



fig.1 Lawren Harris, *Decorative Landscape*, 1917, oil on canvas, 123 x 132 cm, National Gallery of Canada. (Photo: National Gallery of Canada)

"SYNCHROMISM" IN CANADA

Lawren Harris, *Decorative Landscape*,
and Willard Huntington Wright, 1916-1917

On 10 March 1917 the (Toronto) *Mail and Empire* published a review of the annual exhibition of the Ontario Society of Artists. The unidentified critic observed that, because Lawren Harris was serving in the Army, he had opted to exhibit only one picture: his aptly-titled *Decorative Landscape* (fig.1). This painting, the critic noted, "is an experiment in color. He has painted a bright yellow sky, a sky so yellow that it seems to give off light, and against it are outlined stiff, brittle fir trees with rocks in the foreground. It suggests a little of the technique of a stained glass window and is not Mr. Harris at his best."¹

This is one of the four known published references to *Decorative Landscape* prior to the early 1990s when, after more than eight decades out of the public view, it was purchased by the National Gallery of Canada.² Also reviewing the 1917 OSA exhibition, Estelle Kerr referred to Harris' entry only in passing, Eric Brown characterized it briefly as "curious and arresting" and as "decorative in the extreme," while Hector Charlesworth considered the trees well-drawn but judged that "one cannot speak highly" of the picture overall.³ Thus, cursory though it was, the *Mail and Empire* review provided the most detailed description of the painting. However, it failed almost completely to prepare readers for its striking appearance.

Decorative Landscape has a bold and imposing composition in which several severely delineated spruce trees, sharply silhouetted from behind by an intense light, rise powerfully and spikily skyward behind thickly-painted foreground rocks. The composition is highly dramatic and hieratic, and this — as well as the pronounced implication of spirituality expressed through the upward thrust of trees and the intense light — may indicate Harris' recollection of at least some of the thirty Caspar David Friedrich paintings exhibited in *Ausstellung Deutscher Kunst aus der Zeit von 1775-1875*, which he had seen while living as an art student in Berlin in 1906.⁴ However, what distinguishes the painting from the rest of Harris' *oeuvre*, and what clearly impressed the *Mail and Empire* critic most forcefully, is its sharply unnatural colour. The spruce trees are a rich blue with green highlights, while the foreground rocks in particular are built up of clearly visible strokes of blue and purple. Most startling is the sky, which ranges from a deep egg-yolk yellow in the lower half of the canvas to a lighter but still intense yellow with light turquoise highlights. The intensity and omnipresence of the colours (the yellow, for example, permeates not just the horizon but the entire sky) transcend the objective visual facts and imbue the



fig.2 Lawren Harris, *Snow II*, 1915, oil on canvas, 120 x 127 cm, National Gallery of Canada. (Photo: National Gallery of Canada)

image with a depth and intensity of emotional subjectivity unseen in Harris' work prior to this date.

Harris was no stranger to the decorative manipulation of colour during the years 1914-18. Jeremy Adamson has noted that his juxtapositioning of thickly-painted strokes of complementary colours in *Laurentian Landscape* of 1913-14 (private collection) can be traced to his knowledge of the "Segantini stitch" in paintings by the Swiss impressionist Giovanni Segantini.⁵ More generally, these paintings have been related to works seen by Harris at the *Exhibition of Contemporary Scandinavian Art* (Albright Art Gallery, 1913), and especially to what J.E.H. MacDonald termed Gustav Fjaestad's "finely harmonized pinks and purples and blues and cream yellows."⁶ Harris' decorative winter landscapes of 1914-18 frequently feature such things as mauve snow, green skies and pink trees. In *Snow II* (fig.2), for example, his use of broad brushstrokes of turquoise and yellow in the

sky, and mauve shadows around the foreground trees, complements the patterning of the trees to create an overall decorative effect. This is in keeping both with the paintings seen in the 1913 Buffalo exhibition and with contemporary Swedish tapestries reproduced in *The Studio*.⁷ Purple, yellow and white paint also constitute the sky and the foreground snow in, among other paintings, *Spruce and Snow, Northern Ontario* (1916; AGO) and *Snow VI* (now *Winter Landscape With Pink House*, 1917; Toronto-Dominion Bank). Although its colours are significantly less dominant than those Harris used in *Decorative Landscape*, *Snow VI* was considered sufficiently disturbing when it was exhibited at the 1919 Ontario Society of Artists' exhibition to be criticized for its "exaggerated" yellow snow, green sky, and decorative mauve trees.⁸

As in *Snow II*, the colours that dominate *Decorative Landscape* enhance the surface-oriented, decorative effect which characterizes Harris' landscapes at this time. This effect is further supported by the generally thick paint application in the rocks, the high key of most of the colours, the strong imposition of pattern through the spiky branches and trunks of the trees, the nearly square shape of the canvas, and the very title of the painting. Even the distant hills help to collapse the pictorial space, as they are painted in the same tones as the foreground rocks. The small open area in front of them accomplishes the equivalent end through being the same yellow as the sky, from which it is separated by the hills. However, the combination of intensity and artificiality in the colour scheme of *Decorative Landscape* makes this painting unique in Harris' oeuvre, and calls for further explanation.

It is in this regard that Harris' hitherto unexplored interest in Synchronism (from the Greek for "with colours") lends itself to examination. Although the art of the various members of the Group of Seven has often been discussed in relation to its supposedly isolationist Canadian chauvinism and its European roots, it has only rarely been situated within a North American aesthetic context.⁹ Yet Harris, in particular, was unusually well-read, and had a number of friends and professional contacts in the United States long before he moved to New Mexico in 1934. (Among other things he visited New York — including Alfred Stieglitz's Gallery 291.¹⁰) Examination of Harris' degree of attraction to Synchronism as manifested in *Decorative Landscape* offers an opportunity to consider a neglected aspect of Canadian-American artistic interaction.

The earliest indication that Harris was aware of Synchronism occurs in a letter written by J.E.H. MacDonald to Arthur Lismer in December 1916. Lismer had moved from Toronto to Halifax in the late summer to accept a teaching position at the Victoria School of Art and Design, and MacDonald wrote to acquaint him with an ongoing debate at the Arts and Letters Club. According to MacDonald:



fig.3 Thomas Hart Benton, Sketch of Willard Huntington Wright, c.1915, now lost, coll. S.S. Van Dine Scrapbook 42, Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library. (Photo: Princeton University Library)

There was one very interesting evening discussion in connection with the French paintings purchased by the C.N.E. last fall, and put on exhibition at the Club. Your old friend Langton [W.A. Langton, architect, Arts and Crafts enthusiast and first President of the Club] was the presiding[?] spirit, & though there were only a score or so present, & the time too short for conclusions, the talk was lively, good-natured and stimulating. It began a controversy which still flares up, at the lunch tables, with Lawren strong & extreme on the Wright wing, & [George Agnew] Reid & Langton in opposition. Of course, we haven't got anywhere, but we are enjoying the journey.¹¹

As will become evident below, "Wright" in this quote refers to the American art writer and critic Willard Huntington Wright (1888-1939), Synchronism's most active promoter (fig.3). His position as an enthusiastic advocate of the movement was expedited by the fact that his brother was Stanton Macdonald-Wright (1890-1973) who, with Morgan Russell (1886-1953), founded Synchronism in 1912-13. Willard Wright was the art critic of *Forum* magazine, a contributing critic with *International Studio* and the author of a book, *Modern Painting: Its Tendency and Meaning*, published in 1915.¹² Thus, by December 1916 he had published extensively on American and French painting. All of these texts deal with aspects of modern and contemporary art, several concerning themselves entirely or in large part with the pre-history and theoretical underpinnings of Synchronism. It was through Wright's publications that Harris most likely gained familiarity with the movement. In any case, the fact that in his 1916 letter J.E.H. MacDonald clearly expected Lismar to know who Wright was, indicates that the American writer's work had been discussed by the members of Harris' circle or, at the very least, had been raised in correspondence.

