

Impressionism and Imperialism in Maurice Cullen's *African River*

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Maurice Cullen (1866–1934) a longtemps été considéré comme le point d'origine de l'impressionnisme canadien. «Où» se trouve ce point, cependant, reste une question ouverte. Pour les critiques des années 1890, ses peintures étaient clairement «françaises». Plus tard, Arthur Lismer et d'autres les ont vues comme l'incarnation de «l'esprit canadien». Cullen a-t-il ainsi importé un style français ou en a-t-il cultivé un typiquement canadien? L'auteur affirme que les premières œuvres du peintre problématifent déjà, dans leur production même, ce dérèglement du lieu. Son argumentaire repose sur une analyse d'*African River* de Cullen, un tableau de 1893 qui représente la ville algérienne colonisée de Biskra. Dans sa combinaison de la technique impressionniste française et de l'iconographie impérialiste française, cette peinture «canadienne» se présente comme un cas typique révélant les contradictions spatiales inhérentes à l'impressionnisme mondial. Le tableau gère la contradiction, peut-on lire dans cet essai, en combinant deux manières distinctes, bien qu'imbriquées, de conceptualiser l'espace lui-même: phénoménologique et géopolitique.

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Between 2019 and 2022 the exhibition *Canada and Impressionism: New Horizons* was scheduled to travel from Munich to Lausanne to Montpellier to the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa.¹ Curated by Katerina Atanassova, the show and its peripatetic itinerary mirrored a renewed interest in the problem of “mapping” or “globalizing” Impressionism—that is, of situating “Impressionism around the World.”² In relation to Canadian Impressionism, we are led to interrogate the connections between the various sites of artistic production—Montreal, Quebec City, Toronto—and the acknowledged origin point of the movement and style in France. Everyone agrees that the Canadian Impressionists “owed their debt to the French masters but grounded their work in the vision of Canada.”³ But how is it possible to make these geographies coincide? How is it possible to bridge what Matthew Kerr has called the “conceptual distance between ‘Canada’ and ‘Impressionism’”?⁴

Such questions attach themselves to virtually all instances of Impressionism outside France. Virginia Spate, for example, has argued that Australian Impressionism had what she calls a “double nature.” While “being true to the perceptions of Australian nature,” she writes, painters like Tom Roberts and Arthur Streeton “did so through cultural forms generated half a world away.”⁵ Anna Gruetzner Robins likewise argues that Impressionists in London sought to “marry British scenes to an approach to picture making that was French in origin.”⁶ Or take the case of Maurice Cullen (1866–1934). Carol Lowrey has identified him as “the preeminent Canadian Impressionist,” who “was really the first Canadian to interpret native landscape and light in an Impressionist manner.”⁷ As the catalogue for *Canada and Impressionism* put it more recently, Cullen and his colleagues “developed a visual language grounded in French Impressionism that was tailored to the unique color and light of the Canadian winter.”⁸

Within a certain dominant understanding, the generative logic of any Impressionist painting corresponds to the place of the artist who produced it. A Canadian Impressionist is simply an Impressionist in Canada. The colored marks on an Impressionist canvas are the same, the standard argument goes, as the “impressions” received from the corner of nature in front of which the painter stood when producing the painting.⁹ This is what makes an Impressionist painting Impressionist. The stylistic means of conveying this generative logic as a significant part of a painting nonetheless emerged

1. See Katerina Atanassova et al., *Canada and Impressionism: New Horizons, 1880–1930* (Stuttgart: Arnoldsche Art Publishers; Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 2019).

2. See Alexis Clark and Frances Fowle, eds., *Globalizing Impressionism: Reception, Translation, and Transnationalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020); and Emily C. Burns and Alice M. Rudy Price, eds., *Mapping Impressionist Painting in Transnational Contexts* (New York: Routledge, 2021). This essay originated as a talk at the “Impressionism Around the World” conference at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in April 2019. My thanks to Katerina Atanassova, Emily Burns, Tim Clark, Holly Clayton, André Dombrowski, Christopher Riopelle, and others in the audience for their productive comments and conversations. My thanks as well to Kristina Huneault and Kevin Chua for detailed and critically engaged feedback on the current written version.

3. Malcolm Burrows, “A Message from the Exhibition Patron,” in Atanassova, *Canada and Impressionism*, 7.

4. Matthew Kerr, “French Canadians—how Impressionism caught on in the Great White North,” *Apollo*, July 25, 2019, <https://www.apollo-magazine.com/canada-impresionism-review/>.

5. Virginia Spate, “Sunny South: Australian Impressionism,” in *World Impressionism: The International Movement, 1860–1920*, ed. Norma Broude (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990), 117.

6. Anna Gruetzner Robins, “British Impressionism: The Magic and Poetry of Life Around Them,” in Broude, *World Impressionism*, 73.

7. Carol Lowrey, *Visions of Light and Air: Canadian Impressionism, 1885–1920* (New York: Americas Society Art Gallery, 1995), 24–25.

8. Julie Nash and Krista Broeckx, “Chronology: Impressionism Abroad and at Home,” in Atanassova, *Canada and Impressionism*, 255.

9. This logic was inherent in the critical reception of Impressionism even before the word emerged in 1874. See Marnin Young, “Impressionism and Criticism,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Impressionism*, ed. André Dombrowski (forthcoming).

10. See Dennis Reid, “Introduction,” in *The Group of Seven* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1970), 9–16; Katherine Lochnan et al., *Mystical Landscapes: from Vincent van Gogh to Emily Carr* (Munich: Prestel, 2016); and, Gerta Moray, “Painting

out of a distinctly French pictorial tradition. Indeed, most all Canadian Impressionists learned their technique in France. Non-French iconographies depicted by non-French artists could thus be assimilated to the history of French art.

In these terms, Canadian Impressionism emerged out of a contradiction between the local and the international. For some later artists, like the Group of Seven, the sublation of this contradiction could only be achieved by assimilating countervailing aesthetic forms: Post-Impressionism, commercial art, Nordic landscape, mysticism.¹⁰ By contrast, most instances of Canadian Impressionism could only implicitly and naively grapple with its unsettled location. The spatial problematic comes closer to the surface, however, in certain marginal cases. When, for example, an artist lacks a strong national identity or a motif detaches from a national iconography, the attempted harmonization of local motif and international style becomes less stable. In the history of Canadian Impressionism, one example in particular stands out: *An African River*, painted by Cullen in 1893 and now in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada. | **fig. 1** | In its mixture of French Impressionist technique and French imperialist iconography, this “Canadian” painting stands as a test case for the assumed synthesis of local and international in World Impressionism. The picture grapples with these wider spatial contradictions, this essay will argue, through a combination of two distinct, if interlocking, ways of conceptualizing space itself.

