



127 James Wilson Morrice

CAC RCA 1865 – 1924

A Street in the Suburbs of Havana

oil on canvas, signed and on verso stamped
 Dominion Gallery, circa 1915 – 1921
 10 ¾ x 14 in, 27.3 x 35.6 cm

PROVENANCE

Mrs. Howard Pillow, Montreal, circa 1930
 Dominion Gallery, Montreal, circa 1948
 Private Collection, Montreal

LITERATURE

Donald Buchanan, *James Wilson Morrice*, 1936, listed page 177 and the related canvas, collection of the National Gallery of Canada, reproduced plate 19
 David Burnett, *Masterpieces of Canadian Art from the National Gallery of Canada*, 1990, page 87, and the related canvas reproduced page 66
 Christina Carier, *Les voyages de James Wilson Morrice aux Caraïbes (1915 – 1924)*, 2007, the related canvas reproduced page 23

EXHIBITED

Galleries Simonson, Paris, 1926, the related canvas
 Jeu de Paume, Paris, *Exposition d'art canadien*, 1927, the related canvas
 National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, *Seventh Annual Exhibition of Canadian Art*, 1932, the related canvas
 National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, *James Wilson Morrice, R.C.A., 1865 – 1924: Memorial Exhibition*, November 25 – December 27, 1937, traveling to the Art Gallery of Toronto and the Art Association of Montreal, 1938
 Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, *James Wilson Morrice, 1865 – 1924*, September 30 – October 31, 1965, traveling to the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, November 12 – December 5, 1965, the related canvas

Nothing is more telling of the character of Morrice's work than to turn from *The Ferry, Quebec* to *A Street in the Suburbs of Havana*. By his use of colour, cold is transformed to warmth, and the broad harmonies are given specific form by freely drawn linear elements. In his later work, Morrice drew encouragement from the work of the Fauves, who had first shown at the Salon d'Automne in 1905. He painted with Matisse in Tangier in 1912 and 1913, and his work shows a growing warmth and richness of colour, which matches the colours of North Africa to the freedom of colour that Fauvism had introduced.

—DAVID BURNETT
 in *Masterpieces of Canadian Art from the National Gallery of Canada*



James Wilson Morrice, Montreal
 Photo: William Notman (1826 – 1891)
 Collection of the McCord Museum, II-13235



JAMES WILSON MORRICE
A Street in the Suburbs of Havana
 oil on canvas, circa 1915 – 1921
 21 ½ x 25 ½ in, 54.6 x 64.8 cm
 Collection of the National Gallery of Canada

Not for sale with this lot

JAMES WILSON MORRICE was the scion of a wealthy Montreal family. His father, David Morrice, of Scottish ancestry, was a prominent textile merchant and philanthropist, particularly well known in the Presbyterian Church. James, born on August 10, 1865, was the rebel of the family—interested in art, he began to draw when he was a child. Unfortunately for the young man, his father did not approve of James becoming a painter, and the younger Morrice studied law in Toronto during the late 1880s. While studying at Osgoode Hall, Morrice managed to produce a number of paintings and, in 1888, had a painting accepted for the annual exhibition of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts.

At the end of his legal training, having fulfilled his promise to his father to get an education, Morrice resolved to turn his full attention to art. In this endeavour he received support from two major figures in the Canadian art world: the Montreal dealer William Scott and the great Sir William Van Horne, president of the CPR. Indeed, Morrice’s first biographer, Donald Buchanan, records that Van Horne was the first to purchase Morrice’s work.¹ With support from both Scott and Van Horne, Morrice was permitted to go to France in 1890 to continue his training as an artist. Importantly, his father provided an allowance that enabled James to live well in the French capital. Morrice enrolled in the Académie Julian and approached the painter Henri Harpignies,

who agreed to critique the younger artist’s work. Morrice quickly gained a greater confidence in his work and began to be known in Paris’s art world. Perhaps most importantly, in 1912 he met Henri Matisse, whom he much admired, and the two artists occasionally painted the same subjects. Morrice travelled extensively in Europe and frequently returned to Canada. In 1912, he made his first trip to North Africa, where he painted with Matisse, and, in 1915, first visited the Caribbean.

As with many artists, Morrice developed a two-tiered approach to his subjects. He generally painted studies such as *A Street in the Suburbs of Havana* directly from the motif and then used these studies as the basis of larger compositions worked up in his studio. The sketches have an extraordinary immediacy that reflects the spirit of Post-Impressionism and Morrice’s admiration for the Fauvist work of Matisse. *A Street in the Suburbs of Havana* is the primary study for a painting of the same title, now in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada (NGC 28135). Interestingly, both works were owned by collectors in Montreal—the sketch by Mrs. Howard Pillow and the larger canvas by the painter Lilius Torrance Newton.

The differences between the two works are striking. The sketch is more quickly and vibrantly painted—one can sense the confidence and speed of the brush-strokes and Morrice’s engagement



lot 127 in the frame

with the subject before him. The pinks of the blossoms in the trees seem to shimmer and the perspective of the space is exhilaratingly brisk. Our eyes are quickly drawn into the composition by the swelling shape of the plaza or square in the foreground and the march of the trees down the edges of the street in the distance. The placement of the figures in the distance also draws us into the space of the painting. The speed of Morrice’s painting is evident in the architecture, trees and foliage. In contrast, the final canvas is more measured, the composition less immediate, the foreground more developed and acting as a slight barrier to us entering the composition. The road in the background remains slightly a-central, but it is more regular than the placement of the road in the sketch. The buildings on the left side of the composition are likewise more regular in appearance and the sky flatter than in the sketch. The sketch is clearly something directly observed and the canvas an image formalized in the studio.

Both works are remarkable testaments to Morrice’s skills as a painter, but the immediacy of the sketch provides a visual thrill that the canvas cannot match. In Buchanan’s listing of Morrice’s works, the canvas is described as follows:

A figure is seated to the left of a square which forms the foreground of the picture. Behind, a roadway runs out from the

centre of the square and to the left is a house surrounded by a garden. (A signed study for this picture is in the collection of Mrs. Howard Pillow, Montreal.)²

One can barely recognize these visually exciting images of the tropical paradise of Cuba from such a sober description. While, strictly speaking, accurate, Buchanan’s description conveys nothing of the vivacity and power of Morrice’s painting. *A Street in the Suburbs of Havana* brings the landscape and colours of Cuba vividly into our eyes and minds and clearly demonstrates the truth of Buchanan’s words when he calls Morrice “the nation’s first great painter.”

We thank Ian M. Thom, Senior Curator—Historical at the Vancouver Art Gallery from 1988 to 2018, for contributing the above essay.

1. Donald W. Buchanan, *James Wilson Morrice: A Biography* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1936), 7.

2. *Ibid.*, 177, and the final quote p. 2.

ESTIMATE: \$300,000 – 500,000