



108 Lawren Stewart Harris

ALC BCSFA CGP FCA G7 OSA TPG 1885 – 1970

Red House, Barrie, Houses Group xxx

oil on board, on verso signed and titled on the artist's label and inscribed 58 / Bess Harris Collection, BHC 101 / Property of Margaret Harris Knox and with the Doris Mills inventory #3/30, circa 1918
10 5/8 x 12 3/8 in, 27 x 31.4 cm

PROVENANCE

Collection of the Artist
A gift from the Artist to his daughter Margaret “Peggie” Harris Knox, Vancouver
By descent within the family of the Artist

LITERATURE

Doris Mills, *L.S. Harris Inventory*, 1936, Houses, Group 3, catalogue #30, location noted as the Studio Building, titled *The Red House*

EXHIBITED

Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, *Ten Decades—Ten Canadians*, April 25 – May 14, 1967, catalogue #46
Vancouver Art Gallery, *Lawren Harris: Canadian Visionary*, March 1 – May 4, 2014

THE GROUP OF SEVEN holds a monumental place in the cultural history of Canada, representing the first significant artistic movement that strove purposefully to define and establish the uniqueness of the country and its people. Through both his moral and economic support, Lawren Harris was critical to the establishment and success of the Group and was recognized by his fellow members as its unofficial leader. Fellow member A.Y. Jackson wrote, “To Lawren Harris art was almost a mission. He believed that a country that ignored the arts left no record of itself worth preserving.”¹ It was this desire to depict the country on its own terms that led the artists to venture from their base in Toronto, through its varied neighbourhoods and much farther beyond, to find elements of the Canadian landscape that could speak to its history, present and future. As Harris himself would describe, “We had commenced our great adventure. We lived in a continuous blaze of enthusiasm... Above all we loved this country and loved exploring and painting it.”²

While this mission is most often associated with the wilderness depictions that the Group pioneered and national institutions have championed, the paintings that the artists chose to exhibit often demonstrated a considerable variety of subjects. As we can see from the vibrant and idyllic *Red House, Barrie, Houses Group xxx*, Harris’s clarity of vision is just as acute when depicting the familiar and the bucolic as it is when capturing the vast and remote. Reflecting this range, Harris’s contributions to the first Group of Seven exhibition, held in May 1920, consisted of four portraits, five urban scenes and only two Algoma canvases. This



LAWREN S. HARRIS

Pine Tree and Red House, Winter, City Painting II

oil on canvas
32 x 38 in, 81.3 x 96.5 cm
Sold by Heffel, May 23, 2007, lot 149, reproduced front cover
Private Collection

Not for sale with this lot

diversity was indicative of Harris’s artistic output at the time. Though by the mid-1920s his work would focus on more austere and barren landscapes, typified by the north shore of Lake Superior and the high altitudes of the Rocky Mountains, his artistic catalogue is far from the monolithic conjuring of Canada’s wild expanses that it is sometimes characterized as.

One of Harris’s frequent early subjects was the Lake Simcoe area, around Barrie. This region was easily accessible by train from Toronto along the Grand Trunk Railway, with the Allandale Station considered the “flagship of the Grand Trunk” line and a hub of local activity after it was renovated in 1905.³ The house pictured in *Red House, Barrie* is believed to be Woodend, a summer property owned by the Harris family on Kempenfelt Bay, where he would often holiday with his family. In 1918, following a nervous breakdown triggered by the death of his brother, Harris found refuge and solace in this idyllic setting. While there, his recovery included the consideration of future artistic endeavours after the disruption of the Great War and loss of close friend Tom Thomson. From Woodend he wrote to J.E.H. MacDonald



LAWREN S. HARRIS
Midsummer Afternoon
 oil on canvas, 1922
 32 x 40 in, 81.3 x 101.6 cm
 Private Collection

Not for sale with this lot

with plans for a sketching excursion that autumn: "I happened to meet the Dr. [MacCallum] at the Allandale station on Saturday, and we had a rushed chat with this result. Decided to go up the Algoma Central."⁴ The outcome of this planning was the first of the famed boxcar trips to Algoma, a key moment in the genesis of the Group of Seven.

While at Simcoe, Harris also painted much of the landscape that surrounded him, interested in the changing skies, broad open expanses and, as captured here, the quaint Victorian homes. There are over two dozen known sketches from Lake Simcoe that have been catalogued, with most of them likely coming from this summer. He wrote to MacDonald in August: "I still sketch a bit in my spare time... I have a few that are worthy, though I hanker after fall colouring."⁵ In *Red House, Barrie*, the vibrant warm colour of the house and the bright foreground flowers provided the chromatic variety that Harris was longing for in these summer months, and the results were certainly deemed "worthy" by the artist, for he worked up the sketch into a canvas in 1922 that would be shown in the third Group of Seven exhibition.

Red House, Barrie was painted during a time of exciting and rapid artistic evolution for Harris. The work has a boldness and an economy of brush-strokes that speak to his experience observing and depicting the Canadian landscape in the years prior, alongside MacDonald, Jackson and Thomson. The subtle

interplay between colours is handled with confidence and precision, ensuring that there are distinctions between all the various greens (the pine tree, the lawn, the trim and the roof)—a challenge the artist often faced in the summer months. The nimble handling of shadow gives an effective impression of light passing into the picture, and the composition, arranged over several receding planes, draws one's attention deep into the scene. The sketch is a sublime demonstration of Harris's range and ability to distill the complexities of the landscape into navigable and idealized forms. Here, though more decorative in style than his later phases, he has captured a country home in the midsummer afternoon with the same perceptive eye that would later allow him to paint the essence of the remote Arctic, creating opportunities for audiences to connect to these varied depictions of Canada.

Harris, like the other members of the Group of Seven and Thomson, would use oil-on-board sketches as the basis for his large canvases, and in the 1910s and early 1920s, these would be how he initiated an artistic idea (later in the 1920s, he would often precede oil sketches with pencil drawings). Sketches that were chosen to be worked up into canvases, such as this one, are important works in Harris's catalogue, since they represent the genesis of ideas and expressions he felt most strongly about. Even more significant are subjects that were selected for inclusion in exhibitions, and this sketch falls into this special category, being the source for the canvas *Midsummer Afternoon* (private collection), one of 15 works by the artist in the 1922 Group of Seven exhibition at the Art Gallery of Toronto. A companion canvas, painted in 1924 and entitled *Pine Tree and Red House, Winter, City Painting II* (private collection, sold by Heffel in May 2007), depicts the same subject. This revisiting, with almost identical compositional structure as the initial sketch offered here, indicates Harris's persistent interest in the subject, and his access to it in multiple seasons supports the case that he had a strong connection to the site. Taken together, these works are exemplary demonstrations of Harris's dedication to conveying the diversity of Canada's landscapes, and his determination to create, in his words, "an art expression which should embody the moods and character and spirit of the country."⁶

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

1. A.Y. Jackson, *A Painter's Country: The Autobiography of A.Y. Jackson* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1958), 29.
2. Lawren Harris, "The Group of Seven in Canadian History," *Report of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association* 27, no. 1 (1948): 32.
3. "Canadian National Railways Allandale Station at Barrie," Canada's Historic Places, under "Heritage Value," para. 2, <https://www.historicplaces.ca/en/rep-reg/place-lieu.aspx?id=6503>.
4. Harris to J.E.H. MacDonald, undated, 1918, LSH Estate Archives.
5. Harris to J.E.H. MacDonald, August 1918, LSH Estate Archives.
6. Harris, "Group of Seven," 31.

ESTIMATE: \$200,000 – 300,000

