

A Newly Discovered Portrait by F. H. Varley

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Article abstract

Un des premiers portraits réalisés par Frederick Varley a été découvert récemment à l'Université de Toronto (Fig. 145). Le sujet de cette oeuvre, W. Theophilus Stuart (1853-1915), était médecin et professeur à cette Université. La date du décès de ce dernier, de même que le style du tableau, permettent de conclure que l'artiste a peint ce portrait dans les trois premières années suivant son arrivée au Canada (1912-15). Ce tableau, dont le style et la composition sont semblables à ceux du seul portrait connu de l'artiste qui remonte à cette période, soit un dessin de son père (Fig. 146), est vraisemblablement le premier portrait de Varley réalisé sur toile. Il présage également les rapports que l'artiste allait entretenir avec l'Université, particulièrement soutenus au cours des années 20. Aucun lien n'a été établi entre Stuart et Varley, mais deux intermédiaires possibles sont proposés, tous deux des amis de Varley et des collègues du Dr Stuart. Par comparaison aux portraits exécutés par l'artiste plus tard dans sa carrière, ce tableau est de style plutôt conservateur et traditionnel. Il démontre, tout comme les premières oeuvres de l'artiste, que Varley n'avait pas subi l'influence des tendances artistiques d'Europe au moment de son arrivée au Canada et qu'il a élaboré son style plus contemporain une fois ici.



FIGURE 145. *Samuel Joseph Bloom Varley*, ca. 1912. Charcoal on paper, 38.1 × 37.0 cm., Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada. Reproduced courtesy of F. H. Varley Estate, Mrs. Donald McKay (Photo: National Gallery of Canada).



FIGURE 146. *W. Theophilus Stuart*, 1912-15. Oil on canvas, 60.4 × 50.2 cm., Toronto, University of Toronto. Reproduced courtesy of F. H. Varley Estate, Mrs. Donald McKay (Photo: Mr. John Glover, University of Toronto).

*A Newly Discovered Portrait by F. H. Varley**

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RÉSUMÉ

Un des premiers portraits réalisés par Frederick Varley a été découvert récemment à l'Université de Toronto (Fig. 145). Le sujet de cette oeuvre, W. Theophilus Stuart (1853-1915), était médecin et professeur à cette Université. La date du décès de ce dernier, de même que le style du tableau, permettent de conclure que l'artiste a peint ce portrait dans les trois premières années suivant son arrivée au Canada (1912-15). Ce tableau, dont le style et la composition sont semblables à ceux du seul portrait connu de l'artiste qui remonte à cette période, soit un dessin de son père (Fig. 146), est vraisemblablement le premier portrait de Varley réalisé sur toile. Il présage

également les rapports que l'artiste allait entretenir avec l'Université, particulièrement soutenus au cours des années 20. Aucun lien n'a été établi entre Stuart et Varley, mais deux intermédiaires possibles sont proposés, tous deux des amis de Varley et des collègues du D^r Stuart. Par comparaison aux portraits exécutés par l'artiste plus tard dans sa carrière, ce tableau est de style plutôt conservateur et traditionnel. Il démontre, tout comme les premières oeuvres de l'artiste, que Varley n'avait pas subi l'influence des tendances artistiques d'Europe au moment de son arrivée au Canada et qu'il a élaboré son style plus contemporain une fois ici.

Frederick Varley established his reputation as one of Canada's foremost portraitists during the six years he spent in Toronto following World War I. Having achieved success as a war artist, he returned to Toronto in August 1919 determined to earn his living as a painter and immediately turned to portraiture. Although this was his first sustained attempt at professional portraiture, and the first time he received real public recognition, Varley had begun doing portraits at least seven years earlier. Of his initial efforts in the genre, little remains.

Varley's first known portrait is a drawing of his father, Samuel Joseph Bloom Varley (Fig. 145), which was probably executed shortly before the

artist emigrated to Canada in August 1912.¹ The drawing is a competent, conservative rendering, tinged with romanticism in the dramatic lighting and the sitter's distant gaze.

