

# The New York Times

## Steve Martin Adds ‘Curator’ to His Wild and Crazy Résumé

By JORI FINKEL

SEPTEMBER 25, 2015



*Steve Martin and two curators have organized an exhibition of paintings by Lawren Harris. Credit John Francis Peters for The New York Times*

LOS ANGELES — Steve Martin looked as if he were playing a fast-paced board game. Standing inside a gallery at the [Hammer Museum](#) here with its director and two curators, the tall actor was hunched over a small tabletop model of that very room.

The four took turns placing and replacing tiny pictures on the tiny museum walls. There was a lot of pointing and gesturing — though not quite the wild gesticulation of Mr. Martin's most memorable characters. The goal was to hash out a preliminary arrangement of artworks before hanging the actual paintings.

“That’s a beautiful, moody iceberg picture,” Mr. Martin said, as an image no bigger than a business card — this one showing a soaring, snowy mountain peak — fell off a miniature wall.

Mr. Martin reached over to pick up the small reproduction and handed it to the museum’s director, Ann Philbin, who held the tape dispenser. “We’ve got to use stronger tape when we hang the paintings,” he said, with perfect comedic timing.

Yes, this multifaceted actor, comedian, New Yorker writer, novelist, semiprofessional magician and Grammy-winning banjo player, who has long been a serious collector of modern American painting, is adding a new role to his repertoire: art curator.

Working closely with two seasoned curators, Cynthia Burlingham from the Hammer Museum and Andrew Hunter from the [Art Gallery of Ontario](#), he has organized a tightly focused, masterpiece-driven show, “[The Idea of North](#),” to introduce the 20th-century Canadian painter Lawren Harris (1885-1970) to American museumgoers. It opens on Oct. 11 in Los Angeles before traveling to Boston and Toronto.

“He’s Canada’s greatest artist and nobody in America knows who he is, with a few exceptions,” said Mr. Martin, 70, who sees the show as a chance to use “my celebrity face” to try to draw attention to the painter he sees as a counterpart to Georgia O’Keeffe and Marsden Hartley.

Mr. Martin expressed disappointment that the Metropolitan Museum of Art had passed on the show. “I really wanted to have a venue in New York, but I’m very happy the show is going to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts,” he said.

Born in Ontario in 1885 into a manufacturing fortune, Harris helped to establish in 1920 the Group of Seven, painters who celebrated the vast, rugged Canadian terrain at a time when everything French was de rigueur. He soon developed a distinctive style, using flat expanses of color, spiky geometries like triangles and pyramids and a self-mirroring of forms to create highly stylized images of nature. Many of his favorite subjects, whether rays of sun skimming the surface of Lake Superior, dramatic Rockies peaks or hulking Arctic icebergs, are rendered in such strong, simplified volumes that they end up looking like architecture.



*"North Shore, Lake Superior" by Canadian artist Lawren Harris. Credit NGC/via Family of Lawren S. Harris*

Mr. Martin, who owns three paintings by Harris, spent much of the last two years working on the exhibition while also collaborating with Edie Brickell on a musical, "Bright Star," headed for the Kennedy Center in Washington in December. The two also have a new album, "So Familiar," coming out at the end of October.

"I always feel like all these things are linked," he said, sitting in a small Hammer Museum study center, his eggplant-purple jacket and tie the color of some of Harris's mountains.

"You might say it's extreme to curate an art show and then do an hour banjo show, but it's not that far off-center to me. And you apply the same principles to both — the first being, you do the best you can."



*“Mountains in Snow: Rocky Mountain Paintings VII” by Canadian artist Lawren Harris. Credit The Thomson Collection/Art Gallery of Ontario*

He carved out the time while enjoying family life — he and his wife, Anne Stringfield, have a young daughter. “For one, I don’t have a job,” he deadpanned.

But when talking about Harris’s paintings, Mr. Martin stayed away from quick one-liners, often pausing to find the right words and details to capture his experiences. He said he was first drawn to the work “maybe 20 years ago” in Canada, where he has done both comedy writing and filming. “I would stop at these amazing bookstores — big bookstores in little towns — and pick up books on Harris or the Group of Seven.”

“I would call them powerful, emotional landscapes,” he said, sounding more relaxed in the role of a fan than when talking about himself. “You can marvel at a 19th-century American landscape painting because you can’t believe you can see every leaf on every tree. But here there are no leaves and no trees, or nothing that looks like a living tree, and the response is much more emotional, I think.”



