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## Newly Discovered and Never-Before-Displayed Oil Paintings by J.E.H. MacDonald Donated to the Vancouver Art Gallery

Following a remarkable history, 10 rare artworks will be made accessible to the public  
for the first time since their creation.



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**January 13, 2015, Vancouver, BC** – Today the Vancouver Art Gallery unveiled a major donation of newly discovered oil paintings by James Edward Hervey (J.E.H.) MacDonald (1873 – 1932)—modernist painter and founding member of the iconic Group of Seven. Buried in a backyard for over three decades—and unseen by the public for another four—this rare collection of 10 oil sketches has been donated to the Gallery by Toronto-based collectors Ephry and Melvin Merkur. These works will be presented as part of a larger exhibition in the fall of 2015.

Painted by J.E.H. MacDonald early in his career (c. 1910 to 1922), these artworks on paperboard include studies for MacDonald’s most iconic large-scale paintings, which are now part of important collections across Canada, including the National Gallery of Canada and Art Gallery of Ontario. The works include: *Sketch of Tangled Garden*, 1916, *Sketch of Cattle by the Creek*, 1918, *Sketch of Falls, Montreal River*, 1920, *Sketch of The Elements*, 1916, *Sketch of Leaves in the Brook*, 1919, *Sketch of Mist Fantasy, Northland*, 1922, *Sketch of The Wild River*, 1919, and two other oil sketches, *Untitled (Algoma)*, 1915 and *Untitled (Batchawana Rapids)*, 1919 that do not relate to a known larger work.

Together these oil sketches provide a strong overview of both MacDonald’s primary subject matter, depicting his love of the Canadian landscape—including gardens, rivers, rapids, forests—and his maturing style prior to and around the time of his involvement with the Group of Seven.

“We are thrilled to have received these extraordinary paintings that are accompanied by such an incredible story,” said Kathleen S. Bartels, the Vancouver Art Gallery’s Director. “We extend our sincere gratitude to the Merkur Family for this remarkable gesture of generosity. This donation adds much depth to the existing works by MacDonald in our collection and enriches the Gallery’s overall representation of the Group of Seven. It also sheds new light on some of the most cherished and acclaimed MacDonald paintings that are in public collections around the country.”

### **The Burial and Discovery of MacDonald’s Oil Sketches**

The story of these works is traced back to the 1930s, when J.E.H. MacDonald and his family lived in Thornhill, a village north of Toronto. In order to preserve and keep safe the works, MacDonald and his son Thoreau MacDonald wrapped a group of oil paintings in layers of cellophane and tar paper, placing them inside boxes which were then buried underground in the backyard of the family house. They remained buried for more than

thirty years until 1974, when Thoreau MacDonald revealed the existence of these artworks to his friend Max Merkur, a commercial high-rise developer and art collector in Toronto, who purchased all of the buried artworks.

Since the unearthing of these artworks, they have been kept within the Merkur Family for the past four decades, never exhibited anywhere or made known to the public. After Reta Merkur (Max Merkur's widow) passed away in 2012, their son Ephraim Merkur discovered the artworks in pristine condition, and Vancouver Art Gallery's Senior Curator and art historian Ian Thom identified them as the authentic works of J.E.H MacDonald.

"My brother, Mel, and I are thrilled that these fabulous works of art will be displayed for the public to enjoy. My Dad and Mom, who spent a lifetime expanding their collection of Canadian art, surely would be delighted as well," says Ephry Merkur. "Many thanks to Ian Thom for the tremendous work he put into researching this collection and to my dear friends Janet McNaught and Marvin Cohen for their hard work organizing this collection."

"Given its extremely unique nature, this gift marks the most significant historical gift the Gallery has ever received, next to the Emily Carr Trust," says Ian Thom, Senior Curator-Historical at the Vancouver Art Gallery. "The focus on MacDonald's early practice lends considerable insight into the transformation of his style from more traditional depictions of the landscape to the bold, brilliantly coloured landscapes he was known for as a member of the Group of Seven."

