

309 Edward John (E.J.) Hughes

BCSFA CGP OC RCA 1913 – 2007

Courtenay River Landscape

oil on canvas, signed and dated 1950 and on verso signed, titled, dated 1950 and inscribed *LT. COAT 16 OCT 46, COAT PT SPRING 47, V. TH.W.LD DEC 1947* and *1G/2G/3G/4G* on each corner of the stretcher 19 1/8 x 24 1/4 in, 48.6 x 61.6 cm

PROVENANCE

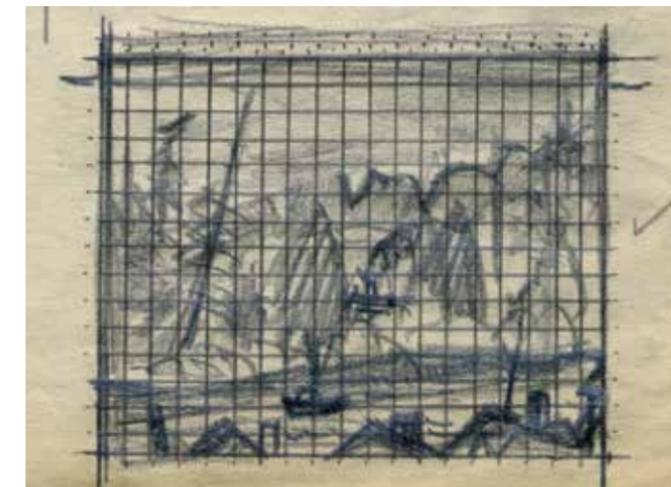
Dominion Gallery, Montreal
 J.S. McLean, Toronto, president,
 Canada Packers Ltd.
 By descent to Mary Stewart, Toronto
 By descent to a Private Collection, Victoria
 By descent to the present Private Collection,
 London, United Kingdom

LITERATURE

Robert Ayre, "New Exhibitions Bring out a Galaxy of Colourful Works," *Montreal Star*, October 27, 1951, page 16
 Doris Shadbolt, *E.J. Hughes, Vancouver Art Gallery*, 1967, the related 1952 oil *Mouth of the Courtenay River* reproduced, unpaginated
 Ian M. Thom, *E.J. Hughes, Vancouver Art Gallery*, 2002, the related 1952 oil discussed page 108, reproduced page 109
 Jacques Barbeau, *A Journey with E.J. Hughes: One Collector's Odyssey*, 2005, the related 2003 watercolour *Mouth of the Courtenay River* reproduced page 110
Canadian Post-War & Contemporary Art, Heffel Fine Art Auction House, June 17, 2009, the related 1952 drawing *Mouth of the Courtenay River* reproduced page 12, lot 5
 Jacques Barbeau, *The E.J. Hughes Album, Volume 1, The Paintings, 1932 – 1991*, 2011, reproduced page 12 and listed page 90

EXHIBITED

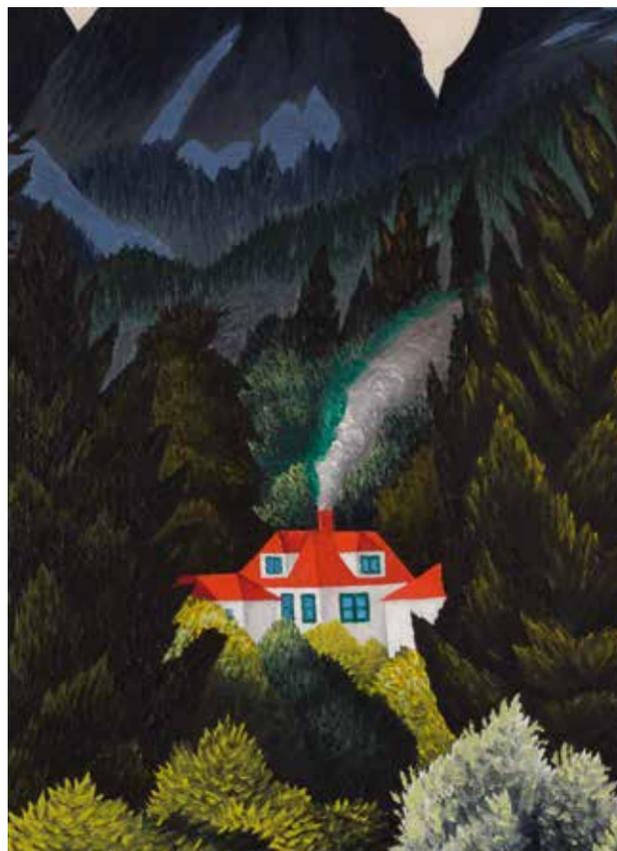
Vancouver Art Gallery, *Quarterly Group Show*, June 20 – July 9, 1950



