



113 Emily Carr

BCSFA CGP 1871 – 1945

War Canoes, Alert Bay

watercolour on paper, signed, circa 1908
14 ¾ x 19 ½ in, 37.5 x 49.5 cm

PROVENANCE

Collection of the Artist
Acquired directly from the above by Dominion Gallery,
Montreal, January 17, 1945, inventory #294e
Acquired from the above by a Private Collection,
Vancouver, May 23, 1947
By descent to a Private Collection, Vancouver
Fine Canadian Art, Heffel Fine Art Auction House,
May 17, 2012, lot 131
An Important Private Canadian Collection

LITERATURE

Doris Shadbolt, *Emily Carr: A Centennial Exhibition*, Vancouver Art Gallery, 1975, revised edition, reproduced page 66, the smaller circa 1908 watercolour reproduced page 66, and the related 1912 oil *Indian War Canoe (Alert Bay)* and 1912 canvas *War Canoes, Alert Bay* reproduced page 71
Doris Shadbolt, *The Art of Emily Carr*, 1979, reproduced page 41, plate 16, and the related 1912 canvas *War Canoes, Alert Bay* reproduced page 41, plate 17
Doris Shadbolt, *Emily Carr*, National Gallery of Canada, 1990, listed in “Works in the Exhibition,” unpaginated addendum
Susan Crean, editor, *Opposite Contraries: The Unknown Journals of Emily Carr and Other Writings*, 2003, page 177
Emily Carr, *Growing Pains*, 2005, page 257
Gerta Moray, *Unsettling Encounters: First Nations Imagery in the Art of Emily Carr*, 2006, pages 80, 81, 85 and 146, the smaller circa 1908 watercolour reproduced page 88 and the related 1912 canvas reproduced page 149
Ian Thom and Grant Arnold, editors, *Shore, Forest and Beyond: Art from the Audain Collection*, Vancouver Art Gallery, 2011, the related 1912 canvas reproduced front cover and page 35
From the Forest to the Sea: Emily Carr in British Columbia, Dulwich Picture Gallery, 2014, reproduced page 152 and listed page 296, the related 1912 canvas reproduced page 153, listed page 296
Emily Carr: Fresh Seeing—French Modernism and the West Coast, Audain Art Museum, 2019, reproduced page 6 (detail) and page 80, listed page 148, and the related 1912 canvas reproduced page 7 (detail) and page 81, listed page 149

EXHIBITED

Vancouver Art Gallery, *Emily Carr: A Centennial Exhibition*, May 18 – August 29, 1971, traveling in 1971 – 1972 to the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, catalogue #10
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, *Emily Carr*, June 29 – September 3, 1990, catalogue #5
Dulwich Picture Gallery, London, *From the Forest to the Sea: Emily Carr in British Columbia*, November 1, 2014 – March 15, 2015, traveling to the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, April 11 – August 9, 2015
Audain Art Museum, Whistler, *Emily Carr: Fresh Seeing—French Modernism and the West Coast*, September 21, 2019 –



EDWARD CURTIS
The Wedding Party, 1914
Still from *In the Land of the Head Hunters*

January 19, 2020, traveling in 2020 – 2021 to the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton, and the Royal BC Museum, Victoria, catalogue #80 and the related 1912 canvas catalogue #81

EMILY CARR'S *War Canoes, Alert Bay* is an icon of Canadian art. The subject in watercolour serves as the basis for the oil on canvas of the same title, now housed in the Audain Art Museum. The work (figure 1) stands as a cornerstone holding in the museum's collection and was featured on the cover of a 2011 Vancouver Art Gallery catalogue. The other related oil, entitled *Indian War Canoe (Alert Bay)* (figure 2), is the cornerstone Carr painting in the collection of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. Furthermore, this magnificent watercolour boasts an illustrious exhibition history, having been included in every major exhibition featuring Carr's work.

