



131 **Lawren Stewart Harris**

ALC BCSFA CGP FCA G7 OSA TPG 1885 – 1970

Coldwell, Lake Superior (Lake Superior Sketch cxxxix)

oil on board, on verso signed and titled on the artist's label, titled as *Coldwell, Lake Superior* on the Art Gallery of Ontario labels and inscribed with the Doris Mills inventory #4-139 and *Reserved*, circa 1925 – 1927

12 x 15 in, 30.5 x 38.1 cm

PROVENANCE

Women's Art Association of Canada, Toronto

LITERATURE

Augustus Bridle, "The Group of Seven Display Their Annual Symbolisms," *The Toronto Star*, February 8, 1928

Doris Mills, *L.S. Harris Inventory*, 1936, Group 4,

Lake Superior Sketches, listed, catalogue #139, location noted as the Studio Building

Bess Harris and R.G.P. Colgrove, editors, *Lawren Harris*, 1969, pages 51 and 61

Jeremy Adamson, *Lawren S. Harris: Urban Scenes and Wilderness Landscapes, 1906 – 1930*, Art Gallery of Ontario, 1978, listed page 227

Joan Murray and Robert Fulford, *The Beginning of Vision: The Drawings of Lawren S. Harris*, 1982, the graphite drawing entitled *Port Coldwell, Lake Superior* listed as circa 1925, reproduced page 86

Allison Thompson, *A Worthy Place in the Art of Our Country: The Women's Art Association of Canada, 1887 – 1987*, MA thesis, Carleton University, 1989

Paul Duval, *Lawren Harris: Where the Universe Sings*, 2010, the circa 1923 graphite drawing entitled *Port Coldwell, Lake Superior* reproduced page 166 and the circa 1923 ink drawing entitled *Port Coldwell Fish House, Lake Superior* reproduced page 169

EXHIBITED

Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, *Lawren S. Harris: Urban Scenes and Wilderness Landscapes, 1906 – 1930*, January 14 – February 26, 1978, catalogue #107



LAWREN STEWART HARRIS
Ice House, Coldwell, Lake Superior
 oil on canvas, circa 1923
 37 1/8 x 44 1/8 in, 94.1 x 114.1 cm
 Collection of the Art Gallery of Hamilton
 Photo: Courtesy of the Estate of Lawren S. Harris

Not for sale with this lot

THIS SERENE AND outstanding Lawren Harris work, from the pinnacle of his landscape period, comes from the collection of the Women's Art Association of Canada (WAAC), a critical organization in promoting the arts and women's engagement with them in Canada. While the exact circumstances of the acquisition by the WAAC are not known, we can be sure the work has been in the collection of the organization since shortly after it was created, as its period frame indicates that it was one of a select group of works acquired by close friends, family or organizations before Harris left Canada in 1934. These typically represent the most impressive and impactful works done up until that time, and this painting exemplifies this, demonstrating Harris at the height of his powers.

The WAAC was established in 1887, with the objective to promote interest in original art in Canada, and to provide opportunities for co-operation between women artists or lovers of art. Offering lectures, workshops and the hosting of exhibitions since the late nineteenth century, this organization has played an instrumental role in supporting and contributing to the visual arts in Canada. The WAAC likely acquired this work as a donation: Harris's mother Annie was an early member, as were many others in Harris's circle of friends and contemporaries. In the 1920s and 1930s, when Harris and other members of the Group



Women's Art Association of Canada, circa 1895
 Photo: Women's Art Association of Canada

of Seven were promoting new approaches to art in Canada, the history of the WAAC demonstrates its members' role as allies in this mission.

When the Canadian Group of Painters was formed in 1933 as a more inclusive successor to the Group of Seven, eight of the nine women included were WAAC members. Exhibitions of works by members of the Beaver Hall Group, Emily Carr, and Harris's future wife, Bess Housser, are recorded in the association's history. Even more directly, in January 1931, WAAC hosted a show for Harris, A.Y. Jackson, Arthur Lismer and J.E.H. MacDonald, all of whom were made honorary members. Though it is not known whether this particular sketch was exhibited, it is easy to picture it fitting in alongside the recently completed arctic sketches.

