

INDIANS AND THEIR ART: EMILY CARR'S IMAGERY IN PAINTING AND IN WRITING

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Abstract

Emily Carr (1871-1945) is best known as the first artist to consistently and systematically map and depict Canadian West Coast totem poles and consider them as art. Since the late 1920s she has been recognized as an outstanding painter who shared the interest of Modernist artists in the 'Primitive' (what is later referred to as 'tribal art'). In the last decade of her life, however, she devoted more and more time to writing: *Klee Wyck*, her first book of 'life writing' received the most prestigious literary prize, the Governor General's Award in the 'non-fiction' category in 1942. The stories and her journals abound in reflections about the life and art of Indigenous people—this significant literary output, however, was neglected by criticism for more than half a century.

*"All the foreign elements incorporated into the white,
the white elements incorporated into the foreign."*

(Carr 2003, 31)

Early Representations of Indigenous People in Canada

Encounters with indigenous people were included in reports by Europeans about Canada from the very start: as early as 1583, Stephen Parmenius de Buda wrote about his desire to describe the "habits, the landscape and the population" (Quinn and Cheshire 1983, 171) in Newfoundland. In 1606, Marc Lescarbot, in his *Théâtre de Neptune en la Nouvelle France* created four 'Savage' speaking characters and some others in non-speaking roles in the typically Renaissance European theatre genre of the masque, and inserted some words in the Huron language in his French dialogues. Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, the journals of explorers described their environment and habits, and the first novel

written on the North American continent, *The History of Emily Montague* by Frances Brooke (1769) also contained descriptions of the native people, showing them as 'noble savages' in the letters of Emily. As Davis (2004, 60) put it,

[t]he Enlightenment's use of the primitive [...] involved a critique of civilization. Arthur O. Lovejoy described this as 'the discontent of the civilized with civilization. [...] It is the belief of men living in a relatively highly evolved and complex cultural condition that a life far simpler and less sophisticated in some or in all respects is a more desirable life'.

A few decades later, John Richardson wrote a typically Romantic historical novel (with several gothic elements) about the battles between the English and the Indians in *Wacousta* (1832). These random examples from the early period of writing in Canada show that there was a marked interest in the native people from early on, and it is also worth noting that they were treated according to the dominant style of the given age, it is therefore not surprising that they would be present in artistic representation in Canada in the early 20th century.

Indigenous Art as 'Primitive'

One of the main features of Modernism was a turn toward the 'primitive': the term always refers to the 'other' and not to the enunciator; it has been used since the 'discovery' of the Americas. In the second half of the 19th century and the first four decades of the 20th, some museums and imperial exhibitions offered possibilities for thousands of Europeans to see non-Europeans and some of their products and art out of their natural context. Many modernist artists started to become interested or fascinated by these exhibitions. They acquired objects, e. g. masks—but it was only Paul Gauguin who spent many years of his life 'on site.'

In 1962 Marshall McLuhan (67) asserted that "Primitivism has become the vulgar *cliché* of much modern art and speculation," while Edward Saïd later underlined that "'the primitive' is the alter-ego of the modern self [...] modernity has "gone primitive" (qtd. in Lemke 1994, 38). Rubin (1984, 7) highlights that "[t]he modern artists' admiration for tribal'

As Rubin (1984, 2, 4) notes, it was in 1906–07 that the "strictly modernist interpretation of the term (i.e. Primitivism) began." After the Great War, "Primitive art" started to be "increasingly identified [...] with tribal objects. [...] That the derived term primitivism is ethnocentric is surely true – and logically so,

objects was widespread in the years 1907–14 [...] we owe primarily to the convictions of the pioneer modern artists their promotion from the rank of curiosities and artifacts to that of major art [...] to the status of art at all.” Williams (1989, 58) explains this feature in a wider context:

It is a striking characteristic of several movements within both Modernism and the avant-garde that rejection of the existing social order and its culture was supported and even directly expressed by recourse to a simpler art: either the primitive or exotic [...], or the ‘folk’ or ‘popular’ elements of their native cultures. [...] ‘primitivism’, a term which corresponded with that emphasis on the innately creative, the unformed and untamed realm of the pre-rational and the unconscious, indeed that vitality of the naive which was so especially a leading edge of the avant-garde. [...]

[...] an emphasis on the ‘folk’ [...] could lead to very strong national and eventually nationalist identifications.

