

J. E. H. MacDonald
The Church by the Sea, 1924

oil on canvas
57.0 cm x 70.0 cm

Collection of the Vancouver Art
Gallery, Gift of Mr. H. Mortimer Lamb
VAG 41.3



Photo: Trevor Mills, Vancouver Art Gallery

J. E. H. MacDonald
The Church by the Sea, 1924



Image source: Vancouver Art Gallery Library
Canadian Artist Files

Artist's Biography

Nationality: Canadian
Born: 1873-05-12, Durham, England
Died: 1932-09-26

Born in England, MacDonald came to Hamilton, Ontario with his family in 1887. He moved to Toronto in 1889 and began an apprenticeship with the Toronto Lithography Company, while attending night and Saturday afternoon classes at the Central Ontario School of Art and Design. He also joined the Toronto Art Students' League which took informal sketching trips to Northern Ontario destinations. Between 1907 and 1911 MacDonald worked as a designer at Grip Ltd. along with Tom Thomson, Arthur Lismer, and John Varley.

Under the encouragement of Lawren Harris, MacDonald ceased working as a commercial artist to focus on his own painting. His reading of Walt Whitman and Henry Thoreau stimulated his study of nature in works like *Rapid of the North*. MacDonald began making regular trips to Northern Ontario and Algoma along with Thomson and Harris.

From 1921 until the time of his death in 1932, MacDonald produced important paintings that were the result of his frequent trips to the Rocky Mountains.

Source: Vancouver Art Gallery Library: Permanent Collection Files: MacDonald, J.E.H.

Artistic Context

Nationality: Canadian

Training: Central Ontario School of Art and Design

Peers: John Constable; Tom Thomson; Arthur Lismer; Franklin Carmichael; Frank Johnston; Frederick Varley; A.Y. Jackson; Lawren Harris

Group: Group of Seven; 20th century

Provenance: donated by H. Mortimer Lamb in 1941; the artist

Subject: landscape; land based nationalism

Other Works in Vancouver Art Gallery Collection

J.E.H. MacDonald
Morning Light, Rocky Mountains, 1931
oil on paperboard
Vancouver Art Gallery, Founders' Fund
VAG 36.2

J.E.H. MacDonald
Lake O'Hara, 1927
oil on panel
Vancouver Art Gallery, Founders' Fund
VAG 36.3

J. E. H. MacDonald

The Church by the Sea, 1924

J.E.H. MacDonald
Larches and Mount Schaefer, 1929
oil on wood panel
Vancouver Art Gallery, Founders Fund
VAG 36.4

J.E.H. MacDonald
Gull River from Moore's Hill, Coboconk, 1921-1923
oil on paperboard
Gift of Thoreau MacDonald
VAG 69.5

J.E.H. MacDonald
Poplars and Spruce, Algoma, 1919-1920
oil on paperboard
Gift of Thoreau MacDonald
VAG 69.6

J.E.H. MacDonald
Harvest Field at Thornhill, 1913
oil on wood panel
Gift of the Simons Foundation
VAG 86.189

J.E.H. MacDonald
Cliffs Near Lake O'Hara, 1930
oil on paperboard
Anonymous Gift
VAG 98.25.1

J.E.H. MacDonald
Mongoose Lake, Algoma, 1920
oil on paperboard
The Parnell Bequest
VAG 2000.39.6

J. E. H. MacDonald

The Church by the Sea, 1924



Bibliography

As We See It: An Exhibition of Canadian Art Publication

[transcription]

J.E.H. MacDONALD

In November 1911 Lawren Harris made a connection that gave a new direction to his life. The occasion was an exhibition of sketches held at the Arts and Letters Club in Toronto. It so impressed Harris that he sought out the artists J.E.H. MacDonald.

James MacDonald had been a designer for twenty-two years. Lawren Harris was successful in convincing him to leave his commercial work behind. The two artists began working together immediately and their first large exhibition of canvases appeared in 1912.

MacDonald and Harris were determined to break away from con-

ventional Canadian Art. In 1913 they attended an exhibition in New York that reaffirmed their feeling that a change must be made in the Canadian art world. The contemporary Scandinavian art exhibit they attended gave them an affinity with other northern artists whose works were receiving positive response and encouragement from the public.

