

# Quantitative equity strategy with call writing seeks enhanced total return and downside capture

## Strategy overview

Emerging markets equity strategy seeks to maximize total return and generate higher income than the reference Index, using model-driven stock selection call options writing.

## Performance

For the quarter, the Fund provided a total return of 8.06% on a net asset value basis, and a total return of 12.85% on a market price basis. The Fund's reference Index, the MSCI Emerging Markets Index, returned 7.86%.

## Equity portfolio

The equity sleeve outperformed the reference Index, primarily due to stock selection. In terms of the sleeve's performance, the core model contributed, led by strong returns in the management signals. The sleeve's higher dividend yield also contributed.

On the sector level, stock selection within the energy and materials sectors contributed. The underweight and selection in consumer discretionary sector also contributed. Conversely, selection in the information technology, utilities and health care sectors detracted. Regionally, selection in the Asia/Pacific excluding Japan contributed the most and selection in Africa/Mideast detracted.

At the individual stock level, the key contributors were overweight positions in Companhia Siderurgica Nacional, Power Finance Corp. Ltd. and REC Ltd. Conversely, not owning Al Rajhi Bank and Celltrion, Inc. as well as the underweight position in SK Hynix Inc. detracted.

## Option portfolio

The Fund's covered call strategy seeks to generate premiums and retain some potential for upside appreciation. This strategy detracted from returns during the period, with two out of three months experiencing negative performance. The Fund typically implements this strategy by writing call options on the emerging markets (EM) exchange-traded fund (ETF). The strike prices of the options written are usually at or near the money, with expiration dates around one month at inception.

## Outlook and current strategy

**U.S. equity markets bounced back during the month, bolstered by economic resilience, waning inflation and another pause in the U.S. Federal Reserve's interest rate hiking cycle.** The S&P 500 Index rose by 4.54% and the Nasdaq Composite Index advanced by 5.52%. Information technology stocks led while utilities lagged. Growth stocks outperformed value stocks during the month, and small caps had a significant lead over large caps.

**The U.S. bond market rallied in December.** The Bloomberg U.S. Aggregate Bond Index gained 3.83% on the unexpected strength of the economy. The 10-year U.S. Treasury yield moved from 4.22% at the beginning of the quarter to 3.88% by quarter-end as inflation eased and expectations of interest rate cuts in 2024 grew.

**In our view, the side effects of the pandemic shock have mostly subsided, and inflation is the final piece of the puzzle.** We view the recovery not as a classic business cycle, but as an economy trying to normalize following a natural disaster. First came the government-mandated lockdowns and the bust. Then came the re-openings and the effects of mega-policy stimulus. Lastly came the 180-degree reversal in monetary policy. Inflation peaked in June 2022 at 9.1%, which means that most of the disinflation we have seen since then has had little to do with Fed policy. We believe that disinflation could continue (and may intensify) over the next 18 months. Corporate earnings are accelerating as the U.S. consumer remains healthy and corporate fundamental factors are sound.

**China continues to disappoint.** There was little (if any) reopening burst of activity, and economic growth is slowing, with retail

sales, industrial production and fixed investment all coming in lower than expected. Exports have plunged, due in part to U.S. companies' efforts to re-shore or move offshored manufacturing elsewhere. Furthermore, China's real estate sector, their main growth engine, is in freefall, with multiple large property developers teetering on the edge of default. However, the country continues to make progress on the technological front (for example, semiconductor chips, electric vehicles, aerospace, etc.). While valuations are at deep discounts (and the government has signaled it may intervene with a stabilization fund to buy stocks), the outlook for Chinese equities remains uncertain. Although other EM countries have better near-term prospects, it's difficult to be bullish on EM equities overall when China is lagging.

### Holdings detail

Companies mentioned in this report – percentage of portfolio investments, as of 12/31/23: Companhia Siderurgica Nacional 0%, Power Finance Corp. Ltd. 0.59%, REC Ltd. 0.62%, Al Rajhi Bank 0%, Celltrion, Inc. 0% and SK Hynix Inc. 0.94%; 0% indicates that the security is no longer in the portfolio. Portfolio holdings are subject to change daily.

