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— ALEX —
COLVILLE

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THE
FORMATIVE
YEARS

1938
—
1942



ALEX COLVILLE

THE FORMATIVE YEARS

1938-1942



Study of a Woman, 1940, chalk on green paper, 41 x 29.5 cm. Alex Colville Fonds, NGC Library and Archives. © A.C. Fine Art Inc.

ALEX COLVILLE ATTENDED THE SCHOOL OF FINE AND APPLIED ART AT MOUNT ALLISON UNIVERSITY IN SACKVILLE, NEW BRUNSWICK FROM SEPTEMBER 1938 TO MAY 1942, GRADUATING WITH A BACHELOR OF FINE ARTS DEGREE. DURING THESE YEARS COLVILLE PRODUCED HUNDREDS OF DRAWINGS IN A RANGE OF MEDIA INCLUDING GRAPHITE, CHARCOAL, INK, CHALK AND WATERCOLOUR. THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES OWNS 570 OF THESE DRAWINGS. ALTHOUGH THE SUBJECTS INCLUDE LANDSCAPES, ANIMAL

STUDIES, STILL LIVES, AND GRAPHIC DESIGN WORKS, THE MAJORITY ARE FIGURE DRAWINGS, MADE FROM DIRECT OBSERVATION. THIS EXHIBITION PRESENTS A SELECTION OF FIGURE DRAWINGS PRODUCED BY ALEX COLVILLE DURING HIS YEARS AT MOUNT ALLISON.

Drawing was a major part of Alex Colville's life from an early age. He began to draw at age nine while convalescing from a severe case of pneumonia. Later, throughout high school, Colville attended weekly art extension classes led by Sarah Hart of Mount Allison University. It was through these classes that Colville first met Stanley Royle (1888-1961), who would become his mentor at Mount Allison. Royle, Head of the School of Fine and Applied Art at Mount Allison and a prolific painter himself, frequented Hart's classes to provide critique for her pupils. Colville's work impressed Royle and convinced him that the young student held great promise as an artist. When he heard that Colville had been offered a scholarship to study law at Dalhousie University, Royle offered him a scholarship to study fine art at Mount Allison. Colville accepted and began his studies in the autumn of 1938.

Mount Allison provided a stimulating creative environment for Alex Colville. It was the first university in the country to offer a Bachelor's degree in fine art and home to the Owens Art Gallery, the oldest university art gallery in Canada. Classes were conducted in the gallery space, which also housed the entire fine and applied art department, and offered studio space for students and instructors. While the majority of Alex Colville's courses were studio classes, he also studied art history and English literature. Reflecting on his undergraduate years, Colville would later recall that "more than ninety percent of the time was spent ... drawing and painting."¹

Royle considered drawing the human figure to be an integral component of the training in his department. He encouraged his students to “think on paper,” to study their chosen subjects in great depth, and to record their impressions in meticulously detailed drawings. For Royle, “drawing was analysis.”¹¹ He also placed great emphasis on discipline. He expected his students to pay particular attention to proportions and surface details and to sketch each subject repeatedly, from a variety of perspectives. This demand for rigor appealed to Alex Colville, who met the Royle’s challenges with exceptional skill and creativity.

The drawings presented in *The Formative Years* provide a glimpse into the sound training Alex Colville received at Mount Allison. They demonstrate the artist’s ability to work with a wide range of materials, to seek out ambitious compositions (see, for example, nos. 5 and 12) and to capture the character of his sitters with intense sensitivity (see, for example, nos. 2 and 8).

During the final two years of Colville’s studies students were required to design and paint murals. These were not painted from life, but had to be carefully designed using compositions created from multiple individual figure drawings.³ Colville painted a mural for the Sackville Train Station using this technique. Regrettably the mural no longer exists, although some of the related drawings are now part of the Alex Colville Fonds in the National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives.



Study of a Boy, 1942, red chalk and graphite on cream paper, 45.7 x 30.5 cm. Alex Colville Fonds, NGC Library and Archives. © A.C. Fine Art Inc.

