

The Prints of David Milne

Reflections in a Quiet Pool: The Prints of David Milne/ Reflets dans un miroir d'eau: Estampes de David Milne. An exhibition held at the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, 13 November 1980 – 11 January 1981, and at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria and the Art Gallery of Ontario.

Catalogue: Rosemarie L. Tovell, Ottawa, The National Gallery of Canada 1980, in English or French. 31 figures, 131 black and white illustrations, 23 colour plates, \$39.95 in Canada, \$45.00 elsewhere.

David Milne understood that it took great effort to recognize genuine creative talent. Until recently, with few exceptions, neither that understanding nor the ensuing effort have been directed towards Milne's own work. The reasons for this are not hard to find. Milne, himself, unlike the Group of Seven, did not promote and popularize either himself or his own work. Milne's art is a very personal, individual creation, one that cannot easily be appreciated by using other creator's

rubrics. Finally, and perhaps most problematically, Milne's art is evolutionary and intellectual in character: in style and in content it avoids emotion and narrative. Considered together these reasons explain the enigma of Milne's current status. Canadian art historians, the few that there are, usually agree that Milne is among the finest Canadian creators, although these historians often base their judgment on knowledge of a few works rather than detailed analysis of his oeuvre. Gallery-goers, on the other hand, are usually mystified by, indifferent to or ignorant of Milne's subtle formal pieces. This exhibition and attendant catalogue address these problems.



FIGURE 1. *Reflections in a Quiet Pool*, view of installation. (Photo: National Gallery of Canada)

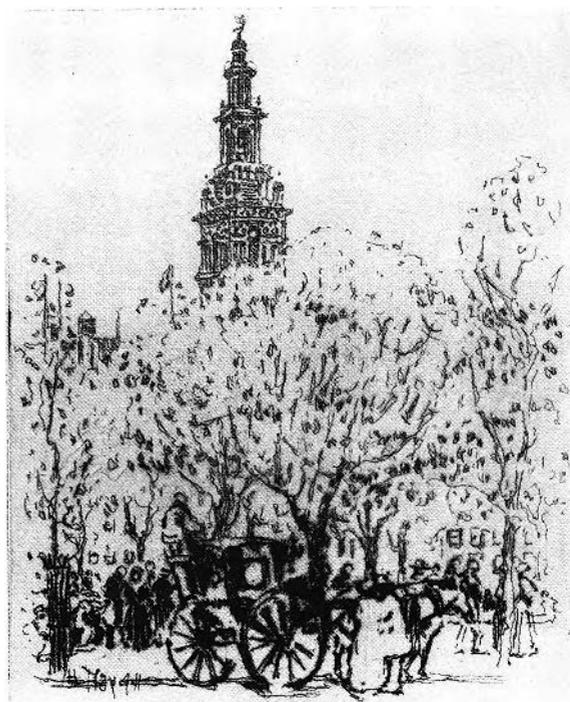


FIGURE 2. David Milne, *Madison Square: Spring*, 1911. Etching, edition unknown, one impression located, 138 × 113 mm. (cat. 9). Milne Family Collection.

