

there: Arthur Lismer, J. E. H. MacDonald, Lauren Harris and Tom Thomson. Lismer wrote that it stood out from the other works in the exhibition like "a glowing flame packed with potential energy and loveliness." Harris declared it was the "freshest, brightest, most vital Canadian note in the exhibition." Thomson, who at the time was himself painting in dark, muddy colours, said that it was the first painting to open his eyes to the possibilities of the Canadian landscape.

With this picture A. Y. Jackson unknowingly provided a bridge between the impressionist excitement of Montreal and the more boldly adventurous search of the Toronto artists for a new idiom to paint Canada. He received a letter from J. E. H. MacDonald in Toronto, saying that another Toronto artist (Lauren Harris) wanted to buy *The Edge of the Maple Wood*, and urging him to come to Toronto and meet others who believed in a new Canadian way of painting.

Jackson was at this time so unsuccessful in selling his work that he was about to leave for Europe. It was a disappointing time in a tough career which he began at the age of 12 as office boy in an engraving plant in Montreal, studying art in his spare time. He had earned enough as a commercial artist to travel to Europe and support himself for two years at the Académie Julien in Paris, where he learnt to admire the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists chiefly for their freedom from academic tradition. He had then returned to Montreal as a professional painter, but found it impossible to make a living.

He came to Toronto and met the artists MacDonald had written about, most of whom worked for the design firm of Grip Ltd. Grip employed five artists who were subsequently to become members of the Group of Seven, as well as Tom Thomson, who had a profound influence on the others, but was not to be one of the group because he died before its formation in 1920.

The Grip artists went to art school in the evenings and formed sketching parties at weekends in the country around Toronto; later they travelled further afield, invariably heading north to Algonquin Park and beyond. Their enthusiasm for the north became something of a cult. They relished the fact that there was no artistic convention for painting such rough and rugged scenery. Here they really felt they were "painting Canada." They would return to their weekday life at Grip Ltd. talking enthusiastically about painting and the north, encouraged by the firm's manager Albert Robson—who nevertheless kept them hard at their design work and would not allow sketching during office hours.

They designed layouts for large stores and much of their work was in the fashionable style of Art Nouveau, with its emphasis on undulating rhythmic lines and flat areas of colour. It was this style applied to nature that eventually gave them a liberating alternative to the academic

approach and, by a queer twist of chance, turned out to be well suited to the contours and moods of the landscape they painted.

They were given a powerful jolt in this direction by an exhibition of Scandinavian painting which came to Buffalo in 1913. Here was northern scenery comparable to their own, snow and mountains, painted in a simplified, non-academic manner derived from Jugendstil, the German version of Art Nouveau. MacDonald and Harris seemed unaware of this underlying influence, but took the paintings to be a direct reaction to nature and exclaimed, "This is what we want to do with Canada!"

Art nouveau

The influence of Art Nouveau on the Toronto artists first became apparent in the winter of 1914. It was this feature more than anything else that established the mature style of the Group. Jackson wrote, "We frankly abandoned any attempt after literal painting and treated our subjects with the freedom of the decorative designer, just as the Swedes had done."

Taking off with the double springboard of Impressionist colour and Art Nouveau design, the group then moved purposefully out into their own uncharted country. Jackson was persuaded not to leave Canada. After meeting the Toronto artists, he spent the summer and early autumn at Georgian Bay, where some of his finest canvases were subsequently painted. Then in the late autumn he returned to Toronto and there painted "Terre Sauvage"—a boldly experimental work which made a strong impression on the other artists and collected its due share of critical disapproval when he eventually showed it in 1918 at the Academy in Montreal.

Thomson came to see the painting while it was still unfinished and this was the beginning of a friendship through which they both gained immeasurably as artists. Jackson always paid tribute to what he learned from the genius of Thomson and it was in Jackson's companionship that Thomson broke away from the constrictions of his earlier painting and found the freedom of his later style. They shared a studio in Harris' new building from late in 1913 until Jackson went away to the war. Jackson and Frederick Varley both painted front line action in the 1914-1918 war, while the others painted on the home front.

Tom Thomson has a special place in Canadian history and legend to which his life in the wild, his sudden and mysterious death and above all the lyrical power of his painting have all contributed. A man who could make such a statement as he does through the monumental simplicity and singing colour of *The Jack Pine* must in any case be a hero to a country in need of visual images for its identity. Added to this was the tragic fact that he died just as he was reaching his full powers, in the midst of the northern scenery that the Group were to make their own.

Though never a member of the Group, Thomson was out front with them in laying its foundations and many feel he was the greatest of them all. He was among the first to make expeditions northwards to Algonquin Park and Georgian Bay, learning the craft of a woodsman from a forest ranger, Mark Robinson, who was one of his greatest friends. He became so skilful as a woodsman that he was reputed to have the reactions of an Indian in the wilderness. After he became a professional painter, Thomson spent all his time in the country—except when it was too cold to live outdoors. Then he would return to Toronto and continue to live like a woodsman in the shack behind the studio building.

One evening in 1917 he failed to return from a solitary canoeing expedition: no one was worried, because he had food and a groundsheet with him. His upturned canoe was found next day and his body a week later. The mystery of his death was never solved. It may have been an accident, it may have been suicide, and books have been written arguing that he was murdered.

The story figures large in the Tom Thomson legend, though it has of course no relevance to his creation as an artist. More revealing in that respect is Lismer's graphic account of Thomson at work: "Whilst other painters, more experienced than he, were fighting the composition and the techniques of drawing, tone, colour and representation, sometimes succeeding, often failing to catch the appearance of actuality, Thomson seemed to drift with the mood, surrendering, waiting for the moment of vision. Then his expression moved into action, his colour and design fell into place, and another 8" × 10" panel became a unit of the whole creative plan, and was added to the stockpile. . . ."

These artists were prolific in writing about one another, their expeditions, their battles and successes and moments of revelation. They did so with a relish and an abandon that are most infectious to read, reaching across the intervening time and taking one along with them in the exploration of their country and their medium.

When attacked by critics and disapproving academicians they swung into their own defence with a zest that gathered strength from their emerging group identity. An early attack came in the *Toronto Star* of 1913, when the critic H. F. Gadsby dubbed them the "Hot mush school" and declared that "all their pictures look pretty much alike, the net result being more like a gargle of gob porridge than a work of art." MacDonald replied in the same newspaper, exuberantly defending "our distinctly native art"—and the "Hot mush school" article became the rallying cry for the Group.

Whatever their enemies, the Group had two powerful allies in Eric Brown, then curator of the National Gallery of Canada, and its chairman, Sir Edmund Walker. The Gallery bought landscapes by MacDonald and Harris as early as 1912; in 1914 they