



120 Arthur Lismer

AAM CGP CSGA CSPWC G7 OSA RCA 1885 – 1969

McGregor Bay Islands

oil on canvas, signed and on verso titled on the Art Gallery of Toronto label and inscribed *McGregor Island, Lismer* and with the University Club of Toronto inventory #UCT-0000-L005 on a label and variously, 1925 32 ¼ x 40 ¼ in, 81.9 x 102.2 cm

PROVENANCE

Harry S. Southam, Ottawa, 1936  
Laing Galleries, Toronto, 1950  
University Club of Toronto

LITERATURE

“Back to Intelligibility,” *Toronto Telegram*, January 12, 1925  
Bess Housser, “In the Realm of Art,” *The Canadian Bookman*, vol. 7, no. 2, February 1925, page 33

Barker Fairley, “The Group of Seven,” *The Canadian Forum*, vol. 53, 1925, page 146  
Lawren Harris, *Arthur Lismer: Paintings, 1913 – 1949*, Art Gallery of Toronto, 1950, reproduced as plate 9 and listed, unpaginated  
Allan Wargon, director, *Lismer*, National Film Board documentary, 1951, reproduced at 16:35  
John A.B. McLeish, *September Gale: A Study of Arthur Lismer of the Group of Seven*, 1955, reproduced facing page 68

EXHIBITED

Art Gallery of Toronto, *Group of Seven Exhibition of Paintings*, January 9 – February 2, 1925, titled as *Macgregor Bay, Georgian Bay*, catalogue #39  
British Empire Exhibition, London, *Canadian Section of Fine Arts*, May 9 – October 31, 1925, catalogue #EE.59; traveling to the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, *Exhibition of Canadian Art*, November 26 – December 23, 1925, catalogue #45; York City

Art Gallery, January 16 – February 13, 1926; Corporation Art Gallery, Bury, February 20 – March 20, 1926, catalogue #52; Blackpool, March 27 – April 24, 1926; Corporation Art Gallery, Rochdale, May 1 – 29, 1926, catalogue #52; Corporation Art Gallery, Oldham, June 12 – July 10, 1926, catalogue #52; Cartwright Memorial Hall, Bradford, July 17 – August 14, 1926; Queen’s Park Branch Art Gallery, Manchester, *Exhibition of Canadian Pictures*, August 28 – October 9, 1926, catalogue #165; Sheffield, October 15 – December 11, 1926; and the Municipal Museum and Art Gallery, Plymouth, January 12 – February 12, 1927, catalogue #2  
Musée du Jeu de Paume, Paris, *Exposition d’art canadien*, April 10 – May 10, 1927, catalogue #110  
Art Gallery of Toronto, *Paintings by Contemporary Canadian Artists*, June 20 – September 20, 1927  
Nutana Collegiate, Saskatoon, *Group of Seven Exhibition*, April 3 – 26, 1928, titled as *McGregor Bay*, catalogue #50  
J. Merritt Malloney’s Gallery, Toronto, *Exhibition of Paintings, Sketches and Drawings by Arthur Lismer, A.R.C.A., O.S.A.*, May 4 – 25, 1935, titled as *Macgregor Bay Islands*, catalogue #9  
Art Gallery of Toronto, *Loan Exhibition of Paintings Celebrating the Opening of the Margaret Eaton Gallery and the East Gallery*, from November 8, 1935, titled as *Islands, MacGregor Bay* and dated 1927, catalogue #120  
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, *Retrospective Exhibition of Paintings by Members of the Group of Seven, 1919 – 1933*, February 20 – April 15, 1936, traveling to the Art Association of Montreal, April 17 – May 3, 1936, and the Art Gallery of Toronto, May 15 – June 15, 1936, catalogue #134  
W. Scott & Sons, Montreal, *Exhibition of Paintings by Arthur Lismer, A.R.C.A.*, November 1936, catalogue #13  
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, *Paintings Lent by H.S. Southam, Esq., C.M.G., Ottawa*, May 27 – July 2, 1944, catalogue #56  
Art Gallery of Toronto, *Arthur Lismer: Paintings, 1913 – 1949*, January 13 – February 26, 1950, traveling to the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, April 13 – May 30, 1950, catalogue #22

THE GROUP OF SEVEN first exhibited as a collective in the spring of 1920. All of its members—Franklin Carmichael, Lawren Harris, A.Y. Jackson, Frank Johnston, Arthur Lismer, J.E. H. MacDonald and Frederick Varley—were experienced designers and painters, but their decision to exhibit as a group was of critical importance in the history of art in Canada. These men—each of whom had extensive experience of this country—with their first exhibition proclaimed loudly that the landscape of Canada was not only a worthy subject of painting but that it was also perhaps the most important subject for defining what they hoped would be identified as a distinctly Canadian art. It is difficult to recognize at a remove of more than one hundred years how radical this stance was. Rather than being background to narrative paintings, the landscape of Canada was to be the central subject of art. The approach these artists took was both direct and unapologetic—the natural world of Canada became their main subject.

Arthur Lismer, although born in England and trained in both England and Belgium, was central to this shift in subject matter. Lismer, who immigrated to Canada in 1911, worked initially as a commercial artist. Like his fellow Group members, Lismer lived

in Toronto, but his subject matter in the 1920s was the unsettled landscapes of rustic Ontario rather than the city. *McGregor Bay Islands* celebrates his exploration of the rugged Canadian wilderness.

McGregor Bay is part of Georgian Bay on Lake Huron. A landscape celebrated for its diverse islands and vast skies, McGregor Bay was a natural subject for Lismer. As Fred Housser noted, McGregor Bay was “a corner of Georgian Bay which none of the other group members have painted,”<sup>1</sup> making the subject uniquely Lismer’s.

*McGregor Bay Islands* is a visually striking canvas that quickly reveals Lismer’s enormous accomplishment as a painter. Lismer has depicted the myriad islands of McGregor Bay with both sensitivity and skill. The composition begins abruptly with a stony foreground and a small patch of water in which some of the rocky landscape is reflected. Lismer’s choice of colours is notable. Initially it appears that there is little variation in colour, but Lismer’s palette is, in fact, richly varied. Closer looking reveals a remarkable range of colours in the foreground rocks.

These rocks, and indeed the whole composition, are enhanced by the sunlight streaming from the right-hand side. On that same side of the image, a windblown tree provides a visual link between the foreground, the rocky islands in the middle ground and the more mountainous islands beyond. In the far distance is a range of blue mountains.

The entire painting is animated by Lismer’s careful use of sunlight and shade, which gives the landscape a strong sense of the third dimension. Above the landforms is a cloud-strewn sky that enlivens the scene. What is equally striking is Lismer’s use of an intense blue for the waters of McGregor Bay. The colour provides a vibrant contrast to the varied reds and browns of the rock forms of the beach, islands and distant mountains. This is a landscape that is never visually still, with each layer of the composition providing rich variety for the viewer’s eye.

*McGregor Bay Islands* clearly demonstrates Lismer’s genius. This painting enables us to see the profound beauty of the Canadian landscape, a goal that informed the work of all members of the Group of Seven.

We thank Ian M. Thom, Curator of Collections at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection from 1982 to 1988, for contributing the above essay.

1. Fred B. Housser, *A Canadian Art Movement: The Story of the Group of Seven* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1926), 179.

We thank Charles H. Hill, former 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 his assistance with researching this lot.

ESTIMATE: \$600,000 – 800,000