# Emily Carr

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I BEGAN WITH a name and a memory: a reproduction of Emily Carr's "Scorned as Timber, Beloved of Sky" had hung over my crib in Montreal, introducing me to art. Almost thirty years later in Venice, California, I initiated my quest for the woman behind that mellifluous name—Emily Carr. I sent letters of inquiry to a variety of possible sources. Then, to facilitate sleuthing, I proceeded to interview people who had actually known Emily; and to view her habitat, haunts and oeuvre, I took a trip to Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. It was there that I found and pieced together the multifaceted elements of this remarkable woman artist.

Emily Carr was born into a large family in 1871, in Victoria, British Columbia. She was "rebellious from the start, refusing to be born soon enough, causing her *father* great inconvenience." Her first art experiences consisted of traditional drawing lessons which were meant to "round out" well-bred young ladies. Defiant as usual, Emily drew her sisters while her sisters drew flowers.

After both her parents died, her eldest sister, by far the most puritanical of the nine siblings, took over the reins of the family. Emily could not tolerate the strict Victorian discipline imposed by her sister. In 1888, aged 17, she managed to persuade her sister to let her attend the San Francisco Art School (later to become the San Francisco Art Institute). Persuaded but not convinced, a slightly horrified Alice Carr dispatched her kid sister Emily to the city then notorious for its decadence and vice.

During her five years in San Francisco, Emily studied portraiture,

*Women's Studies*
1978, Vol. 6, pp. 75–87

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Printed in Great Britain

design, landscape, and drawing from plaster casts. However, her Victorian upbringing kept her from life classes until her mid thirties.

She returned to Victoria in 1894 committed to being an artist and set up a studio in the family barn. There, surrounded by the bovine gazes of the barn residents, she began to teach children's art classes. This was the first of Emily's many and often ingenious solutions to the peculiar survival problem of artists: how to subsist yet have the time and money for one's art.

In 1898 she undertook her first voyage to the isolated Indian village of Ucluelet on the outer coast of Vancouver Island. Perhaps it was the shared sense of alienation which immediately drew Emily into the warm, innermost circle of the Indians she visited. Although she knew no native tongues, she felt intuitive rapport with her friends. She became a mistress of mime and was affectionately named "Klee Wyck" (Laughing One). Emily Carr was taught the indigenous arts and crafts: pottery, basket making and rug hooking. She resolved to document Indian life and art through her own painting.

Carr was convinced that it was necessary for her to go to London or Paris to learn to paint. She saved money from her teaching, traveled to London and enrolled at the Westminster School of Art. Among other art experiences, she was exposed to her first life class. Even in her thirties, this was terribly disturbing to her Victorian sensibility.

Feeling stifled by London's age, crowdedness, soot and cruelty, she was not impressed with its history. She was definitely more at home in the open air, in forests. Therefore, she left London for another art school at St. Ives in Cornwall. She worked happily for a time painting landscapes. Because of her discomfort in the city, Emily affirmed her preference for the vastness and raw landscape of British Columbia. She became staunchly Canadian. City life did take its toll on Emily Carr. She became seriously ill with pernicious anemia and was forced to endure almost two years in sanitarium.

When she returned to British Columbia, she took a studio in Vancouver and supported herself by creating cartoons for the local newspapers. She also resumed studio teaching as well as her trips to the Indian villages of the north. She traveled as far as Alaska, sketching all the time, making her way in the most primitive of vehicles and dog

sleds, at best sleeping in tents, thus forming friendships with many Indian women. She gathered an immense amount of material which she was to use in later paintings—focusing particularly on the vanishing Indian totem poles and other manifestations of their ancient culture.

Emily Carr heard about the "new art" in Paris. The goals of Impressionism and Fauvism seemed much akin to her own. In 1910 she traveled to Paris and enrolled at the Academie Colorossi. Emily was greatly encouraged but again had to leave the city after spending three months in hospital. She fled to Sweden, which reminded her of Canada, but soon returned to France to continue her landscape painting. Two of her paintings were hung in the Salon d'Automne in 1911, alongside such artists as Vlaminck and Matisse. Despite her relative success in Paris, Emily felt "like a pine tree in a pot," and returned to her beloved province after an absence of eighteen months.

