
THE PICTURE FRAMES OF CLARENCE GAGNON: A NEGLECTED HISTORY

At the end of 1913, a major exhibition of the work of Clarence Gagnon (1881-1942), the Québec landscape artist, was held at the Galerie A.M. Reitlinger, 12 rue la Boétie, in Paris. In this, the first substantial exhibition in Gagnon's career, about eighty works were displayed including graphic prints, landscapes of European subjects and over fifty oil paintings of the Canadian landscape. Gagnon's exhibition was reviewed widely and enthusiastically in the French press. The Canadian landscapes received the most attention for the beauty and serenity of the imagery the rural areas of Québec blanketed in snow; the depiction of everyday life in French Canada; and the delicate treatment of light and atmosphere all received praise. At home in Canada, the Montréal papers printed résumés of the favourable critical reception to Gagnon's exhibition,¹ taking pride in the success of a Canadian artist in Paris, the acknowledged centre of the Western art world in 1913.

The fifty-four oil paintings of the Québec landscape, which represented nearly seventy percent of the Paris exhibition, constitute the neglected history of Clarence Gagnon's "oeuvre." Why? Because, *without exception*, each canvas was surrounded by a frame designed, painted and decorated by the artist himself. Gagnon's vision, therefore, did not stop at the edge of the canvas. Rather, his intention was to present a unified "objet d'art," that is, a canvas surrounded by a frame with each component bearing equally the traces of the artist's touch. In aesthetic theory, the frame is considered the mediator between the canvas and the spectator, reflecting the artist's attention to the spatial and colour effects of the canvas on the spectator. In creating both canvas and frame, Gagnon entered directly in the viewer's perception of his work. What type of frame did Clarence Gagnon choose for these Canadian landscapes? When his work was framed by dealers, Gagnon had always instructed the dealer to choose the most simple frame possible, preferably a thin black moulding.² Gagnon was adamant in his belief that gold frames "killed the painting."³ The frames that Gagnon created were very simple in construction and at the same time, highly original in Canada.

From 1909 onwards, Clarence Gagnon divided his time between Baie-Saint-Paul, Montréal and Paris. It was in Baie-Saint-Paul that Gagnon turned to his friend Henri Tremblay, the "habile menuisier"⁴ for the construction of the



fig. 1 Picture frame, 72 cm. x 92 cm, by Clarence Gagnon in the collection of the Musée régional Laure-Conan, La Malbaie, Québec, G-83-88. The frame was exhibited at the *Central Canadian Exhibition*, Ottawa, 1917, on the canvas *Winter, Lake Geneva*. (Photo: V. Gustavison)

frames. Tremblay assembled simple pine frames⁵ with a narrow inner moulding sloping at a forty-five degree angle towards the canvas. This inner fillet was surrounded by a flat frieze about seven centimetres wide, and that in turn by a narrow L-shaped outer band. The corners were mitred and joined by three nails countersunk and filled. Tremblay said that for Gagnon, “il fallait que les pièces de bois soient bien polies.”⁶ Meticulous craftsmanship was a hallmark of every aspect of Gagnon’s artistic practice.

Gagnon then painted and decorated each frame (fig. 1). The inner fillet next to the canvas was painted gold. The outer moulding was painted in a continuous pattern of black and gold triangles. Since the gold, rather than the black, triangles lie on the outer edge of the frames, the visual effect is a dissolving of the transition between the frame and the hanging wall. This band of black and gold triangles is similar to that used extensively by the Victorian

painter Alma-Tadema, and later copied by his daughter and artists of the Newlyn School,⁷ among others.

Gagnon painted the dominant central area of the frame in a dark colour, sometimes black and in other examples, a deep green-blue shade. On this, Gagnon stencilled motifs usually in two or three muted colours. These motifs, which evoke the Québec countryside, differ from frame to frame. The designs included several types of evergreen trees, a wild daisy from the summer fields, a stylized fleur-de-lys, an Indian paddling a canoe, a hybrid bird combining features of a pheasant and a rooster, and a cross perched on a domed shape resembling a stylized hill, to cite a few examples. The motifs complement the imagery of the Québec landscape in the canvases.

