1/2 x 18 1/4 inches





The Owens Art Gallery was the main teaching resource for students and faculty at Mount Allison University. Generations of student artists painted and drew from the works in the collection, which included both original art works and copies and casts, such as this plaster version of the Venus de Milo. It was common in university curricula up into the latter part of the 20th century to copy casts, whether by modelling in clay or by using them as drawing and painting subjects. Colville himself, as a teacher at Mount Allison, would assign such exercises to his students.

This painting, made by Colville in 1939, shows the remarkable skill he was already displaying in his early years at university. The paint handling of this oil reflects the post-impressionist style he had learned from Stanley Royle, head of Visual Arts and Mount Allison, and Colville's early mentor. As Colville once said of Royle, "*he painted with broken colour, something I picked up from him and still do, really.*"<sup>1</sup> The painting is made up of individual brush strokes, with individual colours juxtaposed to mix optically, what Colville called "*a modified pointillist style.*"

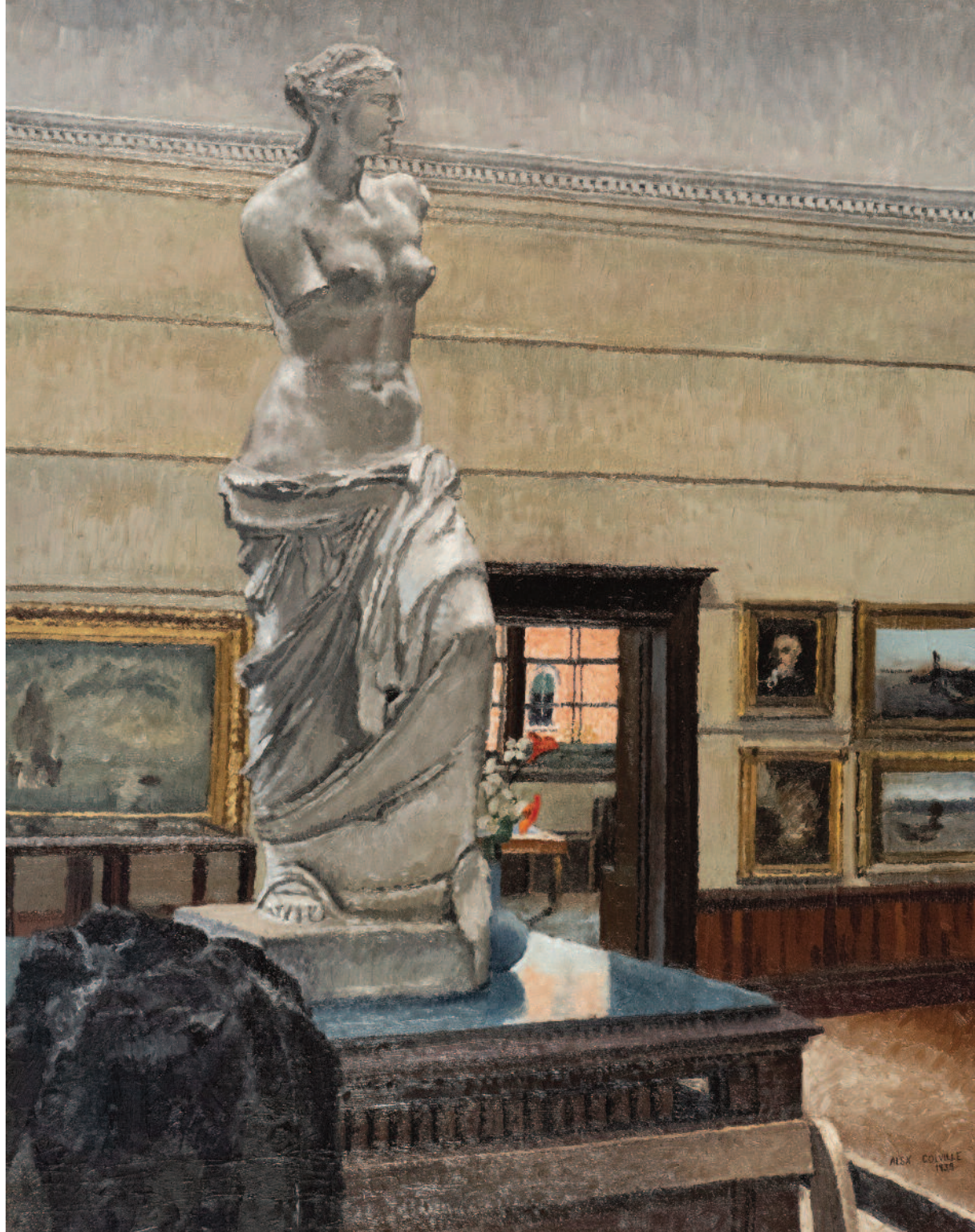
This work was included in the Art Gallery of Ontario's mammoth exhibition, which opened at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 2014 before travelling to the National Gallery of Canada in 2015.

