



119 Maurice Galbraith Cullen

AAM RCA 1866 – 1934

Cab Stands, Phillips Square, Montreal

oil on canvas, signed and dated 1911 and on verso titled *Phillips Square/Le carré Phillips* on the Agnes Etherington exhibition label and certified by the Cullen inventory #1316
26 x 32 in, 66 x 81.3 cm

PROVENANCE

Collection of the Artist
Mr. C.V. Esdaile
Mr. Cook, Montreal
Mr. G. Drummond and Mrs. Anne Birks, Montreal
By descent to the present Private Collection, Montreal

LITERATURE

George Burgoyne, “Montreal’s Spring Art Show,” *Canadian Courier*, vol. 1, no. 17, March 25, 1911, reproduced page 11
“Mr. M. Cullen Wins Prize for Phillips Square,” *Montreal Gazette*, April 1, 1911
Montreal Star, June 16, 1956, reproduced
Hugues de Jouvancourt, *Maurice Cullen*, 1978, reproduced page 37
Sylvia Antoniou, *Maurice Cullen, 1866 - 1934*, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1982, listed page 70

EXHIBITED

Art Association of Montreal Spring Exhibition, 1911, catalogue #82
Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston, *Maurice Cullen, 1866 - 1934*, September 26 – October 31, 1982, traveling in 1983 to the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto; Art Gallery of Hamilton; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; and Edmonton Art Gallery, exhibited as *Phillips Square/Le carré Phillips*, catalogue #38
Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, *Retrospective Maurice Cullen*, December 9, 1983 – January 22, 1984, catalogue #38

MONTREAL’S FASHIONABLE PHILLIPS SQUARE glitters on a winter’s eve in this masterwork by Maurice Cullen (1866 – 1934). Looking across the historic park from the original site of the Art Association of Montreal, the forerunner to today’s Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal, a cabstand’s inviting lights and colourful horses’ blankets illuminate the darkness. Deftly modulating between the pearlescent sheen of fallen snow and the atmospheric gloom of nightfall, the picture’s tonal range is an impressive testament to Cullen’s skilful adaptation of French Impressionist techniques to the unique requirements of Canadian conditions.



Horse-drawn sleigh in front of Phillips Square, with the Art Association of Montreal Building in the background

Born in Newfoundland and raised in Montreal, Cullen acquired an early familiarity with the *plein air* methods of Impressionism while studying in Paris. Arriving in Paris in 1888 to train at the École des beaux-arts with Jean-Léon Gérôme and at the Académie Colarossi with Gustave Courtois and Jean-André Rixens, Cullen participated in a milieu in which Claude Monet, Berthe Morisot, Camille Pissarro, Pierre-Auguste Renoir and other Impressionists were, in the words of Crystal S. Parsons, “at the peak of their common exhibiting careers.”¹ Already by January 1891, Cullen’s own Impressionist leanings were noted by a reviewer for the *Courier du Canada*.²

Following the French government’s acquisition of his painting *L’Été* (1895) and his election as an associate member of the prestigious Société nationale des Beaux-Arts—the first Canadian so honoured—Cullen returned to Canada in 1895. In January of the next year, he exhibited Impressionist pictures to critical acclaim in a rented store of the Art Association building, whose vantage onto Phillips Square is captured in *Cab Stands, Phillips Square, Montreal* (1911).³ The year 1896 would also yield one of the artist’s most iconic works, *Logging in Winter, Beaupré*. Critics’ growing chorus of praise did not initially translate into sales for the adventurous painter, however. Montreal collectors were



detail

accustomed to the darker palette of Dutch masters, and the brighter gamut of Cullen's French landscapes, though admired, did not fit established collecting patterns.⁴

The ensuing period of developing mastery would bear witness to a mutually influential creative dialogue between Cullen and peers including James Wilson Morrice and Edmund Morris, future fellow exhibitors with the Toronto-based Canadian Art Club, founded in 1907. Painting *en plein air* alongside Morrice at Beaupré and Quebec City under challenging winter conditions in early 1897 would prove to be particularly formative for both artists.⁵ The rich range of neutrals speckled by flare-like grace notes in Cullen's iconic *Winter Evening, Quebec* (1905) is powerful testimony to the lessons that he absorbed from Morrice.

Cullen's growing technical daring paralleled his election as an associate member of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts in 1899 (he became a full member in 1907) and his receipt of bronze medals at both the 1901 Pan-American Exhibition in Buffalo and the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair.⁶

Awarded the important Jessie Dow Prize for best oil painting at the Art Association of Montreal's *Spring Exhibition* in 1911, *Cab Stands, Phillips Square, Montreal* achieves a stunning resolution of the multiple facets of Cullen's practice. It deftly balances the high-keyed tonalities of cabstand and snow with a Whistlerian symphony of atmospheric blue greys. The artist's quicksilver application of palette knife to suggest a gust of blowing snow is an audacious display of manual dexterity.

