

Frederick Horsman Varley

Bridge Over Lynn Canyon, c.1932-1935

watercolour, gouache and chalk on
paper
21.8 cm x 26.3 cm

Vancouver Art Gallery Acquisition
Fund
VAG 96.3



© 2006 Estate of Kathleen G. McKay
Photo: Trevor Mills, Vancouver Art Gallery

Frederick Horsman Varley

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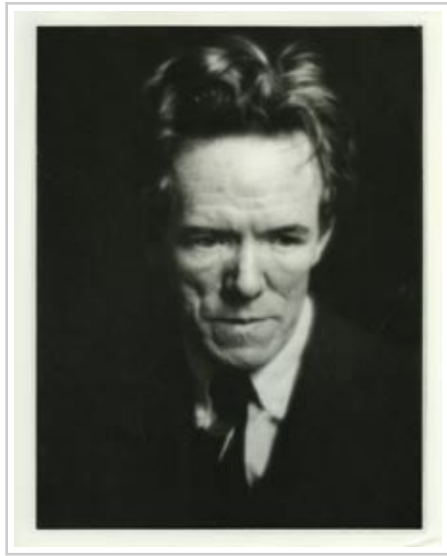


Image source: Vancouver Art Gallery Library
Canadian Artist Files

Artist's Biography

Nationality: Canadian

Born: 1881-01-02, Sheffield England

Died: 1969-09-08

When Fred Varley arrived in Vancouver in September of 1926, he was one of Canada's leading portraitists and a landscape artist of conviction and power. Born in England in 1881, Varley trained in his native Sheffield and at the Academie Royale des Beaux-Arts in Antwerp. He emigrated to Canada in 1912, becoming a distinguished war artist during World War I and a founding member of the Group of Seven. Although he came to Vancouver to take up a job at the Vancouver School of Decorative and Applied Arts (now the Emily Carr College of Art and Design), it was the landscape of British Columbia that was to have a profound effect on his life and art.

Varley, in common with most Post-Impressionist artists, believed in addressing the landscape directly, and he found a rich source of inspiration at his doorstep. A keen hiker, he sketched in the coastal mountains near Vancouver, developing the lush vegetation, rugged terrain and effects of cloud and sun as subjects. In oil sketches such as *Mountain Vista*, *Dawn*, and *Blue Ridge, Upper Lynn*, all executed in the period 1929-1932, Varley moved beyond immediate representations of the landscape to images which suggest his own spiritual journey. In its audacious lack of definition in the middle ground and remarkable sensitivity to colour with an extremely close harmonic range, *Dawn* recalls the landscape images of "the Chinese of the 11th and 12th century," the only artists whom Varley felt had "ever interpreted the spirit of such a country." Where a sketch such as *Blue Ridge, Upper Lyn*, with its rude, fire-scarred stumps, recalls example of Lawren Harris, it is equally evocative of the strong patterns of Chinese calligraphy. Yet it is Varley's own composition in its romantic vitality and sense of rebirth. The engagement with the West Coast landscape radically changed Varley's approach to composition and enriched his palette. This willingness to change, to adjust his assumptions and expand his work from a variety of sources, made Varley an excellent teacher. He strongly influenced a number of local artists—notably Charles Scott, W.P. Weston and Jock Macdonald—as well as many students.

Varley also matured and grew as a portraitist while working in Vancouver. From 1930 to 1936, his principal model was the young artist Vera Weatherbie, and his close relationship with her inspired a series of portrait images unrivaled in Canadian art. Although the Vancouver Art Gallery does not possess a portrait of Vera, its *Portrait of Herold Mortimer Lamb*, (c.1930) is a fine example of Varley's skills in the genre. The image is deceptively casual, almost like a snapshot, with the figure slightly a central. Although the background and torso are richly painted, our attention is concentrated on the head through the use of colour, light and shade, and the more precise application of paint. (Colour is particularly significant in that Varley believed that each of us has a coloured "aura" which reflects our psychological state.)

Sadly, Varley's artistic success was not matched by financial success while he was in Vancouver. The Depression had meant a reduction in his salary at the art school and he and his colleague, Jock Macdonald, left in protest. In 1933, they started a new school, the B.C. College of the Arts, with the assistance of Harry Tauber, Beatrice Lennie and others, but this ended in financial disaster after only two years. In 1937, Varley left Vancouver, closing an important chapter in his life. Although British Columbia and its landscape remained an important reference for him, Varley was never to live in the province again nor was he

Frederick Horsman Varley

Bridge Over Lynn Canyon, c.1932-1935

again to enjoy such a sustained period of creativity. The remainder of his career was spent in Ontario, with visits to the Arctic in 1938 and British Columbia in the 1950s. He died near Toronto in 1969.