Most obviously, artists like Cullen consistently adopted the dominant understanding that an Impressionist works outdoors, en plein air. A painter paints in a specific place that the painted depiction of that place in turn documents. “To trust in the fidelity of the artist,” James Herbert reminds us, “is to accept that his painted colors, purely as dematerialized colors rather than material pigments, are indistinguishable from those passing from world to retina.”¹¹ Thus the “space of the world” stands at the hidden genealogical origin point of our aesthetic perception of any Impressionist artwork. But the world out there appears to us only as mediated through the artist’s subjective perceptions and the physical acts of marking a canvas. In phenomenological terms, the logic of Impressionism rests on the harmonization of the “position” and “situation” of the painter in space.¹² Impressionist paintings propose that an artist stood at a defined *position* in the objective space of the world. They also purport to register the subjective *situation*—perceptual, embodied—of the painter in lived space.

At the same time, Cullen and other fin-de-siècle Impressionists worked within a newly rigorous sense of space, a new spatiality. The late nineteenth century saw the emergence of a disciplined and coordinated system of measuring space throughout the world. And that system came into being as a result of certain forces, ones that sought to organize and synchronize the global political order. As Sumathi Ramaswamy has argued, the broad attempt to position all the subjects of the Earth on a “gridded ‘geo-coded’ sphere” “helped underwrite the conquest ... of most parts of the world in the centuries of European imperial expansion.”¹³ This conquest of the world



Figure 1. Maurice Cullen, *An African River*, 1893. Oil on canvas, 54 x 81.3 cm. National Gallery of Art, Ottawa. Purchased 1981. Photo: ncc.

Figure 2. A.J. Rice, Laprés & Lavergne, Montréal. *La grande kermesse de l'Hôpital Notre-Dame, Galerie des beaux-arts, 1895.* From *Le Monde illustré* (Montreal) 12 année, no. 599 (October 26, 1895): 385.



culminated in the European “scramble for Africa” in the 1880s and the rise of the American and Japanese Empires in the early twentieth century.¹⁴ Global Impressionism thus coincided with the imperialist reordering of the globe.

These phenomenological and geo-political spatialities undergird a wide swath of World Impressionism. Largely unspoken in art history, they arguably constitute the deep structure of the more widely acknowledged problem of the local and the international. This essay contends that they constitute the very ground of Cullen’s wider mid-1890s production in France, Africa, and Canada. And while most of his paintings were understood merely in terms of national styles and iconographies, one work that might have made these twin spatialities comprehensible to its original audience was *An African River*.

An African River appeared publicly for the first time in October 1895. The canvas is just visible at lower right in a period photograph recording the benefit exhibition in Montreal where it then hung. | **fig. 2** | In advance of “La grande kermesse de l’Hôpital Notre-Dame,” Cullen was preparing to return to Canada after a successful six years abroad, studying and working in Paris.¹⁵ Having abandoned his academic training with Jean-Léon Gérôme and Alfred-Philippe Roll, he had come to embrace the plein-air painting then gripping the fancy of North American expatriate artists in France—and with some success. In early 1895, he had become the first Canadian elected as an associate member of the Société nationale des Beaux-Arts, and the French State had purchased one of his paintings at the Salon that year. He was surely optimistic for the public reception in his home town. No critical evaluation of Cullen’s work survives from the autumn of 1895, however, so it is all but impossible to know what the Canadian public made of such a picture.

Some viewers would certainly have been able to situate the iconography within the broader artistic tendency called Orientalism. Cullen’s training with Gérôme would only have confirmed such a reading.¹⁶ The palm trees

Canada: From Impressionism to Modernism,” in Atanassova, *Canada and Impressionism*, 116, 118.

11. James D. Herbert, *Brushstroke and Emergence: Courbet, Impressionism, Picasso* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 65–66. Herbert insists on the contradictory nature of this claim, and he quickly elaborates other related contradictions in this project. But he also notes the claim’s widespread “credibility among contemporary viewers” and its persistence in the present.

12. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New York: Routledge, 1962), 100.

13. Sumathi Ramaswamy, *Terrestrial Lessons: The Conquest of the World as Globe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), xvi.

14. On the emergence and persistence of the American Empire, see Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019).

15. When exactly Cullen returned to Montreal is not clear. He was certainly there by December 1895. See Nash and Broeckx, “Chronology,” 254.

16. On Gérôme and Orientalism, see Linda Nochlin, “The Imaginary Orient,” *Art in America* 71, no. 5 (May 1983): 118–31, 186, 189, 191; reprinted in Nochlin, *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), 33–59.

in the background and the man on a donkey clothed in a white *burnous* situates the “African river” more precisely in North Africa, in the *mahgreb*. And for those who looked closely in 1895, the artist’s inscription marking the location of his motif was still visible on the canvas: the location is Biskra, an oasis town in Algeria, a destination of growing popularity for French and other European tourists. “The town of Biskra,” Thomas Cook informed later visitors, “the Ad Piscinum of the Romans, called in the Arabic Biskra el Nokkel (or ‘Biskra the Palms’), is situated 35° 27’ latitude N. by 3° 22’ longitude E., at an altitude of 111 metres above the bed of the Oued Biskra.”¹⁷ Though the peculiarly specific coordinates are wrong—Biskra lies at 34° 51’ N, 5° 44’ E—*Practical Guide to Algiers, Algeria and Tunisia* helps us to understand that the “African river” in Cullen’s painting is the Oued Biskra, as seen in the dry season.

Even before Cullen arrived there in 1893, Biskra had already become a popular subject for artists.¹⁸ Gustave Guillaumet’s 1884 painting of an irrigation canal, *La Séguia, près de Biskra, Algérie*, for example, then hung in the Musée du Luxembourg. Even earlier, the artist Eugène Fromentin had travelled to Biskra in 1848 and again in the early 1850s, just as the Second Republic formally absorbed Algeria into the French nation, establishing the three official *Départements* of Alger, Oran, and Constantine. During the French Second Empire, however, Biskra and the Sahara still fell under strict military control. In his widely read memoir, *Un été dans le Sahara* of 1857, Fromentin dramatized what has been called the “militarized milieu” of the region.¹⁹ The Orientalist painter travelled with the French army as it continued to expand the colonial territory conquered since the initial invasion of 1830. Biskra had fallen without bloodshed in March of 1844, but a mutiny two months later by the so-called “indigenous infantrymen” (*tirailleurs indigènes*) prompted the establishment of a permanent garrison of 500 French troops in the center of the town.²⁰ Despite, or perhaps because of this, Fromentin could not help but describe the lush gardens of the oasis town as a kind of “Saharan Normandy.”²¹

In 1888, with the arrival of the railroad from Algiers via Constantine and El Kantara, a tourism boom brought thousands of visitors a year to Biskra. A tourist itinerary quickly emerged. For a beholder familiar with such things, the otherwise impenetrable red marks on the right side of Cullen’s river could be understood as a woman of the Ouled Nail tribe. A period postcard more precisely suggests she is doing her laundry. | **fig. 3** | As the work of James Herbert, Roger Benjamin, and others have demonstrated, the Ouled Nail formed a constitutive part of the Orientalist fantasy of Biskra.²² As Benjamin puts it, they were “Berber tribespeople notorious among Europeans for sending their younger women to work as socially sanctioned prostitutes in oasis towns like Bou-Saâda and Biskra.”²³ This was well known in Cullen’s day. Alfred Pease’s 1893 guidebook to Biskra stated that they were “ladies of easy virtue.” He thought it worth adding that, “a few are found who will sit as models for artists.”²⁴ The Ouled Nail continued to dominate the artistic imaginary into the twentieth century, as can be seen most prominently in Henri Matisse’s *Blue Nude (Souvenir de Biskra)* of 1907 (Baltimore Museum of Art).

