



203 Emily Carr

BCSFA CGP 1871 – 1945

Cape Mudge

watercolour on paper, signed and dated 1909 and on verso titled, inscribed *no 18* and *10* and stamped Dominion Gallery 21 3/8 x 14 3/4 in, 54.3 x 37.5 cm

PROVENANCE

Private Collection, Vancouver
Important Canadian Art, Sotheby's Toronto, May 19, 1993, lot 242, titled as *Village Totem*
 Heffel Gallery Limited, Vancouver, December 15, 1993
 Private Collection, Victoria

LITERATURE

Gerta Moray, "Northwest Coast Native Culture and the Early Indian Paintings of Emily Carr, 1899 – 1913, Volume 2: Catalogue and Illustrations," PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 1993, titled as *Village Totem*, listed page 19 and reproduced as catalogue #E.2/2, unpaginated

THIS EXCEPTIONALLY FINE and vivid watercolour in Emily Carr's early style was made three years after her return from studies in England, as she established herself in Vancouver. That same year, 1909, she was a founding member of the British Columbia Society of Fine Arts and well received by the local press. As a critic for the *Province* commented:

An artist of strong personality which finds expression in vigorous work is Miss M.E. Carr, the quality of whose work improves steadily. Her subjects have a distinctness which makes them easily recognizable by one familiar with her style. There is a strength and genuineness about her pictures, a concern for the character of the subject, and a persuasiveness of colour that draws the attention away from the technique, which, nevertheless is as admirable and brilliant as the most critical could ask.¹

With her watercolour of *Cape Mudge*, Carr faced the challenge of conveying the huge scale of an ancient bighouse and the tall pole standing in front of it. The size of the bighouse becomes apparent when we notice how it dwarfs the more modern buildings along the street beyond. The incredible height of the pole becomes clear when we notice the door in the facade and realize that the head of a person exiting would barely reach up to the elbow of the lowest figure on the totem pole.

As Carr declared in the "Lecture on Totems" that she gave to accompany her large 1913 exhibition of paintings made in First Nations villages, "You must be absolutely honest & true in the depicting of a totem, for meaning is attached to every line, you must be most particular about detail & proportion."² She renders the pole with great care: at the base a crouching human figure, above it a darker figure with hollow cheek and protruding mouth that may be a Dzunoqua or supernatural being; then a sea-wolf, close relation of the killer whale and bringer of wealth and success in fishing; and at the top a standing, gesturing human figure, topped off with an eagle.

We know from Harry Assu, Chief of the Cape Mudge Band for many years, that the pole and house in Carr's painting belonged to a high-ranking Cape Mudge man, Tom Wallace. "Tom Wallace

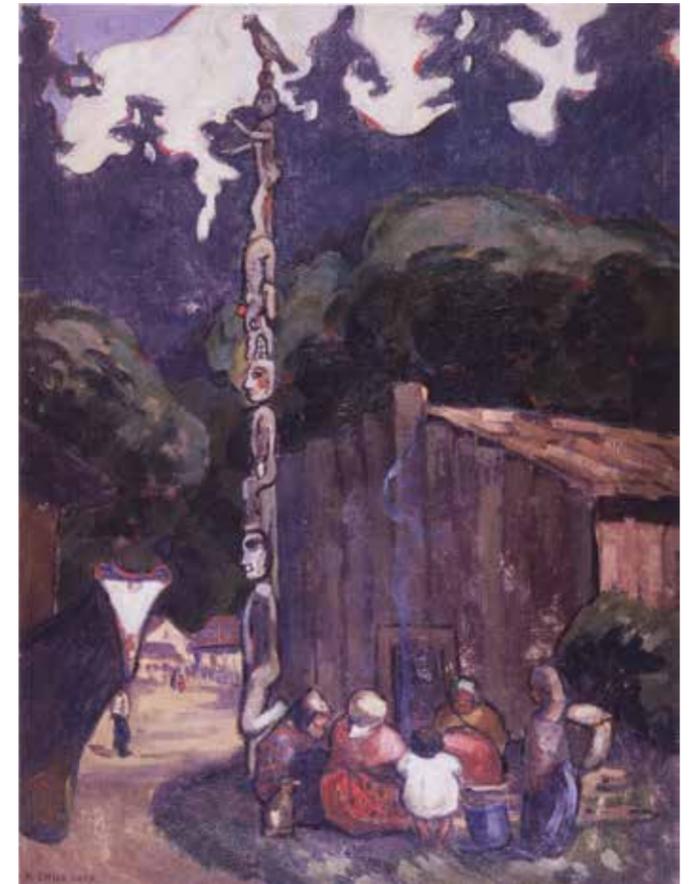


FIGURE 1: **EMILY CARR**
Cape Mudge: An Indian Family with Totem Pole
 oil on canvas, 1912
 32 x 23 1/2 in, 81.3 x 59.7 cm
 Collection of the Beaverbrook Art Gallery

Not for sale with this lot

was a big man at Cape Mudge then, and he was called on as 'speaker' at the potlatches by our chiefs."³ Perhaps the gesture of the pole's top figure refers to this role as speaker, or perhaps to his prominence as a fisherman.⁴ Wallace's house subsequently burned down and presumably the pole with it, since no photograph of it is currently known.

