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Clarence Gagnon's European Etchings, 1905-1909*

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In the summer of 1981, the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria marked the centenary of Clarence Gagnon's birth with an exhibition of thirty-eight etchings drawn from the substantial holdings of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and the National Gallery of Canada, also including four prints from the Victoria collections. A most useful catalogue by Ian Thom reproduced each work and provided the first comprehensive account of Gagnon's activity as an etcher. Many interesting points were raised by this exhibition, and it is the purpose of this note to pursue some of them, providing greater detail concerning Gagnon's development as an etcher following his departure for Paris early in 1904.

Gagnon's unpublished letters to his patron, James Morgan, housed in the McCord Museum, McGill University, although infrequent, are essential for the light they shed on his activities during his first two years abroad. Written from 13 February 1904 to 17 December 1905, the letters provide important data concerning Gagnon's travels and his emergence in Paris as an etcher; they make clear that, despite some early experiments with etching, Gagnon went to Paris with the intention of becoming a serious painter.

James Morgan, head of the Henry Morgan department store and a well-known art collector, enabled Gagnon to go to Paris by purchasing seventeen paintings, sketches and prints. In addition, he offered to pay his fare and provide him with an allowance of \$75.00 per month. In return, Gagnon was to send twelve pictures a year for display and sale in Morgan's gallery.² Gagnon sailed for Paris and the Académie Julian in January of 1904.³ His choice was not remarkable. As A.Y. Jackson, who went to Paris in 1907, would later note, 'all right-minded Montreal artists

aspired to go to Paris and most of them wanted to study at the Académie Julian. It was not the instruction, which amounted to about ten minutes a week, that attracted them to Julian's, it was the association with students from all over the world."

In his first letter to Morgan, dated 13 February 1904, Gagnon consirms his safe, if somewhat tardy, arrival in Paris. (Upon arriving in London, he had accepted the invitation of a new friend, Charles Devlin, MP for Galway, to visit Ireland.) He notes that he is staying with a friend until he finds his own place, and he plans to start at the Académie Julian the next week.5 However, in the next letter, dated 29 May 1904, there is no mention of study; he describes, instead, an excursion to Spain, which was 'exceedingly cheap' and not to be missed. It had always been his great wish to see Velasquez, and the visit convinced him that 'he may not be the greatest artist that ever lived, but he is surely the greatest painter.' He specifically mentions Granada, recording his disappointment in the Alhambra which 'has been spoiled so much either by introducing Gothic architecture or by bad restoration.' Now back in Paris, he plans to

- * I would like to thank Mrs. Margaret Carroll of the McCord Museum, Dr. George Knox and Dr. Fenton MacHardy for their assistance during the course of this research.
- 1 The Prints of Clarence Gagnon (Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, 10 July 8 September 1981).
- 2 Hugues de Jouvancourt, Clarence Gagnon (Montreal: Éditions La Frégate, 1970), 23. Ian Thom identifies the patron as James Watson (Clarence Gagnon, 4), however Watson does not seem to have been involved at all.
- 3 The Menu Card of the SS Champlain for Saturday, 9 January 1904, lists Gagnon's name among the passengers (Gagnon Papers, McCord Museum).
- 4 A.Y. Jackson, A Painter's Country. The Autobiography of A.Y. Jackson. Memorial Edition (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Co., 1976), 8.
- 5 Gagnon to Morgan, 13 February 1904 (Morgan Papers, McCord Museum).

leave for the country on the 15th of July, and hopes to send Morgan some work in the fall.⁶

He eventually chose Pont de l'Arche, as we learn from his letter to Morgan of 8 September 1904. He tells Morgan:

... we went to the sea first, between Dieppe and Havre (sic). All those places are watering places, not at all interesting so after a week's travelling around we came back on our way and stopped here. This place is between Rouen and Paris. It is very interesting. Fine old houses.

He was still in Pont de l'Arche on 10 October, for in his letter to Morgan of this date, he states that he 'will have to go back to Paris in a week or so to work in the school. It is not very pleasant to go back to the stuffy atmosphere of the class studios.' A final, brief note on 23 October 1904 informs Morgan of his plans to return to Paris by the first of November, and he apologizes for the delay in sending pictures, for the damp weather prevents varnish from drying quickly. 9

There is a lapse in correspondence, and then nine months later, on 9 July 1905, Gagnon announces he is sending 'eight proofs of the two etchings I had in the Salon this spring; the first two plates that I have done here,' indicating he had resumed activity in this field during the winter of 1904-05. He also mentions a recent trip to Italy, including two weeks in Venice, where he produced 'about eight sketches in oils and 10 etchings which I intend to carry out during the winter.' He promises to send some of the etchings when done. He plans to return to Pont de l'Arche the next day, where he hopes to stay until the cold of mid-November compells him to return to Paris.

