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Lawren Phillips Harris 40 Years of Paintings

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[See table of contents](#)

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Lawren Phillips Harris, 40 années de peinture

Lawren Phillips Harris vient de terminer un professorat de trente années à l'Université Mount Allison, de Sackville, N.-B. Il y arriva, en 1946, au moment où, à Montréal, commençait une révolution picturale qui, à ce moment, n'avait guère d'adeptes dans les Provinces Maritimes. L'Université Mount Allison fut la première au Canada à décerner, en 1941, un diplôme en beaux-arts¹. La *School of Fine and Applied Arts* d'alors² connu, sous la longue direction de L. P. Harris, une impulsion importante. Elle est encore la seule des trois écoles d'art des Provinces de l'Atlantique qui compte d'anciens élèves dont les œuvres jouissent d'une réputation solidement établie³.

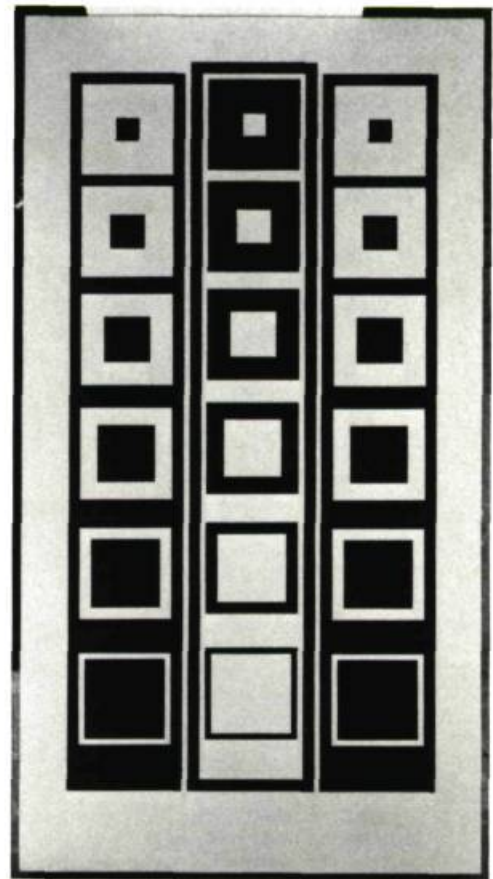
L'étude poussée du modèle vivant était de rigueur à l'École du Musée des Beaux-Arts de Boston où Lawren P. Harris étudia de 1929 à 1931. Il connut là autre chose que les paysages du Groupe des Sept qui lui étaient plus que familiers, et les rares œuvres qui restent de sa première période (1936-1939) indiquent un goût pour les formes nettement découpées, les masses solides et le traitement objectif de l'espace. Ses paysages aux couleurs chaudes et aux formes puristes s'avèrent meilleurs que ses portraits, figiolés et rigides. Transposant sur toile ses esquisses faites en plein air, Harris procéda à une *simplification*⁴ bénéfique, en stylisant arbres, collines et granges et en insistant sur leurs structures et leurs masses.

Comme artiste de guerre (de décembre 1943 à juin 1946), Harris eut à se soumettre au réalisme que l'on attendait des *journalistes-peintres*. Il ne versa ni dans l'anecdote ni dans l'héroïsme moralisateur. Les mouvements des troupes et les ruines squelettiques le fascinèrent. L'élan des chars soulevant la poussière (*Tank Advance, Italy*, et *The Hitler Line Barrage*) n'est pas sans rappeler le dynamisme, meurtrier presque, que les futuristes italiens attribuaient aux machines modernes. Ces tableaux de guerre sont tous exécutés avec beaucoup de soin, et leur finesse les rend attirants, mais il

s'en dégage une atmosphère qui révèle l'inutilité de ces branle-bas et de ces destructions.

Dégagé de l'armée, Lawren P. Harris s'installe à Sackville et partage désormais son temps entre l'enseignement et la peinture. Durant cette troisième période, longue de quinze années celle-ci (1947-1962), Harris développe un genre qui arrive à se libérer entièrement de la figuration et à se suffire du carré, du triangle, de quelques bandes, de trois ou quatre couleurs, . . . Ses talents de dessinateur en font un portraitiste apprécié. On lui commande, entre 1946 et 1967, une trentaine de portraits divers.

