

Tom Thomson: painter and “Canadian legend”

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Tom Thomson: A Canadian Legend, an exhibition at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa, the Vancouver Art Gallery, Musée du Québec, the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Winnipeg Art Gallery

Tom Thomson (1877-1917) is one of the few Canadian artists from the early 20th century known to a wide national audience. His reputation is deserved. Despite his extremely brief period of work—he painted for less than six years—he sowed the seeds of perhaps the first real movement in art in this country, defined as it was by a passionate connection to the northern wilderness and drawn by Thomson with keen perception and an ingenuous style.

To those unfamiliar with Canadian art, the paintings of Thomson are most likely unknown. To those who are familiar with the subject, his work and life have constituted the stuff of legend since virtually the moment of his untimely death in 1917. Despite considerable artistic achievement over the past century in Canada, to this day schoolchildren in this country are routinely offered his work and that of his collaborators in “The Group of Seven” as the high point of “Canadian” art or as one art historian recently put it, “the historic anchor that has tied Canada...to its sense of northernness.”

Why Thomson in particular has been embraced and promoted as a national hero and icon is not a simple matter and involves political and historical as well as artistic questions. With this in mind, the recent attention to his work—and in particular the major retrospective (which recently closed at the Art Gallery of Ontario [AGO] in Toronto) now touring the country billed as “the man, the myth, the mystery,” with more than 140 paintings, oil sketches and works on paper—allows us to make an assessment of his true value as an artist and to distinguish this reality from the mythology that surrounds his name.

Although Thomson’s paintings are a staple of public art collections in Canada, until a year ago there had been no major retrospective of his work for over 30 years. Given the current crisis of the Canadian state, particularly in its relations with the US, it is difficult not to see this large, officially sponsored exhibition as part of an effort by the elite to advance a distinct “Canadian” culture in order to bolster public support for the “Canadian” national project.

Whether there was insufficient international interest or whether it was the design of the show’s organizers, the fact that it did not go beyond the borders of Canada is something that cannot be ignored. The current exhibition is drawn from the collection of the AGO in collaboration with the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa and includes a number of works from private collections. This traveling exhibit, which opened in Ottawa last September, has visited Vancouver, Quebec City and Toronto. It will conclude in Winnipeg on December 7.

Tom Thomson is sometimes mistakenly identified as one of the Group of Seven, a school of artists that included some of the greatest talents to emerge in Canada in the first half of the 20th century. Although Thomson had died by the time the group formed in 1919, he worked closely with a number of its founding members and his work formed a strong influence

on their later development. The Group of Seven’s style has variously been described as post-impressionist or expressionist, although in actuality their connection is less one of style than of subject. Their work deals mainly with the wilderness and rural expanse of the north and far north, with some notable and interesting exceptions depicting rural industry and working class life. Constituted as the Dominion of Canada in 1867, the national confederation of this vast territory was for them a relatively recent event, and its uncharted course was as challenging as its untamed wilds.

Although some of these artists evinced a degree of nationalist sentiment themselves, it would be a mistake to allow the manner in which the powers that be have manipulated their legacy to diminish the genuine value of their work. Moreover, their “nationalism” at this relatively early stage contained an element of healthy hostility to the British Empire and its rule, as opposed to the Canadian nationalism promoted following World War I by a ruling elite in pursuit of its own predatory interests.

Furthermore, the stated intentions of any given group of artists must always be viewed critically, within the context of social and artistic development as a whole. The artists’ work must be appraised beyond the framework within which they themselves may have conceived it (i.e., in objective aesthetic and historical terms). While it is difficult to speak of their work en bloc, one must say that in the paintings of artists such as Thomson, J.E.H. MacDonald and A.Y. Jackson, there is a power, passion and humanism; an enduring voice that still speaks convincingly.

The place of Thomson in relation to the Group was necessarily fashioned somewhat after the fact. The painter died in a tragic and mysterious manner in 1917: though an accomplished woodsman, he drowned while canoeing alone in remote Canoe Lake in central Ontario under circumstances that raised still-unresolved questions about the possibility of foul play. The manner of his death, against the grim backdrop of the war, combined with his pioneering of distinctively Canadian themes to make him all too well suited for legendary status.