Eleven months after his letter to Lismar, MacDonald mentioned the subject again, though more obliquely, in an article in *The Rebel* on Tom Thomson. Thomson had drowned four months earlier, and MacDonald's article constituted an appreciation of his colleague and a description of the commemorative cairn erected at Canoe Lake. It opened with an attempt to locate Thomson's art within a broad historical context:

A remote and simple Ruskin of ancient China, surveying nature and the Modern Painters of his own Celestial day, wrote as follows: "With the breath of the Four Seasons in one's breast, one will be able to create on paper. The Five Colours, well applied, enlighten the World".

Some of our most potent, learned and rebellious Mentors could, doubtless, identify and describe the old Chinese author. They would discover his subtleties of meaning. ... They might digress into Post-Impressionism, Cubism, Vorticism, Synchronism, lining up as rebels or retrogrades according to their ages and the source of their degrees.¹³



fig. 4 Morgan Russell, *Cosmic Synchrony*, c.1913, oil on canvas, 41 x 33 cm, Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, Museum of Art, Utica, New York. (Photo: Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute)

This does not specifically link Harris with Synchronism, but MacDonald must have intended the reference to apply at least in part to his friend who, a year earlier, he had identified as "strong & extreme" in support of Willard Wright's ideas.

MacDonald's article was published almost four years after Russell Morgan and Stanton Macdonald-Wright first exhibited examples of Synchronism at Der Neue Kunstsalon in Munich (June 1913). Later that year they held a second show, at Bernheim-Jeune & Cie., Paris. In March 1914 they opened a third joint exhibition, their first in the United States, at the Carroll Galleries in New York. The exhibited paintings employed non-local colour ("color-forms") to define mass, volume and "pure rhythmic composition." The artists declared their intention was "to fathom the mysterious relations between color and form, between the colors and the characters of form: its organic rhythm, spatiality, density, transparency, luminosity, etc.," and in so doing "to express the emotion of their discoveries through the language of color."¹⁴ An excellent example of mature Synchronism as thus described was Russell's *Cosmic Synchrony* (fig.4) which was, appropriately, one of the few reproductions featured in Willard Wright's 1915 book on the development of modern art. Here a panoply of "color rhythms" eliminate refer-

ences to optical reality in "a spiralic plunge into space, [that is] excited and quickened by appropriate color contrasts."¹⁵

In his various publications Wright explained at length the derivation, ambitions and importance of paintings like *Cosmic Synchrony*. Impressionism, according to him, employed colour-as-light as "the one element that welded the forms of landscape into one indivisible whole." Wright regarded Gauguin's subsequent use of colour as mere decoration, whereas Cézanne — his greatest hero among recent artists — went beyond the Impressionists' recreation of transient conditions of light and atmosphere. Cézanne instead handled colour so as to organize volumes and create form, both on the surface of his paintings and in depth. The result was for Wright "an aesthetic ensemble which would give pleasure intrinsically, and which did not depend for charm on its resemblance to natural objects."¹⁶ He believed that Cubism's contribution to this progress-driven view of art history lay in its insistence upon painting reality as it was subconsciously conceived rather than in its external aspects. Orphism, though similar to Synchronism insofar as it emphasized colour, was, according to Wright's dismissive characterization, merely tinted Cubism.

For Wright it was Synchronism that marked the radical culmination of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century colour experiments — experiments which, over a century-long span, had seen colour exploited, successively, for its verity, its ornamental qualities, its drama, and its beauty as light.¹⁷ Synchronism both unified and purified what he believed to have been, before its own advent, the highest development in the use of colour (Cézanne) with both the greatest intensity of composition (Rubens; Wright held that composition had been lost in recent art — a victim of "the feverish search for new methods"¹⁸), and the most profound freedom from objective form (Cubism). In his writings, therefore, Synchronism is championed as the apogee of art, driving to new heights the greatest achievements of past art by freeing painted colour from fidelity to "true" local colour in order to give it an intrinsically organic and inherently subjective function:

Synchronism raised color to the emotional significance of a generating function, and eschewed the infantile delight of using color merely as a dramatic or decorative medium. Furthermore, the Synchronists brought to modern art an original conception for the creation of composition. They were the first to abrogate illustration. They completely divorced from their art the preoccupation of imitating nature to be found in the varying degrees of Impressionism, Cézanne, Matisse, Picasso and the Futurists. Instead, they treated painting as an organized series of plastic emotions expressed entirely by color and line.

...Synchronism has sensed the meaning of color in its tactile relation to form and light; and by rationalizing the palette into gamuts, it has given to color

a far more significant function than that of its former rôle, which was the dramatic reinforcement of drawing. The emotion of plastic volume one feels in Synchromist pictures is obtained, not by the old methods of disappearing lines (perspective) and the gradation of light and shade, but by the perfect coalition of color with form.¹⁹

Lawren Harris' initial exposure to Wright's work may have been through the latter's 1915 book, *Modern Art: Its Tendency and Meaning*. This was available at an early date from the prominent Toronto bookseller Wm. Tyrrell & Co., though it is unknown whether Harris owned a copy.²⁰ Harris may also have read one or more of the several journal articles Wright published between December 1914 and March 1916, the last of which appeared nine months before MacDonald's letter to Lismer. Of particular interest among these is Wright's contribution to the October 1915 issue of *International Studio*. This periodical was published in New York City, and was available in Canada by the second decade of the century.²¹ Each issue consisted of the articles from the corresponding issue of *The Studio* (London), together with appended pages numbered with Roman numerals. The October 1915 issue should have been of particular interest to Harris, as it reprinted from *The Studio* a survey by Harold Mortimer-Lamb of recently-exhibited Canadian painting and included a full-page reproduction of Harris' *Corner Store* (1912; AGO).²² In that same issue was Willard Wright's article entitled "Synchromism," in which the author surveyed the precursors of the movement, from Delacroix to Cézanne, and expounded on its merits.²³

Although it cannot be confirmed that Harris was aware of Wright's book or any of his articles, he is known to have owned a copy of the exhibition catalogue that accompanied *The Forum Exhibition of Modern American Painters*. This exhibition was conceived by Wright and was held at the Anderson Galleries (East 40th Street, New York) on 13-25 March 1916. Wright was not only — with the assistance of Alfred Stieglitz and John Weichsel — the principal organizer of the show,²⁴ but also the editor of the catalogue and the author of two of its texts, including the main essay, "What is Modern Painting?," which had first been published five months earlier in *The Forum* under the title "The Truth About Painting." It is even possible that Harris saw the show, which was on display three months before he entered the Canadian Army in June 1916. He is known to have kept up-to-date with contemporary exhibitions and to have travelled to New York to visit galleries during much or all of a precious one-week leave beginning 30 December 1916,²⁵ though there is no record of him having been in the city the previous March. In any case, his annotated copy of the catalogue (now in the National Gallery of Canada Archives) bears a stamp indicating that it was acquired from Wm. Tyrrell & Co. Speculation that he obtained it while he was working on *Decorative Landscape* (which was completed in time to be shown at the OSA exhibition in March 1917)²⁶ is supported by the fact — indicated in

MacDonald's letter to Lismer — that by December 1916 he knew enough about the tenets of Synchronism to engage in forceful debate about them.