Sitôt arrivé dans les Maritimes, l'ancien artiste de guerre, pour qui la fidélité au sujet était primordiale, se mue en adepte des courants modernistes de l'Europe. Au début, il est marqué par Kandinsky (*Project*, 1947), le cubisme de la Section d'or (*Figure Composition*, 1951), un peu plus tard par Ben Nicholson. Mais, c'est l'ascétisme de Mondrian qui le convainc de restreindre sa palette, de simplifier ses compositions, d'épurer davantage les formes naturelles qui lui servent de lien ultime avec la réalité tangible (roches, algues, voiles, édifices, . . .). Pour un temps, motifs figuratifs (*Immigrants*, 1951; *Monument*, 1955) et motifs non figuratifs s'entremêlent (*Vertical Variations*, 1955; *Summer Festival*, 1958). En 1959, la possibilité de réaliser cinq murales décoratives pour l'Université Mount Allison l'incite à n'utiliser que de simples jeux de formes qui se balancent dans l'espace. Il en vient à se passer complètement de la nature, à se satisfaire de formes géométriques élémentaires et d'une palette limitée à l'extrême. Il passe résolument à l'abstraction et continue ses recherches en réalisant, entre 1960 et 1964, une douzaine de tableaux montés sur panneaux, fruits de ses expériences comme muraliste. Prenant un soin extrême à équilibrer supports, éléments géométriques et couleurs⁵, l'artiste obtient une unité d'ensemble remarquable, et ces murales miniatures renforcent son sens de la composition.



1. Lawren P. HARRIS
Theme and Variations, No. 1, 1963.
Huile sur contreplaqué; 56 cm x 162,6.
(Phot. Steve Zwerling, Halifax)

La dernière période (1963-1976) de Lawren Phillips Harris se caractérise par une adhésion entière au néo-plasticisme. Au début des années 60, l'artiste avait surmonté son besoin de se référer à des formes encore liées à la nature. Dépouillés de tout élément non conceptuel, ses panneaux étaient devenus austères, hermétiques presque. A la suite d'une décennie consacrée à la recherche et à l'expérimentation, Harris revient aux couleurs chaudes de ses premiers paysages. Les formats s'agrandissent, le latex et l'acrylique remplacent l'huile, l'emploi du rouleau assure l'application uniforme des couleurs. Des bandes rectilignes, brisées, en accordéon, découpent un fond uni et créent un espace qui varie selon leur proximité ou leur éloignement. Certaines œuvres, plus agressives, engendrent des effets optiques, alors que d'autres ne misent que sur les variations subtiles des couleurs.

Vers 1970, Harris atteint un niveau de qualité remarquable. Mieux construites, davantage simplifiées et aérées que celles de la période pré-

cédente, ses grandes compositions se montrent davantage dynamiques, musicales souvent (*Suspended Verticals*, 1970; *Zig-Zag*, 1971; *Theme and Variations*, 1975). Le jeu des plans et des espaces, des bandes et des chevrons, des carrés et des rectangles, des couleurs chaudes et tempérées, engendre autant de variations que l'investigation intellectuelle de l'artiste le lui permet. Ces dernières années, Harris a amplifié quelque peu certains contrastes de couleur, et ses œuvres révèlent souvent une émotivité autrefois proscrite. Il a réussi, par une recherche poussée entre composition, formes et couleurs, à créer une peinture non objective qui intéresse autant la logique du cerveau que la sensibilité de l'œil. En 1969, Harris commença à imprimer des sérigraphies. Très liées à ses tableaux, elles consistent en des arrangements de bandes, de carrés, de triangles. Les formes y sont tout aussi nettement découpées, le jeu des couleurs tout aussi dynamique.

