



133 Thomas John (Tom) Thomson

OSA 1877 – 1917

Moccasin Flower or Orchids, Algonquin Park

oil on board, stamped with the estate stamp and on verso dated spring 1916, inscribed TT 44 and stamped with the Estate stamp 10 ½ x 8 ½ in, 26.7 x 21.6 cm

PROVENANCE

Estate of the Artist
 Acquired from the above by Laing Galleries, Toronto, 1941
 G. Blair Laing, Toronto
 By descent to Andrea Hines, Nova Scotia, 1991
 Laing Galleries, Toronto
 Private Collection, Toronto, 2001
 Private Collection, 2006

LITERATURE

J. Russell Harper, *Painting in Canada: A History*, 1966, reproduced page 282; and in the second edition, 1977, reproduced page 363
 David P. Silcox and Harold Town, *Tom Thomson: The Silence and the Storm*, 1977, page 108, reproduced page 109
 Joan Murray, *Flowers: J.E.H. MacDonald, Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven*, 2002, titled as *Orchids, Algonquin Park*, reproduced pages 104 and 105
 David P. Silcox, *The Group of Seven and Tom Thomson*, 2003, page 50, reproduced page 53

MacDonald's *The Tangled Garden*, one of the best known and possibly most popular of Canadian paintings, has become a kind of Judas goat leading us to think that many Canadian artists have made floral works. Few have. One could wish that Thomson, like Morandi, had set to painting still life in his isolation, for the flowers Thomson placed directly before his palette in shallow space—objects freed from the amphitheatre of the sky or the towering dark of pine—made him flatten out the picture plane, draw it nearer to the eye. He perceived his surface as an area for pattern-making; ephemeral light was no longer of prime concern. He gave nothing to the perfume of delicacy of his flowers, no hostage to sentimentality, but transcribed them simply as broad strokes of colour which impart a toughness of design sometimes missing in his harder themes of rock and bracken. In these few pictures Thomson proved he was able to move to the particular from the panoramic, from air and sun to its product, with ease and sureness of touch.

—HAROLD TOWN

ESSAY BY JOAN MURRAY

AFTER SPENDING THE winter of 1915 and 1916 in Toronto, Tom Thomson arrived in Algonquin Park in the middle of March. In April or early May, Thomson was visited there by Lawren Harris, his cousin Chester Harris and Dr. James MacCallum. The four men would have talked about the contemporary scene in Canadian art, and Thomson would have been brought up to date with what had happened since he left. Among the topics they would have discussed would have been the reception received by J.E.H. MacDonald's *The Tangled Garden* at the Ontario Society of Artists exhibition in March to April of that year; it had been



JAMES EDWARD HERVEY (J.E.H.) MACDONALD

The Tangled Garden

oil on beaverboard, 1916
 47 ¾ x 60 in, 121.4 x 152.4 cm
 Collection of the National Gallery of Canada
 Gift of W.M. Southam, F.N. Southam, and H.S. Southam, 1937,
 in memory of their brother Richard Southam, 4291
 Photo: NGC

Not for sale with this lot

so savagely criticized by Hector Charlesworth in *Saturday Night* magazine that they must have been indignant. They also may have talked about Thomson's paintings of wildflowers, particularly his painting *Canadian Wildflowers*. It had been chosen by his friends (most likely Harris) as one of the works to represent Thomson at the Provincial Exhibition in Halifax the previous September. That spring, when Thomson essayed the theme of wildflowers again but in a vertical format, he may have had MacDonald's painting in mind when he painted the central moccasin flower and the leaf which branches overhead. The distinctive pink, inflated, slipper-like lip and petal-shaped flower and green leaf, of course, face in the opposite direction, but the branching leaf seems to echo MacDonald's curvaceous sunflower stem. As in Thomson's wildflower paintings of the previous year, the flowers are pressed close against the edge of the picture plane so that they seem to grow in an imaginary out-of-doors immediately in front of the viewer. Thomson set them against a dynamic black background to give them a more intense yet tremulous colour. That the flowers may seem more subdued in colour than in his other pictures of flowers could be due to his having painted them in moonlight, as a lost label on the verso of the frame suggested uncertainly ("moon" and "light" both had question marks).

