



David Milne 'Painting Toward The Light'

by Jane Burns

After a successful international tour including the British Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the highly-touted David Milne exhibit 'Painting Toward the Light' returned home.

David Milne is arguably one of Canada's most original and influential artists. He is best known for his surface patterning and incredible pond images. And it isn't what he says in the work that is most compelling – it's what he leaves out. Although Milne painted in oil and used colour drypoint, his watercolours are central to his artistic production - and they are his most stunning works.

The brilliant colours and staccato patterning of Milne's New York period hints at the influence of the European Post-Impressionists, as well as his American contemporaries. His work became more subtle and profound on the heels of his move to Upstate New York where, inspired by the Transcendentalists, he began to explore the poetic and symbolic elements of landscape. These works owe a debt to his favorite artist, Claude Monet, his favorite theoretician, James McNeil Whistler, and to his favorite philosopher, Henry Thoreau.

This exhibit, recently showcased at the Art Gallery of Ontario, included 70 works spanning a period from 1911 to 1952 - a grand tour of his development, starting with his New York days, then on to the Catskills, his year as a war artist, and finally, the return to Canada to build his retreat at Baptiste Lake, where he built a rustic log cabin. There he cut his own logs and built the hand-hewn cabin in solitude.

Painting at the lake, he lived for the most part by himself, with only his paint, his canvas and his vision to keep him company.

Milne, said, "You stumble along for a minute... on you go with colour - the whole world is in front of you. You see things you wouldn't normally see - you solve problems that have been simmering for months. You can do no wrong - this is aesthetic emotion."

Milne made a considerable sacrifice to devote his life to his art and to live close to nature. His son, David Milne Jr., feels that Milne felt most at home in nature and was self-sufficient in that environment. Dr. Kathleen Lochnan, Deputy Director of Research and the exhibition's organizing curator, included a representation of

Milne's cabin in this exhibit. It is apparent that Milne lived a simple lifestyle to devote his energy to the work. Milne kept in touch with the outside world by writing letters and visiting the locals whenever the urge struck him.

Given his penchant for solitude, one might well wonder how this man and his work gained such a prominent international reputation. His early show in 1913 in New York helped set the stage. According to David Silcox in his book on the subject,

Milne's unique and striking images set him on a path of his own early in his life. He never sought fame or fortune. But in time curators sought him out, critics hailed his work and knowledgeable collectors bought his paintings and prints.

Denis Reid, AGO Curator, notes that Milne's rise on the arts scene occurred over a long period of time, and is partly due to the devotion of his son, David Milne Jr., as well as to his Canadian and international connections. The British Museum, for example, was particularly interested in Milne's time spent there as a war artist.

David Milne Watercolours: 'Painting Toward the Light' featured some of Milne's finest works: 'Dark Shore Reflected', 'Bishop's Pond, October 1920' and 'Cobalt Trees', to name a few. The British Museum has one of two public collections of the artist outside Canada that include Milne's watercolours, three of which were included in the exhibition. The remainder of the exhibition's works were on loan from Canadian collections, with the majority coming from the National Gallery of Canada and the Milne family.



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