

See the Land, Listen to the Land

by Brian A. Puppa, Legacy Project Core Team for 7-Generation GTB



At the beginning of December, we had a wonderful event to celebrate generations, the land, and the holidays with local student EcoLeaders, Elders-in-Residence, and some teachers, parents, and community guests. With a lot of great planning by the Legacy Project's Lead Educator Susan V. Bosak, the event was designed as a fun experience for both relationship-building and learning as part of the [7-Generation GTB](#) Intergenerational Zone.

The event took place at the renowned [McMichael](#) Gallery, which originally started with a private collection of the works of the [Group of Seven](#), famous for their paintings of Canadian landscapes.

See the Land, Listen to the Land

The small, approximately 21 × 28 cm panels that artists such as Tom Thomson and the members of the Group of Seven regularly used to record the Canadian landscape were a convenient and portable response to the artists' self-imposed rigours of engaging directly with that landscape. Hiking, camping, portaging, and canoeing did not lend themselves to carrying heavy equipment. A paintbox, often handmade by the artists themselves, with slots to hold ready-cut panels in the lid, could be opened, propped on the knees and used as easel, palette, and storage solution combined. Practicality thus gave birth to one of the most characteristic of Canadian art forms. Sketches made in the open air would be taken back to the studio and worked up into finished works for exhibition. Nowadays, these bright, spontaneous, and swiftly executed works, inaugurating a whole new way of seeing the Canadian landscape, are highly valued in their own right. In the case of Thomson and the Group of Seven, they are among their most vivid and admired—and collectable—works.

The Group of Seven started painting in the 1920s. Canada was a young country exploring its identity. Believing that a distinct Canadian art could be developed through direct contact with nature, the Group of Seven initiated the first major Canadian national art movement. By the early 1930s, the Group's art was popular around the world.

The McMichael collection now holds more than 7,000 works, ranging from Group of Seven pieces to Indigenous to cutting-edge contemporary artworks. The McMichael's

mandate covers all the art of Canada, from coast to coast to coast, from early days to the present, and aspires to reflect its full diversity.

We set up for the event in the Studio space at the McMichael with festive tables. They included GTB (Greater Toronto Bioregion) maps (which teachers could take back to their classrooms) and featured beautiful handcrafted centerpieces created by Susan Graham of Riverdale Farm.



The centerpieces were truly gifts from the land. They were made of Birdhouse Gourds grown on Riverdale Farm, with two years of curing. Susan stained them with inks, laced the edges with upcycled materials, and included prayer bundles using home grown tobacco infused with heartfelt blessings for peace and kindness wrapped in squares of a

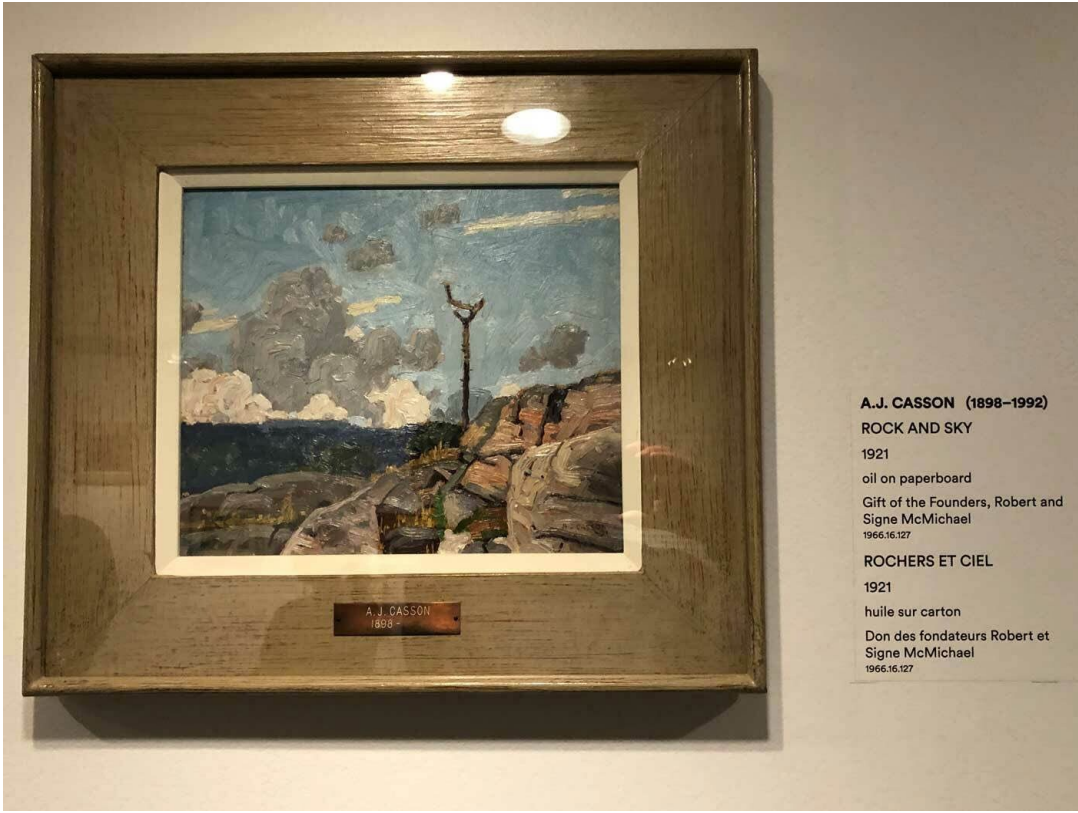
recycled red T-shirt. AND Susan enclosed seed packets of the Birdhouse Gourd and Nicotinia Rustika grown on her farm, hoping individuals or school/community gardens would plant the seeds in the Spring. We did an exercise in collective decision-making at the end of the event, as everyone at each table decided who at the table would take the centerpiece and enjoy it themselves or gift it.