Cab Stands is representative of a larger corpus of Cullen landscapes depicting urban subjects in Quebec City and Montreal.⁷

If the artist's darkening palette coincided with the growing commercial success that he enjoyed after about 1900,⁸ the more sombre cast of *Cab Stands* preserves gem-like flashes of intense colour. A similar contrast characterizes *The Bird Shop, St. Lawrence Street* (1920), a work that is now part of the Thomson Collection at the Art Gallery of Ontario. Where the later canvas seizes upon the picturesque storefronts of lower Saint Laurent Boulevard to stage its twilight drama, the backdrop to *Cab Stands* is the elegant Maison Birks.

Built in 1894, the venerable flagship store of the Birks jewellery empire was designed by architect Edward Maxwell in a Beaux-Arts style that anticipated the new home of the Montreal Art Association after its move to Sherbrooke Street West in 1912.⁹ Now known as the Michal and Renata Hornstein Pavilion, the latter structure was a collaborative design by Maxwell with his brother, William Sutherland Maxwell. Cullen's inclusion of the Birks Building—once the largest jewellery retail space on a single floor in North America—is fitting, given the picture's eventual succession through the private collection of George Drummond and Anne Birks. Drummond Birks, who went by his middle name, was the fourth generation of Birks to oversee the commercial legacy of Henry Birks and Sons, founded in 1879. Under Drummond's leadership, the firm continued the successful expansion strategy initiated by his grandfather, William Massey Birks, growing its commercial network to include retail spaces in shopping centres starting in 1957.¹⁰

Significantly, *Cab Stands, Phillips Square, Montreal* was painted in the same year that Cullen accepted a teaching position with

the Art Association of Montreal, a conduit through which he would have considerable influence on subsequent generations of Canadian artists. Cullen's Museum Sketching class offered a two-week, compressed education in outdoor landscape painting. Students included such future leading lights of Canadian art as Edwin Holgate, Prudence Heward, Mabel Lockerby, Kathleen Morris, Anne Savage and the artist's stepson, Robert Pilot.¹¹ Art historian Parsons speculates that it was A.Y. Jackson's admiration for Cullen—a rare exception to his disdain for the Montreal art establishment—that occasioned the Group of Seven's invitation for Pilot to participate in their inaugural exhibition at the Art Gallery of Toronto in 1920.¹²

"To us [Cullen] was a hero," Jackson effuses in his autobiography, *A Painter's Country*. "His paintings of Quebec City, from Lévis and along the river, are among the most distinguished works produced in Canada."¹³ If Cullen's determination to paint Canadian landscapes under challenging *plein air* conditions would prove an influential precedent for the intrepid Group of Seven, recent art-historical scholarship has also situated Cullen within global Impressionist currents connecting progressive artists from Australia to Morocco and beyond.¹⁴

We thank Adam Lauder for contributing the above essay. Lauder is an art historian based in Toronto. He is an instructor at the University of Toronto and an adjunct professor at the Ontario College of Art and Design.

1. Crystal S. Parsons, *Maurice Cullen and His Circle* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 2009), 5; see also Sylvia Antoniou, *Maurice Cullen, 1866-1934* (Kingston, ON: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1982), exhibition catalogue, 4.
2. See Antoniou, *Maurice Cullen*, 5.
3. *Ibid.*, 9.
4. *Ibid.*, 13.
5. *Ibid.*, 11-12.
6. *Ibid.*, 15, 16, 19.
7. *Ibid.*, 26; Parsons, *Cullen and His Circle*, 9.
8. See Antoniou, *Maurice Cullen*, 22.
9. See Rosalind M. Pepall, *Construction d'un musée beaux-arts: Montréal, 1912—Building a Beaux-Arts Museum* (Montreal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1986).
10. See Fred Langan, "George Drummond Birks Led Montreal Family Jewellery Firm for 40 Years," *Globe and Mail*, July 21, 2017.
11. See Antoniou, *Maurice Cullen*, 20; Parsons, *Cullen and His Circle*, 15.
12. See Parsons, *ibid.*
13. A.Y. Jackson, *A Painter's Country: The Autobiography of A.Y. Jackson* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1958), 17.
14. See, for instance, Katerina Atanassova et al., *Canada and Impressionism: New Horizons, 1880-1930* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, in assoc. with Arnoldsche Art Publishers, Stuttgart, 2019), exhibition catalogue.

ESTIMATE: \$250,000 – 350,000



Maison Birks, Phillips Square, Montreal, 1922
Photo: Wm. Notman & Son
Courtesy of McCord Stewart Museum, VIEW-20563



Phillips Square, Montreal



Art Association of Montreal Building