



17 Lawren Stewart Harris

ALC BCSFA CGP FCA G7 OSA TPG 1885 – 1970

Northern Image

oil on canvas, on verso signed, titled, dated 1952 and inscribed variously on the exhibition labels
50 ¼ x 47 ¼ in, 127.6 x 120 cm

PROVENANCE

Alma Mater Society of the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, acquired with funds donated by Lawren Harris in 1955

LITERATURE

Lawren Harris Retrospective Exhibition, National Gallery of Canada, 1963, reproduced as frontispiece and listed page 86

Bess Harris and R.G.P. Colgrove, editors, *Lawren Harris*, 1969, reproduced page 9 and listed page 144

Dennis Reid, *Atma Buddhi Manas: The Later Work of Lawren S. Harris*, Art Gallery of Ontario, collection of the University of British Columbia, 1985, reproduced page 91

Peter Larisey, *Light for a Cold Land: Lawren Harris's Work and Life—An Interpretation*, 1993, collection of the University of British Columbia, reproduced page 157

Andrew Hunter, *Lawren Stewart Harris: A Painter's Progress*, The Americas Society, 2000, reproduced page 69

Catharine M. Mastin, editor, *The Group of Seven in Western Canada*, Glenbow Museum, 2002, reproduced page 178 and listed page 204

EXHIBITED

Canadian Group of Painters, Toronto, 1952

Vancouver Art Gallery, *Lawren Harris: Recent Paintings*, May 10 – June 5, 1955 and University of British Columbia, October 1955, catalogue #20

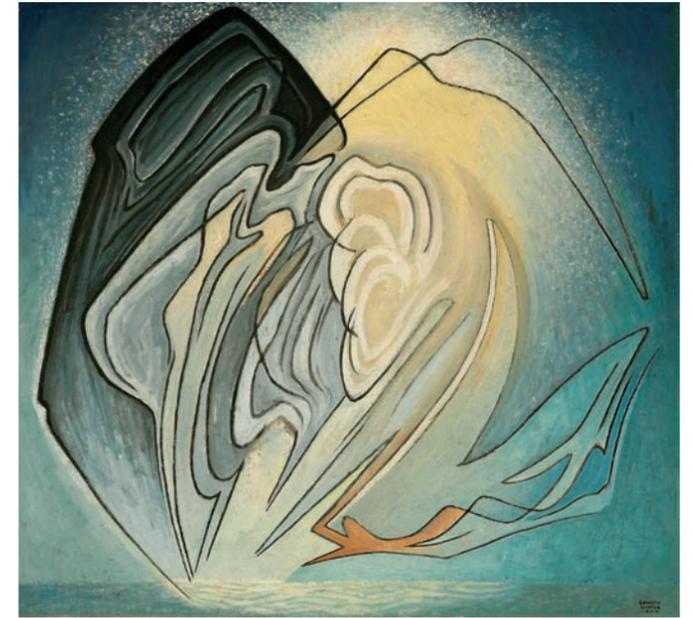
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, *Lawren Harris Retrospective Exhibition*, June 7 – September 8, 1963, traveling to the Vancouver Art Gallery, October 4 – 27, 1963, catalogue #65

Vancouver Art Gallery, *Exhibition of Brock Hall Collection*, March 1965

University of British Columbia, SUB Art Gallery, *Exhibition of Brock Art Collection*, November 1973

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 #57

Glenbow Museum, Calgary, *The Group of Seven in Western Canada*, July 13 – October 14, 2002, traveling in 2002 –



LAWREN STEWART HARRIS

Abstract Painting

oil on masonite, 1950
29 x 31 ¼ in, 73.5 x 79.2 cm
Collection of the National Gallery of Canada
Gift in memory of Aurelie Forbes Stratford, 1991
Photo: NGC

Not for sale with this lot

2004 to the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax; Winnipeg Art Gallery; Art Gallery of Greater Victoria; and National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, catalogue #205
Penticton Art Gallery, *Students Collect: University of British Columbia Alma Mater Society Student Art Collection: 1948 – 1968*, July 11 – September 7, 2008

FOR LAWREN HARRIS, abstraction was an opportunity for an unparalleled expansion in the realms of painting. In one of his many public lectures on art, he described the creative artist as

one who does not look to the past achievements in art for guidance; rather ... seeks to evoke ... the creative attitude and power of those artists who created the great works of art of the past. [They do] so in the hope that [they] may create works that press past traditional painting, the generally accepted, and achieve in some degree a new vision expressive of his time and the new environment.¹



National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, *Lawren Harris Retrospective Exhibition*, 1963, with *Northern Image* indicated
Unknown photographer

In the mid-1930s, Harris had reached an inflection point in his career—the end of where he felt objective representation of the landscape could take him. After the monumental works created from subjects in the Canadian Rockies and the Arctic, his reinvention saw him evolve to explore the “ideas insistently forming which could not be expressed in representational terms.”²² While Harris’s contribution to the landscape art of Canada is possibly without peer in terms of its significance, for over half his career his focus was primarily on abstraction.

