



Lawren Harris, *Figure with Rays of Light (Arctic Group III)*, oil on canvas

VISUAL ART

The Secret

The Group of Seven's infatuation with the occult mysticism of Madame Blavatsky

BY BRETT GRAINGER

In 1927, Emily Carr was creatively blocked, financially insolvent, spiritually arid, and on the verge of becoming the greatest discovery in the history of Canadian art. The fifty-five-year-old spinster had largely given up art and was raising chickens in her backyard in Victoria when Eric Brown, the director of the National Gallery of Canada, knocked at her door and asked if he could look around. Painfully shy, she reluctantly hauled out a few of her “old Indian pictures,” experimental works that set faithful renderings of the totem poles and war canoes of the Haida Gwaii against dynamic, impressionistic landscapes. Brown was besotted. On the spot, he offered to feature her work in an upcoming exhibit in Ottawa focusing on modern Canadian landscape painters, in-

cluding the Group of Seven. Carr, who'd never heard of the National Gallery or the loose collective of artists who had won international acclaim at the British Empire Exhibition three years earlier, initially declined the invitation. Brown recommended that she read *A Canadian Art Movement: The Story of the Group of Seven*, by Fred Housser, a Toronto journalist and good friend of the group. After he left, having secured her participation, Carr dashed to the bookstore.

Published the previous year, *A Canadian Art Movement* was a manifesto that cast the Group of Seven as scions of a confident, independent culture, sprouting like a sapling from the Canadian Shield. It was chest-thumping patriotism infused with wildcat spirituality. When Housser wrote about the “North,” he

wasn't talking about a point on a compass; he meant it as a categorical absolute, like Truth, Justice, and Beauty. Quoting freely from Walt Whitman, the nineteenth-century American poet and Transcendentalist whose *Leaves of Grass* had become scripture for *fin-de-siècle* seekers, Housser called on artists to lead the spiritual evolution of man, that creature whom fellow Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson once called a “god in ruins.” Repairing to the woods and slapping paint to canvas, Housser proclaimed, was a form of nature worship, a quest to divine its so-called immutable essences and connect with “the psychic energy seething within the landscape.”

Carr thrilled to the tome's Whitmanite mysticism. Indeed, few observers in the 1920s would have been at all troubled by the irony of founding a “Canadian art movement” on the second-hand spirituality of New England Transcendentalism. For Housser's partisans, the critical front lay between Europe and America. It was the suffocating paternalism of Old England that had to be overcome.

Yet, for all its influence, Transcendentalism was but a gateway drug that primed its followers for more exotic trips. Though Housser made no mention of it in his book, the search for the immutable essence of the North led many key members of the group—notably Lawren Harris, Arthur Lismer, and Franklin Carmichael, not to mention Housser himself—to become students of Theosophy. Concerned with the recovery of secret wisdom and “underground mysteries,” the Theosophical Society was established in 1875 by a mysterious Russian prophetess named Madame Blavatsky, who claimed to receive mental transmissions from dead Tibetan mahatmas. Her long, rambling books—published under such titles as *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine*—introduced reincarnation and karma to Western audiences and gave a major boost to the New Age movement.

For Harris in particular, this fascination with the occult was no idle pastime. Tall and thin, with a towering cumulus of hair, the group's financier and de facto leader believed he was the reincarnation of William Q. Judge, an important Theosophist and translator

of the Bhagavad-Gita, from which Harris read daily. Housser, for his part, was convinced that the Rockies were a northern Atlantis whose peaks hid troves of lost wisdom; he pored over the creation myths of Canada's First Nations in search of secret teachings, believing they held the key to the country's spiritual destiny. Even the group's name was a nod to Blavatskian numerology. At a time when its active membership hovered around five, the group settled on a number sacred to Theosophists. As Housser wrote in *The Canadian Theosophist*, “The true artist is an occultist.”