Yet, an appraisal of his work reveals that many of his paintings stand out against the work of his contemporaries. The naïve audacity and compassion of early works such as “Northern Lake” tell of the keen purpose he must have felt in depicting the isolated and harsh settings he had come to find so compelling.

Thomson was among the youngest of what was derisively tagged “the hot mush” school by some conservative critics, and one of the least schooled among them. However, in his few active years, he developed a body and style of work that in its ardent sincerity lent a confidence to his colleagues that only grew following his death.

Born in 1877, Tom Thomson grew up in a family of 10 children in the small town of Leith, Ontario, near the shores of Georgian Bay. Second-generation Scottish, his parents placed a good deal of importance on their children’s cultural education, encouraging them in the areas of literature, art and particularly music. Although his father John was nominally a farmer and made a good living at it, it was work he never fully devoted

himself to, preferring rather to lavish his attention on his flower garden and on his family.

Thomson suffered from a weak constitution as a child and at a certain point was taken out of school because of a chronic lung ailment. Consequently, he spent a good deal of time away from the social interaction of school and passed many of his formative years relatively isolated, often exploring the neighboring forests and fields where he developed a close affinity with nature. Though he could be highly focused when he set himself a task, he typically wouldn't pursue any interest for very long and this aimlessness characterized his early adult years. He worked in various occupations—as a farmer and as a machinist, and at one point he attended business school in Chatham, Ontario, before he found a pursuit that brought him some satisfaction.

Thomson's brothers had ventured out to Seattle when he was 20 to start a business school, and he followed them there and began working as a photoengraver for an advertising company. With some success under his belt, he returned to Ontario to continue as a photoengraver and during this time set about developing his skills as a graphic designer. It was at this point that he took to drawing, albeit in somewhat crude strokes, taking some classes in both drawing and painting for a time.

Little is known about his activities until 1911—about five years later. While in Seattle, there is some record of a troubled romantic episode that may have prompted his return to Toronto; his relations with women seem to have been problematic on the whole. It was during this time, however, that he began working for a prominent commercial art firm then known as Grip Limited where he met some of the men who were to influence his development as a landscape painter.

At Grip, he came under the wing of the gifted J.E.H. MacDonald, one of the founders of the Group of Seven, who introduced Thomson to current developments of design and fine art in Europe such as Art Nouveau as well as the Arts and Crafts movement in Britain and America, which clearly furthered his aesthetic refinement. In addition, he drew inspiration without question from earlier movements including the Post-Impressionist and even Romantic schools. One significant influence was the work of Scandinavian artists that two of his colleagues, Lawren Harris and MacDonald, had seen at a show at the Albright Gallery in upstate New York depicting northern wilderness in a way that confirmed their own sensibilities.

While Thomson himself had little or no formal training as a painter, many of the men he worked with had distinguished themselves in that field by the time he came to work with them. He and many of his colleagues who later founded the Group of Seven had a background in graphic design, and though not an uncommon training for visual artists, the decorative aspect is particularly apparent in their work. Thomson was encouraged by men like A.Y. Jackson, also a founder of the Group, to draw on what he knew well and to place greater emphasis on decorative features and pictorial balance. Thus, many of his most well-known paintings are as appreciated for their visually striking design as for any other merit.

With a tree or vine often serving as a foreground subject through which the eye is drawn to the background of the natural setting, many of his best-known images such as "The Jack Pine" and "Northern River," while striking for their graphic impact, lack the simple truthfulness of his less contrived works. These latter deal more directly with feelings of isolation, alienation and the violence of nature in the north.

It remains unclear what Thomson's attitude may have been to the defining historic event of his time, the First World War. Some reports suggest he did at least once attempt to enlist but was refused on medical grounds. Others in his circle did participate in the conflict as war artists, but Thomson continued to paint up until his death, his days as an artist generally coinciding with the war years and inevitably colored by that catastrophic period. What direct evidence there is of his feelings about the

war indicates vague opposition, and revulsion at the irrationality of such massive carnage.

