

Tom Thomson

Galleries West

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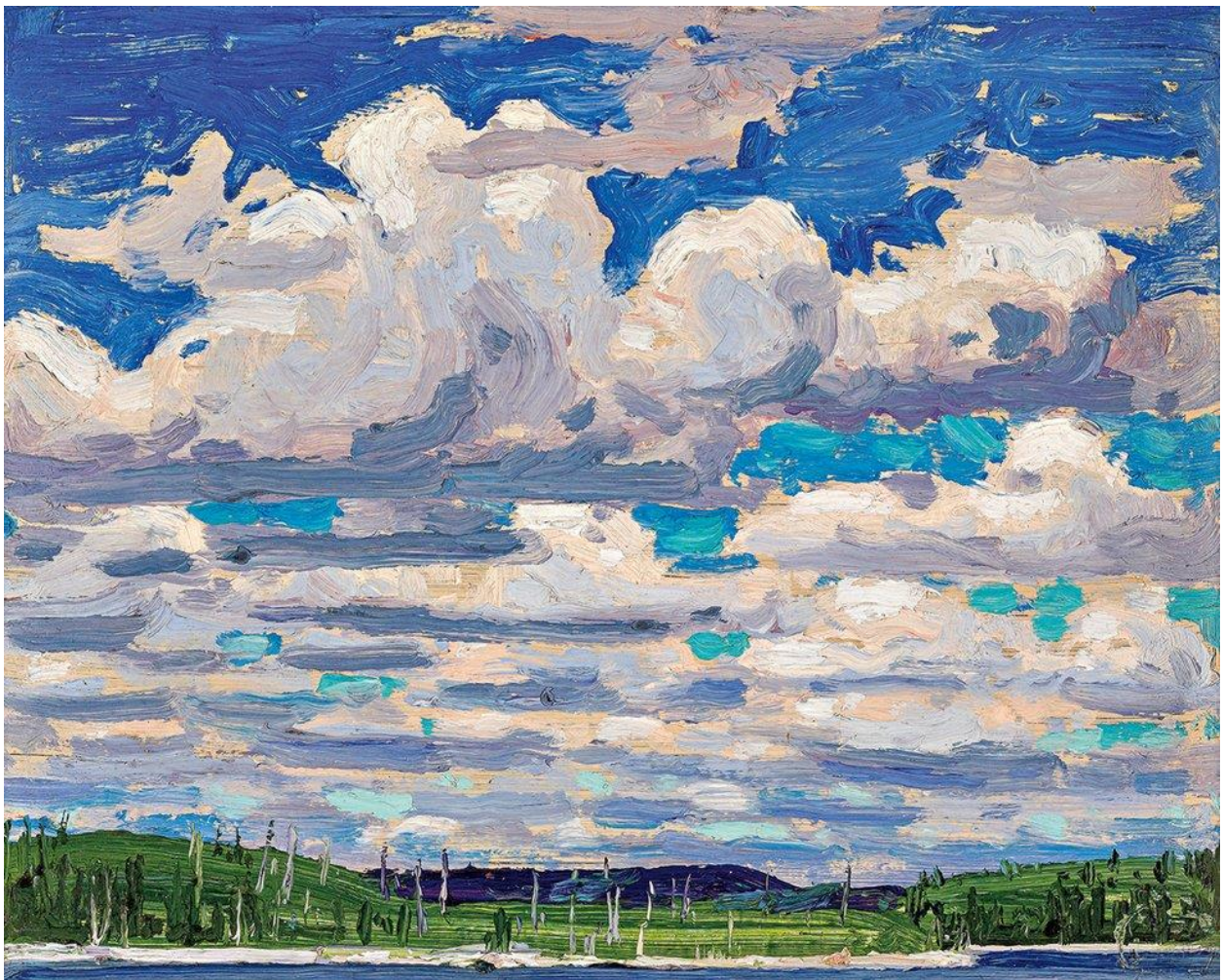


Tom Thomson, "Wildflowers," 1915, oil on board, 8.5" x 10.5" (McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, Ont., 1970.12.2)

Is there anything new to learn about Tom Thomson? Many of us have seen major exhibitions of his paintings and have read books about his life, perhaps even forming a view on whether his mysterious death on July 8, 1917, was an accident or murder.

But more than a century later, discoveries are still possible.

Let's start with Thomson's five oil sketches of wildflowers, all from 1915. They are among the 130 small works that comprise a new exhibition, *Tom Thomson: North Star*, on view until Jan. 14 at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, in Kleinburg, Ont. The show, which will travel to the Art Gallery of Alberta in Edmonton in February, is a chance to savour less prominent works and ponder how Thomson continues to influence artists to this day.



