



120 Arthur Lismer

AAM CGP CSGA CSPWC G7 OSA RCA 1885 – 1969

An Ontario Village (Meadowvale)

oil on canvas, signed and dated 1923 and on verso titled *Meadowvale* and titled on a label and inscribed \$1,500
32 x 40 in, 81.3 x 101.6 cm

PROVENANCE

Laing Galleries, Toronto

Acquired from the above by a Private Collection, Toronto,
March 21, 1959

By descent to the present Private Collection, Toronto

LITERATURE

Evelyn de R. McMann, *Royal Canadian Academy of Arts / Académie royale des arts du Canada: Exhibitions and Members, 1880 – 1979*, 1981, page 241

EXHIBITED

Art Gallery of Toronto, *Royal Canadian Academy of Arts*,

November 22, 1923, titled as *Ontario Village*, catalogue #103

Art Gallery of Toronto, *Summer Exhibition*, May 24 – August 16,

1924, titled as *An Ontario Village*, catalogue #100

Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, *Arthur Lismer Exhibition*,

June 14 – July 9, 1950, titled as *Ontario Village*, catalogue #5

Laing Galleries, Toronto, *Retrospective Exhibition: Arthur Lismer*,

March 14 – 31, 1959

THE ENGLISH-BORN ARTIST Arthur Lismer arrived in Toronto in January 1911, following studies in Sheffield and Antwerp. He soon found work with the graphic design firm Grip Ltd., where he met J.E.H. MacDonald, Tom Thomson, Frank Johnston and Franklin Carmichael. He quickly became a noted figure in this community of emerging Toronto artists, showing in the annual exhibitions of the city's art societies while working as a freelance illustrator for a variety of publications. His work appeared frequently in the pages of the *Canadian Courier*, edited by Augustus Bridle, a fellow member of the Arts and Letters Club, where Lismer was an active participant in art and theatre projects. He first painted on Georgian Bay in September 1913 and with Thomson in Algonquin Park the following spring, and with A.Y. Jackson, Thomson and Frederick Varley in the fall of 1914.

This last, joint sketching expedition played out against the backdrop of the outbreak of a war that would be devastating for Toronto's graphic artists. Without work, Lismer and his wife and daughter moved north of Toronto to Thornhill, where they briefly lived with MacDonald and his family during the summer of 1915. Lismer painted two canvases of the garden behind his John Street house in Thornhill in different seasons: *Winter Sunshine*, 1916 (now titled *Afternoon Sunlight, Thornhill*) and *Springtime on the Farm* of 1917 (both in the collection of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts). These intimate renderings of rural subjects sparkle with a brilliantly fresh, clear blue light.

A job opportunity directing the Victoria School of Art and Design brought the Lismer family to Halifax in the fall of 1916. This was a productive period for the artist, in spite of the destruction wrought by the explosion of December 6, 1917. Hired in June 1918 by the committee of the Canadian War Memorials Fund to document wartime Halifax, Lismer produced some of the finest paintings and prints in the collection. However, a visit from Jackson, newly returned from military service in England, aggravated Lismer's frustration with the lack of response to his efforts in Halifax. In April 1919, he received an offer to take on the job of vice-principal of the Ontario College of Art and returned to Toronto in August.

The post-war years saw a renewed flowering of the Canadian art movement in joint sketching trips to Algoma and the formation of the Group of Seven in the spring of 1920. Lismer was, of course, a charter member, and he returned to Georgian Bay to paint that summer. The rocks, islands, trees and water of the bay would be his favoured subject for almost two decades, as exemplified in his famous painting of 1921, *A September Gale—Georgian Bay* (collection of the National Gallery of Canada).

Yet in the mid-twenties, Lismer painted four canvases depicting small villages and towns. In the November 1923 exhibition of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts, he showed *An Ontario Village (Meadowvale)* (the canvas being offered here) and *A Northern Town, Mattawa, Ontario*.¹ The following March he exhibited *Copper Mining Town* with the Ontario Society of Artists,² and with the Group of Seven in January 1925, *A Factory Town—North of England*, a painting of the town of Mossley, Lancashire, where he visited his family in late summer of 1924.³ In each of these canvases, the towns rise up from the foreground. In *A Northern Town, Mattawa*, the railway leads from the lower left corner to the mine shafts and industrial buildings, crowned by a clear blue sky. The railway platform defines the foreground of *Copper Mining Town*, and an earthen road leads the eye past the wooden houses at the left to the mine shaft on the top of the hill. Stone steps and a church frame the foreground in *A Factory Town* and the road descends to the industrial buildings in the valley, then up to the distant farms on the far hill under a blue sky. In *An Ontario Village (Meadowvale)*, the kitchen gardens and pathway define the foreground, and a water pump, picket fences and meandering footpaths link the variously coloured houses on the hillside. Swiftly moving clouds glide over this bucolic scene, recalling the earlier paintings of his Thornhill garden.

The Ontario village in the painting Lismer showed in the 1923 RCA exhibition was Meadowvale, a small rural village on the Credit River, west of Toronto, now part of Mississauga. Two of its most prominent resident artists in the years prior to the First World War were Frank Carmichael's cousin Fred Haines and George Chavignaud, who preceded Lismer as principal of the art school in Halifax. Muriel Fairbairn enthused in the pages of Toronto's *Mail and Empire* on July 23, 1904, "There is a quaint little village to the north and west of us which promises to be to



ARTHUR LISMER
A Northern Town, Mattawa, Ontario
 oil on canvas, 1922
 32 x 40 in, 81.3 x 101.6 cm
 Private Collection

Not for sale with this lot

Toronto what Barbizon is to Paris ... Meadowvale is full of the most picturesque bits, and is as varied as it is charming in its scenery. Here Mr. and Mrs. Chavignaud have settled in a fine old mansion ... Mr. Spiers, Mr. E. Thurston and Mr. Fred Haynes [sic] are also finding inspiration there, and the artist's easel and umbrella are not an uncommon sight." Edwin Thurston and Fred Haines soon set up the Meadowvale Studio to exhibit their paintings.

Meadowvale continued to attract artists into the 1920s, and the Ontario College of Art conducted its summer landscape painting classes there in 1921 and 1922 under the direction of J.W. Beatty. Lismer was a visiting instructor, and it was undoubtedly then that he painted the studies leading to this canvas.⁴ The white house lower right is probably the Apple Tree Inn where the OCA students stayed in 1921 and 1922.⁵ The college's summer school was moved to Port Hope in 1923.

We thank Charles C. Hill, 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 painting has been in the collection of the same family since it was acquired from Laing Galleries in 1959.

1. Sale of *Fine Canadian Art*, Heffel Fine Art Auction House, November 27, 2014, lot 133.
2. Reproduced in Rosemary Donegan, *Industrial Images* (Hamilton, ON: Art Gallery of Hamilton, 1987), exhibition catalogue, 71.
3. Reproduced in Charles C. Hill, *The Group of Seven: Art for a Nation* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, in assoc. with Douglas & McIntyre, 1995), exhibition catalogue, 161.
4. A Lismer oil sketch, dated 1922 and descriptively titled *Landscape with a Barn, A House on the High Ground*, most likely a Meadowvale subject, sold at Sotheby & Co. (Canada) Ltd., Toronto, October 26, 1970, illustrated in the catalogue.
5. Kathleen A. Hicks, *Meadowvale: Mills to Millennium* (Mississauga Library System, 2004), 121-23.

ESTIMATE: \$250,000 – 350,000

