

TOM THOMSON?

The Art of Authentication

Introduction

Tom Thomson is a source of endless fascination. During his brief six-year career as a painter, he produced hundreds of oil sketches and a handful of canvases that responded to the mid-northern Ontario landscape. An artist of uncommon abilities, he was the subject of immediate national myth-making and subsequent critical myth-dismantling in the century following his death. His legacy and life are well documented, as is his untimely death in 1917 at the age of thirty-nine, by drowning, the mystery of which only adds to the sustained curiosity about the artist. Who was he? What really happened? You can't write better fiction.

As one of the most recognized Canadian painters past or present, it is therefore not surprising that Thomson would be a target for copyists and forgers. He has become one of the most renowned and one of the most faked Canadian artists; as the market for his work skyrocketed, so too did the construction of his artistic reputation. A large retrospective of his work, organized by the National Gallery of Canada and the Art Gallery of Ontario in 2002-3, and accompanied by a brick of a book, served to further consolidate his legacy in the early twenty-first century.

This project returns to Thomson's painting, in particular to those extraordinary oil sketches that he produced over the course of a few short years, mostly outdoors. These small wooden panels give us much of what we know about the artist and his prodigious talent: the what, where and how of his painting practice. They are the primary extant evidence of his life's work. But what makes them authentically his? And what in turn is used to authenticate his work, to know with certainty whether a painting is indeed by Thomson's hand?

The idea for this exhibition dates back to 2014, when Tobi received an email at the Art Gallery of Hamilton from a collector who thought he might have a Thomson painting signed "TT" (cat. 36). He had done considerable research himself, had consulted with Thomson experts and was interested in her having a look. A few months later, a similar situation occurred at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre; in that case, it was a local collector with a small painted panel also signed "TT" who approached Alicia (cat. 37). These parallel encounters led to a conversation between curators that culminates in this exhibition.

As institutional curators, we do not authenticate artworks that are not destined for our respective collections. But the *process* of authentication is fascinating, and something we both felt was worthy of an exhibition. The idea of developing a project that foregrounds the questions we ask when

trying to authenticate works of art struck us as particularly rich and engaging, and ultimately became our starting point. Using these two possible Thomson panels as the nucleus, the project brings together approximately thirty known sketch panels and canvases by Thomson in order to present a visual overview of the artist's practice.

Authenticating artwork is both an art and a science, with technical and scientific examination playing an increasingly significant part. And while leaning one way or another is often based on studied instinct and intuition (also known as connoisseurship), there are several exploratory avenues that help make or break the authentication process. Just because a work is in the style of an artist, is signed even, is no guarantee of its authenticity; more digging is always necessary. This project has set out a series of approaches for review and consideration. They are based on the questions that curators, art historians, conservators, auctioneers and collectors ask to ensure they have a true Thomson. The project examines, and indulges in, Thomson's materials, his painting styles, his favoured subjects and his signature itself, as well as the people who have collected his work.

What you hold in your hands is conceived as a kind of field guide to Thomson, an introduction to understanding the authentication process. It is organized thematically, based on the questions that arise when faced with a "Tom Thomson" not documented in his catalogue raisonné—the listing of all his known works, now available online. Each short essay highlights key elements and issues associated with a particular investigative theme as it relates to Thomson's work. In the end, the

more you look, handle and sense, the greater your ability to judge. This intangible factor is both a highly developed sense and skill, but also a bit of a mystery. Much like Thomson himself. 🐛

Alicia Boutilier and Tobi Bruce

Signature

More Than a Name



One of the first things we look for in the process of authenticating an artwork is the signature—a quick glance to a painting’s bottom corners is a first step in determining authorship, but it’s often not so straightforward. If present, is a signature that crucial piece of the authentication puzzle or is it rather a single, albeit critical, element?

It’s important to note that signatures are not scientific evidence of authenticity but rather painted patterns of lines and forms that give us something tangible to further scrutinize. Forensics are often used to determine whether a signature is authentic and by the hand of the artist. Fake signatures, or those added later, can sometimes be detected through examination under ultraviolet light. Moreover, art historians, curators, collectors, dealers and others who commit to sustained study of an artist’s oeuvre come to recognize even slight variations in an artist’s signature.

Of course signatures, much like painting styles, change over time. This is certainly the case with Tom Thomson. Early examples of his signature, between the years 1906 and 1912 (fig. 1), tend to be larger, cursive and far more declarative than later versions. They are also often painted in a bright, contrasting colour, such as red. Five works painted in the area of Lake Scugog around 1911 form a fascinating study and suggest a young

artist experimenting with various options: a “T” inside a box (fig. 2); a more cursory “T. T.”; and a full signature. By 1913 Thomson appears to settle on a more modestly scaled and consistent “TOM THOMSON” executed in pigments that, for the most part, blend more seamlessly with the work’s overall palette.

For the purposes of this project, the two unauthenticated panels at the centre of this exhibition (cats. 36, 37, pp. 8, 9) are signed “TT.” Firstly, it was important to consider if, when and how Thomson used that form of signature. A review of Thomson’s online catalogue raisonné is indispensable here.¹ We see that between 1906 and about 1910 Thomson signed his work regularly enough using his initials. Significantly, he did so both in painted form (cat. 37) and through incising the paint layer (cat. 36), which Thomson occasionally did throughout his painting career.

Had there been no evidence of Thomson signing with his initials, would such a signature serve as grounds for dismissal? The answer isn’t straightforward. If the work had an undisputed provenance from the artist’s death to the present owner, initials might offer evidence of a new or singular form of signature for Thomson. Without that provenance, however, the signature becomes an outlier.

