

## 137 Frederick Horsman Varley

ARCA G7 OSA 1881 – 1969

### The Artist's Son

oil on canvas, on verso inscribed on the stretcher

*Frederick H. Varley's Son John Age 16, Painted*

*1928 at Garibaldi* and stamped with the Varley

Inventory #1236, circa 1927 – 1929

47 × 30 ¼ in, 119.4 × 76.8 cm

#### PROVENANCE

Acquired directly from the Artist by one

of Varley's students, Vancouver

Sold sale of *Canadian Art*, Joyner Fine Art,

May 20, 1987, lot 176

Private Collection, British Columbia

#### LITERATURE

Christopher Varley, *F.H. Varley*, Edmonton Art Gallery, 1981, a portrait entitled *John*, 1920 – 1921, in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada, reproduced page 64

Peter Varley, *Frederick H. Varley*, 1983, a photograph of Fred and John Varley with Jock Macdonald, camping by the PGE railway tracks near Cheakamus Canyon in 1929, reproduced page 19, and a portrait entitled *John*, 1920 – 1921, in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada, reproduced page 101, and the 1932 oil *Dhârâna* reproduced page 125

Katerina Atanassova, *F.H. Varley: Portraits into the Light*, 2007, pages 23 and 64, a portrait entitled *John*, 1920 – 1921, in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada, reproduced plate 10, unpaginated, and a drawing of John entitled *In the Studio*, 1924, in the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, reproduced page 18

THIS REMARKABLE PAINTING portrays John, the eldest son of Frederick Varley, a major artist most closely associated with the iconic Group of Seven. Despite the Group's celebrated emphasis on the rugged Canadian landscape, Varley is probably better known as a portraitist. However, at least two of his more intimate family paintings, *John* (1920 – 1921) and *Portrait Group* (1924 – 1925), feature this son in much greater detail. That suggests that *The Artist's Son* is less a portrait of John as an individual and more of a kind of figurative placeholder for another, more symbolic reason. Indeed, I argue that this painting is actually an unrecognized forerunner of one of Varley's most celebrated "mystical" portraits, *Dhârâna* from 1932 (collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario, #2593).

*Dhârâna* famously shows Varley's muse Vera Weatherbie (1909 – 1977) in a kind of meditative trance, ignoring the abandoned fire ranger's cabin on whose porch she sits. Instead she withholds her mind from "all external objects, all external sights" in order to hear the "Soundless Sound" of Divine Reality, as cogently linked to theosophy by Ann Davis in her book *The Logic of Ecstasy: Canadian Mystical Painting, 1920 – 1940*. I have come to think that *The Artist's Son* importantly foreshadows this preoccupation.

In the summer of 1928, John was a 16-year-old. In this painting, a boy on the verge of becoming a man stands awkwardly on a tilted surface and leans heavily on a tree trunk. He wrenches his neck backwards to see what remains unseen to us. The painterly swatches of pink that highlight his hair and ear rhyme with the brush-strokes describing the clouds above and to his left. Reflecting the rosy sunlight whose source is also beyond our vision, those clouds metaphorically suggest a moment of transition away from the material world, which is itself represented by the irregular cluster of branches and harder surfaces behind the boy. Like that of Vera in *Dhârâna*, the boy's gaze upward implies a yearning to transcend the here and now. Like *Dhârâna's* porch railing, which rises from right to left, the horizon line in the distance behind John rises from left to right, as if to gather force in order to propel a longing figure upwards. In both paintings, the figures' heads are tilted back and echo the background colours against which they are silhouetted. A clear metaphor emerges: the youth's adolescence is a threshold between the material and spiritual worlds, as is *Dhârâna*, the sixth of eight steps towards fulfillment and inner peace.

The inscription alleges that *The Artist's Son* was painted during or soon after a trip to Mount Garibaldi. Despite the work's title recorded in the Varley Inventory—*John at Bobcaygeon*—it strikes me as unlikely that the painting would involve Bobcaygeon, where the Varleys lived in a tent in the summer of 1923. Having defaulted on the mortgage of their first house, the family was offered camping space on a parcel of land owned by the poet E.J. Pratt. At that point in time, John would have been only 11 years old—much too young to be the model for the tall, ephebic youth in the Garibaldi picture.

Varley started his occasional trips to Garibaldi in 1927 in the company of both his son John and fellow artist Jock Macdonald, who was equally interested in a spiritual relationship with nature. Having also been influenced by the mystically inclined photographer John Vanderpant, Varley possessed a state of mind that would corroborate my mystical interpretation of this painting. His spiritual inclinations have been well described by Davis and many others. Maria Tippett, for instance, states that on one of his visits to Garibaldi, Varley stripped off all his clothes and reclined in an indentation recently vacated by a deer in order "to take into his psyche ... the 'essence' of these shy wild creatures." Similarly, John's immersion in the visual grandeur around him, otherwise unavailable to us as mere viewers, modelled his father's desire for absorption into spiritual reality.

*The Artist's Son* is thus a hugely important and, I think, overlooked contribution to Varley's development towards *Dhârâna*.

We thank Robert Belton, Associate Professor, Art History and Faculty of Creative and Critical Studies, the University of British Columbia, Okanagan Campus, for contributing the above essay.

This work is #1236 in the Varley Inventory listing, titled as *John at Bobcaygeon*.

**ESTIMATE: \$100,000 – 150,000**

