



208 Thomas John (Tom) Thomson

OSA 1877 – 1917

Tamarack Swamp

oil on panel, stamped with the estate stamp and on verso inscribed 1st class in Lawren Harris's hand, *Sketch #5*, *Property of Harkness* (crossed out) and variously and stamped with the estate stamp, fall 1915
8 ½ x 10 ½ in, 21.6 x 26.7 cm

PROVENANCE

Estate of the Artist
Elizabeth Thomson Harkness, sister of the Artist,
Owen Sound
Mellors Fine Arts, Toronto
Acquired from the above by a Private Collection,
Ontario, 1939
Fine Canadian Art, Heffel Fine Art Auction House,
May 22, 2008, lot 45
The Collection of Torben V. Kristiansen, Vancouver

LITERATURE

Harold Town and David P. Silcox, *Tom Thomson: The Silence and the Storm*, 1977, titled as *Tamarack*, reproduced page 167 and listed page 231
David Silcox, *The Group of Seven and Tom Thomson*, 2003, reproduced page 281 and listed page 421
Joan Murray, *A Treasury of Tom Thomson*, 2011, discussed page 74, reproduced pages 14 (detail) and 75
Ian A.C. Dejaridin and Sarah Milroy, editors, *Tom Thomson: North Star*, McMichael Canadian Art Collection, 2023, reproduced page 109, listed page 266

EXHIBITED

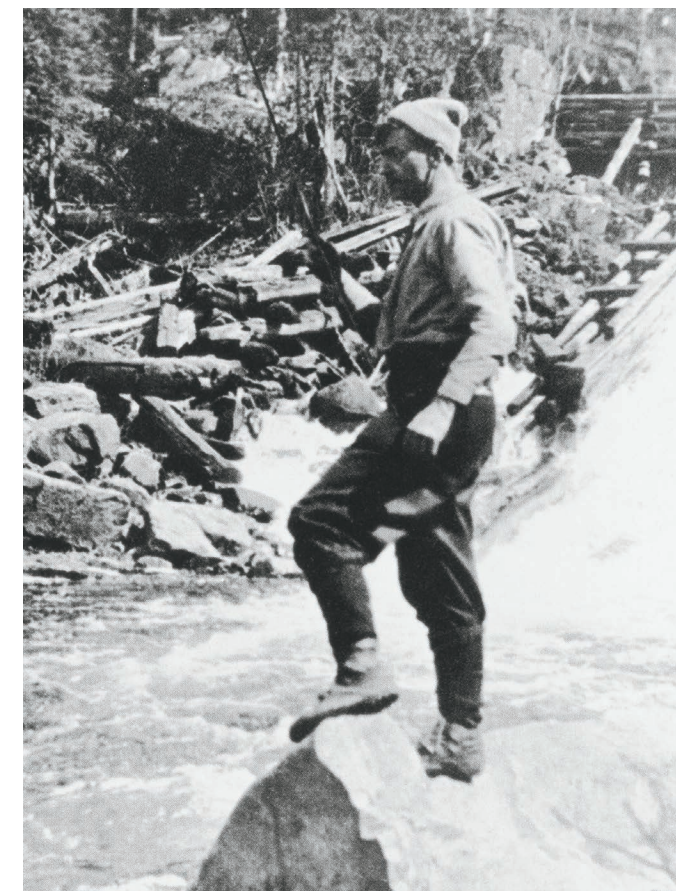
Mellors Fine Arts, Toronto, *Exhibition of the Work of Tom Thomson and J.E.H. MacDonald*, February 1 – 18, 1939, catalogue #44
Galerie Eric Klinkhoff, Montreal, *Tom Thomson: Annual Loan Exhibition*, November 5 – 19, 2022, catalogue #22
McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, *Tom Thomson: North Star*, June 24, 2023 – January 14, 2024, traveling in 2024 to the Art Gallery of Alberta, Edmonton, and the Audain Art Museum, Whistler

TOM THOMSON'S GLOWING *Tamarack Swamp* beguiles the viewer with its unassuming majesty. Its blue sky overcast with swirling grey and white clouds, dark hillside and swathe of golden tamarack growing on boggy land make it one of those works by Thomson that ignited his peers and delight Thomson lovers today. Observed with characteristic fidelity, it inspires as well as instructs. Lawren Harris inscribed his approbation on the back: "1st class," he wrote. G. Blair Laing, the "Mr. Big" among Thomson's early dealers, put it in a keynote show in 1939, and enthusiasts reproduced it in their books from the 1970s on; David Silcox dedicated a full page in colour to the work in his important monograph *The Group of Seven and Tom Thomson* in 2003. In 2023, the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, supported by Heffel, exhibited it in a major traveling show, *Tom Thomson: North Star*, and reproduced it in a handsome publication.

