Who Was Emily Carr?

Objective:
Students learn about the life and work of Emily Carr, while improving their reading comprehension.

Description of Activity:
Working either in groups or individually, students review a text about Carr and her work.

Duration:
1 session, 60 minutes

Background Information for Teachers:
Reading the biography of an artist is one of the oldest and most common ways to begin thinking about his or her work. An artist’s biography can supply us with information about the artist’s birthplace, childhood, education and travels, as well as influential friends and teachers. It can also provide us with insight into the progress of an artist’s career. However, biographical information should be approached with the understanding that different authors often interpret the events of an artist’s life in different ways.

Preparation for Teachers:
- Read the excerpts (Appendix A) that follow this activity, containing biographical information on Emily Carr.

Materials for Students:
- Student worksheet “The Life of Emily Carr.” (See Appendix B.)
- Student Exercises A and B. (See Appendix B.)
- Dictionaries
- Lined paper
- Writing materials
Process:

- Photocopy “The Life of Emily Carr” worksheet (one for each student).
- For beginners, divide the class into four groups so that students can work in teams. Intermediate and advanced students may read the text and work in teams or individually.
- Have students read “The Life of Emily Carr” and use their dictionaries to discuss and define unfamiliar words.
- Have students complete Exercise A, in which they choose a suitable title for each paragraph of the text.
- Then have students complete Exercise B, in which they correct a summary of the text that contains errors.
- When students have finished both exercises, invite them to share new words with the rest of the class.

Discussion:

- Ask students to discuss what they have learned about Emily Carr. What aspect of her life was most memorable to each group or student? Discuss.

Further Engagement:

- Invite students to read more about the life of Emily Carr. They may read one or more of the excerpts (Appendix A) that follow this activity, visit their local public library or search the Internet for further information. Ask students to compare the information they find in this additional source to the information in “The Life of Emily Carr.” What is similar about the way the two sources describe the artist? What is different? What type of information does each source include?
Appendix A: Who Was Emily Carr?

The work of Emily Carr and the circumstances in which it was achieved are unique in Canada. Here was a creative artist painting and sketching throughout most of her life among a people who not only failed to encourage her in her work but who opposed it. For fifteen of her most vigorous years she ran a rooming house and bred and sold hundreds of English sheep dogs in order to earn a living. Fifty people attended her funeral and her physician remarked sadly — “If Victoria knew her value there would have been five thousand people present to-day.”


Emily Carr was born in Victoria on Vancouver Island 13 December 1871, died there 2 March 1945, and lived most of her life within a few blocks of the house where she was born. In her lifetime she travelled by rail back and forth across the broad reach of Canada twice on her way to Europe, and three times more to its eastern centres, so that she had some passing experience of the vast dimensions of space, the great gaps between clusters of habitation, the geographical richness and variety which were insistent characteristics of her natal country. Although she could not have grasped the extent of uninhabited northern wilderness, never having the opportunity to observe it from the air, her travels in her own province in search of native Indian material ensured that she was not lacking in the experience of the hinterland.

Appendix B: Who Was Emily Carr?

The Life of Emily Carr

Emily Carr was born in 1871 in Victoria, British Columbia. There were seven children in her family. Her parents died when she was young. As a young woman, Carr studied art in San Francisco, England and France, where she learned new ways to make paintings.

Emily Carr was a remarkable woman for her time. She did not marry. She liked to be outdoors in nature and often travelled alone. She had many pets, including cats, dogs, birds, a rat and a monkey named Woo.

When she returned to Canada, she travelled north, up the coast of British Columbia to photograph and sketch in First Nations communities. In her studio in Victoria, she made oil paintings based on her sketches. Later she made paintings of the trees, forests and skies in B.C. She painted outdoors, or in her studio, working from sketches.

Emily Carr’s art was not well liked until late in her life. She sold few of her paintings, so she had to work hard doing many other things to earn money to live. She rented out rooms in her house, made and sold pottery and rugs, bred and sold sheepdogs, and taught art classes.

When Carr became ill and could no longer paint, she wrote books about her life. She wrote five books in total. Her books were very successful. In 1941, one book, titled Klee Wyck, won the Governor General’s Award, Canada’s national prize for literature. She died in 1945 at the age of seventy-four.
Appendix B: Who Was Emily Carr?