The earliest recorded oil portraits by Varley were exhibited in 1916. At the Ontario Society of Artists exhibition in the spring of that year, a painting entitled *A Portrait* (no. 128) appeared with one other work called *The Invalid* (no. 127), which could conceivably have been a portrait. At the CNE exhibition during the summer, Varley again showed two works: another (or perhaps the same) *A Portrait* (no. 419) and one entitled *Portrait, Captain H. P. Langston* (no. 420).² None of these paint-

* The faculty and staff of the University of Toronto have been very helpful in providing me with information for this article. I would especially like to thank Alexandra Haldane, University Art Curator, for having brought this painting to my attention in connection with my MA thesis, "The Portraiture of Frederick H. Varley, 1919 to 1926" (Queen's University, 1986) and for her subsequent generous assistance.

1 Dated to 1900 by Christopher Varley, *F. H. Varley* (Edmonton: Edmonton Art Gallery, 1981), 19, but to ca. 1912 by Peter Varley, *Frederick H. Varley* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1983), 81. The later date seems more likely as the technical skill of the drawing suggests that it was done after Varley attended the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Antwerp (1900-1902).

2 Langston seems to have been Varley's next-door neighbour in 1914 and 1915, when the artist lived at 229 Oakmount Road. At that time 227 Oakmount Road is listed in Toronto

ings was reproduced in the exhibition catalogues and none has been traced. The only clue to their appearance is a brief description of one, probably no. 128, in a newspaper review of the OSA exhibition. It is described as a "portrait of a woman's head painted in luminous shadow . . . full of subtle lights and reflections, . . . [but] rather marred by peculiarly strong spots in the background."³ This description brings to mind Varley's portraits of the twenties, such as *John* (ca. 1920, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa), with its luminous shadows and reflections of light, and *Vincent Massey* (1920, Hart House, University of Toronto), which was, like the 1916 portrait, criticized for the treatment of light and colour in the background.⁴

Varley's mature style is first apparent in two portraits he painted during the War: *Captain C. P. J. O'Kelly, V.C.* and *Lieutenant G. B. McKean, V.C.* (both 1918, Canadian War Museum, Ottawa). These and his portraits of the twenties exhibit affinities with contemporaneous British portraiture, especially that of Augustus John. It would be natural, therefore, to suppose that Varley brought this modern British style with him when he came to Canada in 1912. Was this the case or was his early painterly style closer to the *Portrait of Samuel Varley*?

A hitherto unknown portrait by Varley (Fig. 146) that came to light recently at the University of Toronto begins to answer this question. It is a standard bust-length study of a man in academic robes painted in conventional dark tones. The robes are a deep, muted green that is almost indistinguishable from the penumbral, brown background. These sombre colours are enlivened by the white of the shirt and a vibrant splash of red in the hood. Though orthodox compared to the artist's known portraits, this painting bears the clear stamp of Varley's personal style. Typical of Varley are the strong modelling of the head, giving the

impression of solidity of form; the long vertical brushstrokes in the body; an interest in the dramatic effects of light and shade; a mood of restrained, emotional intensity; and an obvious respect for the dignity of his subject.

Although no documentation relating to either the genesis or the subsequent history of the portrait has been located, a certain amount of information can be deduced from the painting itself. It is signed "F. H. Varley" in the lower left corner, but undated. A small plaque on the frame identifies the subject as W. Theophilus Stuart, M.D., C.M. (1853-1915). In addition to having a private medical practice in Toronto, Stuart was Associate Professor of Medicine in the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Toronto and Professor of Anatomy and Chemistry at the Royal College of Dental Surgeons of Ontario.⁵ The Royal College was affiliated with the University of Toronto between 1888 and 1925, covering most of Dr. Stuart's tenure, and thereafter became its Faculty of Dentistry.