In the fall of 1918 several members of the expanding group, Harris, Johnston and MacDonald embarked on the first of their famous "box-car" trips. These journeys, instigated and sometimes humourously outfitted by the enthusiastic Harris consisted of traveling in box-cars rented from the Algoma Central Railway. Whenever the artists found what they considered a good working location the box-car would be uncoupled and the artists would start to work.

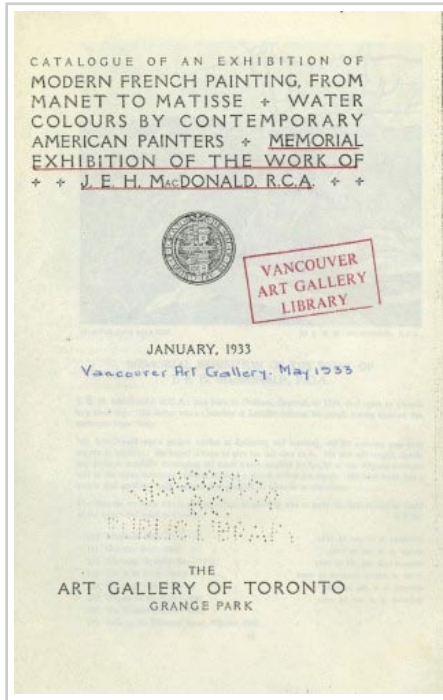
MacDonald is best known for his work during this time. A.Y. Jackson wrote later of his friend, "I always think of Algoma as MacDonald's country. He was awed by the landscape and he got the feel of it in his paintings."

In 1920 MacDonald and Harris gathered their ideas together with five other artists to form the Group of Seven. An informal association without a constitution, they mounted their first exhibition that year at the Art Museum of Toronto. The public reaction was cautious but on the whole favourable and what is now considered by some to be the most important movement in Canadian art began.

J.E.H. MacDonald continued to pursue his career as an artist and eventually became the principal of the Ontario College of Art in Toronto. He died in 1932, and shortly thereafter, because of the loss of a founding member, geographical dispersion and diverging interest, the remaining members, along with other colleagues expanded into the Canadian Group of Painters.



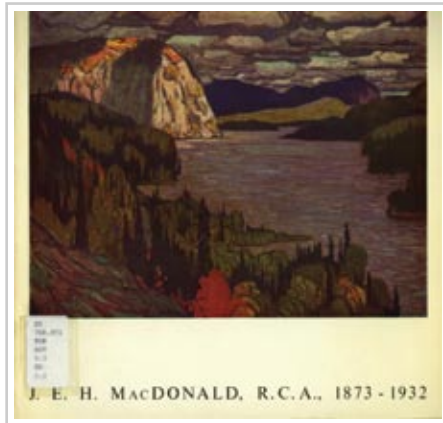
J. E. H. MacDonald
The Church by the Sea, 1924



Memorial Exhibition of the Work of J.E.H. MacDonald, R.C.A.
Publication

[transcription]

135. *Church by the Sea*, Nova Scotia--1924



J.E.H. MacDonald, R.C.A., 1873-1932
Publication

[transcription of excerpt]

42. CHURCH BY THE SEA
oil on canvas, 21 x 26
signed and dated lower right:
J.E.H. MacDonald '24

Near Petite Riviere, Atlantic Coast, Nova Scotia
A related sketch (No. 91) and a pen drawing after the painting are in the collection of Mr. and Mrs. R. MacDonald.

References:
Canadian Drawings 1925;
Hunter 1940, 55.

Exhibitions:
O.S.A. 1924, No. 123;
Ottawa, N.G.C., MacDonald 1933, No. 30;
Toronto, A.G.T., MacDonald 1933, No. 135;
Victoria, A.G.G.V. 1955 No. 35;
Hamilton, A.G.H. 1957, No. 38.

Ex Collections:
H. Mortimer-Lamb

Collection:
The Vancouver Art Gallery

J. E. H. MacDonald

The Church by the Sea, 1924



Souvenir Catalogue: Opening the New Vancouver Art Gallery, 1951.