### Disclaimer

The **MSCI Emerging Markets (EM)** Index captures large- and mid-cap representation across 24 emerging-market (EM) countries. With 1,387 constituents, the Index covers approximately 85% of the free float-adjusted market capitalization in each country. **Investors cannot invest directly in an index.**

**Past performance is no guarantee of future results.** All investing involves risks of fluctuating prices and the uncertainties of rates of return and yield inherent in investing. All security transactions involve substantial risk of loss. The performance quoted represents past performance. Investment return and principal value of an investment will fluctuate, and shares, when redeemed, may be worth more or less than their original cost. Current performance may be lower or higher than the performance data quoted.

**Total investment return at market share price** measures the change in the market value of your investment assuming reinvestment of dividends, capital gain distributions and return of capital distributions/allocations, if any, in accordance with the provisions of the Fund's dividend reinvestment plan. Total investment return at market share price is not annualized for periods less than one year. Closed-end funds like the Fund do not continuously offer shares for sale and are not required to buy shares back from investors upon request. Shares of closed-end funds trade on national stock exchanges. Therefore, market share prices are not directly affected by Fund expenses or fees, which ordinarily have the effect of lowering total return.

**Total investment return at net asset value** has been calculated assuming a purchase at net asset value at the beginning of the period and a sale at net asset value at the end of the period; and assumes reinvestment of dividends, capital gain distributions and return of capital distributions/allocations, if any, in accordance with the provisions of the dividend reinvestment plan. Net Asset Value is total assets less total liabilities divided by the number of shares outstanding. Net Asset Value is net of all fund expenses, including operating costs and management fees. Total investment return at net asset value is not annualized for periods less than one year.

**Principal risks:** All investing involves risks of fluctuating prices and the uncertainties of rates of return and yield inherent in investing. Price volatility, liquidity, and other risks that accompany an investment in equity securities of domestic and foreign companies, and small and mid-sized capitalized companies. International investing does pose special risks including currency fluctuation, economic and political risks not found in investments that are solely domestic. Risks of foreign investing are generally intensified for investments in emerging markets.

**Options risk:** The Fund may purchase put and call options and may write (sell) put options and call options and is subject to Options Risk. The risk in writing a call option is that the Fund gives up the opportunity for profit if the market price of the security increases and the option is exercised. The risk in buying an option is that the Fund pays a premium whether or not the option is exercised. Risks may also arise from an illiquid secondary market or from the inability of counter-parties to meet the terms of the contract. When an option is exercised or closed out, the Fund may be required to sell portfolio securities or to deliver portfolio securities to satisfy its obligations when it would not otherwise choose to do so, or the Fund may choose to sell portfolio securities to realize gains to offset the losses realized upon option exercise. Such sales or delivery would involve transaction costs borne by the Fund and may also result in realization of taxable capital gains, including short-term capital gains taxed at ordinary income tax rates, and may adversely impact the Fund's after-tax returns.

This Fund has **additional risks** that you should consider, such as market discount risk, investment and market risk, foreign investment and emerging markets risk, foreign (non-US) currency risk, Asia Pacific regional and country risk, issuer risk, equity risk, distribution risk, tax risk, dividend risk, small-cap and mid-cap company risk.

The strategy employs a quantitative investment process. The process is based on a collection of proprietary computer programs, or models, that calculate expected return rankings based on variables such as earnings growth prospects, valuation, and relative strength.

Data imprecision, software or other technology malfunctions, programming inaccuracies and similar circumstances may impair the performance of these systems, which may negatively affect performance. Furthermore, there can be no assurance that the quantitative models used in managing the strategy will perform as anticipated or enable the strategy to achieve its objective.

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The opinions, views and information expressed in this commentary regarding holdings are subject to change without notice. The information provided regarding holdings is not a recommendation to buy or sell any security. Fund holdings are fluid and are subject to daily change based on market conditions and other factors.

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