

FEBRUARY 23, 2024

A QUESTION OF AUTHENTICITY THE FAKE SKETCHES ATTRIBUTED TO THE GROUP OF SEVEN'S J.E.H. MACDONALD

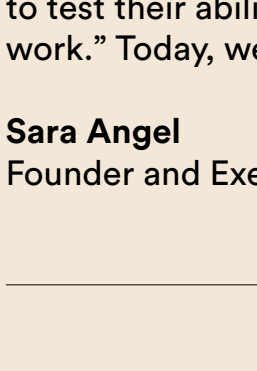
Today, we dive into one of the most discussed stories in Canadian art in decades: ten fake oil sketches that are now the focus of the Vancouver Art Gallery exhibition [J.E.H. MacDonald? A Tangled Garden](#). To learn about the genesis of the exhibition, we talked to VAG Executive Director and CEO Anthony Kiendl.



J.E.H. MacDonald at the Toronto Arts and Letters Club, February 1913, courtesy of Wikimedia.



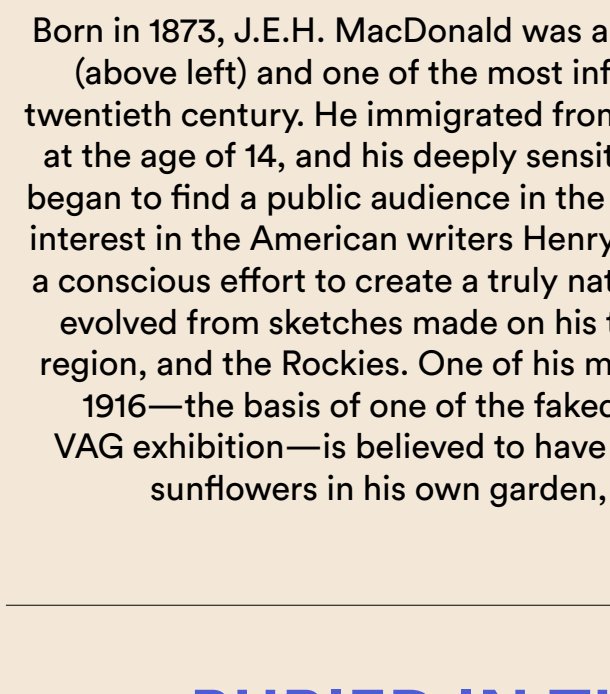
Unknown artist, Sketch after *The Wild River*, n.d., Vancouver Art Gallery.



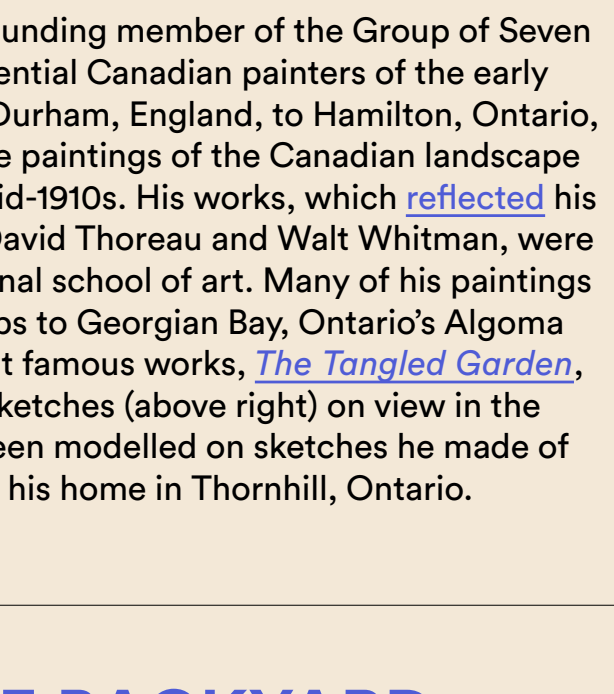
Around the world and since antiquity, the story of art history includes tales of fakes and misattributions. Canada is no exception. In 2015, the Vancouver Art Gallery (VAG) made an astonishing announcement: ten previously unheard-of oil sketches by iconic Canadian painter J.E.H. MacDonald (1873–1932)—who in the 1920s and 1930s was a member of the groundbreaking Group of Seven—had been donated to their collection. Some celebrated the announcement while others doubted its veracity. Then, eight years later, in December 2023, following multiple scientific and art historical investigations, the VAG declared that the paintings were fakes. The announcement accompanied the opening of *J.E.H. MacDonald? A Tangled Garden*, now on until May 12, 2024. The fascinating show presents the fakes alongside authentic MacDonald and Group of Seven paintings and the evidence that brought the truth to light. As well, explains VAG Executive Director and CEO Anthony Kiendl, “it offers visitors the opportunity to test their ability in spotting the difference between an authentic and faked work.” Today, we take a close look at the story behind the exhibition.