### **Cast of Venus de Milo, Owens Art Gallery**

1939

oil on board

35 3/8 x 27 1/2 inches



**Night Scene**

1939

oil on board

16 x 12 inches



ALEX CHAMBERLAIN  
1919

Alex Colville benefitted enormously from his studies with Stanley Royle, both before attending Mount Allison and at university. He described himself as acting like an apprentice to Royle, and before the Second World War his landscapes, such as this view of the sea at Prospect, Nova Scotia, certainly owed a lot to the example of his mentor.

But even here, painted when Colville was just nineteen, one can see how he was turning his mentor's examples to his own ends. Colville used a more restrictive palette than Royle, here there are really only three tones: blue, grey, and tan. The picture recedes in four steps: the first small arc of rocks push forward, implying space between them and the tan ledge behind; that larger arc forms a section of a globe, its edges defined by the sea. Finally, the sky creates its own sense of infinite space in the background.

The compositional strategy is traditional, but the strict geometry is hardly Royle's post-impressionism. And while *Prospect* (page 29) does not reflect the complex geometrical systems of the later Colville, it certainly shows a predisposition that would bear fruit in the 1950s.



**Stanley Royle** Peggy's Cove 1939  
oil on panel 12 x 15 inches  
Private Collection



**Prospect**  
1939  
oil on board  
22 x 30 inches

**Train at Night**

1939

oil on board

14 x 12 inches



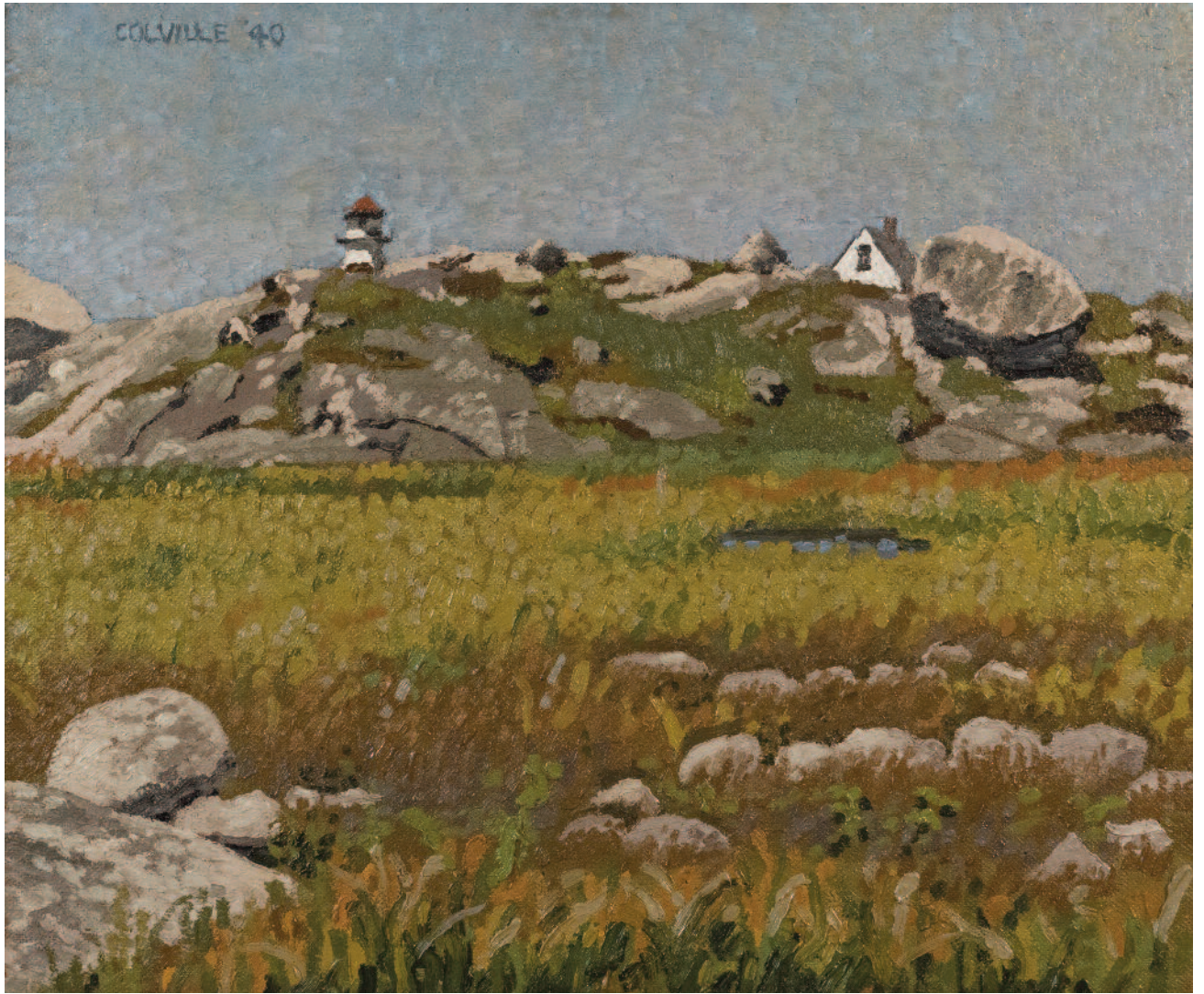


**Peggy's Cove, Grass**

1940

oil on board

19 7/8 x 23 7/8 inches

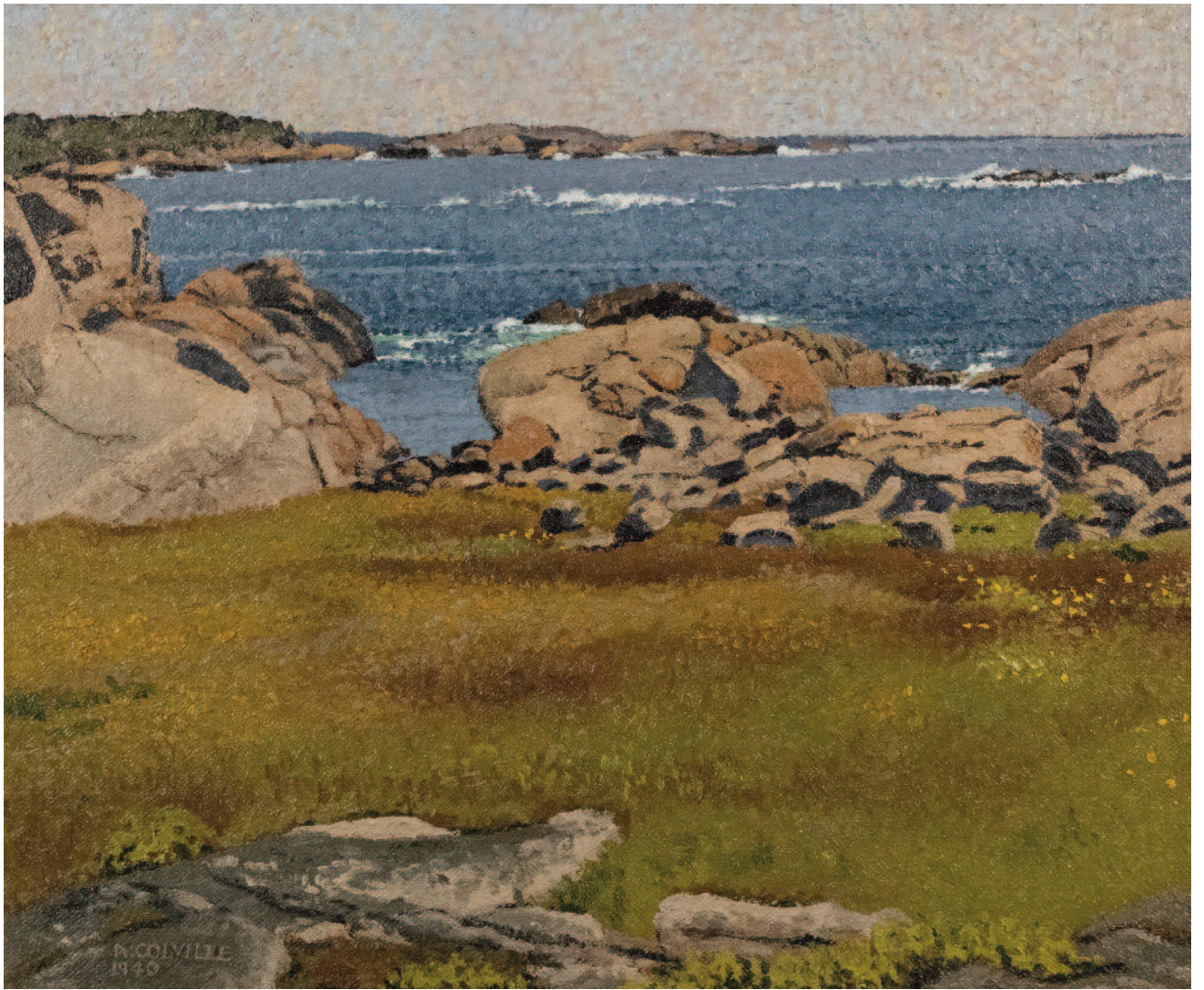


**Peggy's Cove, Shoreline**

1940

oil on board

20 x 24 inches



In 1941 Alex Colville was still a student, but, like so many young men of his generation, he was planning on enlisting in the armed forces to serve overseas. He did so in 1942, eventually being appointed an Official War Artist with the rank of Captain. Much that would capture his interest during his duties, in particular the day-to-day activities of the soldiers, is captured in this scene of a military aircraft landing at the Amherst Airport. Mechanics chat while the plane lands, surely a banal activity for them, while a group of children react with excitement to the fighter's approach. A soldier has his back turned to the action, fiddling with bags.

