



126 Alexander Young (A.Y.) Jackson

ALC CGP G7 OSA RCA RSA 1882 – 1974

Night on the Skeena River

oil on canvas, signed and on verso initialed three times, titled, dated 1927 on the Galerie Walter Klinkhoff label and inscribed No. 4 and A.Y. Jackson, 25 Severn St., Toronto 25 ¼ x 32 ⅞ in, 64.1 x 81.6 cm

PROVENANCE

Collection of the Artist
Peter A. Thomson, Montreal, before 1933
By descent to Joy Thomson, daughter of Peter A. Thomson, Nassau and New York
By descent to T. Asselin, son of Joy Thomson and Edmund Asselin, Nassau and Calgary
Galerie Walter Klinkhoff Inc., Montreal
Private Collection, Montreal

LITERATURE

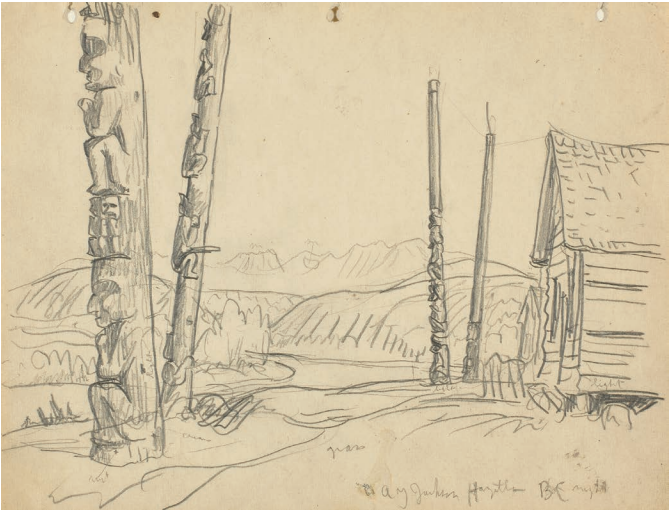
Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art: Native and Modern, National Gallery of Canada, 1927, titled as *Totem Poles, Hazelton*, listed page 15
Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art: Native and Modern and of a Group of Water Colour Paintings by Robert D. Norton, Art Gallery of Toronto, 1928, titled as *Totem Poles, Hazelton*, listed page 14
Marius Barbeau, *The Downfall of Temeaham*, 1928, the related canvas *Kispayaks Village* reproduced verso page 70
David P. Silcox, *Tom Thomson: Life & Work*, reproduced, <https://www.aci-iac.ca/art-books/tom-thomson/significance-and-critical-issues/#the-canadian-documentary-tradition>

EXHIBITED

National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, *Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art: Native and Modern*, November 20 – December 31, 1927, titled as *Totem Poles, Hazelton*, catalogue #43
Art Gallery of Toronto, *Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art: Native and Modern and of a Group of Water Colour Paintings by Robert D. Norton*, January 7 – 29, 1928, catalogue #42, traveling to the Art Association of Montreal, February 17 – March 25, 1928, titled as *Totem Poles, Hazelton, B.C.*, catalogue #42
Western Tour including Pacific Exhibition, Vancouver, from August 12, 1928, Group of Seven loan; New Westminster Provincial Exhibition, September 1928; *Edmonton Museum of Arts Loan Exhibition*, October 29 – November 3, 1928, titled as *Night on the Skeena*, catalogue #19; Calgary Public Museum, December 1928; Drumheller Public Library, February 1929
Eric Klinkhoff Gallery, Montreal, *Highlights from “Embracing Canada,”* October 22 – November 5, 2016, catalogue #21
Eric Klinkhoff Gallery, Montreal, *Collectors’ Treasures II, Annual Loan Exhibition*, October 24 – November 7, 2020, catalogue #2
Eric Klinkhoff Gallery, Montreal, *Masterpieces of Canadian Art, Annual Loan Exhibition*, November 4 – 18, 2023, catalogue #8

ESSAY BY ADAM LAUDER

DANCING NORTHERN LIGHTS accentuate the dynamic rhythms of tilting crest poles in this magical painting of the Gitksan village of Hazelton by A.Y. Jackson. The work is a dramatic record of Jackson’s participation in a watershed episode in Canadian



ALEXANDER YOUNG (A.Y.) JACKSON
Hazelton, B.C.

graphite on wove paper, 1926
8 ¾ x 14 ¾ in, 21.3 x 27.6 cm
Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa
Photo: National Gallery of Canada
© The Estate of A.Y. Jackson / CARCC Ottawa 2025

Not for sale with this lot

and Indigenous art histories. In the summer of 1926, he traveled up the Skeena River valley in the company of fellow artist Edwin Holgate and their host, the influential ethnologist Marius Barbeau.¹ The latter had negotiated free passage for the artists aboard the Canadian National Railway as part of a plan to document and restore Gitksan crest poles by promoting their tourist potential.