Indigenous People and Art in Emily Carr's Work

Looking at the work of painter and writer Emily Carr (1871–1945), we observe that her admiration for indigenous art preceded the European artists' turn in this direction (except for Gauguin), and we note her simultaneous dedication to be ‘modern,’ with a “passionate desire to express some attribute of Canada” (Carr 1997, 442). Carr, who “noticed a visual difference from the East” (meaning the Eastern part of Canada, particularly the Group of Seven painters in Toronto) (Udall 2000, 46–47), from her earliest days as painter, depicted nature and the art and life of the Natives. While “Carr's nationalism incorporated a generous portion of awe at the country's sheer vastness” (Udall 2000, 45), a remarkable element of difference from the male artists forming the Group was that she pursued the same goals not only visually, but verbally, as well: “[t]o Carr, whose writings as well as paintings were inspired by their [British Columbia's coastal Indians'] lore, the natives lived close to a seam where art, mythic nationalism, and folklore were joined” (Udall 2000, 41).

Her very first exposure to native life in its own environment was in 1899²: she visited Ucluelet and was named ‘Klee Wyck’ (the Laughing

for it refers not to the tribal arts in themselves, but to the Western interest in and reaction to them.”

² Carr was not the very first painter to depict First Nations people of the Western part of what later became Canada. Paul Kane in the mid-nineteenth century resolved to “represent the scenery of an almost unknown country [...] [and] sketch pictures of the principal chiefs” (quoted by Davis 2004, 52). “Euro-Canadians’ understanding of the Canadian West, the First Nations, and a contemporary

One) by the natives. She often used this name in the company of her friends while studying in England during the subsequent years, as she remembers in *Growing Pains* (e.g. Carr 1997, 395, 404).³ Carr herself

believed she was aligning herself with the marginal status of First Nations people [...] she conceived of herself as a mediating figure between First Nations cultural groups and white, Western culture (Morra 2005, 46, 47).

While leading European artists like Matisse or Picasso obtained artifacts made by 'primitive' people in the curiosity shops of Paris, and did not have first-hand experiences about the natural context of the masks or sculpture, Carr from the start was recording native art on site. But it was not easy for her. As she explains in her "Lecture on Totems," (1913) "this is one of the trying features of this work. Places are so difficult to get at, accomodation always meagre, boats very erratic. You must therefore come quickly to your conclusions, select your objects and your view of objects," besides "you must shoulder a very heavy pack" (Carr 2003, 194–195). But she was firm in her decision—in *Growing Pains III* she remembers the impact of her 'pleasure trip to Alaska' in the summer of 1907: "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 1997, 427). She intended to make picture-documents of these wooden carvings which were slowly being destroyed by adverse weather conditions—besides, employing "First Nations images, especially totem poles, was to foster a national art free from or not associated with European conventions, even if she depended on techniques acquired abroad in order to do so" (Morra 2005, 49).

As she got older, poor health pushed her towards writing (she said of the stories that later made up the *Klee Wyck* volume that "[t]heir quiet strength healed my heart." *GP*, 461): her first published book was awarded the Governor General's Award for non-fiction in 1942, a year after it first appeared. Although Carr started to write late in her career, as Shadbolt

aesthetic was fundamentally influenced by Kane's images" (Davis 2004, 53). Davis, however, puts the date of Carr's first visit to native sites wrongly to 1896 (2004, 59).

Carr was not the sole white person attached to a 'Native identity': at the time of Carr's return from England an Englishman, Archibald S. Belaney settled down in Canada, married an Ojibway woman and wanted to be called 'Grey Owl' – he 'forged' a mixed family background for himself, became a popular writer and Pioneer of nature conservation in the late 1920s and early 1930s; his true identity was revealed only decades after his death in 1938.

says "[t]he re-writing and final drafting of the works, often begun many years before, [...] was done between 1934 and 1941," she did have earlier 'scrabs'⁴ to draw on: "[d]uring the discouraged years of the 1920s when she was painting little, she wrote [...] her 'stories'." (Shadbolt in Carr 1997, 3) She had been trying to publish the stories for several years, submitting them to magazines like *Maclean's* and *Saturday Evening Post* in the mid-and late 1930s, but only Oxford University Press ventured to bring *Klee Wyck* out at the insistence of Ira Dilworth after some of the stories had been read on CBC Radio in 1940.

Her attraction to aboriginal culture is complex: it contains 'Romantic' elements underlining the 'close-to-nature' life-style of native people, combined with the new ethnographic interest with regard to 'un-civilized' societies, cultures, and the emerging 'cult of the primitive'—James Clifford would classify her as an 'ethnographic modernist' (Udall 2000, 33). Carr herself stressed the 'documentary' facet⁵ of her painting the totem poles and scenes in Indian life: in this respect, she herself claims to belong to those with an ethnographic interest, adding some Romantic elements and nationalism to it.