17. Cook’s *Practical Guide to Algiers, Algeria and Tunisia* (London: Thomas Cook & Son, 1904), 244–45.

18. Although he dated *An African River* to 1893, it is not clear when Cullen actually visited Biskra. A. K. Prakash says it was “probably in 1893.” See Prakash, *Impressionism in Canada: A Journey of Rediscovery* (Toronto: Arnoldsche Art Publishers, 2015), 299.

19. See Eugène Fromentin, *Un été dans le Sahara* (Paris: Michel Lévy, 1857). On the “militarized milieu,” see John Zarobell, *Empire of Landscape: Space and Ideology in French Colonial Algeria* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2010), 87. See also Roger Benjamin, *Biskra, Sortilèges d’un oasis* (Paris: Institut du monde arabe, 2016).

20. Benjamin Claude Brower, *A Desert Named Peace: The Violence of France’s Empire in the Algerian Sahara, 1844–1902* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 40.

21. Fromentin, *Un été dans le Sahara*, 216.

22. See James D. Herbert, *Fauve Painting: The Making of Cultural Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 161–62; and, Roger Benjamin, *Orientalist Aesthetics: Art, Colonialism, and Berber North Africa, 1880–1930* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 165.

23. Benjamin, *Orientalist Aesthetics*, 100.

24. Alfred E. Pease, *Biskra and the Oases and Desert of the Zibans* (London: Edward Stanford, 1893), 47, 48.



Figure 3. Étienne and Louis-Antoin Neurdein, *Lavandière de l'Oued-Kantara*, ca. 1900.



Figure 4. Marabout near Biskra, Algeria, ca. 1900. Photochromic print. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.



Figure 5. French painter in Kbour-el-Abbas, El Kantara, Algeria, ca. 1900.

For a well-travelled viewer in 1895, the small structure in the background of Cullen's painting might also have been recognizable. Situated on the edge of the embankment, to the left of the palm trees, is the tomb of a holy man, usually called a *qubba* or, in North Africa, a *marabout* (also the word for the holy man buried in the tomb).²⁵ Such structures drew the attention of artists in particular, and Orientalist painters from Fromentin to Victor Huget recorded specific ones in Biskra such as the famous *qubba* of Sidi Zerzour.²⁶ A photochrom from around 1900, now in the collection of the Library of Congress, shows what appears to be the same *marabout* as in the background of *An African River*. | **fig. 4** | Cullen thus established a coherent, if predictable, set of iconographic markers of the experience of a standard touristic site in or near Biskra. But perhaps more importantly, the parallel between painting and photograph draws attention to the artist's underlying assertion of his physical relation to the scene depicted. He sought to compel the conviction that he had rendered his motif as directly as possible. Or to put it differently, the artist selected his motif carefully and sought to convey how he painted it in situ, from a precise place: seated next to the Oued Biskra, observing the play of shadow and light, of reflections on water.

Plein-air painting was already the norm in the southern region of French Algeria. A period photograph showing a painter in full colonial regalia, pith helmet and all, suggests in general how Cullen probably worked. | **fig. 5** | Again, this was common, and had been so for some time. In his review of the Salon of 1859, Théophile Gautier already noted that plein-air painting had invaded North Africa along with the French armies: "the Sahara now sees as many parasols spread out by landscape painters as the forest of Fontainebleau once had."²⁷ The likes of Fromentin and Guillaumet were hardly alone. Pierre-Auguste Renoir painted numerous pictures during his trips to Algeria in 1881 and 1882.²⁸ Some of Claude Monet's very earliest works were produced in 1861 while he served in the military near Algiers (although none of them seem to have survived). In an interview with François Thiébauld-Sisson in 1900, he recalled his "two charming years" in the *Chasseurs d'Afrique*: "I incessantly saw something new; in my moments of leisure I attempted to render what I saw. You cannot imagine to what extent I increased my knowledge, and how much my vision gained. I did not quite realize it at first. The impressions of light and colour I received there were not to classify themselves until later."²⁹ By this account, the genealogy of Impressionism can be traced to "French" North Africa, a territory under military domination.³⁰ Equally relevant to later pictures of Algeria, Monet rhetorically converts his direct role in military conquest into a tale of primal seeing.

Such legendary precedents almost certainly served as models for Cullen's own trip to Algeria in 1893. And they probably led him to show his work from Biskra in a private exhibition in early 1896 on Sainte-Catherine Street in Montreal.³¹ The exhibition included a kind of pendant to *An African River*, a canvas of the same dimensions showing an only slightly less picturesque view of the Oued Biskra. | **fig. 6** | Two figures in white stand in the brilliantly blue water on the right, a flock of camels visible in the left background. Both

25. On the use of these terms in North Africa, see Everett Jenkins, Jr., *The Muslim Diaspora: A Comprehensive Chronology of the Spread of Islam in Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas*, vol. 2: 1500–1799 (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2000), 10.

26. See James Thompson and Barbara Wright, *Eugène Fromentin* (Paris: ACR, 2008); and Marion Vidal-Buë, *L'Algérie du Sud et ses peintres, 1830–1960* (Paris: Editions Paris-Méditerranée, 2002).

27. Théophile Gautier, "Exposition de 1859," *Le Moniteur universel*, May 28, 1859, 613: "le Sahara voit maintenant se déployer autant de parasols de paysagistes qu'autrefois la forêt de Fontainebleau."

28. See Roger Benjamin, *Renoir and Algeria* (Williamstown, MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

29. [François] Thiébauld-Sisson, "Claude Monet: Les années d'épreuves," *Le Temps*, November 26, 1900, 3, trans. in Claude Monet, "An Interview with the Artist in 1900," in *Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, 1874–1904: Sources and Documents*, ed. Linda Nochlin (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966), 39.

30. Anne-Marie Christin floats and then refuses a similar, but earlier proposition about Fromentin's "impressionist...descriptions that were able to penetrate him with both the image of locations and their subjective qualities." See Christin, "Space and Convention in Eugène Fromentin: The Algerian Experience," *New Literary History* 15, no. 3 (Spring 1984): 566.

