

David Milne

DAVID MILNE

Paintings and Watercolours

Directly from the Estate of David Milne

Essay by Dr. Katharine Lochnan

November 1 — December 13, 2025

David Milne and “Intransitive Love”

David Milne (1882-1953) is one of the most brilliant and underrated artists in the history of Canadian art. Totally dedicated to personal expression and artistic exploration, he made landscape his specialty. He created a body of work that is remarkable for its intellectual sophistication, originality and aesthetic beauty.

Milne was born in a log cabin near Burgoyne, a rural hamlet close to Lake Huron in Bruce County, Ontario. The last of 10 children born to Scottish immigrant parents, he fondly remembered their rural lifestyle. When Milne was 9, the family moved to the nearby village of Paisley. After attending high school and teachers college in Walkerton, he taught in a one-room school house outside Paisley. While teaching he took a correspondence course in commercial art from a school in New York. In 1903 he decided to go there to study only to discover that the school had closed. He enrolled, instead, in the Art Students' League where Robert Henri, a key figure in the Ashcan School, taught. Milne liked Henri but not his subject matter, and referred to his teachers as “bricklayers.” He was, however, inspired by the energy of his fellow students. The exposure to historical, contemporary, and commercial art fueled his artistic imagination for years to come.

James McNeill Whistler, America's most famous artist, died in 1903. Milne arrived in time to see the Whistler exhibitions mounted by the Society of American Artists and the Grolier Club in summer 1904. Whistler had revolutionized the construction of picture space based on the study of Japanese prints. Milne followed suit and began flattening his compositions, creating a sense of recession by raising the horizon line, placing repoussoir devices in the foreground, and using diagonals to lead the eye back. He arranged elements of the composition asymmetrically, and truncated them at the periphery. This can be seen in Milne's ***Embankment and Bridge***, c. 1910 (page 11), whose subject, composition and palette reference Whistler's early realist paintings of the Thames seen from the window of his Chelsea studio.

Milne went to New York with the intention of becoming a commercial artist. It was an exciting moment as colour lithography, inspired in large part by Japanese woodcuts, was at its apogee, and French post-impressionist artists, including Jean-Édouard Vuillard, Pierre Bonnard and Henri de



James McNeill Whistler, *Chelsea in Ice*, 1864
Oil on canvas, 17 3/4 x 24 in., The Lunder Collection

Toulouse-Lautrec, were designing posters and book illustrations. In America, watercolour was being used in unconventional ways by artists such as Maurice Prendergast and John Marin.

Around 1909, Milne and his friend Amos Engle rented a space and tried to make an income from signage and illustration but this did not work out. Milne began to exhibit his artwork in 1909-1910. His New York watercolours, including ***Wooded Road***, c. 1910-11 (page 13) and ***Spring Foliage***, 1911 (page 17) are characterized by bright colours applied with a staccato, calligraphic short-hand set off against a white background. They capture the energy, vibrancy and excitement of the city at that Ragtime moment.

In 1913, the landmark Armory Show took place in New York. Americans were confronted for the first time by European Modernism which led to much controversy between conservatives and progressives. Five of Milne's works were selected for inclusion in the American section, a great honour. The European section included works by Monet, Gauguin, Matisse and Van Gogh, artists who were to inspire the young artist for years to come.

In 1914, Clive Bell's book Art was published. Hugely influential in the English-speaking world, it built on Whistler's “art for art's sake” aesthetic, and promulgated formalist aesthetic theory. Bell believed that art should express the artist's feeling, which he called “aesthetic emotion,” through the creation of “significant form.” Toward the end of 1914, Milne saw bright colours and metropolitan subject matter

as too closely linked to his commercial work. He decided to devote himself to the creation of fine art, and began experimenting with Bell's concepts of "aesthetic emotion" and "significant form."