Back in Vancouver in 1911 (aged 40) she opened another studio and gave an exhibition of the work she had done in Paris. The brilliant color and impressionist technique brought only jeers and ridicule. Her former pupils and patrons abandoned her in horror. She received absolutely no encouragement. Instead of going back to the "dead ways of working," she returned to Victoria and continued to "taste the joys of the new." She revisited her Indian friends and once again found appreciation and consolation among them. She resumed her painterly documentation of Indian life in her new style.

Emily's father's estate was divided in 1913. She borrowed money and built an apartment house consisting of four suites, which she prophetically called "The House of All Sorts." Based on Emily's hopeful assumption that rent from three of the suites would support her and her art in the fourth suite, she outfitted one of these suites as a splendid studio. However, it was soon obvious that the plans were too optimistic. She was forced to turn the apartment house into a ladies' boarding house and the studio was needed as additional tenant space. Greatly humiliated and embittered, Emily Carr surrendered her brushes to fate and resolutely used her many skills and talents to support herself.

Emily the artist became Emily the landlady, the janitress, the cook, the maid. She raised English sheepdogs, rabbits, hens and birds for

sale; she grew and sold fruits and vegetables; she built a kiln in her backyard and made pottery with Indian designs, as well as Indian style baskets and hooked rugs to sell to tourists. Emily became caustic and cantankerous, crotchety and sarcastic. There was no time nor energy left for herself. It was fifteen years before she painted again.

During this unhappy time Emily Carr had been visited (in 1915) by Marius Barbeau, a Canadian ethnologist hired by the government to document Northwest Indian life and lore. In his wanderings he repeatedly heard of a young woman artist, much beloved by the Indians, who used to sketch village life. He tracked her down and found her in Victoria. Emily tried to throw him out as a curiosity seeker, insisting she was not an artist, and in fact had not "arted" for many years. Barbeau persisted. He eventually was shown those works which she had stored. He bought two. Astounded and grateful, Emily gave him a third. Barbeau revisited in 1927 and brought her work to the attention of Eric Brown, director of the National Gallery in Ottawa, who invited her to participate in an exhibition of West Coast art to be presented at the National Gallery. Barbeau sent sixty of Emily's paintings, as well as sketches, rugs and Indian style artifacts to Ottawa. Equally important, he sent her a train ticket East to attend the exhibition. This was the turning point in her life.

Emily went to Ottawa and finally saw and heard her work praised. The National Gallery bought several of her watercolors. However, of even greater significance was her meeting with the Canadian Group of Seven Painters and other members of the artistic community. The "Group" consisted of seven men who were devoting themselves to painting the vast landscape of (eastern) Canada, each portraying his own particular aspect of the landscape in his own expressive mode. Seeing the work of the "Group" was a major revelation for Emily. She felt keen artistic and spiritual accord with the "Group", especially with one of the members, Lauren Harris. Although they differed broadly on religious matters, he being a theosophist, and she a devout Christian, Lauren was enormously encouraging.

Her experience in the East dispelled her sense of alienation. Feeling kinship, support and love from those whom she admired, Emily felt spiritually revived as her confidence was restored. She was at last

understood and valued as an artist by other artists. (From then on, her work was always included in exhibitions of the Group of Seven.) She returned West stimulated and elated. Three days later she began to paint seriously again.

Understandably, she went back to painting the Indian villages. But by this time, the white missionaries had come, brought religion and "civilization" along with disease and the ultimate destruction of the great art of the Northwest Indians. The majestic totem poles were stolen from their sacred sites. Soon there was little left except the poignant, haunting remains of communities which had flourished for so long in economic and spiritual equilibrium. It was this sad history which Emily documented in her paintings of the late '20s and early '30s.

