

Portraits by Lawren Harris: Salem Bland and Others

L. R. Pfaff

Volume 5, Number 1, 1978

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1077314ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1077314ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Pfaff, L. R. (1978). Portraits by Lawren Harris: Salem Bland and Others. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 5(1), 21–27.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1077314ar>

Portraits by Lawren Harris: Salem Bland and Others

L.R. PFAFF

Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto

Portrait painting is one of the more neglected genres in Canadian art history. There is no National Portrait Gallery, and no comprehensive survey of Canadian portraits has been so far attempted.¹ This neglect is particularly notable with respect to portraits by members of the Group of Seven, the Canadian school that is usually discussed for its landscapes. Lawren Harris's portraits are a typical example: no complete or accurate listing of them exists, while his masterpiece, the portrait of Dr. Salem Bland, has never been studied or documented.

Most of Harris's portraits were painted in the early 1920s. Eleven portraits are known today, and these are listed below. Of the eleven, two cannot be traced, and only two (*Dr. Salem Bland* and *Mrs. Oscar Taylor*, Figs. 1, 2) are securely dated. For these reasons, only a tentative chronology can be suggested.

It seems that Harris did not accept any commissions for portraits, and that none of the portraits which he exhibited were for sale. A review of Harris's relationship with his sitters further shows that he painted portraits only of his friends. Dr. D. Bruce Macdonald (Fig. 4) was the headmaster of St. Andrew's College (then located in Toronto) when Harris and his brother were pupils there. Eden Smith was the architect of the Studio Building on Severn Street, Toronto, a building erected largely at Harris's expense.² The portrait of Thoreau MacDonald (Fig. 5) was 'done for practise' when he was working as a designer in the Studio Building and was therefore available as a model whenever Harris wanted to work.³ Mrs. Bess Harris (Fig. 8), married to Fred Housser when she sat for her portrait, subsequently became Harris's second wife. The subject of the *Portrait of a Girl* was probably the artist's daughter, then about eight years old, who

confirms that her father tried to paint her on several occasions but abandoned the attempt because she wouldn't sit still.⁴ Mrs. Oscar Taylor (Fig. 2) and Mrs. Arthur Holden (Fig. 7) were members of the Christian Science Church on St. George Street in Toronto, as were Harris's mother, Mrs. J.E.H. MacDonald, and Franz Johnston. According to Thoreau MacDonald, Harris considered Mrs. Holden, a reader in the church, as 'a type of spiritual leader.'⁵ Mrs. Taylor, Mrs. Housser, and Mrs. Doris Spiers all took lessons from Varley, all painted in the Studio Building, and all studied from small panels by the Group of Seven which were circulated to their homes.⁶ Dr. John Robins (Fig. 9), Professor of English at Victoria College and great raconteur and humorist, first met Harris at the Arts and Letters Club and became a close friend.⁷ An exception to the foregoing, Harris's self-portrait (Fig. 3) is a satirical likeness which

¹ During the past fifty years only three exhibitions, all of limited scope, have been devoted to Canadian portraiture: *Canadian Portraits of the 18th and 19th centuries* (National Gallery of Canada, Circulating Exhibition, 1959-60); *Faces of Canada: Portrait Paintings and Sculptures from 1900 to the Present Day* (Festival Exhibition Hall, Stratford [Ont.]: 15 July-12 September 1964); *Portraits of Painters* (Public Library and Art Gallery, Woodstock [Ont.]: 5-30 January 1973).

The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance of Sybille Pantazzi, Charles C. Hill, and Douglas Richardson.

² The present location of the portrait of Eden Smith is unknown to the architect's son, Ralph Eden Smith (National Gallery of Canada files).

³ Letter to the author from Thoreau MacDonald (14 March 1977).

⁴ Letter to the author from Mrs. J. H. Knox (18 August 1977).

⁵ Thoreau MacDonald, loc. cit.

⁶ Letter from Mrs. Doris Spiers, 16 November 1973 (National Gallery of Canada files).

⁷ Conversation with Mrs. John Robins, 8 March 1977. According to Mrs. Robins, the portrait of her late husband was painted in the same year as *Dr. Salem Bland*.