*Steve Martin and Cynthia Burlingham have worked with an Ontario curator on a show of paintings by the Canadian artist Lawren Harris. Credit John Francis Peters for The New York Times*

Ms. Philbin, the Hammer’s director, had a similar reaction when she spotted a small painting during a dinner party at Mr. Martin’s home three years ago. “It was a view of trees with a lake behind it, an ordinary subject, but it had a very animated presence, very stylized, almost cartoonish, and I don’t mean that in a pejorative way,” she said. “It was fantastic, so I asked who did it. Steve said Lawren Harris, and I said, ‘Who’s that?’ ”

It took a few more months — and a visit to Montreal, where she saw more of the painter’s work — before Ms. Philbin came up with the idea of asking Mr. Martin to organize a show. (His only prior connection to the museum had been a tribute he once delivered there to Cindy Sherman, an ex-girlfriend.)

“My initial reaction was, ‘Of course not,’ ” Mr. Martin recalled. But the idea grew on him. “It didn’t feel like dilettantism to me. I’ve loved the work for so long. And a loving curator is an asset to an artist, probably.”



*Canadian artist Lawren Harris. Credit via Hammer Museum*

Over the next two years, he made several trips to Canadian museums to visit prized paintings by Harris and make a personal pitch for the loans, focusing on the artist's prime period of the '20s and '30s. He went to great lengths, Ms. Philbin said, "to see every single painting in the show in person."

One stop was the University of Toronto, to see "[Isolation Peak, Rocky Mountains](#)," a striking 1930 oil on canvas of a pyramid-shaped mountain draped in snow. Mr. Martin called it "an incredible, solitary, Hopperesque painting." He said that Harris often reminded him of Edward Hopper, who is at the core of his own collection, but he admitted that the connection was personal, "not art historical — their pictures don't even look alike." Rather, the painters seemed to share an obsession with isolation. "For Hopper, isolation meant desolation," he said, adding that the cosmopolitan Harris found meaning and beauty in it. "He was trying to be alone."

Another stop was the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. He brought along the comedian Martin Short, as they were flying to Calgary to do a benefit show, "Steve Martin and Martin Short in a Very Stupid Conversation."



*“Pic Island” by Canadian artist Lawren Harris. Credit via McMichael Canadian Art Collection*

“Marty’s Canadian, so he loves the work,” Mr. Martin said, then suggested a test of sorts to determine if someone walking the streets of, say, New York or Los Angeles, grew up in Canada: “You say: Hi, Lawren Harris. And see if their eyes twitch.”

Mr. Hunter of the Art Gallery of Ontario, who organized the artist’s 2000 retrospective at the [Americas Society in New York](#), said that within Canada, Harris’s images had traveled far beyond art museums to appear on calendars and postage stamps. “If you’re of my generation — I grew up in the ’60s and ’70s at a time of a great nationalism — you learned about Lawren Harris in school, seeing his images not just in art books, but books of Canadian history and geography,” he said.

“They were so tied to an idea of Canada that we didn’t see them as paintings — they were icons,” he added.



*“Lake Harbour, South Shore, Baffin Island, Morning.” Credit NGC/via Family of Lawren S. Harris*

Ms. Burlingham, the Hammer curator, said that Mr. Hunter did the most work arranging loans; she took the lead on the catalog, and Mr. Martin had the vision that drove the show.

Or, as Mr. Martin put it, “Andrew knows Lawren Harris the best, Cindy has a deep knowledge of museums and has developed an eye for the work, and I am the goofy celebrity — the excited one.”

Self-deprecating comments aside, he said that organizing a show “didn’t feel over my head.” For starters, he has an art collection at home that bridges over a century, from [Georges Seurat](#) to [Mark Grotjahn](#), and he likes to rearrange it from time to time. “If something’s hung for years in the same spot, you tend not to see it any more,” he said.

Mr. Martin noted, though, that his art buying had dwindled over the last few years. “I’m not really an active collector anymore,” he said, adding that he had been “priced out” of many of the American painters he likes.

Harris’s prices are also steep — one painting set a \$3.5 million auction record for the artist’s work, in 2009, but Mr. Martin said he had bought his earlier. None of them are in the Hammer show — “that would have been wrong,” he said.



But Ms. Philbin said she believed that his celebrity did help their efforts to borrow works. “We were afraid of not getting some of the loans,” she said, noting that the museum was competing with Canada’s 150th-anniversary events, planned for 2017.

“I do think the fact that Steve Martin was calling helped to open the door,” she said.