Northern Image represents a high point in the artist’s abstract catalogue, a fusion of landscape suggestions with the spiritual and intangible. The work was painted in the early 1950s, when Harris had been focusing on abstract painting for over a decade. In this time, his work had evolved significantly, moving from hard-edged geometric forms into a realm more responsive to natural, organic forms and the freedom of the unconscious line. As his practice developed and matured, one can sense a growing comfort in looking back on his landscape works as a source, and an increasing awareness of the connection between the visual

language of his abstractions and the subjects that inspired his previous representational works. What could be captured within his abstract paintings, however, was much more expansive, as Harris described: “The purpose of painting abstracts is different from that in landscape painting; it has to do with movements, processes and cycles in nature. One abstract painting of this kind is thus meant to convey more than is possible in a representational painting.”²³

This work, full of energy and excitement, was painted by Harris in his living-room studio in Vancouver, lit by large, north-facing windows. With the rare insight to his process provided by his daughter, Peggy Knox, we can understand the atmosphere during its creation:

Whenever possible he painted to music, and he liked it loud. He was as much inspired by the music as by the painting he was working on. He interpreted the feelings or mood of the music directly onto the canvas. He chose a particular piece of music to accompany the painting—to get just the right spirit

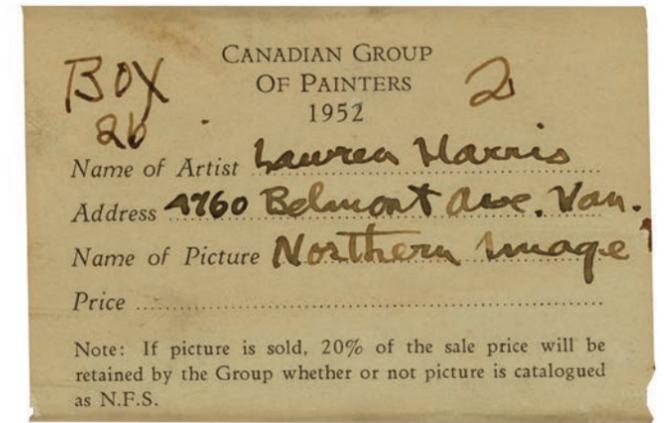
into the idea he was trying to portray. On a day when a powerful Sibelius symphony was fairly bouncing off the walls and the house seemed to shake with it, you could be sure that on the easel would be something like the magnificent *Northern Image*.⁴

In concert with this musical stimulation, the orientation of water and mountain forms in the work suggests that Harris was also drawing from the majestic views of the North Shore mountains and the shimmering waters of Burrard Inlet, which were clearly visible out the window from his easel. While there is an echo of his earlier dramatic and iconic mountain works, this painting moves beyond them, as he argued that abstraction made this possible. Here, we find Harris depicting the broader connections within the environment, reflecting ideas he later put into words: “The mountains are aloof, austere, detached, with their own life above the timber line. Yet they supply the wooded slopes and valleys, the farmlands and cities with the water of life.”⁵

As is often the case with Harris’s abstracts, there are several permutations of this composition that exist: a smaller, preliminary study in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada (NGC 36165), another version in a private collection (*LSH 114*), and a cancelled version on the verso of a work in the collection of the Glenbow Museum (*LSH 74*). This particular canvas, however, stands as the definitive statement on the idea. It was so successful that when his career-spanning 1963 retrospective exhibition was mounted at the National Gallery of Canada, this painting was chosen as the frontispiece for the catalogue, and it was the sole work illustrated out of the 80 listed.

