



123 **Lawren Stewart Harris**

ALC BCSFA CGP FCA G7 OSA TPG 1885 – 1970

**Athabasca Valley, Jasper**

oil on board, signed and on verso signed, titled and titled *Athabaska Valley* on the Laing Galleries label, dated 1926 [sic] and inscribed twice with the artist's symbol / #693 and indistinctly, 1924  
10 5⁄8 × 13 3⁄4 in, 27 × 35.2 cm

**PROVENANCE**

Laing Galleries, Toronto  
By descent within the family of the above, Toronto  
A.K. Prakash & Associates Inc., Toronto  
Private Collection, Toronto

LAWREN HARRIS FIRST visited the Rocky Mountains in the summer of 1924, beginning what would become a lifelong fascination with mountain forms and attempts to convey their spirit in paint. The vibrant and exuberant sketch *Athabasca Valley, Jasper* comes from this first trip, having been painted when Harris, accompanied by fellow artist A.Y. Jackson, spent several weeks exploring the grand vistas of Jasper National Park. The resulting works occupy an important place in Harris’s career, as he sought to constantly refine and reinvent his artistic approach in portraying the Canadian landscape.

Harris and Jackson arrived in July at the Jasper Park Lodge and immediately began the work of painting their surroundings, with no shortage of potential subjects. Harris seized these new opportunities with enthusiasm, and before they departed to some of their more remote painting sites, he had already painted many panels. According to a letter written by Jackson to a friend back in Toronto on July 22, “Lawren has the walls all covered with sketches already.”<sup>1</sup> Over the course of the trip, during which the artists also traveled to the Tonquin Valley and the Maligne Lake area, Harris painted a vast array of works, completing more than 50 oil sketches—and sometimes as many as five per day. Since this was the only trip to the Rockies Harris took before switching from his smaller panels (about 10 1⁄2 × 13 3⁄4 inches) to the slightly larger format of 12 × 15 inches he used from 1925 on, works from 1924 are immediately identifiable.

At this exciting point in his career, Harris’s style was rapidly evolving. During the early 1920s, he had reveled in a diverse range of landscapes, from the opulent forests and rivers of Algoma to the stark and barren expanses of Lake Superior’s North Shore. In response to novel subjects, he experimented with his approaches, refining his methods of distillation and selection, leading to more and more austere and abstracted forms, with limited palettes and simplified compositions. In this process, Harris would sometimes apply a familiar approach from one subject to an entirely novel subject, hence we find fascinating instances of unexpected synthesis connecting his bodies of work. This oil sketch is a striking example of this, where the central dead pine tree, an iconic element of many of his most celebrated Lake Superior works, is the focal point in an entirely different environment, surrounded by lush green hills and soaring mountain peaks in place of the austere and subdued rocky North Shore backed by light-filled skies over a massive lake.

The specific location for this work is the summit of Old Fort Point, near the Jasper Park Lodge and not far from the townsite. We see here the view looking southeast down the valley, with the peaks of Mount Kerkeslin, Mount Christe, Brussels Peak and the various sub-summits of Mount Fryatt lining the horizon. Soft clouds drift across a bright blue sky, and the scene radiates with the excitement and majesty that a summer’s day in the mountains can bring. It represents a moment of tranquility, full of potential, and appropriately finds Harris in position to meet such opportunity, and soar to the new heights that these mountain landscapes would provide for his art and career.

We thank Alec Blair, Director/Lead Researcher, Lawren S. Harris Inventory Project, for contributing the above essay.

1. A.Y. Jackson to Norah Thomson DePencier, July 22, 1924, DePencier fonds, National Gallery of Canada, as quoted in Lisa Christensen, *A Hiker’s Guide to the Rocky Mountain Art of Lawren Harris* (Calgary: Fifth House, 2000), 42.

**ESTIMATE: \$250,000 – 350,000**