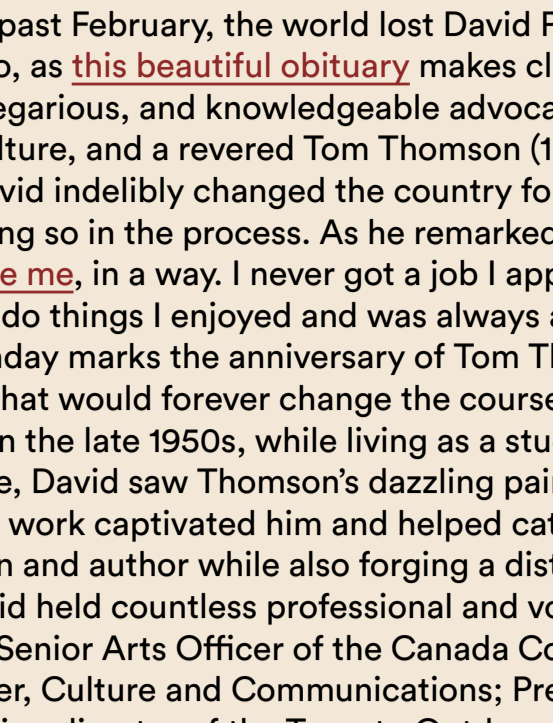
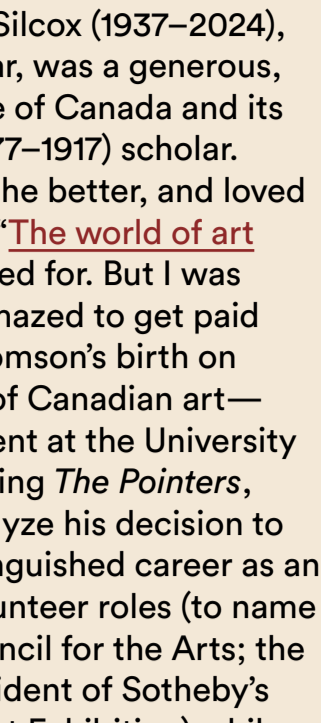


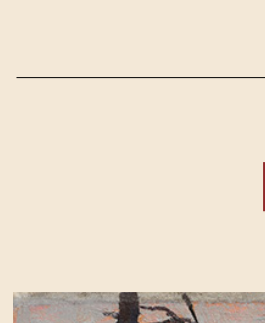
AUGUST 2, 2024

REMEMBRANCES OF TOM THOMSON  
BY ART HISTORIAN DAVID P. SILCOX*Few Canadian art historians knew Tom Thomson—  
or wrote as well about him—like the late, great David P. Silcox.*

Tom Thomson

Tom Thomson, *The Pointers*, 1916–17,  
Hart House Permanent Collection,  
University of Toronto.

