

## EMILY CARR: BORDER-CROSSING CANADIAN ARTIST AND WRITER

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### Introduction: from marginal artist to Canadian icon

Emily Carr (1871–1945) is today generally considered one of Canada's greatest and most unique artists. The term “Canadian icon” is frequently used about her, and according to the *Cambridge Companion to Canadian Literature* “no Canadian has received more attention than Emily Carr” (Egan and Helms 2004, 234). However, recognition did not come easily, and it was only towards the end of her life that fame began to come her way. And despite Emily Carr's iconic status in Canada by now, she is still surprisingly little known outside her own country – which maybe says something about Canada's relative lack of international visibility as compared with her far bigger neighbour to the South?<sup>1</sup>

The story of Emily Carr's life and career may be told as a classic success story of how a keen and strongly individual artistic vision combined with dedication and hard work over a long period of time may lead to success and recognition. It can also be used to illustrate changes in artistic taste from the late Victorian age to the age of Modernism, as well as changing public opinion and focus over more than a century. However, and thirdly: the Emily Carr story can also be seen as an interesting example of a post- or anti-colonial struggle for cultural independence, a search for Canadian-ness. What in my opinion makes this story particularly interesting, is Emily Carr's own lifelong fascination with and admiration for the indigenous peoples and culture of her homeland, and the important role played by this culture in her own development both as an artist and as a Canadian. In fact Carr found herself in a doubly ambiguous position, for while on the one hand she could be classified both as a Canadian colonial or creole<sup>2</sup> and as a representative of the British colonisers/member of the ruling class, she could of course never classify as a member of the indigenous population.<sup>3</sup> From very early in her career, when she ventured out on her sketching excursions to remote native villages on Vancouver Island, she set herself the task of recording the remains of their culture. Struggling with this material, Emily Carr had to do an intricate balancing-act, trying to find a way to be a recorder and mediator as well as an independent artist. Her balancing-act took time and was worked out through several decades and different phases of her career, from the end of the nineteenth century to the end of her life.

<sup>1</sup> However, the fact that dOCUMENTA 13 (2012) in Kassel, Germany included a special exhibit of Carr's work may surely be said to be an indication that worldwide interest is finally on its way: “This is remarkable recognition for Emily Carr. It is wonderful to see Carr receive the international attention she has long deserved. The Gallery is deeply honoured to have been asked to provide these superb paintings from our permanent collection to dOCUMENTA and to have the opportunity to showcase these works to hundreds of thousands of visitors to this world renowned exhibition”. (Vancouver Art Gallery director Kathleen Bartels in an interview, <http://www.digitaljournal.com/article/327864> [last accessed 13 September 2014])

<sup>2</sup> See Benedict Anderson 1991, Chapter 4, “Creole Pioneers”, for a more extensive discussion of the use of this term.

<sup>3</sup> Homi Bhabha points out that nationalism “is by nature ambivalent”, calling this “a structural fact to which there are no exceptions”. (Bhabha 1991, 2)

### Becoming an artist – the search for Canadian-ness

A community of interest is assuredly a powerful bond between men. Do interests, however, suffice to make a nation? I do not think so. Community of interest brings about trade agreements, but nationality has a sentimental side to it; it is both soul and body at once; a *Zollverein* is not a *patrie*.

(Renan 1990, 18)

This paper attempts to trace some of the changes in taste and opinion that took place in Canada at the time of Emily Carr's formative years. It argues that Carr herself played an important role in formulating a Canadian alternative to the dominant, "colonial-English" culture, using her own art to explore the potential for a "true" Canadian art. In taking on this task, she had to grapple with big questions such as "what is art?", "what is culture?", and "what is a nation?"

In addition, being a woman meant that she generally had a harder time than a man would, being taken seriously as an artist. According to Victorian middle-class standards girls were not supposed to have serious ambitions about a career, artistic or otherwise. Women were supposed to dabble in art, as amateurs, while waiting for a husband to come along. Instead of a husband and children, however, Emily chose to settle for animals as her companions in life: her pets – dogs, cats, birds, even a monkey – were to make up her family throughout her life. That she managed by and by to convince not only her sisters, but community and critics as well, that she was serious about her goal and her vision, speaks volumes about her as an individual and her personal strength.

