



## 129 Lawren Stewart Harris

ALC BCSFA CGP FCA G7 OSA TPG 1885–1970

### Arctic Sketch xv

oil on board, on verso titled partially on the remnants of the artist's label and inscribed in graphite *N. Lyle* and with the Doris Mills Inventory #1/15, 1930  
12 x 15 in, 30.5 x 38.1 cm

#### PROVENANCE

Acquired directly from the Artist, with the assistance of Lawren P. Harris, by Norah Lyle, Toronto, circa 1936  
By descent to the present Private Collection, New York

#### LITERATURE

Doris Mills, *L.S. Harris Inventory*, 1936, Arctic Sketches, Group 1, catalogue #15, location noted as the Studio Building, and a drawing of the painting illustrated by Hans Jensen  
Jeremy Adamson, *Lawren S. Harris: Urban Scenes and Wilderness Landscapes, 1906–1930*, Art Gallery of Ontario, 1978, a similar work entitled *Bylot Island 1*, private collection, reproduced page 201  
Christopher Jackson, *Lawren Harris: North by West: The Arctic and Rocky Mountain Paintings of Lawren Harris, 1924–1931*, 1991, a similar work entitled *South Shore, Bylot Island*, private collection, reproduced page 55, plate 13  
Peter Larisey, *Light for a Cold Land: Lawren Harris's Work and Life—An Interpretation*, 1993, a similar work entitled *Bylot Island 1*, private collection, reproduced plate 33

THERE IS A mythical aura to the arctic works of Lawren Harris, a certain sense of fulfillment that they bring to his artistic journey in the depiction of Canadian landscape. All of them originate from the artist's single expedition to the region in 1930, which would be the last sketching trip that Harris would take with a fellow member of the Group of Seven, and in fact, his own final journey into the realms of the Canadian landscape with the express purposes of sketching and painting it. In the years shortly after this trip, Harris's artistic focus would shift significantly, and he would adopt non-objective abstraction as his main subject for the remainder of his career. Works such as this luminous *Arctic Sketch xv*, and the other 48 oil sketches we know resulted from this trip, represent the artist's final word on the landscape of Canada, and provided him with the satisfaction and freedom to move into more purely universal realms.

This expedition to the Arctic took place aboard the *ss Beothic*, which departed from Sydney, Nova Scotia at the beginning of August 1930. Harris was accompanied by A.Y. Jackson, who had been a passenger on the ship three years prior, sketching alongside Dr. Frederick Banting. After hearing favourable reviews of this 1927 trip, and having had the chance to appreciate the resulting works (Harris owned copy number 1 of Jackson's signed book of arctic drawings, *The Far North*), it must have been clear to Harris that the Arctic was full of potential subject matter that would suit his current fascinations and style. His artwork had evolved throughout the 1920s, and in the couple of years prior to this journey, his work in Lake Superior and the Rockies had adopted a much stronger focus on the austere and the expansive.



Lawren Harris aboard the *ss Beothic*, 1930



FIGURE 1: LAWREN STEWART HARRIS  
Drawing 273, Book 7  
graphite on wove paper  
7 ½ x 10 in, 19.1 x 25.3 cm  
Private Collection

Not for sale with this lot



FIGURE 2: LAWREN STEWART HARRIS  
Bylot Island I  
oil on canvas, circa 1930  
32 x 45 in, 81.3 x 114.3 cm  
Private Collection

Not for sale with this lot



Lawren Harris, A.Y. Jackson and Captain Falke aboard the ss *Beothic*, 1930



View from ss *Beothic*, Davis Strait, 1930  
Photo: Lawren Harris  
Courtesy of the family of Lawren S. Harris

His mountain works in particular seemed to be foreshadowing the subjects he would find on this trip: alpine peaks and patterns of rock, snow and glacier, with an increasing focus on solid form and the distillation of only the most essential and core elements of the massive subjects manifesting in his drawings and paintings. In retrospect it would appear inevitable that he might follow up his work on the inland sea of Lake Superior and the Rocky Mountains in a location where he could bring the two together—the dramatic coasts of the Arctic.