The fact that such an important and celebrated work would find its way into the collection of the students of the University of British Columbia is not surprising, as it aligns with Harris’s close connection to the institution, and with his firm enthusiasm for the promotion and appreciation of art. Very appropriately, when receiving an honorary degree from the university in May 1946, the citation read that the degree of Doctor of Laws (*honoris causa*) was presented to “Lawren Harris, creative artist himself and sustainer of the art in others, whose imagination has nobly interpreted the Canadian scene and ventures further into a region of ‘unpath’d waters, undream’d shores.’”⁶ This encapsulation of Harris is especially resonant in the context of this painting, which in late 1955, he would assist the student association to acquire, early in their mission to establish a student-owned collection.

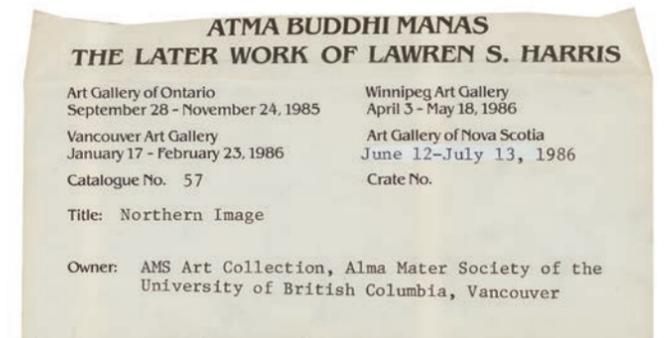
Harris had many connections to UBC after moving to Vancouver in 1940. In 1947, he was elected to the executive of UBC’s fine arts coordinating committee as honorary president, and he held several exhibitions of his works on campus over the years, often alongside lectures he delivered. One show, *Lawren Harris: Recent Paintings*, is especially pertinent, as it included *Northern Image*. The show was at the Vancouver Art Gallery in May 1955, when fellow artist and UBC faculty member B.C. Binning wrote the following for the catalogue: “At a time when most men are simply summing up their past work, Lawren Harris continues to broaden and deepen the dimensions of his expression. The rhythms of his painting swirl deeper into the richness of life and broaden into larger circles, encompassing the greater joy. These



Canadian Group of Painters, Toronto, 1952, exhibition label on verso



National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, *Lawren Harris Retrospective Exhibition*, 1963, exhibition label on verso



Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, *Atma Buddhi Manas: The Later Work of Lawren S. Harris*, 1985 - 1986, exhibition label on verso

The Group of Seven in Western Canada

Exhibition Number: 205

Artist: Lawren S. Harris

Title: *Northern Image*, 1952

Medium: oil on canvas

Size: 127.6 x 120.0

Owner/Lender: Student Society of University of B.C.

Cat Number:

Venues Shown: GM, AGNS, WAG, AGGV, NGC

Section: Abstraction

Crate Number: 41

Glenbow

MUSEUM ART GALLERY LIBRARY ARCHIVES

Exhibit: **"The Group of Seven in Western Canada"**
National Tour

Glenbow Museum, Calgary, Canada
June 10 - Nov 13, 2000

Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax, Canada
Nov 2, 2002 - Feb 2, 2003

Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg, Canada
Feb 22 - May 18, 2003

Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Victoria, Canada
June 12 - Sept 14, 2003

National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Canada
Oct 10, 2003 - Jan 2, 2004

Glenbow Museum, Calgary, *The Group of Seven in Western Canada*, 2002 - 2004, exhibition label on verso

are the qualities of great art."⁷ Binning was presumably enthusiastic in bringing that show to UBC in October 1955, and was then one of the members of the committee who selected and purchased the painting for the UBC student collection by December of that year. Its selection, from the very best works that Harris had at the time, is a testament to its impact and resonance.

Since its acquisition for the Brock Hall Art Collection, *Northern Image* has been lent numerous times for important exhibitions, and it has featured prominently in publications and exhibitions celebrating Harris's work. For such a diverse artist, it is a work as emblematic and representative of his career as any, and its role in inspiring generations of students and the wider public places it in rare company among other important works of Canadian art. A dynamic and powerful painting, *Northern Image* is a triumph of Harris's creativity and his drive to push art into new territories, and it is one of his most significant abstract works.

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

1. Lawren Harris. "Art as an Expression of the Values of Its Day," text from a public lecture, undated, collection of the Lawren Harris Estate, 6.

2. Lawren Harris, quoted in Bess Harris and R.G.P. Colgrove, eds., *Lawren Harris* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1969), 91.

3. *Ibid.*, 114.