David P. Silcox

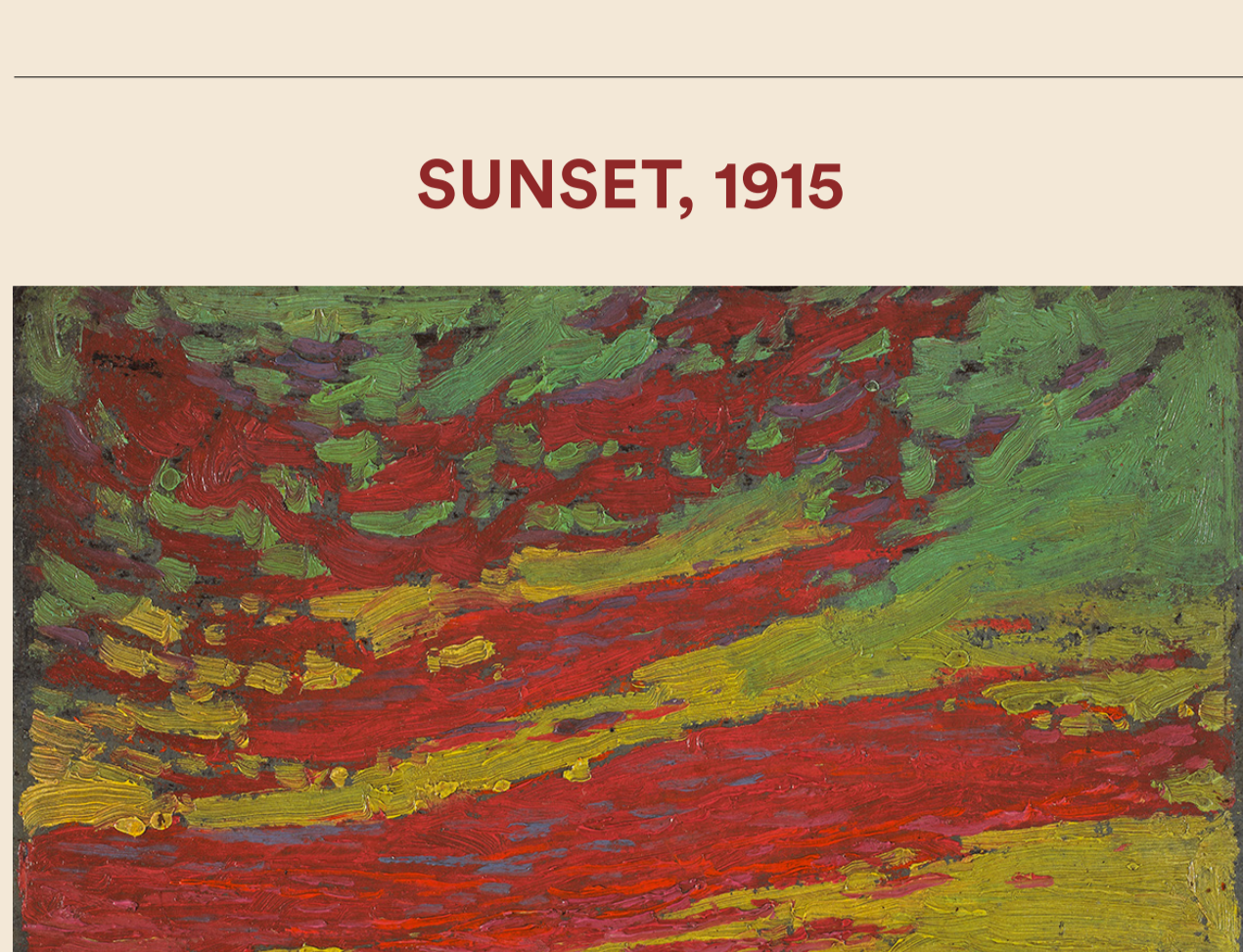


This past February, the world lost David P. Silcox (1937–2024), who, as [this beautiful obituary](#) makes clear, was a generous, gregarious, and knowledgeable advocate of Canada and its culture, and a revered Tom Thomson (1877–1917) scholar. David indelibly changed the country for the better, and loved doing so in the process. As he remarked, “[The world of art chose me](#), in a way, I never got a job I applied for. But I was able to do things I enjoyed and was always amazed to get paid for doing it.” Next Monday marks the anniversary of Tom Thomson’s birth on August 5, 1877, a date that would forever change the course of Canadian art—as well as David’s life. In the late 1950s, while living as a student at the University of Toronto’s Hart House, David saw Thomson’s dazzling painting *The Pointers*, 1916–17, every day. The work captivated him and helped catalyze his decision to become an art historian and author while also forging a distinguished career as an arts administrator. David held countless professional and volunteer roles (to name a few: he was the first Senior Arts Officer of the Canada Council for the Arts; the Ontario Deputy Minister, Culture and Communications; President of Sotheby’s Canada; and the founding director of the Toronto Outdoor Art Exhibition) while researching and writing landmark publications. Several of them were about his beloved Thomson. Like the artist he loved, David remains with us in memory and through his tremendous output. Here, from David’s 2013 ACI book [Tom Thomson: Life & Work](#), we are honoured to share with you his work on ten of the artist’s key paintings—commentary about one great by another.

Sara Angel

Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

## NORTHERN RIVER, 1915

Tom Thomson, *Northern River*, 1915, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

As with so many of Thomson’s paintings, the subject of *Northern River*, 1915, is an ordinary one that the artist might have found in almost any of the places he travelled. What he has done, however, is take a scene common to Algonquin Park and, with tense concentration, transform it into an extraordinary one. As viewers thread their way around and through the receding mesh of branches, they encounter an array of riches: a glimpse of the full autumn colours and their reflections on the river’s surface, or a line of sight through to the bend in the river or even to the hill in the distance on the right.

[Learn more](#)

