



138 Arthur Lismer

AAM CGP CSGA CSPWC G7 OSA RCA 1885 – 1969

Tugs and Troop Carrier, Halifax Harbour, Nova Scotia

oil on canvas, signed and dated 1921

40 x 50 in, 101.6 x 127 cm

PROVENANCE

Collection of the Artist

Laing Galleries, Toronto, 1955

Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, acquired with the A. Sidney

Dawes Fund for Canadian paintings, 1955

Acquired from the above by Laing Galleries, Toronto, 1959,

in exchange for *Cathedral Mountain* by Arthur Lismer

Acquired from the above by a Prominent Canadian

Executive and Philanthropist, Toronto, January 2, 1962

LITERATURE

Augustus Bridle, "Unusual Art Cult Breaks Loose Again,"

The Toronto Daily Star, May 7, 1921

The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts Annual Report, 1956, page 17

Norah McCullough, *The Arthur Lismer Catalogue of Paintings:*

1970 – 1972, Library & Archives, National Gallery of Canada,

dated 1919, catalogue #105

Gemey Kelly, *Arthur Lismer: Nova Scotia, 1916 – 1919*,

Dalhousie Art Gallery, 1982

EXHIBITED

Art Gallery of Toronto, *The Group of Seven*, May 7 – 29, 1921,

titled as *Tugs, Halifax Harbour, N.S.* (listed as \$750),

catalogue #36

Canadian National Exhibition, Toronto, August 27 –

September 10, 1921, titled as *Tugs, Halifax Harbour, N.S.*,

catalogue #201, listed as \$600

ARTHUR LISMER IMMIGRATED to Toronto from Sheffield, England, in 1911. He first worked as a graphic designer at Grip Ltd., where he met Tom Thomson, J.E.H. MacDonald and the other artists who would form the Group of Seven in 1920. The declaration of war in August 1914 would pose numerous challenges for the burgeoning Toronto art movement. Design work and commissions for illustrations dried up; A.Y. Jackson returned to Montreal and then enlisted. In an April 23, 1915 letter to Dr. James MacCallum he observed, "The MacDonalds and Lismer must be running pretty close to the wind." In September Lismer moved his family to Thornhill, north of Toronto, where he attempted to farm with MacDonald.

In September 1916 Lismer was appointed principal of the Victoria School of Art and Design in Halifax; he settled in Bedford, at the north end of Halifax Harbour. War had transformed Halifax, as it became the principal centre for troop movements, the shipping of supplies to England and Europe, and the formation of convoys for self-protection. Submarine nets were installed to prevent submarines from entering Halifax Harbour and Bedford Basin, where the convoys assembled.

Lismer's first winter in Halifax was devoted to reorganizing the school, teaching, and re-establishing the Nova Scotia Museum of Fine Arts. He was able to paint around Bedford and the Sackville River, but sketching the military activities around the port



TOP: **ARTHUR LISMER**
Camouflaged, Bedford Basin
oil on board, 1918
15 ½ x 22 ½ in, 39.2 x 56.9 cm
Private Collection

Not for sale with this lot

BOTTOM: **ARTHUR LISMER**
Halifax Harbour—Time of War
oil on canvas, circa 1917
40 ¾ x 51 ¼ in, 102.5 x 130.0 cm
Dalhousie Art Gallery permanent collection, gift of the artist, 1955

Not for sale with this lot





ARTHUR LISMER

Decoration for the Green Lantern Restaurant, Halifax

Summer 1917 (destroyed)

Photo: Library & Archives of the National Gallery of Canada,

Norah McCullough fonds

Not for sale with this lot

resulted in his arrest as a possible spy. Nonetheless, his commission in the summer of 1917 for 12 nine-foot-wide decorative panels for the new Green Lantern restaurant included a panoramic view of Bedford Basin with its heavy ship traffic and tugs.

