National Gallery of Canada
Frances Elswood Richards

RICHARDS, Frances Elswood
(Brockville, Ontario 1852 – Glassonby, Cumberland, England 1934)

Frances Richards is little known today. She spent much of her life abroad though she was Canadian by birth and did work, teach and exhibit in Canada at various points in her career, most frequently during the 1880s and always maintained a close bond with her Canadian relatives.

There are a few of her works in public collections\(^1\): the Supreme Court of Canada owns her portrait of Sir William Buell Richards (1884), the House of Commons her portrait of the Hon. George Kirkpatrick (1887), the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria a pastel portrait of Lady Crease (1913), the British Columbia Archives a portrait of Sir James Douglas, probably from a photograph, a portrait of Edgar Dewdney (n.d.) and a landscape (n.d.).

Frances Richards was born in Brockville in 1852, the daughter of Albert Norton Richards (1822-1897) and Frances Chaffey (deceased 1853). The Richards family was closely associated with Robert Baldwin’s Reform Party and Albert and his brother William Buell Richards (17815-1889) were prominent lawyers. In 1871 her father moved to British Columbia where he was Lieutenant-Governor of the province from 1876 to 1881.\(^2\) Frances received her early education in Toronto before training as an artist in Paris where she studied under Robert Fleury and Carolus Duran at the Academie Julian from 1878 to 1881. One of her fellow students was Maria Bashkirtseff, who, according to Richards’ brother-in-law, the noted Canadian biographer and encyclopaedist, Henry J. Morgan, painted her portrait and mentioned her in her Journal of a Young Artist.\(^3\)

In 1881 Richards left Paris to teach at the Ottawa School of Art\(^4\) and was elected an Associate of the Royal Canadian Academy the following spring.\(^5\) At the Academy’s

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1 E. Bénézit Dictionnaire Critique et Documentaire des Peintres Sculpteurs Dessinateurs et Graveurs (Gründ, 1999), p. 55 erroneously states that The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts owns a work by Richards. This is the painting Une Parisienne offered for sale at the Art Association of Montreal in 1887 and 1889.
3 Henry J. Morgan, Editor, Types of Canadian Women, Past and Present (Toronto: William Briggs, 1903), p. 296
5 Royal Canadian Academy of Arts, Minute Book, vol. 1, pp. 68-69, Minutes of the General meeting 12 April 1882, in the National Archives of Canada.
1882 exhibition in Montreal she exhibited five oils, including a portrait of a “Peigan Indian” loaned by the Marquis of Lorne, and six “monochromes.”

Soon after the closing of the Montreal exhibition, Richards attended the public lecture given by the twenty-eight year old Oscar Wilde on 16 May in Ottawa, the second stop in the Canadian leg of his North American tour. She asked Wilde to sign her birthday book and to write a letter of introduction to James McNeil Whistler, to which he graciously consented.

My dearest Jimmy, I want you to know, and to know is to delight in, Miss Richards, who is an artist, and a little oasis of culture in Canada. She does really good work and has already civilized the Marquis of Lorne.

She is already devoted to your pictures, or rather to my descriptions of them, which are just as good, I often think better. She is quite worthy of your blue and white china, so I send her to you with this letter: I know you will be charming to her. Toujours

p.s. I have already civilized America – Oscar
il reste seulement le ciel!

Whether Richards did go to London is uncertain but in spring 1883 she did exhibit an oil portrait of “Mme S.R.” in the Salon of the Société des artistes français in Paris with an address at 61 Avenue Friedland. In 1883 or 1884 she moved to New York City as she exhibited at the National Academy of Design in 1884 (no address given), 1886 (listed at