Publication
1951-09-26

[transcription]

SOUTH GALLERY

CANADIAN PICTURES FROM OUR PERMANENT COLLECTION

Soon after its foundation, the Vancouver Art Gallery was presented by the Founders with three Canadian paintings, by James W. Morrice, A. Y. Jackson, and H. Mabel May respectively. These three pictures are hanging in this exhibition and, as one may see, constituted an auspicious beginning for the building of a Canadian collection.

The Morrice, "On the Beach, Dinard", is a small but fine example of this most sensitive and lyrical of Canadian painters who died in 1924. The A. Y. Jackson, "Road to St. Fidele" is typical of the full rhythmic style which distinguishes his position in the Group of Seven, the first concerted movement in Canadian painting history. A dramatic Arthur Lismer, "Pine Trees, Georgian Bay", a soberly splendid J. E. H. MacDonald, "Church by the Sea", a discerning and painterly portrait of H. Mortimer Lamb by F. H. Varley (all three the gift of Mr. Lamb), and a brilliant later Jackson, further represent work by the original 'Seven'. Lawren Harris, also a member of the Group, is represented in this selection by a very recent work.

The influence of the Group was evidenced in the broad landscape style which dominated Canadian painting for some years, a good example of which is here shown in Mabel May's "Autumn in the Laurentians". (This spring the Gallery will hold an exhibition of the work of Miss May who now lives in Vancouver). The tradition of landscape, of course, has continued right up to the present in varying personal interpretations: David Milne, best known for his delicate imaginative watercolors, here shows a brilliantly executed oil; Edward Hughes, a Victoria painter, hangs a landscape of arresting intentness; James MacDonald, a young Vancouver painter, brings the landscape to the city in a richly painted canvas.

Since the time of the Group of Seven, new elements, new trends, already manifest elsewhere, have been finding their expression in our painting. Some of them are reflected in this exhibition. There is the showy realism of W. A. Winter's "Midnight at Charlie's"; the melancholy of Jack Nichols' turpentine wash painting of children, the loneliness of Don Jarvis' "Old Man"; the element of expressionism present in Fritz Brandtner's semi-abstract landscape. There is too, the concern with form, to a greater or lesser degree stripped of its representational references: as in Molly Bobak, for its sensuous life; as in B.C. Binning, for its own structural life; as in the Lawren Harris as a means to a metaphysical meaning.

This selection of painting well demonstrates that this Gallery may be proud of its Canadian collection, and Canada of her painters.

DORIS SHADBOLT
Vancouver Art Gallery Docent

J. E. H. MacDonald

The Church by the Sea, 1924



Canadian Pictures, 1951

Publication
1982

[transcription]

The Vancouver Art Gallery

CANADIAN PICTURES, 1951

December 4, 1982 - March 20, 1983

This exhibition was first hung in September, 1951, for the opening of the expanded and renovated Vancouver Art Gallery. The exhibition was meant to show the gallery's Canadian holdings. Needless to say, 31 years later, our Canadian collection is much richer than this small but strong beginning. In rehanging this exhibition as we prepare to leave this building—cramped and out of date now, but Canada's most modern gallery then—we have an opportunity to see what Canadian painting meant over thirty years ago.

The works demonstrate currents in Canadian art history which were prevalent at the time. The Group of Seven are represented with their spiritual topographies of Canada's North. Social Realism, a movement in Canadian painting of the 30's and 40's which reacted to the lack of a human element in the Group of Seven's work, is represented by Bill Winter and Orville Fisher; the existential city by Don Jarvis, Jim MacDonald and Ghitta Caiserman, and the move to abstraction in the work of Lawren Harris, Fritz Brandtner and B.C. Binning.

Painted before the influx of American ideas about painting, these works are all fairly small in scale. They are easel paintings, meant for private homes in an era, before Art Bank, The Canada Council and the growth of corporate collecting, when the sale of pictures to a private patron was still the major source of income (other than teaching) for artists in Canada.