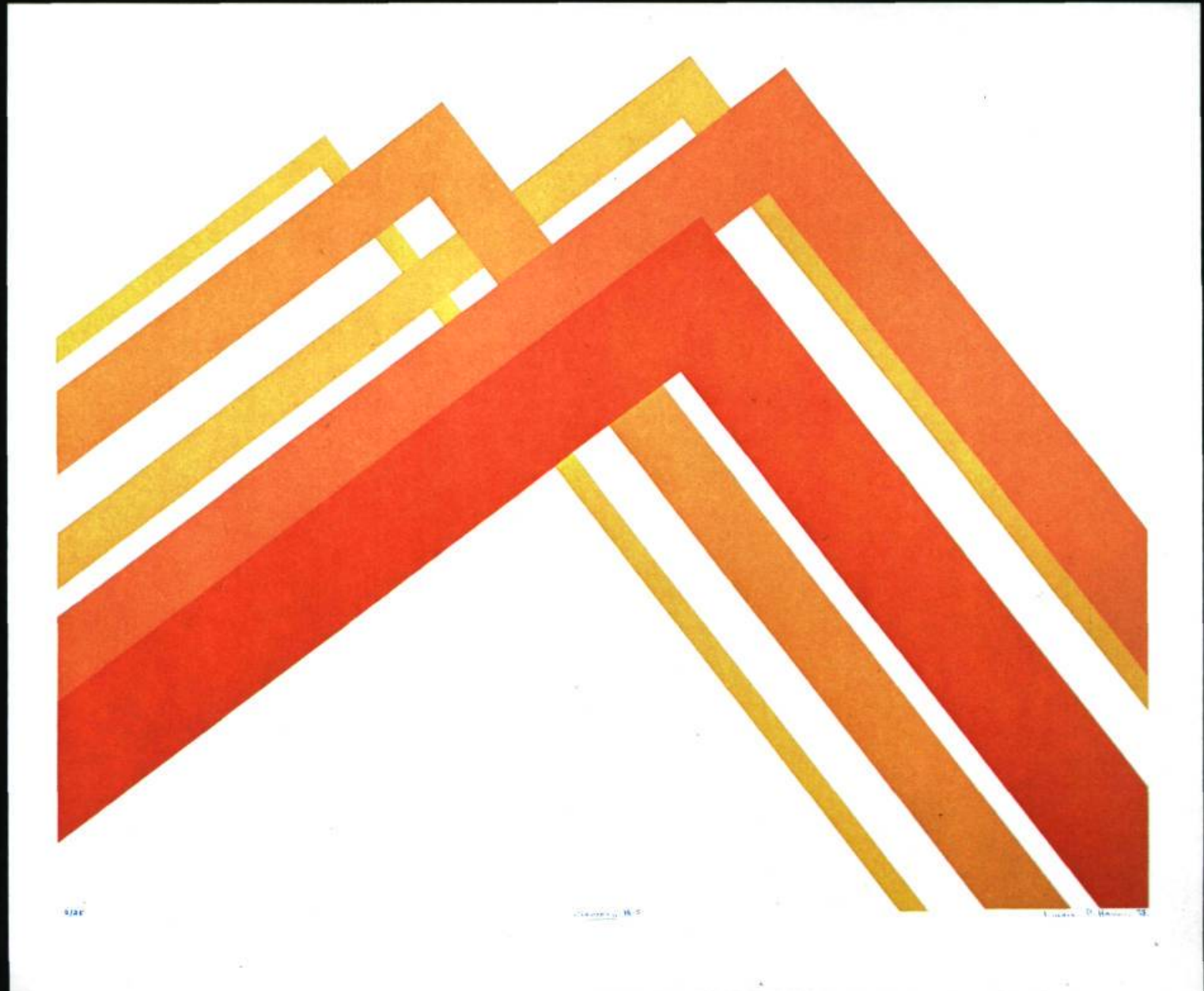
C'est grâce à sa force de conviction et à son

caractère articulé que Lawren Phillips Harris sut développer un genre qui, ayant comme point de départ le paysagisme et le portrait, en arriva à la non-objectivité. Vivant dans une région longtemps réfractaire à l'art abstrait, il resta néanmoins fidèle à l'évolution interne de son œuvre, œuvre disciplinée, au développement régulier et progressif, véritable œuvre de laboratoire.

1. *Arts in New Brunswick*, Fredericton, Brunswick Press, 1967, p. 157.
2. En 1961, l'École s'intégra à la Faculté des Arts et des Sciences et devint le Département des Beaux-Arts.
3. Les trois réalistes Colville, Forrestall et Pratt sont d'anciens étudiants de Mount Allison.
4. Voir Luke Rombout, *Lawren Harris, Profile of a Painter*, dans *Atlantic Advocate* 55 (Décembre 1964), p. 56-61.
5. L'artiste explique l'évolution de son œuvre dans un texte manuscrit qu'il rédigea entre 1962 et 1973.
6. Voir Ernest W. Smith, *Lawren P. Harris 37/72*. Halifax, Dalhousie Art Gallery, 1972.

English Translation, p. 93

2. *Chevrons, No. 3*, 1973. Sérigraphie; 56 cm x 45,7.



