



116 James Wilson Morrice

CAC RCA 1865 – 1924

La plage

oil on canvas, signed and on verso inscribed *Mme R. Voortman* in graphite on the frame and stamped Exposition—CHENUE Emballeurs de Tableaux et Objets d'art. Rue de la Terrasse, Paris on a label on the frame, circa 1898 – 1899
28 ¾ x 36 ¼ in, 73 x 92.1 cm

PROVENANCE

Robert Voortman (1877 – 1937), Ghent, Belgium
Madame Jane Lechat (Mrs. Robert Voortman, 1883 – 1978), Ghent, Belgium
Private Collection, Antwerp, Belgium
By descent to the present Private Collection, Antwerp, Belgium

LITERATURE

Ville de Gand, XXXVII^e Exposition, Salon de 1899, Catalogue des tableaux et objets d'art exposés au Casino, 3^e édition, 1899, listed page 19
Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts: Catalogue des ouvrages de peinture, sculpture, dessin, gravure, architecture, arts décoratifs, Paris, 1899
Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts, Paris: Catalogue illustré du Salon de 1899, Paris, Ludovic Baschet, 1899, listed page 22
Georges Lecomte, "Les Salons de 1899," *Les Droits de l'Homme* (Paris), April 30, 1899, page 2
R.S., "The Paris Salons-11," *St. James Gazette* (London), May 12, 1899, page 5
André Fontainas, "Les Salons de 1899," *Mercure de France*, June 1899, page 746
Charles C. Hill, *Morrice, A Gift to the Nation: The G. Blair Laing Collection*, National Gallery of Canada, 1992, the circa 1898 – 1899 oil *The Ramparts, St-Malo* reproduced page 80

EXHIBITED

Galerie des Machines, Paris, *Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts, Salon de 1899, Paris*, May 1 – June 30, 1899, catalogue #1080, titled as *La plage*
Casino, Ghent, Belgium, *XXXVII^e Exposition, Salon de 1899 de la Société Royale pour l'encouragement des Beaux-Arts*, August 13 – October 8, 1899, catalogue #490, titled as *La plage/Het Strand*

LAST APRIL, HEFFEL received the image of an unrecorded and untitled large canvas, a view of a beach from the water signed by James Wilson Morrice. Written on the back of the frame was the name "Mme R. Voortman." The Voortman name is famous in Belgium, especially in Ghent; Robert Voortman (1877 – 1937) was the second son of Jules, a prosperous cotton manufacturer, and his mother, Clara, was a painter. Like the Morrice family in Montreal, who were also in the textile business, the Voortmans were involved in local cultural life. Robert Voortman preferred art to industry; he often exhibited his etchings and sat on the boards of various art societies, including the Société Royale, responsible for organizing the Ghent venue of the annual Belgian *Salon*, held alternately in Brussels and Antwerp. Morrice participated at least



FIGURE 1: The casino and Hôtel Franklin near the beach, Saint-Malo, circa 1900

three times in the *Salon de Gand* in Ghent, but the only listing in its exhibition catalogues that fits our painting is *La plage* in the 1899 edition (figure 3, Gand catalogue). The painting is not illustrated, and the rare reviews that mention Morrice's painting only give its title. But the catalogue tells us that "R. Voortman," who was only 23 at the time, was already a member of the Société Royale, and his father and elder brother were subscribers.

If our painting, definitely a salon canvas by its large size, is indeed the Gand *La plage*, why would Morrice debut it outside Paris, where he lived and had been exhibiting at the *Salon de la Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts* since 1896? His first two participations were modest, but the reviews of the 1899 SNBA *Salon* make it clear that the Canadian artist was finally "discovered." Among the four paintings he showed, the subject of our painting perfectly fits the title of Morrice's second catalogue entry—*La plage*.

