

Lawren Harris at Toronto

Lawren S. Harris: Urban Scenes and Wilderness Landscapes, 1906-1930. An exhibition held at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, 14 January–26 February, 1978.

Catalogue: Jeremy Adamson, *Lawren S. Harris: Urban Scenes and Wilderness Landscapes, 1906-1930*, Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario, 1978. 231 pp., 169 illus., \$15.00 (paper).

The Lawren Harris exhibition presented a fine opportunity to evaluate the work of this member of the Group of Seven through a comprehensive display of representational paintings and accompanying catalogue. The National Gallery of Canada's *Group of Seven* exhibition (19 June–8 September 1970; Musée des Beaux-Arts de Montréal, 22 September–31 October 1970) provided the basis for the current catalogue which, however, does not evaluate the importance of Harris's artistic influence on the development of Canadian art. Rather, the author considers the organic development of the artist's work without facing the other question; conversely, he does not discuss through given examples (save those of non-formal nature) the influences on and sources of Harris. There is tangential consideration of possible sources and relationships, but even then, his text does not permit these to intersect in any specific work of art.

Two retrospectives of Harris's paintings were held during the artist's lifetime. The Art Gallery of Toronto presented 118 representational and abstract paintings (*Lawren Harris: Paintings, 1910-1948*, October–November 1948). The National Gallery of Canada then organized and exhibited a second retrospective of 80 works (*Lawren Harris Retrospective Exhibition, 1963*, 7 June–8 September 1963; Vancouver Art Gallery, 4–27 October 1963), also covering both representational and abstract periods. The present exhibition restricts itself to representational works alone: urban scenes and landscapes. Its 'abstract complement' will be shown at the National Gallery of Canada in 1981. This division of the artist's work has the unfortunate effect of implying the exclusivity of the two periods. Although Jeremy Adamson acknowledges that the abstractions

'are dependent in part on the transcendental landscapes' and the National Gallery catalogue undoubtedly will treat this in detail, the full weight of the demonstration may be lost without the concrete juxtaposition of the two 'periods' in a single showing.

The catalogue comprises text and illustrations as well as a new chronology by Peter Larisey and an appendix with a letter of 1948 by Harris concerning his student days in Berlin and return to Canada. There are no entries on separate paintings, and an index is lacking. This makes difficult the retrieval of information on specific works of art for the reader and viewer alike.

The exhibition itself was handsomely presented in two galleries. The first hung all the urban scenes dating to 1926, and the early and decorative landscapes to 1918. The second included the landscapes, starting from the 1918 Algoma paintings through the Lake Superior and Rocky Mountain scenes and ending with the Arctic paintings of 1930. In as many instances as possible, oil sketches were shown beside the finished works. Seen together, the paintings revealed the full weight of Harris's vision. Some of these were redated. *Red Sumach* and *Building the Ice House, Hamilton* (cat. nos. 37, 43), previously dated 1912, have been redated to ca. 1915 and ca. 1916 respectively. *Miners' Houses, Glace Bay* (cat. no. 136) has been redated from 1921 to ca. 1925.

The earliest works shown were watercolours and drawings from Harris's student days in Berlin (not seen in any previous exhibition) and his Toronto house façades. These reveal the realist aesthetic found in Berlin and establish a motif that became a constant subject with Harris, alternating with his landscapes – with the exception of temporary displacement by the Lake Superior landscapes – until 1926. This period brought German and other regionalist painters to his attention and perhaps stirred the nationalist impulses to be found later in his art. The early paintings develop planar compositions of row housing façades; later work concentrates on a greater plasticity of houses in three-dimensional space coupled with a bolder treat-