By this time Emily had achieved some notoriety as an eccentric, if not fame as an artist in Victoria. She was often seen in the streets of prim Victoria en route to market wheeling a baby carriage crammed full of exotic pets. Her monkey, Woo, always dressed, rode on her shoulder. There was invariably a herd of her dogs bringing up the rear of this strange procession. Emily eschewed the Victorian fashion of corset and bustle, and dressed always in a loose brown caftan, hair net and headband, Indian style. It was also known that this rather bizarre woman had a studio in which all the furniture was suspended from the ceiling by a system of pulleys. If a visitor was invited for tea (a rare occurrence), he/she would be lowered a chair, and would probably be most startled to see Suzie, a white rat, emerge from her mistress's bosom.

At sixty-five, in 1936, Emily exchanged her apartment house for a small cottage and a van which she called Elephant. From that time on, freed from the responsibilities of being a landlady, Emily was finally able to devote herself full-time to her art. Although she received some recognition, sales of her paintings were sparse. By her late sixties she was able to sustain a most frugal household from their sales.

Lauren Harris remained one of her closest friends despite, or most likely, because of the physical distance between them. When Emily realized that the Indian villages were no longer subject matter for her art, she wrote complainingly to Lauren. He responded that there was

no need for her to feel dependent on that material since he had sensed a unique spirit which she captured in the landscape surrounding the totem poles and village scenes.

Sparked again by Lauren's encouragement, she set off in her van accompanied by four or five dogs, Woo, Su, and a chipmunk or two. She used to find a spot in the woods and set up camp, working in isolation for many weeks at a time. Her approach was rapid, expressionistic. She could complete from 6–10 paintings and 30–50 sketches in a day. Because of the prohibitive costs of oil paint and canvas in that great quantity, she evolved a new technique directly suited to her needs: oil paint thinned with gasoline on brown paper. She could thus afford to do many "thought" sketches (as she dubbed them) to bring back to her studio in Victoria, and then work her favorites onto canvas.

Alone along the northern outer shores of British Columbia, Emily's paintings became personal hymns of praise for the Creator. (Both the style and fervor of these oil sketches are reminiscent of Van Gogh's.) She began to "cast out the personal and strive for the spiritual" in her work. She thought of herself as a "vehicle which had to be kept still and clear to allow the spirit of God to flow through" her. "There are themes everywhere . . ." she wrote; "you must be still in order to hear and see." "Half of painting is listening for the eloquent dumb great Mother (nature) to speak; the other half is having clear enough consciousness to see God in all."

Eventually she was drawn back to the woods, to the deep forests of British Columbia, bringing the landscape closer and closer into her soul; simultaneously looking in and looking out, sensing an exchange of her own "particles" with those of nature, constantly penetrating deeper until the forest became an internalized vision.

> Don't try to do the extraordinary things, but do the ordinary things with intensity. Push your idea to the limit, distorting if necessary to drive the point home. And intensify it, but stick to the one central idea, getting it across at all costs.

Similarly, she examined trees: at first shyly from a reverent, modest distance, and then, once more drawing boldly nearer and nearer into the quick and quiver of life itself. She explored the essence of treeness, and fused the essential spirit of tree with the quintessential spirit of

Emily—strong, special, independent, so much alone: an eloquent voice in an elegant universe.

Emily was twice gifted, a painter as well as a writer. During her sixties, she suffered a series of heart attacks and was forced to curtail her extensive painting trips in the van. The last of these trips was undertaken when she was seventy-one.

Needing another creative outlet she turned to writing. Of her five novels and numerous published stories, the first novel, *Klee Wyck*, won the Governor General's Medal for Literature, Canada's highest award.

Ironically, she first became known as a writer with the success of *Klee Wyck*, published two years before her death. She died in 1945, feeling "extraordinarily alone," mourned by fewer than fifty people at her funeral. She had written earlier in a despondent period: "How completely alone I've had to face the world, no booster, no artists' backing, no relatives interested, no bother taken by papers to advertise, just me and an empty flat and the pictures."