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6 In the 1882 RCA catalogue five works, including this portrait, are catalogued as by “Miss Richards” and six “etchings” or “drawings in monochrome” by “Miss F. Richards.” Morgan, 1903, states that Frances Richards “executed a portrait of Po-kah-nee-hah-pee, a Blackfoot Indian, for the Princess Louise” and given his relationship to the artist this is probably correct. In her index to the RCA exhibitions Evelyn McMann, following Russell Harper’s entry for Ida Richards in Early Painters and Engravers in Canada (University of Toronto Press, 1970), p. 264, lists the five oils in the 1882 RCA exhibition as by Ida Richards. In his biography of Ida Richards Harper cites an article in La Minerve, 14 (actually it is 4) May 1883, as the source of information for Ida Richards having exhibited at the Paris Salon in 1883. The article does give the name of Ida Richards though it was Frances Richards who exited at the 1883 Paris Salon. It is not certain that there is any artist called Ida Richards. According to the AAM exhibition registers, A study of a Girl’s Head by Frances Richards was sold to F.M. Bell-Smith who loaned an oil by Richards by that title to the 1882 Toronto Industrial Exhibition (cat.no. 186).

7 K. O’Brien Oscar Wilde In Canada, (Toronto: Personal Library, 1982), pp.83-84. Frances Richards’ birthday book and letters were in the possession of Mrs. Esmé Rowley, Frances Richards’ daughter-in-law at the time O’Brien’s book was published. These papers also included correspondence with the Marquis of Lorne and Sir Wilfrid Laurier as well as Wilde. See Wm. Kaye Lamb, Dominion Archivist to Mrs. Esmé Rowley, 2 May 1958, National Archives of Canada, Documentary Art Library, Frances Richards documentation file. The current location of these papers is unknown. Photocopies of letters from Oscar Wilde to Frances Richards were in Frances Richards’ NGC documentation file, but have been missing since 1977.


140 West 39th Street) and 1887 (no address given).\textsuperscript{10} At this time she completed two portraits for the Parliament of Canada, one of her uncle Chief Justice Sir William Buell Richards for the Supreme Court in 1884\textsuperscript{11} and one of the Speaker of the House Hon. George Kirkpatrick for the House of Commons in 1887.\textsuperscript{12} In The Dominion Annual Register and Review for 1886, Morgan states that she is resident in Montreal.\textsuperscript{13} She exhibited two oils, and four watercolours at the April 1887 RCA exhibition of the Royal Canadian Academy in Montreal,\textsuperscript{14} one oil and two watercolours at the Toronto Industrial Exhibition\textsuperscript{15} and donated an oil study to the Art Association of Montreal in aid of the endowment fund.\textsuperscript{16}

The Richards family had undoubtedly known that of John Ross. Ross had articled with Andrew Norton Buell, brother of Andrew Norton Richards’ mother. John Ross married Robert Baldwin’s daughter Elizabeth and had a prestigious career, including Speaker of the Canadian Senate from 1869 to 1871. After Ross’ death in January 1871 his family moved to London and some time in 1887 Richards also moved there. She soon became a close friend of one of the Ross daughter Mary Jones (née Ross) and of her brother the eighteen year old Robert who would become known for his close friendship with Oscar Wilde and later manager of London’s Carfax Gallery. At this point Robert Ross had not yet met Oscar Wilde and it has been suggested that Richards introduced the two men.\textsuperscript{17} Richards painted portraits of Robert Ross, his brother Alec\textsuperscript{18} and Oscar Wilde sometime between 1887 and 1890. Richards’ portrait of Wilde, present location unknown, was purportedly the source for Wilde’s story \textit{The Portrait of Dorian Gray}.\textsuperscript{19}


\textsuperscript{11} “Canadian Art – Miss Richards’ Painting” \textit{Ottawa Daily Citizen} Vol. XVI, No.70, Monday, 24 March 1884, p.1 Sir William Buell Richards (1815-1889) was a lawyer (called to the bar in 1837), a Judge of the Court of Common Pleas (appointed 22 June 1853), Chief Justice of the Court of Common Pleas (appointed 22 July 1863), Chief Justice of Ontario’s Court of Queen’s Bench (appointed 16 November 1868), Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada (8 October 1875 – 9 January 1879) and Deputy Governor General in the absence of Lord Dufferin (1877-1879). He was also Frances Richards’ uncle. Her father, Albert Norton Richards and Sir William Buell Richards were Brothers. See \textit{Dictionary of Canadian Biography} Volume XI (University of Toronto Press, 1982) p. 730-731.