After a short welcome and exchange of handmade, nature-themed holiday cards everyone brought with them, we broke into three smaller groups and McMichael educators took us on a tour through several galleries.



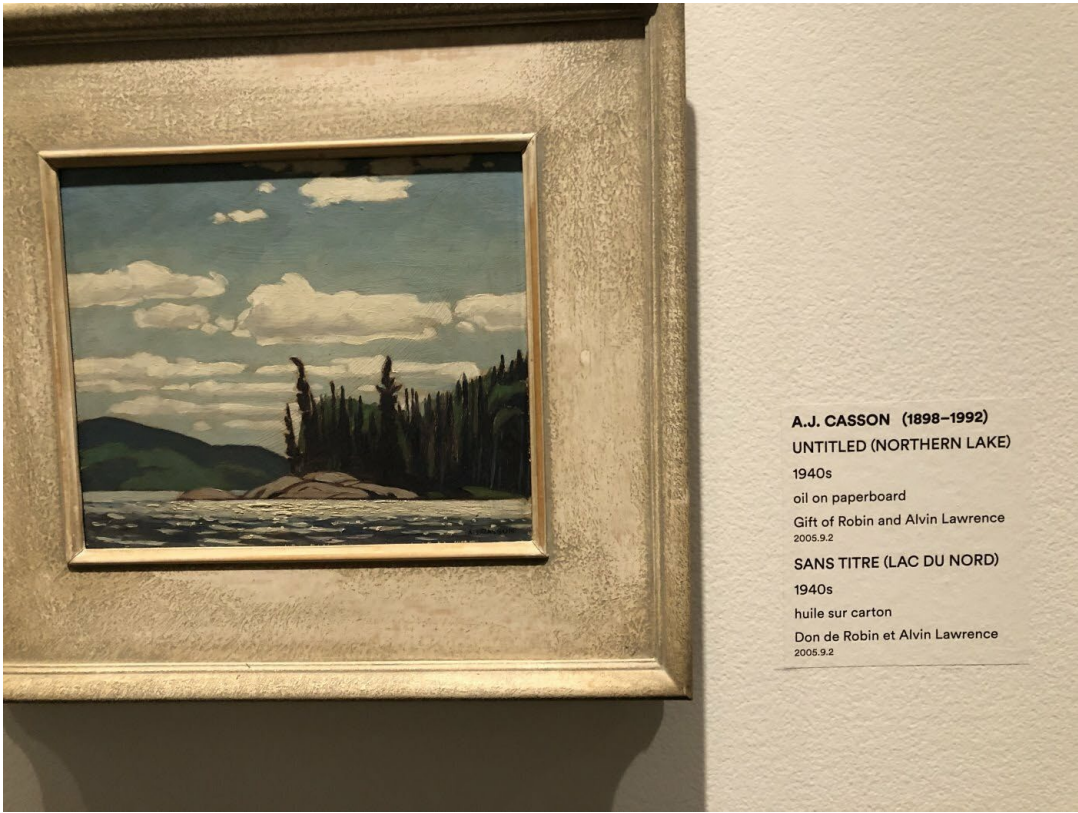


Below are two paintings by Group of Seven member A.J. Casson. Casson is best known for his depictions of the landscapes, forests, and farms of southern Ontario (where the GTB is located), and for being the youngest member of the Group of Seven.



