



12 Alexander Colville

PC CC 1920 – 2013

Night Walk

acrylic polymer emulsion on board, on verso
signed, titled, dated 1981 and inscribed
Winsor & Newton Acrylic / 45 x 45 cm
17 ¾ x 17 ¾ in, 45 x 45 cm

PROVENANCE

Fischer Fine Art Limited, London
Mira Godard Gallery, Toronto
Galerie Claude Bernard, Paris
Dr. Morton Shulman, Toronto
Heffel Gallery Limited, Vancouver
Private Collection, Barbados
Heffel Gallery Limited, Vancouver
Acquired from the above by an Important Private
Collection, California, November 27, 1998
An Important California Trust

LITERATURE

David Burnett, *Colville*, Art Gallery of Ontario, 1983,
mentioned page 210, reproduced page 211, listed page 251

EXHIBITED

Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, *Alex Colville: A Retrospective*,
July 22 – September 18, 1983, traveling in 1983 – 1984 to the
Museum Ludwig, Cologne; Dalhousie Art Gallery, Halifax;
Staatliche Kunsthalle, Berlin; Montreal Museum of Fine Arts;
and Vancouver Art Gallery, catalogue #120, with a smaller
portion of this exhibition including *Night Walk* traveling in
1984 – 1985 to the Beijing Exhibition Centre; Shan Museum,
University of Hong Kong; Tokyo Metropolitan Teien Art
Museum; and Canada House, London, catalogue #11

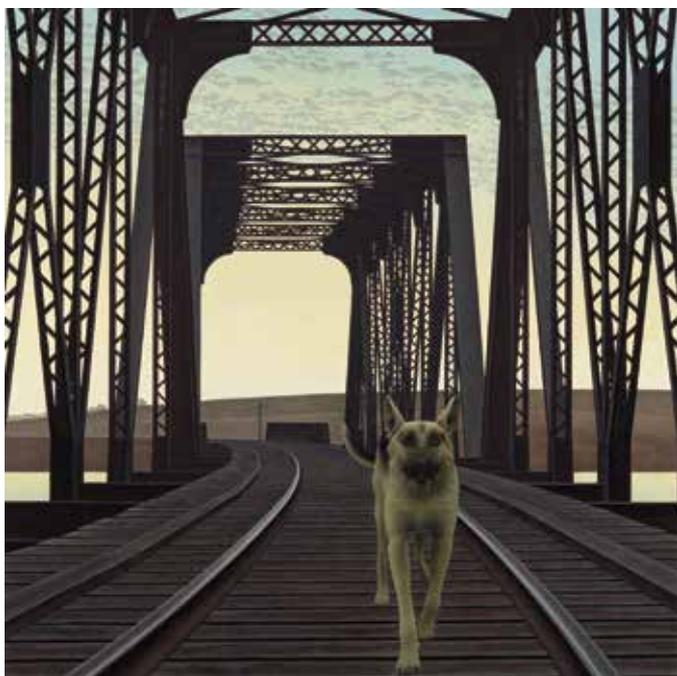
ALMOST A DECADE after his death, works by Alex Colville
continue to garner both popular and critical acclaim. Colville was
much celebrated in his lifetime, officially as well as in everyday
Canadian society—for example, he was named a Companion of
the Order of Canada (1982) and was the subject of several highly
successful retrospectives. On the populist front, he was the cre-
ator of the 1967 Centennial coin set whose images also adorn a
considerable number of book and music album covers—Colville’s
great gift was to give audiences ready access to the profundities
of life.



Night Walk in the frame made by Alex Colville

Night Walk offers such an opportunity. Meticulously com-
posed and painted, the image is easy to read. A dignified figure
(modeled on Colville’s maternal grandfather) is led by his See-
ing Eye dog along a sidewalk at night, the two figures framed by
thick, dark green foliage. The bright street light illuminates its
immediate surroundings, highlighting the dog’s back, the front
of the man’s grey suit and, in a visual echo typical of Colville, the
rounded top of the man’s hat. Colville makes sure that we can
see the paradoxes here. This is a night scene about light, and it is
structured around juxtapositions and replacements that, in their
familiarity, pose philosophical questions.