These works also deal with images and subject-matter and have a great deal of interest as documents. That is, they record personal views of the world the artists lived in and are kind of a window to the past. Although the styles exhibited here might seem rigid or stiff today, we should remember that many of these artists were emerging from training that was grounded in nineteenth century techniques that emphasized drawing over "painting". And works like these, where line and colour are used for their emotional impact, are very much in a tradition which, far from being dead, we see revived in the "new" painting of the 1980's.

Scott Watson
Curator

[Pine, Georgian Bay in blue ink]

J. E. H. MacDonald

The Church by the Sea, 1924



Vancouver Collects

Publication
2001

[transcription]

THE GROUP OF SEVEN: CANADA'S NATIONAL SCHOOL OF PAINTERS

New material demands new methods and new methods fling a challenge to old conventions. It is as impossible to depict the autumn pageantry of our northern woods with a lead pencil as it is to bind our young art with the conventions and methods of other climates and other ages.

(Foreword to the catalogue of the 1922 Group of Seven exhibition, written by the artists)



Established in 1920, the Group of Seven emerged from Toronto as a collective of self-proclaimed modern artists. The Group was initially drawn together by a common frustration with the conservative nature of most Canadian art of the time. The work in contention held up antiquated colonial traditions and a constraining imitative style that the Group chose to reject for new visual material, subject and methods. That new material and subject matter was found primarily in the Canadian wilderness: the Group sought to depict a raw Canada with a modern method and style that reflected the country's adolescent potential in the face of past tradition.

The work of the Group of Seven has become for many Canadians synonymous with Canadian art, even for those who cannot identify all of the members of the Group. Although the Group of Seven was initially a movement concentrated in central Canada, their influence and importance was felt across the country. Indeed, of the ten members of the Group, seven visited or lived in British Columbia at one time or another to make their art.



The first Group of Seven exhibition seen in BC was in 1922 and their work was also included in exhibitions in 1924, long before an art gallery was a permanent presence in the community. However, it was not until Varley arrived in Vancouver in 1926 that the influence of the Group was directly felt in the work of this region. Varley's approach to landscape painting, going out into the landscape to paint directly from his subject matter, encouraged others to follow his example.

The other member of the Group of Seven who had a major influence on the art and artists of this region was Lawren Harris. His influence can be seen first through his friendship with and support of Emily Carr, by which he directly altered the course of landscape painting. Secondly, when he lived in Vancouver and his own work had become abstract, he encouraged artists to approach abstraction.

The artists in the Group were held together by their stylistic and nationalistic ideology, presenting themselves as Canada's national school of painters. As a collective, they sought to affirm a contemporary nationalism through their depiction of a vast and rugged country. Stylistically, the artists in the Group were indebted to Post-Impressionism and Symbolism, recognizing their antecedents while they sought to modify their notions of "significant form" and colour analysis

J. E. H. MacDonald

The Church by the Sea, 1924



toward a bold method of pictorial expression. These formal modernist elements included a thick paint surface, pure and brilliant colour and an incorporation of design into a raw treatment of an unidealized landscape—especially when compared to nineteenth-century English and French landscape painting that carried over into the early cultural identity of Canada.

Compared to modernist painting elsewhere at the time, the Group's work can appear conservative. However, within a Canadian context the artists forged a new visual language that attempted to break free of traditional cultural ties. The Group's manner of painting was seen by many of their contemporaries as crude or rough, mimicking the raw form and palette of the wilderness. Using the untamed Canadian landscape as fuel for their artistic and nationalistic goals, the Group put forth a new perception of beauty, one that spoke of a new world, its possibility and its freedom.

The seven founding members of the Group included Franklin Carmichael, Lawren Harris, A.Y. Jackson, Franz Johnston, Arthur Lismer, J.E.H. MacDonald and F.H. Varley. This initial artistic coalition was formed in Toronto between 1911 and 1913. All, including the independently wealthy Harris, worked as commercial artists at some point in their careers. Tom Thomson, another commercial artist, was included in the pre-Group circle, but his premature death in 1917 precluded his official membership in the Group. An avid outdoorsman, Thomson was significant to the Group in that he sparked an interest in painting the northern Ontario landscape, particularly in and around Algonquin Park.