Furthermore, Emily Carr was located in British Columbia, the western-most province of Canada. This represented a challenge both culturally and practically. Canada was a colony, ruled from Britain, even though its dominion status from 1867 meant independence in most internal affairs.<sup>4</sup> And inside Canada it was the central area, particularly the province of Ontario, and cities like Toronto, Ottawa and Montreal, that were seen to dominate in both political and cultural matters. So British Columbia was a province (or colony) within a colony, handicapped in terms of distance as well as cultural status.

Emily however was in opposition to what she considered the self-effacing or provincial attitudes of her fellow British Columbians. From an early age she found herself critical of her British-oriented compatriots who talked and behaved as if Britain was the centre of the universe and their "real" homeland, with England and English or British culture used as their measuring-stick and quality indicator in all matters. She felt that this made them blind to the beauty and grandness of their own Canadian surroundings. And when she came to England the first time, she was made to feel her difference as a Canadian even more keenly:

He reached for his enrolment book, wrote, "Emily Carr, Victoria, B.C. .... English?"

"No, Canadian."

"Ah! Canadian, eh?"

His smile enveloped Canada from East to West, warming me. So few over here accepted Canada. These people called us Colonials, forgot we were British. English colonists had gone out to America with a certain amount of flourish, years and years ago. They had faded into the New World.

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<sup>4</sup> However, to be precise: in 1867 only Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia made up the new Dominion of Canada. The other provinces joined the confederation by and by; British Columbia in 1871; Newfoundland as late as 1949.

Later, undesirable not-wanteds had been shipped out to Canada. It was hoped that America would fade them out too – all the west side of the earth was vaguely “America” to England. This courteous old gentleman recognized Canada as herself – as a real, separate place.

(Carr, in her autobiography *Growing Pains* 2005, 129)

Emily hated being called a colonial and complained about feeling isolated and alone in her disgust with the colonial mentality. “The six PGs [PG=paying guest] without one direct look amongst them disdainfully ‘took me in’ at lunch. ‘Colonial!’ I felt was their chilly, sniffy verdict. I hated them right away” (*Growing Pains* 2005, 119).<sup>5</sup>

Emily grew up in a home that was definitely English- or British-oriented. Her parents were recent immigrants from England and had kept up close links with the mother country and its culture. Richard Carr first met Emily Saunders in California, where he had settled and made a small fortune. But they went to England for their wedding in 1854, and from 1861–63 they left California for England, aiming to resettle there. But the pull of the New World proved too strong – the “Old” one somehow having proved to be a disappointment – and they arrived in Canada in 1864, bringing their two daughters born in California with them. Emily was born in Victoria on Vancouver Island in British Columbia on December 13, 1871, the youngest of five girls. The only boy to grow up, her brother Richard (Dick), was born in 1875.<sup>6</sup>

From early childhood Emily demonstrated artistic talent and was encouraged to develop it, perhaps partly since she seemed to lack the skills and talents for both schoolwork and for housekeeping and caring that her siblings demonstrated.<sup>7</sup> After the death of her parents — her mother died in 1886, her father in 1888 — her guardian provided the financial support as well as psychological encouragement that made it possible for her to leave home to get proper professional training. At the age of 19 Emily headed for San Francisco, where she attended the California Art Institute for two and a half years (1891–1893). Her period of study in San Francisco was very important to her, giving her “a niche and the promise of a profession” (Tippett 2006, 22). She had gained a sense of self-confidence which was never completely to leave her, despite many setbacks and disappointments in the years to come.

Upon returning to Victoria, Emily started giving art-classes for children. She enjoyed teaching children, and besides it brought in money! The classes first took place in the family dining-room, but she soon decided to turn the barn’s hayloft into a classroom-studio. This studio turned out to be perfect for her: “No studio has ever been so dear to me as that old loft, smelling of hay and apples, new sawed wood, Monday washings, earthy garden tools. – The cow’s great sighs! Such delicious content!” (*Growing Pains* 2005, 105).

Having saved up enough money for a period of study in Europe, Emily set off in 1899 for England. She studied at the Westminster School of Art in London, but during school holidays she also went for instruction and inspiration to other places, such as Cornwall/St Ives, Berkshire and Hertfordshire. Although she made several good friends while in England, many of them with Canadian connections, her time in England turned out to be neither successful nor happy. Emily found herself irritated by British class consciousness and snobbery, and she was dispirited by poverty and city slums. “Oh London! Oh, all you great English cities! Why

<sup>5</sup> It is worth noticing that when another famous Canadian, Northrop Frye, some decades after Carr’s death commented on what he called “this creative schizophrenia” which was so “common in Canada”, he too used the “Colonial” label to explain it: “the most obvious reason for it is the fact that Canada is not only a nation but a colony in an empire”. (*The Bush Garden* 1971, 133)

<sup>6</sup> There were nine children altogether born to the family, but three sons died in infancy, two of them during their years in England; this may have been a contributing factor in the family’s decision to return to North America. Edith: born 1856; Clara: born 1857; Elizabeth: born 1867; Alice: born 1869; Emily: born 1871; Richard: born 1875.

<sup>7</sup> See for instance the chapter “Drawing and insubordination” in *Growing Pains* 2005, 29–33.

did you do this to England? Why did you spoil this sublime song-filled land with money-grabbing and grime?" (*Growing Pains* 2005, 172). Above all, she found herself missing Canada and west-coast nature more or more. The sea, the clean air, the mountains and the forests kept coming into her mind. From 1902 her mental and physical condition deteriorated (Tippett 2006, 55–59), finally with a depression and breakdown which caused her to be sent to spend fifteen months at a sanatorium in East Anglia. Her diagnosis was "hysteria", and the rest cure<sup>8</sup> which was prescribed for her implied "complete rest, freedom from worry and exertion for at least one year", without her sister<sup>9</sup> and without any activity such as painting" (Tippett 2006, 57, including quote from *Growing Pains* 2005, 227).

Before setting off for England in 1899, Emily had visited the village of Ucluelet on the west coast of Vancouver Island, staying with a lady missionary and being very happy sketching "boats and houses, things made out of tangible stuff" (*Growing Pains* 2005, 110). During this time she was given the Native name Klee Wyck, or "Laughing One" in Chinook ("Ucluelet", *Klee Wyck* 1986, 7–8). Getting back to Canada late in 1904, it took Emily some time to recover fully, but in the coming years she went on several sketching trips to indigenous villages on Vancouver Island and the Queen Charlotte Islands, as well as a cruise to Alaska with her sister Alice in 2007. "She went back to Ucluelet, to the Indians. Klee Wyck among the Nootka would be free of the humiliations of Emily Carr among the Victorians" (Tippett 2006, 64). At this stage she was devoted to being a faithful recorder of remains of indigenous culture. In retrospect, however, she realised how she had been avoiding the bigger challenges such as the mystery of the Western forest, and instead "nibbled at silhouetted edges" (*Growing Pains* 2005, 109–110).

But it took Emily Carr another European period of study to really find her artistic bearings. Having once more saved up money for it, she finally headed for France, the country which was considered to be *the* place to catch up with the newest and most exciting developments in art. She registered for study at the reputable Académie Colarossi in Paris in the autumn of 1910, but felt uncomfortable there and switched to a private studio after only a few weeks, then went on to do work in Bretagne with individual supervisors through 1911 (Tippett 2006, 87–88). Being a unilingual English-speaking person in France was not easy, but she felt inspired by the new post-impressionist schools of painting: "She had taken the final step from the conservative camp to the modern by expressing, through colour and form, how she saw the land and sea around Concarneau" (Tippett 2006, 96). And two of her paintings were selected for exhibition in the Salon d'Automne at the Grand Palace. Success (or at least personal triumph) at last!

After her return from France late in 1911, Carr stayed on home, North American, ground for the rest of her life. The choice had partly to do with economic necessity; from having been fairly well-off middle-class women of (some) independent means, the Carr sisters at this time found themselves in increasingly straitened circumstances. However, it was also a natural development following upon Emily's growing awareness of finally knowing what kind of work she wanted to do.

Unfortunately, neither the Victoria nor the Vancouver public or art circles were very enthusiastic about her work, even though her February 1912 solo exhibition in her new Vancouver studio was initially reported to be a success: she sold several paintings and had a good group of students signing up for classes. However, in an anonymous letter in the *Province* (3 April 1912) with the heading "Against French Art", Emily Carr was accused of thinking she could "eclipse the Almighty" by producing 'bizarre work' that was thought to be

<sup>8</sup> The rest cure was a term used about the kind of treatment of neurasthenia or hysteria developed by the American psychiatrist Weir Mitchell in the late 1800s; his most famous patient being Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

<sup>9</sup> Her sister Lizzie had been called in haste from Canada to try and assist her when her illness was at its most serious, but their relationship was never an easy one and did not help at this stage.

‘more satisfactory than nature itself’’ (Tippett 2006, 101). Here was the voice of provincial scepticism speaking out against ‘Moderns’ such as Carr, and perhaps fairly representative of the attitude of the general public? This must have been disappointing to Emily, who was herself often frustrated and disappointed with her own work, despairing about the different demands of what she wanted to record exactly and truthfully, and her own artistic ideas and visions. But Emily Carr was not to be beaten; in fact she answered the critical anonymous letter only five days after it had appeared, using the same column in the *Province*:

Art is art, nature is nature, you cannot improve on it. [...] Pictures should be inspired by nature, but made in the soul of the artist, no two individualities could behold the same thing and express it alike, either in words or in painting; it is the soul of the individual that counts. Extract the essence of your subject and paint yourself into it; forget the little petty things that don’t count; try for the bigger side.

The poor mere copyist has no chance, he is too busy worrying over the number of leaves on his tree, he forgets the big grand character of the whole, and the something that speaks, [...] he has tried for the ‘look’ but forgotten the ‘feel’.

Contrary to my having ‘given up my inspirations’, I have only just found them, and I have tasted the joys of the new. I am a Westerner and I am going to extract all that I can to the best of my small ability out of the big glorious west. The new ideas are big and they fit this big land. [...] I do not say mine is the only way to paint. I only say it’s the way that appeals to me; to people lacking imagination it could not appeal. With the warm kindly criticism of some of the best men in Paris still ringing in my ears, why should I bother over criticisms from those whose ideals and views have been stationary for the past twenty years?

*(Province* [Vancouver], 8 April 1912, as quoted in Tippett 2006, 101)

### **Emily Carr as a recorder and interpreter of indigenous culture**

From early childhood Emily Carr had been used to seeing and befriending Canadian natives. She was intrigued and attracted by their “difference”, in terms of way of life and priorities, above all their closeness to nature, on water as well as in the forest landscape. As already mentioned, Emily’s first serious work on indigenous art was done on her sketching trips to remote and partly deserted villages on Vancouver Island and the Queen Charlotte Islands after her years of training in San Francisco. Her early meticulous sketches (in charcoal and water-colours) of First Nations dwellings and art may well be – and have been – described as anthropological work, a kind of mapping project. And she continued going on these excursions after returning from her studies in Europe, too. Her years of training abroad had provided her with better and more varied skills and techniques, and she was now trying to put them to use on her chosen material, the Canadian west with its mixture of luxurious forests and remains of First Nations settlements and other marks or interventions on the landscape.

However, finding that unique way of seeing and recording her world took its time: after she had returned from France, there followed a long period of about 15 years (1912–1927) when Carr more or less gave up – *seemed* to have given up would be a more correct way of putting it – her artistic ambitions, or so she claims in her autobiographical writing. Instead she devoted herself to building and running a boarding-house in Victoria, intending in this way to secure a steady income, but also hoping at the same time to attract practising or would-be artists as lodgers. Describing the house, she claims that “[t]he purpose of its building had been

to provide a place in which I could paint and an income for me to live on. Neither objective was ever fully realized in the House of All Sorts" (*The House of All Sorts* 1967, 87).

The pictures on my walls reproached me. All the twenty-two years I lived in that house the Art part of me ached. It was not a bit the sort of studio I had intended to build. My architect had been as far from understanding the needs of an artist as it would be possible to believe. The people of Victoria strongly disapproved of my painting because I had gone from the old conventional way. I had experimented. Now I paused. I wished my pictures did not have to face the insulting eyes of my tenants. It made me squirm. The pictures themselves squirmed me in their own right too.

(*The House of All Sorts* 1967, 89)

Then from around 1927, following contacts with other artists, particularly members of the by then famous Canadian Group of Seven, she took up painting again, and now throwing herself whole-heartedly into developing her own vision into a unique version of the Canadian landscape. It was a landscape which consisted to a very large extent of trees – the deep-green Canadian forest, or individual trees; cedars, fir-trees, in various kinds of seasons and light. But this forest landscape also often included the marks of the indigenous culture, and so at this stage of her life Emily Carr's diligent practice of visiting and sketching native settlements over many years turned out to be extremely useful and important for the full flowering of her art. Many of her paintings from this period are in fact based upon her earlier sketches/drawings or water-colours, but now she was able to develop them further into a more personal expression, into expressionist art.

Even though she was never a proper member of the Group of Seven, Emily Carr shared several interests and ideas with them. Believing that a distinct Canadian art could be developed through direct contact with nature, the Group of Seven is most famous for its paintings inspired by the Canadian landscape, and for having initiated the first major Canadian national art movement. They consisted of seven mostly Ontario-based landscape painters in the 1920s: Franklin Carmichael, Lawren Harris, A. Y. Jackson, Frank Johnston, Arthur Lismer, J. E. H. MacDonald, and Frederick Varley. And Lawren Harris became a particularly close friend of and important influence on Carr at this stage in her career.

### **Painting in prose: Emily Carr the writer**

Towards the end of her life Emily Carr turned increasingly to writing, partly due to economic worries and partly because of health problems which made it difficult for her to continue going on her painting excursions. However, her love of language and of expressing herself in words was strong from an early age, and many of her books in fact build on earlier notes, notebooks and sketches. Her first book *Klee Wyck* (1941), which won her the Governor General's award for non-fiction that year, is a collection of short texts, anecdotal in form and largely autobiographical, and focusing on her meetings with the First Nations culture and British Columbia nature. The book was an immediate hit and made Emily Carr a household name in a way which her painting had never done, and it was followed up in the coming years with two further short text collections before her death in 1945: *The Book of Small* (1942), and *The House of All Sorts* (1944).

In her stories Carr presents herself, or rather her first-person narrator – who is sometimes referred to as Klee Wyck, sometimes Small – as a border-crosser and mediator between worlds. When she crossed the border from visual and into verbal art, she may be said to have chosen to side more openly with the doubly colonised, the First Nations. In the words of Doris Shadbolt, "[Carr's] irritation with the false claim to so much Britishness helped her to a

realization of Canadian-ness. Assuming an ardently Canadian rather than an old-world outlook became important morally and artistically for Carr" (Shadbolt 1990, 14). And included in that Canadian stance was Carr's strong sympathy for, and at times downright identification with, the indigenous population: "The natives' plight as outcasts from conventional society only made them potentially more appealing to Carr since she felt herself to be something of a social misfit" (Shadbolt 1990, 15).

