



118 Alfred Joseph (A.J.) Casson

CGP CSPWC G7 OC POSA PRCA 1898 – 1992

Autumn on the York River

oil on canvas, signed and on verso signed, titled on the artist's label and inscribed *Near Bancroft* on the Roberts Gallery label and *58 London Club* on a label, 1959
36 × 45 in, 91.4 × 114.3 cm

PROVENANCE

Roberts Gallery, Toronto

Acquired from the above by Alex S. Graydon of Labatt's Ltd., London, Ontario, June 19, 1959

The London Club, London, Ontario

Gardner Galleries Auction, May 26, 1996, lot 400, reproduced front cover

Acquired from the above by a Private Collection, Ontario then Washington

LITERATURE

Paul Duval, *A.J. Casson*, Roberts Gallery, 1975, reproduced page 140

Paul Duval, *A.J. Casson, His Life and Works: A Tribute*, 1980, reproduced page 205

EXHIBITED

Roberts Gallery, Toronto, *A.J. Casson*, March 1959

“THAT’S A GOOD CANVAS” was A.J. Casson’s succinct judgment of *Autumn on the York River* (1959), a canvas whose elemental drama conveys the burst of creative energy that fueled his first solo show.¹ Though he was widely exhibited and collected by leading art institutions for decades, the celebrated Group of Seven member was not represented by a one-person show until after his retirement as vice-president of the graphic design firm Sampson-Matthews Ltd. in January 1958. Casson’s solo debut at Roberts Gallery in March 1959 presented more than 60 works, including 35 canvases, of which this painting is one of the finest and largest examples.²

The bold brushwork and citrus palette of *Autumn on the York River* represent something of a homecoming for Casson, whose restless experimentation led him to explore increasingly flat and desaturated areas of colour, culminating in the introduction of “cubist” accents.³ In *Autumn on the York River*, the growing linearity and subtly overlapping planes of Casson’s landscapes of the 1940s and early 1950s give way to a more generous painterly treatment reminiscent of works produced during his association with the Group of Seven. Casson had joined the storied band of “rebels” in 1926 as the Group’s youngest member.⁴ Apprenticing to Franklin Carmichael as a commercial artist at Rous & Mann Ltd. had led to joint sketching trips to the outskirts of Toronto as well as Casson’s initial contact with other future Group members at the Arts and Letters Club in 1920. A 1928 painting expedition to the north shore of Lake Superior accompanied by Carmichael, Lawren Harris and A.Y. Jackson was an important stepping stone to more adventurous explorations of northern and eastern Ontario.⁵

Autumn on the York River depicts the densely forested hills north of Bancroft. The titular waterway running through its centre has its source in Algonquin Park, an area closely connected with the genesis of the Group of Seven through excursions that Tom Thomson and Jackson undertook in the 1910s. In subsequent decades, the cottage of Casson’s employer Charles Matthews on Canoe Lake would be another draw to this part of eastern Ontario.⁶ Casson’s innovative application of silkscreen printing in his day job at Matthews’s firm—notably, the influential Sampson-Matthews print program (1942–1963) that partnered with the National Gallery of Canada—undoubtedly contributed to the flattened planes in his 1940s canvases.⁷ In *Autumn on the York River*, Casson achieves a rare balance between the elegant economy of his design work and the flair for elemental dynamism that he inherited from Thomson and Jackson.

Purchased directly from Casson’s inaugural 1959 solo show by Alex S. Graydon of Labatt’s Ltd., this work was acquired by the historic London Club. One of Canada’s oldest private members’ associations, the London Club has operated in the eponymous southwestern Ontario city since 1880 as a convivial hub for networking akin to Toronto’s Arts and Letters Club. It was the creative ferment of the latter that initially brought Casson into the artistic orbit of Harris, whose Lake Superior canvases display a deepening commitment to abstraction that would encourage Casson’s modernist forays. However, the lush greens and loamy earth tones of Casson’s landscapes stand apart from the otherworldly blues of Harris’s landscapes.⁸ Kanien’kehá:ka curator Wahsontio Cross fruitfully compares Casson’s chthonic “respect for the land” with the values expressed by the art of contemporary Anishinaabe artist Michael Belmore.⁹ Casson’s celebration of Ontario landscapes is fittingly memorialized by the toponyms Casson Township, near Thessalon; Casson Peak, located in the artist’s beloved La Cloche Hills on the north shore of Lake Huron; as well as Casson Lake in the district of Sudbury, whose scenic waters the artist painted in 1976.¹⁰

We thank Adam Lauder for contributing the above essay. Lauder is an art historian based in Toronto and an adjunct professor at the Ontario College of Art and Design.

1. A.J. Casson quoted in Ted Herriott, *Sunday Morning with Cass: Conversations with A.J. Casson* (Purpleville Publishing, 1993), 126.
2. Paul Duval, *A.J. Casson* (Roberts Gallery, 1975), 133.
3. Christopher E. Jackson, *A.J. Casson: An Artist’s Life* (McMichael Canadian Art Collection, 1998), 46.
4. Ann Davis, “The Wembley Controversy in Canadian Art,” in *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art*, ed. John O’Brian and Peter White (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007), 124.
5. See A.J. Casson, “A.J. Casson in Conversation,” in *A.J. Casson* (Art Gallery of Windsor, 1978), exhibition catalogue, iii.
6. Herriott, *Sunday Morning with Cass*, 73–74.
7. See A.J. Casson, “The Possibilities of Silk Screen Reproduction,” *Canadian Art* 7, no. 1 (1949): 12–14; Joyce Zemans, “Sampson-Matthews and the NGC: The Post-War Years,” *Journal of Canadian Art History* 21, no. 1/2 (2000): 96–139.
8. See Barry E. Morrison, *A.J. Casson: Retrospective* (McMaster University Art Gallery, 1971), exhibition catalogue, n.p.
9. Wahsontio Cross, “Confluences and Tributaries: Michael Belmore and A.J. Casson,” in *Michael Belmore and A.J. Casson: Nkweshkdaadiingak Miinwaa Bakeziibiisan / Confluences and Tributaries* (Ottawa Art Gallery, 2018), exhibition catalogue, 9.
10. See Herriott, *Sunday Morning with Cass*, 122; Roger Matuz, “A.J. Casson: Painter,” in *Contemporary Canadian Artists* (Gale Canada, 1997), 99; Joan Murray, “Introduction: The Art of A.J. Casson,” in *A.J. Casson* (Art Gallery of Windsor, 1978), 13; Morrison, *A.J. Casson*, n.p.

ESTIMATE: \$200,000 – 300,000