

# Historica Canada Education Portal

## Tom Thomson

### Overview

This lesson is based on viewing the Tom Thomson biography from [The Canadians](#) series. Thomson is famous for his paintings of the Canadian landscape and his association with members of what became known as The Group of Seven painters.

### Aims

In a series of brainstorming and writing activities, students will learn about Tom Thomson, The Group of Seven, and Canadian art.

### Background

From amateur artist to national icon, Tom Thomson sprang into Canada's collective memory in only a few short years. His youth was marked with failures and foiled plans. He did not finish grade school, was unable to enlist in the military with his friends, was rejected by his first love, and never fit completely into his chosen career. However, his passion for nature and fortuitous involvement with many members of the future "Group of Seven" led him down a path of rapid artistic development and propelled him into our national memory.

Algonquin Park became Thomson's favourite haunt, and eventually the site of his untimely death. His love of the outdoors gained a certain impetus from his doctor's prescription of outdoor activity to treat his respiratory ailment. From country walks and fishing in his youth, Thomson eventually became a ranger and fire warden in Algonquin Park in the years just before his death. His knowledge of the outdoors was an asset to the other members of the Group of Seven, and he served as both their colleague and guide during their outings to the park. Tragically but fittingly, Thomson died in Algonquin Park, although the details of his death remain a mystery to this day.

The Group of Seven sought to create a uniquely Canadian form of art, rooted in the landscape of Northern Ontario. Thomson's lack of formal schooling made him a symbol of this mission; he was first a man who loved nature and second a man who painted what he felt and saw. Thomson became a master artist in his last few years and only left us with 40 fully developed canvases. However, his influence on Canadian art is not proportionate to his years or productivity, but rather his power, his skill, and his mystery.

## **Activities**

**Time Allowance:** 1 - 4 hours

### **Procedures:**

1. Before viewing the movie, write this vocabulary list on the board. Have the students come up with their own definitions. Consult a dictionary to verify the definitions.

**Group of Seven | Algonquin | Algonquin Park | Expressionism | Patron | Boer | Fallen Arches | Respiratory Ailment | Extrovert**

2. In groups of five, have students examine the works of the Group of Seven. One student should research Tom Thomson, the other four should select any of the other members (MacDonald, Johnston, Carmichael, Lismer, Varley, Jackson, Harris.) Each student should find several examples of the artists' work from books, and websites. Students should examine their examples and note colour, subject, light, and any interesting features. Students could present this information on a chart. Students should share their observations and compare and contrast the various artists.

Students should then take the reproductions they have found in their research and spread them out on the table. They should brainstorm to see if the works of art naturally fit with each other, and if there are natural divisions among the artists. Students then write a paragraph at home on some of the similarities and differences, and whether they feel the Group of Seven was a homogenous group, a heterogeneous group, or not a group at all.

Alternatively, the class could be divided into 5-6 specialist groups. Each group would examine a different member of the Group of Seven. Each individual would have to supply a couple of samples of the artist's work. After analysing it as a group, they could regroup into heterogeneous discussion groups where they would each supply a sample work and participate in a comparative discussion as outlined above. They could then regroup as a 'specialist' group to review what they have discovered about this amazing group of artists, and complete a paragraph for homework as outlined above.

3. Tom Thomson had contact with many different people throughout his wanderings and attempted careers. Each group will assume the role of one of the following:

- Cottagers on Canoe Lake
- A.Y. Jackson
- The army doctor who rejected Thomson in 1914
- A purchaser for the National Gallery
- His successful brother in Seattle
- His would-be-fiancé

Each individual student will write a eulogy for Thomson, but first the groups can brainstorm together. Once they have brainstormed together for a while, it may be useful to have students read obituaries from local newspapers or from [The Globe and Mail](#). Each student should work independently and eventually deliver the eulogy to the rest of the group, and get feedback on how legitimate it sounds to the rest of the group. Students would then be reorganized as heterogeneous groups and deliver their eulogies to the other 'personalities.' After presenting to others, written eulogies should be submitted to the teacher. Note: although almost everyone would agree on Thomson's artistic skill, each group should concentrate on the unique perspectives they had towards Thomson.

4. Have students complete a timeline. In pairs or small groups, students could be responsible for various periods in Thomson's life, (youth, Seattle, early years at Ontario College of Art, his years as a 'mature' artist), the major world events (Boer War, the Great War), Expressionism (including Picasso, Matisse, Duchamp) as an informative aside, and other important contextual information (founding of the National Gallery, Algonquin Park, births & deaths of Group of Seven members, etc). Post a

skeletal timeline along a wall and surround it with poster paper containing the students' topics. Some requirements for the students' contributions could include: writing a paragraph or series of point form notes, providing at least one visual aid, and presenting their topic in sequence with the others. This timeline would reinforce any other aspects of Canadian history studied and could lead to a better understanding of the influences in Thomson's life (especially useful if also doing activity 6 below) .

5. Students participate in a 'Think-Pair-Share' on the concept of 'National art.' Students first think on their own and record their thoughts for about 2 minutes, then share with the person next to them for about 5 minutes, finally they will participate in a class-wide discussion. This is a huge topic, but students can still get their feet wet. Teachers could narrow the investigation by specifying a topic from the following list:

- What is Canadian art?
- Who are Canadian artists, and what makes them Canadian?
- Why was the Group of Seven unified in their goal to make Canadian art?
- Is a national art form even possible? Is it necessary?

If you are not also using activity #7, students could include contemporary artists in their arguments.

### Individual Activities

6. Have students write an opinion paper answering the great mystery of Thomson's life: How was it that from nowhere he suddenly burst on the scene? Students could consider his youth, his professional path, his artistic influences, his luck, and his perseverance. The format should be a standard 3 or 5 paragraph essay, including a clear thesis/hypothesis that

states the 'answer' to the mystery. No research outside the film is necessary, because the intent is to encourage students to recall the details of the film, and creatively and critically work them into a single argument. It is important, of course, to warn students about this assignment before showing the video.

7. Have students present a contemporary Canadian artist in a manner that suits the artist's medium. Presentations should include their art (music, painting, writing, sculpture), goals, career path, public & critical acclaim. Aside from being simply a biography, students should engage in some of the questions raised in activity 5 above, perhaps specified by the teacher, with regards to the concept of 'Canadian art.' For a more advanced project, students could be limited to versions/visions of landscape in Canadian art, such as in Farley Mowat or Margaret Atwood.

8. If possible, plan a field trip to the National Gallery. The beauty of the Group of Seven is not reflected in the reproductions. Remember that the oil paint has been layered, smeared, and smudged. The texture creates the life of the paintings. Have students find out which paintings are on display at the National Gallery and have them examine a couple of reproductions of their own choice. During the field trip, students then examine the originals and make notes about them. Students should then write a short paragraph, paper, or poem on the differences between the two. Which has more feeling? Which is more *real*? What is the value of the reproductions? What is the value of the original? What is the value of art galleries in preserving the originals?

*Note: You could do this activity using the work of other artists in local galleries.*

## **Resources**

[Tom Thomson Worksheet](#)

[National Gallery of Canada](#)

[Tom Thomson Art Gallery](#)

[Art Gallery of Ontario](#)

[McMichael Canadian Art Collection](#)

[Group of Seven - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[Group of Seven Feature - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[Tom Thomson - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[Canadian Painting in the 19th Century - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

