

# Mabel Killam Day

Franziska Kruschen

## ABSTRACT

Franziska Kruschen examines the career and artistic influences of Mabel Killam Day.

## RÉSUMÉ

Dans cette étude, Franziska Kruschen examine la carrière et les influences artistiques de Mabel Killam Day.

Mabel Killam Day painted with intensity and persistent dedication. She exhibited her work regularly in Canada, particularly in the Maritime region and in the United States. Her canvases attest to her single-minded interest in the expressive power of art, whether she painted the industrialized cityscapes of Pittsburgh or Philadelphia or the rugged and picturesque landscapes of rural Nova Scotia. It was this intensity and vitality that consistently brought her to the attention of art critics and art professionals throughout her half-century long career.

Mabel Eliza Killam was born in Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, in 1884 of a wealthy shipping and shipbuilding family who had thrived in business in that town since the latter part of the eighteenth century. She grew up with all the privileges of family wealth and position. In 1900, Mabel Killam became a student at Mount Allison Ladies' College in Sackville, New Brunswick, where she was both popular and successful academically. The *Allisonia*, the school yearbook, described her as an "all round" girl and "a girl of no common ability" who managed to get more out of her courses than the average college girl. In her last year she was Editor-in-Chief of the *Allisonia* and graduated in 1904 with a Mistress of Liberal Arts degree, winning first prize in drawing, first prize as an essayist and first prize in natural science.<sup>1</sup>

In the following year, Killam pursued her studies in art in New York, a brave, though not unheard of, thing to do. There she enrolled in the New York School

of Art, where one of her teachers was the dynamic and inspiring Robert Henri. Henri, as a teacher and mentor, provided Killam with a framework for thinking about her art and served as a role model in her later career as a teacher. (See Figure #1)

In 1909, after Killam had returned to Yarmouth, she submitted a painting to an exhibition in New York. Upon seeing it, Henri wrote Killam a letter in which he compared her work to that of the Constable, the great English landscape painter. He encouraged her in her vocation as an artist and exhorted her to paint diligently.<sup>2</sup> These words provided a strong stimulus to this ambitious woman early in her career. Years later, in 1935, Killam presented a speech to the Sackville Art Association, in which she spoke of Henri's influence on her as a teacher and mentor, saying:

Robert Henri had some disagreement with the management of the New York School of Art and resigned as head instructor. He was a great painter and a great teacher, probably the greatest teacher of painting that this continent has ever produced. He was followed by twenty devoted disciples and the Henri School of Art was founded in a ramshackle old building on Broadway. There was no nonsense about the Henri art school, there was no posturing or pretending, everyone was a serious but joyful hard

