

## 217 Frederick Horsman Varley

ARCA G7 OSA 1881 – 1969

### Natasha

oil on board, signed and on verso titled on an exhibition label, inscribed 54 and stamped Dominion Gallery, circa 1943  
15 x 11 ¾ in, 38.1 x 29.8 cm

#### PROVENANCE

Dominion Gallery, Montreal  
Private Collection, Toronto  
A.K. Prakash & Associates Inc., Toronto  
Private Collection, Toronto  
*Fine Canadian Art*, Heffel Fine Art Auction  
House, November 26, 2015, lot 153  
Private Collection, Halifax

#### LITERATURE

*Group of Seven Exhibition*, Dominion Gallery, 1944, listed  
Peter Varley, *Frederick H. Varley*, 1983, page 37  
Katerina Atanassova, *F.H. Varley: Portraits into the Light / Mise en lumière des portraits*, Varley Art Gallery, 2007, pages 86, 95 and 105, a circa 1943 portrait entitled *Natalie* (also known as *Natasha*), collection of the Town of Markham, reproduced plate 50, unpaginated, and listed page 155

#### EXHIBITED

Dominion Gallery, Montreal, *Group of Seven Exhibition*,  
May 13 – 24, 1944, catalogue #7  
The Fine Art Galleries, T. Eaton Co. Ltd., Toronto, October 30 –  
November 11, 1944  
Royal Canadian Academy, Montreal (label verso)

IN HIS YEARS as a member of the Group of Seven and following its dissolution in 1933, Frederick Varley painted hundreds of landscapes, marked by fine draughtsmanship, expansive colour and a fluid treatment of form. Unlike the rest of the Group, Varley felt particularly attracted to the figure: the early 1920s saw him work primarily as a portraitist, producing commissions for the likes of the Massey family to make ends meet. Money never lasted long, however, and Varley struggled to make a career as a painter, taking up a teaching position at the Vancouver School of Decorative and Applied Arts in 1926.

Striking out on their own, Varley and fellow artist Jock Macdonald opened the BC College of Arts a few years later, in 1933. Plagued by money problems, the school was forced to close in 1936, and Varley traded the west coast for the east. Spending time between Ottawa, Toronto and Montreal, Varley had hopes that the new locations and personalities in the east would provide potent material for a more fertile portrait career.

The works he produced during this period fell into two broad categories: his commissioned formal portraits, produced for patrons and a vital source of his income; and the more intimate, spontaneous pictures he made of his friends and family. His earlier commissioned portraits of the 1920s tended to be more academic: poised figures, realist settings, evocatively rendered but generally unobtrusively coloured. By the end of the 1930s, Varley's painting increasingly gave way to exotic colours, prismatic use of light and expressive backgrounds. His portraits radiated with a Fauvist energy, but were nonetheless grounded in a mutually productive relationship between artist and sitter. Erica Leach, a friend whom Varley painted (*Erica*, 1942, collection

of Trinity College, University of Toronto), noted: "I feel very defensive of the reputation that is bandied about that he was a womanizer, a philanderer. A man who philanders is taking, grabbing. That was not Varley. He was eager to give from his talent." Among his portraits, the ones Varley produced of his friends prove to be his finest, the artist propelled by a familiarity and affection towards their inner self.

The identity of the present portrait is somewhat more mysterious. Natalie Kassab was a Montreal woman said to be of Armenian or Lebanese descent, recently divorced and independently wealthy. She had a lingerie salon at 648 Sherbrooke Street West—an address associated with studios for other high-fashion Montrealers in the 1940s, including designer Marie-Paule Nolin and hatmaker Lola Lanyi. Her relationship to Varley is unclear: he affectionately referred to her with the diminutive form *Natasha*; and Peter Varley, the artist's son, said "he kept me clear of that one ... She was a mystery lady in Dad's life, the ideal type to awaken Dad's gypsy soul."

Whatever the details of their relationship, it seems to have been brief. According to Katerina Atanassova, "All that we know is that she eventually left Montreal and settled in New York, where she married a wealthy Greek merchant." Varley made only two paintings of this enigmatic woman. Another, titled simply *Natalie*, was painted in 1943 and is now in the collection of the Frederick Horsman Varley Art Gallery in Markham, Ontario. The other, Peter notes in his 1983 monograph with some wistfulness, had vanished: "It was a striking, fearsome portrait—fiery eyes, a flame of hair, torso nearly bare."

Our portrait, *Natasha*, is this vanished work, resurfacing in a private Toronto collection in 2015. Here, Natalie faces outwards, her gaze looking just past the viewer. Her dress and large earrings are rendered in vivid green, her hair simultaneously in burnt umbers and deep blues. She looks both modern and universal: her face seems sculpted in a naturalist, Art Nouveau confidence, while her swirl of hair and ambivalent look most closely recall Botticelli's *Venus*. Varley has delineated her neck and face here, subtly bisecting her face between light and shadow, but this is almost overwhelmed by the warm glow of her skin and lips (Varley was known to use his models' own lipsticks to ensure the shade matched reality). The background is left indefinite but energetic—a tumult of colour and movement—while her figure commands the entirety of the canvas with something of an elemental calm. The overall effect is a harmonious expression of formal skill and the assertive subject, and a compelling example of Varley's ability to capture the essential identity of a sitter when given the opportunity to know them well.

Varley held an intuitive theory of colour, drawing variously from his studies in Buddhist philosophy, Hindu mysticism and Asian visual art, and manifested these influences in a masterful use of closely toned pigments to create prismatic effects. He believed that each person had "a unique aura that could be expressed through a specific colour," and that green had a "spiritual value." *Natasha*, with her tawny skin and iridescent blue eyes, is a mesmerizing presence emerging from a storm of green—a larger-than-life presence, intimately rendered yet barely contained by Varley's evocative brushwork.

*Natasha* is #690 in the Varley Inventory listing, titled as *Natalie*, circa 1943.

**ESTIMATE: \$70,000 – 90,000**

