

Lawren Harris: Canadian Visionary



Lawren Harris
Tamarack Swamp, Algoma, 1920
oil on canvas
Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery

TEACHER'S STUDY GUIDE
Winter 2014

Vancouver
Artgallery

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Vancouver Art Gallery

Teacher's Guide for School Programs

The exhibition *Lawren Harris: Canadian Visionary* is a survey of Group of Seven founding member Lawren Stewart Harris, who played a major role in the history of painting in Canada. The exhibition traces Harris's artistic career from the early years of the twentieth century to the mid-1960s and illustrates his move from representational art to abstraction. The works on display are largely from the Gallery's permanent collection, along with select loans from local and national collections.

DEAR TEACHER:

This guide will assist you in preparing for your tour of the exhibition *Lawren Harris: Canadian Visionary*, and provides follow-up activities to facilitate discussion after your Gallery visit. Engaging in the suggested activities before and after your visit will reinforce ideas generated by the tour and build continuity between the Gallery experience and your ongoing work in the classroom. Most activities require few materials and can be adapted easily to the age, grade level and needs of your students. Underlined words in this guide are defined in the Vocabulary section.

The tour of *Lawren Harris: Canadian Visionary* has three main goals:

- to explore the techniques and practices of Lawren Harris,
- to consider how Harris's work connects to the Canadian landscape,
- to examine Harris's individual approach to art in terms of his ideas, materials, techniques and inspiration.

THE EXHIBITION: *Lawren Harris: Canadian Visionary*

“It was an ever clearer and deeply moving experience of oneness with the spirit of the whole land. It was this spirit which dictated, guided and instructed us how the land should be painted.”

The exhibition *Lawren Harris: Canadian Visionary* showcases numerous works by Lawren Harris dating from 1906 to approximately 1967 and includes images on paper, oil sketches and paintings. There are oil panels that were initially conceived as studies for larger works, quick sketches done on the spot, and drawings that are squared up for transfer to a canvas.

Harris, like most of his colleagues in the Group of Seven, created his landscape paintings in the studio, working from paintings done on sketching trips he took across Canada—particularly throughout Ontario and the Rockies and on a single trip to the Arctic. Later in his career, he left landscapes behind and moved to abstraction to pursue a non-representational expression of the spiritual.

The Vancouver Art Gallery is fortunate to have in its collection several major canvases by Harris, both landscapes and abstractions, which provide a sense of the power and grandeur of his vision. The exhibition consists of works from the Vancouver Art Gallery’s permanent collection, which is the most important collection of Harris works in western Canada, generously supplemented by loans from private collections and public institutions.

Organized by the Vancouver Art Gallery and curated by Ian M. Thom, Senior Curator–Historical.

ARTIST'S BACKGROUND

Lawren Harris (1885–1970)

“If we view a great mountain soaring into the sky, it may excite us, evoke an uplifted feeling within us. There is an interplay of something we see outside of us with our inner response. The artist takes that response and its feelings and shapes it on canvas with paint so that when finished it contains the experience.”

Lawren Stewart Harris is one of the most important figures in the history of Canadian art. His long career took him from his birthplace of Brantford, Ontario, to Europe, the United States and throughout Canada. After settling in Vancouver in 1940, he was a central figure in the artistic life of British Columbia. Through both his life and his work, Harris helped establish an identity for Canadian art and was a driving force in the development of Modernist painting.

Visionary in his art, Harris was also a great supporter of art, and of artists who were interested in exploring Canada's rugged northern landscape. A founder of the Group of Seven and the Canadian Group of Painters, he collected the work of younger artists and encouraged others to support it as well. As the only wealthy person amongst his fellow painters, he provided financial support that made early sketching trips into wilderness areas possible. Harris not only saw the artistic and cultural potential of his country, but also made works that have helped to define the very identity of Canada.

