

The Trouble with Emily

by Robert Fulford

In the summer of 1990, a wall text accompanying an Emily Carr exhibition at the National Gallery declared that Carr “forged a deep bond with the native heritage” of British Columbia, and developed a “profound understanding of the meaning of that heritage.” That’s not a new notion: it’s a point often made about Carr by those who write earnest schoolbooks, and anyone who has read even a little about Canadian art will be familiar with it. But what does it mean? The answer involves a controversy that has been gathering around Carr in recent years, nibbling at the pedestal on which she has stood for two generations, drawing her into the midst of racial politics and postmodern theory, and challenging her place of high honour in Canadian art and women’s history.

How profound, exactly, *was* the understanding to which the wall text pays tribute? Did Emily Carr understand native culture in the way she understood, say, the British-colonial Victoria in which she grew up? Or did she understand it in the way a diligent scholar may come to know a single foreign culture after years of study? Could she have explained the subtleties of belief by which coastal natives lived their lives and made their art? Or could she have described the differences between the Haida she encountered at Skidegate and the Tsimshian she met on the Skeena River in a way that either the Haida or the Tsimshian would recognize? Or does the word

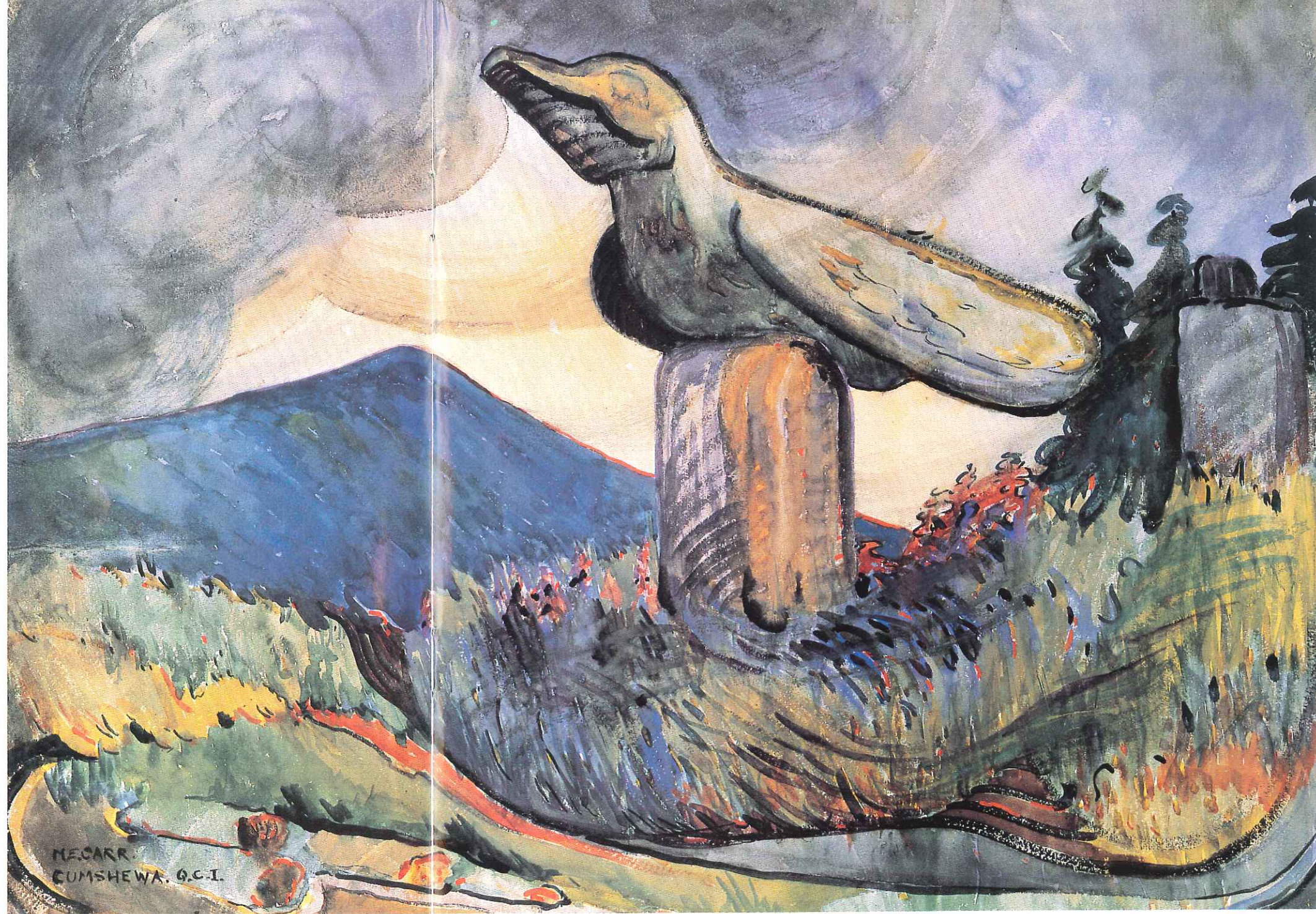
How Canada’s greatest woman painter ended up on
the wrong side
of the political correctness debate