Thomson may have intended *Moccasin Flower* as an unpretentious exercise, but the luscious image and striking design that he crisply conveyed has set the work apart in his oeuvre as one of the unique expressions of his art. It is proof that Thomson's study of colour and design was yielding better and better results. More than that, for many of its admirers, its quality of fragility and



THIS PAGE: TOM THOMSON
Marguerites, Wood Lilies and Vetch
 oil on panel, 1915
 8 7/16 x 10 9/16 in, 21.4 x 26.8 cm
 Collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario, 2563
 Gift from the Albert H. Robson Memorial
 Subscription Fund, 1941
 Photo: AGO

Not for sale with this lot

OPPOSITE PAGE: TOM THOMSON
Sketch for "The West Wind"
 oil on panel, 1916
 8 7/16 x 10 9/16 in, 21.4 x 26.8 cm
 Collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario, L69.49
 Gift from the J.S. McLean Collection, Toronto, 1969,
 Donated by the Ontario Heritage Foundation, 1988
 Photo: AGO

Not for sale with this lot



tenderness, its arresting glamour, is a metaphor for life on earth, triggering a visual experience transposed to the cerebral memory forever. Thomson managed to achieve a more than successful result in this painting of wildflowers. The flowers have an almost vibratory effect, which he achieved by employing bright colour—pink, yellows and orange among whites, while he rendered the leaves with longer brush-strokes. The painting, a really convincing picture of flowers, would have given him hope for the future, a future which included his rewriting the genre of landscape painting up to that time with works such as *The Jack Pine*, among other great examples of his art. The painting *Moccasin Flower* is an ode to Algonquin Park and the inspiration he found in the sanctity of the north. As Harold Town once wrote, flowers “visit the sick room of the painter’s frustration and cheer him up.”

Moccasin Flower is an icon of Canadian art, a national treasure.

We thank Joan Murray, author of the Tom Thomson catalogue raisonné and former chief curator at the Art Gallery of Ontario, for contributing the above essay.

This work is included in the Tom Thomson catalogue raisonné, researched and written by Joan Murray, as # 1916.68 and can be viewed at <https://www.tomthomsoncatalogue.org/catalogue/entry.php?id=510>.

ESSAY BY ROSS KING

TOM THOMSON’S FRIEND A.Y. Jackson once described Algonquin Provincial Park as a place “hacked up...fire-swept, dammed by both man and beaver, and overrun with wolves.”¹ This ruggedness was a large part of the appeal for Thomson and Jackson, and

many of their works exploited the harsh allure of wind-wrought pines, frigid lakes and baleful skies. Yet the northern landscape was also, as Jackson noted, a place of gentler motifs of rare and elegant beauty—such as Thomson shows in this gorgeous painting of wildflowers on the forest floor.

Spring was one of Thomson’s favourite seasons in which to paint. When he arrived in Algonquin in March 1916, snow still lay on the ground, as revealed by more than a dozen works he painted over the space of the following weeks. Then, as the snow and ice retreated, the spring ephemerals emerged—woodland flowers that pushed through the soil and bloomed in the short space of time between the spring melt and the summer leaf-out. Thomson had painted flowers at least once before. In the summer of 1915, attracted by the bright bursts of colour and the sinuous lines of stems and leaves, he created a series of small panels of summer flowers, such as *Marguerites, Wood Lilies and Vetch* (collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario). In this 1916 painting he concentrated instead on delicate, early spring plants such as the trout lily and the moccasin flower, which stop photosynthesizing and disappear from the forest floor when summer arrives and the tree canopy blocks out the sunlight.

