

Group of Seven:

Not Formed in a Day

Friday, July 1
to Sunday, July 10

Daily 12–5pm

River Bookshop

Hole in the Wall
(2nd floor)

67 Richmond Street
Amherstburg



Free Admission

Arthur Lismer, *Islands of Spruce* (from the portfolio *Canadian Drawings by Members of the Group of Seven*) detail, 1925, offset lithograph on paper, 70/100, 39.0 cm x 28.0 cm Courtesy of the American Friends of Canada Committee, Inc., through the generosity of Elliot and Ruth Brebner and family, 1994.024.012

Group of Seven: Not Formed in a Day

The art produced by the Group of Seven transformed how people saw the art of Canada. The artists worked together to present a unified artistic vision, thinking of their art as symbols of Canadian patriotism. They made art that looked completely different from the more realistic styles popular at the time. Their use of bright colours and thickly applied paint can be seen in the paintings included in *Group of Seven: Not Formed in a Day*.

The place that the Group of Seven occupies in the story of Canadian art was born from conversations. These conversations started first between the artists, as they worked to define a new art for Canada. The conversations continue today as other artists, curators, writers, thinkers and makers consider their work from different perspectives.

Who was The Group of Seven? Beginnings

In 1920, a group of seven self-proclaimed modern artists – Franklin Carmichael, Lawren S. Harris, A. Y. Jackson, Frank Johnston, Arthur Lismer, James E. H. MacDonald, and Frederick H. Varley – presented themselves as Canada’s first national school of painters. Having met as co-workers and artistic peers, they sketched and painted together in the hardwood forests and lakesides of Georgian Bay and Algonquin Park. In Toronto, members painted at The Studio Building, an artist studio space designed by Eden Smith co-founded by Lawren S. Harris and Dr James MacCallum¹. Members who joined the Group later included L. L. Fitzgerald, Alfred Casson, and Edwin Holgate. Together, they introduced

the idea that Canadian art could be important and distinctive enough to earn international recognition. The liveliness of their paintings, with their surprising colour choices, explosive brushwork and expressive depictions of landscape contributed to Canada’s national identity. J.E.H. MacDonald said of their ambitions: “Let the reader go if he will [to the exhibition] and feel in the pictures the Canadian spirit in art, striving through sincere expression for a self-determination which will enable our people to make their necessary and fitting contribution to the common art treasures of the world.”²

While the Group of Seven are now upheld by Canadian art connoisseurs as the most important group of painters in Canadian history, their work was

¹ Waldron, Andrew. “The Studio Building, 25 Severn Street, Toronto, Ontario”, *Journal of the Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada*, Volume 31, N° 1, 2006

² Whitelaw, Anne, “Whiffs of Balsam, Pine, and Spruce: Art Museums and the Production of a Canadian Aesthetic,” in *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and*

Contemporary Art, ed. John O’Brian and Peter White (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007), 176.

³ Nasgaard, Roald. *The Mystic North: Symbolist*

controversial when they first emerged. Members of the artistic establishment of the time disliked what the group declared about their art. Early exhibitions by the Group were compared to “the contents of ‘a drunkard’s stomach’”. Art critic H.F Gadsby dubbed them “The Hot Mush School”. Others compared their paintings to split cans of paint or “daubing by immature children” – a kind of critique that continues to be levelled against art that breaks with traditions.

The Group of Seven: Outside influences

The Group of Seven’s desire to define a national identity for Canada and to capture the connection they felt to the natural world through art was not a new idea. Painters in other countries were also making art that reflected how they felt about nature, and about the power of art to build national identity.

While the Group was searching for a style, they were inspired by a group of Scandinavian painters whose work they saw in Buffalo, New York in 1912. The group was inspired by how these painters expressed the feeling of being ‘overcome’ by what they saw in nature³. They were drawn to the idea of putting nature ‘before’ the art and allowing themselves to be overwhelmed by what they saw.

The Group read American authors like Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau. These writers wrote about land and nature in a way that connected to the Group of Seven’s ideas. They were also inspired by the spiritual movements of Theosophy, Christian Science and Transcendentalism.

Combining these influences, the Group was passionate about making something distinctly expressive of their nation. Carmichael wrote in an artist statement that while he had “nothing but admiration for the best of what has been produced in the past in other countries”, he disagreed that external ideals should impose upon the artistic efforts of the Group of Seven as “that would be admitting an incapacity to shape...(their) own ideas.”⁴

Franklin Carmichael: The Higher Hill and Thorn-apple Tree

Born in Orillia, Ontario, Franklin Carmichael began practising his artistic skills in his father’s carriage-making shop. He later attended the Ontario College of Art in Toronto, and Toronto Technical School. While he worked at a commercial art firm, Grip Limited, he connected with Lawren S. Harris, Arthur Lismer, and others. Further studies in Europe were cut short because of World War I. Carmichael returned to Toronto and became an art director and industrial designer for over twenty years. He taught at the Ontario College of Art from 1932 until his death in 1945.