After a six-year courtship, Milne married Patsy Hegarty in 1912 and became increasingly concerned about income. Despite very positive reviews, his works failed to sell. After holding an exhibition of his New York works in spring 1915, he began to paint views of the Bronx in a very different style using a subdued palette of black, green and white. He considered these "black core" works one of his most important innovations. On September 12, 1915, he painted ***Olive Matrix (Bronx Skyline II)*** (page 21) in which abstracted black forms, embedded in an olive-green matrix, suggest trees and figures; walk-up apartment buildings appear to be looking down on them from the top of the hill. This enigmatic work captures the anonymity, density and frenetic quality of city life which Milne was finding increasingly stressful. He later acknowledged that the works he made at this time may have reflected a troubled state of mind.

He worked increasingly in black and white. He made black ink drawings on Japanese paper and turned a few of them, including ***Landscape with Trees***, c. 1915-17 (page 25), into lithographic prints. The abstract quality of the forms, and the dramatic contrast between the black of the ink and the white of the paper, recall the woodcuts of Edvard Munch.¹

In ***Stream Bed Rocks***, c. 1915-16 (page 23), Milne demonstrated a level of refinement and aesthetic sensibility which indicate a deepening appreciation for, and understanding of, oriental aesthetics. Nature is only the starting point for a two-dimensional, asymmetrical composition. There is a Zen-like contemplative quality to this work.

Milne longed for the rural lifestyle that had characterized his childhood. In 1916, he and Patsy moved to Boston Corners. This inaugurated a productive period during which he felt he had found his own artistic voice.

The period 1914-18 was overshadowed by the First World War. When Canada introduced conscription in 1917, Milne signed up in 1918. Fortunately the war ended before he was shipped from England to France giving him time to explore museums and galleries in London. It was there that he learned about the Canadian War Memorials Fund which had been set up in 1916. He was

¹ Edvard Munch's *The Kiss*, which was included in the Armory show. Carl Zigrosser, later founder of the Metropolitan Museum's Department of Prints and Drawings, admired Munch's prints, especially his lithographs. Milne would have been aware of Zigrosser's feelings as he also admired Milne's works in the Armory exhibition.

hired as a Canadian war artist, put on "London pay", given an officer's uniform, painting supplies, and a chauffeur. Milne was one of the first admitted to the battlefields where Canadians had fought; the horrors he encountered there must have been traumatic.

He executed his war watercolours using a "dry brush" technique, a mixture of painting and drawing which he invented. Following his return to America, Milne applied this technique to his work at Boston Corners and discovered that he could drag a wet brush across the dry watercolour to create a controlled blur. This enabled him to create his brilliant series of *Reflections* on Bishop's Pond.

The war had taken an emotional toll on him. In 1920, inspired by Thoreau's *Walden*, he decided to spend the winter alone in a Nissen hut built near Alander Mountain in the Lower Berkshires while Patsy worked in New York. In 1921 and 1922, economic concerns led them to seek employment at a summer resort on Dart's Lake in the western Adirondacks. There Milne began experimenting with different ways to create texture. He painted in layers, rubbing in tints while the paint was still wet, scraping it off with a palette knife, and drawing lines through it with a brush handle. This can be seen in ***Black House and Tree*** (page 27), painted on March 3, 1922, a view of Biddicott, the house his friend James Clarke purchased that month near Mount Riga.

After spending another winter at Mount Riga, the Milnes returned to the Adirondacks to run a tea house on Big Moose Lake. As this proved unprofitable, and left little time for painting, Milne decided to build his own tea house. He went to Ottawa for the winter of 1923 hoping to make money by teaching art and selling work to the National Gallery. Although he could not find work, the National Gallery did buy six watercolours. Clarke stepped forward and financed the building of the tea house as a business venture. After spending the summers of 1924-29 building it in an Arts and Crafts style Milne put it on the market.

In 1925, he stopped painting in watercolour for 12 years and began to use oils in a looser, more painterly, manner. In the ***Stream in Winter***, c. 1926 (page 29), he played off black and white pigment with tiny touches of red and green against the buff canvas much as he had played off watercolour against the white of the paper.

In May 1929, Milne returned to Canada and left Patsy to work at Lake Placid. He camped on an island near Temagami and dedicated himself to painting. That winter he moved to Weston near

Toronto where Patsy joined him. In spring 1930, as the Depression set in, they moved to Palgrave. The marriage, under stress for several years, ended in 1933. That same year Milne's work was admired by Vincent and Alice Massey when they encountered it in an exhibition at the National Gallery. Encouraged by the director, Eric Brown, and the curator, Harry McCurry, the Masseys purchased their first work by Milne.

