

In the spring of 1942 Alex Colville was in his last semester at Mount Allison University. In those months he completed two murals that were the most ambitious paintings he had made to date. Both showed his preoccupation with the events of the war, a preoccupation shared by most of the world in those grim times when the Germans were supreme in Europe and the Japanese were conquering the Pacific.

One of these, *Departure*, 1962, a 4' x 9' mural-sized painting, showed a busy scene at the Sackville train station, with numerous soldiers amidst the far fewer businessmen and other travellers. The central figures in this large work are a soldier and a young woman clasped in an embrace. While just one amongst a series of vignettes, the couple commands our attention, conveying a story that was surely all too familiar to Canadians in the war years. Just months after painting this work, Colville would be one of the soldiers leaving Sackville—and his new wife—for the uncertainty of the battlefield.

Eleven years later Colville returned to this scene in his remarkable painting *Soldier and Girl at Station*, one of a series of paintings he made in that year that showcased the maturation of his style after his war service and his first years teaching in Sackville. The figures occupy roughly the same space in the composition in both paintings, just to the right of centre. But where the mural is busy and filled with detail—steam swirling amongst the figures; a porter wheeling a laden dolly; a bowler-hatted figure buying a paper from a newsboy; a man piling luggage—*Soldier and Girl at Station* is stripped to its essentials: two figures on an otherwise deserted platform at night, a stool, a satchel, a silent train, another line of track. The two figures are intent only on each other, the empty station symbolic of how, for them, the world has disappeared. *Departure* in comparison feels like a magazine illustration—engaging, romantic, and perhaps even a little naïve. *Soldier and Girl at Station* depicts a return, a theme Colville would come back to again and again throughout his long career. And while the figures are not exactly identifiable, one cannot help but read them as Alex and Rhoda—as in so many of Colville's mature paintings— here reunited and completely, utterly, together.

In this study for that painting, the composition is vertical, the station compressed into narrow strips on either side of the couple. The soldier's right arm is uppermost, with the fingers of his left hand splayed, suggesting the emotion coursing through him. In the final painting the arm positions are reversed, that sense of movement has been removed, the couples seem even more still, as if outside of time.

One can see how Colville was working out small details such as the splashes of light from the train windows and the light standards, the angle of the girl's head, the placement of her feet. The compressed space in this study enhances the focus on the couple, roots them, somehow, more solidly in the world, while in the finished painting the space is dreamlike, the emptiness of the station emphatic, almost surreal. The evolution from the mural is striking. In it the couple depicted embrace amidst a busy crowd, though they nonetheless manage to create a sense of isolation. This image, which presaged one of the most famous ones from the Second World War—Alfred Eisenstaedt's *Life* magazine photograph of a sailor and a woman kissing in Times Square on VJ day—obviously stayed with Colville, reappearing, pared down to its essence, powerfully evoking the quiet relief and deep joy of a return, as opposed to the drama and bustle of a departure.

Colville made no image lightly. His process of making study after study, plotting out each aspect of the composition until satisfied, ensured that his final paintings were distilled into images that carry all the power of profound truths. "I never thought of myself as a patriot, or even as a sentimental person," Colville told Graham Metson in 1980, remembering his homecoming from the war, "but I was very moved by that experience."¹ Where *Departure* might be found to be sentimental, *Soldier and Girl at Station* has none of

¹ Alex Colville interviewed by Graham Metson, November 1980, *Alex Colville: Diary of a War Artist*, compiled by Graham Metson and Cheryl Lean, Nimbus Publishing, 1981, p. 159.

that easy emotion. Through his process of building an image, the artist stripped away any pretence to sentiment, leaving only strong, timeless, emotion.

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