In *Survival* Margaret Atwood also discusses how Carr and other Canadian writers use "the Indian – as a mediator between the whites and a nature which is life-giving rather than death-dealing" (Atwood 1972, 103).<sup>10</sup> With this in mind, it is interesting to register that Emily Carr sees herself too as a go-between, the mediator who is committed to recording vital parts of the west-coast native culture that was disappearing quickly with the advent of western/European culture and the ways of "modern civilization": industrialism, capitalism and consumerism. And it is perhaps in this context worth noticing that even Emily's/Klee Wyck's dog Ginger is described as a go-between? In the story "Kitwancool" he "bridged the gap between their language and mine with laughter" (*Klee Wyck* 1986, 105). Read in postcolonial terms: women, dogs and other unprivileged groups are sometimes better at bridging gaps.

### **The artist's borderscape – a close reading**

Several times in *Klee Wyck* Carr dwells on the border between land and sea, for instance in the second paragraph of the first story in the collection: "It was low tide, so there was a long, sickening ladder with slimy rungs to climb down to get to the canoe" ("Ucluelet", *Klee Wyck* 1986, 3). The transitional step between the two elements seems somehow to be both frightening and fundamental. The sea – an altogether different element from land – must be respected: this is a warning message that may be said to run through several of the *Klee Wyck* stories.

A little further on in the same story the narrating 'I' is struck by what she describes as a kind of no-man's land(scape):

One day I walked upon *a strip of land that belonged to nothing*.

The sea soaked it often enough to make it unpalatable to the forest. Roots of trees refused to thrive in its saltiness.

*In this place belonging neither to sea nor to land* I came upon an old man dressed in nothing but a brief shirt. He was sawing the limbs from a fallen tree. The swish of the sea tried to drown the purr of his saw. The purr of the saw tried to sneak back into the forest, but the forest threw it out again into the sea. Sea and forest were always at this game of toss with noises.

The fallen tree lay crosswise in this "*nothing's place*"; it blocked my way.  
("Ucluelet", *Klee Wyck* 1986, 10. My italics)

It is impossible not to notice the many significant clues thrown out here; for instance the negation of the word "belong": "a strip of land that belonged to nothing". By using a word denoting property or ownership, the text turns the discourse towards economics and politics. And not only that, the use of repetition, and together with the negation, the "nothing" even being repeated three times, the passage forces the reading to a halt, with the fallen tree blocking her way serving as a concrete reminder of the need to stop.

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<sup>10</sup> Margaret Atwood offers some interesting comments on Carr and *Klee Wyck* in her *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1991, 96–97), too.

So what is it that blocks the speaker's way here — apart from the fallen tree? This is a landscape with elements that "refuse" to strike root, that "block" the way, a landscape that represents opposition. And when the forest throws the purr of the saw out again into the sea, this may be read as forces of nature rejecting the inroads of human beings — even indigenous human beings. The Indians too move on, leave their villages behind, with their totem poles looking sadly after them when they leave. They are and were always destined to rot and fall apart — *and* return to Nature. The narrator is not a romantic in the sense of othering or orientalising the indigenous people here; on the contrary she respects them for their practical sense of survival, settling where they can survive, which means being constantly on the move in these coastlands. (But the romanticising tendency inherent in a view of nature as an independent force or agent is obviously more difficult to overlook.)

As we have already seen, Carr takes great care to emphasize the separation between sea and land in her stories. This makes it worth noticing when the border between them is seen to disappear, for instance when the vegetation is too forceful, or because of fog or mist:

There was lots of work for me to do in Yan. I went down the beach far away from the Indians. At first it was hot, but by and by haze came creeping over the farther points, blotting them out one after the other as if it were suddenly aware that you had been allowed to see too much. The mist came nearer and nearer till it caught Yan too in its woolly whiteness. It stole my totem poles; only the closest ones were left and they were just grey streaks in the mist. ("Sailing to Yan", *Klee Wyck* 1986, 61)

The mist "stole" her totem poles, she says: Here is a reminder by the very landscape that the totem poles are *not* hers. These repeated references to ownership, or rather non-ownership, in her stories may be said to add up to a sort of low-key discourse on economics which shows Emily Carr to be quite aware of the hard facts of Canadian colonial and settler society. The First Nations people, with their different ideas of ownership and culture are doomed to lose when confronted by such a culture, even when termed Civilization, the narrator suggests.