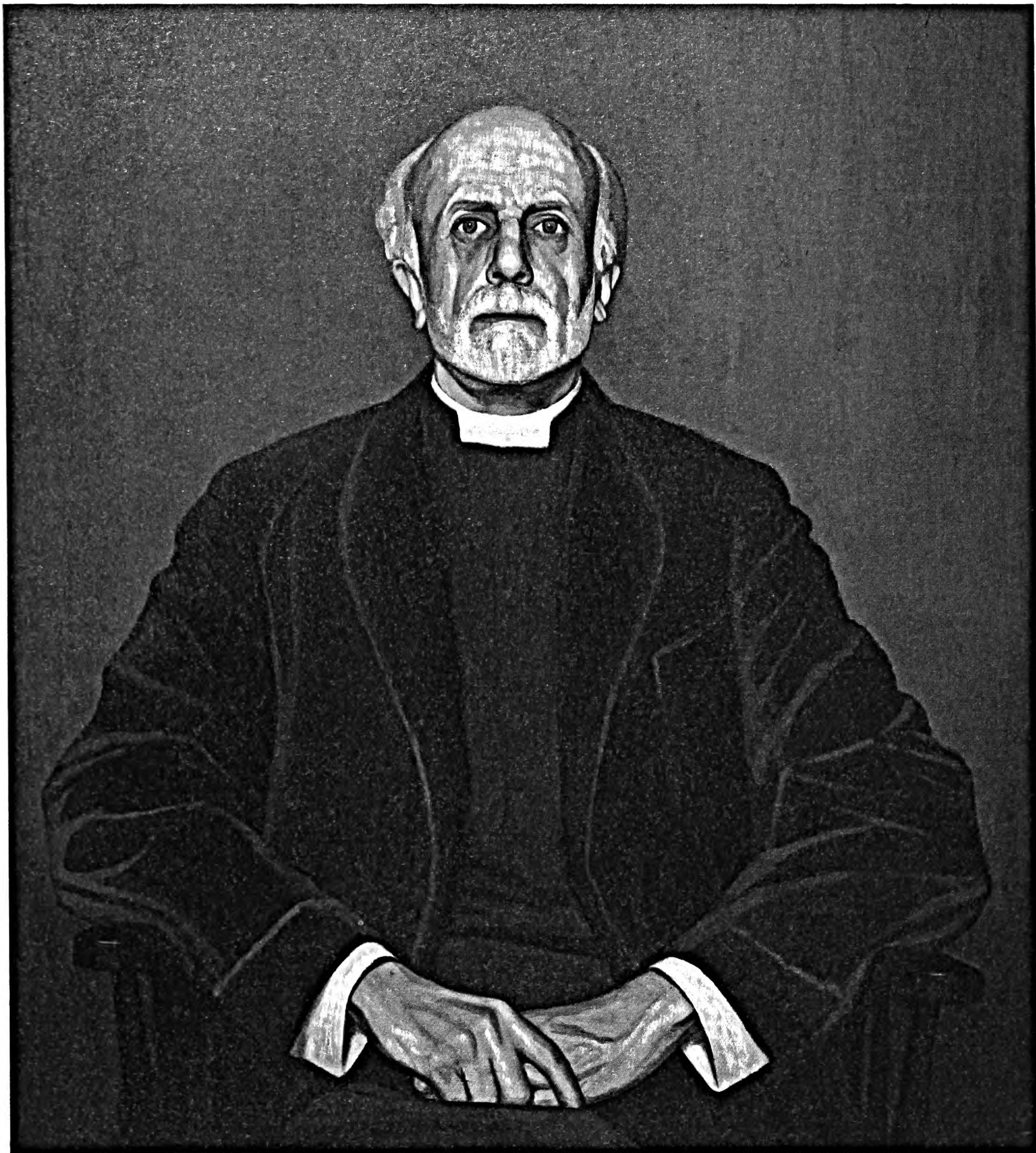


FIGURE 1. Lawren Harris, *Dr. Salem Bland*, 1925. Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario (Photo: Ron Vickers Ltd.).

emphasizes his resemblance to Charlie Chaplin; it seems to have been painted for an exhibition of members' self-portraits at the Arts and Letters Club on 27 February 1932.⁸

⁸ The present owner, Mrs. C.S. Band, states that it was painted for such an exhibition. Mr. Hunter Bishop, Librarian of the Arts and Letters Club, can find a record of only one such exhibition, held on 27 February 1932.

