

The Making and Marketing of a Canadian Icon: Tom Thomson

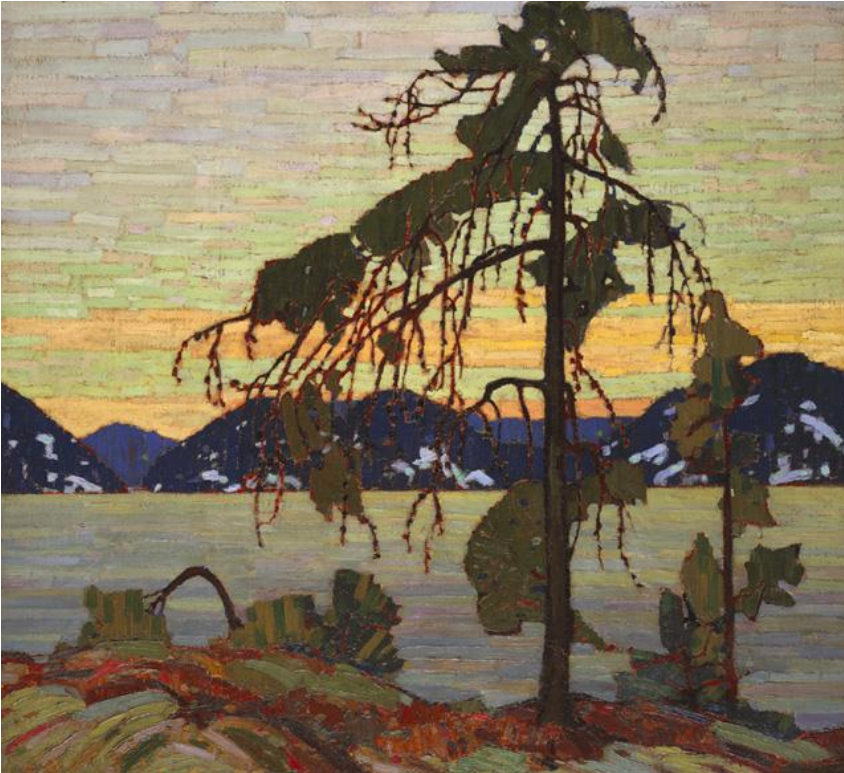
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Sprott School of Business

Who was Tom Thomson?

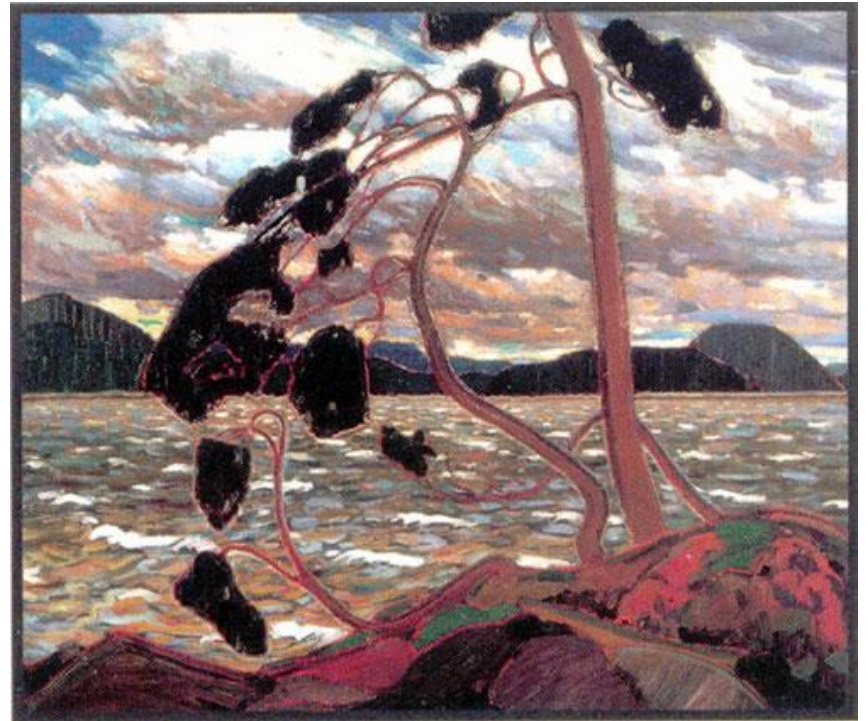
- Friend and forerunner of the Group of Seven
- Born Claremont, ON, 1877
- Died under 'mysterious' circumstances, Canoe Lake, Algonquin Park, 8 July 1917
- Worked as commercial artist
- In the last 3 years of his life produced art work on which *part* of his legend is based



