

## 132 Thomas John (Tom) Thomson

OSA 1877 – 1917

### Daydreaming (Portrait of Thoreau MacDonald)

oil on board, on verso certified by Thoreau MacDonald,

circa 1914 – 1915

7 ½ x 11 ¾ in, 19.1 x 29.5 cm

#### PROVENANCE

Acquired directly from the Artist by Thoreau MacDonald

Estate of Thoreau MacDonald

Empire Auctions, Montreal, October 18, 1989, lot 493

Nancy Poole’s Studio, Toronto, 1990

Private Collection, Vancouver

Private Collection, British Columbia

#### EXHIBITED

Nancy Poole’s Studio, Toronto, November 10 – 22, 1990

TOM THOMSON’S CHARMING painting of a daydreaming boy depicts a thoughtful youngster in a recumbent pose, lying in the shade on a grass-covered hill with a bright view of farmland in the distance, wearing a hat with a wide brim. There seems to be something red at his neck, a neckerchief perhaps.<sup>1</sup> The boy looks at the painter studying him with a glance composed partly of curiosity, partly of sensitivity to the world around him.

The painting is of the young Thoreau MacDonald, only child of J.E.H. MacDonald, destined already at this young age (he would be about 13)<sup>2</sup> to be an artist, a boy said to be intelligent, with a gravity beyond his years. As an artist, young Thoreau’s seriousness would certainly have been shaped in part by his colour-blindness. As a result, when he did become adept at art and design, he worked in black-and-white lifelong as an illustrator, graphic artist and designer.

But this painting is of Thoreau when he was young. Thomson would have felt an affinity with this curious young person, who, like Thomson himself, was finding his way in the world. Thoreau’s father, J.E.H. MacDonald, was the senior artist in the Design section at Toronto’s Grip Ltd., where Thomson had begun to work in 1909, and it was through this job that Thomson would take part in his earliest sketching trips, including his first visit to Algonquin Park. Although MacDonald was only four years older than Thomson, in his role as a senior artist he provided guidance and encouragement to Thomson, who had received the bare minimum in artistic instruction and relied upon colleagues and magazines to learn about the movements gaining momentum in art circles. Thomson regarded MacDonald as a trusted mentor and friend.

MacDonald lived in Thornhill, a rural area situated along the northern border of Toronto, in a two-storey white house with a garden. Occasionally, MacDonald had a rush job calling for over-night work and Thomson went to Thornhill to help him. He would have met MacDonald’s son on this and other, social visits.

In these years, Thomson too was finding his feet as an artist. Coached by MacDonald, he had been told to paint out of doors.

He would have carried sketch equipment in case something struck him as paintable. What better subject than Thoreau, the older man’s son, he might have thought. As a result, Thomson not only painted this sketch but gave the youngster other sketches painted on early painting trips to Algonquin Park, such as *Northern Lake* of 1912 (private collection).<sup>3</sup>

Thomson would probably not have given *Daydreaming* to Thoreau immediately after he painted it but taken it home to add a few final touches. The light-blue colouring on the face, which gives it more detail, may be one of those later improvements, caused less by an interest on Thomson’s part in painting an accurate portrait in situ than in capturing Thoreau’s position on the grass. Thomson’s interest in rendering his subject’s pose and dress rather than in painting a formal portrait is clarified by the verso of the oil sketch. Here, Thomson sketched in pencil the boy’s face but this version is more detailed, more fully realized. Thomson likely drew the sketch first in pencil, then flipped the panel to the other side and painted *Daydreaming*.

Thomson did not paint many figure paintings. The figurative artists were in another section of Grip Ltd. Although he and MacDonald were in the Design section, this sketch demonstrates Thomson’s ease in tackling the figurative subject. The composition has an easy grace, proof of Thomson’s adaptability and skill. *Daydreaming* is something of a surprise in the body of his work. Thomson’s true love was landscape, what MacDonald Sr. called “the breadth of the Four Seasons,” and even in an endearing subject like this one, the suggestion of farmland in the background, the house and distant silo indicate that nature would be Thomson’s primary inspiration.

We thank Joan Murray, former curator of Canadian art and chief curator (1972) at the Art Gallery of Ontario, for contributing the above essay. Murray helped to bring the paintings of Tom Thomson to world attention through a series of exhibitions and seven books, including a biography (the most recent is *A Treasury of Tom Thomson*). Murray is the author of the *Tom Thomson Catalogue Raisonné*.

This work is included in the Tom Thomson catalogue raisonné, researched and written by Murray, as catalogue #1913.39: <https://www.tomthomsoncatalogue.org/catalogue/entry.php?id=165>.

1. What he wears resembles the outfit of a member of a Scouts troop in Canada, although his membership in such a group is unknown.
2. MacDonald wrote on the verso: “Drawing and oil by Tom Thomson looks about 13 or 14 / Thoreau MacDonald.”
3. Thomson gave the young man this sketch around 1915 or 1916, as Thoreau wrote on the back, likely on a visit by Thoreau to the shack behind the Studio Building on Severn Street where Thomson lived and worked at the time.

**ESTIMATE: \$200,000 – 300,000**