Colville described his war art as a "*a kind of genre painting,*"<sup>1</sup> depicting "*everyday life in the army.*" His two years as a war artist were hugely important in his development, and not only for the ability to paint and draw full-time for that period. It crystallized an approach to images that, as is apparent in ***Airport, Amherst*** (page 37), was already well on its way to becoming his signature style.

## **Airport, Amherst**

1941

pastel and watercolour on paper

14 1/2 x 19 5/8 inches



**Portrait**

1941

oil on board

24 x 20 inches





In 1941, Alex Colville was completing his studies at Mount Allison University. Portraits such as this one were part of his program of study, indicative of his strategy of mastering all the various components of the painter's trade. "*I didn't do many academic things,*" he recalled, "*more than ninety percent of the time was spent just painting and drawing.*"<sup>1</sup> Colville had concentrated on landscape painting, but towards the end of his final year, he remembered, "*I became interested in people as subjects.*"<sup>2</sup>

That focus is apparent in this skillful portrait, and in another portrait from that year, of a male model. The treatment of the woman's hand in the foreground is particularly strong, expressing a languidness that contrasts with the set of her jaw. Hands, of course, when done well, are remarkably expressive. ***Portrait***, 1941 (page 39) is another example, with the male figure's huge hands sitting in his lap, implying a strength that also comes through in his forceful look and clenched jaw.

***Portrait of Woman in Pink Cardigan*** (page 41) also shows Colville's mastery of the "divisionist" style of applying colour—strokes of colour laid side by side rather than mixed—that he had learned from Stanley Royle. Post-war this near-pointillist approach, refined to much smaller strokes, would be apparent in all of his work.

## **Portrait of Woman in Pink Cardigan**

1941

