



209 Lawren Stewart Harris

ALC BCSFA CGP FCA G7 OSA TPG 1885 – 1970

Mountain Experience

oil on canvas, on verso signed, titled, dated circa 1946
 on the McMichael Canadian Art Collection exhibition label,
 inscribed F75 twice and variously and stamped
 Lawren Harris LSH Holdings Ltd. 172
 51 ½ x 44 ½ in, 130.8 x 113 cm

PROVENANCE

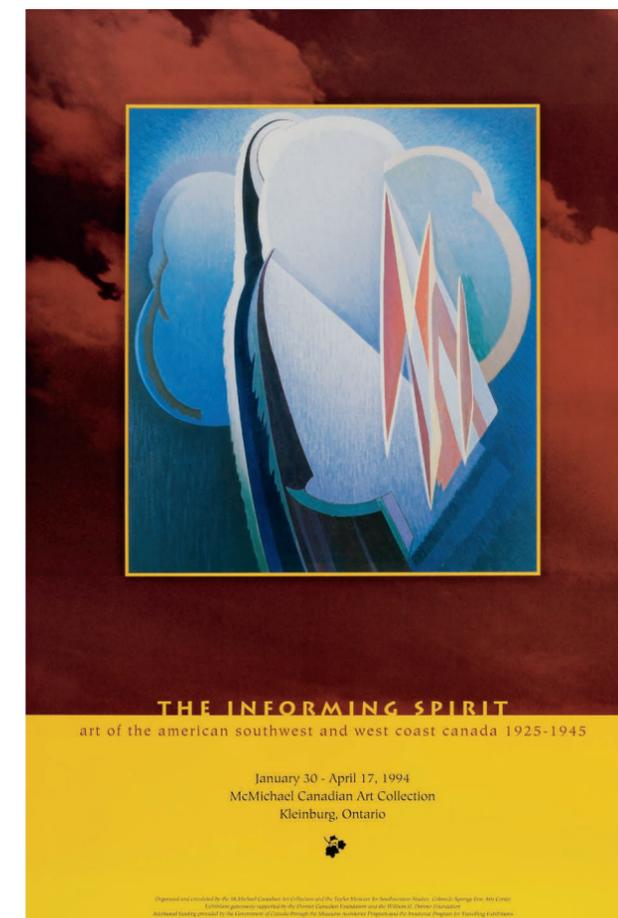
Collection of the Artist
 LSH Holdings Ltd., Vancouver
 Estate of the Artist
 The Collection of Torben V. Kristiansen, Vancouver

LITERATURE

Lawren Harris Paintings 1910 – 1948, Art Gallery of Toronto,
 1948, listed page 35, titled as *Abstract Painting*
 Bess Harris and R.G.P. Colgrove, editors, *Lawren Harris*, 1969,
 listed page 145 and reproduced page 93, dated 1954
 Dennis Reid, *Atma Buddhi Manas: The Later Work of Lawren S.
 Harris*, Art Gallery of Ontario, 1985, reproduced page 34
 and listed and reproduced page 87
 Megan Bice and Sharyn Udall, *The Informing Spirit:
 Art of the American Southwest and West Coast Canada*,
 McMichael Canadian Art Collection, 1994, reproduced
 page 167 and listed page 175

EXHIBITED

Vancouver Art Gallery, *15th Annual British Columbia Artists’
 Exhibition*, September 21 – October 13, 1946, titled *Abstract
 Painting of a Mountain Experience*, catalogue #53
 Little Centre, Victoria, *Exhibition of Abstract Paintings by
 Lawren Harris*, October 29 – November 17, 1946, titled
Abstract Painting of a Mountain Experience 1, catalogue #19
 Art Association of Montreal, *64th Annual Spring Exhibition*,
 March 21 – April 20, 1947, titled *Subjective Painting,
 Mountain Experience*, catalogue #111
 Art Gallery of Toronto, *Lawren Harris Paintings 1910 – 1948*,
 October 16 – November 14, 1948, traveling in 1949 in Canada,
 titled *Abstract Painting*, catalogue #63
 Vancouver Art Gallery, *Lawren Harris: Recent Paintings*, May 10 –
 June 15, 1955, shown at the University of British Columbia in
 October 1955, catalogue #12
 Willistead Art Gallery, Windsor, *Lawren Harris*, March 19 –
 April 2, 1958, traveling to the Elsie Perrin Williams Memorial
 Art Museum, London, catalogue #11
 National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, *Lawren Harris Retrospective
 Exhibition*, June 7 – September 8, 1963, traveling to the Art
 Gallery of Vancouver, October 4 – 27, 1963, dated 1950 – 1952,
 catalogue #49
 Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, *Atma Buddhi Manas: The Later
 Work of Lawren S. Harris*, September 28 – November 24, 1985,
 traveling in 1986 to the Vancouver Art Gallery, Winnipeg Art
 Gallery and Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax, catalogue #49
 McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, *The Informing
 Spirit: Art of the American Southwest and West Coast Canada,
 1925 – 1945*, January 30 – April 17, 1994, traveling in 1994 –
 1995 to the Vancouver Art Gallery, Colorado Springs Fine
 Arts Center and Gibbes Museum of Art, South Carolina,
 catalogue #86