In addition to teaching during the academic year Stanley Royle also offered annual summer art classes in which students had the opportunity to sketch outdoors from direct observation. Each year the classes were held in a different location. Alex Colville attended each summer during his undergraduate years, following Royle to Prospect, Nova Scotia in 1939, Peggy’s Cove in 1940, and Woodstock, New Brunswick in 1941.⁴

After he graduated in the spring of 1942, Colville immediately enlisted in the army. He served as an official war artist from 1944 to 1946 and then returned to Mount Allison following the War, where he taught painting and art history until he retired in 1963 to devote himself to painting full-time.

STEVEN CARLETON McNEIL

Curator, Crown Collection

Official Residences of Canada, National Capital Commission

¹ “Alex Colville on Alex Colville: Transcription of an interview with Graham Metson, November 1980,” in G. Metson and C. Lean, *Alex Colville: Diary of a War Artist*. Halifax: Nimbus Publishing, 1981, p. 21.

² Alex Colville, “Stanley Royle,” in Stanley Royle 1888–1961, by Patrick Condon Laurette. Halifax: Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, 1989:22.

³ *Ibid*, p. 23.

⁴ David Burnett, *Colville*. Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1983, pp. 38–40.

CHECKLIST

All drawings are from the Alex Colville Fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives

- 1.** *Figure Study, Back View*, 1940, graphite, pastel chalk and watercolour on cream paper, 39 × 28 cm (279)
 - 2.** *Boy with Scarf*, 13 October 1938, graphite on paper, 46.2 × 30.9 cm (142)
 - 3.** *Woman with Hat*, c. 1939–40, chalk on green paper, 48.6 × 31 cm (474)
 - 4.** *Seated Woman*, 15 February 1939, ink on cardboard, 33.7 × 27.9 cm (342)
 - 5.** *Interior View From The Upper Gallery, Owens Art Gallery*, undated, graphite on paper, 37.9 × 28 cm (298)
 - 6.** *Woman with Yellow Scarf*, 1939, chalk on green paper, 48.5 × 30.8 cm (471)
 - 7.** *Woman in Purple*, 1939, chalk on green paper, 44.5 × 30 cm (492)
 - 8.** *Study of a Woman*, 1940, chalk on green paper, 41 × 29.5 cm (463)
 - 9.** *Woman with White Collar*, 1940, watercolour over graphite on paper, 38.7 × 28.2 cm (317)
 - 10.** *Woman with Coiffed Hair*, 1940, chalk on grey paper, 48 × 33.5 cm (521)
 - 11.** *Study of a Woman*, 1941, pastel on grey paper, 48.5 × 32 cm (196)
 - 12.** *Male Figure From Above*, 1941, red, white and black chalk on green paper, 41.5 × 29.3 cm (465)
 - 13.** *Female Nude*, 1941, pen and watercolour on paper, 23.5 × 50 cm (523)
 - 14.** *Study of a Woman*, September 1941, red chalk and graphite on cream paper, 45.5 × 30.4 cm (459)
 - 15.** *Sleeping Soldier*, 17 March 1942, graphite on cardboard, 45.7 × 60.9 cm (76)
 - 16.** *Study of a Boy*, 1942, red chalk and graphite on cream paper, 45.7 × 30.5 cm (467)
 - 17.** *Model Near Easel*, 1942, ink on paper, 43.2 × 30.6 cm (360r)
 - 18.** *Young Man in Hooded Jacket*, 1942, graphite and watercolour on paper, 59.1 × 40.8 cm (77)
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Front cover: *Male Figure From Above* (detail), 1941, red, white and black chalk on green paper, 41.5 × 29.3 cm. Alex Colville Fonds, NGC Library and Archives. © A.C. Fine Art Inc.

Inside panel: *Figure Study, Back View* (detail), 1940, graphite, pastel chalk and watercolour on cream paper, 39 × 28 cm. Alex Colville Fonds, NGC Library and Archives. © A.C. Fine Art Inc.