“profound,” which springs so easily to our lips, mean something vaguer in this case, something like a mystical leap of imagination and empathy by which Carr miraculously found her way, through otherwise impenetrable forests of exotic belief and custom, into the very heart of native life?

Perhaps the wall text was no more than a pious tribute to one of the saints of Canadian culture, a saint whose story has nourished nationalists, feminists, British Columbians, and many other admirers of her work. Judith Mastai, who runs public programs at the Vancouver Art Gallery, has noticed how Carr enthusiasts love to burnish this story and “stand in its warmth,” a beautiful phrase for one of the familiar uses of the cultural past. By now just about everyone knows the two dramas that make up Carr’s myth. One is the standard modernist saga of the solitary artist whose talent and courage triumph over obscurity, neglect, poverty, and depression, making each painting into a personal victory that later generations adopt as part of their national heritage. In this case the sex of the protagonist heightens the narrative and places it firmly in women’s history as well as in the history of Canadian painting. The other drama, equally powerful, involves her encounter with the great wooden sculpture of the coastal villages of British Columbia, sculpture which was largely created in the nineteenth century and allowed to rot through much of the twentieth, neglected both by the descendants of those who made it and by the white authorities who were governing the province and making every effort to obliterate the native cultures.

Carr began visiting those villages in 1907, fell in love with them, and soon (to use a phrase that seemed quite innocent only a few years ago) “made them her own.” She found them dying and determined to give them life in her paintings, a project that involved much arduous travel; it turned her into one of those artist-adventurers whose work involves going long distances to find their subjects.

She succeeded so well that even today many of us, when we think of those villages, think first of Carr’s paintings. We understand that her work was stylized, sometimes caricatured, that she added her own distortions to the native art that she saw. We know that sometimes it’s impossible to say for certain which distortions are Carr’s own and which belonged to the objects she sketched, sometimes in haste. She was, after all, an artist, not a reporter. We have far more precise visual accounts from photographers and filmmakers who have made their way up and down the B.C. coast. And yet it is Carr’s version that first springs to mind, partly because of her undoubted talent and partly because she was seeing it freshly, discovering for herself a miracle of cultural history in her own part of the world. She was far from the first outsider to see the poles of the coastal and river villages, but she was the first to focus on them with the eye of an outstanding artist in the European tradition. She was equipped to do for them what Picasso did for the African sculpture he encountered around the same time, and what Gauguin earlier did for Tahitian art: she could take them imaginatively

