Group of Seven reminds us that homegrown travel can be evocative

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It’s no stretch to say staycations have become a byword for recovery in a world still churning through the pandemic wringer.

But a company of artists emerging from the world’s last devastating plague a century ago — the Spanish flu — were well ahead of the domestic tourism trend. Not that they knew it at the time.

The names of these men, famed though they are, are perhaps hazy. Yet nearly all Canadians can point through a car window and say of the landscape beyond: “That looks right out of a Group of Seven painting.”

Also known as the Algonquin School, the original Group of Seven members were J.E.H. MacDonald, F.H. Varley, Arthur Lismer, Franz Johnston, A.Y. Jackson, Franklin Carmichael and Lawren Harris. Others came later. List any three of them at a pub trivia night? Perhaps not.

Their surnames may not trip off the tongue, but their talents established a new benchmark in Canadian art and focused a nation on the wonders at its doorstep. Unwittingly as it may have been, the Group of Seven made homegrown travel evocative.

Before the troupe was founded in 1920, landscape art was forged through a European prism that allowed little time for simple forms and bright colours, the techniques the group used to animate their canvases and romanticize the hinterland. Urbanites gazed at images of trees clinging to the Canadian Shield, waves buffeting the shores of Lake Superior and jagged peaks piercing the western sky — and dreamt of escape.

The artistic establishment wasn’t as easily seduced. Detractors sniped at their lofty nationalistic rhetoric, reviewers compared their early exhibitions to “the contents of a drunkard’s stomach” and critics dismissed the “garish,” “loud” and “freakish” brush strokes.

Debate raged in artistic circles, but by the mid-1950s the public had clearly spoken. They liked what they saw. Canadian galleries clamoured for showings and classroom walls across the land were festooned with reproductions. The Group of Seven had arrived.

For A.Y. Jackson, controversy trumped complacency. Writing in 1922, he said: “The modern painters either stimulate, amuse or cause anger … Why stick to the barnyard, why paint cows and sheep and rural tranquillity?”

Why, indeed. Here are seven destinations where you can pay homage:

Celebrating its 55th anniversary this July, the McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Kleinburg, northwest of Toronto, houses an extensive Group of Seven collection yet is also noted as a final resting place for many of the artists, as well as gallery founders Robert and Signe McMichael.

A.Y. Jackson, who lived with the couple from 1968 until his death in 1974, is buried at the McMichael Artists’ Cemetery alongside Johnston, Harris and A.J. Casson, the last surviving member. He died in 1992. Sculptures carved from Ontario granite dot the burial ground, which sits on a grassy knoll overlooking river valleys and woods on the 40-hectare site. (mcmichael.com)

For quintessential wildness, look no further than Carmichael’s 1927 painting North Shore, Lake Superior. This corner of northern Ontario retains the desolate beauty that inspired him and is

worth the lonely drive around the biggest of the Great Lakes. The one-day Agawa Canyon Tour Train follows in the footsteps of the painters as they made their way north from Sault Ste. Marie between 1918 and 1922 to paint vistas such as Johnston's Distant Lake Superior and MacDonald's Solemn Land. Audio narration is available. (northernontario.travel)

Though mostly associated with the backwoods, the painters occasionally chased their muse in the city. Lawren Harris was especially drawn to a Toronto slum known as "the Ward," though his renderings of row houses and the ragged were too close to the bone for some.

"Ugly things in art are like ugly things in life," huffed critic Hector Charlesworth.

Times change. Houses, St. Patrick Street, by Harris fetched

$2.8 million when it sold in 2009, making it one of Canada's most expensive artworks.

Visitors will find no trace of those early 20th-century slums as they crane their necks at the curved towers of Toronto City Hall, which replaced most of the old St. John's Ward. To the west, however, MacDonald celebrated a city green space that is still much enjoyed today in his 1912 work, Morning after Snow, High Park. (seetorontonow.com).

During the First World War years, Nova Scotia was home for the British-born art teacher Lismer, who brought his easel to bear on the Bay of Fundy's mighty tides, as well as raw-boned loggers and jumbled fishing villages. Commissioned to paint troops returning to Halifax Harbour, he also captured on canvas the aftermath of the 1917 Halifax Explosion. (novascotia.com)

Out West, the Rockies were the attraction, especially for MacDonald, whose consuming passion manifested itself not only in paintings but in his poetry, lectures and essays, the National Gallery of Canada says. His work Distant Mountain, captures him "at the height of his power." Maligne Lake was a favourite. (travelalberta.com)

Varley, meanwhile, cemented the Gold Rush settlement of Yale, B.C., in the artistic firmament with his 1930 piece Church at Yale, and MacDonald spotlighted British Columbia's Yoho National Park with his Mountain Solitude painting of Lake Oesa, near Field. (destinationbc.ca)

Last word goes to the man best described as the fifth Beatle — Tom Thomson.

A peer and leading influence of the Group of Seven, Thomson died in mysterious circumstances in 1917 before the clique had officially clicked. But he cast a big shadow, producing gems such as The Jack Pine and encouraging the members to share his love of northern Ontario landscapes through art.

He died at the age of 39, his bruised body found eight days after his fully laden canoe had capsized on his beloved Canoe Lake in Algonquin Provincial Park, whose 7,770 square kilometres of lakes and trails are more popular than ever. Though his death was officially ruled

an accidental drowning, murderous theories continue to flourish. Sleuths can visit a stone cairn erected in his memory at Hayhurst Point. (algonquinpark.on.ca)

At the McMichael gallery, guests can check out the wooden shack he used as a studio while contemplating what might have been. As the curators conclude: “His loss was a true tragedy for Canadian art and was keenly felt by his friends, but his influence proved fundamental to the founding of the Group of Seven in 1920.”