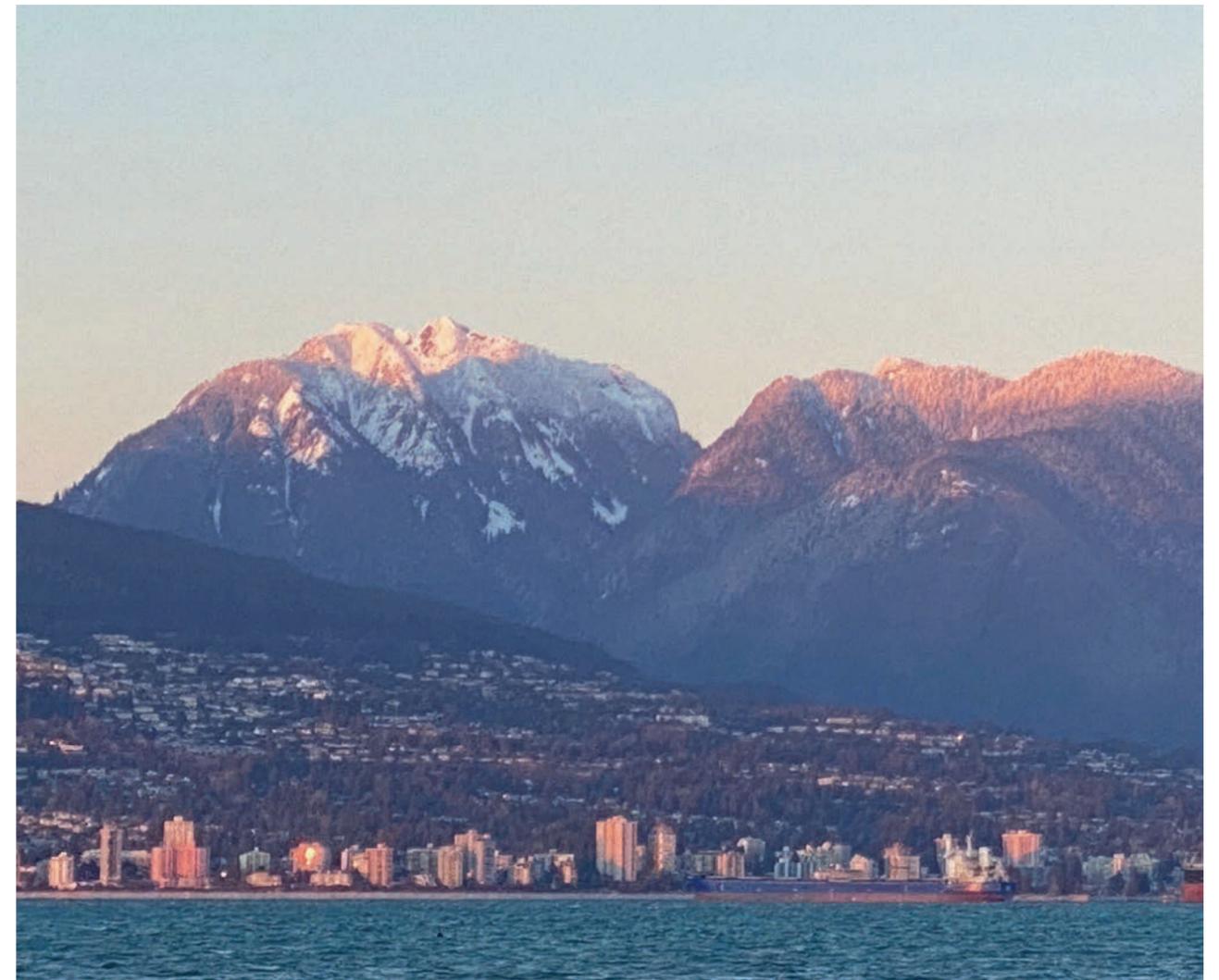
4. Peggy Knox, "Personal Reminiscences by Peggy Harris Knox," addendum to *Beginning of Vision: The Drawings of Lawren S. Harris*, by Joan Murray (Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, in assoc. with Mira Godard Editions, 1982).

5. Lawren Harris, quoted in "What B.C. Means to Nine of Its Best Artists," *Maclean's*, May 10, 1958, 30.

6. The printed citation is included in a letter from UBC president Norman MacKenzie to Harris, May 16, 1946, collection of the Lawren Harris Estate.

7. B.C. Binning, in *Lawren Harris: Recent Paintings* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1955), exhibition catalogue.

ESTIMATE: \$450,000 – 550,000



View of the North Shore mountains from Point Grey, visible from Lawren Harris's home in Vancouver
Photo: Alec Blair