



117 Lawren Stewart Harris

ALC BCSFA CGP FCA G7 OSA TPG 1885 – 1970

Mountain Sketch LXX

oil on board, on verso signed, titled, inscribed with the Doris Mills inventory #7/70 and stamped Dominion Gallery, circa 1928
12 x 15 in, 30.5 x 38.1 cm

PROVENANCE

Stevens Art Gallery, Montreal, January 14, 1947
Estate of Theodosia Dawes Bond Thornton, Montreal
Sold sale of *Fine Canadian Art*, Heffel Fine Art Auction House,
May 26, 2010, lot 132
Steve Martin, Los Angeles, California

LITERATURE

Lawren Harris to Emily Carr, June 1930, in Emily Carr Correspondence, January 1928 – December 1932, MG 30 D215, National Archives of Canada

Doris Mills, *L.S. Harris Inventory*, 1936, Rocky Mountain Sketches, Group 7, catalogue #70, listed, location noted as the Studio Building, a drawing of this work illustrated by Hans Jensen page 40
Theodosia Dawes Bond Thornton, *Personal Art Collection Catalogue*, reproduced, unpaginated, catalogue #R4
Bess Harris and R.G.P. Colgrove, editors, *Lawren Harris*, 1969, pages 91 and 109
Paul Duval, *Lawren Harris: Where the Universe Sings*, 2011, a similar sketch of the same scene, entitled *Rocky Mountain Sketch*, reproduced page 306
Cynthia Burlingham et al., *The Idea of North: The Paintings of Lawren Harris*, Art Gallery of Ontario and Hammer Museum, 2015, essay by Steve Martin, pages 17 and 18

EXHIBITED

Dominion Gallery, Montreal

THE MOUNTAIN PAINTINGS of Lawren Harris are among the most celebrated icons of Canadian art. These works, such as the luminous *Mountain Sketch LXX*, are the culmination of the artist's unrelenting desire to portray underlying truths and enduring values in the world around us. Art, according to Harris, is "an adventure toward an illusive, yet insistent reality" and "one of the ways in which man endeavours to find himself in the universe." Harris was an ambitious and restless artist, searching for ways to express such ideas he referred to as "insistently forming." Constantly evolving, Harris regularly reinvented his practice, and for a career spanning six decades, he seldom maintained an approach to his painting, whether in style or subject, for more than a few years.

By the end of the 1920s, he had reached the pinnacle of his representative treatment of landscape, achieving the clarity of vision that resulted in his most powerful paintings, which conveyed both the Canadian environment and deeper, more universal, ideas. As he wrote to fellow artist Emily Carr in 1930, "[Profoundness] is the interplay in unity of the resonance of mother earth and the spirit of eternity. Which, though it sounds incongruous, means nature and the abstract qualities fused in one work." Evident in this work offered here, Harris was able to achieve this cohesion of ideas successfully and impressively.

This sketch, portraying the rocky shore and idyllic waters of Lake MacArthur looking towards the peaks of Odaray Mountain, provides a faithful representation of the scene on a summer day in the Rocky Mountains of British Columbia's Yoho National Park. But these particulars are not the motivator for the work, but simply the vehicle that Harris uses to explore much larger ideas. Harris declared further to Carr, "Representation means nothing—the spirit everything—but we cannot get the spirit without the use of representation ... [and] we come to love the representational because it provides a home for the spirit—and we sensed the spirit first and always through the life and forms of nature."

Harris's infatuation with the mountains seems inevitable when tracing the ascension of his interests: moving from the immediate and earthly attentions of urban scenes, snow-laden forests and abundant lakeshores to the broadening horizons of Algoma's hilltop vistas, and eventually the solemn, ethereal expanses over Lake Superior. It was in the mountains, however, where Harris finally found a landscape that allowed him to ascend into these higher planes himself—where the landforms seemed to aspire to the same heights as his ideas. Here he reached the empyrean of his landscape ambitions, surrounded finally by the subject matter that matched the altitude of his ideas.

Mountain Sketch LXX comes from the collection of comedian, actor, author, musician and, most pertinently, art curator Steve Martin. Previously part of the esteemed collection of Theodosia Dawes Bond Thornton, the pedigree of this work is demonstrated by its history in the collections of knowledgeable, passionate and dedicated devotees of the artist. In 2015, Martin co-curated *The Idea of North*, an exhibition that aimed not only to (re)introduce Harris to the United States, but also to recognize the artist's achievements as a modernist painter in addition to his significant contributions to Canadian cultural identity.

Martin's own collection of works, including this painting and another Harris recently donated to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (*Northern Painting 25*), played a significant role as a

catalyst for the exhibition, fostering interest in those not familiar with Harris's works and demonstrating a desire to rectify the so-far impermeable nature of Canada's borders to the fame of one of its greatest artists.

This work immediately recalls the monumental *Mountain Forms*, a highlight of *The Idea of North*, with an analogous, centred, triangular peak, very nearly breaching the top of the composition. But, in contrast to that dramatic canvas, this work allows for more intimacy, with an immediacy achieved by placing the observer at the shores of the placid lake. There is tension inherent in this tranquility, as the beauty and serenity of the alpine landscape is simultaneously full of the power and volatility of such awe-inspiring landscapes. Duality such as this is central to the work of Harris. Martin writes of these landscapes, "The absence of organic things ... created a paradoxical effect: the pictures came to life," and "The mountain views want to oscillate—if paint would allow them to." The interplay of these apparent contradictions captures the brilliance found in many of Harris's finest works: the ability to reveal the life in the barren and the energy in the still.

Through works such as *Mountain Sketch LXX*, Harris succeeds in achieving one of the promises he described in the creative practice: the opportunity "both to find ourselves in our environment and to give that environment new and more far-reaching meaning."

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

ESTIMATE: \$300,000 – 500,000