

Emily Carr: Deep Forest



Emily Carr
Deep Forest, circa 1931
Oil on canvas
Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Emily Carr Trust

TEACHER'S STUDY GUIDE
Winter 2013

Vancouver
Artgallery

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Vancouver Art Gallery

Teacher's Guide for School Programs

Throughout her life, Emily Carr spent a great deal of time outdoors and expressed her love and appreciation of nature through her art. The exhibition *Emily Carr: Deep Forest*, will showcase over 40 forest paintings created by Carr in the 1930's, most of them depicting scenes within 25km of her Victoria home. These works are the most important representation of B.C's landscape in the first half of the 20th century, as they re- shaped how the coastal forest landscape was perceived in British Columbia. The paintings in the exhibition are almost all drawn from the Vancouver Art Gallery's permanent collection.

DEAR TEACHER:

This guide will assist you in preparing for your tour of the exhibition *Emily Carr: Deep Forest*, and provides follow-up activities to facilitate discussion after your Gallery visit. Engaging in the suggested activities before and after your visit will reinforce ideas generated by the tour and build continuity between the Gallery experience and your ongoing work in the classroom. Most activities require few materials and can be adapted easily to the age, grade level and needs of your students. Underlined words in this guide are defined in the Vocabulary section.

The tour of *Emily Carr: Deep Forest* has three main goals:

- to explore the techniques and practices of Emily Carr
- to consider how Carr's work connects to the landscape of British Columbia,
- to examine Emily Carr's individual approach to art in terms of her ideas, materials, techniques and inspiration.

THE EXHIBITION: Emily Carr: *Deep Forest*

The Vancouver Art Gallery is home to the richest collection of Emily Carr works in the world. We are fortunate to have major pieces from throughout her career, but our collection is particularly rich in her forest paintings from the 1930s, both canvases and works on paper. Her images depicted the coastal forest landscape, generally around Carr's Victoria home, in a way previously unseen in British Columbian art.

For Carr, the forests of the West Coast were not a difficult subject matter, but a place where the beauty and harmony of the natural world was ever-present. She entered the forest to make her work and saw nature in ways unlike her fellow British Columbians, who perceived it as either untamed wilderness or a plentiful source of lumber.

Carr's remarkably personal and spiritual vision of the forest is seen in these works. While her art was strongly influenced by modernist ideas—which came from her reading and looking at the work of artists such as Mark Tobey and Lawren Harris, among others—her expression of the spiritual and natural is uniquely her own.

In a passage from her 1934 journal, Carr wrote:

What do these forests make you feel? Their weight and density, their crowded orderliness. There is scarcely room for another tree and yet there is space around each. They are profoundly solemn yet upliftingly joyous. You can find everything in them that you look for, showing how absolutely full of truth, how full of reality the juice and essence of life are in them. They teem with life, growth, expansion...

While others thought of the forests as impenetrable and unappealing, Carr saw the energy and vitality of the natural world and seized the opportunity to express her vision. Although it may not be obvious today, her works were extremely radical during her lifetime and provided a new and unique way of seeing the landscape of the coastal rainforest.

Carr's paintings of the forest profoundly influenced the way British Columbians perceived the natural world. No subsequent painter can depict the forests of British Columbia without acknowledging her achievement.

ARTISTS' BACKGROUND

Emily Carr (1871–1945)

One of the most important British Columbia artists of her generation, Emily Carr is best known for her work documenting the totem Poles of First Nations peoples of the province of British Columbia and her forest landscapes.

Carr began taking art lessons as a child in Victoria and continued her studies in San Francisco and England, where she most likely first began sketching outdoors. She returned to Canada with solid—if conservative—technical skills. In 1911 she went to France to study drawing and painting, and returned to Canada this time with a completely new approach to painting and to using watercolour paints. She worked directly from her subject matter and used vibrant Fauvist colours, broken brushstrokes and minimal detail, and her work achieved a new-found immediacy and freshness.

