

# Revisiting the Group of Seven

## HOOKING THE DETAILS

BY SUSAN GABY-TROTZ/PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANNA GABY-TROTZ

**A**s August slips into September, Canada starts to tip toward the cold months. The light is a thicker yellow. While nature still retains some of the greens of summer, it focuses on ripening, and dresses in regal golds and reds. It is no wonder, then, that many Canadians view the Group of Seven paintings as an expression of our psyche and an iconic interpretation of the vastness and colours of our wilderness.

My recent project is based on my response to two Group of Seven paintings to express how, as I age, I see things that I haven't had the time or the inclination to notice. By using modern technology, I am able to zoom in and out of images of these paintings to see both the details and the overall: from the representational to the abstract, the macro to the micro.

Tom Thomson (1877-1917) was the inspiration for the founding of the Group of Seven in 1920. Thomson became part of our family saga over the last century when Tom gave my grandfather two sketches of the Algonquin wilderness in Northern Ontario. At that time, my grandfather, J.C. McRuer, was in a sanitarium in Huntsville recovering from a bout of tuberculosis. After returning from a lengthy solo painting trip in Algonquin Park, Ontario, Tom Thomson threw several sketches (oil paint on pallet boards) from his canoe onto the dock. He told my grandfather to take two paintings because no one would want them. They are now worth hundreds of thousands of dollars and are part of the McMichael Gallery Collection in Kleinburg, Ontario.

The seven members (with a few later additions) were Franklin Carmichael, Lawren Harris, A.Y. Jackson, Frank Johnston, Arthur Lismer, J.E.H. MacDonald, and Frederick Varley. Emily Carr, who painted at the same time, was

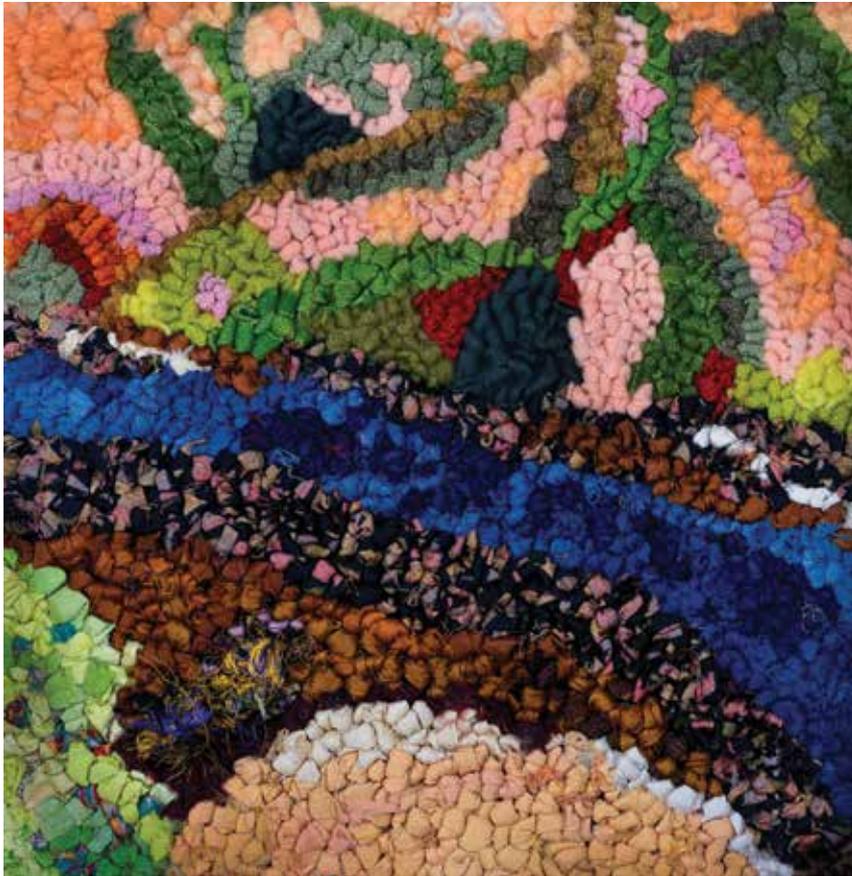
an adjunct but never an official member. My connection to this group is even more personal as I have spent decades of my life living in the Group of Seven's landscapes, and within walking distance of the largest art collections of the Group of Seven at the McMichael Gallery and the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto.

