

Emily Carr: Into the Forest



Emily Carr
Cedar, 1942
Oil on canvas
Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Emily Carr Trust

TEACHER'S STUDY GUIDE
Spring 2017

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: Into the Forest* will showcase numerous forest paintings created by Carr in the 1930s, as well as three key early works completed during 1913–1918. These works are the most important representation of BC's landscape in the first half of the twentieth century, as they reshaped people's perceptions of the coastal forest landscape in British Columbia. Almost all of the paintings in the exhibition are 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: Into the 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: Into the 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: Into the Forest*

The Vancouver Art Gallery is home to the finest collection of Emily Carr works in the world. While we are fortunate to have major works from throughout her career, the Gallery's collection is particularly rich in her forest paintings from the 1930s. The exhibition *Emily Carr: Into the Forest* includes both her canvases and oil-on-paper works, a medium she began using during that period. Supplemented with a generous loan of three key early works completed during 1913–1918, and the remarkable *Grey*, both from private collections, this exhibition highlights her continued explorations of the natural environment—from the formative days of her career to the final stages of her life.

Carr captured the coastal forest landscape, generally around her Victoria home, in a way previously unseen in British Columbian art. She rejoiced in the diversity of greens and browns found in West Coast forests. With oil on paper as her primary medium, Carr was free to work outdoors in close proximity to the landscape. She went into the forest to paint and saw nature in ways unlike those of her fellow British Columbians, many of whom perceived it as either untamed wilderness or a plentiful source of lumber. While others found the forests impenetrable and unappealing, Carr saw the vitality of the natural world and seized the opportunity to express her vision of it. The paintings of the forest profoundly shaped not only Carr's own work but the way British Columbians perceive their surroundings to this day.

Organized by the Vancouver Art Gallery and curated by Ian Thom, Senior Curator-Historical.

ARTIST'S 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 for 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 this time she returned to Canada 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 and turned 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 (pp. 7 and 8)
- writing materials, pencil crayons

Process:

1. Divide students into four groups. Give each group one of the first four categories from the Artist 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 her art.
- Ask: 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

- 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
- crayons or pencil 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 excerpt 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- or POST-VISIT ACTIVITY: Forest Forms (all grades)

Objective:

Students create an abstract forest collage focusing on shape, form and colour.

Discussion:

Bright colours and bold forms characterize many of Emily Carr's paintings. As she progressed as a painter, her works became increasingly abstract and simplified, particularly the trees in her paintings of B.C. forests. Over time, Carr began to simplify her colours as well. She did not attempt to portray her subject in a realistic manner; rather, she used the real world as inspiration for abstract, personal interpretations of her subjects.

Materials:

- construction paper, tissue paper and/or other paper in a variety of colours
- pencils
- scissors
- glue
- printer
- access to the Internet
- printed image of a landscape or one of Emily Carr's paintings

Process:

1. Discuss Emily Carr's style of painting and her use of simple shapes, forms and colour to represent landscapes.
2. Have students find or print an image of a Carr painting *OR* an image of a Canadian landscape of their choice. If a print is not available, have students look at some works by Carr and then use their imagination to create a forest.
3. Encourage students to look at the painting or printed image as if it were a combination of simple shapes. What shapes do they see?
4. Provide students with a selection of paper in a variety of colours.
5. Have them draw out the major shapes they see on their chosen paper.
6. Have students show light and shadow by using papers with different shades of colour.
7. Have students glue shapes onto a background sheet of construction paper to create a bold and simplified landscape.
8. Display the work in the classroom.

Conclusion:

- Invite students to look at the work and talk about similarities and differences in colour shapes and compositions.
- Have them discuss the process. How easy or hard was it to create the work? What are the differences between creating a shape collage, a painting and a landscape?
- How do the students perceive landscape and nature differently now?

Examples of Student Work (all grades)



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

Objective:

Students learn about trees native to British Columbia.

Background:

B.C.'s rich, diverse forests include more than forty different species of native trees, some of Canada's most interesting and valuable species. Coniferous, or softwood, species such as pine, spruce, fir, hemlock and western red cedar are predominant in close to 90 percent 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 (p. 14)
- Student Worksheet (p. 15)
- access to the Internet. A useful website:
<http://www.for.gov.bc.ca/hfd/library/documents/treebook/introduction.htm>
- access to library
- access to printer
- pens, pencils and pencil crayons

Process:

1. Divide students into pairs. Assign each pair one tree species from the List of Trees (p. 14).
2. Have students work in pairs 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 may 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. Display students' work. If they have made drawings, display images and worksheets side by side in the classroom.

Conclusion:

- Ask students: Did you learn something new about the trees of B.C.? If so, what?
- How might you look at trees differently now?
- Why are trees important?
- 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

Student Worksheet

TREE:

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

PRE- or POST-VISIT ACTIVITY: In Her Own Words (intermediate grades)

Objective:

Students learn about Emily Carr, the writer.