Thomson's Best Known Works



The Jack Pine, 1916-1917



The West Wind, 1917

“...the most legendary of Canadian artists”

(Cameron 1999, p. 185)

- *How can we understand Thomson’s ‘legendary’ status?*
 - By examining the myth narrative
- *What went into the making and marketing of Thomson?*
 - Through a production of culture lens

The Making of Thomson as *Tragic Hero*

(Frye, 1957)

- There's no need to 'make' Thomson because in one sense he's already 'made' – he's the tragic hero
- Focus is on single individual rather than group
 - Although Thomson interacted with Group of Seven, he stood outside of the group
- Centre of the tragedy is the hero's isolation
 - Both MacCallum (1918) and Harris (1948) speak to Thomson's desire to be away from the city in the wilds
 - Yet Thomson himself welcomed some company some times

The Tragic Mythos

- Tragic hero's fate is to suffer – focus is on internal battles & self-confrontation
 - Should he enlist? Should he focus only on his painting? Should he marry?
- Tragedy is linked to maturity, gaining of wisdom
 - Can see this in maturing of Thomson's style & his 'education' by AY Jackson regarding techniques and colour
 - Thomson represents maturing of Canadian nation (Cameron, 1999) & its coming of age thru WWI
- Tragic hero is somewhere between the divine and the all-too-human
 - Much emphasis placed on Thomson's 'natural' artistic ability, an 'untutored genius' (Francis, 1997)
 - Davies (1935, 1967) affinity with nature, wild animals
 - Harris (1948) notes his periods of despondency
 - Canoe Lake friends talk about drinking

The Tragic Mythos

- Plot focuses on serious events, conflict situates protagonist in opposition to fate or the Gods, hero is doomed by a 'fatal flaw'
 - Doomed by imperfections of a corrupt society
 - WWI brought about chaos, disruption, failure, moral uncertainties
- The ending is gory or at best ambiguous
 - Suicide? Accident? Murder?
- The form and content of the tragedy myth are familiar to us as members of western culture

Why does Thomson work so well? (Grace, 2004)

- Scots heritage = fits 'dominant narrative of Canadian development'
- Died young before he could disappoint *and* he died a mysterious death
 - Like other 'icons', e.g., James Dean, Marilyn Monroe
- Left behind little to define him (no journals, few letters) -- just an 'outline' that could be filled in by others
- Lived at a time of great change
- Death during the war years came to represent what was lost by so many (?)
- Not only was the work 'good', but it was "closely identifiable with the spirit of Canada" (Harris, 1948, p. 39)

The Marketing of Tom Thomson

‘Waves’ of interest

- Grace (2004) argues there was a wave of interest from Thomson’s death until the first biography in the 1930s, then interest lapsed until the 1950s, and has been fairly steady since

How can we account for those waves?

Cultural Production System: Set of individuals and organizations responsible for creating and marketing a cultural product

Components of a CPS (Peterson & Anand, 2004)

Three major subsystems

- *Creative subsystem*: generates new symbols & products
 - Individual artists like Thomson, groups like Group of Seven, Grip group
- *Managerial subsystem*: selects, produces and distributes symbols and products
 - Industry that produced and distributed 18th C French prints, or Ontario Art Society exhibitions which made art available for public consumption
- *Communications subsystem*: gives meaning to products, provide symbolic attributes, communicates with customers
 - Advertising agencies, PR firms, but also experts, patrons & friends

The Marketing of Tom Thomson

Before his body was found

- *The Globe* article, July 17th
 - ‘one of the most talented’, ‘risen rapidly in esteem,’ ‘his interpretation of the north...could only come from a deep love of nature’, *Northern River* purchased by National Gallery
 - Lehto (2005) argues this could only have come from Dr. MacCallum
- Dr. James MacCallum was a Toronto eye specialist
 - He became a patron of Group of Seven members
 - Shared cost of erecting studio building with Lawren Harris
 - Special interest in Thomson – owned largest collection of his work

The Marketing of Tom Thomson

Immediately after his death

- Thomson had not signed his summer 1917 sketches
- Dr. MacCallum, JEH MacDonald and JW Beatty stamped Thomson's sketches with newly-designed studio stamp
- They also designed and erected memorial cairn on Canoe Lake