As the verso indicates, the subject of this painting is the village of Coldwell, on the north shore of Lake Superior, an area located just east of what is now Neys Provincial Park, and frequented by Harris and other members of the Group in the 1920s. Following the successful series of trips to Algoma, Lake Superior was the next area of collective attention for the Group. While Franklin Carmichael, A.J. Casson, Lismer and Jackson all were participants on trips to the North Shore, none were more enthusiastic or responsive to it than Harris, the only constant on all the expeditions. His enthusiasm for the area was evident in the

impact it had on the evolution of his work, and the success he found in furthering his own distinctive style. On at least four trips, Harris painted in the Coldwell area (1922, 1925, 1927 and 1928). The size of this work, 12 x 15 inches, indicates that it was done on one of the later trips, as prior to 1925 Harris used smaller panels for his sketches. Works from this period depict a range of subjects, with focus shifting during and between his Lake Superior trips, from the inland charred remains of forests to the expansive clouds and skies over the lake. By the latter half of the decade, one of the areas of interest for Harris became the settlement of Coldwell itself.

The view here depicts a portion of the small fishing port, looking almost directly south up the bay towards the massive lake. Harris painted from this exact vantage point, on the approach from the railway tracks, at least three times. This particular treatment, with its deep contrasting shadows and the buildings glowing in the dying light of the day, was certainly the most successful. Indicating his own recognition of this, Harris chose to reproduce this image in pen and ink for the September 1930 *Canadian Forum* magazine.

As with many subjects, Harris experimented with different compositions from a variety of perspectives, and another view, looking along the shore to precarious wooden structures for storing fish and ice, was ultimately translated from a sketch to the striking and austere canvas *Ice House, Coldwell, Lake Superior*. This work, first exhibited in the February 1928 Group show (and likely completed just prior to that), echoes many of the same ideas and characteristics of the painting offered here. The arresting canvas was considered by many at the time to be provocative, even, as Augustus Bridle commented in a 1928 review, "despairingly beautiful and inhuman." Both paintings seem almost prescient in their portrayal of the village without activity (the settlement was later vacated due to local fishery collapses). In the panel, the boat in the harbour is the only indication that the area is only temporarily resting, and not fully abandoned.

The expansiveness of Lake Superior allowed Harris to refine his portrayal of the landscape, eschewing detail and texture for volume and form. As details were reduced and his style evolved over return trips, we can follow the direct path to his work in the Arctic, and eventually, abstraction. His own reflections on the journey of the artist and the evolution of his career give insight into the motivation and guiding principles in the creation of this work. Harris described a process of refinement for Group artists: "They became more vigorously selective, and sought to have no element, no line or colour in the picture that did not contribute to the unified expression. This led to the utilization of the elements of the North in three dimensions—an organization in depth, giving a still fuller meaning, a still deeper significance to every form and to the relationship of all the forms in the picture."

Coldwell, Lake Superior (Lake Superior Sketch CXXXIX) displays a mastery of composition, bringing the essential elements together

as if on a dramatic stage, confined, but expressing expansive, seemingly limitless light and atmosphere. The eerie light and heavy shadow produce a placid aura over the scene, while the topography maintains the attention on the simplified and stoic houses, bathed in almost uncanny brightness under the irradiated blue sky.

The striking effect of the low light on modest structures is one also utilized on canvases Harris recognized to be among his most modern and important in the mid-1920s. In addition to *Ice House, Coldwell, Lake Superior*, this is characteristic of *Ontario Hill Town* and *Miners' Houses, Glace Bay*, both of which he chose to send to modern art shows in the United States during the mid-1920s. According to Harris, the exploration of depth and space in these pictures was part of an effort to "seek to enable the soul to live in the grand way of certain wondrous moments in the North when the outward aspect of nature becomes for a while full luminous to her informing spirit—and man, nature and spirit are one."

In the pursuit of this goal, this work is emphatically successful. The otherworldly glow, the reduction to the most essential forms and the expertly arranged composition all draw you into the world of Coldwell Bay as the evening light fades. Transience and extraneous detail is removed—only the underlying foundations of the scene remain, inviting us to explore a timeless, true, wondrous moment, as impactful now as it was when painted and acquired by the Canadian artists of the WAAC over 90 years ago.

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

ESTIMATE: \$250,000 – 350,000