

SOME NOTES ON ELSA MARJORIE MAY

The information on Elsa May comes from various sources such as: Francois Lareau, Brian Doucette, Guy St-Denis and others.

Elsa / Elsie Marjorie May was born on 11th April 1890 and baptized on 15th June 1890 at St. John the Evangelist Anglican church in Montreal, Canada. She was the daughter of Frank Wolf and Mary Elizabeth (VanKoughnet) May.

B
May

Elsa Margone daughter of Frank Wolff May and Mary Elizabeth VanKoughnet - his wife born on the eleventh of April eighteen hundred and ninety. was baptized on the fifteenth of June following by me

M. J. Amichest
Clara May for E. Doucette
E. G. Major

Frank May
Mary E. May

Elsa Marjorie died, unmarried, on 13th October 1968 and her death notice appeared on October 14th:

MAY, Elsa Marjorie. At the Montreal General Hospital, on Sunday, October 13th, 1968, Elsa Marjorie May, daughter of the late Frank W. and Mary May. Funeral notice to follow.

MAY, Elsa Marjorie. At the Montreal General Hospital, on Sunday, October 13th, 1968, Elsa Marjorie May, daughter of the late Frank W. and Mary May. Funeral service at St. George's Anglican Church, on Wednesday, October 16th, at 2:30 p.m., thence to Mount Royal Crematorium. In lieu of flowers, donations to the S.P.C.A. will be gratefully acknowledged.

She was buried at Cimetière Mont-Royal. She appears to have spent much of her adult life at Westmount in Quebec, Canada. There were a number of unrelated May families living in Montreal and surrounds at the same time, including that of Henrietta Mabel May who was not related to Elsa although both were painters. There was also a chanteuse / actress by the same name who was not "our" Elsa.

Elsa May studied at King's Hall, Compton, Eastern Townships, QC. King's Hall was founded by the reverend Joseph Dinzey in 1874. In 1902, Gena Smith, then Headmistress, organized the school on the model of British ladies' schools and had its name changed to King's Hall to mark the coronation of King Edward VII of England, which took place on the 9th of August of that year. Elsa, who would have been twelve years old, probably joined the school at this time.

PUBLIC EXAMINATION RESULTS.

A. A. Province of Quebec, 1906, preliminary subjects—Seven candidates. Royal Drawing Society of England, 1906—40 honors certificates, 20 pass certificates; 1907—33 honors certificates, 25 pass certificates. Two candidates, Elsa May and Jean Kennedy, gained full honors certificates, having taken honors in all six divisions of the examination.

She is mentioned in *The Montreal Gazette*, March, 1915, at an art exhibition:

RAIN DETERRED PICTURE-LOVERS

Smaller Attendance Than Usual
at Art Gallery Private View

Inclement weather conditions and other attractions of various sorts combined last night to prevent the attendance of many guests who would otherwise have been present at the private view of the thirty-second Spring Exhibition of the Montreal Art Association.

Even before the opening hour, however, a number of members, artists and friends had assembled and spent a pleasant couple of hours studying the pictures and pieces of sculpture. Later in the evening refreshments were served from a long buffet in the lecture room, which was decorated with vases of pale yellow daffodils.

Amongst those present during the evening were Mr. H. V. Meredith, the president of the Association, and Mrs. Meredith, Mr. and Mrs. Frederick Stevens, Mrs. Molson Crawford, Mr. and Mrs. Bernard Coghlin, Mr. and Mrs. William Kirtley, Miss Isabel Ferguson, Mr. and Mrs. Alexander Burnett, Mr. Recorder Weir, Miss Winnifred War, Mrs. J. E. Goodall, Professor and Mrs. Armstrong, Mr. and Mrs. L. P. Berard, Mrs. Rhys-Roberts, Mr. W. D. Lighthall, K.C., Mrs. Lighthall and the Misses Cybel and Alice Lighthall, Miss Hurbliatt, Mr. and Mrs. Eugene Lafleur, Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Hunter, Mr. and Mrs. James Hutchison, Dr. and Mrs. Richard Kerry, Lt.-Col. C. E. A. Paterson, Mr. and Mrs. R. Wilson Reford, Mr. Henri Robert, Miss Madeleine Hanson, Mr. Suzor-Cote, Mr. William Brynner, Miss Marion Jack, Miss Winnifred Duckett, Mr. Norman Holland, Mr. Ployart, Mr. A. Hodgson Smart, Mrs. and the Misses Donnelly, Mrs. Daniel Cream, Mr. and Mrs. J. T. Donald, Mr. and Mrs. William Rutherford, Miss Elsa May, the Misses Geo. Claves, A. G. B. Claxton, K.C., Mr. and Mrs. W. H. Winter, Mr. and Mrs. J. B. Abbott, Miss Carrie Hill, Mrs. J. H. Garth, Miss Estelle Holland, Mr. Robert Hudson, Mr. Walter Lyman, Mr. Clarence Lyman, Mr. A. V. Jackson, Mrs. Arthur Browning, Miss Lillian Thomas, Mr. Kenneth Macpherson, Mr. William McNab, Mr. William Drysdale, Mr. M. Faure and Mr. and Mrs. Horne Russell.