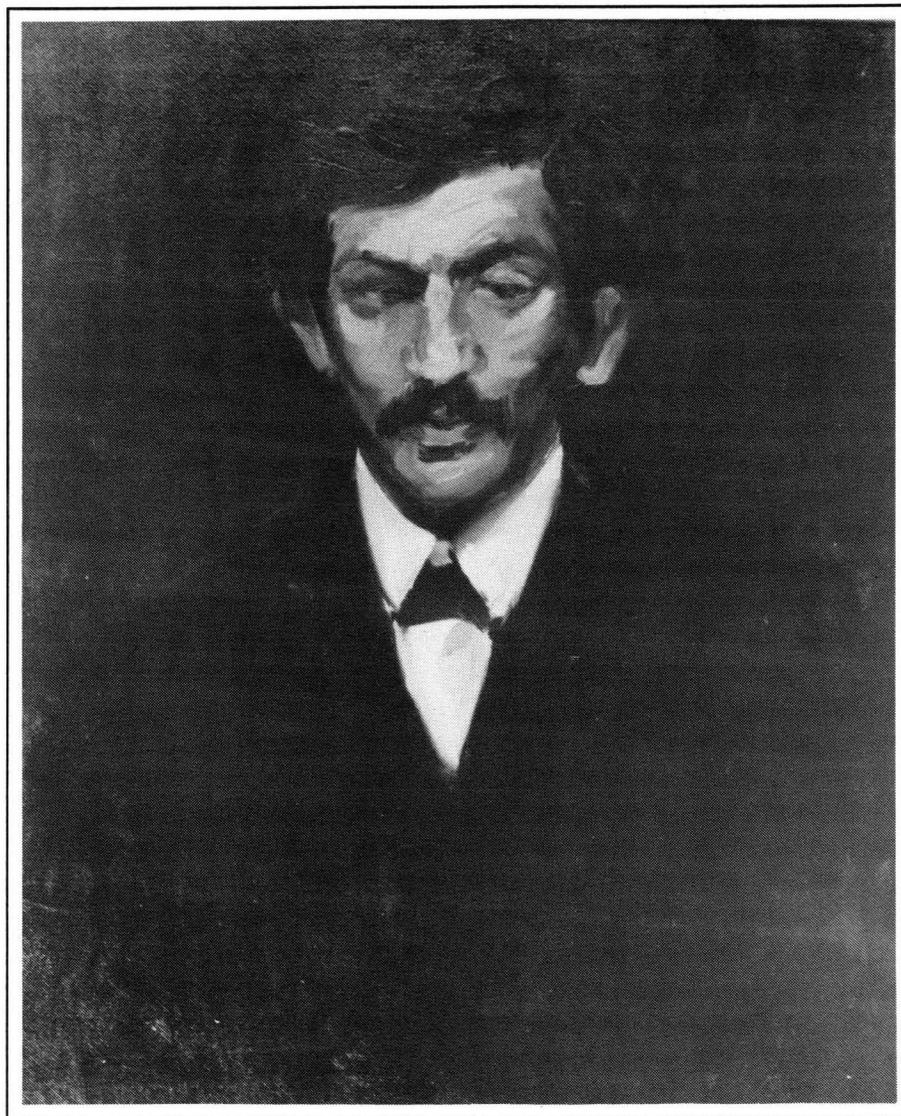


Figure 1. Portrait of Robert Henri (?), Mabel Killam Day, oil on canvas. Photo courtesy of Acadia University Art Gallery, Wolfville, N.S.

worker. I had the good fortune to be one of that group of twenty. How we worked for ourselves and our master. Henri spent hours with us, struggling to find in the work of each of his pupils something worth while upon which something better could be built. He often disregarded the faults, he searched for the good. He believed in the individual, and the development of each pupil's personality, he was suspicious of and frowned upon established convention. He was the great rebel against Academic authority in America. We his students hung upon his words.<sup>3</sup>

In 1910, Mabel Killam married the scholar and writer, Frank Parker Day, who had been a student at Mount Allison University at the same time as Killam. After studying at Christ Church, Oxford, as a Rhodes Scholar, Day took up a teaching post at the University of New Brunswick. Killam Day accompanied him to Fredericton.

In 1912 the couple moved to Pittsburgh, where Day served first as Head of the English Department and then as Director of Academic Studies and Dean of Freshman at the Carnegie Institute of Technology. Except for a period overseas during the war, when Day was on the battlefield and Mabel Killam Day spent time in England, the couple remained in Pittsburgh until 1926. Here Killam Day participated actively in the artistic life of the city. She was a member of the Associated Artists of Pittsburgh and became one of its directors in 1913. She participated regularly in the association's annual exhibitions, which were held in the Carnegie Art Gallery, winning honors and awards on several occasions<sup>4</sup> and had a solo exhibition there in 1923. She also exhibited at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and at the Chicago Art Institute.

In 1918 Killam Day went home to Yarmouth for

the birth of her son Donald. Early in his life, Donald developed medical problems which needed specialized intervention and care, much of it centered in Philadelphia. In 1926 Frank Parker Day resigned from his position at the Carnegie Institute and became Professor of English at Swarthmore College, so that the family could be near specialists in Philadelphia. Here Mabel Killam Day again became actively involved in the artistic life of the city.