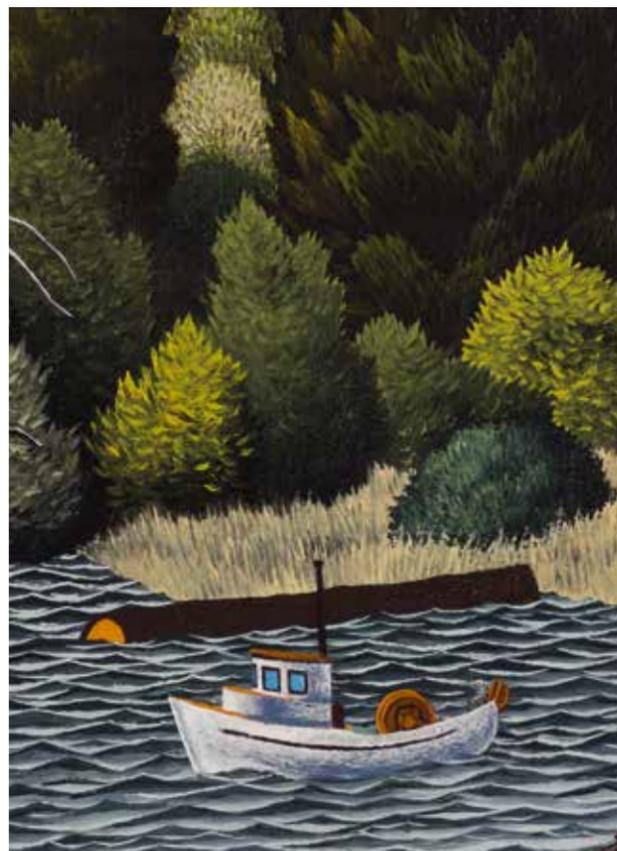
EDWARD JOHN (E.J.) HUGHES
 Study for Courtenay River Landscape
 pencil drawing, 1948

Not for sale with this lot

Vancouver Art Gallery, *21st Annual B.C. Artists' Exhibition*, 1952, the related 1952 oil, price \$150
 Vancouver Art Gallery, *E.J. Hughes: A Retrospective Exhibition*, October 5 – 29, 1967, traveling to York University, Toronto, November 13 – December 8, 1967, the related 1952 oil, catalogue #23
 Vancouver Art Gallery, *E.J. Hughes*, January 30 – June 8, 2003, traveling in 2003 – 2004 to the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, and the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, the related 1952 oil



details



COURTENAY RIVER LANDSCAPE is a prime example of the so-called primitive paintings E.J. Hughes created in the years immediately following his service as an official war artist for Canada. These distinctive canvases have always been considered his most important works, treasured for their powerful lighting effects and bold perspectival shifts. It is especially interesting to discover a painting such as this one, which has not been seen in a very long time.

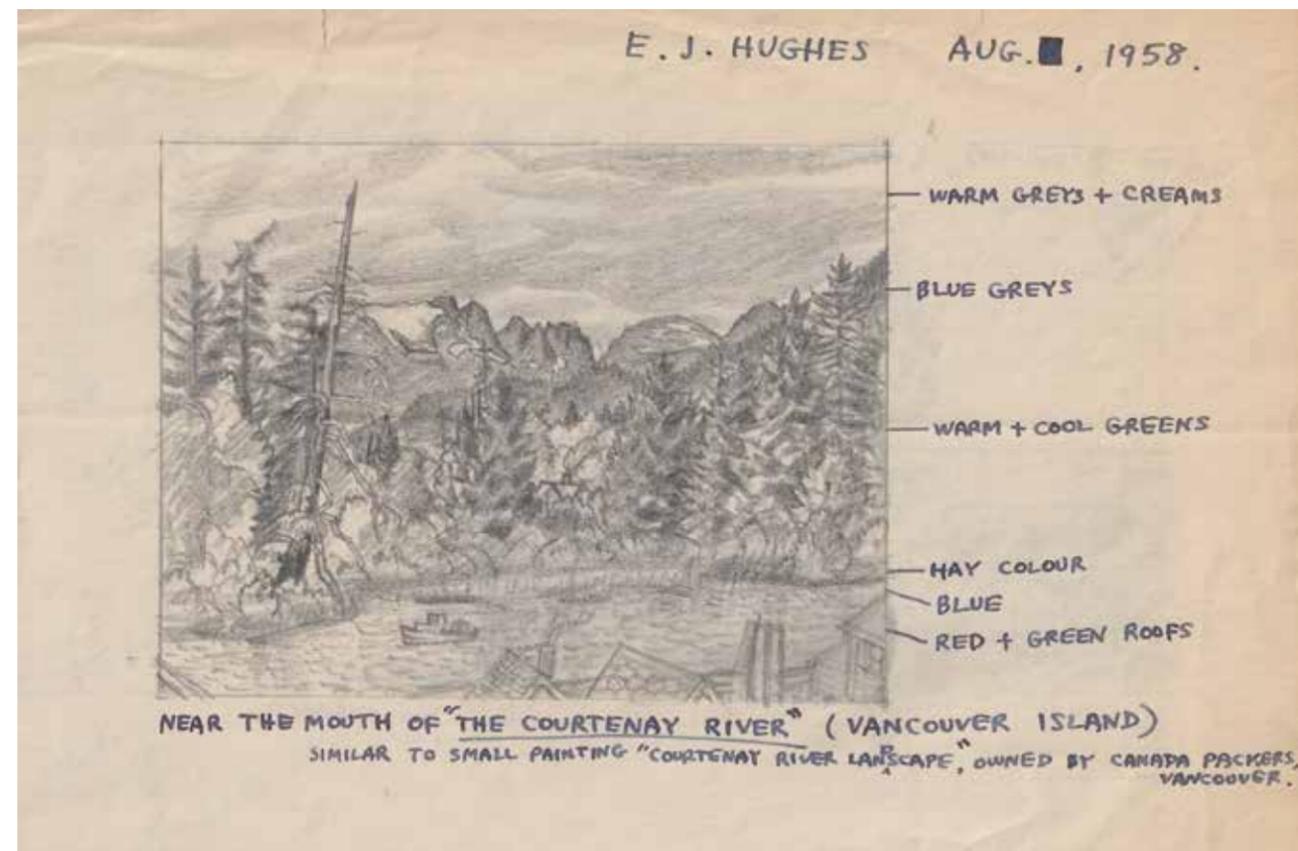
Soon after his discharge from the army, Hughes was awarded the Emily Carr Scholarship. This prize enabled him in 1948 to travel by bus up the east coast of Vancouver Island, during which expedition he made a large number of sketches. While staying at Courtenay, the most northerly point of the journey, he hiked east towards Comox and from there drew scenes that served him throughout his career.

Courtenay River Landscape shows a scene just below the bridge to Courtenay, looking west towards the mountains of the Forbidden Plateau. Hughes adopted his “primitive style” after a 1945 visit to New York’s Museum of Modern Art, where he was inspired by *The Sleeping Gypsy* (1897) by the French Naïve painter

Henri Rousseau. Hughes explained his attachment to this style: “I admire the primitives so much, especially with the slight flattening, the distortion of perspective to make the shapes more interesting on the picture plane.”¹

In the middle distance, stylized tree forms reach for the sky, and beyond them the snowy peaks of Strathcona, BC’s oldest provincial park, are overtopped by heavy clouds. A pool of light in the centre illuminates the bright white farmhouse with its vivid red roof. Rising from the home’s central chimney, a plume of white smoke echoes the dark smoke drifting from the chimney in the foreground. Further animating the composition, a single fishing boat with a seine spool heads downstream. Details throughout the painting, whether waves or leaves or tufts of grass, are not handled naturalistically but are reduced to stylized motifs endlessly repeated.

Courtenay River Landscape was originally shown at the Vancouver Art Gallery’s first *Quarterly Group Show* “for upcoming talent,” held from June 20 to July 9, 1950. A year later Montreal gallerist Max Stern, following Lawren Harris’s advice, sought out Hughes in his Shawnigan Lake home and on that memorable day bought



EDWARD JOHN (E.J.) HUGHES
Near the Mouth of the Courtenay River (Vancouver Island)
 pencil drawing, August 1958
 Proposal for a mural for the Royal York Hotel

Not for sale with this lot

everything Hughes had in his studio. *Courtenay River Landscape* was one of 13 oils he purchased, and it was soon sold by Stern’s Dominion Gallery to J.S. McLean, president of Canada Packers Ltd. Stern became Hughes’s sole agent and went on to buy everything the artist produced, an arrangement that lasted for the next half century.

Two years later, Doris Shadbolt wrote about Hughes in *Canadian Art Magazine*, noting the special mood of his work: “The faint darkening in the sky, which for the moment so sharpens colours and atmosphere, tells us it cannot last.”² In August 1958, Hughes proposed the image of *Courtenay River Landscape* for a mural in Toronto’s Royal York Hotel, though eventually a view of Qualicum Beach was chosen.

Joan Lowndes, reviewing Hughes’s first retrospective in 1967, expressed her reaction to the artist’s early paintings: “Suddenly as you step into the large Emily Carr gallery, you are overwhelmed by the strength of the artist’s forms, by the supernatural quality of his light, and by the intensely personal nature of his vision.”³

In years to come, his arrangement with the Dominion Gallery gave Hughes confidence and he set aside the “primitive” style, developing a more naturalistic, albeit still acutely technical approach. But the power of these early paintings, coloured by the intensity of his wartime experiences and the uncertainty of his artistic future, have made them the most desirable of Hughes’s oeuvre.

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. Quoted in *The Lively Arts*, CBC Television program, 1961.
2. Doris Shadbolt, “Ed Hughes—Painter of the West Coast,” *Canadian Art Magazine*, Spring 1953, 100.
3. Joan Lowndes, “The Hughes Revelation,” *Vancouver Province*, October 6, 1967.

ESTIMATE: \$300,000 – 400,000