



221 Lawren Stewart Harris

ALC BCSFA CGP FCA G7 OSA TPG 1885 - 1970

Above Moraine Lake

oil on board, signed and on verso signed, titled and inscribed *Mountain Sketch / Not for Sale / Box 4 / Bess Harris Collection 1950 / BHC 72 / Sentinel Pass III* and variously and *Mountain Sketch cII* on a label, 1926
12 x 15 in, 30.5 x 38.1 cm

PROVENANCE

Collection of Bess Harris
G. Blair Laing Ltd., Toronto
McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, Ontario
Private Collection, Toronto
A.K. Prakash and Associates Inc., Toronto
The Collection of Torben V. Kristiansen, Vancouver

LITERATURE

Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art: Native and Modern, National Gallery of Canada, 1927, listed page 13, Group of Rocky Mountain Sketches
Paul Duval, *The McMichael Conservation Collection of Art*, McMichael Conservation Collection, 1970, reproduced as *Sentinel Pass, Above Moraine Lake*, dated 1924, unpaginated

EXHIBITED

National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, *Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art: Native and Modern*, December 2 - 31, 1927, traveling in 1928 to the Art Gallery of Toronto and Art Association of Montreal, Group of Rocky Mountain Sketches, catalogue #27

BY THE MID-1920S, Lawren S. Harris's approach to landscape painting was evolving rapidly and moving into deeper and more conceptual realms. His discovery of new sketching grounds along the north shore of Lake Superior and in the mountains of the Canadian Rockies provided austere and expansive subjects that allowed him to strip away the unnecessary detail of the world to better access the fundamental truths he sought to convey. His efforts in careful consideration and deliberate response to the character of his subject defined his final phase of landscape painting and foreshadowed his transition into more and more abstracted efforts.

A bold and confident sketch, *Above Moraine Lake* was painted in 1926, when Harris was 40 years old and enraptured by his mountain subjects. In October of that year, the *Toronto Daily Star* reported that "Lawren Harris with his family also spent the summer and several yards of canvas getting interpretations of the Rockiescapes somewhere in the vicinity of Lake Louise, but further out."¹ After an initial visit to Jasper in 1924, this was Harris's first return to the mountains, and his first opportunity to explore the remarkable Banff and Yoho National Parks. (In 1925, his only



National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, *Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art: Native and Modern*, 1927, catalogue cover designed by Emily Carr

known sketching trips were to Glace Bay and Lake Superior.) During this visit, Harris would have the chance to hike and sketch iconic vistas around Lake O'Hara, Lake Louise and Moraine Lake, adding the awe-inspiring grandeur of these locations to his growing catalogue of Canadian landscape depictions.

On this return trip, Harris utilized what he had learned from previously sketching in Jasper to hone his approach. Works from 1926 often embrace a perspective from midway up a mountain, a preference Harris and A.Y. Jackson discovered in Jasper's Colin Range, where they "found the six-thousand foot level, where we could look both up and down, most satisfying for painting."² Such is the case for *Above Moraine Lake*, a sketch painted from Sentinel Pass, which links Paradise Valley with the Valley of the Ten Peaks.



Installation view of *Canadian West Coast Art: Native and Modern*, National Gallery of Canada, 1927, with *Above Moraine Lake* indicated in the room to the left
 Courtesy of National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa

It is a view towards the latter that Harris has chosen to paint, with three of the ten named peaks depicted—Mount Bowlen, Tonsa Peak and Mount Perren.

This outlook also gives a wonderful aerial view of the Minnistemma Lakes, shimmering on the seemingly stark and barren plateau below. The sketch is looking back at the path Harris would have taken to reach this sketching site, originating from the shores of Moraine Lake (not visible from this vantage point). The hike to this point is still popular today, ascending through the Larch Valley, filled with the eponymous tree whose needles change to a brilliant yellow gold in the fall. Harris has avoided suggesting forest details in this painting, instead concentrating on the underlying topography of the alpine landscape.

