

MYSTERY SOLVED

Team solves decades-old riddle behind painting by Group of Seven member and York Region resident

BY LISA QUEEN
Staff Writer

In the end, it all came down to a sunflower reaching skyward for the sun's rays.

Funny that something so seemingly trivial could unlock the key to a mystery surrounding a Canadian cultural icon.

The sunflower is part of The Tangled Garden, perhaps the best-known painting by artist James Edward Hervey (J.E.H.) MacDonald, a founding member of the Group of Seven.

While it had long been suspected the artist captured the famous scene in 1916 at his Thornhill property at 121 Centre St., known as Four Elms, it had never been proven.

There were also rumours he could have relied on a setting up north for inspiration. As a member of the Group of Seven, Mr. MacDonald travelled to places such as Georgian Bay and Algonquin Park to capture scenes on canvas.

"I thought J.E.H. MacDonald was so famous that somebody, some art student, would have written his Ph.D. on (The Tangled Garden) but we couldn't find it. It was just painstaking going through it all," said Susan MacDonald, a relative of the artist who is part of a committee researching the history of the painting and restoring the property.

David Waverman is also part of the team.

He is a senior landscape architect with Stantec Consulting, which was hired by the City of Vaughan to work

on the project, which is costing \$190,000. The city acquired the property from Mr. MacDonald's son, Thoreau MacDonald, in 1974.

Mr. Waverman helped recognize the significance of the sunflower.

After team members had finally managed to establish The Tangled Garden had been painted at Four Elms, they believed the actual spot was up against the west side of house because slats of a building can be seen through the artwork's tangle of flowers.

But Mr. Waverman realized there is no way the sunflower in the painting would be straining northward to the sky because sunflowers track the sun from east to west.

That meant the team's perspective had to be shifted 90 degrees.

After searching Thoreau MacDonald's journals and sketches of the property, the team determined there had been a horse barn on the property which burned down in the 1930s. A closer look at the painting revealed hinges for a barn door, Mr. Waverman said.

The city hired an archeology consulting firm, which quickly found the footings of the barn. Posts recently erected stand as a symbolic outline of the structure.

It then became obvious the rise of the land leading up to the old barn was the scene Mr. MacDonald had captured in The Tangled Garden 16 years before his death in 1932.

When the team started off its research about five years ago, it believed it could pinpoint the loca-



STAFF PHOTO/STEVE SOMERVILLE

Susan MacDonald and David Waverman are part of a team restoring the property of Group of Seven painter J.E.H. MacDonald in Thornhill. They've also been part of an effort to figure out where he captured the scene in his most famous painting, The Tangled Garden. The posts represent where a barn once stood and where the sunflower in the painting was located.

tion of the garden relatively easily.

Reality proved much more challenging.

"What we thought would have taken a couple of months took a couple of years," Mr. Waverman said.

But the work was worth the effort, Ms MacDonald said.

"I was relieved (we found the right location) because we didn't want to do the research improperly. The eyes of the art world were on us." She remembers visiting Four Elms often as a girl, tagging along with her now-deceased father Jack MacDonald, who helped care for Thoreau MacDonald and tended to the property.

It had operated for years as a fully working farm and apple orchard and often played host to members of the Group of Seven who dropped by to paint or chat with other artists.

"All the Group of Seven were here at one time or another, for conversations or for painting," said Ms MacDonald, who is the grand-niece of Thoreau MacDonald, J.E.H. MacDonald's only child.

"When I came here, I originally found it was from another time, like it was forgotten in time. He (Thoreau) lived like a pioneer."

Also a noted artist, Thoreau Mac-

Donald's black and white sketches of rural Vaughan are considered a valuable record of country life.

But even as late as the 1960s and 70s, he had no running water in his home. Jack MacDonald's suggestions that he install a toilet indoors fell on deaf ears.

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Thoreau MacDonald insisted on coal to heat the home long after that was the norm. Eventually, Jack MacDonald had to buy coal from the one distant supplier still in business.

Thoreau MacDonald's only modern convenience was a transistor radio.

Thoreau MacDonald lived in home until 1980 and died May 30 1989 at the age of 89.

The property was designated as a historical home under the Ontario

Heritage Act in 1983 but was permitted to go derelict for about 20 years before the steering committee became involved.

Today, a restoration project has meant the grounds have been cleaned up while the home has running water and has been revitalized.

This weekend, volunteers are planting flowers in an effort to recreate the famous garden.

Ms MacDonald also runs an annual art show and sale out of the house in September as part of the Thornhill Village Festival.

"I'm always coming up with new ideas for the property," said Ms MacDonald, who shows off the restorations with enthusiasm.

To view The Tangled Garden, search for the title on the web site <http://cybermuseum.gallery.ca>

Another York Region Group of Seven connection is through member Fred Varley, who lived and painted in Unionville for many years.

Today, a Town of Markham-owned art gallery in Unionville is named after him.

Ms MacDonald can be reached at fourelmsconsulting@hotmail.com



The Tangled Garden is perhaps the best-known piece by artist James Edward Hervey (J.E.H.) MacDonald, who lived in Thornhill when he painted it in 1916.



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