



## 24 Alexander Colville

PC CC 1920 – 2013

### Girl on Piebald Horse

glazed tempera on board, signed and dated 1952 and on verso signed, titled, dated and inscribed *Glazed Tempera*  
22 ¾ x 14 in, 57.8 x 35.6 cm

#### PROVENANCE

Galerie Martin, Montreal  
Private Collection  
Dominion Gallery, Montreal, inventory #G4388  
Private Collection, Toronto

#### LITERATURE

Helen J. Dow, *The Art of Alex Colville*, 1972, reproduced page 94  
David Burnett, *Colville*, Art Gallery of Ontario, 1983, reproduced page 79, catalogue raisonné #33  
Andrew Hunter, editor, *Colville*, Art Gallery of Ontario, 2014, reproduced page 83 and listed page 144

#### EXHIBITED

Willistead Art Gallery, Windsor, *Canadian Figure Painting, Southern Ontario Circuit Exhibition*, November 1956 – June 1957, label on verso  
Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, *Alex Colville: A Retrospective*, July 22 – September 18, 1983, traveling in 1983 – 1984 to the Museum Ludwig, Cologne; Dalhousie Art Gallery, Halifax; Staatliche Kunsthalle, Berlin; Montreal Museum of Fine Arts; and Vancouver Art Gallery, catalogue #8  
Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, *Colville*, August 23, 2014 – January 4, 2015, traveling to the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, April 24 – September 7, 2015

ALEX COLVILLE ENJOYED a long and successful artistic career. He was widely recognized and celebrated during his lifetime, in Canada, Europe and the United States. His reputation has continued to grow since his death. Colville was an exacting person and painter. He worked methodically, never producing a large number of works. That said, he created many truly memorable paintings, including *Man on Verandah* (1953), *Horse and Train* (1954), *To Prince Edward Island* (1965), *Dog and Priest* (1978), *Target Pistol and Man* (1980), and the breathtakingly direct self-portrait completed when he was 80, *Studio* (2000). For experts and the public alike, Colville’s “magic realist” works of the 1950s are special even in this company. *Girl on Piebald Horse* stands out as a pivotal work of that decade.

What we see in *Girl on Piebald Horse* is much more than Colville’s characteristically simple title describes. He was a

master of careful technique and planning: these qualities should bring us up close to his paintings. He was also a thinker, a self-styled and well-read intellectual whose works require of their viewers a certain contemplative distance. This painting is notable for its unity of surface and for the seamlessly blended, yet easily legible forms of the girl and horse. Looking closely, we see the style of paint application that Colville evolved in the early 1950s and carried throughout his career. He layered and packed small points or lozenges of colour in egg tempera—not oil, as in his earlier work—evenly across the flat plane, creating a smooth, nuanced surface that was then glazed.

Subtle changes in hue, saturation and tone allow Colville to articulate and separate his forms, to make them real yet also evanescent. The girl’s dress is mixed with more green than is the white of her horse, for example, but with less green than the area of grass below. This technique derives from the French Neo-Impressionist Georges Seurat’s (1859 – 1891) famous Pointillism. The Colville scholar Helen Dow has even dubbed Colville “the true successor to Seurat’s Pointillism.”<sup>1</sup> As Ray Cronin claimed in a recent book on the artist, however, “Colville used a much less expressive style of pointillism that does not draw attention to the tiny strokes of colour that comprise his compositions.”<sup>2</sup> Colville typically went to great lengths not to be emotional: he wanted his themes, not his own gestures or opinions, to stand out. It is the visual perfection of Colville’s surface that takes us beyond the quotidian reality of a girl on horseback. The carefully rendered stones on the road, for example, are too perfect in their randomness to be real. The whole is magical in the sense of being dreamlike.

*Girl on Piebald Horse* was part of Colville’s working out of the fundamentals in his art. In a lecture delivered in 1951, he said: “I realized that I couldn’t go on using horses as my only organic forms, and also that oil painting was entirely unsuited to my method of working. I therefore decided that I would paint the human figure and that I would use tempera.”<sup>3</sup> We can see so much in this painting that it begins to seem strange, though not disturbing. From these particulars, we can build an interpretation of the entire image.

Colville is famous for his love and tender depiction of animals (usually domestic). He sees them as innocent and good. From the 1950s with *Girl on Piebald Horse*, he increasingly put humans and animals in relation, if not direct communication. Here, the girl looks neither at us nor at her horse. The horse looks ahead, perhaps walking slowly, or standing still. The young woman sits sideways—though not literally sidesaddle—suggesting that she has just mounted or is about to dismount. She and the horse are in perfect accord, even though unlike the equestrian woman in Colville’s masterly *French Cross* (1988), for example, she is not so much riding the horse as being “on” it, as Colville’s title



**ALEX COLVILLE**  
**French Cross**  
 acrylic polymer emulsion on hardboard, 1988  
 22 ¼ x 31 ½ in, 56.5 x 80 cm  
 Private Collection  
 © A.C. Fine Art Inc.

Not for sale with this lot

proposes. Colville often depicted horses and people with horses, most notably in *Horse and Train* (1954). Along with dogs, they are the epitome of an unspoken cross-species bond that we also see in *Child and Dog* (1952), *Dog and Bridge* (1976), *Dog and Priest* (1978), and the double portrait of the artist and his pet, *Dog and Groom* (1991).

Colville's titles and images are only ostensibly simple and direct. The partial list of animal-human paintings above suggests that he favours pairings, comparisons using the conjunctions "and" or "with." Colville used this comparative, relational practice for other themes too, such as *Woman with Revolver* (1987). Of course, he deployed other title patterns and depicted other interactions, but the point remains that Colville wants us to notice and to think about life's relationships. In the 1951 lecture cited above,

he declared that his most important values were "humanity" and "mystery." Colville was an existentialist artist: he believed we must choose to behave ethically in the world as we find it. We need to register the subtleties of that world. His paintings reveal these and, with their rigorous geometries, provide a framework for their contemplation. Colville cared profoundly about what he called the "grace" in everyday, domestic existence. Not so much a religious notion as simply a human recognition of the specialness of the world made palpable for a fleeting moment, this is what we acknowledge in *Girl on Piebald Horse*.

We thank Mark Cheetham, Professor of Art History at the University of Toronto and author of *Alex Colville: The Observer Observed*, for contributing the above essay.



**ALEX COLVILLE**  
**Horse and Train**  
 glazed oil on hardboard, 1954  
 16 ¼ x 21 ¾ in, 41.2 x 54.2 cm  
 Collection of the Art Gallery of Hamilton  
 © A.C. Fine Art Inc.

Not for sale with this lot

1. Helen J. Dow, "The Magic Realism of Alex Colville," *Art Journal* 24, no. 4 (Summer 1965): 319.
2. Ray Cronin, *Alex Colville: Life & Work* (Toronto: Art Canada Institute, 2017), 57.
3. Alex Colville, "My Experience as a Painter and Some General Views of Art" (address, New Brunswick Museum, Saint John, 1951), reprinted in Helen J. Dow, *The Art of Alex Colville* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1972), 203-8.

This work is in the original frame made by Colville.

**ESTIMATE: \$700,000 – 900,000**