The composition of *Above Moraine Lake* is distinctly rhythmic, with the undulations of the orange-brown foreground plateau echoing in the grey and yellow sky. These harmonious horizontal elements serve to accentuate the verticality of the mountain forms they surround, which have been reduced to their most essential, glowing in pale, cerulean blue with subtle gradients used to suggest their massive volumes. This process of simplification is the hallmark of Harris's work at the time, which he described as evolving from the "relative prodigality of the decorative phase" to attempt to "have no element, no line or colour in the picture that did not contribute to a unified expression."³

This panel finds its sense of unity through its suggestion of cyclical movement, where the warm, earthy tones of the foreground and eerie yellow light of the sky seem to flow around the mountain peaks, which are the central, cool focal point of the composition. Later in his career, Harris would go on to explore this theme further in his epic abstract works of the 1950s, including *Nature Rhythm* (collection of the National Gallery of Canada) and *Painting (Formative III)* (private collection, sold by Heffel in December 2021), which depict swirling layers of ethereal forms.

Back in the studio after the 1926 trip to the Rockies, Harris used his pencil drawings and oil-on-board sketches as source material to develop and further refine his impressions of the mountains onto large canvases. He continued to do so through 1927, another year without a trip to the Rockies, as Harris spent the summer in Temagami and moving to a new home in Toronto, before heading to Lake Superior to sketch with Arthur Lismer in the fall. Late in the year he sent a series of *Rocky Mountain Sketches* to the National Gallery of Canada for inclusion in the exhibition *Canadian West Coast Art: Native and Modern*, curated by Marius Barbeau, which was hung in December 1927. The exact works shown by Harris were unfortunately not documented and were hung in a side room that was not directly photographed. However, in an installation photograph of the main room, one work is clearly visible off to the side: *Above Moraine Lake*. This



Beatrice (Trixie) Harris, A.Y. Jackson and Lawren S. Harris, with companions in the Rockies, 1924
 Courtesy of the family of Lawren S. Harris

sketch is therefore the only Harris work we can confirm definitively as having been included in this historic exhibition.

Although the exhibition itself at the time did not create the massive public engagement the curator hoped for, it would turn out to be a critically important show in the history of Canadian art, since it created the first opportunity for Emily Carr and Harris to meet. Carr, who had also been invited to contribute her works to the show, ventured east for the opening in late 1927 and was exposed to the work of Harris and the Group of Seven for the first time during her visit.

While Harris's now iconic, stylized approach to mountains was something that contemporary audiences were not necessarily ready for, his works spoke deeply to Carr, who found a strong and immediate kinship in them. She visited with Harris in his studio and his home and saw his works hanging in the exhibition. The result was an indelible impression, which she describes in her journal: "Lawren Harris's work is still in my mind. Always, something in it speaks to me, something in his big tranquil spaces filled with light and serenity. I feel as though I could get right in them, the spirit of me, not the body. There is a holiness about them, something you can't describe but just feel."⁴

This exhibition, which led to their meeting, marked the start of a long friendship between Harris and Carr, one that would assist her in re-engaging with her own artistic pursuits and encourage

her to evolve her own work in the 1930s. In 1934, she again wrote in her journal about the influence of this meeting: "Lawren's work influenced me. Not that I ever aspired to paint like him but I felt that he was after something that I wanted too."⁵ With *Above Moraine Lake* we are given the opportunity to directly understand and appreciate the source of such influential artistic inspiration, and to recognize the long-lasting and important legacy of Harris's works, especially those done in the mountains.

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

1. "Notes and Notables," *Toronto Daily Star*, October 9, 1926, Literature, Life and Art section, 7.
2. A.Y. Jackson, *A Painter's Country: The Autobiography of A.Y. Jackson* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1958), 106.
3. Lawren Harris, quoted in Bess Harris and R.G.P. Colgrove, eds., *Lawren Harris* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1969), 51.
4. Emily Carr, *Hundreds and Thousands: The Journals of Emily Carr* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1966), 11.
5. *Ibid.*, 117.

ESTIMATE: \$400,000 – 600,000