

FIRE

TOM THOMSON FIRE-SWEPT HILLS, 1915



RITA LETENDRE TABORI, 1976



Fire is one of the four Classical elements of nature, along with earth, water, and air. It can symbolize many different things, including life and death, warmth and decay, desire and sustenance, love and tears. With all of these layered meanings, fire has been an important source of inspiration for numerous artists.

In Tom Thomson's *Fire-Swept Hills*, fire is a destructive element, leaving behind charred remains of the forest. In Rita Letendre's work *Tabori*, on the other hand, fire represents spiritual passion, the flame that keeps us moving forward.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

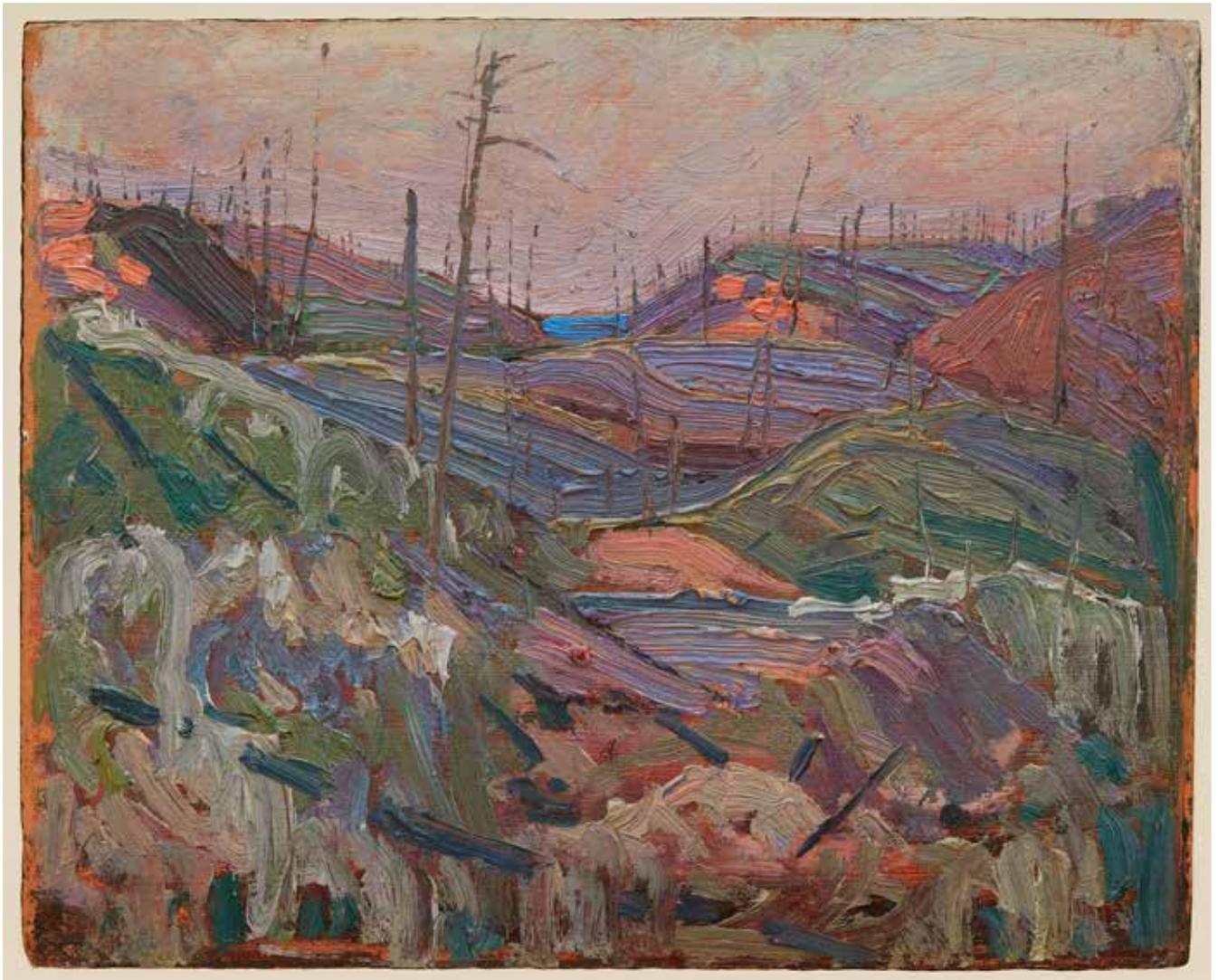
- What colours come to mind when you think about fire?
- What images come to mind when you think of the word "fire"?
- How does our relationship to fire change depending on the context?