The two etchings exhibited in the Salon de la Société des Artistes français in the spring of 1905

- 6 Gagnon to Morgan, 29 May 1904.
- 7 Gagnon to Morgan, 8 September 1904.
- 8 Gagnon to Morgan, 10 October 1904.
- 9 Gagnon to Morgan, 23 October 1904.
- 10 Gagnon to Morgan, 9 July 1905.
- 11 Salon de la Société des Artistes français (Grand-Palais, Paris, 1905), nº 4385 and 4386. Journée d'autonne en Normandie is likely En Novembre (Thom 10).
- 12 Thom suggests that *Moonlight, Venice* was done on a return trip to Venice in 1906. I have found no evidence of such a trip and believe that this print was done at the same time as the others.
- 13 Gagnon to Morgan, 19 October 1905.
- 14 Gagnon to Morgan, 17 December 1905.
- 15 For an account of the career of George Aid, see The Stamp of Whistler (Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, 2 October – 6 November, 1977), 262. For Webster, see Herman A. Webster, Drawings, Water-Colours and Prints (National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, 15 February – 21 April 1974).
- 16 Roger Marx, 'Une Exposition d'aquafortistes américains', Gazette des Beaux-Arts, 111/xxxv (mars 1906), 244-5.

were Jardin du Luxembourg (Thom 22) and Journée d'automne en Normandie. 11 Of the ten Venetian etchings referred to, only eight are known to exist today, and it is possible that the other two may not have been completed or printed. Three of the prints are dated 1905 in the plate: La Salute, Venice; Courtyard of San Gregorio, Venice and Public Gardens, Venice (Thom 12, 13 and 17). To these three may be added five which are not dated in the plate: Canal San Agostino, Venice; Canal San Pietro, Venice; Grand Canal, Venice; Moonlight, Venice and Isola San Burano, Venice (Thom 14-16, 19-20). 12

While in Pont de l'Arche during the autumn of 1905, Gagnon's interest in etching continued. In his letter of 19 October 1905, he tells Morgan of three etchings done in Rouen, but he does not elaborate. Vue de Rouen (Thom 11) is certainly one of these three as it is dated 1905 in the plate. Rue à Pont de l'Arche (Thom 9), dated 1905 in the plate, and Rue à Caudebec-en-Caux (Thom 18), though not Rouen, are most likely the other two.

By 17 December 1905, Gagnon was back in Paris and informs Morgan:

I am just now working hard on my Venetian etchings trying to get them ready for this exhibition with those two American etchers I told you about, (sic) But I have to depend on a friend's press to get proofs, so it is very annoying because I lose a lot of time that way. I am trying to save money to buy one.¹⁴

Although the letter referring to the American etchers is lost, the exhibition was undoubtedly the one held early in 1906 at the American Art Association premises, 74 rue Notre-Dame-des-Champs. Gagnon's affiliation with the Association dates back to his first days in Paris, for his first letter to Morgan (13 February 1904) and most subsequent letters sent from Paris are written on its letterhead. The other two exhibitors, Herman Armour Webster and George Aid, were, like Gagnon, young North Americans studying in Paris and tending the flame of Whistler's memory. Webster was born in New York in 1878, and Aid in Quincy, Illinois, in 1872. Both arrived in Paris at much the same time as Gagnon and also studied at the Académie Julian. There is no evidence that etching was taught at the Académie, but the three may have met here initially. All three were caught up in the novelty and romance of the Old World and haunted ancient monuments and picturesque locales.15 The exhibition was reviewed for the Gazette des Beaux-Arts by Roger Marx whose comments must have been especially gratifying to Gagnon, pronouncing him 'le mieux doué et plus foncièrement artiste,' while suggesting that his prints 'annoncent un tempérament de graveur.'16

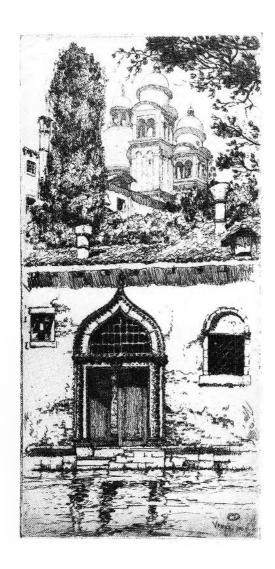


FIGURE 1. Clarence Gagnon, La Salute, Venice, 1905. Etching, 210 \times 100 mm. Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada (Photo: Museum).