Source. Thom, Ian M. "Frederick Varley," *Vancouver Art Gallery Collection*. Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1994.

Artistic Context

Nationality: Canadian

Training: Sheffield School of Art; École des Beaux Arts, Antwerp

Group: Group of Seven; Canadian War Memorials, Post-impressionism; 20th century

Peers: J.E.H. MacDonald; Arthur Lismer; Franklin Carmichael; Frank Johnston; Tom Thomson; A.Y. Jackson; Lawren Harris

Provenance: purchased from Peter Ohler Fine Arts Limited in 1996; Masters Gallery, Calgary; Mr. & Mrs. S.J. Margolese; the artist

Subject: landscape; land based nationalism; portraits

Legacy: Influenced the work of Vancouver artists Charles Scott and Jock Macdonald; changed landscape painting in B.C.

Other Works in the Vancouver Art Gallery Collection

Frederick Horsman Varley
Portrait of H. Mortimer-Lamb, c.1930
oil on board
Gift of Mr. H. Mortimer-Lamb
VAG 41.2

Frederick Horsman Varley
Untitled Figure Study, 1939
oil on canvas
Gift of Mr. J. E. Boughton
VAG 83.118

Frederick Horsman Varley
Dawn, 1929
oil on wood panel
Vancouver Art Gallery Acquisition Fund
VAG 86.193

Frederick Horsman Varley
Steeple Mountain, Kootenay Lake, 1956
charcoal on paper
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Francis C. Reif
VAG 88.41.14

Frederick Horsman Varley
Sketch of Garrow Bay, c.1935
oil on board
Vancouver Art Gallery Acquisition Fund
VAG 89.14 a-b

Frederick Horsman Varley

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Frederick Horsman Varley
Mountain Vista, B.C., 1929
oil on wood panel
Vancouver Art Gallery Acquisition Fund
VAG 89.38

Frederick Horsman Varley
Untitled, 1929
graphite pencil on paper
Vancouver Art Gallery Acquisition Fund
VAG 90.15.1

Frederick Horsman Varley
Untitled, 1929
graphite pencil on paper
Vancouver Art Gallery Acquisition Fund
VAG 90.15.2

Frederick Horsman Varley
Untitled, 1929
graphite pencil on paper
Vancouver Art Gallery Acquisition Fund
VAG 90.15.3

Frederick Horsman Varley
Swimming Pool at Lumberman's Arch, 1932
oil on paperboard
Gift of Master's Gallery Ltd., Calgary
VAG 90.27

Frederick Horsman Varley
Untitled (Vera and Mr. Weatherbie), 1929
watercolour, pencil and gouache on wove paper
Vancouver Art Gallery Acquisition Fund
VAG 90.67

Frederick Horsman Varley
Young Artist at Work, 1924
oil and pencil on paperboard
Vancouver Art Gallery Acquisition Fund
VAG 91.6

Frederick Horsman Varley
Ice Floes, Low Tide, Cape Dorset, 1938
watercolour and pencil on paper
Vancouver Art Gallery Acquisition Fund
VAG 92.6

Frederick Horsman Varley
Blue Ridge, Upper Lynn, 1931
oil on panel
Vancouver Art Gallery Acquisition Fund
VAG 92.41.3

Frederick Horsman Varley
Bridge Over Lynn Canyon, 1932
watercolour, gouache and chalk on paper
Vancouver Art Gallery Acquisition Fund
VAG 96.3

Frederick Horsman Varley

Bridge Over Lynn Canyon, c.1932-1935

Frederick Horsman Varley
Girl's Head, c. 1931
oil on panel
Gift of Ruth Van Dusen
VAG 98.64

Frederick Horsman Varley
Evening-Georgian Bay, c.1920
oil on wood panel
Anonymous Gift
VAG 99.24.3

Frederick Horsman Varley
Mount Garibaldi, 1927-1928
oil on wood panel
The Parnell Bequest
VAG 2000.39.7

Further Reading

Tippet, Maria. *Stormy Weather, F.H. Varley—A Biography*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1998.