In May 1933, Milne paddled a canoe from Orillia to Big Shute on the Severn River where he camped for awhile. He decided to lease a lot and build a cabin on Six Mile Lake where he lived and worked for 6 years. In 1934, he sold 300 paintings at a nominal price to the Masseys, some of which were placed on the market, bringing Milne to the attention of Alan Jarvis who was to become a lifelong supporter and director of the National Gallery of Canada. Jarvis introduced Milne to Douglas Duncan who became his agent and dealer. This brought some financial stability into his life.

After 1937, Milne worked almost exclusively in watercolour and began to loosen up, using more wash and a warmer palette. Watercolours made at the cabin include **Fireplace with Oven**, 1938 (page 31) and **Cracks in the New Ice**, 1939 (page 33). In 1938 he met, and fell in love with, Kathleen Pavey, a nurse with psychiatric training, who took refuge in his harbour while canoeing on a stormy day. She found him suffering from "cabin fever."

Milne visited Kathleen in Toronto and Muskoka that winter. In spring, 1939, he visited her at her apartment in the Sunnyside district of Toronto and painted her in **Sun Porch at Sunnyside** (page 35), the popular amusement park on Lake Ontario at the foot of Roncesvalles. In August, 1940, Milne visited Montreal where his grand-parents lived, and made the watercolour **Little Square in Montreal** (page 37) using spare, refined, brushstrokes. In September or October he painted **Stream in the Bush, Haliburton** (page 39). In October, when Kathleen was three months pregnant, the Milnes moved to Uxbridge where their son, David, was born in May 1941.

Family life had a major impact on Milne's work. His paintings began to convey tenderness and warmth, playfulness and humour. He became more generous with paint and employed "a voluptuous spectrum of colours."² He experimented with new themes and styles: **Easel, 1945** (page 41), an abstract explosion of creative energy, may owe a debt to the German Expressionists whose brushwork and deliberate *naïveté* were inspired, like Milne's, by childrens' art.

² David P. Silcox, *David Milne: An Introduction to his Life and Art*, Richmond Hill, Canada: Firefly Books, 2005, 58.

In fall, 1947 Milne took the train to Baptiste Lake where he bought a lot and built a log cabin. **Farm III** (page 43) was painted near the town in spring 1950, and **Driftwood in Ice** (page 45) on Baptiste Lake on November 24.

Milne's health began to deteriorate. In 1951, he was operated on for cancer. In 1952, the family moved to Bancroft when a stroke ended his ability to paint. Milne died there on December 26, 1953. He is buried in Mount Pleasant Cemetery in Toronto.

One of Canada's greatest artists, Milne followed a path of his own. He devoted himself to his practice, and firmly believed that art rooted in "aesthetic emotion" is a form of "intransitive love."³ We are all beneficiaries of his rich intellectual, emotional and visual bequest.

Dr. Katharine Lochnan

Dr. Katharine Lochnan is Senior Curator Emeritus, Art Gallery of Ontario. She holds a Ph.D. Art History, Courtauld Institute, University of London, a Master of Theological Studies, University of Toronto; an Honours B.A. and M.A. in Art History from the University of Toronto. She organized the exhibition and contributed the essay, "Reflections on Turner, Whistler, Monet and Milne," to the catalogue *David Milne Watercolours: Painting Toward the Light* which accompanied the exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario, British Museum, and Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2005. Her essay "David Milne: Face to Face with Infinity" appeared in *Queen's Quarterly* in Spring 2006. Her essay "The Mystery Thing": David Milne and Spirituality" was published in the catalogue *David Milne: Modern Painting* which accompanied the exhibition at the Dulwich Picture Gallery, Vancouver Art Gallery and McMichael Gallery in 2018.

³ David B. Milne, "Feeling in Painting", 1948. Quoted in Silcox, *Painting Place*: 1996, 1.

