

# First Snow, Algoma

Alexander Young Jackson (1882-1974) studied art in France and Italy during the first years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. He learned the techniques of the Impressionists but was also affected by Van Gogh and Cézanne. After painting for a while in Quebec, he moved from Montreal to Toronto in 1914, and became friends with James MacDonald (1873-1932), Lawren Harris (1885-1970) and Tom Thomson (1877-1917). This group of painters began to paint *en plein air* in the wilderness in Northern Ontario. Their paintings forged a new style of landscape painting that combined aspects of neo-impressionism, art deco, and expressionism. In 1915, Jackson enlisted in the Canadian army and was wounded in 1916. After convalescence he returned to active service as an official war artist from 1917 to 1919. In late 1919, he joined Harris, MacDonald and Frank Johnston (1888-1949) on a trip to the Algoma wilderness. Drawings and oil sketches from this trip provided the basis for his 1920 painting *First Snow, Algoma*. In 1920, Jackson became a founding member of the Group of Seven, an association of Canadian landscape artists, which lasted from 1920 to 1933.

## Early Paintings

Between 1905 and 1912, Jackson made several trips to Europe to learn the new painting styles. Back in Montreal, he produced landscapes using the techniques of impressionism. One of these paintings was *The Edge of the Maple Woods* (1910). Although it accurately portrayed the light of an early winter scene the focus of the painting was the dark shadow of a tree on the ground. What is not there is as important as what is.



During his visits to Europe, Jackson was also affected by the Cézanne, Van Gogh and the post-impressionists. In the small painting *Autumn in Picardy*, he used their broad brush-strokes and heightened color-palette to produce an image that conveys the brightness of the scene. The Canadian critics were not impressed: one dubbed the style “hot mush” (King, 2010, p 106)



Jackson's 1910 painting *The Edge of the Maple Woods* was exhibited over the following years in Montreal and Toronto. The picture drew the attention of Lawren Harris, one of the heirs to the Massey-Harris agricultural-machinery fortune, and also a painter. He bought the painting from Jackson and the two became fast friends. In 1913, Harris convinced Jackson to move to Toronto, where they shared studio space. There Jackson soon made the acquaintance of James MacDonald, Frank Johnston, and Tom Thomson, who worked with a Toronto graphics firm called Grip, which published a satirical magazine and produced designs for advertisements, brochures, catalogues and posters.

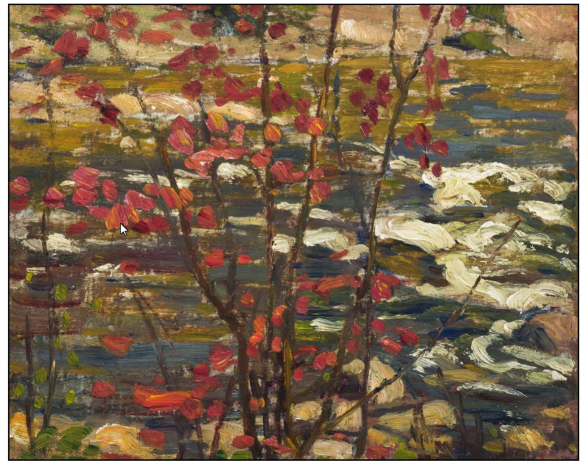
On the basis of sketches made during a trip to Georgian Bay in Northern Ontario, Jackson produced a large painting in

Harris's studio. The painting was originally called *The Northland* but later came to be known as *Terre Sauvage*. The painting combines the post-impressionist brushstrokes with some of the graphic techniques of Art Deco. In lithography, elements were portrayed in outlines filled with flat colors. In Jackson's painting, the trees are outlined but the colors within the outline are textured by the brush.

The landscape is both powerful and pristine. MacDonald called the painting "Mount Ararat" since "it looked like the first land that appeared after the Flood subsided" (Jackson, 1958, p 25).



In October 1914, Jackson and Thomson spent time together in Algonquin Park. Jackson gave his companion some academic painting tips, and Thomson responded with advice on wilderness living. They canoed through various regions of the park, making multiple drawings and oil sketches. These were about 20 by 25 cm in size and thus easily portable from one campsite to another. One of the sketches, shown on the right, became the basis of a studio painting called *The Red Maple* (shown on the next page).