31. Nash and Broeckx, "Chronology," 254.

these Algerian paintings record a standard Orientalist-tinged tourist itinerary, but they also manifest Cullen's search for a new style of painting not common to him or his fellow Canadians. Even among those more worldly beholders in Montreal who might have recognized the Algerian motifs, the dense iconography of these paintings and its relation to French colonialism and Orientalism would probably have been less striking than the manner in which Cullen had rendered them. A large number of viewers in 1895 and 1896 would surely have recognized their stylistic origins in the direct observation of a brilliantly lit landscape, and they would have had a name for it: Impressionism.

As early as 1891, Cullen had been singled out as an artist who "rather inclines towards the impressionist school."³² And, upon his return to Canada, he was called "an impressionist of the modern French school."³³ What this meant, primarily, is that the painter used broken brushstrokes and high-keyed colour. This has certainly been the quality of *An African River* most readily noted by viewers ever since. As Dennis Reid put it in 1990, the canvas "reveals a bold ability to describe the fraying fragmentation of forms as observed under the intense southern sunlight that suggests an affinity to the closer analysis of the Impressionists."³⁴ Reid alerts us here to Cullen's use of abbreviated brushstrokes throughout the canvas. The rendering of the reflections on the water offers a good example of his sketchy facture, but the technique is also visible in the greenish and reddish tints applied on top of the ground at left. Even closer to Impressionist practice is Cullen's treatment of the modifications of local color under the conditions of full exterior illumination. Most striking in this regard is his use of purple hues in the rendering of shadows on the riverbank cliffs at right. These formal effects, coded as the record of perceptions obtained directly en plein air was precisely what defined Impressionism for the global generation of the time.

The American painter Lilla Cabot Perry famously recorded Monet's lesson: "When you go out to paint," he told her around 1890, "try to forget what objects you have before you, a tree, a house, a field or whatever. Merely think, here is a little square of blue, here an oblong of pink, here a streak of yellow, and paint it just as it looks to you, the exact colour and shape, until it gives your own naïve impression of the scene before you."³⁵ Although Cullen knew some who were close to Monet—Thiébault-Sisson was a friend—he seems never to have had a direct encounter with the painter. Nevertheless, the Canadian would have picked up these famous injunctions, as conveyed by Perry and others, as they circulated in the expatriate studios and the cafés of the time.

When applied to an understanding of *An African River*, this popular (and admittedly reductive) theory of Impressionism brings a number of things into focus. The logic of Cullen's technique becomes clear. He builds a painting out of coloured streaks corresponding to the "impression" of a given scene. Cullen also adopts the studied indifference Monet seems to propose to the motif: "forget what objects you have before you." Under this instruction, the painter of Biskra establishes an aesthetic regime that permits the

32. M. O'R., "Nos Artistes à Paris," *Le Courrier du Canada*, January 22, 1891, p. 2, as quoted in Sylvie Antoniou, *Maurice Cullen* (Kingston, ON: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1982), 5: "M. Cullen penche plutôt vers l'école impressionniste."

33. *Witness*, March 31, 1897, as quoted in Antoniou, *Maurice Cullen*, 11.

34. Dennis Reid, "Canadian Impressionism," in Broude, *World Impressionism*, 96.

35. Lilla Cabot Perry, "Reminiscences of Claude Monet from 1889 to 1909," *The American Magazine of Art* 18, no. 3 (March 1927): 120. Perry's husband was the grand-nephew of Commodore Matthew Perry, responsible for the forcible opening of Japan to the West in 1854.



Figure 6. Maurice Cullen, *Biskra*, 1893. Oil on canvas, 53.6 x 81.9 cm. Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. Photo: Pymous.



Figure 7. Claude Monet, *The Artist's Garden in Argenteuil (A Corner of the Garden with Dahlias)*, 1873. Oil on canvas, 61 × 82.5 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Gift of Janice H. Levin, in Honor of the 50th Anniversary of the National Gallery of Art (1991.27.1).



Figure 8. Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Claude Monet Painting in His Garden at Argenteuil*, 1873. Oil on canvas, 49.7 × 59.7 cm. Wadsworth Athenaeum Museum of Art, Hartford, Ct. Photo: Allen Phillips/Wadsworth Athenaeum.

iconography, the history, the politics of the subject to disappear. The scenic pleasure of Cullen's Impressionism is premised less on the armchair-travelling voyeurism of Orientalism than on a blindness to it. This is, almost certainly, how the public in Montreal would have perceived the picture.

Of equal significance, if largely implicit, is Monet's framing spatial conceit: that "you go out to paint ... the scene before you." Building on almost a century of the practice and theory of plein-air painting, the lesson of Impressionism by 1890 rested on a core presumption about the relation of painting and place. The Impressionist "goes out" to paint and, in turn, completes the painting in situ, not in the studio. Consequently, an Impressionist painting stands as a representation, if not an unmediated record, of the "impression" experienced by the painter at that precise moment. The painter was thus located in front of what she represents, on this side, our side of the picture plane. The production of the marks on the canvas and the representation of a motif originate, at least rhetorically, in the same physical place.

Monet and Renoir thematised this spatial conceit of Impressionism in an extraordinary pair of paintings from 1873. Monet painted a view of his garden in Argenteuil, depicting a colourful range of blooming dahlias. | **fig. 7** | Renoir's canvas represents Monet painting these same dahlias, demonstrating the point of view relative to his chosen motif. | **fig. 8** | The relation of the two pictures allows the viewer to imagine a potentially infinite elaboration of viewpoints: another painter painting Renoir painting Monet, and so on. It also serves to secure the claim that in the production of any Impressionist painting the painter actually stood in front of the motif represented, thus occupying the "real space" depicted in the "virtual space" of the picture.³⁶ The Renoir picture secures the objective place of Monet's motif. Monet painted it just *there*, in the garden at Argenteuil, at a particular and definable geographical location. Numerous examples of this conceit exist in the period. A list of those involving Monet would include Edouard Manet's *The Boat*, 1874 (Neue Pinakothek, Munich), John Singer Sargent's *Claude Monet Painting by the Edge of the Wood*, ca. 1885 (Tate, London), and Monet's own *In the Woods at Giverny: Blanche Hoschedé at Her Easel with Suzanne Hoschedé Reading*, 1887 (Los Angeles County Museum of Art). At the same time, the techniques of the division of colour, broken brushstrokes, and the speed of application in all these paintings registers the presence of the bodies of the artists *there* in front of the canvas.

How to characterize the location of the Impressionist painter in relation to the painting remains a difficult task. James Herbert has called this problem Impressionism's "planar/spatial uncertainty."³⁷ What, we might ask, do the brushstrokes on an Impressionist canvas represent? Do they represent the "impression" of the outside world, out *there*, entering the eye of the painter? Or do they represent the "sensation" on the retina or inside the brain of the painter? This ambiguity—outside or inside, world or subject—manifests itself in most all Impressionist practice and theory. A significant distinction consequently emerges between the depiction of virtual

36. On this distinction, see David Summers, *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* (London: Phaidon, 2003), 43: "Real space is the space we find ourselves sharing with other people and things; virtual space is space represented on a surface, space we 'seem to see.' In fact, space can only be represented visually as virtual, but at the same time we always encounter a virtual space in a real space."