A few years prior to his death, Carmichael was invited to create illustrations for books that explored narratives and themes seeking to define Canada. Carmichael completed the book design as well as the illustrations inside – a natural project for Carmichael, given his years of experience working as a commercial artist. The wood engravings featured here, from the two titles ‘Thorn-apple Tree’ (1942) and ‘The Higher Hill’ (1944), by Grace Campbell, share stories of early settlers and their struggles working and living on the land.

Landscape Painting in Northern Europe and North America, 1890-1940. Toronto: Published in association with the Art Gallery of Ontario by University of Toronto Press, 1984. Print.

⁴ Correspondence from Franklin Carmichael to D. C. Scott at the Vancouver School of Art, January 1, 1933, MG30-D293, vol. 5, file 22, Franklin Carmichael fonds, Library and

Archives
Canada, Ottawa, Ontario.

⁵ Dooley, Tatum, “The Group of Seven Doesn’t Define Canadian Art” Updated 15:00, Feb. 19,



The prints illustrate key moments in each book's colonial narratives.

Group of Seven: Building Mythologies

By declaring themselves as leaders of an important movement, the Group created spaces for stories and myth-making. In 1925, "Canadian Drawings: A Portfolio of Prints by Members of the Group of Seven", was published in an edition of 100 by Rous & Mann Limited of Toronto. The National Gallery had started a program making and selling copies of Canadian artworks. These prints were one of the first ways the Group of Seven circulated images of their work across the country and internationally.⁵ The prints could be purchased by government agencies, offices, as well as privately for display in the home.⁶ Both A.Y. Jackson and Arthur Lismer were involved in the selection of works⁷.

As the popularity of Group of Seven continues, conversations around their

work have changed. Early critiques about how the work looked and what it said about national identity, have given way to new conversations.

Conversations about what their works do, and do not, tell us about Canada, authenticity, and place. As voices are added to the conversation, the shape of the Group's legacy changes. Although the Group of Seven disbanded in 1933, thirteen years after their formation, the Group's legacy is still not fully formed. It is fitting, in the words of Franklin Carmichael, to understand how the Group of Seven and their vision for an art of Canada was not formed in a day:

"Traditions grow, they are not formed in a day and it is only through an unswerving attachment to an ideal, that grows out of a continual and intimate contact with our own life and surroundings, that an artist can hope to contribute towards that which in time will become the traditions of his own country."⁸

James E.H. MacDonald, *Lake O'Hara* (from the portfolio *Canadian Drawings by Members of the Group of Seven*), 1925, offset lithograph on paper, 70/100, 39.0 cm x 29.0 cm, Courtesy of the American Friends of Canada Committee, Inc., through the generosity of Elliot and Ruth Brebner and family, 1994.024.016

²⁰²¹ | Published 14:00, Feb. 19, 2021, thewalrus.ca

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Correspondence from Franklin Carmichael to D. C. Scott at the Vancouver School of Art, January 1, 1933, MG30-D293, vol. 5, file 22, Franklin Carmichael fonds, Library and

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Canada, Ottawa, Ontario.



Group of Seven Facts:

Lismer was the member credited with naming the 'group', they could not come up with one word that adequately described their ambitions, so he counted the number of people in the group.

J.E.H. MacDonald named his son "Thoreau" after one of his favourite writers, Henry David Thoreau.

The name "Group of Seven" isn't accurate, as additional members joined after the group was named. Tom Thomson, widely thought to be a 'member' of the group, was not in fact a member although his work greatly influenced the Group.

Lawren S. Harris co-founded The Studio Building, where many members of the Group painted, with collector Dr. James MacCallum. The Studio charged artists only enough rent to cover the expenses to run the space so that artists had the freedom to concentrate and innovate.

The Studio building where many of the Group of Seven worked was designated a National Historic Site in 2005, can you find the sketch of it in the Not Formed in a Day exhibition?

Many members of the Group of Seven were teachers and educators, mentoring younger artists.

Want to learn more? Check out these book titles:

Jackson's Wars, A.Y. Jackson, the Birth of the Group of Seven, and the Great War, Douglas Hunter, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022

A Like Vision: The Group of Seven and Tom Thompson, Ian A.C. Dejardin, Gooselane Editions, 2020

The Group of Seven and Tom Thompson, David P. Silcox, Firefly Books, 2011

Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art, edited by John O'Brian and Peter White, Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007

The Best of the Group of Seven, Joan Murray, Penguin Random House, 1993

Franklin Carmichael
Title page decoration for *The Higher Hill*, 1944
wood engraving on paper, 12.0 cm x 15.0 cm
Gift of the artist's estate in memory of Mrs. Judith
Saltmarche, 1992.006.001



Lawren Stewart Harris, *Mount Samson, Jasper Park* (from the portfolio *Canadian Drawings by Members of the Group of Seven*), 1925, offset lithograph on paper, 70/100, 39.0 cm x 28.0 cm, Courtesy of the American Friends of Canada Committee, Inc., through the generosity of Elliot and Ruth Brebner and family, 1994.024.004

Text by Jennifer Matotek and Nadja Pelkey with files from Richard Peddie and Lana Zagorac



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