Her painting - *The Outcast* - is said to be "... a rare political painting, expressing the subjugation of women". The painting was part of the 39th Spring Exhibition of the Art Association of Montreal held in March 1922 at the Art Gallery on Sherbrooke Street, Montreal. The painting sold for five hundred dollars that same year.



The Outcast

The original label is still on the back of the painting:



The paragraph below is from a much longer article titled: "Exhibits Drawn from Wide Area. Growing Importance of Spring Art Exhibition More Generally Recognized", Gazette (Montreal) March 21, 1922. p.5, and mentions The Outcast:

SINCERE YOUNG PAINTERS.

The sincerity evinced by the younger painters may, with industry, carry them far. With some, ambition has outstripped performance, and others have done well with a difficult subject, such as Elsa May's "The Outcast," which shows a partly nude girl with face, hidden by her arm, prostrate on some steps.

In the article: "A Final Glance Around: The Art Exhibition Here", *Montreal Daily Star*, 12 April 1922, the author also writes about Elsa May's painting "The Outcast" at the Spring Exhibition:

Elsa May, in "The Outcast" (190), has essayed to visualise grief and despair in a semi-nude figure flung at the foot of a flight of stone steps, with a glimpse of the city—typical of the relentless cruelty of life—beyond. It is not wholly successful in drawing, but it does show imagination and no little ability to express an idea in lucid dramatic form.

Below, Elsa's portrait of Hon. Margaret (Peg) Helena Graham Shaughnessy, (private collection of Guy St-Denis). The painting is an oil on canvas, 24 x 18" -- 56 x 48 cm, " faint stamps indicating the source of the canvas as having been the Art Emporium, 23 [street name illegible], Montreal.



Margaret (Peg) Helena Graham Shaughnessy

Margaret (Peg), born in 1912, was the daughter of William James Shaughnessy, 2nd Baron Shaughnessy, K.C., (1883-1938) and Marion Graham. She died, unmarried, on 24 September 1966.

Below, a self-portrait:



Elsa May

Elsa's art teacher, William Brymner, retired from teaching at the Art Association of Montreal in 1921 and was replaced by Randolph Stanley Hewton (1888 - 1960), as the new director from 1921 to 1924.

Below left is William Brymner with his students in 1918. Perhaps Elsa is among them? In 1921, when Brymner retired, the Art Association of Montreal held a special afternoon tea in his honour. His students presented him with a celebratory scroll (below right) inscribed: "... with affection and appreciation from those whom he has taught and inspired." Among the signatories was Elsa.

CANADIAN MARRIAGES.

The following Canadian marriages have taken place :

At St. George's Church, Montreal, Miss Emily Frances English, daughter of the late Mr. Henry English and of Mrs. English, to Captain Philip de Lacy Deare Passy, son of Mr. and Mrs. Philip H. Passy, Port Hope, Ontario. The bride's gown of ivory satin was draped with some old Irish point worn by her mother on her wedding day. It was made with court train, caught at the shoulders with a bandeau of pearls and sprays of orange blossoms. Mr. Soden English gave his sister away. The bridesmaid was Miss Elsa May, and the best man Mr. Gerald Forbes, Ottawa.

During the Second World War, Elsa raised money for the Canadian Red Cross, at least enough for the purchase of an ambulance:



Elsa May was reported as a speaker at a large meeting of the Oxford Group by the *Sherbrooke Daily Record* on 10th October, 1933:

At the evening service the period of worship was conducted by Rev. Dr. Ellery Read and Rev. Dr. W. S. Lennon. The speakers from the Oxford Group were Mrs. J. A. Wilson, leader, of Ottawa, Miss Jacqueline Sprinkle, Miss Elsa May, Hamilton Lane, Carlos McKyes and Oliver Dow, all of Montreal. They spoke with great conviction and earnestness, and held the close attention of the congregation throughout.

