



## March/April 2022 Newsletter

Dear Friend,

OPP Museum staff continue to work diligently on our Gallery renovations as we look forward to seeing many of you this summer when we resume in-person visits. It has been a challenging and exciting time at the Museum and we are striving to present a variety of interesting and engaging stories to promote a better understanding of the OPP, both with a contemporary and historic lens.



Left: Karin repairing a drug education display

Right: Chris put together a sneak peak of our “Life in the 1970s” display at GHQ- a fun flashback

Friends of The OPP Museum will be hosting their upcoming Annual General Meeting on May 18 from 4:30 – 6:00 pm. All Members are encouraged to attend to catch up and learn about the future direction of Friends’ endeavours.

We are still accepting 2022 renewals of memberships and are always happy to accept new Friends into the fold. Renewing and donating is easy! Please visit our newly re-designed website at <https://oppmuseumfriends.ca/product/friends-of-the-opp-museum-membership/> for more information. Every membership renewal and/or donation will be answered with a membership card or tax receipt, and with our deepest appreciation. Member benefits include informative newsletters, regular information updates by email, voting rights at the Annual General Meeting, invitations to exhibit openings and special events and more!

We thank you in advance for your ongoing commitment to helping support OPP heritage throughout the province!

Yours truly,

OPP Museum and Friends of The OPP Museum

Coming in May!

The 2<sup>nd</sup> annual Run with Friends will take place between May 11 to 31, 2022, and we have made 2022 an even bigger year! With the addition of our new ½ Marathon, joining our successful virtual 5k and 10k races, this is a great way for our Friends to support OPP Museum programming and enjoy some healthy exercise.



Many thanks to Matt Oliveira, Graphic Designer in the OPP's Corporate Communications and Strategy Management Bureau, for designing this year's medal inset.



### **Get Moving for a Cause!**

In 2021, over 130 participants completed 5k and 10k races between Wednesday May 12<sup>th</sup> and Monday May 31<sup>st</sup>. Participants, including Friends members, OPP frontline and civilian staff, helped to raise a total of \$4,500 in support of the Friends' future public programming and special events. In 2022, we expect to support several fall fairs, community events and the Mariposa Folk Festival. We also hope to welcome back our Museum tours that bring the OPP's history to life for hundreds of people annually. We could not provide these services to our communities without fundraisers such as the Run with Friends, so challenge your family, friends and co-workers!

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co-workers!

Registration is \$35 per entry for the 5k, 10k or 21k ½ Marathon. You will receive a fantastic finisher's medal and a \$25 tax receipt.

To learn more about Run with Friends head to: [www.oppmuseumfriends.ca](http://www.oppmuseumfriends.ca) or contact us at [support@oppmuseumfriends.ca](mailto:support@oppmuseumfriends.ca)

### **Don't forget to share your glory**

Send us your photos and videos- we would love to share them for future Run with Friends events.

Please email them to [support@oppmuseumfriends.ca](mailto:support@oppmuseumfriends.ca)

## **How an Art Legend Helped Solve Crime**

**By Allison Lawrence and Chris Johnstone**

Studying Canadian art at the National Gallery of Canada was an unlikely place for Inspector James L. Erskine to find himself in his role as the head of the OPP's new Anti-Rackets Squad, but that is nonetheless where he landed when he received a special request.

In November 1962, Erskine took on a case when J. Russell Harper, then Curator of Canadian Art at the National Gallery of Canada, asked the OPP to investigate a flood of Canadian forgeries of the works of several well-known artists, including the Group of Seven – a case that later came to be known as the Great Canadian Art Fraud.

Erskine's big break in the investigation, according to a May 1964, issue of Canadian Weekly, came when a ruckus broke out at the Toronto art-auction house, Ward-Price. Some in attendance at a sale questioned the authenticity of some Group of Seven works on offer. The scene led one purchaser of a work, purportedly by Group of Seven artist J.E.H. MacDonald, to take it to the Toronto Art Gallery (now the Art Gallery of Ontario), for authentication. When the purchase proved fake, the gallery informed Erskine, and he immediately seized the

paintings and records from Ward-Price.

