

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.

The Group of Seven were a hearty bunch—riding the rails, hitching boat rides, scaling rock faces, hiking and paddling long and hard to reach inspiring vistas. They camped in the wilderness, stayed in vacant cabins, and lived off the land, often in less than ideal conditions. Marie, inspired Tom Thomson's View Over a Lake, Shore with Houses, (c. 1913, National Gallery of Canada). Side trip: If you have time on your hands, turn north on Highway 129 and make your way to Aubrey Falls Provincial Park, where you'll find a Moments of Algoma interpretive sign in the shape of an artist's stool. Thomson's brilliance as a landscape artist was influenced by a two-month canoe trip he took along the Mississagi River in 1912. Its beauty is breathtaking. Sault Ste. Fine art prints of the Group of Seven, —Tom Thomson, Lawren Harris, —AY Jackson, Franklin Carmichael, A.J Casson, J.E.H MacDonald, F.H. Varley, Emily Carr, Clarence Gagnon. Purchase Museum Quality Prints of World's most important historical artists, including Tom Thomson and The Group of Seven. Start Shopping! Shipping and return policy. Contact us. Facebook. Free Shipping to Canada (with Min. \$250 order) Dismiss. Joan Murray, Flowers: J.E.H. Macdonald, Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven (2013). Joan Murray, The Best of the Group of Seven (1993). David Wistow and Kelly McKinley, Meet the Group of Seven (2005). Catherine Mastin, The Group of Seven in Western Canada (2002). John O'Brien and Peter White, eds., Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art (2017). External Links.