This is evident in the canvas, *Winter, Village of Baie-Saint-Paul* for example (collection of Power Corporation of Canada). Here Gagnon focussed on the traditional French-Canadian house, an image closely linked with French-Canadian nationalist ideology at this period in history; and he has suppressed the particularities of the landscape under an enveloping blanket of snow. Small details derived from the Québec landscape — a stylized bird and a fleur-de-lys motif — appear on the frame. *Winter, Village of Baie-Saint-Paul*, illustrates a curious, but all-too-typical fate of Gagnon's frames (and it could be added, of all artists' frames). The frame presently on this canvas bears the label, *Street Scene, Baie-Saint-Paul*, a title used by Power Corporation. The back of the canvas, however, has the title *Winter, Village of Baie-Saint-Paul*, which related more closely to the subject matter: a cluster of houses, sheds and trees. This title identified the painting in the exhibition, *Scenes of Charlevoix 1784-1950*.

This confusion exists because the frame was intended for a larger canvas and it has been cut and scaled down to fit the present canvas. This is obvious as the zigzag pattern on the outer border of the frame and the bird motifs in the corners of the frieze do not meet to form the perfectly matched imagery found on Gagnon's other frames. Such lack of perfection in the execution of the design is not compatible with Gagnon's insistence on meticulous craftsmanship. It can be concluded, therefore, that while the frame is by Gagnon, the alterations would not have met his standards. Furthermore, the contradictory labeling confirms that this frame was intended for another canvas.

René Boissay has suggested that the stencilled motifs were executed in the dominant tones of the canvas for which the frame was intended.⁸ The four frames of Gagnon (four of at least fifty to sixty frames that once existed) that I have been able to locate and examine do not support such a conclusive opinion. In all the examples studied, the predominant tones of the stencilled motifs were similar — dark muted red and dark green with touches of gold. This would suggest that the dominant tones of all Gagnon's canvases were the same, which is a doubtful observation. Furthermore, the two Gagnon frames in the collec-

tion of the Musée Régional Laure-Conan at La Malbaie no longer contain canvases and the frame in the Power Corporation Collection in Montréal does not contain the canvas for which it was originally intended.

All the frames by Clarence Gagnon bear the readily visible trace of the artist's brushwork — both the solid painted surfaces and the stencilled motifs. The motifs are always arranged symmetrically with a dominant element at the corners and/or in the centre of the upper and lower friezes. The motifs appear as isolated elements on the frames with no connecting design elements. This decorative style is often typical of stencilling as it does not readily lend itself to an interconnected pattern. Such punctuation of the frame surface is reminiscent of frames by the Pre-Raphaelite artists, particularly Rossetti. The simplicity and sometimes even naivety of the motifs creates an overall visual effect which bears more affinity to the traditions of folk art than to the traditions of Gagnon's academic training. By combining such frames with his canvases depicting the vernacular architecture and rural life of the Charlevoix region, Gagnon has clearly revealed a sympathy for and a valorization of rural traditions.

The history of picture frames has followed and echoed that of both furniture and architectural ornamentation. Clarence Gagnon's frames are no exception as they reflect his passionate interest in the heritage of French-Canadian culture.

Clarence Gagnon, plus que tout autre artiste peut-être, comprend très tôt le respect dû aux vieilles traditions françaises sur cette terre d'Amérique; tout ce que cela comporte pour la survivance de notre culture. À ses yeux, c'est un patrimoine infiniment cher, et il le défend jusqu'à sa mort.⁹

There is a close relationship between the construction of Gagnon's frames and traditional everyday Québec furniture. Gagnon did not turn to an "ébéniste," professional furniture or frame-maker for his woodwork. Rather, he chose a "menuisier" or carpenter to construct the frames. This echoes the tradition of rural French Canadian furniture, particularly that made from solid wood found and executed by local carpenters as opposed to furniture of a "grand style" made by cabinet makers using veneer and inlaid woods.¹⁰

Like Gagnon's frames, this type of furniture was nearly always painted or stained. Some pieces were also decorated with painted motifs, though the motifs were not necessarily stencilled. Examples of such decoration exist not only on Québec furniture, but also on that of the Pennsylvania Dutch,¹¹ the New Jersey Mennonites, areas of New England and rural areas of Europe. As Jean Palardy has observed:

French provincial furniture was decorated with geometrical designs which originated in folk drawings which are common to most European countries. These designs are to be found all the way from the Mediterranean to Scandinavia and were taken to Canada by the early colonists. They include

stylized patterns of flowers, leaves, stars, crosses of all shapes, roses, roundels, chip-carved circles, lozenges, discs, shells, hearts and human figures... these widespread designs were also used on Canadian furniture...¹²