These works proved to be the tip of the iceberg. While new technologies like x-ray, raking light and infrared could provide some clues, fraudsters were using sophisticated methods to deceive buyers and police. Inspector Erskine needed someone with intimate knowledge of the group to tell him whether or not artwork featuring signatures from the likes of Lawren Harris, J.E.H. MacDonald, Frank Johnston, Arthur Lismer, Fred Varley, Franklin Carmichael and A.Y. Jackson were worthy of the astronomical prices being fetched at auctions and in private sales across the country.



OPP Commissioner Harold Graham, A.J. Casson, Roy McMurtry (lawyer and future politician) and Inspector James Erskine were photographed in 1971 at an event honouring Casson for his contributions to the 1962-1964 art fraud investigation that came to be known as the "Great Canadian Art Fraud." (Accession # 2005.8.2)

### **The Expert Eye of A.J. Casson**

All of the Group of Seven members had passed away by that time-with the exception of A.J. Casson. Despite being one of the final members to join the group (replacing Frank Johnston in 1921), Casson had intimate knowledge of their styles, techniques, materials used and places where they had painted “en plein air” (a term used to describe the act of painting outdoors). The only unofficial group member who Casson had never met was Tom Thomson, who was highly influential to the collective, but had drowned before the Group was officially formed.

It wasn't long after meeting Franklin Carmichael that A.J. Casson was invited to the Arts and Letters Club where he met the artists that would soon form the Group of Seven. In October 1921, A.Y. Jackson and Lawren Harris – the wealthy and most eccentric member of the group – had paid for their own box car on the train in order to explore the north shore of Lake Superior for the very first time. The conductor couldn't stop in Rosspport, Ontario, but they convinced him to slow down to 40 kilometers per hour so they could toss out their paint supplies and take a leap into the unknown. Harris described the beauty of the area as “breathtaking” and “unlike anywhere else in Canada.” It wasn't until 1928 that A.J. Casson was able to see the area for himself, but it was a memory he would cherish for the rest of his life.

Not all of the now-famed artists were well received initially. Even at the height of their careers, they faced rejection with one critic comparing some of their artwork to “the contents of a drunkard's stomach.” In fact, some of Casson's fellow artists passed away before they ever saw a commercial market for their work.

Things began to change, however, and the group was finally getting the recognition they deserved. By the early 1960s when the OPP became involved in the investigation of these art sales, collectors, dealers and gallerists across the world were clamouring to get their hands on this increasingly valuable work.

In 1958, at the age of 60, Casson retired from his long-time career in the silkscreen printing industry to pursue painting full-time. As his fame and success grew, more and more collectors were reaching out to him for assistance in authenticating their Group of Seven works.

Wanting to speak for his friends that could no longer speak for themselves, Casson must have been relieved when the OPP reached out to him, asking for his help. With his intimate knowledge of the group and Inspector Erskine's access to state-of-the-art technologies, together they could bring justice to the scammers who were profiting off the Group of Seven's newfound fame.

With the combined efforts of Erskine and Casson, and National Gallery conservator Dr. Nathan Stolow, 91 paintings were confirmed as forgeries. The Ward-Price records showed that the fakes were sold on behalf of Leslie Lewis, who operated a studio gallery at the back of Ward-Price. Mr. Lewis had in turn obtained some of those works from another dealer, Neil Sharkey.

Further investigation led to three painters, all of whom had created the works for other purposes and did not know their paintings were being passed off as being from more prominent artists. The two dealers pleaded guilty and were jailed.

### **An Unlikely Duo**

This unlikely duo of officer and artist began under unique circumstances, but it resulted in a long-lasting and very special relationship between Casson and the OPP. In fact, Casson was made an official honorary member of the OPP as the organization's first ever Special Art Advisor, a role he spoke about with great pride. Apparently, he didn't leave home without his special OPP badge!

Casson's expertise proved to be invaluable. In one instance, for example, Casson knew at a glance that a painting, supposedly done by Franklin Carmichael, was not his work. This particular scammer may have been a talented painter, but had failed to do any background research on the artist. The painting was of the Rocky Mountains, and the furthest Franklin had traveled was to the North Shores of Lake Superior.

