

# 100th anniversary of the Group of Seven

Appreciation of the Canadian landscape and art inspiring vision for a collective future

Nothing conjures up the term "Canadian identity" like images of the country's iconic landscapes. When seven artists decided to come together for their first show 100 years ago, they shaped the way many Canadians perceive and value the bounty at their doorsteps.

While the rugged, vibrant and alive depictions of the Canadian landscape earned Franklin Carmichael, Lawren Harris, A. Y. Jackson, Frank Johnston, Arthur Lismer, J.E.H. MacDonald and Frederick Varley much acclaim as individuals, their collective impact as the Group of Seven was even more powerful.

"As a brand, the Group of Seven can't be beat – it sounds dynamic, modern and exciting. And these people coming together was a momentous occasion that effectively changed Canadian art," says Ian DeJardin, executive director of the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, which has a long affiliation with the artists.

When Robert and Signe McMichael acquired Lawren Harris's *Montreal River* (c. 1920) in 1955, it became the first of the many Group of Seven pieces that now make up the core of the institution's collection.

"And members of the group were frequent visitors when the property still served as the McMichaels' home," says DeJardin. "We feel we have a special connection, and this inspired us to take a leadership role in celebrating the centenary with a major exhibition titled 'A Like Vision': The Group of Seven at 100 this year."

## A MAGIC MOMENT FOR CANADIAN ART

For DeJardin, the appeal of the Group of Seven comes from a "mix of technical expertise plus the business of venturing outside," he says. "They became explorer artists and actually put on their hiking boots to march into the wilderness to record the landscape with this new visual language."

What led to this evolution, DeJardin believes, was that the artists were simply "bored with the kind of reactionary painting that was common in Canada at the time."

All seven had studied in Europe or the U.S., where they had encountered the exciting developments in Impressionism and post-Impressionism, and decided to apply these principles to a new subject matter, he says. "They felt liberated to experiment with colour and brushstrokes and expressive use of paint. Their concept – of recording Canada in a vibrant, exciting and colourful new style – really struck a chord."

For later exhibitions, the Group of Seven invited other artists, including A.J. Casson, Edwin Holgate and L.L. Fitzgerald, to join. And in 1933, the Canadian Group of Painters, a



Among the paintings included in the 'A Like Vision': The Group of Seven at 100 retrospective at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection are (clockwise from top left): Lawren S. Harris, *Mount Robson*, c. 1929, oil on canvas, 128.3 x 152.4 cm, © Family of Lawren S. Harris; Franklin Carmichael, *Gambit #1*, 1945, oil on board, 60.9 x 76.2 cm, gift of Mr. and Mrs. R.G. Mastin; Frank Johnston, *Algoma*, 1918, oil on paperboard, 26.6 x 33.6 cm, gift of Mr. and Mrs. John A. Jackson; F.H. Varley, *Girl in Red*, 1920/1921, oil on canvas, 53.2 x 51.6 cm, in memory of H. Laurence Rous; Arthur Lismer, *Canadian Jungle*, 1946, oil on canvas, 44.8 x 53.7 cm, gift of the founders, Robert and Signe McMichael. THE MCMICHAEL CANADIAN ART COLLECTION

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**Ian DeJardin**  
Executive Director of the  
McMichael Canadian Art  
Collection



collective of 28 painters, was formed. "No doubt, they saw this as a seamless extension of what the Group of Seven had started, but the Canadian Group of Painters simply didn't get the same sprinkling of fairy dust," notes DeJardin.

A drawing by Arthur Lismer, dated 1933, illustrates this succession. It shows a gravestone with the inscription, "Here lies the Group of Seven," surrounded by signs of life: daisies growing in the grass, birds in the trees.

For DeJardin, this symbolizes the Group of Seven's role as progenitors of Canadian art and, with six of the artists buried on the McMichael's grounds, affirms the organization's vision of making this legacy more widely known and appreciated.

"One of our goals – and we've already achieved it – is to become the principal source for major exhibitions on Canadian-themed art," he says.

**A 'FANBOY' PERSPECTIVE**  
Canadians' familiarity with the imagery may cause them to take the Group of Seven for granted, believes DeJardin, who offers a very different – a "fanboy" – perspective.

It began over 30 years ago, when he still lived in England and came across a book that featured Group of Seven paintings, he says. "Opening that book blew me away. The subject matter was completely different from anything I'd ever seen before."