In the summer of 1912, Carr travelled north to visit First Nations villages on the Skeena River and Haida Gwaii (the Queen Charlotte Islands) and in the fall she produced the first of her major canvases of First Nations subject matter, using her recently acquired Modernist painting skills. Carr exhibited these works in Vancouver in early 1913 and offered them for sale to the provincial government. The works were rejected on the grounds that they were not “documentary” enough; they were too abstract. Unable to support herself through her art, she returned to Victoria to turn her attention to alternative ways of making a living. Over the next decade, Carr produced very little painting; she ran a boarding house, raised sheepdogs, made pottery and gave art lessons.

In 1927, Carr’s work was included in the exhibition *West Coast Art: Native and Modern* at the National Gallery in Ottawa. This was her introduction to other artists, particularly members of the Group of Seven, who recognized the quality and originality of her work. In the 1930s, Carr began devoting most of her attention to landscape, particularly the forest, as her subject matter. Greatly influenced by her exchange of letters with Lawren Harris, a member of the Group of Seven, Carr sought to capture a sense of the spiritual presence that she experienced in nature. Her work became increasingly abstract as she experimented with shape, form, colour and movement.

In the late 1930s, as her health worsened, Carr began to focus more energy on writing, producing an important series of books. One of these, *Klee Wyck*—stories based on her experiences with First Nations people—won the Governor General's Award for Literature in 1941. She died in 1945 in Victoria at the age of seventy-four, recognized as an artist and writer of major importance.

PRE-VISIT ACTIVITY: The Artist (all grades)

Objective: Students explore the life of Emily Carr: her art practices, influences and artistic process.

Materials:

- the Internet; some useful websites:
<http://www.emilycarr.ca/>
<http://bcheritage.ca/emilycarrhomework/gallery/gallvag/vagmain.htm>
- Artist Information Sheet and Student Worksheet (following pages)
- writing materials, coloured pencils

Process:

1. Divide students into four groups. Give each group one of the first four categories from the Information Sheet (p.7)
2. Give each student a copy of the Student Worksheet (p. 8) and ask them to consider what they need to find out to complete their section. Have them conduct research using the Internet, either at home or at school.
3. Ask each group to find and sketch a work by the artist and add it into the space provided in the Worksheet.
4. Have each group present their information to the class while the rest of the students fill in their worksheets.

Conclusion:

- Ask students to comment on what they find interesting or notable about the artist and their art.
- Did Emily Carr have practices, attributes or perspectives that might be described as particularly British Columbian? Explain.
- What makes Carr a significant or important artist?
- What else are students interested in finding out about the artist?

Artist Information Sheet

Emily Carr

<http://bcheritage.ca/emilycarrhomework/gallery/gallvag/vagmain.htm>

<http://www.emilycarr.ca/>

- Born and died in Victoria
- Lived most of her life alone, had lots of animals
- Was thought of as unusual, different from other women in Victoria
- Studied art in San Francisco, England and France
- Travelled through British Columbia visiting First Nations villages and forests
- Found it hard to make a living, gave up art for a long time
- Only later was recognized as an important British Columbian artist
- Influenced by Fauvism, abstraction and Lawren Harris and the Group of Seven
- Modernist painter who experimented with colour, form, shapes and visible brushstrokes
- Preferred to sketch her landscapes outdoors; often made final works in her studio
- Wrote many books toward the end of her life, which were well received
- Best known for painting the forests of British Columbia and First Nations villages
- Only sometimes used watercolour, most often painted in oil

Student Worksheet

	Emily Carr
Personal information	
Travels & influences	
Process and techniques	
Description of artworks	
Annotated sketch of an artwork	

PRE- or POST VISIT ACTIVITY: Sketch and Paint (all grades)

Objective:

Students are introduced to Emily Carr’s process of working by sketching outdoors and then, back in the classroom, creating a painting based on the sketch.

Discussion:

Emily Carr often created sketches for her landscapes out in nature, where she could study the colours and textures of the trees, foliage, lakes and sky, and observe the way light, wind and weather affected her subjects. Carr began sketching in charcoal, but later developed a technique of thinning out oil paints with gasoline, which enabled her to create quick, colourful sketches. She would take the sketches she had accumulated out in the field back into the studio, and there she would make oil paintings based on—but not exactly the same as—her sketches.

