

48: Harold Weston *Three Trees, Winter* (1922)

Rebecca Foster

I stopped beside a big hemlock tree and reached around the great trunk to feel its vigor, its reality, its life existing essence. My ear, laid against the wet bark, seemed to hear the pulse, the flow of life-creating sap....[R]oots plunged into the soil, made it one with the earth and gave it life. As a primitive pagan I bowed before the mystery of that world spirit that giveth life to nature and to man.¹

—Harold Weston, 1922

With a staff to support his half-paralyzed leg, Harold Weston walked on snowshoes through the Adirondack wilderness on nights when the moon reflected bright light on the snow. He wanted to know the woods in every mood and every season, even at night. He hiked the hills and rowed the lakes, chopped his wood and howled at the moon. He lunged, hopped, and swung himself with powerful arms and climbed elevations to see and study every change in the light, colors, and forms. If he embraced the mountains, if he listened to their inner pulse, he thought, perhaps he could paint them. And perhaps he could become a painter.

He had built a one-room studio near his family's summer home in St. Huberts, New York, in the spring of 1920. An heir to the American transcendentalists through his father, a radical, intellectual theologian who led the Society for Ethical Culture movement in Philadelphia, Weston believed that nature embodied the spiritual and the aesthetic. He shut out all concerns but paint with the vigorous discipline of an autodidact. "If I have anything vital to say I must work it out with this great and ever changing source of inspiration about me,"² he wrote to his former teacher Hamilton Easter Field. He packed a knapsack with a tin sketch box containing paints, pencils, and small pieces of cardboard. Vigorously, expressionistically, ecstatically, he daubed and smeared paints on field sketches that Weston said came from "without."

The oils on canvas Weston painted in the studio, by contrast, are interpretive, symbolic, and write the inner world of the artist's living—a living defined by "mystical nature worship."³ To look at the canvas *Three Trees, Winter* is to experience the place as he did, looking out from the woods and their soft shadows to the top of a moonlit hill where there is nothing more triumphant than...air. The painting is not about a single objective—a mountaintop, a view, a tree—it is about being surrounded by snow and light. It is more meditative than some of his other paintings of this period. *Three Trees* is about reaching the transcendent through the immanent, through unremarkable, tangible moments. His uncharacteristically quiet appreciation allows Weston to focus on the rhythm—or pulse—of the scene. At least one critic agreed: "There is so much rhythm in some of these forest scenes that one well believes the trees can 'clap their hands together,' and indeed, make any gesture of joy and abandon."⁴

Historically, large stands of trees served as inspiration for cathedrals, but over time the referent inverted itself and trees came to be seen to resemble cathedrals. Cloisters of trees and altars of mountaintops make up the house of pagan worship before which Weston bowed. The uninhabited landscapes he painted reach back to something primal, to a time "before anything had a soul / While life was a heave of matter, half inanimate," as D. H. Lawrence wrote in a poem that Weston clipped from a magazine.⁵ Weston was discovering the birth of the world in the aerial optimism and snow-frozen forms of his winter canvases. Painters of the northern romantic tradition, such as Caspar David Friedrich, often used blue—the color Wassily Kandinsky called spiritual, infinite, heavenly—to



paint landscapes in lieu of religious iconography. The blue in *Three Trees* makes Weston a descendant of this tradition, but with a “joy and abandon” that are not often found in a Friedrich, Ferdinand Hodler, or Edvard Munch.

He had succeeded in finding something “vital to say,” and the dealer Newman Montross was astute enough to realize it. Upon being offered a show at the Montross Galleries in New York City, one of the few venues for modernist works in 1922, Weston was so excited, and perhaps so anxious, about his first show that in the evenings he carved frames for the canvases. Each frame echoed the “emotional purport” of the painting it surrounded.⁶ Not only does the frame for *Three Trees* mimic the curved form of the painting’s tree trunks, but it also reflects the contemplative, peaceful mood of the picture. The hand-carved and gilded frames around the sixty-three canvases hung at Montross in November 1922 helped earn Weston the uniformly high critical praise that was his introduction to the art world.

Henry Tyrrell from the *New York World*, whom Weston called one of the few progressive critics, lingered for two and a half hours at the gallery, telling Weston that his work was the “biggest thing of its kind to hit the New York art world in the last two years.”⁷ Critics for the *New York Evening Post*, *American Art News*, *Art Review*, and *Vanity Fair* agreed that Weston’s paintings were highly personal, not of any one school, and certainly not academic.⁸ Most important was the critical approval of Henry McBride, the longtime champion of modernist work, in the *New York Herald*. Accustomed to making and breaking careers, he anointed Weston “likely to have a career.” He called Weston heroic for pursuing his wilderness solitude, claiming that most great American artists, such as Thomas Eakins and Winslow Homer, had been recluses, too.⁹

The Memorial Art Gallery exhibited Weston’s early landscape paintings in January 1925. The museum director, Gertrude Herdle, admitted that “the literal-minded among our gallery visitors cannot put themselves in tune with your cosmic rhythms because they look upon nature and the world with the eye of a camera.”¹⁰ “Like Blake, [Weston] will find a small number of kindred natures whose emotions toward nature spring from similar sources,” wrote one Rochester critic. “He is merely a stray poet whom a few will listen to thankfully.”¹¹ He had strayed to the mountains from the throngs of artists exploring the sophisticated speed and power of the city with cubist, futurist, and surrealist techniques. The stray poet no more took on the affectations of the “lost generation” than he did the economic plenty of the “roaring twenties.” Even so, in Rochester he was dubbed “one of America’s most significant living artists.”¹² Herdle, who felt that Weston’s work, “as an instance of spiritual intuition” was a “remarkable event,”¹³ made sure that one of the landscapes was purchased for the permanent collection—*Three Trees, Winter*.



Harold Weston on the Upper
Ausable Lake, 1921
Courtesy Harold Weston
Foundation

(Facing page)
Harold Weston,
1894–1972
Three Trees, Winter, 1922
Oil on canvas, 16 x 20 in.
Wood frame carved
by the artist
Gift of Emily Sibley Watson,
25.33

Over the next fifty years Weston lived and worked in France and New York City as well as the Adirondacks, and he even stole time from his painting for humanitarian causes.¹⁴ His career changed radically over the decades but it had a fundamental integrity. In 1932 an *Art News* review noted that in spite of his continually evolving style Weston had “remained curiously and courageously himself.” The explanation, the review concluded, was his early contact with nature.¹⁵ Until the end he put “a full living into vital expression,”¹⁶ a living whose creative foundation was the Adirondacks and the idea of wilderness that had plunged its roots into him at an early age and given life to his passion for paint.

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