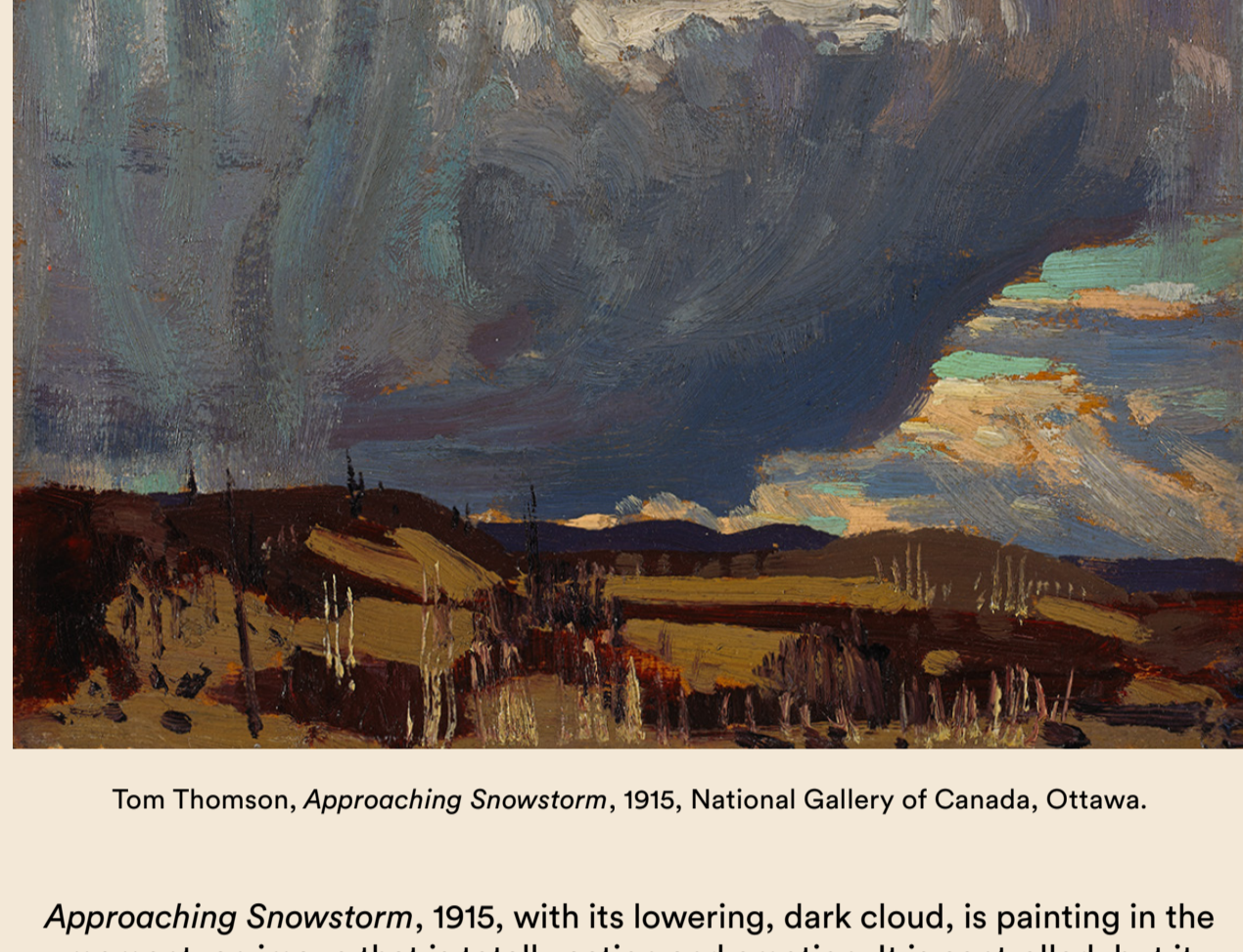
## SUNSET, 1915

Tom Thomson, *Sunset*, 1915, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Thomson sketched this scene from a canoe, almost at water level, with the universe wrapped around him. He portrays the sunset in shocking hues and agitated brushwork, with a blazing reflection in the lake that doubles its allure, magic, and power. Thomson paints not just crimson clouds but an acid yellow-and-green sky behind them. His constant preoccupation with skies, clouds, and sunsets reached a peak with this painting as he entered the most productive and accomplished period of his short career. With this small image, Thomson takes liberties and soars above mere documentation, capturing the brilliance, drama, and fleeting nature of a sunset in Algonquin Park.

[Learn more](#)

