

A Modernist in Canada: The Art of Emily Carr

Background Notes

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Emily Carr Self Portrait, 1938



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British Columbia in the time of Emily Carr

In the 19th century and before the economy of British Columbia was based on fishing, logging and mining. In 1858 the discovery of gold at Fraser River brought an influx of European and American immigrants. Dependent on the supply services from the major American Pacific ports like San Francisco, there was debate about whether B.C. should become part of the USA or align itself with the Canadian Confederation. The majority of B.C. residents, especially those born in Britain, supported the latter and in 1871 - the year of Emily Carr's birth - B.C. became the 7th province to join Canada. The economy of the region grew in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, immigration increased and transport links with the mainland were improved with the arrival of the Trans Canadian railroad in 1886. WWI and the Great Crash brought protracted depression and affected the income of the Carr family. Prosperity did not return to the province until WW2.

Canada as a nation was the second largest country in the world geographically but at the time of Emily Carr's contacts with the Group of Seven [in the 1920s], it had a tiny population of just over seven million. However, Canada's participation in WWI had helped to create a sense of distinct nationhood and this surge of cultural nationalism was reflected in the work of the Group of Seven, and in British Columbia in the work of Emily Carr.

First Nations in British Columbia

At the time Emily Carr was painting the totems of British Columbia, it was widely assumed that the First Nations peoples and their culture were dying out. There had been massive population decline amongst them throughout the 18th and 19th centuries due to deaths from Western diseases, especially smallpox, and to the introduction of alcohol and firearms. Settlers to British Columbia - who began to arrive in significant numbers from 1858 - took over the traditional territory of the First Nation people and with the loss of their traditional subsistence economy, many moved to the towns. By 1885 the population had dropped to 28,000. By 1929, it was down to 23,000. Cultural knowledge and languages were lost. By the early 20th century missionary activity had converted many to Christianity. Residential schools were established and Indian children removed from their homes so that they could be taught the ways of Euro-Canadian society. The traditional potlatch, a ceremony to witness events of social significance such as marriages, the formal assumption of the role of chief, the transfer of rights and responsibilities, was banned in 1884 as heathenish along with its associated distribution of gifts to guests, though it continued underground until this ban was repealed in 1951. (Emily Carr attended illegal potlatch ceremonies.)

Emily Carr (1871 – 1945)

Born and brought up in Victoria, British Columbia, Emily Carr was interested in making art from an early age. She began art classes while still a schoolgirl, then studied at the California School of Design with Amedee Joullin from 1890-93. She taught art to children in Victoria, then studied in England at Westminster School of Art, in St Ives with Julius Olsson and Algernon Talmadge, and in Bushey with John Whitley. She had a breakdown and spent 15 months in a sanatorium before returning to Canada in 1904. From 1904 to 1909 she worked as a political cartoonist, taught children's art classes and, with her sister, Alice, travelled to Alaska where her introduction to the art of Totem poles led to further exploration to Indian villages on the Pacific coast.

Searching for more modern ideas of art, in 1910 she travelled to Paris to study at Academie Colarossi, and then privately with John Duncan Fergusson, Harry Gibb and Frances Hodgkins. She exhibited at the Salon d'Automne before returning to British Columbia to make further studies of Indian monuments. She showed her work in her studio (1912) and at an exhibition in Vancouver (1913). However, it did not meet with the success she had hoped for. Because of this and her need to ensure an income, she built and ran an apartment house in Victoria. Running this occupied much of her time until the 1930s. However, in the 1920s she took part in group shows in Seattle and continued to make contact with other artists. Her most formative encounter came when her paintings were selected for the "Canadian West Coast Art" exhibition in Ottawa in 1927. Here she met Lawren Harris and other members of The Group of Seven and determined to make work which was infused with an equivalent emotional and spiritual power to theirs. In 1928, the American artist Mark Tobey taught an advanced art course in her studio. By this time, Carr's work was entering the national collection and attracting buyers.

Carr continued to make sketching visits to Indian villages up to 1930 and was shown in Washington, D.C. and Seattle. From the early 1930s she concentrated on landscape studies, developing a new sketching method of gasoline thinned paint on manila paper for her forest studies. By 1939 her increasingly poor health meant that she divided her time between painting and writing. She made sketching trips closer to her home in Victoria, producing visionary studies of the west coast landscape. In 1941 her book *Klee Wyck* won her national acclaim. In 1944 she had a large retrospective show in Montreal. She continued to paint and write up to her death in 1945.

Teachers and colleagues

Amedee Joullin (1862-1917)

French American painter trained in California and Paris. Specialised in the landscapes of California and later in his career in depictions of the Pueblo Indians of New Mexico.

Julius Olsson (1864-1942)

English artist, a late impressionist style marine and landscape painter who ran the Cornish School of Landscape, Figure and Sea Painting in St Ives with Algernon Talmadge. His school encouraged students to work out of doors at all times and it placed great emphasis on the teaching of colour and tonal values. The school had an international reputation.

Algernon Talmadge (1871 -1939)

Painter of landscapes, animals and figure subjects. Tutored Emily Carr during her studies in St. Ives. His criticism was a significant influence on her work as he encouraged her early forest paintings.

John Whiteley (n.d.)

Emily Carr studied with Whiteley at Bushey in Hertfordshire. Bushey was the site of The Herkomer School, opened in 1883 to teach composition, landscape and portraiture. Algernon Talmadge had studied there. The School had an international status and attracted a high proportion of female students.

Academie Colarrossi

Art School established in Paris in the 19th century as an alternative to the official Ecole des Beaux Arts. Unlike the Ecole, the Academie admitted female students, permitting them to draw from the nude model. Frances Hodgkins was appointed its first female teacher in 1910.