Tom Thomson, "Summer Day," 1915, oil on board, 8.5" x 10.5" (McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, Ont., 1966.15.18)

The show's sketches were done in the four-year period preceding Thomson's death. Gallery director Ian Dejardin, who curated the show with chief curator Sarah Milroy, says they were "the sparks" that set off an "explosion" of painting.

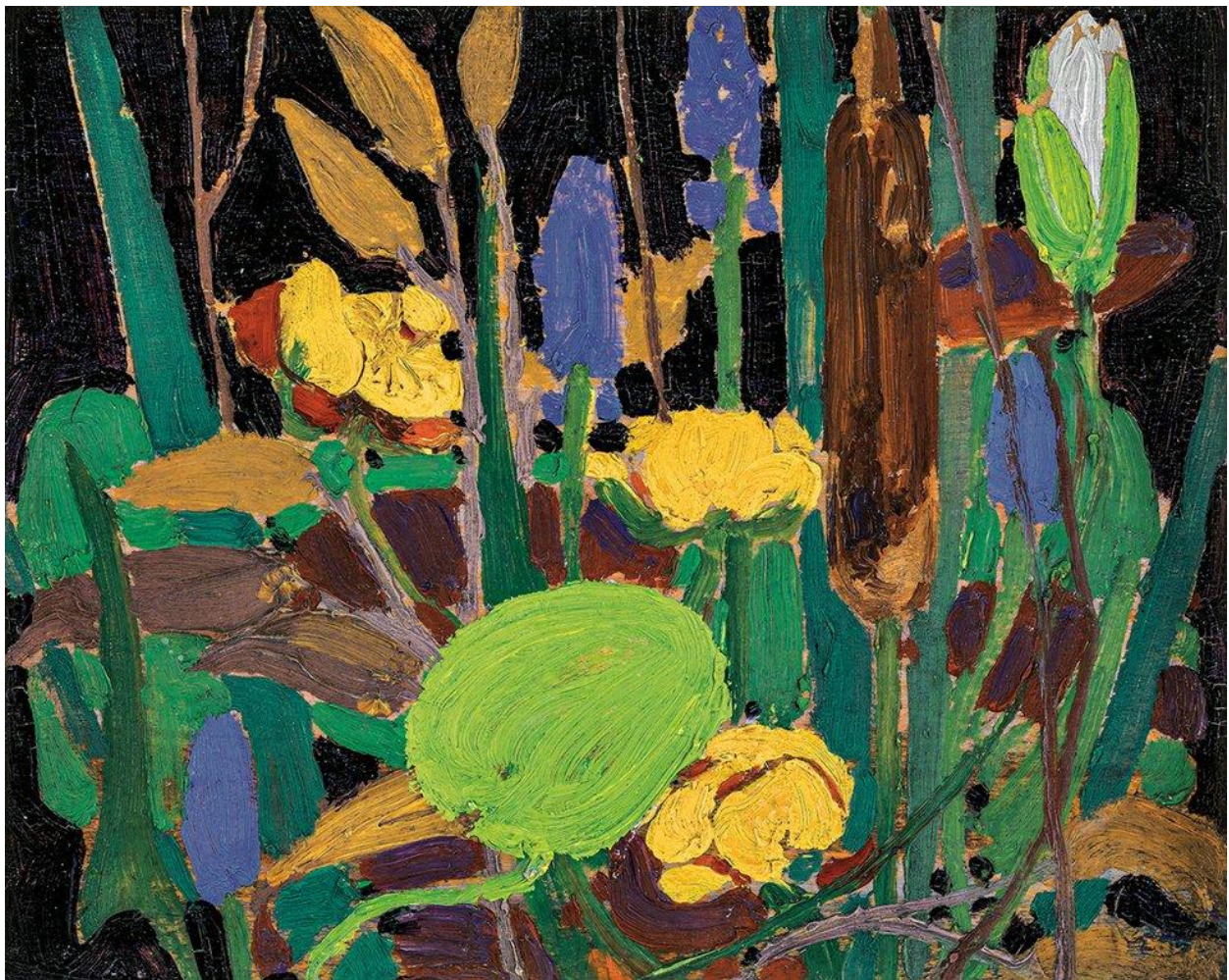
Not all sketches became larger works. That's the case with the florals. Initially, they seemed new to me. Then I vaguely recalled seeing some of them in a 2002 exhibition, *Tom Thomson*, at the National Gallery of Canada.



Tom Thomson, "Ragged Pine," 1916, oil on paperboard, 8.5" x 10.5" (McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, Ont., 1970.1.2)

Painted on wooden panels that measure only eight by 10 inches, they are easily overshadowed when placed alongside larger, iconic canvases, such as *The West Wind* or *The Jack Pine*. But that's not a problem at the McMichael exhibition, where the show is all about the small works.