The Forum Exhibition, now recognized as a landmark event in the history of American art,²⁷ was first conceived as a showcase for the recently-developed Synchronist movement. It was subsequently expanded to include the work of other contemporary artists such as Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, John Marin and Man Ray.²⁸ When it finally opened it featured 193 works by seventeen contributors, including Russell's *Cosmic Synchrony*, and was accompanied by a substantial catalogue. Although the artists' aesthetic approaches ranged from Synchronism to derivations of Impressionism, Fauvism and Analytic Cubism, their brief "Explanatory Notes" united their various approaches with Synchronism through shared emphasis on formal qualities — most frequently colour, and the reduction or simplification of form at the expense of naturalism.²⁹

The organizers of, and participants in *The Forum Exhibition* hoped that by displaying recent work by some of America's most avant-garde artists they would counter the European-dominated *International Exhibition of Modern Art* (the *Armory Show*), held three years earlier.³⁰ Although sales ultimately proved disappointing, the show attracted much attention, vindicating Macdonald-Wright's prediction that "after the Armory Show it will be the most talked of exhibition ever given" in New York.³¹ Publicity was enhanced by the reputation of the Anderson Galleries as, in Macdonald-Wright's words, "the biggest selling gallery in the world, and by the way, the most sumptuous and whose patrons are the Rockefellers, the Yerkes, Harrimans, the Morgans and the rest of the rich ones."³² Indeed, the Anderson Galleries were a central fixture of art in New York and a venue for some of the most interesting exhibitions seen in that city. Among other events, in 1913 they had hosted the *Exhibition of Contemporary Scandinavian Art* prior to its showing in Buffalo. In 1927 they became the second institution, after the Brooklyn Museum, to display the Société Anonyme's touring *International Exhibition of Modern Art* — the same exhibition that Lawren Harris was instrumental in bringing to the Art Gallery of Toronto later that year. Anderson Galleries activities were thus sufficiently important to attract the attention of those with more than a passing interest in modern and contemporary art, and Harris' acquisition of *The Forum Exhibition* catalogue is therefore not especially surprising.

Willard Wright's twelve-page catalogue essay titled "What is Modern Painting?," like his earlier book and his periodical articles, offers in part an ardent defence of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century painting, culminating in Synchronism. Harris used his pencil to highlight Wright's insistence that the most important means employed by modern painters is colour: "Color is capable of producing all the effects possible to black and white, and in addition of exciting an emotion more acute. The old static system of copying trees in green, shadows in black and skies in blue did not, as was commonly believed, produce realism."³³

This claim was of course not new, especially by 1916, as Wright fully knew. Nor was it a novel idea to Harris, who had a good knowledge of recent art history and whose winter and urban landscapes had already made use of imaginative colour choices. Instead, Harris may have highlighted Wright's statement because the author provided an intellectual and historical context by systematically tracing the development of colour in modern art, thus linking Synchromism with questions of form, composition, and what Wright conceived as the almost evolutionary development of painting's formal tools. In addition Wright's essay engaged in a somewhat more complex elaboration of Synchromist colour practice, expanding on the passage quoted above, and reiterating points that he had already detailed at greater length in other writings, including his article in the October 1915 issue of *International Studio*.

Wright's essays in *International Studio* and other publications are particularly interesting because they discuss Synchromist use of colours in terms that are directly applicable to the choice of hues in *Decorative Landscape*, just as the brightness of colour in the painting recalls Synchromist painting more generally. In the October 1915 *International Studio* article, for example, Wright analyzed how Morgan Russell and Stanton Macdonald-Wright had come to similar conclusions about the use of colour to generate form, though they had originally approached the problem from different perspectives.³⁴ Russell, he explained, developed Synchromism by "extending and completing" Impressionist observations that sunlight is yellow and that shadows contain violet:

Russell went further, and discovered that quarter and half tones also possess colours by which they can be interpreted. He thus arrived at a complete chromatic interpretation of the degrees of light forces or tones. By modulating from light to dark (from yellow to violet) not only was light conceived forcibly, but form resulted naturally and inevitably. This was the principle by which Cézanne achieved his eternal light which brought form into being; but the principle with him was subjugated to the influences of local colour, varying *milieu*, reflections, etc. Russell stated the principle frankly and applied it purely.

In contrast, Macdonald-Wright's starting point had been to study pure colours more from the standpoint of form than from that of light:

He recorded their inherent tendencies to express degrees of material consistency. Thus with him a yellow, instead of meaning an intense light, represented an advancing plane; and a blue, while having all the sensation of shadow about it, receded to an infinity of subjective depth. The relative spacial [*sic*] extension of all the other colours was then determined, and a series of colour scales was drawn up, which gave not only the sensation of light and dark, but also the sensation of perspective. Thus it was possible to obtain any degree of depth by the use of colour alone, for all the intermediate steps from extreme projection to extreme recession were expressible by certain tones or pure hues.³⁵

Thus, though Russell and Macdonald-Wright had approached Synchromism through analyzing colour from different starting points, Wright linked their differing trajectories by describing their aesthetic development in terms of a polarity between yellow and blue/violet. This was a polarity that both artists discussed in their own writings.³⁶ The fact that *Decorative Landscape* is constructed almost entirely through the juxtaposition of large areas dominated either by yellow or by blue and violet thus seems to acknowledge the importance Wright attached in the exhibition catalogue, the *International Studio* article and elsewhere to these colours as cornerstones of Synchromist theory. It further raises the possibility that Harris may have wished to initiate experiments in Synchromist painting by relying at first upon the very colours most frequently discussed in texts sympathetic to the movement, thus starting with basic considerations and later working towards greater complexity. In any case, *Decorative Landscape* was painted at a time when — as J.E.H. MacDonald's 1916 letter indicates — Harris was ardent in his support of Wright's ideas. It is therefore entirely conceivable that the painting owes its striking colouration in large part to Harris' 1916-17 reading of Wright, even though its colouration was grounded in Harris' earlier and less adventurous alterations of local hues. It is likewise intriguing that, just as no references linking Harris with an interest in Synchromism after 1917 have been found, so *Decorative Landscape* has no comparably colourful successor. What might have been the first step in a series of colour experiments is instead Harris' only painting for which Synchromism can be understood as a noteworthy source.

In addition to the structuring of the image as a dynamic relationship between yellow, blue and violet, other aspects of *Decorative Landscape* also accord closely with Synchromist colour theory and use. Synchromist artists' belief in the rejection of local colours as an inadequate basis for the organization of pictorial form and coherence was resolutely defended by Wright and is visually present in *Decorative Landscape*. Synchromist colours also tended toward richness and, often, to high saturation, and those in *Decorative Landscape* are, indeed, rich and highly saturated compared with the colours in Harris' other decorative landscapes of 1914-18. Harris' close fusing of colour with form is also more complete in this painting than in any of his other winter landscapes, and may thus be associated with Wright's persistent avowals that colour creates form, and that colour, form and composition are therefore firmly inter-related and interdependent. Further, the intensity and unnaturalness of the colours, combined with the upward-thrusting motif of the spruce trees, suffuses the painting with a sense of spiritual yearning. This yearning, much more pronounced in *Decorative Landscape* than in Harris' other paintings of these years, is in sympathy with Wright's many references to how Synchromist colour strives for the evocation of subjective emotion through colour-defined forms. Harris' insistence upon this matter was, if not identical to,

at least in harmony with Wright's explanations, and was repeatedly articulated in his statements that Canadian landscape painting should convey the subjective qualities of "mood," "character" and "spirit."³⁷