If a signature doesn’t appear on the painted surface, the back of the work (or verso) is often a gold mine of information. It’s on the back of an artwork that mysteries are often solved and greater knowledge and understanding of a work may be had. Inscriptions, dates, labels, numbers, stamps and much more can open up a range of avenues to be explored

for further information. In the best-case scenario, Thomson himself has signed, dated, titled and/or located the work (fig. 3). While this scenario is exceedingly rare,² there are other proxy signs that can equally build a solid case for authentication. The catalogue raisonné outlines a range of oft-present verso inscriptions and markings that allow us to trace a work's provenance, thereby helping to secure authorship.³ The list consists of identifiers assigned to individuals close to the artist during his lifetime, such as his ardent supporter and patron, the ophthalmologist and collector Dr. James MacCallum, or family members who managed the Thomson inventory following the artist's death, such as two of his sisters, Elizabeth Harkness Thomson and Margaret Thomson (Tweedale), as well as his brother George Thomson. It also lists Thomson collectors who subsequently owned his work. These notes and annotations are crucial as they bear witness to a work's location at a certain time.

In the case of Thomson, there is also a crucial instrument at play with regard to signature: two estate stamps (cat. 35, p. 50). After Thomson's accidental death at the age of thirty-nine in July 1917, his close colleague and the future Group of Seven member J. E. H. MacDonald designed a die-cut stamp to apply to Thomson's works that remained in the Studio Building,⁴ as a form of authentication. The stamp was applied to the front of the paintings, usually in the lower right or lower left corner, and embedded into the paint layer so as to ensure its permanency (fig. 4). Correspondingly, a rubber stamp of the same design was inked and used on the verso of works for the same purpose. The importance of these stamps cannot be overstated. Not only do they essentially confirm authenticity,⁵ but also their presence, like the handwritten notes or labels, signals key provenance history.

Let's consider two Thomsons, and let their versos do the talking. The Art Gallery of Hamilton (AGH) holds two works that, between them, offer an excellent range of information that traces near comprehensive provenance. The presence of the rubber estate stamp on the verso of *Ragged Lake* (fig. 5) tells us that it was in the Studio Building at the time of Thomson's death. "Not For Sale" is in J. E. H. MacDonald's script, and it was likely he who applied the estate stamp. We know that the work was not sold by MacDonald, owing to the presence of an inventory number written by Thomson's sister Margaret Thomson, who managed the estate in the 1930s.⁶ The work was sold through the estate to Walter Cameron (W. C.) Laidlaw,⁷ who then bequeathed it to his brother Robert Alexander (R. A.) Laidlaw. The large red encircled "30" is a telltale sign of R. A. Laidlaw's inventory. The panel was then acquired by Mrs. G. Y. Douglas of Hamilton, who in 1963 donated it to the AGH.

The verso of *Cranberry Marsh and Hill* (fig. 6) is also rife with information, though it is also somewhat misleading. Like *Ragged Lake*, the estate stamp tells us it was likely left in the Studio Building after Thomson's death. The identification of the title and owner, "Mrs. Harkness / Sister of the Artist," as well as Margaret Thomson's inventory number, "84 M. Thomson," confirms that the work remained in the family until it was sold through Laing Galleries and acquired by the AGH in 1953. A nice and tidy provenance, yes, but what about the date that appears as "1915," with a "4" over the "5"? Subsequent research initially re-dated this panel to the spring 1916, however a recent review suggests the original date of "1915" is indeed correct.⁸ Who, then, "corrected" the date to 1914? If this tells us anything, it is to remain cautious in taking verso information at face value.

Indeed, arriving at firm conclusions based on verso signatures, labels, annotations and markings is a tricky business, and unbridled optimism, as seductive as it is, should not lead to hasty or hopeful assumptions. In some instances, annotations rely on memory, that most elusive of faculties; recollections shift, morph and often fail us. And so while these fascinating elements offer significant—and compelling—evidence, they must always be considered cautiously, and only in light of all of the other factors that bear so directly on authentication. Signature is but one piece of a very large and complex puzzle. 

Tobi Bruce

1 Joan Murray, *Tom Thomson Catalogue Raisonné*: <https://www.tomthomsoncatalogue.org/>.

2 It is also unusual for the artist to list a purchase price on the verso. One plausible explanation put forth by Thomson scholar Joan Murray is that Thomson painted the panel in late April or early May 1916 when Lawren Harris, his cousin Chester Harris and James MacCallum came to visit him in Algonquin Park. It could be that MacCallum suggested Thomson sign, title and add a purchase price, so that he could take the panel back to Toronto for sale. Joan Murray, email correspondence with the author, 22 April 2021. I thank Joan Murray for generously sharing her knowledge.

3 Joan Murray, “A Note on the Verso Inscriptions,” *Tom Thomson Catalogue Raisonné*, https://www.tomthomsoncatalogue.org/section/?id=verso_inscriptions.

4 The Studio Building, completed in 1914, was home and studio space to several future Group of Seven members as well as other artists. Thomson occupied the “shack” located behind the building when in Toronto.

5 The existence of a fake estate stamp should be noted here. And while its design resembles the original, close inspection reveals key differences. See cat. 38, page 96.

6 Murray, “A Note on the Verso Inscriptions.”

7 While there are no verso markings that indicate the work was in the collection of W. C. Laidlaw, it is known to have been exhibited in 1937 and 1959 with Laidlaw listed as the owner. Exhibition history also plays a critical role in the authentication process.

8 A recent review of the verso markings on *Cranberry Hill and Marsh* has yielded this new dating. Joan Murray, email correspondence with the author, 27 April 2021.

Subject Matter

Points of View

 e knew where to find subjects—a stretch of muskeg, a fine stand of pine with possibilities for the kind of thing he wanted to paint. . . . He identified a bird song, and noted changes in the weather. . . . It was this sense of awareness and significance of simple sights and sounds, his uncanny sensitivity carried over into his painting and sketching that gave the authentic tang to his work.¹

Using subject matter to authenticate artwork is a slippery exercise. Subject matter historically binds artistic endeavour to a specific genre—a flower painter, a landscape artist—rendering explorations outside those bounds as anomalous, and maybe even suspect. But when an artist’s work is so strongly tied to place, as Tom Thomson’s is, what is in the work becomes a focal point of scrutiny. From his first trip in May 1912 until his death there in July 1917, Algonquin Park, about 250 kilometres from Toronto, was Thomson’s primary painting place and the place he primarily painted. A stretch of muskeg and a fine stand of pine, or any Algonquin Park tree, are what we have come to expect in a Thomson, and he painted them spectacularly well. If a building shows up, or an atypical landform, or figures (which he did not paint so well), then careful geographical and biographical analysis comes into play regarding the what, where and who.² If it’s all woodsy water and trees, and we’re

just not sure about attribution, we move on from subject matter to other authentication tools, like style and provenance.

“Authentic” is also a slippery term when talking about Thomson. Its meaning risks jumping from an attribution exercise to sounding like it’s all about Thomson “being real” and capturing “the real thing.” This slipperiness comes through in fellow artist Arthur Lismer’s construction of Thomson in the epigraph above. Thomson = Algonquin Park = “the North” = Canada: decades of mythmaking have entrenched this equation, or rather elision. And I myself risk evoking it here. “The idea of Canada-as-North and of Algonquin Park as a metonym of North,” Sherrill Grace points out, “is still powerful,”³ even after much critical dismantling of it as hegemonic colonial discourse. “No landscape may be apprehended as a universal truth by those who see it,” John Wadland writes. “Every landscape is a social place, with different versions of itself available to different perceptions.”⁴ The question here is not what is authentically Algonquin Park or Thomson but rather what are the representations of Algonquin Park that are authentically Thomson’s.

Not much survives of Thomson’s writing, if indeed he even wrote much. His handful of letters to friends and family, however, are filled with talk about changing weather and seasonal colour, and how many sketches he was painting, or not, in and around Algonquin Park. The logged-over, dammed-up, railroad-crossed, fish-stocked park for tourists—traditional Algonquin, Anishinabek territory—was “the woods” for Thomson. So much so that, in July 1914, after staying at patron James MacCallum’s cottage in Georgian Bay for two months, Thomson wrote “a short note”

to fellow artist Fred Varley: “I am leaving here about the end of the week and back to the woods for summer. . . . This place is getting too much like north Rosedale to suit me—all birthday cakes and water ice etc. Will be over in Algonquin Park from about a week from today.”⁵ By October that year, in the park, Thomson remarked to MacCallum how “the maples are about all stripped of leaves now but the birches are very rich in colour. . . . the best I can do does not do the place much justice in the way of beauty.”⁶

We see these rich fall birches, over and over again, from this year and others, in *Northern Lake* (cat. 16, p. 21), *White Birches* (cat. 29, p. 32), *Autumn Woods* (cat. 2, p. 41), *Wood Interior* (cat. 31, p. 40), *Northern Woods* (cat. 17, p. 38), and even the canvas *The Birch Grove, Autumn* (cat. 3, p. 37), an autumnal transformation of the spring sketch (cat. 4, p. 36). These birches are just one motif indicative of the critical mass that establishes Algonquin Park as the subject matter expected from Thomson. On September 8, 1915, Thomson wrote, “Have travelled over a great deal of country this summer, and have done very few sketches, it will be about a hundred so far.”⁷ Only a hundred.

While in Algonquin Park, Thomson largely painted the subjects that were before him, outdoors, in spring, summer, fall and late winter. Only the dead of winter is missing, when he was painting canvases from those sketches in his studio (often called a “shack” in the mythic Thomson narrative) behind the Studio Building at 25 Severn Street in Toronto. In April 1917, he skipped a family visit to make it to the park “before the snow was gone so could not spare the time,” he admitted to his father. “The lakes are still frozen over and will be for two or three weeks yet

and there is still about two to three feet of snow in the bush so I expect to get a lot more winter sketches before the snow and ice are all gone.”⁸ Later that month it appears, he sent MacCallum a weather update: “The snow is pretty well cleared off, just patches in the bush on the north side of the hills and in the swamps so now I will have to hunt for places to sketch when I want snow.”⁹ In Thomson’s sketches, as Charles Hill outlines, “one is able to follow the seasons’ passing, from the late winter snow to the budding of spring, the skies of summer and changing of fall leaves from red to yellow to the first snows of winter. These were his prime subjects, a limited number of motifs endlessly repeated in constantly evolving perceptions.”¹⁰ Thomson chose these motifs and organized them according to a sense of design honed in the various commercial engraving studios where he had worked in his earlier years. Each sketch is a view selected, marking what is distilled, what is not there, what is added. There are certainly views that Thomson favoured and repeated: a screen of trees, sometimes on a diagonal that bisects the panel; a horizontal stretch of water as if from a canoe or shore edge; a hilly patch of blue-shadowed snow. Thomson’s views of Algonquin Park are always, like anyone’s, points of view.

In 1963–64, sketches labelled “Tom Thomson” and “Algonquin Park” were embroiled in the biggest art fraud case in Canadian history. Nathan Stolow, chief of the newly formed Conservation and Scientific Research Division at the National Gallery of Canada, was appointed scientific consultant to the Attorney General in the case. “We all thought that surely Canadian art had come of age if it was worthwhile creating fake works,” he recalled.¹¹ Thomson fakes were not the only ones in the case that resulted in charges against two Toronto art dealers, but they were at the core of a sensational

revelation. Artist Thomas Chatfield (then art director for Famous Players Canadian Corporation) was called to the stand and identified several oil “Tom Thomsons” as actually his own sketches, from an earlier stage in his career when he was influenced by Thomson (cats. 39 and 40, pp. 95, 94). Unbeknownst to Chatfield, the labels had been affixed to the backs of the works (fig. 10). Artificially aged and embossed with a fake estate stamp, the Chatfields were sold as genuine sketches of Algonquin Park by Thomson.¹² Subject matter can be the first thing faked, and may be the easiest.

With Thomson having produced hundreds of Algonquin Park sketches, art dealers, curators and conservators in Canada are always poised to hear about another. In the case of one sketch at the centre of this exhibition (cat. 37, p. 9), a “TT” signature piques interest—especially when the owner has a story about validation from artist A. J. Casson (who had been an advisor in the 1963–64 fraud), and preliminary scientific analysis reveals paint materials comparable to those used by Thomson.¹³ But it is the subject, that screen of birch trees, that first gives pause and propels continued study. 🍷

Alicia Boutilier

1 Arthur Lismer, “Tom Thomson (1877–1917): Canadian Painter,” *The Educational Record of the Province of Quebec* 80, no. 3 (July–September 1954): 171.

2 See, for examples, four paintings included in the exhibition *Drawn to the West* at the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies as “The Case for Thomson in the Rockies,” <https://www.whyte.org/posts/the-case-for-thomson-in-the-rockies>, and a landscape of Lake Washington, Seattle, in the documentary film *West Wind: The Vision of Tom Thomson*, directed by Michèle Hozer and Peter Raymont, produced by Nancy Lang and Peter Raymont (Toronto: White Pine Pictures, 2011), 95 min.

3 Sherrill Grace, *Inventing Tom Thomson: From Biographical Fictions to Fictional Autobiographies and Reproductions* (Montreal; Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2004), 56.

4 John Wadland, “Tom Thomson’s Places,” in *Tom Thomson*, eds. Dennis Reid and Charles C. Hill (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2002), 95.

5 Tom Thomson to Frederick Varley, postmarked 8 July 1914, “Tom Thomson’s Letters,” compiled by Joan Murray, in *Tom Thomson*, 298.

6 Tom Thomson to James MacCallum, 6 October 1914, “Tom Thomson’s Letters,” 298.

7 Tom Thomson to James MacCallum, 8 September 1915, “Tom Thomson’s Letters,” 301.

8 Tom Thomson to John Thomson, postmarked 16 April 1917, “Tom Thomson’s Letters,” 303.

9 Tom Thomson to James MacCallum, 21 April [1917?], “Tom Thomson’s Letters,” 304.

10 Charles C. Hill, “Tom Thomson, Painter,” in *Tom Thomson*, 112.

11 Nathan Stolow to Charles C. Hill, 27 December 2001, curatorial file, Imitator of Tom Thomson, *Untitled*, ST8, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

12 For an in-depth study of the art fraud case, see Jon Dellandrea’s book, to be published by Goose Lane Editions in 2022.

13 Author in conversation with the owner of *Untitled* (cat. 37), 2021; Camille Beaudoin, “A Technical Examination of Two Unattributed Canadian Sketches Possibly Painted by Tom Thomson,” Research Project, Department of Art History and Art Conservation, Queen’s University, Kingston, 2017.

Style

Colour, Brushstroke, Influences

om Thomson developed his style through observing the work of his teachers and peers, by taking their advice, and from his readings. His background as an artist was in design: he worked for commercial art firms in Seattle and Toronto. It was after his return to Toronto, in late 1905 or 1906, that he began an artistic evolution that sped up when he joined the ambitious firm Grip Limited in 1909. There, mentored by Grip's senior artist, J. E. H. MacDonald, and the art director, Albert H. Robson, among others, he progressed as a painter with astonishing rapidity.

In January 1914, encouraged by his friends, Thomson left commercial art to paint. He shared a studio with A. Y. Jackson, in the newly built Studio Building in Toronto. Jackson had returned from four years in France and conveyed to Thomson what he had learned there of Impressionism. Years later, Jackson would describe how he influenced Thomson, showing him how to combine colours by using little separate strokes or “clean-cut dots.”¹ Thomson soon began to use large strokes of colour to give a gently vibrating effect in major canvases such as *Morning Cloud* (fig. 11) and *Moonlight* (fig. 12), both shown that March

in the Ontario Society of Artists exhibition. The result was gratifying. *Moonlight* was purchased by the National Gallery of Canada in 1914. With the sale, Thomson's life settled into a new and positive rhythm. He went north in the spring to make oil sketches and returned to the studio in the autumn to develop them into canvases.

Thomson always had Impressionist techniques in his arsenal to use when he wanted, sometimes with spectacular results, as in *Chill November* (cat. 8, p. 45). Here, he depicts the water's flow with broad horizontal strokes of colour in the foreground merging into an uneven band of light blue on the horizon; light blue and pink strokes in the hills; and above, high in the sky area, pale pink, lavender, turquoise and white strokes—the effect is mesmerizing. *Wild Geese* (cat. 30, p. 44), the sketch for the canvas, is muted by comparison. The use of colour in the canvas is proof that Thomson followed Jackson's advice even some years later, combining it with his own gift as a colourist.

Thomson emulated Jackson often. In his oil sketches, he regularly used a few dots, large or small, in strategic places, as in *Poplar Hillside* (cat. 19, p. 33), *First Snow* (cat. 11, p. 48) and *Autumn Woods* (cat. 2, p. 41). Thomson created depth using horizontal bands of landscape, as in *Chill November*—which was Jackson's typical way of composing. Sometimes, too, Thomson used a device found in Jackson's *The Edge of the Maple Wood* (fig. 13); he depicts the shadow of a tree that is in the viewer's space but not in the artwork's.

In his desire to elevate his canvases beyond the oil sketches, Thomson borrowed from Art Nouveau, a style he was familiar with from his

commercial work. He associated “high art” with this style—but not for long, because he, and his painter friends, soon apprehended a third stylistic influence, Post-Impressionism, in which he worked out his own language of form and colour. Never having travelled abroad, he would have learned of this style by studying the work of his peers, particularly the paintings of Lawren Harris, and through books from the public library (a branch was near his studio) or that Harris lent him.

Today, Thomson and the Group of Seven artists are described as Post-Impressionists, a disparate group that used form and colour for expressive effect—though in Canada, the style was combined with a record of nature, as with Thomson’s work.

For Thomson, and the entire group, the style meant a new vitality, breadth of handling and pictorial freedom, particularly when applied to a major canvas. Thomson’s *The Birch Grove, Autumn* (cat. 3, p. 37), for instance, toys with the viewer’s perception. It is a powerful painting of a Canadian forest, with brilliant colour applied in a heavy impasto and broad strokes. Judging by the sketch *Birches* (cat. 4, p. 36), Thomson’s initial idea was more modest. The general composition is there but without the bold strokes of colour.

Thomson’s work reveals that he painted with confidence and employed a sizable vocabulary of delicate strokes and broad swatches of colour. In his small sketches, he sought a summary effect attained with thin lines, single and grouped. Sometimes he used thick paint and complementary colour mixtures. He was always sensitive to design. His vision is marked

by keen observation and by certain habits likely formed in the commercial art field, such as the way he painted trees, branches first, and then the sky—a technique visible in *First Snow* (cat. 11, p. 48). Snow itself was painted in a myriad of colours, never white.

His “style,” therefore, is hard to categorize, and even harder to copy. He couldn’t have painted the known fake in this exhibition (cat. 38, p. 96): the brushstrokes are too coarse. A copyist does not have the poetry of colour, the careful observation and, most of all, the experience of landscape that Thomson did—a vista continuing beyond the painting.

Thomson’s closest friends among the painters, Harris and MacDonald, had difficulty describing his style. Their words sound similar, as though discussed beforehand and agreed upon. Both called him a genius. MacDonald wrote of Thomson’s “concentration of purpose,” Harris of his “concentrated directness . . . which drew from colour its maximum intensity.”²

Others, such as Jackson and F. H. Varley, called him a Cubist.³ In fact, with his high-keyed colour, notational style (at least in his oil sketches) and strong design, Thomson was more of a sibling to the Fauves. He even essayed a form of abstraction in a few sketches, though Jackson warned of the danger of going too far in that direction.

Thomson’s feeling in making art must have been one of high resolve. He participated in what is sometimes called the “Advent of Modernism,”⁴ as though it were a new religion. Conquering artistic territory meant

initiating radical change, and he knew he was a pioneer in the endeavour —yet when he spoke about his art, he seemed unsure of what to call it. Perhaps it was only modesty. He knew what he was creating: art in a new style, the Tom Thomson way. 

Joan Murray

- 1 A. Y. Jackson, interview by Joan Murray, 4 March 1971. Joan Murray-Tom Thomson Catalogue Raisonné collection (LA.SC159), Edward P. Taylor Library & Archives, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.
- 2 J. E. H. MacDonald, “A Landmark of Canadian Art,” *Rebel* 2, no. 2 (November 1917): 45–50; Lawren Harris, interviewed in a documentary about Thomson by Graham McInnes, *West Wind* (Ottawa: National Film Board of Canada, 1944), 20 min.
- 3 From letters written to Dr. J. M. MacCallum, October 1914, MacCallum correspondence, National Gallery of Canada Archives, Ottawa.
- 4 As in Peter Morrin, *The Advent of Modernism: Post-Impressionism and North American Art, 1900–1918* (Atlanta: High Museum of Art, 1986).

Provenance

The History of Ownership

he ideal provenance of an artwork documents its movement from the artist's hands to the first owner and then down an unbroken chain of ownership to the present, thereby helping to confirm the work's authenticity. Most provenance is not ideal, leaving undocumented gaps in the artwork's ownership history. In the case of Tom Thomson, more than half of the over six hundred items in his catalogue raisonné (a listing of the artist's entire oeuvre)¹ are works that he gifted to family or were left in his estate, providing a solid first step in their ownership history.

Determining the chain of ownership for the works not given to family begins with the connection the first owner had with Tom Thomson. In the case of friends, colleagues and others, Thomson's history with these individuals needs to link closely to the circumstances of his life to make the provenance solid. This short history of ownership for Thomson's painting *The Marsh, Lake Scugog* (cat. 14, p. 18) provides a fairly straightforward case study. As well, it reveals how investigating a work's provenance can turn up fascinating stories about places, people and events in the artist's life.

From Thomson's Hands to Stanley Kemp

From January 1909 to October 1912, Thomson and Stanley Kemp (fig. 14) were co-workers at Grip Limited, a design firm in Toronto. Kemp had received a master's degree in 1908 from the University of Toronto, where he enjoyed lectures on English literature given by Professor William Alexander.² Kemp's connection with Alexander likely made its way into his conversations with Thomson, who loved poetry and literature. The two co-workers were sufficiently friendly that Kemp invited Thomson to his home. Kemp wrote in a 1934 letter to Martin Baldwin, Curator of the Art Gallery of Toronto: "I knew Thomson rather well in the days when he and I were commercial artists together at Grip Limited, and I had the honour of being numbered among his trusted friends."³

Kemp married Gertrude Maidment in June 1908, and they had a daughter, Helen,⁴ in 1910. He borrowed ten dollars from Thomson, possibly to help with hospital fees for the birth. (Thomson also helped fellow artist Arthur Lismer with similar hospital fees in 1913.)

In 1913, Thomson and Kemp assisted their former boss at Grip, J. E. H. MacDonald, to meet the deadline for his commission from the Toronto General Hospital Board.⁵ The board wanted drawings of hospital views for a leather-bound album to present to the Lieutenant-Governor at the hospital's opening on June 18, 1913. Thomson and Kemp worked amiably and quietly through the night. In his letter to Baldwin, Kemp confirms receiving a painting from Thomson shortly thereafter in the autumn of 1913, while visiting him on Isabella Street in Toronto:

*The picture is as it stands, frame, glass and all is exactly as it was presented to me one evening off-hand by Tom Thomson as we smoked a friendly pipe together. He had just been showing me a multitude of his sketches, most of which (if not all) were unframed, and which were no doubt a whole summer's work. The picture you have just bought from me is a little larger than most of those I remember in his studio at that time, and it is the only one I remember that was clearly framed.*⁶

Kemp sought out Thomson in 1914 or 1915 to repay his debt: "Once when I called on him at the famous 'shack' just south of the studio building on Severn Street to make belated return of a borrowed ten dollar bill, all he said was, 'I can use it.'"⁷

Lake Scugog as a Painting Location for Tom Thomson

The catalogue raisonné lists five works with "Lake Scugog" in their titles, raising a number of questions: Why did Thomson go there? How did he get there? Who did he go with? And where did he paint and stay in the area?

Some of the answers may be found in Thomson's family connection to this region. Lake Scugog (70 km northeast of Toronto) is not far from Claremont, where Thomson was born in 1877. His father, John, was also born in Claremont and was educated in Whitby; he enjoyed fishing in the local lakes and streams. Thomson's curiosity about this area is documented in the many photographs he took in southern Ontario (fig. 15).⁸ Lake Scugog's fine fishing would also have drawn him.

One of Thomson's companions on a trip to Lake Scugog in 1911 was Grip co-worker T. H. Marten⁹—an artist, an inventor keenly interested in technology, and a consummate photographer, who took the famous photo of Thomson at the lake (fig. 16). The *Globe* had carried a report in April 1911 of an aeroplane rising into the air over Lake Scugog,¹⁰ which may have been the impetus for their trip to the area.

Thomson and Marten would have made their way to Lake Scugog via the Port Whitby and Port Perry Railway. A short history of the area from 1913, *On the Shores of Lake Scugog*, indicates that it was possible to "leave Toronto at 5:30 pm on Saturday evening and be in Port Perry by 8 o'clock, spend Saturday night, Sunday and Sunday night . . . and return to Toronto early Monday morning."¹¹

Another of Thomson's Lake Scugog companions was H. B. Jackson.¹² Born in Massachusetts, Jackson studied and worked in the United States before joining Grip as a senior designer in 1910. He and Thomson went to Lake Scugog for the fishing. In the summer of 1912, the two men made their first trip to Algonquin Park to fish and paint. Years later, Jackson would write to the historian Blodwen Davies: "We were . . . spending our holidays & weekends in the country sketching."¹³ And in another letter: "In 1911 we visited Lake Scugog two or three times where Tom did some sketching."¹⁴

Of Thomson's five Lake Scugog works, three depict marshes. Osler Marsh, on the lake, was then a private duck hunting preserve, sign-posted and with a caretaker. Thomson's works look much like that marsh, but shallow

Lake Scugog is surrounded by marshes, and he had his pick of many. Marten's photo of Thomson was probably taken in nearby Caesarea at the Kenosha House Hotel, a popular weekend destination that had boats for rent. The photo also shows the characteristic low-lying land around Lake Scugog.¹⁵

An Undisputed Provenance

The catalogue raisonné lists S. H. F. (Stanley) Kemp as the first owner of *The Marsh, Lake Scugog*. Kemp received the painting as a gift from the artist in 1913. A little over two decades later, in 1934, Kemp sold it to the Art Gallery of Toronto (now the Art Gallery of Ontario). After the sale, Martin Baldwin, the curator at the time and later director of the gallery, asked Kemp to provide a history of the work. Kemp wrote a two-page letter that describes the circumstances around the gift (fig. 17). This letter became a key document in establishing the painting's provenance.

In 1955 Blodwen Davies asked Kemp to recall his time with Tom Thomson. Kemp did not refer specifically to the work he received from Thomson in 1913, but his reminiscences testify to their strong friendship. Thus, *The Marsh, Lake Scugog* has a well-documented, undisputed provenance directly back to Tom Thomson, with no gap in ownership. From the artist's hands to the current owner—an example of ideal provenance. 📖

