his observational skills to a sharp edge. He developed a working method that remained largely unchanged for his whole career.

A Hughes composition began with a highly detailed pencil drawing done on the spot. These annotated drawings eventually recorded (using a careful code) details of colour, light and form. The drawing was then turned into a more formalized cartoon, executed in pencil as well, and without annotation—although Hughes often added a grid to these cartoon drawings to allow for their transfer to the canvas. It was only after completing a careful distillation of the subject—eliminating details that did not matter and emphasizing aspects of the subject that were of particular interest—that Hughes began to paint. He would draw a grid on the canvas and begin transcribing the cartoon onto the support, using the annotated drawing to refresh his memory on details of colour and light. This process meant that Hughes did not produce work quickly; indeed, he often worked on paintings for months.

Hughes received a great deal of support from other artists, notably Lawren Harris, who had awarded him the Carr scholarship and encouraged early purchases of Hughes's work by the Vancouver Art Gallery, the National Gallery of Canada and Hart House, in Toronto. It was only in 1951, however, that Hughes established a relationship with a dealer, Dr. Max Stern of the Dominion Gallery, Montreal, who on seeing this painting on display in Vancouver hunted down the artist on Vancouver Island. As Stern later wrote, "I was so deeply impressed by the quality of this work that I decided then and there to include Hughes in my forthcoming exhibition, and thus give him a chance to become known to the world of art and—I hoped—to collectors all over the world."[1]

This meeting was a turning point in Hughes's life because Stern agreed to take on Hughes's work at his gallery. More importantly for the financially struggling artist, Stern agreed to buy the paintings outright, thus assuring Hughes of an income. The first Hughes paintings were shown in Montreal in 1951, and *Steamer Arriving at Nanaimo* was among them. It is a quintessential Hughes subject and one of his favourites—the Canadian Pacific steamboats that connected Vancouver Island to the mainland before the establishment of the BC Ferries system.

Hughes's paintings of the late forties and early fifties have a deliberately primitive feel to them. This was because, as Hughes said, "I admire the primitives so much, especially their slightly flattening and slight distortion of perspective to make the shapes more interesting on the picture plane."[2] The primitives he was speaking of were the great Mexican muralists—Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros.

Harris wrote of Hughes's *Tugboats, Ladysmith Harbour* (1950, collection of the National Gallery of Canada): "Nothing quite like this has been done here or anywhere in the country. Everybody likes it, painters, laymen and just folks. It's that kind of painting—factual, detailed, accurate, full of interest but its art quality transcends all of these."[3] These words apply equally to *Steamer Arriving at Nanaimo*. Hughes's ability to control his composition and the enormous number of elements is remarkable. This small canvas contains five watercraft, a lighthouse, a log boom, a dock, a couple of buildings, several spars in the water, at least 18 figures and an expansive view of the Nanaimo harbour, and yet it works brilliantly.

The distorted perspective of the steamer allows Hughes to more fully explore the details of the boat—the lifeboats, the

Canadian Pacific steamboat, Nanaimo Harbour, 1948
Courtesy of the Royal BC Museum and Archives, I-28435

smokestacks, the decks and even the ensign flying at the rear. Notice, too, how the curve of the steamer is echoed on the left side of the composition in the whitecaps on the water. His use of colour is carefully considered—note the placement of red and orange in the middle ground and the yellow of the steamer smokestacks echoed in the log boom in the distance. Hughes was a master at depicting the surfaces of bodies of water and this painting demonstrates that admirably—the various brush-strokes in the reflections, whitecaps and wakes all lead the viewer's eye into Hughes's world.

As has been suggested, this is a complex composition but it is a deeply satisfying one. It works despite the fact that Hughes has suspended the laws of perspective—linear and atmospheric, as well as scale—to paint it. We see things that our eyes could not see because Hughes has deliberately chosen to paint as if the atmosphere does not exist; how else can we see the trees on the distant hills or the captain's hat, not to mention the large man silhouetted on the lower deck? The painting was reproduced in a Victoria paper in 1951 and upon seeing it Hughes wrote to Stern: "I realized that my masses & tones are improving…If I could just go further & get halftones without losing the sharpness, it would be a great step."[4] Hughes was always striving to improve his work, but here he sold himself short. One cannot help but be, like Dr. Stern, "deeply impressed by the quality of this work."

We thank Ian M. Thom, curator of the 2003 exhibition *E.J. Hughes* at the Vancouver Art Gallery and author of the book produced for that show, for contributing the above essay.

1. Foreword to *Edward J. Hughes, RCA* (Montreal: Galerie Dominion, 1982), exhibition catalogue.

2. Quoted in "Five BC Painters," episode on the program *The Seven Lively Arts*, CBC Television, Vancouver, broadcast December 26, 1961.

3. Lawren Harris to H. O. McCurry, received December 1, 1950, National Gallery of Canada Archives, Ottawa.

4. E.J. Hughes to Max Stern, December 10, 1951, University of Victoria Archives, Victoria.

ESTIMATE: $500,000 – 700,000

34　Edward John (E.J.) Hughes
BCSFA CGP OC RCA 1913 – 2007

Steamer Arriving at Nanaimo
oil on canvas, signed and dated 1950 and on verso signed, titled, dated and inscribed on the Dominion Gallery labels with the Dominion Gallery inventory #D1338 and #G8838 and stamped Dominion Gallery twice
19 × 23 in, 48.3 × 58.4 cm

PROVENANCE
Dominion Gallery, Montreal
Acquired from the above by Herbert Steinmann, New York, 1951
Dominion Gallery, Montreal
Acquired from the above by the present Private Collection, Montreal

LITERATURE
Victoria Sunday Times (magazine section), November 17, 1951, reproduced
Ian M. Thom, *E.J. Hughes*, Vancouver Art Gallery, 2002, reproduced page 86
Jacques Barbeau, *The E.J. Hughes Album: The Paintings, Volume 1, 1932 – 1991*, 2011, reproduced page 12
Robert Amos, *The E.J. Hughes Book of Boats*, 2020, reproduced page 50 and listed page 82, titled as *Steamer Approaching the Dock, Nanaimo*

EXHIBITED
Vancouver Art Gallery, *Quarterly Group Exhibition,* June 20 – July 9, 1950, titled as *Steamer Approaching the Wharf at Nanaimo*

E.J. HUGHES WAS the first recipient of an Emily Carr scholarship, which allowed him to spend part of the summers of 1947 and 1948 exploring Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands. He had been demobilized from the Canadian military in 1946, and this small scholarship was a godsend for an artist who had no market. While in the military, Hughes had been employed as an official war artist—he spent time in England and Canada. The opportunity to work full time as an artist allowed Hughes to hone