The impact on *Decorative Landscape* of the theories explained by Wright thus seems evident. However, the reasons for Harris' attraction to Synchronism at this point in his career are less clear. Attempts to identify and address the nature of his involvement with the movement could begin with a letter written by his wife, Bess, to J. Russell Harper in 1962:

You will have a difficult time to pinpoint the influence of this or that writer or painter to particular canvases. I do not think Lawren works that way. A few months after he has read a book he might be unable to recall its contents — but he would be acutely aware of what he had gleaned from it.³⁸

When viewed in this context at least some of the reasons for Harris' interest in Wright's work can be situated within relatively tangential aspects of Synchronism. Tentative efforts can be made to elucidate them by, for example, identifying points of potential overlap between Wright's ideas and Harris' later obsession with Theosophy, the movement with which he became increasingly engaged between c.1918 and the beginning of the 1920s following his earlier exposure to spiritualist concerns.³⁹ It would be misleading to posit a simple relationship between his interest in the two phenomena; his involvement with Synchronism was a flirtation compared to the longevity and profundity with which he embraced Theosophy as a philosophy and as a basis for his artmaking. There are, however, suggestive parallels between Synchronism and Harris' developing spiritualist ideas and ideals. In particular, his exposition of Theosophical principles of universal rhythm was foreshadowed in Willard Wright's introductory essay in the catalogue for *The Forum Exhibition*. "The forces of all art are the forces of life, coordinated and organized," wrote Wright. "No plastic form can exist without ... the rhythm which underlies the great fluctuating and equalizing forces of material existence. Such rhythm is symmetry in movement. On it all form, both in art and life, is founded."⁴⁰ Similarly, the insistence of Wright and the principal Synchronist artists upon the primacy of subjectivity in art clearly struck a chord in Harris, and may be seen to have anticipated his later Theosophical championing of artists as humanity's prophets — creators who earned their place at the apex of the Theosophical triangle of spiritual evolution through their personal access to transcendental truths. Even the dominant colours in *Decorative Landscape* were of particular importance to Theosophists; yellow represented intelligence, blue represented religious feeling, and the occult significance of the yellow-blue polarity was explored by Rudolf Steiner, Kandinsky and others.⁴¹ While it may be premature to propose that the colours in *Decorative Landscape* are unprecedentedly early evidence of Harris' interest in Theosophy, the leading role they play in this painting does at least raise the possibility.

Bess Harris' letter to Harper is also a useful basis for considering other evidence that Harris' attraction to Wright's ideas was at least partly grounded in aspects of Synchronism outside its central concerns with colour and form. These are aspects that, while not unique to Synchronist theory, reinforced or validated his own views. Here it is instructive to consider the sections that Harris highlighted in his copy of *The Forum Exhibition* catalogue. For example, his highlighting of text often suggests that he was interested not only in Wright's explanations of colour, but equally in his argument that modern painting is on a continuum with the great art of the past, with which it shares "the inherent aesthetic qualities of order, rhythm, composition and form" but upon which it advances by incorporating new techniques.⁴² Harris himself would reiterate exactly these ideas in print several times in the following years, as for example in an essay published in 1925: "Though creative activity is ever the same in its gift of understanding, its results are not the same in any two ages or in any two nations, and thus the creative individual has creative freedom only within the limits of the possible vision, first of his people, then of his day."⁴³ In a related vein Harris' pencil notations in *The Forum Exhibition* catalogue indicate that he approved of Wright's declaration that modernism "is not a fad ... [or] a transient aspect of art."⁴⁴ Ideas such as these about aesthetic continuity, technical innovation and the legitimacy of contemporary art were of course not inherently or uniquely Synchronist, but they were of obvious importance and support to Harris as he worked towards a modern art for Canada. In the end, however, they were not sufficiently novel or specific to Synchronism to lead to a full or long-lasting endorsement of Synchronist practice.

Whatever the reasons for Harris' 1916-17 interest in Synchronist theory, they were clearly too diffuse to extend that interest much beyond the painting of *Decorative Landscape*. As the preceding paragraphs propose, one reason was probably that his interest in the movement was to some extent predicated upon ideas that it endorsed but that were not particular to it. A second factor relates more directly to the technical aspects of Synchronism, and can be traced to the question mark he wrote beside the claim, in Willard Wright's catalogue essay, that colour must be employed to give "the sensation of rhythmically balanced form in three dimensions."⁴⁵ This was of course a central aspect of Synchronist art, but one that was out of keeping with the broad, flat decorativeness that Harris had been pursuing in his 1914-18 series of winter landscapes. His use of relatively broad areas of two dominant colours is an essential component in achieving this effect in *Decorative Landscape*. He seems to have been interested in using colour not to explore Synchronist ideals, but to enhance the unnatural colour he had already used to imbue his other landscapes of the period with the same decorative qualities he had admired at the 1913 exhibition of Scandinavian art. This quality is pushed to its furthest extent in *Decorative Landscape* (as the painting's title sug-

gests), but has very little in common with Synchronism's approach to, and goals regarding, the use of colour.

A third possible explanation for the brevity of Harris' involvement with Synchronism is rooted in the issue of rules versus subjectivity, especially as he understood it in texts by Willard Wright, Stanton Macdonald-Wright and Morgan Russell. His reaction to Macdonald-Wright's "Explanatory Note" in *The Forum Exhibition* catalogue is singularly relevant. In his brief statement Macdonald-Wright reflected on how he had "determined, by years of color experimentation, the relative spatial relation of the entire color gamut."⁴⁶ Harris' response was laconic and to-the-point: "scientific divorced from life meaning." In *Decorative Landscape* he in fact transgressed Wright's prescriptive recommendations regarding the use of blue and violet. "Yellow," according to Wright, is "tangible" and "advances toward the spectator's eye," whereas violet "is limpid" and expresses "not solidity but a quality of space, something intangible and translucent." He warned that ignoring these considerations would result in paintings in which there would be "a continuous warring between linear composition and color values."⁴⁷ Yet Harris made extensive use of blue and violet in the foreground rocks in *Decorative Landscape*, thus violating Synchronist desiderata as explained by Wright. It is therefore unsurprising that, though his later adherence to Theosophy was adamant and profound, colours in his Theosophy-based paintings are not necessarily consistent with the codes of symbolism expounded in Annie Besant and C.W. Leadbeater's *Thought Forms*, an important Theosophical primer with which he was almost certainly familiar.⁴⁸ Instead, the hues in Harris' abstract paintings — though strongly influenced by Theosophical doctrine — are not restricted to a specific set of guidelines detailing colour symbolism.