SPOTLIGHT I

TOM THOMSON, *FIRE-SWEPT HILLS*
1915

Fire Swept Hills shows the aftermath of fire—a formidable, destructive force.



Tom Thomson. *Fire-Swept Hills*, Summer–Fall 1915. Oil on composite wood-pulp board, 21.6 x 26.7 cm. The Thomson Collection at the Art Gallery of Ontario.
© Art Gallery of Ontario 69222

GUIDED OBSERVATION

ELEMENTARY

- Take 30 seconds to look at the details in this artwork. Write down five words that describe the landscape.
- What season do you think this painting depicts? What time of day do you think the artist may have captured? What clues in the painting tell you this?
- Look closely at how the artist has applied paint onto the surface of this work. Imagine your fingers as a paintbrush, trace the brush strokes throughout the painting. What effect do you think the artist was trying to creating by moving his brush in this way?

SECONDARY

- What is striking about the composition of this painting?
- What feeling does this painting evoke? How has Thomson used colours to communicate this feeling?
- How would you describe the paint textures in this work to someone who has not seen it?

CONTEXT

Tom Thomson (1877–1917) was a Canadian painter who became famous for his colourful and expressive images of the Ontario landscape. As a keen outdoorsman he particularly loved Algonquin Park and spent many summers there, camping, fishing, and sketching. Thomson started many of his works in the park, including *Fire-Swept Hills*. He made small oil sketches on 8 x 10 cm wood panels, and then used these to create larger canvases in a studio during the winter in Toronto. Many of these small sketches are in the AGO's collection.

Fire-Swept Hills is one of several works that Thomson made depicting scenes of mature forest destroyed by fire. The lifeless charred trunks stand out as evidence of fire's destructive power, and the colourful ground conveys chaos and confusion.

CREATIVE RESPONSE

Thomson would often paint small sketches outdoors to capture the impression of what he saw in nature.

For this activity, colour or create a sketch outside, capturing your impressions of the elements around you. Are there trees and rocks? Or tall buildings and cars? What will you decide to include, and what will you leave out? How does your composition change based on your choices?

What lines and colours will you use to capture the wind rustling the trees or the wispy clouds in the sky or the sounds of animals in nature?

