



109 **Lawren Stewart Harris**

ALC BCSFA CGP FCA G7 OSA TPG 1885 – 1970

Mountain Sketch

oil on board, signed and on verso signed, titled, inscribed x x/ and with the Doris Mills Inventory #7/79, and with the Dominion Gallery Inventory #F1816 on the gallery label and stamped with the Dominion Gallery stamp, circa 1928
12 x 15 in, 30.5 x 38.1 cm

PROVENANCE

Dominion Gallery, Montreal
Acquired from the above by Enid Strathearn Hendrie Owen,
May 4, 1955
By descent to the present Private Collection, Quebec

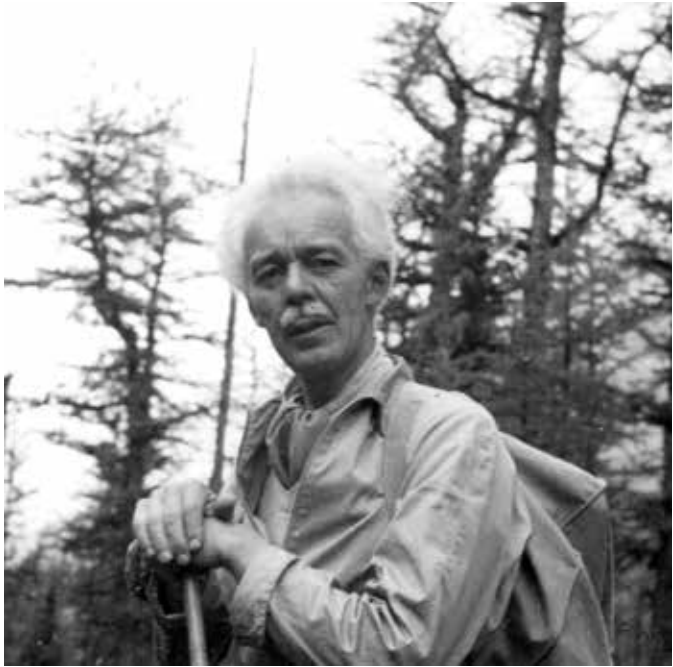
LITERATURE

Doris Mills, *L.S. Harris Inventory*, 1936, Rocky Mountain Sketches, Group 7, catalogue #79, location noted as the Studio Building, and a drawing of the painting illustrated by Hans Jensen

MOUNTAIN SKETCH, a confident and powerful painting, is a brilliant demonstration of Lawren Harris’s ability to channel the inspiration of the Canadian landscape into striking and profound artistic expressions. Painted at the apex of his landscape period in the late 1920s, and featuring a scene near Lake McArthur in Yoho National Park, this work depicts an imposing mountain landscape in brilliant blues and using dramatically simplified forms. It is also a clear testament to Harris’s fascination with light, reflecting the importance it held for him in the mission to discover and convey the underlying spiritual significance of the world around him through his art.

Harris first traveled to the Rockies in 1924, accompanied by A.Y. Jackson, and together they explored the valleys, lakes and peaks of Jasper National Park. Capturing landscapes on an entirely different scale than seen anywhere in Ontario, Harris’s initial works focus mostly on the striking topography of the region and are impressive, original and invigorating. As Harris continued to return to the mountains and as he explored the areas around Lake O’Hara, Lake Louise and Mount Robson, his focus shifted, expanding from the grandeur of these wondrous geological cathedrals to include the spirit of being amongst their majesty and the resonance of their presence. His work in the mountains became a significant step in his artistic journey, where he pushed the limits of objective expression and his processes of simplification and selection. Through this, he would find a direct path to abstraction, where he would later “in one painting endeavor to achieve a combination of moods, rhythms, character, and spirit that would be an expressive synthesis of many mountain experiences.”¹ With mountains providing Harris with the gateway to abstraction, it is no surprise that we find not only clear reference to their forms in many of the later abstract works but also the clearest precedents of abstraction in his mountain subjects, such as in this fine painting.