As Lismer wrote to Eric Brown, director of the National Gallery of Canada, on October 5, 1917, “Halifax is intensely interesting just now to a painter & if one had the privilege of going about with a sketch book some valuable material could be gathered. The harbour is full of transports with American troops, & the inner basin with neutral shipping. The coming & going of these make good subjects.”

But on December 6, 1917, the outgoing Belgian relief ship *Imo* collided with the incoming French freighter *Mont-Blanc*, which was loaded with tons of armament chemicals and TNT, at the Halifax Narrows. The resulting explosion destroyed the Richmond area of the city, killing about 2,000, injuring 9,000 (including 200 people blinded), leaving over 20,000 homeless, and wrecking the interior of the art school. “My school is full of coffins now,” Lismer wrote to Edward Greig at the Art Museum of Toronto, “and all boarded up. I don’t know yet how many of my students have suffered ... The word is now that no schools will open for 6 months.”

The unexpected school closure did provide Lismer with more time to paint, but he still required the necessary permits from the military authorities. On January 12, 1918, he wrote to Brown expressing his frustration, “More than any other city perhaps in the Dominion, Halifax is of vital interest as a war city and there is a tremendous amount of activity that I’d like to record—the departure & arrival of troopships, convoys, hospital ships, troopships from Australia & New Zealand & the States—camouflaged men of war of different nationalities—it’s intensely interesting & graphic & no one is painting it. It is absolutely impossible to make sketches. It is forbidden strictly & almost useless to apply for permission or access to the piers etc. & all this material full of interest to a painter is unrecorded.”

Nonetheless, he sent three canvases of Halifax Harbour and a lithograph of a transport to the combined exhibition of the Royal

Canadian Academy of Arts and the Ontario Society of Artists that opened the new Art Museum of Toronto (now the Art Gallery of Ontario) in April 1918. The largest, *Halifax Harbour, Time of War*, recalls the Green Lantern commission with its carefully positioned ships and tugs viewed from the same position. *Winter Camouflage* (acquired by the National Gallery of Canada) is principally a landscape with a harbour backdrop. But both canvases now depicted the ocean liners converted into troopships painted in the remarkable dazzle patterns, camouflage designed to create a visual confusion against the threat of enemy submarines at sea.

In June 1918, the Canadian War Records Office, initiated by Lord Beaverbrook in London and administered in Canada by Brown and Sir Edmund Walker, chair of the National Gallery’s board, asked Lismer to prepare studies of Halifax in wartime for possible purchase by the war art program. Most importantly, the request got Lismer the necessary permits to sketch, yet by the time he obtained them in August 1918, he wrote to Brown:

Activities have quieted down until, for many weeks, there has been absolutely nothing happening here. Transports have ceased to come & go. Convoys have not left for a long time & the submarine menace I suppose is responsible in some measure ... I have of course collected quite a lot of useful material ... The military & naval people are very decent in regard to my work but the public make it a little unpleasant occasionally ... One of the local papers is lashing up an argument against landscape painters having access to docks etc. & I have been frequently reported as a suitable subject for internment ... There is a lot of spy talk in Halifax just now in the press.

Lismer was able to draw the ships and harbour activities, but was prevented from making many oil sketches due to the poor weather conditions. The influenza epidemic in October closed the art school temporarily, giving him more time to sketch, but on November 11, 1918, the Armistice was declared, and his attention quickly turned to the ships bringing the soldiers home. The recently returned Lieutenant A.Y. Jackson joined Lismer in