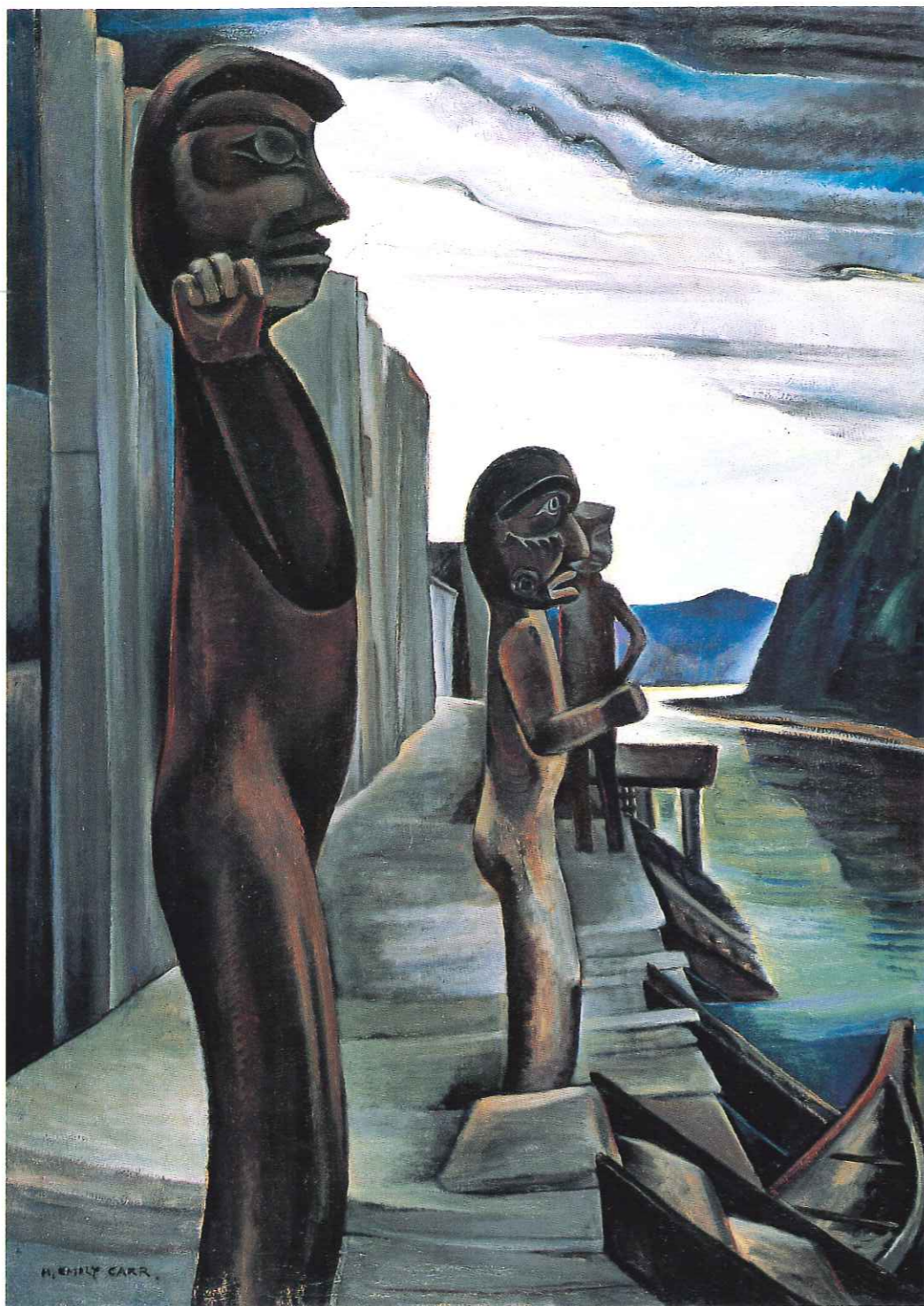


Cumshewa c. 1912
Watercolour and graphite on paper
20 x 30 in.
Collection: National Gallery of Canada

out of their own milieu and exhibit their virtues within another culture, a service that artists have been performing for other art at least since the time when ancient Romans copied Greek sculpture and thereby spread Hellenic influence through the empire. The idea that her eloquent tributes to native B.C. carving would one day be resented, and even perhaps labelled “appropriation,” could not have occurred to her, any more than it could have occurred to Picasso or Gauguin or the Romans.

Carr was also something of an amateur anthropologist, which has lately turned out to be another source of trouble. In 1935, aged sixty-four, with her travels to the coastal villages and her paintings of native art now well in the past, she discussed the life of the natives with great confidence as well as obvious affection. Lecturing in Victoria, she implied that native B.C. art could be ranked alongside the greatest known, an idea that must have seemed radical at the time and is by no means universally acknowledged even today.

