



10 Lawren Stewart Harris

ALC BCSFA CGP FCA G7 OSA TPG 1885 – 1970

Painting (Formative III)

oil on canvas, on verso signed, titled, inscribed *Return to Vancouver Art Gallery / Top / Vancouver Canada / ix* and various inscriptions crossed out and stamped
Lawren Harris LSH Holdings Ltd. #152, 1950
41 × 51 in, 104.1 × 129.5 cm

PROVENANCE

Collection of the Artist
LSH Holdings Ltd., Vancouver
Estate of the Artist
By descent to the present Private Collection,
Vancouver

LITERATURE

Vancouver Sun, December 13, 1951, titled as *Formative III*, reproduced
Ian McNairn, editor, *Lawren Harris: Retrospective Exhibition*, National Gallery of Canada, 1963, listed page 85
Bess Harris and R.G.P. Colgrove, *Lawren Harris*, 1969, titled as *Abstraction*, reproduced page 115 and titled as *Forming Toward Beneficence*, listed page 146
Dennis Reid, *Atma Buddhi Manas: The Later Work of Lawren S. Harris*, Art Gallery of Ontario, 1985, reproduced page 90
Peter Larisey, *Light for a Cold Land: Lawren Harris's Work and Life—An Interpretation*, 1993, titled as *Formative III (Forming Toward Beneficence)*, reproduced page 48
Andrew Hunter, *Lawren Stewart Harris: A Painter's Progress*, The Americas Society, 2000, reproduced page 67
Roald Nasgaard and Gwendolyn Owens, *Higher States: Lawren Harris and His American Contemporaries*, McMichael Canadian Art Collection, 2017, titled as *LSH 152*, reproduced pages 181, 184 and 185, and a photograph of Harris with the work reproduced page 174 and a photograph of Harris painting this work reproduced page 186

EXHIBITED

Canadian Group of Painters, Toronto, November 10 – December 17, 1950, titled as *Formative III*, catalogue #37
Vancouver Art Gallery, *British Columbia Society of Artists*, November 27 – December 16, 1951, titled as *Formative III*, catalogue #37



Lawren Harris with *Painting (Formative III)* in his studio at 4760 Belmont Avenue, Vancouver, May 1955
Photo: Jack Long

Vancouver Art Gallery, *Lawren Harris: Recent Paintings*, May 10 – June 5, 1955; shown at the University of British Columbia in October 1955, titled as *Forming Toward Beneficence*, catalogue #15
Laing Galleries, Toronto, *Lawren Harris: Abstract Paintings and Canvases and Sketches from the Group of Seven Period*, November 15 – 29, 1958
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, *Lawren Harris: Retrospective Exhibition*, June 7 – September 8, 1963, traveling in 1963 to the Vancouver Art Gallery, titled as *Formative II*, catalogue #56
Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, *Atma Buddhi Manas: The Later Work of Lawren S. Harris*, September 27 – November 24, 1985, traveling in 1986 to the Vancouver Art Gallery; Winnipeg Art Gallery; and Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax, catalogue #54



Lawren Harris at his Belmont Avenue studio with abstract canvases, May 1955
 Foreground: *Painting (Formative III)*; middle ground: *Geometric Composition*; background: *White Triangle*
 Photo: Jack Long

The Americas Society, New York, *Lawren Stewart Harris: A Painter's Progress*, September 5 – November 5, 2000, catalogue #42
 McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, *Higher States: Lawren Harris and His American Contemporaries*, February 4 – Sept 4, 2017, traveling in 2017 – 2018 to the Glenbow Museum, Calgary, titled as *Untitled (LSH 152)*

PAINTING (FORMATIVE III) is a monumental work, a triumph in Lawren Harris's pursuit of conveying the primal, underlying and indescribable beauty that he experienced in the world. He wrote, "To the artist, his art is adventure in which he seeks to regain unity

with nature and the knowledge of his own immortal being."¹ For Harris, after 1934 this mission was fundamentally reliant on the opportunities that abstraction provided, and his writings demonstrate his growing feelings of limitation by the constraints of landscape forms: "My purpose in attempting to paint abstractions is that there is at once more imaginative scope and a more exacting discipline in non-objective painting. I have had ideas insistently forming which could not be expressed in representational terms."²

