

# Exhibition Reviews



**Emily Carr: New Perspectives on a Canadian Icon** . NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA and the VANCOUVER ART GALLERY. Mounted at the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. 2 June–4 September 2006. Accompanying publication: Charles Hill, Johanne Lamoureux, and Ian M. Thom. *Emily Carr: New Perspectives on a Canadian Icon*. Toronto: Douglas McIntyre, 2006. 335 p. ISBN 1-55365-173-1.

Another exhibition about Emily Carr could not be unpopular, could it? Everyone, even schoolchildren, has at least heard of Emily Carr. As a child, I first noticed her when snooping through my father's art books, where I found *Emily Carr, Her Paintings and Sketches*, the exhibition catalogue for the 1945 memorial show put on after her death by the National Gallery of Canada and the Art Gallery of Ontario. The odd cover image of fantastic totem creatures near bundled Native women made me look inside, and there I saw massive plasticine structures in the forms of buildings, trees, and columns. That moment of discovery bubbled up again when I entered the 2006 show, organized by the National Gallery of Canada and the Vancouver Art Gallery. My anticipation grew, knowing that Emily Carr's paintings were waiting silently beyond the first doorway, simmering with their intensity and grandeur.

The concept of this show was a key element of the Vancouver Art Gallery's seventy-fifth anniversary plans, since the Emily Carr collection is an important part of the Gallery's holdings. What was planned was a fresh look at the artist that involved revisiting the major twentieth-century exhibitions that had formerly presented her work, an honest presentation that would rely on new sources and perhaps dispel or at least deflate myths or assumptions about the artist. A team of national and international curators and professionals gathered artworks by Emily Carr and related artists. The exhibit was first mounted at the National Gallery in Ottawa, where I viewed it. After this showing, the exhibit was scheduled to go to the Vancouver Art Gallery, the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, and finally, the Glenbow Museum in Calgary.

The defining characteristic of this show was the variety of artifacts, supporting archival documents and publications gathered to surround the art. Beyond her paintings, Carr was also explained through a variety of her crafts, potteries and textiles, and by her writings. This depth resulted in a truly summer “blockbuster” show that met its objectives. Advertising in Ottawa was good, with Emily’s face seen everywhere, even on buses. As the promotional material promised, the show explored her complex identity in two ways: as defined by her audiences, and as defined by herself.

You might say there was actually too much to see. I had to go through the show twice to absorb the layers of information from scholarly wall-panel texts and informative audio guides. More warning about the show’s breadth might have prompted the public to plan longer visits.

The National Gallery’s installation was in approximately eight rooms. There were three distinct sections created for about two hundred items on display. The first major section was a partial reconstruction of the 1927 *Exhibit of West Coast Art: Native and Modern* show, the show that is credited with first presenting her work to eastern Canada. A second section revisited themes seen in the 1945 *Carr Memorial Exhibition*, and explored the artist’s role as a modernist, her re-interpretation of First Nations’ art, and her expression of spirituality. The third major section provided the newest ideas: her connection to a land threatened by logging; her role as a cultural tourist set amongst other tourists; and a final area called “self-construction,” which offered an intimate look at the person.

The 1927 show was re-enacted in the first two rooms. Earlier Carr works such as *Return from Fishing, Guydons* (1912), illustrated her vantage point as a passive observer of West Coast First Nations’ culture. These were shown beside paintings of similar subjects from different periods by other artists like Paul Kane, Langdon Kihn, Frederick Alexcee, and A.Y. Jackson. Native motifs swirled through replica and remarkable signature artifacts by First Nations artists themselves. We were reminded of Carr’s encounter with Marius Barbeau, and her renewed resolve to continue painting. In the second room, her *Kispiox; Bear and Moon Totem, Kispiox;* and *Indian War Canoe (Alert Bay)* (1912), appeared alongside rugs and pottery made by Carr herself, the tangible evidence of her early struggle to survive. Through audio guides, early government policies of British Columbia were brought to light. Such things as the banning of Potlach and the ravaging practice of confiscating Native artifacts, provided a context for the environment in which artists worked. Her errors in ethnology were mentioned as were some of the Native legends she brought to light.

