



208 Thomas John (Tom) Thomson

OSA 1877 – 1917

Hillside on Big Cauchon Lake

oil on panel, on verso initialed, titled and dated 1915
by J.E.H. MacDonald and inscribed 2611A and stamped
with the estate stamp
8 ½ x 10 ½ in, 21.6 x 26.7 cm

PROVENANCE

Estate of the Artist
Masters Gallery Ltd., Calgary
Tom Chapman, Red Deer, Alberta
The Art Emporium, Vancouver
George Clark, Fannin Hall Collection, Vancouver
Kenneth G. Heffel Fine Art Inc., Vancouver, 1980

Acquired from the above by a Private Collection, Toronto,
February 28, 1980
Private Collection, Hamilton
Roberts Gallery, Toronto
Private Collection, Toronto
Important Canadian Art, Sotheby's Canada, June 2, 2010, lot 25
Private Collection, British Columbia

LITERATURE

Rosalyn Porter, *The Group of Seven and Their Contemporaries*,
Kenneth G. Heffel Fine Art Inc., 1980, listed, unpaginated
Dennis Reid, editor, *Thomson*, Art Gallery of Ontario and
National Gallery of Canada, 2002, the related 1915 canvas
Burnt Land, collection of the National Gallery of Canada,
reproduced page 194 and listed page 340

EXHIBITED

Vancouver Art Gallery, *Canadian Painting*, 1970, catalogue #2,
and after on extended loan
Kenneth C. Heffel Fine Art Inc., Vancouver, *The Group of Seven
and Their Contemporaries*, February 29 – March 22, 1980,
catalogue #137
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, *Thomson*, June 7 –
September 8, 2002, traveling in 2003 to the Vancouver Art
Gallery; Musée du Québec, Quebec City; Art Gallery of Ontario,
Toronto; and Winnipeg Art Gallery, the related 1915 canvas
Burnt Land, catalogue #41

TOM THOMSON'S *Hillside on Big Cauchon Lake* is a powerful
depiction of the northern woods painted by Thomson in the
early morning hours of a cold spring day. The dry grasses in the
foreground are painted with a rich scumbled effect of creams set
against golds and browns, and the scene is balanced by dark-blue
hills and dark trees in the background set against a lighter sky.
The foreground features a few birch trees, which serve almost as
sentinels of the coming dawn. The painting is a bold exercise in
subtle colour acutely observed and transcribed as well as an exer-
cise in composition. The result is an evocative portrayal of spring
in the North.

In the middle of March 1915, after a two-day visit to his girl-
friend Winifred Trainer's home in Huntsville, Thomson, anxious
to get started painting, traveled by canoe to Tea Lake and Big
Cauchon Lake, the place of this sketch. Shortly afterwards, he
went to the Kearny area and stayed at McCann's Half-way
House.¹ While there, he discovered and was intrigued by an area
called "burned land" that he subsequently enjoyed painting.

When he returned to the city from Algonquin Park in the fall,
he would have shown the works he had painted to friends and
fans of his work, such as J.E.H. MacDonald and Lawren Harris
in the Studio Building in Toronto. This explains why MacDonald
knew the date and title of the painting, which he wrote on the
back of this sketch after Thomson's death.

The year 1915 marked a great improvement in Thomson's
work, a new assurance on his part, coupled with novel ideas for
painting colour and related to composition. What counted for
Thomson in his sketch of Big Cauchon Lake was the contrast
between the dark blue, evenly painted background hills and the
pale blue and white sky. The branches of the birches against the
sky were likely painted first, as can be seen from the patches he
left bare around them. The painting device of dark against light
is called *contre-jour*, a French phrase meaning "against the day-
light," and is much loved by people who know and love design,
as did Thomson. Using a *contre-jour* technique allows artists to
explore the unusual effects caused by darkness in daytime, like
the ethereal birch trees in *Hillside on Big Cauchon Lake*.

The result is a combination of colours and forms that may have
given him the inspiration for the well-known but larger work done
later that year, *Burnt Land* (1915, collection of the National Gal-
lery of Canada), owned originally by Harris, who bought it in the
fall of 1915. Both the sketch and canvas have dark hillsides and

lighter skies that are punctuated by trees or tree branches or, in
Burnt Land, tree skeletons. Thomson may have been so pleased
with the effect of *Hillside on Big Cauchon Lake* that he thought of it
in painting *Burnt Land*.

Thomson used the combination of dark hills and trees against
light, even brilliant sky, sporadically thereafter that year, notably
in works such as *Pine Trees at Sunset* (summer 1915, private col-
lection). It is a technique that forces the viewer to look beyond
the foreground and focus on the light, which became Thomson's
compelling theme later in this painting year.

Other works painted by Thomson the important year of 1915
include the dynamic *Winter Morning*, sold by Heffel in the fall
2024 sale *Legendary: The Collection of Torben V. Kristiansen*, and
many other solid works given high ratings by his painting mates.
MacDonald even thought Thomson's painting so good this year
that he chose sketches for himself, the spectacular *Marguerites*,
Wood Lilies and Vetch (summer 1915, collection of the Art Gallery
of Ontario) and the boldly painted *Sunset, Canoe Lake* (fall 1915,
location unknown). Harris, too, owned the mysteriously beautiful
sketch *A Rapid* (fall 1915, collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario)
as well as *Burnt Land*. These two men, mentors to Thomson, felt
confident in his progress as his ability reached new heights of
achievement, and they knew how to show their approval—by
either accepting as gifts or acquiring works Thomson offered
when he returned that fall. Of course, they chose only works they
considered his best or which most appealed to them.

Hillside on Big Cauchon Lake was sold from the Studio Building
in Toronto to a collector at an early date, since there are no mark-
ings with the names of family on the back, only labels of galleries.
In 1980, this work was included in *The Group of Seven and Their
Contemporaries*, part of an important exhibition and sale of the
Fannin Hall Collection at Kenneth G. Heffel Fine Art Inc. in Van-
couver. Since 2010, when this painting was sold at Sotheby's, it
has been treasured and sequestered in a private collection in
British Columbia.

We thank Joan Murray, former curator of Canadian art and
chief curator (1972) at the Art Gallery of Ontario, for contribut-
ing the above essay. Murray helped to bring the paintings of Tom
Thomson to world attention through a series of exhibitions and
seven books, including a biography (the most recent is *A Treasury
of Tom Thomson*). Murray is the author of the *Tom Thomson Cata-
logue Raisonné*.

This work is included in the Tom Thomson catalogue raisonné,
researched and written by Murray, as catalogue #1915.30: [https://
www.tomthomsoncatalogue.org/catalogue/entry.php?id=309](https://www.tomthomsoncatalogue.org/catalogue/entry.php?id=309).

1. Joan Murray, "Chronology," in *Thomson*, ed. Dennis Reid
(Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, in assoc. with Douglas & McIntyre,
2002), 314.

ESTIMATE: \$500,000 – 700,000