Exercise A: Choose a Title

The information on the worksheet “The Life of Emily Carr” is divided into five paragraphs. Choose an appropriate title for each paragraph, from the titles listed below. Be careful! There are eight titles to choose from and only five paragraphs.

Possible Titles:

Emily Carr the Writer  Emily Carr the Portrait Painter
An Unusual Woman      Early Life
Emily Carr the Sculptor Other Work
Emily Carr’s Home      The Paintings of Emily Carr

Write the titles you have chosen below:

Paragraph 1: ___________________________________________

Paragraph 2: ___________________________________________

Paragraph 3: ___________________________________________

Paragraph 4: ___________________________________________

Paragraph 5: ___________________________________________
Appendix B: Who Was Emily Carr?

Exercise B: Correct a Summary of the Information

Below is a summary of the information on the worksheet “The Life of Emily Carr.” The summary is incorrect. Write a correct summary in the space below.

Emily Carr was born in the city of Vancouver. She studied sculpture in Italy and New York. She was an unusual person who like strange food and hated animals. When she returned to Canada from Europe, she made paintings of cities. Emily Carr’s paintings were very popular and made her lots of money. When she became too old to paint, she made movies.

Write a correct summary below:

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
A Sense of Place

Objective:
Students investigate ways in which Carr expressed her personal relationship to the landscape.

Description of Activity:
Students compare a literal description of a place to a description that is interpretive, meaning that it relates to experience and emotion. Students then consider this same approach to Emily Carr’s paintings, building on their writing skills in the process.

Duration:
1 session, 60 minutes

Background Information for Teachers:
Emily Carr was both a visual artist and a writer. In her artwork and her books she explored her deep love of nature, in particular the forests, mountains, seas and skies of British Columbia. Using words and paintings, she tried to communicate a sense of the powerful experience of being in nature. In her paintings she uses strong, bright colours, solid forms and waving lines of colour in the earth and sky that create a sense of energy. In her books she uses descriptive words and metaphors to share a sense of energy and growth. Here is a short passage from her journal, published in 1966 under the title Hundreds and Thousands:

...go into the woods alone and look at the earth crowded with growth, new and old bursting from their strong roots hidden in the silent, live ground, each seed according to its own kind expanding, bursting, pushing its way upward toward the light and air, each one knowing what to do, each one demanding its own rights on the earth. Feel this growth, the surging upward, the expansion, the pulsing life...

Reading Carr’s works enables us to see her paintings in a new way, and looking at her paintings can help us to understand her words.
Preparation for Teachers:

- Examine *Old and New Forest*, 1931-1932, and *A Rushing Sea of Undergrowth*, 1935. (See Appendix C for reproductions). Consider how Carr uses colour, form and line to express the energy and growth that she describes in her journal.

Materials for Students:

- Reproductions of *Old and New Forest*, 1931-1932, and *A Rushing Sea of Undergrowth*, 1935
- Lined paper
- Writing materials

Process:

Part I:

- Invite students to choose a personal, special place as the focus of their work. This place can be real or imaginary.
- Ask students to create a precise written description of that special place, describing it literally, explaining exactly what we would see there.
- Have students describe why the place is so special to them. Encourage them to use specific, expressive, descriptive language that conveys experiences and feelings. Ask them: What is it like to be in your place? How does it feel? How do you feel when you are there? What do you think about? What do you see, smell, hear and touch?
- Ask students to compare the two pieces of writing, focusing on how one is a record of a place, whereas the other is a reflection of how that place makes them feel.

Part II:

- Invite students to look at reproductions of Emily Carr’s work and to repeat the writing exercise, focusing on what she is trying to show literally (the sky, water, the forest) and then describing what they think made the place important to Carr.