This expedition was the opening move in Barbeau’s bold gambit to invite the Group of Seven and associates to forge a new image of Canadian landscape inspired by their encounters with the rich material cultures of Indigenous Peoples in Western Canada.² A consequential outcome of this project would be the 1927 touring *Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art: Native and Modern*, which, under Barbeau’s guidance, mounted both an unprecedented pairing of masterpieces by Euro-Canadian and Indigenous artists and provided Central Canada’s first exposure to Emily Carr.³

In photo-documentation of the National Gallery of Canada’s presentation of *Canadian West Coast Art*, Carr’s *Graveyard Entrance, Campbell River* (1912)—now in the permanent collection of that institution—hangs immediately adjacent to Jackson’s *Night on the Skeena River*, which is identified as *Totem Poles, Hazelton* in the exhibition catalogue.⁴ Carr’s journals reveal her admiration for Jackson’s Skeena canvases, some of which she viewed in his Toronto studio. “I loved his things,” Carr enthuses, “particularly . . . three canvases up Skeena River. I felt a little as if beaten at my own game. His [Indigenous] pictures have something mine lack—rhythm, poetry.”⁵ Carr was uniquely qualified to assess the exceptional merits of Jackson’s Skeena pictures, having executed several works on the same theme in 1912. For instance, *Totem*



Installation view of *Canadian West Coast Art: Native and Modern* at the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, 1927, with *Night on the Skeena River* indicated
Photo: National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives

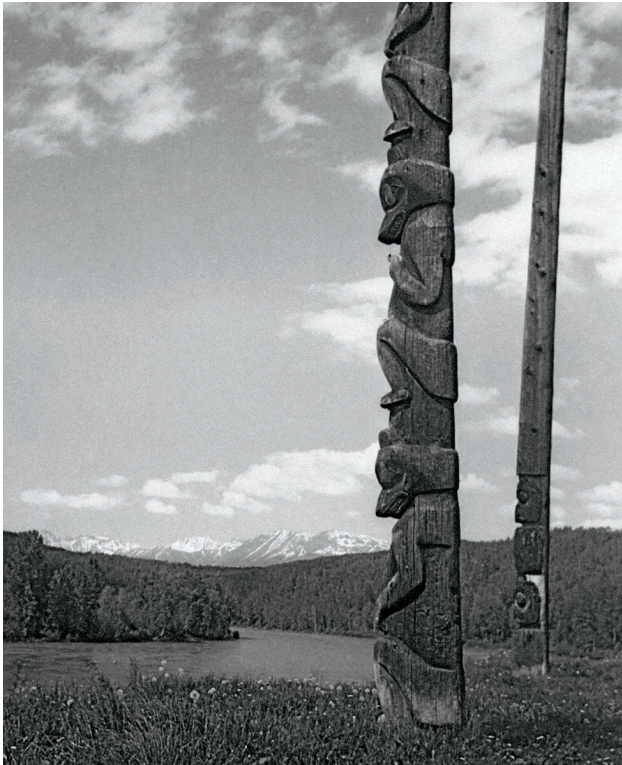
Pole at Hazelton (1912), now in the permanent collection of the National Gallery of Canada, portrays a reverse view of the crest pole farthest to the left in Jackson’s painting. Relatedly, Carr’s *Indian Totem Pole, Hazelton, Skeena River, British Columbia* (1912), in the collection of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, depicts a frontal view of the crest pole second from the left in Jackson’s picture. Carr’s Hazelton paintings corroborate the siting of Jackson’s *Night on the Skeena River* as a view up the titular waterway from the hill just north of St. Peter’s Church, an identification consistent with historic photographs in the George and Joanne MacDonald Northwest Coast Image Archive digitized by Simon Fraser University.

The majestic crest poles featured in Jackson’s *Night on the Skeena River* can be cross-referenced with Barbeau’s 1929 book, *Totem Poles of the Gitksan*, which the ethnologist was researching while traveling with the Group of Seven artist. Through detailed iconographic analyses, Barbeau identifies the Gitxsan title-holders memorialized by the hereditary crests visible in supporting photographs, including Gitemraldo (far left) and Sanaws (far right).⁶ A 1926 sketch by Jackson from the collection of Naomi Jackson Groves, his niece, testifies to his remarkable ability to capture symbolic details necessary to such interpretive work in swift but precise pencil strokes. While furnishing additional evidence that *Night on the Skeena River* portrays a specific location,

this sketch is also revealing, however, of the creative licence that Jackson took with his subject. In the finished painting, the artist notably adds two poles not documented by either Barbeau or contemporary photographs: the smaller central pole as well as the sharply slanting one in the distance. These elements contribute to the rhythmic effect of the composition that so impressed Carr, while also revealing Jackson’s subtle resistance to Barbeau’s ambitions.

