



Norah Lyle, circa 1940

THE FOLLOWING OIL paintings by Lawren Harris from the Lyle family represent the very finest examples of his three important subjects: Lake Superior, the Rocky Mountains, and the Far North. They have been lovingly cared for by the same family since they were purchased by Norah Lyle with assistance from Lawren Harris Jr. in the mid-to-late 1930s. Harris Jr. and Norah arranged to meet at the famed Studio Building, co-financed by Harris Sr. and Dr. James MacCallum as studio space for Group of Seven artists, and from the works stored there, Norah selected these three masterpieces. We are aware of where this took place, as well as approximately when, since at this point Lawren Harris Sr. had departed Toronto for New Hampshire, and the invaluable inventory that Doris Mills completed for Harris in 1936 lists the location of each of these works as the “Studio Building.”

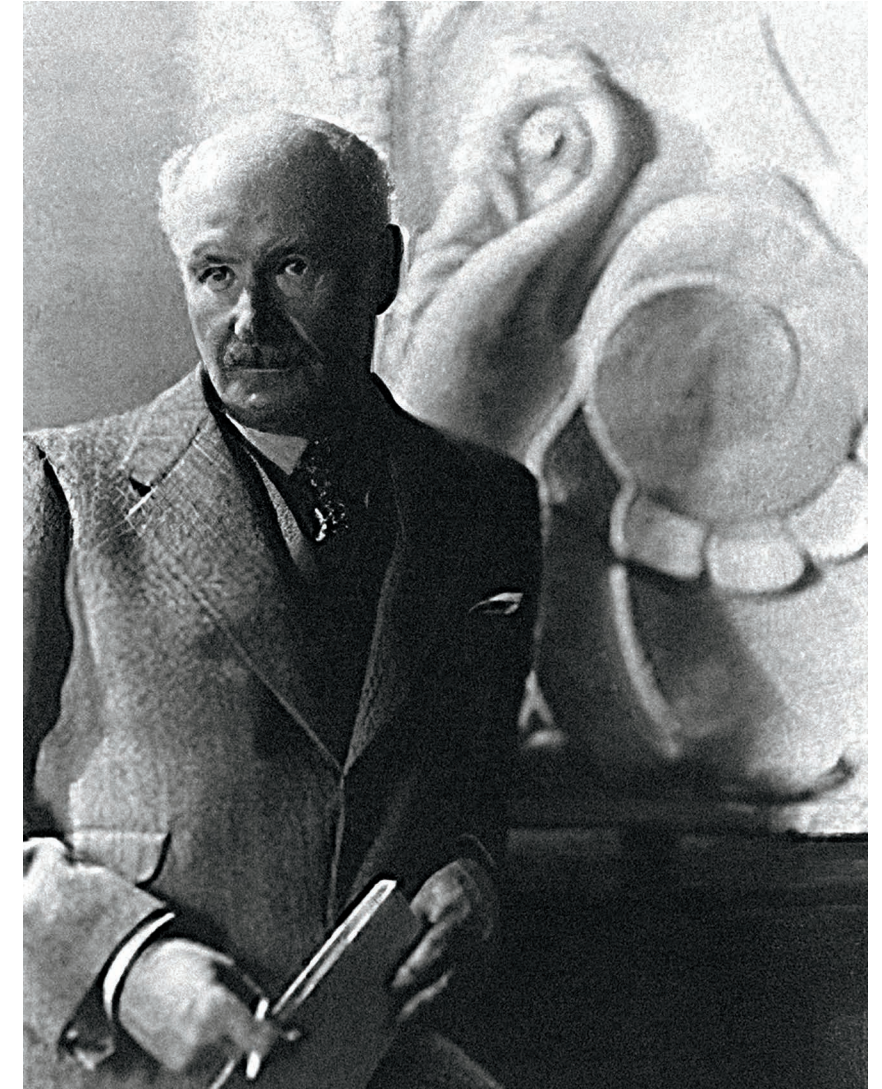
Norah and Harris Jr.’s friendship descended from their fathers’ friendship before them. Harris and Norah’s father John Lyle (1872 – 1945) formed a close connection based on their mutual search for a truly Canadian aesthetic. For Harris, this was through painting, and for Lyle, it was through architecture. After immigrating as a child with his family to Hamilton from Connor, Ireland, Lyle went on to be educated at Yale and the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Lyle’s first building design was Toronto’s beloved Royal Alexandra Theatre, begun in 1905, and years later, amongst many other important projects, he co-designed Toronto’s monumental Union Station, completed in 1927.

Stirred by the aims of Harris and the Group, Lyle became increasingly drawn to developing a uniquely Canadian style in the arts, leading to his design of the Runnymede Public Library in 1929. For its construction, he incorporated elements inspired by rural Canadian architecture, and used local materials such as yellow limestone from Ontario’s Credit Valley. His work reached its peak in what is considered Lyle’s masterpiece, the Bank of Nova Scotia in Halifax, with his integration of 86 separate emblems of Canada throughout its edifice, completed in 1931. In a fascinating overlap of creative force, the three artworks Norah acquired were produced by Harris during the same years as some of Lyle’s most notable accomplishments.

Lyle’s lifelong commitment to a particularly Canadian vision also led him to become the third president of the Art Gallery of Toronto (now the Art Gallery on Ontario), and he guided the institution through the harrowing years of World War II. When asked if the gallery should stay open throughout the war, Lyle responded:

We stand for the preservation of our intellectual and spiritual resources. Art is the visible and imperishable expression of free minds and, therefore, typifies one of the great goals we are fighting for. It is an escape from the present and a source of inspiration for the future.

Like Harris and the other members of the Group of Seven, Lyle sought a purer and more authentic celebration of Canadian beauty. It is our great fortune that he instilled these same ideals in his daughter, Norah, as she did in her descendants, who have so devotedly stewarded these exceptional paintings over many years.



John Lyle, circa 1940