Indeed, throughout his career Harris remained critical of any artmaking based on sets of rules rather than on "living attitude" and subjective content.⁴⁹ It is critically relevant that *Decorative Landscape's* colours, exaggerated though they are, help structure an image of concentrated emotion and diffuse spirituality. They accomplish this in large part through their emphasis on the presence or absence of light: the painting shows an exaggeratedly intense dawn or sunset blazing behind the foreground trees and casting them into unnaturally blue shadow.⁵⁰ The implied spiritual ramifications of this — exemplified by the subtle but unmistakable rays of light emanating in lines from the unseen sun — oppose what Harris inaccurately interpreted as the drive for excessive codification of regulations in Stanton Macdonald-Wright's and Willard Wright's catalogue texts. It is telling that Harris approvingly highlighted Morgan Russell's "Explanatory Note" in *The Forum Exhibition* catalogue. Russell — the Synchronist who, as Wright had explained in *International Studio* in 1915, had begun his colour experiments from the Impressionist equation of colour with light — makes an uncompromising assertion of the importance of subjectivity in art. "I infuse my own vitality into

my work," wrote Russell. "The difference between a picture produced by precise formulas and one which is the result of *sensibilité*, is the difference between a mechanical invention and a living organism."⁵¹

Finally, analysis of why Harris' interest in Synchromism did not endure beyond *Decorative Landscape* must take into account his concern to create an art of recognizable content encompassing nationalist dimensions. Intriguingly, his marginalia indicate that he seems to have been particularly interested in the "Explanatory Notes" of the artists whose reproductions in *The Forum Exhibition* catalogue showed figurative works, most notably Ben Benn, Thomas Hart Benton, Oscar Bluemner, Alfred Maurer and George Of. His desire to create a specifically Canadian art, using the northern landscape as its lodestone, encouraged him at this early date to be wary of abstraction beyond the level of stylization. "Pure" Synchromism, by contrast, logically implied complete abstraction. In *The Forum Exhibition* this was exemplified by the work of Macdonald-Wright and Russell, and was vociferously defended by Willard Wright. The "real importance" of the Synchromists, the latter repeatedly insisted, "lies in the fact that they have emancipated painting from the primitive demands of illustration, and have purged it of its dependence for effect on scenes, portraits and *genre* subjects."⁵² For Harris, adequate justification for abandoning figuration in favour of abstraction would not come until the late 1920s, when his Theosophical beliefs made the faithful transcription of optical reality increasingly irrelevant to him.

Whatever Harris' degree of, and grounds for, interest in Synchromism in 1916-17, he moved on from it fairly quickly. No mention of the movement has been found in his extant published and extensive unpublished writings. As for *Decorative Landscape*, it seems to have been exhibited only once during his lifetime: at the Ontario Society of Artists' *Forty-fifth Annual Exhibition* in March 1917.⁵³ Reviews were generally polite, if not particularly enthusiastic, though Hector Charlesworth — no friend of the members of the future Group of Seven — described its general effect as "merely that of a garish poster."⁵⁴ It was not included in any subsequent group show or in either of Harris' solo exhibitions that featured figurative work and for which he assisted in the selection of pictures (1948, 1963).⁵⁵ Nor is it illustrated in Bess Harris's 1969 book about his art, the images of which were selected with Lawren Harris' assistance.⁵⁶ Unusually for such an ambitious work, it remained in his studio until the mid-1960s, unknown to most of Harris' friends and critics.⁵⁷ It entered a public collection and public visibility only in 1992, twenty-two years after Harris' death.

Nor was the short-lived character of Harris' interest in Synchromism unusual. The same was true even for artists with a broader knowledge of, and a deeper sympathy for, the movement. By the date of *The Forum Exhibition* Morgan Russell's growing religious and philosophical concerns were leading him away from his previous adherence to abstract Synchromist compositions and toward a more clas-

sical approach to figure painting. (The composition of even his 1915 *Cosmic Synchrony* was based on a series of drawings showing a human figure, although these are completely obscured in the finished work.⁵⁸) Wright's editing of Russell's "Explanatory Note" in the exhibition catalogue — editing so severe that it caused a rift between the two men — minimized this impression.⁵⁹ Stanton Macdonald-Wright painted his final *Synchrony* in 1920. The movement exercised a significant influence on such artists as Thomas Hart Benton and Andrew Dasburg but, despite the milestone status of *The Forum Exhibition*, it was not a force in American art after 1921.⁶⁰ In Canada, in the short term, it became a factor in the singing colour of *Decorative Landscape*. On a more subterranean and ephemeral level Willard Wright's championing of an art of radical formal innovation, underlying rhythm, structural and emotional synthesis, and subjective profundity shadowed many of Harris' established and emerging convictions. Those convictions — though not their manifestation in Synchronist theory — shaped and informed his subsequent work, first as he staked out a new art for a new country and later as he moved into abstraction, transcending the surface of the world to plumb its underlying order.

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Notes

I am grateful to Charles Hill (Curator of Canadian Art, National Gallery of Canada) for drawing my attention to the possibility of Lawren Harris having interest in Synchronism and for his invaluable assistance in the research for this article.

1 "Ontario Artists Do Vigorous Work," *Mail and Empire*, 10 Mar. 1917.

2 Acquired from the artist in the 1960s by Blair Laing, it was subsequently purchased by a private collector. Prior to being bought by the NGC it appears to have been exhibited only in the 1917 OSA exhibition, and to have been reproduced on only one occasion. For a colour reproduction of *Decorative Landscape*, see Roger BOULET, *The Canadian Earth: Landscape Paintings by the Group of Seven* (Toronto: Cerebrus/Prentice Hall, 1982), 89.

3 Hector CHARLESWORTH, "Good Pictures at O.S.A. Exhibition," *Saturday Night*, 24 Mar. 1917; Estelle M. KERR, "Paintings at O.S.A.," *Canadian Courier* 21, no. 7 (24 Mar. 1917); and Eric BROWN, "Two Spring Exhibitions of Canadian Art," *Christian Science Monitor*, 6 July 1917.

4 On Harris and the 1906 exhibition see Peter LARISEY, *Light for a Cold Land: Lawren Harris' Work and Life — An Interpretation* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1993), 14-15.

5 Jeremy ADAMSON, *Lawren S. Harris: Urban Scenes and Wilderness Landscapes, 1906-1930* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1978), 50.

6 J.E.H. MACDONALD, "Scandinavian Art." Hand-written text (Public Archives of Ontario; typescript version in E.P. Taylor Reference Library, Art Gallery of Ontario) for a lecture

delivered 7 April 1931. Published in full in J.E.H. MACDONALD, "Scandinavian Art," *Northward Journal* 18/19 (1980): 9-35 (quoted material on p.18).

7 Agnes BRANTING, "Modern Tapestry Work in Sweden," *The Studio* 53, no. 240 (March 1913): 102-11.

8 Diana [Emma Griesbach], "In the Gallery and at the Station," *The Weekly Sun*, 26 Mar. 1919; quoted in ADAMSON, *Lauren Harris*, 76.

9 Two noteworthy exceptions are: Roald NASGAARD, *The Mystic North: Symbolist Landscape Painting in Northern Europe and North America, 1880-1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, in association with the Art Gallery of Ontario, 1984), and Peter MORRIN, Judith ZILCZER and William C. AGEE, *The Advent of Modernism: Post-Impressionism and North American Art, 1900-1918* (Atlanta: High Museum of Art, 1986).

10 See, for example, Dennis REID, *Atma Buddhi Manas: The Later Work of Lauren S. Harris* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1985), 24.

11 J.E.H. MACDONALD to Arthur Lismer, 21 Dec. 1916 (Library, McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg). The selection of modern French art shown at the 1916 *Canadian National Exhibition* was drawn from the *Panama Pacific International Exposition* (San Francisco, 1915) and offered Torontonians their first opportunity to see a broad survey of contemporary French painting, including work by Impressionists and Post-Impressionists. A small number of the more conservative works were acquired by the Art Gallery of Toronto from the C.N.E., and it would have been these — by artists such as Alfred Pierre Agache, Jules Cyrille Cavé and Lucien Simon — that were shown at the Arts and Letters Club. See Sybille PANTAZZI, "Foreign Art at the Canadian National Exhibition, 1905-1938," (National Gallery of Canada) *Bulletin* 22 (1973), especially p.27-28 and illustrations 12, 13 and 14.