Carr was still recovering from the shock of Eric Brown's visit when she stopped in Toronto on her way to Ottawa to meet the artists with whom she would be sharing an exhibit. On a tour of their studios, she thought she'd died and gone to heaven. “Oh, God, what have I seen?” she confided to her journal. “Something has spoken to the very soul of me, wonderful, mighty, not of this world.” She described “a world stripped of earthiness, shorn of fretting details, purged, purified; a naked soul, pure and unashamed... I think perhaps I shall find God here, the God I've longed and hunted for and failed to find... Jackson, Johnson, Varley, Lismer, Harris—up-up-up-up!”

Like most in the group, Carr had been raised with the monkish disciplines and heartfelt piety of Calvinism. For the hard-bitten evangelical pioneers of Upper Canada and New England, nature offered no sweet foretaste of heaven but only fearful intimations of hell: the dark, forested wastes surrounding each precarious outpost were the devil's quarter, a wilderness of heathenism, barbarism, and death. Jonathan Edwards, America's greatest theologian, carried Calvin halfway to the Romantics. Musing that Providence intended to launch the millennial kingdom in the New World, he hymned the beauties of nature as joyful emanations of the all-pervading love of God. But it wasn't until the 1830s that Emerson could openly preach what to Edwards had been rank heresy: that Nature was God and God was Nature.

Though Transcendentalism was then a literary movement, painters soon added it to their box of colours. Expanding Hor-

izons, the recent exhibit hosted by the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, considers how, between 1860 and 1918, mysticism helped landscape painters pull the plow of nation building in Canada and the United States. The Hudson River School, America's most important early group of landscape painters, had begun to reveal the land as sacred geography: terrifying, mist-shrouded waterfalls; fearsome mountain ranges; and tangled cathedral groves. And while Canadian artists lacked the millennial airs of their neighbours, they, too, sought communion with God in Creation. In works by artists like Homer Ransford Watson and Lucius O'Brien, the sublime glowed and pulsed behind every verdant wood and mossy stone, Nature was scaled to fit the modest frame of life under the British North America Act.

The optimism and vitality of the new, scenery-chewing spirituality masked a deepening sense of disorder in Victorian Christianity. As Protestant denominations were harried by skirmishes with Darwinists, rattled by the colonial encounter with Eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, and outflanked by alternative theories of historical progress such as Marxism, spiritual start-ups gained adherents by promising direct experience of the divine and a synthesis of science, religion, and art—a theory of everything. When Whitman's exuberant yawp finally reached north of the border, the Protestant establishment made a lame attempt to muffle the echo. Before J.E.H. MacDonald, a founding member of the Group of Seven, was allowed to borrow *Leaves of Grass* from a Toronto library, he first had to fill out an application and go through an interview with the head librarian, who determined the artist was mature enough to resist its corrupting influences.

One can imagine the horrors *The Secret Doctrine* of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky might have awakened for MacDonald's inquisitor. In the Victorian court of manners, few figures were as delightfully transgressive as the Russian Madame. She favoured a red flannel dressing gown, regardless of the occasion, and embowered her fingers with gaudy rings. She smoked incessantly, carrying

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her tobacco around her neck in a furry pouch made from an animal's head. One journalist described her as a "volcano in petticoats."

Relying on Blavatsky's fawning biographers for a chronology of her life is like trying to pick up medieval history from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. This much can be said: she was born in the Ukraine in 1831, exposed to a variety of occult teachings as a youth, and fled for Constantinople as a teenager in 1849 after being married off to an older man. For the next twenty-four years, she wandered around Europe and the Middle East, possibly making it as far as Egypt and supporting herself as a medium, before turning up in New York in 1873. Two years later, she co-founded the Theosophical Society with Henry Steel Olcott, an American lawyer she met while investigating paranormal activities in Vermont. In 1878, she left with Olcott for India and converted to Buddhism. After a scandal involving some Society friends, who accused her of fraud, Blavatsky removed to London, where she wrote her magnum opus, *The Secret Doctrine*, before dying in 1891.