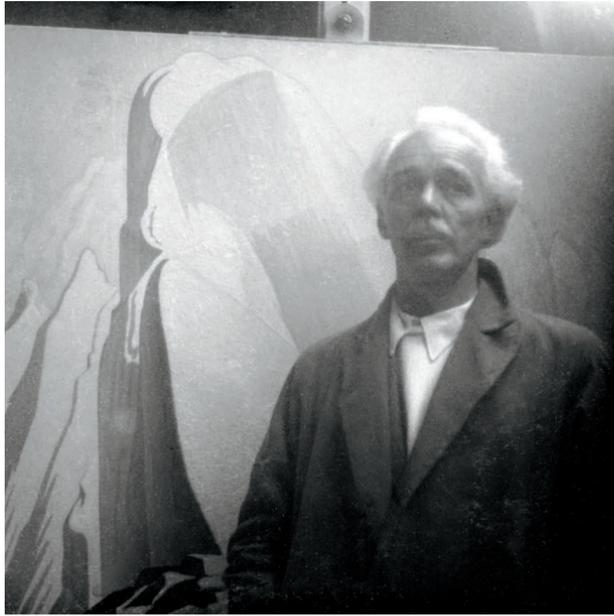


Exhibition poster for *The Informing Spirit: Art of the American Southwest and West Coast Canada, 1925 – 1945*, McMichael Canadian Art Collection, 1994, featuring *Mountain Experience*

LAWREN S. HARRIS’S artistic transition from landscape painting to abstraction was both rapid and definitive, marking a distinct junction of reinvention in his long career. In the span of a few short years, he went from realizing some of his boldest and most impressive landscape canvases, in the early 1930s, to a complete reimagining of his practice, where the representation of literal landscapes would be replaced by depictions of his own subjective experiences. This new approach is brilliantly seen here, in the luminous and epic canvas *Mountain Experience*.

Harris’s enthusiasm for this path was obvious, and he wrote to Emily Carr in 1936, “At the present I am engrossed in the abstract way and ideas flow, and it looks as though it would take the rest of my days to catch up with them.”¹ Indeed, though he would occasionally return to painting the landscape in a more direct and representational form, Harris’s turn towards abstraction was a decidedly permanent reorientation, and his continual development within this realm ensured his next three decades of work would remain fresh and exciting.

There is also an alternative perspective on this transition that demonstrates how the separation between the different phases of Harris’s career can be considered much less distinct. During his



Lawren Harris and *Mt. Ann-Alice* in the background, circa 1940 – 1941
 Photo: Harold Mortimer-Lamb
 Courtesy of the family of Lawren S. Harris



LAWREN STEWART HARRIS, *Mt. Ann-Alice*
 oil on canvas, 1943
 49 x 49 in, 124.5 cm x 124.5 cm
 Private Collection
 Courtesy of the Lawren Harris Inventory Project

Not for sale with this lot

landscape period, Harris's style evolved quickly and constantly, with works of the same subject evolving dramatically over the course of even a couple of years. This is particularly evident in his work in the Rocky Mountains and at Lake Superior, where the shift towards more heavily abstracted forms can be seen in the reduction in detail and the insistent pursuit of more foundational, elemental subjects.