⁹ Thoreau MacDonald, loc. cit.

'As to [a] friendship between L.S.H. & Dr. Bland [Fig. 1] I only know that Lawren had great respect for him & thought of him as a type of spiritual leader & as a good subject for a portrait. I don't think they were friends in the way that Lawren & John Robins were,' writes Thoreau MacDonald of the connection between Harris and Bland.⁹ Salem Goldworth Bland was born in Lachute, Quebec, in 1859, the son of a Methodist



FIGURE 2. Lawren Harris, *Mrs. Oscar Taylor*, 1920. Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada (Photo: National Gallery of Canada).

minister. He graduated from McGill University in 1877, and after several pastoral charges in Eastern Ontario was appointed professor at Wesley Methodist College, Winnipeg; in 1917 he was dismissed because of his support of the labour movement. While he took no part in the Winnipeg general strike of 1919, Bland spoke in favour of the strikers. In the same year he was called to Broadway Methodist Tabernacle, Toronto, where his attacks on fundamentalist doctrine caused a split in the congregation, and in 1923 the stationing committee of the church left him without a charge for two years. In 1925 he was appointed minister of Western Congregational Church in Toronto, where he remained until his retirement. Bland was a gifted speaker and journalist. From about 1924 he contributed a

daily column to the *Toronto Star* under the heading 'The Observer'; he continued this column, which dealt with social and religious matters, until his death in 1950. Bland's sympathy for the cause of the Spanish Republic led to the establishment of the Salem Bland Home for refugee children outside Barcelona.¹⁰

Several points of common interest between Lawren Harris and Salem Bland can be suggested. Harris himself took religion very seriously. Two of his uncles were distinguished clergymen in Baptist and Presbyterian churches of Toronto. Throughout his life, Harris was a

¹⁰ Biographical information from Richard Allen's introduction to a reprint of Bland's *The New Christianity* (Toronto, 1973) and from Bland's obituary in the *Toronto Star*, 7 February 1950.

strong adherent of Theosophy, and his second wife is said to have dressed in the colour of the circle of Theosophy which she thought they had reached.¹¹ Dr. Salem Bland addressed the Toronto Theosophical Society on 9 September 1928,¹² three years after his portrait had been painted; whether this was at the invitation of Harris is not known. From Bland's 'reading lists' in the United Church Archives we also learn that he read Lawren Harris's volume of verse, *Contrasts* (Toronto, 1922), in 1925, the year in which he sat for the Harris portrait.¹³ Bland's review of the Group of Seven's fourth exhibition (*Toronto Star*, 31 January 1925) was entitled 'The Group of Seven and the Canadian Soul.' In it he wrote, 'In these strong and solemn landscapes of the North it was with me as with some watcher of the sky when a new planet swims into his ken. I felt as if the Canadian soul was unveiling to me something secret and high and beautiful which I had never guessed; a strength and self-reliance, depth and mysticism I had not suspected. I saw, as I had never seen before, the part the wilderness is destined to play in moulding the ultimate Canadian.'¹⁴ Indeed, Bland's copy of Fred Housser's *A Canadian Art Movement: The Story of the Group of Seven* (Toronto, 1926) is heavily annotated and underlined.¹⁵ The painting of Bland's portrait must have followed soon after his demonstrated interest in the work of the Group.

Curiously enough, the provenance of the Bland portrait has not yet been clearly established. The portrait was exhibited six times between 1925 and 1928 before being donated to the Art Gallery of Toronto by the *Toronto Star* in 1929. No mention of the owner is given in the catalogue of five exhibitions;¹⁶ in the sixth, the *Loan Exhibition of Portraits* (Art Gallery of Toronto, 7 October–6 November 1927) the entry for no. 163 reads 'Rev. Salem Bland. Canvas. Lent by

11 Information from Mrs. C.S. Band.

12 United Church Archives (Toronto), The Bland Papers.

13 Ibid.

14 Cited in *The Group of Seven* (National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, 19 June–18 September 1970), 199; 'The Observer' is not, however, identified as Salem Bland.