For a secret society, the Theosophical Society enjoyed healthy growth following Blavatsky's death. By 1888, there were about two dozen lodges in the US and an aggregate membership of about 460. The first Canadian lodge opened in Toronto in 1891; by 1922, the city had no fewer than three. Whereas Transcendentalism went viral through the democratic medium of Whitman's poetry, Theosophy operated more like a private club. It was the Kabbalah of its day, attracting A-list celebrities, artists, activists, and other cultural elites with a hodgepodge of Eastern wisdom, self-help psychology, and the belief that the same universal truth turns up perpetually in every culture and epoch.

Artists in particular were drawn to the new religion, in part because they got the best seats. On the seven-storeyed mountain of mystical ascent, art occupied the "Buddhic" plane, just below nirvana. The artist was the vanguard of man's spiritual evolution, a prophet who tore aside the translucent veil of matter and penetrated the hidden depths of ultimate

reality. Yeats was gaga for Blavatsky; so was Wassily Kandinsky, who credited Theosophy for his aesthetic theories; in *The Waste Land*, T.S. Eliot described his Blavatsky proxy, Madame Sosostri, as "the wisest woman in Europe"; even Elvis carried her book *The Voice of the Silence* in his back pocket and recited from it to his audiences.

When Emily Carr was whisked from relative obscurity in Victoria to the artsy inner circles of Toronto high society, she was struck by the new religion's popularity. "They are all Theosophists," she wrote in her diary. And Harris, especially, took his spiritual struggle to the easel. His 1922 work *Above Lake Superior* has been described by one scholar as "reasonably orthodox Theosophy, with the white light of Divine Knowledge streaming down from above, the world of phenomena reduced to essential forms, the distant and glimmering suggestion of a world of absolute ideas behind this phenomenal world."

Over time, Harris amended his technique according to theosophical principles, thinning the paint until the pigment seemed to shed all mass. In *Lake Superior*, the last piece in the Expanding Horizons exhibit, paint levitates off the canvas. His subjects became increasingly remote and austere: from Superior, Harris ascended to the Rockies, eventually conquering the land of light itself, the Arctic Circle. In these serene, static wastelands, detail was surrendered to simplified shapes laden with allusions to Blavatsky's symbology of spheres, cubes, and upward-facing triangles—a Canadian *Da Vinci Code*, without the homicidal albino monk.

In the 1930s, when Harris became one of the first Canadian artists to embrace abstraction, the transition was the smoothest in art history. For years, he'd been painting a world of heavenly forms free of the stubborn particulars of place, as if he couldn't see the forest for the Tree. Without particulars to paint, however, art inevitably becomes more about the artist. Indeed, following the theosophical theory that cooler hues demonstrate a higher degree of enlightenment (pale azure, for example, indicates "self-renunciation and union with the divine"), Harris gradually migrated

away from warm colours. In works such as *Icebergs, Davis Strait*, his subject rendered as a rhythm of triangular blue striations, it's tempting to think that he wasn't simply striving to channel the "psychic energy" seething within a block of ice—he was executing a self-portrait of the artist as a young god.

In the writings of mystics, it's common for the line between self-surrender and self-divinization to become blurred. In such cases, it can be hard to tell whether the mystic is an egoless saint or a raging narcissist. Harris may have been both. One friend described the handsome, well-heeled heir of the Massey-Harris fortune as "self-centred, rather wanting to be courtiered, especially in his own studio." Another wrote that he "carried his head as if he wore a crown." But if Harris thought himself a god, he was a saint to Carr. Despite her new-found acceptance in Toronto and Ottawa, insecurity continued to dog her, and Harris took her under his wing, initiating a prolific correspondence that included a steady stream of theosophical philosophizing.

Over the next five years, Carr dabbled in the occult and wove its lessons into her paintings of the British Columbia landscape. With a renewed sense of purpose, she set to work by screwing up her eyes, which she felt brought "the spiritual into clearer focus," and stripped her totem poles to bare geometries. "Seek ever," she reminded herself in her journal, "to lift the painting above the paint." But whereas Harris stressed stasis and serenity, Carr sought struggle and movement. Her trees and mountains became writhing demons, a dynamic spirit world lurking behind the phenomenal, manifestly ambivalent. In her 1929 work *Indian Church*, a primal pine forest rampages about the canvas, threatening to overwhelm a small white church in a tempest of greens and browns; yet the delicate structure, like a storm-tossed ship or a beleaguered lighthouse, remains unconquered, beating back Nature's rawest rhythms with a steady inner light. Harris told her it was the best thing she'd ever done.