The Marketing of Tom Thomson

- MacCallum's 1918 tribute, *Canadian Magazine*
 - "greatest colourist"
- Myth elements (Cameron, 1999):
 - Thomson as artist & woodsman, intimate companion of nature
- MacCallum arranged for NGC to acquire sketches from family
 - Montreal Museum of Fine Arts
 - Art Gallery of Toronto
 - Donates 83 Thomson works from his own collection



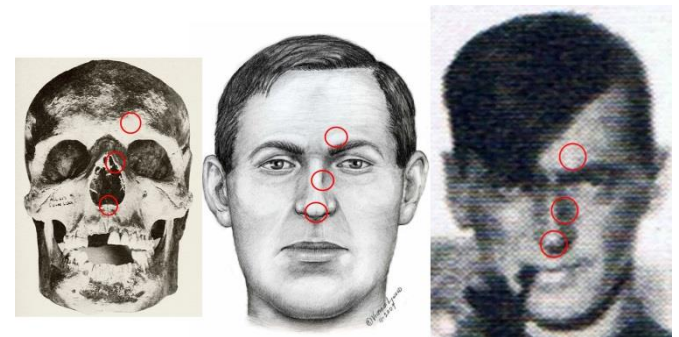
The Marketing of Tom Thomson

Blodwen Davies, writes first biography in 1935

- “Thomson’s affinity with the natural world was almost uncanny”
- “Thomson was equipped with four important qualities to work with at this time, and they were fundamentals: his earnestness, his knowledge of the North, an instinct for design and a natural feeling for color.”

In 1956, William T. Little and three companions dig up Thomson’s gravesite at Canoe Lake

- Followed by series of newspaper stories & book by Little
- Feeds the mystery – where is the body?
- 2010, forensic reconstruction of skull – looks like Thomson?



Continued Fascination & Mythmaking

Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History

DEATH ON A PAINTED LAKE: THE TOM THOMSON TRAGEDY

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Welcome

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Welcome



Tom Thomson, one of Canada's most influential painters of the 20th-century, was last seen alive around mid-day, July 8, 1917, when setting out alone across Canoe Lake to begin a fishing trip. He was familiar with the area, having visited there a number of times – while working in the Park as a fire ranger, a guide for fishing parties, and of course, pursuing his painting. Within hours of his departure, his empty canoe was spotted floating not far from the dock he had left from, and more than a week later, his body surfaced in the lake. His untimely death helped transform the aspiring artist into a cultural giant. His paintings are now seen in galleries across Canada, and exhibitions of his work always attract large audiences. In the last few years, paintings by Thomson have fetched over a million dollars at auction.

How Thomson died, who found his body, its condition, and even its final resting place all remain mysteries. Some propose the cause of Thomson's death was an accident resulting from plain bad luck, while others suggest suicide, and still others point to foul play resulting from a conflict over debt, a love interest, or opinions about the war effort. To add even more mystery to the affair there are serious questions regarding whether Thomson's body was moved from its first resting place.

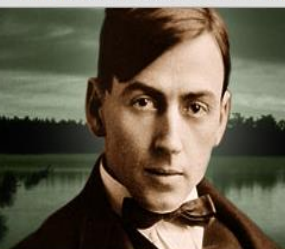
Could it be that Algonquin Park, and Canoe Lake, were more dangerous than they appeared in Thomson's paintings? As investigators began to consider the artist's mysterious death, popular ideas of a peaceful, harmonious, natural parkland began to evaporate. The region bore the marks of intensive logging – treacherous stumps and logs lurked under the water's surface. Could one of these have tipped Thomson's canoe, resulting in his drowning? Could his death have resulted from something even more frightening? The abundant wildlife the Park helped protect presented a tempting target for poachers, who might be willing to go to extreme ends to hide their illegal activities. Could the trains coming through the Park, carrying troops and goods important for the war effort have attracted spies and saboteurs desperate to hide their subversions? The isolation of the Park might also have attracted Canadian and American men attempting to avoid fighting in the war. How far might one of these men have gone to maintain their anonymity?

