The Group of Seven and Tom Thomson
DAVID SILCOX
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Do you ever ask yourself, "If the house were on fire and I could save just one of my books, which would I choose?" I do, and it always comes down to the very thick and not readily available Joaquin Sorolla or Peter Mellen's 1973 The Group of Seven. Cost of replacement pushes me toward the former, sentiment toward the latter. As always, sentiment trumps cost.

The painters who comprised the group—Lawren Harris, A.Y. Jackson, J.E.H. MacDonald, Arthur Lismer, F.H. Varley, Frank Carmichael, and Frank Johnson—were active before and after World War I. Their best-known work is of the Canadian landscape, both its lyrical splendor and harsh austerity. Tom Thomson, having joined some of the others on painting trips, would have been part of the group had he not drowned in 1917 at age 40 before it was officially organized. The painters had no formal organization, no elected leader or charter. No more than four of them ever painted together at the same time. They were more a school of painting whose names, along with those of A.J. Casson, LeMoine FitzGerald, and Edwin Holgate, became associated with one another. Together they are one of Canada's national treasures.

David Silcox, an art historian and managing director of Sotheby's Canada, and Firefly Books have served enthusiasts of the Seven's movement well. The first major work on the group in 30 years has 369 color reproductions. One hundred twenty-three of the images in the book have never before appeared in print outside auction catalogs. Silcox has divided the book into sections according to subject matter and location. Along with various places in Canada—Algonquin Park and the Georgian Bay; the Arctic; the St. Lawrence River and Quebec; Algoma and Lake Superior; the Prairies, Rockies, and West Coast—we find chapters on cities and towns, still life and portraiture, and World War I.

The art is sometimes realistic, other times highly stylized. Colors can be garish or muted. Impressionistic technique is prevalent in the on-location paintings, refined design in the large studio works. Varley seems to have had the greatest interest in, and certainly flair for, portraiture. He used thick paint and strong color to maximum effect. His Vera depicts a woman whose almond eyes remind us of Modigliani's women, while her subtle smile recalls the Mona Lisa. Of the landscape paintings, Thomson's have the most distinctive style. His experience as a commercial artist (he designed, among other things, greeting cards) is always evident. Broken color and bold composition were his hallmark.

Reproductions are always imperfect representations of actual paintings. Even such excellent ones as those in this book raise questions about accuracy. One need only compare the reproductions of A.Y. Jackson's The Edge of the Maple Wood in Mellen's earlier book to that in Silcox'. The painting shows a patch of uncultivated ground with some trees in the middle ground and farm buildings in the distance. In the earlier book, the mostly earth colors are warm, giving the effect of late afternoon sun, however diffused. In the Silcox book, the colors are cooler and less saturated. Only a few shadows suggest the presence of direct sunlight. Such differences make the viewer wish all the more to see the original.

Silcox' preference for Lawren Harris is evident in the disproportionate number of reproductions of his work—almost 100 of the 369. No one could reasonably quarrel with this decision. Harris was not only the most prolific of the painters but also the moving force behind the group, and its most articulate spokesman.

When the group disbanded in 1933, in part to make way for younger painters similarly intent on creating a pan-Canadian art, they could take pride in having committed to canvas enduring testimonies to the strength and freedom of their country. They did this by showing what was extraordinary about it and by finding the extraordinary in the ordinary. To these artists Canada owes much of its national identity.

REVIEWER: Gary Michael is a nationally acclaimed artist who has reviewed art books for TBR and other publications for more than 30 years. You can see his work at garytheartist.com.