



117 Clarence Alphonse Gagnon

CAC RCA 1881 – 1942

The Beach at Saint-Malo

oil on panel, signed and on verso titled *Plage of St. Malo* and dated circa 1908 on a label, 1907
6 x 9 in, 15.2 x 22.9 cm

PROVENANCE

Private Collection, Detroit
Galerie d'art Michel Bigué, Toronto
A.K. Prakash & Associates, Toronto
Private Collection, Toronto

LITERATURE

Katerina Atanassova, *Canada and Impressionism: New Horizons, 1880 – 1930*, National Gallery of Canada, 2019, the related 1908 canvas entitled *The Two Beaches: Paramé and Saint-Malo*, collection of the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton, reproduced page 169 and listed page 238

EXHIBITED

Kunsthalle München, Munich, *Canada and Impressionism: New Horizons, 1880 – 1930*, July 19 – November 17, 2019, traveling in 2019 – 2021 to the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; Fondation de l'Hermitage, Lausanne; and Musée Fabre, Montpellier, the related 1908 canvas *The Two Beaches: Paramé and Saint-Malo*, collection of the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton, catalogue #38

THROUGHOUT HIS CAREER as a painter, engraver and illustrator in Paris (1904 – 1936), Clarence Gagnon distanced himself as much as possible from the hustle and bustle of the “City of Light.” In a period of three and a half years, that is, before his first return visit to Canada in July of 1908, yearly journeys by the young artist-in-training took him to Spain, Morocco (1904) and Italy (1905 – 1907), not to mention his repeated explorations of Brittany and Normandy. At that time, he drew more inspiration from the romantic and picturesque nature of medieval villages and peasant life than from scenes of modernity. However, in the summer of 1907, Gagnon discovered a favourite subject of his period, far from the capital. Painted primarily between 1907 and

1909, his beach scenes correspond to a time when he decided to be recognized as a painter rather than an engraver. Several photos from his personal album bear witness to the summer of 1907 and the pleasure he took frolicking in the waters of the Channel in Brittany, with his brother Willford and the sisters Katherine (his future wife) and Ethel Irwin. Faced with the spectacle of the Emerald Coast’s seaside resorts at Dinard, Saint-Malo, and Paramé, Gagnon the painter could satisfy his love of *plein air* painting.

These delicate and elegant impressions of beach scenes would henceforth associate him with the master James W. Morrice, his compatriot 15 years his senior. Under Morrice’s influence, Gagnon painted his observations on small wooden panels. The light of the sea striking the coastline and the beaches crowded with holidaymakers brightened his colour palette. Incidentally, Morrice was staying in Saint-Malo in July 1907. However, no documents exist to confirm that the two painters met there. For Gagnon, beach scenes provided no more than a passing interest for a period of at most three years, during which time he completed such works as *Summer Breeze at Dinard*, 1907 (collection of the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec); *The Two Beaches: Paramé and Saint-Malo*, 1908 (collection of the Beaverbrook Art Gallery); and *The Beach at Dinard*, 1909 (collection of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts). To our knowledge, this theme in Gagnon’s works of *pochade* and painting combined has only one Canadian expression: the delectable oil sketch *Beach Scene, Baie-Saint-Paul*, 1908 or 1909 (private collection).

Before the First World War, holiday resorts cultivated an exclusively aristocratic and bourgeois clientele. While elegant villas, casinos and hotels rose along the French coast in the second half of the nineteenth century, attractive and modern seaside activities provided painters with light and colour. Impressionists and Post-Impressionists extensively depicted the rich and fashionable elite indulging in the pleasures of the beach.

It is in this context that the magnificent oil sketch *The Beach at Saint-Malo* is being offered for sale this autumn. It is an exceptional discovery that offers a unique testimony to the process of the creation of the previously mentioned canvas *The Two Beaches: Paramé and Saint-Malo*. In February of 1908, Gagnon worked on this composition in order to present it at the exhibition of the Société des Artistes Français, to be held from May to June of the same year, where he intended to be recognized as a painter and no longer only as an engraver. He transferred the view captured on the *pochade* to a canvas eight times larger, broadening the sketch’s palette to include warm colours, such as red, pink and coral. He also added several elements to his larger composition, including bathing tents, those essential accessories to seaside recreation, which he depicted with their decorative stripes, lined up to the right of the scene.

Art historians have long suspected that Gagnon used photography or created a three-dimensional model in order to compose this painting, so symbolic of his Impressionist period. To these hypotheses, we may now add tangible proof in the form of *The Beach at Saint-Malo*, a valuable and faithful witness to the memorable view of a wide beach at low tide extending for two kilometres from Saint-Malo to Paramé, its two pools of emerald



CLARENCE ALPHONSE GAGNON

The Two Beaches: Paramé and Saint-Malo

oil on canvas, 1908

49 x 67 ½ in, 124.5 x 171.50 cm

Collection of the Beaverbrook Art Gallery

Gift of the Beaverbrook Canadian Foundation

Not for sale with this lot

water separated by a rocky point. The sea breeze drives the waves and pushes the clouds, through which escape, depicted with several pale strokes, rays of light that shine upon the villas of the Belle Époque at Rochebonne Point, to the east of Paramé. On the *pochade*, in the distance, we recognize the facade of the Grand Hôtel, while, rooted in the village, the church spire points towards a capricious sky.

It is interesting to note that Gagnon’s *pochade* and painting present a similar view to Morrice’s *View of Paramé from the Beach* (private collection), a painting shown at the exhibition of the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts in Paris in 1902, and reproduced in *The Canadian Magazine* in 1907. My thanks to Lucie Dorais, author of the catalogue raisonné of James W. Morrice, for sharing this information. Finally, let us add that throughout his life, Gagnon would keep a small scene of Pouldu Beach, painted by Morrice in 1906, which is now in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada.

French art critic Claude Neully, writing in the *Revue Moderne Universelle of Paris* in 1908, compared *The Two Beaches: Paramé and Saint-Malo* to “a snapshot of summer life, intelligently interpreted, with the greatest sincerity.” This commentary is particularly appropriate when applied to the painted sketch, which reveals Gagnon’s alert and meticulous personality, attentive to the movements of light, water and wind.

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

ESTIMATE: \$75,000 – 100,000