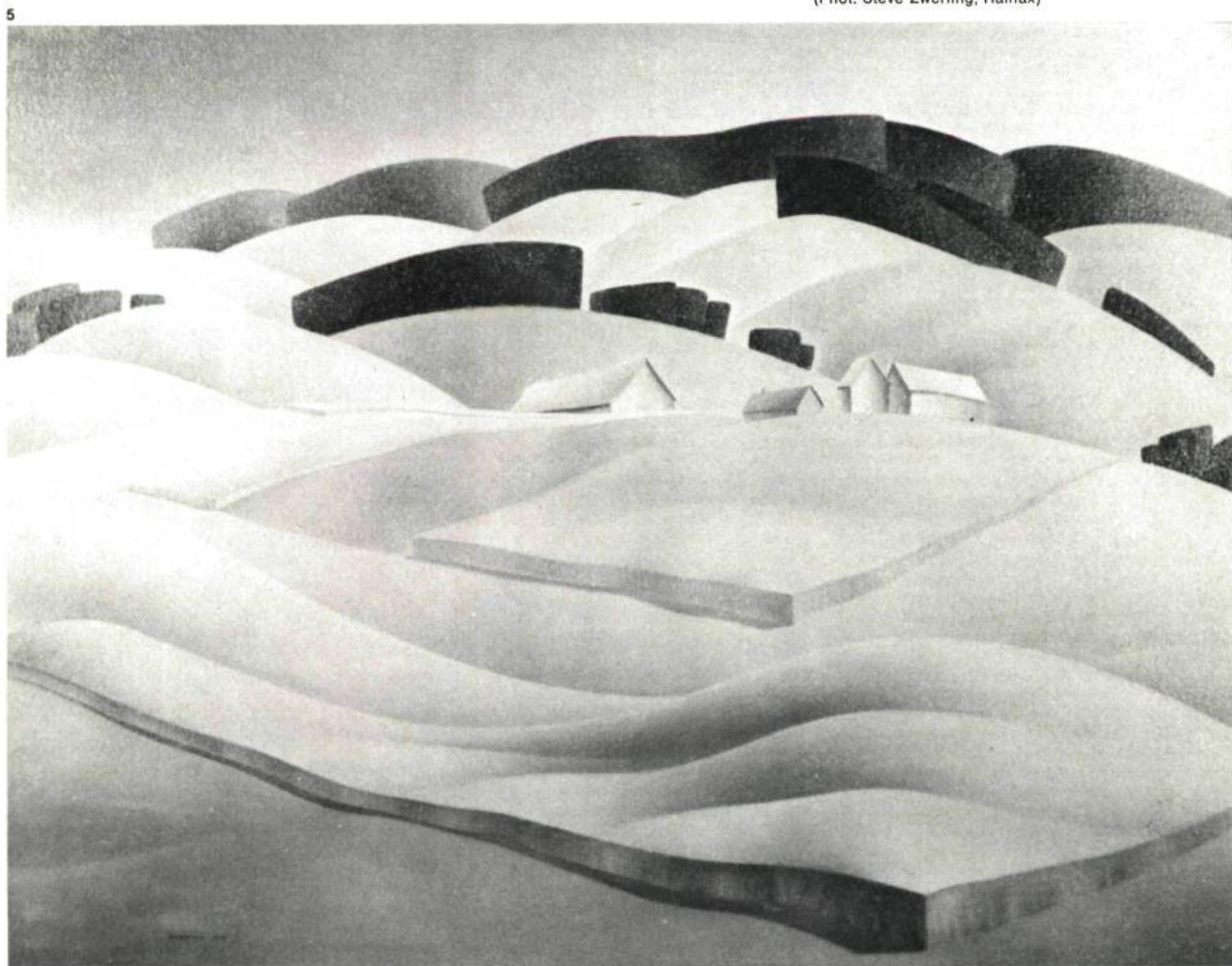
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3. *Hitler Line Barrage, Italy.*
Huile sur toile; 81 cm 3 x 122.
Ottawa, Musée Canadien de la Guerre.

4. *Tank Advance, Italy, 1944.*
Huile sur toile; 76 cm 2 x 101,6.
Ottawa, Musée Canadien de la Guerre.