Elsa May wrote a letter to the Editor of the *Sherbrooke Daily Record* which was published on 16th January, 1942:

Letters To The Editor

The Record will publish letters from its readers which are considered in the public interest providing they bear the signature and address of the writer. Opinions expressed in this column are the personal views of the writers and not necessarily those of the Record.

HELPING TO MAKE THE SAILORS HAPPY

To the Editor of the Record.

Dear Sir—Your readers sent so many generous contributions in money and in gifts to the "Allied Post" for the Christmas parcels shipped to Allied sailors, and so often asked for further information about our future plans, that we are taking the liberty of writing you another letter to report the achievements of the "Allied Post" to date and its plans for year-round activity.

Through the generosity of the Canadian public, in every province of the Dominion, we were able to send an individual parcel to every member of the crew on every ship we had undertaken to care for this season, and we are now preparing to make a second shipment of "comforts" at the end of January, and hope to continue regular bi-monthly shipments for the duration of the war.

The main object of this organization is to provide Allied seamen, who are entirely cut off from their homelands and families, with friends among the Canadian people, so that each man may feel that there is someone who takes an interest in him and his welfare.

The name of one subscriber was placed on each of the individual parcels sent out at Christmas, and letters of thanks are now coming into our offices, for forwarding to the persons concerned. It will be some time before all these acknowledgements are received, for many of the ships picked up their parcels in a Canadian port before Christmas Day and opened them at sea. Their replies must cross an ocean before returning to us.

In the meantime, we are expanding our work just as quickly as funds and supplies permit, and will take in more and more ships in our bi-monthly mailings.

As there is great need for warm woollen things among the men at sea, we are now trying to establish knitting groups across Canada to provide a steady flow of sweaters, scarves, caps, helmets, mitts, gloves, seaboot stockings, heavy socks, etc., for the Allied ships. All this organization work necessarily takes time, but we are much encouraged by the present rate of progress and deeply grateful for the interest shown by the public.

Until our general funds become large enough, we must ask our knitters to raise their own wool funds locally, and we are, of course, in need of assistance through gifts and money contribution to complete the supplies required for the regular shipments, the next of which will be packed during the last week of January, in the Allied Post Store Room, 211 Marine Building, 1405 Peel Street, Montreal.

Gifts in goods should be sent to the Store Room, Allied Post, Montreal. Money contributions should be addressed to the Allied Post Headquarters, 2955 Viewmount Avenue, Montreal.

Yours very truly,
ELSA MAY.
President, Allied Post.



Above, a photo of Princess Alice, left, with Elsa May at the Allied Post, *La Presse*, Montréal, Wednesday 11th February 1942 at p. 4 recovered by Francois Lareau.

Elsa is reported (below) as having high tea with Princess Alice Countess of Athlone whose husband was Governor General of Canada during World War Two:

Visite de la Princesse

S. A. R. la princesse Alice, comtesse d'Athlone, a honoré ces jours derniers de sa présence l'Ouvroir du Courrier des Alliés, Immeuble Marine, 1405 rue Peel.

S. A. R. a été reçue à l'entrée par la présidente, Miss Elsa May, et la vice-présidente, Mme Westcott Papineau.

Après l'inspection des vingt caisses prêtes à partir et contenant 1,500 paquets individuels qui seront remis à chaque marin sur son unité, la princesse Alice a fait l'honneur aux membres du comité de prendre le thé avec elles. Parmi ces dernières, citons: Mme Daniel Steen, représentant la Norvège; Mme H.-A. Stevenson, Belgique; Mme G.-P. Luden, Hollande; Mme Drzezinska, Pologne; Mme Tserepis, Grèce; Mme Rodolphe Lemieux, France Libre; Mme de Salis, Mme Frankowska, Mme W. Stanley Phillips, secrétaire honoraire; Mme T. Anderson et Mme D. Crawford en charge de l'Ouvroir, Mme A. U. Jones, Mme H.-M. Russel, Mme C. Rosenthal; et pour la publicité, Mme R.-E. Buchanan et Mme A. P. P.