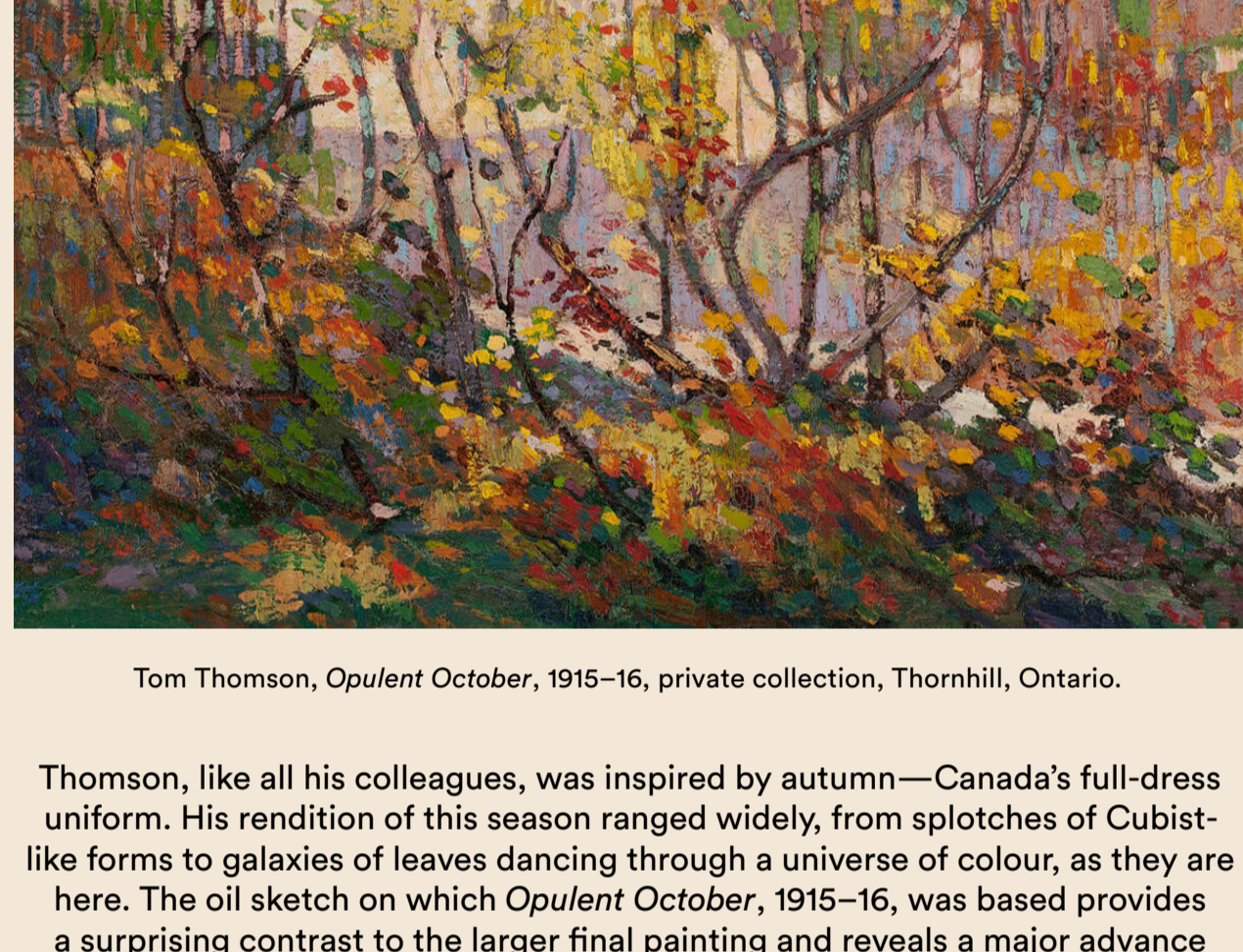
## FIRE-SWEPT HILLS, 1915

Tom Thomson, *Fire-Swept Hills*, Summer-Fall 1915, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

This agitated and chaotically messy elegy to what was once a mature forest illustrates powerfully an unexpected aspect of Thomson’s paintings in Algonquin Park: his reaction to the land after fire has swept through and ravaged it. The work spills out from the high, distant horizon point between two hills, with charred spindles of trees standing precariously like lifeless skeletons, reminding viewers constantly of fire and destruction. In the lower half, a tumble of paint crashes over rocks and more burnt trunks and branches like a wild cataract. Blood reds, blues, ash greys, and whites, all jumbled and mashed violently together, complete this statement of confusion and disorder.

[Learn more](#)