The motifs designed by Gagnon reflect close affinities with folk art traditions in Canada and abroad, although it should be stressed that he has made his own, original statement in the decoration of the picture frames. This link between Gagnon and folk art is not unexpected from an artist who himself declared that he had “devoted the greater part of [his] life to folk art... [he had] studied it in the remotest part of the Tyrol, Spanish Cordilleras, Carpathian mountains, Ruthenia, Slovakia, Scandinavia...”¹³ Gagnon might well have also mentioned his own country, Canada. In the province of Québec, particularly the Charlevoix region, he was deeply involved in the design and promotion of the handicrafts and folk art. This link with the universal nature of folk art perhaps accounts for the varied reaction to Gagnon’s frames. One curator described the frames as very Russian in appearance¹⁴ while a historian has mentioned their affinity to the decorative arts of the Swiss alps.¹⁵

Following his studies at the Art Association of Montreal under William Brymner from 1897 to 1900, and prior to his 1904 departure to study in Paris, Gagnon spent the summer months sketching and painting at Saint-Joachim and Baie-Saint-Paul. During the winter months he was associated with the architectural firm of Edward and William Maxwell, particularly the latter: “William who was a keen amateur painter and fine draughtsman, had closer contact with [the] employees in the draughting room and the craftsmen hired on commission...”¹⁶ The literature on Gagnon’s particular relationship with William Maxwell has been contradictory. Some authors have suggested that it was an employee-employer situation; others have merely cited Clarence Gagnon and William Maxwell’s shared interest in the decorative arts and their contact during Saturday afternoon life-drawing sessions in the Montréal studio of Maurice Cullen. In fact, the connection between the artist and the architect can be described more precisely.

It was William Maxwell who taught and assisted Gagnon in pulling his first prints — drypoint etchings that were portraits of a young girl and also of his friend, the artist F.W. Hutchison.¹⁷ It was also from Maxwell that Gagnon gained experience in the art of stencilling, another form of printing. The account books of William and Edward Maxwell contain no record of Clarence Gagnon in their continuous employ as a draughtsman. Entries do, however, record payments to Clarence Gagnon for stencilling work in the house of the Honourable L.J. Forget on Sherbrooke Street in Montréal and also that of E.S. Clouston both jobs carried out in the spring and summer of 1903.¹⁸ While William Maxwell’s own designs are more elaborate, and closer to the Beaux-Arts decorative arts tradition than those developed by Gagnon, their method is the

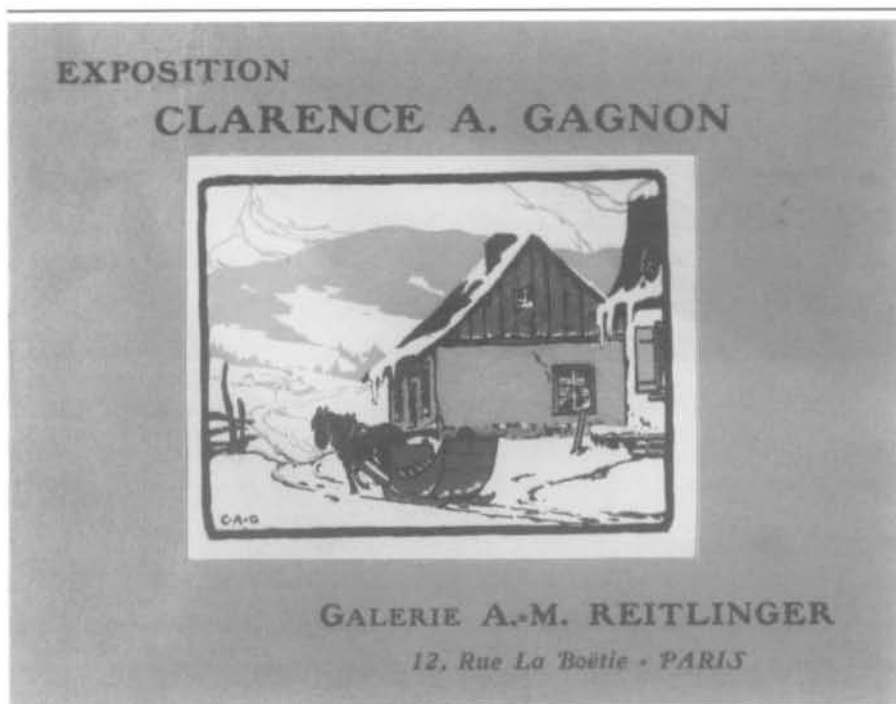


fig. 2 Cover of 1913 Paris exhibition catalogue, *Exposition Clarence A. Gagnon*. The black line around the print parallels Gagnon's use of a black background on his picture frames. (Photo: Bibliothèque Nationale du Québec, Montréal, Jean-Marie Gauvreau Papers)

same. This connection is a more important element in Clarence Gagnon's artistic formation than has previously been acknowledged.