Embankment and Bridge
c. 1910
oil on canvas
15 7/8 x 20 1/8 inches
CR#103.2



Wooded Road
c. 1910-11
watercolour on illustration board
17 1/2 x 14 3/4 inches
CR#103.35



Blue Palisades
c. 1910-11
oil on canvas
14 7/8 x 18 5/8 inches
CR#103.29



Spring Foliage

3 May 1911

watercolour on illustration board

17 3/4 x 14 7/8 inches

CR#103.64



Intense Black Trees
c. 1915
ink on paper
13 1/4 x 15 3/4 inches
CR#601.8



Olive Matrix (Bronx Skyline II)
12 September 1915
watercolour on paper
17 3/4 x 22 inches
CR#106.44



Stream Bed Rocks
c. 1915-16
ink on paper
21 x 15 7/8 inches
CR#601.30



Landscape with Trees
c. 1915-17
offset lithograph
16 x 19 1/4 inches
ed. 1/1



Black House and Tree
3 March 1922
oil on canvas
12 x 16 inches
CR#204.72



Stream in Winter
c. 1926
oil on canvas
12 x 16 inches
CR#207.84



Fireplace with Oven
1938
watercolour on paper
14 5/8 x 21 7/8 inches
CR#306.64



Cracks in the New Ice
January 1939
watercolour on paper
14 x 19 3/4 inches
CR#306.84



Sun Porch at Sunnyside
July 1939
watercolour on paper
14 x 17 3/4 inches
CR#401.4



Little Square in Montreal
August 1940
watercolour on paper
14 x 20 inches
CR#401.100



Stream in the Bush, Haliburton
September/October 1940
watercolour on paper
14 7/8 x 20 inches
CR#402.1



Easel, 1945
c. 30 September 1945
oil on canvas
12 x 16 inches
CR#405.68



Farm III
c. January-April 1950
watercolour on paper
14 1/2 x 20 1/2 inches
CR#502.36



Driftwood in Ice
24 November 1950
watercolour on paper
14 3/8 x 20 1/2 inches
CR#502.65



List of Works

Black House and Tree 3 March 1922 oil on canvas 12 x 16 inches	page 27	Fireplace with Oven 1938 watercolour on paper 14 5/8 x 21 7/8 inches	page 31
Blue Palisades c. 1910-11 oil on canvas 14 7/8 x 18 5/8 inches	page 15	Intense Black Trees c. 1915 ink on paper 13 1/4 x 15 3/4 inches	page 19
Cracks in the New Ice January 1939 watercolour on paper 14 x 19 3/4 inches	page 33	Landscape with Trees c. 1915-17 offset lithograph 16 x 19 1/4 inches ed. 1/1	page 25
Driftwood in Ice 24 November 1950 watercolour on paper 14 3/8 x 20 1/2 inches	page 45	Little Square in Montreal August 1940 watercolour on paper 14 x 20 inches	page 37
Easel, 1945 c. 30 September 1945 oil on canvas 12 x 16 inches	page 41	Olive Matrix (Bronx Skyline II) 12 September 1915 watercolour on paper 17 3/4 x 22 inches	page 21
Embankment and Bridge c. 1910 oil on canvas 15 7/8 x 20 1/8 inches	page 11	Spring Foliage 3 May 1911 watercolour on illustration board 17 3/4 x 14 7/8 inches	page 17
Farm III c. January-April 1950 watercolour on paper 14 1/2 x 20 1/2 inches	page 43	Stream Bed Rocks c. 1915-16 ink on paper 21 x 15 7/8 inches	page 23

Stream in the Bush, Haliburton September/October 1940
watercolour on paper 14 7/8 x 20 inches

page 39

Stream in Winter c. 1926
oil on canvas 12 x 16 inches

page 29

Sun Porch at Sunnyside July 1939
watercolour on paper 14 x 17 3/4 inches

page 35

Wooded Road c. 1910-11
watercolour on illustration board 17 1/2 x 14 3/4 inches

page 13

© 2025

Mira Godard Gallery and the Estate of David Milne

© 2025 Essay:

Dr. Katharine Lochnan

David Milne and “Intransitive Love”



22 Hazelton Avenue Toronto ON M5R 2E2 (416) 964-8197
godard@godardgallery.com godardgallery.com