12 Willard Huntington WRIGHT's articles included: "Impressionism to Synchromism," *The Forum* (December 1914); "Cézanne," *The Forum* (July 1915); "Modern Painting," *Reedy's Mirror* (20 Aug. 1915); "Synchromism," *International Studio* (October 1915); "The Truth About Painting," *The Forum* (October 1915); "Modern American Painters — and Winslow Homer," *The Forum* (December 1915); "Art, Promise, and Failure," *The Forum* (January 1916); "The Aesthetic Struggle in America," *The Forum* (February 1916); "Paul Cézanne," *International Studio* (February 1916); "An Abundance of Modern Art," *The Forum* (March 1916); and "John Marin's Water-Colours," *International Studio* (March 1916). In addition to these articles and his book he helped organize the first American exhibition of Synchromism and was the author of the "Foreword" in the accompanying catalogue; see *Exhibition of Synchromist Paintings by Morgan Russell and S. Macdonald-Wright* (New York: Carroll Galleries, 1914).

13 J.E.H. MACDONALD, "A Landmark of Art," *The Rebel* 2, no. 2 (November 1917): 45.

14 Willard Huntington WRIGHT, "Foreword," *Exhibition of Synchromist Paintings by Morgan Russell and S. Macdonald-Wright* (New York: Carroll Galleries, 1914); Stanton MACDONALD-WRIGHT and Morgan RUSSELL, "General Introduction," *Les Synchromistes S. Macdonald-Wright et Morgan Russell* (Paris: Bernheim-Jeune & Cie., 1913).

15 Morgan RUSSELL, "Explanatory Note," *The Forum Exhibition of Modern American Painters* (New York: Anderson Galleries, 1916), n.p. *Cosmic Synchromy* was one of two paintings given by Russell to Wright as gifts after *The Forum Exhibition*; see Anne HARRELL, *The Forum Exhibition: Selections and Additions* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, at Philip Morris, 1983), n.p. (exhibition checklist).

16 WRIGHT, "Modern Painting," 8-9.

17 WRIGHT, *Modern Painting: Its Tendency and Meaning* (New York: John Lane, 1915), 281. For criticism of Wright's characterization of Synchromism as a new vision of painting see Marilyn S. KUSHNER, *Morgan Russell* (New York: Hudson Hills Press in association with The Montclair Museum, 1990), 18.

- 18 WRIGHT, *Modern Painting: Its Tendency and Meaning*, 283.
- 19 WRIGHT, "Modern Painting," 9.
- 20 The copy owned by the National Gallery of Canada Library bears the Tyrrell store stamp and was accessioned by the Library in February 1921, although it was acquired earlier than that; see Library Accession Book, NGC Fonds, NGC Archives, entry no. 757.
- 21 The National Gallery of Canada Library acquired the 1915 and 1916 issues at an unknown date but certainly before the end of 1919; see Library Accession Book, entries no. 256 and no. 257.
- 22 Harold MORTIMER-LAMB, "Canadian Artists and the War," *International Studio* 56, no. 224 (October 1915): 259-64. *Corner Store* is enthusiastically described on p.264, and is reproduced on p.261.
- 23 WRIGHT, "Synchronism," *International Studio*, xcvi-c.
- 24 William C. AGEE, "Willard Huntington Wright and the Synchronists: Notes on the Forum Exhibition," *Archives of American Art Journal* 24, no. 2 (1984): 10. Three others — Christian Brinton, Robert Henri and W.H. de B. Nelson — were added to the list of organizers, but their involvement seems to have been limited to the writing of brief introductory texts; see Thomas Hart BENTON, *An Artist in America* (New York: Robert M. McBride & Company, 1937), 37. Harris' interest in the catalogue might have been stimulated by the fact that writer and editor Christian Brinton was also the author of the catalogue for the *Exhibition of Contemporary Scandinavian Art* (New York: American Scandinavian Society, 1912).
- 25 ADAMSON, *Lawren Harris*, 72.
- 26 Although he was in the Army, Harris also attended lunches at the Arts and Letters Club, and had opportunities to paint during evenings and while he was on leave; see *ibid.*, 72, 185 note no. 32.
- 27 The historical importance of *The Forum Exhibition* has made it the subject of three subsequent exhibitions in New York City: *The Forum Exhibition, 1916* (Zabriskie Gallery, 1963); *The Forum Exhibition of Modern American Painters* (A.C.A. Galleries, 1966); and *The Forum Exhibition: Selections and Additions* (Whitney Museum of American Art, at Philip Morris, 1983).
- 28 Ben Benn, Thomas Hart Benton, Oscar Bluemner, Andrew Dasburg, Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, Stanton Macdonald-Wright, John Marin, Alfred Maurer, Henry McFee, George Of, Man Ray, Morgan Russell, Charles Sheeler, A. Walkowitz, William Zorach and Marguerite Zorach.
- 29 HARRELL, *The Forum Exhibition*, 6.
- 30 "In Explanation," *The Forum Exhibition of Modern American Painters*, 5.
- 31 Stanton MACDONALD-WRIGHT to Morgan Russell, early 1916. Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Art, Morgan Russell Papers, microfilm roll 1266, frames 1261-3; quoted in AGEE, "Willard Huntington Wright and the Synchronists," 11. Gail LEVIN verifies the accuracy of Macdonald-Wright's prediction, in *Synchronism and American Color Abstraction, 1910-1925* (New York: George Braziller, in association with The Whitney Museum of American Art, 1978), 30.
- 32 Stanton MACDONALD-WRIGHT to Morgan Russell, early 1916. Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Art, Morgan Russell Papers, microfilm roll 1266, frames 1261-3; quoted in AGEE, "Willard Huntington Wright and the Synchronists," 11.
- 33 Willard Huntington WRIGHT, "What is Modern Painting?," *The Forum Exhibition of Modern American Painters*, 22.
- 34 For detailed studies of the work of these artists see: David W. SCOTT, *The Art of Stanton Macdonald-Wright* (Washington: Smithsonian Press, for the National Collection of Fine Arts, 1967), and KUSHNER, *Morgan Russell*.

