MOUNTAIN EXPERIENCE: LAWREN HARRIS AND THE SPIRITUAL IN ART

an essay
by Priscilla B. Reimer, Curator
written for the exhibition

MUSE ECOLOGY

a critical selection of works from the Collection
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Ever since the publication, in 1911, of Wassily Kandinsky's *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (*Concerning the Spiritual in Art*), spirituality and abstraction in art have been inextricably linked in art discourse, because the publication of Kandinsky's book coincided with his departure from representational art and his arrival, several years later, at 'pure abstraction.' This alliance of spirituality and abstraction in art has generated the unfortunate misunderstanding that abstraction holds a monopoly on spirituality or that spirituality is the unique purview of abstraction.

Canadian artist, Lawren Stewart Harris's (1885-1970) career as a painter spanned the years in which the visual arts in the European tradition moved from representation to abstraction. The painting in this exhibition, *Mountain Experience,* ca. 1936, reflects Harris's personal shift and is thus a transitional piece within his oeuvre. It is widely assumed that Lawren Harris's later abstract paintings are his spiritual or theosophical paintings when, in fact, Harris was a committed theosophist most of his life and his religious beliefs imbued his entire body of work. This short essay will argue that Lawren Harris may have achieved his most spiritual work during his Group of Seven years, especially in the decade 1920-30, and not, as is often thought, in the second half of his life.

While there is a strong historical connection between the two, it is important, from the outset, to distinguish between spirituality and organized or institutional religion. Religion is a belief system organized around a prophet, teacher, or a set of human dogmas. Spirituality, on the other hand, is a more autonomous experience. Every major religion, worldwide, has its mystics or spiritual people, but membership in a religion is not necessary for the mystic. And at the turn of the century, a kind of secular or nature mysticism came to the fore as an independent cultural influence. It was based on the view that the universe or cosmos is a spiritually charged entity or environment in which spirit—God, Ultimate Reality, Life Energy, or World Soul—is in a constant state of becoming. The individual participates in this development through ongoing expansion or growth into full spiritual awareness. Spiritual consciousness is attained through mystical experience—the direct, intuitive, inner, unitive experience of God or Ultimate Reality—and the interpretation of that experience—in writing, painting, music.

"I value only those artists," said Wassily Kandinsky, "who . . . consciously or unconsciously . . . embody the expression of their inner life. . . " (Kandinsky quoted in the introduction to *Concerning the Spiritual*, p. vii). The best vehicle for the expression of inner life or soul in art, Kandinsky argues, is abstract art: an art which, like music, relies solely on rhythm, colour, harmony, and movement.

Lawren Harris maintained religious affiliations at the same time that he cultivated an autonomous spirituality. Perhaps it was his religious upbringing that gave impetus to Harris's enduring quest for the meaning of life and spiritual reality. Born in Brantford, Ontario and raised in Toronto, a grandfather and two of Harris's uncles were ministers. This predominantly conservative Christian environment was eased when Harris's mother turned to Christian Science shortly after her husband's death. (Harris was only nine years old at the time.)

When he ran into difficulties in his first year at the University of Toronto, the twenty-year-old Harris was sent to Berlin to live with an aunt and uncle, and to study painting (Reid, 1973, p. 135). Here, in the years 1904-07, the young student of art was surrounded by all the major European philosophies of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and eagerly absorbed as much as he could. For the purposes of this brief essay, reference to the dominant sources will have to suffice.

Lawren Harris's favourite writings during the Berlin years included the religious mysticism of William James and the nature-mysticism of Ralph Waldo Emerson. His teacher, Adolf Schlabitz, introduced Harris to landscape painter and thinker Paul Thiem who, in turn, introduced him to religious unorthodoxy which "shocked and stirred him." Whether Thiem's introduction included Theosophy is not clear. William Hart suggests that Harris came into contact with eastern thought and philosophy as espoused by Theosophy after he joined the Toronto Arts and Letters Club (p. 32), but it is unlikely that Harris escaped contact with theosophical thought while he was in Europe. It was pervasive.