A.J. CASSON (1898-1992)
ROCK AND SKY
1921
oil on paperboard
Gift of the Founders, Robert and
Signe McMichael
1966.16.127

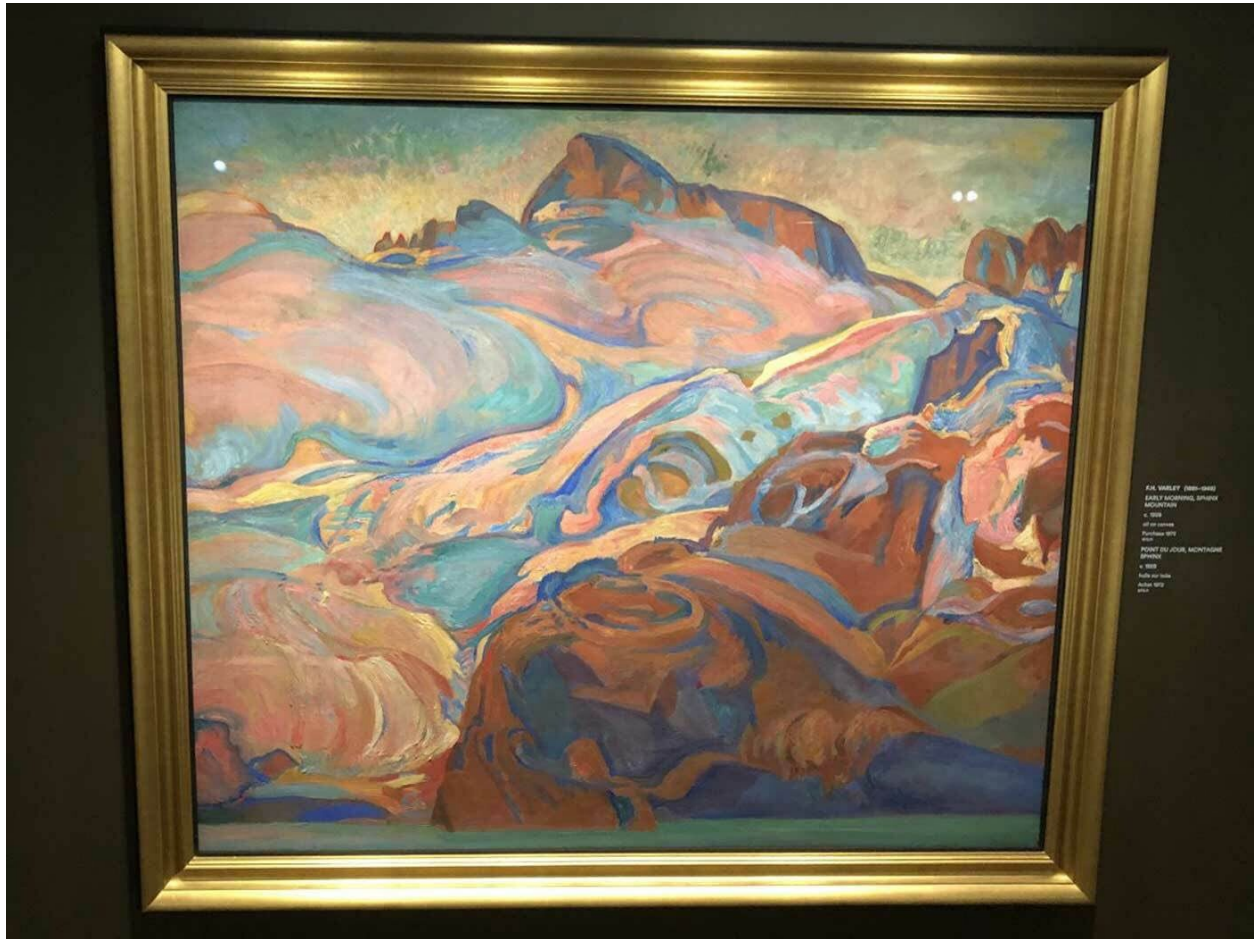
ROCHERS ET CIEL
1921
huile sur carton
Don des fondateurs Robert et
Signe McMichael
1966.16.127



A.J. CASSON (1898-1992)
UNTITLED (NORTHERN LAKE)
1940s
oil on paperboard
Gift of Robin and Alvin Lawrence
2005.9.2

SANS TITRE (LAC DU NORD)
1940s
huile sur carton
Don de Robin et Alvin Lawrence
2005.9.2

Another member of the Group of Seven was Frederick Varley. Varley saw art as a spiritual vocation. He was a founding member of the Group of Seven. Below is his 1928 painting, "Early Morning, Sphinx Mountain."



How do we define what a "landscape" is? Our guide asked us, "Is this a landscape painting?" The image below, "Pool, for Tom," was painted by contemporary artist Zachari Logan depicting some of the native plants in this area.