37. Herbert, *Brushstroke and Emergence*, 65.

space in Impressionist paintings and the brush marks indexing the bodily presence of the artist in real space.

Such distinctions have constituted some of the core philosophical concerns of phenomenology, a tradition that can be usefully mobilised for the purposes of clarifying the spatial tensions inherent in Impressionist practice. In his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty designates two orders of understanding the body in space: a “spatiality of position” and a “spatiality of situation.”³⁸ He writes:

my body appears to me as an attitude directed towards a certain existing or possible task. And indeed its spatiality is not, like that of external objects or like that of “spatial sensations,” a *spatiality of position*, but a *spatiality of situation*. ... I know where my hand and my body are, as primitive man in the desert is always able to take his bearings immediately without having to cast his mind back and add up distances covered and deviations made since setting off. The word “here” applied to my body does not refer to a determinate position in relation to other positions or to external co-ordinates, but the laying down of the first co-ordinates, the anchoring of the active body in an object, the situation of the body in face of its tasks.³⁹

What we see in the virtual space of an Impressionist painting—an instance not far off Merleau-Ponty’s own frame of reference—is what the painter purportedly saw in real space at the location of his or her easel and canvas in the world. It shows the body’s “spatiality of position,” as in Renoir’s locating Monet just next to the dahlias and the fence in his garden. By contrast, the “lived space” of the artist’s body interacting with the canvas, gesturally marking it, equates to the body’s “spatiality of situation.”

One standard viewing of Impressionist paintings, then, the uptake of a viewer attuned to Impressionist theory, places the beholder in the imagined geographical position *and* experiential situation of the painter. The two are harmonized. The beholder recognizes the objective position of the artist in front of the motif depicted and the situation of his or her body oriented towards the physical action of marking the canvas. Modernist histories have implicitly valued the knife-edge between the phenomenological “situation” of the artist and the geographical “position” of the artist. This merely undergirds the proliferation of what Roger Benjamin has critically termed the “site-specific” histories of Impressionism in the last forty years.⁴⁰ Within a standard social-historical account of nineteenth-century painting, the meaning or cultural function of the location or site represented in a painting must be understood in relation to the lived circumstances of the artist working at that same location. This relation is of course a profoundly constructed fiction—Impressionists rarely completed their paintings in situ, and Cullen was no exception—but it was importantly the ruling fiction for the global reception of Impressionism in the 1890s.

Cullen understood the story. His mastery of Impressionist precedents and precepts is well known. For example, the paintings he produced at Moret-sur-Loing, some of which were shown at the Paris Salon of 1895, mark his awareness that painters like Alfred Sisley had positioned themselves with great care in front of the motif. In a painting of Moret dated to October 1888, Sisley’s view looks upstream from the right bank of the Loing

38. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 100. For the original French, see Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), 116.

39. *Ibid.*

40. Roger Benjamin, “The Decorative Landscape, Fauvism, and the Arabesque of Observation,” *The Art Bulletin* 75, no. 2 (June 1993): 295. He cites the work of T. J. Clark, Paul Tucker, and Robert Herbert in particular. On the origins and wider consequences of the Impressionist practice of painting side by side at specific sites, see Harmon Siegel, “Monet and Other People” (Ph.D., Harvard University, 2021).

Figure 9. Alfred Sisley, *Moret au coucher du soleil, octobre, 1888*. Oil on canvas, 73.5 × 93 cm. Private collection.



Figure 10. Maurice Cullen, *Moret, Winter, 1895*. Oil on canvas, 59.7 × 92.1 cm. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

Figure 11. Maurice Cullen, *Logging in Winter near Beau-pré*, 1896. Oil on canvas, 64.1 × 79.9 cm. Art Gallery of Hamilton. Gift of the Women's Committee dedicated to the memory of Ruth McCuaig, President of the Women's Committee (1953–1955), 1956.

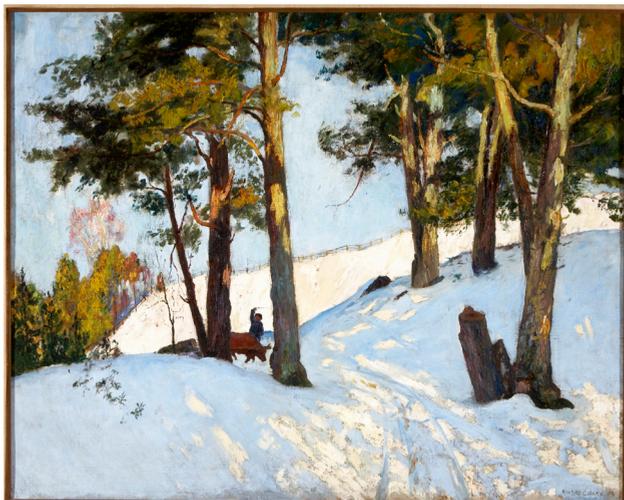


Figure 12. Maurice Cullen, *Lévis, Quebec*, c. 1897. Oil on canvas, 46.3 × 73.5 cm. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Purchased 2014 with the Andrea and Charles Bronfman Canadian Art Fund, National Gallery of Canada Foundation. Photo: NGC.

towards a bridge crossing the river, with the city's landmark Porte de Bourgogne and the Église Notre-Dame de la Nativité obscured by trees on the left bank. | **fig. 9** | Cullen swivels from approximately the same position, taking a view directly across the Loing towards a group of houses in the town of Moret. | **fig. 10** | His composition and his use of colour and broken brushstrokes differ somewhat from his French predecessor, but the way the two artists set up and frame their views has significant similarities. Most notable is the shared choice to include in the bottom foreground the tufted grass on the riverbank where the painter stood. This device secures the fiction that these men were there, *just there*, and saw this from a particular position. At the same time, the residue of the physical acts of marking the canvas in the representation of this world in paint serves to establish their phenomenological situation. Position and situation once again harmonize.