The second major section of the show filled central rooms where three elements were presented: the artist as a modernist, her later interpretation of First Nations art, and, finally, her spirituality. “Modernism Remembered” recollected the 1945 *Carr Memorial Exhibition* where she had been

re-examined and redefined since 1927, recalling the influence of modern artists like Mark Tobey and Lawren Harris. Early and later works hung side by side, treating the evolution of her favoured Native subjects. *Indian Church* (1929) and *Big Raven* (1931) illustrated the later distillation and focus of form.

“Affective Resonance” focused on Carr’s re-interpretation of Native motifs and the land. The visitor was encouraged to consider this change and her spirituality through an introspective look revealed in her own words through quotes from her book, *Klee Wyck*. The later works, *Crying Totem* and *Totem Mother, Kitwancool* (1928), provided examples of the full canvases and tight compositions of this period. Form seemed to burst from the edges of the canvas. In *Strangled by Growth* (1931), swirling trees almost totally engulfed the totem. “Nature and Transcendence” explored Carr’s relationship with Lawren Harris. Here the exhibit explored the theory that their friendship and his exploration of theosophy led to Carr’s anthropomorphic use of the form of the human eye in her landscapes. In the painting *Grey* (1929–30), trees were pulled into abstraction around a magnificent omnipotent central tree-trunk eye, using a serene neutral palette. Lawren Harris called this a “pivotal” work in Carr’s career.

Another section of the show provided a look at the physical realities of the landscape Carr depicted, her place in a larger natural movement of home exploration, and, finally, a look inward. “Unnatural Landscapes” presented Carr in a more contemporary way with a successful use of rich supporting historical documents. The painting *Logger’s Culls* (1935) was presented beside a John William Clark photo from the British Columbia Archives: *Topping a Spartree, Vancouver Island* ca. 1940, documenting clear-cut logging. Carr’s painting, *Scorned as Timber, Beloved of the Sky* (1935), was evidence of her witness to the violation of her lovely forests and the threat to her environment. But the paintings maintained a beauty and a reverence for the forest despite the threat, and show her familiar use of waves of rhythmic vibrating colour to define the light of hope at the top of the sky. Other documents and media presented were BC Forest Service logging photographs, *Timber Licence Maps*, 1915–41, and a 1935 film from the Canadian Government Motion Picture Bureau, *Big Timber*, which praised the industry.

The “Cultural Tourist” set Carr back into a larger society that recognized the value of the unique West Coast culture. Along with other artworks on the walls, a showcase presented archival items outlining the evolution of tourism. Among the items was a reproduction of an Alaskan journal of 1907 documenting an early trip through British Columbia, thought to be the inspiration for her life-long passion. Other items included a 1921 postcard, a cover from the 1927 exhibition catalogue, a copy of Marius Barbeau’s book, *Downfall of Temlaha*, and the back cover of a 1931 *Canadian National Railways Magazine* from Library and Archives Canada.

“Between the Mirror and the Echo” was a favourite theme of the third section and of the show . Alternative perspectives provided an intimate look through the eyes of Carr ’s contemporaries and then from her own outward gaze. One room was filled with personal memorabilia, including photographs of colleagues, friends, pets, and even her mobile home. There were facsimiles of her illustrated journals; newspaper reviews; Carr ’s published works; and portraits and self-portraits (the most telling artwork of all). Remarkable quotes from Emily’ s own words swirled around the room on the walls. The most original elements of the show were full-size replicas of her lovely early illustrated journals, 1901–1910, made up of caricature and prose, such as *London Student Sojourn* (1901), that were placed on coffee tables near comfy couches.

Portraits in the last room reminded us of Carr ’s struggle as an artist and as a woman. Her first self-portrait (1924–25), was placed at the beginning of the room. In it, an introspective Carr had her back to us! We were reminded of her recognized struggle with self-worth, especially in the face of past critics. Leaving this room the visitor was stopped by a freestanding blocking wall on which was hung the arresting 1938–39 self-portrait. Here a strong, confident and peaceful Carr seemed to ask “this is all that I am ... this is who I am ... what do you think?” My answer to her question was simply , “Thank you for all your wonderful work – it’s a privilege to see it.”

This show allowed both the reinterpretation of established theories and the clarification of assumptions about Emily Carr , a strong, innovative Canadian woman, author, and artist. Congratulations to the curators and staff on this truly definitive show.

**Martha Catchpole**  
**Library and Archives of Canada**