In another instance, technology was the key to uncover the fraud. As Tom Thomson had passed away in 1917, before the Group was officially formed, Casson couldn't say with

certainty whether or not the painting was real or a fake. But, the OPP was able to use new technologies to discover that the white paint contained titanium oxide – which wasn't used in paints until the 1930s.

Over the years, Casson and Erskine identified over 300 fraudulent works – valued at over \$100,000 at the time. With Group of Seven works now fetching up to \$11.5 million dollars, it would be hard to imagine how much those paintings would be worth today. Erskine went on to become the OPP's eighth Commissioner when he took on the role in 1982.

**A rare interview with Casson from 1978 can be found on YouTube, courtesy of CTV News Archive at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0TqItC-9Li4>**

### **This is Northwestern Ontario**

What most people who visit the Art Gallery of Ontario or McMichael Canadian Art Collection to admire the Group of Seven's paintings don't realize, is that many of these sublime landscapes can be found here in Ontario. Mountains soaring from deep, blue waters isn't something you expect to see east of the Rocky Mountains, but in fact, the north shore of Lake Superior was one of the most beloved areas visited by the Group. In fact, it could be argued that these landscapes influenced Lawren Harris' style of painting, which became more abstract as he journeyed throughout the area.

*We found that, at times, there were skies over the great Lake Superior which, in their singing expansiveness and sublimity, existed nowhere else in Canada. – Lawren Harris*

Many of our officers over the years have had the privilege of living and working among the stunning northern landscapes that have been immortalized in these now iconic paintings. Consider exploring some of these unforgettable landscapes that can be found right here in Ontario for yourself – and maybe take a paintbrush along just in case!

### **Ways to discover:**

1. By Road - Follow the road signs or download the app to follow the [Group of Seven Driving Tour](#). Along this route, you can find reproductions of the artist's work in front



of the real landscapes that inspired them. Take a break from driving to hike the 9 km Pic Island Overlook Trail and 1.5 km Rosspoint Coastal Trail, where you'll catch a glimpse of Quarry Island that inspired Lawren's 1921 work titled Rosspoint, Lake Superior. Don't forget to stop into the Marathon District Museum to hear stories and see photographs related to the Group of Seven.

2. By Land - Follow the [Group of Seven Trail](#) from Pukaskwa National Park to Neyes Provincial Park. While still within the park, check out Horseshoe Beach where one of A.Y. Jackson's most famous paintings was created.

Continue on the [Casques-Isles Hiking Trail](#) – rated one of the top 10 hiking trails in Canada. It begins in Terrace Bay at the 100 foot Aguasabon Falls and Gorge. The entire trail is 53 kms, but can be divided up into 11 sections for varying experience levels or length of stays.

3. By Water - One of the most inspiring ways to see the areas that inspired the Group of Seven's iconic paintings is by Sea Kayak. On a [7-day guided trip](#), you can travel from Jackfish to Hattie Cove, the gateway of Pukawaska National Park. Time permitting, this epic journey includes a hike up to the spot where Lawren Harris painted his famous 1926 painting, Pic Island.

Of note, a new book that chronicles Erskine's investigation is due out in October of 2022 titled *The Great Canadian Art Fraud Case* by Jon Dellandrea, a senior fellow at Massey College and chair emeritus of the Art Canada Institute and a Member of the Order of Canada. His articles on fakes and forgeries in Canadian art have appeared in the *Literary Review of Canada* and *Canada's History*.

**Calling all Volunteers!** The Friends are looking for volunteers to assist with our booth at the Mariposa Folk Festival on Saturday, July 9 and Sunday, July 10.

Enjoy a day of music and fun at Tudhope Park! Engage our community with information on the OPP Museum and Friends while enjoying the music of Blue Rodeo, Serena Ryder, The Strumbellas, Lennon Stella, JP Saxe, and many more.

For more information, please email [volunteers@oppmuseumfriends.ca](mailto:volunteers@oppmuseumfriends.ca)

**Covid-19 Update**

Though our gallery remains closed, we are now welcoming in-person donations as we prepare for re-opening in Summer 2022.

Please visit [www.opp.ca/museum](http://www.opp.ca/museum) for all updates!

**Happy Spring,**

**OPP Museum and Friends Newsletter Committee**