Angie Littlefield

- 1** The *Tom Thomson Catalogue Raisonné* was researched and written by Joan Murray over a period of fifty years. It is published online at <https://www.tomthomsoncatalogue.org>.
- 2** William Alexander had a Muskoka cottage and was a charter member of the Arts and Letters Club in Toronto. He was also one of the first to purchase a work from the Thomson estate.
- 3** Stanley Kemp to Martin Baldwin, 21 November 1934, Art Gallery of Ontario accession file, *The Marsh, Lake Scugog*, 2188.
- 4** Helen Gertrude Kemp was an educator, artist and editor. In 1933 the artist Arthur Lismer hired her as an assistant in the education department at the Art Gallery of Toronto, and in 1937 she married Northrop Frye, who would become a world-renowned literature professor and critic.
- 5** Ottelyn Addison and Elizabeth Harwood, *Tom Thomson: The Algonquin Years* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1969), 84. MacDonald's son Thoreau reminisced: "It was winter, I think 1912 or 13, that he first came to our house to help my father with some work in commercial design that they hoped to finish by working all night. I hung around hoping to hear something about the North but can only recollect Tom smiling and quietly working. It is his quiet ways I remember best in thinking of him."
- 6** Kemp to Baldwin: "The room, or rooms, was upstairs on the south side of Isabella Street."
- 7** S. H. F. Kemp, "Recollections of Tom Thomson," in William T. Little, *The Tom Thomson Mystery* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1970), 173–78. Copied from Kemp's manuscript, dated 3 December 1955, by Blodwen Davies: "The year Toronto General Hospital was opened in its present location, J. E. H. MacDonald was doing a sizeable freelance job for the hospital authorities and he had hired me to work with him all day through a public holiday . . . MacDonald was fortunate to get Tommy Thomson on the phone and happy that the latter would come directly on the radical railway."
- 8** Dennis Reid, "Photographs by Tom Thomson," *National Gallery of Canada Bulletin* 16 (1970). The lake photographed by Thomson in "A lake in Southern Ontario, I, II and III" (three photos) is likely Lake Scugog.
- 9** Thomas Henry Oake Marten was known by many variations on this name, of which T. H. Marten and Tom O. Marten are two. Marten wrote and illustrated "Frenchy and the Parrot: A Tale of the Open Sea," based on his own high sea adventures, published in *Canadian Courier* 1, no. 20 (13 April 1907): 18. Thomson saw Marten tinker away at his drawings for the T. H. Marten Davit for Launching Lifeboats, for which he filed the first patent paper on 29 December 1914.
- 10** "Mr. Ross M. Jewell's Aeroplane," *Globe* (Toronto), 29 April 1911, A6. "The aeroplane was built in Port Perry, and the picture shows the machine being started on Lake Scugog."
- 11** Samuel Farmer, *On the Shores of Scugog* (Port Perry: Lake Scugog Historical Society, 2017), 141. First edition published in 1913.
- 12** Henry Benson Jackson, a.k.a. H. B. Jackson and Harry B. Jackson, like Marten, used variations of his name.
- 13** Harry B. Jackson to Blodwen Davies, 29 April 1931, Library and Archives Canada, MG30 D38, Blodwen Davies fonds, vol. 11.
- 14** Harry B. Jackson to Blodwen Davies, 5 May 1931, Library and Archives Canada, MG30 D38, Blodwen Davies fonds, vol. 11.
- 15** Tom Thomson left Grip Limited in October 1912, but Marten and Jackson both continued to work as commercial designers, Jackson in the U.S. at the Consolidated Paper Co. in Monroe, Michigan, and Marten at Rapid, Grip and Batten in Toronto.

Materials

The Role of Scientific Analysis

 Scientific analysis can play a key role in artwork authentication. It can confirm the presence of materials appropriate to a time period or consistent with what we know of an artist's technique. Conservation scientists employ methods such as X-ray diffraction to analyze pigments, and they draw on research into an artist's materials and techniques. Results from scientific analysis must always be considered alongside other factors, such as a work's provenance and style, in authenticating an artwork.

Tom Thomson's materials and techniques were studied at the Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI) in Ottawa as part of a research program on twentieth-century Canadian artists, which began in the 1990s.¹ The project focused on the analysis of pigments in the paints and the types of supports Thomson used, as well as certain technical details, such as his preparation of supports. In 2000 results were published for twenty-two oil sketches and eleven paintings executed between 1912 and 1917.² Although the selection is a small proportion of Thomson's total production, it represents his entire career, with well-attributed works from each year in which he painted.

The CCI database assists conservators with problems of artwork degradation and in conservation treatments, and informs scholars regarding questions of attribution and authenticity.

Supports

Of the twenty-two sketches examined in the CCI study, most were done on wood panel (a thin wood plank); others were done on board, on canvas or on canvas or paper adhered to wood. "Board" is a general term used for a stiff cellulose product and includes millboard, or pressed board, made of paper pulp castings milled or pressed into a stiff sheet; cardboard, or pasteboard, made of several laminated sheets glued together; and fibreboard, made of wood fibres (like Masonite), plant fibres or other wood or plant by-products, such as sawdust.³

The art historian Joan Murray had previously studied the evolution of Thomson's supports used for sketches, and the CCI drew on her research.⁴ According to Murray's findings, in 1912 and 1913 Thomson favoured store-bought Birchmore boards of 7 by 10 inches (about 18 × 25 cm);⁵ in 1914 he switched to slightly larger birch panels and pressed boards of approximately 8½ by 10½ inches (about 22 × 27 cm), corresponding to the size of the sketch box he made based on a design by A. Y. Jackson,⁶ and continued using them until the end of his life. In 1915 and 1916 he used a heavy grey pressed board, and in the spring of 1917 he cut up old wood crates to make small panels of 5 by 7 inches (about 13 × 18 cm).

The conservators Sandra Webster-Cook and Anne Ruggles confirmed this information and supplemented it through the examination of over

150 Tom Thomson sketches and paintings.⁷ They observed that the supports used for sketches varied, particularly in the early years (1909–13), and reported that Thomson started using the smaller panels cut from crates in 1916, and indeed used them more often in 1917.

All eleven oil paintings examined in the CCI study were done on canvas. It was possible to sample the canvas in nine cases, all of which were identified as linen except one that was cotton. The predominant use of linen throughout Thomson's career was noted by Webster-Cook and Ruggles, who also reported occurrences of cotton in 1915–16 and jute or mixed fibres, probably linen and jute, in 1916–17.

Preparation Layers

The preparation layer (also called ground layer) is applied to the support to obtain a smooth, uniform and nonporous surface to paint on. Thomson used no preparation layer for the sketches on panels that the CCI examined, but he did use a preparation of variable colour for the sketches on board included in the study. This observation was confirmed by Webster-Cook and Ruggles in their larger sampling of his works. Thomson began priming his boards in 1914 or 1915; he left the priming visible in places as a pictorial element, much as he left bare wood visible on panels.⁸

In most of his paintings, the canvas was first covered with a white preparation, the composition of which varied in early (1912–14) and later (1914–17) paintings; a second layer of preparation was sometimes observed—white in early paintings and coloured in later paintings (figs. 18, 19).

