



119 Emily Carr

BCSFA CGP 1871 – 1945

Glorious Tree

oil on paper, signed with the estate stamp
and on verso inscribed CH206 and CH, circa 1932
36 × 24 in, 91.4 × 61 cm

PROVENANCE

Acquired directly from the Estate of the Artist, circa 1950
By descent to the present Private Collection, Victoria

AT FIRST GLANCE the painting *Glorious Tree* reveals a young tree bursting with life and colour. The tree stands out against the dark forest behind it, illuminated from the right. The forest and the slope on which the tree grows are quickly and sketchily rendered, while the volume of the tree is emphasized by bold strokes of colour that curve into almost geometric forms. The painting is striking and memorable for its joyous, vibrant colour and the speed and boldness with which Emily Carr has pinned down an inspired thought.

This sketch also tells a deeper story about a little-known aspect of Carr—her intense period of stylistic experiment during the years 1928 to 1933. In 1927, at a time when her career had faltered from a lack of local support, Carr was suddenly hailed as a colleague by the Group of Seven, then Canada’s controversial modernist group, when her work was shown at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa.¹ Her acceptance into the national art scene came because of her 1912 Post-Impressionist paintings recording Northwest Coast First Nations villages and their carvings, which were now being appropriated as a Canadian national heritage. When she made a new series of paintings after her return journey through Indigenous territories on the North Coast, she harmonized the landscape settings into which she placed the poles with the curving lines and abstracted forms of the Indigenous carving style. We see this in her famous canvases such as *Kitwancool Totems*, 1928, and *Church in Yuquot Village* (previously titled *Indian Church*), 1929, which she later sent for exhibition alongside the Group of Seven in Toronto.²

When Carr’s mentor and friend Lawren Harris urged her to move away from dependence on Indigenous subjects and to find her own vision of the landscape, she faced a huge challenge. A.Y. Jackson, for one, pronounced the coastal rain forest unpaintable.³ Carr embarked on prolonged research through exploratory drawings and studies of tree forms and of landscape configurations in pencil, charcoal, watercolour, and black and white brush painting. She did not exhibit these works, but used them to gain a grasp of the vastness of the coastal landforms and the distinctive growth patterns of its trees, and to give her paintings an ever greater expressive force. Her first pure landscapes done in 1929 to 1930 were of trees grouped within monumental and mysterious forest interiors.⁴ She drew stylistic inspiration from Harris’s calm vistas filled with a spiritual light and from the cubistic experiments of Mark Tobey, as well as from numerous books on modern painting.⁵ These monumental forest interiors were impressive and well received at exhibitions in the East, although, with the Crash of 1929 and ensuing Great Depression, she garnered almost no sales. Her continuous thoughtful and searching creative process would find its culmination by 1935 in the



FIGURE 1: EMILY CARR

Untitled

charcoal on paper, 1930 – 1931
24 1/2 × 19 in, 62.6 × 48.2 cm

Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Emily Carr Trust, VAG 42.3.121

Not for sale with this lot

confident, free-flowing, lyrical paintings that make her arguably the most adventurous and convincing modern artist of the 1930s in Canada.⁶

Where does *Glorious Tree* fit into this development? By January 1931, Carr was questioning the sombre, sculptural treatment of her forest landscapes. She noted in her journal, “My aims are changing and I feel lost and perplexed. I’ve been to the woods today. It’s there but I can’t catch hold.” Six days later she wrote: “I have done a charcoal sketch today of young pines at the foot of a forest. I may make a canvas out of it. It should lead from joy back to mystery—young pines full of light and joyousness against a background of moving mysterious forest... Oh Spring! I want to go out and feel you and get inspiration. My old things feel dead. I want fresh contacts, more vital searching.”⁷

During the course of 1931, Carr explored this new motif of young pines at the edge of a forest through drawings like the charcoal *Untitled* in the collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery (figure 1). She had come to realize that she needed a guiding idea to make a compelling picture. As she wrote: “First there must be



FIGURE 2: EMILY CARR
The Little Pine
 oil on canvas, 1931
 44 x 27 in, 111.6 x 68.7 cm
 Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Emily Carr Trust, VAG 42.3.14

Not for sale with this lot

an idea, a feeling, or whatever you want to call it, the something that interested or inspired you sufficiently to make you desire to express it. Maybe it was an abstract idea that you've got to find a symbol for, or maybe it was a concrete form that you have to simplify or distort to meet your ends, but that starting point must pervade the whole."⁸

As Carr pursued this direction, the single tree emerged as a key symbol in her work. She was familiar with the theme of the heroic tree in the work of the Group of Seven, from Tom Thomson's celebrated *Jack Pine* to Frederick Varley's and Arthur Lismer's pines struggling against the westerly winds of Georgian Bay.⁹ During her sketching trip to Goldstream Park in September 1931, Carr often placed one of the mighty cedar trunks as a central feature, where earlier she would have placed a totem pole. And she developed the motif of the young pine tree in works such as *The Little Pine*, 1931 (figure 2), another canvas that she sent off to exhibit with the Group of Seven in December 1931.¹⁰

Carr's oil on paper sketch *Glorious Tree* bears a strong resemblance to *The Little Pine*, but in certain ways it pushes her experiments further. In *The Little Pine* the young tree is the central protagonist, but within a coordinated landscape scene made up of equally finished contrasting elements, overlapping in an orderly recession. But *Glorious Tree* has a far more dramatic presence. Carr makes the tree vivid by the daringly simplified rendering of its volume, imparting a sense of life and movement. Her oil on paper sketch revels in the pleasure of colour and creates its unity through the repetition of triangular forms.