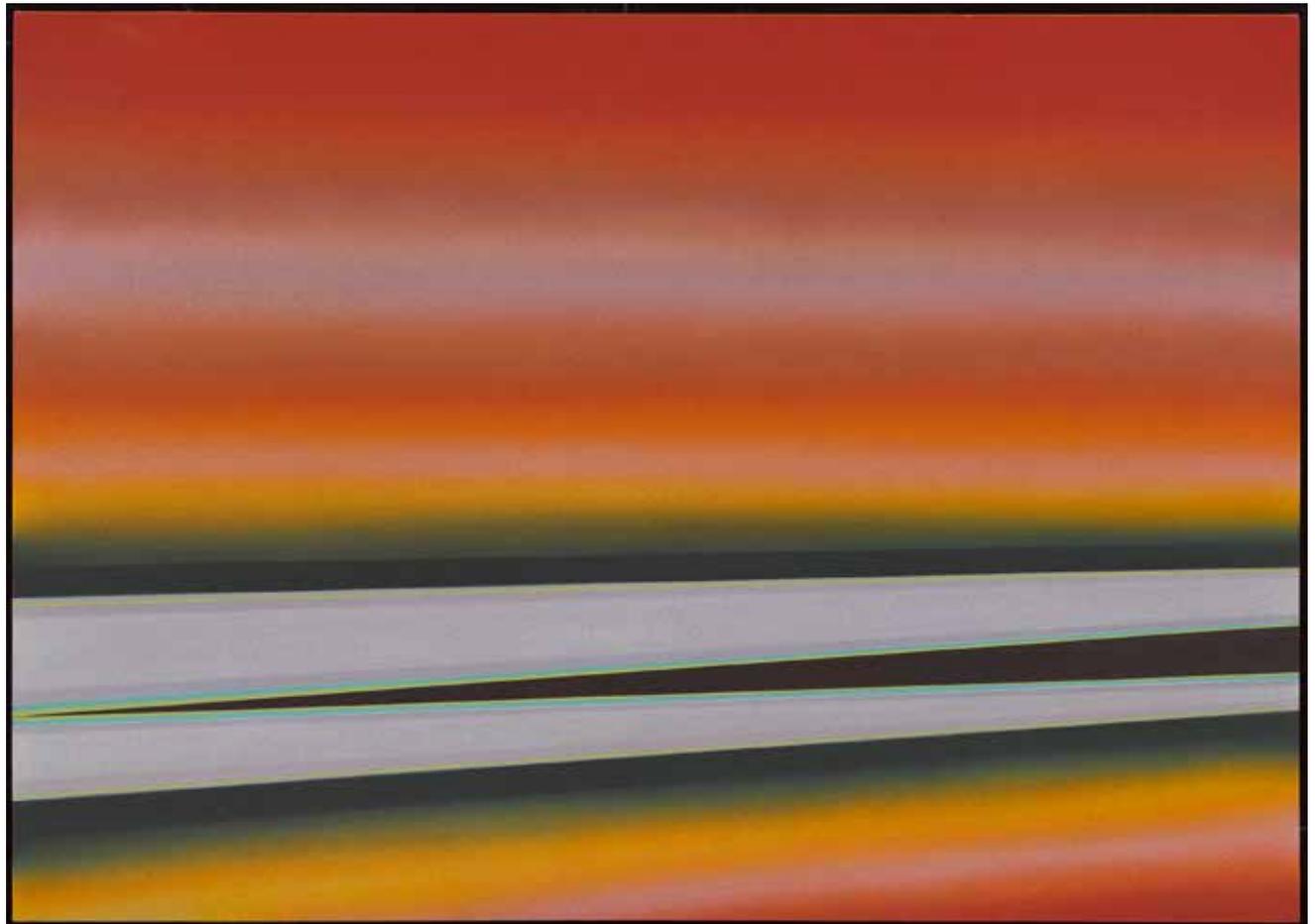


SPOTLIGHT 2

RITA LETENDRE, *TABORI*
1976

“I wanted to portray life and the strength of it. There’s no wishy-washy, or ‘wait for a minute.’ Jump on it!” — Rita Letendre.

The fire in Rita Letendre’s work comes from the intense fiery spirit that drives her life and inspires her art. This is fire as a creative spirit and life force.



Rita Letendre. *Tabori*, 1976. Acrylic on canvas, 86.5 x 122 cm. Gift of Marie A. Dunseith, 1983. © Art Gallery of Ontario 83/289



GUIDED OBSERVATION

ELEMENTARY

- Look at this work for 30 seconds. Then turn away from it, and list the details you can remember. Look back at the work. What did you remember? What did you forget?
- If you could give this painting as a gift to someone, who would it be? Why would you give it to that person? What about this painting would they really like?
- Describe the colours in this artwork. Describe the lines. How do the colours and lines make you feel?

SECONDARY

- How does your eye move through this painting? How does the composition of the work guide this movement?
- What emotion does this work evoke? What do you feel when looking at it?
- If music accompanied this painting, what would it sound like? Would it be a particular song? A genre of music? Or a particular musical instrument?

CONTEXT

Rita Letendre (b. 1928) is a Québécois/Abenaki artist who studied art at the École des Beaux-Arts in Montreal when Paul-Émile Borduas and the Automatistes were active in the city. Inspired by the Surrealist theory of “automatism,” or creation without conscious control, the Automatistes wrote a manifesto called the *Refus global*, arguing that art should be about free expression rather than figurative representation. Letendre’s dynamic, energetic, and boldly colourful compositions show her commitment to the Automatiste spirit.

In the catalogue for the exhibition *Rita Letendre: Fire and Light* at the AGO in 2017, Wanda Nanibush, the AGO’s Curator of Indigenous Art, wrote: “Letendre is a master of colour and light; the fiery quality in her work is significant to what makes it beautiful. Light moves through her work like a beacon of hope, a pathway to somewhere else, and as an uncontainable futurity. Her use of colour and the sheer monumental size of her paintings tend to create for the viewer the impression of being engulfed: we walk inside and wrap them around us, finding insights into the spirit of life through our embodied response.”

CREATIVE RESPONSE

In a conversation with Wanda Nanibush, Curator of Indigenous Art, Letendre spoke about the influence of music on her art. Letendre said that she often listens to opera while painting in her studio.

Listen to their talk here: <https://ago.ca/agoinsider/rita-letendres-lessons-life>

In this activity, experiment with creating art while your favourite music plays in the background. Sketch or paint to the sounds of the music. Try this a few times with different musical genres. How does the music influence your work? How do the lines you draw or the colours you choose vary depending on the music?

Select your favourite piece from this activity and give it a title.
Share your creation with us on social media! #AGOmakes



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