### **About J.E.H MacDonald and the Group of Seven**

J.E.H. MacDonald is celebrated for his landscape paintings that depict the rural Canadian settings of his Thornhill home, Georgian Bay, Algoma and the Rocky Mountains as well as for his dark, rich palette highlighted with bold, unadulterated applications of fiery colour.

Born in Durham, England, MacDonald first moved with his family to Hamilton, Ontario in 1887 where he attended evening classes at the Hamilton School of Art. In 1890 he moved to Toronto where he worked in commercial design for Grip Printing and Publishing Co., took classes at Central Ontario School of Art and Design with William Cruikshank, and became a member of the Toronto Arts Students League. Following a short stint in London, England working at Carlton Studio from 1903 to 1907, MacDonald returned to Toronto and exhibited paintings regularly at the Ontario Society of Artists and Canadian National Exhibition. He became a member of the Arts and Letters Club in 1911, where he often convened with A.Y. Jackson, Lawren Harris, Frank Johnston, Arthur Lismer, Franklin Carmichael and Frederick Varley—the other members of what would become known as the Group of Seven—and shortly thereafter began to paint full time.

The first Group of Seven exhibition took place at the Art Gallery of Toronto in 1920 and they exhibited extensively together, nationally and internationally, until 1932. The Group was committed to exploring the Canadian landscape, depicting the harsh wilderness and breaking with European painting traditions that tended to depict idealized landscapes. Today, the Group of Seven is among Canada's most well-known artists in history, symbolizing a distinct Canadian identity.

Posthumous solo exhibitions of MacDonald's work include those at Vancouver Art Gallery (1933, 1938); National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa (1933, 1966, 1984, 2012). His work has also been included in numerous group exhibitions nationally and recently internationally at Dulwich Picture Gallery (2011.) His work is in numerous public collections including Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston; Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto; Glenbow Museum, Calgary; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg; and Vancouver Art Gallery. The Vancouver Art Gallery previously had nine works by J.E.H. MacDonald in the collection, ranging in date from 1913 to 1931, representing the full span of his career. His work has been included in sixteen exhibitions at the Gallery, making him an important part of the Gallery's exhibition history.

### **About the Vancouver Art Gallery**

Founded in 1931, the Vancouver Art Gallery is recognized as one of the most respected and innovative visual arts institutions in Canada and is committed to strengthening ties between artists and diverse communities throughout the city, province and beyond. As the largest public art museum in Western Canada, the Gallery features the work of ground-breaking contemporary artists from around the world and presents historical art of international significance, is committed to exploring the art of Asia, and provides a global platform for British Columbia's dynamic artistic community, including the work of First Nations artists. Its growing collection represents the most comprehensive resource for art in British Columbia and is the principal repository for visual art produced in the region, as well as related works by other notable Canadian and international artists. The Gallery also places an emphasis on advancing scholarship through major publications and presents a multitude of public programs that offer new ways to consider art for visitors who come from throughout the region and internationally.

In response to the significant growth in collections, exhibitions and attendance over the past decade, the Gallery announced in 2014 the selection of Herzog & de Meuron for the design of a new and expanded home in downtown Vancouver. The future facility will double the Gallery's current size and will be a vital catalyst to Vancouver, enhancing the city's cultural community and serving as a centre for cross-cultural dialogue and exchange in the visual arts.

The Vancouver Art Gallery is a not-for-profit organization supported by its members, individual donors, corporate funders, foundations, the City of Vancouver, the Province of British Columbia through the BC Arts Council, and the Canada Council for the Arts.

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Image credits:

(left) J.E.H. MacDonald, *Sketch for Tangled Garden*, c. 1916, oil on paperboard, Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Gift of Ephry and Melvin Merkur

(middle) J.E.H. MacDonald, *Untitled (Algoma)*, c. 1915, oil on paperboard, 22.0 x 27.0 cm, Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Gift of Ephry and Melvin Merkur, Photo: Rachel Topham, Vancouver Art Gallery

(right) J.E.H. MacDonald, *Untitled (Batchawana Rapids)*, c. 1919, oil on paperboard, 21.5 x 26.5 cm, Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Gift of Ephry and Melvin Merkur

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