Day, Mabel Killam
(Yarmouth, Nova Scotia 7 July 1884 – Yarmouth, Nova Scotia 26 August 1960)

Born in 1884, Mabel Killam was raised in a prosperous household in Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, where her family had been leaders in the shipping and shipbuilding trades since the late 18th century. With the encouragement and financial support of her parents she studied art under John Hammond at the Mount Allison Ladies' College in Sackville, New Brunswick from 1900 to 1904, where she received a prize for best drawing in her graduating year. Although none of her works from this period have survived, it is probable that she left Sackville in 1904 with the ability to paint atmospheric land and seascapes as well as conventional still life arrangements, the hallmarks of John Hammond's curriculum.

In 1905 Mabel Killam moved to New York City where she became an enthusiastic student of Robert Henri at the New York School of Art, and eventually followed him to his own school, the Henri School of Art on Broadway where she was among the first to enroll along with the American painters Edward Hopper and George Bellows. Under Henri's guidance Mabel Killam began to paint with rapid, gestural brushstrokes in a conscious effort to free her work of the academic conventions she had learned at Mount Allison. She wholeheartedly embraced Henri's bold Ashcan aesthetic and heeded his well-known advice to "paint what you see, paint what is real to you." As a result she began painting portraits of her friends and colleagues (such as Laughing Model and Portrait of a Man, Possibly Robert Henri, both in the collection of the Acadia University Art Gallery), as well as scenes of urban life in New York.

Upon completing her studies in New York Mabel Killam returned to Nova Scotia and began painting strikingly modern seascapes such as those presented here, Blue Water c.1907 and Stormy Sea c.1907-08. While these uninhabited seascapes may seem unlikely subjects for a student of Robert Henri (who encouraged the painting of city life) they were completely logical choices for Mabel Killam, to whom the city would have been a relatively foreign and distant entity, and the sea an entirely familiar one.

1 The headquarters of this business, the Killam Bros. Building in Yarmouth is now an historic site, operated by the Yarmouth County Museum.
3 F. Kruschen “The Art Spirit”, p.3 (no page nos. – my pagination).
4 An anonymous author (probably Walter Abell) “Mabel Killam Day” Maritime Art 1:1 (October 1940), p.8
6 I am not aware of any surviving New York cityscapes by Mabel Killam Day, however such paintings are mentioned in "Mabel Killam Day" Maritime Art 1:1 (October 1940), p.8
Blue Water may have been initially painted outdoors from immediate observation and later worked up in the artist's studio. This was common practice for Mabel Killam who conceded the benefit of "colour and form notes from nature", but insisted that paintings should be composed in the studio to avoid "the sight and intrusion of too many details". It is a sincere and beautiful painting that demonstrates the artist’s rejection of the genteel, restrained techniques of John Hammond for those of Robert Henri, most noticeably in the vigorous and generous manner in which the paint has been applied to the board.

Stormy Sea, with its lively brushwork and rich colours is a superb example of the artistic maturity Mabel Killam achieved in New York and brought with her to Atlantic Canada. The foreground of this canvas is filled with a sloping hillside set against a background of dark, turbulent waves and a cloud filled sky. This painting has a remarkable presence when viewed in the galleries and will considerably enhance the current representation of modernist paintings by Atlantic Canadian artists.

In 1909 Mabel Killam sent some of her paintings from Nova Scotia to New York where Robert Henri viewed them and wrote back with his approval:

We were glad to see your excellent pictures. I admire tremendously the things. My favorite is the splendid weathery upright. Anyone who can make such a fresh frank transcript from nature as that is, can be a great artist and a true one...I hope you will never let it up.

The works Henri saw and referred to in this letter have not been identified, nor has the exact reason they were sent. Presumably they were submitted to an exhibition, and not sent simply for Henri's approval. Regardless, this letter does confirm that Mabel Killam valued the instructions she received from Henri and continued to paint seriously upon her return to Nova Scotia, much to her mentor's approval.