- 35 WRIGHT, "Synchronism," *International Studio*, xcvi. Yellow and violet are also the colours discussed by Wright in *Modern Painting: Its Tendency and Development*, 295-96.
- 36 Stanton MACDONALD-WRIGHT and Morgan RUSSELL drew attention to the significance of the Impressionists' association of yellow with strong light, and of blue and violet with shadows, in "In Explanation of Synchronism," *Ausstellung Der Synchronisten Morgan Russell, S. Macdonald-Wright* (Munich: Der Neue Kunstsalon, 1913) and *Les Synchronistes S. Macdonald-Wright et Morgan Russell*.
- 37 Lawren HARRIS, "The Group of Seven in Canadian History," *The Canadian Historical Association: Report of the Annual Meeting Held at Victoria and Vancouver, June 16-19, 1948* (Toronto: CHA, 1948), 31; and HARRIS, *The Story of the Group of Seven* (Toronto: Rous and Mann, 1964), 14-15. Though published in 1948 and 1964, these statements summarize Harris' reactions to the 1913 exhibition of Scandinavian art.
- 38 Bess HARRIS to J. Russell Harper, 14 July 1962 (NGC Archives). In this regard see especially Michael BAXANDALL's important discussion of the complicated logistics of artistic "influence," in *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1985), 58-62.
- 39 On possible sources of exposure to spiritual ideas from as early as 1908 see Brian LAUDER, "Two Radicals: Richard Maurice Bucke and Lawren Harris," *Dalhousie Review* 56, no. 2 (Summer 1976): 307-18. The first issue of *The Canadian Theosophist* was published in Toronto in 1921. According to A.Y. Jackson, Harris was discussing Theosophy between 1919 and 1921; see JACKSON, *A Painter's Country: The Autobiography of A.Y. Jackson* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Company Limited, 1958), 56. Peter LARISEY (*Light for a Cold Land*, 7, 41-2) argues that Harris' interest in spiritual concerns was catalyzed by his 1918 nervous breakdown, and records that in 1919 he gave a copy of the *Upanishads* to Fred and Bess Housser.
- 40 WRIGHT, "What is Modern Painting?," *The Forum Exhibition of Modern American Painters*, 14.
- 41 ADAMSON, *Lawren S. Harris*, 190. On Harris' overall use of colour in his Theosophical paintings see REID, *Atma Buddhi Manas: passim*.
- 42 Willard Huntington WRIGHT, "Foreword," *The Forum Exhibition of Modern American Painters*, 40.
- 43 Lawren HARRIS, "Artist and Audience," *The Canadian Bookman* 8, no. 12 (December 1925): 197. See also: HARRIS, "Revelation of Art in Canada," *The Canadian Theosophist* 7, no. 5 (15 July 1926): 87; and "Theosophy and Art," *The Canadian Theosophist* 14, no. 5 (15 July 1933): 130.
- 44 WRIGHT, "Foreword," *The Forum Exhibition of Modern American Painters*, 40.
- 45 WRIGHT, "What is Modern Painting?," in *ibid.*, 24.
- 46 Morgan RUSSELL, "Explanatory Note," in *ibid.*, n.p.
- 47 WRIGHT, "What is Modern Painting?," in *ibid.*, 20, 24. See also WRIGHT, "Synchronism," *International Studio*, xcix. Wright used "dense" as a synonym for "tangible" in his "Modern Painting," 9.
- 48 *Thought Forms*, originally published in 1921, was reissued in 1925. It was reviewed in *The Canadian Theosophist* on 15 June 1926, and Harris must therefore have known about it, but his use of some of the colours in his contemporaneous work more accurately recalls the colour symbolism set forth in Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, 1912. See ADAMSON, *Lawren S. Harris*, 190, 193, and REID, *Atma Buddhi Manas*, 16-17.
- 49 On art being based on "a living attitude and not a formula" see, for example, Lawren HARRIS, "Theosophy and Art," *The Canadian Theosophist* 14, no. 6 (15 Aug. 1933): 161-2.
- 50 The symbolism of light in Harris' art — though not in *Decorative Landscape* — is discussed

in Dennis REID, "Lawren Harris," *artscanada* 25, no. 5 (December 1968): 9-16.

51 RUSSELL, "Explanatory Note," *The Forum Exhibition of Modern American Painters*, n.p.

52 WRIGHT, "Modern Painting," 9.

53 It was also perhaps shown at Hart House five years later, though the evidence for this is scant and inconclusive. A November 1922 review commenting on an unnamed painting shown at Hart House states that "Lawren Harris has one of his antagonizing studies on the general subject of landscape, this time running into bluey-greens and a sickly yellow. One likes it, but feels he shouldn't, for it is most uncompromisingly cold and feelingless" ("Hart House Pictures," *The Varsity* 42, no. 24 [24 Nov. 1922]: 2).

54 CHARLESWORTH, "Good Pictures at O.S.A. Exhibition."

55 *Lauren Harris: Paintings, 1910-1948* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Toronto, 1948); *Lauren Harris: Retrospective Exhibition, 1963* (Ottawa: NGC, 1963).

56 Bess HARRIS and C.P. COLGROVE, eds., *Lauren Harris* (Toronto: MacMillan of Canada, 1969).

57 The painting is included on an inventory of Harris paintings in Toronto, prepared by Doris Huestis Mills, "The Paintings of Lawren Harris compiled by Mrs. Gordon Mills, July-Dec 1936" (typescript; NGC Archives), and in Ian McNairn's 1963 inventory of works still owned by Harris (NGC Archives: Exhibition files for 1963 *Retrospective Exhibition of Painting by the Group of Seven, 1919-1933*). It is not mentioned at all in Peter Larisey's monograph on the artist, and, in the other major study examining his figurative work, Jeremy ADAMSON (*Lauren Harris*, 73), its title is incorrectly proposed as an alternate name for *Kempfenfelt Bay* (c.1917).

58 KUSHNER, *Morgan Russell*, 94-95. The figurative basis in Russell's art is well-discussed in Gail LEVIN, "The Tradition of the Heroic Figure in Synchromist Abstractions," *Arts Magazine* 51 (June 1977): 138-42.

59 AGEE, "Willard Huntington Wright and the Synchromists," 10-15.

60 LEVIN, *Synchromism and American Color Abstraction, 1910-1925*, 44.

Résumé

LE «SYNCHROMISME» AU CANADA

Lawren Harris, *Decorative Landscape* et

Willard Huntington Wright, 1916-1917

En 1992, le Musée des beaux-arts du Canada achetait *Decorative Landscape* (1917), une grande (122.5 x 131.7 cm) et visuellement impressionnante huile sur toile de Lawren Harris. Le tableau avait été présenté à l'exposition de mars 1917 de l'Ontario Society of Artists, puis ne fut plus exposé par la suite. Pendant les cinq décennies qui suivirent, la toile fut reléguée dans le studio de Harris et ne fut jamais présentée dans une exposition personnelle ou collective. Lorsque le Musée en fit l'ac-

quisition, elle était pratiquement inconnue des historiens de l'art canadien.

Decorative Landscape est une composition hardie empreinte d'une intense spiritualité. Cette dernière s'exprime vigoureusement par les silhouettes des arbres et par le soleil, bas sur l'horizon et irradiant des rayons de lumière subtils, mais cependant très perceptibles. Toutefois son principal intérêt, dans le contexte de l'œuvre de Harris, réside dans son coloris intense et nettement artificiel. Les épinettes sont d'un bleu profond avec des rehauts verts, les rochers au premier plan sont d'épaisses couches de bleu et de violet et le ciel est d'un jaune qui va du jaune d'œuf profond jusqu'à un jaune plus léger, mais très intense, avec de légères taches turquoise. Bien que plusieurs des paysages que Harris a peints à cette époque (p. ex., *Snow II*, 1915) aient été des essais de manipulation décorative de la couleur, l'intensité et l'artificialité de la couleur dans *Decorative Landscape* imprègnent l'image d'une profondeur et d'une intensité de subjectivité émotive qu'on ne retrouve pas dans ses autres œuvres de la même époque.