Certainly the Venetian etchings are among the softest and most sensitive of Gagnon's prints, as if the elusive quality of the city itself depended upon the fragility of his line. There is no evidence that Gagnon intended a series in the Whistlerian mode, but such comparisons are inevitable, for Gagnon, like so many artists of this era, viewed Europe – Venice in particular – through the selective lens of Whistler. He, too, preferred misty canals and details of façades and was keenly interested in the play of light on water or on stone. Frequently there is a hint that the motif was captured not from a fondamenta or bridge but from the water itself.



FIGURE 2. The Salute, Venice, in 1982. (Photo: Author).

Two of the etchings are particularly interesting. At first glance, La Salute appears to be a careful and accurate view of one of Venice's most famous monuments, though seen from an unusual angle (Fig. 1). Actually, it is composed of two separate scenes. As Gagnon did not reverse his plates before printing, the upper half of the print is the Salute, seen in reverse from the Fondamenta delle Zattere ai Saloni (part of the Palazzo Contarini Michiel is visible just below the domes), while the foreground, consisting of a low wall with an ogival doorway, is a scene as yet unidentified (Fig. 2).¹⁷ In spite of the evident success of this approach, Gagnon does not appear to have repeated it in any other works.

The second etching, Moonlight, Venice (Fig. 3), may have appealed to Gagnon (and many others in Venice at this time) for literary more than for artistic reasons. The scene is clearly taken from the Ponte dell'Angelo, looking down the Rio del Mondo Nuovo. Since the plate is not reversed, we see on the left (the right in reality), the Palazzo Soranzo (Casa dell'Angelo) with its sixteenth-century tabernacle commemorating an encounter between Father Matthew, a Capuchin friar, and the

¹⁷ Thom in Clarence Gagnon, 14, identifies the scene as viewed from the Rio della Salute, and on p. 16 states that Gagnon has, in fact, taken into account the reversal of the plate.

Devil. 18 Unlike La Salute, this is a straightforward account of the scene, as a recent photograph makes clear (Fig. 4).

This quiet corner, not far from San Marco, had recently been drawn to the attention of the English colony in Venice by Robert Browning's poem Ponte dell'Angelo, written between 1888 and 1889, and published in Asolando some hours before the poet's death on 12 December 1889. In the poem, 19 Browning directs the reader across a bridge (the one from which Gagnon viewed the scene) and exhorts him to '... look on high!':

An angel visibly guards yon house: Above each scutcheon -a pair - stands he, Enfolds them with droop of either wing

Guided by Browning, Gagnon has transformed the scene into a nocturne, enhancing the romantic history of the canal.

At the Salon de la Société des Artistes français in May of 1906, Gagnon exhibited a painting entitled Ole! and twelve etchings, all presumably done the previous year and likely among those shown at the American Art Association premises earlier in the year. The etchings were awarded an Honourable Mention (the plaque is with the Gagnon Papers in the McCord Museum), and were remarked by Emile Dacier in the Revue de l'Art ancien et moderne.20 A further mention in the Gazette des Beaux-Arts noted that Gagnon was one of a group of 'charmants artistes continuant avec intelligence la tradition whistlerienne."21 As a further success in 1906, the South Kensington Museum (now the Victoria and Albert) purchased four of his Venetian etchings: Courtyard of San Gregorio; Isola San Burano; La Salute and The Grand Canal, from the Paris dealer Jacques Bramson.

In addition to his heavy exhibition schedule in the early part of the year, it would appear that Gagnon intended to travel some more. A letter of 16 May from William Brymner, his former teacher at the Art Association of Montreal classes notes: 'your programme for the next couple of years seems to me to be a very good one. I'd think Heidelberg and Nuremburg would both be good

19 Robert Browning, 'Ponte dell'Angelo,' in The Complete Works of Browning (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1895), stanzas 1 and 2, lines 6-9.

20 Emile Dacier, 'Les Salons de 1906 - La Gravure,' La Revue de l'Art ancien et moderne, xx (juillet 1906), 47-56.

'Les Salons de 1906,' Gazette des Beaux-Arts, 111/xxxv1 (juillet 1906), 60-61.