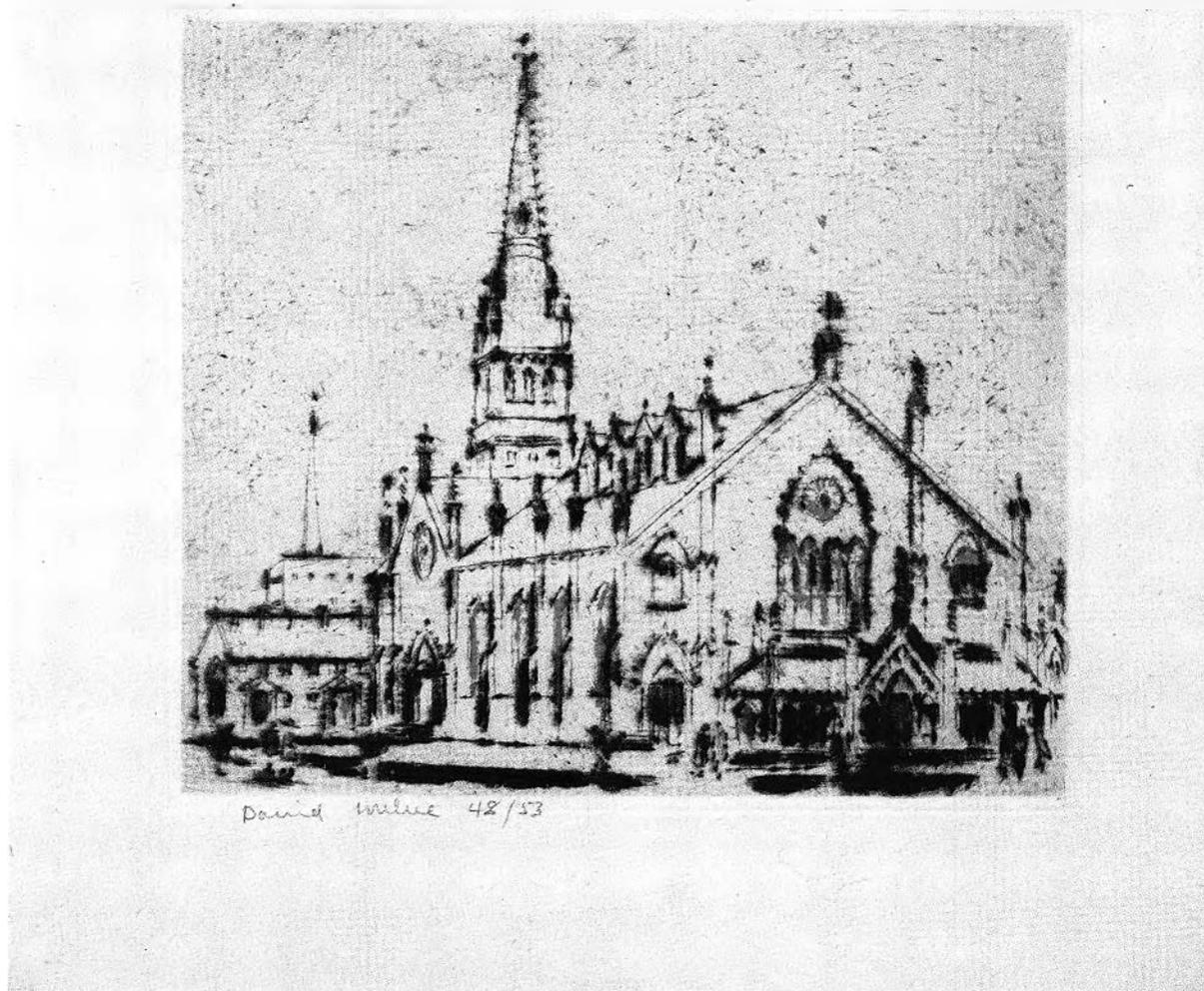


FIGURE 3. David Milne, *St. Michael's Cathedral, Toronto*, 1943. Colour drypoint, state VII/VII, edition of fifty-three, 188 × 215 mm (cat. 82). National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

The core of this production is Milne's prints. Executed between about 1909 and 1947, these are mainly colour drypoints fashioned in Milne's individualistic manner. Production methods were never static; the editions produced were never large. Milne's full print oeuvre, eighty-nine completed images, are included in the show. Numerous states of the same work are often shown. The show is organized chronologically, with the

featured prints intercalated with relevant Milne watercolours or oils in order 'to dispel the illusion of the minor role Milne's prints played in his development as an artist in general, and in the development of his paintings and watercolours in particular (p. 1).' As if to underline this, at the National Gallery of Canada the exhibition was subdivided into half a dozen rooms, in which works created within a specific geographic

and time frame were distributed. Each room, in turn, was accented by different wall or pillar colours (Fig. 1), such that the planographic prints and related drawings are hung on deep blue walls while late pieces, put on the square pillars in the final long gallery, are hung on a background of bright orange and hot pink. This rather daring use of colours, taken from Milne's own palette, prevents a dulling, uniform sensation of white, the potential boredom of prints, although it also at times fosters problems with the readability of the labels. Aside from this usually minor problem, the labels are full and thoroughly informative without intruding on the works of art. This aids immeasurably in isolating Milne's aesthetic changes and in correlating his three primary media: painting, watercolour, and print.

