



133 Franklin Carmichael

CSPWC G7 OSA RCA 1890 – 1945

Georgian Bay

oil on board, signed and dated 1919 and
on verso titled on the Laing Galleries label
20 ¾ x 22 ½ in, 52.7 x 57.2 cm

PROVENANCE

Laing Galleries, Toronto
The Art Emporium, Vancouver
Acquired from the above by Mr. and Mrs. Gordon T. Southam,
Vancouver, June 26, 1974
By descent to the present Private Collection, Vancouver

LITERATURE

Catherine M. Mastin, *Portrait of a Spiritualist: Franklin Carmichael and the National Gallery of Canada Collection*, National Gallery of Canada, 2001, unpaginated
David Silcox, *The Group of Seven and Tom Thomson*, 2003, reproduced page 218
Ross King, *Defiant Spirits: The Modernist Revolution of the Group of Seven*, 2010, page 154

GEORGIAN BAY IS a key subject for the artists who would form the Group of Seven, particularly in the years predating their first official exhibition. One reason for this is that Dr. James MacCallum, an essential patron of the Group and co-financier of the Studio Building in Toronto, owned Island 158 in Georgian Bay's Go Home Bay, which he later renamed West Wind Island. In 1911 he built a large cottage there and commissioned J.E.H. MacDonald, Arthur Lismer and Tom Thomson to produce murals for the interior. Many Group works depict this region, and it was where Carmichael and his new wife Ada were invited by MacCallum to spend their honeymoon in 1916. Due to his full-time employment as a commercial artist, and the welcome new demands of domesticity, this stay in Georgian Bay and other trips to the area were the most remote of Carmichael's sketching trips until the Group sketching trips to the north shore of Lake Superior that he participated in during the mid-1920s.

Communicating the immensity and ruggedness of Georgian Bay—which early French colonial explorers named “La Mer Douce” (The Freshwater Sea)—has always been a special test for artists. Here Carmichael rises to that challenge. A great spire of cloud helps to express the tremendous presence of nature in the bay, and the noticeable dropping of the horizon line serves to amplify this sense of scale. This choice instills two effects—one is a feeling of awe at the enormity of this towering wall of cloud, and the other is a sense of spirit from the unbounded vault of sky beyond.

An important element of context to understand when engaging with this painting was Carmichael's relationship to his peers. He was the youngest of the artists who formed the original Group of Seven, and was not yet 30 when this work was completed. He was 8 years younger than A.Y. Jackson, 17 years younger than MacDonald, the eldest of the Group, and had Thomson still been alive, Carmichael would have been 13 years his junior. It is easy to assume that a lesser artist without his fixity of purpose would have their aesthetic sense of self overwhelmed by the imposing presence of these senior artists, but Carmichael was able to find

and cultivate for himself an artistic identity that is one of the most distinctive of the period. He did, however, find inspiration in his friends.

He was especially moved by Thomson, and how art and life became inseparable in him. Of the many artists inspired by Thomson's work, Carmichael may have known him the best. The two worked together as designers at Grip Ltd. and Rous & Mann Ltd., and shared a studio space in the Studio Building over the fall and winter of 1914 to 1915. Carmichael wrote that they enjoyed their interactions, and “gab[bed] away like so many geese.” They also played music together, as both were accomplished amateur musicians who played multiple instruments. Both would correspond during Thomson's time in Algonquin Park until his untimely death there in 1917. Thomson's influence can be felt here in the Impressionist palette of the Art Nouveau-edged clouds, and in the foreground of the scene with the near shore at the bottom right. An important element of many Thomson compositions, it amplifies the sense of distance as well as instilling the forbidding and humbling sense that the expanse is to be traversed.

Humility before nature's magnitude and its ability to render the human circumstance as fragile in comparison is an important element of this work and of Carmichael's work in general. Stemming from this, one aspect that Carmichael is able to express with more feeling and authenticity than perhaps any other artist is a sense of a grand scale in the landscape. Carmichael's work often captures in its moulding of forms a palpable sense of volume, mass, distance and size, resulting in a powerful and primordial presence. His most successful executions of this, as seen here, leave the viewer with a sense of awe in their contemplation of the landscape.

One final influence on Carmichael and his companions that should be noted is the nineteenth-century literary movement of Transcendentalism. Carmichael found the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson especially resonant, with Catherine M. Mastin, executive director of the Art Gallery of Windsor and granddaughter of the artist, stating that Emerson's *Essays and Other Writings* “was among the most thumbed through books in his library.” Emerson stressed many ideals in his work, such as individualism, self-reliance, the presence of the Divine in all things, and the necessity of the creation of new traditions for new situations and for new countries. This work seems as though directly inspired by Emerson's essay “The Poet,” which says in its closing paragraphs, “Wherever the blue heaven is hung by clouds... wherever is danger, and awe, and love,—there is Beauty, plenteous as rain...”

This magnificent painting comes with an illustrious provenance, having first been sold by Blair Laing of Laing Galleries, Toronto. The painting was acquired from The Art Emporium, Vancouver, 45 years ago by Mr. and Mrs. Gordon T. Southam, Vancouver, and has remained in the family by descent since that time. Mrs. Jean Southam was the daughter of H.R. MacMillan, founder of the Canadian forest company MacMillan Bloedel Limited, and Gordon T. Southam was the grandson of William Southam, founder of the Canadian newspaper chain of Southam Inc.

ESTIMATE: \$300,000 – 500,000

Franklin Carmichael (May 4, 1890 – October 24, 1945) was a Canadian artist and member of the Group of Seven. Though he was primarily famous for his use of watercolours, he also used oil paints, charcoal and other mediums to capture the Ontario landscapes of which he was fond. Besides his work as a painter, he worked as a designer and illustrator, creating promotional brochures, advertisements in newspapers and magazines, and stylizing books.