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Skull recreation attempts to solve ‘perfect mystery’ behind untimely death of artist Tom Thomson



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James Masters/The Owen Sound Sun Times/Postmedia NetworkArtist Michael Markowsky holds up a clay facial reconstruction — that may or may not be based on Tom Thomson's skull — made by forensic artist Louise Solecki-Wier.

A hundred years ago this summer, the painter Tom Thomson died in Ontario's Algonquin Park.

His artistic legacy is unquestioned. Barely five years of serious painting during the First World War produced works, like *The West Wind* and *Northern River*, that still inspire the Canadian imagination of wilderness. His contemporary admirers became the Group of Seven, almost in his honour, like apostles carrying on the work of a lost prophet.

But Thomson's death, a month shy of his 40th birthday, continues to be a source of mystery. Like the Kennedy assassination for Americans, picking through the Thomson theories about murder and grave-robbing has become almost a parlour game. And now, a new art project in honour of the artist's centenary has added another wrinkle, and perhaps even a chance for modern day fans to look Thomson in the eye, in three dimensions.



Archives Canada Tom Thomson

Drawing on autopsy photographs of a skull unearthed from a grave that once (at least briefly) contained Thomson's body, Michael Markowsky, an artist and professor at Emily Carr University of Art and Design in Vancouver, and sculptor Louise Solecki Weir have produced a head that bears an uncanny resemblance to photographs of Thomson.

Markowsky's first thought on seeing the finished product was "Wow, that's Tom. We've solved the mystery."

If so, then the great Canadian conspiracy theory is true. Thomson's grave near Owen Sound, Ont., does not actually contain his body, perhaps just stones put there by an unscrupulous undertaker. And Thomson's true resting place is in the woods above Canoe Lake, marked with a white-washed cross in a stand of evergreens, near the ruins of the logging town of Mowat.

But if the skull belongs to someone else, then a serious indignity has been committed. In that case, this man — likely indigenous, according to forensic examiners — has been denied both a proper burial and a criminal investigation into the suspicious

circumstances of how his body ended up secretly buried in the rough grave of Canada's greatest painter, with a hole in the left temple of his skull.

Either way, the legends live on.

"I think it's a perfect mystery because so many people have such conflicting memories of him," said Markowsky, whose certainty about the identity of the recreated skull has wavered, such that he is no longer sure what to believe.

The mystery began in early July 1917, when Thomson was back in Algonquin for a fifth summer, painting on small wooden boards that he would enlarge in Toronto over the winter.

He was last seen July 8. Two days later, his canoe was found, with paddles lashed inside as if for portaging. Six days after that, his decomposing body was found out in Canoe Lake, with fishing line wrapped mysteriously around his legs.

A doctor examined the body and concluded he drowned. A coroner supported this, and ruled it accidental, which remains the leading theory, that this accomplished canoe tripper somehow fell, either on shore or in the canoe, perhaps hitting his head, and it was the motion of the waves and currents that wrapped his fishing line around his legs.

He was buried immediately in the Mowat plot, but dug up two days later and interred in the family plot near Owen Sound.

As Thomson's legacy grew in the following years, interest in his death rose, and new theories emerged, notably about a love affair, bad blood with various local men, even suicide. In 1956, a judge called William Little dug up the Mowat grave with three friends, and rather than find it empty, they found a man's skeleton, with that worrisome hole in the skull.

That led to a police investigation and a coroner's report that concluded this was the skeleton of an indigenous man, not Thomson, and it was simply reburied, unmarked. The coroner, Noble Sharpe, left a trove of records to the Tom Thomson Art Gallery in Owen Sound, which is how Markowsky came to be involved.

With great drama and secrecy, the gallery offered these records to Markowsky for what turned into his exhibit, now on display at the gallery, called *The Persistence Of Doubt*. It includes sketches by Markowsky of the possible scenarios of Thomson's death, from a bad fall to falling asleep drunk in his canoe, to being shot from shore. It also includes the mysterious head.