What he couldn't have fully appreciated was that the ambivalent, restless

energy in Carr's new work had something to do with her uneasy relationship with Theosophy. While attracted to its syncretism, she bridled at the elitism and smugness it seemed to breed. She especially hated how her new friends in Toronto were constantly belittling Christianity. Their long-winded parsings of theosophical dogma bored her stiff; it seemed all head and no heart, and she found herself missing the warmth of a personal Jesus.

Then, in January 1934, she attended a lecture by Raja Singh, a Christian Hindu, and felt her heart leap in her chest. "Oh, this is live, vital religion," she wrote. She wanted to see life "dipped in love" through communion with a personal divinity. "God as love," she wrote, "is joyous." Though she feared the disapproval of Harris and the rest, she was relieved by her decision to "go back sixty years to where I started." In language reminiscent of Emerson's assault on the "corpse-cold" rationalism of New England theology a century before, Carr attacked Theosophy as "bloodless," a "cold storage of beautiful thoughts," and heaved Blavatsky's work into the fire.

To see *Icebergs, Davis Strait* in the National Gallery of Canada, visitors climb a long ramp that winds through the bowels of a glass mountain. At the summit is the light-filled Great Hall, a secular temple to Harris and his vision of Canada as the "replenishing North." So it may surprise Canadians to hear that nationalism for Harris was but a lever of transcendence, a step on the path to "cosmic consciousness," a phrase coined by the psychiatrist and Whitmanite Richard Bucke, whose *Cosmic Consciousness* Harris hailed as the greatest book ever written by a Canadian. As one Theosophist put it, "Internationalism follows nationalism—that stage must complete itself—before we can safely go on to the next."

Cosmic consciousness might seem an awfully thin rod to hang a flag from, but given the checkered history of nationalist experiments in the twentieth century, that may have been a godsend. During the 1920s and '30s, when Germans were falling for a myth of the mystical superiority of the Nordic race, Canadian

Theosophists were promoting a quaint, aristocratic mysticism that privileged the wisdom of colonized peoples and taught the values of internationalism and universal brotherhood.

However, you'd be hard pressed to hear such ideas in a contemporary exhibit of the Group of Seven. Expanding Horizons, which devotes significant space to exploring the religious encounter with nature, includes only a brief mention of Harris's "theosophically influenced beliefs." Most would agree that it is hard to grasp the nuances of Shakespeare without at least a rudimentary knowledge of the Bible. Does it matter that visitors to the Great Hall come away thinking they've been looking at a painting of an iceberg and not a spiritual self-portrait?

No doubt there are worse crimes against historical memory. Still, there may never be a better moment to reflect on the wisdom and folly of modern attempts to marry nationalism, mysticism, and art. While current debates over the role of religion in public life are flush with hostile caricature and mutual mistrust, few realize that previous generations brought spiritual resources to bear on questions of national identity without succumbing to either the xenophobia of fundamentalism or the wan procedural pieties of the secular nation-state.

The beliefs of the Group of Seven seem strange to us in part because the artists straddled the ages of Victorian Christendom and modern multiculturalism. They spoke in a spiritual creole, a mishmash of East and West, old and new. The vocabulary was Vedic—nirvana instead of heaven, karma rather than sin—but the plot remained roughly Biblical. The millennial kingdom that Jonathan Edwards dreamed would descend upon the New World had simply retreated north, where it still twinkled like a shining beacon on a hill, inviting stronger souls to pursue their errand in what Housser called "that infinite unfathomable thing—the wilderness." North was the new West. And artists like Lawren Harris and Emily Carr were Canada's answer to Emerson—homegrown prophets who glimpsed in the country's vast landscapes a faint evocation of Nature's nation. ☺