



Fig. 1. Helen Galloway McNicoll, *Study of a Child*, ca. 1900, oil on canvas, 61 x 50.8 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

## Helen McNicoll's *Study of a Child*: An Exploration of Composition, Colour and Technique

Dina Georgaros

This essay will examine Helen Galloway McNicoll's (1879–1915) painting *Study of a Child* (ca. 1900) (fig. 1), particularly the artist's approach to composition, colour and technique in representing her subjects as autonomous individuals. This painting will be analyzed alongside two other works by McNicoll, entitled *Little Girl in Blue* (n.d.) (fig. 2) and *The Little Worker* (1907) (fig. 3), as well as French Impressionist artist Pierre-Auguste Renoir's (1841–1919) *A Girl with a Watering Can* (1876) (fig. 4) and his contemporary Berthe Morisot's (1841–1895) *The Cradle* (1872) (fig. 5).



Fig. 1. Helen Galloway McNicoll, *Study of a Child*, ca. 1900, oil on canvas, 61 x 50.8 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

The arrangement of elements in McNicoll's *Study of a Child* precipitates questions about its subjects.<sup>1</sup> At first glance, the work portrays an interaction between an infant and a young woman. McNicoll leaves the background undefined to direct the viewer's attention to the relationship between the figures. The background of *Study of a Child* is largely obscured by the infant and the woman, who occupy most of the composition. Wrapped in a yellow blanket, the child's body is hidden save for its head and mittened hand. The baby's head is the focal point of the painting, its mouth and pacifier nearest to the centre of the painting. The boundary between the child's blanket and the young woman's pink dress creates a sharp diagonal axis transecting the painting (fig. 6). The young woman is positioned peripherally in the upper left corner, and her body is cut off by the edge of the canvas.



Fig. 6. Compositional breakdown of *Study of a Child*.

McNicoll's strong diagonal composition emphasizes the child's prominence, yet the infant is not

idealized or adorned in any way. This approach is unlike some nineteenth-century Impressionist depictions of children that were popular commodities, such as Renoir's *A Girl with a Watering Can*.<sup>2</sup>

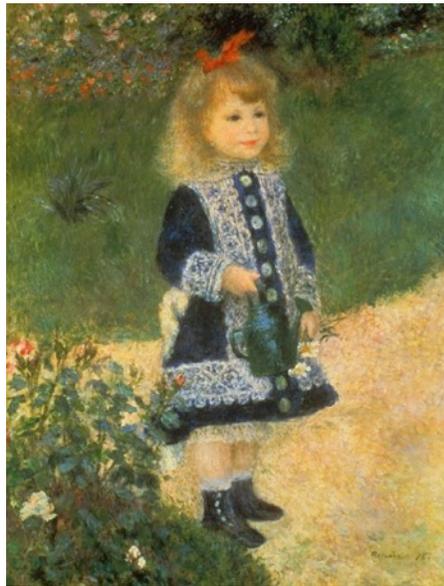


Fig. 4. Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *A Girl with a Watering Can*, 1876, oil on canvas, 100.3 x 73.2 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC. <https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/asset-viewer/a-girl-with-a-watering-can/pgHLNTnAE2OCRQ?projectId=art-project>.

In this painting the girl is put on display in her finest garments. With a watering can in hand, she appears stiff and motionless, as though she has been instructed to hold her pose. Contrary to Renoir's model, McNicoll's subjects are devoid of theatricality and are isolated as independent and unique individuals.<sup>3</sup> This is emphasized by the gazes of the figures: the young woman is looking at the child, who is not returning her gaze but is instead looking off into the distance. The viewer is invited into the space of the painting through the proximity of the subjects to each other and to the picture plane, yet the young woman and child remain oblivious to the viewer's presence. This "psychological distance" is a recurring element in McNicoll's works.<sup>4</sup>

McNicoll's *Little Girl in Blue*, a picture of a young girl sewing, similarly explores the psychological state of its subject.



Fig. 2. Helen Galloway McNicoll, *Little Girl in Blue*, n.d., oil on canvas, 47.6 x 42.6 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Compared to *Study of a Child*, there is a greater sense of depth and a clearer definition of the interior space, which includes a chair, a table and wooden floor panels spreading across the room to the wall behind the girl. In both paintings, however, the subjects are compressed and elements are cropped to create an intimate and enclosed environment.<sup>5</sup> Similar to the figures in *Study of a Child*, the subject in *Little Girl in Blue* does not meet the viewer's gaze, as she is completely absorbed in the act of sewing. In her essay entitled "Impressions of Difference: The Painted Canvases of Helen McNicoll," Kristina Huneault explains that while sewing is characterized as a signifier of patience, traditionalism and domesticity, it is also a marker of independence.<sup>6</sup> Whether the young girl is performing a household task or working on a personal project,

McNicoll's depiction of a young girl actively engaged in her work demonstrates her individuality. Notably, in these two paintings, McNicoll examines the young women's "absorption in the physicality of their space."<sup>7</sup> Unaffected by what is going on around them and resistant to being put on display, the figures in *Study of a Child* and *Little Girl in Blue* dominate their space, immersed in the acts of observing and/or creating with their hands. These works mirror the artist's own process of observing and creating a work of art.