Varley: The Middle Years. Burnaby: Burnaby Art Gallery, 1974.

Varley, Christopher. *F.H. Varley*. Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1979.

Varley, Christopher. *F.H. Varley: A Centennial Exhibition*. Edmonton: Edmonton Art Gallery, 1981.

Varley, Peter. *Frederick H. Varley*. Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1983.

Exhibition History

Exhibitions at the Vancouver Art Gallery

Visions of Paradise: Varley in British Columbia. October 16, 1999 - January 23, 2000.

75 Years of Collecting: British Masters, Group of Seven and Pop Icons. February 4, 2006 - May 14, 2006.

Frederick Horsman Varley
Bridge Over Lynn Canyon, c.1932-1935



Archival History

Christopher Varley Correspondence Correspondence

[transcription]

6 Kendal Ave.
Toronto, M5R 1L6
February 8, 1996

Rod Green
Masters Gallery

Dear Rod;

Thanks for your telephone inquiry about the following;

F.H. Varley; Bridge over Lynn c. 1935
watercolour
8 1/2"x 10 1/4"
signed twice I.I.
Varley Inventory no. 240
prov: Mr. and Mrs. S.J. Margolese, Montreal

This is one of about half a dozen watercolour nocturnes that my grandfather painted within spitting distance of his home in Lynn valley during the mid-thirties. The figures in the foreground stand on the bridge across Lynn Creek. Lynn Peak itself, which my grandfather affectionately called "The Dumpling", appears in the mid-ground on the left side. As you probably know, this mountain is clearly visible from the east end of Vancouver.

One of the most extraordinary things about this magnificent watercolour is the aerial perspective. It's as if Varley painted it sitting in midair about two hundred feet above the creek. His admiration for Chinese landscape painting, William Turner and Samuel Palmer are all evident.

To the best of my knowledge, this painting has been in the same collection since my grandfather's short stint in Montreal in the early forties. It's quite possible that Louis Muhlstock arranged the original sale, for he tried to help grandad out whenever possible. Unfortunately, this proved to be a thankless task, for grandad and money were always soon parted.

Best Wishes

Christopher Varley
Art Dealer, Inc.

Frederick Horsman Varley

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Research

Miscellaneous History

[transcription]

Frederick Horsman Varley
Bridge Over Lynn, 1936
oil on canvas
EL92.2.3

Frederick Varley's time in British Columbia 1926-1936, was pivotal to his career and marked all his later achievements. Varley came west to teach painting at the newly established Vancouver School of Art (VSA) in 1926. Upon his arrival in British Columbia, he was immediately struck by the dramatic landscape around Vancouver and began to explore the countryside through his work.

Bridge Over Lynn Valley is one of the few paintings created near the end of Varley's time in BC. In 1935 he lost his job at the VSA. Under great financial duress, he moved into a small small house at the end of Lynn Valley Road. Close to the tramline, it offered a panoramic view of Mt. Seymour, Lynn Valley and Lynn Peak. Varley captures the view from the second floor of the house, placing the viewer above the scene looking down.

This canvas, with its broad swirls of intense colour reveals Varley's growing interest in colour and colour theory, as well as his increasing work with the physical qualities of paint. The small hikers in the landscape may reflect on the tiny figures in Taoist Chinese painting of the 11th century something Varley was very interested in, as that work seemed to him to capture the intense spiritual symbolism of the mountains.

Lynn Valley is one of the last major canvasses Varley created before leaving Vancouver to return to eastern Canada. It was a time of extreme poverty and isolation for the artist. Large oils from this period are rare, as Varley had little money for materials and painted mostly small watercolours.

Frederick Varley had been a founding member of the Group of Seven, Canada's nationalist landscape school, which first exhibited as a group at the Art Gallery of Toronto in 1920. Despite this his experiences as a landscape painter were, in fact, quite limited. Although he had produced one of his finest works, the landscape *Stormy Weather* (National Gallery of Canada) for the first Group exhibition, his primary activity was as a portraitist. If Varley had not moved to British Columbia in 1926, it is likely that he would not be regarded as a major landscape painter.