ARTHUR LISMER

Tugs in Halifax Harbour

black conté on wove paper, 1918

10 x 7 ¾ in, 25.3 x 19.9 cm

Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum,

CWM 19720256-096

Photo: National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

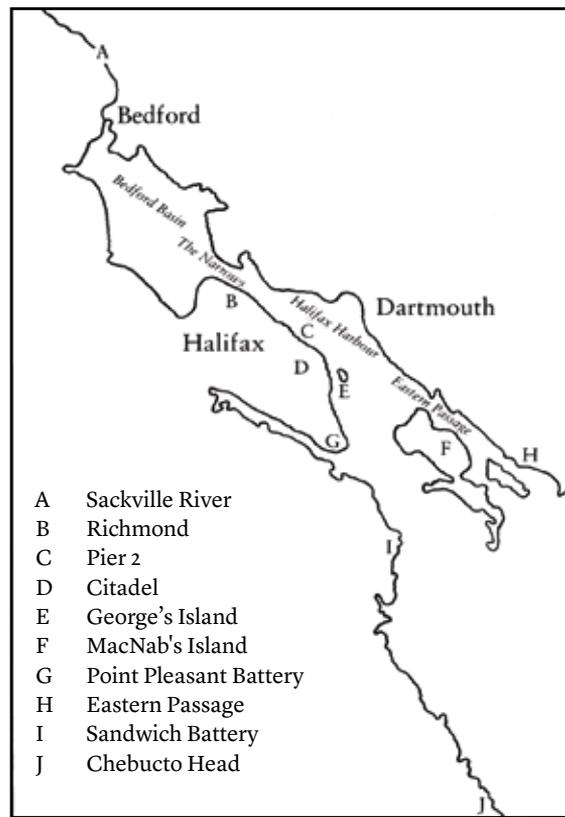
Not for sale with this lot

Halifax and wrote to Brown on February 24, 1919, “The camouflage has almost disappeared and the big liners have been withdrawn.”

Lismer left Halifax in September 1919, returning to Toronto to teach at the Ontario College of Art. The Canadian War Records Office eventually purchased three large Halifax canvases, and a fourth was commissioned by the Regina Boat Club, but *Halifax Harbour—Time of War* remained with the artist and was included in the first exhibition of the Group of Seven, in 1920.

Lismer’s work in Halifax has been superbly documented by Gemey Kelly in the exhibition *Arthur Lismer: Nova Scotia, 1916–1919* at Dalhousie Art Gallery in 1982, but *Tugs and Troop Carrier, Halifax Harbour, Nova Scotia*, dated 1921, was not included.

Almost a year and a half after leaving the city, Lismer returned to his Halifax subject matter. Included in the May 1921 Group of Seven exhibition as *Tugs, Halifax Harbour, N.S.*, this painting was characteristically praised by Augustus Bridle in the *Toronto Daily Star*, who stated “Arthur Lismer... has one of war boats in a perfect high-keyed hullabaloo of wind, blue water and bluer sky.” Lismer had not returned to Halifax, but based his composition on the 1918 oil sketch *Camouflaged, Bedford Basin*, stripping the ship of its dazzle pattern. While he has demilitarized the harbour,



Map of Bedford and Halifax Harbour

he has animated the waters with tugs based on his 1918 drawing. The canvas is painted in a higher key, with bolder brushwork and a more structured treatment of form, as seen in the foreground waves and clouds. *Tugs and Troop Carrier, Halifax Harbour, Nova Scotia* is a wartime image translated into an image of peace, full of joy and life.

Lismer’s and Jackson’s letters to Brown are in the National Gallery of Canada, the letters to Greig are in the Art Gallery of Ontario, and Jackson’s letter to Dr. MacCallum is in the Naomi Jackson Groves fonds, Library & Archives Canada, Ottawa.

The exhibition *Masterpiece in Focus: Halifax Harbour 1918* is on display at the National Gallery of Canada from October 12, 2018 to March 17, 2019.

We thank Charles C. Hill, former curator of Canadian art from 1980 to 2014 at the National Gallery of Canada and author of *The Group of Seven: Art for a Nation*, for contributing the above essay.

This work and lots 139 and 140 in this sale are from a prominent Canadian executive and philanthropist who served in the Royal Navy in World War II.

ESTIMATE: \$700,000 – 900,000