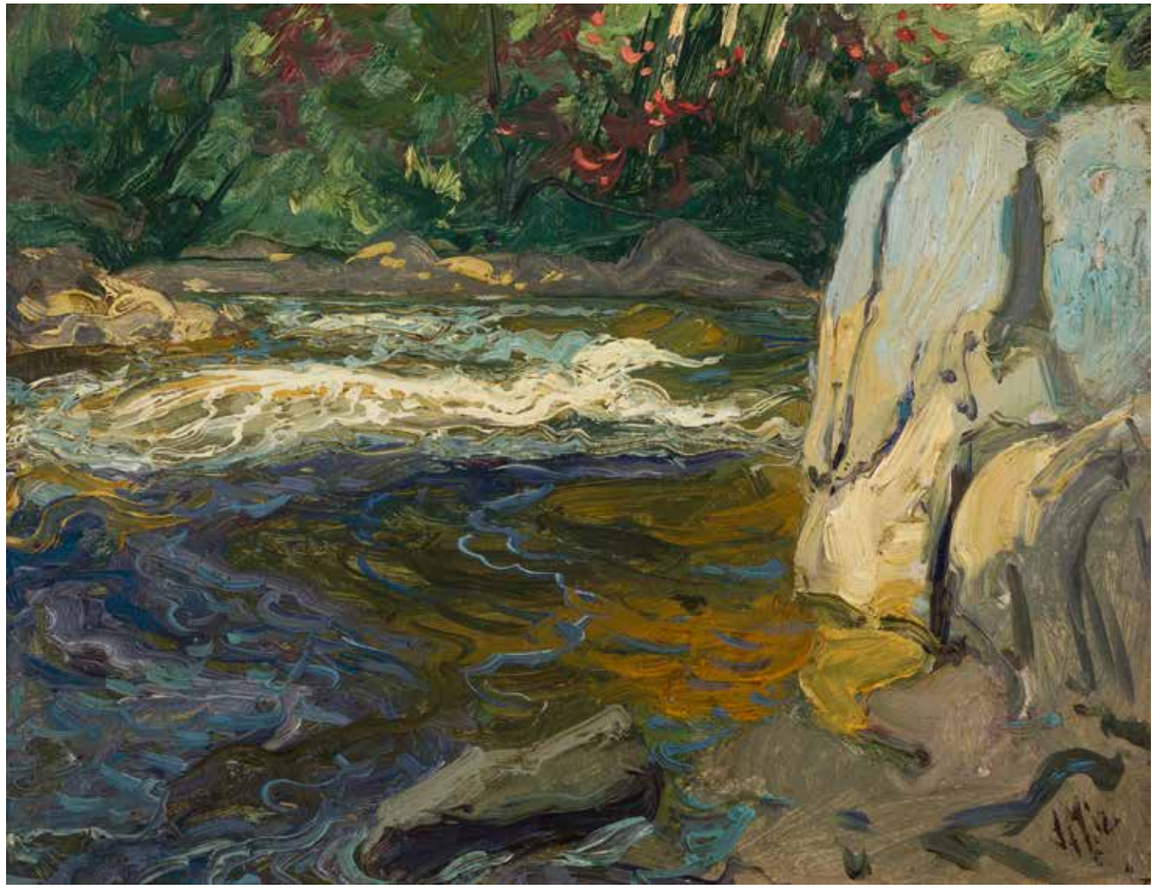


103 James Edward Hervey (J.E.H.) MacDonald

ALC CGP G7 OSA RCA 1873 – 1932

Magnetawan River Rapids

oil on board, signed and dated 1912 and on verso titled *Song of the Rapid (Study)* on a label and inscribed #698A and 7
7 × 9 in, 17.8 × 22.9 cm

PROVENANCE

Florence Alicia Grasset Gates (Mrs. George F. Hagarty), likely owner until 1939
Beatrice Hagarty (Mrs. Percy Robertson), Toronto, until 1962
Anne Grasset Hagarty (Mrs. Samuel Casey Wood), Toronto, until circa 1965
Allan Hagarty Wood, Toronto, by 1965
By descent to a Private Estate, Toronto
Private Collection, Toronto

LITERATURE

E. R. Hunter, *J.E.H. MacDonald: A Biography & Catalogue of His Work*, 1940, the related canvases *A Rapid in the North* and *The Song of the Rapid* listed page 48
Nancy Robertson, *J.E.H. MacDonald, R.C.A., 1873 – 1932*, Art Gallery of Toronto, 1965, pages 7 – 8, reproduced page 46, and the related 1913 canvas *A Rapid in the North* reproduced page 20
Paul Duval, *The Tangled Garden: The Art of J.E.H. MacDonald*, 1978, pages 46 – 47, a related 1912 sketch titled *Thomson's Rapids, Magnetawan River* reproduced page 32, its related 1913 canvas *Song of the Rapids* reproduced page 33 and both works listed unpaginated
Robert Stacey, ed. "J.E.H. MacDonald, 'Scandinavian Art,' " *Northward Journal*, no. 18/19, 1980, pages 17 – 18

