

Renowned artist considered ‘religion and art as one’

Governor General Award winner was a prolific writer, a purposeful painter, and a Canadian icon.

Emily Carr was a woman of few flourishes, of purposeful and precise strokes. She became one of the first artists to capture the spirit of Canada in the modernist style, developing a technique of stunning originality and strength that enabled her to give form to a Pacific mythos that was so carefully distilled in her imagination.

“I think that one's art is a growth...” Carr said when questioned about her life as an artist, “I do not think one can explain growth. It is silent and subtle. One does not keep digging up a plant to see how it grows.”

Self-deprecating and wildly eloquent, Carr was a recluse of curious eccentricities and rebellious shyness. Her autobiographical writings skewed the line between fact and fiction; the events are described as Carr herself liked to remember them, often unflattering and rarely grammatically correct. Carr insisted her published works keep true to her eccentricities. As she put it: “Is it better to say nothing politely or to say something poorly?”

Carr’s work as an artist earned her recognition as a Canadian icon. Her work with the indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest Coast provided a glimpse of the ancient culture to newly arrived Europeans; she was a forerunner for the modernist art movement in an artistically unadventurous society, with her enduring works “making the spirit of western places speak to westerners”; she was a darling of the women’s movement in the 1930s; she wrote five books, three published post-humously and one awarded the Governor General’s Award for non-fiction; and, finally, her intent as an artist carries on, with numerous educational institutes and an inlet named in her honour, dozens of books published

about her, and a permanent exhibit in the Vancouver Art Gallery. Carr was, at the root of her successes, a liaison between cultures, a translator for the ambiguous nature of peoples and places.

“She created a body of work that’s almost timeless,” remarked Kathryn Bridge, the curator of the Emily Carr exhibit at the Royal B.C. Museum. “That’s high art, that’s a sign of success”

Early Life

An unexceptional student, Emily hated school – “When I moved up a grade the new teacher would say, ‘Ah, another good Carr!’, but was disappointed”. Emily’s parents encouraged all of their children to sketch and paint. It was a rare point of pride for Emily, who won a prize for copying a boy with a rabbit from Miss Emily Wood, the Carr children’s drawing teacher. She often drew faces on her books and fingernails.

Emily was an adventuresome and lively child, often found outdoors. She was a favourite of her father, indulged and pampered to many of her childish whims. Her father created her first easel from four twisted cherry tree branches he had pruned in the yard.

When Emily was 12 years-old, her father and her became estranged. She never spoke of the catalyst until close to her death, referring to it as “the brutal telling”, somehow related to an explanation of sex and reproduction. For the remaining years of Richard Carr’s life, the rift persisted and laid the foundation for Emily’s unresolved relations with men later in her life.

Childhood ended for Emily at 15 with the death of her mother. Edith, the Carr’s oldest daughter at 32 years-old, became the head of the household. This caused strife with Emily, who, despite being shy, was already something of a rebel.

Carr began to pursue art seriously at 18, attending the San Francisco School of Art until an economic downturn forced Carr to return to Victoria in 1895 and seek work as a teacher. Her art may have gained

technical merit, but critics remark that it lacked emotion, that Carr had yet to mature and learn about the deeper parts of art and life.

It was at this age that Carr made a visit to the Native village of Ucluelet, midway up the coast of Vancouver Island. Carr would later describe this trip as one that affected her destiny, but the realization came much later in life.

At 27 years-old, Emily travelled to England to attend the Westminster School of Art; it was only during periods spent outside of London in smaller towns closer to nature that Carr enjoyed herself.

Though she received many marriage proposals, Carr rejected them all. Carr's continued education was an increasingly lonely journey; as a woman from the colonies, Carr felt out of place. The city became unbearable, and she suffered a complete physical and psychological collapse.

After a residence in a sanatorium in the countryside, Carr returned to Victoria in 1904. In her own eyes and in the eyes of those who awaited her at home, she was a failure, with no reputation or renown to show for her effort.