I have found that my relationship with these paintings has changed over the decades. As a child, I loved staring at my grandfather's Tom Thomson sketches: an apricot sunset and a mysteriously deep forest scene. Later in my life, when my twin daughters were little, we frequented the McMichael Gallery, especially when we were stuck indoors on snowy winter days. My four-year-olds loved running through the large galleries, and we saw the Group of Seven's paintings flashing by. (Incidentally, they grew up to be artists.) Recently, in my re-examination of life, decade by decade, I had time to see the paintings with a fresh perspective. What I once saw as a vibrant landscape, I now saw as the artists using shape, texture, and color in innovative ways for their time. Indeed, they still can move the modern viewer.

On a recent visit to the AGO (Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto), I stopped in front of a large painting, *Forest Wilderness* by J.E.H. MacDonald, a Group of Seven member. Instead of looking at the overall beauty of the painting, my



**Forest Wilderness #1**, 18"x 24" linen burlap, hand cut wool, yarn, silk, and synthetic fibres on linen burlap. Detailed and altered from J.E.H. McDonald's Forest Wilderness, 1921. Designed and hooked by Susan Gaby-Trotz, Toronto, Ontario, 2019.



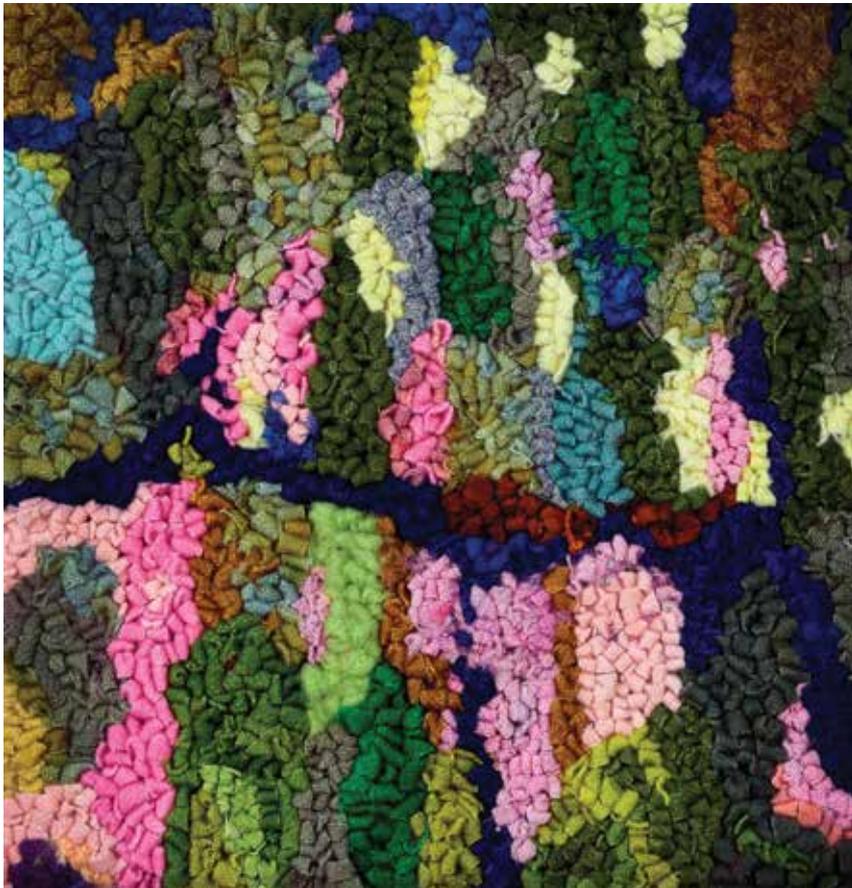
**Forest Wilderness #2**, 10" x 10", hand cut wool, yarn, silk, and synthetic fibres on linen burlap. Detailed and altered from J.E. H. McDonald's *Forest Wilderness*, 1921. Designed and hooked by Susan Gaby-Trotz, Toronto, Ontario, 2019.