It maybe that Elsa turned from painting to interior ship design as there are some references to her being employed by the Canada Steamship Lines (CSL), such as the following found in her old school's magazine -the *Kings Hall Magazine* for 1929:

ed by James Barrie's Quality Street, also produced by Miss Starke.
Elsa May has been on the staff of the Canada Steamship Lines for the past two years. She runs their shop at the Manoir Richelieu, at Murray Bay in the summer and has recently completed the decorating of the S.S. Tadousac and the S.S. Quebec. She is now working on designs for homespuns.

Below, Manor Richelieu headquarters of the CSL where Elsa worked:



Below two of the ships that Elsa helped decorate:



SS Tadousac



SS Quebec

The Porteous connection:

Miss **Elsa May**, of Montreal, who has been the guest of the Misses Porteous for the past two months in Nassau, left recently for Montreal.

In the Women's Canadian Club of Montreal list of members (1913-14), Elsa is listed living with her mother at 278 Stanley Street. The street now consists of just modern office blocks.

She worked for a number of charities such as the SPCA



Brian Doucette has written two articles on Elsa that have appeared in the Westmount Independent

Guest column

Elsa May - pioneer, painter, polemicist

By BRIAN DOUCETTE

My first thought upon seeing this painting, "The Outcast," for sale in summer 2019 on my Facebook group - Art Found in Canada - was "suffragette."

The suffragettes of Canada, the United States and the UK have long interested me, starting with my happenstance purchase of Eleanor Roosevelt's cupboard. The seller had mistaken my yard sale for an antique store and driven it right to my front door in 2017.

It had been built by Eleanor's furniture company, Val-Kill Industries, itself a part of her strong belief in feminism and women's rights.

The experience of researching that piece had taught me about suffragette symbolism, which I recognized immediately in "The Outcast."

I had also learned that suffragette art was rare. I needed to know more.

We all know of women chaining themselves to buildings in protest. The chain symbolism seen in the painting was also used in cartoons.

Women adorned themselves with brooches in solidarity. Wonder Woman was a suffragette!

Some of my Facebook members deemed the painting a worthless sex-slave portrait or cheap erotica, but the painting had such a sadness. I knew it was more.

I drove the seven hours from Nova Scotia to middle-of-nowhere New Brunswick for her. I was so delighted to see the original exhibition label, a great starting point for more research.

Elsa Marjorie May was born in Westmount in 1890, daughter to a wealthy merchant family. At 16, she won the prestigious Royal Drawing Society's Full Certificate Prize at King's Hall, Compton, for being talented in all her subjects, especially art.

In 1914, she attended the Art Association of Montreal (AAM) and was taught by William Brynner, one of the best art teachers in Canadian history.

Elsa exhibited at the AAM from 1914 until 1922, only stopping during the Great War when she joined the British Commission of the French Red Cross. She served as a nurse in England.

At the spring show of 1922, she exhibited Number 190, "The Outcast." It is oil on canvas. At 40 by 27 inches, it was a painting with a statement. Female artists were not taken seriously, and it was audacious to paint a bare breast - and add a large chain.

Elsa was so courageous for the day. The women of Quebec did not get the right to vote until 1940, and Elsa never exhibited again. One can only assume that "The Outcast" finished her career. Was there ridicule? I am sure there was...

Later, Elsa was busy at gala balls and the SPCA, and acting in plays. In 1928, she worked with Canada Steamship Lines, decorating the Manoir Richelieu in Murray Bay, and later moved on to its passenger vessels.



"The Outcast" by Elsa May and its original exhibition label, below



Elsa stayed with the Red Cross for years, becoming president of the Beaver Hall Red Cross tearoom and the Allied Post goodwill movement. Her membership in the Canadian Club kept her involved with her suffragette ideals. Both led her to raise funds to buy an ambulance needed during World War I. There are many mentions of Elsa in her war role, even lunching with Frances Alice of Atholton.

Elsa stayed in contact with her painting friends. Frances Porteous is mentioned on several trips. Elsa May was never married and died in 1968.

My take

People look at art for many reasons. It can be an investment, a memory, even a status symbol.

I personally see this piece as a snapshot of a time when women had no voice. It must have turned heads at that show. Here's a very talented trained artist who took her heart and put it to canvas.

You can imagine how much I wish I knew more about her life. The value of this isn't like a work by a prolific artist such as Mabel May or Tom Thomson. It's the subject matter she's expressing. I sent images to many art and women's rights academics and educators. All could see the suffragette iconography.

I searched the UK and the United States. There's nothing comparable... I think I just about summed up Elsa May.