She discussed, as equivalents, “the old masters of Europe, the Chinese and Japanese, the Greeks, the Byzantines, the Assyrians, the African negroes, the Indians of America...” She argued that the source of the greatness of the coastal art could be found in the natives’ relationship with nature, a relationship she believed she understood. She particularly focused on the simplicity of native life, which in her view made their art possible. The natives were obliged to work directly from nature: “They saw, heard, smelled, felt, tasted



Blunden Harbour c. 1930
Oil on canvas
51 x 37 in.
Collection: National Gallery of Canada

her," drawing knowledge from intimate contact rather than theory. "They looked upon animals (through which they mostly expressed their art) as their own kindred. Certain of the animals were more than that: they were their totems and were regarded by them with superstitious reverence and awe." She described the use of animal symbols by the chiefs, and the pride a carver took in representing these creatures: "His heart and soul were in his work; he desired not only to uphold the greatness of his people but to propitiate the totem creature." The Indian's art became great "because it was produced with intensity. He believed in what he was expressing and he believed in himself."

When she described this accomplishment, every verb she used was in the past tense. Finally she mentioned the artists of the present, 1935. She acknowledged that some still carved well, "but the objective and desire has gone out of their work." They no longer believed in the power of the totem. "The greatness of their art has died with their belief in these things." Reading, writing, and "modern ways" had irreparably broken their concentration on art. By the end of her talk it was clear that she was speaking a lament for a dead culture, one which she had been fortunate enough to glimpse and portray in its dying moments before the last great poles collapsed of their own weight and were reclaimed by the rain forests.

FOR MUCH OF HER LIFE, Carr was personally isolated, but she nevertheless painted, thought, and wrote from inside the heart of an empire of taste that ruled the world by what it regarded as natural right. She proceeded from the European tradition (somewhat, but not radically, modified by Canadian experience), and looked at the world, including the coastal natives, as a European. For that reason, her reputation is now under attack. Her legacy has become a battlefield in the culture wars, the subject of postmodern revisionism combined with retroactive racial justice. Just as she used native culture as a way of expressing herself, now natives (and others sympathetic to the present situation of natives) are using her as a way of exhibiting and analyzing the imperialism of white Canadian culture, in her time and ours.

To understand what has happened we need to understand that postmodernism represents the triumph of context over art. This kind of criticism began as a way of demonstrating the importance of the environment in which art is produced and used. It arose specifically to deny the work of the New Critics of the 1940s and 1950s, whose "close reading" of poetry excluded biography and history and searched for meaning within the poem itself. It also opposed formalist art criticism, which depicted the development of art as proceeding from an inner logic rather than as a part of its society. Twenty or thirty years ago, enemies of the New Critics and the formalists believed they were righting the balance, introducing realism into a too-rarefied criticism by insisting on the importance of social and political influences. But since then, postmodern thought has reversed the old emphasis rather

than adjusting it; in fact, criticism now habitually uses art as an illustration of its context rather than using the context to illuminate the art. Art has become criticism's tool. In many a literature class across western Europe and North America, theory has superseded poetry itself, reducing Wallace Stevens or Sylvia Plath or Shakespeare to the level of "examples," evidence to prove academic theories about race, sex, and imperialism.

Within this world, it seems natural to focus on what we can now properly say on the subject of Emily Carr, and what that in turn says about her time, our time, and the relationship of culture to social justice. Marcia Crosby, a Haida/Tsimshian student of art and history, has a firm response to that National Gallery wall-text's assertion about Carr's "profound understanding." She states it in her essay, "Construction of the Imaginary Indian," published in 1991 in *Vancouver Anthology: The Institutional Politics of Art*, edited by Stan Douglas. Put plainly, she doesn't believe a word of it. In her view Carr could not possibly have had a profound understanding of the many nations inhabiting British Columbia. Crosby names sixteen distinct nations, from Nisga'a to Sto:lo, and that's the short list — she doesn't mention any of the nations of the interior. It would be impossible for anyone to develop, as a part-time interest over a couple of decades, a deep understanding of so endlessly complicated a world. What Carr did was form an emotional bond with it: it deeply touched her imagination, and she felt for it. But even that bond (Crosby argues persuasively) was not with the nations themselves but with something that never existed: a homogeneous civilization, Carr's own mental construct, a kind of generic native civilization, what Crosby calls "the Imaginary Indian."