oil on board

20 x 16 inches



During his service as a war artist, Alex Colville often depicted heavy machinery, including tanks, armored personal carriers, heavy trucks, and bulldozers. After visiting a destroyed farm in Belgium where he made some drawings, Colville wrote, “*the next day I returned to this farm and made a pen and watercolour drawing of a mined Staghound [an armoured car] and an armoured bulldozer. The latter was one of the best subjects I have seen.*”<sup>1</sup>

Colville was demobilized in 1946 and that fall began teaching at Mount Allison. He found the transition from the war to teaching difficult, and struggled to produce work, by one account making just four oil paintings in the first two years he was at Mount Allison.<sup>2</sup> ***Snowplow***, 1946 (page 45) was one of his first subjects, and it exists between the war work and his mature realism that was coming.

Throughout his long career Alex Colville was fascinated with the machines we have created to master our environment. Machines can provide shelter, as in ***Family and Rainstorm***, 1955 or they can represent imminent destruction, as in ***Horse and Train***, 1954 (page 6). More often, their meanings are more ambiguous. ***Ocean Limited***, 1962 (page 43), with the contrast of an onrushing train and a walking man, revisits the dynamic of ***Horse and Train***, which was inspired by poet Ray Campbell’s lines, “Against a regiment I oppose a brain, and a dark horse against an armoured train”.



Family and Rainstorm 1955  
glazed tempera on masonite 22 1/2 x 30 1/2 inches  
Collection: National Gallery of Canada



Ocean Limited 1962 oil and synthetic resin 27 x 47 inches  
Collection: Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax



Snowplow 1967 original signed screenprint 24 x 32 inches edition 20

Visually the train is headed for the figure's head, though our training in looking at pictures allows us to imagine depth and thus separate them. Colville uses the disconnect between the real flatness of a painting and its imagined depth, to oppose frail flesh with cold steel again in 1967's **Snowplow** (page 43) and **Road Work**, 1969.