Brian Doucette lives in Northwest Harbour, Nova Scotia.

Elsa May, in "The Outcast" (190), has managed to visualize grief and despair in a semi-nude figure lying at the feet of a flight of stone steps, with a glimpse of the city - typical of the relentless cruelty of life - beyond. It is not wholly successful in drawing, but it does show imagination and no little ability to express an idea in lucid dramatic form.

SINCERE YOUNG PAINTERS.

The sincerity evinced by the younger painters may, with industry, carry them far. With some, ambition has outstripped performance, and others have done well with a difficult subject, such as Elsa May's "The Outcast," which shows a partly nude girl with face, hidden by her arm, prostrate on some steps.

Contemporary reviews of Elsa May's work



Elsa May of the Red Cross Tea Room presented a cheque of \$1,750 for an ambulance to Colonel W. Leggat, who accepted it on behalf of the Red Cross. From left, according to the usage of the time, Miss Betty Hart, Mrs. Normand Prentice, May, Miss Martha Allan, Miss Florence Sellers and supporters. \$1,750 in 1940 is worth \$31,128.13 today.

Westmount artist lived from 1890 to 1968

Doucette continues to unearth Elsa May paintings

Nova Scotian Brian Doucette is nothing short of enthusiastic about the work of Westmounter Elsa May (1890-1968), calling her "incomparable" and "courageous." His interest began three years ago when he came across and purchased her painting



"The Outcast" (see "Elsa May - pioneer painter, polemicist," August 31, 2021, p. 26). The suffragette-sympathetic work was exhibited at the Art Association of Montreal's spring 1922 show.

According to Doucette, "Female artists were not taken seriously, and it was audacious to paint a bare breast - and add a large chain!"

Two finds

He has since found two more of May's paintings in private hands, a 1916 self-portrait and a circa 1920 painting of Margaret ("Peg") Helena Graham Shaughnessy (1912-1966), daughter of William James, second Lord Shaughnessy of Montreal.

He gushed about finding the self-portrait. "It was purely coincidence. I had been asking about another artist's genealogy.

"I thought it was a typing error when the owner wrote her painting's subject was different. There it is: the 1916 Art Association of Montreal self-portrait by Elsa May.

"Yes, I bought lottery tickets. The chances of ever finding this painting's owner is about the same odds. I have to go change my dressings where I fell over after seeing the images - and the signatures are identical!"

◀ Margaret ("Peg") Helena Graham Shaughnessy by Elsa May. PHOTO: COURTESY OF GUY FIDELLE

▶ A self-portrait by Elsa May. PHOTO: COURTESY OF ANNE WILSON COLLIER



The 1901 Census

31	487	99	May Frank	M	Head	W	Sept 8	1824	47	Quebec	269	1876	Quebec	Quebec	St. Hubert
32			May	F	Wife		Aug 27	1864	36	Quebec			Quebec	Quebec	
33			Wretchen		Daughter		June 24	1881	19	Quebec			Quebec		St. Hubert
34			Beauchamp				Oct 2	1886	14						
35			Belou				Sept 12	1859	41						
36			Mullin Jane		Servant		May 17	1860	40	Ireland	18	1876	Quebec	Quebec	St. Hubert
37			Quimet				Aug 9	1870	30	Quebec			Quebec	Quebec	St. Hubert
38			Pittcock Ellen				March 18	1861	40	England			Quebec	Quebec	St. Hubert
39			Roberts Adelaide				Nov 2	1872	28				Quebec	Quebec	St. Hubert

FRANK W. MAY IS DEAD IN 77TH YEAR

Widely - known Sportsman
and Manufacturers' Agent
Had Long Illness

Frank W. May, veteran sportsman and prominent manufacturers' agent, died yesterday at his home, 2 Viewmount avenue, in his 77th year. Death followed a long illness.

Mr. May was noted in Montreal for his support of athletics, and in the business world his death removes a much liked figure. He was in partnership with Edmond Leclercq under the name of May and Company, manufacturers' agents, for several years, a business that he organized with his brother, Gustave. He was one of the oldest members of the Royal Montreal Golf Club, and a member of the St. James Club and the Montreal Racquet Club.

Mr. May was born in London, England, and educated overseas. He is survived by Mrs. May, formerly Mary Van Koughnet; three daughters, Mrs. Grigg, of London, and Mrs. John Riddell and Miss Elsa May, of Montreal, and by a sister resident in England.

My father Frank Man was named after Frank May,