



237 LAWREN STEWART HARRIS

ALC BCSFA CGP FCA G7 OSA RPS 1885 ~ 1970

Houses, St. Patrick Street

oil on canvas, signed and dated 1922 and on verso titled on the CNE label and the Art Gallery of Ontario label
32 1/2 x 40 1/4 in, 82.5 x 102.2 cm

PROVENANCE:

Mrs. E.F. Ely, Toronto
Charles S. Band, Toronto
Estate of Helen E. Band, Toronto

LITERATURE:

Lawren Harris, *Contrasts: A Book of Verse*, 1922, pages 36 and 57
Lawren Harris, *Art as an Expression of the Value of its Day*, National Archives of Canada, Lawren Harris fonds, Mg 30 D28 volume 2
Canadian National Exhibition of Paintings and International Graphic Art, 1923, reproduced page 29, listed page 30
Lawren Harris, *Paintings 1910~1948*, The Art Gallery of Toronto, 1948, listed page 33
Jeremy Adamson, *Lawren S. Harris, Urban Scenes and Wilderness Landscapes, 1906~1930*, Art Gallery of Ontario, 1978, reproduced page 121
David P. Silcox, *The Group of Seven and Tom Thomson*, 2003, the 1925 Rous & Mann print produced from an ink drawing of this painting reproduced page 24 and listed page 411

EXHIBITED:

Canadian National Exhibition of Paintings and International Graphic Art, Toronto, August 25 ~ September 8, 1923, catalogue #178
The Art Gallery of Toronto, *Lawren Harris, Paintings 1910~1948*, October ~ November, 1948, catalogue #24
David B. Findlay Galleries, New York City, *Paintings and Drawings from the Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Charles S. Band, A Loan Exhibition on the Occasion of the Celebration and Centennial of Canadian Confederation*, May 1 ~ October 4, 1967, traveling to the Albany Institute of History and Art, Confederation Art Gallery and Museum, Charlottetown and the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton, catalogue #15
Art Gallery of Ontario, *Lawren S. Harris, Urban Scenes and Wilderness Landscapes, 1906~1930*, January 14 ~ February 26, 1978, catalogue #99



Dundas Street looking east to St. Patrick Street, June 12, 1919

Many of Lawren Harris's earliest paintings were of Toronto street scenes ~ buildings and houses in what was known as the Ward, an area around University Avenue and College Street, where much of Toronto's immigrant population lived at the turn of the century. The T. Eaton Co. Ltd. factory was nearby, one of many manufacturing companies that sprang up in Toronto in the industrial boom of the late 1800s. The area was a ramshackle maze of tumbledown houses and shacks. Some of these dwellings were once stately Georgian-style homes, given over to tenement housing and factory work. Now demolished and completely built over, St. Patrick Street would have been on the Ward's outer edge. The area fascinated Harris ~ its colour and texture, varied ethnic populations and teeming life must have been a strong contrast to his genteel and wealthy upbringing.

A young man at the time of these works, Harris was not without scars. His brother Howard had been killed in World War I, and he himself had been discharged from the army after a nervous breakdown. Returning to the hustle and bustle of Toronto after these experiences, he was keenly aware of social position and its ramifications on one's life. Tom Thomson, his wilderness inspiration, had drowned, and we can assume that any idealization left from his youth had been worn away by these losses. He turned to the streets and alleys of his home city, and his paintings of it are



Housing, 33 St. Patrick Street, Square Rear, September 28, 1939



*William Street (St. Patrick Street) and corner of Anderson Street
(Dundas Street ~ Anderson Street widening), March 5, 1912*



Fence and lodge of The Grange, 1909



Spadina Avenue north of St. Patrick Street, west side, circa 1914



full of social commentary and visual polemics. Their exhibition caused quite a stir, with both admirers and detractors, all of them vocal ~ but this would always seem to be the case for Lawren Harris.

Shortly after this work was painted, Harris joined the Toronto Chapter of the Theosophical Society of Canada. He was deeply interested in the sublime mystical experience, and it is important to note that the dramatic and remote North Shore of Lake Superior works were being painted during the same years that Harris was exploring the poorer neighbourhoods of Toronto, several of them the same year that *Houses, St. Patrick Street* was painted. At Lake Superior, Harris sought the spiritual essence of his subject, the greater meaning of things. So, too, in his Toronto street scenes, he sought the greater meaning. Instead of a sublime natural order in an isolated island or a single, stark tree trunk, in *Houses, St. Patrick Street*, the greater meaning, the sublime centre of the work, is humanity. Light streams down brilliantly onto a single figure, walking determinedly along a street littered with fallen chestnut leaves. She is a minor part of the work, yet her presence is important. She is resolute, upright, determined, with her back to the shadows. She represents humanity, as does the home, the light and the dazzling gold of the tree leaves. All of it is hope.

Harris published an important book of poetry in 1922, aptly titled *Contrasts*. The free verse poems within discuss the very questions of social order that the homes of the poor in Toronto presented to him. Harris felt that the arts of poetry, painting, music and theatre were all interrelated. This magnificent work, painted the same year the poems were published, can be seen as a visual poem. Harris wrote:

*In people
There is a sun
A centre of light, of hope,
A rose of bliss.*

Harris was an eternal optimist. His serious nature and eloquent, intellectual writing, which could sometimes be blatantly critical of wrongs he saw in society, does not always bring this quality forth. *Contrasts* was not happily received ~ its truths were too much for some. But Harris's optimism is found in his art, in his continual pursuit of the elusive "something more". In every brush~stroke of every painting, he seeks this "more", this rightness, this justice. He seeks clarity, purity and knowledge through beauty.

*Are you sad like that?
Are you sad walking down streets,
Streets hard as steel; cold, repellent;
Cruel?
Are you sad seeing people there,
Outcast from beauty,
Even afraid of beauty,
Not knowing?*

Decorative and delicate works such as *Houses, St. Patrick Street* represent Harris's Impressionist period of painting, wherein fine brushwork, dappled light and vividly coloured urban and natural scenes dominate. Impressionism's far-reaching influence had touched Canadian painters through their European travels and war experiences, as well as through traveling exhibitions and books. Harris's early work drew on the techniques of the Impressionists and the design tenets of Art Nouveau, which we see side by side in *Houses, St. Patrick Street*. Perfect partners, these two styles shaped his scenery of urban Toronto. "Impressionism affected all of us," he would write. "It took us out of doors in the early years and for most of our lives as painters we remained there." During this period he painted with a palette knife, laying thick swaths of paint in brilliant colours onto his canvases. And, as in the Lake Superior works, he was concerned deeply with light and shadow, and the effect of these upon colour and atmospheric qualities. It was in these, and earlier canvases of street scenes, that his mastery of light, seen in such a different manifestation in his Lake Superior and Arctic works, is first tested.

Houses, St. Patrick Street is a beautifully delicate work. Carefully composed, with the house set back from the street, it is hard to imagine anything rushed, hurried or boisterous in looking at this scene. Still, the Ward was a bustling beehive of activity, commerce and life. In fact, at the time this work was painted, the central part of the Ward was the poorest neighbourhood in Toronto. Yet Harris has painted stately trees, their tops dressed in gold, their trunks recalling his trees of Lake Superior. Was it the overlaying beauty of Impressionism that causes this work to read as so very lovely, or is it Harris's notions of social justice and humanity that we read in it?

ESTIMATE: \$1,200,000 ~ 1,600,000