

On the surface, Alex Colville's *The River Thames* seems outside of his normal run of subject matter. It is hard to imagine a location much farther from the intimate confines of small-town New Brunswick or Nova Scotia than the busy heart of London, fed by its liquid artery, the Thames. This painting's geographic—if not emotional—distance from Colville's usual haunts marks it as a relatively rare one in Alex Colville's mature body of work. But it is, perhaps, exactly that sense of distance that the artist is seeking to express.

The River Thames is a highly focussed image. The long diagonal of the bridge rail squeezes the lone figure into the left third of the picture, while the river itself, reflecting the sky above it, takes up much of the remaining space, creating a sense of openness that leads the eye out of the picture. That right-to-left movement evokes the river's current, or course, but even more, *The River Thames* is a meditation on time's passing: the figure is rooted in the moment, but the river flows on, immune to human desires, regrets, or expectations.

The stylish young woman on the bridge gazes out at the river, her expression pensive. Paused in her walk, she holds an umbrella lightly, a shield against the rain predicted by the dark clouds over the buildings on the other side of the river. Like so many of Colville's arresting images, the scene is simple, almost banal, yet suffused with import. Why depict this moment of quiet reverie—despite the city setting, the image seems intimate, the double-decker bus in the background the only other evidence of human presence—amongst all the other possible moments and settings the artist could have chosen?

Colville is often thought of as an artist who painted place—specifically, the places where he lived most of his long life: Sackville, New Brunswick; and Wolfville, Nova Scotia. But it is not really geography that Colville painted, but community. Specifically, the islands of order in an inherently chaotic world that we humans try to create wherever we are. For Colville, nothing exemplifies the victory of order over chaos like the family, however temporary that victory may ultimately be, and he regularly used his own family as his subject matter. His wife, Rhoda, figures in many of his paintings; she was by far his preferred model. Friends and colleagues appear, as do his sons as boys, and a long series of family pets. Over the long scope of his career, one sees a family and its members form, grow, evolve, and age.

After Rhoda, his most familiar female model was his daughter, Ann, whom he first painted as a toddler in *Child and Dog*, 1952. She appears again in *Child Skipping*, 1958 and *August*, 1964. She appears as an adult in later paintings, such as *Embarkation*, 1994, in which, as Tom Smart notes, "an embarkation causes a father to recall a prolonged separation from his daughter."¹ And here is the crux. *The River Thames* was painted when Colville's daughter was in her early twenties, an age when children are usually setting out on their own journey in life, a time when parents must re-evaluate their relationship and role vis á vis their children, whom they suddenly find to be adults.

As the figure gazes out over the river's inexorable flow, we can feel the realization of the one-way journey she has embarked upon, because we are all in the same boat. That Colville used a scene of embarkation by boat twenty years later to revisit this theme just highlights the depth of his thinking about seemingly simple tropes of human lives, such as children growing up and moving on. In this image he has captured and communicated a profound truth and has conveyed it so powerfully and poetically as to take us back to our own moment of launching, to revisit those first steps taken on our own, and to feel again the trepidation—and exhilaration—of freedom. And that is what Colville was able to do time and time again in his paintings, present seemingly simple moments that are freighted with meaning and contain worlds.

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¹ Tom Smart, *Alex Colville: Return*, Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Douglas & McIntyre, 2003, p. 84.