EXHIBITED

Art Galleries of the Public Reference Library, Toronto, *First Exhibition of Little Pictures by Canadian Artists*, February 26 – March 22, 1913, possibly catalogue #218, titled as *Rapid, Magnetawan River*
Art Gallery of Toronto, *J.E.H. MacDonald, RCA, 1873 – 1932*, November 13 – December 12, 1965, traveling to the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, January 7 – February 6, 1966, catalogue #53

HAVING MADE A career in the graphic arts in Toronto and London, J.E.H. MacDonald first exhibited paintings in the spring of 1908, small landscapes of High Park near his home in west Toronto and the Humber River. In the summer of 1911, he painted on Georgian Bay. Two years before he had first traveled to Burks Falls in Muskoka, where his wife's aunt, Esther Prior, lived. There he painted a small, vertical oil sketch of a rapid on the Magnetawan River and exhibited the canvas *Clearing after Rain, Magnetawan River, Ontario* (collection of the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton, 1984.04) in the 1910 exhibition of the Ontario Society of Artists.

MacDonald gave up his job at the design firm Grip Ltd. in December 1911 to work freelance, thus enabling him to devote more time to painting, and in the spring or summer of 1912, MacDonald returned to Burks Falls. He painted a sawmill on nearby Lake Cecebe (collection of the National Gallery of Canada, acc. no. 4741) and some rapids on the Magnetawan River (*Spring Rapids*, National Gallery of Canada, acc. no 4740), identified in a sketch in the McMichael Canadian Art Collection as *Thomson's Rapids* (acc. no. 1981.38), however, not after Tom Thomson, as the latter had never painted on the Magnetawan.

The McMichael sketch and *Magnetawan River Rapids* (our painting) were worked up into two canvases included in the *Exhibition of Paintings by J.W. Beatty, Wm. Brymner, W.H. Clapp, Maurice Cullen, Clarence A. Gagnon, E. Wyly Grier, Lawren Harris, Charles W. Jefferys, and J.E.H. MacDonald* shown at the MacDowell Club in New York in March 1913, where they were titled *A Rapid in the North* and *A Canadian Rapid*. The latter was retitled *The Song of the Rapid* when exhibited at the Ontario Society of Artists exhibition in Toronto in April 1913. E.R. Hunter confused the two very similar canvases in his 1940 catalogue of MacDonald's paintings. Hence the error on the typed label on the back of the sketch being offered here, an error corrected by Nancy Robertson (later Dillow) in 1965. *A Rapid in the North* is in the collection of the Art Gallery of Hamilton, a gift of the artist's family (acc. no. 74.87.2) and *The Song of the Rapid* is in the Thomson Collection at the Art Gallery of Ontario (acc. no. 103852).

In *A Rapid in the North*, painted from our oil sketch *Magnetawan River Rapids*, MacDonald abandoned the more open composition of the other sketches. A prominent rock on the right frames the rapid, breaking the flow of the water, forcing the stream to the left and leaving a calm pool at its base. The intimacy of the composition is enhanced by the background screen of trees, and the overall linear rhythm creates a superbly decorative effect.

In January 1913, MacDonald and fellow artist Lawren Harris traveled to Buffalo to see an exhibition of contemporary



J.E.H. MacDonald painting in Algoma, circa 1918 – 1919
Photo: National Gallery of Canada