\textsuperscript{12} Henry J. Morgan, Editor \textit{The Dominion Annual Register and Review 1886} (Montreal: Eusèbe, Senécal & Fils, 1887), p. 257. Although this edition covers activities of 1886 the painting of the Speaker of the House of Commons is clearly dated 1887 next to the artists signature.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid, p. 257.

\textsuperscript{14} The oils were \textit{Yseult} (sold to E.B. Greenshields according to the AAM registers) and \textit{Une habitante}, the watercolours, \textit{Evelyn} (sold to W.J.R. Wilson), \textit{Yachting} (sold to Greenshields), \textit{In the Park} and \textit{Come for a stroll} (sold to E. Clonsiel).

\textsuperscript{15} The oil was \textit{Une habitante}, the watercolours Gipsy and \textit{Study of a Head}.

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Catalogue of Paintings and Statuary in the Galleries of the Art Association of Montreal}, 1887, no.90 \textit{Une parisienne} listed as For sale. The same work is listed for sale in the 1889 catalogue of the same title.


\textsuperscript{18} O’Brien, op.cit., p. 85. The portrait of Robert is reproduced in Borland, op.cit, illustration no.10.

\textsuperscript{19} O’Brien, op.cit., p.85 and p.. The source is an article in the \textit{St.James Gazette} 24 September 1890.
On 10 July 1888 Frances Richards married William Edwin Rowley\(^{20}\) at the Ross home in Chelsea\(^{21}\) and thereafter divided her time between their country home in Cumberland and her London studio.\(^{22}\) She exhibited three watercolours at the Spring Exhibition of the Art Association of Montreal in 1889 and in 1893 at the New Gallery in London.\(^{23}\)

Richards’ studio was listed in *The Year’s Art* up to 1896 though from 1893 to 1912 she does not appear to have exhibited. She had three children, two sons, Guy and Esmé and a daughter (whose married name was Mrs. Cyril W. Distin),\(^ {24}\) and it appears she remained in close contact with her two sisters, Emily and Minnie who lived in Canada all their lives. In 1911 Frances visited Minnie in British Columbia\(^{25}\) and from 1912 to 1914 she exhibited a total of ten works at the annual exhibitions of the Island Arts & Crafts Society in Victoria. It was probably at this time she painted the portrait of Lady Crease now in the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria. The Public Archives of British Columbia owns two paintings of the interior of Minnie Richards’ house by Josephine Crease, Lady Crease’s fourth daughter.

Frances Richards died at her home in Glassonby, Cumberland County, England in November, 1934.\(^{26}\)

Please cite in the following manner:


\(^{20}\) William Edwin Rowley was the second son of Edwin Rowley of Gawthorpe Hall (an Elizabethan country house in West Yorkshire). See Henry Morgan *Types of Canadian Women, Past and Present*, p296. This house is still privately owned. I have written to the West Yorkshire Archives to get in touch with the current owners.

\(^{21}\) O’Brien, op.cit., p.85

\(^{22}\) A. Carter *The Year’s Art* (London: J.S. Virtue & Co.) lists her studio as “6, Wentworth-studios, Manresa-ard, Chelsea from 1894 to 1896. In Morgan *Types of Canadian Women* 1903, p.296 her studio is listed as “20A Cheyne-walk, Chelsea”.

\(^{23}\) A. Graves *A Dictionary of Artists Who Have Exhibited Works In The Principal London Exhibitions from 1760 to 1893* (Bath: Kingsmead Reprints, 1901, reprinted 1973), p. 241


\(^{25}\) Frances Richards Rowley to Bertie Morgan, 1911, National Archives of Canada, Henry J. Morgan Papers, MG29 D61, Vol. 43.