

The Transmission of Ideas: Sources of Influence for Lawren Harris

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Visual Arts Collection

Lawren Harris is best known for his paintings depicting the Canadian landscape, which are brilliantly-coloured, striking images that made him, and the other members of the Group of Seven, successful artists in the 1920s and early 1930s. Lesser known is Harris' departure from Canada in the 1930s and his adoption of abstract painting, which was informed by and in conversation with Harris' musings about spirituality. This poster maps ideas and their sources that influenced Lawren Harris.

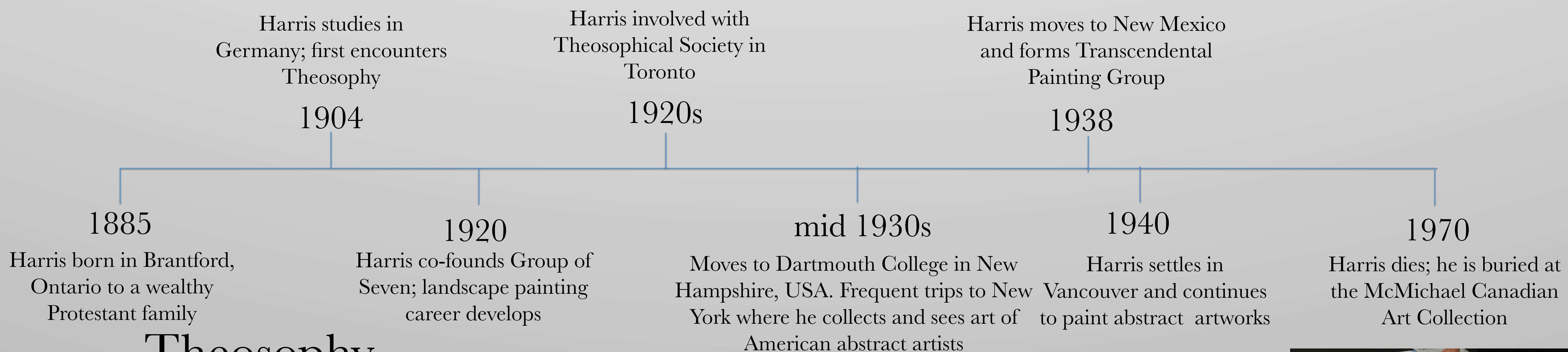
This research is part of the exhibition *Higher States: Lawren Harris and His American Contemporaries*, organized by the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, and curated by Gwendolyn Owens and Roald Nasgaard. I gathered documentary materials, wrote artist biographies, and assisted with exhibition design under the supervision of Gwendolyn Owens, Director of McGill's Visual Arts Collection. The exhibition will open at the McMichael in February 2017.



Lawren S. Harris, *Icebergs, Davis Strait*, oil on canvas, 123.3 x 153.9 cm, McMichael Canadian Art Collection



Lawren S. Harris, *Untitled (LSH 89A)*, oil on canvas, 90.2 x 73.7 cm, Private Collection



Theosophy

Harris became interested in Theosophy, a belief system and philosophy that merged Eastern and Western spirituality. Influenced by the writings of Helena Blavatsky, who founded the movement, and then the Theosophical Society in Toronto, Harris turned his focus from landscapes to his inner spirituality.



Photo by Daisy Charles



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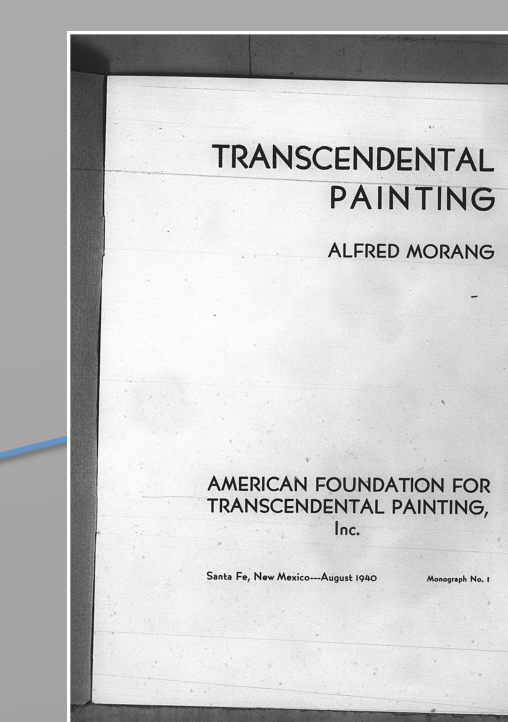
Wassily Kandinsky's *On the Spiritual In Art*

Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky's art and thought was informed by Theosophy, and Kandinsky, like Harris, read texts by Helena Blavatsky, and Annie Besant and Charles Leadbeater. Harris became interested in Kandinsky's art and his book, *On the Spiritual in Art*. This influence was reflected in Harris's abstract work, as he strived to represent an expression of the self rather than a strict representation of the outside world.