Such “site-specific” painting became Cullen’s default mode throughout the rest of his career. After the failure to find traction at the Montreal exhibitions of 1895 and early 1896, he began to paint a series of canvases in and around Quebec City. In this campaign, he reversed his Biskra motif of sunlit sand and began painting the subject that would define his career: snow. “No Canadian painter has approached Mr. Cullen in his delineation of snow in sunshine,” wrote Margaret Laing Fairburn in 1907.⁴¹ In the late autumn of 1896, he completed a now-canonical painting of logging in the forest of Beaupré. | **fig. 11** | In early 1897, he moved across the Saint Lawrence to Lévis, opposite Quebec City, looking downriver at the wintry ice floes. | **fig. 12** | Like Monet and Renoir before him, Cullen here worked side-by-side with other painters. He was joined first by William Brymner and then James Wilson Morrice. At Beaupré and Lévis they worked en plein air in the brutal cold. Morrice claims it dropped to “30 below zero.”⁴² Under these conditions, they seem to have worked out preliminary sketches on poplar panels that they later translated into enlarged canvas versions in the studio.⁴³ The resulting paintings are more heavily impastoed than the works of 1893 and 1895, but they effectively evade the problem of “Impressionism’s being lost in translation.”⁴⁴ They are, by general consensus, “the first in Canada to bring the tenets of Impressionism to the treatment of Canadian landscape.”⁴⁵

To be sure, their perceived significance for a later generation of Canadian artists is a matter of record. For the Group of Seven, Cullen was a “hero,” not least perhaps because he successfully harmonized what Arthur Lismer called “the impressionist mood with the Canadian spirit.”⁴⁶ Yet, when such works appeared at the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts and the Art Association of Montreal in 1897, they were still seen primarily as “French.”⁴⁷ Robertine Barry, writing under her pen name Françoise, praised the “extraordinary effect of his paintings ... The winter scenes have an astonishing colour strength.” Yet Cullen stood apart from other Canadians who might have depicted the same subjects. He was an “impressionist from the French school,” she noted, “one feels that he paints what he sees ... with the sole intention of rendering nature faithfully.”⁴⁸

41. Margaret Laing Fairbairn, “A Milestone in Canadian Art,” *The Canadian Courier* 1 (April 13, 1907), n. 20: 12.

42. James Wilson Morrice, letter to Edmund Morris, February 1897, Canadian Art Club Fonds, series 13, file 12, Art Gallery of Ontario, E.P. Taylor Library and Archives, as quoted in Atanassova, *Canada and Impressionism*, 254.

43. On the plein-air production of these panels, see Prakash, *Impressionism in Canada*, 304.

44. T. J. Clark, “At Tate Britain,” *London Review of Books* 39, no. 3 (February 2, 2017): 16.

45. Dennis Reid, *A Concise History of Canadian Painting*, 3rd ed. (1973; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 134.

46. Arthur Lismer, as quoted in Peter Mellen, “Around a Retrospective: Maurice Cullen and the Group of Seven,” *Vie des Arts* 61 (Winter 1970–71): 29. “Hero”: A.Y. Jackson, *A Painter’s Country: The Autobiography of A.Y. Jackson* (Toronto: Clarke Irwin, 1976), 16–17.

47. *Witness*, March 31, 1897, as quoted in Antoniou, *Maurice Cullen*, 11.

48. Françoise, “Chronique du lundi,” *La Patrie*, April 12, 1897, p. 2: “Un impressionniste consciencieux de l’école moderne française que M. Cullen. Je ne pourrais jamais vous rendre l’effet extraordinaire de ses tableaux. Les scènes d’hiver sont d’une puissance de coloris étonnante; on sent qu’il peint ce qu’il voit et comme il le voit, avec le seul souci de rendre sincèrement la nature.” Trans. in Prakash, *Impressionism in Canada*, 304.

This is precisely the “double nature” of Impressionism. The artist paints what she sees, therefore what is seen and who sees it determines the place and identity of a picture. Cullen is a Canadian painting Canada, and thus produces Canadian painting. Yet his mobilization of an Impressionist technique seems inescapably French. More to the point, the “Frenchness” of Impressionism registers as an international approach to the problem of local or national self-representation.⁴⁹ Australian and British Impressionists paint in more or less the same way as Canadian ones. Is it even possible, then, to have national schools of Impressionism? Phrased in these terms, the contradiction in the project remains unresolvable. At a deeper level, the double nature of World Impressionism merely instantiates the spatial ambiguities inherent in all instances of Impressionism. For Monet, Renoir, and Sisley the task was always to harmonize their position and situation in the production of a picture. For painters outside France, the phenomenological “situation” of the artist in historically lived local space sometimes emerged as an internal counterpoint to the reduction of the objective “position” within a global system of spatial coordination.

This seems to have been the case with Cullen’s paintings of 1896 and 1897. The standard view holds that he decisively turned to iconic Canadian subjects as a way to secure the “Canadian spirit” of the pictures: the boreal forests, icy waters, snow. There are aspects of this iconography, however—the timber industry and shipping—that situate them within global economic networks. The likelihood is great, for example, that the logs felled near Beaupré would have been shipped down the Saint Lawrence (as seen from Lévis) and on to England, at the time the dominant export market for Canadian timber. As such, these pictures still stand within the frame of the British Empire, and that globally positioned frame is only somewhat occluded by the painter’s bodily situation painting a picture in the freezing cold of the New World. Perhaps as significant, though, is the way these pictures propose to establish the imagined relation between the painter, the beholder, and the place depicted.

The evidence suggests that Cullen conceived these works en plein air. And the critics in 1897 all recognized the conceit that he stood somewhere and saw what is represented in the paintings of Beaupré and Lévis, “rendering nature faithfully.” But the more one looks at these paintings, the less clear the conceit becomes. There is, for example, a subtle but destabilizing formal play between the depicted spatial position of the painter and the turning and plunging ground in the virtual space on the other side of the picture plane in the paintings of 1896 and 1897. Adopting the position of the painter-beholder located dead centre in the tracks of the oncoming loggers in the painting of Beaupré, can lead a viewer to a vertiginous reading of the ground plane falling abruptly away in the foreground. Scanning from the bottom edge of canvas upwards, one senses a strange shift in the perceptual relation to depicted space as one swivels from a suspended, disembodied view looking from on high to a fully embodied view looking ahead. In the painting of Lévis, the high position of viewing, hovering to the left above the slope of

49. On the perceived “foreignness” of Impressionism in Canada, see Samantha Burton, “Transplanting Impressionism to Canada,” in Burns and Price, *Mapping Impressionist Painting*, 65–76.

the road, likewise produces an effect of teetering on a cliff edge. A beholder can secure a place neither in the snow-covered street nor off to the side. One instead shutters endlessly between the two. Within the pictorial structure of these paintings, space becomes unsettled. This might very well be a practical result of the translation from poplar panels to canvas, but in phenomenological terms, the painter's position and situation diverge. Cullen's objective location in the world when he painted the work and the subjective location of his "impressions" simply do not align. It is as if these paintings show the world from a vantage point that the artist could not in fact have occupied. Such a formal misalignment seems intentional, if not fully self-conscious, and as such conforms to an emerging awareness of a tension or contradiction between any individual's coordinate position and his or her phenomenological situation. This disjunction follows from the historical conditions of the representation of space.

