

Rediscovering a lost masterpiece: The Art Gallery of Hamilton displays *The Bean Harvest* for the first time in 110 years

Recently found painting featured in the history-making exhibition,
Helen McNicoll: An Impressionist Journey



Helen McNicoll (1879-1915), *The Bean Harvest*, 1911-1912, oil on canvas.
Pierre Lassonde Collection.

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It's truly history in the making. [Helen McNicoll: An Impressionist Journey](#) – the new exhibition at the Art Gallery of Hamilton, which runs until May 25, 2025 – features many works by this important artist that have rarely been presented publicly. **PLEASE NOTE THAT THIS EXHIBITION HAS BEEN EXTENDED – IT NOW RUNS UNTIL AUGUST 31, 2025!**

Of the 60-plus works on display, one painting in particular is garnering well-deserved attention. *The Bean Harvest* was lost for more than a century and is being shown at the AGH for the first time in 110 years.

At a recent auction in England, a painting that depicted women in a bean field caught the attention of retired English artist David Taylor. The auction house listed the painting with the title *Women of the Fields* and labeled it as being "in the style of Helen Galloway

McNicoll." Her name was misspelled on the plaque, and the artwork was dated as having been created in 1958 – well past McNicoll's time of death.

After Taylor purchased the piece for £2,090 GBP (just under \$4,000 CAD), he made an amazing discovery upon removing the painting from its frame – Helen McNicoll's signature could now be seen in the bottom left corner. However, no work called *Women of the Fields* was recorded in McNicoll's catalogue.

Wondering if he had inadvertently bought an art treasure, he turned to Philip Mould and Fiona Bruce, hosts of the popular BBC program *Fake or Fortune?* Mould and Bruce led a thorough analysis that revealed the presence of Red Lake pigment – a paint that was derived from natural sources like insects or plants.

Their investigation led to the Art Gallery of Hamilton, where a McNicoll painting in the AGH's permanent collection – *The Apple Gatherer* – was also tested for the presence of Red Lake paint. The distinctive pigment, which glows pink under UV light, was found in both Taylor's painting and *The Apple Gatherer*, and the paint was applied in an identical manner on the figures' faces and the surrounding foliage in both works. Further analysis revealed that both canvases showed a matching thread count: eight vertical by 10 horizontal threads per square centimetre.

After researching exhibition catalogues, the *Fake or Fortune?* team discovered that a painting called *The Bean Harvest* by McNicoll had been exhibited multiple times in Canada between 1912 and 1913 before mysteriously vanishing from public view. Its ownership was traced back to the Pine-Coffin family, with evidence suggesting that Norman Pine-Coffin, an artist exhibiting alongside McNicoll in London, may have acquired the work.

All of these findings led to the expert conclusion that the painting acquired by Taylor was actually the long-lost masterpiece, *The Bean Harvest*. The work was purchased by Canadian art collector and philanthropist Pierre Lassonde for £174,000 (\$308,000 CAD) at auction in late 2024. Mr. Lassonde generously lent *The Bean Harvest* to the AGH for display as part of *Helen McNicoll: An Impressionist Journey* – the first time the piece has been presented publicly in 110 years.

"We are extremely honoured to feature *The Bean Harvest* as part of *Helen McNicoll: An Impressionist Journey*," says Shelley Falconer, President and CEO at the Art Gallery of Hamilton. "Thank you to the Pierre Lassonde Private Collection for lending us this long-lost work, which will be seen in public for the first time in over a century, and thank you to our presenting sponsor, Cowley Abbott. This exhibition is a truly inspiring tribute to one of Canada's most important Impressionist painters, and we invite everyone to experience her remarkable work in person."

We also invite the public to attend the [Winter Exhibitions Opening Celebration](#) on Sunday, February 23, 2025 from 2:00 to 4:00 pm, where we'll be celebrating *Helen McNicoll: An Impressionist Journey*. Remarks will begin at 3:00 pm.

Her Too: Contemporaries of Helen McNicoll

Organized as a companion to *Helen McNicoll: An Impressionist Journey*, this exhibition highlights the work of women artists who, like McNicoll, were at the forefront of Canadian art in the early 1900s. Drawn entirely from the Art Gallery of Hamilton's permanent collection, this selection highlights the work of some of Canada's most ambitious modern artists. Among the first generation of professionally-trained artists, they adopted modern styles of painting, bringing new artistic approaches to Canada, including Impressionism and Post-Impressionism.

Her Too: Contemporaries of Helen McNicoll includes works by Harriet Ford, Laura Muntz Lyall, Hannah Rusk Kelly, Florence Carlyle, and Florence McGillivray. They represent the first wave of women artists to travel abroad for study and exhibition and paved the way for future generations. Each of their journeys was as unique as their artistic practice. While all embraced international trends in their work, their paths differed. Some returned to establish careers in Canada, others taught the next generation of artists, and some remained largely abroad.

Notably, many of the artists featured have strong ties to Hamilton and the surrounding region, having been born, lived, or studied here. These include Otilie Palm Jost, Marion Mattice, Laura Muntz Lyall, Hortense Gordon, and Grace Coombs.

Media Kit

[*Helen McNicoll: An Impressionist Journey*](#)



Helen Galloway McNicoll, *Picking Berries*, 1913, oil on canvas.
Pierre Lassonde Collection. Photo: MNBAQ, Idra Labrie

Acknowledgements

Helen McNicoll: An Impressionist Journey was created and organized by the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec and adapted by the Art Gallery of Hamilton.



The exhibition at the AGH is presented by Cowley Abbott, Canada's Art Auctioneers.



We also acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, and the City of Hamilton.



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About Helen McNicoll

Helen McNicoll was born in Toronto in 1879 and grew up in Montreal. Scarlet fever rendered her deaf when she was two years old and her parents encouraged her to develop her artistic and musical creativity. She began her artistic training in the late 1890s with William Brymner at the Art Association of Montreal, then moved to England on his advice. She settled in London in 1902 and took courses at the Slade School of Fine Art. McNicoll began to exhibit her work at the Art Association in 1906 and received the first Jessie Dow Prize there in 1908. Elected to the Royal Society of British Artists in 1913, then to the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts in 1914, McNicoll died in 1915 at the age of 35 following complications from diabetes.

About the Art Gallery of Hamilton

Founded in 1914, the Art Gallery of Hamilton is the oldest and largest public art gallery in southwestern Ontario. Its permanent collection, which is focused on historical Canadian, International, and Contemporary art, numbers more than 11,000 works and is recognized as one of Canada's finest. The AGH is a vital creative hub and centre of lifelong learning that enables people of all ages to enrich their lives by gaining a deeper understanding of art.

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