Sara Angel
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

J.E.H. MACDONALD: A LEADING MODERNIST PAINTER



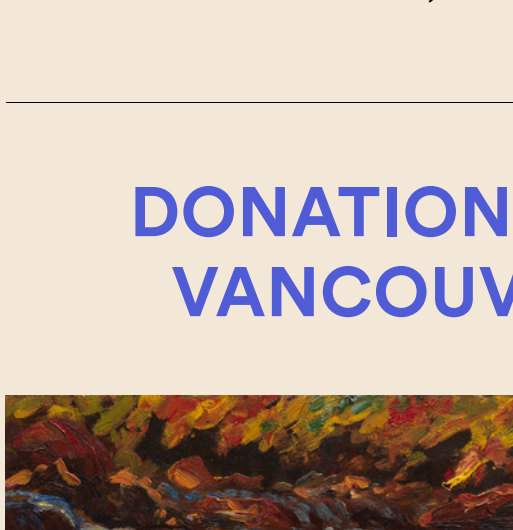
J.E.H. MacDonald (centre) at the Arts and Letters Club in Toronto, 1929, photograph by John Vanderpant. Clockwise from top left: Bertram Brooker, A.Y. Jackson, J.E.H. MacDonald, Lawren S. Harris, Arthur Lismer, and Merrill Denison.



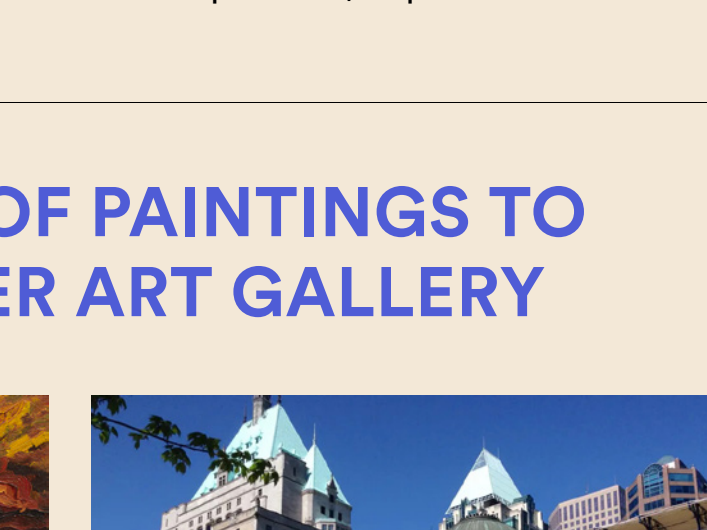
Unknown artist, Sketch after *The Tangled Garden*, n.d., Vancouver Art Gallery.

