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## Art: Lawren Harris art curated by Steve Martin in new MFA exhibit "The Idea of North"



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Guest curator Steve Martin during the press preview for the exhibition "The Idea of... [+]



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Guest curator Steve Martin during the press preview for the exhibition "The Idea of...  
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By **Keith Powers**

For **The Patriot Ledger**

Posted Mar. 16, 2016 at 11:23 am

Updated at 11:32 AM

BOSTON - It's not often that the curator of an exhibition is more famous than the artist. That's clearly the case with comedian Steve Martin organizing the newest exhibit at the Museum of Fine Arts.

On view are 30 evocative paintings from renowned Canadian landscape painter

Lawren Harris (1885-1970), who captures the cold in such a grand way with paintings of snowcapped mountains and majestic icebergs.

Martin introduced the exhibit, "The Idea of North: The Paintings of Lawren Harris," last Friday in the Art of the Americas Wing of the Huntington Avenue museum.

"He paints what a mountain looks like in the north," Martin said, "but reduced to its essentials."

Typically, the Harris show would be treated as a cozy exhibition, bringing worthy attention to a largely overlooked artist. But not when the "wild and crazy" Martin curates the show. The famous comedian has always been something of a Renaissance man, not only amusing millions with various antic personas, but establishing himself as a dramatic actor, writing successful plays, contributing to the New Yorker magazine, playing the banjo, and most relevant to this exhibition, collecting art.

Martin began collecting in the 1970s and had a show taken from his holdings in

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Las Vegas's Bellagio in 2001 that featured works by more well-known artists: Lichtenstein, Picasso, Hockney, Hopper. His interest in Harris – who not only painted these architectural, abstract landscapes of the far north, but who was able to bankroll a coterie of Canadian painters, known as the Group of Seven, financing painting excursions throughout his homeland – began somewhat later.

“At first I mistook him for Rockwell Kent,” Martin said about Harris’ work. “I’ve had a longtime passion for American modernism, but I had never heard of Harris though. When I was first approached to curate this show, I thought, ‘Absolutely not.’ That was my first instinct. But then I realized that Harris was the only artist I could conceive of curating. This is a collection of Harris’s work that has never been together, not even in Canada.”

Cynthia Burlingham of the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, along with Andrew Hunter of the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, and the MFA’s own Taylor Poulin, collaborated with Martin to create the exhibition.

“We have 90 percent of his best work in the world from the period,” Burlingham said.






“The period” Burlingham refers to is 1921-24, when Harris made several trips to the far north, and came away with a sense of the landscape that is bold, architectural and simplified. The show originated at the Hammer Museum, and will subsequently travel to Toronto.

“Harris’s vision was an idea,” Hunter said.


The Boston version of “Idea of North” differs from the other two museum shows in that it contains adjacent galleries, where Martin and the curators have assembled works from multiple artists of the same generation, which inform Harris’s own paintings. Martin’s presence might bring initial attention to Harris’s work; it is these accompanying shows that place Harris’s work in the context of better-known American artists as well.

Seeing these large, stark landscapes alongside Georgia O’Keeffe, Charles Sheeler, Arthur Dove and Rockwell Kent, makes Harris’s case for greater attention more effectively than Martin’s celebrity.






Not that the star power hurts. A crowded press reception last Friday supplied proof enough of that. Martin’s own enthusiasm for Harris’s work was genuine and palpable, informed not only by decades of collecting, but personal experience as

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well.

“I filmed a movie in the Yukon,” he says. “Every day we took a helicopter through these mountains to get to the set, right through landscapes like these. Even when a painter abstracts a landscape, like Harris did, when you’re there, you can see it.”

### If you go

**WHAT:** “The Idea of North: The Paintings of Lawren Harris”

**WHEN:** through June 12

**WHERE:** Museum of Fine Arts, 465 Huntington Ave., Boston

**COST:** \$25 adults; \$23 seniors and students 18 and older; free for children 17 and younger after 3 p.m. weekends and Boston public school holidays; otherwise \$10. After 4 p.m. Wed., admission by voluntary contribution.

**INFO:** [www.mfa.org](http://www.mfa.org) or 617-267-9300.

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