**Snowplow**, 1946 (page 45) depicts a plow designed to run in front of a train engine to clear railroad tracks. It is all curving lines and forceful presence. Seen at dusk, the plow is, despite its visually striking design, really just a tool, albeit an immense one, and it is that tool quality to which Colville responded. So much of the drama in Colville's work has to do with potential—a potential for violence, say, that lurks at the edges of the banal. But that sense of potential is something we bring to the image. Colville does not anthropomorphize machinery, nor does he romanticize it. To him, a painting was simply, "*a construction on a flat surface.*"<sup>3</sup> He did not seek inspiration in the world, but significance, something much easier to find. "*I have selected an avenue along which I expect to encounter significant things and have started moving along that sometimes bleak but often rewarding avenue.*"<sup>4</sup> A painting had to have its own identity, Colville believed: "*Although a painting is derived from experience, it must exist as a thing in itself, an end, not a means.*"<sup>5</sup> This is an essential difference from a tool such as this snowplow, of course, which is only a means to an end, a means that, nonetheless, Colville found significant enough to paint.

## **Snowplow**

1946

oil on linen

20 x 24 inches



**Woman Standing**

1946

oil on canvas

18 x 9 3/4 inches





**Landscape**

1947

oil on board

15 15/16 x 11 15/16 inches



**Nude and Cat on Bed**

1947

oil on canvas

23 7/8 x 36 1/8 inches



**Reclining Nude, Rear View**

1947

red and white conté and ink on green paper

11 3/4 x 18 inches



Alex Colville's first exhibited paintings as a civilian in 1946 and 1947 were of horses. These depictions of placid animals lack the horror of the last paintings he did as a war artist, among which were his images of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. He admitted to returning to Canada "*bewildered*"<sup>1</sup> by the war, and sought subjects through which he could work out this feeling. "*I made some drawings of horses, then a painting from these drawings,*" he recalled. "*I began to feel that I was moving ahead.*"<sup>2</sup>

In 1946 he sent the first painting from this series, ***Three Horses***, 1946 (page 54) to a Royal Canadian Academy exhibition at the then Art Gallery of Toronto, which purchased the work. He continued with the subject, painting in 1947 what he called "*a large and rather complex **Group of Horses.***" That work was consigned to a gallery in Montreal and sold (its whereabouts now are unknown). This drawing is a preparatory study for that "*rather complex*" painting, which at over three feet wide is indeed large for a Colville. The drawing represents the almost completed composition, lacking only a fence on the right midground, and a stretch of river that runs behind the horses in the finished painting. The strong, almost sculptural, modelling in this drawing is indicative of his mature style. That he was indeed moving ahead is clear from how horses came to play recurring roles in his evolving body of work, not least in such paintings as ***Horse and Train***, 1954 (page 6) and ***Church and Horse***, 1964.



Three Horses 1946  
oil on canvas  
20 x 36 inches  
Collection: Art Gallery of Ontario



Group of Horses 1947  
oil on canvas  
27 5/8 x 37 3/8 inches  
Private Collection



Church and Horse 1964  
acrylic polymer emulsion  
21 3/4 x 30 inches  
Collection:  
The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts





**Study for Group of Horses**

July 1947

ink and conté crayon on grey-green paper  
11 1/4 x 14 1/4 inches

Alex Colville often said that he was more influenced by the Italian artists of the early 15th century than he was by any modern peers. Nonetheless, there were 20th century artists with whom he felt an affinity, including the British sculptor Henry Moore. Moore had achieved quite a lot of fame during the Second World War with his Shelter Drawings, 1940–41, but it was the Saint John painter (and fellow war artist) Miller Brittain who led Colville to study the works of the British sculptor.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the early 1950s he completed a series of paintings of female figures in the landscape that clearly show the influence of Moore, works such as *Nudes on Shore*, 1950. *Woman with Arch* (page 57) is an early example of this trend in Colville's work, with the almost sculptural treatment of the figure (he taught sculpture at Mount Allison in addition to painting and drawing). The architecture which frames both the figure and the sea in the background echoes the renaissance painters he loved so much, as well as having echoes of certain surrealists, such as the Italian painter Giorgio de Chirico (1888-1978).



*Nudes on Shore* 1950  
tempera on masonite 24 x 38 inches  
Collection: Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton



**Henry Moore** Shelter Drawing:  
Seated Mother and Child 1941  
pencil, crayon, watercolour, pastel, pen,  
ink and gouache 14 1/4 x 10 3/4 inches  
Private Collection

**Woman with Arch** 1948 tempera on board 31 1/2 x 23 1/2 inches



The Cumberland Basin is the northeastern tip of the Bay of Fundy, the site of the highest tides in the world, where the water level drops and rises over 16 metres twice a day. This scene, on the Isthmus of Chignecto, which connects Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, depicts a land and sea scape that is in constant motion, churning, like the sea ice that forms as the tide drops in the winter.