Gagnon's motifs and use of stencilling derive from vernacular art and furniture styles, and his connection with William Maxwell. However, this does not explain Gagnon's choice of a black or nearly black background for his frames. One reason was certainly his desire to accentuate the highly-coloured tones of his imagery without distracting the viewer's attention. One French critic reviewing Gagnon's exhibition made just such an observation.

L'idée amusante des cadres en bois peint, s'adaptant au sujet, favorise les effets de soleil sur la neige, les larges vallées désertes, les lacs gelés, toutes les étendues claires et frigides où notre enfance aimait à suivre en pensée les exploits des trappeurs.¹⁹

Another factor governing Gagnon's choice of a black background for the frames is the link with his early career as an engraver. Traditionally graphic prints were not properly framed unless they were bordered by a black moulding.²⁰ In his own prints, Gagnon frequently used a black line of varying thickness to define the limits of his image. This is particularly evident in the



fig. 3 Clarence Gagnon in his Paris studio about 1910. On the rear wall are small works framed in a similar style to Gagnon's large picture frames.
(Photo: Bibliothèque Nationale du Québec, Montréal, Jean-Marie Gauvreau Papers)



fig. 4 Installation photo of Clarence Gagnon exhibition at Galerie Reitlinger, Paris, 1913 showing uniform framing practice of Gagnon.
(Photo: Bibliothèque Nationale du Québec, Montréal, Jean-Marie Gauvreau Papers)

print used for the catalogue cover of the major Clarence Gagnon exhibition held at the Galerie Reitlinger in Paris in 1913. (fig. 2)

The dating of Gagnon's frames must also be considered. It is possible to establish only an approximate period in which Gagnon created his own frames. Although Gagnon had been sketching in Charlevoix as early as 1898 and 1899 in his student days, it seems that his framing practice dates from about 1909 to the second decade of the twentieth century. In 1909 Gagnon completed his Parisian studies and his first extended stay in Europe. He and his wife returned to Canada and lived in their own house in Baie-Saint-Paul. It would seem logical, therefore, that Gagnon befriended the "menuisier" Henri Tremblay at this time. This friendship allowed him to use Tremblay's atelier for the preparation of his stretchers, canvases and panels. This was also the period in which Gagnon turned from engraving to oil painting, creating works that required larger, and consequently more expensive frames. While Gagnon's own frames no doubt satisfied his aesthetic sense, the economy of their production was probably also a consideration at this relatively early stage in his career. A photograph used by Jean-Marie Gauvreau in a 1943 article in *Technique*²¹ is identified as a 1910 view of Gagnon in his Paris studio. Cropped on the right hand side of the magazine reproduction, but evident in a copy of the photograph in the Gauvreau archives²² (fig. 3), are small pochades in frames of the same type and construction as Gagnon decorated with paint and stencilled motifs.

As mentioned, the largest presentation of Clarence Gagnon's landscapes in his own frames was in November and December 1913 at the Galerie Reitlinger in Paris (fig.4). Of the approximately twenty articles written about the exhibition, only three mentioned Gagnon's frames and even then the remarks are slipped in at the end of the articles in a rather off-hand manner. For example, Pierre Danton in *Le Journal des Arts* (Paris) commented in his closing paragraph:

On trouvera, en un mot, dans les tableaux de Clarence A. Gagnon — présentés, ne l'oublions pas, dans des cadres extrêmement originaux, exécutés par l'artiste — un vrai talent faisant admirablement ressortir le caractère de beauté d'une contrée plutôt méconnue et pourtant si voisine de nous par ses hommes issus de notre race et qui ont conservé nos moeurs et notre langage.²³

Danton's review clearly evoked an image of the serene beauty of Canada; and he, like other writers, linked that image with the common racial heritage of French Canada and France. His lack of focus on the frames by the artist could be just another example of the neglect of the frame. As Henry Heydenryk has so aptly observed: "no subject so essential to the appreciation of a work of art has been so neglected as framing."²⁴

It is probable, however, that Gagnon's execution of both canvas and frame was not particularly highlighted by the critics as it was commonplace in the late

nineteenth and early twentieth century. The Pre-Raphaelites had experimented with symbolic motifs on picture frames, and the Impressionists had contested the issue of gold frames. (Even earlier, Delacroix had raised this issue.) Similarly, the Symbolists had also pursued an interest in the correlation between the canvas and its frame.

