



103 Clarence Alphonse Gagnon

CAC RCA 1881 – 1942

La plage de Saint-Énogat, Bretagne

oil on panel, on verso signed faintly, titled *La Plage de St. Euspat, Bretagne* [sic] on the Dominion Gallery labels, dated circa 1908 on the Lucile Rodier Gagnon inventory label, inscribed with the Dominion Gallery inventory #B7680 and variously, certified by the Lucile Rodier Gagnon inventory #430 and stamped Dominion Gallery, 1907
6 ¼ x 9 in, 15.6 x 22.9 cm

PROVENANCE

Collection of the Artist, Paris
Private Collection, Switzerland
Dominion Gallery, Montreal, 1980
Private Collection, Quebec
Private Collection, Toronto

LITERATURE

Hélène Sicotte and Michèle Grandbois, *Clarence Gagnon, 1881 – 1942: Dreaming the Landscape*, Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, 2006, reproduced page 89 and listed page 343, titled as *The Beach at Saint-Énogat*

EXHIBITED

Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, Quebec City, *Clarence Gagnon, 1881 – 1942: Dreaming the Landscape*, June 7 – September 10, 2006, traveling in 2006 – 2007 to the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, and McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, catalogue #23

THREE YEARS AFTER his arrival in Paris in 1904, Canadian artist Clarence Gagnon was becoming known for his body of engravings inspired by Brittany’s medieval villages. At that time, he also fell under the spell of the seaside resorts of the Emerald Coast, Saint-Malo and Dinard, capturing them in small oil-on-board paintings. Some black-and-white photographs in a personal album attest to a beachside holiday in the summer of 1907 with his brother Wilford and two young women: Katherine (whom Gagnon would later marry) and Ethel Irwin. There they are cavorting in the waters of the English Channel with other bathers as a sailboat moves towards the horizon; another photo shows holidaymakers relaxing on the beach in the shade of a striped tent.¹

The young Gagnon’s love of the seaside also infuses the few luminous canvases that signaled his definitive farewell to engraving and embrace of an exclusively painterly vocation. From 1907 to 1910, Gagnon’s painted oeuvre was enriched by beach scenes that owe much—in both subject matter and form—to French *plein air* master Eugène Boudin (1824 – 1898) and to Gagnon’s Canadian compatriot James W. Morrice (1865 – 1924), who introduced him to working with a *pochade* box and whom he deeply admired.

Serious Gagnon fans know well the paintings of Dinard’s and Saint-Malo’s fashionable beaches from that brief three-year period. Art historians have made them the standard-bearers of Canadian Impressionism for the modern subject matter they share with the great Impressionists Boudin, Claude Monet, Paul Signac, Mary Cassatt, James McNeill Whistler, and so on. Those luminous Gagnon compositions are also held by Canada’s major

public galleries, repeatedly appearing in permanent exhibitions of the collection or on loan for national and international tours.

Less familiar to the public, however, are the more numerous *pochade* paintings on the same themes, which for the most part are jealously guarded in private collections. Fortunately for us all, however, a few have emerged from the shadows in recent years, affording us a chance to appreciate Gagnon’s observational acumen in their subtle rendering of the fleeting effects of wind and light in the seaside haunts of wealthy holidaymakers. And then there’s the discovery, via sales at Heffel, of painted *pochade* works that shed light on the extraordinary *Summer Breeze at Dinard* (collection of the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec) and *Two Beaches: Paramé and Saint-Malo* (collection of the Beaverbrook Art Gallery).

Gagnon was by no means a stranger to the Emerald Coast beaches west of Dinard, such as the one at Saint-Énogat, sheltered by rocky promontories at either end. Here, Gagnon gives us a panoramic view of the sandy beach as it curves elegantly off towards the sombre, rugged headland dividing the airy blues of the sky from those of the sea. The sea and sky space is painted in broad horizontal sweeps, the sands and slope peopled with scattered dabs and notes of colour representing holidaymakers, bathers, tents, and the villas atop the cliffs.

To our knowledge, *La plage de Saint-Énogat, Bretagne* has been on public display only once, for the *Clarence Gagnon, 1881 – 1942: Dreaming the Landscape* retrospective organized by the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec and the National Gallery of Canada in 2006 and 2007. Gagnon’s widow, Lucile Rodier Gagnon, catalogued it in 1946 among the hundreds of *pochades* piled up in his Paris studio, after which it was put up for sale.² It landed in Switzerland, in the hands of collectors who already had their fair share of Gagnons stacked away. For sale at the Dominion Gallery in Montreal in 1980, it was snapped up quickly. In the 40 years since, *La plage de Saint-Énogat, Bretagne* has gone from a Quebec collector to one in Ontario on the way to its auction this spring of 2024.³ It attests wonderfully to the atmospheric Impressionism that for a time pervaded Gagnon’s work.

We thank Michèle Grandbois, co-author of *Clarence Gagnon, 1881 – 1942: Dreaming the Landscape*, for contributing the above essay, translated from the French.

1. See illustrations in René Boissay, *Clarence Gagnon* (Ottawa: Éditions Marcel Broquet, 1988), 42–43.

2. Lucile Rodier indicated “circa 1908” on her certificate on the back of the panel. But research by Hélène Sicotte, curator of the 2006 – 2007 retrospective, suggests that 1907, the year of Gagnon’s first stay on the Breton coast, was a likelier date. This is supported by the date and address on a letter from Gagnon to Montreal dealer James Morgan: Hôtel de la Mer, Dinard – Saint-Énogat, August 18, 1907. See Hélène Sicotte and Michèle Grandbois, *Clarence Gagnon, 1881–1942: Dreaming the Landscape* (Quebec City: Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, in assoc. with Les Éditions de l’Homme, Montreal, 2006), exhibition catalogue, 318n44.

3. Special thanks to Philip Dombowsky, whose research in the National Gallery of Canada’s Dominion Gallery Archives helped us document the provenance of the work.

ESTIMATE: \$70,000 – 90,000