Le présent essai veut démontrer que *Decorative Landscape* doit beaucoup à l'intérêt, jusqu'à présent non documenté, de Harris pour le synchronisme, mouvement américain contemporain dont Stanton Macdonald-Wright et Morgan Russell furent les pionniers et que le frère de Stanton Macdonald-Wright, Willard Huntington Wright (1888-1939), fit connaître au public dans une série de textes enthousiastes. La peinture synchroniste utilisait la couleur pour définir la masse, le volume et ce que Macdonald-Wright, Russell et Willard Wright appelaient «la composition rythmique pure». Dans des tableaux presque entièrement abstraits, les artistes tentaient «de sonder les rapports mystérieux entre la couleur et la forme, entre les couleurs et les caractères de la forme: rythme organique, spatialité, densité, transparence, luminosité, etc.». Harris était bien placé pour connaître l'art et la théorie synchronistes. Il avait des relations aux États-Unis et s'y rendait souvent, y compris à New York où Macdonald-Wright et Russell avaient exposé des œuvres synchronistes en 1914. On sait aussi qu'il s'intéressait aux idées publiées par Willard Wright, comme en fait foi une lettre de 1916 de J.E.H. MacDonald à Arthur Lismer (Collection McMichael d'art canadien). Entre autres sources venant de Wright, son livre de 1915, *Modern Painting: Its Tendency and Meaning*, qui comportait un chapitre important sur le synchronisme, était disponible à Toronto peu après sa publication. L'opinion de Wright, que le synchronisme constituait l'étape ultime dans une histoire évolutive de l'art, était aussi exposée dans des articles publiés entre décembre 1914 et mars 1916 dans divers journaux, dont *International Studio*, publié à New York et disponible au Canada jusqu'à la fin des années vingt. Le numéro d'octobre 1915, dans lequel Wright a publié un article sur le synchronisme, a dû être d'un intérêt particulier pour Harris, car on y retrouvait aussi une étude par Harold Mortimer-Lamb sur des expositions récentes de peintres canadiens, illustrée par une reproduction pleine page du tableau de Harris *Corner Store* (1912, Art Gallery of Ontario).

Le plus révélateur toutefois, c'est que nous savons que Harris possédait un

exemplaire du catalogue de l'exposition *The Forum Exhibition of Modern American Painters*, tenue aux prestigieuses Anderson Galleries de New York en mars 1916, un an avant qu'il a peigne *Decorative Landscape*. Wright avait dirigé la publication du catalogue dont il avait aussi écrit ou révisé plusieurs des textes. L'exposition, considérée aujourd'hui comme un événement marquant dans l'histoire de l'art américain, avait été conçue comme une vitrine du mouvement synchroniste et, bien qu'elle y ait subséquemment ajouté les œuvres d'autres artistes contemporains, tels Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, John Marin et Man Ray, elle gardait un parti pris en faveur du synchronisme. La copie annotée de Harris, achetée à Toronto, est maintenant conservée aux archives du Musée des beaux-arts du Canada.

Ainsi, bien que nous ne sachions pas dans quelle mesure Harris connaissait la théorie synchroniste, en 1917, il ne fait aucun doute qu'il en avait une certaine idée, grâce aux écrits de Willard Wright, et cela est évident dans *Decorative Landscape*. Tout comme l'éclat général du tableau rappelle la méthode synchroniste, les couleurs dominantes — le bleu, le violet et le jaune — sont celles que Wright, Macdonald-Wright et Russell nommaient constamment dans leurs nombreux écrits sur la théorie et le développement du synchronisme. De plus, bien que fortement figuratif, *Decorative Landscape* se caractérise par le rejet synchroniste de la couleur «réelle» du sujet. D'autre part, la fusion de la couleur et de la forme est plus poussée dans ce tableau de Harris que dans tous ses paysages d'hiver de la même époque. On peut donc l'associer aux affirmations de Wright que la couleur crée la forme, et que la couleur, la forme et la composition sont intimement interreliées et interdépendantes. Même le sentiment diffus de quête spirituelle que dégage le tableau — sentiment qui va bien au-delà de ce qu'on trouve dans les autres tableaux de Harris de la même époque — s'accorde avec l'idée de Wright que la couleur synchroniste tend à évoquer l'émotion subjective au moyen de formes définies par la couleur.

Toutefois l'intérêt évident que Harris portait au synchronisme, au moment où il peignait *Decorative Landscape*, peut fort bien avoir été fondé en grande partie sur des aspects du mouvement relativement secondaires par rapport à l'importance primordiale de la couleur. Ainsi, alors que Harris adoptait de plus en plus des principes spiritualistes, l'article d'introduction de Willard Wright dans le catalogue de *The Forum Exhibition* annonçait les idéaux spiritualistes — tels le concept de rythme universel — qui allaient plus tard dominer son art et sa vie. De même, l'insistance de Wright et des principaux artistes synchronistes sur l'importance de la subjectivité dans l'art touchait clairement une corde sensible chez Harris. On peut déjà y voir comment il allait éventuellement devenir, en tant que théosophe, le champion des artistes comme chefs de file de l'évolution spirituelle de l'humanité. Par coïncidence, même les couleurs de *Decorative Landscape* avaient une importance particulière pour les théosophes: le jaune représentait l'intelligence, le bleu le sentiment religieux, et le sens occulte de la polarité jaune-bleu — telle qu'on peut la voir dans *Decorative Landscape* — a été explorée par Rudolf Steiner, Kandinsky et

autres. Dans un autre ordre d'idées, les annotations de Harris dans son exemplaire du catalogue *The Forum Exhibition* suggèrent qu'il trouvait intéressant l'argument de Wright que la peinture moderne est dans la droite ligne du grand art du passé, dont elle partage les qualités esthétiques inhérentes d'ordre, de rythme, de composition et de forme, mais qu'elle dépasse en lui incorporant des techniques nouvelles. Ces annotations indiquent aussi qu'il approuvait les déclarations de Wright que le modernisme n'est pas l'objet d'un engouement passager, mais plutôt une extension naturelle d'idées développées dans le passé.

En dernière analyse toutefois, ces éléments n'étaient pas suffisamment nouveaux ou particuliers au synchronisme pour qu'on puisse affirmer que Harris souscrivait encore à la méthode synchroniste après 1916-1917. Le synchronisme lui permettait d'aller plus loin dans l'expérimentation avec la couleur qu'il avait déjà entreprise dans ses paysages d'hiver, mais il n'était pas prêt, à ce moment-là, à suivre le mouvement dans son insistance sur l'abstraction. Ses annotations suggèrent aussi qu'il se méfiait de ce qu'il semble avoir interprété à tort comme l'importance exagérée accordée par le synchronisme aux «règles», aux dépens de la véritable subjectivité. En réalité, l'usage qu'il fait du bleu et du jaune, dans *Decorative Landscape*, viole certaines directives du synchronisme quant au rôle que doivent jouer ces couleurs dans la composition. L'hostilité à l'égard d'un art fabriqué selon un ensemble de principes plutôt que d'après une «attitude vivante» et un contenu subjectif allait devenir un aspect dominant de la carrière de Harris et pourrait avoir, dès cette époque, contribué à lui faire perdre tout intérêt pour le synchronisme. Ainsi, bien que *Decorative Landscape* ait été fortement influencé par ce mouvement, il n'a pas eu de suite dans l'œuvre de Harris.

Il est intéressant de noter que si l'intérêt de Harris pour le synchronisme aura été de courte durée, ce fut aussi le cas d'autres artistes qui s'intéressaient de plus près au mouvement: de fait, déjà à l'époque de *The Forum Exhibition*, l'intérêt croissant de Morgan Russell pour les questions religieuses et philosophiques avait commencé à l'éloigner de son adhésion antérieure aux compositions synchronistes abstraites et à le conduire à une approche plus classique de la peinture figurative. Pour sa part, Stanton Macdonald-Wright a peint sa dernière «synchronie» en 1920. Le mouvement a fortement marqué certains artistes comme Thomas Hart Benton et Andrew Dasburg, mais, en dépit de l'importance de *The Forum Exhibition*, il a cessé d'influencer l'art américain après 1921. Ses manifestations au Canada ont été encore plus éphémères, ce qui fait de *Decorative Landscape* une pièce clé dans la documentation d'un aspect jusqu'à maintenant inexploré des contacts entre artistes américains et canadiens.

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