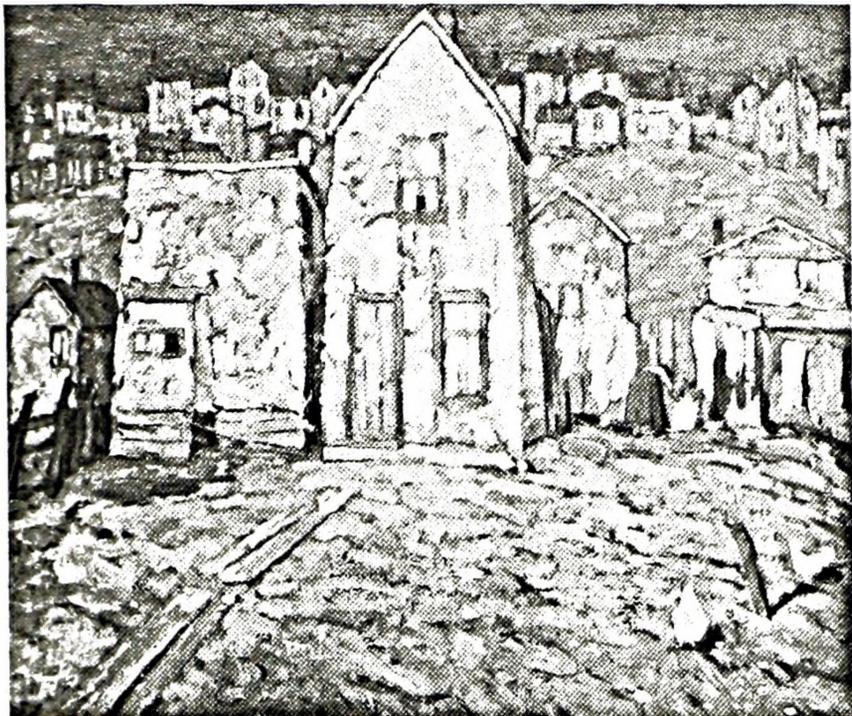


FIGURE 1. Lawren Harris, *Outskirts of Toronto*, 1918. Toronto, collection Rita and Max Merkur. Cat. no. 81.

ment of colour. This suggests some conflict with the aims of the Group of Seven: between 1919 and 1921, when other members of the Group were creating monumental landscapes based on the Algoma countryside, Harris exhibited more urban scenes than landscapes. The implied content of these urban paintings also differs from the earlier works, with Adamson suggesting an unresolved conflict between landscapes and cityscapes, the latter of which he interprets in terms of the book of poetry, *Contrasts*, that Harris published in 1922. The poems' subject matter is used to probe the 'new psychological dimension' of many of the urban paintings of ca. 1920-22 (Fig. 1). The catalogue usefully sets the social situation of the depicted areas of Toronto as it discusses the nature of the paintings' social commentary and public awareness of this act.

The first major development in Harris's art occurred after his and J.E.H. MacDonald's visit to the Exhibition of Contemporary Scandinavian Art in Buffalo, 1913. The decorative winter landscapes that occupied him from 1914 to 1918 were attempts to paint equivalents to Gustav Fjaestad's snow scenes. Harris adapted the technique of dragging a heavily colour-laden brush over the surface of his two-dimensional composition, *Laurentian Landscape*, 1913-14 (cat. no. 32), to the Art Nouveau stylizations of Scandinavian paintings. The combination of decorative colour with constructive brushwork produced a flattened and somewhat abstracted image. The tendency towards heavy sculptural form is first found here.

Development in Harris's landscapes naturally followed successive encounters with a Northland experienced through trips to different areas of the country. Adamson argues (pp. 54, 66) for two undocumented trips in January-February 1913 and the autumn of 1914 prior to the first documented trip to Algonquin in April 1916. The Algoma country absorbed Harris's attention for some years during yearly or twice-yearly

trips from autumn 1918 on. At the end of the September-October 1921 excursion, Harris and A.Y. Jackson travelled further along Lake Superior to its north shore, a voyage that was to change Harris's art. *Above Lake Superior*, ca. 1922 (cat. no. 102, here Fig. 2), is then a pivotal work which led to the abandonment of the mixed brushwork of earlier painting in favour of unified formal means.

At this point, Adamson begins the transcendental, but more specifically, Theosophical, interpretation of Harris's northern landscapes. No doubt Harris was interested in and influenced by Theosophy and other transcendental literature. Writers during Harris's lifetime developed this connection, while authors such as Dennis Reid have since used it to interpret his work. Adamson, however, sets out at length a Theosophical interpretation, at least by implication. If Theosophic content cannot be denied, its specific application may be questioned here in that one is left with the feeling that certain methodological questions have neither been stated nor resolved.