This was a fantasy vessel that Carr, like other whites, created. Into it she poured her longing for a Canadian culture and her ideals about nature. Believing she understood this "Indianness," she naturally felt qualified to judge it, and even to write its obituary. Like the European writers who enjoyed their own melancholy feelings about the dead cities of the Middle East (the theme of Rose Macaulay's *The Pleasure of Ruins*), Carr saw the sweet poetry of death in the fallen totems of the Northwest. As Crosby says, her paintings of the last poles "intimate that the authentic Indians who made them existed only in the past, and that all the changes that occurred afterwards provide evidence of racial contamination, and cultural and moral deterioration. These works also imply that native culture... may be measured in degrees of 'Indianness' against defined forms of authenticity," which were also located in the past. "Emily Carr loved the same Indians Victorian society rejected, and whether they were embraced or rejected does not change the fact that they were Imaginary Indians."

This is why (as Judith Mastai wrote in a paper given in November, 1992 at the University of Essex) "Today Carr's images are perceived as part of the problem" rather than as the act of tribute that Carr believed they were. Mastai argued that "paternalistic, white artists" romanticized the idea of

dying races and claimed to salvage the remains of these doomed civilizations while at the same time, “consciously or unconsciously” supporting the federal government’s development of a nation that ignored aboriginal rights. These artists also, and Carr in particular, “appropriated the imagery of the First Nations’ peoples.”

The word “appropriation,” bearing the implication that people of one culture do not have the moral right to depict other cultures in fiction or painting, has lately become a rhetorical weapon in the hands of intellectuals claiming to speak for minority rights. Its power derives, oddly, from its very irrationality. In my experience, people hearing of it for the first time cannot believe that anyone could put forward so ludicrous an idea: even the most modest education in cultural history teaches us that art of all kinds has always depended on the mixing of cultures. But just because the concept of “appropriation” stands so far outside the realm of common sense, it has acquired the charm of the exotically radical and attracted an exceptional amount of attention. It depends heavily on another idea, which has no name but has nevertheless become widely popular: I call it “ethnic possession.” According to this doctrine, I hold a form of ownership in the culture produced by members of my race, even if I myself actively produced none of that culture. More than that, I am, by virtue of my race, inherently more knowledgeable about “my” heritage than people of other races can ever be.

“Ethnic possession” applies, so far, only to races and cultures oppressed by the majority. If someone of English background said “I automatically understand Chaucer better than any Pakistani who has studied him daily for ten years — and those who argue otherwise are both insensitive and insulting,” that statement would be seen as almost insanely racist. But if an intellectual speaking for a minority sets forth precisely the same formulation, it is not only given a fair hearing but may sometimes be applauded and even taken seriously by institutions such as the Canada Council. The burden of historic guilt created by racism has so distorted the perceptions of western intellectuals that frequently we cannot see support for this notion as the act of condescension that it surely is.

Robert Linsley, a teacher at the Emily Carr College of Art and Design, carries the critique of Carr to another level: he attacks her not only for what she did but also for what she failed, in his view, to do. In *Vancouver Anthology* he writes: “Carr’s empathy with the natives partly depends on her distance from them. The glamour of the noble savage that surrounds the Haida and other northern tribes in her work could not belong to the natives of the Songhees reserve in Victoria.” He goes on to note the absence of figures in her mature work: “People are replaced entirely by their artifacts.” Linsley implies that it was Carr’s duty to paint the living Songhees rather than the villages left by dead Haida. Apparently Carr should have looked ahead to the 1990s, when she would be judged by Linsley and similar critics; then she might have made some small contribution to the understanding of the situation of natives in the twentieth century.

True, she could still have been accused of appropriation, but she could have consoled herself with the thought that it was done in a good cause. Instead, poor fool, she acted like an artist: she saw a magnificent subject, unknown to the world but within her reach, and, hardly able to believe her luck, joyfully painted it.