Discussion:

- Discuss the way that Emily Carr tried to combine these two types of descriptions in her art and writing. She captured not only the look of a place, but also her experience of that place.
Further Engagement:

- Have students read an excerpt from Carr’s journal, published in 1966 as *Hundreds and Thousands: The Journals of An Artist*, to see if their interpretation of Carr’s paintings is similar to what the artist wanted to communicate with her work.
Appendix C: A Sense of Place

Emily Carr
*Old and New Forest*, 1931-1932
oil on canvas
112.2 x 69.8 cm
Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Emily Carr Trust
VAG 42.3.23

Photo: Trevor Mills, Vancouver Art Gallery
A Rushing Sea of Undergrowth, 1935
oil on canvas
112.8 x 69.0 cm
Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Emily Carr Trust
VAG 42.3.17
Photo: Trevor Mills, Vancouver Art Gallery
Representing First Nations Cultures

Objective:
Students consider Emily Carr’s interest in First Nations cultures of the Northwest Coast.

Description of Activity:
Students study Carr’s rather complicated relationship with the First Nations people of British Columbia, while developing listening and oral communication skills.

Duration:
1 session, 60 minutes
Independent research time

Background Information for Teachers:
In 1889, Carr went to the village of Hittats’uu (Ucluelet) on the west coast of Vancouver Island to visit her older sister Lizzie, who was living there as a missionary. Her stay in Hittats’uu was brief, but the sketches she produced during her journey reveal an interest in the people and their culture. This interest led Carr to visit other First Nations communities in the years that followed.

Like many people of European descent living in Canada in the early twentieth century, Carr believed that the Northwest Coast Nations were in danger of disappearing with the pressure of European settlement into the region. Consequently, she wanted to document aspects of coastal First Nations cultures, especially the totem poles, before they were gone. The question of Carr’s intention in depicting these cultures has prompted heated debates in recent years. Some scholars argue that Carr used European ideas and techniques to portray a culture that was not her own. Others claim that Carr was one of the few Western artists in this period to treat First Nations culture as a subject worthy of representation.
Preparation for Teachers:

- Look at *Skidegate*, 1912, and *Blunden Harbour*, c.1930. See Appendix D for reproductions.
- Review the resource material on totem poles (Appendix E) that follows this activity.

Materials for Students:

- Reproductions of *Skidegate*, 1912, and *Blunden Harbour*, c.1930.
- Flip chart
- Markers
- Lined paper
- Writing materials

Process:

Part I:

- Ask students to bring in any information they can find about totem poles, including postcards, tourist brochures and items from the Internet.
- Write the following questions on the flip chart and work with students to answer them, using the information they have discovered and the resource material on totem poles in Appendix E:
  - What is a totem pole?
  - How are the poles created?
  - What material are they made of?
  - What are some of the functions of a totem pole?
  - Where have you seen totem poles? (museums, airports, parks, tourist brochures, telephone book cover, etc.)
  - Are totem poles still made today?

Part II:

- Show students reproductions of *Skidegate*, 1912, and *Blunden Harbour*, c.1930.
- Have them describe what they see. What is the main subject of the painting? Where is the painting set? What other elements are important to the composition?
- Invite students to share what they have learned about totem poles, and have them discuss how this information relates to the totem poles depicted by Emily Carr.
Discussion:

• Summarize what students have learned about totem poles. Discuss the fact that Emily Carr was inspired by First Nations culture and artefacts like totem poles, though she was not of First Nations ancestry herself. Reiterate that her work represents her perception of the totem poles she encountered on her journeys.

Further Engagement:

• Students can research the First Nations peoples of British Columbia online. Assign each student one of the following nations, whose villages Emily Carr visited in her travels: Coast Salish; St’át’imc; Nlaka’pamux; Nuu-chah-nulth; Tlingit; Kwakwaka’wakw; Gitxsan; Wet’suwet’en; Nisga’a; Haida. Have students present their findings to the class.
Appendix D: Representing First Nations Culture

Emily Carr

Skidegate, 1912

oil on card mounted on board

65.6 x 35.8 cm

Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Emily Carr Trust

VAG 42.3.46

Photo: Robert Keziere, Vancouver Art Gallery
Emily Carr
*Blunden Harbour*, c.1930
oil on canvas
129.8 x 93.6 cm
National Gallery of Canada, Purchased 1937
4285
Appendix E: Representing First Nations Culture

Northwest Coast First Nations are famous for their totem poles—monumental objects that are typically carved from a single red cedar tree. All groups on the north Pacific coast, from the Coast Salish in Puget Sound to the Tlingit in southeast Alaska, practised this art form.