In 1910 Mabel Killam married Frank Parker Day, a bright young English Professor at the University of New Brunswick. They had studied together at Mount Allison and, while she was in New York he had been a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford. The young couple lived together near the campus in Fredericton for two years where Mabel continued to paint Ashcan influenced landscapes such as Woods near Fredericton c.1910 (collection of Gerald Ferguson), and submitted two works to the Art Association of Montreal’s spring exhibition in 1910: Lake Annis and Under Cool Birches.

The Days moved to Pittsburgh in 1912 where Frank was Head of the English Department and Director of Academic Studies at the Carnegie Institute of Technology and Mabel immediately became active in the local art community. She exhibited at the Associated Artists of Pittsburgh Annual Exhibition from 1912 to 1914, the Carnegie Institute’s International Exhibition of Painting in from 1913 to 1914, and the First Annual

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7 Ibid, p.10
Experimentalist Salon in 1913. Some of these works, including Woman with Red Hair (Heredity) c.1912 are now in the collection of the Acadia University Art Gallery.

During WWI Mabel Killam Day lived in London, while her husband served in the Canadian Forces. After the war they returned to Pittsburgh where Mabel continued to paint and exhibit frequently. In addition to having an important solo exhibition in 1923 at the 14th Annual Exhibition of the Associated Artists of Pittsburgh, her work was included in the 1920, ’23 and ’26 Carnegie Institute International Exhibitions of Painting, the 1922, ’26 and ’27 Annual Exhibitions of the Associated Artists of Pittsburgh as well as the 118th Annual Exhibition of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in 1923.

The Milk Bottle was among the 29 works in Mabel Killam Day’s 1923 solo exhibition. It depicts an open doorway through which a vista of the industrial slums of Pittsburgh is visible. Beams of light stream in through an open doorway towards the viewer and create beautiful highlights in the foreground, where a milk bottle, mop and pail are visible. The billowing grey smoke stacks near the centre of the canvas and the cool blue hues that pervade the entire work contrast nicely against the dark interior in which the viewer is situated. It is an Ashcan influenced canvas intended to capture a non-idealized impression of urban life as seen by the artist. Day painted several similar subjects while in Pittsburgh, some of which are now in public collections: Factory Landscapes (Acadia University Art Gallery and Polish Slum, Pittsburgh (Owens Art Gallery).

In 1926 the Days moved to Philadelphia where Frank taught at Swarthmore College and Mabel continued to paint. From 1928 to 1933 they lived in Schenectady, New York where Frank was President of Union College and Mabel had a solo exhibition of her work at the College Women's Club (1929). After 1933 they lived in Yarmouth, Nova Scotia where Mabel continued to paint well into her seventies and to exhibit with the Nova Scotia Society of Artists and the Maritime Art Association.

Mabel Killam Day painted prolifically from the turn of the nineteenth century until the late 1950s. However, like so many artists who enjoyed long careers, the aesthetic quality of her work did not remain consistent. Many of her paintings that predate the great depression have great aesthetic merit (such as the three presented here), while those she produced during the 1930s, 40s and 50s grew progressively more static and conventional.

The majority of Mabel Killam Day’s most important works remained in private collections where they received little public attention and were often stored in undesirable conditions. This oversight was first addressed when the Acadia University Art Gallery acquired a group of excellent canvases ranging in date from c.1905 to 1926 and, in conjunction with the Dalhousie University Art Gallery mounted the most recent

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10 It should also be noted that in 1937 Zwickers Gallery in Halifax was gutted by fire while a solo exhibition of works by Mabel Killam Day was installed. Several of her early works were destroyed in this fire.
solo exhibition of her work in 1996.\textsuperscript{11} Franziska Kruschen, Director of the Acadia University Art Gallery has championed Mabel Killam Day’s art with success in Atlantic Canada.\textsuperscript{12} Despite this, her work has received little public attention elsewhere and there are, to my knowledge, no works by her in any public collection outside Atlantic Canada: the Acadia University Art Gallery owns 18 oil paintings, the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia owns 8 oil paintings and one watercolour, the Dalhousie University Art Gallery owns 2 graphite sketches, the Nova Scotia Museum owns 1 oil painting, and the Owens Art Gallery owns 2 oil paintings.

Please cite in the following manner:

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