Discussion:

Emily Carr struggled for recognition as a painter for most of her life. Critics, patrons and even her own family complained that her canvases were too experimental. Her work as an author, however, was an immediate success. Her first book, *Klee Wyck*, a semi-autobiographical account of her travels to First Nations communities in British Columbia, won the Governor General's Award for 1941. Carr followed *Klee Wyck* with two other books, *The Book of Small* in 1942 and *The House of All Sorts* in 1944. Her other major works, *Growing Pains: The Autobiography of Emily Carr* (1946) and *Hundreds and Thousands: The Journals of An Artist* (1966), were published after her death in 1945. *Growing Pains* and *Hundreds and Thousands* contain some of the most engaging examples of her writing, showing how Carr often worked out her ideas about art on the page.

Materials:

- ❑ drawing paper
- ❑ pencils, crayons, pencil crayons or markers
- ❑ reproductions of *Untitled Self-Portrait* (1924) and *Self-Portrait* (1938–39), pp. 17 and 18 (Note: these paintings are not featured in the exhibition.)
- ❑ excerpts from *Growing Pains*, p. 19

Process:

Part 1:

1. Read selected excerpts from *Growing Pains* to students.
2. Have students write down points and keywords that they remember from the reading.
3. Have each student draw a portrait of Carr, inspired by her words.
4. Display student portraits of Carr.

Part 2:

1. After a class discussion about the portraits they have created, show students *Untitled Self-Portrait* (1924). Ask how Carr depicts herself in this painting. Where is she? What is she doing? How is she posed? What is she wearing? Carr does not look at the viewer in her self-portrait. Discuss the impact of this with students.
2. How does Carr's image of herself differ from how students see her? How are the two similar?
3. Show students Carr's later *Self-Portrait* (1938–39). Compare this painting to Carr's earlier self-portrait. How do the two portraits differ? What factors might have contributed to this change?

Conclusion:

- Invite students to look at the work and talk about similarities and differences.
- Have them discuss the process. How easy or hard was it to create the work?
- How do the students perceive Emily Carr differently now?



Untitled Self-Portrait (1924)



Self-Portrait (1938–39)

In Her Own Words

Drawing and Insubordination

I wanted to draw a dog. I sat beside Carlow's kennel and stared at him for a long time. Then I took a charred stick from the grate, split open a large brown-paper sack and drew a dog on the sack. My married sister who had taken drawing lessons looked at my dog and said, "Not bad." Father spread the drawing on top of his newspaper, put on his spectacles, looked, said "Um!" Mother said "You are blacked with charred wood, wash!" The paper sack was found years later among Father's papers. He had written on it, "By Emily, aged eight." (pp. 29-30)

The Outdoor Sketch Class

Of all the classes and all the masters the outdoor sketching class and Mr. Latimer were my favourites. Every Wednesday morning those students who wished met the master at the ferry boat. There were students who preferred to remain in Art School and work rather than be exposed to insects, staring eyes, and sun freckles. We sketchers crossed the Bay to some quiet spot and I must say people did stare. Thirty or forty men and women of all ages and descriptions done up in smocks, pinafores and sunbonnets, sitting on campstools before easels down in cow pastures or vacant lots drawing chicken houses, or trees, or a bit of fence and bush, the little Professor hopping from student to student advising and encouraging. (p. 46)

Rejected

My pictures were hung either on the ceiling or on the floor and were jeered at, insulted; members of the "Fine Arts" joked at my work, laughing with reporters. Press notices were humiliating. Nevertheless, I was glad I had been to France. More than ever I was convinced the old way of seeing was inadequate to express this big country of ours, her depth, her height, her unbounded wideness, silences too strong to be broken... (pp. 277-78)

Rejected

"Marius Barbeau, Government Anthropologist, told me about your work," said Mr. Brown (Eric Brown, Director of the National Gallery in Ottawa). "He heard about it from the Coast Indians. We are having an exhibition of West Coast Indian Art in the Gallery this autumn. Will you lend us fifty canvases?" "We pay all expenses of transportation. Come over for the show. I can get you a pass on the railway." (pp. 283-84)

All excerpts from:

Emily Carr. *Growing Pains: The Autobiography of Emily Carr*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2005.

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*. Scarborough ON: 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; Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada; Vancouver: 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
- <http://bcheritage.ca/emilycarrhomework/gallery/gallmain.htm>
- <http://bcheritage.ca/emilycarrhomework/gallery/gallvag/vagmain.htm>
- www.for.gov.bc.ca/hfd/library/documents/treebook/introduction.htm
- <http://www.museevirtuel.ca>
- <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/emily-carr/>
- www.wikipedia.com

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