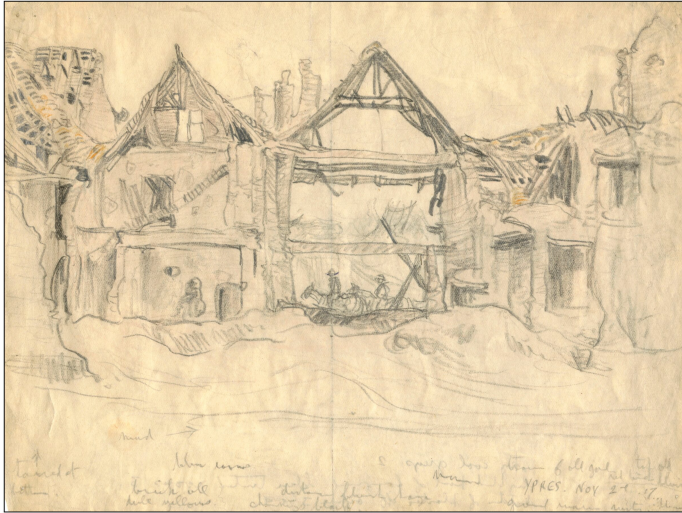
## World War I



As it became apparent that the war was not going to be over by Christmas, Jackson returned to Montreal in 1915 and enlisted in the 60<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion. After training, he was shipped to France in the spring of 1916, and fought in the battles near Vimy Ridge. He was wounded on June 11, 1917, and sent back to England to convalesce. On returning to active service, he was appointed an official war artist and promoted from private to lieutenant (Butlin, 1996, Brandon, 2021; Hunter, 2022). He painted war scenes near Ypres in Belgium, and then portrayed the Canadian troops returning to Halifax. The photographs on the right show him in 1915 and 1919.

One of the most striking his war paintings was *House at Ypres* (1917). The following illustrations show the original sketch and the finished painting. What is fascinating about the image is how the devastation of the war has laid open the structure of the buildings. The peacefulness of the image's symmetry is at odds with the violence that revealed it. Jackson depicted war's effects on humble houses rather than the more usual image of the ruined Cloth Hall:

In focusing on the skeletal remains of homely dwellings in which men and women had lived and worked, the artist evokes the destruction of ordinary life with particular force, yet in a remarkably understated way. (Butlin, 1996).





In *Trenches near Angres* (1918), Jackson portrayed a land blown apart by explosives, riddled with trenches and covered with barbed wire. His impressionist technique finds an abstract beauty in the ravaged scene.



Jackson's painting contrasts with the more dramatic and expressionist view of the trenches captured in a gouache image by the Otto Dix (1891-1961), who fought in the German army in the same regions of Northern France (Brandon, 2014).

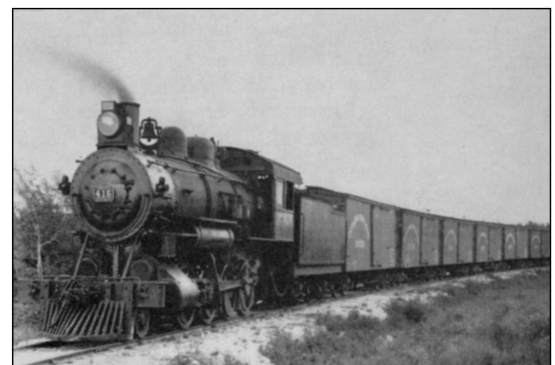
Jackson was significantly influenced by the British war artist Paul Nash (1889-1946). Jackson's 1918 painting of *Copse, Evening* shows many similarities to Nash's *Menin Road*, which went through many variations from 1917 until its final version in 1919.





## The Algoma Paintings

When his commission as a war artist ended in 1919, Jackson returned to Toronto. One of his first artistic endeavors was a trip with Harris, Johnston and MacDonald to the Algoma region of Northern Ontario in the fall of 1919. Several railways had been built in Northern Ontario to provide transportation for the mines and logging camps. These are illustrated on the map below. The Algoma Central Railway had been built over the first years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. By 1914 the line extended from Sault-Ste-Marie to Hearst, a distance of 476 km.



Lawren Harris arranged with the company to provide the artists with a boxcar, ACR 10557, fitted with bunk beds, a stove, a table and chairs. The boxcar was taken by the freight train (right) and left at different sidings, where the artists could find places to paint. The country through which the railway ran was stunningly beautiful. Just north of Agawa Bay was the canyon of the Agawa River. Further south, the Montreal and Batchewana Rivers tumbled down to Lake Superior. Everywhere were lakes and beaver ponds.

