

# *The gentle art of observation<sup>1</sup>: Morrice & Bittar*

## **Introduction**

My choice of J.W. Morrice was a fortuitous accident. While researching my first paper, on John Lyman, I saw that Lyman had been influenced by the Canadian expatriate painter Morrice.

Curiosity made me extend my research to Morrice and that, in turn, led me to discover that one of my favourite contemporary artists, Antoine Bittar, is a follower of Morrice.<sup>2</sup>

I was intrigued and dazzled by the paintings of Morrice, for me an unknown artist. And although I am lucky to own a painting by Bittar,<sup>3</sup> I knew little about the artist. Ironically, after extensive research, and a thorough review of Bittar's paintings, I am forced to say that I know little more about him! However, that does not interfere with the purpose of this paper which is to show Morrice's influence on Bittar's *work* not on his *life*.

## **John Wilson Morrice**

John Wilson Morrice was born in 1865, in Montreal to a family of wealthy Scottish textile merchants. He was one of eight children. His father urged him to become a lawyer. Following his father's wishes, he studied at the University of Toronto and at Osgoode Hall. While studying law, he painted landscapes in the Adirondacks and at Lake Champlain. In 1888, he exhibited a painting with the Royal Canadian Academy.<sup>4</sup>

He took and passed the Ontario bar examination and articulated with a firm. That duty fulfilled, he turned his back on the law, apparently never spending a day in its practice! Instead, he was off to Paris which would become his home for most of his life.

Morrice studied briefly at the Académie Julian in Paris.<sup>5</sup> This was his only formal training apart from early advice from the veteran landscape painter Henri Joseph Harpignies.

John Wilson Morrice was the first Canadian painter to gain international recognition. Some say he was Canada's most important painter.<sup>6</sup> But Morrice the man was

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<sup>1</sup> The title is from a Vancouver exhibition of Morrice's work: [www.projects.vancouvergallery.bc.ca](http://www.projects.vancouvergallery.bc.ca)

<sup>2</sup> "Antoine Bittar, like Clarence Gagnon, Albert Robinson, Alexander Young Jackson and others, was undeniably influenced by James Wilson Morrice." Antoine Bittar. Galerie D'Art Vincent, Chateau Laurier, Ottawa, Canada. At p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Our painting is a night view of Center Block, Parliament, Ottawa.

<sup>4</sup> John Wilson Morrice. <http://findarticles.com>.

<sup>5</sup> Canadian painter John Lyman also would study there, too. Lyman was a friend of Morrice's and a great admirer of his work. Henri Matisse whose own work would influence both Lyman and Morrice also studied at Academy Julian.

<sup>6</sup> "He was the finest artist of his time – some would say of any time..." Burnett, David. Masterpieces of Canadian Art from the National Gallery of Canada. (1990). Hurtig Publishers, Ltd. Edmonton, AL. at p. 64.

unforgettable, too. His literary friends, Somerset Maugham and Arnold Bennett, immortalized him in their work.<sup>7</sup>

Maugham described his friend: “The further he goes from sobriety the more charming he is. He’s the only man in this room of whom you’ll never hear a word of evil. The strange thing is that he’s very nearly a great painter. He has the most fascinating sense of colour in the world.”<sup>8</sup>

Travel clearly was a Morrice’s passion. While living in Paris, he made numerous trips to exotic locations in Europe, North Africa and the Caribbean. He did not cut his ties to Canada and continued to visit until the end of his life.

He gained renown for being the first to capture the subtle colouring of a Quebec winter. “The French commented upon his oily and rich pigments, and particularly the way in which he diffused throughout his canvases a gentle, at times almost imperceptible, pinkish glow...Morrice discovered and began to use this rose-colouring, which is so peculiar and so natural to the otherwise sombre darkness of a Canadian winter sky, when doing his first large canvases of Quebec scenery...It is hardly an exaggeration to say that he afterwards painted Parisian skies with Canadian eyes.”<sup>9</sup>



**Winter landscape with sleigh, Morrice**

The addition of the small sleigh in “Winter Landscape with a Hand-driven sleigh” is typical Morrice, adding a touch of humanity against a background of white and purplish snow.<sup>10</sup>

Morrice became a member of the Canadian Art Club and exhibited in Canada until 1916, although only rarely did he paint Canadian scenes.

James Wilson Morrice can best be described as a “Post-Impressionist.” He is considered by at least one author as “one of the four great pioneers who introduced Post-

<sup>7</sup> Arnold described him in *Sketches for an Autobiography*. He also was Somerset Maugham’s inspiration for Canshaw in *Of Human Bondage* and his hero, Warren, in *The Magician*. Ibid. Also see: <http://findarticles.com>.

