

Thomson: painter and legend



THE M^CMICHAEL



CANADIAN COLLECTION



And over the years the legend has grown by reports of canoe parties having seen Thomson.

"I raised my voice and called and called," one woman wrote about a sunset encounter, "but there was no response, for even as we looked the canoe and its paddler, without warning or sound, vanished into nothingness and on the undisturbed lake were only our lonely selves and the shrieking of a loon."

Thomson has been described as Canada's most important artist. Whatever the ages may decide about his work, there is little doubt that Thomson's art was a major influence on his friends and colleagues who formed the Group of Seven three years after his death and whose work to this day is a major force in Canadian art.

In the three years when Thomson's art was at its peak, he achieved an astonishing body of work. His large canvases were few but his small oil panels numbered into the hundreds.

Of these, the largest single body—more than 60—are a part of the McMichael Canadian Collection at Kleinburg, just north of Toronto. His work hangs among that of his friends and colleagues of the Group of Seven and other Canadian masters such as Milne, Carr, Gagnon and the magnificent art of Canada's Indian and Inuit.

The work of these artists are dramatically blended with the surrounding hills and the glacial valley of the Humber River. Century-old hand-hewn timbers, native granite and huge expanses of window area, intimately link more than 30 galleries with the landscape that provided the Canadian masters with their inspiration. In the last years of his life, the Collection was the home of A. Y. Jackson, a founding member of the group and friend of Thomson.

Among the thousand and more treasures of the Collection, the small oil panel with the unassuming title, "Islands, Canoe Lake" will, for many, always have a special meaning.

le somewhat out of place environment. He was an man but capable of elings toward his art, ich sometimes left him-articulate until he an artistic goal—cap- exact color, an exact scene. Some of the most insights into Thomson ded by the quick pen of mer, the wit of the Group ho captured Thomson in sketches.

n was last seen alive on on of July 8, 1917, a dull th a brisk northeasterly was paddling south on e to fish, he had said, Gill Lake or Tea Lake s life and work captured ations of Canadians, his death was to raise or generations.

etails vary from witness but in the main there is with the following facts:

n upturned canoe was an American cottager, tcher, and his sister. e upturned canoe was y Bletcher.

e canoe, Thomson's, was search for Thomson was friends.

omson's body was found islands which he had nted and was towed to a e and, still lying in the s tethered to a tree to coroner.

e coroner, located more

than 100 miles away, had not arrived, and Thomson's body was examined by a doctor vacationing in Canoe Lake. Sixteen or 17 turns of fishing line were found around the left ankle. There was a wound on the left temple. Thomson was buried later that day in a small graveyard near the west shore of the lake which contained other graves.

July 18: an undertaker arrived with orders from Thomson's family to exhume the body and ship it home. Unassisted, he completed his grisly task between 8.00 p.m. and midnight.

July 19: a casket said to contain the artist's body was shipped to Owen Sound for a family service.

July 21: the casket was buried in the family plot at Leith, Ontario. The church record notes: "Talented and with many friends and no enemies—a mystery."

Few of Thomson's friends could accept that the skilled canoeist, woodsman and swimmer could have fallen from his canoe and drowned on a reasonably calm day and within a few 100 yards of shore. No one could explain the wound nor the fishing cord around his ankle.

The night before his death, Thomson had argued with Martin Bletcher about the progress of World War I. Bletcher, who apparently spent long periods in Canada to evade serving in the U.S. forces, may also have had an interest in Winnie Traynor, a Canoe Lake resident to whom

Thomson may have been engaged.

Theories about his death, for these and other reasons, have been many. Nor have the years lessened interest in the mystery. One theory, widely held, is that Thomson was murdered. Another, that he was struck by lightning—not so uncommon an accident as might be supposed. Other theories include the views of a mystic that

