

108 Emily Carr

BCSFA CGP 1871 – 1945

Sitka Totem Pole

oil on canvas, signed M. Emily Carr and on verso inscribed \$400 / xv and variously and stamped twice with the Dominion Gallery stamp, 1912
34 ½ x 11 ½ in, 87.6 x 29.2 cm

PROVENANCE:

Dominion Gallery, Montreal
Acquired from the above by a Private Collection, Montreal
By descent to the present Private Collection, Ontario

LITERATURE:

Charles C. Hill et al., *Emily Carr: New Perspectives on a Canadian Icon*, National Gallery of Canada, 2006, reproduced page 72 and listed page 306

EXHIBITED:

Dominion Hall, Vancouver, *Paintings of Indian Totem Poles and Indian Life by Emily Carr*, April 1913
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, *Emily Carr: New Perspectives on a Canadian Icon*, June 2 – September 4, 2006, traveling in 2006 – 2008 to the Vancouver Art Gallery; Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto; Montreal Museum of Fine Arts; and Glenbow Museum, Calgary, catalogue #141

THE CANVAS *Sitka Totem Pole* marks an important moment in Emily Carr's career. She painted it for a landmark exhibition that she held in April 1913, *Paintings of Indian Totem Poles and Indian Life by Emily Carr*.¹ She rented a grand public assembly hall, the Dominion Hall on Pender Street, where the Vancouver Canadian Club had held its inaugural luncheon in the presence of the governor general in 1906. That same year, Carr had established herself in Vancouver after returning from art studies in England. The hall was also where the British Columbia Society of Fine Arts, of which she was a founding member in 1909, had mounted its first annual show.

This 1913 exhibition was the public launch of her project to make a record of all remaining First Nations totem poles in their village settings. Vancouver as yet did not have an art gallery, but Carr's local landscape watercolours had already garnered considerable success when shown at the city's two fledgling art organizations. In 1910 and 1911 she spent a further period of study, this time in France, where she became a convert to the bold colours and arabesque lines of her Post-Impressionist and Fauve teachers. Returning to Vancouver with her ambition redoubled, she first put on a display of 70 of her French works in her newly rented West Broadway studio. Her subsequent 1913 show, entirely of Indigenous subjects, was a huge and educational venture. A lengthy review in the *Vancouver Province* announced:

Miss Carr has for a number of years made a special study of this class of work and has made many expeditions into remote parts of the country in order to secure material for her sketches. The collection which she is now showing and



FIGURE 1: Totem poles installed at the Lewis and Clark Centennial Exposition in Portland in 1905. The pole at the left is in Carr's painting *Sitka Totem Pole*. Photo: National Park Service

which is said to be the largest ever secured on this subject by any one artist, comprises nearly two hundred canvases and if the pictures are kept together will doubtless form, in years to come, a very valuable record of a passing race.

The reviewer added that on two nights, Miss Carr would give a lecture on the poles and their significance.

Carr had prepared this explanatory lecture by reading the books on anthropology available to her in Vancouver at the time and, whenever she could, by asking people in the First Nations villages about the meaning of their carvings. She knew she was no expert, but she wished to advocate for the value of Indigenous traditions in her province.²

Her boldly and lusciously painted canvas *Sitka Totem Pole*, from 1912, would have been an anchor point in this show. Carr explained in her "Lecture on Totems" that the carved cedar poles were "peculiar to the North West Coast," from Alaska down to the Vancouver area, mentioning that she had learned from a Squamish elder that his village had formerly held many carved lodge poles. The 1912 painting also had a personal significance for Carr. It was inspired by a visit she made to Alaska in 1907, a holiday cruise with her sister Alice, when for the first time she saw displays of monumental poles and where her project to record them was conceived. There she had met an American artist, Theodore J. Richardson, who visited Alaska during the summers, traveling with local Tlingit and Kaigani Haida people to make paintings of their villages, which he successfully sold in New York.³