It was in 1907, on a cruise to Alaska, that Carr had first glimpsed the monumental totem poles of First Nations villages in the North and conceived the idea of recording the poles in their village settings. She had ventured north the two following summers to sketch extensively in the Kwakwaka'wakw village at Alert Bay. On the second trip, in 1909, she stopped halfway along the steamer route at the two Lekwiltok⁵ (southern Kwakwaka'wakw) villages of the We Wai Kai and the We Wai Kum First Nations, at Cape Mudge on Quadra Island and at Campbell River. We know of four large watercolour paintings she made there, of which *Cape Mudge* is one.

How does this watercolour reflect what Carr would have encountered at Cape Mudge? Unlike her Alert Bay scenes, there



FIGURE 2: Cape Mudge village, circa 1915
 Courtesy of Liḡw̓iḡdaḡ Research Centre

are no people in her sketch, as the villagers were usually away during summer at the fisheries and canneries. And it was only after her visit that Cape Mudge enjoyed its greatest spate of potlatches as the chiefs of the leading families celebrated and shared the wealth—gained from their active engagement in a local economy that had expanded since 1906 alongside the arrival of white entrepreneurs and settlers. Chief Billy Assu would build his great bighouse in 1910 to receive the nearly 2,000 guests he called to his potlatch in 1911, and three more great potlatches were held soon after.

As Harry Assu writes: “In my time, Wallace, Dick, Assu, and Naknakim were the [chiefs] to reach the position of Eagle because they went beyond the Lekwiltok tribe and called the people of all the tribes of the Kwagiulth.”⁶ Carr missed witnessing this climax of Cape Mudge’s traditional life, the evidence of which is seen in a photograph taken a few years after her visit, where the white-painted, planked facades of the newer potlatch houses can be seen in the second row of houses (figure 2). Carr has left us a valuable record of the older style of potlatch house, built of hand-hewn cedar boards, with cedar shakes on its roof.

Carr’s watercolour also records another essential aspect of Cape Mudge when she shows a modern house on the village street beyond the bighouse. Henry Assu’s father, Chief Billy Assu, had been the first to build his family a modern house at Cape Mudge in 1894, and to decide that the traditional bighouses should be kept or built only for the holding of potlatches. By 1920, as village leader, he would persuade the We Wai Kai to demolish all the remaining potlatch houses and commit to a modern lifestyle.

Carr’s watercolour is thus a poignant record of Cape Mudge’s monumental past. It seems she did not show the work in her big 1913 exhibition, since the signature is in her late handwriting, probably added when she consigned it to the dealer Max Stern and the Dominion Gallery. Instead she used the watercolour as the basis for a large oil painting in 1912 (figure 1), inserting a group of figures and, at the left, one of the ancient war canoes that were used at Cape Mudge, just as at Alert Bay, as valuable potlatch gifts. In her oil painting the sunlit modern houses in the distance are framed by enduring images of traditional life in a balance upheld by the We Wai Kai themselves.

Surveying the changes over his lifetime, Harry Assu wrote: “[Now] we have a modern village that has been said to be the finest native village in British Columbia by people who know. And we are building up our traditions and holding the big potlatches again. So it has been good in both ways, modern and traditional.”⁷

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. Reviewing the Studio Club Show of June 1909. Quoted in Gerta Moray, *Unsettling Encounters: First Nations Imagery in the Art of Emily Carr* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2006), 74.
2. Ibid.
3. Harry Assu with Joyce Inglis, *Assu of Cape Mudge: Recollections of a Coastal Indian Chief* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1989), 48 and 127n3. See also Moray, *Unsettling Encounters*, 29 and 41, for more information on the owner of the pole.
4. Assu, *Recollections*, 29.
5. Also spelled Laich-kwil-tach or Liḡw̓iḡdaḡ.
6. Assu, *Recollections*, 41 and 53.
7. Ibid., 58.

The sheet is embossed with the watermark “Guaranteed Pure Paper, R.W.S., 5a Pall Mall,” identifying it as high-grade rag paper distributed by the Royal Watercolour Society from its London premises at 5a Pall Mall. These sheets, often manufactured by Whatman and rebranded under the R.W.S. mark, were renowned for their durable rag content, stable surface and superior capacity for repeated washes—qualities prized by professional watercolourists at the turn of the twentieth century.

Carr studied in London from 1906 to 1910 at the Westminster School of Art, and in 1909 she undertook further training in St. Ives, Cornwall. During these years she had direct access to the professional art suppliers of London, including the R.W.S., making the presence of this paper in this 1909 work consistent with her practice and materials from this formative period.

ESTIMATE: \$100,000 – 150,000