The rough wilderness of the landscape, its raw, dramatic austerity, coupled with breathtaking colour and light, spoke far more directly of Canada for these artists than anything to be found in the cities or settled areas. For them, the north, a constant motif in earlier discussions of Canadian identity, found its first expression in the rocks, burnt land, trees, colour and light of Algonquin Park.

The fresh, "uncivilized" landscape of northern Canada became, for the Group and their proponents, synonymous with the promise of a young country.

In order to increase awareness of the importance of art for the development of Canada as a nation, the Group circulated their paintings across Canada during the 1920s (showing especially in western Canada, such as at the Vancouver Exhibition in 1927 followed by exhibitions at the New Westminister Provincial Exhibition, in Edmonton and Calgary). The populist intent of their project is reflected in the words of Eric Brown, the director of the National Gallery of Canada at the time, who said, "a great country needs a great art." During this time the Group also wrote numerous nationalistic articles about art and their country, illustrated Canadian books, decorated public buildings, wrote poetry and designed stage sets.

In the mid-1920s the Group underwent a change in members. In 1926 Johnston left the Group and A.J. Casson filled his spot until the Group disbanded in 1933. Four years later, in 1930, the Group widened its scope by including Edwin

Holgate from Montreal, and in 1932 L.L. FitzGerald from Winnipeg joined the Group to further the representation of other provinces.

The mythology built up around the Canadian wilderness by the members of the Group ran parallel with developments in literature, poetry and politics that sought to identify Canada with the North and a nationalism based on the land. The identification with the land has been one reason, amongst others, for their continued popularity and success.

J. E. H. MacDonald

The Church by the Sea, 1924

The first Canadian work of art purchased by the Vancouver Art Gallery was a landscape by A.Y. Jackson in 1932, and later Harris gave several works by himself and other members to the Gallery. The Group of Seven has an important, if modest, presence in the Vancouver Art Gallery's permanent collection and is significantly present in several private collections in the community. This selection of work supplements the holdings of the Gallery with a group of excellent canvases drawn from Vancouver collections and gives an opportunity for the public to see works that were predominantly collected in the east.

Melanie O'Brian and Ian Thom

Further Reading

Christensen, Lisa. *The Lake O'Hara Art of J.E.H. MacDonald and Hiker's Guide*. Calgary: A Fitzhenry & Whiteside Company, 2003.

Hunter, Edmund Robert. *J.E.H. MacDonald: a Biography & Catalogue of his Work*. Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1940.

Stacey, Robert, and Hunter Bishop. *J.E.H. MacDonald: Designer*. Toronto and Ottawa: Archives of Canadian Art, an imprint of Carleton University Press, 1996.

Robertson, Nancy. *J.E.H. MacDonald, R.C.A., 1873-1932*. Toronto and Ottawa: Art Gallery of Toronto and National Gallery of Canada, 1965.

Robson, Albert Henry. *J.E.H. MacDonald*. Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1937.

Whiteman, Bruce. *J.E.H. MacDonald*. Kingston: Quarry Press, 1995.

Exhibition History

Exhibitions at the Vancouver Art Gallery

Opening the New Vancouver Art Gallery, 1951. September 26, 1951 - October 14, 1951.

Canadian Pictures, 1951. December 4, 1982 - March 20, 1983.

Land/scape. September 19, 1986 - November 16, 1986.

From the Collection: The Group of Seven. June 16, 1990 - September 16, 1990.

Vancouver Collects: The Group of Seven. October 20, 2001 - January 20, 2002.

75 Years of Collecting: British Masters, Group of Seven and Pop Icons. February 4, 2006 - May 14, 2006.

J. E. H. MacDonald

The Church by the Sea, 1924

Selected Exhibitions outside of the Vancouver Art Gallery

Art Gallery of Toronto, Toronto. *Ontario Society of Artists Fifty-Second Annual Exhibition.* 1924.

Art Gallery of Toronto, Toronto. *Memorial Exhibition of the Work of J.E.H. MacDonald, R.C.A.* January 1933.