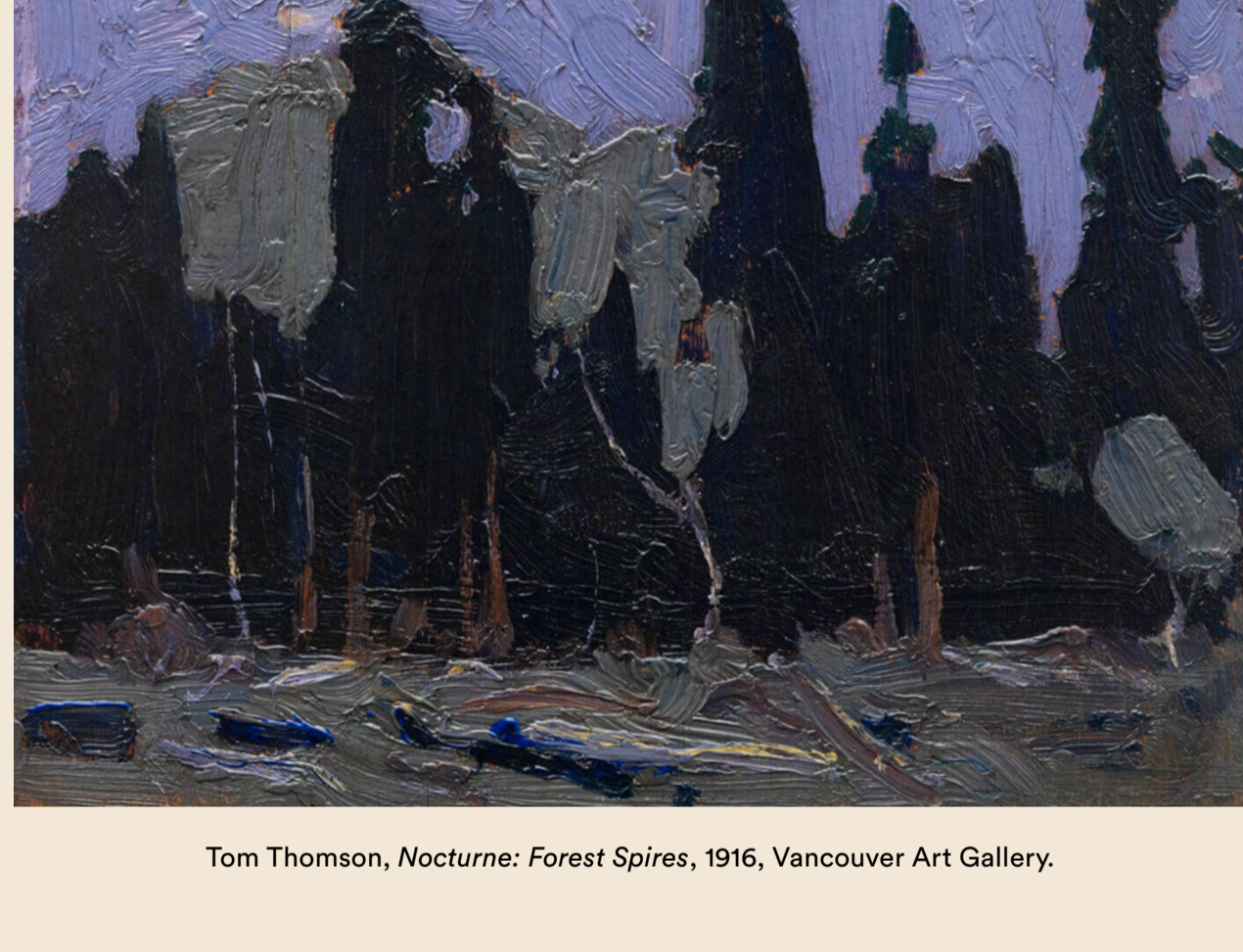
## APPROACHING SNOWSTORM, 1915

Tom Thomson, *Approaching Snowstorm*, 1915, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

*Approaching Snowstorm*, 1915, with its lowering, dark cloud, is painting in the moment, an image that is totally action and emotion. It is controlled, but it also shows how out of control nature can be from the human vantage point. The sweeping vertical brush strokes on the left and the black and angry cloud on the right, set against the bright sky, are underscored by the equally ominous black tract of land in which spindly trees are about to be snapped by a force they cannot resist. With this work Thomson has reached a point where his hand, mind, and heart were focused on one well-conceived target.

[Learn more](#)

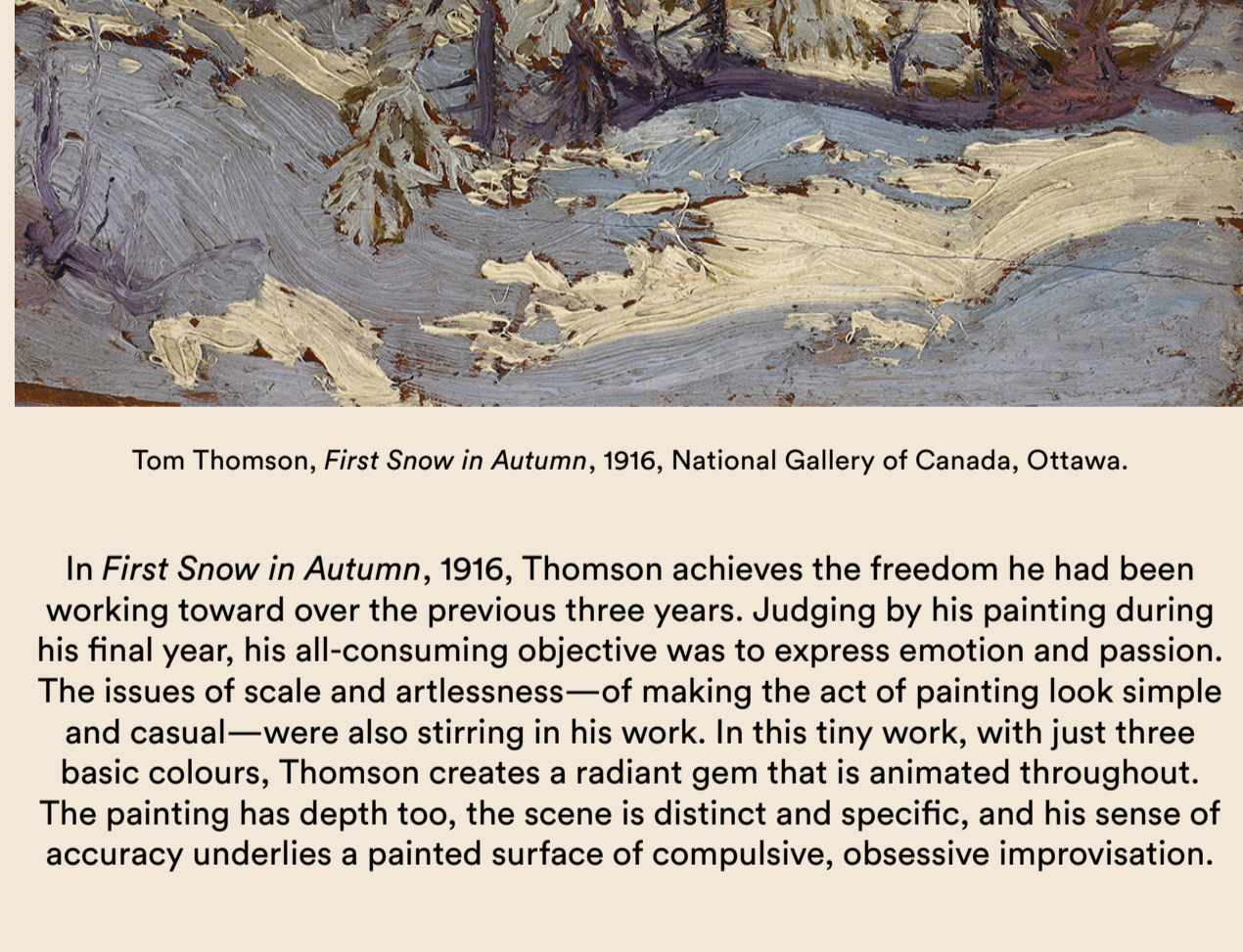
## OPULENT OCTOBER, 1915–16

Tom Thomson, *Opulent October*, 1915–16, private collection, Thornhill, Ontario.