When DeJardin was appointed director of the Dulwich Picture Gallery in London, his first action was to put the Group of Seven and Tom Thomson on the exhibition list. "It took me five years, until 2011, to pull it off," he says. "After having discovered them in the late '80s, I kept looking around and wondering, 'Where are the big exhibitions?' And I thought, 'I'm going to be the first to unleash the Group of Seven on the British public.'"

During his travels to Canada to raise funds and conduct research for the show, DeJardin encountered an "astounding reaction." He says, "I saw this as a truly great exhibition for which the public would go wild. But I remember vividly that someone actually said, 'Don't you think that people in Europe will just laugh at this?'"

Doubters were proven wrong when the London exhibit was a huge success. When it finally made its way to the McMichael on the invitation of Victoria Dickinson, DeJardin's predecessor, he once again was surprised. "When I came over for the opening, I saw an entire wall dedicated to the responses from the London critics," he says.

It was as if Canadians needed their art to be validated abroad to confirm its value, DeJardin thought.

For many years, the exhibition remained one of the McMichael's most successful events, and DeJardin's research – during which he also encountered Emily Carr and David Milne – fuelled his enthusiasm for Canadian art even further.

"It set me on the path that led me to Canada and the McMichael in 2017," he says.

**THE CENTENARY EXHIBITION**  
It has long been DeJardin's goal to inspire greater awareness of Canadian art. He started planning the centenary well in advance, since he expected to be "snowed under with loan requests for the most famous paintings."

Yet the anticipated level of demand never materialized. Drawing on the McMichael's substantial collection, which includes over 2,000 pieces by the Group of Seven, DeJardin set out to assemble this year's largest Group of Seven retrospective with more than 280 paintings, drawings, prints and other artworks in five galleries.

His aim? To "create an appreciation for how good these artists really were," he says. As a result, each artist has a dedicated space where viewers can find well-known masterpieces, such as Jackson's

*First Snow, Algoma* (1919/20), Carmichael's *October Gold* (1922) and Harris's *Mount Robson* (1929), as well as lesser-known pieces.

In the process of curating the show, DeJardin says he's gained a new appreciation for some members of the group while reinforcing his regard for others.

"I fell in love with the work of Arthur Lismer, whom I never liked as much as the others before," he says. "His drawings and cartoons are excellent. There is a wonderful image of Harris sitting on a hilltop and looking at Lake Superior, where he is literally conducting the cosmos."

For DeJardin, this proves that both Lismer and Harris, who had previously owned the sketch, possessed a sense of humour.

Frederick Varley, a portrait painter, turned to producing landscapes because it was expected from a member of the Group of Seven, explains DeJardin. "And although he is arguably Canada's best portrait artist, he also painted some of the greatest landscapes produced in Canada; for example, *Stormy Weather, Georgian Bay*, in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada."

In addition to increasing his appreciation for Jackson, Johnston and MacDonald, working on the exhibition also deepened DeJardin's "complete devotion to Franklin Carmichael."

He says, "I always feel like I have to apologize for loving Carmichael so much. I love everything he did: his water colours, his oil paintings, his prints. His wood cuts are as good as anything coming from the golden age of wood cutting – they are brilliant and unparalleled in Canadian art."

**A VISION FOR THE FUTURE**  
While DeJardin hopes his selection will resonate with all visitors, he expects that everyone will come away with personal discoveries and insights. And perhaps Canadians will see the natural beauty of their country with fresh eyes.

"Canadians have a deep and inherent love of going into the country," he says. "With the rediscovery of the Canadian landscape during the pandemic, there is real potential for the Group of Seven to have a bit of a revival."

This appreciation may bring the desire to conserve nature, notes DeJardin. "The first painting from the Group of Seven I ever saw was MacDonald's *Falls, Montreal River*," he says. "But where it was painted is now a hydroelectric dam. Despite the vastness of the country, industrial development has imposed itself on the landscape in many places."

From shaping the way Canadians have regarded their country for the past 100 years, the Group of Seven can help to inform a vibrant vision for a collective future.