Arts Centre of Greater Victoria, Victoria. *The Group of Seven.* February 15, 1955 - February 27, 1955.

Art Gallery of Hamilton, Hamilton. *J.E.H. MacDonald, 1873-1932.* March 1957.

University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon. June 1959.

Art Gallery of Toronto, Toronto. *J.E.H. MacDonald, R.C.A., 1873-1932.* November 13, 1965 - February 6, 1966.

Simon Fraser University Art Gallery, Burnaby. *The Group of Seven and Their Contemporaries.* July 18 - August 5, 1977.

Edmonton Art Gallery, Edmonton. *The Other Landscape.* September 8, 2003 - March 8, 2004.



Archival History

J.E.H. MacDonald Letter

Correspondence
1933-06-10

[transcription of excerpt]

Mining Association of British Columbia

June 10th, 1933

Dear Mr. MacDonald,

Thanks so much for securing me the privilege of acquiring the "Church by the Sea." The price placed on the picture was most reasonable, and if I could have afforded to pay it I would not have heisted. But as a matter of fact I have no sort of business for buying pictures these days. Still it is not everyday that one has an opportunity to buy an example of your fatherâ€™s work, of which I am an enthusiastic admirer, and so regardless of economic circumstances I decided to wire you the offer you have been good enough to accept. If my circumstances presently improve I should very much like to possess a companion work. There is a possibility that our art gallery may buy "Warm Autumn in the Rockies." If however, they donâ€™t I shall be grateful if you will provide me with the opportunity to buy it a little later on. My intention is to leave my collection to the Vancouver Art Gallery, and I have already made a provision in my will to that affect. They donâ€™t deserve

[Re: J.E.H. MacDonald Church by the Sea VAG 41.3 in pencil]

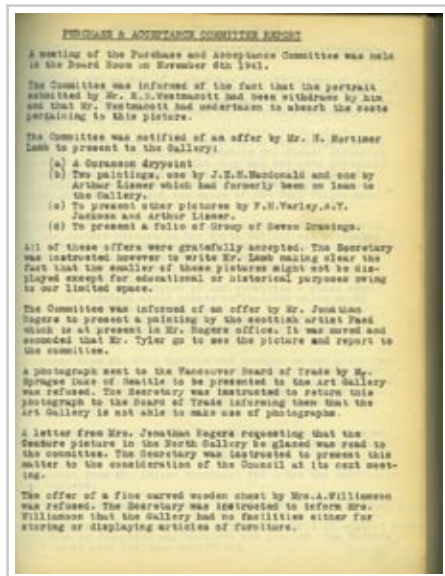
to be given anything but junk, as that is what appeals to the taste of the "powers that be" and determines their buying policy. When I was on the "purchase and

J. E. H. MacDonald
The Church by the Sea, 1924



selection committee" I was in terribly cold water all the time:--with Scott and myself cropping to the worst. However we did succeed in accomplishing a little and actually exerted enough influence to induce the purchase of a Jackson landscape. This year the "revolutionists" as the committee have had their guns effectively spited, as now the selection of Canadian pictures for purchase is practically in the hands of Wyley Grier and Robson on Toronto. As a result we have had intensified as a normally commonplace Gager and there is now every likelihood that a Peel of extreme feeblemen and futility will be acquired. The purchasers are the Founders of the Gallery, and are leading business men, and haven't the sense to realize that men with commercial considerations, the purchases of bad pictures is asinine and wasteful. I believe their price reached for the Peel is \$1350. It would be dear at any price.

Sincerely yours,
 H. Mortimer Lamb



Purchase & Acceptance Committee Report
 Acquisition Record
 1941-11-06

[transcription of excerpt]

PURCHASE & ACCEPTANCE COMMITTEE REPORT

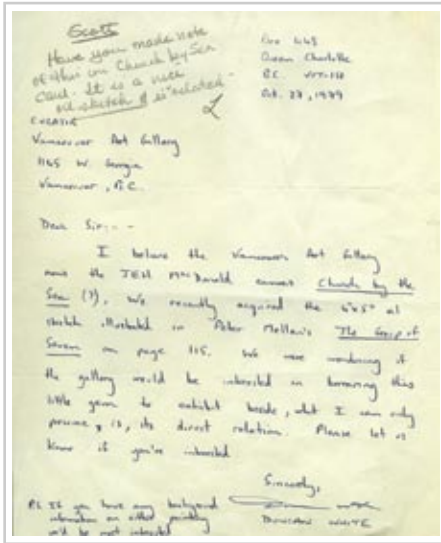
A meeting of the Purchase and Acceptance Committee was held in the Board Room on November 6th 1941.