Thomson, like all his colleagues, was inspired by autumn—Canada’s full-dress uniform. His rendition of this season ranged widely, from splashes of Cubist-like forms to galaxies of leaves dancing through a universe of colour, as they are here. The oil sketch on which *Opulent October*, 1915–16, was based provides a surprising contrast to the larger final painting and reveals a major advance in Thomson’s development as an artist. In the canvas, he uses only the basic structure of the sketch and recreates all the detail. This transformation of a modest sketch into a canvas entirely different in tone, colour, and light was a breakthrough in method and achievement.

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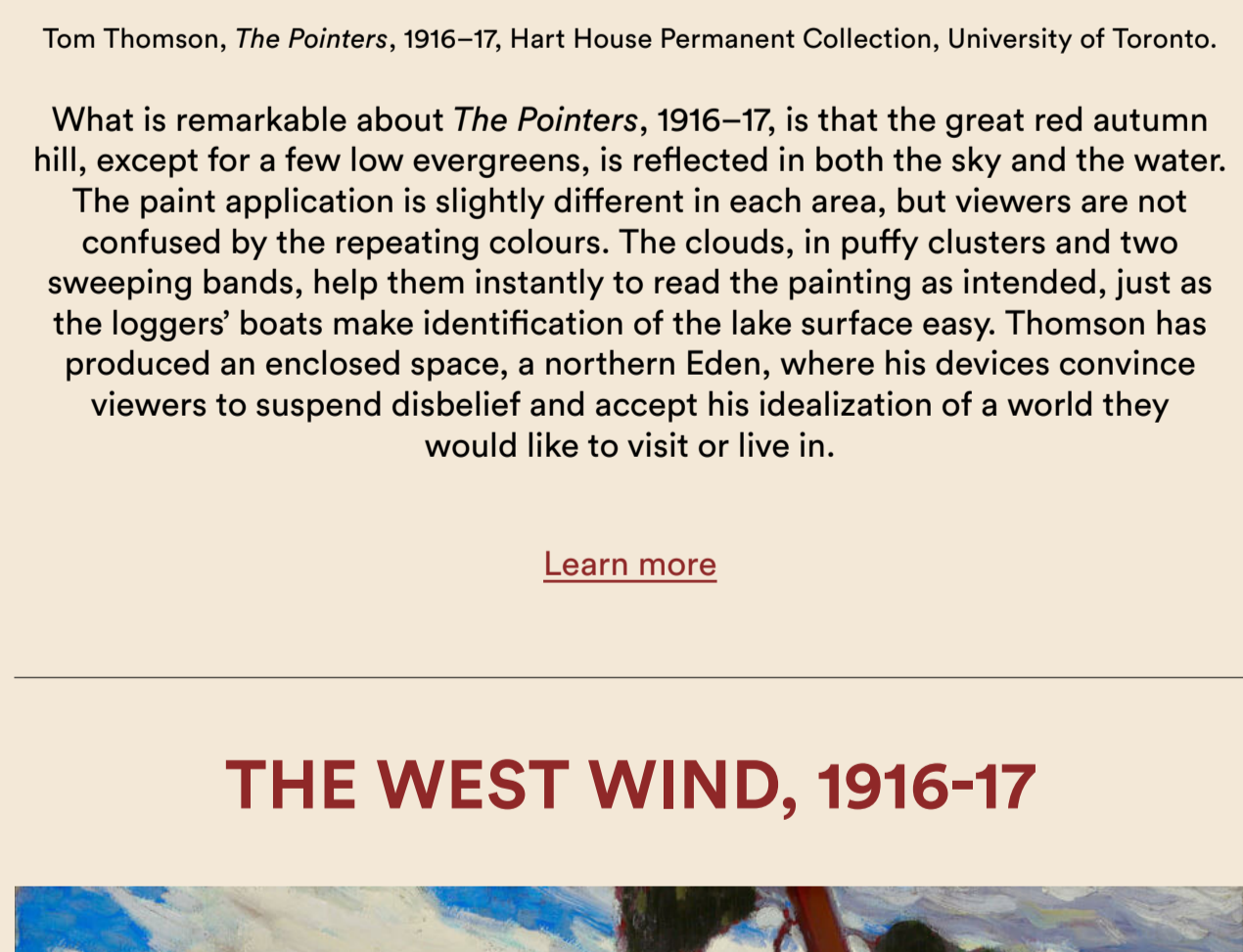
## NOCTURNE: FOREST SPIRES, 1916

Tom Thomson, *Nocturne: Forest Spires*, 1916, Vancouver Art Gallery.

For Thomson, the nights in Algonquin Park were just as seductive as the days, and he painted this subject repeatedly. *Nocturne: Forest Spires* stands out among the artist’s depictions of darkness because it catches not only the atmosphere but also the character of the forest at night, mysterious and looming. Here Thomson presents with accuracy and emotion the feeling of being in the night—a sense of peace, of night like a comforting blanket, wrapping itself around both the subject and the viewer. His ability to find intensity in a scene was as great in this nocturne as in his wildly colourful autumn tapestries.”