She had her first one-woman exhibition in 1936 (at 65), the second in '37, third in '38, fourth and fifth in '43 and '44. None except the last were financially rewarding to her, despite her growing reputation. (Paintings which sold in the '40s for $200 are now valued at over $60,000.)

Fame as a painter accrued posthumously as her art became more widely known and accepted. In 1971 the Canadian government commemorated the centennial anniversary of the birth of Canada's most famous woman artist with a stamp of the "Big Raven."

Emily's puritan upbringing, distressed economic situation, and hermetic lifestyle all contributed to her becoming a frustrated, angry, difficult woman. She had a few friends who loved her despite the many tongue-lashings to which they were constantly subjected. Yet, throughout her solitary existence, she felt and expressed much love, directing it mainly towards animals and nature. Her creative work stands as a tangible visual testament to a most intimate, inspired love affair with the great wilderness of British Columbia.

## Acknowledgement

This article was first published in *Feminist Art Journal*, Vol. V, No. 2.

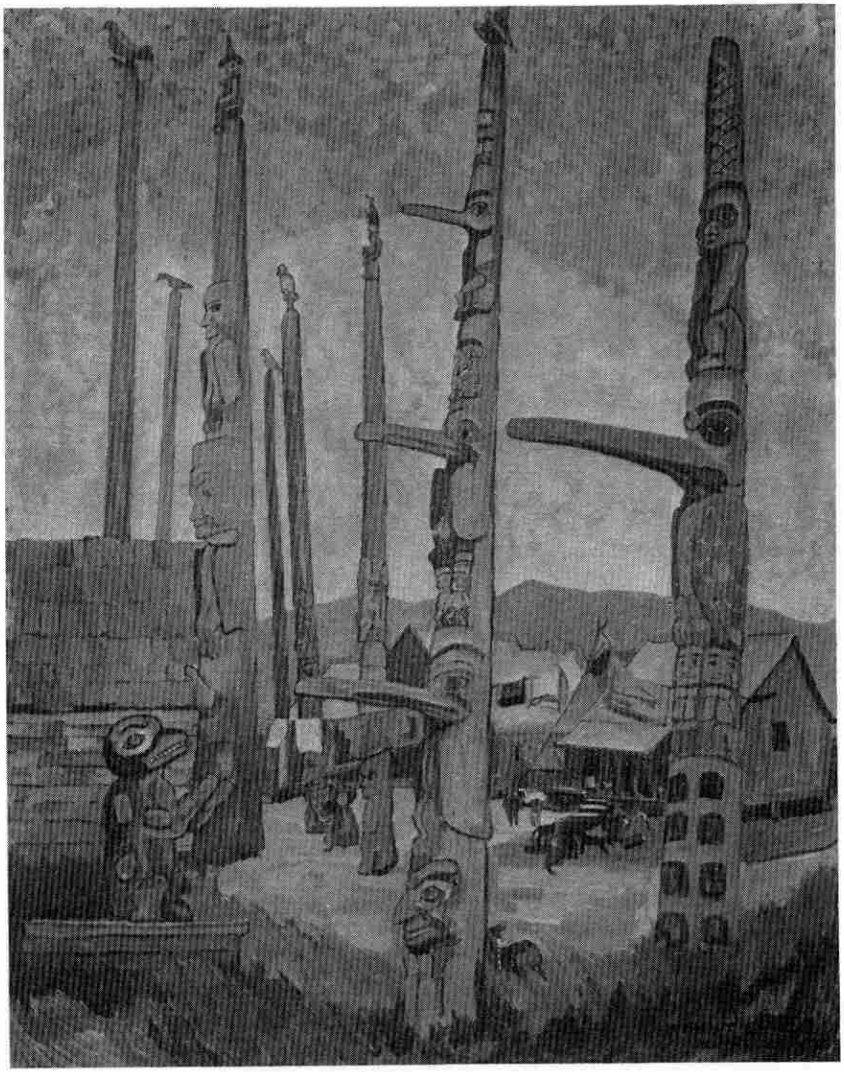

FIGURE 1 Emily Carr, *Totem Poles, Kitseukla,* 1912. Oil on canvas ($24\frac{3}{4}'' \times 11\frac{3}{4}''$), collection. The Vancouver Art Gallery.