Totem poles typically record the histories of chiefly families and the greater community. The poles have many real purposes: to record real and mythic histories, display ancestral crests, celebrate marriages, memorialize the dead, define territorial claims, and welcome guests to feasts and potlatches. Most carved images on totem poles are crest figures. They show the animal, human and supernatural ancestors of a family. The rituals involved in constructing and erecting totem poles are ancient and complex.

Totem poles are made of wood, usually Western red cedar (*Thuja plicata*), and are carved by a master carver assisted by apprentices. In early times totem poles were traditionally painted with bright, durable pigments derived from minerals, burnt and pulverized clamsheells and charcoal, and mixed in a medium of crushed salmon eggs. In the late historic period, commercial oil-based paints replaced the naturally occurring pigments and provided a broader palette of colour.

When a pole is erected, a designated speaker gives a detailed account of the meaning and history of each figure depicted on the pole. The pole is then validated at a feast or potlatch where guests witness the event and the claims of the host chief; the witnesses are then paid with food and gifts to confirm the transactions.

First Nations communities continue to erect and dedicate totem poles for traditional purposes. In addition, many poles are now commissioned by governments, corporations, cultural institutions and individual collectors.

**Welcome pole**: Usually a single standing figure, often with outstretched arms, erected in front of the host’s house to welcome guests to ceremonial events.

**Memorial pole**: Erected in front of a house or at a gravesite and featuring the primary crests of a deceased chief. The pole is usually dedicated by his successor at a memorial potlatch held a year or more after his death. Alternatively, a single human figure, often representing the deceased, may be erected beside a gravesite.

**Mortuary pole**: A pole about 6 metres (20 feet) high. A mortuary pole of the Haida and Tlingit contains a cavity at the top in which the coffin of a high-ranking chief is placed. Crest figures may decorate the column and the rectangular plaque that covers the burial niche.
**Interior house posts:** The four main structural supports for the framework of the great cedar post-and-beam houses of the Northwest Coast, often decorated with crest figures. The posts support the huge beams, which in turn support the rafters and roof planks.

**House frontal poles:** Poles placed against the façade of a house. These may include a ceremonial entranceway at or near ground level.

**Potlatch figure:** A potlatch figure may be placed permanently in front of an owner’s house or erected temporarily during a potlatch. It may indicate the privileges transferred at a marriage, symbolize orators, depict the host, ridicule a rival, represent an ancestor or account for the goods to be given away as gifts to the assembled witnesses.
**Objective:**
Students learn about Emily Carr as a woman artist working in turn-of-the-century western Canada. Designed to expand both listening and oral communications skills, this activity also asks students to translate what they learn into written form.

**Description of Activity:**
Students examine a work by Carr and use it to discuss the changing role of women over time.

**Duration:**
2 sessions, 60 minutes each

**Background Information for Teachers:**
While there have always been women artists, not all of them have had the same opportunities to develop their skills or to showcase their work that men have had. In Canada, Emily Carr was part of the first generation of women to attend official art academies. She began her studies in San Francisco and went on to study art in England and Paris. As a student she encountered a number of obstacles to embarking on a career as a professional artist, not the least of which was her discomfort with drawing the nude body from life.

Nevertheless, Carr persisted in her ambitions, choosing the life of an artist over that of a wife and mother, the usual roles of women in her day. She was resolute in her decision, but her writing sometimes reveals a sense of loneliness and frustration at society’s expectations. She also alludes to the dominance of male artists, especially the members of the Group of Seven. Some authors argue that Carr looked to male authority figures for approval of her own work. Whether or not this was the case, Carr’s life and her career point out the divide that existed between men and women in her day and the implications that this had for her work as an artist.

**Preparation for Teachers:**
- Examine *A Skidegate Pole*, 1941-1942. See Appendix F for reproductions.
- Read the excerpts (Appendix G) that follow this activity for an idea of some of the challenges that Carr faced as a woman artist.
Materials for Students:

- Reproduction of *A Skidegate Pole*, 1941-1942 (one for each group)
- Flip chart
- Markers
- Lined paper
- Writing materials

Process:

- Choose one or more of the excerpts (Appendix G) that follow this activity and read them to the class, listing any words that are unfamiliar to students (and their definitions) on a flip chart.