The flower sketches are startling because they are so different from Thomson's usual offerings. These five are close-ups of flowers, to the exclusion of everything else. Most of Thomson's paintings are more muscular panoramas that show trees, water and sky. As well, the background of the floral paintings is black, another deviation for Thomson.



Tom Thomson, "Water Flowers," 1915, oil on wood panel, 8.5" x 10.5" (McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, Ont., 1976.20)

"These are wildflowers, haphazardly flung, rather than arranged – emphatically not florists' bouquets," Dejardin writes in the exhibition catalogue. "They are a riot of colour and while the individual species – marguerites, wood lilies, vetch, daisies, water lilies, irises – are easily recognizable and distinct, they are painted with a broad brush, at speed."

One sketch, *Wildflowers*, particularly impressed Regina artist Zachari Logan when he undertook research at the McMichael in preparation for a series he was completing for the gallery to mark the centennial of Thomson's death in 2017.

"It stopped me in my tracks, literally," Logan, a creator of many botanical-themed works, writes in the show's catalogue. The "dynamic composition, use of colour and paint handling leapt out at me ... So much drama is unfolding in just eight by 10 inches."



Zachari Logan, "Pool, for Tom (July 8th, 1917, a Wildflower Was Pulled from Canoe Lake)," 2017, acrylic on plywood, 84" x 84" (McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, Ont., 2017.7.2; photo by Craig Boyko; © Zachari Logan)

Wildflowers led Logan to craft his largest work for the centenary project, *Pool, for Tom (July 8, 1917, a Wildflower was Pulled from Canoe Lake)*. It depicts flowers, weeds and twigs floating freely, as if in space, against a black background similar to that used by Thomson.

Thomson's *Wildflowers* comes with a mystery. A ragged X has been scratched across the sketch. Logan speculates it was made by a wooden brush handle. Did Thomson mean to discard the painting? Yet, it survives. The mystery of the X makes Logan love the sketch even more.



Tom Thomson, "Tea Lake Dam," 1917, oil on wood panel, 8.5" x 10.5"(McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, Ont., 1970.1.4)

The five flower sketches are just one part of the McMichael exhibition, which clusters around several themes, including trees, logging, gorges, Georgian Bay, big skies and winter scenes. Thomson fans will undoubtedly find surprises.

Logan is one of three contemporary artists included in the catalogue. Sandra Meigs, a longtime professor at the University of Victoria now living in Hamilton, concentrates on "tree portraits," while the tribute from Vancouver's Ben Reeves focuses on Thomson's brilliant hues.

"Thomson's colours, in his best moments, run against the grain of what is expected," writes Reeves. "They not only serve depiction but also address the viewer directly."



Ben Reeves, "Foragers," 2022, oil and acrylic on canvas, 68" x 52" (McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, Ont., TD.2023.2; photo courtesy the artist; © Ben Reeves)

His painting, *Foragers*, shows two figures dwarfed by trees in a forest portrayed in shocking blue shades that would be at home in a Thomson painting.

For her part, Meigs sees the human body in Thomson's paintings of trees. "The trees are alive – they're speaking to me," she says in an interview with Milroy.

Thomson's *Sketch for "The Jack Pine"* is in the exhibition. Meigs says she prefers it to his more famous painting, *The Jack Pine*. The colours in the larger painting are more subdued. The small sketch reminds Meigs of the "expressive trees" she saw on her painting excursions to Algonquin Park.



Sandra Meigs, "Untitled no. 24 (Mother Log, Big Pine Trail)," 2022, gouache on paper, 11" x 15" (courtesy Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto; photo courtesy the artist; © Sandra Meigs)

Her painting, *Untitled no. 24 (Mother Log, Big Pine Trail)*, is a barely-there brown and green forest fronting a blue sky that was created with just a few brush strokes. The scene is spare yet full of life and movement.

Even diehard Thomson fans may see the artist anew by studying the immediacy of the show's small sketches.

Logan, for instance, says he had “an amazing experience” studying Thomson’s work during the weeks he spent in a residency at the McMichael. It allowed him, he said in an interview with *Galleries West*, to see Thomson somewhat separated from the mythos of the Group of Seven.

“There was so much to look at and reassess for my own purposes as an artist set to the task of commemorating Thomson,” he says. “Just by way of looking at his work, the paintings were my obvious roadmap.” ■

***Tom Thomson: North Star* at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Kleinburg, Ont., from June 24, 2023, to Jan. 14, 2024. It travels to the Art Gallery of Alberta in Edmonton in February 2024.**