

## WHO "DISCOVERED" EMILY CARR?

Nineteen twenty-seven was Emily Carr's *annis mirabilis*, the year she was discovered for Canadian art through the National Gallery's *Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Indian Art* and simultaneously introduced to the stimulating influence of the Group of Seven. Prior to 1927, the accepted version runs, she was condemned to earn a living by running a four-suite apartment known as "The House of All Sorts." Landlady chores gave her little time to paint and so from about 1913 her brushes lay idle. Marius Barbeau of the National Museum is usually credited as the man who "forged the first link of the chain which . . . brought both Miss Carr and her pictures to Ottawa."<sup>1</sup> Hearing of Carr "from William Beynon, [his] half-breed Tsimshyan interpreter at Port Simpson, in the winter of 1915," Barbeau was prompted to visit her Simcoe Street studio the following spring. Impressed by her work, he bought two pictures and was given a third. When twelve years later the *Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Indian Art* was planned cooperatively between the National Gallery and the National Museum in 1927, Barbeau again visited Carr "to examine the stock of canvases she kept in her upper story." Laying aside "about eighty of them, from which to make a final selection," he then "discussed the exhibition in detail with Mr. Brown," Director of the National Gallery, who went to Victoria "at that time . . . and made final arrangements with Miss Carr for the shipment of her pictures."<sup>2</sup> Brown found that Carr had been painting "fine stuff among the Indians for 20 years" and invited her "to send a collection to our Indian West coast show."<sup>3</sup> Carr was flattered by Brown's invitation and interested to learn that there was a group of eastern artists who painted the Canadian wilderness in a modern way. Travelling East for the opening of the exhibition she met the Group of Seven and established a long relationship with one of its members — Lawren Harris. Revived in spirit through contact with the Group she returned West, picked up her long-idle brushes, and began the most intense and prolific period of her career.

This long perpetuated story of Emily Carr's "discovery" may be questioned. She had not stopped painting in 1913. Brown had known of her work since 1921. And there is little evidence to suggest that Barbeau either visited or purchased works from Carr before 1926.

When Eric Brown visited Emily Carr in September of 1927, he did not meet a woman who had ceased painting. The chores of running an

apartment house and new interests in potting and dog-breeding overshadowed her art, but she continued to paint. From the early 1920's Seattle artists Viola and Ambrose Patterson spent many weekends at the House of All Sorts painting and discussing art with Carr.<sup>4</sup> She read Jan Gordon's *Modern French Painters*, broke from her Impressionism of 1913 to a less inhibited Expressionist style and turned from the Indian motif to the landscape.<sup>5</sup>

One may assume that when Brown visited Carr in 1927 he did not see this post-1913 work.<sup>6</sup> The aim of the *Exhibition of Canadian West Coast and Indian Art* was to "mingle for the first time the art work of the Canadian West Coast tribes with that of our more sophisticated artists," so it was the Indian motif that primarily interested him.<sup>7</sup> Brown felt that he had "discovered the work of an exceedingly interesting woman artist," and had "put her on the map."<sup>8</sup> (Fig. 1)

This discovery was late. As A. Y. Jackson wrote, "the first person to realize the potentiality of Emily Carr's work was Mortimer Lamb," a Vancouver mining expert, art connoisseur and old friend of Jackson's, who "directed several letters to me when the Group of Seven was formed."<sup>9</sup> At the same time [1921; Ed. note] Lamb wrote to Brown expressing "the opinion that the National Gallery should take cognizance of the work of a Western artist who to my mind possessed unusual power." He enclosed a few "exceedingly poor snapshots, which though hopeless for purposes of reproduction . . . might be better than no graphic evidence."<sup>10</sup> Brown did not share Lamb's enthusiasm. His curt reply to Lamb suggested that her work "would be more interesting to a Provincial or National Museum than to the National Gallery." Though Brown politely stated that the paintings "have, as you say, some artistic merit," he forwarded the letter to the government anthropologists.<sup>11</sup> He showed no further interest in Carr's work until shortly before the 1927 *Exhibition of West Coast and Indian Art*.