The Committee was notified of an offer by Mr. H. Mortimer Lamb to present to the Gallery:

- a) A Goranson drypoint
- b) Two paintings, one by J.E.H. Macdonald and one by Arthur Lismer which had formerly been on loan to the Gallery.
- c) To present other pictures by F.H. Varley, A.Y. Jackson and Arthur Lismer.
- d) To present a folio of Group of Seven Drawings.

All of these offers were gratefully accepted. The Secretary was instructed however to write Mr. Lamb making clear the fact that the smaller of these pictures might not be displayed except for educational or historical purposes owing to our limited space.

J. E. H. MacDonald
The Church by the Sea, 1924



Letter
 Correspondence
 1979-10-27

[transcription]

Box 448
 Queen Charlotte
 B.C. V0T-1S0
 October 27, 1979

Curator
 Vancouver Art Gallery
 1145 W. Georgia
 Vancouver, B.C.

Dear Sir:

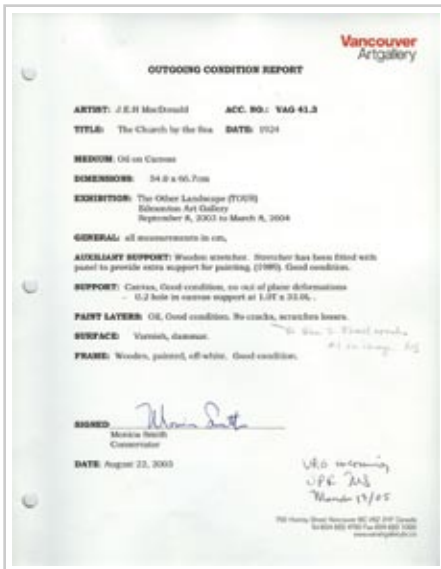
I believe the Vancouver Art Gallery owns the J.E.H. MacDonald canvas *Church by the Sea*? We recently acquired the 4x5 oil sketch illustrated in Peter Mellan's *The Group of Seven* on page 115. We were wondering if the gallery would be interested in borrowing this little gem to exhibit beside, what I can only presume, is, its direct relation. Please let us know if you're interested.

P.S. If you have any background information on either painting we'd be most interested

Sincerely,

Duncan White

[Scott have you made note of this in Church by Sea card. It is a nice oil sketch & is "related" in pencil]



Outgoing Condition Report
 Conservation
 2003-08-22

[transcription]

OUTGOING CONDITION REPORT

ARTIST: J.E.H. MacDonald **ACC. NO.:** VAG 41.3

TITLE: The Church by the Sea **DATE:** 1924

MEDIUM: Oil on Canvas

DIMENSIONS: 54.0 x 66.7

EXHIBITION: The Other Landscape (TOUR)
 Edmonton Art Gallery
 September 8, 2003 to March 8, 2004

GENERAL: all measurements in cm,

J. E. H. MacDonald

The Church by the Sea, 1924



AUXILIARY SUPPORT: Wooden stretcher. Stretcher has been fitted with panel to provide extra support for painting. (1989). Good Condition.

SUPPORT: Canvas, Good condition, no out of plane deformations - 0.2 hole in canvas support at 1.0T x 33.0L

PAINT LAYERS: Oil, Good condition. No cracks, scratches losses.

SURFACE: Varnish, dammar.

FRAME: Wooden, painted off-white. Good condition.

SIGNED: [Monica Smith in pen]

Monica Smith
Conservator

DATE: August 22, 2003

[VAG incoming SPR MS March 17/05 in pencil]

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