Many Parisian critics singled out Morrice's *La plage*, but only a few gave any details of the subject—a beach, the ramparts—and the *Mercure de France* mentions "an opaque and heavy puddle of still water." The most complete description is found in the Paris publication *Les Droits de l'Homme* of April 30, 1899: "a beach of gray sand at the foot of the sombre granite of a rampart, with the bright note of umbrellas and of the dresses of children playing in the water." This translation is found in a newspaper clipping glued to the back of the sketch *The Ramparts, St-Malo* (figure 2) and was transcribed by Charles C. Hill in his important 1992 catalogue of the Laing gift to the National Gallery of Canada. The clipping, from an unidentified source, is entitled "A Canadian Artist" and dated by hand "Sept. 1899." Its description of *La plage* could apply to the sketch, but Hill raised an important point in saying it was unlikely that such a small panel painting would have been accepted for the Paris *Salon*, which featured hundreds of large-scale canvases.

Hill suggested that maybe the SNBA painting was the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts' well-known *Beneath the Ramparts, St-Malo*.



FIGURE 2: JAMES WILSON MORRICE
The Ramparts, Saint-Malo
 oil on wood, circa 1898 – 1899
 5 x 6 in, 12.6 x 15.4 cm
 Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, 30441
 Gift of G. Blair Laing, Toronto, 1989
 Photo: NGC

Not for sale with this lot

However, a closer look at our painting shows how much better the clipping’s description applies to this newly found treasure. The “bright notes” correspond to the bright red touches of the parasol and the girl’s blouse—almost a Morrice signature; she and her friend actually play in the water, unlike the baby that merely sits beside it in *Beneath the Ramparts*; and the “heavy puddle” mentioned by the *Mercur* critic is obvious here. The purchase of the painting in Ghent that summer was perhaps Morrice’s first sale from a *Salon*, a milestone worthy of being commemorated by the newspaper clipping; it was attached to the National Gallery sketch because the canvas, which it actually describes, had already left Morrice’s studio for good.

At first sight, the panel is not exactly a preparatory work. Compared to the canvas, the beach is farther away, and a large dark stone tower and its reflection dominate the right side; the buildings to the left are also significantly different, but the huge white building is the same. The sketch securely locates the setting in

Saint-Malo, where Morrice had spent the previous September. The panel, likely painted on site, is more faithful to reality; it shows a much lower retaining wall, doubled by rows of protective wooden posts (see figure 1, postcard); the road to Paramé, bordered by imposing buildings, runs atop the wall. The only element found in both paintings and the postcard is the Hôtel Franklin, with its west facade glistening in the late afternoon sun. The sketch places the hotel immediately to the left of the tower, but in reality the casino and its adjacent buildings stand between them, and the tower is not even visible in the postcard. However, when Morrice visited in late summer 1898, the casino lot was vacant, as the new structure shown in the postcard was not yet built; in the sketch, the tower conveniently hides the empty space.

Despite the differences in size, scale and the depth of the pictorial space, we realize that most of the central right half of the canvas is actually an enlargement of the panel. What look like the old walls of Saint-Malo in the canvas coincide exactly with