Read more about *Nocturne: Forest Spires*, 1916

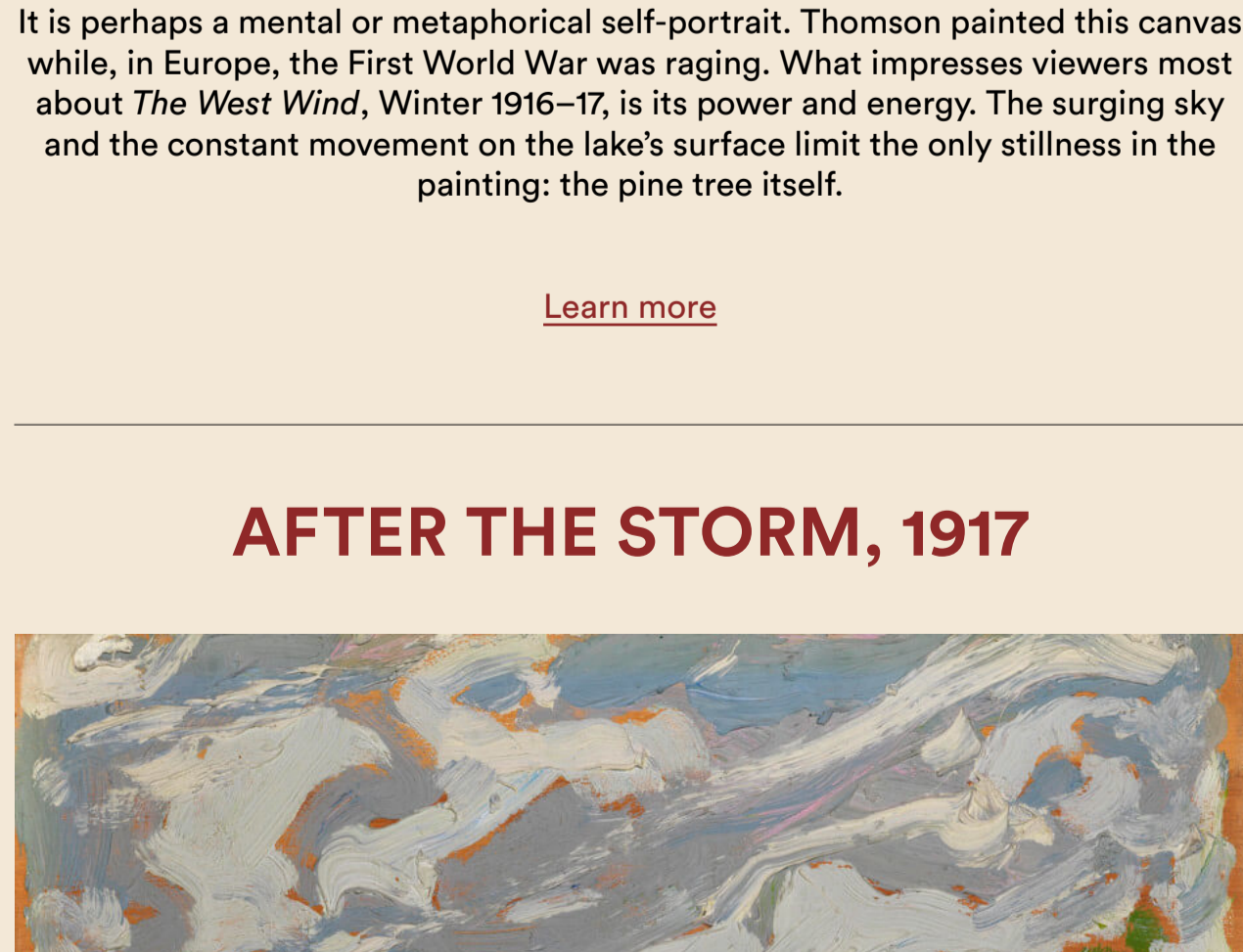
## FIRST SNOW IN AUTUMN, 1916

Tom Thomson, *First Snow in Autumn*, 1916, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

In *First Snow in Autumn*, 1916, Thomson achieves the freedom he had been working toward over the previous three years. Judging by his painting during his final year, his all-consuming objective was to express emotion and passion. The issues of scale and artlessness—of making the act of painting look simple and casual—were also stirring in his work. In this tiny work, with just three basic colours, Thomson creates a radiant gem that is animated throughout. The painting has depth too, the scene is distinct and specific, and his sense of accuracy underlies a painted surface of compulsive, obsessive improvisation.