Often referred to as a "sunshine painter" in newspaper exhibition reviews of the early twentieth century,<sup>8</sup> McNicoll employed a colour palette that was not merely dictated by painting *en plein air* but was largely determined by her subject matter—that is, the daily lives of women and children.<sup>9</sup> In *Study of a Child*, McNicoll uses primary colours mixed with white to produce lighter values in her compositional colour combinations. Her explorations of the effects of colour and light can be seen in her use of yellow to depict the baby's blanket, brightened through the integration of white.<sup>10</sup> McNicoll creates further optical effects with an application of thin washes and transparencies. The circular arc of nearly transparent white surrounding the child, penetrated by the grey background to give the illusion that the blue marks are a blue grey, is one example of such an effect. Another is the artist's application of blue paint in her rendering of the girl's chair, which is mixed with white and yellow to make it appear green. Evidently, McNicoll was mindful of the effects of colour mixing and the notion that different colours become static or active when juxtaposed with one another. Although oil permits colours to be easily mixed together due to a prolonged drying time, McNicoll does not blend colours to a smooth finish; rather, her markings of yellow and white are clearly distinguished.

McNicoll's methods of applying paint onto the canvas were influenced by Impressionism, a nineteenth-century Parisian art movement that espoused working "quickly and spontaneously without reflection."<sup>11</sup> McNicoll's swift and gestural brushstrokes reflect a then emerging "romantic/atmospheric style" that encouraged naturalism, as seen in *The Little Worker*.<sup>12</sup>

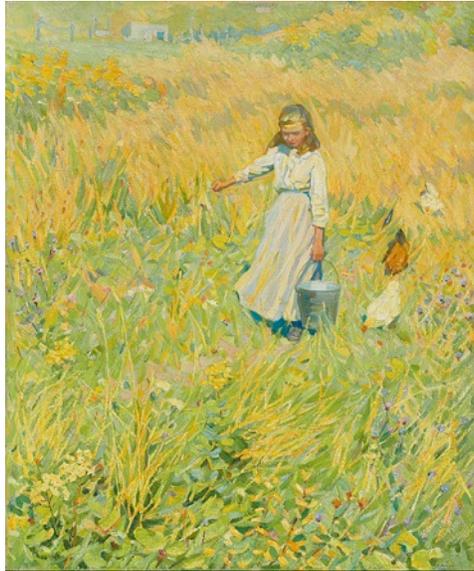


Fig. 3. Helen Galloway McNicoll, *The Little Worker*, ca. 1907, oil on canvas, 51.3 x 61 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario. © 2013 Art Gallery of Ontario.  
<https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/asset-viewer/the-little-worker/OQHbG9JMgoQkIw>.

Here McNicoll portrays a young rural worker whose working life is neither dramatized nor glamourized.<sup>13</sup> The artist makes use of similar colours and vivid hues as *Study of a Child* to portray a different subject. She captures an atmospheric perspective and the fleeting effects of sunlight.<sup>14</sup> Like the infant in *Study of a Child* surrounded by yellow and white, the young worker is dressed in a white garment with tints of yellow.

While the colour white typically signifies purity and innocence, Huneault states that as a “painter of white fabric, its connotations central to [McNicoll’s] art suggest both a freshness and blankness.”<sup>15</sup> The artist thus creates a paradox: while her subjects are dressed or surrounded by a “purified” white, her portrayal of children as independent and unique insinuates their rejection of the Victorian ideal of a domestically oriented woman.<sup>16</sup> Her subjects thus simultaneously comply with the image of a purified child and reject it altogether. Moreover, McNicoll’s execution of fabric, in its texture and weight, is suggestive of cotton. Since women workers contributed to the mass production of cotton during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, cotton was often associated with a woman’s rejection of familial commitments. Women cotton workers were “the best paid, most highly unionized female manual workers in Britain whose non-domestic way of life contravened Victorian domesticity.”<sup>17</sup> McNicoll’s choice to portray her subjects in cotton suggests that she intended the viewer to associate them with working women.