In the summer of 1907, at 36 years-old, Carr took a cruise to Alaska. In the town of Sitka and a nearby Tlingit village, she saw for the first time the totem poles that would become her overriding subject matter. She loved their monumental size and majesty and thus made a decision. She would document the totem poles of British Columbia, providing a record as accurate as she could of the many poles in the province. It was her way of preserving them, at least on canvas; it would be her mission.

With native culture in the back of her mind, Carr made a trip to France in 1910, where she met the English artist Harry Gibb. His paintings contorted figures and used abstract, muddy backgrounds. Though Carr was taken aback by the distortion, she saw how "flavourless, little, and unconvincing" her traditional painting was by comparison.

Embarrassed by the male nude model in her figure drawing class at Academie Colarossi, she switched to a clothed model class, but left the school a month later. Robin Laurence, author of *Our Emily*, described Carr's outlook as the "refusal of adult sexuality, stranding her in eternal, innocent childhood, defiant yet chaste."

Carr joined the private studio of Scottish artist John Fergusson following her short tenure at Academie Colarossi. After three months, Carr became sick; overworked and strained with worry that she was falling behind the other students, she became "demented with headaches," and, to her sister, "too hateful for words".

After her sickness, Gibb complimented her on a recent work and showed her how to add her own imagination; his lesson was not to copy the subjects, but to realize them. An awareness and sensuousness crept into Carr's work as she switched from watercolours to oil paints, as energy and vibrancy became "colour shorthand for translating visual information" that mirrored her mood.

Period of Rejection

Carr described returning to Victoria in *Growing Pains*: "I unpacked my box and there was a dead silence among my sisters and my favourite friends... they turned away and talked hard about something else."

There were many gasps at Carr's art exhibition, but several paintings sold and numerous students signed up for lessons with the "violently modern" artist.

Carr was extremely sensitive to such criticisms and wary of any comments on her work. According to Carr in *Growing Pains*, "'the good old Camera cannot lie. That's what we like, it shows everything,' said the critics. This bigger, freer seeing now seemed so ordinary and sensible to me, so entirely sane. It could not have hurt me more had they thrown stones. My painting was not outlandish, it was not even ultra."

Following this critical roasting, Carr had trouble finding work as a teacher in schools she once held residence in.

“Why should simplification to express depth, breadth and volume appear to the West as indecent as nakedness?” Carr asked in response to the critics. “People did not want to see beneath surfaces. The West was ultraconservative.”

In 1912, Carr began her work with the totem poles and Indian houses of Northern B.C.. She was greeted with courtesy from some nations, such as the Haida, but treated with suspicion and hostility by others who feared white intruders.

Carr saw totem poles as one of the few ways of recording culture, and was devastated to see them being used as firewood by First Nation’s people who had come to view their own culture as backward and pagan. Carr’s paintings often depict the poles in a state of decay, showcasing the decaying culture

Though well-intentioned, numerous native and white critics viewed Carr’s approach to colonialism as naive. Carr, and a number of her patrons, believed she was doing her part to make the whole of B.C. appreciate aboriginal culture.

The challenge for Carr came in applying the techniques she learned in France to the depictions of the totem poles; they demanded an absolute accuracy, and Carr provided a powerful accuracy for sight, but nothing deeper.

Carr longed for success and feedback, but found compliments over-sweet and suspicious, especially if they came from critics. She preferred the intuitive response of regular people without a place in the art sphere. “I liked the little Chinaboy’s remarks much better,” she said after a party in her studio “badly expressed but from his heart.” Following the criticisms of her Aboriginal art, Carr claims she did not paint for 15 years, with “all of the art smashed out of me flat.”

Her father's land was divided into city lots and sold at a loss. Each sister kept one, and Carr built a four suite apartment studio on hers. She worked as a landlord and lived off of the rent of her tenants. In 1918, Carr temporarily moved out of the building and lived in a tent in the back yard. To make money, she painted Aboriginal designs on pots to sell to tourists, though she "hated [herself] for prostituting Indian Art." As well, she bred bobtail sheepdogs, chickens, rabbits, and grew fresh produce for sale.