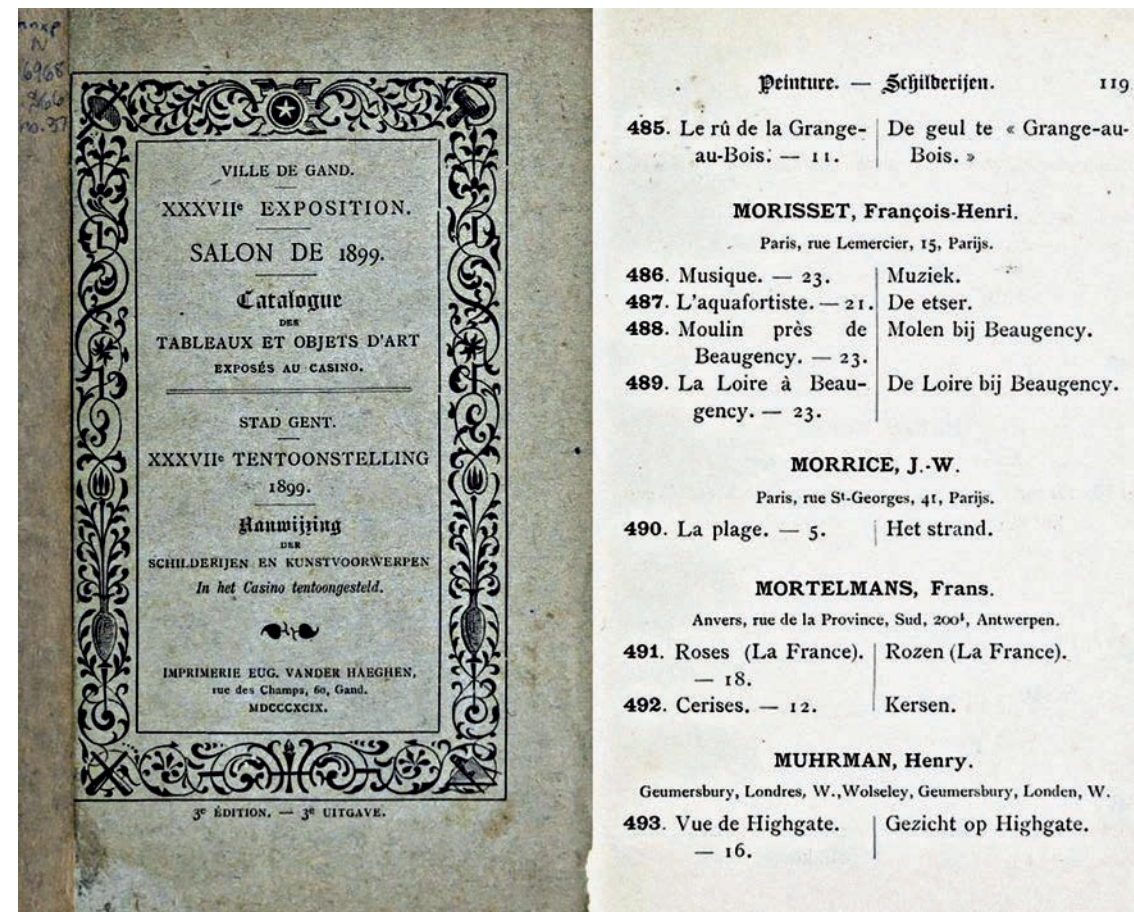


FIGURE 3: Casino, Ghent, *Salon de 1899*, catalogue cover and page listing *La plage*

the beach in the sketch. If Morrice had been faithful to his small composition, the water would have filled the bottom half of the canvas, but the figures would have been too small, and the retaining wall too narrow in the left section of the image. Instead, the artist transformed his beach into a solid grey wall, and most of the water into a beach—leaving only the pool that forms when the tide goes out. There is now plenty of room to animate the right foreground with the “puddle,” the little girls, the wicker beach chair and the tents—all lovingly reflected in it—the high wall and its shadow, and finally the huge hotel. Linking the foreground to the architecture is the carefully placed nanny and child at centre left, walking towards a group of figures in black clothing closer to the wall: women probably, as the husbands had returned to work; and fully dressed, according to resort fashion of the time.

The diagonal movement to the left is paralleled by another diagonal linking the two bright red spots. The composition is now perfectly balanced: a huge tower at the right would have

broken the fine equilibrium between the various objects and figures in the painting; and discarding it also eliminated the need to include Saint-Malo in the title. With that singular change, Morrice attracts our attention not to the place depicted, but to the joy he felt whenever he was near water; a title and a purpose that definitely reflect his full embrace of Impressionism.

We thank Lucie Dorais, who is compiling a catalogue raisonné on the work of James Wilson Morrice, for contributing the above essay.

The exhibition *Canada and Impressionism: New Horizons*, which originated at the Kunsthalle München in Germany and includes works by Morrice, will travel to the National Gallery of Canada in fall of 2020.

This work will be included in Dorais’s forthcoming catalogue raisonné of the artist’s work.

ESTIMATE: \$300,000 – 500,000