The use of similar colours to render the child and the young woman in *Study of a Child* raises questions about the nature of their relationship. The yellows and whites of the child’s blanket and bonnet are echoed in the creases of the young woman’s garment. The hints of blue surrounding the child’s glove and bonnet also appear in the young woman’s hair. A harmony is reflected in the stillness of their facial expressions and in their similar facial features, such as their blush cheeks, rosy ears and red lips. While McNicoll’s depiction of women and children may be interpreted as a reference to motherhood,<sup>18</sup> her paintings do not “categorically indicate a maternal theme.”<sup>19</sup> The artist, who never married or had children of her own, was aware of childbearing and the maternal experiences of women, as most of the advertisement clippings she collected in her notebook were of women and children (fig. 7). Although the young woman in

*Study of a Child* appears too young to be a mother, the matching features of the two figures imply a maternal bond.



Fig. 7. Open page of Helen McNicoll's scrapbook, ca. 1900, private collection. Courtesy Art Gallery of Ontario.

The formal elements and content of McNicoll's *Study of a Child* are comparable to Morisot's *The Cradle* (fig. 5), which is a depiction of Morisot's sister Edma (1839–1921) and her daughter Blanche.<sup>20</sup> The most obvious correlation between the two paintings is the subject matter: both are images of women contemplatively studying an infant child. However, Morisot's painting portrays a mother's physical distance from her newborn child, who is sheltered in her veiled cradle from the outside world.<sup>21</sup>



Fig. 5. Berthe Morisot, *The Cradle*, 1872, oil on canvas, 56 x 46 cm, Musée d'Orsay.  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Berthe\\_Morisot,\\_Le\\_berceau\\_\(The\\_Cradle\),\\_1872.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Berthe_Morisot,_Le_berceau_(The_Cradle),_1872.jpg).

This work recalls *Study of a Child* not only in the mirrored gestures of the mother and child, but also in the inaccessibility of the child, who remains in his/her own world.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, both paintings, small in size, evoke a sense of intimacy through the condensed pictorial space and the omission of an outside world.<sup>23</sup> Morisot renders a light, lace-like fabric in her painting as a physical barrier between the mother and child and to hide the details of the child's face. The blanket in McNicoll's painting similarly functions as a method of concealment in that it completely envelops the child's body. Despite the connotations of a harmonious relationship between the female figure and child in both McNicoll's and Morisot's works, the physical barrier between them suggests a psychological distance, a simultaneous sense of proximity and of disassociation between the two subjects.

Through a comparative analysis this essay has examined McNicoll's *Study of a Child* as an image of a young woman and child as two autonomous beings. Although the similar facial features and colours used to render the figures suggest a close bond between the two figures, there remains a psychological distance between them, as well as between them and the viewer. Both the young woman and the child remain detached from their surroundings, absorbed in their interior worlds.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> *Study of a Child* was produced in 1900, when McNicoll was attending art classes taught by William Brymner (1855–1925) in Montreal, and it may be one of the artist's earliest works. See Natalie Luckyj, *Helen McNicoll: A Canadian Impressionist* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1999), 23.

<sup>2</sup> Greg M. Thomas, *Impressionist Children: Childhood, Family and Modern Identity in French Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 33.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>4</sup> Kristina Huneault, "Impressions of Difference: The Painted Canvases of Helen McNicoll," *Art History* 27, no. 2 (March 2004): 226.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas, 149.

<sup>6</sup> Huneault, 223.

<sup>7</sup> Luckyj, 46.

<sup>8</sup> *Montreal Daily Star*, March 31, 1908.

<sup>9</sup> Luckyj, 57.

<sup>10</sup> Jordi Vigué, *Great Women Masters of Art* (New York: Watson-Guption, 2002), 366.

<sup>11</sup> The once canonical view of Impressionism that artists paid no attention to the meaning of their work of art was quickly challenged when Impressionism proved to be a visual study and commentary on the ever-changing Parisian morals and way of life. See Norma Broude, *Impressionism: A Feminist Reading: The Gendering of Art, Science, and Nature in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991), 8.

<sup>12</sup> Luckyj, 23.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Huneault, 241.

<sup>16</sup> The period in which McNicoll was active saw the Victorian ideal of a women's domestic role being challenged by the idea of the "New Woman," whose duties extended beyond the household into public domains. See Luckyj, 17.

<sup>17</sup> Harold Benenson, "Patriarchal Constraints on Women Workers' Mobilization: The Lancashire Female Cotton Operatives, 1842–1919," *British Journal of Sociology* 44, no. 4 (December 1993): 613.

<sup>18</sup> McNicoll's paintings of motherhood include *The Mother* and *Helping Mother*. See no. 34 and no. 39 in Art Association of Montreal, *Memorial Exhibition of Paintings by the Late Helen G. McNicoll, R.B.A., A.R.C.A.* (Montreal: Art Association of Montreal, 1925).

<sup>19</sup> Huneault, 237.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas, 95.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

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