John Duncan Fergusson (1874-1961)

Most commonly referred as one of the 'Scottish Colourists', Fergusson spent most of his life in France, moving to Paris in 1907 where he absorbed and evolved the latest developments in the work of artists like Picasso, Derain and Matisse. He combined working in a studio with sketching and painting outdoors. Fergusson taught part time at the Academie Blanche where Emily Carr attended his classes. Under his direction, she studied figure drawing and still life, and learned new painting techniques and the use of the Fauve palette. At this time she began to frequently work in oils.

Harry Phelan Gibb (1870-1948)

English painter and potter who lived in Paris and moved in the same circle as Picasso, Matisse and Gertrude Stein. The latter was a great supporter and friend. He regularly exhibited at the Salon d'Automne. Emily Carr studied with him at Crecy-en-Brie and St. Eflame. His fauvist techniques and colour had a lasting impact on Emily Carr's work, teaching her to represent her own vision and interpretation of the scene.

Frances Hodgkins (1869-1947)

New Zealand born watercolour painter. Emily Carr studied with her for 6 weeks in Concarneau. Hodgkins showed Carr how to let her washes run into each other and to use bold, broken outlines and minimal detail. In the watercolours that Carr produced under Hodgkins' guidance, there is energy and movement, bold outlines and minimal detail.

Mark Tobey (1890-1976)

American artist, best known for his later abstract expressionist works, Tobey trained at the Art Institute of Chicago. In 1918 his conversion to the Bahai faith was profound and permanent and this lies behind his work. Tobey came to Victoria in the fall of 1928 and taught an advanced course in Emily Carr's studio. At this period he embarked on a period of great experimentation and had begun to adopt a Cubist technique of overlapping planes. He encouraged Carr to incorporate movement in her work, to play with perspective and to move toward semi-abstraction with jagged and disjointed forms. Carr toyed with abstraction, but she never felt comfortable taking her work to its extreme conclusion.

The Group of Seven

This group of Canadian artists – Lawren Harris, J.E.H. MacDonald, A.Y. Jackson, Franklin Carmichael, Frederick Horsman Varley, Frank Johnston and Arthur Lismer - began to exhibit collectively in 1920. They were modernists, deliberately setting out to reject outmoded academic ideas and replace them with something new and experimental. But they were modernists who identified intensely with Canada, and who sought to interpret her vast wilderness areas in an expressive manner.

Lawren Harris (1885-1970)

The Group of Seven member with whom Carr felt the greatest affinity, the independently wealthy Harris had studied under Franz Skarbina (1849-1910) in Berlin. Harris's work in the 1920s was simplified and austere, stripped down to express the spiritual power of the landscape. Harris was a Theosophist – a movement popular in North America at this time. The overarching objectives of Theosophy were universal brotherhood, the study of comparative religion and the spiritual understanding of nature. It was Harris's work which had the most impact on Carr and he who suggested she paint the forest rather than Indian subjects. Harris wrote to Carr of his admiration for her work: "I feel there is nothing being done like them in Canada...their spirit, feeling, design, handling, is different and tremendously expressive of the British Columbia Coast...its spirit..." (**Carr Growing Pains**, Prospero Books, 2002, p.463)

Brief bibliography

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Autobiographical works by Emily Carr (many editions available)

Klee Wyck

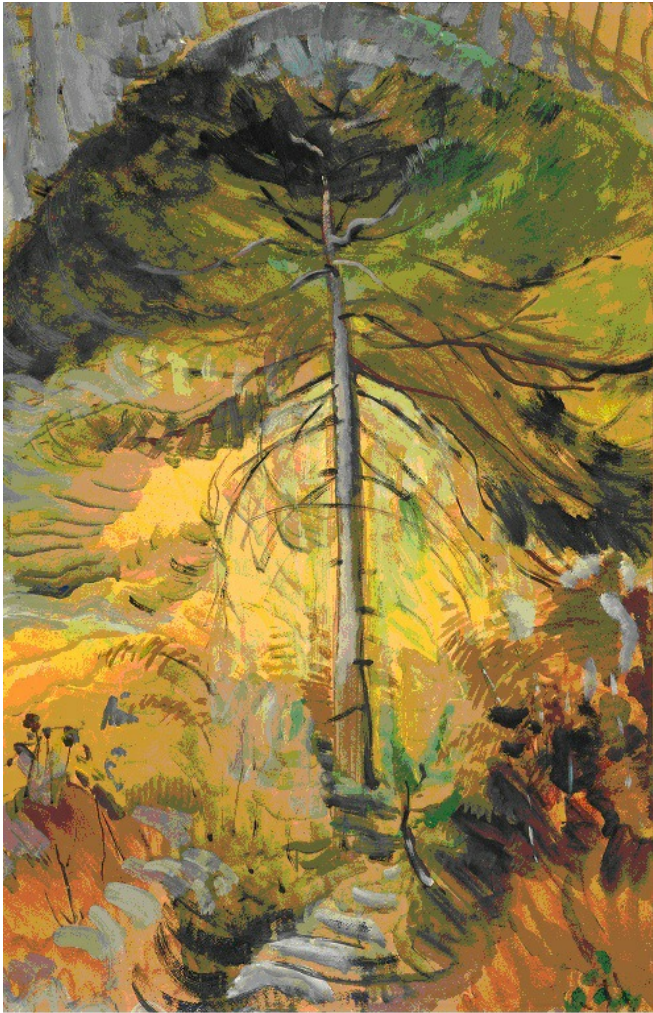
The Book of Small

The House of All Sorts

Growing Pains

The Heart of a Peacock

Hundreds and Thousands: the journals of an artist.



Emily Carr *Happiness*, 1939