



118 **Lawren Stewart Harris**

ALC BCSFA CGP FCA G7 OSA TPG 1885 – 1970

House in the Ward, Winter, City Painting No. 1

oil on canvas, signed and on verso titled as *Street Scene, Winter* on the Laing Galleries label, circa 1924
32 x 38 ¾ in, 81.3 x 97.5 cm

PROVENANCE

Laing Galleries, Toronto
Volkswagen Canada, acquired from the above in 1957
Private Collection, Switzerland
Important Canadian Art, Sotheby’s Canada,
May 11, 1994, lot 102
A Prestigious Corporate Collection

LITERATURE

Doris Mills, *L.S. Harris Inventory*, 1936, City Paintings,
catalogue #1, location noted as the Art Gallery of Toronto,

and a drawing of the painting illustrated by Hans Jensen in the section titled Large Pictures
Jeremy Adamson, *Lawren S. Harris: Urban Scenes and Wilderness Landscapes, 1906 – 1930*, Art Gallery of Ontario, 1978, page 25
Paul Duval, *Lawren Harris: Where the Universe Sings*, 2011, reproduced page 105, titled as *House in the Ward, City Painting No. 1*, dated as circa 1918, listed page 401, and the sketch for this work entitled “*Houses*” Group XXXIII dated as circa 1918 (sold by Heffel November 24, 2005, lot 78), reproduced page 104, listed page 401

LAWREN HARRIS WAS one of the founding members of the Group of Seven in 1920 and is renowned in the history of abstraction in this country, but there is a third important aspect of his artistic practice that is slightly less well known. Beginning with his training in Germany in the early years of the twentieth century, Harris also painted the urban scene. Upon his return to

Canada and his home in Toronto, he continued that interest through his depiction of the environs of Toronto, specifically the area of largely immigrant housing in the area of the Ward. As Jeremy Adamson observed in his landmark 1978 exhibition catalogue, *Lawren S. Harris: Urban Scenes and Wilderness Landscapes, 1906 – 1930*, “no other member of the Group of Seven painted Toronto subjects as consistently as Harris.” Indeed, in the 1925 Rous & Mann portfolio, *Canadian Drawings by Members of the Group of Seven*, two of the four images Harris contributed were of Toronto street scenes, suggesting the importance of this imagery to him. Harris went on to paint urban scenes in Barrie, Hamilton, Grimsby Park, Glace Bay and Halifax, among other towns and cities, but the most important body of urban subject matter is the work done in Toronto.

The earliest Toronto images date from 1909 to 1910, and they continue alongside his developing work as a landscape painter, through most of the next two decades. As Adamson has also pointed out, in the period from 1919 to 1921, Harris exhibited more house paintings than any other theme, and most of these were Toronto subjects. These Ward paintings were of buildings and streetscapes in St. John’s Ward, the area of Toronto bounded by Yonge Street on the east, University Avenue on the west and Bloor on the north. The poorest section of the Ward was the area south of College Street.

Group of Seven members were sometimes criticized by their contemporaries for their depiction of the wilderness of Canada rather than the more picturesque aspects of the country. Harris faced similar criticism about his depictions of Toronto—because he chose to paint slightly decrepit, decaying housing rather than the bright, new commercial buildings or the homes of the wealthy. What the urban and landscape works of the period shared was an intensity of looking which has seldom been rivaled in Canadian painting.

The process that Harris (and his colleagues that formed the Group) developed was to paint or draw in the field and later develop this preliminary work into a canvas. There are, therefore, far more Harris drawings and oil sketches than there are canvases, because many field studies were not developed into larger compositions. This process allowed Harris to refine his compositional ideas, and we can see this clearly when we compare *House in the Ward, Winter, City Painting No. 1* with the sketch “*Houses*” Group XXXIII (figure 1, sold by Heffel November 24, 2005, lot 78). The sketch, done outdoors, depicts a snowy landscape with two red-brick houses and a group of snow-shrouded trees in the foreground. Strikingly, the sky is a pale yellow. Harris used this sketch as the basis for his larger canvas, but he made important changes to the composition which, in turn, change our reading of the image.

The relatively brisk brushwork of the sketch has been replaced in the canvas by a more considered application of paint. The on-the-spot sketch shows a complex tangle of tree branches at the top of the composition, whereas in *House in the Ward, Winter, City Painting No. 1*, this web has been simplified. One of the trees on the right has been enlarged and moved, and the tree on the left has been straightened. These changes allow us to see the central house more clearly and permit Harris the opportunity to introduce the figure walking along the sidewalk. The canvas also broadens the view, showing more of the house on the right side. This allows the house to be the greater focus and gives the



FIGURE 1: **LAWREN STEWART HARRIS**
“Houses” Group XXXIII
oil on panel, circa 1919
10 ¾ x 10 ¾ in, 27.3 x 27.3 cm
Private Collection

Not for sale with this lot

composition a quiet, but insistent, left to right rhythm, subtly echoing the journey of the figure.
Harris has also dramatically changed the light within the painting. In the sketch there is little indication of shadow and no indication of the time of day—it might be dawn or dusk. In *House in the Ward, Winter, City Painting No. 1*, dramatic shadows are cast by the trees across the snow by the intense sunlight, suggesting midday. This bright light gives the image a remarkable clarity, and allows us to feel the icy chill of the winter day. Other changes are equally subtle—a slight increase in the verticality of the houses, and the shadows that reach the edge of the pictorial space give the image both a greater distance and gravity. Harris has lightened the red-orange colour of the brickwork on the central house, bringing it more into focus. This shift in colour has been matched by a slight deepening of the tone of the blinds in the house windows. Harris has strengthened the snow-covered horizontals on the house facade to provide a balance to the verticality of the trees. There are many other small but significant changes between the sketch and the completed canvas, but all contribute to making *House in the Ward, Winter, City Painting No. 1* more visually compelling and a fuller expression of Harris’s unique vision of the Ward and winter in the city, one that continues to resonate with Canadians.
We thank Ian M. Thom, senior curator at the Vancouver Art Gallery from 1988 to 2018 and author of *Lawren Stewart Harris: A Painter’s Progress*, the catalogue for the Americas Society exhibition in 2000.

ESTIMATE: \$2,000,000 – 3,000,000