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"I felt there's a difference between a sculpture and a drawing," Markowsky said. "It exists, and people would have to confront it and think about it."

To make it, he started talking to experts, forensic anthropologists, police consultants, people who knew how to put flesh on bones. That is how he met Solecki Weir, a portrait sculptor who mainly does heads, and who has studied forensic techniques in the U.S., including at a Texas university “body farm,” where cadavers are left in different environments to see how they decay.



Michael MarkowskyA drawing by Michael Markowsky that depicts one theory of how artist Tom Thomson may have died in 1917.

She built a three-dimensional rendering of the skull, based on two autopsy pictures — a front view and profile — and also images of the skull just after it was dug up, which gave a useful perspective at an angle. A Vancouver coroner guided her, advising that it was probably an adult white man, not too old to judge by the good teeth.

Using a chart of average flesh depths, and with some guidance from the bone on the shape of the nose, she built up a head. The effort was “probably more art than science because I built the skull as well,” she said. The hair was certainly artistic. She researched hair styles of Thomson’s era, and reproduced a common one, but tried to make it as inconspicuous as possible.

She was more skeptical than Markowsky. “The forehead slope of my fellow is quite pronounced,” she said. He also has a pronounced overbite, which Thomson did not seem to have. But like Markowsky, her view has changed.

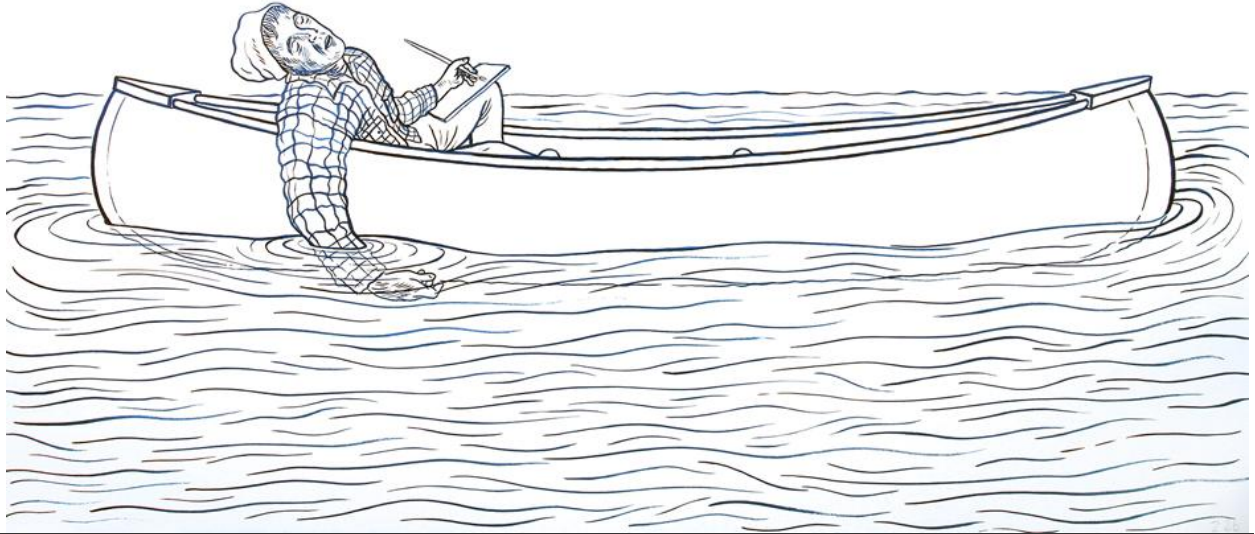
“I was quite dubious it was Tom Thomson until I saw a photo at the art gallery, taken when he was quite older,” she said. “Oh boy, now I’m not sure again.”



Michael MarkowskyA drawing by Michael Markowsky that depicts one theory of how artist Tom Thomson may have died in 1917.



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