

The attending psychiatrist immediately organized a debriefing session for the staff. “How do you feel?” she asked me. Angry, Ma’am. Angry at the inefficient system that didn’t get the cart to me in time, angry at the reckless adolescent who defied orders, angry at her friends who let her dance. Above all, angry with myself for failing.

Then, some years later, there was the Saturday morning at the neighbourhood swimming pool, where — my family still asleep — I was enjoying some quiet time alone. A sudden commotion diverted me from my newspaper. My name was being shouted; I looked up to see a neighbour emerging from the pool, a small boy in his arms. The child was a purple-black colour and looked truly lifeless. I pounced on him, started to breathe into his mouth and pounded his chest, again conscious that I was, professionally, alone; that the task was awesome; that I did not want to be there. Then suddenly a cough, a joyful spurt of vomitus, the welcome sounds of retching and crying. He was saved, I the saviour. I handed him over to the ambulance and returned to my life, glowing in the newly won status of glorious physician and saver of life.

Years passed by. I had left the world of acute care, and now spent my time in management. The stethoscope seldom hung around my neck, and my clinical skills were little tested. A neighbour called me as I lay in bed on the edge of sleep. He was agitated: his wife was sick, throwing up. I found her vomiting on the floor of their room. They had enjoyed a heavy meal, with perhaps a bit too much wine. I knew she suffered from gastritis from time to time. I waited until she felt better and told her husband to call me again if necessary.

The next morning I checked her again. She looked pale, was still nauseous, and was not drinking. I suggested getting her to the ER, in case she needed IV fluids. She smiled, dismissing my concern. I returned home and was immediately called back. “She’s collapsed.” Having just seen her, I wasn’t too worried. Probably she’d had a fainting spell when she got up. But I still walked back to her house, perhaps a little slower than I had the night before.

I entered her room and immediately experienced that old emotional volcano, the eruption of horror out of comfortable, clinical concern. She lay lifeless on the bed. I was alone again. I, the pediatrician, dragged her to the floor and started

CPR, struggling to remember the adult ratio of beats to breaths, screaming instructions to call for the mobile ICU unit, to call another doctor. I thumped, blew, shouted, begged. Surely she would suddenly gasp and start breathing like the boy at the pool. More physicians arrived, and the ICU team. The minutes dragged by. Intubation, IV, drugs, electrical shocks. Deep down, I knew it was over.

Whom do I blame? My clinical skills? Her lifestyle? Her physician? The ambulance that could, and should, have arrived five minutes earlier? Or did the finger that directed baby Smith to live simply turn this time in the other direction? What is the recipe for bringing someone back from the banks of the River Styx: knowledge and skill, timing, location and luck? Which will determine life or death? Does it matter whether I am alone or not? Would it make any difference if I were surrounded by the whole team? In these cases, I am not sure. Perhaps the slightly consoling thing is to try to remember one’s place.

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### *Lifeworks*

## Escape artist

*The Jack Pine* (1916–1917) is Tom Thomson’s iconic painting of the Canadian wilderness. It is also an icon of the status that Thomson himself achieved after his unexplained death on Canoe Lake in Algonquin Park, Ont., at the age of 39. This status originated among his peer artists, who later formed the Group of Seven,<sup>1</sup> and his patron, Toronto ophthalmologist Dr. James MacCallum (1860–1944).<sup>2</sup> In the exhibition *Tom Thomson* the National Gallery of Canada presents a comprehensive and intriguing look at both the artist and the icon and reveals the extent to which the two coexist.

Thomson’s fame as an artist rests on five short years of production, beginning in 1912, after his first trip into Algonquin Park. It is apparent in the over 140 works in the show that his abilities as a painter increased exponentially during this period — which, had he lived longer, would have been considered his formative years. Largely self-taught, Thomson developed his painting skills through connections with several future Group of Seven artists who, like Thomson, were employees at Toronto’s Grip Limited, a graphic arts firm. Thomson was already interested in painting landscapes out-