With his first documented non-objective paintings done in 1928, Harris was seeking new avenues to push beyond the limitations he found himself encountering in the depictions of landscape. He wrote, "My purpose in attempting to paint abstractions is that there is at once more imaginative scope and a more exacting discipline in non-objective painting. I have had ideas insistent forming which could not be expressed in representational forms."² To pursue his vision, Harris went through a significant perceptual evolution, shifting from trying to portray "form" in his art to instead focusing on the conveying of "experience." Though his subject matter in many cases remained the same, including his persistent fascination with mountains, the resulting canvases were distinctly different, and fostered fertile ground for his creativity.

This is probably nowhere more clearly or impressively demonstrated than by this magnificent canvas *Mountain Experience* and what might be considered its representational twin, *Mt. Ann-Alice* (private collection), both expressions of the same subject. These works provide a singular opportunity, as there are no other known pairings in Harris's catalogue that demonstrate such parallel explorations. Harris was photographed with the representational work on his easel in the early 1940s, shortly after he moved to Vancouver, and it is analogous in scale (49 x 49 inches) to

Mountain Experience. The subject, as suggested by the name, is Mount Anne-Alice, a peak in Mount Robson Provincial Park. It is a place where Harris sketched extensively in 1929, and which he returned to visit in the 1940s with his wife Bess. Revealingly, a photograph of the representational canvas, taken around 1941 before it was reworked, finds the artist assigning the title *Mountain Form*, as he did to many of his major mountain works in the 1920s.

A fascinating contrast can then be observed between *Mountain Form* and *Mountain Experience*, painted a few years later, that reveals Harris's shift in perspective. Harris expanded on this in his writing:

Where the older representational artists would paint a number of sketches and paintings of subjects seen on a trip in the mountains, an artist today painting in the abstract expressionist manner would in one painting endeavour to achieve a combination of the moods, rhythms, character, and spirit that would be an expressive synthesis of many mountain experiences. The result, if successful, would be an extension of the experience beyond the range of realistic painting.³

Dispensing with the shackles of representing physical reality, *Mountain Experience* is Harris sharing his holistic response to the mountains, and their fundamental truth, unhampered by specificity of location or time.

In the otherworldly *Mountain Experience*, Harris has maintained the underlying architecture of the mountain peak, but untethered it from the terrestrial setting. Instead, it now exists integrated within a dominion of glowing colour and dynamic



Installation view of *Lawren Harris Retrospective Exhibition* at the National Gallery of Canada, 1963, with *Mountain Experience* indicated

shapes, with the artist using its familiar form to suggest ideas that might not be expressible in words. Short, visible brush-strokes cover much of the canvas, dabs of colour placed closely together, irradiating the work with a sense of movement and vibration. This recalls methods Harris had used decades previous in his decorative snow scenes, and the reanimation of the technique in this new context breathes vibrant life into this fantastical composition.

Mountain Experience has been shown in numerous important exhibitions, including the artist's retrospective 1948 and 1963 shows. In the latter, it was hung among other important abstract works including *Abstraction 119* (Audain Art Museum Collection, sold by Heffel in May 2005), *Northern Image* (private collection, sold by Heffel in May 2023) and *Migratory Flight* (lot 218 in this sale), all stellar examples of Harris's ability to connect the visual language of his abstractions to the environments and landscapes that inspired his previous representational works.

In considering these provocative and enthralling works, the words of the artist again can help guide us:

Really the pertinent question is not 'What does it mean?' but 'What experience does it contain?' For a real work of art exists to engender a certain kind of life within us. Its power is to evoke, to enhance, to develop depths and heights of

experience we have not had, or to develop those experiences we have already had to greater depths of understanding. Its function is to enlarge our consciousness, to sharpen, intensify, and deepen our awareness, and to increase our range of experience.⁴

Harris has managed in *Mountain Experience* to transcend the limitations he found in landscape work and convey his love not for a specific mountain, but instead for the awe-inspiring experience of being amongst them, and all the excitement and vitality and beauty that such places are imbued with.

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

1. Harris to Emily Carr, May 3, 1936, Emily Carr Papers, MS-2181, box 2, folder 3, BC Archives, Victoria.
2. Lawren Harris, quoted in Bess Harris and R.G.P. Colgrove, eds., *Lawren Harris* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1969), 91.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., 18.

ESTIMATE: \$150,000 – 250,000