Scott Watson of the UBC Fine Arts Gallery has convicted Emily Carr of another sin: she didn’t keep up with public affairs. “She seemed to have little knowledge of the real legislative oppressions of her First Nations friends,” he announces in an essay that appeared in *Eye of Nature*, published by the Walter Phillips Gallery at Banff in 1991. Watson can’t forgive Carr for painting what she saw, in this case, magnificent villages that were on the point of disappearing: “Carr’s ruins are carcass-like; there’s a sense of something violated, a body disinterred, of something brought wrongly into the corrosive light and air. This morbidity in her was stimulated and fueled by the idea of cultural extinction and annihilation....” Watson seems to be saying that there was something unhealthy (“morbidity”) in Carr’s fascination with the dying villages. Unlike her critics of the 1990s, she lacked the power of positive thinking. She should have turned away from this amazing spectacle and focused her attention instead on the problems of native rights and the difficulty of maintaining native cultures in the twentieth century. If she had been truly healthy she might have avoided art altogether, and perhaps have found work as a social worker, a politician, or even a professor. Postmodern criticism could have saved her from herself.

A far more thoughtful and sympathetic account of Carr’s relationship with the natives can be found in “Northwest Coast Native Culture and the Early Indian Paintings of Emily Carr, 1899-1913,” a recently completed doctoral thesis by Gerta Moray of the University of Guelph. Unlike Carr’s other contemporary critics, Moray has gone far beyond the usual sources: her research encompasses the written record, contemporary newspaper coverage of Carr’s activities, oral-history material, and, most important, the many paintings and sketches that Carr made in the years she spent studying native art. Moray understands the postmodern critique of Carr, and has read these arguments with care. Yet her thesis is an eloquent defence of Carr, her work, and her motives. In the end she persuasively refutes just about every point made by Carr’s critics.

For Moray, the notion that Carr appropriated Indian art for the use of whites, and ignored the native culture of her own time, entirely misses the point. As Moray shows, she was not an artist seizing on Indian art for purely formalist reasons; all to the contrary, her art was a public, political act, owing as much to her civic conscience as to her artistic sensibility. She specifically opposed the white authorities, whether missionaries or government employees, who were urging natives to change their way of life, and she saw the totem poles as part of “an integrated and complex native culture....” In writing about her travels to native villages “she took pains to acknowledge that these places belonged to



Skidegate 1928
Oil on canvas
27 x 43 in.
Photo: Carlo Catenazzi
Collection: Art Gallery of Ontario

her guides and it was they, not she, who understood them.”

Carr’s goal was to vindicate the natives against the negative views of whites, “asserting their honour, dignity, and the coherence of their traditional way of life and beliefs.” Far from ignoring contemporary natives, she took care to show them her work, and took pride in the fact that they accepted it. Moray quotes George Clutesi, an Indian artist who knew Carr and visited her studio: “She made it so very simple for me to see how important it was to remain myself, and to not change my style.... It was largely because of her counselling that I kept the style that I began with.” Carr understood that some natives, in their desire to assimilate, were ignoring or destroying the evidence of their cultural past, and she wanted to persuade them that this art was worth saving.

Unfortunately, she didn’t have the effect on the white community that she hoped to have. In her dealings with provincial museums and in her Vancouver exhibition of 1913, she discovered that few of her fellow whites could be persuaded to share her esteem for native art. As Moray says, “Carr’s espousal of native art forms was not acceptable for her own local audience until... the message of her art’s significance came from Ottawa.” But that doesn’t reduce the

fact that her documentary project was what she called it: an “homage” to the art of the coastal Indians.

The past can be a great burden for the living, if one’s present life is seen as no more than a melancholy epilogue to vanished greatness. But this is not a unique problem for natives, and should not be discussed in isolation. Egyptians, Greeks, and Italians have known about it for millennia; the English are beginning to understand it, and the Americans think they can see it just ahead. Its implications for those who live with it are far more complicated than the formulations of postmodern criticism might suggest. It is a gross insult to any group of people to say that they have no future. But avoiding that insult should not involve distorting the past.

Marcia Crosby, in dealing with another work of art, George Bowering’s novel, *Burning Water*, objects to the depiction of bad-smelling, drunken, promiscuous Indians, even though she acknowledges that Bowering’s intention is to criticize white, Western ideology. Good authorial intentions aren’t enough, she says: “There is a difference between using a theoretical critique and being used by it.” Emily Carr, if she could speak from the grave, might well make precisely the same point. ■