



138 Sir Frederick Grant Banting

1891 – 1941

Etah

oil on board, signed and on verso titled, 1927
8 ½ x 10 ½ in, 21.6 x 26.7 cm

PROVENANCE

Richard Finnie, son of Deputy Minister O.S. Finnie, Ottawa
The Art Emporium, Vancouver
A Distinguished Private Collection, Vancouver

LITERATURE

A.Y. Jackson, *Banting as an Artist*, 1943, titled as
Eskimo Tents at Etah, listed page 34

EXHIBITED

Hart House, University of Toronto, *Exhibition of Paintings by
the Late Sir Frederick Banting*, February 13 – March 1, 1943

A GROUP OF parka-clad Inuit gaze upon the majestic Foulk Fjord from their camp at Etah, Greenland, in this painterly record of arctic life by Sir Frederick Banting. Better known for his Nobel Prize-winning co-discovery with Charles Best of the life-saving drug insulin, Banting was also an accomplished amateur visual artist with strong ties to the Group of Seven. *Etah* belongs to a suite of oils and sketches produced by Banting while accompanying A.Y. Jackson on a six-week trip to Ellesmere Island, then the location of the most northerly post in the world.¹ Consciously pushing the Group of Seven's pursuit of ever more northerly subject matter to a logical extreme, Banting and Jackson's arctic sojourn would help raise awareness about the impacts of colonization on Inuit lifeways.

Boarding the icebreaker *Beothic* in Nova Scotia on July 16, 1927,² Banting and Jackson made their first port of call at Godhavn, where the governor of Greenland received the ship's crew with all the pomp of a ceremonial visit. Zigzagging northward between Greenland and Canada's eastern Arctic, the *Beothic* would stop at Etah before reaching its final destination, Bache Post. A storied locale in narratives of arctic exploration—having served as a base camp for both Knud Rasmussen and Robert Peary—Etah has also played an important role in successive waves of Indigenous migration from the Canadian Arctic to Greenland spanning thousands of years. When Banting and Jackson arrived there in the summer of 1927, however, they found only four Inuit tents. (The fluctuating population of Etah was then said to range between 16 and 60.)

During their abbreviated visit, both artists would capture the angular forms of these sealskin shelters (*tupiit*) in a variety of media and formats. Multiple rapid pencil sketches by Jackson are reproduced in the 1982 book *The Arctic 1927*. Dynamic ink sketches by both artists were also published, respectively, in Banting's report on their expedition for the inaugural issue of the *Canadian Geographical Journal* in 1930 and in Jackson's handsome 1928 book of drawings, *The Far North* (to which Banting contributed an introduction).³ Adroitly simplifying these detailed works on paper, Banting's oil on board enlivens the scene with a nuanced spectrum of charcoal and earth tones.

The traditional way of life that Banting and Jackson documented at Etah was not to be found among Inuit settlements that they visited on the Canadian side of the Nares Strait—as Banting would observe in an explosive story published by the *Toronto*



SIR FREDERICK GRANT BANTING

Etah

ink on paper, 1930

Not for sale with this lot

Daily Star upon the artists' return to Southern Canada.⁴ He was alarmed by the effects of the commercial fur trade on Inuit communities, which included the propagation of deadly pathogens and changes in diet that led to vitamin deficiencies, as well as the substitution of Western building materials—canvas and packing crates in lieu of traditional sealskins or caribou hides—that, in his medical opinion, exacerbated other health stressors.

Deputy minister of the Interior O.S. Finnie, who had arranged for Banting and Jackson to travel aboard the *Beothic*, had cautioned them against making public statements about the conditions they encountered in the North.⁵ Following the *Toronto Daily Star's* front-page interview with Banting, the medical researcher found himself facing allegations of libel. He successfully diffused threats of legal action, and his comments would ultimately stimulate policy reform and a broader awareness of Inuit struggles.⁶

Exhibited in the memorial retrospective of Banting's art at Hart House in 1943 (and listed in its catalogue as being in the collection of O.S. Finnie's son, Richard),⁷ *Etah* is an enduring testament to Banting's humanitarian activism and a persuasive fusion of artistic and scientific perspectives.

We thank Adam Lauder for contributing the above essay. Lauder is an art historian based in Toronto and an adjunct professor at the Ontario College of Art and Design.

1. A.Y. Jackson, *A Painter's Country: The Autobiography of A.Y. Jackson* (1958; repr., Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1976), 114.

2. F.G. Banting, "With the Arctic Patrol," *Canadian Geographical Journal* 1, no. 1 (May 1930): 19; Jackson, *Painter's Country*, 116.

3. A.Y. Jackson, *The Arctic 1927* (Charlottetown: Penumbra Press, 1982); Banting, "Arctic Patrol," 22; and A.Y. Jackson, *The Far North: A Book of Drawings* (Toronto: Rous & Mann, [1928]), n.p.

4. C.R. Greenaway, "Banting Regrets Hudson Bay Use of Eskimo," *Toronto Daily Star*, September 8, 1927, 1, 36.

5. See Jackson, *Painter's Country*, 114, 121.

6. See A.Y. Jackson, "Memories of a Fellow Artist, Frederick Grant Banting," *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 92, no. 20 (1965): 1079–80.

7. See A.Y. Jackson, *Banting as an Artist* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1943), 34.

ESTIMATE: \$20,000 – 30,000