Born in 1873, J.E.H. MacDonald was a founding member of the Group of Seven (above left) and one of the most influential Canadian painters of the early twentieth century. He immigrated from Durham, England, to Hamilton, Ontario, at the age of 14, and his deeply sensitive paintings of the Canadian landscape began to find a public audience in the mid-1910s. His works, which [reflected](#) his interest in the American writers Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman, were a conscious effort to create a truly national school of art. Many of his paintings evolved from sketches made on his trips to Georgian Bay, Ontario's Algoma region, and the Rockies. One of his most famous works, *The Tangled Garden*, 1916—the basis of one of the faked sketches (above right) on view in the VAG exhibition—is believed to have been modelled on sketches he made of sunflowers in his own garden, at his home in Thornhill, Ontario.

BURIED IN THE BACKYARD



Home and studio used by J.E.H. MacDonald and his son, Thoreau MacDonald, courtesy of Retrospective Vaughan.



Ephraim Merkur, the son of major Group of Seven collectors Max and Reta Merkur, in his house in Toronto, photograph by Nathan Cyprys, courtesy of Maclean's.

The story of the controversial oil sketches donated to the VAG purportedly began in 1931 at MacDonald's residence in Thornhill, Ontario (above left). According to a 2015 press release by the Vancouver Art Gallery, before MacDonald was set to travel to Barbados that year for health reasons, he and his son, Thoreau MacDonald, wrapped the painted sketches in cellophane and [buried](#) them in his backyard for safekeeping. Fast forward four decades to 1974, when Max Merkur, a family friend of the MacDonalds, happened upon Thoreau unearthing the paintings, which included what appeared to be sketches of some of MacDonald's best-known works, such as *The Tangled Garden*, 1916, *The Wild River*, 1919, and *Falls, Montreal River*, 1920. Merkur was advised to buy the paintings from Thoreau by A.J. Casson (1898–1992), a member of the Group of Seven and a friend, which he did for the price of \$35 per sketch.

DONATION OF PAINTINGS TO VANCOUVER ART GALLERY



Unknown artist, Sketch after *Leaves in the Brook*, n.d., Vancouver Art Gallery.

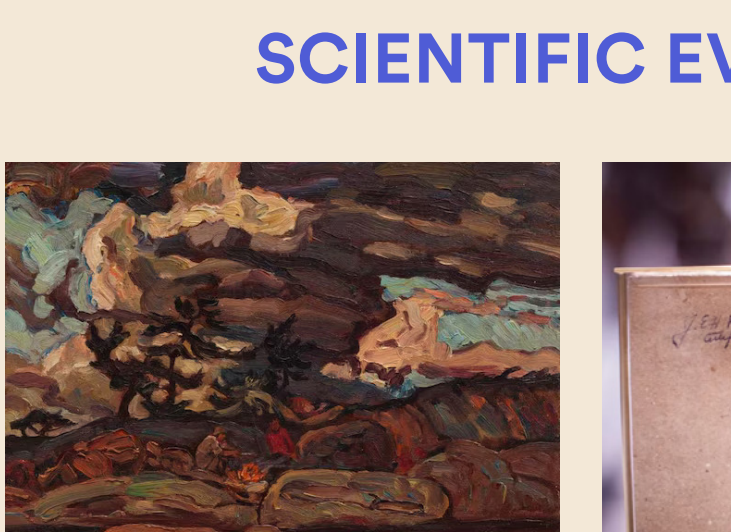


Vancouver Art Gallery, courtesy of the Vancouver Art Gallery.

Part of the exhibition *J.E.H. MacDonald? A Tangled Garden*, explains Anthony Kiendl, includes videos “that tell the story of how events unfolded.” Following Max Merkur's death in 2007 and his widow Reta's in 2012, their sons Ephraim and Melvin were left to sort through the [sizeable store](#) of Canadian art owned by their late parents. They asked Janet McNaught, co-owner of Arctic Experience McNaught Gallery in Hamilton, Ontario, to assess their collection. Upon seeing ten purported MacDonald sketches, McNaught contacted the Vancouver Art Gallery. After consulting expert curatorial opinions, the VAG then [authenticated the paintings](#). In January 2015, the gallery announced the Merkurs had donated the paintings.