eye focused on one small section of the painting. I was struck by the complex shapes, the brush strokes, and the unusual juxtaposition of colour. I took a picture of this corner. I played around further, enlarging and cropping sections of this image. I found, as I blew up small pieces of my image, the landscape of the forest wilderness took on more abstract shapes and were quite beautiful as new images.

With some trepidation, a new rug hooking project was born. Deconstructing iconic paintings to find my own interpretation has its own unique set of challenges. I wanted to do the artist's work justice, but as well, I wanted the work to embody my own creativity and vision. I found that as I did more pieces from different paintings, the original artist's style still could be seen, but my vision and passion took over.

I started my *Forest Wilderness #1-#4* pieces using a colour palette similar to the corner of McDonald's painting. McDonald's palette was quite different from my usual choices, but I soon found that he guided, but did not dictate, my own interior landscape and language. His varied brush strokes translated well into different sizes of hand cut wool strips in my pieces. I used some sari silks in places to mirror the reflective nature of paint. I also used tangled embroidery threads to add texture and colour.

After finishing J.E.H. McDonald's *Forest Wilderness #1*, I photographed my rug. I manipulated this image and found sections of my piece to zoom in on to create new images. I then worked on three little pieces (*Forest Wilderness #2-4*) based on my #1 piece. I enjoyed these further abstractions. To my surprise, I found that the smaller pieces were more difficult to work on because every stitch was important and required its own careful decision. I



**Forest Wilderness #3**, 10" x 10", hand cut wool, yarn, silk, and synthetic fibres on linen burlap. Detailed and altered from J.E.H. McDonald's *Forest Wilderness*. Designed and hooked by Susan Gaby-Trotz, Toronto, Ontario, 2019.



**Forest Wilderness #4**, 10" x 10", hand cut wool, yarn, silk, and synthetic fibres on linen burlap. Detailed and altered from J.E.H. McDonald's Forest Wilderness. Designed and hooked by Susan Gaby-Trotz, Toronto, Ontario, 2019.

created movement by juxtaposing shades of colors and shapes.

I moved on to an examination of A.J. Casson's *Little Island*, 1965. This particular painting has grand architectural shapes and a limited color palette of greens, greys, and yellows. By manipulating my photograph of the painting, I found my own view to reimagine as a hooked rug. Just as A.J. Casson translated the wilderness into new ways of representing landscape, I used my rug hooking aesthetic to inform my own view.

I decided that a long skinny rug would give the feeling of the vertical movement of the reflection in the water to the tree at the height of land. I marked out the shapes of the foundation of my rug on linen burlap and proceeded from there. I maintained the cool colours of the mood while abstracting the shapes of the original painting. The overall result of my piece is a melding of my ideas and A.J. Casson's.

It's always exciting to imagine a new project, but it is even more interesting to reflect on the journey of the creation. I intend to do a few more pieces in this Group of Seven project and then move on to a project of the graffiti in the lane ways of Toronto: its own kind of city wilderness. **RHM**

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**Little Island #1**, 14" x 30", hand cut wool, yarn, silk, and synthetic fibres on linen burlap. Detailed and altered from A.J. Casson's *Little Island* 1965. Designed and hooked by Susan Gaby-Trotz, Toronto, Ontario, 2019.