

Tom Thomson's last painting for sale at Heffel auction

Heffel auction also includes pair of million-dollar paintings by Lawren Harris

BY JOHN MACKIE, VANCOUVER SUN OCTOBER 28, 2015



David Heffel (left) holds Tom Thomson's *After The Storm*, along with Lawren Harris's *Winter Land and Mountain and Glacier* beside Robert Heffel (in back), all part of the upcoming Heffel auction.

Photograph by: Mark van Manen, PNG

Art historian Joan Murray spent four decades putting together a *Catalogue Raisonné* of every known work by Tom Thomson.

The online catalogue includes 591 oil paintings, listed in chronological order. The last entry is *After The Storm*, a small oil-on-panel sketch Thomson executed in the spring of 1917.

"Conjecture is it may be his last painting," said Robert Heffel, who runs the Heffel auction house with his brother David.

The painting is a blur of energy, with a vivid green landscape beneath a grey-blue sky. Ninety-eight years after it was painted, it still looks fresh and exciting. And on Nov. 26, it is going up for sale at the Heffel Auction of Fine Canadian Art in Toronto.

It will be on view this weekend in a preview at the Heffel Gallery at 2247 Granville St. It is one of 156 lots in the Nov. 26 auction, which has an estimate of \$10 million to \$15 million.

Thomson drowned in Canoe Lake, Ont. on July 8, 1917, a month before he would have turned 40. He only completed 35 paintings the year he died, and they are cherished by collectors.

“His finest and most sought-after work is 1917,” said Heffel. “He’s at the peak of his artistic career.”

The essay in the Heffel catalogue was done by Charles Hill, the former curator of Canadian Art at the National Gallery of Canada.

“The last spring of Thomson’s life saw him paint some of the finest paintings in his all-too-brief career,” Hill writes. “His sketches from that spring have a crispness and freshness, the light is clear and sharp, and they were painted with increasing energy.”

The Thomson painting carries an estimate of \$500,000 to \$700,000.

But it isn’t the highest estimate in the sale, which belongs to the Lawren Harris painting *Winter Landscape*, a large oil-on-canvas that is estimated at \$1.2 million to \$1.6 million.

Winter Landscape is a classic Canadian landscape of trees covered in a fresh snowfall. And it has a dramatic impact, partly because it is four feet tall and four feet wide.

Most of the Harris paintings that have been sold at auction in recent years are much smaller. *Winter Landscape* looks like the kind of thing you’d find in a museum.

Heffel just returned from the opening of a Lawren Harris exhibition, *The Idea of North*, that was co-curated by movie star Steve Martin at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles.

The opening was a star-studded affair, done in concert with a fundraiser called the Gala in the Garden.

“There were lots of movie stars,” Heffel relates. “My wife kept hitting me. ‘Do you realize who you just walked by?’ I was ‘No.’ ‘You just walked right by Julia Roberts!’”

"I literally almost bumped into her."

Idea of North is something of a greatest hits exhibition, bringing together key works such as North Shore Lake Superior, Mt. Lefroy and Mount Thule, Bylot Island.

Heffel expects it to raise Harris's profile immensely in the U.S., where he is largely unknown. And he is already fielding enquiries from American collectors about Winter Landscape and another Harris painting in the Nov. 26 auction, Mountain and Glacier (estimated at \$1 million to \$1.5 million).

"One would think the Hammer Museum exhibition of Lawren Harris would have a very positive impact on his market," said Heffel.

"I think of Harris as one of North America's most important 20th Century painters. These paintings still represent really good value, especially when you think of the Canadian dollar being 25 per cent off in the U.S."

This is the 20th anniversary of the first Heffel auction, which was held Nov. 9, 1995 at the Wall Centre ballroom in Vancouver.

"Our goal was to do a million-dollar sale within the first five years of doing auctions," he recalls.

"And at our first sale in 1995 the room was completely packed, and we did a million-dollar auction that first sale."

The Heffel auction took off in tandem with a dramatic rise in value of Canadian art.

"We sold Emily Carr's War Canoes, Alert Bay for a million dollars in 2000," said Heffel.

"That was only the second painting in Canada to break the million-dollar mark. (The year) 2000 was really the beginning of the great Canadian art boom, and I guess the international art boom as well.

"The market has just grown and grown since then. Our biggest sale was a \$23-million sale in 2007."

The Heffels now do two live auctions annually (Vancouver in the spring, Toronto in the fall), along with monthly online auctions. They split the live auctions in two, with Fine Canadian Art in the evening and Post-War and Contemporary in the afternoon.

In recent years, they have only sold Canadian art at the live auctions, but this November they are going to sell a lithograph by American Roy Lichtenstein and a sculpture by Britain's Barbara Hepworth.

The reasoning is that many of the Canadian artists they were selling (such as Jean Paul Riopelle) didn't have a specific Canadian appeal. They worked and sold internationally. Clients also bought international art, so it made sense to sell it. And the Heffels were already selling international art online.

"We tried to get consignments of international artists, but our price target we were looking for was \$100,000 and above," said Heffel. "We did take things under \$100,000 if we thought they were really important pieces."

The Lichtenstein lithograph Modern Room is estimated at \$60,000 to \$80,000, and Hepworth's Three Forms (Three Horizontal Curves) is estimated at \$200,000 to \$300,000.

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HEFFEL AUCTION PREVIEW

2247 Granville St., Vancouver

Saturday to Tuesday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Free

www.heffel.ca