Although a 1927 *Maclean’s Magazine* article authored by Jackson endorsed Barbeau’s restoration efforts, his 1958 autobiography expressed reservations about this work that can also be gleaned from *Night on the Skeena River*.⁷ The dramatically angled crest pole that Jackson inserts into this painting is consistent with his comment in the latter text that he and Holgate “preferred the poles leaning forward or backward.”⁸ Jackson’s addition of the leaning pole in *Night on the Skeena River* is thus more than a picturesque flourish: it deftly amplifies the Gitxsan opposition to Barbeau’s preservation project that Jackson recorded in his memoir.

As he wrote to Barbeau, Jackson considered *Night on the Skeena River* to be among a short list of “the best” canvases he’d painted over the fertile ten-year span beginning in 1922.⁹ Its bold composition, assured brushwork and lyrical palette testify to an artist at the peak of his creative powers. Jackson harnesses these



Two poles in Hazelton, depicting Standing-Bear totem pole of Spawrh (right) and the Pole of Sanaws (left)
Photo: George and Joanne MacDonald Northwest Coast Image Archive, SFU

expressive resources to fashion a new type of Group of Seven landscape, one that is aware of Indigenous presence on the land and that pays homage to Indigenous arts.

We thank Adam Lauder for contributing the above essay. Lauder is an art historian based in Toronto and an instructor at the University of Toronto as well as an adjunct professor at the Ontario College of Art and Design.

1. Sandra Dyck, “‘A New Country for Canadian Art’: Edwin Holgate and Marius Barbeau in Gitxsan Territory,” in *Edwin Holgate* (Montreal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 2005), exhibition catalogue, 55.
2. Leslie A. Dawn, *National Visions, National Blindness: Canadian Art and Identities in the 1920s* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2006), 210.
3. Ibid., 239.
4. *Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art: Native and Modern* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1927), 15. See also Jonathan Klinkhoff, “A.Y. Jackson’s Skeena River Canvases,” Allan Klinkhoff Gallery blog, October 9, 2013, <https://www.klinkhoff.ca/blog/4790/>.
5. Emily Carr, *Hundreds and Thousands: The Journals of Emily Carr* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2006), 24. See also Joan Murray, “‘Powerful’ Jackson Canvas Sold by Klinkhoff Is One of Only Five,”



EMILY CARR
Hazelton
oil on board, 1912
24 ¾ x 13 in, 62.9 x 33 cm

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Alan Klinkhoff Gallery blog, May 30, 2013, <https://www.klinkhoff.ca/blog/4524/>.

6. Marius Barbeau, *Totem Poles of the Gitksan, Upper Skeena River, British Columbia* (Ottawa: F.A. Acland, 1929), 231, plate 11.

7. A.Y. Jackson, “Rescuing Our Tottering Totems,” *MacLean’s Magazine*, December 15, 1927, 23, 37.

8. A.Y. Jackson, *A Painter’s Country: The Autobiography of A.Y. Jackson* (1958; repr., Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1976), 110.

9. Jackson to Barbeau, “Canvases Painted by A.Y. Jackson,” Marius Barbeau fonds, Correspondence, Canadian Museum of History, Gatineau.

A.Y. JACKSON PRODUCED some magical paintings in the 1920s. Made with a bold, expressionist touch and rich colour on medium-large canvases, his images of landscapes, Quebec villages, and the homes and poles of the First Nations have a remarkable staying power. Whatever he painted, Jackson’s work always involved a modernist rethinking of lessons he had learned in studies abroad, which he combined with a new kind of liberty discovered through contact with Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven. While his earlier work had a darker palette and denser composition, in works such as *Night on the Skeena River*, the forms seem to sing to each other across open space.

As in other works of the 1920s, Jackson painted the scene as though he were alone in the landscape. With this scene, the viewer feels instinctively Jackson’s ability to create a powerful and poetic mood. As the critic Fred Jacob wrote of Jackson’s works of 1924, such as *Dawn—Pine Island* (in the McMichael Canadian Art Collection), each presents “a mood of nature perfectly expressed with refinement that does not mar the power of the conception.”¹

Jackson painted about six canvases from studies made during his trip to the Skeena River in 1926.² Of the works known so far, this canvas and *Kispayaks Village* (collection of the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria) are the largest. *Night on the Skeena River* is closely related to a drawing in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada, on which Jackson wrote “Hazelton, B.C.” However, as in other works he painted of this area, he generalized the totem poles—he had drawn them in detail only at Kispiox, farther down the river. Without much that was specific in First Nations information to convey, he diverted the viewer’s attention to what he knew he could paint with devastating power—the northern lights in the sky, the light on the water and the mountain ranges in the background, indications of the way he felt about the place he visited.