*Arctic Sketch XV* provides a stellar example of connections that can be drawn to preceding works. The pyramidal peaks of the foreground, shining in the warmth of the sun, could have been taken directly from the top half of a work like *Mountain Forms* (a point that Arthur Lismer comically pointed out at the time in a cartoon, now in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada, which reads “Mr Laurentian ’Arris changes his mountains into icebergs with a single stroke of his brush,” showing Harris in front of recently altered mountain canvases with a large bucket labeled “blue” on the floor). Yet, while the scalloping, strong lighting and snow patterns are familiar, the overall colour palette clearly distinguishes this as an entirely distinct subject. The inviting gradation of light on the water, from deep teal to a bright green-blue, contrasts strikingly against the pale grey and tans of the rock forms, and draws from Harris’s explorations of light and water on the north shore of Lake Superior, but is totally reinvented in this novel context.

Throughout the 1920s, Harris had developed a methodology that integrated the use of preliminary graphite drawings (or notes,

as he and Jackson would refer to them) much more prominently. This was perhaps born out of convenience in the Rockies, where the need to always carry heavy paints and panels up steep slopes and into potentially inclement weather would be a challenge. But in the Arctic, it became a necessity, as Harris recounted: “While we were on this trip Jackson and I painted a large number of sketches, although painting was difficult as we usually saw the most exciting subjects while steaming through channels or while being bumped by pack ice. On many occasions we had time only to take rapid notes. These notes we worked up into sketches, crowded into our small cabin, seated on the edge of our respective bunks with only a porthole to let in the light.”<sup>1</sup> Beyond addressing logistical challenges, the use of preliminary pencil sketches seems to have allowed Harris additional opportunity to consider the composition and the most salient core elements. It was obviously an important methodology for the artist, as he seems to have used it even while the ship was anchored for several days, as in the case with this work, which was based on a drawing from his *Arctic Sketchbook* (figure 1, *Drawing 273, Book 7*, currently unlocated).

The subject of the drawing, and the subsequent panel, is the southern shore of Bylot Island, looking across Eclipse Sound. According to Jackson’s recounting of the trip, they anchored there, off of Pond Inlet, on the evening of August 26 and left on August 31, 1930. During that stay, Harris drew abundant inspiration from the surrounding dramatic landscape, resulting in at least seven oil sketches of the area and numerous canvases. The most closely related to *Arctic Sketch XV* is a sketch entitled *South*

*Shore, Bylot Island* (private collection) and the brilliant canvas *Bylot Island I* (figure 2, sold by Heffel May 26, 2010, lot 165). The region depicted in all of these works is now part of Sirmilik National Park, an Inuktitut name meaning “the place of glaciers,” reflecting the legacy of over 2,000 years of human occupation in the area, and the ongoing importance of the place to the communities of Pond Inlet (Mittimatalik) and Arctic Bay (Ikpiarjuk).

The *Beothic* made the stop at Pond Inlet on its way south, and the open water and spectacular mountain views were clearly a bit of welcome peace after some tense days of adventure. After having battled ice floes and almost running aground in shallow water near Bathurst Island, the *Beothic* had worked its way through Lancaster Sound, where Harris and Jackson painted the ice. Harris later recounted, “From this point we went south along the coast of Ellesmere Island into Lancaster Sound where we were held up by ice for days. For four hours on our way out the ship was in danger of being crushed by the immense weight of the huge moving ice flows. We then went around the top of Baffin’s Island.”<sup>2</sup> With these experiences in mind, *Arctic Sketch XV*’s brightly lit and luminous shoreline mountains and eerie glaciers, contrasted against foreboding and ominous dark clouds behind, are a fitting representation of the ever-present connection between beauty and danger in this remote region of the world, a true visual depiction of the awesome. Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke captured such a tension in 1923’s *Duino Elegies*, “For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror which we are barely able to endure, and it amazes us so, because it serenely disdains to destroy us.” It is exactly this kind of beauty and amazement that Harris found

in the entrancing power of the Arctic, and it radiates from this superb panel.

For Harris, the works depicting the Arctic represent the culmination of his mission to define Canadian visual art on its own terms, and they provided the necessary inspiration and satisfaction to allow him to continue his evolution into pure abstraction. It was clear, even to contemporary audiences, that this was the direction the work was taking him in. It is as though all of Harris’s prior landscape painting somehow led him, almost unescapably, to the Arctic, and prepared him to create stunning works such as this panel. And, in turn, it was the arctic works, and perhaps the sense of completion they brought to that phase, that allowed him to move into the abstract realm. The emergence of important works such as this is exceedingly rare and exciting these days, and *Arctic Sketch XV*, once again, is a welcome addition to the catalogue of Harris’s phenomenal artistic achievements.

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

1. Lawren Harris, *The Story of the Group of Seven* (Toronto: Rous & Mann, 1964), 24.
2. *Ibid.*

ESTIMATE: \$700,000 – 900,000