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A QUESTION OF AUTHENTICITY



The Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI), Ottawa, courtesy of Doors Open Ontario.



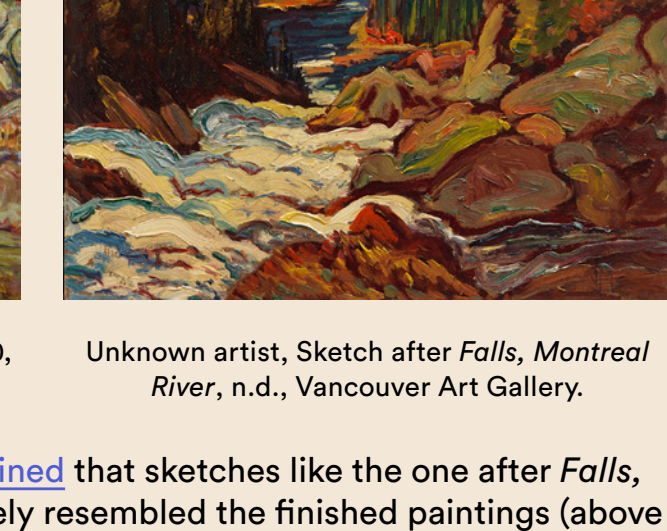
Cover of *J.E.H. MacDonald Up Close* by Kate Helwig and Alison Douglas, published by Goose Lane Editions, 2024.

Against the media fanfare about the newly discovered MacDonald sketches, experts raised questions as to whether the works were authentic. Gallerist Alan Klinkhoff, who had been asked to appraise the works in 2014 and declined to do so, doubted their provenance. Delaying the sketches' public unveiling, Anthony Kiendl explains, “the VAG had the works examined further by art historian and former National Gallery of Canada curator Charles Hill.” The Ottawa-based Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI) (above left), a Heritage Canada agency that conducts scientific investigations for museums and galleries, also investigated; its findings are detailed in the newly released book [J.E.H. MacDonald Up Close](#) (above right) by CCI conservators Kate Helwig and Alison Douglas.

SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE



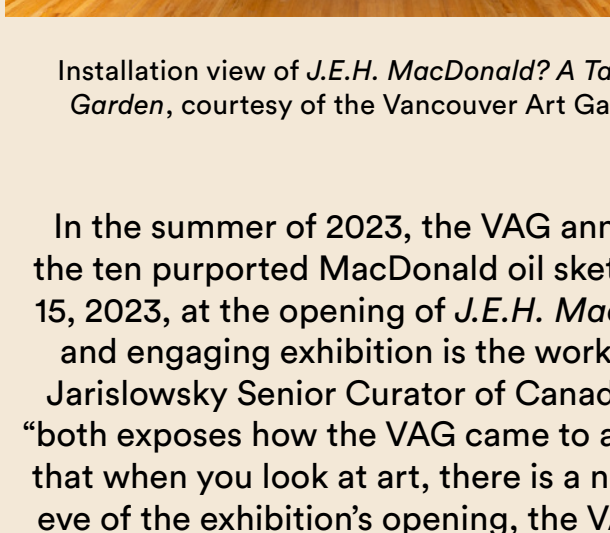
Unknown artist, Sketch after *The Elements*, n.d., Vancouver Art Gallery.