5. *Summer Landscape, 1937.*
Huile sur toile; 71 cm x 91,5.
Coll. Mrs. Godfrey Chowne.
(Phot. Steve Zwerling, Halifax)



LAWREN PHILLIPS HARRIS: 40 YEARS OF PAINTING

By Ghislain CLERMONT

Lawren Phillips Harris has just ended a professorship of thirty years at Mount Allison University in Sackville, N.B. He arrived there in 1946, at the time when a pictorial revolution was beginning in Montreal which then had few supporters in the Maritime Provinces. In 1941 Mount Allison University was the first in Canada to award a degree in fine arts¹. *The School of Fine and Applied Arts* of the time² experienced an important impetus under L. P. Harris' direction. It is still the only one of the three schools of art in the Atlantic Provinces to have former students whose works enjoy a solidly established reputation³.

The advanced study of the living model was compulsory at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston where Lawren P. Harris studied from 1929 to 1931. There he became acquainted with something other than the Group of Seven's landscapes that were more familiar to him, and the few works that remain from his first period (1936-1939) show a taste for shapes which stand out clearly, solid masses and the objective treatment of space. His landscapes in warm colours and pure forms prove better than his finicky, rigid portraits. Transferring to canvas his sketches made in the open air, Harris proceeded to a beneficent simplification⁴, by stylizing trees, hills and barns and by emphasizing their structures and their masses.

As a war artist (from December 1943 to June 1946), Harris was bound by the realism that was demanded of painter-reporters. He fell prey neither to anecdote nor to moralizing heroism. Troop movements and skeletal ruins fascinated him. The dash of armoured cars raising dust (*Tank Advance, Italy, and The Hitler Line Barrage*) recalls the dynamism, almost murderous, that the Italian Futurists attributed to modern machines. These war pictures are all executed with much care, and their delicacy makes them attractive, but an atmosphere emanates from them that reveals the uselessness of these turmoils and destructions.

Discharged from the army, Lawren P. Harris settled in Sackville and henceforth divided his time between teaching and painting. During this third period, fifteen years long (1947-1962), Harris developed a style that succeeded in freeing itself wholly from figuration, resorting to the exclusive use of the square, the triangle, a few bands, three or four colours, . . . His talents as a draughtsman made him a valued portraitist. Between 1946 and 1967 he received commissions for about thirty different portraits.

No sooner arrived in the Maritimes, the former war artist for whom fidelity to the subject was of prime importance changed into a follower of modern European trends. At first he was influenced by Kandinsky (*Project, 1947*), by the cubism of the Golden Number (*Figure Composition, 1951*) and, a little later, by Ben Nicholson. But it was Mondrian's asceticism that convinced him to restrict his palette, to simplify his compositions, to refine further the natural forms that served him as ultimate link with tangible reality (rocks, algae, sails, buildings, . . .) For a time figurative subjects (*Immigrants, 1951; Monument, 1955*) and non-figurative subjects (*Vertical Variations, 1955; Summer Festival, 1958*) intermingled. In 1959 the possibility of producing five decorative murals for Mount Allison University prompted him to

use only simple sets of forms balanced in space. He reached a point where he did entirely without nature, satisfied himself with elementary geometric forms and with a palette limited in the extreme. He passed determinedly to abstraction and continued his research by producing, between 1960 and 1964, some twelve pictures mounted on panels, fruits of his experiments as a muralist. Taking extreme care to balance supports, geometric elements and colours⁵, the artist obtained a remarkable unity of ensemble, and these miniature murals strengthened his sense of composition.

Lawren Phillips Harris' last period (1963-1976) is characterized by a total adherence to neo-plasticism. At the beginning of the 60's, the artist had overcome his need to refer to forms still linked to nature. Stripped of any non-conceptual element, his panels had become austere, almost hermetic. After a decade devoted to research and experiment, Harris returned to the warm colours of his first landscapes. The formats became larger, latex and acrylic replaced oil, the use of the roller assured uniform application of colours. Rectilinear bands, broken, pleated, carved a plain background and created a space that varied according to their nearness or their remoteness. Some works, more aggressive, generated optical effects, while others emphasized only the subtle variations of the colours.

Around 1970 Harris reached a remarkable level of excellence. Better constructed more simplified and more airy than those of the preceding period, his large compositions appeared more dynamic, often musical (*Suspended Verticals, 1970; Zig-Zag, 1971; Theme and variations, 1975*). The play of grounds and spaces, of bands and stripes, squares and rectangles, warm and restrained colours gave rise to as many variations as the artist's intellectual investigation allowed. These last years, Harris has somewhat expanded certain colour contrasts, and his works often reveal an emotivity once forbidden. He has succeeded, by determined research in composition, forms and colours, in creating a non-objective painting which interests equally the logic of the mind and the sensitivity of the eye⁶. In 1969, Harris began to make silk-screens. Very closely related to his paintings, they consist of arrangements of bands, squares and triangles. Their forms are just as clearly defined, the play of the colours just as dynamic.