The show starts with prints and watercolours done in New York City between about 1909 and 1912. Milne had gone to New York from Ontario in 1903 intending to become a commercial artist. His earliest prints showed influences of his efforts at commercial illustration as well as interest in the work of Joseph Pennell and James McNeill Whistler. These prints, clearly experimental and uncertain in their varying styles, concentrate thematically on New York architectural landmarks. In contrast Milne's own paintings and watercolours were thematically much more interested in the colour and cacophony of the bustling city and stylistically were closer to the Impressionism practiced by such American painters as John Twachtman and Maurice Prendergast. The stylistic and compositional differences between the prints on the one hand and the paintings and watercolours on the other hand are quite distinct, as author Rosemarie Tovell points out. To some extent this also holds for subject matter although here a rapprochement seems to be taking place. In *Madison Square: Spring* (Fig. 2) the subject is similar to known contemporary paintings and watercolours. Soon the rapprochement would occur in style and composition as well.

The next grouping of six prints is quite different. Clearly done from drawings, these large black and white prints evolved from Milne's commercial work. While the precise printing method is unclear, obviously some photo-offset lithographic method was used. The different printing method – for the earlier prints had been etchings and drypoints – had a marked effect. The change of scale and the elimination of tonal values link these prints to the contemporary watercolours. And, in their forceful simplicity, these prints, such as *Bronx Hillside* (cat. 25), are more resolved than similar watercolours.

Tovell's next section, Milne's printmaking between 1919 and 1930, explores the third great technical and stylistic change. These philosophical shifts were encouraged by Milne's reading of John Ruskin and Clive Bell. Milne was particularly interested in Ruskin's accent on nature as the source of all great art and in

Bell's insistence on the formal analysis of painting. By including in the catalogue judicious selections from Milne's own analytic painting journal and letters, Tovell shows us how Milne integrated these philosophies into his work of the 1920's.

Of particular interest during that decade was Milne's invention of colour drypoint. Quite clearly his watercolour style (a buildup of lines, lines delineating form, texture and even colour) influenced his drypoint production. In March of 1922, using an old laundry wringer borrowed from a neighbour, he pulled his first experimental colour drypoints. These three metal-plate prints, along with two watercolours and an oil on the theme of *House at Mt Rega*, are particularly effectively hung in an area of their own and positioned in such a way that one can follow their order of execution. This serial approach, or reworking of one subject in many media, had ramifications for the development of each medium. However Milne did not attempt drypoints again for another five years. This time, in 1927, he had a proper press, permitting greater technical facility; over the next few years, his printmaking became a vital force in his artistic vision.

In 1929 Milne returned to Canada permanently and, next spring, moved to Palgrave, Ontario, where he stayed for three productive years. Here he continued his earlier innovations, in particular the use of weak and warm colours rather than the usual black or cold colours in the key for defining plate and the general tinting of the paper. Now Milne was loosely 'rag-wiping' rather than hand-wiping his plates, a process which allowed the whole surface of the print to be dusted with colours, although one colour dominated the tinting. While in Palgrave Milne clarified his belief in 'quickenings' or 'aesthetic emotion' through 'aesthetic economy' or simplification. Colour and line continued to be the basic means of expression with colour, as before, based on a three-value system of dark, middle and light values. At this point Milne had eliminated the use of black in his prints and often also omitted strong colours to define forms, working instead with softer, pure colours. This is in contrast to his contemporary paintings where thin lines of black are used to strengthen the shapes. As Tovell points out, a curious transposition was occurring in which paintings were concentrating on value and line (the usual concerns of prints), and the drypoints were worked in colour, a feature normally associated with painting.