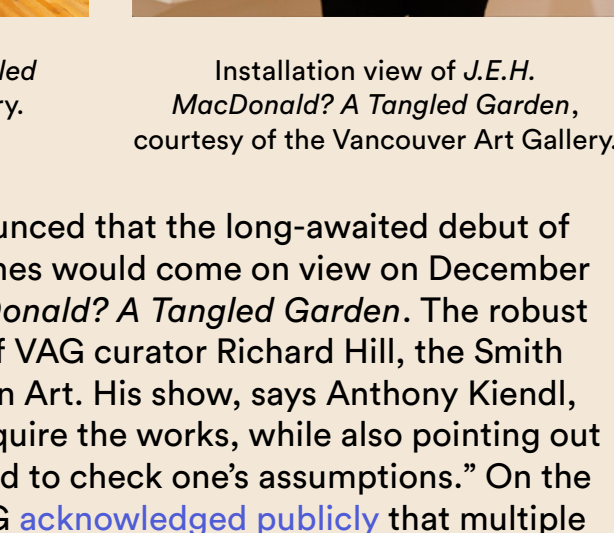
Handwriting on the back of the sketches were not by J.E.H. MacDonald, photograph by Ben Nelms, courtesy of CBC.

The examination of the paintings at the Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI) yielded [scientific and physical evidence](#) that the sketches could not be original works by MacDonald. The CCI's analysis found that the board sizes and types used for the sketches (above left) were inconsistent with his usual materials. Moreover, eight of the ten sketches contained pigments that wouldn't have been available in the artist's lifetime. The sketches also bore signatures from both his son, Thoreau, and A.J. Casson; however, Thoreau's is misspelled three different ways. On the back of one work (above right), the handwritten last name “MacDonald” is missing a letter. In 2016, the CCI reported to the VAG that the works were inauthentic.

A COPY AFTER THE FACT



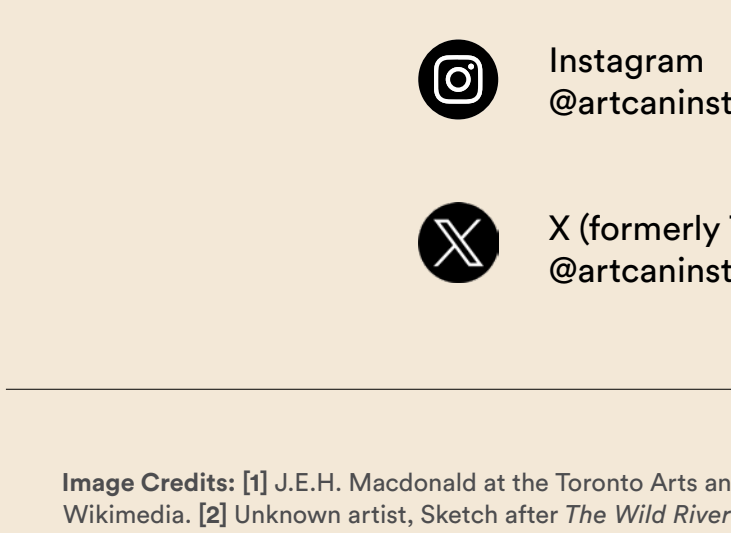
J.E.H. MacDonald, *Falls, Montreal River*, 1920, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.



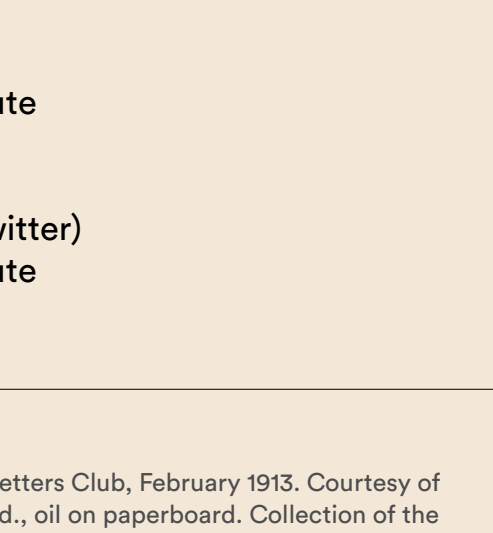
Unknown artist, Sketch after *Falls, Montreal River*, n.d., Vancouver Art Gallery.