Perhaps the least obvious physical and conceptual substitution
is the way that the lamp standard mimics the trunk of one of the
trees that form a backdrop in this image. Colville shows us the
contrast between human technology in its perfect rectilinearity
and the slightly angled tree trunk just behind. He worked out

**ALEXANDER COLVILLE****Dog and Bridge**

acrylic polymer emulsion on board, 1976

35 1/2 x 35 1/2 in, 90.2 x 90.2 cm

Private Collection

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Not for sale with this lot

the geometry of this relationship in preparatory drawings and its mood in the fully coloured drawing *Night: Street Light and Tree* (1981), which contains only the lamp, sidewalk and trees. But Colville's passion is to understand human relationships.

The central substitution in the painting *Night Walk* is the dog's sight for that of his owner. As plotted in *Study for Night Walk*, lot 13 in this sale, the dog's eyes are slanted slightly upwards, suggesting that it is actively guiding its master. The man, on the other hand, looks straight ahead, dependent on prosthetic eyes and the sense of touch made explicit by his grip on the animal's harness. The interdependence of human and dog is clearly successful; they are walking, and it is night. The dog sees; the man does not. Their harmony is at once remarkable and quotidian.

Each Colville painting is the product of laborious preparation and execution. *Night Walk* readily constructs its own world of associations. This independence is one of the appeals of Colville's artworks. Yet knowing more about his propensities expands our understanding and appreciation of this painting. Speaking

generally, Colville was preoccupied with what we might call the intimate distance between human and both domesticated and wild animals. We depend on one another but do not—cannot—fully understand what the other sees. Some of his best-known works explore such connections and distinctions. *Dog and Child* (1952) suggests a mutual innocence. *French Cross* (1988) memorably depicts a young woman on horseback reflecting on the expulsions of the Acadians from Nova Scotia. *Dog and Groom* (1991) shows the artist's own devotion to his pet, as does the serigraph *Black Cat* (1996), which depicts one of the Colvilles' felines playfully disrupting the geometrical perfection of his drawing tools.

The more one reflects on *Night Walk* in the context of Colville's central themes, the more pivotal it becomes. *Dog and Priest* (1978) also powerfully establishes the substitution of a dog's sight for that of humans. While there is no suggestion that the priest is blind, as both gaze out over the ocean, we see the dog's eye from the side, not those of its master. Both wear collars, but presumably "see" quite differently; both remain enigmatic. Closer still to *Night Walk* is *Dog and Bridge* (1976), one of Colville's most famous works. We would likely not see the connection without knowing that the drawing *Seeing-Eye Dog, Man and Bridge* and its preparatory study (both from 1968) anticipated by a decade the concerns of *Dog and Bridge*.

Colville had been ruminating on the theme of blindness and sight and location for all this time. He rejected his early formulation of the scene, however, changing its components radically by 1976. The man is removed; we see instead a close-up of both dog and bridge. Shortly after *Dog and Bridge* was completed, Colville said in an interview that "the original plan... was to have a blind man and a dog crossing the bridge," an uncomfortable scene to witness. But "the image with the man was, in Colville's mind, 'too corny,'" ¹ the artist said, by which he likely meant "too obvious." Human contact is nonetheless suggested in *Dog and Bridge*. The animal looks slightly up, as if waiting for a command from someone bending over. A blind person may depend on a Seeing Eye dog as a technology, but for Colville, this would be only one of many possible relationships to explore visually. He does not limit our options in this way as he further investigates blindness, sight and insight in *Night Walk*.

We thank Mark Cheetham, Professor of Art History at the University of Toronto and author of *Alex Colville: The Observer Observed*, for contributing the above essay.

1. Quoted in Virgil Hammock, "Alex Colville: la perfection dans le réalisme / Alex Colville: Perfection and Reality," *Vie des Arts* 21, no. 84 (automne 1976): 88.

ESTIMATE: \$400,000 – 600,000