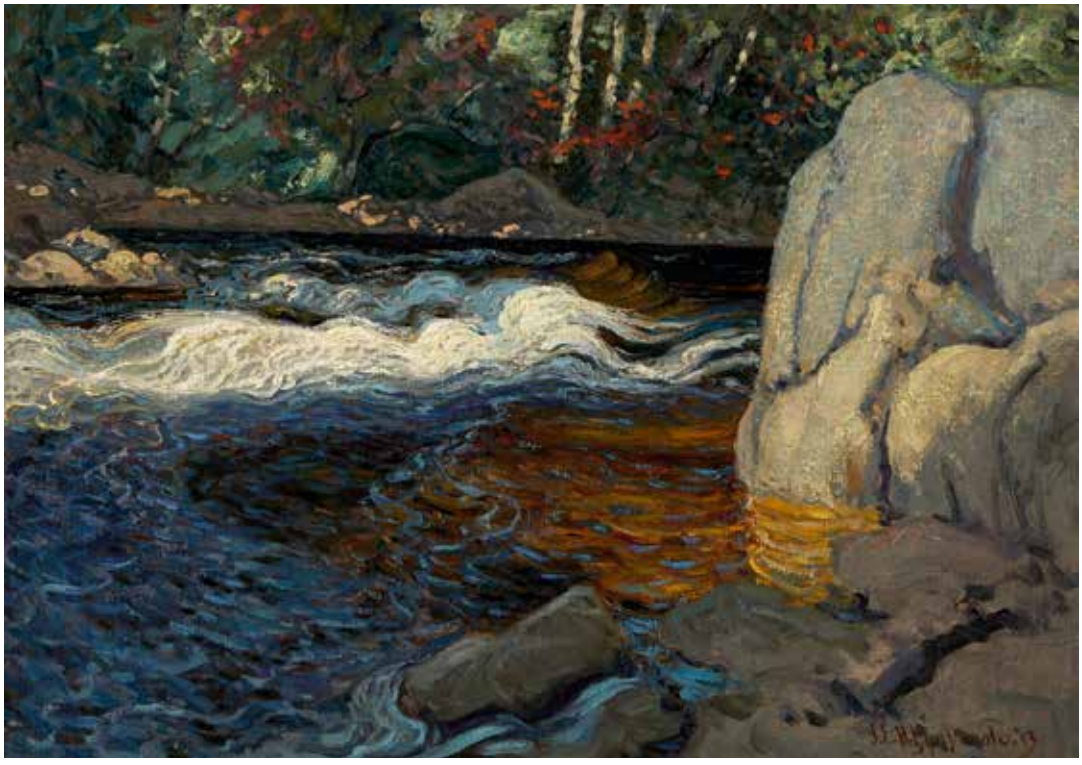
Scandinavian art, an experience that has long been seen as key to the development of both artists' work. MacDonald famously lectured on their visit in 1931. Harris and MacDonald were most struck by the paintings of the Swedish artist Gustaf Fjaestad.

> [T]hose two Canadian innocents abroad … found his work perhaps the most attractive of all. It was more definitely stylized than that of most of the painters. … The flow and ripple of water were beautifully painted by him, and shaded trees and stony rapids, and mottled rocks, and spotted birch trunks.

Yet MacDonald was already arranging his compositions in a decorative and intimate manner, as evidenced by this oil sketch. His exposure to the Scandinavian exhibition confirmed a direction MacDonald had already embarked on, though it would mark a major turning point for Harris.

Nancy Robertson admiringly wrote of our sketch:

> Suggestions of what he [MacDonald] could achieve can be detected in sketches and paintings as early as 1912 and 1913 …. The sketch (No. 53) for *A Rapid in the North* (No. 11) has much of the decisive, economic vigour of an Algoma sketch while the final painting itself and the companion picture *Song of the Rapid* (No. 10) are logical predecessors of *The Little Fall* (No. 30) or *Leaves in the Brook* (No. 31) of 1919.



JAMES EDWARD HERVEY (J.E.H.) MACDONALD
A Rapid in the North
oil on canvas, 1913
20 ¼ × 28 ⅜ in, 51.4 × 72.1 cm
Collection of the Art Gallery of Hamilton, 74.87.2.
Gift of the MacDonald Family, 1974
Photo: Mike Lalich, 2008

Not for sale with this lot

And Paul Duval acutely observed of the two sketches for *A Rapid in the North* and *The Song of the Rapid*:

> They are close-up studies, vibrating with crisp, stabbing brush strokes that trace the foaming passage of the rapids…. For some years the artist repeatedly tackled the difficult pictorial task of expressing such an elusive theme, and the two Magnetawan River compositions were only the first of those canvases of rushing water which led to such masterpieces as *Leaves in the Brook*; *Falls, Montreal River*; *The Wild River*; and *Algoma Waterfall*.

Robertson identified the first owner of this sketch as Mrs. George F. Hagarty, and subsequently Mr. and Mrs. Percy Robertson, information most likely obtained from the owner of the sketch in 1965. But it is possible that the painting may have been first acquired by the artist Mrs. Percy Robertson, née Beatrice Hagarty. On October 5, 1914, A.Y. Jackson wrote to MacDonald from Canoe Lake in Algonquin Park: "Art is raging round here now, no less than five O.S.A. exhibitors on the job. Varley, Lismer, Tom and a Miss Beatrice Hagarty that was… now Mrs. Robertson."[1] Beatrice Hagarty married Percy Robertson September 27, 1914, and they spent their honeymoon at Canoe Lake.

Boasting historic provenance, *Magnetawan River Rapids* represents a rare opportunity to acquire an on-site sketch directly related to MacDonald's early canvas *A Rapid in the North*.

We thank Charles C. Hill, former curator of Canadian art from 1980 to 2014 at the National Gallery of Canada, for contributing the above essay. Hill is the author of *The Group of Seven: Art for a Nation*, among other publications.

1. A.Y. Jackson, Canoe Lake, to J.E.H. MacDonald, Toronto, October 5, 1914, J.E.H. MacDonald fonds, Library & Archives Canada, Ottawa.

ESTIMATE: $100,000 – 150,000