It was due to his strength of conviction and his articulate character that Lawren Phillips Harris was able to develop a style which, having as its point of departure landscape art and the portrait, reached non-objectivity. Living in a region long resistant to abstract art, he nevertheless remained faithful to the internal evolution of his work, a disciplined work, to regular and progressive development, a true laboratory effort.

1. *Arts in New Brunswick*. Fredericton, Brunswick Press, 1967, p. 157.
2. In 1961 the School was integrated into the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and became the Fine Arts Department.
3. The three realists, Colville, Forrester and Pratt are former Mount Allison students.
4. See Luke Rombout, *Lawren Harris, Profile of a Painter, in Atlantic Advocate* 55 (December 1964), pp. 55-61.
5. The artist explains the evolution of his work in a manuscript he wrote between 1962 and 1973.
6. See Ernest W. Smith, *Lawren P. Harris 37/72*. Halifax, Dalhousie Art Gallery, 1972.

(Translation by Mildred Grand)

A SURVEY ON FILMS ON ART IN CANADA

By René ROZON

Premises? The eruption of an indigenous art. The kick-off? The Group of Seven (1913-1931) that broke free of foreign influences and formulated painting Canadian in style and content. Consequence? *Canadian Landscape* (Graham McInnes, 1941), the first film on Canadian art, which deals with painter A. Y. Jackson, leading member of the Group. Commissioned by John Grierson, founder and commissioner of the National Film Board, and financed by the National Gallery of Canada, this film inaugurated a series, *Canadian Artists*. At that time, the static film in *post card* style, to designate the monotonous recording of works of art by a simple succession of stills, was current practice. There was nothing of this sort in Canada. From the beginning, they filmed dynamic *portraits* of artists taken live whose works took turns with the milieu that inspired them. There would follow some ten films during the course of the next two decades, on famous Canadian painters, in particular on two other members of the Group of Seven, *Lismer* and *Varley* (Allan Wargon, 1952 and 1953, respectively, the automatist *Paul-Émile Borduas* (Jacques Godbout, 1963), and the surrealist Alfred Pellon (*About Pellon*, Louis Portugais, 1968). In sculpture this same method of shooting reconciling the presence of the artist, his work and his ambient universe was applied, as confirmed by David Millar's films (*Vaillancourt*, 1964), Julius Kohanyi's (*Henry Moore*, 1968), and Pierre Moretti's (*Bronze, 1969*) from Charles Daudelin's work.

Some film producers prefer the poetic evocation to the artist's profile with a biographical slant. Harmonious images, solemn rhythm and lyrical commentary distinguish them. These are their sources of inspiration: accuracy and clarity of Ozias Leduc's landscapes, portraits and still lifes (*Correlieu*, Jean Palardy, 1959); the mythical and legendary dream-like quality of the engravings of *Eskimo Artist Kenojuak*, (John Feeney, 1964); or again the enigmatic mutism of the hieratic figures of painter Jean-Paul Lemieux (*Tel qu'en Lemieux*, Guy Robert, 1973). While cutting itself off from any context, this last example overlaps another approach where the work of art itself constitutes the sole object of the film. Witness three studies on painters: *Quebec in Silence* (Gilles Gascon, 1969), another film delving deep into Lemieux's work; *The Jolifou Inn* (Colin Low, 1955), a suite of genre scenes by Cornelius Krieghoff; and *Paul Kane Goes West* (Gerald Budner, 1972), author of anecdotal and romantic pictures of the great Indian tribes of the country.

There is no rule without an exception, even at the risk of infringing on animated film cinema. Two reasons, filming technique and affinities with painting, of which we previously spoke in this magazine (Vol. XIX, No. 78, pp. 50-51), justify the place occupied by Norman McLaren. Isn't painting directly on film also making film on art before the fact? A development he would continue for a good many years from *V for Victory* (1941), to *Short and Suite* (1959). We must not ignore his only venture into the pictorial universe of another artist: *A Little Phantasy on a 19th Century Painting* (1947), a cheerful version of *Isle of the Dead*, a picture by Arnold Böcklin. Humour, sprightly rhythm and comprehension of the subject through the transformation of forms characterize this peerless film producer.