***Cumberland Basin with Ice***, 1950 (page 59) depicts a landscape reminiscent of the scenes of devastation Colville painted while serving as a war artist during the Second World War. The land churned into mud, the shattered tree, the seemingly ruined wharf, bear witness here, though, to the power of nature, not the power (and folly) of humankind.

The bare poles of the ruined wharf, in the middle ground of the painting, are perhaps what drew Colville's eye: evidence of the attempt by humans to conquer this unconquerable force, an attempt that is bound to fail without constant vigilance.

### **Cumberland Basin with Ice**

1950

oil on canvas

22 1/8 x 26 1/8 inches



**Six Figures on Beach**

19 Nov. 1951

pencil and white casein tempera on grey paper

20 x 24 inches



Colville made numerous studies for every one of his paintings, ranging from near complete images to geometric exercises refining the positioning or placement of individual elements. He attended the Amherst cattle show every year while he lived in Sackville, and this study is one of a series that led to a finished painting in 1955. **Cattle Show** features far fewer elements than the study: three cows led by their owners, and one figure, evidently a judge, walking against the left to right flow of the heavy animals. In the study Colville captures the circular pacing of the animals and their minders, and shows the stands where observers would sit. The vantage point is from the rail, as close as possible to the action.

Colville was intent of getting his observations right, even going so far as to climb into a stall to get a closer look at one of the bulls in the show. He told his barber what he had done, who responded that he might “have been killed, as bulls are unpredictable.” It didn’t seem to worry Colville, who concluded the story to Halifax art dealer Robert Manuge, “*an artist’s life is full of hazards.*”<sup>1</sup>



Cattle Show 1955 oil on board 25 7/8 x 40 7/8 inches  
Private Collection





**Study for Cattle Show**

1954

tempera on board

17 3/8 x 27 3/4 inches

In 1965 Alex Colville submitted designs to the Canadian Department of Finance for a competition to design the backs of the coins being issued to celebrate Canada's centennial in 1967. The mint, which had requested submissions from several artists, was so taken with Colville's simple designs of common Canadian animals that he won the commission for the entire set.

In writing of his choice of subjects, Colville said, "*I wished to use creatures which were common, which had certain moving or symbolic associations, and which had not been made trite by repeated and, perhaps, unthinking usage.*"<sup>1</sup> The snowshoe hare, pictured here, is a typically Canadian animal, which turns white in the winter and is adapted for the heavy snows of its northern habitat.

This preparatory sketch highlights Colville's meticulous construction, placing the hare in a starburst of lines that fix it in place, containing the boundless energy of the animal in the abstracted perfection of geometry. That interplay of the natural—as represented by animals—and the abstract or intellectual is central to Colville's work. "*To me the presence of animals seems absolutely necessary. I feel that without animals everything is incomplete.*"<sup>2</sup>



