

## McMichael gallery's Ian Dejardin leaves Canada behind, but not his love of Tom Thomson

By: Kate Taylor

*The Globe and Mail*

September 8, 2023

Original URL: <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/art-and-architecture/article-mcmichael-art-galleries-ian-dejardin-leaves-canada-behind-but-not-his/>



*Ian A.C. Dejardin, executive director of the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, sits at the gallery in Kleinburg, Ont., on Aug 23*

The McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Kleinburg, Ont., sits in green woodlands with pleasing views of sweeping pines and big maples. With that classic northern backdrop outside his office window, director Ian Dejardin considers a Canadian problem: a certain sense of cultural inadequacy.

Dejardin, the British art historian who has led the McMichael since 2017 and is retiring next month, has been a self-described “fan boy” of Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven for decades, but has found Canadians were often surprised that he was interested.

“There was this kind of national inferiority complex,” he said. “Or keeping your light under a bushel thing. I later discovered the other side of that coin, which was that if Europe approves something, then Canada says ‘Oh, it must be good after all.’ ”

Arriving at the McMichael soon after both the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Royal Ontario Museum had named Americans as their directors, Dejardin’s appointment caused some head-scratching. Why was a Brit being hired to run the quintessentially Canadian McMichael, the only major museum in the country dedicated exclusively to Canadian and Indigenous art?

But Dejardin was no ordinary museum executive offered up by a global head hunter: While managing the Old Masters collection and ambitious exhibition schedule at the Dulwich Picture Gallery in London, he had established himself an expert on Canadians’ best-loved artists. He had successfully mounted London exhibitions devoted to Tom Thomson and the Group in 2011, a show which also toured to Norway and the Netherlands, and to Emily Carr in 2014. Canadian lenders had been surprised – won’t Europe laugh at the Group of Seven, one collector asked – but eagerly offered up their treasures, while British audiences delighted in a whole new school of landscape painting.

Still, it wasn’t simply a love of paintings of rocks and trees that Dejardin brought to Canada. He also arrived in Kleinburg with fundraising credentials – unlike the McMichael, the Dulwich does not receive an annual government grant – and a track record as a director who could build audiences for a smaller institution by expanding beyond its foundational collection. He offered ambitious plans to fundraise for increased programming at the McMichael and, outside the COVID years, the gallery has more than doubled the number of temporary exhibitions it offers while reaching new audiences by touring them.

Dejardin feels the museum has finally pulled free of what he describes as its “toxic” background: the fights between the province and collectors Robert and Signe McMichael over control of the institution in the 1980s and 1990s, and the unusual move by Ontario premier Mike Harris in 2000 to reimpose the founders’ narrow definition of Canadian art, legislation that was only changed in 2011.

“It took years to really recover from that. I suppose even when I arrived, there was still quite a strong memory of that. In some ways the institution felt slightly sort of brutalized.”

His fundraising instincts told him you can’t get donors on board if there is any question of outside control, and his job was to raise money for shows. The McMichael’s contemporary exhibition program has recently included the Indo-infused sci-fi art of Sri Lankan-Canadian Rajni Perera and the photography in which Meryl McMaster explores her mixed settler-Cree heritage. The gallery is currently showing landscapes by veteran Canadian artist Sandra Meigs alongside *Uses of Enchantment*, a show in which seven contemporary artists consider the environmental crisis.

These shows are masterminded by the gallery's chief curator, Sarah Milroy, who Dejardin hired soon after his arrival and who will take over as director on Nov. 1. A former *Globe and Mail* art critic and editor of *Canadian Art* magazine, she has provided Dejardin with the local context needed by someone who only made his first visit to Canada in 2007, while he has mentored her as museum professional. (It was a baptism by fire: A month after she arrived, he had to take time off for cancer treatment.)

"Sarah has the stamina and the drive to make things happen that I wanted to happen," he said. "I wanted more exhibitions; I wanted people to be open to fundraising. ... I wanted to tour. We have this unique mandate to celebrate Canadian art. If you believe in the mandate, do the exhibitions but make sure everyone else has access too."

When COVID closures aren't a factor, about 120,000 people make the trip to Kleinburg every year, but this spring and summer another 100,000 saw the McMichael's *Uninvited* exhibition, devoted to female contemporaries of the Group, in Ottawa at the National Gallery of Canada. Meanwhile, the *Early Days* show devoted to the McMichael's large collection of art by Inuit and First Nations artists is currently touring to three American cities.

If Milroy has brought the McMichael into increasing contact with living Canadian artists, Dejardin has not abandoned Thomson and the Group. Indeed, his swan song is *Tom Thomson: North Star*, the current exhibition aimed at dusting off the cultural clichés that have come to surround the artist.

Dejardin points out Thomson died so young – only 39 when he drowned in Canoe Lake in 1917 – that we can't know where his art might have led. He was experimenting in those years, under the influence of everything from Art Nouveau to pointillism, and Dejardin stresses that his famed Jack Pine, a decorative painting of the tree, is not a mature work.

"Would he have become more like Franklin Carmichael? Or would he have gone the Lawren Harris route? I don't know. I don't think anyone ever can," he said, making the distinction between the more abstracted, spiritual Harris "all about the trees" and the more detailed and earthy Carmichael "all about the leaves."

Thomson was largely self-taught and Dejardin's research focuses on his friendships with the artists who went on to form the Group in 1920, especially A.Y. Jackson, suggesting this was how Thomson followed developments in contemporary art before the days of widespread colour reproduction. Dejardin considers the energetic sketches that Thomson made during his summers painting and guiding in Algonquin Park to be his masterpieces. In the larger paintings, worked up during the winter in Toronto, he sees some attempts to adjust compositions for a decorative appeal to the market.

Dejardin and Milroy, who first worked together on the Dulwich's Carr show, have increasingly included Indigenous perspectives on classic Canadian art. The catalogue for *North Star* features an essay by educator and businesswoman Christine Luckasavitch in which she considers her Algonquin ancestors' presence on the land: They were driven from their traditional territory to make room for Algonquin Park. Author Douglas Hunter contributes an essay on the romantic "pretendian" phenomenon of

Thomson's day and examines many attempts to ascribe Indigenous characteristics to the non-Indigenous Thomson.

None of this context detracts from DeJardin's – and the McMichael's – commitment to those classics of Canadian art. He has often told the story of how, as a research assistant at the Royal Academy in London three decades ago, he happened upon a book about the Group of Seven and saw a reproduction of J.E.H. MacDonald's vibrant Falls, Montreal River. Where Canadians may be overly familiar with this energy, the Briton was blown away, and saw a blockbuster exhibition in his future.

Many blockbusters later, he is retiring with his husband, designer Eric Pearson, back to their London house not far from the Dulwich. He plans to savour the city, travel in Europe and knit his own socks, a lifelong habit almost as powerful as gallery-going.