**Tom Thomson, *Sunset*** (summer 1915).  
Oil on composite wood-pulp board.  
21.6 cm x 26.7 cm

National Gallery of Canada. Request of Dr. J. M. MacCallum. Toronto

doors, and his technique underwent startlingly rapid growth through his close contact with J.E.H. MacDonald, Arthur Lismer, Franklin Carmichael, Frederick Varley, Lawren Harris and A.Y. Jackson. At his death he left an impressive body of work — roughly 45 canvasses, 600 oil sketches and a small collection of watercolours, drawings and graphic designs. His many surviving sketches — small, on-site paintings on paperboard or wood panels, such as *Sunset* (1915) — reveal his almost obsessive interest in the northern Ontario landscape.<sup>3</sup> The sketches, executed with energetic brushwork and vivid colours, pulsate with a sense of directness and immediacy. They also reveal that Thomson's painting was an intuitive and emotional response to an environment, an atmosphere, a quality of light. This approach imbues his work with a spiritual dimension.<sup>4</sup>

In the years since his death, Thomson, like Niagara Falls, the Rocky Mountains, the RCMP and Anne of Green Gables, has become part of the Canadian identity. The basic facts of his life are verifiable: born the sixth child of a Claremont, Ont., farmer in 1877, an avid camper and fisherman, an ambivalent graphic artist who drifted to Seattle, then to Toronto, ar-



**Tom Thomson, *Little Cauchon Lake*** (spring 1916). Oil on wood, 26.6 cm x 21.4 cm

tistically talented, but not inclined to paint in earnest until the last five years of his life. These details have been filtered and reformulated to create an idea of Thomson that endures in the popular imagination. The tales of his wilderness exploits in Algonquin Park, the ambiguities surrounding his violent death and even his purported haunting of Canoe Lake have transcended the facts. Instead of ignoring the Thomson mythology and attempting to present a scholarly study of his life and work, the National Gallery's show acknowledges and clearly situates the mythological Thomson alongside the documented one, delivering a thoroughly satisfying portrait of both.

Beyond the immediate beauty of the paintings and the larger-than-life mythology, *Little Cauchon Lake*, a small oil sketch painted during a visit to Algonquin in spring 1916, encapsulates Thomson's universal appeal. In the foreground, Thomson depicts a small figure fishing, dwarfed in the rush of a waterfall behind him. But the sweep of the fisherman's arm follows the direction of the water's flow — the figure is subordinate to nature, but is also in harmony with it. This, Thomson's experience of nature, is what everyone desires to experience.

For Thomson ultimately symbolizes escapism: he personifies our need and desire to put aside the ordinary routines of our daily lives and challenge ourselves with the same activities that were so important to him. At one point or another we all dream of the opportunity to test our ability to not only confront and survive the elements, but also to connect with our own origins at their most elemental level.

Thomson succeeded in living out this ideal. He also succeeded, in his short artistic career, in communicating not only the evidence but the primor-



**Tom Thomson, *The Jack Pine*** (winter 1916-1917). Oil on canvas, 127.9 cm x 139.8 cm

dial essence of this need. *Tom Thomson* scrutinizes these interwoven implications of the artist's life and work and establishes a high standard for others to follow.

*Tom Thomson* runs at the National Gallery of Canada until September 8, 2002 and will be circulating until the end of 2003 to the Vancouver Art Gallery, le Musée du Québec, the Art Gallery of Ontario, and the Winnipeg Art Gallery.

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#### Notes

1. In the words of J.E.H. MacDonald (1873–1932), one of its founding members, the Group of Seven, established in 1920, believed that Canadian art should express "the mood and character and spirit of the country." The other original members were Franklin Carmichael (1890–1945), Lawren Harris (1885–1970), A.Y. Jackson (1882–1974), Frank Johnston (1882–1949), Arthur Lismer (1885–1969) and Frederick Varley (1881–1969).
2. Mason RB. Dr. James MacCallum: patron and friend of Canada's Group of Seven. *CMAJ* 1996; 155(9):1333-5.
3. An interesting component of the National Gallery show is a display that shows that, by 1912, Algonquin Park was a popular tourist destination and supported a thriving logging industry, and was not a pristine wilderness at all.
4. According to Andrew Hunter, one the curators of the show, Thomson's interest in both the practicalities and the spiritual dimensions of the outdoors is evident in his study of Isaak Walton's 1653 treatise on fishing, *The Compleat Angler: or the contemplative man's recreation*, a book that Thomson frequently consulted on his painting expeditions in Algonquin Park.