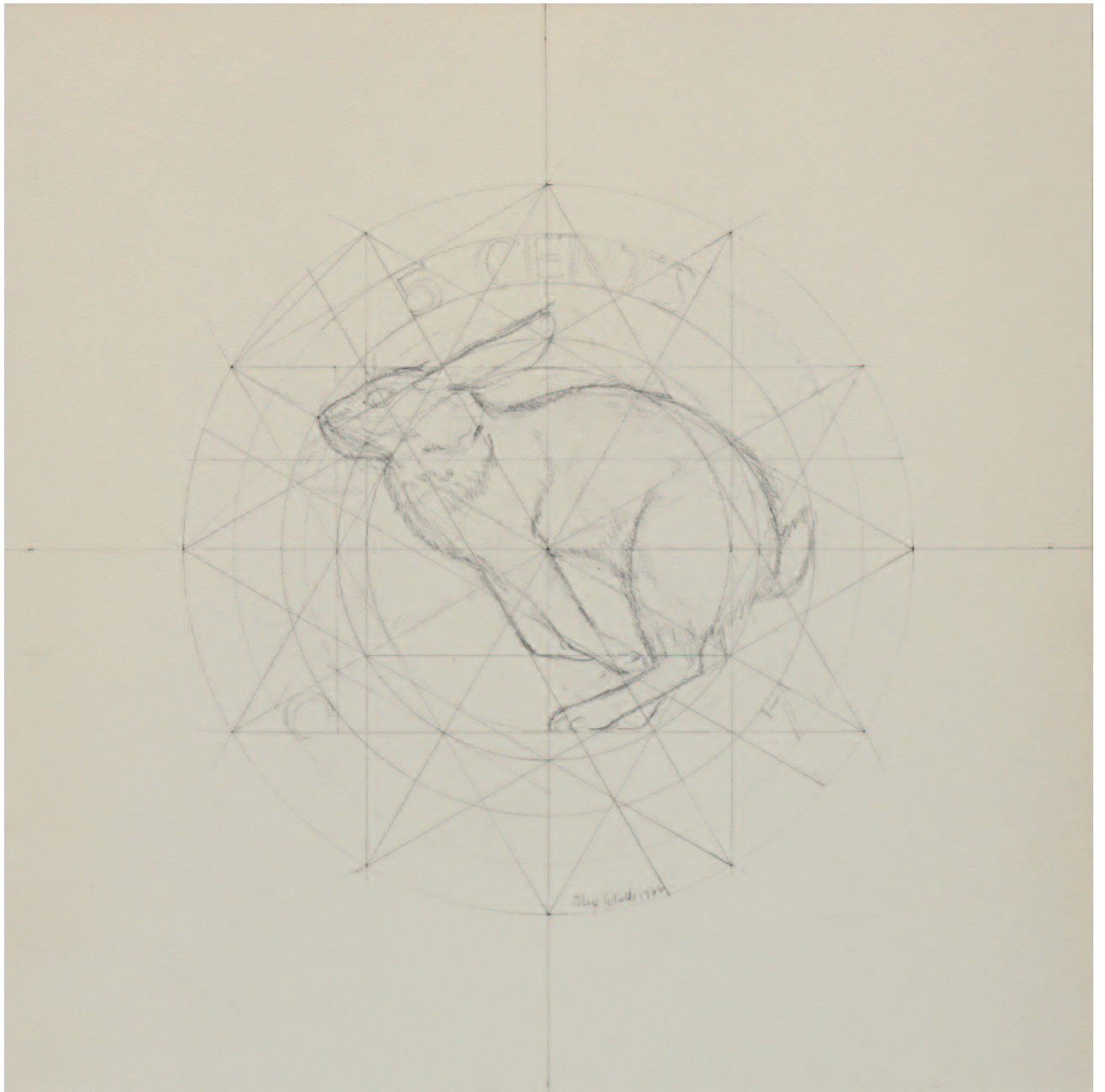
Centennial coins designed by Alex Colville 1967

## Drawing for 5 Cent Coin

1966

pencil on card

12 x 12 inches



# List of Works

Airport, Amherst 1941 pastel and watercolour on paper 14 1/2 x 19 5/8 inches	page 37
Back Street Amherst 1936 oil on board 12 x 18 1/8 inches	page 15
Birch Trees 1938 oil on board 11 3/4 x 9 inches	page 17
Cast of Venus de Milo, Owens Art Gallery 1939 oil on board 35 3/8 x 27 1/2 inches	page 25
Cumberland Basin with Ice 1950 oil on canvas 22 1/8 x 26 1/8 inches	page 59
Drawing for 5 Cent Coin 1966 pencil on card 12 x 12 inches	page 65
Landscape 1947 oil on board 15 15/16 x 11 15/16 inches	page 49
Night Scene 1939 oil on board 16 x 12 inches	page 27
Nude and Cat on Bed 1947 oil on canvas 23 7/8 x 36 1/8 inches	page 51
Peggy's Cove, Grass 1940 oil on board 19 7/8 x 23 7/8 inches	page 33
Peggy's Cove, Shoreline 1940 oil on board 20 x 24 inches	page 35
Portrait 1941 oil on board 24 x 20 inches	page 39

Portrait of Woman in Pink Cardigan 1941 oil on board 20 x 16 inches	page 41
Prospect 1939 oil on board 22 x 30 inches	page 29
Reclining Nude, Rear View 1947 red and white conté and ink on green paper 11 3/4 x 18 inches	page 53
Robb Engineering Co. 1938 oil on board 13 3/8 x 18 1/8 inches	page 19
Six Figures on Beach 19 Nov. 1951 pencil and white casein tempera on grey paper 20 x 24 inches	page 61
Snowplow 1946 oil on linen 20 x 24 inches	page 45
Still Life with Mirror 1938 oil on board 16 x 20 inches	page 21
Study for Cattle Show 1954 tempera on board 17 3/8 x 27 3/4 inches	page 63
Study for Group of Horses July 1947 ink and conté crayon on grey-green paper 11 1/4 x 14 1/4 inches	page 55
Train at Night 1939 oil on board 14 x 12 inches	page 31
Winter, Amherst 1938 oil on board 13 1/2 x 18 1/4 inches	page 23
Woman Standing 1946 oil on canvas 18 x 9 3/4 inches	page 47
Woman with Arch 1948 tempera on board 31 1/2 x 23 1/2 inches	page 57