In short, the student, Lawren Harris, was already forging an aesthetic and an eclectic mysticism or spirituality that would occupy him for the remainder of his life. His official entry into the International Theosophical Society towards the end of the First World War and later (1923) into the "thriving Toronto branch" were landmarks on Harris's journey and not the beginning of the journey itself.

John Galbreath describes Theosophy (a word meaning 'God wisdom' or 'divine wisdom'), as a confusing blend of "Western occult traditions, nineteenth-century American spiritualism, and oriental religions, especially Buddhism and Hinduism, all placed within an evolutionary framework that was derived from both contemporary scientific evolution and traditional Indian concepts of cosmic cycles" (p. 388). Harris, the artist, concurs: "The whole Theosophical paraphernalia," he wrote to Emily Carr after more than a decade of involvement with the Society, "is so immense and intricate and various that all we can do is to take what at the time suits us . . ." (quoted in Reid, 1985, p. 26). While Harris was not a literalist—his paintings are not religious icons in the traditional sense—there are obvious parallels between theosophical doctrine and his paintings.

Theosophic teachings, as they were formulated by Helena P. Blavatsky (1831-91), depict the cosmos as in a "dynamic process of emanation and return." God descends from above and takes shape in ever increasing stages of materialization, and ultimately in nature. Human beings, on the other hand, ascend through stages of spiritual awareness and are ultimately absorbed back into God. In the middle ground there is a place of meeting or crystallization. "This entire process of cosmic and human evolution . . . is also the story of divine awakening, in which spirit interacts with matter and comes to know itself through the evolution of consciousness" (Galbreath, p. 388).

This notion of the continual or great 'River of Becoming' or the ascent of human consciousness to full spiritual awareness was attractive to the young Canadian artist, as was the primary aim of theosophical teaching: "to enhance awareness of the relationships between nature and spirit, and thus to enable the individual to achieve direct, intuitive knowledge (wisdom) and personal experience of the spiritual" (Ibid).

It was the centrality of nature and the belief that it emanated from God or Great Spirit, that was so easy to nurture in the Canada to which Harris returned in 1909. The land was still largely untamed wilderness, the country was coming to cultural self-awareness, and artists were ready for change. A number of artists collected around Harris and as one of a minority of professionally trained Canadian artists, he quickly became their unofficial leader—Harris was a born leader but also a critical thinker and an elegant spokesperson. These artists operated on the principle that Canadian art could be nurtured in Canada alone and need no longer rely on an inherited European tradition. The Group of Seven, as they were called after their first exhibition in 1920, found their ideal subject matter in the Canadian landscape and Harris found, there, the perfect visual metaphor for his ideas and spiritual aspirations.

From the North Shore, Lake Superior, 1923 and *Isolation Peak*, 1931 are excellent examples of Harris's mature achievements. The northern Ontario landscape depicted in *North Shore* already captures the clarity, that cold and vast, unpeopled expanse of space that Harris later discovered in the Canadian Arctic (1930) and considered the supreme source of creativity: "This North of ours is a source of spiritual flow which can create through us . . . a source of a flow of beneficent informing cosmic powers behind the bleakness and barrenness and austerity . . . of the land" (Harris, p. 11).

The viewer can trace this spiritual flow or emanation by following the light in the painting—light represented the "pure truth of Theosophy to Mme. Blavatsky" (Reid, 1985, p.17). In *North of Superior*, the light emanates from the upper, the cosmic or heavenly realm where it hovers and glows under dark cloud like forms. It is just enough light to illuminate the lower or earthly level and to give shape to the hint, the outline of headlands and the occasional island. And then, in a pool of light off the Lake, it is reflected back to the skies where it plays off clouds, so that the entire landscape glows or broods with the celestial light that became Harris's signature. The picture is a telling visual image of the process of emanation and return, from the cosmic level downward and the ascent, back to spiritual awareness.