Indian culture, preserving it, passing it on to a wider public within Canada and beyond the borders of the country became a major obsession for Emily Carr—and it was her totem pole paintings principally that garnered her a place in the history of 20th century art. Her first major exhibition of these paintings in April 1913 was accompanied by two lectures on totems she gave (as later research—Crean—revealed, she was using encyclopaedias, ethnographical sources in it), where she described Indians the following way: "people with [...] quiet dignity," "[t]he Haidas [...] are a particularly fine race of people," "strong, fine, primitive

⁴ 'Painting' with a brush or with words were two sides of the same coin and based on the same strategy by Carr, so what she mentions in *Growing Pains* with regard to her work as painter may be relevant to her writing, too. "Unknowingly I was storing, storing, and unconscious, my working ideas against the time when I should be ready to use this material." (Carr 1997, 346, under "Home Again")

⁵ "You must be absolutely honest and true in the depicting of a totem, for meaning is attached to every line; you must be most particular about detail and proportion. *I never use the camera nor work from photos*; every pole in my collection has been studied from its actual reality in its own original setting [...] Indians [...] say to one another, 'Come and see the woman make pictures with her head and hands, not with a box.' [...] I glory in our wonderful West and I [would] like to leave behind me some of the relics of its first primitive greatness. These things should be to us Canadians what the ancient Britons' relics are to the English. Only a few more years and they will be gone forever into silent nothingness" (Carr 2003, 195, 203). Apparently in later years Carr did use the camera as 'memory aid'.

people," "[i]n their own primitive state they were a moral people with a high ideal of right" (Carr 2003, 185, 191, 196, 197).

Totem poles and her experiences during the sketching trips, of meeting native people in their own environment and spending time with them, inspired not only her paintings, but also her literary output—both the stories, and her 'life writing'. It is important to note at this point, however, that her communication with the Natives primarily consisted of gestures (hence her 'Indian name', Klee Wyck) and a few basic words⁶, implying that Carr's stories about the meaning of totem poles or Indian legends are partly the work of her imagination—at the same time, it has to be underlined that she produces beautiful texts both in *Klee Wyck* and in *Growing Pains* about her encounters with native culture. Who, after all, could not be moved by her story of the totem poles of Gittex?

Once they, too, had been forest trees, till the Indian mutilated and turned them into bare poles. Then he enriched the shorn things with carvings. He wanted some way of showing people things that were in his mind, things about the creatures and about himself and their relation to each other. He cut forms to fit the thoughts that the birds and animals and fish suggested to him, and to these he added something of himself. When they were all linked together they made very strong talk for the people. He grafted this new language on to the great cedar trunks and called them totem poles and stuck them up in the villages with great ceremony. Then the cedar and the creatures and the man all talked together through the totem poles to the people. The carver did even more—he let his imaginings rise above the object that he saw and pictured supernatural beings too. (Carr 1997, 51)

The Indian used distortion, sometimes to fill spaces but mostly for more powerful expressing than would have been possible had he depicted actualities—gaining strength, weight, power by accentuation.

The totem figures represented supernatural as well as natural beings, mythological monsters, the human and animal figures making 'strong talk' [...] Totems were less valued for their workmanship than for their 'talk'. (Carr 1997, 426)

It can be stated that Carr surpassed the mere ethnographical interest of her time: she was convinced that totem poles were works of art in their own right and she 'reversed' the general attitude of Europeans' aiming to 'civilize' natives, by claiming that *she*, the white artist could *learn from*

⁶ We can note at this point that even some 'professional' researchers of ethnography were not able to speak any aboriginal language, including Claude Lévi-Strauss, born about ten years after Carr's first Indian sketches, and making his first important field work in Brazil in the second half of the 1930s.

them. This viewpoint was in sharp contrast with the prevailing views of the white society of her time—formulated and strongly supported by the Church—that the customs and artifacts of aboriginal people should be despised and dismissed as 'primitive' and suggestive of pagan beliefs. Instead, native people were expected to assimilate into white society, through the vehicle of the school system. "Education was left largely in the hands of missionaries, who also had a crucial role in the assimilation process: the replacement of traditional religious beliefs and practices by Christianity" (Cook 1985, 435). As Laurence (1996, 16) put it, Carr

could be admired for [...] arguing against the negative stereotypes about natives that existed in the minds of her white audience. Emily Carr also promoted the great accomplishments of native artists as a valuable part of Canadian cultural heritage [...] she was battling against not only a reactionary response to her avant-garde art but also a dismissive way of thinking about native culture.

Carr—as Udall remarks—"never forgot that she was an outsider" and "never fooled herself about her cultural borrowings" (2000, 43, 44) and was ready to admit that

Indian art broadened my seeing, loosened the formal tightness I had learned in England's schools. Its bigness and stark reality baffled my white man's understanding. I was as Canadian-born as the Indian but behind me were Old World heredity and ancestry as well as Canadian environment. The new West called me, but my Old World heredity, the flavour of my upbringing, pulled me back. I had been schooled to see outsides only, not struggle to pierce.