# Footnotes

## **“I Too Will be an Artist”: The Education of Alex Colville** (pages 4-10)

1. Alex Colville, quoted in Graham Metson and Cheryl Lean, *Alex Colville: Diary of a War Artist* (Halifax: Nimbus Publishing, 1981), p. 21.
2. Alex Colville, “My Experience as a Painter and Some General Views of Art,” lecture from November 1951, reprinted in Helen J. Dow, *The Art of Alex Colville* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1972), p. 203.
3. Alex Colville, “My Experience as a Painter and Some General Views of Art,” lecture from November 1951, reprinted in Helen J. Dow, *The Art of Alex Colville* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1972), p. 203.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, p. 204.
7. Helen J. Dow, *The Art of Alex Colville* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1972), p. 48.
8. Alex Colville, “My Experience as a Painter and Some General Views of Art,” lecture from November 1951, reprinted in Helen J. Dow, *The Art of Alex Colville* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1972), p. 204.
9. Alex Colville, *Statement in Canadian Art 8 No.4* (Summer 1951), quoted in Lora Senechal Carney, *Canadian Painters in a Modern World 1925-1955* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press: 2017), p. 266.
10. Alex Colville, “A Tribute to George Grant,” in Peter C. Emberley (ed.), *By Loving Our Own* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1990), p. 5.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

## ***Cast of Venus de Milo, Owens Art Gallery*** (page 24)

1. Alex Colville quoted in Graham Metson and Cheryl Lean, *Alex Colville: Diary of a War Artist* (Halifax: Nimbus Publishing, 1981), p. 16.

## ***Airport, Amherst*** (page 36)

1. Alex Colville quoted in Graham Metson and Cheryl Lean, *Alex Colville: Diary of a War Artist* (Halifax: Nimbus Publishing, 1981), p. 18.

## ***Portrait of Woman in Pink Cardigan*** (page 40)

1. Alex Colville quoted in Graham Metson and Cheryl Lean, *Alex Colville: Diary of a War Artist* (Halifax: Nimbus Publishing, 1981), p. 23.
2. Alex Colville, “My Experience as a Painter and Some General Views of Art,” lecture from November 1951, reprinted in Helen J. Dow, *The Art of Alex Colville* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1972), p. 204.

***Snowplow*** (pages 42-44)

1. Alex Colville quoted in Graham Metson and Cheryl Lean, *Alex Colville: Diary of a War Artist* (Halifax: Nimbus Publishing, 1981), p. 102.
2. Paul Duval, *High Realism in Canada* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin and Company, 1974), p. 66.
3. Alex Colville, statement in *Canadian Art*, 1951, quoted in Lora Senechal Carney, *Canadian Painters in a Modern World 1925-1955* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2017), p. 265.
4. Alex Colville, "My Experience as a Painter and Some General Views of Art," lecture from November 1951, reprinted in Helen J. Dow, *The Art of Alex Colville* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1972), p. 205.
5. Alex Colville, statement in *Canadian Art*, 1951, quoted in Lora Senechal Carney, *Canadian Painters in a Modern World 1925-1955* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2017), p. 265.

***Study for Group of Horses*** (page 54)

1. Alex Colville, "My Experience as a Painter and Some General Views of Art," lecture from November 1951, reprinted in Helen J. Dow, *The Art of Alex Colville* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1972), p. 204.
2. *Ibid.*

***Woman with Arch*** (page 56)

1. David Burnett, *Colville* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1983), p. 64.

***Study for Cattle Show*** (page 62)

1. Alex Colville, letter to Robert Manuge, February 13, 1982, quoted in David Burnett, *Colville* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1983), p. 245.

***Drawing for 5 Cent Coin*** (page 64)

1. Helen J. Dow, "Alex Colville on His Centennial Coins," *The Art of Alex Colville* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1978), p. 208.
2. Alex Colville, interview by David Burnett, July 28, 1982, quoted in David Burnett, *Colville* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1983), p. 157.

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“I Too Will be an Artist:” The Education of Alex Colville Ray Cronin

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Cover Image: Alex Colville in his office, Owens Art Gallery, Sackville N.B. c. 1955  
Inside Covers: **Winter, Amherst (detail)**, 1938, oil on board, 13 1/2 x 18 1/4 inches

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38



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