The trout lily with its nodding head of yellow flowers, along with the pentagonal white blooms of hedge bindweed, was a common enough sight in Algonquin Provincial Park. However, the moccasin flower, or lady’s slipper, was much less so. The moccasin flower is an orchid, a member of what a nineteenth-century American botanist called the “high-bred race, fastidious in habits, sensitive as to abodes.”² Moccasin flowers grow only under certain special conditions: as Catharine Parr Traill noted in *Canadian Wild Flowers*, first published in 1868, they were found in the

damp soil on the edges of forest streams and in boggy ground such as tamarack swamps. Moccasin flowers were a rare sight even in the 1860s, and Traill lamented that a time would come when “these rare productions of our soil will disappear from among us.”³ In fact, by the turn of the twentieth century, conservation efforts were needed to stop gardeners and plant-hunters from uprooting them, and therefore, because they rarely survived transplanting, driving them to extinction.

The rare and endangered status of the moccasin flower gave it special connotations, and it became a metaphor for anything native, wild and scarce that was threatened by intruders. Throughout the nineteenth century, the plight of the moccasin flower was compared by poets and conservationists to that of Native Americans, who, as Traill noted as early as the 1850s, were “dying out fast thanks to the white man.”⁴ Or as Susan Fennimore Cooper wrote around the same time, a “bold and hardy race” of foreign invaders was “driving away the prettier natives”—both moccasin flowers and the aboriginal inhabitants of the Americas. The “vanishing orchid” motif went side-by-side with the “vanishing Indian” theme so prevalent in Canadian and American writing.⁵

How much Thomson knew of these connotations is an open question. On one level he was no doubt simply drawn to this rare specimen, a pink-tinged orchid with its shoe-shaped pouch and large, creased leaves. As both a nature lover and trained designer he had a brilliant eye for patterns in nature—what Arthur Lismer (who on several occasions painted with him in Algonquin Provincial Park) called an “uncanny sensitivity” for “simple sights.”⁶ The moccasin flower with its distinctive shape and colour would have made an arresting sight. But Thomson was a visual poet,

acutely attentive to the emotions invoked by a landscape, as a work he created that same spring—the sketch for *The West Wind*, done during a sudden storm—amply demonstrates. In the spring of 1916, with the war raging in Europe and friends like Jackson at the front, Thomson must have been struck by the poignancy of such fragile and vulnerable beauty surviving for a brief time in the midst of the ruggedness of the boreal forest.

We thank Ross King, author of *Defiant Spirits: The Modernist Revolution of the Group of Seven*, for contributing the above essay.

1. A.Y. Jackson, foreword, *Catalogue of an Exhibition of Paintings by the Late Tom Thomson* (Montreal: The Arts Club, 1919).
2. A.B. Hervey, *Beautiful Wild Flowers of America* (Boston, 1882), 101.
3. Catharine Parr Traill and Agnes FitzGibbon, illus., *Canadian Wild Flowers*, 4th ed. (Montreal, 1895; first published 1868), 61. Conservation efforts are described in Richard Primack, “Science and Serendipity: The Pink Lady’s Slipper Project,” *Arnoldia*, Spring 1996, 9–14.
4. Catharine Parr Traill, *The Canadian Settler’s Guide*, 7th ed. (Toronto: Office of the Toronto Times, 1857), 217.
5. For an exploration of these issues, see Kyhl D. Lyndgaard, “Prologue: Taking Off the Moccasin Flower and Putting on the Lady’s Slipper,” in *Captivity Literature and the Environment: Nineteenth-century American Cross-cultural Collaborations* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 1–11; Cooper quoted on p. 4.
6. Arthur Lismer, “Tom Thomson (1877 – 1917), Canadian Painter,” *Educational Record of the Province of Quebec* 80 (1954): 171.

ESTIMATE: \$1,000,000 – 1,500,000