About twenty-five years earlier, in 1886, the French poet and critic, Jules Laforgue had written:

In the various independent exhibitions, a refined and intelligent variety of imaginative frames has replaced the eternal moulded gilt frame. A green landscape flooded with sunlight, a white winter beach, an interior scene alive with fluttering lamps, require frames which only the artists who painted the pictures will know how to produce. We noted frames which were flat, white, pale pink, jonquil yellow, and others which were outrageously gaudy.²⁵

Five years later in *La Revue Blanche*, Maurice Denis also documented the widespread phenomenon of artists creating their own picture frames. He noted that:

...white frames surrounding large canvases painted in wax or distemper are considered acceptable; they set off the lightened palettes. Or else, use black frames like Messieurs Bernard and Anquetin... And for this idea of picking up the tonality of a painting in the arabesques which surround it, take the frames covered with flowers, spotted frames, frames embroidered by loving hands, of Messieurs Ranson, Bonnard, Denis...²⁶

Clarence Gagnon's practice of creating his own picture frames had many parallels among European artists, and the situation was no different among Canadian artists. Henry Sandham,²⁷ Otto Jacobi,²⁸ and Maurice Cullen all carved their own picture frames. It was not until about 1920 that Cullen's dealer, William Watson, anxious to obtain a sufficient quantity of Cullen's works to mount a one-man exhibition, persuaded him to abandon the time-consuming process and found someone able to make frames to Cullen's specifications.²⁹ The sketchbooks of James Wilson Morrice in The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts include sketches for frame designs although no research has yet been done on this aspect of Morrice's production. A.Y. Jackson, like other members of the Group of Seven, was also concerned with framing. In the early years of the twentieth century he spoke out against gold frames, linking them with the private Montréal collections of Dutch landscapes which he so despised. In his opinion, "Ornate gold frames, plate glass and spotlights added a glamour and gave their owners social prestige."³⁰

The 1913 Paris exhibition marked the most concentrated presentation of Gagnon's own frames but it was not the last time they were used for exhibition purposes. In the summer of 1914, Gagnon was again in Baie-Saint-Paul and Henri Tremblay assembled frames which the artist then decorated. He sent three

by boat to his Montréal art dealer, Johnson Art Galleries, for his entries to the Royal Canadian Exhibition in Toronto.³¹ Evidently Gagnon continued the practice until at least 1917 for the two frames in the collection of the Musée Régional Laure-Conan both were used at the 1917 Central Canadian Exhibition at Ottawa, one for a painting entitled *Old Houses, Winter* and the other, *Winter-Lake Geneva*. The former could be the same painting exhibited at the 1914 Royal Canadian Academy exhibition and the latter from the 1915 exhibition. It is hard to be certain, however, as Gagnon sometimes used different titles to designate the same paintings.

On October 8, 1923, Gagnon wrote from Baie-Saint-Paul to his friend in Ottawa, Duncan Campbell Scott. He asked Scott to send the canvas, *Village Street, Winter* to the National Gallery of Canada for the British Empire Exhibition. Although he was somewhat agitated at both the short notice of the call for entries and the fact that much of his work was in New York, Gagnon showed little concern about the frame. He merely said: "They will see about putting a frame on it."³² It would seem then, that by this time Gagnon was no longer creating his own frames and that his interests had shifted in other directions.

Of the more than fifty frames created by Clarence Gagnon, I have located four. Two frames, without canvases, are in the collection of the Musée Régional Laure-Conan at La Malbaie, Québec. One frame, although altered, is in the collection of Power Corporation of Canada. The fourth example which is in a private collection, is a beautiful example of Gagnon's intention. The frame motifs echo the imagery of the canvas, *Dimanche Matin, Hiver, Comté Charlevoix* (c. 1910).³³ The rest of Gagnon's frames are no doubt lost, destroyed, in private collections, or perhaps even tucked away in a museum storage area. They are victims of changing taste, victims of the need of collectors and dealers to suppress the individuality or singularity of a work that might not readily lend itself to integration in a collection. Consequently, the picture frames of Clarence Gagnon have been a neglected part of art history.