Paint

Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven often used a characteristic white pigment, referred to as Freeman's white or Cambridge white, a specific mixture of lead sulfate and zinc white.⁹ Cambridge white was used as a white paint and as a base to which other colours were added to achieve specific hues; it has been found in twenty-three of the thirty-three Thomson sketches and paintings analyzed to date. Other white pigments identified include lead white and zinc white.

Most samples of paint analyzed as part of the CCI study proved to be complex mixtures of pigments (figs. 20, 21)—often mixtures of the same major components, with other pigments present in minor or trace amounts. Thomson was likely further mixing his paints, as indicated by the diversity in mixtures found in the paint samples.

The pigments most frequently found in significant quantities are alizarin lake, vermilion, cadmium yellows, cobalt yellow, viridian and ultramarine. Iron oxide pigments also occurred frequently, but in minor or trace amounts. Cobalt blue and cerulean blue were commonly found, but not nearly as often as ultramarine. Thomson did not use pure black; rather, he mixed black and other colours to produce very dark shades of blue, burgundy or green, which he used to render black in his sketches and paintings.

Cross-sections prepared from paint applied to his canvases revealed that Thomson sometimes used a single layer of colour to achieve a desired effect (fig. 19), and sometimes extensively worked his paints, applying several layers wet-on-wet (figs. 22–23, 24–25).

Scientific Analysis as an Aid to Authentication

The example of Thomson's *Landscape with Snow/Northern Mist* (cat. 13) shows how critical it is to have enough reference data when examining a painting for attribution purposes. The work is a double-sided panel: a different sketch was painted on either side of the wood panel. This was a common practice for artists who had access to limited supplies during sketching trips in remote locations.

The double-sided panel was examined at CCI before the research project on Tom Thomson had begun.¹⁰ Three oils on panel by Thomson were examined for comparison, and no inconsistencies were found. Notably, Cambridge white, which had not yet been identified in other paintings, Canadian or foreign, was identified in *Landscape with Snow /Northern Mist*, as well as in two of the three oils on panel. However, this particular detail gained more importance after later research at the CCI revealed that Thomson used this pigment extensively.¹¹ The CCI project has provided reference data on many technical details of his paintings, as described above, that are particularly useful when Cambridge white is not found in a painting, as he used the pigment frequently but not systematically.

Scientific analysis as an aid to authentication is based on our knowledge of materials, and on when and how they were used by artists. This knowledge is constantly evolving as research progresses; it constitutes one of many tools employed in the authentication process. Scientific analysis, if deemed necessary, is usually the last step in the process of authentication, aimed at supporting or invalidating attribution. 

Marie-Claude Corbeil

- 1 The Analytical Research Laboratory (now the Conservation Science Division) at the Canadian Conservation Institute, Department of Canadian Heritage, conducted research on the materials and techniques of twentieth-century Canadian artists such as Tom Thomson, David Milne, Alfred Pellán and Jean Paul Riopelle.
- 2 Marie-Claude Corbeil, Elizabeth A. Moffatt, P. Jane Sirois and Kris M. Legate, "The Materials and Techniques of Tom Thomson," *Journal of the Canadian Association for Conservation* 25 (2000): 3–10.
- 3 Conservation & Art Materials Encyclopedia Online (CAMEO) Materials Database, http://cameo.mfa.org/wiki/Category:Materials_database, accessed November 2020.
- 4 Joan Murray, *The Art of Tom Thomson* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1971), 54.
- 5 Birchmore boards were produced by George Rowney & Company. See Wikipedia, s.v. "Daler-Rowney," <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daler-Rowney>, accessed November 2020.
- 6 Sandra Webster-Cook and Anne Ruggles, "Technical Studies on Thomson's Materials and Working Method," in *Tom Thomson*, eds. Dennis Reid and Charles C. Hill (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2002), 144–52.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Webster-Cook and Ruggles, "Technical Studies on Thomson's Materials and Working Method"; Murray, *The Art of Tom Thomson*, 23.
- 9 Corbeil, Moffatt, Sirois and Legate, "The Materials and Techniques of Tom Thomson"; and Marie-Claude Corbeil, P. Jane Sirois and Elizabeth A. Moffatt, "The Use of a White Pigment Patented by Freeman by Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven," in *ICOM Committee for Conservation, 12th Triennial Meeting, Lyon, 29 August–3 September 1999: Preprints*, ed. Janet Bridgland (London: James & James, 1999), 363–68. At the time of the research, the pigment's source was not known and it was referred to as "Freeman's white," a name associated with the patent holder and one of several synonymous names used for this pigment in historical sources. Because more recent research has shown that the source of this white pigment is the Cambridge Colours paint brand, it is now referred to as "Cambridge white." See Kate Helwig, Elizabeth Moffatt, Marie-Claude Corbeil and Dominique Duguay, "Early Twentieth-Century Artists' Paints in Toronto: Archival and Material Evidence," *Journal of the Canadian Association for Conservation* 40 (2015): 19–34.
- 10 Ian N. M. Wainwright, Marie-Claude Corbeil, Elizabeth A. Moffatt, Jeremy J. Powell, P. Jane Sirois, Gregory S. Young, Marc Rioux, Luc Cournoyer and Guy Godin, *A Comparative Study of a Double-Sided Oil Sketch Attributed to Tom Thomson* (Ottawa: Canadian Conservation Institute, 1990). Unpublished confidential report.
- 11 Corbeil, Sirois and Moffatt, "The Use of a White Pigment Patented by Freeman by Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven"; Corbeil, Moffatt, Sirois and Legate, "The Materials and Techniques of Tom Thomson."