Emerging out of earlier philosophical conceptions of space and time as the a priori givens of all action, standardized conceptions of measured space in the nineteenth century came to dominate throughout the world. David Summers has termed this modern worldview "metaopticality." In his words, metaopticality is "an infinite and therefore centreless three-dimensional extension" which serves as the notional framework of the modern visible world.⁵⁰ In pictorial representation, metaopticality crystallizes in the expansive and measured virtual space of fifteenth-century linear perspective. For those of us living in the early twenty-first century, this notional framework has been concretized so ubiquitously through a military-produced Global Positioning System that our "locational transparency" in a universal, three-dimensional grid seems not ideological at all but fully natural.⁵¹ It is, in fact, only in the 1880s that the metaoptical worldview approached its fullest realization. The adoption of a universal system of measurement marked a watershed. The meter took on its decisive modern form—the "mètre étalon"—first at a Paris conference in 1876 and finally with the casting of the platinum-iridium meter bar in 1889. Following a proposal by Sandford Fleming presented in Toronto in 1879, the International Meridian Conference established Greenwich as the Prime Meridian in 1884, dividing the Earth along universally accepted lines of longitude and latitude.⁵² The meridian, the meter, and thus the modern world picture of space took form in the 1880s. But the emergence of a global spatial coordinate system at exactly this moment is, of course, anything but a coincidence.

In December 1884, only two months after the International Meridian Conference, the dominant world powers met in Berlin in order, infamously, to divide Africa among themselves. A huge map of the continent hung in the meeting room, and the fairly arbitrary assignment of colonial borders was the primary task at hand. This process had been ongoing for a very long time, but the cartographic sophistication of colonialism escalated over the course of the nineteenth century with projects like the Great Trigonometrical Survey of India, begun in 1802 and completed in the 1870s.⁵³ The conquest and control of space merely intensified by the century's end. The distinctive

50. Summers, *Real Spaces*, 555.

51. Hiawatha Bray, *You are Here: From the Compass to GPS, the History and Future of How We Find Ourselves* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), xii.

52. Fleming in fact preferred what he called an "anti or nether meridian" running through the Bering Strait. See Charles W. J. Withers, *Zero Degrees: Geographies of the Prime Meridian* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 164.

53. See Matthew H. Edney, *Mapping an Empire: The Geographical Construction of British India, 1765–1843* (1990; Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1997).

characteristic of the years just before 1900 is, as Vladimir Lenin once put it, that “the colonial policy of the capitalist countries [had] completed the seizure of the unoccupied territories on our planet.”⁵⁴ And with the completion of that global conquest, a tension emerges within the very understanding of space.

As Frederic Jameson has argued in an essay on “Modernism and Imperialism,” the colonial order that followed the Berlin Conference of 1884 made it all but impossible to grasp the global economic system as a whole. It instead created what he calls a “spatial disjunction” between imperial centers and the subjugated other. “No enlargement of personal experience,” Jameson writes, “can ever be enough to include this radical otherness of colonial life, colonial suffering and exploitation, let alone the structural connections between that and this, between daily life in the metropolis and the absent space of the colony.” This spatial disjunction is, he claims, “the problem, and the dilemma, the formal contradiction that modernism seeks to solve.” Artistically speaking, “common-sense space perception is disrupted by the emergence here and there of a dawning sense of the non-perceptual spatial totality.”⁵⁵ For painters as for writers, the representation of localities as if individually experienced unravels in the face of the new world order.

Such, it seems, was the case in Montreal and Quebec in the mid-1890s. When Maurice Cullen was born in 1866, Canada was, like India, straightforwardly a British colony. (Although raised in Montreal, he was born in Newfoundland, not part of Canada until much later). One year later the British North America Act established the Dominion of Canada and autonomous rule from Ottawa of the Confederation of four provinces. By 1905, the Dominion had expanded its federal rule across the continent, realizing the founders’ biblical notion of “dominion...from sea to sea.”⁵⁶ In the westward expansion, 1896—the same year Cullen began his campaign establishing the first iteration of “Canadian Impressionism”—was a decisive turning point. Even more than the Yukon gold rush that year, the policies of Clifford Sifton, the new Liberal Minister of the Interior, mark the final conquest of the Canadian West. Using so-called “colonization agents,” Sifton recruited hundreds of thousands of immigrants from throughout Europe to move into the prairies of what is now Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. Many of these immigrants first arrived in Canada at Grosse île, just off Beauport.⁵⁷ The function of the Liberal immigration policy was explicitly tied to the control of space. “One of the principal ideas western men have”—this is Sifton—“is that is right to take anything in sight provided nobody else is ahead of them.”⁵⁸ After the Indian Act of 1876 had enforced the dispossession of the First Nations and Prime Minister John A. MacDonal began to pursue a policy of “aggressive assimilation,”⁵⁹ the presumptions of such a claim probably did not sound so absurd. Today, however, the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada considers these government policies regarding Indigenous peoples a “cultural genocide.”⁶⁰

Canada, then, had its own form of empire. The 1890s saw a scramble for the West, one that echoed the scramble for Africa. The differences between

54. Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1917), in V. I. Lenin, *Essential Works of Lenin*, ed. Henry M. Christman (New York: Bantam, 1966), 227 (emphasis in original).

55. Fredric Jameson, “Modernism and Imperialism” (1990), in *The Modernist Papers* (London: Verso, 2016), 160.

56. The Canadian national motto, *A Mari usque ad Mare*, officially adopted in 1921, drops the “dominabitur” from the Latin version of Psalm 72, but the term “Dominion” to denote the country came from the King James translation of it. See W. Kaye Lamb, “A Mari usque ad Mare,” in *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, ed. James H. Marsh (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1999), 1.

57. See Marianna O’Gallagher, *Grosse Île: Gateway to Canada, 1832–1937* (Sainte-Foy, Quebec: Carraig Books, 1984).

58. Clifford Sifton, as quoted in Desmond Morton, *A Short History of Canada*, 5th ed. (1983; Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2001), 147. On Sifton, race, and westward expansion, see also Pierre Berton, *The Promised Land: Settling the West, 1896–1914* (1984; Toronto: Anchor Canada, 2002).

59. The term “aggressive assimilation” derived from the American policies of President Ulysses S. Grant in 1869, but Nicholas Flood Davin recommended their adaptation in Canada in a report to MacDonal in 1879. See Davin, “Report on Industrial Schools for Indians and Half-Breeds, 1879,” in *Reconciling Canada: Critical Perspectives on the Culture of Redress*, ed. Jennifer Henderson and Pauline Wakeham (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 299.

60. *Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. Volume One: Summary: Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future* (Toronto: Lorimer, 2015), 1.

the two have conventionally, and perhaps rightly, been understood as settler and exploitation colonialism respectively.⁶¹ In important ways, however, the Canadian situation structurally approached what Hannah Arendt has called “continental imperialism.”⁶² In her volume on *Imperialism*, Arendt contrasts the pan-German and pan-Slav movements of the nineteenth century with French and English imperialism. “The chief importance of continental, as distinguished from overseas, imperialism,” she writes, “lies in the fact that its concept of cohesive expansion does not allow for any geographic distance between the methods and institutions of colony and nation.”⁶³ (The two imperialisms nonetheless agree with Cecil Rhodes: “Expansion is everything.”)⁶⁴ Of equal significance, however, is the fact that Canada remained at the end of the nineteenth century a core territory within the British Empire, containing a strong “imperialist” faction in the polity.⁶⁵ When Britain went to war in 1899 against the Boers in South Africa, for example, Wilfrid Laurier supported the 7,000 Canadian volunteer troops who served among the armies of Empire. Although more “nationalist” than “imperialist,” the Prime Minister understood that Canada’s status was still heavily contested. His policies of conciliation consequently acknowledged that Canada was both a member of the British Empire and an emerging, autonomous nation—not a colony but not quite independent—a country that still lacked distinctive national bonds and a national iconography. This is something that an Anglophone Newfoundlander painting the forests and ports of Quebec in 1896 or 1897 would have instinctively grasped.

