



Defiant Spirits: The Modernist Revolution of the Group of Seven

Ross King

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Beginning in 1912, *Defiant Spirits* traces the artistic development of Tom Thomson and the future members of the Group of Seven, Franklin Carmichael, Lawren Harris, A. Y. Jackson, Franz Johnston, Arthur Lismer, J. E. H. MacDonald, and Frederick Varley, over a dozen years in Canadian history. Working in an eclectic and sometimes controversial blend of modernist styles, they produced what an English critic celebrated in the 1920s as the “most vital group of paintings” of the 20th century. Inspired by Cézanne, Van Gogh and other modernist artists, they tried to interpret the Ontario landscape in light of the strategies of the international avant-garde. Based after 1914 in the purpose-built Studio Building for Canadian Art, the young artists embarked on what Lawren Harris called “an all-engrossing adventure”: travelling north into the Canadian Shield and forging a style of painting appropriate to what they regarded as the unique features of Canada’s northern landscape.

Sumptuously illustrated, rigorously researched and drawn from archival documents and letters, *Defiant Spirits* constitutes a “group biography,” reconstructing the men’s aspirations, frustrations and achievements. It details not only the lives of Tom Thomson and the members of the Group of Seven but also the political and social history of Canada during a time when art exhibitions were venues for debates about Canadian national identity and cultural worth.

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