The scene in the work is set off by touches of red in the foreground and the brilliant golden colour of the tamaracks. Like all of Thomson's work, the image carries not only conviction but



verso of lot 208



Tom Thomson, Algonquin Park, circa 1915



Installation views of *Tom Thomson: North Star*, Audain Art Museum, Whistler, BC, 2024, with *Tamarack Swamp* indicated



also certainty. As Harris said of the artist in the 1944 NFB documentary *West Wind*: “Tom Thomson had many of the qualities of genius as a painter ... a concentrated directness that went right to the heart of whatever he was painting and an easy and deft yet inspired skill in applying paint which drew from colour its maximum intensity.”¹ His words well describe the Thomson who painted this confident sketch.

In 1915, Thomson, if asked, might have replied that this confidence came from a conviction about the way his life was going. His paintings were in several important shows, he had artist friends, a girlfriend. The National Gallery of Canada had bought a major painting, *Northern River*. The sale provided him with funds to buy a new canoe, tent and camping supplies—and to take a camping trip.

That summer he canoed up the Magnetawan River to South River, and then went back again. He mentioned in a letter that there were stretches of country on the return journey “mostly Burnt over.”² Perhaps he got the idea for *Tamarack Swamp* on this return trip—*tamaracks* are a common pioneer among trees that grow immediately after a fire. He would have painted this sketch after he got back to his base camp in Mowat around Labour Day.

Among the inscriptions on the back of the work is “Sketch #5.” It possibly refers to a list drawn up by Blair Laing and his father of the first group of over 30 sketches they purchased from Thomson’s estate for Mellors Fine Arts Ltd. in Toronto (later the gallery was renamed Mellors-Laing and then Laing Galleries). These purchases occurred after the gallery’s comprehensive loan exhibition of the work of Tom Thomson in 1937, celebrating the diamond jubilee of Thomson’s birth.³ Only three paintings and one watercolour were for sale in the show of 90 works.⁴ After the show, recognizing Thomson’s importance, the two men began to buy his work in volume. In the end, they handled and sold for the Thomson family every one of the pictures in Thomson’s estate, recalled Blair Laing.⁵

Tamarack Swamp was one such work. It was acquired by Mellors and shown in the *Exhibition of the Work of Tom Thomson and J.E.H. MacDonald* at the gallery in February 1939. A collector in Ontario acquired it from the Mellors show, and he and his family kept it until 2008, when Heffel sold it to the canny dealer Torben V. Kristiansen, owner of the Art Emporium in Vancouver.

The Art Emporium sold many works by Thomson, notably *Moonlight, Fall* (1915, private collection), but Kristiansen could not bring himself to part with *Tamarack Swamp*. He counted it among his many treasures, probably fascinated by its directness and liveliness, so characteristic of Kristiansen himself.

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 #1915.106: <https://www.tomthomsoncatalogue.org/catalogue/entry.php?id=385>.

1. Quoted in *West Wind*, directed by Graham McInnes, Canadian Artist Series No. 2, National Film Board of Canada, 1944.

2. Tom Thomson to Dr. J.M. MacCallum, September 9, 1915, MacCallum Papers, National Gallery of Canada Archives, Ottawa.

3. *Loan Exhibition of Works by Tom Thomson*, Mellors Galleries, Toronto, March 13 – 31, 1937. See also G. Blair Laing, *Memoirs of an Art Dealer*, vol. 1 (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1979), 72.

4. Laing, *Memoirs*, 72.

5. *Ibid.*, 74.

ESTIMATE: \$1,200,000 – 1,600,000