Emily Carr wrote the following passage in her book *Growing Pains*:

“Outdoor study was as different from studio study as eating is from drinking. Indoors we munched and chewed our subjects. Fingertips roamed objects feeling for bumps and depressions. We tested textures, observed contours. Sketching outdoors was a fluid process, half looking, half dreaming, awaiting invitation from the spirit of the subject to ‘come, meet me half way.’ Outdoor sketching was as much longing as labour. Atmosphere, space cannot be touched, bullied like the vegetables of still life or like the plaster casts. These space things asked to be felt not with fingertips but with one’s whole self.”

Materials:

For Part 1:

- ❑ drawing pads or clipboards and sheets of paper
- ❑ pencil crayons or crayons

For Part 2:

- ❑ thicker paper for painting
- ❑ paint—preferably liquid tempera or acrylic, but any available paint will work
- ❑ paintbrushes, water in containers

Process:

Part 1:

1. Discuss Carr’s two-step process of sketching outdoors and painting in her studio. Read students the above excerpts from the writings of Carr.
2. Have students go outdoors and make a colour sketch as a precursor to making a painting. Choose an outdoor area with some greenery and one or more trees. Have the students decide on a starting perspective; for example:
 - close up, with tree trunk or branches filling the page,
 - from a distance, including grass, trees and sky,

- looking up, including the top of the tree and an expanse of sky,
 - a single tree.
3. Encourage students to look closely at the greens and yellows of the leaves, the browns and greys of the trunk and branches, and the blues and greys of the sky. Remind them that landscape painters like Carr didn't use just one colour, but mixed and blended colours and shades to create rich, dense surfaces.
 4. Have the students make a few colour sketches from different perspectives or angles, from close up and far away. Encourage them to fill the page with quick detail—broad strokes of colours, lines and shapes that include all the elements in their line of vision.

Part 2:

1. Back in the classroom, within a week after making the sketches, have the students look at their sketches and choose the one they would most like to make a painting from. What parts of their sketch do they want to leave in? What parts would they like to change? Does the composition feel balanced, or are there some areas they would like to add something to or remove something from? Would they like to combine elements from two drawings?
2. Have the students set up workspaces at their tables, where they can see their sketches and have access to paper, paint and brushes.
3. Have them paint their new landscapes. Encourage them to fill the page, layering on and blending colours as they work.

Conclusion:

- Display the students' paintings alongside their sketches.
- Have them look at the work and talk about the similarities and differences in materials, location, colours, shapes and compositions.
- Discuss the process, how easy or hard it was to create the work, the differences between making the sketch and creating the painting, and the process of changing media and reworking an idea.
- Ask students if any of the sketches could stand alone as finished works. Do they prefer any of their sketches to their final paintings? Why or why not?

PRE-VISIT ACTIVITY: Realism vs. Abstraction (all grades)

Objective:

Students create a realistic drawing and then abstract it.

Background:

Carr was enormously inspired by the places she visited. Carr sketched in the south of France influenced by the terrain as much as the brushstroke and bright colours of the French Post-Impressionists. Sometimes she sketched on site, sometimes she brought home objects that inspired her artwork. Carr did not attempt to portray her subject in a realistic framework; rather she used the real world as inspiration for abstract, personal interpretations of her subject matter.

Materials:

- ❑ Two sheets of paper per student
- ❑ Coloured pencils or pastels

Process:

1. Discuss the inspiration that Carr found from her travels and the world around her.
2. Set up a still life in the classroom i.e. a vase of flowers, a plant etc. OR ask students to bring in an object that they have collected. It could be a souvenir from another city or country, a pebble or pinecone from a walk at the beach or park.
3. Give each student a sheet of paper and ask them to copy their object as realistically as possible, filling the whole sheet of paper. Use coloured pencils or pastels to colour and shade their work in realistic colours.
4. Give each student a second sheet of paper and ask them to draw the object again – but this time, to make it abstract. They can think about simplifying shapes, using flat blocks of colour, reducing parts to shapes like triangles or circles. They could change colours, making a rock green, a pine cone purple or a face blue. They could play with size and scale. Again, they should fill the whole page and use the same drawing tools that they did for the realistic drawing.
5. Display the original object, the abstract and realistic artworks alongside each other

Conclusion:

Discuss the ways the realistic and abstract drawings relate to one another and to the original object.

- What draws their attention? Why?
- Are the realistic or abstract drawings - or the object itself - more interesting? Why?
- Should Emily Carr be showing nature exactly as it is, or is it reasonable for artists to use their imaginations to portray a place or an object? Explain.

