

The outbreak of war in Europe that summer had, by the following spring, touched them all and, during the next two years, only MacDonald and Thomson remained in Toronto. Thomson in fact spent only the period of the deep winter snows in the city and lived nine months of the year in Algonquin Park, working as a guide or fire ranger during the summer heat and painting hundreds of small, vibrant oil sketches in the spring and autumn. His artistic progress was astonishing, and the myth of the woodsman-artist, his art a seemingly natural consequence of seasonal change, was only enhanced by the mystery of his death by drowning in Algonquin Park in July 1917.

The Group of Seven

There was soon a confirmed belief that Thomson's simple, responsive life in the bush had brought him closer to the 'Canadian' condition than any artist had ever come before. At the same time, his broadly expressive handling of paint and exciting colour sense, bold, yet faithful to local colour, although related to post-impressionism, seemed to his contemporaries in Canada to be a direct response to nature, entirely free of the conventions of European tradition. In a series of memorial exhibitions immediately following the war, his full achievement was, for the first time, presented to the public. Then, in May 1920, Frank Johnston (1888-1949) and Frank Carmichael (1890-1945) joined with Harris, MacDonald, Jackson, Lismer and Varley to exhibit as the Group of Seven.

This first showing of the northern enthusiasts doubtless would have occurred earlier if the war had not intervened. But the Canadian effort in Europe, in which it was widely held that Canada had 'come of age', seemed now to make even more urgent the need that its painting too should demonstrate this new independence and maturity. A distinctively Canadian art for Canadians became the battle-cry of the Group of Seven, and they too embraced as their working method Thomson's special relationship with the land, literally working in the wilderness.

Driven by a sense of mission, they ceaselessly promoted their position by exhibitions in Toronto and across the nation for more than ten years. The initial response to their effort was mild, verging on apathetic. But the Group pressed on, and as they gradually achieved prominence they attracted controversy and passed through the mid-1920s with an air of notoriety that enhanced the sense of their modernity in the public eye. By the end of the 1920s they had generated a considerable artistic following in Toronto and, in fact, a few artists who worked in the Group of Seven manner — a broad, often bold handling of rugged landscape themes, free of impressionistic colouring and texture — could be found in most of the principal cities of the nation.

The Group consciously sought a national role: in the specific landscape they depicted (by 1930 they had sketched on the Pacific Coast, in the Rockies, in the High Arctic, in the Maritimes, as well as in the pre-Cambrian shield north