



105 Frederick Horsman Varley

ARCA G7 OSA 1881 – 1969

Vera and Fellow Student Sketching at Lynn / Lynn Valley Mountains, BC

double-sided oil on board, circa 1934

15 x 12 in, 38.1 x 30.5 cm

PROVENANCE

Estate of Vera Weatherbie, Vancouver
Mr. and Mrs. Fred Schaeffer, Toronto
Christopher Varley, Toronto
Masters Gallery Ltd., Calgary
Private Collection, Calgary

LITERATURE

Joan Murray, *The Best of the Group of Seven*, 1984, the related watercolour entitled *Lynn Valley* reproduced page 92

F.H. VARLEY'S OIL on board *Vera and Fellow Student Sketching at Lynn / Lynn Valley Mountains, BC*, a two-sided work, unites a vertical scene on the front of the panel in which two students are sketching amid the lush growth of the Lynn Valley in North Vancouver with a horizontal painting on the back of fall or winter in the same area (there is snow on the mountain, which suggests the season). In the painting on the front, the two students are shown from behind. The student wearing pink is unknown, but the one wearing a yellow sweater is Varley's inamorata, Vera Weatherbie.

In a letter of January 23, 1990, which accompanies this lot, Christopher Varley, Varley's grandson, identifies Vera from several details: her yellow sweater, which appears in other paintings of her, as in *Portrait of Vera* (circa 1935, in the Thomson Collection at the Art Gallery of Ontario), her slightly stooped posture, her hair, and the fact that she is painting—for she too was an artist. She had met Varley when she attended the Vancouver School of Decorative and Applied Arts (now Emily Carr University of Art + Design) in 1926, when the school first opened. He was one of her instructors, had a wife and children, and was 45 years old. She was 17, impish, attractive, and with "unusual charm."¹

Their exact relationship will never be known, but it put *finis* to Varley's marriage. She believed that her friendship with him was spiritual and that she encouraged and guided his development, teaching him about colour choices, for instance;² he painted many portraits of her in a way that exudes sensuality. Misunderstandings on both sides abounded. But this beautiful painting reveals a tender feeling on his part as he painted the two young people in a veritable Garden of Eden, Canadian-style.

He had painted certain features of what must have been a favourite painting place—the upright shapes of the dead trees, for example—when he had earlier painted the work that some consider his finest portrait, *Dharana* (1932, Art Gallery of Ontario),



verso

a portrait of Vera holding her breath in the Buddhist exercise to increase concentration of the mind. Art scholars such as Christopher Varley say that she inspired some of the best figure work he did in British Columbia. Of all the work he did of her in all media, "there is scarcely one that is not fully felt."³

By contrast, this more modest painting beguiles the viewer with its benign view of Vera and her friend. The relationship of Varley with Vera, whatever it was, meant something to both of them. Perhaps the quality that made it endure for him was that it was a restful respite for him to look at romantic Vera, who idolized him, even as she sat quietly painting with a friend at a time when he was beset with financial woes. The period from 1934 to 1936 proved to be a challenging time for Varley.

Fellow painter Arthur Lismer had come to Canada from Sheffield, in the UK. His enthusiasm brought Varley from the same town in England to Toronto in 1912, where he got a job at the design firm Grip Ltd. After he moved to Vancouver in 1926, he worked at the newly founded art school, where he oversaw the Department of Drawing and Painting. By 1931, the school was in difficulties. In 1933, Varley and his colleague Jock Macdonald opened a separate school, the British Columbia College of Arts, but it too faced difficulties and closed in 1935 at the end of the spring term.



FREDERICK HORSMAN VARLEY
Lynn Valley
 watercolour and graphite on paper
 7 x 10 ¼ in, 17.9 x 25.7 cm
 Collection of the Winnipeg Art Gallery
 Courtesy of the family of Frederick H. Varley