The portrait was almost certainly a commission connected with Stuart's position on the faculty. Like many portraits in the University collection, it was probably presented to the subject to mark some special occasion. The most common occasion was retirement. That this was not the reason for the Stuart portrait is proved by the fact that Stuart died rather suddenly on 13 November 1915, while he was still teaching. There remains the possibility that Varley was hired after Stuart's death, in which case he would presumably have worked from photographs. Yet there is nothing of the woodenness and formal ambiguity that is apparent in later portraits that Varley is known to have done from photographs.⁶ If, as seems more likely, the artist painted Stuart from life, he must have done so sometime between his arrival in Canada in August 1912 and Stuart's death in November 1915.

city directories as occupied by Harry P. Langston. The portrait of Langston disappeared from view after the exhibition and years later Varley claimed that it had been destroyed. (Research notes for Varley retrospective exhibition, *F. H. Varley: Paintings, 1915-1954* [Toronto: Art Gallery of Toronto, 1954]; Varley documentation file, E. P. Taylor Reference Library, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.)

3 M. L. A. F., "Some Pictures at the Art Gallery," *Toronto Daily Star*, 11 March 1916, 5.

4 While generally praising the portrait of Vincent Massey, two Varley supporters—Barker Fairley and Augustus Bridle—both objected to a bright patch of blue in the background. Fairley called it "a slightly precarious adventure into colour interpretation and not finally convincing" ("Some Canadian Painters: F. H. Varley," *Canadian Forum*, 11 [April 1922], 596), while Bridle decided it was "irrelevant" ("Are These New-Canadian Painters Crazy?" *Canadian Courier*, 22 May 1920, 10).

5 "Obituary—Dr. W. T. Stuart," *Oral Health*, v (December 1915), 535, and "Notes re William Theophilus Stuart" (typescript notes, Faculty of Dentistry, University of Toronto).

6 This was a series of four drawings of members of the British royal family, which appeared in the *Toronto Star Weekly* (25 September-16 October 1926). Three of the four photographs that Varley must have used have been traced (see my thesis). The artist was reluctant to paint portraits from photographs, but apparently agreed to do so on at least one occasion. In 1921 Norman Gurd, a prominent Sarnia lawyer and art collector, wrote to Varley about a proposed portrait of his recently deceased friend, James Henry Kittermaster: "I appreciate very much your undertaking to do this, as I know that you are averse to painting from photographs, but it means a great deal to me to have a man for whom I had such affection painted by you" (Norman Gurd Letters, no. 571, Lambton County Library, Wyoming, Ontario). The painting seems never to have been completed.

This painting is very similar to the drawing of Samuel Varley. The angle of the body and the position of the head are virtually identical in the two portraits, as is the treatment of light, entering from the same direction and casting half the face into shadow. Only the tilt of the head and the direction of the gaze are slightly different. In the work of many artists such a marked similarity would mean little. Varley's later portraits, however, demonstrate that he was disinclined to repeat himself. In this case, then, the similarity suggests that the artist's approach had not been changed either by the lapse of a great deal of time or by the intervention of other portraits. In other words, the Stuart portrait is probably Varley's first portrait canvas.

Certain minor technical weaknesses in the painting support this hypothesis. The professor's hood seems to take on a life of its own, occupying an ambiguous position in space somewhere in front of Stuart's shoulders. Moreover, the flesh-tones, which incorporate some of the deep green of Stuart's gown, are rather murky. Although Varley continued to paint flesh-tones in dark, clay-like colours, he became more successful in keeping them fresh and less adulterated.

Painted at any time during the artist's first three years in Canada, this portrait was done at a time when Varley was virtually unknown as a painter. According to A. Y. Jackson, Varley was known until the war as a designer and illustrator.⁷ Preoccupied with his career as a commercial artist, he painted very little. His friend Barker Fairley described him as "an extreme case of inner growth without productiveness."⁸ How, then, would this unknown artist have been engaged to paint the portrait of a man who seems to have had no personal connection with the artist or any direct involvement with Toronto's art community?