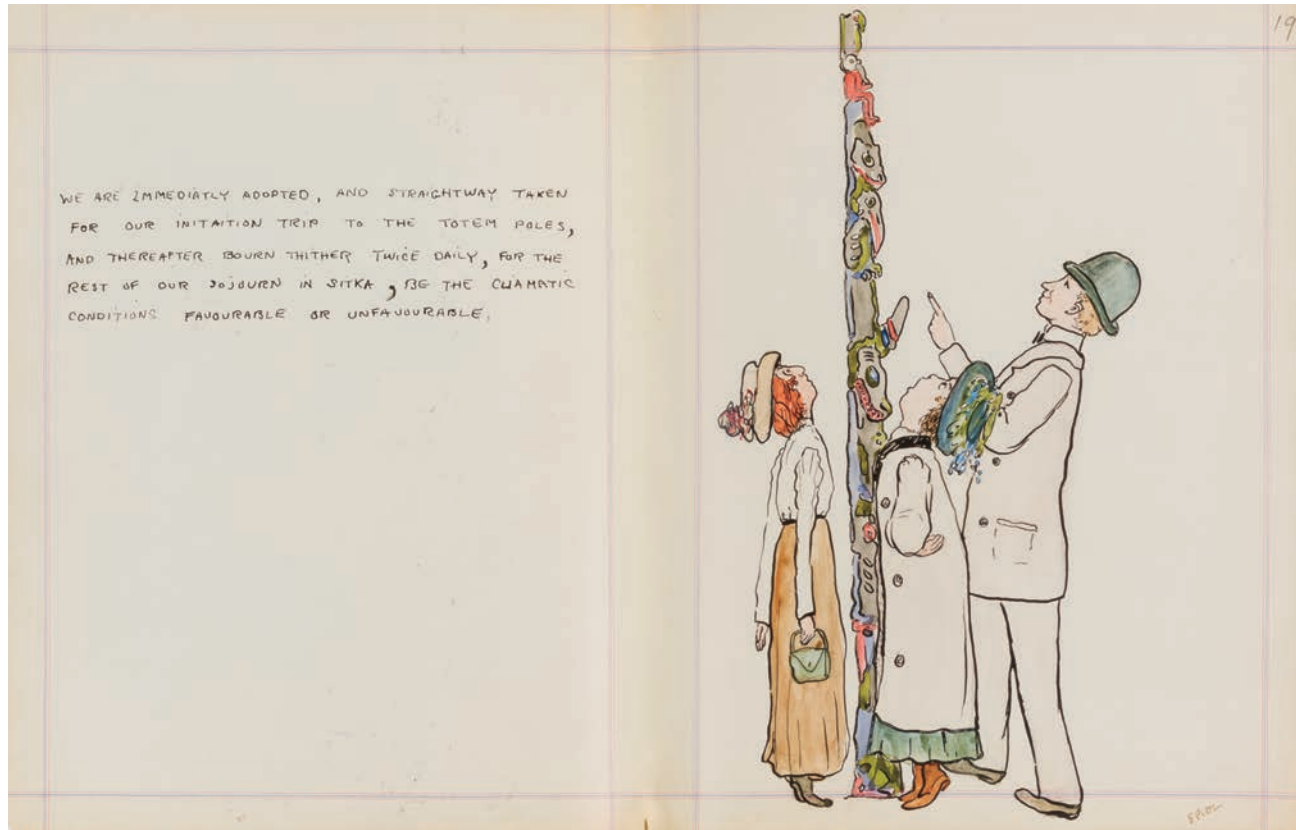


FIGURE 2: EMILY CARR
Sister and I in Alaska
 watercolour and ink on paper, 1907
 Collection of National Gallery of Canada

Not for sale with this lot

While in Sitka, the Carr sisters had visited Totem Walk, a striking display of Tlingit and Haida poles set up in a park as an attraction for tourists. The poles had been secured in 1904 by Governor John Green Brady to represent Alaska's heritage at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis. They were then sent on to the Lewis and Clark Centennial Exposition in Portland in 1905 (figure 1) and after being repaired and retouched with fresh paint were installed at Sitka (figure 3).⁴ It is one of these poles, taken from the Tlingit village of Tuxekan on Prince of Wales Island, that Carr sketched in 1907, and depicted in the oil painting *Sitka Totem Pole* in 1912.

We have a fascinating document of the Carr sisters' experiences on their Alaska trip in the form of a book Emily made to illustrate their journey. In her memoirs she described it thus: "We kept a diary called the 'funny book' every evening I drew a skit of something that had happened that day & we wrote it up."⁵ Carr repeatedly declared in her writings that this journey was the site of her epiphany about First Nations' artistic heritage, so it is curious that only one page in the travel diary shows a totem pole. This one page, however, represents the very pole featured in Carr's 1907 watercolour (figure 2) and the 1912 oil.

In her image Carr has positioned caricatures of herself and the red-haired Alice, both on tiptoe, gawping in amazement up at the

animal carvings and the height of the pole. Carr refers to the well-dressed gentleman shown beside them as "La Totem," and he is clearly lecturing to them about the carvings on the pole. As we can see from the photograph of the pole and from Carr's various renderings, these are, from top to bottom, a raven, a seated man, a downward facing frog, a bird (cormorant or raven), a whale, and an eagle. And who was La Totem?

Carr's text opposite the watercolour (figure 2) tells us (with her spellings): "We were immediately adopted, and straightway taken for our initiation trip to the totem poles, and thereafter bourn thither twice daily, for the rest of our sojourn in Sitka..." She amplified in a later memoir, "In Skagway we were introduced to a 'Pole' Domiarmus Mutchulous he was customs or emigration or something. He was in Sitka during our visit and took us about."⁶ In the "funny book" Carr made drawings of a perilous and exhausting excursion on Mount Verstovia on which they were led by La Totem. When they got lost, Carr has him exclaiming "Mein Gott!" Their guide, then, was probably a German or Polish immigrant, now working as a government official and apparently an enthusiast for anthropology.