I had once before visited these three villages, Skedans, Tanoo and Cumshewa. The bitter-sweet of their over-whelming loneliness created a longing to return to them. The Indian had never thwarted the growth-force springing up so terrifically in them. He had but homed himself there awhile, making use of what he needed, leaving the rest as it always was. Civilization crept nearer and the Indian went to meet it, abandoning his old haunts. Then the rush of wild growth swooped and gobbled up all that was foreign to it. Rapidly it was obliterating every trace of man.

(“Salt Water”, *Klee Wyck* 1986, 78–79)

This is a different way of responding to the "belonging" or ownership question from that associated with western/European values. And it seems somehow very fitting that the narrator should find deep satisfaction, even some kind of mystical pleasure, in losing her own physical sense of borders:

At five o'clock that July morning the sea, sky, and beach of Skidegate were wholly smoothed into one. There was neither horizon, cloud, nor sound, of that pink, spread silence even I had become part, belonging as much to sky as to earth, as much to sleeping as waking as I went stumbling over the Skidegate sands. ("Salt Water", *Klee Wyck* 1986, 78)

It is a beautiful story, written in what could certainly qualify as prose poetry, or perhaps painterly poetry? Passages such as the above for one thing demonstrate that *Klee Wyck* is much more than entertaining stories of a rebellious late Victorian childhood. But equally important; they could also be said demonstrate the link between the verbal and the visual artistic expressions. So whereas some critics<sup>11</sup> warn Carr scholars to stop looking for connections between her two forms of artistic expression, I would argue that such attempts may give new insights into her work.

### **Summing up: From outsider to mediator to problematic icon and ideal?**

A hundred years on, and almost seventy years after Emily Carr's death, several questions which continue to engage art critics as well as postcolonial and cultural theorists in general, are clearly relevant to an appreciation of Carr's artistic value: to what extent has the indigenous heritage or influence been respected, or perverted, in the process of merging aboriginal material with an individualistic western vision? Who "owns" such visions anyway? Is the artist justified in crossing the border between the indigenous original work, the expression of communal spirit and tribal existence – and that of the westerner, who is in this case the outsider looking in and giving her individual, personal version of these works? And looked at from the other perspective – to what extent can her "anthropological commitment/interest/drive" be said to have weakened Emily Carr's artistic talent and vision? Northrop Frye offers a comment which stresses her border-crossing achievement in a refreshing, albeit somewhat equivocal, way:

In Canada, the Romantic nineteenth-century traditions are reflective and representational: "modern" poets have unconsciously bridged the cultural gap with the Indians, just as the painting of Emily Carr bridges the gap in British Columbia between a culture of totem poles and a culture of power plants. (Frye 1971, 45)

In recent years, not surprisingly, criticism has increasingly been voiced against Emily Carr's iconic status within Canada. Some of it is concerned with the ways in which iconic status in itself may overshadow important alternative voices or visions, or lead to neglect of weaknesses in the icon. Not surprisingly, some of the strongest such criticism has come from First Nations artists and critics, who have argued that Carr, despite her sympathy and expressed admiration for indigenous culture, tended to portray the Indians as nostalgic figures, and that such portrayals "devalued present-day native cultures in the guise of celebrating their past" (Crosby 1991, as quoted in Braun, 2002, 212).