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Board Minutes

Acquisition Record
1996-03-20

[transcription of excerpt]

SCHEDULE "A"

Works Recommended for Acquisition

Meeting Held: March 20, 1996

Submission

2. *Bridge over Lynn*, c. 1932-5
Watercolour, gouache, chalk. 31.7 x 26.2 cm

Artist Frederick Horsman Varley

Vendor: Peter Ohler fine Arts

Condition: Excellent for work of this period which are all on poor paper.
Requires conservation treatment

Provenance: Master's Gallery, Calgary; Mr. & Mrs. S.J. Margolese; the artist

Varley's influence as Head of Painting and Drawing at the Vancouver School of Art changed landscape painting in B.C., and his sketching excursions helped establish the careers of Macdonald, Surrey, Weatherbie and others. Varley's landscape work during his residence in B.C. (1926-36) is critical to our understanding of the artist. This watercolour, long known to Varley scholars, is notable for its daring composition and suggestion of atmosphere. This would be the fifteenth Varley work and the third watercolour in the collection.

Curatorial Comments: Recommend purchase
Committee Disposition: Approved unanimously
Board Approval: [March 27, 1996 in ink]



Minutes of the Acquisition Committee Meeting

Acquisition Record
1996-03-20

[transcription of excerpt]

VANCOUVER ART GALLERY ASSOCIATION

ACQUISITIONS COMMITTEE MEETING TO BE HELD

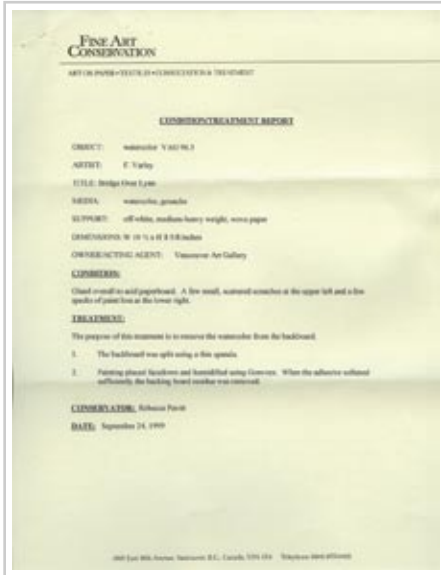
Wednesday, March 20, 1996 at 4 p.m.

Recommended Works

PURCHASES

Artist: Varley, Frederick
Title: *Bridge over Lynn*, c. 1932-5
Vendor: Peter Ohler Fine Arts

Frederick Horsman Varley
Bridge Over Lynn Canyon, c.1932-1935



Condition/Treatment Report

Conservation
1999-09-24

[transcription]

FINE ART
CONSERVATION
ART ON PAPER—TEXTILES—CONSULTATION & TREATMENT

CONDITION/TREATMENT REPORT

OBJECT: watercolor VAG 96.3

ARTIST: F. Varley

TITLE: Bridge Over Lynn

MEDIA: watercolor, gouache

SUPPORT: off-white, medium-heavy weight, wove paper

DIMENSIONS: W 10 1/2 x H 8 5/8 inches

OWNER/ACTING AGENT: Vancouver Art Gallery

CONDITION

Glued overall to acid paperboard. A few small, scattered scratches at the upper left and a few specks of paint loss at the lower right.

TREATMENT

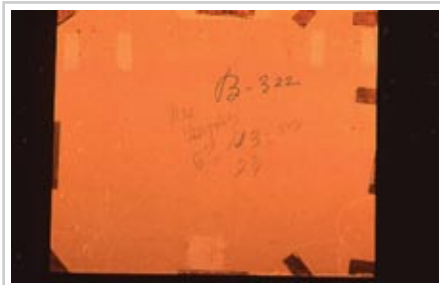
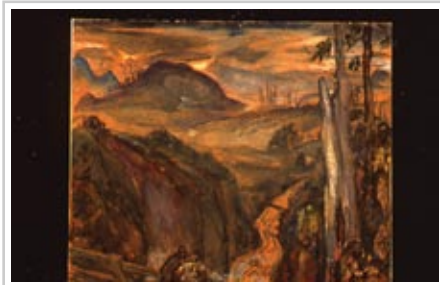
The purpose of this treatment is to remove the watercolor from the backboard.

1. The backboard was split using a thin spatula.

2. Painting placed facedown and humidified using Gore-tex. When the adhesive softened sufficiently the backing board residue was removed.

CONSERVATOR: Rebecca Pavitt

DATE: September 24, 1999



Frederick Horsman Varley

Bridge Over Lynn Canyon, c.1932-1935

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