As you survey the evidence gathered here, you will learn about Tom Thomson's life, his artist friends and acquaintances in the Park, and the Park itself. Thomson's death poses some unresolved questions that have vexed researchers for decades. As you conduct your own investigation, and read theories proposed by others, you might even discover you have

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THE VISION OF TOM THOMSON



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TOM'S LEGACY

THE TRAGEDY

THE FILM



Tom Thomson, Algonquin Park, 1914
The National Gallery of Canada

*"Thomson sought the wilderness, never seeking to tame it,
but only to draw from it, its magic of tangle and season."*

- Arthur Lismer, colleague

Enjoy this unprecedented online collection of Tom Thomson paintings, generously shared by The Art Gallery of Ontario, The National Gallery of Canada, The McMichael Canadian Art Collection, The Tom Thomson Gallery and The Winnipeg Art Gallery.

Follow Tom's life story. Explore his places of inspiration. Read letters by those who knew him. Listen to artists and curators discuss Tom's legacy. Examine the tragedy of his death.

Tomthomsonart.ca offers an intimate glimpse of this brilliant, beloved artist and unravels many of the mysteries of his life.

NEW PHOTOS DISCOVERED





Tom Thomson

@TTLastSpring · FOLLOWS YOU

Follow my tweets as they occurred 98 years ago and learn of the mystery of my death. #WhoKilledTomThomson

Canoe Lake

TTLastSpring.com

Joined November 2011

Tweet to Message

3 Followers you know

TWEETS 24.3K FOLLOWING 3,044 FOLLOWERS 3,586 FAVORITES 6,870 LISTS 6

Following

Tweets Tweets & replies Photos & videos

- Tom Thomson retweeted
Grey Owl @ABelaney · 11m
@Kevin_Forestry @TTLastSpring Indeed; volunteering for that hell believing it the right thing to do was a mistake I never recovered from.
View conversation
- Tom Thomson retweeted
Henry John Whyatt @HJWhyatt · 20m
Spring brings the remaining #artists northern #adventurers #fishermen and #wanderers back @TTLastSpring @Algonquin_PP #1917 #WW1

Who to follow · Refresh · View all

- Shannon Fraser @mowatlo...
Follow
- Liz Burns @bunsy3
Follow
- Kevin Morris @Kevin_Morri...
Followed by SSMA and others
Follow

Popular accounts · Find friends

Trends · Change

Continuing Fascination

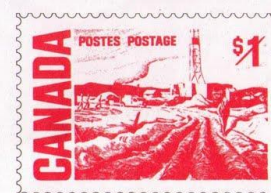
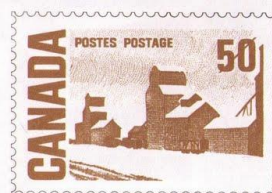
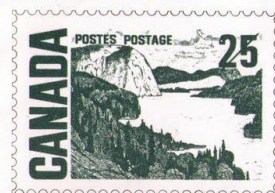
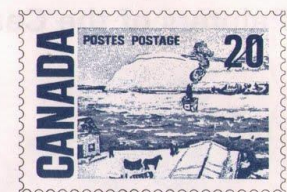
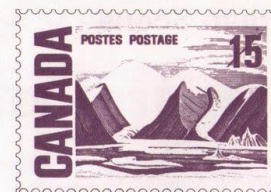
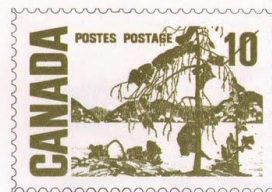
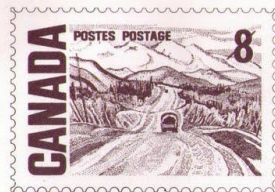
- Recent 'Masterpiece in Focus' exhibition at NGC
- 'All That Glitters' episode of Murdoch Mysteries
 - (Season 8, Episode 11) Inspector Brackenreid enters a painting in an amateur exhibition. His painting is stolen, but soon recovered - minus its frame, which is all the thief wanted. Discouraged, Brackenreid sells the canvas to the painting's lone admirer: an exhibition assistant by the name of Tom Thomson. Original air date: 19 Jan 2015





APPAREL INSPIRED BY TOM THOMSON
AND LIFE IN ALGONQUIN PARK

Iconic Symbols of Canadian Nation



Iconic Symbols of Canadian Nation?



In Summary

- Artists and engravers collaborated in establishing the reputations of artists and of individual paintings in 18th century France
 - Making and Marketing Art History in 18th-century France exhibition
- So too did family members, fellow artists, Canadian art institutions and patron Dr. J.M. MacCallum collaborate to establish and maintain the reputation of Tom Thomson
 - In many ways the myth or legend of Thomson means he is alive today
 - Like in 18th C France, new technologies diffuse the art to new markets