

# ALEXANDRE

## “The Quality of the Light is the Essence of the Work” Emily Nelligan’s Drawings of Great Cranberry Island

by Isabelle Dervaux

*I am here in my favorite place.  
WORKING again and feeling much better.*

Emily Nelligan, Great Cranberry  
Island, July 1981<sup>1</sup>

When Emily Nelligan first went to Great Cranberry Island, she was immediately charmed. Captivated by the light and atmosphere of this small island off the coast of Maine, she returned there every summer for more than sixty years and made its landscape the almost exclusive subject of her art. Working *en plein air* from June through October and from memory during the winter and spring months in her Connecticut home, she deployed all the resources of charcoal—her sole medium—to capture the ever-changing character of the site and convey her emotional attachment to it.

Born in New York City in 1924, Nelligan completed her studies at Cooper Union in 1944. Although her classes focused on painting, she would devote her entire career to drawing. Early works include delicate pen-and-ink landscape and plant drawings in a refined, linear style—such as *Untitled* [EN 110]—but charcoal soon became her preferred medium and she relied on it for most of her Maine drawings. Nelligan and her husband, artist Marvin Bileck (1920-2005) began going to Great Cranberry Island in the mid-1940s. A friend had recommended the place for its beautiful scenery and cheap rent. “The moment I first arrived on the island over

50 years ago," Nelligan recalled in 2003, "I felt at home."<sup>2</sup> In a later interview, she elaborated, "I owe everything to the island. When I'm away from it I can't work. I feel claustrophobic. I grew up in New York City, and I suppose I was always dealing with that. When I got to Maine with all that openness, the expanse of the sea and the sky with nothing there, it was such a relief. It was wonderful."<sup>3</sup> Located south of Mount Desert Island, the two-mile long island of Great Cranberry offers an austere landscape defined by its forests of spruce and fir, rocky shore, and cobble beaches. Nelligan and Bileck worked outdoors following a daily routine: "We used to go out every day in the morning, and then again in the afternoon and just set ourselves down and look. Sometimes something would present itself and sometimes it wouldn't. But the process was looking and waiting and hoping to come up with something.... If the light was right I would set myself down and try and capture it. I'm utterly dependent on what I see."<sup>4</sup>

In the early years, Nelligan often drew meadows and trees in closed-in settings, with little or no sky visible. She would focus on a path toward the woods or a grassy field, as in *Field I* [EN 44] or *Untitled* [EN 60.03], rendered in an almost impressionistic manner with short marks registering the blades and sprigs. From the 1980s on, she favored broader vistas in views of the shore and open sea under vast expanses of sky, seen from multiple vantage points. Whatever the scene she depicted, her main subject was the light, especially at dawn and dusk, when the oblique rays of the sun create longer shadows and the fog in the air dissolves the contours. "The quality of the light is the essence of the work," Nelligan said.<sup>5</sup> Exploiting the rich chromatic range of charcoal, from deep blacks to subtle gradations of grays, she suggested the hazy atmosphere that enshrouded the rocks and trees and blurred the edges between land, water, and sky—as can be seen, for instance, in *20 Oct 95 (1)* or *24 Oct. 99 (3)*. Her growing concern with recording the luminosity of a fleeting moment rather than accurately describing a specific site is reflected in the titles of her drawings. While initially she would note places—as in *Meadow: Spurling Point* or *Nearing Thrumpcap*—eventually she chose to identify a work by its date, privileging a sense of time over a geographical location.

Nelligan claimed to have adopted charcoal "simply because it was cheap," but this fast drawing medium also suited her working method.<sup>6</sup> When early on she participated in sessions of drawing from the model organized in downtown artists' studios in New York, her friend Lois Dodd reported that Nelligan liked to draw quickly: "Emily and I both loved short poses—one minute, two minutes. ... She can do fantastic things in a very short amount of time."<sup>7</sup> Bileck also remarked that although his wife did most things slowly and deliberately, "she drew extremely fast."<sup>8</sup> Since the nineteenth century, charcoal has been the medium of choice for artists drawing outdoors because it allows to capture sweeping vistas and rapidly changing effects of light more easily than pencil.<sup>9</sup> Nelligan fully took advantage of this property as can be seen in a stack of unfinished drawings found in her home after her death. In one of them (Fig. 1), for instance, she swiftly blocked large areas by using the charcoal stick on its side to create broad strokes across the sheet. Straight off, she inserted deep black passages next to untouched areas to indicate powerful contrasts of light and shadow. Once she had established the overall effect, she could rework the drawing at length, relying on another essential property of charcoal: the ease with which it can be erased, modified, and layered. Nelligan never used fixatives, refusing to compromise the purity of the medium—and wary of manipulating such highly chemical products. As a result, she could constantly revise her drawings. One of her most important tools in this process was the eraser, which she used extensively—not to correct mistakes but to alter a tone, diminish a contrast, or introduce highlights by lifting some of the charcoal dust. "I use the eraser a lot," she said, "and I work the charcoal into the paper with various cotton swabs. I also rub it in with my finger."<sup>10</sup> A photograph of Nelligan's working table in Connecticut (Fig. 2) shows her familiar tools: rectangular sticks of compressed charcoal; a couple of stumps (pointed rolls of paper used to spread the medium); a soft brush to smooth out the surface; an erasing shield (a small template with cutouts allowing to insert crisp highlights); and several erasers.