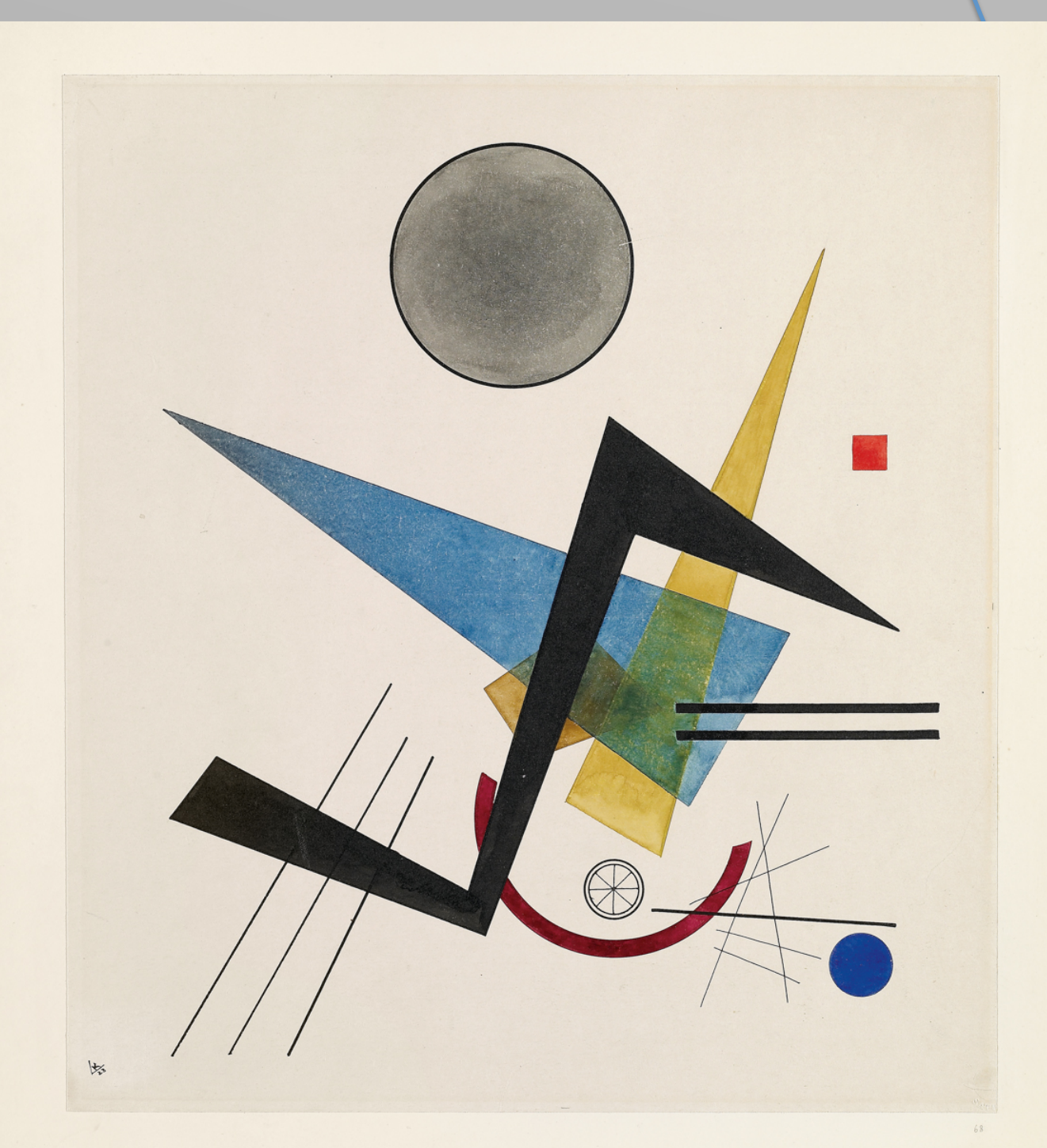


The Transcendental Painting Group

Harris met like-minded artists in Santa Fe, New Mexico in 1938. Together, they established the Transcendental Painting Group. It included Harris and a number of American artists including Emil Bisttram, Agnes Pelton, and Raymond Jonson. Their treatise, written by artist Alfred Morang, stated that the guiding concept of the group was "to carry painting beyond the appearance of the physical world through new concepts of space, light, and design, upon planes that are termed idealistic and spiritual."



Raymond Jonson, *Cosmic Theme No. 4*, 1937, oil on canvas, 103 cm x 106 cm, Collection of the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, The University of British Columbia.



Wassily Kandinsky, *Untitled*, watercolor and Indian ink on paper, 24 x 26.5 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario

