



# That Green Ideal

## **Emily Carr and the Idea of Nature**

**TEACHER STUDY GUIDE**  
SPRING 2026

**Vancouver**  
Artgallery

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

3	<b>PROGRAM INFORMATION AND GOALS</b>
6	<b>GLOSSARY</b>
7	<b>THE ACTIVITIES</b>
8	<b>PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY: WHO WAS EMILY CARR?</b>
12	<b>PRE- OR POST-TOUR ACTIVITY: TREE PORTRAIT</b>
14	<b>PRE- OR POST-TOUR ACTIVITY: FOREST FORMS</b>
16	<b>PRE- OR POST-TOUR ACTIVITY: TREE SCULPTURE</b>
20	<b>FURTHER LEARNING   TEACHER AND STUDENT RESOURCES</b>



Cover: Emily Carr, *Cedar*, 1942, oil on canvas, Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Emily Carr Trust, VAG 42.3.28; *Grey*, 1929–1930, oil on canvas, Private Collection; *Red Cedar*, 1931, oil on canvas, Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Gift of Mrs. J. P. Fell, VAG 54.7

Above: Visitors discover the interactive space as part of *That Green Ideal: Emily Carr and the Idea of Nature*, February 2026, Photo: Vancouver Art Gallery

# VANCOUVER ART GALLERY

## TEACHER'S GUIDE FOR SCHOOL PROGRAMS

*That Green Ideal: Emily Carr and the Idea of Nature* is the largest solo exhibition of British Columbia artist Emily Carr (1871–1945) at the Vancouver Art Gallery in over twenty years.

Featuring more than a hundred paintings, the exhibition explores Carr's deep interest in the landscape of the Pacific Northwest and the Indigenous Peoples of the province of British Columbia. The exhibition examines how Carr understood nature and her relationship to it through her paintings and writings, highlighting the balance she achieved between her direct experiences in the dense rainforest of British Columbia and the challenge of conveying those impressions through painting. The exhibition's title, *That Green Ideal*, comes directly from Carr's own writing—a phrase she used to describe her ongoing effort to capture not only the landscape's physical presence but also the spirit found within the natural world.

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### DEAR TEACHER

This teaching guide will assist you in preparing for your class tour of the exhibition *That Green Ideal: Emily Carr and the Idea of Nature*. It provides activities to facilitate discussion before and after your visit. Engaging in the suggested activities will reinforce ideas generated by the tour and build continuity between the Gallery experience and your ongoing work in the classroom. Most activities require very few materials and are able to be easily adapted to the age, grade level and needs of your students. Underlined words in this guide are defined in the Glossary section.

### LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

*That Green Ideal: Emily Carr and the Idea of Nature* takes place on the unceded territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and səliwətaʔ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.

## **THAT GREEN IDEAL HAS 3 MAIN GOALS:**

1

### **TO INTRODUCE**

STUDENTS TO EMILY CARR'S BODY OF WORK, TRACING THE EVOLUTION OF HER ARTISTIC STYLE FROM HER EARLY PERIOD TO HER MATURE PHASE

2

### **TO CONSIDER**

HOW THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST LANDSCAPES INSPIRED EMILY CARR'S WORK

3

### **TO EXPLORE**

INDIVIDUAL ARTWORKS IN THE CONTEXT OF IDEAS, TECHNIQUES AND PROCESSES



# GLOSSARY

**ABSTRACT(ION)** 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 unrecognisable and have no direct reference to external reality (also called non-representational art).

**GROUP OF SEVEN** A group of Toronto-centred Canadian painters devoted to landscape painting (especially of northern Ontario subjects) and the creation of a national style. The group was active from 1920 to 1933. In 1933, their name was changed to the Canadian Group of Painters.

**INDIGENOUS PEOPLES** The first inhabitants of a place. In Canada, the term "Indigenous" includes First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples.

**LANDSCAPE** Artwork of which the primary focus is natural scenery, such as mountains, forests, cliffs, trees, rivers, valleys, etc. Traditionally, landscapes have been paintings or drawings depicting natural scenes and are often concerned with light, space and setting.

**MODERN(ISM) / MODERNIST** An approach to art, prominent from 1850 to 1970, that embraced the new ideas in fields ranging from science to political thought. The modernists rejected the restrictions of past art traditions and stressed innovation over all other criteria.

**UNCEDDED** A term for a relationship between the Government of Canada and Indigenous Peoples when no treaties have been established. In general, "unceded" means the lands and waters of Indigenous Peoples were never surrendered and were taken without permission.

<sup>1</sup> Monica Gray Smith, *Speaking Our Truth: A Journey of Reconciliation* (Victoria BC: Orca, 2017), 144

# PRE- AND POST-TOUR ACTIVITIES

## GRADES 2-12

### **WHO WAS EMILY CARR?**

Grades 4–12 | Pre-Tour Activity

### **TREE PORTRAIT**

All Ages | Pre- or Post-Tour Activity

### **FOREST FORMS**

All Ages | Pre- or Post-Tour Activity

### **TREE SCULPTURE**

All Ages | Pre- or Post-Tour Activity

# GRADES 4–12 | WHO WAS EMILY CARR?

## PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY | ABOUT THE ARTIST



### OBJECTIVE

Students are introduced to the life, artistic processes and works of artist Emily Carr.

### MATERIALS

- Writing materials
- Access to Internet
- Artist Information Sheet (p. 10) and the Student Worksheet (p. 11)

### PROCESS

- Divide the class into small groups.
- Give each group one of the categories from the Artist Information Sheet.
- Give each student a copy of the Student Worksheet (p. 11) 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.

- Ask each group to find and describe a piece of work by the artist and add it to the space provided on the worksheet.
- Have each group present their information while the rest of the students fill in their worksheets.

### CONCLUSION

Discuss the following:

- What were some of the most interesting things students learned or discovered?
- Which piece are students curious about seeing in the exhibition?
- Do the artist's works connect to or resonate with the student's lives? Why or why not?
- What else are students interested in finding out about the artist?

# GRADES 4-12 | WHO WAS EMILY CARR?

## PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY CONT.

Few artists have affected the world with both their paintings and writings more than Emily Carr (1871–1945). Carr was one of the most important British Columbia artists of her generation, best known for her work documenting the totem poles of Indigenous Peoples in 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. She also travelled to France to study drawing and painting, which is where she most likely first began sketching outdoors. She returned to Canada with a new, modern way of painting, using bold colours and large, visible brushstrokes.

In 1912, she travelled north to visit Indigenous villages on the Skeena River and Haida Gwaii, and she produced her first major canvases of Indigenous subject matter influenced by her painting explorations in France. Carr offered these works for sale to the provincial government, which rejected the work on the grounds that it was not “documentary”; they were too abstract. Dejected, over the next decade, Carr produced very little painting; she returned to Victoria to make a living by running a boarding house, raising sheepdogs, making pottery and giving 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 of her work. In the 1930s, Carr began devoting most of her attention to landscape with the forest as her particular subject. She sought to capture a “sense of awe” in her paintings of the forest, sketching outdoors using thinned oil paint on paper during the summer and making final paintings in her studio using oil paint on canvas during the winter. Her work became increasingly abstract as she experimented with shape, 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, including *Klee Wyck* (1941), a book of stories based on her experiences with Indigenous Peoples, which won the Governor General’s Award for Literature in 1941. Carr died in 1945 in Victoria at the age of seventy-four, recognized as an artist and writer of major importance.

# GRADES 4–12 | WHO WAS EMILY CARR?

## PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY CONT.

### ARTIST INFORMATION SHEET

#### EMILY CARR

- Born and died in Victoria, BC
- Lived most of her life alone; had lots of animals
- Was thought of as unusual and different from other women in Victoria as she chose to focus on her art and not get married nor have children
- Studied art in San Francisco, England and France
- Travelled throughout British Columbia visiting forests and Indigenous villages
- Influenced by Lawren Harris and the Group of Seven
- Modernist painter who experimented with colour, shape and brushstroke
- Best known for painting the forests of British Columbia, Indigenous villages and totem poles
- Sketched outdoors using thinned oil paint on paper; made final paintings in her studio using oil paint on canvas
- Only sometimes used watercolour; most often painted in oil
- Found it hard to make a living; gave up art for a long time
- Toward the end of her life, wrote many books, which were critically acclaimed
- Received the Governor General's Award for Literature
- Became one of the most important British Columbia artists of her generation

# GRADES 4-12 | WHO WAS EMILY CARR?

## PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY CONT.

STUDENT WORKSHEET (FILL IN THE CHART WITH THE FOLLOWING)

<b>PERSONAL INFORMATION</b>	
<b>TRAVEL &amp; INFLUENCES</b>	
<b>ART PROCESS</b>	
<b>AN ARTWORK</b>	

# ALL GRADES | TREE PORTRAIT

PRE- OR POST-TOUR ACTIVITY | INSPIRED BY *THE LITTLE PINE*, C. 1931



**“The little pines are [...] always on the swirl and dance in May and June.”**

**—Emily Carr, excerpt from her journal, June 5, 1934**

# ALL GRADES | TREE PORTRAIT

## PRE- OR POST-TOUR ACTIVITY CONT.

### OBJECTIVE

Explore Emily Carr's process of working by sketching outdoors and then creating a portrait painting based on the sketch back in the classroom

### DISCUSSION

Emily Carr was a painter known for her paintings of nature, especially trees. And while Emily Carr was a landscape painter, she rarely painted wide, sweeping views of the outdoors from far away in a horizontal "landscape" format. Carr often painted in a vertical "portrait" format, presenting trees and landscapes up close. In 1931, she produced a group of four paintings that can be described as tree portraits. She thought of each tree as having its own personality, and she wanted viewers to feel connected to the trees she depicted. In her own words, even the smallest pines seem to dance, which she captures in the painting *The Little Pine* with its playfully reaching branches. Emily Carr felt deeply connected to the forests of British Columbia, even describing herself as a "lone old tree," and she shared the sense of wonder she experienced in the presence of the trees in her own unique way.

### MATERIALS

- Sketching paper and a surface to draw on
- Watercolour paper or heavy cardstock
- Crayons or pencil crayons
- Paint—liquid tempera or acrylic
- Paintbrush and water container

### PROCESS

- As a class, look at Emily Carr's painting *The Little Pine*. If you were to give the trees personalities, which tree seem playful? Which one is serious? Which ones are friends? What do you see that makes you say that?
- What shapes do you see? What do you notice about the lines? How would you describe them? How has Carr used brushstrokes to evoke the personality of the pines?
- Carr thought that even the smallest pines seem to dance. Which pine is performing in this painting? What do you see that makes you say that?

- Go outdoors with sketching paper and crayons or coloured pencils. Choose an outdoor area with some greenery and one or more trees.
- What personalities would you give the trees you see? Choose one and try to capture its personality. Look closely at the shapes and lines to create an abstract sketch that captures the personality of your subject.
- In the classroom, gather your painting supplies.
- Use your sketch as reference. What parts of your sketch do you want to leave in, and what parts do you want to change? Remember to think of your tree composition as a portrait, making viewers feel up close and connected to your tree's personality.
- Fill the paper with colour. Carr created browns by blending complementary colours: blue/orange, yellow/purple and red/green.
- Think about where the sun is located in the sky and add highlights and shadows.

### CONCLUSION

Display your drawings in the classroom and discuss the following:

- Which elements did you use or consider from Emily Carr's painting *The Little Pine*?
- What similarities and differences do you notice in the artworks?
- What personalities do you feel your classmates have captured in their tree portraits?
- If you were to do this project again, what would you do the same and what would you do differently?

# ALL AGES | FOREST FORMS

PRE- OR POST-TOUR ACTIVITY | INSPIRED BY *DEEP FOREST*, C. 1931



Emily Carr, *Deep Forest*, c. 1931, oil on canvas, Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Emily Carr Trust

# ALL AGES | FOREST FORMS

## PRE- OR POST-TOUR ACTIVITY CONT.

### OBJECTIVE

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

### DISCUSSION

Bright, blended colours and simplified shapes 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 BC forests. Over time, Carr began to simplify her colours as well. She did not attempt to portray her subjects in a realistic manner; rather, she used the real world as inspiration for abstracted, personal interpretations of her subjects.

### MATERIALS

- Construction paper, tissue paper and/or paper in a variety of colours
- Pencils
- Scissors
- Glue

### PROCESS

- Look closely at Emily Carr's painting *Deep Forest*. How has she abstracted the forest using shape? Find some shapes that she has used for trees.
- Gather a selection of paper in a variety of colours.
- Draw some of the shapes you can see in Carr's painting on your chosen paper.

- Show light and shadows by using papers with different shades of colour.
- Arrange your shapes onto a background sheet of construction paper to create a bold and simplified landscape.
- When you are satisfied with your composition, glue down the shapes carefully.

### CONCLUSION

Discuss the process.

- What elements did you use or consider from Emily Carr's painting *Deep Forest*?
- What did you find easy or challenging about creating your collage?
- What similarities and differences do you notice in the artworks?
- Do you perceive landscape and nature differently now? Why or why not?

# ALL AGES | TREE SCULPTURE

PRE- OR POST-TOUR ACTIVITY | INSPIRED BY *MOUNTAIN FOREST*, C. 1935–36,  
AND THE WRITING OF EMILY CARR



Emily Carr, *Mountain Forest*, 1935–36, oil on canvas, Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Emily Carr Trust

# ALL AGES | TREE SCULPTURE

## PRE- OR POST-TOUR ACTIVITY CONT'D

### OBJECTIVE

Create a tree sculpture inspired by the painting and writing of Emily Carr.

### DISCUSSION

Emily Carr spent much of her life seeking recognition as a painter. Critics, patrons and even her family often said her paintings were too experimental. However, her writing was quickly recognized. Her first book, *Klee Wyck*, a semi-autobiographical story about her travels to Indigenous communities in British Columbia, was published in 1941 and won the Governor General's Award for Literature that year. She went on to publish *The Book of Small* in 1942 and *The House of All Sorts* in 1944. After she died in 1945, her other major works, *Growing Pains: The Autobiography of Emily Carr* (1946) and *Hundreds and Thousands: The Journals of An Artist* (1966), were published.

In her journals, Carr detailed her creative process as she sought to refine her ideas for paintings, particularly her quest to capture "that green ideal": a representation of the Canadian West Coast's majestic sky and towering trees. She wanted not only to depict the natural beauty of British Columbia but also to express a sense of awe she felt within it, painting bold colours and shapes and using sweeping brushstrokes. Few have written as evocatively about their connection to nature as Carr did, and her life and work remain deeply intertwined with the Pacific Northwest Coast, where she was born and spent the majority of her life.

### MATERIALS

- Two blank 5 × 7 in. index cards
- Markers
- Scissors and glue stick

### PROCESS

- As a class, read the selected excerpt from *Hundreds and Thousands: The Journals of Emily Carr*:

**Over and over one must ask oneself the question, "What do I want to express? What is the thought behind the saying? What is my ideal, what my objective? What? Why? Why? What?"**

–Emily Carr, *Hundreds and Thousands: The Journals of Emily Carr* (Clarke, Irwin and Company, 1966), 293.

- With Carr's journal entry in mind, what do you think she is trying to express in *Mountain Forest*? What do you see that makes you say that?
- Where has she used bold shapes and colours? Or sweeping brushstrokes? How do you think this plays into what you think she was trying to express?
- After reading her words and looking at her painting, do you think she found it challenging to capture not only the beauty of the forest but also what she was feeling when she was in it? Why or why not?
- What words would you use to describe one of your experiences in nature? What are some colours, shapes or brushstrokes you could use to convey those experiences?
- To start your project, find a tree near your school. Draw a branch of the tree whose shape is interesting to you. What kind of expressive line would you use to create it on your paper?

# ALL AGES | TREE SCULPTURE

## PRE- OR POST-TOUR ACTIVITY CONT'D

- With a light-coloured marker, draw the branch from edge to edge on the long side of your index card using an expressive line. Notice how the tree branch is wider at the base and narrows towards the tip.
- Carr mixed most of her greens and browns herself. You can create browns using complimentary colours: red/green, orange/blue or purple/yellow. Following one of the lines you used to create your branch, layer two complimentary-coloured markers to fill your branch shape with expressive lines.
- Divide the rest of your index card in half. Fill one half of the card with mixtures of green using sweeping lines from edge to edge. Experiment with lines of different colours before layering the green overtop. For example, what happens to green when it is layered over yellow, blue or red?
- Fill the rest of your card with expressive lines using mixtures of blue. Again, have fun experimenting with colour before layering blue on top. What happens when you add red or green? What happens when you just add a second layer of blue?
- With your scissors, cut the brown sweeping shape to create a tree trunk. Make sure you cut the shape the entire length of the paper.
- Using the sweeping lines as a guide, cut bold shapes of greens and blues for tree boughs, land and sky. Save your scraps.
- Fold down the bottom of your tree trunk approximately 1.5 in to make a flap.
- Place your green and blue shapes in front and behind your tree trunk to create a composition you find pleasing. The green is the tree's branches and the blue is the sky. What happens when you put the sky down low? The greens in front and behind the trunk? Do you hide the top of your trunk or leave it exposed?
- When you are satisfied with your composition, glue your shapes onto your trunk.
- Using your second index card as a base, glue the folded tree trunk flap onto the card to stand your tree sculpture up.
- If you want, use your coloured paper scraps to glue on the bottom of the trunk to represent the ground.
- Emily Carr wrote, "Trees love to toss and sway, they make such happy noises," when sharing how she felt in the forest. Create a poem inspired by your sculpture and Carr's writing about the trees.
- Choose a few individual words from Carr's sentence.
- Write each word down.
- Each word will become the last word of a line in your poem. For example: The wind creates such noises. The leaves tumble from above as the trees toss. The tree bends and sways.
- Write your poem. Don't forget to note down where the original word came from that inspired each line!

## CONCLUSION

Display your sculpture and poem in class and discuss the following:

- What kind of experience do you feel you captured using colour, shape and line? What were the "whats and whys" that went into your creative decisions?
- What surprised you about creating your sculpture and poem inspired by Emily Carr?
- Did your poem change the way you viewed your sculpture? Why or why not?
- What similarities and differences do you notice between the sculptures created?

# ALL AGES | TREE SCULPTURE

PRE- OR POST-TOUR ACTIVITY CONT'D



Student examples

# FURTHER LEARNING

## TEACHER AND STUDENT RESOURCES

### BOOKS

*Emily Carr Collected*. Introduction by Ian M. Thom. Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery and Douglas & McIntyre, 2013.

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

Carr, Emily. *Emily Carr: Hundreds and Thousands*. Introduction by Gerta Moray. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2006.

### WEBSITES

[Activities for exploring creative writing through art | Art UK](#)

[Clearcutting Emily Carr](#)

[Emily Carr | The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

### VIDEO

[The Canadian Artist Who Painted The PNW | Mossback's Northwest](#)

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