

# Tom Thomson

## *Cat's-Tails, Canoe Lake, 1913*

oil on canvas and paperboard  
21.7 cm x 26.9 cm

Collection of the Vancouver Art  
Gallery, Gift of Dr. F. and Dr. M.  
Bylsma  
VAG 91.5



Photo: Tomas Svab, Vancouver Art Gallery

# Tom Thomson

*Cat's-Tails, Canoe Lake, 1913*



Image source: Vancouver Art Gallery Library  
Canadian Artist Files

## Artist's Biography

Nationality: Canadian

Born: 1877-10-05, Claremont, Ontario

Died: 1918-10-08

Tom Thomson was born near Claremont, Ontario and grew up in Leith, near Owen Sound. In 1899 he unsuccessfully tried to volunteer to fight in the Boer War, and instead went to a business college in Seattle, Washington. In 1904 he returned to Canada, and in 1907 joined an artistic design firm in Toronto where many of the future members of the Group of Seven also worked. With his colleagues he often travelled around Canada, especially to the wilderness of northern Ontario, which was a major source of inspiration for Thomson. His first exhibition was in 1913.

Beginning in 1914 he acted as a fire fighter and guide in Algonquin Park in northern Ontario. During the next three years he produced many of his most famous works, including *The Jack Pine* and *The West Wind*. However, he disappeared during a canoeing trip in July of 1917, and his body was discovered on July 17. The official cause of death was drowning, but there are still questions about how he actually died. He was buried at Canoe Lake in Algonquin Park, but at the request of his family his body was reinterred in the family plot beside the United Church in Leith.

Thomson was largely a self-taught artist, although he had had a long career as a graphic designer, much of it with Toronto's Grip Ltd., which gave him a keen sense of draughtsmanship. Although he began painting and drawing at an early age as a hobby, it was only in 1912, when Thomson was well into his thirties, that he began painting seriously. His first trips to Algonquin Park inspired him to follow the lead of fellow artists in producing oil sketches of natural scenes on small, rectangular panels for easy portability while traveling. Between 1912 and his death in 1917, Thomson produced hundreds of these small sketches, many of which are now housed in such galleries as the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto and the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa.

Many of Thomson's major paintings, including *The Jack Pine*, *Northern River*, and *The West Wind*, began as sketches before being expanded into large oil paintings at Thomson's "studio"—an old utility shack with a wood-burning stove on the grounds of an artist's enclave in Rosedale, Toronto. Although Thomson sold few of these paintings during his lifetime, they formed the basis of the posthumous exhibitions, including one at Wembley in London, that eventually brought international attention to his work. Thomson's peak period was from 1914 to 1917, after a one-year patronage from the Toronto physician James MacCallum enabled Thomson's transition from graphic designer to professional painter (although he never made a living entirely from painting).

Although Thomson was not a member of the Group of Seven (it is a common misconception that he was), his work bears much stylistic resemblance to that of such group members as A. Y. Jackson, Frederick Varley, and Arthur Lismer. These artists shared in common an appreciation for rugged, unkempt natural scenery, and all used broad brush strokes and the liberal application of paint to capture the stark beauty and vibrant colour of the Ontario landscape.

Thomson never visited Europe, but his art bears some stylistic resemblance to the work of such post-impressionists as Vincent Van Gogh and Paul Cezanne, whose work he may have known from books or visits to art galleries. Other key influences were the Art Nouveau and Arts and Crafts movements of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, both of which styles he knew from his work in the graphic arts.

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Since his death, Thomson's work has grown ever-more valuable and popular. In 2002, the National Gallery of Canada staged a major exhibition of his work, giving Thomson the same level of prominence afforded Picasso, Renoir, and the Group of Seven in previous years. In recent decades, the increased value of Thomson's work has led to the discovery of numerous forgeries of his work on the market.

Source: "Tom Thomson," *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*. December 15, 2005. <http://www.wikipedia.org>.

## Artistic Context

Nationality: Canadian

Training: Central Ontario School of Art and Design

Group: forerunner of Group of Seven; 20th century

Peers: J.E.H. MacDonald; Arthur Lismer; Franklin Carmichael; Frank Johnston; Frederick Varley; A.Y. Jackson; Lawren Harris

Provenance: donated by Dr. F. and Dr. M. Bylisma in 1991; Miss Violet Trainor; Walter Klinkhoff Gallery; Art Emporium, Vancouver

Subject: landscape; land based nationalism

Legacy: Thomson's use of paint and depiction of the landscape has influenced landscape painters since his death

## Other Works in the Vancouver Art Gallery Collection

Tom Thomson  
*Nocturne, 1914*  
oil on panel  
Gift in Memory of Robert A. de Lotbiniere Harwood by his Friends  
VAG 52.8

Tom Thomson  
*The Waterfall*  
oil on panel  
Gift in Memory of Robert A. de Lotbiniere Harwood by his Friends  
VAG 52.9

# Tom Thomson

*Cat's-Tails, Canoe Lake, 1913*

## Further Reading

Grace, Sherrill. *Inventing Tom Thomson: from Biographical Fictions to Fictional Autobiographies and Reproductions*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004.

Hubbard, R.H. *Tom Thomson, Gallery of Canadian Art*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1962.

Murray, Joan. *Tom Thomson: Design for a Canadian Hero*. Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1998.

Murray, Joan. "The World of Tom Thomson" *Journal of Canadian Studies*. 26 (1991): 5-51.

Reid, Dennis, ed. *Tom Thomson*. Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 2002.

Silcox, David P. *The Group of Seven and Tom Thomson*. Toronto: Firefly Books, 2003.

## Exhibition History

### Exhibitions at The Vancouver Art Gallery

*Eight Days*. May 31, 1996 - December 15, 1996.

*James Wilson Morrice and His Contemporaries*. October 5, 2002 - January 5, 2003.

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

## Archival History

### Board Minutes

Acquisition Record  
1991-02-14

[transcription]

SCHEDULE "A"

Recommended for Acquisition

MEETING HELD FEBRUARY 14, 1991: Page Seven

Submission

Donations

8. *Cat's-tails, Canoe Lake, c. 1913*  
oil on canvas (laid down on paperboard)  
21.7 x 26.9 cm

Submission	Recommended for Acquisition	Acquired	Date Acquired
8. <i>Cat's-tails, Canoe Lake, c. 1913</i> oil on canvas (laid down on paperboard) 21.7 x 26.9 cm			

# Tom Thomson

*Cat's-Tails, Canoe Lake, 1913*

Artist: Thomas John (Tom) Thomson

Donor: Dr. E. Bylsma

Provenance: Miss Violet Trainor; Walter Klinkhoff Gallery; Art Emporium, Vancouver

Condition: Good (some cleaning & reframing required)

Thomson began his career as a commercial artist. His painting career did not begin promisingly until, with the encouragement of Dr. McCallum and other artists, he devoted himself full time to painting in 1912, when he began to produce images of conviction. He spent much of that year in Algonquin Park and in the Canoe Lake area. This work, if not entirely successful, points the way to the artist's extraordinary achievements of the next two years, and the use of colour is particularly interesting. It would be an interesting contrast to the two later Thomson works in the collection and an important addition to our small holdings of historical Canadian landscape paintings.

Curatorial Comments: Recommend Acceptance

Committee Disposition: [Accepted Unanimously in black ink]

Board Approval: [Feb. 20, 1991 in blue ink]

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