Brown may have heard of Emily Carr also in 1921 through Marius Barbeau. In a statement to the Art Gallery of Toronto in 1945, Barbeau writes that he had visited Carr at the House of All Sorts a second time in 1921. Back in Ottawa he showed the three paintings he had acquired on his first visit in 1916 to Brown, who "did not seem to think it worth while to bother about Miss Carr." She was "not important enough." This 1945 statement is the only evidence, however, that Barbeau visited Carr before October 1926.<sup>12</sup>

In writing to Brown in October 1927, Barbeau did not mention having met Carr or owning any of her paintings. He was interested to learn that Brown had seen Miss Carr, and was favourably impressed with her work. "I saw 4 of her paintings at Hazelton, which she had given to some one [sic] there, fifteen years ago," Barbeau wrote. "They were certainly from a genuine artist. Miss [Anne] Savage who saw them, is supposed to have described one of them as 'a masterpiece'."<sup>13</sup> The possibility that he had met Carr before 1926 is further eroded by a letter from Carr to Barbeau.

Carr heard from a friend in Vancouver in 1926 that Barbeau was giving a series of lectures on the Northwest Indians at the University of British Columbia. She wrote to Barbeau in Vancouver asking if he planned to lecture in Victoria because:

I am very interested in the Indians and have made a very large collection of paintings of their villages & totem poles, going up North many years ago before they were taken away, living among them & painting in their villages. If you do come to Victoria, I would be very pleased if you would care to come to my home and see the collection it might be of interest to you.

She gave her telephone number and told him that:

my house is only a few blocks from the C.P.R. wharf & the Empress hotel. Walk out Government street south to Simcoe St 4 blocks, turn to the left, up Simcoe. I am the last house on Simcoe & my studio upstairs.

She closed, "hoping I shall have the pleasure of meeting you."<sup>14</sup> Had Carr forgotten the eminent anthropologist's previous visits, even his purchase of paintings?

There is no evidence to show that Barbeau met Carr's 1926 invitation. If such a meeting ever took place he did not tell Brown in his letter of October 3. Nor does Carr mention in any of her published writings that she met Barbeau before Brown.<sup>15</sup> It can be established, however, that in organizing the West Coast Exhibition, Barbeau suggested to the

Gallery's Director, as Maude Brown has written, that the work of the Victoria artist should be considered for the 1927 show.<sup>16</sup> Whether Barbeau had merely heard of Carr through his interpreter and seen her paintings at Hazelton or had met her in 1926 must remain a mystery until further evidence comes to light. What is important, and this is supported by Carr's letter of October 23, is that she pointed herself out to Barbeau.

The interest of Barbeau and Brown in Carr's pictures was a shock for someone whose Indian work had been rejected by the Provincial Museum in 1913.<sup>17</sup> Brown's visit was "like a breath of inspiration coming from the outside world," making her struggle "worth while."<sup>18</sup> Meeting the Group of Seven two months later confirmed Carr's belief that the East had rescued her from obscurity.

So great was Carr's 1927 success and subsequent artistic development that H. O. McCurry, Brown's successor as Director of the National Gallery wrote:

As long ago as 1927 the National Gallery of Canada recognized the outstanding nature of Miss Carr's work . . . At that time we also organized an exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art which was really devised to give Miss Carr the publicity we felt she deserved.<sup>19</sup>

That Brown overlooked Carr in 1921, that plans for the exhibition were well underway before Brown met Carr in 1927 and that the National Museum shares in organizing the exhibition were ignored by McCurry. The exhibition was probably devised to give the Group of Seven and its allies a showplace for their recent British Columbia work rather than for Emily Carr whose inclusion has the appearance of being almost an afterthought. As early as 1921 Brown, A. Y. Jackson and possibly Barbeau knew of the Victoria lady who painted among the Indians, but it was not until the West Coast show was conceived that Carr fitted into the eastern art scene. Carr was chosen to contribute to the exhibition because she had, like no other artist, made a record of Indian totems and villages. The work exhibited was that of her 1912-13 period, not her more advanced landscape work of the early Twenties. Writing of the exhibition, eastern newspapers commented upon her braveness in travelling to remote areas among the Indians: "she has been lost, strayed, shipwrecked and starved" in her endeavour to make "a pictorial record of the

fast-disappearing villages."<sup>20</sup> Her greatness as an artist and recognition of that greatness came later — after the Group, after the experiences with Mark Tobey and after her own exploration into nature and her psyche.