Another puzzle is that only two pole sketches have apparently survived from Carr's Alaska trip. It seems that at this initial stage she had difficulty in recognizing and rendering the abstracted



detail lot 108

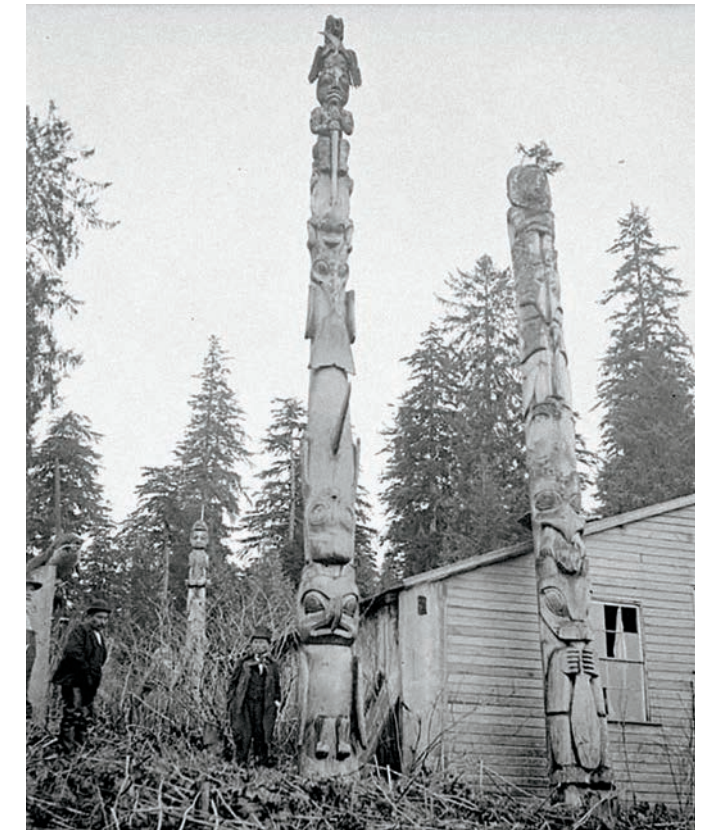


FIGURE 3: Two totem poles in front of a clan house in Tuxekan. The pole on the left is depicted by Carr in *Sitka Totem Pole*.
 Photo: Elbridge W. Merrill / Sitka National Historic Park

forms of the carved crest animals and figures on the poles. In her 1907 watercolour *Totem Walk at Sitka*, now in the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, the forms on the pole near the foreground are vague and illegible. In the "funny book" sketch, the animals on the pole being explained to her by La Totem become clearer though not yet stylized in accord with Indigenous formline design.

The oil painting *Sitka Totem Pole* shows just how far Carr had grown in understanding in the five years from her 1907 visit to Alaska. On subsequent sketching trips, she had made careful studies of hundreds of poles. Her teacher in France had told her in 1911, "Your silent Indian will teach you more than all the art jargon,"⁷ and the emphasis on curves and outlines in Fauvism gave her a means to clearly echo the stylized designs. Post-Impressionist teachings on light and colour enabled her to render the scale and presence of the coastal terrain in which the First Nations villages were set. *Sitka Totem Pole* shows the Tlingit pole in a dramatic coastal landscape, but Carr lamented the removal of poles from their villages and from the lives of the Indigenous population in the face of settler domination and demands. She would rejoice to see First Nations peoples reclaiming them today.

We thank Gerta Moray, Professor Emerita, University of Guelph, and author of *Unsettling Encounters: First Nations Imagery in the Art of Emily Carr*, for contributing the above essay.

1. See Emily Carr, *Unvarnished: Autobiographical Sketches by Emily Carr*, ed. Kathryn Bridge, (Victoria: Royal BC Museum, 2021), 97 and 199n141.

2. For a discussion of Carr's attitude to the First Nations people she sought out in British Columbia, and her relations with the anthropologists, missionaries, and politicians who shaped settler views in her day, see Gerta Moray, *Unsettling Encounters: First Nations Imagery in the Art of Emily Carr* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2006)

3. Moray, *Unsettling Encounters*, 81–82 and Carr, *Unvarnished*, 74 and 194n112.

4. For a detailed history, see National Park Service, "The Poles of Historic 'Totem Park,'" <https://www.nps.gov/sitk/learn/historyculture/totem-park.htm>

5. This book, assumed lost for many years, recently resurfaced and has been published in facsimile as Emily Carr, *Sister and I in Alaska*, introduction by David Silcox (Vancouver: Figure 1 Publishing, 2013), 51.

6. Quoted in Moray, *Unsettling Encounters*, 94.

7. Carr, *Unvarnished*, 73.

ESTIMATE: \$1,000,000 – 1,500,000