[Learn more](#)

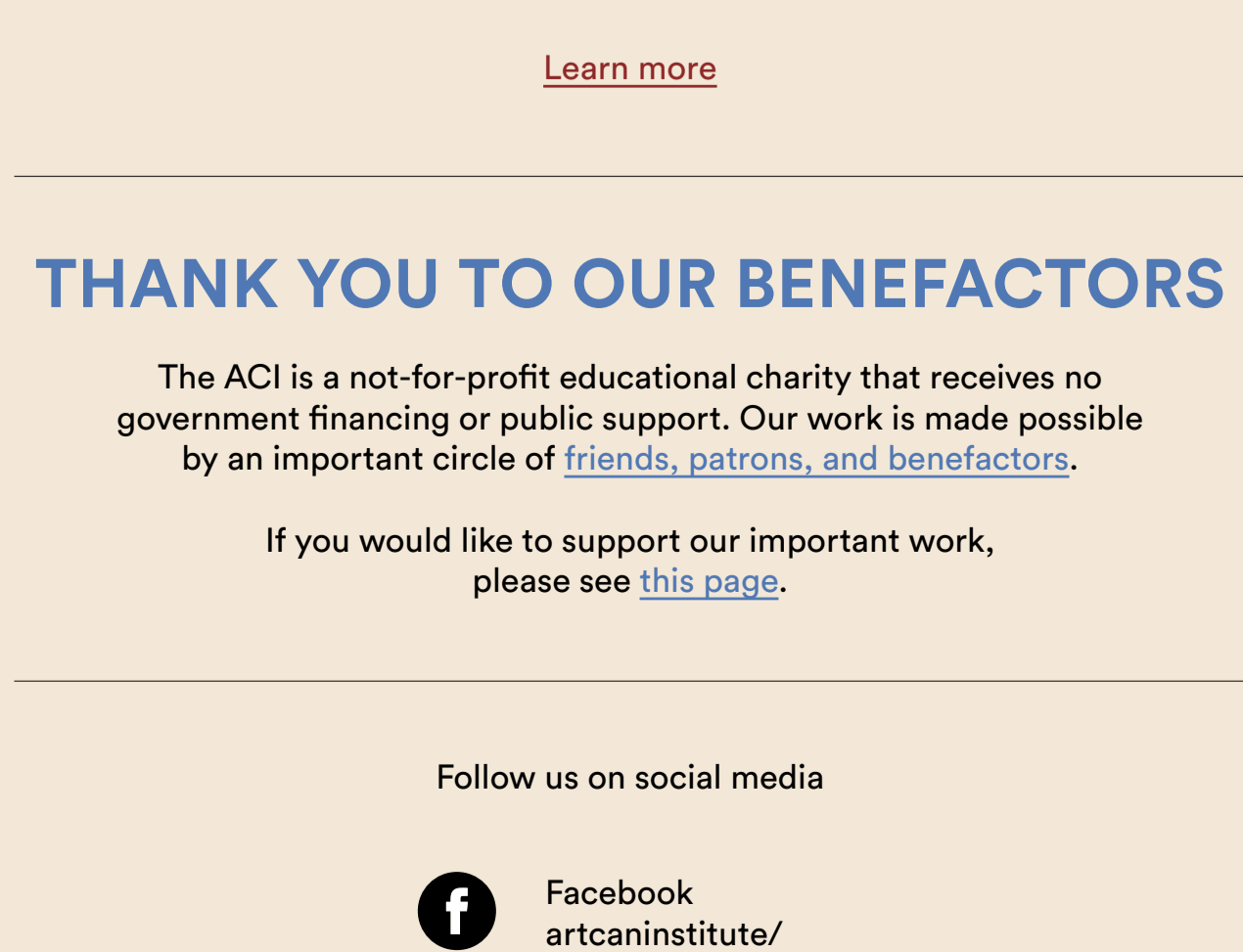
## THE POINTERS, 1916–17

Tom Thomson, *The Pointers*, 1916–17, Hart House Permanent Collection, University of Toronto.

What is remarkable about *The Pointers*, 1916–17, is that the great red autumn hill, except for a few low evergreens, is reflected in both the sky and the water. The paint application is slightly different in each area, but viewers are not confused by the repeating colours. The clouds, in puffy clusters and two sweeping bands, help them instantly to read the painting as intended, just as the loggers’ boats make identification of the lake surface easy. Thomson has produced an enclosed space, a northern Eden, where his devices convince viewers to suspend disbelief and accept his idealization of a world they would like to visit or live in.

[Learn more](#)

## THE WEST WIND, 1916-17

Tom Thomson, *The West Wind*, Winter 1916–17, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

Thomson places the pine tree alone on a point beside a lake. It stands in the middle of the canvas, lopped off at the top—a position that transforms a simple subject into one making a strong and provocative statement. The twisted trunk and branches show age and perseverance, and bravery against the elements. It is perhaps a mental or metaphorical self-portrait. Thomson painted this canvas while, in Europe, the First World War was raging. What impresses viewers most about *The West Wind*, Winter 1916–17, is its power and energy. The surging sky and the constant movement on the lake’s surface limit the only stillness in the painting: the pine tree itself.

[Learn more](#)

## AFTER THE STORM, 1917

Tom Thomson, *After the Storm*, 1917, private collection.

This powerful little panel is one of the last, if not the last, of Thomson’s paintings. Despite the war in Europe, the air was crackling with artistic apprehension, tumultuous change, fear of collapse, and an embrace of the unknown. The prospect of abstraction had already infected the zeitgeist of the Western world. Thomson was already reacting to it, without yet knowing exactly what it was. If you magnify *After the Storm*, 1917, to the point where the scrambled landscape melts into strokes of pigment, you see pure abstraction. Thomson’s short, fitful art education meant that he absorbed things quickly, in a haphazard and frenetic way.

[Learn more](#)

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