The spatial disjunctions in *Logging in Winter near Beaupré* or in *Lévis, Quebec* can thus be understood as responding to the historical ground on which they were produced. On a structural level, Cullen untethered the “metatoptical” position of his iconographic motifs from the phenomenological situation of his production of the pictures. Such formal tensions served to grapple with the inherent contradictions between Canada as a new nation-state, as a “continental” Empire, and as a subject of the British Empire. The loosening of this ideological knot flowed out of the implicit doubling of locality and internationality so widespread in World Impressionism. Cullen’s Impressionist approach to “Canadian” subject matter all but inevitably involved an internal splitting, a disharmony of space.

If Canadian Impressionism came to recognize, if only implicitly, the challenge of suturing disparate forms of spatiality, the origin point of this formal and ideological problem can be located, ultimately, in Cullen’s representation of Biskra. By the early 1890s, Monet, Renoir, and Sisley had established for an international audience a model for the harmony between the artist’s “spatiality of position” and his or her “spatiality of situation.” In Algeria, however, for a non-French artist, that harmony grew strained. The Thomas Cook guidebook tells us that Biskra “is situated 35° 27’ latitude N. by 3° 22’ longitude E., at an altitude of 111 metres above the bed of the Oued Biskra.” These are purported facts, metaoptical facts, about the “non-perceptual spatial totality” of measurement and the meridian that served the imperialist drive to global domination. And however much these “facts”

61. See Adam J. Barker, Toby Rollo, and Emma Batell Lowman, “Settler Colonialism and the Consolidation of Canada in the Twentieth Century,” in *The Routledge Handbook of the History of Settler Colonialism*, ed. Edward Cavanagh and Lorenzo Veracini (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 153–68. For a recent study of Canadian settler colonialism and architectural space, see Magdalena Miłosz, “Simulated Domesticities: Settings for Colonial Assimilation in Mid-Twentieth-Century Canada,” *RACAR* 45, no. 2 (Fall 2020): 81–96.

62. Hannah Arendt, *Imperialism*, Part Two of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: A Harvest Book; Harcourt Brace & Company, 1968), especially Chapter Four, “Continental Imperialism,” 102–46. Arendt was not of course speaking of Canada. But Sifton’s policies constitute something like a mirror image of what in 1897 the German geographer Friedrich Ratzel infamously called “Lebensraum.” See Ratzel, *Politische geographie* (Munich: R. Oldenberg, 1897); and, Mark Bassin, “Imperialism and the Nation State in Friedrich Ratzel’s Geography,” *Progress in Human Geography* 11, no. 4 (September 1987): 473–95.

63. Arendt, *Imperialism*, 103.

64. *Ibid.*, 124.

65. Carl Berger defined this form of Canadian imperialism as “that movement for the closer union of the British Empire through economic and military co-operation and through political changes which would give the dominions influence over imperial policy.” See Berger, *The Sense of Power: Studies in the Ideas of Canadian Imperialism, 1867–1914*, 2nd ed. (1970; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 3. In turn, Douglas Cole has argued that the “ideas and assumptions of Canadian imperialists are best seen as a Britanic or pan-Anglo-Saxon nationalism.” See Cole, “The Problem of ‘Nationalism’ and ‘Imperialism’ in British Settlement Colonies,” *Journal of British Studies* 10, no. 2 (May 1971): 171.

skew—again, they are wrong—they serve to reinforce Cullen’s “position” relative to his motif, a position that lies inescapably *within* the frame of Empire. The painting is thus, in one reading, part of the more deeply ideological discourse of Orientalism: “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.”⁶⁶ The “situation” of the painter recording his perceptions of the sunlit riverbed, however, offers a countervailing reading. The function of Impressionism was to replace the world with its impression, “to forget what objects you have before you.” In this sense, Cullen’s Algerian Impressionism attempted to obstruct a vision of Empire. To see *An African River* as Impressionist is not to see it as an Orientalist fantasy of the French imperialist domination of the *maghreb*. And, yet, this occlusion of Empire ultimately does not hold. The presence of the Indigenous peoples in the picture returns the viewer again and again to the position of the painter in the circumstances of European occupation. The failed harmonization of position and situation thus emerges as the painting’s unresolvable problematic.

Cullen sought to avoid making the same mistake in Canada. His new iconography surely offered the artist the potential for a more harmonic spatiality. The absence of the Innu and other First Nations of Quebec, for example, offers a telling contrast to his painting of Algeria.⁶⁷ Tracey Lock has related the “remote and timeless” quality of *Logging in Winter near Beaupré* to the more general sense that the Impressionist “intent to capture the fleeting moment had the effect of excising all previous time. This concentration on the present moment erased all earlier history of ownership; it was the ideal painting method for the new frontier.”⁶⁸ Canadian Impressionism can thus be said to contribute to the “colonial elision of indigenous experiences.”⁶⁹ Or to put it in slightly different terms, Impressionism in Canada most certainly served to occlude Empire. Only in their formal, spatial inconsistencies do the paintings begin to reveal a deeper ideological incoherence.

The spatial tensions in Cullen’s painting of the 1890s exemplify the general problem of World Impressionism at this same moment. The contradictions between national identity and an international style—“Canada” and “Impressionism”—can be understood in both phenomenological and political terms. Such versions of Impressionism manifested the implicit relation of the “position” and “situation” of the painter, even as they rested on a globalizing endeavor to synthesize the metaoptical worldview with local instances of lived space. Of course, there is a potential tension between position and situation in all Impressionist painting. Monet, Renoir, and Sisley make this much clear. And that tension is ultimately a question of place and power. The complexity of such spatial propositions in late nineteenth-century artistic practice have only begun to be elaborated in art history. They are, nonetheless, as this essay has sought to argue, foundational to any account of Impressionism in the age of Empire. ¶

66. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978), 3.

67. On the Indigenous peoples of the Saint Lawrence River region, see Arthur J. Ray, *An Illustrated History of Canada’s Native People: I Have Lived Here Since the World Began*, revised and expanded edition (1996; Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2011).

68. Tracey Lock, “Epilogue: New World Impressionism,” in Atanassova, *Canada and Impressionism*, 132, 135.

69. Kerr, “French Canadians.”