

The Group of Seven and Tom Thomson

DAVID SILCOX

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Do you ever ask yourself, “If the house were on fire and I could save just one of my books, which would I choose?” I do, and it always comes down to the very thick and not readily available *Joaquin Sorolla* or Peter Mellen’s 1973 *The Group of Seven*. Cost of replacement pushes me toward the former, sentiment toward the latter. As always, sentiment trumps cost.

The painters who comprised the group—Lawren Harris, A.Y. Jackson, J.E.H. MacDonald, Arthur Lismer, F.H. Varley, Frank Carmichael, and Frank Johnson—were active before and after World War I. Their best-known work is of the Canadian landscape, both its lyrical splendor and harsh austerity. Tom Thomson, having joined some of the others on painting trips, would have been part of the group had he not drowned in 1917 at age 40 before it was officially organized. The painters had no formal organization, no elected leader or charter. No more than four of them ever painted together at the same time. They were more a school of painting whose names, along with those of A.J. Casson, LeMoine FitzGerald, and Edwin Holgate, became associated with one another. Together they are one of Canada’s national treasures.

David Silcox, an art historian and managing director of Sotheby’s Canada, and Firefly Books have served enthusiasts of the Seven’s movement well. The first major work on the group in 30 years has 369 color reproductions. One hundred twenty-three of the images in the book have never before appeared in print outside auction catalogs. Silcox has divided the book into sections according to subject matter and location. Along with various places in Canada—Algonquin Park and the Georgian Bay; the Arctic; the St. Lawrence River and Quebec; Algoma and Lake Superior; the Prairies, Rockies, and West Coast—we find chapters on cities and towns, still life and portraiture, and World War I.

The art is sometimes realistic, other times highly stylized. Colors can be garish or muted. Impressionistic technique is prevalent in the on-location paintings, refined design in the large studio works. Varley seems to have had the greatest interest in, and certainly flair for, portraiture. He used thick paint and strong color to maximum effect. His *Vera* depicts a woman whose almond eyes remind us of Modigliani’s women, while her subtle smile recalls the *Mona Lisa*. Of the landscape paintings, Thomson’s have the most distinctive style. His experience as a commercial artist (he designed, among other things, greeting cards) is always evident. Broken color and bold composition were his hallmark.

Reproductions are always imperfect representations of actual paintings. Even such excellent ones as those in this book raise questions about accuracy. One need only compare the reproductions of A.Y. Jackson’s *The Edge of the Maple Wood* in Mellen’s earlier book to that in Silcox’s. The painting shows a patch of uncultivated ground with some trees in the middle ground and farm buildings in the distance. In the earlier book, the mostly earth colors are warm, giving the effect of late afternoon sun, however diffused. In the Silcox book, the colors are

cooler and less saturated. Only a few shadows suggest the presence of direct sunlight. Such differences make the viewer wish all the more to see the original.

Silcox’s preference for Lawren Harris is evident in the disproportionate number of reproductions of his work—almost 100 of the 369. No one could reasonably quarrel with this decision. Harris was not only the most prolific of the painters but also the moving force behind the group, and its most articulate spokesman.

When the group disbanded in 1933, in part to make way for younger painters similarly intent on creating a pan-Canadian art, they could take pride in having committed to canvas enduring testimonies to the strength and freedom of their country. They did this by showing what was extraordinary about it and by finding the extraordinary in the ordinary. To these artists Canada owes much of its national identity. ■

REVIEWER: Gary Michael is a nationally acclaimed artist who has reviewed art books for *TBR* and other publications for more than 30 years. You can see his work at garyheartist.com.

Leading the way was Tom Thomson. In little more than three years of electrifying creativity before his premature death in 1917 he formulated an artistic language that captured the unique qualities of the Canadian landscape. Three years later his friends--Lawren Harris, J.E.H. MacDonald, Arthur Lismer, Frederick Varley, Frank Johnston, Franklin Carmichael and A.Y. Jackson--formed the Group of Seven. This book tells of the Group's collective quest to depict Canada in paint. It recounts their beginnings, the challenges they faced and the remarkable and often extreme journeys they undertook in search of new subject matter. Essays explore the artists' relationship with the Arctic north, and analyse Thomson's art through the prism of the prevalent scientific theories of the day. Tom Thomson, who died before the Group was established, was always present in the public mind. Included are works by: Frank Carmichael Frank Johnston A.J. Casson Arthur Lismer Le Moine FitzGerald J.E.H. MacDonald Lawren Harris Tom Thomson Edwin Holgate F.H. Varley A.Y. Jackson The artwork is organized by the various regions of Canada, with additional sections on the war years and still-life paintings. Not long after the death of artist Tom Thomson in 1917, a group of artists with whom he had worked met and founded the Group of Seven, a group of artists who primarily painted the Canadian landscape which was then not in vogue and in their own styles instead of attempting to copy the then fashions of Europe.