22 Brymner to Gagnon, 16 May 1906 (Gagnon Papers, McCord Museum).

23 Brymner to Gagnon, 27 October 1906.

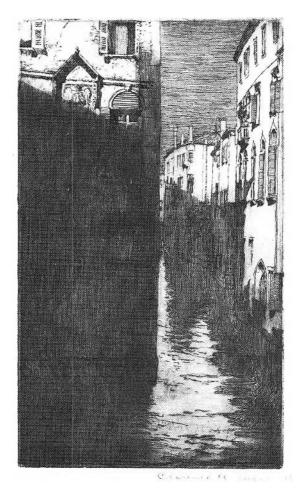


FIGURE 3. Clarence Gagnon, Moonlight, Venice, 1906. Etching, 170 × 100 mm. Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada (Photo: Museum).

for etching."22 No etchings have come to light from either locale and it may be that the trip did not take place. Perhaps Gagnon devoted the rest of the year to fulfil his agreement with Morgan, which may have been somewhat compromised by his burst of etching activity.

Meanwhile, we learn from Brymner's letter to Gagnon of 27 October 1906 that his etchings continued to sell. He notes: 'I am extremely pleased that you are managing to sell more etchings in Paris. If you can manage to get a regular income from them, you'd not be in need of selling pictures for less than their price."23

The original agreement between Morgan and Gagnon was now becoming increasingly unsatisfactory to both parties. This led to an amendment in the following year, 1907. Brymner, acting as the young artist's friend and confidant, advised him in August that Morgan kept prices so high that the paintings did not sell. He cautiously approved

¹⁸ Tassini, Curiosità Veneziane (1863), as recounted in William Clyde De Vane, A Browning Handbook, 2nd ed. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1955), 540.



FIGURE 4. Rio del Mondo Nuovo, Venice, 1982. (Photo: Author).

Gagnon's suggestion that he should provide Morgan with twelve good pictures a year plus three proofs of each etching, in return for \$1200 per year, leaving Gagnon free to dispose of what he could besides.²⁴ One of the major benefits of such an arrangement would be that the etchings could be recognized as works involving time and effort in their own right. The final break with Morgan, against which Brymner cautioned, did not come until 1909.²⁵

In 1907, Gagnon spent part of the summer in Moret-sur-Loing before travelling on to Saint-Malo, Mont Saint-Michel and parts of Picardy. A number of etchings resulted: Porte de Jerzual, Dinan; Rue des Cordeliers, Dinan; Tour de l'Horloge, Dinan (Thom 23-25); then, the Carrenage d'un Terreneuvas, St. Malo; Rue des Petits Degrés, St. Malo and Mont St. Michel (Thom 26-28), as well as Rue à Nemours; Porte de Bourgogne, Moret-sur-Loing and Canal du Loing, Moret (Thom 29-31). To this pro-

ductive year also belong L'Orage; Vieux Moulin en Picardie (Thom 32-33); Moulin à Saint Briac (Fig. 5) (Thom 34) and the Route de Picardie (Thom 35).

The three windmill etchings of this last group seem to have been the result of an interesting collaboration between Gagnon and another etcher. In mood they are closer to Rembrandt than to Whistler, and while two writers on Gagnon have referred to a connection between his etchings and those of Rembrandt, their accounts are vague and differ slightly. Robert Pilot reported that Gagnon and 'MacLaughlan the etcher' were loaned six small etched copper plates of Rembrandt from which they pulled several prints; Hugues de Jouvancourt, though not contradicting this claim, stated only that Gagnon bought fifteen etchings by Rembrandt in 1907.²⁶ It is possible to furnish greater detail to these accounts.

Donald Shaw MacLaughlan, the etcher referred to by Pilot, was born in Charlottetown in 1876 and moved with his family to Boston in 1890, where he was later naturalized as an American citizen.27 He moved to Paris in 1898 and became well-known as an etcher in the style of Whistler and Meryon. His path frequently crossed that of Gagnon during the first few years Gagnon was in Paris. MacLaughlan had a solo exhibition of etchings at the American Art Association shortly after Gagnon's debut at these premises in 1906, and it seems likely that Gagnon may have used MacLaughlan's press to print on until he obtained one of his own. Mac-Laughlan was entrusted by the French government with the reprinting of a number of Rembrandt's plates.28 The exact date of this commission is unclear, but it was certainly prior to the summer of 1907 when Alfred Steiglitz saw the proofs and was sufficiently impressed to offer MacLaughlan a show in New York at '291' in late February of 1908.29 Linking all this to Pilot and de Jouvancourt's testimony, it appears likely that Gagnon helped MacLaughlan with this commission or that he was at least on hand while it was being carried out.

