



110 Marc-Aurèle Fortin

ARCA 1888 – 1970

Paysage à Hochelaga

oil on board, signed and on verso titled and dated
circa 1930 on the gallery and exhibition labels
21 × 33 in, 53.3 × 83.8 cm

PROVENANCE

Galerie d'art Michel Bigué, Quebec
Private Collection, Montreal

LITERATURE

Michèle Grandbois, *Marc-Aurèle Fortin: L'expérience de la couleur*, Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, 2011, page 110, listed page 249 and reproduced page 164

EXHIBITED

Musée Marc-Aurèle Fortin, Montreal, on loan
Galerie Walter Klinkhoff Inc., Montreal, *Marc-Aurèle Fortin (1888 - 1970), Retrospective Exhibition*, September 2006
Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, Quebec City, *Marc-Aurèle Fortin: L'expérience de la couleur*, February 10 – May 8, 2011, traveling in 2011 to the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, catalogue #63

PAINTER, WATERCOLOURIST, AQUAFORTIST and pastelist Marc-Aurèle Fortin is well known for the expressive power of his exceptionally prolific body of work. From his first paintings completed while studying in Chicago in 1909, to his famous landscapes from the 1920s and 1930s featuring tall green trees, views of Montreal and its surrounding region, and then to his landscapes of Charlevoix, Gaspésie and Saguenay in the 1940s, Fortin's contribution to modernity has continued to fascinate enthusiasts, collectors and historians of Canadian art. At a time when European influence, such as the School of Paris, determined the path of modernism, Fortin turned away to embrace a mode of painting aimed at capturing the country's profound essence.

In that respect, in the interwar period, Fortin shared the aspirations of painters of American Regionalism and the Group of Seven, not to mention Clarence Gagnon, whom he greatly admired. However, this independent painter did not find his first subjects in the wilderness of the Ontarian Great Lakes, nor in Charlevoix's picturesque villages, which would interest him later, but in Chicago's urban landscape and the built-up countryside surrounding Montreal. Throughout the 1920s, he was inspired by the setting of his childhood village, Sainte-Rose, which the American elms adorned with their immense canopies in the summertime. This was the period of "tall trees," followed, at the end of the decade, and for 10 more years, by the period of views of Hochelaga and the Port of Montreal, breathing new life into the career of the then 40-year-old painter.

From 1925 to 1933, Fortin boarded in Montreal's historic district, on Notre-Dame Street East. From the window of his room, he observed the phases of construction of the Jacques Cartier Bridge, a subject he set down using a variety of techniques. During the same period, in the course of his walks in eastern

Montreal, the painter discovered the working-class neighbourhood of Hochelaga. "Sundays, I didn't know what to do, so I walked along the railway track that ran below St. Catherine Street all the way up Hochelaga. There I would sit a hundred times in the same place. And I painted all sorts of subjects. All you had (to do) was turn around and things were changing. I did a watercolour each outing. Sometimes I did two."

Particularly affected by the industrial changes taking place in the neighbourhood of Hochelaga, in his compositions Fortin brought together all the signs the purists removed from their idealized landscapes: industrial buildings, poles, power lines and train tracks. When *La Presse* critic Albert Laberge praised *Vue d'Hochelaga*, exhibited in 1929, by comparing it to a "poem of large modern cities," it marked the start of the success of this output, which lasted until the end of the 1930s. The watercolour remarked on by Laberge also caught the eye of the National Gallery of Canada, which chose it for its annual exhibition dedicated to authentically Canadian expressions. In acquiring it the following year, the influential museum bestowed the first official recognition on the Montrealer's work. During the 1930s, the views of Hochelaga were the main factor contributing to the spread of Fortin's work, in Canada and abroad.

Once back in his workshop, the painter eventually transferred the subjects of his watercolours onto canvas, usually without bothering to record the completion date. Indeed, we observe this absence as frequently in his paintings as in his watercolours, making them difficult to date accurately.

His oil painting technique was very different from the immediacy obtained in his watercolours: following the method of the English painter Sir Alfred East, whom he had developed a liking for during his studies in Chicago, Fortin customarily sectioned chromatic planes onto dark backgrounds. He did this by layering coats of paint, from dark to light, refining the design and applying lights as the work progressed.

Paysage à Hochelaga, offered for sale here, was featured prominently among the selection of 15 powerful testimonies on the neighbourhood of Hochelaga in the retrospective exhibition organized by the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec in 2011. Its impact rests in its finely tiered construction, which the painter restricts to a horizontal format, as was his usual practice. The cart in the centre-right of the foreground—a frequent motif in Fortin's art—draws the eye and invites it to follow its path. From the cultivated fields, which still denote a bit of space dedicated to Mother Earth, the view leads all the way to the river and the distant mountains beyond, to finally reach the sky enlivened by heavy clouds bearing down on the crowded city. This skilful arrangement admirably embodies the painter's vision, depicting past and present, growing urban occupation and the mighty power of nature.

We thank Michèle Grandbois, author of *Marc-Aurèle Fortin: L'expérience de la couleur*, for contributing the above essay.

This work will be included in the forthcoming catalogue raisonné on the artist's work, #H-0836.

ESTIMATE: \$60,000 – 80,000