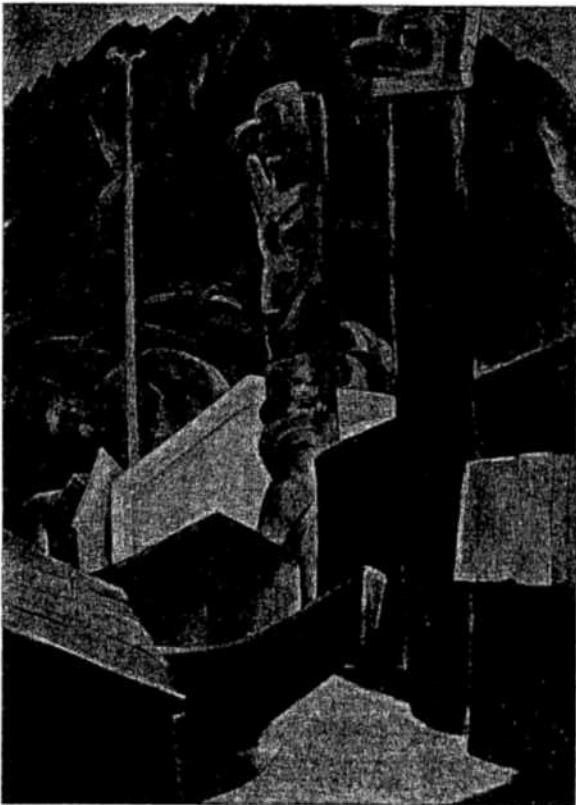


Stormy Weather, Georgian Bay by Frederick Varley.



A Haida Village by Emily Carr.

The Group of Seven

At the turn of the century, art and especially painting was changing considerably. Some of the old rules were breaking down. Artists around the world were experimenting with new techniques and ways of expressing themselves. Impressionists, for example, wanted to express their feelings for their subjects through their art. They were less concerned about representing their subjects to look exactly as they were. Canadian artists, particularly members of the **Group of Seven**, were influenced by the Impressionists.

Members of the Group of Seven were also determined to create art that dealt with the Canadian experience. They took their inspiration from the Canadian landscape. The first exhibition of paintings by the Group was held in May 1920 at the Art Gallery of Ontario. The pictures portrayed Canada as a land of spectacular open spaces, rivers, lakes, and forests.

Lawren Harris was one member of the Group. In 1912, Harris saw an exhibition of paintings by J. E. H. MacDonald that changed his life. Not only was he impressed with the work, but through MacDonald he was introduced to other Toronto-based artists. Franklin Carmichael, Frank Johnston, Arthur Lismer, and Fred Varley became members of the Group. In 1913, MacDonald wrote to a Montreal friend, A. Y. Jackson, whose work they admired. Jackson soon moved to Toronto to join the other six. A. J. Casson joined the Group of Seven in 1926. By that time, Frank Johnston had left the Group.

Some of the most inspiring pictures were produced on sketching trips in northern Ontario, but members of the Group also illustrated other parts of Canada including areas of Quebec, Nova Scotia, and the Rocky Mountains. The painters used bright, strong colours to portray the forces of nature. Often the paint was applied thickly with vivid brush strokes.

The Group of Seven were the first to create a Canadian national style in painting. Their influence and popularity spread steadily during their lifetimes. Today, Canadian art collectors eagerly seek out and pay high prices for works by the Group of Seven.

They captured the vitality and ruggedness of the landscape by using simple, bold shapes.

Later, West Coast artist Emily Carr also exhibited with the Group. Many of her paintings took their inspiration from the life and culture of Aboriginal nations on the West Coast.

Roaring Cultural Contradictions in the 1920s

In an oft quoted statement, Canadian painter Arthur Lismer stated: "most creative people whether in painting, writing, or music began to have a guilty feeling that Canada was as yet unwritten, unpainted, unsung....In 1920 there was a job to be done."

Lismer was one of the Group of Seven, likely the most recognized visual artists in Canadian art history. Lismer was joined by Lawren Harris, A.Y. Jackson, Frank Carmichael, Frank Johnston, and James E.H. Macdonald. Their first exhibition was held in Toronto in 1920 but their collaboration had begun years earlier. In the twenties, the public began to respond to their body of work. One of the early reactionary critics called labelled the group "the Hot Mush School." He was referring to the non-representational bold brush strokes on their canvases. While the group and many of their admirers cultivated a revolutionary image it is likely they had been influenced by the postimpressionists like Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Matisse. However, it would be wrong to say that the Group's style was entirely derived from European painters. Their distinctive vivid colours and designs captured the essence of northern Canada, principally the Algoma region of Ontario. The Group's paintings received generally favourable international review. The most unreserved acclaim came from the Canadian public. In time the revolutionaries had become the most esteemed members of the Canadian art community. To this day, most surveys of the distinct nature of Canadian identity are obliged to feature the significant contributions of the Group of Seven.

Literature and poetry also came of age in the twenties. Mazo de la Roche's popular *Jalna* series fed a voracious Canadian appetite for romantic and sentimental novels. Charles Yale Harrison's *Generals Die in Bed*, R.J.C. Stead's *Grain*, and Morley Callaghan's *Strange Fugitive* followed American realism in their

unvarnished portrayal of contemporary life. In poetry modernism began to appear.¹⁸ In Montreal a group of poets led by F. R. Scott defied traditional forms in their embrace of modernist free verse and experimentation. Poets such as F. R. Scott continued writing for many years, and interestingly, he wrote a poem about Mackenzie King after King's death:

W.L.M.K.

How shall we speak of Canada,

Mackenzie King dead?

The Mother's boy in the lonely room

With his dog, his medium and his ruins?

He blunted us.

We had no shape

Because he never took sides,

And no sides

Because he never allowed them to take shape

He skillfully avoided what was wrong

Without saying what was right,

And never let his on the one hand

Know what his on the other hand was doing.

...

He seemed to be in the center

Because we had no center,

No vision

To pierce the smoke-screen of his politics

Truly he will be remembered

Wherever men honour ingenuity,

Ambiguity, inactivity, and political longevity.

...¹⁹

Comprehension Questions:

1. What was the *Group of Seven*?
2. How did their work serve to reflect Canadian culture and expression in the 1920s?
3. How significant do you think the contribution of the Group of Seven was to Canadian culture and art?
4. Do you think that F.R. Scott's poem about Mackenzie King was an accurate portrayal of his leadership according to what we have studied about him so far in this class? Explain your answer.