In all this, Gagnon was not alone in his preference for the romantic and nostalgic windmill.

25 De Jouvancourt, 38.

²⁴ Brymner to Gagnon, 16 August 1907.

²⁶ Robert Wakeham Pilot, 'Notes on Clarence Gagnon,' undated typescript (National Gallery of Canada Library); de Jouvancourt, 32.

²⁷ Biographical questionnaire, National Academy of Design, New York.

²⁸ E.A. Taylor, 'The Original Etchings of Donald Shaw Mac-Laughlan,' *The Studio*, LIX (July 1913), 129.

²⁹ William Innes Homer, Alfred Steiglitz and the American Avant-Garde (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1977), 310.

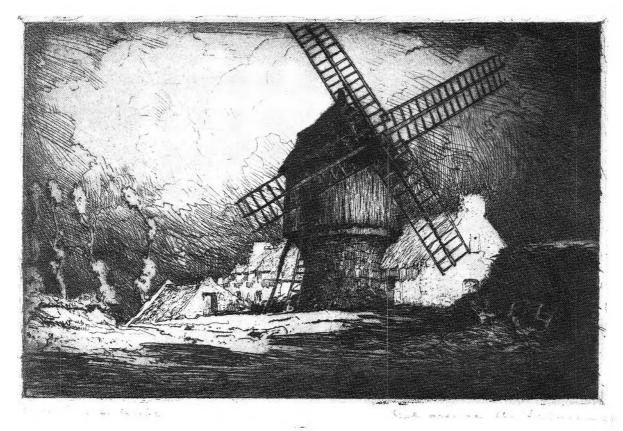


FIGURE 5. Clarence Gagnon, *Moulin à St. Briac*, 1908. Etching, 138 × 208 mm. Montreal, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts: purchase, Shepherd Fund and Dr. and Mrs. Martin (Photo: Museum).

MacLaughlan had explored this theme in 1902,³⁰ and Herman A. Webster, Gagnon's associate in the 1906 American Art Association exhibition, so loved old mills that he was instrumental in founding the Société des Amis des Vieux Moulins in 1928.³¹

A selection of the 1907 etchings was exhibited in the 1908 Salon de la Société des Artistes français, described in the catalogue under the loose caption

- 30 Reproduced in H.F., 'The Etchings of Donald Shaw Mac-Laughlan,' *The Studio*, xL (March 1907), 119.
- 31 Herman A. Webster, Smithsonian, n.p.
- 32 Salon de la Société des Artistes français (Grand-Palais, Paris, 1908), nºs 4350 and 4351.
- 33 S., L'Eau-forte américaine au Salon de la Société des Artistes français, Gazette des Beaux-Arts, III/xL (août 1908), 120-121.
- 34 Thom, Clarence Gagnon, 37. Gagnon's visit to Pont de l'Arche in the fall of 1908 is confirmed by Brymner in a letter of 24 October in which he inquires, 'Are you all alone at Pont de l'Arche?'
- 35 Although Robert Pilot, 'The Etchings of Clarence Gagnon,' *Opinions* (April 1929), 10, refers to it as 'one of the English series,' no others have come to light.
- 36 De Jouvancourt, Preface.
- 37 Gagnon to Edmund Morris, 22 January 1910 (Art Gallery of Ontario Library); de Jouvancourt, 43.

as "Vues de Bretagne et Moret-sur-Loing." Once again, the reviewer for the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* commented favourably. Despite such encouragement, only two new etchings were forthcoming in 1908. In the early autumn of this year, Gagnon returned to Pont de l'Arche. The *Street Moonlight*, *Pont de l'Arche* (Thom 37) derives from the similar etching of three years earlier. 4

The other etching which may be dated to the winter of 1908-09 is *Ripon Cathedral*⁸⁵ (Thom 36), an indirect result of Gagnon's marriage on 2 December 1907 to Kathryn Irwin. A Canadian by birth, Irwin was living in Paris by 1906, and de Jouvancourt notes that she was one of Rodin's models.³⁶ In a letter to Edmund Morris of the Canadian Art Club two years later, Gagnon mentions that he spent Christmas of 1909 with his wife's relatives in Yorkshire, while de Jouvancourt notes that Irwin's relatives lived in Harrogate, some ten miles south of Ripon.³⁷ Thus we may surmise that Gagnon made an earlier trip to Ripon, probably during 1908, following his marriage.