Jackson (1957, also 1958) remembered:

In the autumn Harris had arranged a sketching party in Algoma and had a box car fitted up with bunks and a stove. Along with the canoe we had a three-wheel jigger worked by hand to go up and down the tracks. There were few trains on the Algoma Central Railway at that time. Our car was hitched to the passenger train or the way freight and left on a siding. The only inhabitants were the section men. The box car became a studio. There was Harris, MacDonald, Frank Johnston and my-self. The railroad runs north for two hundred miles from Sault Ste. Marie to Hearst on the CNR crossing the CPR at Franz. It is a heavily wooded country, birch and maple, poplar, spruce and white pine, a country of big hills that drop down steeply to Lake Superior. The rivers cut through them and romp down in a series of rapids and waterfalls to the lake. In October it is a blaze of colour.

...The nights were frosty, but in the box car with the fire in the stove we were snug and warm and discussions and arguments would last until late in the night—from Plato to Picasso, from Madame Blavatsky to Mary Baker Eddy—between Harris, a Baptist and later a Theosophist, and MacDonald, a Presbyterian interested in Christian Science. Outside the aurora would be playing antics in the sky and the murmur of the rapids or a distant waterfall blended with the silence of the night. Every few days we would have our box car moved to another siding.

In an earlier description of their time in Algoma, Jackson (1921) expressed the difficulties and the ultimate satisfaction they found in attempting to depict the beauties of the land:

Sketching here demanded a quick decision in composition, an ignoring or summarizing of much of the detail, a searching-out of significant form, and a colour analysis that must never err on the side of timidity. One must know the north country intimately to appreciate the great variety of its

forms. The impression of monotony that one receives from a train is soon dissipated when one gets into the bush. To fall into a formula for interpreting it is hardly possible. From sunlight in the hardwoods with bleached violet-white tree trunks against a blaze of red and orange, we wander into the denser spruce and pine woods, where the sunlight filters through – gold and silver splashes – playing with startling vividness on a birch trunk or a patch of green moss. Such a subject would change entirely every ten minutes and, unless the first impression was firmly adhered to, the sketch would end in confusion. Turning from these to the subtle differences in a frieze of pine, spruce, and cedar or the slighter graceful forms of the birch woods, one had to change the method of approach in each case; the first demanded fulness and brilliancy of colour, the second depth and warmth, the next subtlety in design and colour; and these extreme differences we found commingled all through.

He noted that MacDonald

has a predilection for Bald Rock, bald only because it was once well singed by a fire which roared up the hillside from below, and left a tumbled tangle of charred tree trunks and a few gaunt standing pines to silhouette the sky. From here there was an outlook over range on range of forested hills, red and gold with maple and birch, or dark with patches of spruce and pine; here and there the sheen of small lakes.

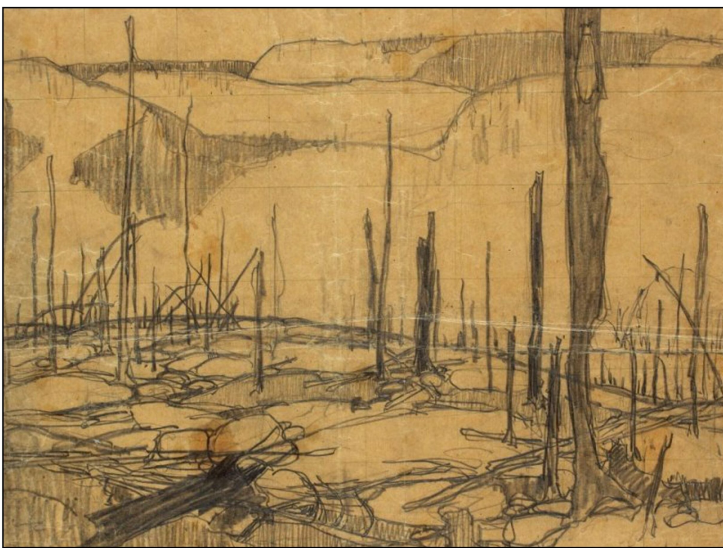
This fits with MacDonald's 1921 painting *Forest Wilderness*:



Jackson was intrigued by the areas in Algoma that had been burnt by forest fires. One of his paintings from the Algoma trip, now in Hart House at the University of Toronto is called *October Morning, Algoma*. The painting was based on a view of Wartz Lake (now known as Wart Lake). Gary McGuffin (see website, and also the DVD *Painted Land: Ellis, 2015*) has taken photographs of the lake from where Jackson must have painted:



The Ontario Northland shows many areas that have been burnt from forest fires started by lightening in the summer woods. Frank Johnston depicted another region in his 1920 painting *Fire-Swept, Algoma* (Cole, 2014). The following illustrations show both the original drawing and the final painting:





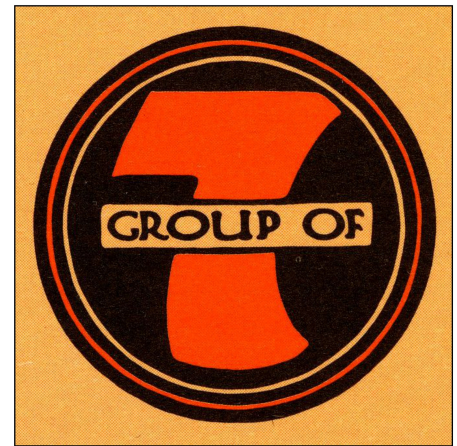
Jackson's most important painting from this Algoma trip was *First Snow, Algoma* which he completed in 1921. The painting is intriguing in that the original sketches for it apparently did not show the burnt stumps in the foreground (Dejardin, 2023). The original visual experience was likely something similar to MacDonald's *Forest Wilderness* (1921).

In creating the final painting, Jackson appears to have combined his Algoma experience with his memories of the war and the blasted and burnt trees of that covered the countryside of Flanders (Brandon, 2001). In addition, he added the snow, almost as though he was seeking to quieten his memories of those terrifying times. There is nothing so peaceful as falling snow. As he was painting the final version of this picture, he was also laying his demons to rest. This was not easy. As Larsen (2009, p 94) remarks

Dabbing white dots over an image can be a difficult and risky undertaking; there must be just enough snowflakes to make the image come alive. Too little would not be effective, and too many might obscure the scene and ruin the entire painting.



**The Group of Seven**



In 1920, a group of painters that worked for Grip joined with Lawren Harris and A. Y. Jackson to found the Group of Seven (Mellon, 1970; King 2010; Weinberg, 2021). The group held its first exhibition at the Art Museum of Toronto (now the Art Gallery of Ontario). They created a logo (illustrated on the left) as befitted a group with ties to the graphic arts. In the forward to their exhibition, they proposed that

an Art must grow and flower in the land before the country will be a real home for its people

Although he was one of the guiding lights for their ideas of a new Canadian art, Tom Thomson had drowned in Canoe Lake in Algonquin Park in 1917 (Town & Silcox, 1977). At Grip Ltd., MacDonald and Johnston had been joined by Franklin Carmichael (1890-1945), Arthur Lismer (1885-1969) and Fred Varley (1881-1969). Although there are no photographs of the whole Group of Seven together, the following image from 1920 shows six of the founding members (Carmichael is missing) around a table at the Arts and Letters Club. From left to right are Frederick Varley, A. Y. Jackson, Lawren Harris, Barker Fairley (not a member), Frank Johnston, Arthur Lismer, and J. E. H. MacDonald.



Although each member of the group painted in their own style, the group shared several important characteristics. They were all patriotic, believing that their images of the Canadian landscape would help to establish a distinct Canadian identity. They preferred the wilderness to civilization. They insisted that their paintings should originate in nature rather than in the studio. They thought that landscape painting should be more than representational: it should also convey the emotions that their experience had evoked. In this respect they were following the Northern romantic tradition (Rosenblum, 1975; Nasgaard, 1984). They tried to understand and reveal the underlying form of what they experienced. They used the heightened colors and broad brush-strokes of the impressionists, and the sinuous outlines of Art Deco graphics.

## **Later Years**

A. Y. Jackson continued to paint the landscapes of Canada until his eighties. He sketched and painted the land from Vancouver Island to Newfoundland, and from Ontario to the Northwest Territories (Jackson, 1958; Groves, 1969; Larsen, 2009). One of his recurring images was of the barns in the snow. The following illustrations show the drawing, oil sketch and final painting of *Red Barn* (1930).



Jackson always based his paintings on direct experience. The following shows his 1955 painting of *Shoreline, Wawa, Lake Superior*, together with a modern photograph of the tiny cove where he had painted (Waddington & Waddington, 2013). Even at the age of 73 years, Jackson was still scrambling over rocks looking for the perfect place to paint.





We shall leave him there then: painting the land that he loved, feeling the breeze off Lake Superior, and listening to its waters lapping on the beach.

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