



## 115 Henrietta Mabel May

ARCA BCSA BHG CGP 1877–1971

### Indian Women, Oka

oil on canvas, signed and on verso inscribed with the Dominion Gallery Inventory #D1036 on a label and variously and stamped faintly Dominion Gallery, circa 1927  
36 × 40 in, 91.4 × 101.6 cm

#### PROVENANCE

Dominion Gallery, Montreal  
Private Collection, Vancouver, 1970s  
By descent to the present Private Collection, Vancouver Island

#### LITERATURE

Jacques Des Rochers and Brian Foss, editors, *1920s Modernism in Montreal: The Beaver Hall Group*, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 2015, the related 1927 canvas *Indian Woman, Oka* reproduced page 229

DUBBED “THE EMILY CARR of Montreal” by the *Toronto Star*, Henrietta Mabel May was well suited to this sobriquet.<sup>1</sup> Like Carr, in the 1910s and 1920s, May was at the forefront of Canadian artists’ experimentation with the innovations of the French avant-garde.<sup>2</sup> Again recalling Carr, May’s formal explorations would culminate in “cosmic” landscapes animated by a strong sense of

rhythm.<sup>3</sup> *Indian Women, Oka* brings into focus a further parallel with the West Coast artist: namely, both artists’ sympathetic and stylistically adventurous depictions of Indigenous subjects. Nonetheless, May painted in her own distinctive manner.

*Indian Women, Oka* is an unusual picture in May’s oeuvre. Although May’s early career was devoted to a combination of figurative and landscape subjects, the 1920s saw the artist transition to a near-exclusive focus on landscape. While the Laurentian backdrop to the group portraiture of *Indian Women, Oka* is thus in keeping with May’s thematic preoccupations in this period, the painting is first and foremost a compelling demonstration of the figurative possibilities of the formal vocabulary honed by the artist in topographic studies such as *Summer Landscape, Knowlton, Quebec* (1927).

In both style and subject matter, *Indian Women, Oka* is closely related to May’s painting *Indian Woman, Oka* (1927), now in the collection of the Art Gallery of Hamilton. If that work’s flat bands of vibrant colour have drawn comparisons to Paul Gauguin and the Fauves, *Indian Women, Oka* is closer in technique to Paul Cézanne. This is particularly evident in May’s modeling of the sitters’ clothes, whose mottled, planar treatment recalls works by the French artist such as *The Boy in the Red Vest* (1888–1890). Like Cézanne, May gives us portraiture with a formal rather than psychological emphasis.

The striking individuality of the principal figures in May’s painting can be likened to Carr’s sensitive 1914 portrait of her long-time S̓wxwú7mesh (Squamish) friend Sewinchelwet (Sophie Frank).<sup>4</sup> Like Carr’s watercolour, May’s group portrait constitutes a significant departure from a harmful tradition of generic representations of Indigenous subjects that rehearse inaccurate Euro-Canadian ideals of “authenticity” or narratives of Indigenous decline and disappearance.<sup>5</sup> May delivers a very different picture, one that insists on the specificity of Indigenous peoples’ negotiation of modernization and tradition in a particular place: in this case, Kanyen’kehà:ka (Mohawk) women from Kanesatake, whose Algonquin name is Oka. Situated at the mouth of the Ottawa River, Oka would be the site of the 1991 Kanesatake Resistance, a defiant assertion of Indigenous sovereignty documented by Abenaki filmmaker Alanis Obomsawin’s 1993 masterpiece *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance*.

In fact, May depicts the view of Oka from the other side of the Ottawa River in Hudson, Quebec. The artist was intimately familiar with this location, it being the site of her cherished family cottage. May’s choice of locale for *Indian Women, Oka* is in keeping with a generational search for distinctive landscape imagery encouraged by the intrepid example of the Group of Seven.<sup>6</sup> But like other women of May’s generation, the artist has chosen a site not far removed from an urban centre—in this case, rapidly modernizing Montreal.<sup>7</sup> The Group’s influence is particularly legible in the gently rolling contour of Mont Bleu in the distance. Karen Antaki has observed an affinity between May’s images of Quebec and the “undulating landscape” of A.Y. Jackson.<sup>8</sup> Jackson was a strong supporter of women artists, and a crucial bridge between the Group of Seven and the Montreal-based Beaver Hall Group, which May co-founded in 1920, and for which Jackson served as first president.<sup>9</sup> Noted for its equitable representation of genders, the short-lived Beaver Hall collective would form a nucleus for the later Canadian Group of Painters, of which May was also a founding member, in 1933.<sup>10</sup>



### HENRIETTA MABEL MAY

#### Indian Woman, Oka

oil on canvas, 1927  
26 3/4 × 21 1/4 in, 67 × 54 cm  
Collection of the Art Gallery of Hamilton, 58.86.v

Not for sale with this lot

We thank Adam Lauder for contributing the above essay. Lauder is an art historian based in Toronto and an instructor at the University of Toronto and Ontario College of Art and Design.

1. Augustus Bridle, *Toronto Star*, February 18, 1950, 7.
2. See Karen Antaki, “H. Mabel May (1877–1971): The Montreal Years: 1909–1938,” MA thesis, Concordia University, 1992; Kiriko Watanabe, Kathryn Bridge, Robin Laurence, and Michael Polay, *Emily Carr: Fresh Seeing—French Modernism and the West Coast* (Vancouver: Audain Art Museum, in assoc. with Figure.1 Publishing, 2019).
3. See Antaki, “H. Mabel May,” 98.
4. See Sesemiya (Tracy Williams), “Sewinchelwet (Sophie Frank),” in *Uninvited: Canadian Women Artists in the Modern Moment*, ed. Sarah Milroy (Kleinburg: McMichael Canadian Art Collection, 2021), 267–68.
5. See Maura Broadhurst, “H. Mabel May,” in *Lasting Impressions: Celebrated Works from the Art Gallery of Hamilton* (Hamilton: Art Gallery of Hamilton, 2005), 130.
6. See Antaki, “H. Mabel May,” 96.
7. *Ibid.*, 80.
8. François-Marc Gagnon quoted in *ibid.*, 89.
9. See Antaki, “H. Mabel May,” 71; Jacques Des Rochers, “The Beaver Hall Group: A Much Anticipated Re-Reading,” in *1920s Modernism in Montreal: The Beaver Hall Group*, ed. Jacques Des Rochers and Brian Foss (Montreal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 2015), 28.
10. See Antaki, “H. Mabel May,” 83.

ESTIMATE: \$25,000 – 35,000