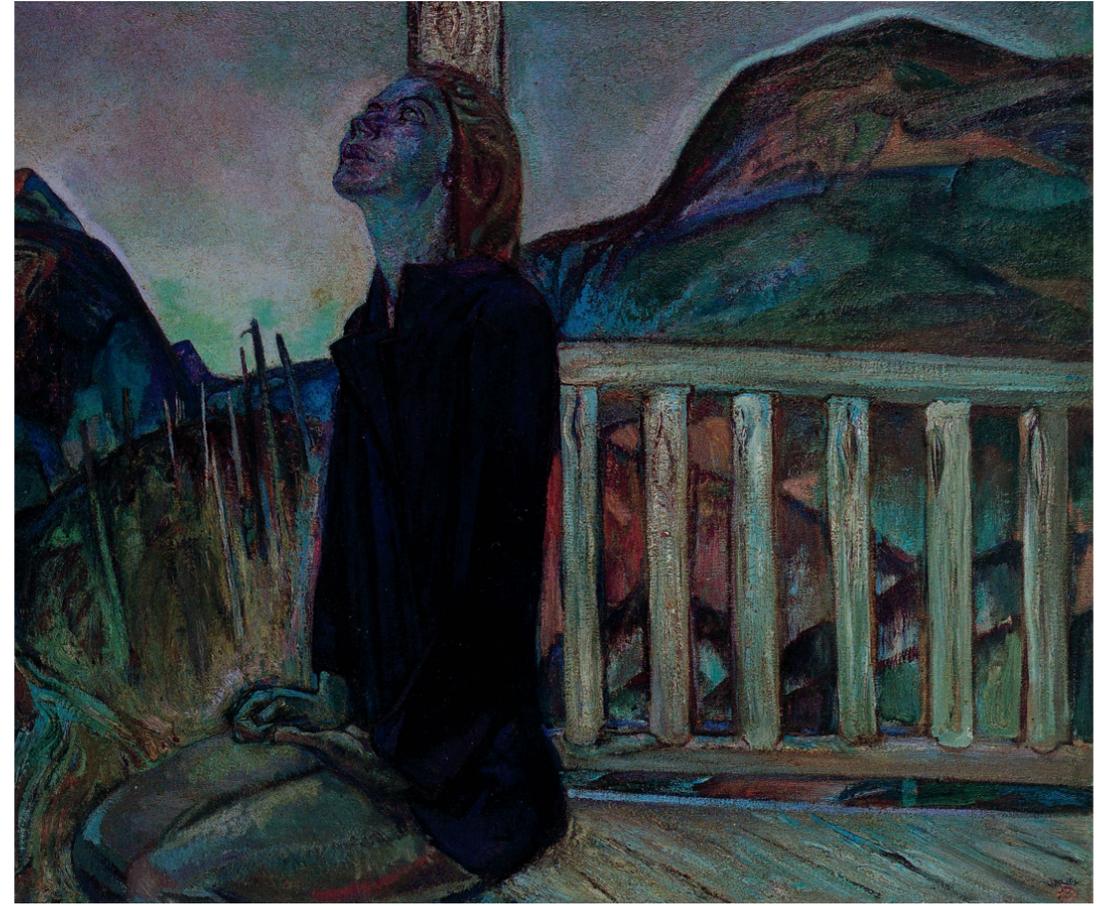
Not for sale with this lot

The freelance teaching Varley undertook did not pay the bills. He retreated to his house at 4395 Rice Lake Road in the Lynn Valley, tucked into the forest near Lynn Canyon, his refuge and hideout since he owed money to many in Vancouver. His friend Harold Mortimer-Lamb had to help him with the rent of \$8 per month. By February 1936, Varley was seeking ways to leave Vancouver. A commission to paint a portrait of H.S. Southam, chair of the board of the National Gallery of Canada, provided the necessary funds, and he took the train bound for Ottawa. It was a difficult time and he had to escape.

A small, superb, related watercolour titled *Lynn Valley* (1932, Winnipeg Art Gallery), which depicts the landscape extending beyond the views in other paintings, shows us that Varley, in looking at that particular landscape, felt he had discovered a world newborn. Lynn Valley was exotic to him and somehow compelling. He drew its attractions in detail, focusing on two upright tree stumps, but never with a heavy hand.

Looking again at the painting of *Vera and Fellow Student Sketching*, the viewer is a party to the happiness Varley felt in painting the students. He chose the vertical or upright format for the sketch, which was unusual for him as he usually painted horizontal works in the sketch format. Perhaps he saw the two young people at work below and realized how quickly the composition would fit into a vertical; he had to get in the dead trees in the background. *Dharana* shows part of a building, perhaps an old ranger's cabin, and the two girls may have sat nearby. In short, the skies may be grey but the vegetation is lovely, exotic and teeming with life. The students earnestly sketch—the view shows the world as it should be at a perfect moment, a moment in which subject, composition, light and emotion all align, recorded by Varley.

Vera and Fellow Student Sketching at Lynn / Lynn Valley Mountains, BC was one of a number of paintings owned by Vera Weatherbie Mortimer-Lamb. They were discovered after her



FREDERICK HORSMAN VARLEY
Dharana
 oil on canvas
 34 x 40 in, 86.4 x 101.6 cm
 Collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario
 Gift from Albert H. Robson Memorial Subscription fund, 1942
 Courtesy of the family of Frederick H. Varley

Not for sale with this lot

death in 1977 and were not therefore included in the Varley Inventory.

We thank Joan Murray, former curator of Canadian art and chief curator (1972) at the Art Gallery of Ontario, for contributing the above essay.

Included with this lot is a letter signed and dated January 23, 1990, from the artist's grandson, Christopher Varley, confirming the authenticity of this work.

1. Katerina Atanassova, *F.H. Varley: Portraits into the Light / Mise en lumière des portraits* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2007), 54.
2. Interview by McKenzie Porter, *Maclean's*, November 7, 1959, cited in *ibid.*, 86.
3. Christopher Varley, *F.H. Varley* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1979), 19.

ESTIMATE: \$75,000 – 100,000