In the many outings he made to paint from nature, particularly in the central Ontario nature preserve designated as Algonquin Park in the late 19th century, Thomson would typically do smaller painted "sketches" on site that would be taken back to his studio and developed into larger, more finished works. The majority of this exhibition is made up of these rough studies. Less carefully designed and more spontaneous, they have a conviction and vitality lacking in many of his larger pieces. These works set themselves different tasks and should perhaps be assessed accordingly. Nevertheless, from the standpoint of artistic truth, his less finished oil sketches often capture essential qualities that have a more enduring resonance than what could be termed his more "beautiful" larger canvasses.

It should be noted that the territory dealt with in Thomson's painting was not exactly virgin wilderness. Algonquin Park and the area around Georgian Bay where he grew up had been marketed for decades in the tourist trade as a retreat from the burgeoning urban centers to the south. Many of his paintings, in fact, treat the themes of encroaching industry with a measure of sadness, but also with a tinge of pride, indicating some ambivalence regarding social progress and man's intrusion into the wilderness. An avowed naturalist, Thomson had a reputation as an accomplished guide and woodsman, but this was a lifestyle he adopted consciously in contrast to the urban existence to which he had grown accustomed.

Thomson came to painting rather late in life, and his meager training may have hampered his early explorations, but at the same time lent a kind of naïve boldness that translated movingly on canvas. These unrefined qualities brought him not only condemnation from some in the official cultural establishment, but also the favorable attention of a number of artists and collectors.

The work of Thomson and the others in his circle early on attracted the support of one particular art collector, Dr. James MacCallum, whom they met at the Arts and Letters Club in Toronto. MacCallum was a key figure in bringing their work to public attention. He also acted as something of a patron to Thomson himself, who seldom had enough money to subsist on. MacCallum spoke passionately of Thomson's paintings for "their truthfulness, their feeling and their sympathy with the grim, fascinating northland."

At the time of his first public exhibitions on the eve of the First World War, the influence of revolutionary new forms in art such as cubism was spreading so that more representational painting like Thomson's was already considered somewhat conventional, if not passé. The work of Thomson and his colleagues nevertheless has its own particular significance—while not in the vanguard of formal innovation, they defined a genre of painting with their distinctive treatment of their chosen subject matter.

One work that successfully achieves a synthesis of Thomson's skill as a designer and his passionate humanism is a small painting entitled "Path beyond Mowat Lodge," which was done the year he died. It depicts in vivid tones of rust and blue a trail of tangibly melting snow winding up into the woods on what one imagines is a sunny spring morning. The presence of humanity, while peripheral, is essential in the composition, inviting the viewer to follow the trail up and over the rise.

While Thomson's paintings almost exclusively depict nature, seldom showing a human figure, that figure is present in the eyes and hand of the artist himself. And while Thomson may have been something of a naturalist, his relationship to nature is always contradictory. As well as treating nature's beauty and appeal, his work deals with the threatening aspect of one of the world's most hostile environments, and his coarse and dramatic style corresponds to that reality.

While raising the question of Thomson's mythology, the current exhibit

makes little effort to dispel it, and in fact seems to uncritically safeguard and augment it. Certainly, the facts of his life and his art lend themselves well to the purpose, but there are other interests at work beyond the benign weavers of folklore. While one might wish to appreciate the Thomson show for itself, his place in the project of Canadian nationalism can't be ignored.

In the wealth of material produced around this artist there is surprisingly little that would assist one in making a more objective appraisal of his work in relation to international movements or artists of the period; and this in itself serves to strengthen his legendary status. It is no small matter to rescue genuine artists such as Thomson from the obscuring position of national icon and assess their true place in cultural history. It is an injustice to the man and his art that he has been so treated. However, it can be said that the simple honesty and conviction of his work will find him a lasting and deserved appreciation when the dust settles.



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