<sup>8</sup> Burnett. Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Buchanan, Donald W. *Canadian Painters from Paul Kane to the Group of Seven*. (1945) .The Phaidon Press, Oxford. at p. 7

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. at p. 8.

Impressionism into Canada.”<sup>11</sup> “For all of these artists, the effect was the same – a new vitality and exuberance, a breadth of handling and pictorial freedom...It can be seen in the Canadian use of colour. In Post-Impressionism, colour is often said to be used in a special way, as a carrier of meaning...Characteristics of Post-Impressionist painting as it was adopted by Canadian artists include formal simplification, along with the elimination of tonal modeling, incidental detailing and depth progression that followed strict rules of perspective.”<sup>12</sup>

“(Morrice) was the finest Canadian artist of his time – some would say of any time... And if, in 1911, he could say of the first Cubist works shown at the Salon d’Automne that he was incapable of understanding them, he had, for twenty years, responded to the complex changes in advanced art, from Impressionism to the Fauves, without yielding the distinction of his own touch and vision. He was a Post-Impressionist painter, not by the adoption of a style but by virtue of his own art.”<sup>13</sup>

John Wilson Morrice died in Tunisia in 1924 after several years of poor health probably due to the alcohol he famously consumed.

## Influences on his work

At the Académie Julian in 1892, Morrice formed a bond with two other artists, the American Maurice Prendergast and an Australian, Charles Conder<sup>14</sup>. They painted together for three or four years, along the coasts of Normandy and Brittany.



**A Holiday at Mentone, Charles Conder**

Conder was a “fun loving man who painted with a humorous touch”. According to one author, Conder and Morrice shared “the same devil-may-care attitude towards the politics of mankind.”<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Murray, Joan. *The Birth of the Modern: Post-Impressionism in Canadian Art 1900-1920*. (2001).The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa, ON. at p. 12. The author also named John Lyman, David Milne and Lauren Harris.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p. 12-13.

<sup>13</sup> Burnett op.cit. at p. 64.

<sup>14</sup> Conder was English-born. He emigrated to Australia and became a key figure in the Heidelberg School, “arguably the beginning of a distinctively Australian tradition in Western art.” Charles Conder.

[www.en.wikipedia.com](http://www.en.wikipedia.com)

<sup>15</sup> Buchanan. Op. cit. at p. 8.

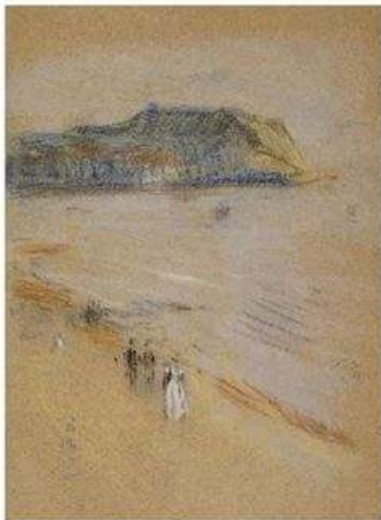
Conder's composition of "A Holiday at Mentone" may have been borrowed from James Abbott McNeill Whistler. Whistler was an influence on Conder, as he would be on Morrice.<sup>16</sup>

During these early years, Morrice also met and became close to the Canadian artist William Brymner who is considered Canada's first great art teacher.<sup>17</sup>



**Wreath of Flowers, William Brymner**

### **James Abbott McNeill Whistler**



**On the Beach, Hastings, Whistler**

Whistler was an American-born painter and graphic artist whose life was spent mainly in England. He was an admirer of the Diego Velázquez and of Japanese print and oriental art and decoration in general.<sup>18</sup> Whistler's art is in many respects the opposite of his often aggressive personality, being discreet and subtle, but the creed that lay behind it was radical. He believed that painting should exist for its own sake, not to convey

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> William Brymner. [www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com)

<sup>18</sup> James Abbott McNeill Whistler. [www.ibiblio.org](http://www.ibiblio.org).

literary or moral ideas, and he often gave his pictures musical titles to suggest an analogy with the abstract art of music.”<sup>19</sup>

Morrice adopted Whistler’s philosophy of art. In Morrice’s earliest years as a painter, he also clearly adopted Whistler’s subtle colour schemes. “.the influence of Whistler is paramount in most of Morrice’s work before the turn of the century.”<sup>20</sup> He also was drawn to some of the same painting locals as Whistler, particularly coastal scenes.

