



## 2 Edward John (E.J.) Hughes

BCSFA CGP OC RCA 1913 – 2007

### Steamers

graphite on paper board, signed and dated 1948 and on verso titled, dated and inscribed with the Dominion Gallery inventory #A1338 on the gallery label 19 7/8 x 29 7/8 in, 50.5 x 75.9 cm

### PROVENANCE

Dominion Gallery, Montreal  
Barbeau Owen Foundation Collection, Vancouver

### LITERATURE

Doris Shadbolt, *E.J. Hughes*, Vancouver Art Gallery, 1967, the related 1948 canvas titled *Coastal Boats Near Sidney, BC* reproduced, unpaginated  
Ian M. Thom, *E.J. Hughes*, Vancouver Art Gallery, 2002, reproduced page 47 and on the back cover (detail), dated 1947, and the related canvas reproduced page 83 and on the front cover (detail)

Jacques Barbeau, *A Journey with E.J. Hughes: One Collector's Odyssey*, 2005, reproduced page 2 and listed page 165, dated 1947

Jacques Barbeau, *The E.J. Hughes Album, Volume 1, The Paintings, 1932 – 1991*, 2011, the related canvas reproduced page 10

Jacques Barbeau, *E.J. Hughes Through the Decades, Volume 2, The Paper Works, 1931 – 1986*, 2014, reproduced page 31 and listed page 84, dated 1947

Robert Amos, *The E.J. Hughes Book of Boats*, 2020, the related canvas reproduced page 66

### EXHIBITED

Vancouver Art Gallery, *E.J. Hughes*, January 30 – June 8, 2003, traveling to the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, November 29, 2003 – February 15, 2004, and the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, March 11 – June 13, 2004

E. J. HUGHES created paintings imbued with what Robert Ayre described as “a tremendous intensity.”<sup>1</sup> Few paintings convey this more than his renowned canvas *Coastal Boats Near Sidney, BC*

(1948). This work appeared on the front cover of the catalogue by Ian Thom that accompanied the 2003 retrospective exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery, and it was matched on the back cover with the graphite cartoon of the same image. It is this cartoon, *Steamers* (1948), which is here offered for sale.

The intensity that is such a feature of this image resulted from the unique circumstances of the artist's life. During six years at the Vancouver School of Art (1929 – 1935), Hughes, under the guidance of Charles H. Scott, learned the skills of careful observation and conscientious drawing. Though Fred Varley of the Group of Seven was his painting teacher, the Group's on-location modernist aesthetic was not for Hughes.

His schooling was followed by his enlistment in 1939 and his service as a war artist from 1941 to 1946, during which time he worked tirelessly creating hundreds of precise drawings and watercolours. Returning to Ottawa after postings in England and the Aleutian Islands, he spent his last two years of service in the war art studio in Ottawa. There his small, light-toned work underwent a profound change. He now painted larger, darker images based on powerful compositions jotted down as thumbnail sketches. These he worked up through numerous drawings, eventually gridding them for enlargement.

His penultimate stage was a so-called cartoon, a deep-toned rendering of the complete image about half the size of the final canvas. Working with a soft pencil on illustration board, he resolved every detail of the subject before moving on to oils. These “cartoons” were not amusing drawings but were to his canvases what the designer's drawing was to a mural or a tapestry. With the possible exception of Alex Colville—another war artist—it is hard to think of another Canadian artist who developed his images so meticulously.

But the “tremendous intensity” comes not only from Hughes's technique. There was anguish and anxiety in his wartime experience. Though he did not face active combat, these were years of unrelieved tension. Never secure in his postings, he repeatedly joined and then was separated from his young wife, Fern. Every time they were together she became pregnant, and then lost each of the three children shortly after birth. At last able to return, though childless, to civilian life with Fern, Hughes found himself without a job. After 20 years of art practice he had really never sold a painting, and he had no gallery representation. So he devoted himself completely to doing what he knew best. Slowly and by stages he developed his paintings.

With daytime taken up with painting, his evenings were given over to cartoons. Hughes drew at the kitchen table, while Fern read magazines and they both listened to the radio. The tonal studies were executed on Hi-Art illustration board, a sheet of cartridge paper mounted on cardboard for stability that could stand up to a great deal of eraser work.<sup>2</sup>

When Hughes was “discovered” by Max Stern of the Dominion Gallery in 1951, the dealer bought every one of his paintings, including the oil *Coastal Boats Near Sidney, BC* (1948). At that time Stern also bought “32 pencil studies,” cartoons that included *Steamers*.<sup>3</sup> Though his paintings soon began to sell, Hughes did



### E.J. HUGHES

*Coastal Boats Near Sidney, BC*

oil on canvas, 1948

36 1/4 x 48 1/4 in, 91.8 x 122.2 cm

Collection of Emily Carr University of Art + Design

Donated by the Peter and Joanne Brown Foundation

Not for sale with this lot

not really see these pencil studies as desirable. In early spring 1960, Hughes offered five more of them to the Dominion Gallery, and with his usual humility he wrote, “You have kind of put me on the spot when you ask me to let you know what I want for them, net, from you. Actually I would like \$20 each, but please use your own discretion in this matter.”<sup>4</sup>

By 1960, Hughes had switched to watercolour as a prelude to his canvases and no longer made “cartoons.” Between 1946 and 1960, he had created more than 53 of these highly finished tonal studies in graphite, of which *Steamers* is a prime example.

We thank Robert Amos, artist and writer from Victoria, BC, for contributing the above essay. Amos is the official biographer of Hughes and has so far published five books on his work. Building on the archives of Hughes's friend Pat Salmon, Amos is at work on a catalogue raisonné of the artist's work.

1. Robert Ayre, “New Exhibitions Bring Out a Galaxy of Colourful Works,” *Montreal Star*, October 27, 1951, 16.

2. Leslie Allan Dawn and Patricia Salmon, *E.J. Hughes: The Vast and Beautiful Interior* (Kamloops, BC: Kamloops Art Gallery, 1994), exhibition catalogue, 41.

3. Robert Amos, *E.J. Hughes Paints Vancouver Island* (Victoria: TouchWood Editions, 2018), 22.

4. E.J. Hughes to Max Stern, March 28, 1960, Special Collections, University of Victoria.

**ESTIMATE: \$70,000 – 90,000**