



122 Alfred Joseph (A.J.) Casson

CGP CSPWC G7 OC POSA PRCA 1898 – 1992

Poplar

oil on canvas, signed, 1950
30 x 40 in, 76.2 x 101.6 cm

PROVENANCE

Commissioned by the Canadian Pulp and Paper Association, Ottawa, 1950
Forest Products Association of Canada, Ottawa

LITERATURE

Six Forest Landscapes [brochure], Pulp and Paper Industry of Canada, circa 1955, reproduced, unpaginated

EXHIBITED

National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, *Six Forest Landscapes*, July 4, 1955 – January 31, 1956

DRAMATIC SKIES SET off the dynamic mountain forms of A.J. Casson's *Poplar* (1950), a striking example of the Group of Seven artist's mature production. The work's fascinating provenance illuminates its unique genesis.

Commissioned by the Canadian Pulp and Paper Association (now the Forest Products Association of Canada) as part of a suite

of six paintings by leading Canadian artists, *Poplar* has remained in the association's hands ever since. Each of the paintings in the series depicts a tree species commonly utilized in the production of pulp and paper products. The paintings—which include works by A.Y. Jackson (lot 123), Charles Comfort and others—were the jumping-off point for an innovative multimedia experiment promoting awareness of Canadian forests as a public good.

The original artworks were complemented by black-and-white interpretations in pen and ink as well as colour reproductions in letterpress and silkscreen. The latter were printed under Casson's supervision by Sampson-Matthews Ltd., the Toronto-based graphic art company of which Casson had become vice-president and art director in 1946.¹ Casson had followed fellow Group of Seven member Franklin Carmichael to Sampson-Matthews after both artists had enjoyed a formative association with the Toronto printing firm of Rous & Mann.

Sampson-Matthews' enduring reputation for excellence and innovation remains closely tied to its signature print program—a collaboration with the National Gallery of Canada that began in 1942 as a wartime project to distribute high-quality silkscreen reproductions of Canadian paintings to army bases and officers' mess halls, both at home and overseas.² Printing and distribution costs were recouped through art-and-industry partnerships with Canadian businesses—a far-sighted arrangement that

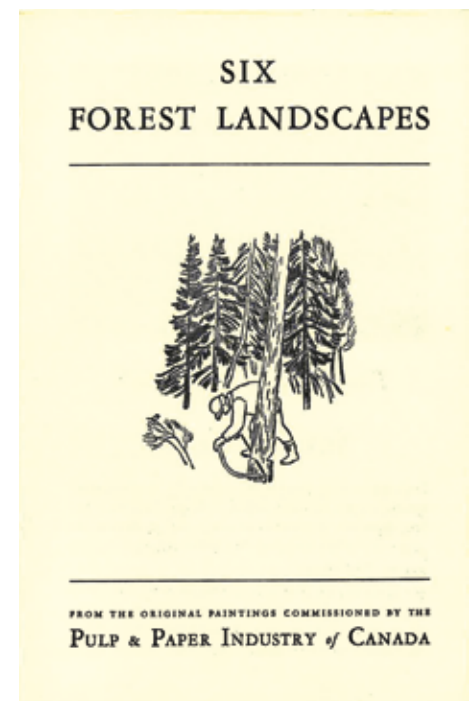
anticipated such post-war collaborations between artists and private industry as the celebrated Art & Technology Program hosted by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in the late 1960s and early 1970s.³ The Sampson-Matthews print program was later expanded to distribute reproductions of Canadian art to schools across Canada. Wayne Larsen has described this as “the single most effective promotion of Canadian art to date.”⁴ In particular, this initiative helped to consolidate the Group of Seven as a national cultural institution. For his part, Casson seized on the print program as an opportunity to promote the innovative formal possibilities of the silkscreen medium.⁵

The six paintings commissioned in 1950 reprised an earlier project documenting the phases of pulp and paper manufacturing in a series of 10 original artworks, and would be followed by Casson's design of a postage stamp celebrating the pulp and paper industry in 1956.⁶ Casson's leadership role in these partnerships was characteristic of his politically astute “foot in both camps” approach to negotiating competing institutional commitments, which at different times included membership in the vanguard Group of Seven and presidency of the more conservative Ontario Society of Artists.⁷

Casson's skilful layering of values to construct the incredible range of depth seen in *Poplar* showcases the artist's adaptation of formal principles honed through his intensive work with silkscreen and watercolour to his handling of oil paint. On the one hand, the silkscreening process translates individual colours in the original painting into separate screens that are overlaid in facsimile. The organization of *Poplar*'s picture plane into distinct zones exemplifies a compositional logic tailored to these requirements of silkscreen reproduction. On the other hand, approximately three-quarters of Casson's output was executed in watercolour, and oil paintings like *Poplar* demonstrate a masterful transposition of the clarity of outline and brilliance of hue that characterize his works in that medium. The transparency of watercolour is also suggested by the emerald-like glow of *Poplar*'s titular forest cover and the lapidarian reflectivity of the pool below.

We thank Adam Lauder for contributing the above essay. Lauder is an art historian based in Toronto and an instructor at the University of Toronto and the Ontario College of Art and Design.

1. Margaret Gray, Margaret Rand, and Lois Steen, *A.J. Casson* (Agincourt, ON: Gage, 1976), 23.
2. Ibid., 23; Wayne Larsen, *A.Y. Jackson: The Life of a Landscape Painter* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2009), 189–90; National Gallery of Canada, “Sampson-Matthews Collection: Finding Aid,” <https://www.gallery.ca/library/ngc121.html>.
3. See Maurice Tuchman, *Art & Technology: A Report on the Art & Technology Program of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1967–1971* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1971).
4. Larsen, *A.Y. Jackson*, 190.
5. See A.J. Casson, “The Possibilities of Silk Screen Reproduction,” *Canadian Art* 7, no. 1 (1949): 12–14.
6. Ibid., 12; Gray, Rand, and Steen, *A.J. Casson*, 27; D.H. Paterson, “The Canadian Forests as Seen by Six Canadian Artists” (Montreal: Pulp and Paper Industry of Canada, 1951).
7. Gray, Rand, and Steen, *A.J. Casson*, 13.



TOP: ALFRED JOSEPH (A.J.) CASSON

Poplar

silkscreen

30 x 40 in, 76.2 x 101.6 cm

Not for sale with this lot

BOTTOM: *Six Forest Landscapes*, a brochure from the Pulp and Paper Industry of Canada, including sketches based on the paintings

Not for sale with this lot

Consignor proceeds will benefit charity. In addition to A.Y. Jackson's painting from this series (lot 123 in this auction) the four other landscapes from the series can be found in Heffel's November Online Auction, closing November 30, 2023, at heffel.com.

ESTIMATE: \$125,000 – 175,000