

character and spirit of the country

Emily Carr
Forest, British Columbia
oil on canvas, 1931-32
130 x 86.5 cm
The Vancouver Art Gallery

quite different from their own. What they do not know at that age is that the Group of Seven – which included nine artists – were fundamentally Ontario-based painters, drawing their inspiration from the wilderness at the southern tip of the Laurentian Shield. In other words, the landscape which they painted and which so richly inspired them could be found two or three days north of Toronto – if you were travelling in the first quarter of this century. North Bay, on the shores of Lake Nipissing and a few miles from the north west corner of Algonquin Park, is about an hour away by plane today.

Lawren Harris (1885-1970) was the pivotal force in the Group of Seven and it was he who most vigorously propounded the view that the depiction of the Canadian landscape was an act of nationalism, a means of defining the young country. For him, the idea behind the Group of Seven was 'the possible development of painting in Canada into an art embodying the very character and spirit of the country.' His paintings of Algoma – further west but still part of the Laurentians – and his near abstract views of the Arctic conform to his belief that the Canadian landscape is unique and to portray it was to not merely distinguish oneself from Americans and Europeans, but to positively declare one's Canadian-ness.

The only Group of Seven painters to deal significantly with landscapes outside Ontario were Fred Varley (1881-1969), who produced some of his most powerful pictures during the ten years he lived in or near Vancouver, and A Y Jackson



Photo: The Vancouver Art Gallery

Tom Thomson 1877-1917
The West Wind
oil on canvas, 1917
120.7 x 137.5 cm
Art Gallery of Ontario
Gift of the Canadian Club of
Toronto, 1926



Photo: Art Gallery of Ontario