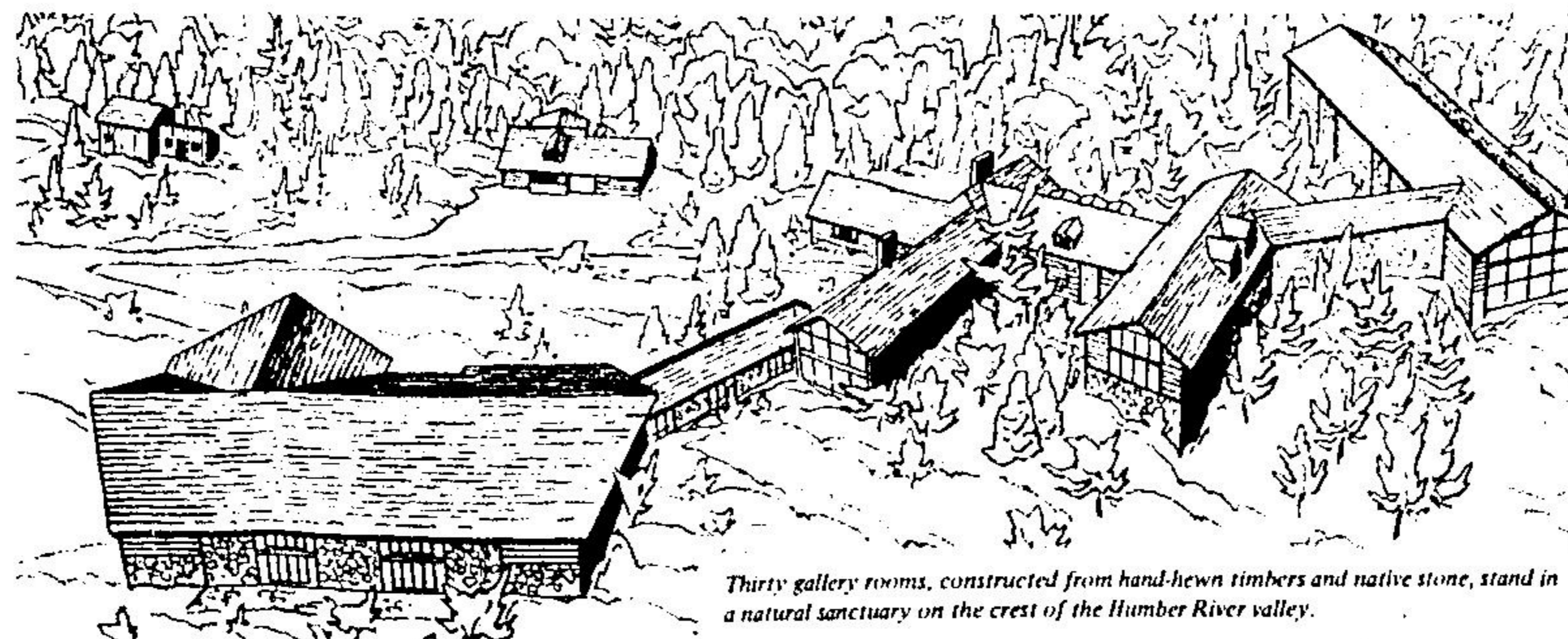
he faked his own death and travelled to the U.S. to join the armed forces after being unable to join in Canada.

Over the years there was also a belief that Thomson's body had never been removed from the Park and the doubts were strong. In 1956 a small group led by Toronto judge William T. Little—one of the best known of Thomson's biographers

and investigators—located the gravesite in a pine grove on the west shore of Canoe Lake. In it they found a skeleton. The skull showed a wound.

Forensic scientists, however, said the body was that of an Indian or a half-breed, but many questions were left unanswered and doubts about the final resting place of the artist remain to this day.

McMichael Canadian Collection housed in village of Kleinburg



Thirty gallery rooms, constructed from hand-hewn timbers and native stone, stand in a natural sanctuary on the crest of the Humber River valley.

The grandeur of nature and the creativity of people are combined dramatically at the McMichael Canadian Collection in the village of Kleinburg.

The McMichael Canadian Collection displays some 700 works by Canada's most famous artists, the historic Group of Seven and their contemporaries.

Closely associated with the Group of Seven was Tom Thomson who has emerged as the most legendary figure in Canadian art. Thomson knew the northern wilderness intimately and portrayed it in paint with an unrivalled spontaneity and splendour.

The McMichael Canadian Collection exhibits the largest permanent display of Thomson's art to be seen anywhere. The studio-shack in which Thomson created many of his masterpieces has been preserved on the gallery grounds.