

The Group of Seven and Enchantment

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I want to discuss here, very briefly, a movement in painting directly concerned with enchantment. It was explicitly committed to painting the natural world in ways that open us up to its enchantment and suggest that ultimately, nature itself is the source of artistic enchantment. Its soubriquet was the Group of Seven, a loose collective of painters ‘world-famous in Canada’, as the writer Mordechai Richler once wryly described his own status.

Taking their lead from the pioneering work of Tom Thomson, members of the Group of Seven painted mainly in Northern Ontario and the Rockies, from 1920 till 1933.¹ The inspired work of Emily Carr extended their sensibility west, taking viewers deep into the dramatic old-growth forests of British Columbia that she loved. With striking prescience, Carr insisted that they could not be captured by ‘ten million cameras’ but had to be ‘passed through live minds, sensed and loved.’² One iconic portrait of a single towering tree, still standing after a clear-cut, expresses how she felt about them; it is entitled, *Scorned as Timber. Beloved of the Sky. Reaching ever up, does not escape or transcend the Earth; instead, it is rooted in the sky.*

Nor could these forests be captured, she said, by ossified artistic traditions. The Group of Seven were the first European-trained artists to address the Canadian landscape, and they adapted whatever was robust enough to do it justice but abandoned as mannerism whatever failed. The result was an astonishing creative flowering. These are paintings you can walk into and smell the tang of the cold, wonder at the turning leaves’ fire, be struck by the dignity of the mountains and feel the wind whipping up whitecaps on the lake. In artistic psychogeography, it is the enchantment of the North, and thence Northness.

There are several considerations at play, not least a relative lack of egoism, whether individual or collective. One member of the Group, J.E.H. MacDonald, recalled an exhibition of Scandinavian art in 1913, one of its inspirations: ‘These artists seemed to be a lot of men not trying to express themselves so much as trying to express something that took hold of themselves. The painters began with nature rather than art.’³

Relatedly, like all good painting where the natural world is the subject, this art is ecocentric. It recognises, values and works with the agency of the land itself. To pass, as I recently did, from a room of these open doors into nature into the main body of the gallery, adorned with endless conventional portraiture, whether religious or high society, renders the narcissism and lifelessness of the latter unmistakable. Insofar as all enchantment is rooted in living more-than-human nature, it will flourish more freely when nature itself, in any of its parts, is the character portrayed. Of course, we are part of nature too. But an exclusive concern with human beings loses the larger life that sustains us, and with it the wellsprings of enchantment.

The best of the Group of Seven was probably Thomson, a great colourist and world-class artist. As F.B. Housser says, it is ‘as though nature itself were speaking to you through a perfectly attuned and seasoned medium’.⁴ Thomson’s embrace of the elemental grandeur of Northern Ontario never neglects the tiny, telling detail of sapling or stratum or snow. Perhaps the most enchanting of Thomson’s own work are his vivid outdoor oil sketches, painted outdoors, often in severe weather, and necessarily undertaken in quick, bold strokes with three or four colours at most on small canvasses, 21 x 27 cm. It’s tragic that Thomson died

before his work had matured to the point where, like Monet, he had sufficiently internalised his subjects to be able to work on them in a studio without any loss of detail or freshness.⁵

The contrast with the work of another leading member of the Group, Lawren Harris, is significant. Harris's monumental mountains, phallic dead trees and icy lakes were part of his search for the truth of nature, or God, stripped to its bare essentials or geometric Forms in an effort to 'transcend' and 'escape' mere matter. In this respect he described 'the great North' as 'cleansing'. I know what he means, but like all grand spiritual universalisms it's a bit fascistic. In any case, whether secular or religious, such a drive can become strongly anti-enchancement, and in Harris's case it terminated, predictably enough, in deathly Apollonian abstraction and second-rate paintings.

The parallel with Kandinsky is instructive. Both men were inspired by Theosophy to look for universal spiritual truths, supposedly higher or deeper than what the sensuous world can offer, and both followed the same dispiriting trajectory. In abandoning the concrete, they lost both it and the 'magic' they sought.

¹ See Ross King, *Defiant Spirits: the Modernist Revolution of the Group of Seven* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2010); Charles C. Hill, *The Group of Seven: Art for a Nation* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1991); and Michael Tooby (ed.), *The True North: Canadian Landscape Painting 1896-1939* (London: The Barbican Art Gallery, 1991).

² King, *Defiant*, 104.

³ Tooby, *True North*, 57. (Emphases in original.)

⁴ F.B. Housser commentary on Tom Thomson in the National Gallery of Canada.

⁵ See Tooby, *True North*, 80; also Ian A.C. Desjardins, *Painting Canada. Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven* (London: Philip Wilson Publishers 2011); Dennis Reid (ed.), *Tom Thomson* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2002); David P. Silcox and Harold Town (eds), *Tom Thomson: The Silence and the Storm*, 3rd edn (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd, 1989).