15 Now in the Library, Art Gallery of Ontario.

16 *Canadian National Exhibition*, Toronto (29 August–12 September 1925), no. 284; *Group of Seven* (Art Gallery of Toronto, 8–31 May 1926), no. 26; *Sesquicentennial International Exposition*, Philadelphia (1926), no. 1549; *2nd Annual Exhibition of Canadian Art* (National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, 11 January–28 February 1927), no. 87; *22nd Annual Exhibition of Selected Paintings by American Artists* (Albright Art Gallery, Buffalo, 1928), no. 49.

17 Conversation with Carol Lindsay, Editorial Department Library, *Toronto Star*, 11 March 1977.

18 Conversation with Mr. Richard A. Bland, grand-nephew of the sitter (14 March 1977).

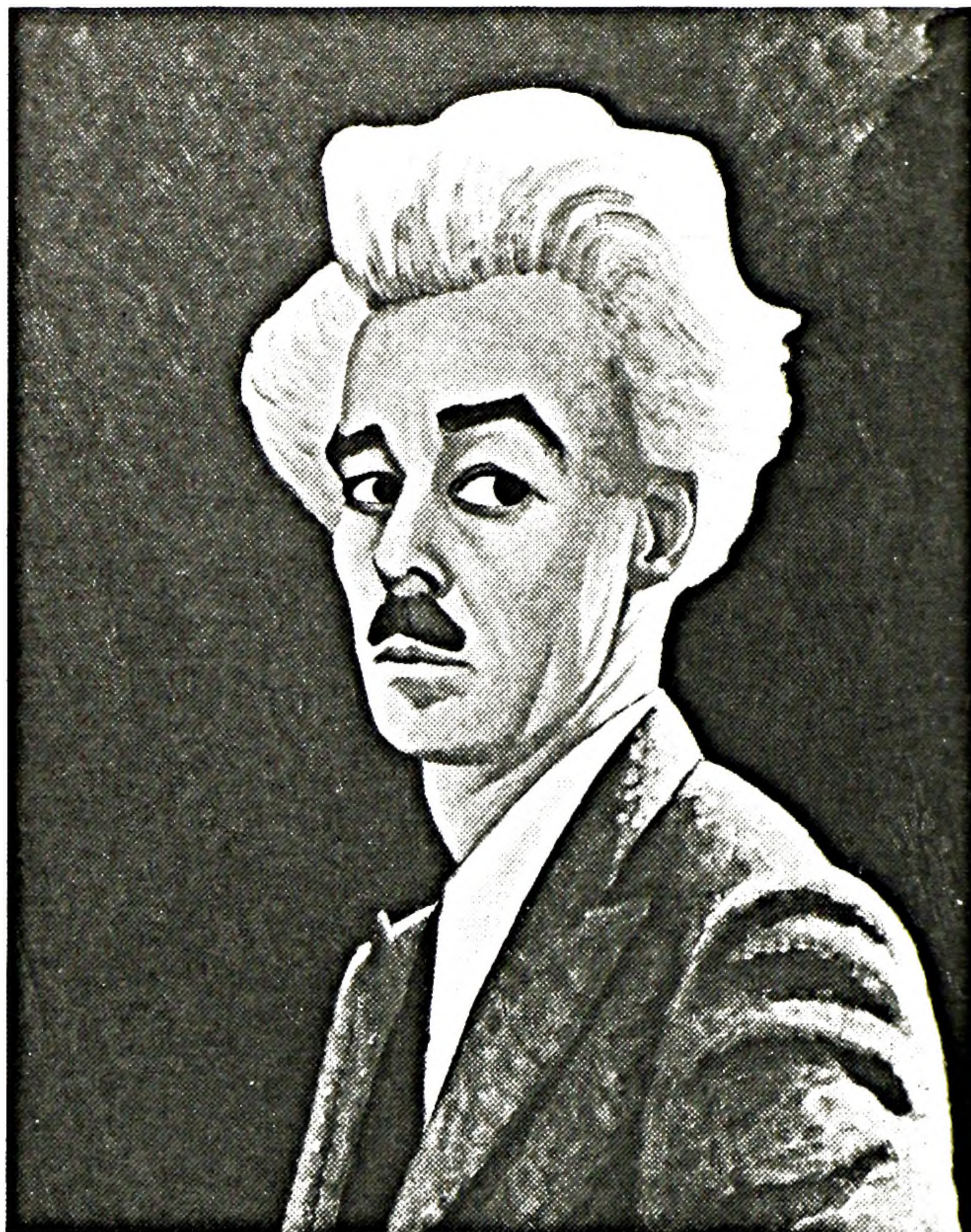


FIGURE 3. Lawren Harris, *Self-Portrait*, ca. 1932. Toronto, Collection Mrs. C.S. Band (Photo: Art Gallery of Ontario).

the Rev. Salem Bland, Toronto.' This suggests that Harris gave Bland the portrait, as was the case with John Robins. How it was acquired by the *Toronto Star* in order to donate it to the Art Gallery of Toronto in 1929 cannot be determined. The *Star* archives have no record of the transaction. Mrs. Ruth Atkinson Hindmarsh, daughter of Joseph E. Atkinson, late publisher of the *Star*, suggests that her father and Bland were friends and fellow champions of the labour movement, and that Atkinson may have paid for the painting and presented it in the name of the *Star*.¹⁷ According to Bland family tradition, Atkinson commissioned the half-length portrait.¹⁸

Bland's strength of character and spiritual ideals are presumably reflected in Harris's portrait. Bland is seen seated in an armchair, facing the viewer with his elbows resting on the arms of the chair and his hands folded in his lap. His blue eyes look upward; his hair, moustache, and beard are grey. He wears a dark blue velvet smoking jacket which is open and reveals his black clerical bib, set off by the white shirt cuffs and clerical collar. The picture is quite bare of accessories and depends for its effect on a taut and linear symmetry emphasized by the smooth paint sur-



FIGURE 4. Lawren Harris, *Dr. D. Bruce Macdonald*, ca. 1919. Aurora, St. Andrew's College (Photo: St. Andrew's College).



