



109 Muriel Yvonne McKague Housser

CGP FCA OSA RCA 1898 – 1996

Miners' Shacks, Cobalt / Mulleins (verso)

double-sided oil on canvas, on verso signed and titled
on the exhibition labels, circa 1926, verso 1932

22 ½ x 31 7/8 in, 57 x 81 cm

PROVENANCE

A gift from the Artist to Harry B. and Lucile Housser, circa 1930s
By descent within the family of the Artist

LITERATURE

*Exhibition of Canadian Paintings by the Group of Seven and Etchings
by Robert F. Logan*, Art Gallery of Toronto, 1928, the related
1928 canvas, titled as *Cobalt, Ont.*, catalogue #80

Fourth Annual Exhibition of Canadian Art, National Gallery
of Canada, 1929, the related 1928 canvas, titled as *Cobalt,
Ontario*, catalogue #110

*Exhibition of Seascapes and Water-Fronts by Contemporary Artists
and an Exhibition by the Group of Seven*, Art Gallery of Toronto,
1931, the related 1931 canvas *Cobalt*, catalogue #126

Seventh Annual Exhibition of Canadian Art, National Gallery
of Canada, 1932, the related 1931 canvas, catalogue #183

Exhibition of Paintings by Contemporary Canadian Artists,
International Art Center of Roerich Museum, 1932, the
related 1931 canvas, catalogue #43

*Sixty-fourth Annual Exhibition of the Ontario Society of Artists,
Canadian Paintings: Collection of Mr. and Mrs. R. S. McLaughlin*,
Oshawa, Art Gallery of Toronto, 1936, verso titled as
Mullens [sic], catalogue #149

*Exhibition of Contemporary Canadian Painting: Arranged on behalf
of the Carnegie Corporation of New York for circulation in the
Southern Dominions of the British Empire or Southern Dominions
Exhibition*, National Gallery of Canada, 1936, the related 1931
canvas, catalogue #62

The Development of Painting in Canada, 1665 – 1945, Art Gallery
of Toronto, 1945, the related 1931 canvas, catalogue #166

Sarah Milroy, editor, *Uninvited: Canadian Women Artists in the
Modern Moment*, McMichael Canadian Art Collection, 2021,
the circa 1926 canvas, titled as *Sketch for “Cobalt”* and dated
circa 1931 [sic], reproduced page 20 and listed page 303; the
related 1931 canvas reproduced page 20 and listed page 310;
and the related work *Marguerite Pilot of Deep River (Girl with
Mulleins)*, dated circa 1936 – 1940, reproduced page 90 and
listed page 303

Catharine Mastin, *Cobalt: A Mining Town and the Canadian
Imagination*, McMichael Canadian Art Collection, 2024, the
circa 1926 canvas reproduced page 96 and listed pages 46,
95 and 176; the related 1928 canvas reproduced page 47 and
listed pages 46, 47, 176 and 177; and the related 1931 canvas
reproduced pages 4 and 97, listed pages 82, 95, 98, 101, 179
and 180



verso



Installation view of *Uninvited: Canadian Women Artists in the Modern Moment* at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, 2021, with *Miners' Shacks, Cobalt* indicated
Photo: McMichael Canadian Art Collection



Installation view of *Cobalt: A Mining Town and the Canadian Imagination* at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, 2023, with *Miners' Shacks, Cobalt* indicated
Photo: McMichael Canadian Art Collection

EXHIBITED

Art Gallery of Toronto, *Forty-eighth Exhibition of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts*, November 18, 1926 – January 2, 1927, catalogue #98
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, *Annual Exhibition of Canadian Art*, January 11 – February 28, 1927, catalogue #156
Canadian National Exhibition, Toronto, *Canadian Paintings*, August 27 – September 10, 1927, possibly exhibited as *Lac Beauvert, Jasper Park* by Yvonne McKague [sic], catalogue #165, label on verso
Art Gallery of Toronto, *Sixty-fourth Annual Exhibition of the Ontario Society of Artists, Canadian Paintings: Collection of Mr. and Mrs. R. S. McLaughlin, Oshawa*, March 1936, verso exhibited as *Mullens* [sic], catalogue #149
McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, *Uninvited: Canadian Women Artists in the Modern Moment*, September 10, 2021 – January 16, 2022, traveling in 2022 – 2023 to the Glenbow Museum, Calgary; Vancouver Art Gallery; and National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, titled as *Sketch for “Cobalt”* and dated circa 1931 [sic]
McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, *Cobalt: A Mining Town and the Canadian Imagination*, November 18, 2023 – April 21, 2024, the circa 1926 canvas and the related 1931 canvas

YVONNE MCKAGUE HOUSSEY’S captivating *Miners’ Shacks, Cobalt* (circa 1926) provides us with a surprising insight into her well-known, often reproduced and closely related painting *Cobalt*