In his 1915 report, Charles Hill [explained](#) that sketches like the one after *Falls, Montreal River* (above right) too closely resembled the finished paintings (above left), and were likely copies painted after the original works. One sketch was nearly identical to a copying painting, *The Elements*, 1916, that historians already knew was modelled on two very different sketches. Hill concluded that the Merkurs's sketch must have been based on MacDonald's work. He also noted that people appeared in some of the sketches, when MacDonald was known to have included them only in his final paintings. For visitors to the show, says Anthony Kiendl, “the pieces on view—both fakes as well as genuine paintings—present an opportunity to learn the difference between a sketch and a painting, an authentic work and a fake.”

J.E.H. MACDONALD? A TANGLED GARDEN: THE FULL STORY ON VIEW



Installation view of *J.E.H. MacDonald? A Tangled Garden*, courtesy of the Vancouver Art Gallery.



Installation view of *J.E.H. MacDonald? A Tangled Garden*, courtesy of the Vancouver Art Gallery.

In the summer of 2023, the VAG announced that the long-awaited debut of the ten purported MacDonald oil sketches would come on-view on December 15, 2023, at the opening of *J.E.H. MacDonald? A Tangled Garden*. The robust and engaging exhibition is the work of VAG curator Richard Hill, the Smith Jarislowsky Senior Curator of Canadian Art. His show, says Anthony Kiendl, “both exposes how the VAG came to acquire the works, while also pointing out that when you look at art, there is a need to check one's assumptions.” On the eve of the exhibition's opening, the VAG [acknowledged publicly](#) that multiple examinations had determined that the ten sketches donated by the Merkurs were not authentic works by MacDonald and would be attributed to an unknown artist. Now on view, the show presents the sketches alongside authentic Group of Seven paintings and the scientific results of the CCI investigation and additional art historical research. *J.E.H. MacDonald? A Tangled Garden* bravely shares the story and process of art and authentication, which is rarely a straightforward matter.

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Image Credits: [1] J.E.H. MacDonald at the Toronto Arts and Letters Club, February 1913. Courtesy of Wikimedia. [2] Unknown artist, Sketch after *The Wild River*, n.d., oil on paperboard. Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery. [3] J.E.H. MacDonald (centre) at the Arts and Letters Club in Toronto, 1929, photograph by John Vanderpant. Clockwise from top left: Bertram Brooker, A.Y. Jackson, J.E.H. MacDonald, Lawren S. Harris, Arthur Lismer, and Merrill Denison. [4] Unknown, Sketch after *The Tangled Garden*, n.d., oil on paperboard. Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery. [5] Home and studio used by J.E.H. MacDonald and his son, Thoreau MacDonald. Courtesy of Retrospective Vaughan. [6] Ephraim Merkur, the son of major Group of Seven collectors Max and Reta Merkur, in his house in Toronto, photograph by Nathan Cyprys. Courtesy of Maclean's. [7] Unknown artist, Sketch after *Leaves in the Brook*, n.d., oil on paperboard. Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery. [8] Vancouver Art Gallery. Courtesy of the Vancouver Art Gallery. [9] The Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI), Ottawa. Courtesy of Doors Open Ontario. [10] Cover of *J.E.H. MacDonald: Up Close* by Kate Helwig and Alison Douglas, published by Goose Lane Editions, 2024. [11] Unknown artist, Sketch after *The Elements*, n.d., oil on paperboard. Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery. [12] Handwriting on the back of the sketches offered further proof that the sketches were not by J.E.H. MacDonald, photograph by Ben Nelms. Courtesy of CBC. [13] J.E.H. MacDonald, *Falls, Montreal River*, 1920, oil on canvas, 121.9 x 153 cm. Collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Purchase, 1933 (2109). Photo © AGO. [14] Unknown artist, Sketch after *Falls, Montreal River*, n.d., oil on paperboard. Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery. [15] Installation view of *J.E.H. MacDonald? A Tangled Garden*. Courtesy of the Vancouver Art Gallery. [16] Installation view of *J.E.H. MacDonald? A Tangled Garden*. Courtesy of the Vancouver Art Gallery.