



108 Edwin Headley Holgate

AAM BHG CGP CSGA G7 RCA 1892 – 1977

Busy Corner

oil on board, signed and on verso signed and titled on a label, inscribed variously and stamped Dominion Gallery, 1939 – 1940
20 x 20 in, 50.8 x 50.8 cm

PROVENANCE

Private Collection, Montreal
Dominion Gallery, Montreal
Acquired from the above by a Private Collection, Montreal,
March 12, 1968

Miss Elvie Blum, Galerie Fore, Winnipeg
Acquired from the above by a Private Collection,
Saskatchewan, May 10, 1969
By descent to the present Private Collection, Saskatchewan

HAILED BY DENNIS REID as “the single most important artist to have emerged from that loose gathering of painters that in the early nineteen-twenties called itself the Beaver Hall Group,”¹ Edwin Holgate was at the height of his powers when he painted *Busy Corner* at the close of the 1930s.

In a 1969 letter to Winnipeg gallerist Elvie Blum, which accompanies this lot, Holgate identifies the fenced green space

of *Busy Corner* as Cabot Square (known as Western Square until 1957). This park in the Shaughnessy Village neighbourhood is adjacent to the intersection of Atwater Avenue and Sainte-Catherine Street, across from the beloved Montreal Forum—home to the Montreal Canadiens hockey team from 1926 to 1996. In the foreground, Holgate depicts a soldier in midstride while a line of commuters prepares to board a bus. Predominantly people of colour, Holgate’s figures offer a rare snapshot of Black Montreal in the Beaver Hall corpus; this, despite the group’s penchant for urban subjects.² Atwater is notable as a thoroughfare connecting the historic Black community of Little Burgundy to downtown Montreal.³

Busy Corner reprises compositional strategies explored by Holgate in several works, beginning with *The Gare Montparnasse* (1920). The aerial perspective of this street scene produced during the artist’s second Parisian sojourn recalls the balcony views of Parisian boulevards painted by Impressionists such as Gustave Caillebotte and Camille Pissarro. Reid likens the rhythmic effect of Holgate’s tiny figures in this early picture to the “pattern effects of some early works of the French painter Pierre Bonnard.”⁴

Though better known for his rural landscapes, Holgate would revisit the elevated perspective and urban theme of *The Gare Montparnasse* after resettling in Montreal in the fall of 1922, most notably in *Fresh Snow* (1933), a large oil depicting the iconic Morgan’s department store (today’s Hudson’s Bay provincial flagship) from the roof of the Birks Building on Phillips Square. Art historian Brian Foss observes that Holgate’s marshaling of “diminutive figures as anchors and punctuation marks” in works like these makes for pictures that “are among his most pleasing.”⁵

The bold modeling of *Busy Corner* and its strong sense of form reflect Holgate’s Parisian studies with the Russian émigré Adolf Milman following World War I.⁶ Holgate would later recall this Cézannesque painter as “the only man who ever really taught me something.”⁷ Holgate’s European formation—a course of study abroad encouraged by his Art Association of Montreal teacher William Brymner—would set his paintings apart from those of his peers.

Prominent artist and critic Bertram Brooker would later identify Holgate as the standard-bearer of a more internationally oriented current of Canadian painting, one distinct from the atmospheric effects explored by older academicians as well as the rhythmic forms favoured by the Group of Seven,⁸ to which Holgate was invited to become the eighth member in 1929. Foss notes a kinship between Holgate’s use of “architecture as an indication of human presence” and the rural landscapes of A.Y. Jackson, the only other member of the Group with strong ties to Quebec and an important mentor to the Beaver Hall Group, whose premises at 305 Beaver Hall Hill were leased in Holgate’s name.⁹

Initially achieving equal renown as a printmaker and painter, Holgate was adept at bridging divides—across media and genres, between generations of practitioners, and spanning Montreal’s anglophone and francophone artistic communities. “Drawn to both modern and traditional approaches,” as Rosalind Pepall observes, Holgate was embraced by the modernist Group of Seven and also invited to become a member of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts.¹⁰ Important solo exhibitions include a



Mrs. Sol Knight and Elvie Blum of Galerie Fore with *Busy Corner*, December 1968

1938 Art Association of Montreal survey and a 1975 retrospective at the National Gallery of Canada, which toured across the country. In 2005, the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts organized a major show that traveled into 2007.

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

Busy Corner emerges from a private collection in Saskatchewan, where it was enjoyed for 55 years. Included with this lot is a handwritten letter by Holgate to the Galerie Fore in Winnipeg, dated January 11, 1969, regarding *Busy Corner*.

1. Dennis Reid, *Edwin H. Holgate* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1976), 7.
2. See Esther Trépanier, “The Beaver Hall Group: A Montreal Modernity,” in *1920s Modernism in Montreal: The Beaver Hall Group*, ed. Jacques Des Rochers and Brian Foss (Montreal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, in assoc. with Black Dog Publishing, 2015), exhibition catalogue, 161–218.
3. See Dorothy W. Williams, *The Road to Now: A History of Blacks in Montreal* (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1997).
4. Reid, *Edwin H. Holgate*, 9.
5. Brian Foss, “Living Landscape,” in *Edwin Holgate*, ed. Rosalind Pepall and Brian Foss (Montreal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 2005), exhibition catalogue, 42.
6. See Rosalind Pepall, “An Art of Vigour and Restraint,” in *ibid.*, 16–17; also Reid, *Edwin H. Holgate*.
7. Quoted in Reid, *Edwin H. Holgate*, 9.
8. Bertram Brooker quoted in Foss, “Living Landscape,” 44.
9. See Jacques Des Rochers, “Defining the Beaver Hall Group Today,” in *1920s Modernism in Montreal*, 58–59.
10. Pepall, “Art of Vigour,” 20.

ESTIMATE: \$40,000 – 60,000