When Gagnon returned to Montreal in February of 1909, he had been absent from Canada for five years. 38 He exhibited his etchings in a number of shows. In March, nine etchings were seen in the Canadian Art Club exhibition (he was originally accepted into this organization as an etcher), and ten etchings were included in the Fifth Loan Collection of High Class Paintings in Winnipeg. Nine etchings were shown in the Art Association of Montreal exhibition and four were listed in the Henry Morgan and Company catalogue, along with works by Whistler, Millet, Pennell and Meryon. 39

Gagnon's stay in Canada was not a long one, for as noted earlier, he was back in England by Christmas of 1909. His return to his studio in Paris led to no new etchings, although his trip to Canada provided fresh inspiration for his painting. A letter to Edmund Morris, dated 13 January 1911, promises that:

I will remember if ever I decide to make a series of etchings of Montreal, Quebec and Toronto ... I would like to have done some of Quebec while I was there but the cities at home have so little character of their own especially from an etcher's point of view, they would fail to arouse any interest in the art centres over here. It is only the natural scenery of Canada especially our Canadian winter that interests them on this side; and the brush can do far more than the needle in giving the variety of effects of our glorious Canadian winter.⁴⁰

He echoes this sentiment later in the year (2 November) when again, in a note to Edmund Morris, he writes:

If I did nothing else but etch the studies I have done of some of the smaller towns of Tuscany I would be busy for the rest of my life even if I never saw Canada again. There is more character in one little village of Tuscany alone than every city of Canada to etch...¹¹

One etching was evidently suggested by his trip to Canada of 1909, although it was not completed until 1917. Le Lac, Séminaire Saint-Sulpice (Thom 38) is Gagnon's last etching. It is a fitting conclusion to his works as an etcher: along the side of the lake, seminarians wander, singly or in groups, dwarfed by the massive trees rising on either side of the water. Perhaps deliberately, nothing suggests that the setting is Canada; it could equally be a location in the Old World.

In any event, a one-man show at the Galerie Reitlinger in Paris in 1913 reflected a waning commitment to prints. Eighty-two works are listed in the catalogue, of which fifty-four are described as 'Paysages d'hiver dans les Laurentides au Canada,' twenty-one are European scenes, and only seven are etchings.⁴³

Many years later, in 1938, Gagnon explained his loss of interest in etching in the following terms:

The reasons I could not go on with etching was the lack of colour. What always attracted me in French Canadian life was the abundance of colour in the lives of the habitant. This is manifest in his handicraft, his house, his dress, and everything he does. The drama of his life captivated me with its vivid contrasts and I have always felt myself part of it.⁴⁴

An important factor may well have been his increasing success in selling his canvasses, together with a determination that his future should lie as a painter of the Canadian scene for the Canadian market.

Even so, his achievement as an etcher was not unimportant to Canada. As Newton MacTavish noted in 1915, Gagnon introduced etching to Canada. It was, he suggested, 'the exhibiting, in particular, of Gagnon's work (which) began to arouse interest, and a few years ago there was a really imposing exhibition of etchings under the auspices of the Art Museum of Toronto. Prints were shown from plates etched by leading artists from the time of Rembrandt and earlier, down to the present time ... and soon the trustees of the National Art Gallery began to procure examples of some of the best etchings."

38 De Jouvancourt, 38.

- 39 Canadian Art Club Second Annual Exhibition (Toronto, 1909), not 19-27; Fifth Loan Collection of High Class Paintings (Winnipeg, 1909), not 43-51 and one not numbered; Art Association of Montreal (Montreal, 1909), not 138-147; Exhibition of Etchings (Henry Morgan and Co. Ltd., Montreal, 1909), not 95-98.
- 40 Gagnon to Edmund Morris, 13 June 1911 (Art Gallery of Ontario Library).
- 41 Gagnon to Edmund Morris, 2 November 1911 (Queen's University Archives, Kingston, Ontario).
- 42 For the sequence of events surrounding the execution of this print, see Thom, Clarence Gagnon, 37.
- 43 Clarence Gagnon (Galeric Reitlinger, Paris, 1913).
- 44 Muriel Miller, 'Famous Canadian Artists. Clarence A. Gagnon, R.C.A., Landscape and Figure Painter, Illustrator and Etcher,' *Onward* (1938), n.p.
- 45 Newton MacTavish, 'Notes on Some Canadian Etchers,' *The Studio*, LXIII (January 1915), 256.