- Divide the class into four groups. Give each group a reproduction of *A Skidegate Pole*, 1941-1942, as well as a copy of the background information for students (Appendix H) that follows this activity.

- Ask each group to consider the following questions in relation to the image, using the information provided:
  
  o Do you think it would be easier for women today to do what Carr did? Explain why or why not.
  
  o Can you think of examples in today’s world where men and women are expected to do certain things and not others?
  
  o Was it easier for the men or the women in your group to come to Canada to study/work?
  
  o Do you know what life was like for women in your home country in the 1920s and 1930s? Do you think a woman artist could have lived as Carr did, in your home country seventy years ago?

- Have each group present their answers to the class.

Discussion:

- Have each student write a paragraph summarizing what he or she has learned about Carr as a woman artist working in turn-of-the-century western Canada. Ask students to read their summaries to the class.

Further Engagement:

- Screen the video *The Other Side of the Picture*, 1999, which discusses the challenges faced by women artists in Canada over the last 100 years. Ask students to write down any information that they feel is relevant to Carr. This information can be directly about the artist, or it can reflect the larger social realities that characterized the period in which Carr lived.
Appendix F: A Remarkable Woman

Emily Carr
*A Skidegate Pole, 1941-1942*
oil on canvas
87.0 x 76.5 cm
Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Emily Carr Trust
VAG 42.3.37

Photo: Trevor Mills, Vancouver Art Gallery
Appendix G: A Remarkable Woman

Home Again:

I was rebellious about religion. In our home it was forced upon you in large, furious helps. The miserableness of continuously sprawling across doubled-over ladies, with their noses on the seats of their chairs, and their praying knees down on our carpets, annoyed me. You never knew in which room or at what hour.

The Y.W.C.A. was just beginning in Victoria; my sisters were among its founders, and enthusiastic over the concern. As the society had, as yet, no headquarters, they used to come to our house to pray. I was always bursting in on them. The knocked-over-ones glowered, and, over their horizontal backs, my sister’s eyes shot fire at me. She hung on to her prayer voice till afterwards—and then—! (p. 106)

Cariboo Gold:

My sister owned a beautiful mare which she permitted me to ride. On the mare, astride as I had ridden in the Cariboo, my sheep-dog following, I went into the woods. No woman had ridden cross-saddle before in Victoria! Victoria was shocked! My family sighed. Carrs had always conformed; they believed in what always has been continuing always to be. Cross-saddle! Why, everyone disappointed! Too bad, instead of England gentling me into an English Miss with nice ways I was more me than ever, just pure me. (p. 248)

France:

I asked Mr. Gibb’s advice [William Phelan “Harry” Gibb was an English artist working in Paris at the time] as to where I should study. “Colarossi,” he replied. “At Colarossi’s men and women students work together. At Julien’s the classes are separate. It is often a distinct advantage for women students to see the stronger work of men.” — Mr. Gibb had not a high opinion of the work of women artists.

The first month at Colarossi’s was hard. There was no other woman in the class; there was not one word of my own language spoken. The French professor gabbled and gesticulated before my easel — passed on. I did not know whether he had praised or condemned. I missed women; there was not even a woman model.” (p. 264)

Appendix H: A Remarkable Woman

In Emily Carr’s time (1871-1945), women did not usually paint landscapes. They were expected to paint portraits, floral arrangements known as still lifes or scenes of domestic life. Carr, however, painted outdoors, depicting First Nations villages and the deep forest, places where women did not usually go.

*A Skidegate Pole*, 1941-1942, is based on a sketch Emily Carr made when she travelled up the coast of British Columbia in 1912. Back then women did not usually travel alone in the wilderness. Only men had this kind of freedom. Most women were concerned with home, marriage and family. Emily decided at an early age that she would not marry, and she never did. Her home included nature — especially the forest.
What it Means to be Canadian

Objective:
Students examine Emily Carr’s paintings within the context of national identity.

