

How Tom Thomson's Paintings Stop Time in Its Tracks

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Tom Thomson, *Sunset*, 1915. Oil on board, 21.3 x 26.7 cm. Gift of the founders Robert and Signe McMichael, McMichael Canadian Art Collection.

In this moment of seemingly endless political and cultural crises, it is useful to step away from the news cycle and remind oneself that there are other worlds than this.

Start with the work of Canadian artist Tom Thomson, whose largest-ever exhibition of paintings is featured in *Tom Thomson: North Star* at the Audain Art Museum in Whistler. The show is rich, immersive and strangely

heartbreaking. It's a portal into not only the vision of the artist himself, but something even deeper.

In many of the small oil studies featured in the show, an in-the-moment vibrancy, as electric as a live wire, leaps out.



Tom Thomson, *Petawawa Gorges*, 1916. Oil on wood panel, 21.4 × 26.5 cm. Purchased with funds donated by Maj. F.A. Tilston, VC, McMichael Canadian Art Collection. Photo by Toni Hafkenscheid.

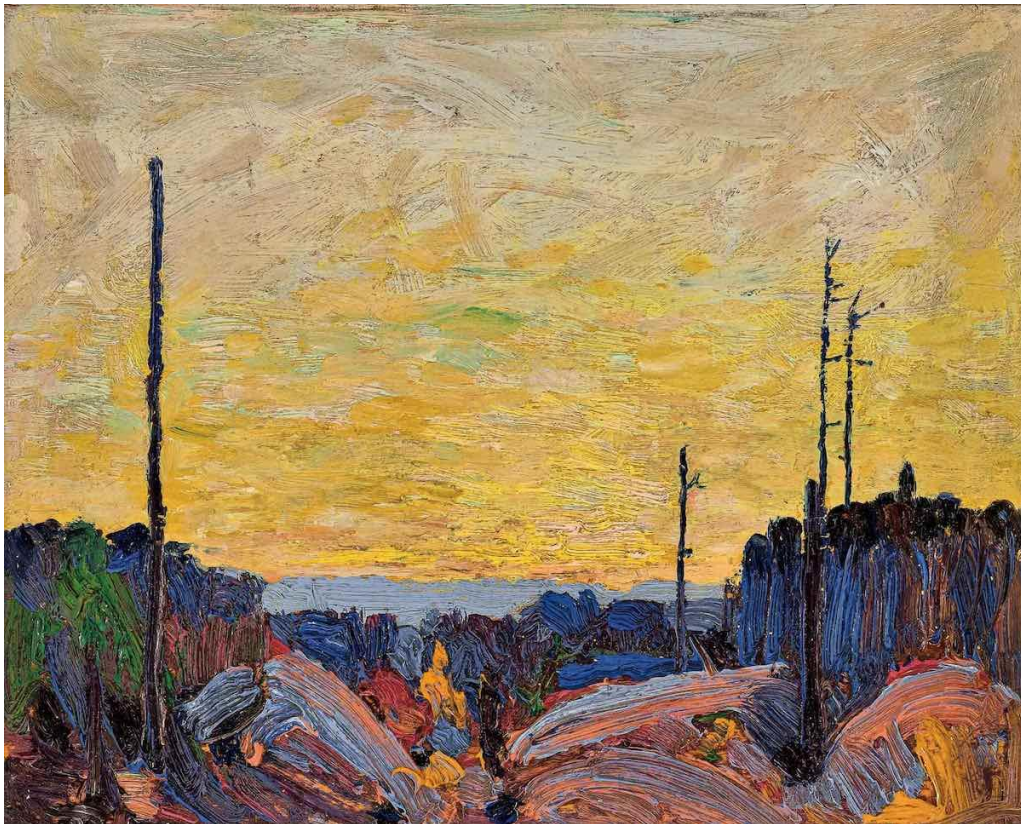
Born on Aug. 5, 1877, and raised in rural Ontario, Thomson didn't demonstrate any prowess for the arts as a child. Even in his early career as an illustrator, there were few indications of the splendour of his later work. But his friendships with other artists, as well as a life-changing sketching trip to Algonquin Provincial Park, proved revelatory; the painter found his *métier* working outdoors and drawing inspiration from the land.

Thomson's oil studies were often done quickly, outdoors, in not the easiest conditions, but they place you right in the centre of what he was attempting to capture. A slivered moon rising over a dark northern lake, a stand of raggedy bulrushes, an unexpected waterfall deep in the forest, wind scudding clouds across a pale blue sky.

Many of his contemporaries went on to form the superstar painting collective known as the [Group of Seven](#). While he was often regarded as an informal member, Thomson's creative vision in fact preceded the work of the most famous collection of Canadian landscape artists.

Of the more than 450 works attributed to Thomson in *North Star*, many were created in the few years that preceded his death. The summer when he would have turned 40, Thomson disappeared while on a canoe trip on July 8, 1917. His body was found more than a week later with a mysterious cut on his temple, leading to speculation that his death was not accidental.

The rest is history, as they say, but there is something about Thomson's paintings that stops time in its tracks. Or, maybe more correctly, renders it meaningless.



Tom Thomson, *Burned Over Land*, 1916. Oil on wood panel, 21 x 26.7 cm. Gift of the founders Robert and Signe McMichael, McMichael Canadian Art Collection. Photo by Toni Hafkenscheid.

Co-curated by Ian Dejardin and Sarah Milroy, *North Star* offers a rejoinder of sorts to all the sound and fury that have surrounded Thomson's larger-than-life persona. Lover, outdoorsman, and rough and ready dude, Thomson has been the subject of [films](#), [plays](#), [books](#) and music.