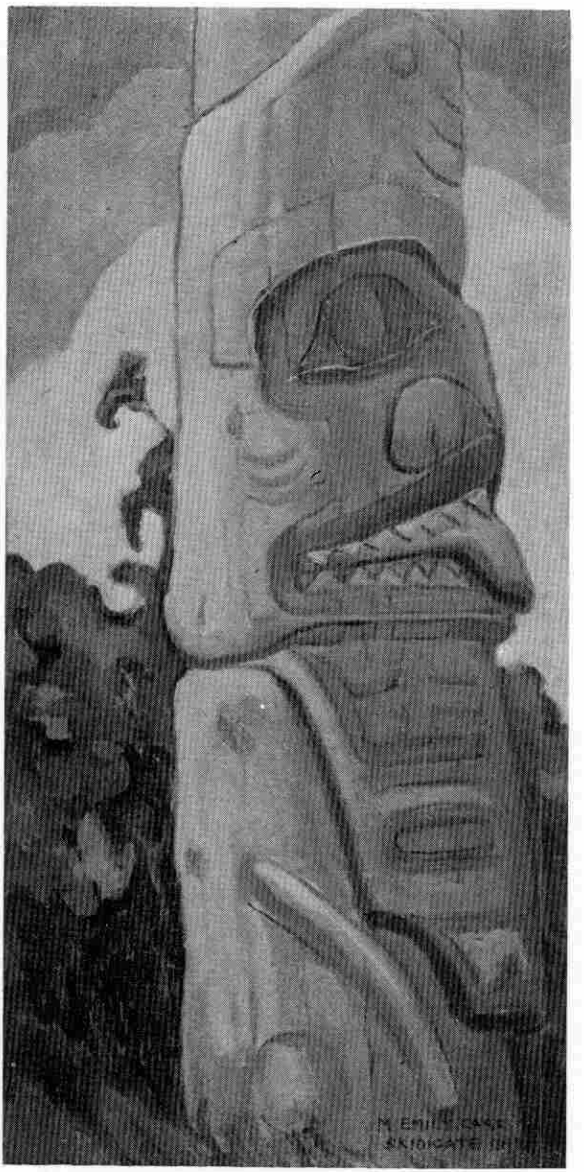

FIGURE 2 Emily Carr, *Skidigate,* 1912. Oil on canvas (24″ × 17$\frac{15}{16}$″), collection. The Vancouver Art Gallery.

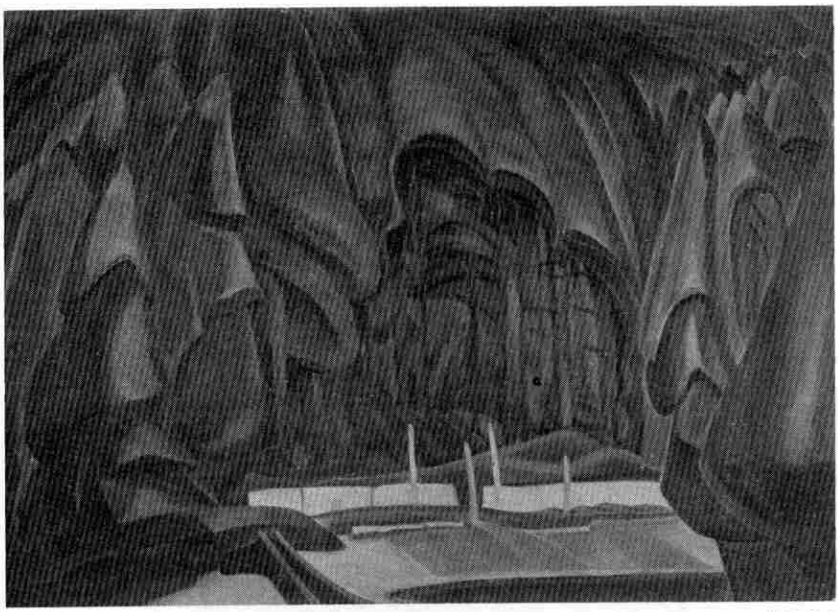

FIGURE 3 Emily Carr, *Old Time Coast Village*, 1928. Oil on canvas (36″ × 50½″), collection. The Vancouver Art Gallery.