In 1933 Milne moved to Six Mile Lake, built himself a log cabin and stayed there for six years. Here he did little printmaking, probably because of deteriorating eyesight. What prints he did pull continued his reduction of dark value as a prime stabilizer and his acknowledgement that outline also had to be diminished. In a colour drypoint such as *Yard of the Queen's Hotel* (cat. 75 second version), the forms are created by the dominant colour, Chinese Vermillion, with highlights in French Ultramarine and Yellow Ochre; the ground tint, a speckled orange, provides a warm base



FIGURE 4. David Milne, *The Saint* (Milne?), 1944. Transfer drawing for an unpublished colour drypoint (cat. 84).

on which these colours and forms glow. These effects also appeared in his paintings and drawings, works Milne called 'memory pictures'. Done rapidly with the precise elements reduced to an absolute minimum such that they were 'furthest from the realistic,' Milne was still seeking 'a strong kick from the subject (p. 126).' Interestingly he never broke completely with nature as the source of his art; he never went completely abstract.

While his years at Six Mile Lake were a period of pretty intense isolation, it was during this time that Milne finally gained some recognition. Of particular importance was the sale of his Canadian work to Alice and Vincent Massey, and his friendship and business dealing with Douglas Duncan. Duncan soon became Milne's print dealer, and, in 1938, Milne ended his association with Mellors Gallery, handing over full responsibility to Duncan's Picture Loan Society. The inaugural exhibition at the Society was a well-praised show of Milne's drypoints. By the early forties Milne had become a respected and established artist, who, for the first time in his life, was earning modest income from his art.

During the last years of his life (Milne died in 1953) his print output, typically small, reached new heights. His search for aesthetic emotion was firmly concentrated on composition, achieved by means of design, colour scheme and texture. The serial concept was used fully, with certain subjects being repeated time and again, in different or the same media. One stunning example is *Still Water and Fish*. Two drypoint versions (cat. 77-78) were based on a January 1941 watercolour which, in turn, relates to two earlier paintings. A series of a different sort was the run of the drypoint *St. Michael's Cathedral* (Fig. 3), in Tovell's opinion (p. 186) 'the crowning achievement of his colour drypoints.' Here Milne's varied inkings created a separate work with each print pulled. The last colour drypoint on metal plates, *The Saint* (Fig. 4), is a charming example of Milne's only new subject, the fantasy. Fantasy also appeared in two prints done on bakelite, an early form of plastic. *The Ascension* (cat. 89), dated 7-9 April, 1947, was his last print.

By pulling together all of Milne's known prints and by putting these in the context of David Milne's oeuvre, Rosemarie Tovell has thrown wide open the door to Milne's complex and penetrating aesthetic vision. The scope of the exhibition is prodigious. Since the nature of Milne's work is foreign to so many, since the exploration of the connections between the prints and other media is one of Tovell's major contributions, the exhibition itself had to examine not only the prints for themselves, but had also to include the watercolours and oils that related to these prints. The catalogue, of course, explored these same concerns, all the while giving readers an appropriate background. That these aims were convincingly met, as I feel they very definitely were, is a considerable feat of discernment and organization.

Much of this discernment appears, in context, in the fully illustrated and documented catalogue. Included here is a full biography, a catalogue raisonné and reproduction of each print – some repeated in large colourplates – and an assessment of the place of printmaking within Milne's oeuvre. Here too is a broad discussion of the artist's philosophy, techniques and theories, all extensively documented from Milne's many letters and journals. The extensive information on each print, information on dating, editions, exhibitions, related works, archival references and collections, is of particular value for the researcher or collector.

Neither the exhibition nor the catalogue are appropriate fare for the casual browser. Both are too dense and have too much to say. Despite a clear emphasis on the prints, the whole enterprise depends on the development of a firm understanding of Milne's evolving philosophy and aesthetics. This show proves conclusively that Milne's oeuvre deserves careful attention; whether one is willing to devote the required time and effort to his work may be open to question. Tovell has produced an invaluable lead.

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