

135 **James Wilson Morrice**

CAC RCA 1865 – 1924

La foire à Concarneau

oil on canvas on board, on verso titled on the gallery labels,
certified by W. Scott & Sons and stamped J.W. Morrice Studio
and Dominion Gallery, circa 1910
9 ½ x 12 ½ in, 24.1 x 31.8 cm

PROVENANCE

Dominion Gallery, Montreal
Camille Hébert, Montreal
Collection Sogespól Inc., Quebec
A.K. Prakash & Associates Inc., Toronto
Peter Ohler Fine Arts Ltd., Vancouver
Private Collection, Vancouver

LITERATURE

Kathleen Daly Pepper, *James Wilson Morrice*, 1966, in a group
of paintings dated circa 1905 – 1912, listed page 91
James Wilson Morrice, 1865 – 1924, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts,
1965, listed page 70

EXHIBITED

Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, *James Wilson Morrice, 1865 –
1924*, September 30 – October 31, 1965, traveling to the
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, November 12 –
December 5, 1965, catalogue #83

DRESSED IN TRADITIONAL Breton costume, three female fig-
ures advance towards the viewer in this charming document of
enduring folkways in the picturesque port of Concarneau. The
tightly composed oil on canvas on board showcases James Wil-
son Morrice’s renowned ability to capture the fleeting moment.
Enlivened by the artist’s atmospheric calligraphy, the dark mass
of the trio’s garb floats remarkably cloud-like across the painting’s
burnished surface. Though mere daubs of colour, their faces and
white headdresses are full of personality, a signature economy of
facture that Morrice cultivated through studies with the Barbizon
School painter Henri Harpignies.¹

The Whistlerian harmonies of *La foire à Concarneau* reflect
Morrice’s preference for painting *plein air* subjects in the golden
light of late afternoon.² The flaxen expanse of its foreground
exemplifies his talent for animating areas of restricted tonal
range. This aptitude earned words of praise from no less than
Henri Matisse, with whom the Canadian artist wintered in the
Moroccan city of Tangiers shortly after completing this work, in
1911 to 1912 (and again in 1913 to 1914). In a letter addressed to
magazine editor Armand Dayot in 1915, Matisse celebrated his
traveling companion’s “touching tenderness in the rendering of
landscapes of closely allied values.”³ Morrice’s consummate taste
and wit also brought him into the orbit of eminent writers includ-
ing Arnold Bennett and W. Somerset Maugham, both of whom
based characters on the Canadian émigré.⁴

The circuitous depiction of provincial fair-goers in *La foire
à Concarneau* is typical of Morrice’s fascination with strolling
figures and liminal states. Rather than focusing on the titular
festivities, he characteristically portrays a scattering of figures
in leisurely transit. His own habit for scouting urban subjects
on daily promenades has prompted National Gallery of Canada

curator Katerina Atanassova to liken Morrice to the *flâneur*
evoked by such keen observers of Parisian life as the poet Charles
Baudelaire.⁵ His penchant for spur-of-the-moment travels to
Brittany and Normandy extended this wandering aesthetic to
encompass such rural locales as Concarneau, a spot that also
inspired canvases by the divisionist artist Paul Signac as well as
Morrice’s friend Robert Henri, of the Ashcan School.⁶

La foire à Concarneau dates from an extended stay in the his-
toric seaside town from mid-November 1909 to June 1910.⁷ Art
historian Lucie Dorais describes how, after the artist arrived in
Brittany downhearted, “In Concarneau, Morrice recaptured a
zest for life.”⁸ A mood of rejuvenation permeates the convivial
circus and market scenes that he painted during this sojourn,
one of which is in the permanent collection of the Art Gallery of
Ontario (*The Market Place, Concarneau*, circa 1910). It is to this
period that the inauguration of Morrice’s mature style—defined
by thin washes of intense colour—can be securely dated.⁹

Morrice is noted for elevating works of smaller format exe-
cuted *en plein air* above the rough *pochades* of forebears such as
Gaston La Touche. As Morrice’s biographer Donald W. Buchanan
observed, “His studies became, not notes on canvas, but finished
compositions... as free in their handling as had been any sketch
by Constable, or any painting by Manet.”¹⁰ Buchanan credits
Morrice’s *plein air* panels for inspiring subsequent artists—such
as the Group of Seven—to follow his example.¹¹ Although more
cosmopolitan in outlook than the Group, Morrice was praised by
A.Y. Jackson for “open[ing] our eyes to things no one ever thought
of painting.”¹²

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 as well as an adjunct professor at the
Ontario College of Art and Design.

1. Kathleen Daly Pepper, *James Wilson Morrice* (Toronto: Clarke,
Irwin, 1966), 21.
2. Ibid., 26.
3. Quoted in Donald W. Buchanan, *James Wilson Morrice: A Biogra-
phy* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1936), 110.
4. Denys Sutton, “The Canadian Nomad,” in *James Wilson Morrice,
1865–1924* (Bath: Holburne of Menstrie Museum, 1968), exhibition
catalogue, 7.
5. Katerina Atanassova, “James Wilson Morrice in Paris: The Con-
noisseur of the Street,” in *Morrice: The A.K. Prakash Collection in Trust
to the Nation* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, in assoc. with Fig-
ure 1, 2017), exhibition catalogue, 60.
6. See Henri Belbeoch, *Les peintres de Concarneau* (Quimper: Édi-
tions Palantines, 1993).
7. Ibid., 167. Lucie Dorais, *J.W. Morrice* (Ottawa: National Gallery
of Canada, 1985), 17.
8. Ibid. See also Belbeoch, *Les peintres de Concarneau*, 167.
9. See William R.M. Johnston, introduction to *James Wilson Mau-
rice, 1865–1924* (Montreal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1965),
exhibition catalogue; 7; Sutton, “Canadian Nomad,” 10–11.
10. Buchanan, *James Wilson Morrice*, 90.
11. Ibid., 44.
12. A.Y. Jackson, preface to Pepper, *James Wilson Morrice*, x.

ESTIMATE: \$100,000 – 150,000