### **Gauguin, Matisse or the Nabis**

At least one author speculates that Morrice’s Post-Impressionist work, dating from 1903, was influenced by Paul Gauguin.<sup>21</sup> Another, John O’Brian, links Morrice with the Nabis, a group of painters that included Pierre Bonnard and Edouard Villard. “These ‘Intimists’, as they are called, painted sequestered interiors that reverberated with quiet, indefinable dramas... And a sense of intimacy suffused Morrice’s work.”<sup>22</sup>

There is evidence of a direct influence exerted by Matisse. The two men met in 1913 on Morrice’s second trip in two years to Tangiers in Morocco. Aspects of Morrice’s paintings from here on may show Matisse’s influence: their decorative quality; the luminous, trancelike feeling of space and time, and their compositional motif.<sup>23</sup>

Regardless of the source of his inspiration, clearly his painting evolved during these years. “North Africa encouraged him to summarize the essence of a subject and adopt more vivid hues. Morrice’s individuality is in his formal sense of composition and decorative patterning, the latter his heritage from the Nabis.”<sup>24</sup>

## **Morrice’s work evolves**

### **1890 – 1897**

In the 1890s, Morrice’s work was described by the critics as having a “pleasing soft grey tone”<sup>25</sup>. Clearly the influence on his work was Whistler. Like Whistler, Morrice “reveled in his preference for the evocative over the representational, using a greyed range of colours.”<sup>26</sup>

In 1896, he began to paint on *pochades*, small wooden panels used for quick oil paintings done on the spot. Some of his *pochades* were no bigger than a postcard. Morrice considered them to be complete works in themselves.<sup>27</sup> He painted about 500 of them

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Reid, Dennis. A Concise History of Canadian Painting, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. 1988. Oxford University Press. Don Mills. ON. at p.133.

<sup>21</sup> But “the feeling of spiritual distance in Morrice’s work is at odds with Gauguin’s expansive exoticism.” Ibid. p.117.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. p.118.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 117.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> James Wilson Morrice. [www.virtualmuseum.ca](http://www.virtualmuseum.ca)

during his lifetime and at least 200 were translated into full-scale paintings in his studio.<sup>28</sup> “His small sketches on wooden panels were always exquisite. His larger compositions on canvas, which he did usually in his studio on the Quai des Grands Augustin, in Paris, were, however, sometimes variable in quality.”<sup>29</sup>



View of Quebec City from the River, Morrice, 1997

## 1898 – 1902



Beach at St. Malo, Morrice, 1998

In 1897, Morrice met and painted with the Canadian Impressionist **Maurice Cullen**. Under Cullen’s influence, Morrice began to lighten his palette. By the turn of the century “Morrice’s painting had lost the wash-like effect of his earlier work and begun to display a more textured ‘painterly’ quality.”<sup>30</sup>

“The paintings done just before 1900 are rendered in a very thick paint, which he then rubs to smoothen the surface; the modulations of colour are then painted over, in very light passages. The results are very subtle harmonies that reveal themselves slowly to the spectator.”<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup> James Wilson Morrice. [www.projects.vancouvergallery.bc.ca](http://www.projects.vancouvergallery.bc.ca) at p. 2.

<sup>29</sup> Buchanan. Op. cit. at p. 8.

<sup>30</sup> Reid. op. cit. p. 133.

<sup>31</sup> James Wilson Morrice. [www.magma.ca](http://www.magma.ca) and Dorais, Lucie. J. W. Morrice.(1985). Musée Des Beaux-Arts Du Canada. Ottawa, ON. at p.

## 1903 – 1911



**Venetian Girl, Morrice**

The year 1903 is cited as the first manifestation of Post-Impressionism in Canadian art – in the work of J. W. Morrice.

In that year, Morrice began to substitute thin washes of paint for the impasto surface he had previously favoured. And *he significantly* brightened his colours and began to use more of a *Pointillist* technique, juxtaposed with regular brush strokes.<sup>32</sup>

He uses very diluted paint over a white preparation, but his harmonies are as subtle as before.<sup>33</sup>

During this period, he painted what is considered one of the very greatest paintings of Canadian art, “The Quebec Ferry.”



**The Ferry, Quebec, Morrice**

## 1912 – 1914

These are the years in which Morrice chose to travel south to paint, rather than north to the coasts of Normandy and Brittany. And they are the years during which he met and painted with Matisse. How much of Morrice’s change in style can be attributed to Matisse is debatable but without a doubt his work underwent a change that would be evident for the remainder of his life.