This brings up that old (by now) discussion of authenticity and voice: Who can speak, or paint, as other? It is certainly not a question which concerns Emily Carr or Canadian art only; it is a general and urgent question which is relevant in many countries and cultures around the world even today. And since the 1990s there has been a lively debate about such issues as they concern Emily Carr's art. And so, considering Emily Carr's tentative and precarious position in the artistic establishment throughout her life, such debates could be seen as a lesson in changing artistic taste as well as in changing cultural politics. One such lesson is for instance provided by Bruce Braun, a geographer, who in "Colonialism's Afterlife: Vision and Visuality on the Northwest Coast", a long and well-argued article, tends to see Carr's present iconic status as expressing a new form of colonialism:

Carr's central place in Canadian culture is arguably as much a historical accident as a product of artistic excellence, due in part to her work fitting

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<sup>11</sup> See for instance Braun 2002, 215.

well into an ideological slot available within an anxious Canadian nationalism in the years immediately preceding the Second World War.  
 (Braun 2002, 208)

Braun certainly has some interesting points; obviously there is an element of chance (“historical accident” he calls it) in much of what goes into artistic recognition and fame. And any icon surely needs to be submitted to serious reassessment at regular intervals. However, to me Braun seems to spend too much energy on playing down Carr’s achievement: he sounds unwilling to see the obstacles in her way, the many handicaps linked to gender, as well as financial, provincial or colonial pressures. He seems to me to try too hard to downplay both her personal challenges and her artistic achievement.

However, with the emergence of more and more sophisticated and nuanced discussions of colonialism, postcolonial and colonialist discourse in recent years, it is perhaps becoming possible now to not only see, but appreciate Emily Carr as *both* the insider and outsider that she felt herself to be. Rather than denouncing her attempts to create art which uses or “fuses” or mixes the indigenous art/cultural expressions with her own sense of artistic vision, branding it contamination, we should perhaps see Carr’s artistic achievement in terms of hybridity, as the cultural mixture that could be said to be the inevitable product of what Bhabha calls “the ambivalent margin of the nation-space”? (*Nation and Narration* 1991, 4). Or as he puts it in *The Location of Culture*: “It is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated” (Bhabha 1994, 2). It is also interesting to view Carr’s art, written as well as visual, as expressing an awareness of a Third Space, a liminal space somehow outside or apart from the binary spaces of colonial or other forms of oppression, on several occasions. Several of the passages already quoted from *Klee Wyck* under the heading “The artist’s borderscape” above make that point, but let me repeat one passage here to emphasize it further:

At five o’clock that July morning the sea, sky, and beach of Skidegate were wholly smoothed into one. There was neither horizon, cloud, nor sound, of that pink, spread silence even I had become part, belonging as much to sky as to earth, as much to sleeping as waking as I went stumbling over the Skidegate sands. (“Salt Water”, *Klee Wyck* 1986, 78)

In other words, Carr is to be credited, if not congratulated, with her efforts to create what could be called truly hybrid works of art, art that crosses as well as collapses borders.

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## Latin Summary

*De Aemilia Carr: artifice auctriceque Canadiā, quae limites transgreditur.* Aemilia (Emily) Carr (1871–1945) hodiernis temporibus generaliter percipitur ut Canadae artifex maxima atque maxime singularis. Quidquid id est, diu durabat, usque dum éadem bene cognoscebatur, et denique in fine vitae sua paulatim facta est nota claraque. Hac symbolā tractatur receptio critica operum Aemiliae Carr et ut pictrix et ut auctrix. Specialiter autem attenditur ad eius strategemata limites transeuntia, cum arte cultuque civili indigeno in operibus suis utatur. Praeterea inquiritur in progressum artis Aemiliae Carr et in coniunctionem modi, quo in initio saeculi vicesimi identitas nationalis Canadiana construebatur.

**English Summary**

Emily Carr (1871–1945) is today generally considered one of Canada's greatest and most unique artists. However, her recognition was a long time coming, and it was only towards the end of her life that fame came her way. The article discusses the critical reception of Carr's work both as a painter and writer, paying particular attention to her border-crossing strategies in her use of indigenous/First Nations art and culture in her own work. Furthermore, it looks at the development of Carr's art and its connection to the construction of a Canadian national identity, or Canadian-ness, in the early twentieth century.

**Keywords**

Emily Carr, Canadian art and literature, Canadian-ness and nationality, Colonialism and postcolonialism, Border-crossing art, Indigenous perspectives.