In April of 1913, Emily Carr held an important exhibition of her work at Drummond Hall, Vancouver. The exhibition included almost 200 works and was her first solo show. The works presented were the result of her travels in the summer of 1912 to northern British Columbia, where she visited a number of First Nations villages on both Haida Gwaii and the mainland. The exhibition also featured many of the earlier First Nations studies, such as *War Canoes, Alert Bay*, done in the years 1908 to 1910. Carr had previously shown some of what an unidentified reporter had described as her “strong, clever studies of Indian life.”¹ Indeed, it likely that this watercolour was included in that exhibition.²

The larger 1913 exhibition, which concentrated exclusively on First Nations subjects, also occasioned Carr's first public talk. Her speech entitled “Lecture on Totems” was delivered twice during the exhibition. Carr began her remarks as follows:

My object in making this collection of totem pole pictures has been to depict these wonderful relics of a passing people



FIGURE 1
EMILY CARR
War Canoes, Alert Bay
 oil on canvas, 1912
 25 x 31 1/2 in, 63.5 x 80 cm
 Collection of the Audain Art Museum

Not for sale with this lot

in their own original setting: the identical spots where they were carved and placed by the Indians in honour of their chiefs. These poles are fast becoming extinct. Each year sees some of their number fall, rotted with age; others bought and carried off to museums in various parts of the world; others, alas, burned down for firewood.³

Carr clearly had a sense of mission in choosing to portray First Nations villages such as Alert Bay. This sense of mission took form in 1907. In the summer of that year, she and her sister Alice took a boat trip to Alaska. This trip changed the course of her artistic career. As she writes in her autobiography *Growing Pains*:

We passed many Indian villages on our way down the coast. The Indian people and their Art touched me deeply. ... By the time I reached home my mind was made up. I was going to picture totem poles in their own village settings, as complete a collection of them as I could.

Carr felt that “Indian Art broadened my seeing, loosened the formal tightness I had learned in England’s schools.”⁴

One of the villages Carr and her sister visited was Yalis or Alert Bay, the Kwakwaka’wakw village on Cormorant Island, off the northern coast of Vancouver Island. The village was a striking sight for tourists because of the “row of ten large community houses facing the beach, with five major carved totem poles and a pair of eagle houseposts in front of them.”⁵

Carr decided to revisit the community in 1908, and the houses and poles of Alert Bay became an important subject for the artist. As Gerta Moray notes, she painted “at least six large views of the impressive house row and boardwalk.”⁶ It was almost certainly on this trip (or immediately afterward) that she executed *War*

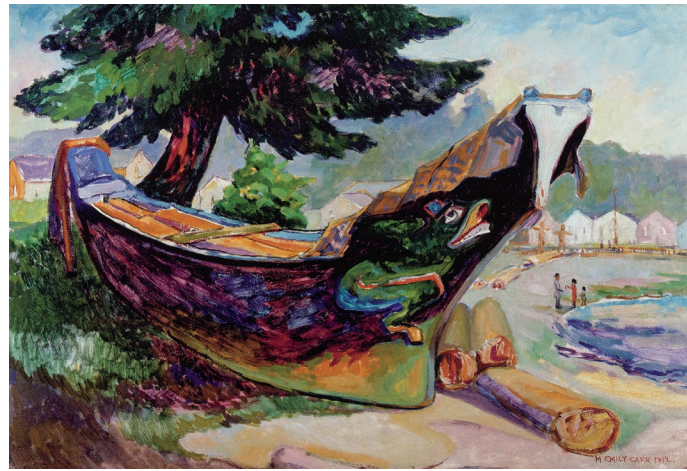


FIGURE 2
EMILY CARR
Indian War Canoe (Alert Bay)
 oil on cardboard, 1912
 25 1/2 x 37 1/2 in, 65 x 95.5 cm
 Collection of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts
 Gift of A. Sidney Dawes, inv. 1948.995

Not for sale with this lot

Canoes, Alert Bay along with another watercolour, *War Canoe, Alert Bay* (private collection, sold by Heffel in November 2011). *War Canoes, Alert Bay*, which is the larger, more developed version of the watercolours, is a powerful composition that depicts the village in the distance and gives prominence to a group of canoes in the foreground. These canoes were important possessions of the village, displayed as “emblems of wealth that had passed from one owner to another as potlatch gifts.”⁷ Carr was obviously struck by the beautiful forms of the canoes and their vivid painted decoration. The tree that rises above the canoe at the right is sensitively rendered and hints at the great accomplishment and boldness of her later paintings of BC’s forests.

The “broadening of her vision” and loosening of the “formal tightness” of her work that “Indian Art” had inspired also made Carr feel that she needed further training, and in the fall of 1910, she left for a period of intensive study in France. There she was introduced, through her studies with British and New Zealand expatriate artists, to the brilliant non-naturalistic colour use of the Fauves, such as Henri Matisse and André Derain. Her brushwork in both watercolour and oil also opened up, and the work she produced in France displays a new energy. With these new methods, she returned to Canada and First Nations subjects.