FIGURE 5. Lawren Harris, *Thoreau MacDonald*, ca. 1920. West Palm Beach, Collection Mr. E.R. Hunter (Photo: Lee Brian).

face, the austere colour scheme, and the large unbroken area of green against which the figure is silhouetted. No drawings or preliminary sketches are known. The troubled gaze is that of a man who once in a sermon applied to himself the words of St. Paul: 'When I was persecuted in one city, I fled to another.'¹⁹ The face absorbed in thought and the eyes looking far away could be said to express the vision of the author of *The New Christianity*, who argued that the distinctive task of the age was to abolish modern capitalism in order that democracy be fully realized.²⁰ The portrait is certainly a most successful attempt at representing the whole man, his character, and his historical significance.

In contrast to *Dr. Salem Bland*, Harris's other early portraits are generally competent but not strikingly original. Writing of Harris in 1920, Augustus Bridle maintained that the 'portrait of Eden Smith – not to mention two others almost as good – is a fine and sane interpretation of the subject.'²¹ *Mrs. Leslie Wilson* and *Mrs. Bess Harris* (Figs. 6, 8) are conventionally elegant, the latter being the livelier and the more casual. Of the portraits painted around 1920, that of Mrs. Oscar Taylor (Fig. 2) stands out as being possessed of

some of the same strength and penetration as that of Salem Bland, but the early portraits seem superficial in comparison with those of Bland and Robins, which are more severe and formal almost to the point of oppressiveness. Both Bland and Robins are possessed of a static quality recognized by Northrop Frye, who commented in 1948: 'In the amazing portraits of John Robins and Salem Bland . . . two very human and warm-blooded people are stylized into contemplative yogis.'²²

A search for non-Canadian sources for Harris's portrait of Bland was inconclusive. Dennis Reid has pointed out that the early portraits of Harris and Varley suggest a high degree of interaction,²³ and indeed the three-quarter pose, rigid position, and eyes looking off into space of Harris's *Thoreau MacDonald* (Fig. 5) do bear striking resemblances to Varley's portraits of Vincent Massey and Chester Massey painted in 1920. On

¹⁹ Recalled by Mrs. John Robins.