Throughout her years in Pittsburgh and Philadelphia we see Robert Henri's continuing influence on Killam Day's style and choice of subjects. In Killam Day's 1915 portrait of an unknown woman, for example she has built up the structure of the head and shoulders through a pattern of strong and simple geometric shapes before adding individualizing detail. (See Figure #2) This is consistent with Henri's writings, in which he tells the artist to select factors of constructive value and to build them into a unique vision of the subject. In portraiture, he encouraged the artist to see with the inner eye, to memorize particular characteristics of the sitter, to include those characteristics in the composition that contributed to the idea, and to leave out distracting details or a dominating background. Henri saw art as a social force that could be used to make people more sensitive to their environment. He charged his students to paint the vitality and richness of the American scene; the industrialized and populated urban environment.<sup>5</sup> Killam Day consistently painted works which used the energy and rawness of city life as her subject, though, as in her portraits, she generalized her forms, subordinating individual details to the overall design and mood. In her prize-winning works such as Woods Run, a painting of a Pittsburgh slum, in which small dark figures are subordinated to the box-like houses and other man-made structures, and Evening Glow, which is a lively composition of angular shapes representing the multi-storied buildings and a pattern of roof-tops covered in snow, bathed in the soft light of evening, mood is con-

veyed through the harmonious arrangement of colour and power lies in the massing of large generalized shapes.

Canada's Group of Seven also left its mark on Killam Day's work. Years later, as a teacher in Yarmouth, Killam Day spoke about the Group's influence when she told her class about an exhibition of work by the Group of Seven that she had seen in Pittsburgh. She described the exhibition as being like "a breath of fresh air."<sup>6</sup> It provided an alternative to the subject matter and style which she had learned from Henri, confirming the validity of painting the rural environment in Nova Scotia. Her exhibition record throughout her time in Pennsylvania included landscapes of Nova Scotia, painted during visits to the Killam residence in Yarmouth and to the family's summer home on nearby Lake Annis. The Group of Seven's loyalty to the Canadian landscape and their vigorous post-impressionist style provided an alternative to Henri's social realism and his dark and gloomy atmosphere. Their high key colors inspired Killam Day to brighten her palette. Her painting *Early Spring*<sup>7</sup> of birch trees in sunlight, for example, is painted with loose brush strokes in a post-impressionist pattern of light and shade similar to the manner of Tom Thomson and members of the Group of Seven. (See Figure #3) Much of the success of this painting depends on the dramatic contrasts between the white birch trees set against the areas of intense colour. Another painting, *House on Chestnut Street*<sup>8</sup> with its cold-looking lilac snow, is reminiscent of Lawren Harris' winter landscapes. (See Figure #4)

In 1928, when Frank Parker Day assumed the position of President of Union College, the family moved to Schenectady, New York, and Mabel Killam Day took on the role of President's wife. However, her devotion to art remained and, in a well-lighted studio in the southwest wing of the President's house, she continued her painting. A year later she had an exhibition under the auspices of the Union College Wom-

en's Club. Her work seems to have been part of a larger exhibition, but a review in the Union College paper, *Cordiensis*, speaks of Killam Day's landscapes in oil "dominating the exhibit despite the fine portraits in water color, pastels and sculptures by other exhibiting artists." The review describes her "views of the gloriously undisturbed land of Nova Scotia and the industrially ravished landscape of Pittsburgh." It notes that, "The critics have always been impressed with [her] vigorous style of painting" and that "Connoisseurs of art have been impressed with her ability to construct a composition without any lurking hints of femininity," which the review defines as painting "in a hearty fashion", "with a vigor that is never merely a striking exhibition of force to disguise emptiness." The review goes on to say that, "She [Killam Day] has an interest in the forceful projection of nature, and she achieves a commensurate expression of this force through the medium of the gem-like quality of the colors found in the earth, sea and sky, be they in Nova Scotia or Pittsburgh."<sup>9</sup> Killam Day expressed a similar view about painting in her 1935 speech to the Sackville Art Club. Responding to the comment that, "the pretty picture seems to have gone out of style", she said, "I am glad that some of the prettiness has gone and that much new beauty has come in its place". She then explained that simplicity of lines and shapes and an inner harmony characterize a good painting.<sup>10</sup>