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Notes

- 1 *The Montreal Star* and *The Gazette* (Montréal) both noted the event.
- 2 René BOISSAY, *Clarence Gagnon* (Ottawa: Marcel Broquet Publishing, 1988), 55.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 Jean-Marie GAUVREAU, "Clarence Gagnon à la Baie-Saint-Paul," *Mémoires de la Société Royale du Canada*, Vol XXXVIII, Section 1, Série III (May 1944): 115.
- 5 BOISSAY, *Clarence Gagnon*, 55.
- 6 GAUVREAU, "Clarence Gagnon à la Baie-Saint-Paul," 115.
- 7 Lynn ROBERTS, "Nineteenth Century English Picture Frames, II. The Victorian High Renaissance," *The International Journal of Museum Management and Curatorship* 5 (1986): 277-278.
- 8 BOISSAY, *Clarence Gagnon*, 55.
- 9 Jean-Marie GAUVREAU, "Clarence Gagnon," *Aujourd'hui*, 49 (October 1943): 18.
- 10 Jean PALARDY, *The Early Furniture of French Canada* (Toronto: McMillan, (1963), 25-26.
- 11 One of the pieces of furniture distinctive to the Charlevoix region of Québec – a chair-table – was a design of the Mennonites of Pennsylvania and New England. The popularity of their furniture designs spread during the nineteenth century. The link between the Pennsylvania Dutch and rural Québec, therefore, is not as tenuous as might at first be imagined.
- 12 PALARDY, *The Early Furniture of French Canada*, 26.
- 13 Clarence GAGNON, "For a Revival of Canadian Folk Art," 1939 manuscript, Gagnon Papers, McCord Museum, Montréal, Box 2, Folder 19.
- 14 Charles Hill, Curator of Canadian Art, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, in conversation with the author, February 4, 1988.
- 15 Laurier Lacroix, Associate Professor, Department of Art History, Université du Québec à Montréal, Montréal, in conversation with the author, February 4, 1988.
- 16 Rosalind PEPALL, *Building a Beaux-Arts Museum* (Montréal: The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1986), 49.
- 17 "Arts Club Honors Clarence Gagnon," *The Montreal Gazette*, December 7, 1936. "In reminiscent mood, Mr. Maxwell went on... to tell the gathering that it was at his home that Mr. Gagnon made his first etching – in 1902, a drypoint 'bigger than a visiting card but smaller than a playing card'." See also Ian THOM, *The Prints of Clarence Gagnon* (Victoria: The Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, 1981), 4, 7, 8.
- 18 Edward Maxwell Office Records, Book C, Canadian Architecture Centre, McGill University, Montréal.
- 19 *L'Opinion*, le 13 décembre, 1913. Clipping in Jean-Marie Gauvreau Archives, Bibliothèque Nationale, Montréal, MSS-2, Boîte 3, 2.3.12.
- 20 David Revere McFADDEN, *Scandinavian Modern Design 1880-1980* (New York: Abrams, 1982), 24.
- 21 Jean-Marie GAUVREAU, "Clarence Gagnon, RCA, L.L.D., 1881-1942," *Technique* (Part I, juin 1943): 436.
- 22 Jean-Marie Gauvreau Archives, Bibliothèque Nationale, Montréal, MSS-2, Box 3, File 2.3.7.

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- 23 Pierre DANTON, "Clarence A. Gagnon," *Le Journal des Arts* (Paris), no page number.
- 24 Henry HEYDENRYK, *The Art and History of Frames* (New York: James H. Heineman, Inc., 1963), 4.
- 25 Jules Laforgue quoted in Phillipe JULLIAN, *The Symbolists* (London: Phaidon, 1973), 229.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 48.
- 27 Sybil PANTAZZI, "A Canadian Picture Frame," *Canadian Collector* (November 1975), 53-54.
- 28 I have examined an unresearched example in a private collection.
- 29 William WATSON, *Retrospective Recollections of an Art Dealer* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), 34.
- 30 A.Y. JACKSON, "The Birth of the Group of Seven," in Malcolm Ross (ed.), *Our Sense of Identity* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1954), 222.
- 31 BOISSAY, *Clarence Gagnon*, 59.
- 32 Clarence GAGNON, letter from Baie-Saint-Paul to Duncan Campbell Scott, October 8, 1923. Gagnon Archives, McCord Museum, Box 1, File 3.
- 33 This canvas is reproduced, removed from its Gagnon frame, in Hugues de JOUVANCOURT, *Clarence Gagnon* (Montréal: Éditions de la Frégate, 1970).