# A Like Vision

## The Group of Seven at 100

McMichael

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Clockwise from top left: Arthur Lismer, *Bright Land* (detail), 1938, Gift of Colonel R.S. McLaughlin; A.Y. Jackson, *Road to Baie St. Paul* (detail), 1933, Purchased 1968 with funds donated by C.A.G. Matthews; Franklin Carmichael, *October Gold* (detail), 1922, Gift of the Founders, Robert and Signe McMichael; J.E.H. MacDonald, *Goat Range, Rocky Mountains* (detail), 1932, Gift of the Founders, Robert and Signe McMichael; J.E.H. MacDonald, *Moose Lake, Algoma* (detail), 1920, Gift of Mr. R.A. Laidlaw; F.H. Varley, *Early Morning, Sphinx Mountain* (detail), c. 1928, Purchase 1972. All works McMichael Canadian Art Collection.

timed tickets masks required

social distancing 100 acres of grounds & trails

**How to see the Group of Seven at the McMichael**

The McMichael is currently open Thursdays through Sundays and holiday Mondays. Timed tickets are required for all visitors and can be booked online in advance. The grounds and trails, including the Sculpture Garden, Artists Cemetery and Tom Thomson Shack, are open seven days a week. Unable to visit in person? Virtual tours of the collection are offered throughout the week.

More information at [mcmichael.com](http://mcmichael.com).

## LESSONS FROM A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

Like many Canadians, Kathleen Sharpe, executive director of the Ontario Cultural Attractions Fund (OCAF), is exploring her own backyard at a time when international travel opportunities have been curtailed by the global pandemic. Yet while there is an uptick in local tourism, closures and restrictions due to COVID-19 have had a big impact on the arts and cultural institutions that receive support from the OCAF, a program that invests in cultural tourism on behalf of the Province of Ontario.

In order to continue delivering on their mandates, partner organizations, such as the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, which received support for the centenary of the Group of Seven, have turned to creative solutions, reports Sharpe. "When the pandemic hit, the McMichael came up with all kinds of innovative ways to get the visuals out and get people engaged."

Online programming – including webinars and virtual tours of the exhibition – enabled the organization to meet two goals: one, to generate interest in the exhibition for a time when people will again feel comfortable to attend in person; and two, to allow access for people who might normally not be able to participate.

For Ian DeJardin, executive director of the McMichael, the level of positive response has been a welcome surprise. "On the actual day of the centenary of the Group of Seven's first exhibition, I was going to give a lecture, which we then decided to hold as a Zoom webinar," he says.

Typically, gallery events have attracted an in-person crowd of 150, and DeJardin hoped for an at-capacity audience of 180 for the Group of Seven lecture. But when the event was taken online, 3,700 people in 18 countries across the world tuned in.

COVID-19 physical distancing guidelines will bring different parameters for how events are



The McMichael Canadian Art Collection is bringing its Group of Seven retrospective to a wider audience with virtual tours and webinars. SUPPLIED

evaluated, believes DeJardin. "I have always worked with sensational but small museums and collections. For the 70 or 80 exhibitions I have facilitated in the course of my career, I've always chosen material that I felt was important rather than being led by the idea that we needed to attract hundreds of thousands of people as a measure of success. It has taken a global pandemic to introduce the concept that we cannot judge the success of an exhibition purely on visitor numbers."

While bringing art to an audience remains a key goal, other criteria can include the public reaction to the show or the importance of the exhibition for the reputation of the institution, but DeJardin concedes that these are less easy to measure.

"Suddenly, people have to take a close look at what their core values are in mounting an exhibition," he says. "This is potentially a revolution."

In the past, the success of OCAF-supported initiatives has also typically been measured with attendance numbers, and Sharpe explains that this concept is currently under review. "We have to look at our definition of what a visitor is and what attendance means," she says.

Another impact of the pandemic is that arts organizations have to rely more on their own collections, of which sometimes only 5 per cent is on display, says DeJardin.

The McMichael, for example, is postponing until next summer the upcoming exhibition *Uninvited: Canadian Women Artists in the Modern Moment*, which planned to feature female artists contemporary to the Group of Seven, he says. "We've replaced it with something that is equally important and comes entirely from our own collection, *Early Days: Indigenous Art at the McMichael*, an exhibition of historical Indigenous art and new acquisitions."

On a recent drive along the north shore of Lake Superior, Sharpe's thoughts turned to the landscape artist and founding member of the Group of Seven in whose art the lake is a recurrent feature. "It was quite extraordinary," she says. "All I could see was Lawren Harris."

Such experiences – and the contributions of the McMichael and other OCAF partners – are more important than ever, she explains. "We need to be able to experience art and beauty. These are the kind of things that can help us through this difficult time."