One feature in the painting reveals Jackson’s preference in painting totem poles. He and fellow artist Edwin Holgate, who was accompanying him on the trip to the Skeena in 1926 with Marius Barbeau, preferred the way the poles leaned forward or backward to being set in concrete straight in the ground, as the Canadian National Railway engineer who was with them, a Mr. T.B. Campbell, had been charged with doing. (When the two men complained to him about the way he was straightening the poles, Campbell replied that he could not put up leaning totem poles, but he added, “You can make them lean any way you like in your drawings.”)³

Jackson also recorded in his autobiography that the way the poles were being restored in terms of colour was absurd. The First Nations had only a few earth colours, which Jackson described as “quiet and dignified,” as he painted them here.⁴

In the *Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art: Native and Modern* at the National Gallery in late 1927, Jackson’s work was not singled out for as much praise as the Indigenous art and the work of Emily Carr. However, Barbeau chose to reproduce *Kispayaks Village* in his book *The Downfall of Temlaham* (1928), proof that Barbeau recognized the importance of Jackson’s contribution.



Jackson himself knew that he had made new strides in his work on the Skeena and specifically in this painting. In a letter of June 27, 1933, Jackson wrote to Barbeau that he included this work on a list he made of the works he considered his most important from the decade starting in 1922.⁵ Emily Carr also recognized and appreciated Jackson’s Skeena works. In 1927, she visited Jackson in his studio and recorded in her journal that she “loved his things, particularly... three canvases up Skeena River. I felt a little as if beaten at my own game. His [Indigenous] pictures have something mine lack—rhythm, poetry.”⁶

Carr likely looked at this painting, which Jackson would have had ready to take to the exhibition. Later, Jackson’s niece Naomi Jackson Groves wrote that it was Jackson’s canvases on Skeena subjects that “truly imprinted Emily with new richness and poetic mood and sent her back to do her own great ‘new visions.’”⁷ Paintings such as *Night on the Skeena River* can therefore be regarded as about one great artist using the work of another as a touchstone to emulate. Carr would have recognized



People gathered at the edge of the Skeena River. In the background, the poles from left to right are the Pole of Sanaws, Standing-Bear, Place-of-Climbing, and Nose-like-Cohoe.
Photo: George and Joanne MacDonald Northwest Coast Image Archive, SFU

LEFT: Two poles in Hazelton, depicting Place-of-Climbing (left) and Nose-like-Cohoe (right), 1910
Photo: George and Joanne MacDonald Northwest Coast Image Archive, SFU

in paintings such as this work the rightness with which things fit together. Jackson here achieved a kind of lock of different parts, a coherence that leaves the viewer entranced by his achievement, essentially private in spirit, but tough and of fascinating beauty.

We thank Joan Murray, former curator of Canadian art and chief curator (1972) at the Art Gallery of Ontario, for contributing the above essay.

1. [Fred Jacob], “In the Art Galleries,” *Toronto Mail and Empire*, January 31, 1925, 14.
2. At the 1927 show *Canadian West Coast Art*, Jackson exhibited this work along with *Indian Home* (Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa, 1987.JA43), *Gitseg yukla Village (Skeena Crossing, Gitseg yukla)* (McMichael Canadian Art Collection, 1968.8.27), and *Kispayaks Village* (Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, 1984.049.001). See Charles C. Hill, *The Group of Seven: Art for a Nation* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, in assoc. with McClelland & Stewart, 1995), 327, entry for *Indian Home*, cat. #114 including notes 1 & 2. The McMichael

Canadian Art Collection also has two Skeena sketches: *Totem Poles, Indian Village*, 1968.8.5, and *Totems, Skeena River*, 1974.12.

3. A.Y. Jackson, *A Painter’s Country: The Autobiography of A.Y. Jackson* (1958; repr., Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1976), 110.

4. Ibid.

5. Jackson to Barbeau, “Canvases Painted by A.Y. Jackson,” Marius Barbeau fonds, Correspondence, Canadian Museum of History, Gatineau.

6. Emily Carr, *Hundreds and Thousands: The Journals of Emily Carr* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2006), 24.

7. Naomi Jackson Groves to Joan Murray, January 19, 1987, accession files re: *Jackson, Indian Home*, Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa.

ESTIMATE: \$800,000 – 1,000,000