That's all fine and good, but the public fascination with the details of his biography can sometimes get in the way of the work. *North Star* does something quite different, offering up the deepest heart of the thing: a painter wrestling with the work of translation. That is, taking the overwhelming amount of information offered by the natural world and distilling it into its most essential, critical elements.

Drawn largely from the National Gallery of Canada and the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, as well as private and public collections, the exhibition is a journey, organized along both thematic and chronological lines.

There are sections of *North Star* dedicated to the work created seasonally (winter, spring, autumn) as well as Thomson's particular obsessions: the night sky, clouds, the rawness and beauty of the land itself.

One of the most interesting things about the collection of Thomson's smaller oil sketches is not only their aliveness, but the level of attention and shining regard for the homeliest of things, such as a swampy patch of turf or a stand of trees leaning together like a drunken host. These close, immediate observations demonstrate the painter's appreciation for ordinary things, the rough-and-tumble stuff that is easy to overlook.

While later works by Thomson's friends and colleagues in the Group of Seven would elevate the Canadian landscape to near-mythological levels with epic vistas and Wagnerian mountains, Thomson's bushes and flowers, bogs and trees are equally infused with abundance, generosity and love.



Tom Thomson, *Northern Lights*, 1916 or 1917. Oil on wood, 21.5 x 26.7 cm. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, bequest of Dr. J.M. MacCallum, Toronto, 1944.

In photographs of his work, Thomson's small, quickly rendered pieces are interesting and charming. But up close and personal, they are entirely different. They're rugged, tough explorations into what works, what doesn't. They are the epitome of Irish dramatist Samuel Beckett's [ethos](#): "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better."

The struggle of trying, failing, trying again is the important part. With each painting, there is the sense of being right there with Thomson, not so much looking over his shoulder but standing beside him in solidarity as he aims to figure it out.

One of the easily overlooked of Thomson's works is a quick oil sketch of a bunch of wildflowers. A close look reveals a savage X scratched through the paint, right in the centre of the canvas. Anyone who has ever felt a moment of searing frustration in trying to capture the veracity of anything in oil paint will relate.

It is an imperfect process, and no matter how carefully or dutifully one attempts to document the details of a thing, be it daisies or a mountain range, some essence will always escape you. Prone to self-deprecation, Thomson was known to pitch his art supplies into the bushes when feeling particularly frustrated. He often gave away work to anyone who expressed an interest in his paintings.

As explained in the introduction to the work, the experience of painting *en plein air* in northern Ontario is a beast, to say the least. Unlike in the sunnier climes of southern France, working outdoors when it is cold enough to stiffen oil paint into immobility requires a certain hardness of the spirit and the flesh.

Thomson would paint as long he could stand it, then duck back into his tent to warm up. But in the intensity of this process emerges a bone-hard kind of truth.

The bulk of the work in the show was painted in a little under four years, a shooting star moment. Brief and incendiary, but all the more powerful because of it.

The works of the French impressionists, as well as British artists like [J.M.W. Turner](#) and [John Constable](#), offer clear precedents in Thomson's work. But in looking at *North Star*, I was reminded of another major exhibit of landscapes from two very different parts of the world.

The Musée des beaux-arts in Montreal recently offered an exhibition dedicated to the work of [Georgia O'Keeffe and Henry Moore](#). Like Thomson, O'Keeffe was born in a rural place. She trained and worked in New York before finding her inspiration in the bone-dry landscapes of New Mexico. Moore followed a similar trajectory; he spent his formative years in London before returning to the [green fecundity of Hertfordshire](#).

While O'Keeffe's dedication to capturing the colours and shapes of the high desert are immediate and unmistakable, Moore's interest in landscape is somewhat more oblique.

As a sculptor, Moore's work was often figurative. But natural forms provide the jumping-off place, as well as the bucolic setting of his studio in Perry Green. In an interview, Moore stated that sculpture was, in fact, "an art of the open air; daylight — sunlight is necessary to it, and for me its best setting and complement is nature."

The Audain Art Museum's director and chief curator, Curtis Collins, well expressed Thomson's perceptive power in the press materials for the exhibition. "*North Star* is the most important historical exhibition that the AAM [Audain Art Museum] has hosted since opening to the public in 2016," he wrote.

He added that visitors will "marvel at Thomson's ability to evoke the ruggedness of Ontario's northern lakefronts, which is a perfect complement to our

superlative collection of Emily Carr paintings that capture British Columbia's towering forests."



Tom Thomson, *Late Autumn*, 1915. Oil on plywood, 26.7 x 21.6 cm. Gift of Margaret Thomson Tweedale, McMichael Canadian Art Collection.

Seeing these paintings in the flesh is critical. Even the most detailed reproduction cannot capture their true nature.

Looking at Thomson's work, alongside that of [Emily Carr](#) and E.J. Hughes, among many other Canadian artists in the Audain's permanent collection, the

relationship that all of the artists had with the respective landscapes comes ringing out.

As Carr wrote of the landscape that moved her: “Nothing is still now. Light is sweeping through the spaces. Everything is alive. The air is alive. The silence is full of sound. The green is full of colour. Light and dark chase each other. Here is a picture.”

In a letter written to his patron [James MacCallum](#), Thomson admitted the challenge of capturing the scale and scope of the place: “The best I can do does not do the place much justice in the way of beauty.”

The beauty is there, of course. As immediate as wind, rain, snow and dirt, it’s in the fractured iridescence of moonlight on a midnight lake, the lean and swoop of an ancient, gnarled tree. Clear as the open sky.

‘Tom Thomson: North Star’ runs until Oct. 14 at the [Audain Art Museum in Whistler](#). ■