One more material element that played a crucial role in the array of effects Nelligan was able to achieve is the paper support. Charcoal requires a slightly textured surface, to which its dry particles can adhere. At first Nelligan used artists' paper specifically manufactured for charcoal or pastel.<sup>11</sup> In the 1970s, looking for a less expensive option, she experimented with writing paper. After trying different finishes, she settled on a thin cotton paper produced by Crane, characterized by a fine-grain texture mimicking the laid structure of traditional handmade paper.<sup>12</sup> Clearly visible in most of Nelligan's drawings, this grid pattern becomes an integral part of the composition, imparting a sense of order to the image and setting off, by contrast, the gentle curves that define the coves, beaches, waves, and clouds of the motif.

With remarkable consistency, Nelligan used the same paper, cut to about the same size, for decades.<sup>13</sup> What may seem like a restriction felt liberating to her, allowing her to concentrate on what was more meaningful to her: how to express the sensation she experienced in front of a particular landscape. A comparison between two groups of drawings illustrates the breadth of graphic and emotional effects she could produce within her material limitations. A series of sheets from the 1970s depict a stormy sea at twilight (all *Untitled* [EN nd.22; EN nd.23; EN nd.24; EN nd.25]). Alternating bands of light and dark render the clouds pressing on the horizon, reflected in the rolling waves of the churning sea below. Gestural, broken touches and agitated, short black strokes evoke a sense of turmoil, imparting a mood of high drama to the scene. A radically different feeling prevails in later drawings—such as *27 Oct 99 (1)*, *23 July 01 (3)*, or *4 Oct 07*—in which long curving lines and a velvety surface obtained through smooth application of pigment conjure a more peaceful vision. Verging toward abstraction, these sensuous drawings distill the elements of the local topography into broad, luminous masses, disregarding the description of natural phenomena in favor of a more personal form of expression. Such an approach calls to mind the works of early twentieth-century American

modernists like Georgia O'Keeffe and Arthur Dove, whose semi-abstract landscapes convey an emotional, nearly spiritual experience of nature.

Whether turbulent or serene, Nelligan's views of nature are both surprisingly consistent and extraordinarily varied. Throughout her life, she exploited with increasing mastery the versatility of the charcoal medium to capture the metamorphoses of light over her favorite seashore while at the same time articulating the intense feelings it stirred in her through images of subtle power and exquisite refinement.

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Fig. 1 – Unfinished drawing



Fig. 2 – Emily Nelligan's working table, Winsted, Connecticut. (Photo Phil Alexandre)

## NOTES

- 1 Card from Emily Nelligan to Richard Pousette-Dart, postmarked 18 July 1981. I am grateful to Joanna Pousette-Dart for sharing this correspondence with me.
- 2 Edgar Allen Beam, "The Center of the Universe: For contemporary island artists, art is all about edges" *Island Journal*, vol. 20, 2003, p. 21. Accessible online: [https://www.islandinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/2003\\_Island-Journal.pdf](https://www.islandinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/2003_Island-Journal.pdf)
- 3 John A. Parks, "Island Light," *Drawing Magazine*, Spring 2015, p. 31.
- 4 Parks, p. 32.
- 5 Parks, p. 32.
- 6 Parks, p. 32.
- 7 Oral history interview with Lois Dodd, 1988 October 10-November 7. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Accessible online: <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-lois-dodd-11891>
- 8 Weisgall, p. 32.
- 9 On the use of charcoal in 19th-century landscapes, see Lee Hendrix, ed., *Noir: The Romance of Black in 19th c. French Drawings and Prints*, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 2016.
- 10 Parks, p. 34.
- 11 The watermark INGRES FABRIANO, for instance, is visible in drawings from the 1950s, such as *Still Evening*, c. 1956, reproduced in *Maine Drawings: Emily Nelligan*, The Tidal Press, Cranberry Isles, ME, 1983, p. 22.
- 12 Traditional handmade paper presents a pattern of horizontal lines intersected by more widely spaced vertical ones, created by the wire mold used to make the paper. A similar effect can be obtained in machine-made paper by using a press to imprint the grid pattern onto the paper.
- 13 At first, the dimensions of Nelligan's drawings varied and were around 10 × 13 in. or 8 ½ by 11 in. From the late 1970s on, she consistently adopted the dimensions of 7 ¼ × 10 ½ in., which correspond to the Monarch-size sheets produced by Crane for upscale stationery. Although Nelligan may have initially bought sheets of that size, eventually she purchased larger sheets, which she cut down to these dimensions.