After the dissolution of the Group of Seven in 1933, Harris had the courage to take his own art into the realm of abstraction at a time when most of the public was unwilling to follow. His abstract work reflected his interest in theosophy and biology, and his search for deeper spiritual meaning. In 1940 he moved to Vancouver, where he remained until his death in 1970. During these later years he became a major figure in the community and an important leader in the life of the Vancouver Art Gallery, in particular encouraging the development of its Emily Carr Trust collection.

PRE-VISIT ACTIVITY: The Artist (all grades)

Objective: Students explore the life of Lawren Harris: his art practices, influences and artistic process.

Materials:

- ❑ the Internet; some useful websites:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lawren_Harris
<http://www.arthistoryarchive.com/arthistory/canadian/Lawren-Harris.html>
- ❑ Artist Information Sheet and Student Worksheet (following pages)
- ❑ writing materials, pencil crayons

Process:

1. Divide students into four groups. Give each group one of the first four categories from the Artist Information Sheet (p. 7)
2. Give each student a copy of the Student Worksheet (p. 8) and ask them to consider what they need to find out to complete their section. Have them conduct research using the Internet, either at home or at school.
3. Ask each group to find and sketch a work by the artist and add it into the space provided in the Worksheet.
4. Have each group present their information to the class while the rest of the students fill in their worksheets.

Conclusion:

- Ask students to comment on what they find interesting or notable about the artist and his art.
- Did Lawren Harris have practices, attributes or perspectives that might be described as particularly Canadian? Explain.
- What makes Harris a significant or important artist?
- What else are students interested in finding out about the artist?

Artist Information Sheet

Lawren Harris (1885–1970)

- Born in Brantford, Ontario, and died in Vancouver, BC.
- Coming from a wealthy family, Harris was able to devote himself entirely to his art.
- From 1904 to 1907, he studied in Berlin, Germany.
- He is best known as a member of the Group of Seven who started a distinctly Canadian painting style in the early twentieth century.
- Harris painted the urban landscape of Ontario, Quebec, the Rockies and the Arctic.
- He was a Modernist painter who experimented with colour, form and shapes.
- He preferred to sketch his landscapes outdoors; often made final works in his studio.
- He used colour, shape, composition and subject matter in a symbolic way.
- In the 1920s he stopped signing and dating his works so that people would judge his works on their own merit and not by the artist or when they were painted.
- He was interested in theosophy, a mystical branch of religious philosophy that influenced his later painting.
- In later years he continued to simplify and abstract elements in his landscapes until his work became completely abstract.

Student Worksheet: Lawren Harris

Personal information	
Travels & influences	
Process and techniques	
Description of artworks	
Annotated sketch of an artwork	

PRE- or POST-VISIT ACTIVITY: Shapescapes (primary and intermediate grades)

Objective:

Students create abstract collage landscapes, focusing on shape, form and colour.

Discussion:

Rich colours and bold forms characterized Lawren Harris's paintings in the early 1920s. His works were abstract and simplified, especially his stark landscapes of the Canadian North and the Arctic. Over time, Harris began to simplify his colours and forms, which inevitably led to complete abstraction.

Materials:

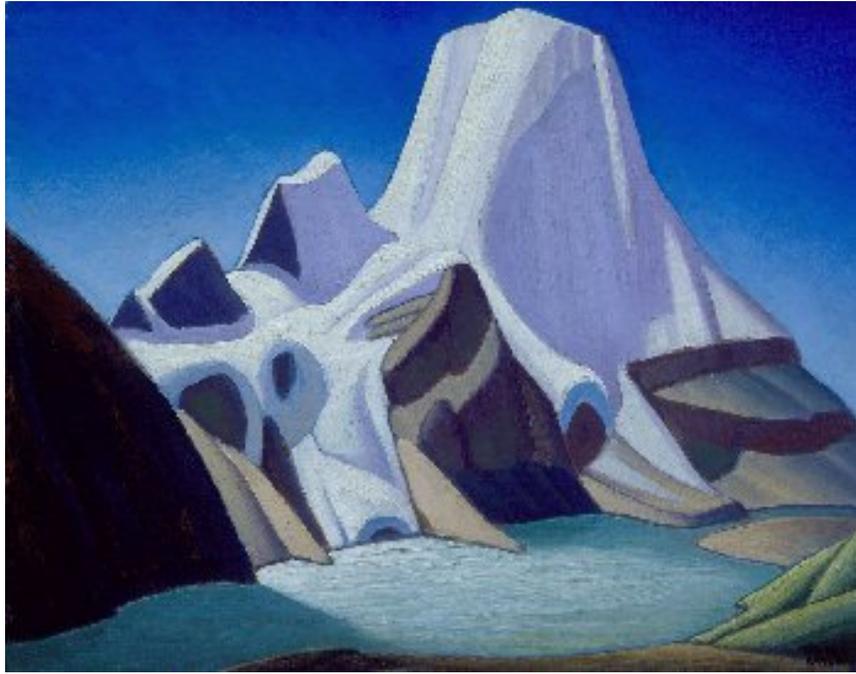
- construction paper in a variety of colours
- pencils
- scissors
- glue
- printer
- access to the Internet
- printed image of a landscape or a Lawren Harris painting

Process:

1. Discuss Harris's style of painting and his use of colour and simple shapes and forms to represent landscapes.
2. Have students find or print an image of a Harris painting, OR an image of a Canadian landscape (see example on p. 10). If a printer is not available, have students look at some works by Harris and then use their imagination to create a landscape.
3. Encourage students to look at the painting or landscape as if it were a combination of simple shapes. What shapes do they see?
4. Provide students with a selection of construction paper in a variety of colours.
5. Have students draw out the major shapes they see onto the chosen colour of construction paper.
6. Ask students to consider light and shadow by using different shades of colour.
7. Have students glue shapes onto a background sheet of construction paper to create a bold and simplified landscape.
8. Display work in the classroom.

Conclusion:

- Have students look at the work and talk about the similarities and differences in colour shapes and compositions.
- Discuss the process: how easy or hard it was to create the work, and the differences between creating a shape collage and painting or drawing a landscape.
- How do students perceive landscape and nature differently now?



Lawren Harris
Mount Robson, c. 1929
oil on canvas



Construction paper Shapescape inspired by Lawren Harris painting

PRE-VISIT ACTIVITY: Start with a Sketch (all grades)

Objective:

Students create pencil sketches of a landscape or outdoor scene while considering close observation and abstraction.

Background:

Lawren Harris was a great believer in the pencil sketch as a “beginning of vision,” and over the years he amassed a collection of sketches that traced his development as an artist. Sketching, the first step in his artistic process, served as a starting point for final works. Harris took many sketching trips with his fellow artists to different regions of Canada.

Materials:

- ❑ two sheets of paper per student
- ❑ pencils
- ❑ access to the outdoors, OR images of landscapes
- ❑ examples of sketches by Lawren Harris (see p. 12)

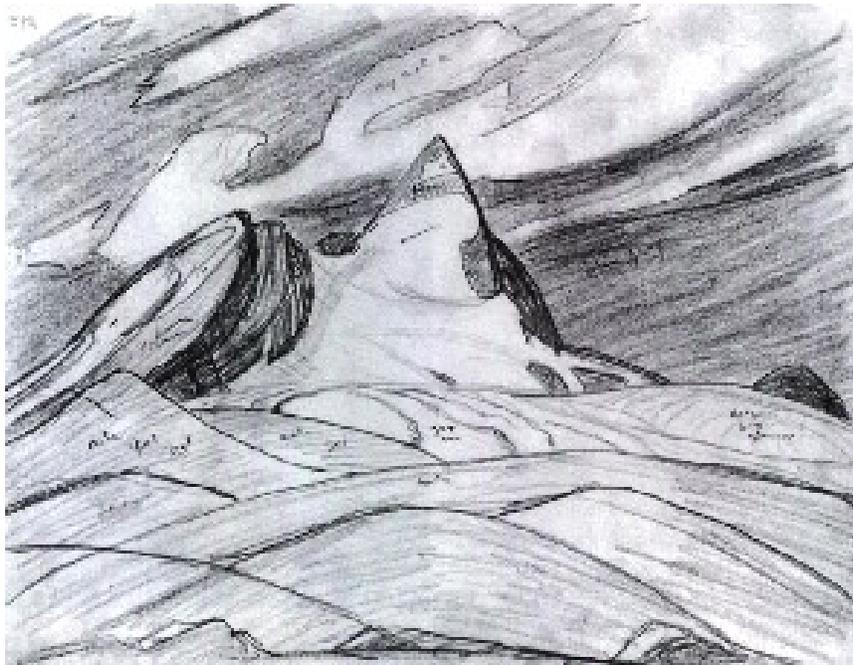
Process:

1. Discuss the inspiration that Harris found from the world around him and his travels, particularly his sketching trips.
2. Discuss his interest in abstraction and simplifying the landscape into bold shapes and forms.
3. Choose an outdoor area with a landscape view or some greenery, OR find an image of a landscape that students can sketch from.
4. Give each student a sheet of paper and ask them to sketch the scene with pencil, filling the whole sheet of paper.
5. Give students a second sheet of paper and ask them to draw the scene again—but this time, to make it abstract. They can think about simplifying shapes, or parts of shapes such as triangles or curved lines. Again, they should fill the whole page and use the same drawing tools that they did for the realistic drawing.
6. Display the abstract and realistic artworks alongside each other.

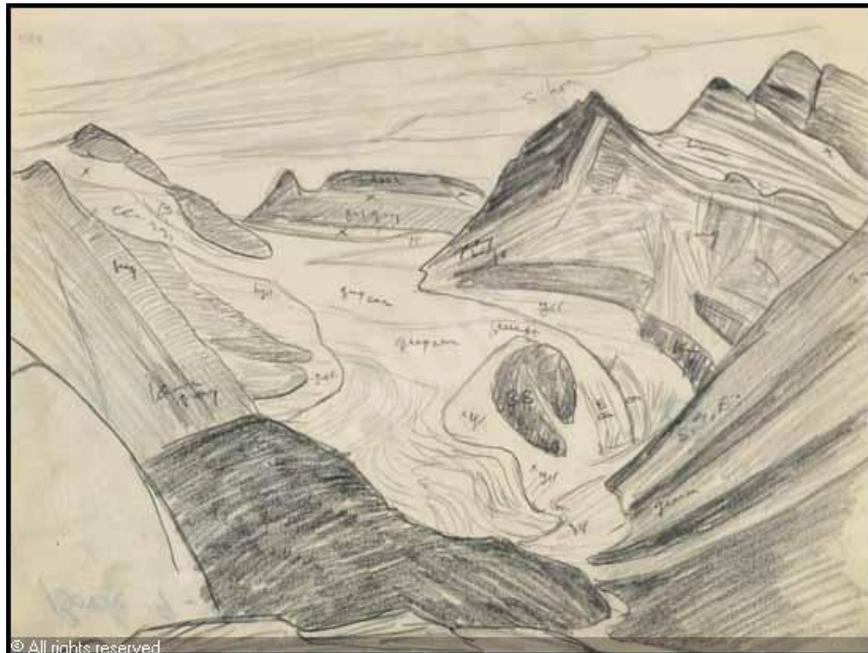
Conclusion:

Discuss the ways in which the realistic and abstract drawings relate to one another and to the original scene.

- What draws the students’ attention? Why?
- Are the realistic or abstract drawings—or the scene itself—more interesting? Why?
- Should Harris be showing nature exactly as it is, or is it reasonable for artists to use their imagination to portray a place? Explain.



Lawren Harris
Isolation Peak, 1930
graphite on paper



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Lawren Harris
Rocky Mountains, 1929
graphite on paper

PRE- or POST-VISIT ACTIVITY: Landscape Locations (adaptable to all grades)

Objective:

Students learn about the different locations where Harris painted.