²⁰ Original edition, Toronto, 1920.

²¹ Quoted by Russell Harper in *Lawren Harris: Retrospective Exhibition* (National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, 7 June–8 September 1963), 16.

²² Northrop Frye, 'The Pursuit of Form,' *Canadian Art*, vi (Christmas 1948), 54.

²³ *The Group of Seven*, 149.



FIGURE 6. Lawren Harris, *Mrs. Leslie Wilson*, ca. 1920. Vancouver, L.S. Harris Holdings, Ltd. (Photo: Art Gallery of Ontario).



FIGURE 7. Lawren Harris, *Mrs. Arthur Holden*, ca. 1921. Kleinburg, McMichael Canadian Collection (Photo: Photography Place).



FIGURE 8. Lawren Harris, *Mrs. Bess Harris*, ca. 1920. Vancouver, L.S. Harris Holdings, Ltd. (Photo: Art Gallery of Ontario).



FIGURE 9. Lawren Harris, *Dr. John D. Robins*, ca. 1925. Toronto, Collection Mrs. John Robins (Photo: Art Gallery of Ontario).

the other hand, Varley's portrait of Mrs. Barker Fairley (ca. 1921) is much more delicate and lively than any of Harris's women, and in general Varley's brushwork is looser and more exuberant. In the end Lawren Harris's portrait of Salem Bland remains an isolated and unique image which comparisons with portraits by other artists somehow fail to illuminate.

Photographs of John Robins represent him as the jovial extrovert, yet Harris depicts him as sombre and staring (Fig. 9). This suggests that Harris may at this time have been more concerned with forms than with the actual representation of character. In his paintings of the Rocky Mountains produced during the years 1924 to 1928, (e.g. *Isolation Peak* and *Mount Lefroy*), Harris was preoccupied with stripping every possible detail from his subject. This stylization – the smoothness, the simplicity of colour and composition, and the atmosphere of awe and remoteness – results in a sternness and grandeur, inappropriate to a personality like Robins, but highly successful when coincident with the strength of character and ideals of Dr. Salem Bland.

A CHRONOLOGY OF PORTRAITS BY LAWREN HARRIS

- 1 *Dr. D. Bruce Macdonald*, ca. 1919. 63 × 53 cm. Aurora, St. Andrew's College. (Fig. 4)
- 2 *Mrs. Oscar Taylor*, dated 1920. 96 × 110 cm. Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada. (Fig. 2)
- 3 *Eden Smith*, ca. 1920. Present location unknown.
- 4 *Thoreau MacDonald*, ca. 1920. 59 × 58 cm. West Palm Beach, Collection Mr. E.R. Hunter. (Fig. 5)
- 5 *Mrs. Leslie Wilson*, ca. 1920. 88 × 76 cm. Vancouver, L.S. Harris Holdings, Ltd. (Fig. 6)
- 6 *Mrs. Bess Harris*, ca. 1920. 111 × 91 cm. Vancouver, L.S. Harris Holdings, Ltd. (Fig. 8)
- 7 *Portrait of a Girl*, ca. 1920. 55 × 55 cm. Present location unknown.
- 8 *Mrs. Arthur Holden*, ca. 1921. 74 × 65 cm. Kleinburg, McMichael Canadian Collection. (Fig. 7)
- 9 *Dr. Salem Bland*, dated 1925. 102 × 90 cm. Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario. (Fig. 1)
- 10 *Dr. John D. Robins*, ca. 1925. 100 × 81 cm. Toronto, Collection Mrs. John Robins. (Fig. 9)
- 11 *Self-Portrait*, ca. 1932. 80 × 63 cm. Toronto, Collection Mrs. C.S. Band. (Fig. 3)