The Topographies exhibit, featuring Montreal artist Moridja Kitenge Banza, reveals the impacts of resource extraction in his home country of the Democratic Republic of Congo. His abstract imagined topographies (example below) suggest river systems and agricultural zones tainted by the waste of the mining industry, as well as the mass burial sites that can be detected on Google Earth.



Three of Rebecca Belmore's "Wave Sound" sculptures (below), installed by a window, point out over the treetops of the Humber River Valley. The listening horns are made out of aluminum and are larger than dinosaur bones. The surface texture is cast from real Canadian landscapes, some of the same rocky terrain the Group of Seven depicted. Suggesting deep time, the "Wave Sound" sculptures invite us to listen carefully to the land to hear everything that it's saying. In this time of ecological overshoot, is the land saying something different now than it did in the 1920's to the Group of Seven?



Norval Morrisseau is considered a trailblazer for contemporary Indigenous artists across Canada. He is best known for originating the Woodland School style. His deep spirituality and cultural connections guided his career, which spanned five decades. Morrisseau's characteristic style, as in the "Thunderbirds with Loons and Fish" piece below, uses black-line outlining to connect and create a holistic depiction. Our gaze is drawn across the painting. Contrast this with the Group of Seven paintings, where the viewer is more in control of how they view a piece. The perspective we take on something is a dance between viewer and what is viewed.



Another Indigenous artist influenced by Morrisseau's work is Daphne Odjig. The painting below is titled "Rebirth of a Culture." Notice how she brings in more movement and cycles in her work.



Bioregions are defined not only by land but also by culture and history.

In 2022, Indigenous artist Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun created the piece below, "Indian Residential School, Leaving the Shallow Graves and Going Home." Influential as both artist and activist, Yuxweluptun merges traditional iconography with representations of the environment and the history of colonization, resulting in his powerful imagery.

Yuxweluptun said the painting depicts the spirits of children killed in Canada's residential schools as they return home from the shallow graves where their bodies lay buried. "I'm

showing the world the truth... We're at the stage of finding the bodies. And we're at the stage where the government admitted that they did wrong. As a survivor, I've found it very difficult to grasp not knowing that you wake up and they're going to find more shallow graves. It's something that only survivors can explain what sorrow we have. This country has to carry the burden of what it did to us, as a nation. It has to be accountable for what it did. This is the kind of help that we need. We can get along – it's not that difficult to start at some point, to do something together. If we start in truth then we can start on the right foot."



A recent addition to the McMichael, Indigenous artist Bonnie Devine painted the mural below, "From Water to Water: A Way Through the Trees." It depicts the Indigenous Carrying Place Trail, an ancient trade route that ran along the Humber River from Lake Ontario to Lake Simcoe.



In the photo above, you can see the small plexiglas boxes that contain artifacts. One of these is an Indigenous clay effigy pipe (below) that was excavated near the Carrying Place Trail, during the construction of a local highway.



After viewing all the wonderful art, we left the building and headed out into the 100 acres of forest surrounding the McMichael. For December in Canada, it was a warm day, which made the walk very pleasant but, of course, also reminded us of a changing climate. Where is the snow?



We felt into the forest and the Carrying Place Trail. In the photo below, Elder-in-Residence James Brown looks out at the beginnings of the Humber River. The Humber River gurgles up from cool springs near the base of the Niagara Escarpment in Dufferin and Simcoe Counties and the Town of Caledon. The river then meanders for 126 km across the Oak Ridges Moraine and the Peel Plain to its mouth at Lake Ontario. The Carrying Place Trail was also known as the Humber Portage.



After a 45-minute hike, everyone was ready for some holiday goodies from Reesor's Farm Market along with the Apple and Cherry Cider from Heartwood Farm & Cidery.



Students and adults shared their impressions from the afternoon:

"It's interesting that the Group of Seven painted landscapes with no animals or people in them."

"I really felt the connection to the land in the art. And then it was cool to actually go out onto the real land."

“It hit me how siloed high school courses are (e.g. French, physics, math) and how we lose our connection to the land. We need to reconnect to the land through art and experiencing our local forests.”

“I was struck by how the artists used color to evoke connection to the land.”

“I really enjoyed the diversity of the art and paintings. This reflects the diversity in nature. As a farmer, I connected to the diversity of life I’m encouraging in healthy soil.”

“I enjoyed watching people’s reactions to the art.”

“It opened our eyes to new ways of seeing things. I saw stories of nature portrayed in art.”

“I think every child and adult should be able to experience this.”

Everyone went home with a copy of the [Dream](#) book, by Susan V. Bosak, to start making Dream Stars and EcoArt as we prepare for the [7-Generation Bioregional Earth Summit](#) in the new year.

Happy Holidays everyone, from the GTB!