Indeed, Adamson attributes the 'dramatic change seen in *Above Lake Superior* and the landscapes that follow' to Harris's involvement in Theosophy and mysticism, further suggesting the use of such texts – as well as writings on Harris – to comprehend paintings after ca. 1922 (pp. 126, 132, 140, 161). This may aid in general comprehension of artistic intention, but is rather insufficient for questions of specific interpretation. Could Theosophical content *determine* the formal artistic refinement in conjunction with Harris's discovery of an appropriate landscape to serve as subject? In other words, did Theosophical content deflect the formal development of Harris's painting, or were there other, compelling, reasons? With this arises the whole problem of abstraction: the logic of Harris's vision did lead him to abstraction, but is there content present in the form of the abstracted landscapes? The three general principles of Theosophical 'thought-forms' from Besant and Leadbeater's *Thought-Forms* (1901) are given by Adamson as:

- Quality of thought determines colour
- Nature of thought determines form
- Definiteness of thought determines clearness of outline (p. 133)

Although Adamson states that 'the design of painting, in Harris's opinion, should correspond to the mystical arrangement of the spiritual universe,' he retains only the pictorial features of space and light as means of embodying Harris's mystical vision. Nowhere does he develop these three points with respect to any other abstract formal elements of Harris's painting.

Mystical apprehension of landscape invariably adapts the landscape to its own vision. Adamson maintains that the Lake Superior landscapes bear little resemblance to actual typography and are seen only with the inner eye. This is not necessarily the case; in fact, the study for *Above Lake Superior* (cat. fig. 14) shows that Harris adapted and simplified for a stronger formal statement in the final work. This is no

different a practice than occurs in the transformation of the image from sketch to final painting in all of the Group's work. Most of the earlier paintings are stylized to a degree; and yet the author admits the 'greater amount of realism' in a painting *First Snow, North Shore, Lake Superior* (cat. no. 104) of a year later. Any discussion of Harris's consistency of vision in this and subsequent periods must then come to terms with symbols and their understanding. Adamson's approach is apparent in the treatment of *North Shore, Lake Superior*, 1926 (cat. no. 130 and pp. 156-58). If symbols cannot be rationally determined, or lack exact interpretations, there is a certain danger of over-interpreting or over-determining the paintings by applying broad and unqualified statements. While Harris rejected traditional symbolism in painting, his own interpretation of his work accords with the German Romantic notion of symbol, historically developed from the close distinction between the symbolical and rational made by Kant. While one may interpret the artist's intention as symbolical for the purposes of art historical discussion, one must question whether the painting itself is a symbol.

Adamson has great apparent sympathy for Harris's notions of mysticism, perhaps as a result of drawing too literally from Harris's own writings. This criticism pertains to the inappropriate use of metaphysical terminology that may go beyond the bounds of discourse. Examples of this include the 'archetype of icebergs' or the presumption that Harris wished to depict 'the Platonic ideal of "islandness"' in the *Pic Island* painting, ca. 1924 (cat. no. 118). One might accordingly question the necessity of the author's universal application of Theosophical interpretation to Harris's paintings. He asserts, for example, that the bands surrounding the mountain in the sketch *Isolation Peak*, ca. 1929 (cat. fig. 29) doubtlessly represent the aura of thought-form clothed in the pre-existing, or natural, mystical triangle. While these thought-forms seem to appear in Harris's later abstractions, this banding is absent from the final painting of the above subject (cat. 156)! Such bands could in any case be stylizations: they do not accord with the thought-forms produced by the music of Wagner and described as mountain ranges in Besant and Leadbeater. Nor are they similar to the eccentric, jagged, and multicoloured forms that rise above the mountains in the abstract *Mountain Spirit*, 1945 (University of British Columbia),



FIGURE 2. Lawren Harris, *Above Lake Superior*, ca. 1922. Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario. Cat. no. 102.

that are, at this later date, closer to the thought-forms represented in this same book. In sum, the Theosophic tendency seems not to have deflected Harris's landscapes away from their nationalistic impulses: his own writings show their intimate connection.

In conclusion, the catalogue makes an important contribution to scholarship on Canadian art in its documentation of Harris's career. It suffers, however, from too much and too lengthy discussion of formal qualities in Harris's artistic development. Such exclusivity of interpretation can only be detrimental to the evaluation of other influences on Harris, even if there is no lack of possibilities mentioned in the text and notes; these unfortunately are out of sequence from notes 215 to 240 inclusive. Artists such as Rockwell Kent and Bertram Brooker, the latter of whom was a friend and abstract painter, are discussed without suggesting what these relationships signified for Harris. Friedrich is mentioned only for his nationalist ideas, although the discussion should be broadened to formal and iconographic terms. In any event, the long-awaited National Gallery exhibition will afford the opportunity to determine the interpretation of the late landscapes and to see whether, and to what degree, Theosophical content is applicable to the course of Harris's entire development.

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