The Inner and Outer Reality

In 1927, Carr had nearly abandoned the notion of painting as a serious vocation. However, Eric Brown, the director of the National Gallery of Canada had travelled to B.C. to lecture on modern art and make selections for an exhibit on West Coast Indian art. He sought out Carr, who was initially hostile to him, and persuaded her to bring her collections out of the basement. He found her work powerful and original.

Carr and Brown went to Eastern Canada together, where Carr's story of rejection from conservative West Coasters evoked sympathy and approval. She became acquainted with the Group of Seven, seven nationalist modern painters concentrated in Eastern Canada and the modern art movement.

The Group of Seven's ideal was that distinctive Canadian art could be developed through direct contact with nature itself. When the group accepted her and stated they were impressed with her work, Carr's mood uplifted profoundly. Lawren Harris, one of the members, became one of Carr's most profound mentors.

Of Lawren Harris, Carr said, "to both of us, religion and art are one."

Carr, invigorated once more, returned to Victoria and began to paint and sketch more than she had at any other period in her life. She began to produce her most original and uninhibited works, following on themes that had fascinated her in childhood, the crux being the nature of Western B.C.

“There is something bigger than fact: the underlying spirit, all it stands for, the mood, the vastness, the wildness, the Western breath of go-to-the-devil-if-you-don't-like-it, the eternal big spaceness [sic] of it. Oh the West! I'm of it and I love it!” Carr remarks in *Hundreds and Thousands*.

Despite her mounting renown in the art canon of Canada, Carr “remained a highly individualist artist, never truly part of larger world movements or their Canadian expressions, though, from time to time, she borrowed from their mannerisms” according to Kathryn Bridge, Manager of the B.C. Story Project and curator of the Emily Carr exhibit at the Royal B.C. Museum.

She discarded her impulse to record totems accurately and endeavoured instead to capture the mythology and emotion behind them.

In the 1930's, Carr abandoned Aboriginal themes on Harris' suggestion to focus on her own art instead of someone else's. She would return to her original passion of landscape. In her twilight years, Carr's work began to play with light and movement, to express glory, joy, and identification with nature in stark contrast to the dark, sombre pieces that she created in her formal period.

In her 60's, Carr began to experience a decline in health. With no desire to travel far, she purchased a caravan and named it the Elephant, towing it to various locations in Victoria. She began to paint less and write more, compiling autobiographical accounts of her life. Her driving tenet was not facts and figures, but the truth of the memory, the feeling of the moments that made it up. The inner and out reality were united in her art; Carr's strokes expressed a movement in themselves, a purpose that came with intent and focus that had been lacking in her life.

“The danger in canvases is that of binding and crucifying the emotion, of pinning it there to die flattened on the surface. Instead, one must let it move over the surface as the spirit of God moved over the face of the waters,” said Carr.

In 1937, Carr had a heart attack. She devoted practically all of her time to writing, which she could do in bed. She wrote numerous letters to friends, remarking that “the absence of flesh in writing perhaps brings souls nearer.”

In 1942, Carr took a final sketching trip up Mount Douglas in Victoria. The resulting paintings, though technically competent, captured neither the darkness nor joy that characterized her early work.

However, a certain morose serenity seems to emanate, a complacent maturity shown in the setting.

It was during these last years that Carr began to receive recognition, both critically and commercially. In

1945, while preparing for her annual exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery, Carr was overwhelmed with exhaustion and checked herself into a nursing home for rest.

“She was one of those artists who, in the words of psychoanalyst Otto Rank, live themselves out completely in their work,” remarked Shadbolt.

Emily Carr

Emily Carr was born in Victoria, B.C. on Dec. 13, 1871. She died on Mar. 2, 1945 of a heart attack. She was 73 and never married. Ira Dilworth published her literary works posthumously. Lawren Harris donated most of her paintings and sketches to the B.C. Archives and the Vancouver Art Gallery on her behalf.

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