Isolation Peak, like Harris's entire 'mountain series,' depicts a solitary triangular mountain peak, covered in snow, thrusting skyward out of an unpeopled, austere landscape. The triangle is universally associated with mountains and pyramids, carrying the mythic themes of questing, searching, and climbing or of goals, visions and dreams; it symbolizes the ascent and classic 'mountain-top experience' of religious mysticism.

And, every culture has its sacred mountains, "from Parnassus, the ancient mount of the Muse, to Japan's Mount Fuji, considered by the Japanese people to be the point of contact between heaven and the underworld" (Arrien, pp. 55-7). Here, in *Isolation Peak* and in his other mountain paintings, Lawren Harris gives us our sacred mountains and they are uniquely Canadian—cold, crisp, rugged, harsh, bright and crystal clear.

Are they less sacred because they are 'real' or because they are drawn from the landscape?

Even while he was tramping the Canadian bush and exploring the Arctic for subject matter, Lawren Harris kept abreast of artistic developments on the international stage. He visited New York regularly and Europe on several occasions. There he saw the work of Wassily Kandinsky, himself a Theosophist, and other artists working in abstraction. While it is unclear when Harris first read

Kandinsky's seminal text, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*; there is substantial evidence that it influenced his aesthetic (Davis, Hart, Reid). And, as early as 1927 in an essay for *The Canadian Forum*, "Modern Art and Aesthetic Reactions: An Appreciation," in response to the International Exhibition of Modern Art at the Art Gallery of Toronto, Harris himself began to talk and write about the expressive potential of abstraction (Reid, 1985, p. 15). In his own painting, however, the artist continued to reject Kandinsky's call to a complete departure from nature or representation in art.

Until, suddenly, at midlife, after almost three years of little or no painting—during these years Harris divorced his first wife, left Toronto with Bess Housser whom he quickly married, and settled in the United States—Lawren Harris turned to abstraction. The painting in this exhibition, *Mountain Experience* dates from those transitional years in Hanover, New Hampshire (1934-38).

For Wassily Kandinsky, the triangle or pyramid was the ideal symbol of the life of the spirit, "moving slowly, almost invisibly forwards and upwards" (Kandinsky, p. 6). Here, in *Mountain Experience*, two triangles dominate Harris's composition. One, an inverted triangle descends from the upper level of the painting—is this a reference to God? The triune Christian God? The other triangle, a stylized mountain, ascends from below, out of a series of wavy lines and organic shapes that in nature would have been rocks or hillocks. The two triangles converge on each other in the middle ground and are compositionally connected by geometric patterns, shafts of yellow light and jagged lines of lightening-like energy. Blue, "the typically heavenly colour," dominates the composition.

By comparison with *From the North Shore, Lake Superior* and *Isolation Peak, Mountain Experience* is a stiff, formal, stylized recapitulation of the earlier paintings; a semi-abstract illustration of emanation and return. In short, the best of Lawren Harris's landscape paintings embodied his world-and-life-vision. *Mountain Experience* merely illustrates it.

Unfortunately, many of Harris's later, fully abstract paintings fall prey to the same criticism. When they are placed side by side, as are *Country North of Lake Superior*, 1925 and *Nature Rhythm*, 1950, in the book *Lawren Harris*, the abstract painting evokes the earlier landscape. *Northern Rhythm* uses essentially the same colour scheme as *Country North of Lake Superior* and the forms in *Northern Rhythm* are thinly disguised hills, patches of snow, and sky.

Why did Lawren Harris hesitate to move into abstraction and, when he did, why were his paintings so unconvincing? Why do Harris's abstractions lack the "the pervading vitality that was positively spiritual," which was already there in his earlier work? (This quotation is Harris's own response to the best abstractions in the International Exhibition of Modern Art at the Art Gallery of Toronto, 1927; quoted in Reid, 1985, p. 14).

