

## 124 Alexander Young (A.Y.) Jackson

ALC CGP G7 OSA RCA RSA 1882 – 1974

### Émileville, Que.

oil on canvas, signed and on verso signed, titled, dated 1912 incorrectly and inscribed *Studio Bldg Severn St., Toronto, 1913* 31 ¼ × 32 in, 79.1 × 81.3 cm

#### PROVENANCE

Collection of the Artist  
Sir Frederick Grant Banting, Toronto  
Estate of Dr. Henrietta Banting, Toronto  
Private Collection, Toronto  
By descent to the present Private Collection, Ontario

A.Y. JACKSON PAINTED this remarkable work in Quebec’s Eastern Townships in the spring of 1913, at an absolutely crucial juncture in his life. He was 31 years old and had recently returned to Montreal after more than a year in Europe, during which he had painted landscapes in both France and Italy. He found himself with “a lot of canvases which no one wanted,” because in Montreal his Impressionist-inspired works were regarded, he later wrote, as examples of an “extreme modernism.”<sup>1</sup>

Yet Jackson, typically, was undaunted. Determined to forge a career as a painter, he did not, as in the past, take a job with a commercial design firm. Instead, in February 1913, he joined forces with Randolph Hewton, another young Quebec painter whom he had met in Paris, and the pair staged a small exhibition at the newly opened Montreal Museum of Fine Arts on Sherbrooke Street. Their works attracted favourable reviews, with the *Montreal Daily Star* assuring its readers that the pair deserved praise and encouragement, “so great is the promise that they exhibit.”<sup>2</sup> But the venture was far from a financial success: Hewton sold only a single painting (to an obliging aunt) while Jackson failed to sell anything at all. He complained to his cousin Florence Clement that since wealthy Montreal collectors “buy only the works of dead artists, it’s kind of hard on the ones still living.”<sup>3</sup>

Jackson contemplated moving to the United States—the choice of many young Canadian artists frustrated by their lack of local support. However, in the middle of March, before making any firm decisions about his future, he retreated with Hewton to the tiny village of Émileville, 40 miles east of Montreal. They boarded with a local family, the Guertins, and tried to find inspiration, as he wrote to Charles Clement, “for some more stuff to inflict on the long-suffering public.”<sup>4</sup> He modestly described his efforts as “messaging away with lots of paint, trying to make it interpret Nature without imitating too carefully.”<sup>5</sup> In fact, he proved creative and prolific, producing works such as *Early Spring, Émileville, Quebec* (in the McMichael Canadian Art Collection), in which the purplish-blue shadow of a tree forks across the snow; *Morning after Sleet* (collection of the National Gallery of Canada), a beautiful study in mauves, pinks and pale blues; and *Cedar Swamp, Émileville* (collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario), a richly toned panorama showing Mont Yamaska rising in the distance.

*Émileville, Que.* is an even more emphatic demonstration of striking patterns and vivid tones. Painted once the snow had retreated, the canvas shows a jumbled foreground of rocks, bare earth and a reflective pond of meltwater, all brushed confidently and vigorously in dabs of orange, crimson and flickers of lime

green. In the clearing stands a shed, almost in camouflage, its statuesque chimney and patchwork roof both crossed with multi-hued shadows. A woodshed adjoins the shack, its stacked logs another motley display, and behind we see a wagon with wheels painted a fierce orange. The screen of slender trees in the background forms a dense tapestry of rusts and umbers streaked with vermilion and olive green.

The painting is an assured demonstration both of lessons learned from seeing avant-garde painting first-hand in Paris and—even more—of a new appreciation for the rustic charms of the Canadian backwoods. Jackson had spent the previous year painting the beaches of Normandy and the hills of Italy. Now, in Émileville, he was more than ever determined to paint the Canadian hinterlands. “The country is glorious,” he wrote to his cousin before his departure, “but its beauties are unknown and but waiting for a real live artist to splash them onto a canvas.”<sup>6</sup> This visit to Émileville helped him find the way to capture Canada’s robust northern beauties, and in doing so to establish crucial elements of what became the Group of Seven style. *Émileville, Que.* showcases the kind of landscape close-up that over the next decade became a hallmark of paintings by Jackson and friends such as Tom Thomson: the close-quarters glimpse across rocky terrain into the dazzling patterns of the rugged northern bush.

While Jackson forged this powerful new style, he also began forming the relationships that would change Canadian art. Still in Émileville, he received a letter from J.E.H. MacDonald in Toronto. The pair had never met, though Jackson remembered admiring one of MacDonald’s winter landscapes two years earlier in Montreal. MacDonald was acting as intermediary for Lawren Harris, who wished to purchase one of Jackson’s works, *The Edge of the Maple Wood*, painted three years earlier in nearby Sweetsburg. The rest, of course, is history. In the summer of 1913, Jackson used the proceeds of this sale to fund a trip to Toronto and then Georgian Bay. Over the course of the summer he met MacDonald and Harris for the first time, as well as Arthur Lismer and F.H. Varley, and then, in the autumn, Tom Thomson. He quickly decided that his future lay not in New York City but, rather, in splashing Canada’s beauty onto canvas in the way that had served him so well in Émileville.

*Émileville, Que.* was owned after World War I by Jackson’s friend Dr. Frederick Banting, co-recipient of a Nobel Prize in 1923. The distinguished doctor was a fitting owner for the work—he was a talented amateur painter, who during the 1920s was Jackson’s frequent traveling and sketching companion in rural Quebec.

We thank Ross King, author of *Defiant Spirits: The Modernist Revolution of the Group of Seven*, for contributing the above essay.

1. A.Y. Jackson, *A Painter’s Country: The Autobiography of A.Y. Jackson* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1958), 23 and 24.
2. *Montreal Daily Star*, February 20, 1913.
3. A.Y. Jackson to Florence Clement, March 5 and 7, 1913, box 95, Naomi Jackson Groves fonds, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.
4. A.Y. Jackson to Charles Clement, April 19, 1913, box 75, file 11, *ibid.*
5. Quoted in F.B. Housser, *A Canadian Art Movement: The Story of the Group of Seven* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1926), 81.
6. A.Y. Jackson to Florence Clement, March 5 and 7, 1913.

**ESTIMATE: \$125,000 – 175,000**