The real discoverer (if one can use the word) was Emily Carr herself. She contacted Barbeau through whom she subsequently met Brown. Harold Mortimer Lamb must be given credit for first raising her name in the East, though his letters to the East had no impact. It was only six years later when a peculiar exhibition was planned and when representatives of two Ottawa institutions visited Carr, that the fifty-seven year old Victoria artist at last gained recognition and contacts in Canada. Carr, thought by many to have been an exception to western exclusion from eastern acceptance was in fact the epitome of it.

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Notes:

- <sup>1</sup> Muril Brewster, "Some Ladies Prefer Indians," *Toronto Star Weekly*, 21 January 1928.
- <sup>2</sup> Art Gallery of Ontario (hereafter AGO), Marius Barbeau to Grace Pincoe, 28 August 1945.
- <sup>3</sup> National Gallery of Canada (hereafter NGC), Eric Brown to H. O. McCurry, 17 September 1927.
- <sup>4</sup> Viola Patterson to author, 5 October 1973.
- <sup>5</sup> John Lane, *The Bodley Head* (London: 1923). Carr inscribed the book with the date 1924. There are at least six known paintings from this period, some of which are dated on the canvas or board.
- <sup>6</sup> Mrs. Maude Brown, who accompanied Eric Brown to Carr's studio in September 1927, recalls only viewing the French and pre-1913 Indian works of Emily Carr. Interview with Maude Brown, September 1974.
- <sup>7</sup> NGC, *Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Indian Art* (Toronto: 1927), p. 3.
- <sup>8</sup> NGC, Brown to Sir Henry Thornton, 13 October 1927; Brown to McCurry, 17 September 1927.
- <sup>9</sup> A. Y. Jackson, *A Painter's Country* (Toronto: Clarke Irwin, 1964), pp. 112-113.
- <sup>10</sup> AGO, H. Mortimer Lamb to Barbara Swann, 14 July 1945.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, Brown to Lamb, 23 November 1921. (copy).
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, Barbeau to Pincoe, 28 August 1945.
- <sup>13</sup> NGC, Barbeau to Brown, 3 October 1927.
- <sup>14</sup> Extract from a letter to Marius Barbeau, October 23 [1927] (sic). Marius Barbeau Collection, Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies, National Museum of Man, National Museums of Canada, Ottawa.
- <sup>15</sup> Emily Carr, *Growing Pains* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Co. Ltd., 1946) pp. 233-34.
- <sup>16</sup> F. Maude Brown, *Breaking Barrier* (n.p.: The Society for Art Publications, 1964), p. 103.
- <sup>17</sup> In 1912 Carr wrote to Dr. H. E. Young, Minister of Education, requesting that the government finance her further excursions into the Indian villages of northern British Columbia. C. F. Newcombe was requested to view her work and found it anthropologically unsuitable. Provincial Museum Records, Victoria, B.C.
- <sup>18</sup> NGC, Carr to Brown, September, 1927.
- <sup>19</sup> NGC, McCurry to the Editor, *Victoria Daily Times*, 26 January 1940.
- <sup>20</sup> Brewster, *Toronto Star Weekly*, 21 January 1928.



Fig. 1. Installation shot from the *Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Indian Art*, The National Gallery of Canada, 1927. The photograph contains a Hooked Rug, *Yan*, Queen Charlotte Islands and *Skedans*, Queen Charlotte Islands by Emily Carr. (Photo: Courtesy of the National Gallery of Canada).