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<sup>32</sup> Murray. op. cit. p. 14.

<sup>33</sup> John Wilson Morrice. [www.magma.ca](http://www.magma.ca) op cit. and Dorias. Op. cit.



**Tangiers, Morocco**



**Algiers, Morocco**

### **1921-1922**

The pictures of the last years of his life are considered among his finest.<sup>34</sup> They were painted during his last visits to the Caribbean.



**The Pond, West Indies, Morocco**

“The Pond, West Indies,” painted in 1921, is one of his most daring works. In this painting, “landscape reflected in the pond counterbalances the sense of depth created by the lines of trees off to the right, drawing the viewer’s gaze towards the pink horizon. With their backs turned, the two figures in the foreground invite the viewer to ‘enter’ the painting, where the contrasting greens and pink create a striking decorative effect. The use of colour and flattened space is reminiscent of Henri Matisse...”<sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Reid. op. cit. p. 135.

<sup>35</sup> John Wilson Morrice. [www.virtualmuseum.ca](http://www.virtualmuseum.ca)

## Antoine Bittar

Antoine Bittar was born in 1957. He immigrated to Canada in 1962 and lives in Montreal. He has been painting full time since 1981.<sup>36</sup>

He has been described as “an artist with a bug for travel who has painted in over seventeen countries.”<sup>37</sup> He is represented in a number of galleries in Canada and his work can be found on numerous web sites. However, public information about the artist himself is non-existent.<sup>38</sup>

Bittar appears to be self-taught, at least that is the implication in one brochure of his current work: “the painter acquired his knowledge through experience.”<sup>39</sup>

That same brochure readily admits, in its lead sentence, that “Antoine Bittar, like Clarence Gagnon, Albert Robinson, Alexander Young Jackson and others, was undeniably influence by James Wilson Morrice.”

## Inspired by Morrice

“Morrice was known as the ‘painter par excellence of the five o’clock twilight hour on the boulevards.’ No place was more amenable to the flaneur<sup>40</sup> than the boulevards, with the cafes and the people. Armed with a pocket-sized palette box, Morrice would go to the cafes, and later fortified with Pernod, jot down his observations of the life that passed by, a life of a particular nature. The people are at leisure, the places are exotic; both suitable fare for the Canadian painter who excelled at the *gentle art of observation*.”<sup>41</sup>

Although I know nothing of Bittar’s work habits, I would argue that he too is a *gentle observer of human nature*. He openly admits to being influenced by Morrice and that influence seems to extend *from subject matter, to palette, style and mood*.

Without more information on this contemporary artist, it is impossible to know for certain his *philosophy of art*. However, a good guess would be that, like Morrice and Whistler before him, he paints for the pure sensation of art for its own sake, leaving politicizing and moralizing to others.

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<sup>36</sup> Antoine Bittar. [www.pages.citenet.net](http://www.pages.citenet.net)

<sup>37</sup> Antoine Bittar. [www.ontheglobe.com](http://www.ontheglobe.com)

<sup>38</sup> I own a painting of Bittar’s, and I have a vague memory that he was described as an Egyptian Canadian but I have been unable to verify this fact. The gallery where we purchased our painting did not respond to our inquiries for more detailed biographical information on Bittar.

<sup>39</sup> Antoine Bittar. Galerie D’Art Vincent, Château Laurier, Ottawa, ON. at p. 5.

<sup>40</sup> le flaneur is the stroller

<sup>41</sup> James Wilson Morrice. [www.projects.vancouvergallery.bc.ca](http://www.projects.vancouvergallery.bc.ca). op. cit. at p. 9.

## **Subject matter**

Morrice was -- and Bittar is -- a *traveler*. Bittar gives out little information about himself but the one fact he appears proud to share is the number of countries to which he has traveled. Some of them are the same ones chosen by Morrice before him.

Both men *put people in their landscapes*. It is hard – almost impossible -- to find a painting by either artist that does not include people. Like Morrice, Bittar is “impelled towards a living tradition in which equal importance is given to landscapes and figures.”

Morrice was described as *le flaneur* ....someone who strolled by and gently observed and recorded the passing scene. Bittar’s paintings have the same *gentle perspective*. A pamphlet of his current work notes that he is “gifted with a creative sense of observation, allowing him to appreciate the exoticism of the countries he visits during his travels.”<sup>42</sup>

Morrice appears to have been fascinated with *beach scenes* and Bittar paints his own share of them, too. Both artists painted along the Normandy and Brittany coasts and both painted multiple paintings of St. Malo.