In 1933, after serving as president for five years, Day resigned from his post because of increasing ill-health and moved with his family back to the Maritimes. Frank Parker Day did not settle into the quiet life, but took on new challenges. In Yarmouth, he was business manager of the hospital, devoted time to the Red Cross and contested the Yarmouth seat in a provincial election for the Tories.<sup>11</sup> In New Brunswick, he organized the Canadian Officer Training Corps at Mount Allison University, designed a physical fitness program, prepared a basic English course for service men, and helped in the establishment of a

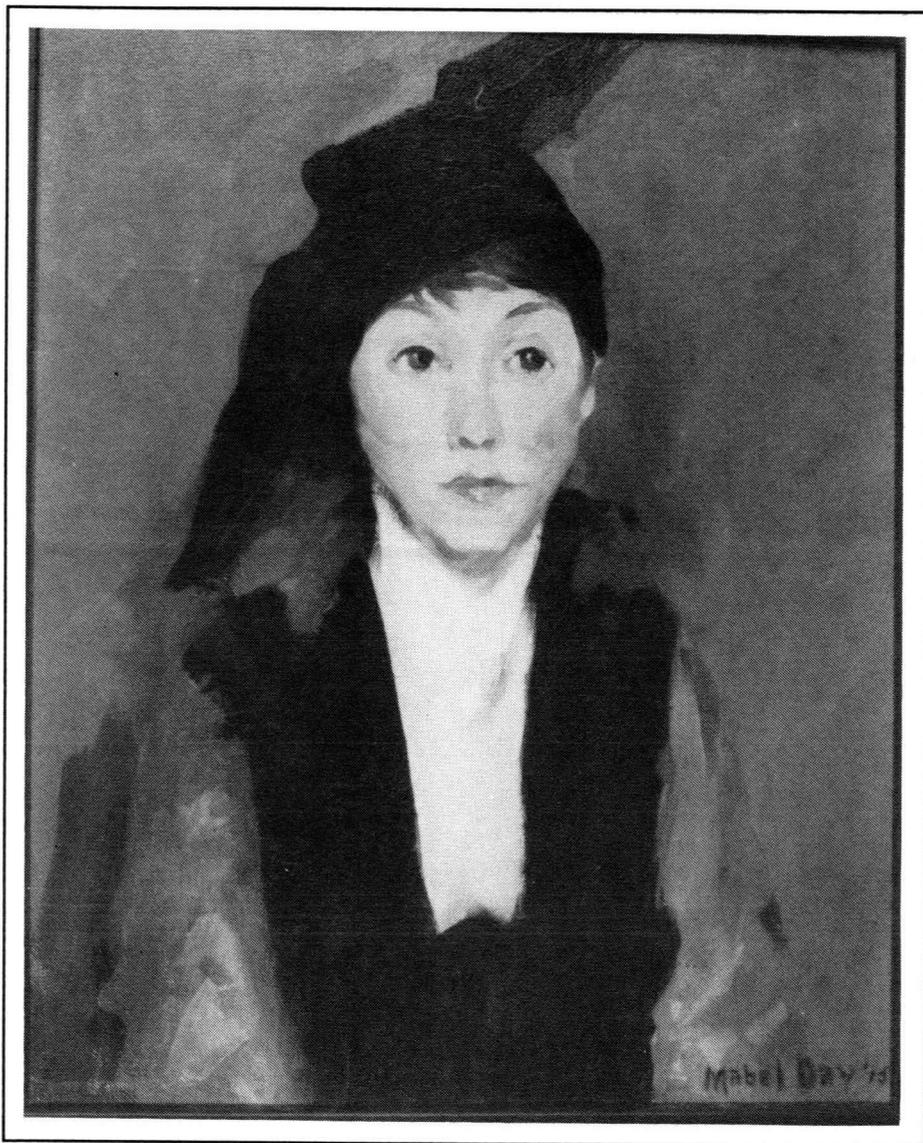


Figure 2. Portrait of a Lady with a Hat, 1915, Mabel Killam Day, oil on board. Photo courtesy of Acadia University Art Gallery, Wolfville, N.S.