PRE- or POST VISIT ACTIVITY: Trees of B.C. (all grades)

Objective:

Students to learn about trees native to British Columbia.

Background:

B.C.'s rich forest diversity includes more than 40 different species of native trees, with some of Canada's most interesting and valuable tree species. Coniferous, or softwood, species such as pine, spruce, fir, hemlock and western red cedar are predominant in close to 90 per cent of B.C.'s forests. Emily Carr spent a great deal of time in these forests and depicted their trees in her paintings.

Materials:

- List of trees provided on p.13
- Student Worksheet (p.14)
- Access to the Internet - a useful website:
<http://www.for.gov.bc.ca/hfd/library/documents/treebook/introduction.htm>
- Library
- Printer
- Pens, pencils and pencil crayons

Process:

1. Divide students into pairs. Assign each pair a specific tree from list provided.
2. Working in pairs, ask students to research their tree and fill in their worksheet with at least 5 facts about the tree.
3. Ask students to find and print an image of the tree.
4. Students could also create a sketch or drawing of their assigned tree with pencils, pencil crayons or another medium.
5. Have students present their information to the class
6. Images and worksheets can be displayed in the classroom side by side.

Conclusion:

1. Did you learn something new about the trees of B.C.? If so, what?
2. How might you look at trees differently now?
3. Why are trees important?
4. Why do you think Emily Carr was so fascinated with trees?

List of Trees:

1. Western Red Cedar
2. Yellow Cedar
3. Douglas Fir
4. Western Hemlock
5. Lodgepole Pine
6. Ponderosa Pine
7. White Pine
8. Sitka Spruce
9. Engelmann Spruce
10. Black Spruce
11. Subalpine Fir
12. Amabilis Fir
13. Grand Fir
14. Larch
15. Yew
16. Juniper

TREE:

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

VOCABULARY

abstract: a style of art that can be thought of in two ways:

- the artist begins with a recognizable subject and alters, distorts, manipulates or simplifies elements of it;
- the artist creates purely abstract forms that are unrecognizable and have no direct reference to external reality (also called non-representational art).

Fauvism: A name (meaning “wild beasts”) for an art movement that originated in France at the end of the nineteenth century. Fauvists were concerned with creating fresh and spontaneous images, and used brilliant colours in an arbitrary and decorative way.

First Nations: Aboriginal cultures of Canada.

landscape: a work of art in which the subject is a view of the exterior physical world. Traditionally, landscapes have been paintings or drawings depicting natural scenes and have often been concerned with light, space and setting.

Modern: an approach to art that embraced new ideas ranging from science to political thought. The Modernists rejected the restrictions of past art traditions and stressed innovation over all other criteria.

RESOURCES

Books:

Bennett, Bryan. *Discovering Canadian Art: Learning the Language*. Toronto: Prentice-Hall Canada, 1984.

Hill, Charles C., Johanne Lamoureux, Ian M. Thom, et al. *Emily Carr: New Perspectives on a Canadian Icon*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre/National Gallery of Canada/Vancouver Art Gallery, 2006.

Laurence, Robin. *Beloved Land: The World of Emily Carr*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1996.

Murray, Joan. *Canadian Art in the Twentieth Century*. Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1999.

Rhodes, Richard. *A First Book of Canadian Art*. Toronto: Owl Books, 2001.

Shadbolt, Doris. *Emily Carr*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1990.

Shadbolt, Doris, ed. *The Emily Carr Omnibus*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1993. Includes *Klee Wyck*, *The Book of Small*, *The House of All Sorts*, *Growing Pains*, *Pause*, *The Heart of a Peacock* and *Hundreds and Thousands*.

Thom, Ian. *Emily Carr: Drawing the Forest*. Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 2002.

Online:

www.artcyclopedia.com

www.for.gov.bc.ca/hfd/library/documents/treebook/introduction.htm

www.wikipedia.com

<http://www.sharecom.ca/phillips/wetpaint18.html>

<http://bcheritage.ca/emilycarrhomework/gallery/gallmain.htm>

<http://bcheritage.ca/emilycarrhomework/gallery/gallvag/vagmain.htm>

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