**Beach at St. Malo, Morrice**



**Study for Dieppe, Morrice**

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<sup>42</sup> Galerie D’Art Vincent, op.cit. at p. 5.



**Tanning, Bittar**



**A Sunny Sunday, Bittar**

As noted above, Morrice was “the painter par excellence of the five o’clock twilight hour on the boulevards.”<sup>43</sup> Bittar’s promotional material acknowledges his “special interest for twilights.”<sup>44</sup>

Another subject popular with both artists is *night*. Morrice “rejected the idea that night eliminated all traces of colour – with a few sources of light, the colours of the night could be revealed.”<sup>45</sup> Judging by his very effective and evocative night paintings, Bittar agrees.



**Paris by Night, Morrice**



**A Wet Evening, Bittar**

<sup>43</sup> [www.projects.vancouvergallery.bc.ca](http://www.projects.vancouvergallery.bc.ca). op. cit. at p. 9.

<sup>44</sup> Galerie D’Art Vincent, op.cit. at p. 5.

<sup>45</sup> James Wilson Morrice. [www.virtualmuseum.ca](http://www.virtualmuseum.ca)



**Sur de lune, Montreal, Bittar**



**Montreal Fireworks, Bittar**

As Canadians and Montrealers, neither artist could escape a certain fascination with *winter and snow*:



**Towards Evening, Beaupre, Morrice**



**Winter Mist, Bittar**

Finally, both men chose *exotic locales and people*, based upon their travels to some of the same countries.



**View of a North African town, Morrice**



**A l'entrée-de-la-medina, Bittar**

### **Palette**

James Wilson Morrice painted in a Post-Impressionist manner but in his earlier days he favoured a more low-keyed palette, probably influenced by his admiration for Whistler. His palette brightened up over the years and became quite bold towards the end of his

life. Bittar appears to alternate between a similar low key palette and vivid colours. For example:



Tunisia, Bittar



Nepal, Bittar



Stroll in the Harbour, Bittar



Les Chauffeurs, Bittar

His promotional materials acknowledge that he “has experimented with a wide range of chromatic colours.”<sup>46</sup>

Many paintings by both men make use of gold tones with touches of red.

### Style

Morrice’s work has a *spontaneous* feel to it, probably because he worked on the spot from his small pochades, turning them into larger canvases in his studio. Bittar’s work has that same spontaneous quality. His promotional literature points to his “spontaneity, flair for colour, a free brushstroke and the painter’s consciousness of lyrical themes.”<sup>47</sup>

Morrice *simplified his composition*, eliminating unnecessary detail, again a cue he took from Whistler. Bittar has learned this lesson, too.

<sup>46</sup> Galerie D’Art Vincent, op.cit. at p. 5.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

And in Morrice's work, "figures often appear as static elements serving the overall composition of the painting."<sup>48</sup> Bittar's paintings sometimes give the same impression. For example, take a look at the use of figures in a painting by each artist:



Morrice

**Figures on a River Embankment in Brittany, Morrice**



Bittar

The work of both artists has a *diffused quality* to it. Although Bittar is a contemporary artist, with modern figures in modern settings, there remains in most of his work a *subtlety of approach and colour harmony* that harkens back to Morrice and before him to Whistler.

In their painting, both men favour *the evocative* over the strictly representational. Their compositions have a *decorative quality* reminiscent of Whistler.

### **Mood**

With their love of nighttime paintings, in particular, both artists at times achieve a certain evocative, almost mysterious mood, for example:

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<sup>48</sup> John Wilson Morrice. [www.virtualmuseum.ca](http://www.virtualmuseum.ca)



Street in Gloucester, Bittar



Effet de neige, Morrice

## Conclusion

Above all, James Wilson Morrice and Antoine Bittar both have that personal, intimate quality to their work which is a combination of *humanistic subject matter* and a *gentle approach* to that subject matter.

Bittar's painting "exudes a certain sensitivity, an unquestionable lyricism in the description of elements that captivates the viewer's attention."<sup>49</sup> This is, of course, reminiscent of Morrice.

Bittar is modern but never harsh in his depiction of the human element always present in his paintings. His depiction is gentle but not sentimental. He appears to have taken the many lessons Morrice learned and applied them to the present era. He is today's gentle observer, heir to Morrice, *le flaneur*.

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<sup>49</sup> Galerie D'Art Vincent, op.cit. at p. 5.

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