FIGURE 4 Emily Carr, *Deep Forest*, c. 1932–33. Oil on canvas (27″ × 44″), collection. The Vancouver Art Gallery.

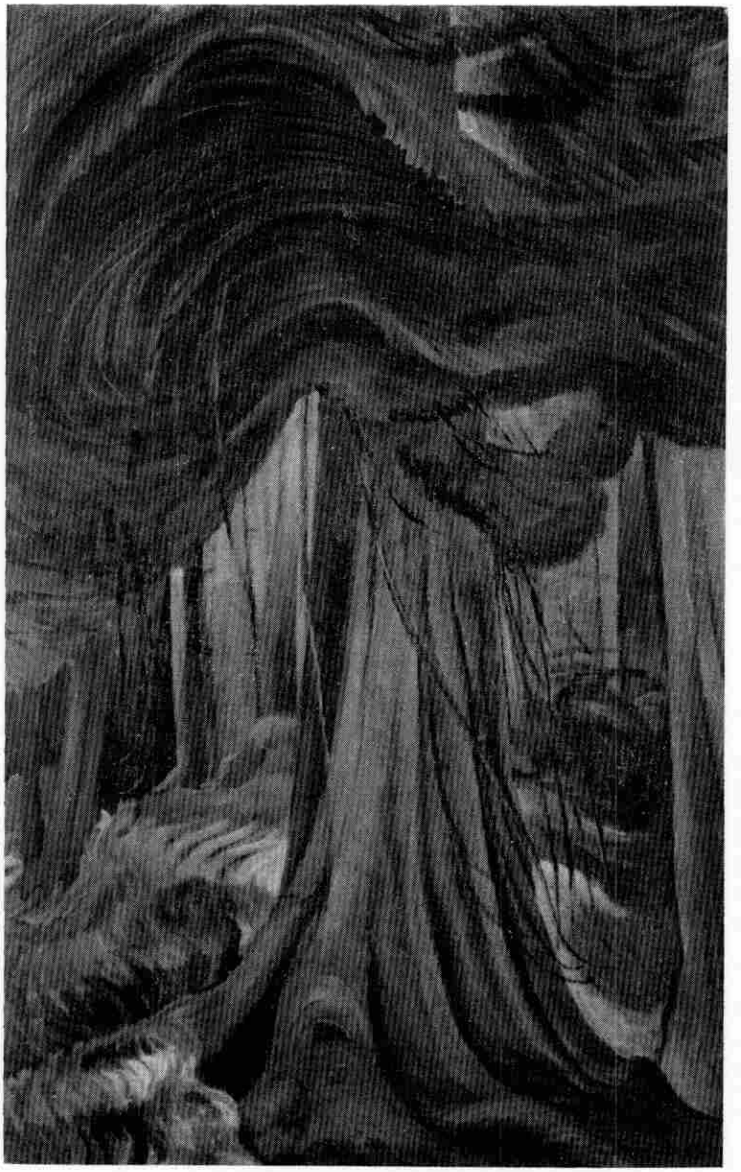

FIGURE 5 Emily Carr, *The Red Cedar*, c. 1932–33. Oil on canvas (43 11/16″ × 27″), collection. The Vancouver Art Gallery.

FIGURE 6 Photograph of Emily Carr, courtesy: The Vancouver Art Gallery. Credit: H. Mortimer-Lamb.

FIGURE 7 Gilah Yelin Hirsch, *Annan*, 1976. Oil on canvas (30″ diameter).