Background:

Throughout his life, Harris was inspired by the Canadian landscape and expressed this in his many works. Over time, he came to believe that the landscape outside the city was more rewarding and pure, so he began to work in more remote regions. From Ontario to Quebec and beyond to the Arctic, Harris travelled throughout Canada and took much inspiration from the variety, beauty and purity of the northern landscape.

Materials:

- ❑ List of Locations (p. 13)
- ❑ Student Worksheet (p. 14)
- ❑ access to the Internet or library
- ❑ printer
- ❑ pens, pencils and pencil crayons

Process:

1. Divide students into pairs. Assign each pair a specific location from the List of Locations provided. All locations are in Canada.
2. Ask students to work in pairs researching their location and filling in their worksheet with at least two facts about the location.
3. Ask students to find and print an image of the location.
4. Have each pair fill out a Student Worksheet, using the last box to create a drawing of their assigned location with pencil crayons.
5. Have each pair present their information to the class.
6. Images and worksheets can be displayed in the classroom side by side.
7. If a map of Canada is available, have students find and mark their locations on the map displayed in the classroom alongside their work.

Conclusion:

Ask students:

1. Did you learn something new about the different regions of Canada? If so, what?
2. How do you think Lawren Harris's travels influenced his work?
3. Have you ever made artwork inspired by a place you've visited or travelled to?
4. If you could travel somewhere in Canada or the rest of the world to paint landscapes/cityscapes/people, where would you go? Why?

List of Locations

1. Lake Superior
2. Georgian Bay
3. Algonquin Park
4. Baffin Island
5. Bylot Island
6. Mount Lefroy
7. Maligne Lake
8. Jasper Park
9. Isolation Peak
10. Rocky Mountains
11. Algoma Region
12. Mount Robson
13. Mount Thule
14. Pic Island, Ontario
15. Kempenfelt Bay

Student Worksheet

Location:

Facts:

VOCABULARY

abstract/abstraction: a style of art that can be thought of in two ways:

- the artist begins with a recognizable subject and alters, distorts, manipulates or simplifies elements of it;
- the artist creates purely abstract forms that are unrecognizable and have no direct reference to external reality (also called non-representational art).

Group of Seven: a group of Toronto-centred Canadian painters devoted to landscape painting (especially of northern Ontario subjects) and the creation of a national style. The group was active from 1920 to 1933. In 1933 the name was changed to the Canadian Group of Painters.

landscape: a work of art in which the subject is a view of the exterior physical world. Traditionally, landscapes have been paintings or drawings depicting natural scenes and have often been concerned with light, space and setting.

Modern/Modernist: an approach to art that embraced new ideas ranging from science to political thought. The Modernists rejected the restrictions of past art traditions and stressed innovation over all other criteria.

non-representational art: another way to refer to abstract art. These artworks do not represent or depict a being, a place or a thing in the natural world.

representational art: art that seeks to depict the physical appearance of reality; also called objective art and figurative art.

survey: a detailed and comprehensive study or examination; for example, a *survey* of Italian art.

theosophy: any of a number of philosophies maintaining that a knowledge of God may be achieved through spiritual ecstasy, direct intuition or special individual relations, especially the movement founded in 1875 as the Theosophical Society by Helena Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907).

RESOURCES

Books:

Adamson, Jeremy. *Lawren S. Harris: Urban Scenes and Wilderness Landscapes, 1906–1930*. Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1978.

Harris, Bess, and R.G.P. Colgrove. *Lawren Harris*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1969.

Jackson, Christopher. *North by West: the Arctic and Rocky Mountain Paintings of Lawren Harris 1924–1931*. Calgary: Glenbow Museum, 1991.

Murray, Joan. *Lawren Harris: An Introduction to His Life and Art*. Toronto: Firefly Books Ltd., 2003.

Murray, Joan, and Robert Fulford. *The Beginnings of Vision: the Drawings of Lawren S. Harris*. Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1982.

Online:

www.artcyclopedia.com

<http://www.arthistoryarchive.com/arthistory/canadian/Lawren-Harris.html>

www.wikipedia.com

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