The Indian caught first at the inner intensity of his subject, worked outward to the surface. [...]

Indian Art taught me directness and quick, precise decisions. (Carr 1997, 427)

This conviction was supported by H. P. Gibb in Paris in 1910 who encouraged her by saying that "[y]our silent Indian will teach you more than all the art jargon" (432).

Carr's visual and verbal artistic expression is imbued with all that she experienced during her time among the Natives and her observations about their art. The stories in *Klee Wyck* can very often be directly linked to a given painting or a series. The best illustration of this is the D'Sonoqua case: it is the title of a story in *Klee Wyck* (Carr 1997, 40–44), a watercolour bearing the same title from 1912 is reproduced in Udall, accompanied by a photo from the same period (2000, 37), and almost two

decades later, Carr painted a large oil on canvas about the same totem pole (100.3X65.4 cm) (reproduced in Shadbolt 1990, 114). She made mention of the story and the painting at the time of her 'open house' exhibition in 1935: "I think the story and the picture were special things experienced by me" (April 5th, Carr 1997, 782). The stunning female forest spirit figure was surrounded by mystery—when Carr asked the Indians about her, the reluctant answer was "I dunno".



Emily Carr: Guyasdoms D'Sonoqua

1.1.1.4/bmi/www.virtualmuseum.ca/Exhibitions/EmilyCarr/data/images/AGO-2705_lge.jpg.(Access March 1st, 2012)

What she later found out was that this "wild woman of the woods [...] steals children [...] carries them to her caves [...] [and was] sometimes bad [...] sometimes good" (Carr 1997, 42). In her story she described the 'terrifying' "great wooden image towering above me" with the following words:

Her head and trunk were carved out of, or rather into, the bole of a great red cedar. She seemed to be part of the tree itself, as if she had grown there at its heart, and the carver had only chipped away the outer woods so that you could see her. Her arms were spliced and socketed to the trunk, and were flung wide in a circling, compelling movement. Her breasts were two eagle-heads, fiercely carved. [...] The eyes were two rounds of black, set in wider rounds of white, and placed in deep sockets under wide, black eyebrows. Their fixed state bored into me as if the very life of the old cedar looked out, and it seemed that the voice of the tree itself might have burst from that great round cavity, with projecting lips, that was her mouth. Her ears were round, and stuck out to catch all sounds. (Carr 1997, 40–41)

Udall (2000, 36–43) gives a convincing analysis of the relationship between the pictures and the literary text, mentioning that Claude Lévi-Strauss in his work on North Pacific Coast native cultures (*La Voie des Masques*, 1975) also elaborated on what he transcribed as 'Dzonokwa'. Udall's subsequent insights are also worth sharing:

Part of Carr's lasting fascination with D'Sonoqua is, without doubt, the ogre's role bridging nature and history. By siting her mythic power within nature, brooding in the shadows, Carr unknowingly captured what the critic Roland Barthes would later call the modern function of myth. 'Myth today,' wrote Barthes, 'turns reality inside out, empties it of history and fills it with nature.' This is precisely what Carr does; she paints the mythic aspect, negating history (the specifics of which are, in any case, unknowable for each sculpture), and allows nature to flow around and into the void. [...]

To Canadians [...] D'Sonoqua signified the alien, the monstrous, the exotic within its borders. (2000, 42)

In linking Carr's search to grasp the essence of Canada and of herself with Northrop Frye's famous questions 'Where is here?' and 'Who am I?' and also with Atwood's 'survival theory' where the latter defines Nature as female, Udall continues by pointing out that

Emily Carr, as both writer and painter, struggled for her own artistic and emotional survival. In *Klee Wyck*, her collection of prose sketches describing her journeys among the Indians, she reveals her obeisance to this faintly threatening environment. Unlike many Canadians, she wrote not of Canada's frozen north, but of the enveloping greenness, the initial impenetrability of the British Columbian rain forest. Often she feared falling victim to the overwhelming power of the place; she struggled against nature, as well as [...] the twin dangers of social oppression and deprivation which had victimized the Indians. (2000, 43)

Like many experimenting artists, recognition came late for Carr: she was 56 when her paintings, dominating the "Canadian West Coast Art, Native and Modern" at the National Gallery in Ottawa, were exhibited in the fall of 1927. She was active for almost two more decades, producing an impressive body of paintings that were shown not only in her own country, but also in galleries in the United States, Holland, England, and France. Her writing, however, only attracted critical attention decades after her death in 1945. Even today, most anthologies of Canadian literature tend to omit them entirely. On the other hand, a tome of her collected works (short stories, journals) was published in recent years, accompanied by other books offering a selection of her letters and diary entries. These books attest to her prolific output in a number of literary genres.

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