Stylistic changes in Harris's art, as Paul Duval has pointed out, were never arbitrary (p. 23). *Isolation Peak*, as we have seen, was painted in the full knowledge that abstraction was setting the pace in art and Harris's move into abstraction was an equally conscious decision. Dennis Reid suggests that one of the reasons Harris hesitated was the lack of public support in Canadian art circles at the time. Bertram Brooker's 1927 exhibition of abstractions—the first of its kind in Canada—met with critical hostility and

Harris was a friend of Brooker's. But there were other, internal reasons for Harris's deferral and Reid hints at these as well. Harris, he suggests, may have needed the intense interaction with or experience of nature in order to create (Reid, 1985, p. 17). It is true that even at the peak of his abstract period, Harris continued to trek the mountains because he loved them; nature may have been his primary muse.

But Harris also needed nature as a logical extension of his world-and-life-vision. Harris believed, that there are universal or cosmic laws in nature to which the artist responds and to which art corresponds; the laws of nature are equally the laws of art—essential order, dynamic harmony, ultimate beauty—they are one and the same. Because, the same God, Great Spirit, or Life Energy—source of these natural laws—flows through all living things—the earth, trees, animals, birds, women and men, fungi, rivers and mountains—and, therefore, through the artist into their work, and binds them all together in cosmic unity.

This did not mean, for Harris, that art had to be a copy or literal reflection of nature. There is a kind of abstraction in art, he wrote in his 1927 essay, that draws on "naturalistic sources wherein the more abstract and lasting qualities of design, movement, rhythm, equilibrium, spatial relationship, light, and order were extricated from the fleeting aspects of a scene or scenes to suggest its informing, persisting life" (Reid, 1985, p. 15).

In fact, Harris was compelled to accept abstraction for the very reason that he was attached to representation. Abstraction was a logical extension of his belief in an ever expanding universe or becoming of human spirit. Abstract art, Harris said, was evidence of the human "search into new experience, new creative expressions, ideas and forms, toward new and unrevealed horizons" (Harris quoted in Hart, p. 30). The artist saw his own inner spiritual compulsion and his external quest reflected there.

So, while he was able to justify abstraction, abstract expressionism presented Harris with a dilemma he never fully resolved. The artist could not accept psychic automatism or automatic painting because it lay beyond the "control of reason and outside all common aesthetic or moral preoccupations." For Harris, 'abstract painting is a creative interplay between the conscious and unconscious with the conscious mind making all the final decisions and in control throughout' (Harris quoted in Hart, p. 30).

This emphasis on conscious rational choice may be the key to Harris's lengthy struggle with abstraction and it may explain why, at least in my opinion, his abstractions were never completely convincing. Because true or authentic abstraction or abstract expressionism seems to require a kind of automatism or 'pure spontaneity.' It may be essential.

Does it also explain why, at the end of his life in paintings like *Abstraction*, 1967, and *Two Hemispheres*, 1968, Harris's art, once again, shone with that inner life or light that the artist so ardently sought? Is it possible that, born out of the knowledge of his imminent death, the artist was finally able to let go of rational control and achieve a genuine spontaneity?

In conclusion, the question remains: How do we value or evaluate *Mountain Experience*? Lawren Harris holds a firm and assured position in the pantheon of Canadian artists. As Paul Duval has suggested, the ten year's work from 1920-30, alone, would have earned Harris "a leading place in Canadian art" (p. 23). Every major collection, every survey of Canadian art should include a Lawren Harris painting. I suspect, it is for this reason that Gallery 1.1.1. acquired *Mountain Experience*. On its own, however, as in this

exhibition, it neither represents the artist—it does not give us a true example of Harris's achievements—nor does it, in my opinion, offer a satisfying aesthetic experience. *Mountain Experience* is nevertheless of value, especially to art historians and theorists, because each of Harris's paintings contributes to a fuller understanding of the artist and his work. *Mountain Experience* is a transitional painting, an experiment, and it must be measured against the artist's full and mature creative capacity.

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