Description of Activity:
Looking at works by members of the Group of Seven and Emily Carr, students compose a letter to a friend or relative in their home country, describing what it means to be Canadian.

Duration:
1 session, 60 minutes

Background Information for Teachers:
One of Carr’s most compelling written statements on art appeared in the McGill News in June 1929. Here she called for the formation of a uniquely Canadian art:

What are we Canadian artists of the west going to do with our art? We are young yet, and are only slowly finding a way, but are we obliged to bedeck ourselves in borrowed plumes and copy art born of other countries and not ours?

Carr was not alone in the search for a new visual language to express her sense of the land that she felt was unlike any other. In the early decades of the twentieth century, many artists shared this goal; the most prominent among them were members of the Group of Seven. Made up of seven male artists from Ontario, the Group of Seven sought to capture the spirit of the Canadian landscape in their work, through expressive colours and simplified forms that they believed reflected the essence of their subject.

Carr did not meet the Group of Seven members until 1927, when she went east to participate in an exhibition at the National Gallery in Ottawa. At that time she was already employing similar techniques in her own work. Her treatment of trees as emblematic of the land found a parallel in the paintings of the Group of Seven. This suggests that at the time, Canada’s wilderness landscape provided the most vivid sense of what it was like to live in this country, an image that persists to this day.
Preparation for Teachers:

- Read the excerpt (Appendix J) that follows this activity, describing the influence of Lawren Harris on Carr’s work. The two artists developed a close friendship after meeting in 1927. For many years, Carr and Harris wrote letters to each other, discussing their ideas about art and nationhood.

Materials for Students:

- Reproductions of *Forest, British Columbia*, 1931-1932 and *Island, MacCullam Lake*, 1921
- Lined paper
- Writing materials
- Dictionaries

Process:

- Show students reproductions of Carr’s *Forest, British Columbia*, 1931-1932, and Harris’ *Island, MacCullam Lake*, 1921.
- Tell students about the Group of Seven and their relationship to Emily Carr.
- Ask students to consider Carr’s work and Harris’ work from the perspective of what it means to be Canadian. What type of impression is created by their work? How is this different from the work of artists in other countries? What do these two paintings say about Canada?
- Invite each student to write a letter to a friend or a relative in their home country, describing how Carr and Harris depicted Canada in their paintings.

Discussion:

- Invite students to share their letters with the rest of the class. Does the image of Canada created by Carr and Harris correspond to their experience of this country?

Further Engagement:

- Questions of identity and nationality continue to be of interest to Canadian artists. Invite students to find a contemporary artist whose work shows similar concerns to those of Harris and Carr, and have students share what they learn about this artist with the rest of the class. Suggestions: Liz Magor, Jack Shadbolt, Jeff Wall.
Appendix I: What it Means to be Canadian

Emily Carr
*Forest, British Columbia*, 1931-1932
oil on canvas
130.0 x 86.8 cm
Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Emily Carr Trust
VAG 42.3.9

Photo: Trevor Mills, Vancouver Art Gallery
Lawren Harris
*Island, MacCullam Lake*, 1921
oil on burlap
76.0 x 96.7 cm
Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Transfer from Women’s Auxiliary Provincial School Loan Scheme
VAG 65.23

Photo: Trevor Mills, Vancouver Art Gallery
Appendix J: What it Means to be Canadian

Mr. Harris’ letters were a constant source of inspiration to me. He scolded, praised, expounded, clarified. He too had tasted our West, having sketched in the Rocky Mountains. He understood many of my despairs and perplexities. Sometimes my letters were bubbling with hope, sometimes they dripped woe. I wrote him of the change taking place in the Indian villages—in Indian workmanship. His advice was “For a while at least, give up Indian motifs. Perhaps you have become too dependent on them; create forms for yourself, direct from nature.”

I went no more then to the far villages, but to the deep, quiet woods near home where I sat staring, staring, staring—half lost, learning a new language or rather the same language in a different dialect. So still were the big woods where I sat, sound might not yet have been born. Slowly, slowly I began to put feeble scratchings and smudges of paint onto my paper, returning home disheartened, wondering, waiting for the woods to say something to me personally. Until they did, what could I say?