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From basement to auction: Owner says Thomson painting 'doesn't look like much'

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Glenna Gardiner holds a picture of her painting in Edmonton Alta, on March 28, 2018.

JASON FRANSON/UNDEFINED

Many of Tom Thomson's paintings hang in the hallowed halls of Canada's finest galleries, but until recently, one of his sketches was collecting dust among a pile of artworks in an Edmonton grandmother's basement.

Glenna Gardiner, a 71-year-old retired nurse, said she used to laugh off her late father's claims that the painting that has been in her family for some 80 years was created by Thomson, who is often considered the forefather to the Group of Seven.

The heirloom's supposed origins became a running joke between Gardiner and a longtime friend, who insisted the work was authentic, so she gave it to her as a gag gift for her birthday.

Her friend had the painting assessed by the Heffel Fine Art Auction House, where experts verified the attribution to Thomson and valued the sketch between \$125,000 to \$175,000 on the auction market.

Even with a six-figure pricetag, Gardiner said she doesn't see what all of the fuss is about.

"Have you seen the painting? It doesn't look like much," she said in a phone interview. "It never really took my fancy."

The oil painting of Algonquin Park's temperamental landscape was sketched by Thomson on location in 1913, according to Heffel vice-president Robert Heffel. Heffel said the roughly 18-by-25-centimetre sketch was later adapted onto a larger canvas in "Lake in Algonquin Park," a painting in the National Gallery of Canada's collection.

In "Sketch for Lake in Algonquin Park," Thomson sets the choppy waters of the lake against a backdrop of rolling hills, green foliage and a swirling blue and off-white sky.

The Canadian Conservation Institute determined that one of the white pigments used in the painting has only been found in works by Thomson and the Group of Seven, said Heffel, which strongly supports the attribution. But all one needs to do is see the painting in person to recognize Thomson's skillful hand, he added.

"Any time we have a Thomson consigned to one of our live auctions is a great day. Thomsons are very rare in the market because he passed away so young in 1917," he said, referring to the artist's untimely death in Algonquin Park at age 39.

"It's rare to find a Thomson with such great provenance that traces back directly to the artist."

Thomson gifted the sketch to the son of the Group of Seven's J.E.H. MacDonald in 1915, said Heffel, and the painting was later acquired by a reverend at Toronto's Emmanuel College, who in 1937 gave it to a fellow minister, Gardiner's father.

The painting hung in every house her father lived in, but Gardiner said his boasts about the work's illustrious origins were met with indulgent disbelief from family members.

"To have some painting that might be famous in the house was just beyond my comprehension, because we weren't well off, and that sounded like something someone else would have," she said. "It was just dad's Tom Thomson and we never corrected him.

"My girlfriend thinks my dad is just laughing at all the fun we're having with it."

Gardiner said she held on to the painting for its sentimental rather than aesthetic value, but neither she nor her father ever considered having its value assessed for auction.

"It had intrinsic value, just because someone thought enough of (my dad) to give that to him, not for what it was worth," she said.

Had she known Thomson was its true artist, Gardiner said she would have put more effort into maintaining the painting rather than stacking it in a pile of paintings in her basement.

"It was treated with care, but not a huge amount of respect," she said.

Heffel will be previewing the painting for the public as part of its spring auction in Calgary, Vancouver, Montreal and Toronto over April and May. A live auction will be held at the Design Exchange in Toronto on May 30.

In addition to helping out her son financially, Gardiner said she plans to spend some of her profits from the sale to take her friend on a Mediterranean cruise ship as a thank you for her role in selling the painting.

Despite expert authentication, Gardiner said she finds it hard to believe her father's claims about the Thomson painting have been "vindicated" after all these years.

"It really is a matter of pinching myself once in a while," she said. "It's hard to imagine I could be part of that in any way."