After increasingly abstracting his landscape subjects throughout the 1920s, Harris experienced major changes in his personal life in the 1930s, including a relocation to the United States and marriage to fellow artist Bess Larkin Houser. These changes

were accompanied by a newfound conviction that non-objective abstraction was the path forward. "There is no doubt in my mind that it enlarges the range, the scope of painting enormously. It replaces nothing. It adds to the realm of painting. It makes possible an incalculable range of ideas that the representational painting is closed to. It increases the field of experience, enlarges it and that is surely all to the good," he wrote to a skeptical Emily Carr in 1936, clearly stating, "As for me, there is for the present no other way."³ Yet this newfound enthusiasm was not meant to be a deviation from the spirit of his prior artistic output, but a continuation and expansion of its exploration. After experiencing Carr's lack of enthusiasm, he wrote to her again in 1937, further elucidating the approach that he and Bess were taking: "You ask about our abstract endeavors ... I try always to keep away from the representational however—for it seems the further I can keep away and into abstract idiom the more expressive the things become—yet one has in mind and heart the informing spirit of great Nature."⁴

The task of separating himself from the semi-abstract landscape style that he had mastered with his own unique voice was a task Harris viewed as integral in the universal development of all art. Around the time when he was painting *Painting (Formative III)*, he drafted what would be published in 1954 as *A Disquisition on Abstract Painting*, describing this process of emancipation:

In actuality the art of painting in all ages "begins where imitation ends." It may be an equivalent, a re-creation of the experience of things seen in nature but there has always been inherent in it throughout the centuries the possibility of an art independent of representing things seen in nature. Anyone who has truly experienced the great masterpieces of the past in the light of present-day creations in the art of painting cannot fail to see the inevitable attempt to extricate the art from imitation or representation of nature.⁵

It was in works such *Painting (Formative III)* and *Nature Rhythm* (collection of the National Gallery of Canada), both done at the start of the 1950s, that Harris reached the summit of his artistic vision for non-representational painting and the synthesis of poetic forces of nature unshackled from geometric space and recognizable structure. With its muted tones and swirling layers of ethereal forms, this work demonstrates that Harris is a master of his own form of Abstract Expressionism, which he saw as a "new realm of imagination," providing the freedom he believed necessary for his vision.⁶

As an artist who worked through iteration, large canvases, whether landscape or abstract, almost without exception had preceding works that allowed Harris to distill and hone his vision. In his attempts to distance his work from the representational, the sources for Harris's abstract expressions were varied and often experimental. Many of his canvases had their origins in pencil sketches, which for a time he did through so-called automatic drawing, letting the pencil trace paths across a sketching pad with as little conscious direction as the artist could muster. But Harris also worked from more intentional places—creating pencil sketches of landscapes and overlaying sweeping rhythmic

lines, some that lined up with the major natural forms, and many that deviated, with the final result only recognizably linked when the process is known. He did something similar with partially scraped-off landscape oil panels from the 1920s. Through this approach, he was able to retain the organic and familiar shapes that communicated the underlying truth of nature's grand presence, but without the constraints of the inevitable narratives associated with distinguishable landscapes.

This painting, having never left the Harris family, is the most published and exhibited abstraction by Harris; it has been featured in almost every major exhibition of the artist's since the 1950s and in every major publication of his abstract works. The significance of the work is further enshrined by the fact that it was chosen by Harris to be featured alongside him when he was photographed in May 1955 by Jack Long, a still photographer from the National Film Board of Canada. Long visited Harris at his home to capture his artistic practice and work, as part of the NFB's mission to document Canada and Canadians. While *Painting (Formative III)* was completed several years earlier, and already had been framed and exhibited, Harris's selection of it demonstrates its favour in the eyes of the artist. Shortly after the photograph was taken, the painting would go on to be displayed at the Vancouver Art Gallery, titled as *Forming Toward Beneficence*, in one of the many exhibitions it has been featured in over the past 70 years.

With musicality, tension and invigorating presence, this painting's symphony of warm and cool forms enraptures the viewer, leaving no doubt that Harris's aspiration to translate his inspiration into "a suggestion of eternal meaning" has been achieved here.⁷ As with his prowess in creating unique representations of landscape subjects, his stylistic development and use of shape and line are exceptional and definitively individual. Well versed in the vast spectrum of modern art (including Abstract Expressionism) during his time, Harris managed to find, once again, a distinctive voice to communicate his vision, encapsulated perfectly by *Painting (Formative III)*.

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

1. Lawren Harris, quoted in Bess Harris and R.G.P. Colgrove, eds., *Lawren Harris* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1969), 7.
2. *Ibid.*, 91.
3. Harris to Emily Carr, May 3, 1936, Emily Carr Papers, MS-2181, box 2, folder 3, BC Archives, Victoria.
4. Harris to Carr, April 15, 1937, *ibid.*
5. Lawren Harris, *A Disquisition on Abstract Painting* (Toronto: Rous & Mann Press, 1954), 7.
6. *Ibid.*, 11.
7. Quoted in Harris and Colgrove, *Lawren Harris*, 87.

ESTIMATE: \$200,000 – 250,000