



139 Thomas John (Tom) Thomson

OSA 1877 – 1917

Northern Lake

oil on canvas on board, on verso titled on the Roberts Gallery label and inscribed s-7622 / 954 / A good example of Tom Thomson's earlier work—Thoreau MacDonald / Thornhill Oct/68 / I am certain this was painted by Tom Thomson in 1911 or 1912—A.Y. Jackson / Oct. 1967 and Tom Thomson / A.Y. Jackson / Sept. 3/1965, 1913 7 x 10 in, 17.8 x 25.4 cm

PROVENANCE

Acquired directly from the Artist by Dr. James M. MacCallum, Toronto, circa 1913
A wedding gift from the above to Mrs. Field (née Blackstock), first cousin of Dr. MacCallum's wife, Toronto and then Winnipeg, 1914
Mrs. Beswick, close friend of Mrs. Field, Winnipeg, 1964
Roberts Gallery, Toronto
The Framing Gallery, Toronto
Acquired from the above by a Distinguished Private Collection, Vancouver, September 19, 1968

TOM THOMSON'S OIL sketch *Northern Lake* is a deceptively simple view looking up the shoreline of a lake in Algonquin Park that is littered with driftwood. To the right are the open waters of the lake. A few whitecaps show the viewer that the lake is blown by the wind. The wood debris along the shore has an idiosyncratic shape in parts. Over all arches a blue sky enlivened by a few clouds. It is a simple, literal sketch, moody and evocative. Clearly, Thomson has had a vision of what to paint. It only remains for him to clarify the means with which to paint it.

Thomson at 36 years of age was known as a top designer in the commercial art field. He had worked in Toronto for leading companies such as Grip Ltd. and since 1912 for Rous & Mann Press Ltd., where since October 16 he had been engaged as an "artist" at 75 cents per hour for a working week of 46 ½ hours. A sketch of him probably done at the time by his friend and workmate Arthur Lismer shows him as he was then (figure 1). He was not yet the woodsman of Canadian myth.

The art director at Grip Ltd. and afterwards at Rous & Mann, Albert H. Robson, had told the artists in the firm to create

authentically Canadian scenes by working out of doors on weekends. They did as they were told and brought the head of the design section, J.E.H. MacDonald, a trained fine art artist, the work they had done on their days off to show him on Monday.

Thomson was no exception. He had done a sketch of a northern lake on a camping trip to Algonquin Park the previous year and with the help of artists at Grip such as Frederick H. Varley, and the use of Grip's office space at night, painted a canvas he titled simply *A Northern Lake* (winter 1912 – 1913, collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario).

He showed the painting at the 41st Ontario Society of Artists (OSA) exhibition, April 5 to 26, 1913. To what must have been his delight, the work sold to the Ontario government for \$250, a goodly sum in those days. More than that, likely it was the painting that brought him to the attention of the OSA. That March, prior to the show, he was elected to membership in the society. He would have considered it an honour, the first in his meteoric career.

The sale of his canvas empowered him. He decided to take time off work and go north that spring. For some months he may have worked as a fire ranger, but by the autumn he was at Canoe Lake, in Algonquin Park. He painted a group of sketches there, of which our *Northern Lake* was one. These works are important markers in Thomson's evolution as a painter. They show a new confidence and power in his work, as can be seen in their steady and controlled handling and clearly perceived spatial composition. Many of them suggest themes he would deal with in more detail and daring colour later.

Thomson returned to Toronto that November to his rented room. Soon, a friend he had met in 1912, an ophthalmologist, Dr. James M. MacCallum, came to visit him. MacCallum was sufficiently impressed by Thomson's work that he took half the sketches home to study. "Their truthfulness, their feeling and their sympathy with the grim, fascinating northland" in which MacCallum had loved to paddle and canoe since he was 11, stirred him with their authentic character.¹

MacCallum in turn showed the sketches to a promising young artist he had met, A.Y. Jackson. Now the story of the genesis of the Group of Seven begins. Already, by the following January, the two artists were sharing Studio One in the new Studio Building in Toronto built by Lawren Harris and MacCallum for just such a group. Artist friends and the doctor soon talked Thomson into becoming a full-time artist. Thomson at first showed no enthusiasm for the idea—he was afraid he would have to live on charity if he changed professions—but with the doctor's promise of a year's support, he agreed.² It was the beginning of the fable of the Group of Seven.

Jackson always remembered Thomson's sketches done that fall as the start of the Group. He described them, saying they were "faithful and painstaking." Some of them had a low shoreline and a big sky. "The country in them always seemed to be viewed extensively... only the... shore of lakes, far hills..."³

MacCallum valued *Northern Lake* and made it part of his growing collection. He gave it as a wedding present to his wife's first



FIGURE 1: ARTHUR LISMER

Portrait of Tom Thomson

ink over graphite on paper, 1912 – 1913

9 ¾ x 11 ¼ in, 25.7 x 30.2 cm

McMichael Canadian Art Collection, gift of the Founders, Robert and Signe McMichael, 1966.16.116

Not for sale with this lot

cousin in 1914, and she later gave it to a friend. It remains an important part of the canon of the work of Tom Thomson.

We thank Joan Murray, former curator of Canadian art and chief curator (1972) at the Art Gallery of Ontario, for contributing the above essay. Murray helped to bring the paintings of Tom Thomson to world attention through a series of exhibitions and seven books, including a biography (the most recent is *A Treasury of Tom Thomson*). Murray is the author of the *Tom Thomson Catalogue Raisonné*.

This work is included in the Tom Thomson catalogue raisonné, researched and written by Murray, as catalogue #1913.32: <https://www.tomthomsoncatalogue.org/catalogue/entry.php?id=158>.

1. Dr. James M. MacCallum, "Tom Thomson: Painter of the North," *The Canadian Magazine* 50, no. 5 (March 1918): 376.

2. Charles C. Hill, "Tom Thomson, Painter," in *Tom Thomson*, by Dennis Reid and Charles C. Hill (Vancouver: Art Gallery of Ontario and National Gallery of Canada, in assoc. with Douglas & McIntyre, 2002), exhibition catalogue, 122.

3. A.Y. Jackson, foreword, *Catalogue of an Exhibition of Paintings by the Late Tom Thomson* (Montreal, 1919), n.p.

ESTIMATE: \$200,000 – 300,000