There are two possible intermediaries. One is Dr. James MacCallum, an ophthalmologist and professor of pharmacology in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Toronto, who is well known for his involvement with Tom Thomson and members of the Group of Seven. MacCallum had met Lawren Harris in 1909 or 1910, J. E. H. MacDonald in 1911, and Thomson in 1912.⁹ In January 1912 he joined the Arts & Letters Club and was, therefore, already a member when Varley joined in November of the same year.¹⁰ Hence, the two men could have met as early as Varley's arrival in Toronto. They certainly knew one

another by 1914, when Varley spent time at MacCallum's property at Go-Home Bay.¹¹ Although no acquaintance between MacCallum and Stuart is documented, it is likely that they knew each other as fellow members of the Faculty of Medicine, and given MacCallum's known enthusiasm for the group of young painters, it is not unlikely that he would have played a role in bringing Varley to the attention of Stuart or whoever commissioned his portrait.

The other possible intermediary is Dr. A. D. A. Mason, who became a close friend of Varley's. Mason studied at the Royal College of Dental Surgeons from 1898 to 1900 and from 1901 to 1902, when Dr. Stuart was one of only three faculty members.¹² In 1912 Mason was appointed librarian and curator of the museum at the Royal College and subsequently taught at both the College and the Faculty of Medicine.¹³ Exactly when Mason and Varley met is unknown, but their friendship was well established by the early 1920s.¹⁴

Speculative though it is, the involvement of either or both of these men provides a tentative link between Varley's circle and this otherwise isolated portrait.

Its association with the University of Toronto also connects this painting with Varley's post-war career in Toronto. The relationship between Varley and his portraiture on the one hand and the university on the other was complex and multifaceted. Many of his friends—men like MacCallum, Mason, Barker Fairley, Peter Sandiford, and E. J. Pratt—taught at the university. Many who sat to Varley—Margaret Fairley, Viola Pratt, Joan Fairley, Primrose Sandiford, Mrs. Gilbert Jackson, Mrs. W. H. Fraser, and Mrs. Alexander McPhedran—were related to faculty members. Some of the artist's most important commissions of the twenties came from the university: *Dr. Irving Heward Cameron* (ca. 1921-22, University of Toronto), *Vincent Massey* (1920, Hart House), and *Chester Massey* (1920, Hart House), the latter two having been commissioned to commemorate the opening of Hart House, the university student union building.

11 Varley was at Go-Home Bay in October 1914.

12 Typescript biographical notes, Faculty of Dentistry Library, University of Toronto.

13 *Announcement of the Royal College of Dental Surgeons of Ontario* (1912-13), 89. In 1912 Mason was appointed demonstrator for the newly established Department of Dental Surgery in the Faculty of Medicine, University of Toronto ("Editorial," *Oral Health*, II [September 1912], 374).

14 Varley drew Mason's portrait ca. 1922-23 (McMichael Canadian Collection, Kleinburg, Ontario). The two men corresponded after Varley moved to Vancouver in 1926 and in 1945 the artist painted an oil portrait of Mason (private collection).

7 *F. H. Varley* (Toronto), 6.

8 Fairley, "Some Canadian Painters," 594.

9 Dennis Reid, *The MacCallum Bequest* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1969), 11-13.

10 Membership records, Arts & Letters Club, Toronto.

Varley's portrait of Stuart would have blended well into the university's collection of official portraits. It conformed to accepted standards for that type of portrait at the time and is similar in format, pose, and colour scheme to several others in the collection. In some measure, its conservative treatment may have been dictated by whoever commissioned the painting. However, there is nothing in Varley's other work at the time to indicate that, in this case, he was deliberately archaizing to suit his client. Neither his *Portrait of Samuel Varley* nor his landscapes nor his illustrations were more stylistically advanced.¹⁵ The Stuart portrait

15 For examples, see P. Varley, *Frederick H. Varley*, 79, 80, and 82.

thus rounds out the picture, demonstrating that Varley came to this country in 1912 virtually untouched by contemporary trends in European art. The 1916 review mentioned above hints that by then he had abandoned his early conservatism and was moving towards the modern style first apparent in his war portraits. This means that the early development of Varley's portrait style took place in Canada and, while the primary influence was modern British portraiture, the stimulus for change no doubt came from the new environment. The catalyst was probably contact with the Canadian painters who later became fellow members of the Group of Seven.