Glorious Tree thus seems less a preparation for the 1931 painting than a revision, as Carr seeks a more direct statement of her experience of a young tree. The sketch invites comparison with another painting of a single tree, the 1932 canvas *Grey* (figure 3). Carr's sketching companion at the time, Edythe Hembroff-Schleicher, records seeing *Grey* on Carr's easel in that year, and says it was based on *Forest Interior*, one of the oil on paper sketches that Carr made as they worked together at an old hunting lodge up on Braden Mountain in the Sooke Hills in May of 1932.¹¹

The compositions of all three works are very similar but the mood in *Grey* and in *Glorious Tree* could not be more different. *Grey* evokes a contemplative hush. The young tree, illuminated from within, stands contained within the protective shelter of the forest's depths. Its sculptural forms look back to Carr's work of 1928 to 1929, when she most closely emulated Harris. Could *Grey* be a last homage to Harris, whom she considered her most significant mentor? *Glorious Tree*, in contrast, is an explosion of colour and light. When writing the first draft of her autobiography, Carr looked back at their relationship: "I wanted to get hold of something in his work that mine lacked, a bigness behind it. I did not want to paint like him. I never could because in ourselves our natures were so different. He was calm where I was all turbulence and eruption."¹²

With *Glorious Tree* that turbulence is unleashed and controlled, as Carr discovers a glimpse of the divine illumination she would seek and find in 1933, when her purchase of a caravan enabled her to immerse herself totally in the skies and woods of the Vancouver Island shoreline. *Glorious Tree* shows the full power of the new technique of sketching in oil on paper that she perfected in

1932, and heralds the outpouring of spontaneous feeling that would characterize her outstanding late works.¹³

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.

Glorious Tree was acquired directly from the Estate of Emily Carr and has remained within the same family for over 70 years.

1. Carr visited Ottawa and Toronto for the National Gallery *Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art: Native and Modern*, which introduced her to the national scene.

2. *Kitwancool Totems* (Hart House, University of Toronto) was shown at the Ontario Society of Artists' annual show in March 1928, while *Church in Yuquot Village* (original title *Indian Church*, Art Gallery of Ontario) was selected by Lawren Harris and A.Y. Jackson for the exhibition of contemporary Canadian artists mounted by the American Federation of Arts in Washington, D.C. See Edythe Hembroff-Schleicher, *Emily Carr: The Untold Story* (Saanichton, BC: Hancock House, 1978), 349 and 371.

3. In her draft autobiography Carr quotes Jackson as writing: "It is unfortunate you are so far away from everything out there. I have seen that country and realize how unpaintable it is with its density of trees & Undergrowth," and gives her own response as "Pity me would he! ... I'll show those Easterners." See Emily Carr, *Unvarnished: Autobiographical Sketches by Emily Carr*, ed. Kathryn Bridge (Victoria: Royal BC Museum, 2021), 110.

4. Examples include *Wood Interior*, 1929-33 (collection of Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa), and *Western Forest*, circa 1929-30 (collection of Art Gallery of Ontario).

5. Carr's stylistic borrowings and development have been discussed in detail by Doris Shadbolt in *Emily Carr* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1990), 45-63.

6. Harris's move into abstraction was made only after he left Canada for the USA in 1934.

7. Emily Carr, *Hundreds and Thousands: The Journals of Emily Carr* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1966), 24-25, entries for January 12 and 18, 1931.

8. *Ibid.*, 25, entry for January 28, 1931.

9. Carr had seen work by members of the Group in person on visits to Toronto in 1927 and 1930, and reproduced in Fred Housser, *A Canadian Art Movement: The Story of the Group of Seven* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1926).

10. Other examples are *A Young Tree* and *Sea Drift at the Edge of the Forest* (collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery). Carr made many images of single cedar trees during her sketching trip to Goldstream Park in September 1931, for example *Untitled (cedar tree)*, 1931, charcoal, VAG collection. See Shadbolt, *Emily Carr*, 168.

11. The sketch was bought from Carr by a friend and UBC colleague of Hembroff's husband. See Hembroff-Schleicher, *Untold Story*, 127.

12. Carr, *Unvarnished*, 113.

13. Hembroff-Schleicher, *Untold Story*, 78. It is noteworthy that Carr began to send her oil on paper sketches mounted for public exhibition in the following year. Carr, *Hundreds*, 61-62, entry for September 26, 1933.

ESTIMATE: \$200,000 – 300,000



FIGURE 3: EMILY CARR
Grey
 oil on canvas, 1932
 44 x 27 1/2 in, 111.8 x 69.9 cm
 Private Collection

Not for sale with this lot