Figure 3. Early Spring, (?), Mabel Killam Day, oil on canvas. Photo courtesy of Acadia University Art Gallery, Wolfville, N.S.



Figure 4. House on Chestnut Street, c. 1935, oil on canvas. Photo courtesy of Acadia University Art Gallery, Wolfville, N.S.

Prisoner of War camp. Mabel Killam Day seems to have been an active partner in much of her husband's work, but she continued to pursue her own career as an artist. She had a studio on the family property at Lake Annis, where she painted avidly, often choosing her subjects from her immediate surroundings. Sketching trips with artists from the Yarmouth area, such as Evelyn Perry and Helen Weld, also provided her with sketches, which she turned into paintings in her studio. She sketched and painted when she accompanied her husband to Cape Breton on fishing trips and produced paintings when she traveled with him to the West Indies, where he spent time recuperating from his illness. Frank Parker Day died in Yarmouth in 1950.

Killam Day exhibited her paintings regularly from the mid-1930s until her death in 1960. Her work was prominent in the Nova Scotia Society of Artists annual member exhibitions and in the Maritime Art Association exhibitions. She had a solo exhibition of oils at the Owens Art Gallery in 1937, which was followed by an exhibition at Zwickers Gallery in Halifax. Tragically, a fire in the Gallery prevented the opening of the exhibition and destroyed many of her best canvases. In 1940, she represented Nova Scotia at the Canadian National Exhibition in Toronto entitled Contemporary Art of Canada and Newfoundland. With Emily Carr, she achieved national recognition as one of Canada's outstanding women artists and received a Medal of Merit for her "Notable Contribution to the Art of the World" That year, her work was also se-

lected for the Canadian Women Artists exhibition, sponsored by the National Council of Women of Canada and the National Council of Women of the United States, and was shown at the Riverside Museum in New York, in the company of paintings by other great Canadians, such as Prudence Heward of Montreal, Paraskeva Clark and Katherine Daly of Toronto, and Bess Harris and Emily Carr of Vancouver.

Mabel Killam Day spent the last twelve years of her life, but one, teaching adult art classes in Yarmouth and only resigned in 1959 because of ill health. She died on August 26, 1960. Her students described her as a wonderful teacher and a very special person, pointing out that she had made art so popular that everyone wanted to take art classes. A strong amateur art movement in Yarmouth developed out of her inspiration.<sup>12</sup> Day was vigorous and outspoken, passing on the lessons that she learnt from her own teachers and always trying to bring out the best in her students. One of her students wrote that, "If one copied a painting or used a photograph she wouldn't even look at it."<sup>13</sup> This is consistent with her life-long dedication to the principle that art was a personal and expressive response to one's environment. Like Henri before her, Killam Day believed that real art was the domain of a specially attuned and dedicated person and that it was the role of the teacher to encourage these qualities in the students.

NOTES

1. Allisonia vol. II. no.1 (Nov. 1904),
2. Robert Henri letter to Mabel Killam Day, 1909
3. Handwritten manuscript of speech to Sackville Art Association, March, 1935
4. Day won first honors in the Association's 1913 annual exhibition for her painting Winter which showed a scene of the frozen St. John river. In 1922 she won the prize awarded by the Pittsburgh School of Design for "Best picture painted by a Woman".
5. For Robert Henri's views on art see Robert Henri The Art Spirit (Philadelphia; Lippincott, 1960 )
6. A letter from Margaret Chipman, Yarmouth, Nova Scotia to Rosemary Feener, March 3, 1990
7. The location of this work is unknown, though it is likely situated near the artist's home on Lake Annis. Date unknown.
8. This house with its snow covered porch, is still standing on Chestnut Street, Yarmouth, and was given as the artist's winter home in the 1950's. Date of painting unknown.
9. The Cordiensis Tuesday, March 19, 1929
10. See footnote 3
11. Dalhousie University News, May 1977
12. Conversation with Yarmouth artist Ruth Rideout, September 1992
13. Ibid.

