

Emily Carr exhibition at the Art Gallery of Hamilton

Regina Haggio

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“Pictures should be inspired by nature,” wrote Emily Carr, “but made in the soul of the artist.”

That thought, expressed in 1912, makes Carr sound like a 19th-century Romanticist. But she balanced such thoughts by painting in a simplified modern style at a time when most Canadians regarded an old-fashioned lifelike style as the hallmark of good art.

Carr believed a new country like Canada needed to be painted in a new way.

“More than ever I was convinced that the old way of seeing was inadequate to express this big country of ours.”

Carr’s work is showcased in *Nature and Spirit: Emily Carr’s Coastal Landscapes*, an exhibition at the Art Gallery of Hamilton. The 35 paintings on show date from 1912 to 1942.

Carr, who was born in Victoria in 1871, spent most of her life in British Columbia, but travelled, in her 20s and 30s, to San Francisco, England and France to study art. The year in France was pivotal. It nurtured her modernist style by introducing her to the vivid colours and energetic shapes of such painters as Henri Matisse and Vincent van Gogh.

In her late 50s, Carr embarked on her most prolific painting period, depicting the forests of British Columbia and First Nations villages with their totem poles.

Carr set out to record a way of life that was rapidly changing, “collecting” totem poles in their original settings, not in museums.

She lets the totemic forms dominate. *Big Raven* (1931), based on a sketch she made in 1912, features a wood carving of a stylized bird on a post being slowly obliterated by vegetation in Cumshewa, an abandoned Haida Gwaii village. Nature covering human monuments was a popular theme in 19th-century Romanticism.

Carr infuses the composition with movement through a variety of contrasting shapes. The bird’s head and folded wings create a strong diagonal cutting through the upper right. Carr paints the green growth in the foreground as wavy layers lapping at the sculpture’s base.

A pine rises in the upper right, its foliage reduced to a few forms that recall windblown drapery. Light emanates from the dark, heavy arc of the sky in wide vertical strips that hit the distant mountain.

In *Pemberton Meadows* (1933), Carr juxtaposes nature with architecture and lets nature shine.



Emily Carr - Raven. Emily Carr, *Big Raven*, 1931, oil on canvas. Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Emily Carr Trust. Trevor Mills/Vancouver Art Gallery
Source: Vancouver Art Gallery

A swirling mass of conical evergreens meets us in the foreground. A few tall, thin trees stick out of the mass and direct our attention upward.

A cluster of houses, all straight lines and neatly lined up one behind the other, contrast with the curved shapes of nature. Even the buildings' shadows are rectangular.

The mountains in the background take up almost half of the composition, their undulating slopes adding a pulsating movement. Carr paints most of them in an intense blue and adds a white range in the distance on the left. The intensity of these colours makes the mountains appear closer, creating a flat, modern landscape.

Carr's soul was decidedly modern.

Regina Haggo, art historian, public speaker, curator and former professor at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand, teaches at the Dundas Valley School of Art.

Emily Carr

What: Nature and Spirit: Emily Carr's Coastal Landscapes

Where: Art Gallery of Hamilton, 123 King St. W.

When: Now until Oct. 28

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