This new approach to art-making also allowed her to reconsider her earlier Alert Bay subjects, and the 1908 watercolours became the basis for 1912 canvases. Carr seems to have been particularly struck by the canoes she saw in Alert Bay, and she produced important canvases of this subject. *Indian War Canoe (Alert Bay)*, as previously mentioned, is now in the collection of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. The second, in the Audain Art Museum collection, also titled *War Canoes, Alert Bay*, is based on this watercolour. In the canvas, Carr has reproduced all of the elements that made the watercolour such a compelling composition.



Installation view of *Emily Carr: A Centennial Exhibition*, Vancouver Art Gallery, 1971, with *War Canoes, Alert Bay* indicated

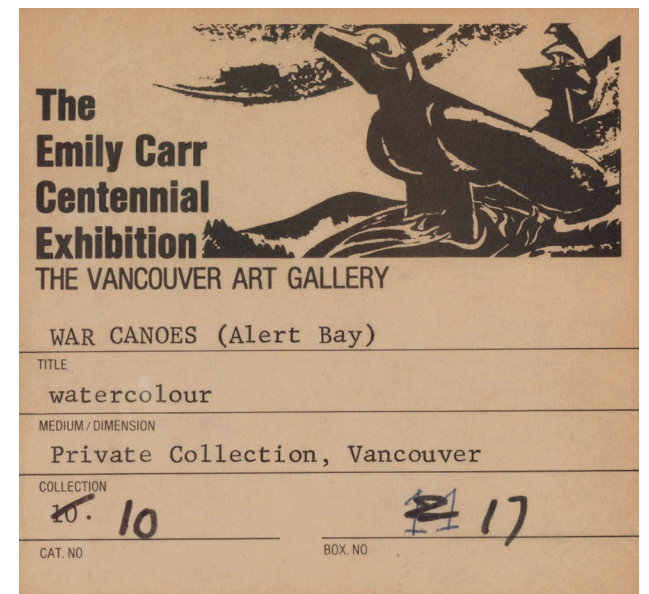
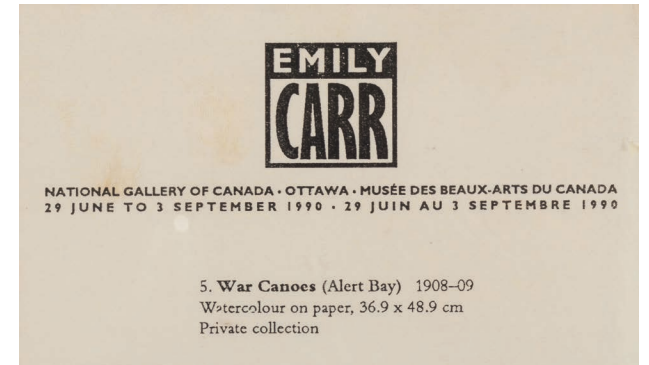
The canvas, however, uses Fauve-influenced colours, seen most strikingly in the vivid purple on the background hillside and the elements of purple and blue in the tree trunk. The canvas also simplifies the background and introduces a small group of people, who serve to emphasize the size and splendour of the canoes.

War Canoes, Alert Bay was an important subject for Carr and an early example of her documentary project that culminated in the 1913 exhibition. Although Carr did not succeed in having the BC government purchase the collection of paintings, something which the first owner of the canvas, Mrs. Dennis Harris, lobbied for, works such as *War Canoes, Alert Bay* provide a vital record of Kwakwaka’wakw culture and mark Carr’s emergence as a major and distinct voice in Canadian painting.

Included with this lot are copies of correspondence between Doris Shadbolt, the National Gallery of Canada, and publisher Douglas & McIntyre relating to exhibition loans, which form a historical record of this iconic watercolour.

1. Quoted in Gerta Moray, *Unsettling Encounters: First Nations Imagery in the Art of Emily Carr* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2006), 80.
2. Ibid., 81.
3. Quoted in Susan Crean, *Opposite Contraries: The Unknown Journals of Emily Carr and Other Writings* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2003), 177.
4. Emily Carr, *Growing Pains: The Autobiography of Emily Carr* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1946), 211. Citations refer to the 1966 paperback edition.
5. Moray, *Unsettling Encounters*, 85.
6. Ibid., 86.
7. Ibid.

ESTIMATE: \$500,000 – 700,000



TOP: Audain Art Museum 2019 – 2020 exhibition label

MIDDLE: National Gallery of Canada 1990 exhibition label

BOTTOM: Vancouver Art Gallery 1971 exhibition label