(1931), in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada, as well as an insight into the aspirations of a woman artist in Canada who was finding her path. Only 29 when she painted it, this work provides a powerful step both in the direction of a new phenomenon on the Canadian art scene—the Group of Seven—and towards establishing Houssey’s credentials as an important artist.
In *Miners’ Shacks, Cobalt*, Houssey coordinated a jumble of forms through composition and colour—subjects she taught at the Ontario College of Art. She massed the idiosyncratic shapes of the red, yellow and green houses around a central axis to produce a crowded, lively effect.¹ It is a *tour de force* as a painting and was recognized from the moment it was shown as “notable.”²
Houssey regarded the town of Cobalt, Ontario, as a unique discovery on her part. With its rough-and-tumble houses ascending every which way on a height, twisting staircases, tall hydro poles, and the mine towering above like an olden-day castle, the town was a treasure trove for her, embodying her romantic view of the pioneering spirit of Canada’s northern industry. She had discovered it while changing trains on a trip to Gowganda in 1911 and quickly decided that she loved Cobalt’s architecture, particularly the mining shafts. When she returned to it in 1926, the town’s natural resources were drying up, its heyday over.
The colours Houssey used for the architecture and the dramatic, overcast sky give the scene the quality of a stage set, yet her inclusion of homey touches—the people on the stairs, the curtained windows, the laundry on the line, the decrepit fence-line—reveal her own sensibility, the idiom and attitude of her work. In *Miners’ Shacks, Cobalt*, Houssey achieved the sense of

bustle she sought to convey by using architecture. As she wrote to Fred Houssey from Cobalt in 1934, the “crowds on the street, old-timers, children, dogs, roulette wheels and confusion and noise and much beer-laden air—it’s like a Breughel painting. I wish I could find a way to translate it to canvas that was not just imitative. The thing one feels about it not just the appearance.”³
The canvas *Cobalt*, the National Gallery painting, which Houssey painted five years later, is, by contrast, more simplified and dignified, more Group of Seven-like. The salient features of the 1926 work are there but now there are no people on the stairs, the house windows are blank, and the mine in the background has been turned into a slag pile. These also appear altered and subtly refined in a now lost 1928 version. In 1928, 1930 and 1931, Houssey had been invited to contribute to the Group of Seven exhibitions, a singular honour. She would have had time to consider what was characteristic of the Group’s work and tone down her anecdotal exuberance. In the Group show of 1931, she exhibited a new version of *Miners’ Shacks, Cobalt*, a work she titled simply *Cobalt*. Her idea of submitting a modified version of *Miners’ Shacks, Cobalt* brought her success. *Cobalt* sold the year after being exhibited to the National Gallery of Canada, which would have delighted her.
Houssey still had her earlier 1926 canvas *Miners’ Shacks, Cobalt* in 1932 when she painted *Mulleins* on verso. Not long after, she used this motif of mulleins—the spiky plant with its broad spreading leaves—in her new painting *Marguerite Pilot of Deep River (Girl with Mulleins)*. The addition of the hearty mulleins adds to *Marguerite Pilot* what we think of as the subject’s strength of character.
Houssey never sold *Miners’ Shacks, Cobalt* / *Mulleins* but generously gifted it to Harry B. Houssey and his wife, Lucile. Harry, the brother of Frederick B. Houssey—whom the artist loved and married in 1935—was a distinguished Canadian, known for his leadership at the Toronto Stock Exchange, where he served as president from 1936 to 1937. He was also the president of the investment firm H.B. Houssey & Co. and featured on the cover of *Time* magazine on April 5, 1937. The painting has remained treasured by the Houssey family to this day.
We thank Joan Murray, former curator of Canadian art and chief curator (1972) at the Art Gallery of Ontario, for contributing the above essay. Murray was director of the Robert McLaughlin Gallery from 1974 to 1999 and in that capacity organized a retrospective titled *The Art of Yvonne McKague Houssey* (1995).

1. Alicia Boutilier, “Mapping an Artist’s Identity: The Life, Work and Writing of Yvonne McKague Houssey” (master’s thesis, Carleton University, 1998), 80.
2. “The R.C.A.,” *Canadian Bookman*, January 1927, 11.
3. “Excerpts from Letters to Fred Houssey, Cobalt, 1934,” *Northward Journal: A Quarterly of Northern Arts* 16 (June 1980): 31. I thank Alicia Boutilier, previously cited, for bringing this article to my attention.

ESTIMATE: \$100,000 – 150,000



YVONNE MCKAGUE HOUSSEY
Marguerite Pilot of Deep River (Girl with Mulleins)
oil on canvas, circa 1936 – 1940
30 x 24 in, 76.2 x 61 cm
McMichael Canadian Art Collection, 1966.16.13
Gift of the Founders, Robert and Signe McMichael
© Estate of Yvonne McKague Houssey

Not for sale with this lot