Harris perceived the trajectory of an artist as evolving through stages, with growth and discovery being the reward of the courageous and determined devotee. As he explained, “Each new phase constitutes a new experience, a fresh revaluation, readjustment and alteration of emotional values that at times may prove trying. But the growth has been an inevitable and natural one,



Lawren Harris hiking in the Rockies, circa 1940s
Courtesy of the family of Lawren S. Harris



THIS PAGE:
 FIGURE 1: **LAWREN HARRIS**
Untitled Mountain Landscape
 oil on canvas, circa 1928
 48 ¾ x 60 ¼ in, 122.2 x 152.7 cm
 Thomson Collection at the Art Gallery of Ontario,
 AGO ID: 103935
 Photo: © Art Gallery of Ontario

Not for sale with this lot

OPPOSITE PAGE:
 FIGURE 2: **LAWREN HARRIS**
Rocky Mountain Drawing 9-19
 graphite on paper
 7 ½ x 9 ¾ in, 19 x 25.1 cm
 Private Collection

Not for sale with this lot



and will broaden and extend and deepen in the future. Inevitably, if the artist does not slip into the deadening backwater of desire for reward or position, he is led from particular expression and outward aspect toward universal expression and the spirit that informs all life.”² *Mountain Sketch* is a demonstration of Harris in the process of such development, as he strains against the tethers of reality in the expression of his own perception of the mountain experience—trying to capture its essence and convey truths that more literal translations would fall short of.

This painting’s central focus, the atmospheric beams of ethereal light that are reverently depicted and celebrated, represent much more than an atmospheric phenomenon, a fleeting moment in time. For Harris, they are an exploration of the connections between the realms of heaven and earth and, more generally, a manifestation of ideas Harris often contemplated regarding the interplay between conceptual planes. Similar themes can be found in Harris’s earliest explorations of abstraction, including the canvas *Figure with Rays of Light* (in the Thomson Collection at the Art Gallery of Ontario), which was exhibited as *Design for a Chapel* in 1928. It is easy to align these works and, given its luminance and clarity of design, view *Mountain Sketch* as akin to an allegorical stained glass window for these deeper inquiries.

Mountain Sketch’s treatment of the sky also directly links it to one of Harris’s most spiritually imbued landscape canvases, the ethereal *Untitled Mountain Landscape* (also in the Thomson Collection at the Art Gallery of Ontario, figure 1). Though the

canvas depicts a different specific location (the mountains surrounding Banff’s Moraine Lake) and is preceded by another oil on board sketch, the light beams that we see in the sketch and the canvas seem to find their inspiration in the scene depicted in *Mountain Sketch*. Significant insight into Harris’s methods can be gained from the examination of his graphite sketches, which were almost always carried out in the field, in front of the scene, preceding the oil done on site or in the studio. *Mountain Sketch* has a related pencil study (*Rocky Mountain Drawing 9-19*, sold by Heffel in November 2013, figure 2), which places the subject in the vicinity of Lake McArthur in Yoho National Park and features the same central mountain and indications of light beams, a composition that the oil sketch refines, placing the mountain directly under the source of light. *Untitled Mountain Landscape* features this same arrangement, but the composition of the original pencil sketch for that scene (*Rocky Mountain Drawing 9-63*, sold by Heffel in June 2019) shows no reference to the beams of light, suggesting their origin is from elsewhere, and the connection can clearly be drawn here to our work. Like his fellow artists, Harris would sometimes use multiple source materials for a final piece (Tom Thomson’s *The Jack Pine* being the most well-known painting illustrating this practice), and in such a manner, the full magnificence of the *Untitled Mountain Landscape* canvas was realized utilizing key components from *Mountain Sketch*.

In the catalogue to the first Group of Seven exhibition, in 1920, Harris wrote some brief notes about the artists’ inspiration and motivations, and also how they hoped the works would

be received. Harris wrote, “The artists invite adverse criticism. Indifference is the greatest evil they have to contend with. But they would ask you—do you read books that contain only what you already know? If not, they argue, then you should hardly want to see pictures that show you what you can already see for yourselves.”³ In *Mountain Sketch*, Harris has indeed revealed to us something original and challenging, a vision of realms beyond the immediate, peering into the eternal. Even now, almost a century later, works such as this invite new reflection, shining exciting insight into Harris as an artist and offering inspiring, novel perspectives on the Canadian landscape itself.

We thank Alec Blair, Director/Lead Researcher, Lawren S. Harris Inventory Project, for contributing the above essay.

The original owner of this work, Enid Strathearn Hendrie Owen (1888 – 1968), was the daughter of Sir John Strathearn Hendrie KCMG CVO (1857 – 1923), 11th Lieutenant-Governor of Ontario, from 1914 to 1919.

1. Bess Harris and R.G.P. Colgrove, eds., *Lawren Harris* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1969), 91.
2. Quoted in *ibid.*, 96.
3. Foreword, *Catalogue: Exhibition of Paintings, May 7th – May 27th, 1920* (Toronto: Art Museum of Toronto, 1920).

ESTIMATE: \$500,000 – 700,000