



18 Edward John (E.J.) Hughes

BCSFA CGP OC RCA 1913 – 2007

Abandoned Village, Rivers Inlet, BC

oil on canvas, signed and dated 1947 and on verso signed, titled, dated and inscribed
AMS / Med. Coat 17 Oct. 46 / Lt. 3 Jan. 47 and variously
32 x 40 in, 81.3 x 101.6 cm

PROVENANCE

Alma Mater Society of the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, 1948

LITERATURE

Ian M. Thom, *E.J. Hughes*, Vancouver Art Gallery, 1967, reproduced, unpaginated

Jane Young, *E.J. Hughes, 1931 – 1982: A Retrospective Exhibition*, Surrey Art Gallery, 1983, reproduced page 61 and listed page 92

Ian M. Thom, *E.J. Hughes*, Vancouver Art Gallery, 2002, reproduced page 79

Aliyah Shamsheer et al., *Alma Mater Society of the University of British Columbia: Permanent Collection 1948 – 2008*, 2008, reproduced page 9 and listed page 90, catalogue #9

Jacques Barbeau, *The E.J. Hughes Album: The Paintings, Volume I, 1932 – 1991*, 2011, reproduced page 9

Robert Amos, *E.J. Hughes Paints British Columbia*, 2019, reproduced page 35

EXHIBITED

University of British Columbia, Vancouver, *The Brock Hall Collection of Canadian Paintings at the University of British Columbia*, September 1957

Vancouver Art Gallery, *E.J. Hughes*, October 5 – 29, 1967, traveling to York University, Toronto, November 13 – December 8, 1967, catalogue #7

Surrey Art Gallery, *E.J. Hughes, 1931 – 1982: A Retrospective Exhibition*, November 18 – December 11, 1983, traveling in 1984 and 1985 to the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria; Edmonton Art Gallery; Glenbow Museum, Calgary; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; and the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton

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
Penticton Art Gallery, *Students Collect: University of British Columbia Alma Mater Society Student Art Collection: 1948 – 1968*, collection of the Alma Mater Society of the University of British Columbia, July 11 – September 7, 2008

THE PAINTING *Abandoned Village, Rivers Inlet, BC* from 1947 is based on an early pencil drawing executed by E.J. Hughes one Sunday in the summer of 1938. Hughes was in his second summer as a gill net fisherman, working with fellow artist Paul Goranson. From the base camp at Rivers Inlet, Hughes accurately recorded the driftwood, waterwheel, cabins and distant trees eventually included in the final painting. “These houses were not quite abandoned,” Hughes told Pat Salmon, “as a Japanese family still lived in one of them. Looking at the painting now, I can see the influence of the Mexican muralists, in this case, Ruiz. That is the way he treated the inside of a wheel and the house behind it.”¹

Hughes was a Canadian war artist from 1939 to 1946. After the war he and his wife took refuge at his parents’ home at 410 Quebec Street in Victoria. There was plenty of vacant space on the top floor, and there he returned to his pre-war studies and painted *Near Third Beach, Stanley Park* (1946) and *Fishboats, Rivers Inlet* (1946, sold by Heffel, November 21, 2018, lot 47).

After moving to a big old house at 239 Menzies Street in February 1947, Hughes took up the image of *Abandoned Village, Rivers Inlet, BC*, creating a compositional study heavily worked in pencil. He shifted his point of view to show the buildings as seen from the water. Work on the oil painting was interrupted by a trip to Prince Rupert, sponsored by an Emily Carr scholarship. On his return, he completed it and then painted *Indian Church, North Vancouver* (1947).

These first four post-war paintings are a special series. Large and thickly painted, they have always been recognized as his most powerful works. Though Hughes never offered any interpretation of his paintings, it is hard to avoid reading these dark elegies as a reaction to the times he had just lived through. Emerging from the post-war era, the artist was moving towards optimism and had found his full painterly strength. In the mimeographed catalogue for the first exhibition of the Brock Hall Art Collection at the University of British Columbia in September 1957, Hughes wrote:

I painted this picture from a sketch which I did in 1938 when I was working at the nearby Brunswick Cannery. This old water mill and these cottages are part of a group of several more buildings. Why they were abandoned to the bleaching and rotting elements of the weather, I don’t know. On viewing the scene, I was impressed by the loneliness, the starkness and emptiness of the pale buildings against the dark cedar background, and the contrast of the twisted driftwood root forms with the straight-line forms of the buildings.²



Lawren Harris unveiling *Abandoned Village, Rivers Inlet, BC* by E.J. Hughes, 1948
Unknown photographer
Courtesy of University of British Columbia Archives, UBC 3.1/360

The painting is so dark that it seems to be a night scene lit by moonlight. Ruined buildings collapse in front of a storm-tossed forest. A huge wheel looms above the driftwood writhing at the shore. A rope tied to driftwood to secure boats hangs down to the dark waters at the lower centre.

These were hard times for Hughes, somewhat relieved in 1947 by the Emily Carr scholarship awarded to him by Lawren Harris. Hughes began to make sales, and was nominated to the Canadian Group of Painters by A.Y. Jackson and George Pepper in 1948. Perhaps it was Harris who suggested that the Brock

Hall Collection purchase a Hughes canvas. The Brock Hall Collection of the Alma Mater Society of UBC was created by a fund for art supported by a 15-cent contribution from each student. *Abandoned Village, Rivers Inlet, BC* was purchased by the university in 1948 for about \$150, the first artwork to enter the collection.

In the summer of 1951, Harris was visited by Max Stern of the Dominion Gallery in Montreal, the dealer for Harris and other members of the Group of Seven. He was also the agent for the Estate of Emily Carr and had come west in search of new talent. While in Vancouver, Stern had lunch with Harris at the Faculty

Club at UBC and asked for his recommendations. As it happened, the Hughes painting *Fishboats, Rivers Inlet* was on loan to the university and was hanging in the dining room. Stern, a northern European, recognized an echo of Albrecht Altdorfer. Hughes's "renderings of trees, forest and landscapes seemed to bridge time and space for me," he reflected.³ That afternoon they went on to discover *Steamer Approaching the Dock, Nanaimo* (1950), also on loan and hanging in a student dormitory. It is also likely that they saw *Abandoned Village, Rivers Inlet, BC*, which already belonged to the Brock Hall Collection.

In 1982 Stern wrote about this day: "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 art world and—I hoped—to collectors all over the world."⁴ He immediately went to Vancouver Island to seek out the elusive artist. When he eventually found him at Shawnigan Lake he bought all that Hughes had in his studio, and undertook to purchase everything Hughes would create in the future. At the opening of the Hughes exhibit at the Beaverbrook Gallery in 1984 Stern put it simply: "In 1943 I went west in search of new Canadian artists and found Emily Carr. In 1951, I went west and found Ed. Hughes, and since then I have found no other."⁵

It may seem surprising that a painter known for his sunny landscapes and holiday settings should be revered for these darkly brooding post-war canvases. Hughes commented on this in a rare television appearance on *The Seven Lively Arts* (CBC TV, 1961): "I believe that mysticism is a very important part of a painting. In fact I don't believe that a painting can be a work of art without some mystery in it."⁶

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 four 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. E.J. Hughes in conversation with Pat Salmon, October 8, 1989, recorded in Salmon's unpublished manuscript.
2. Exhibition catalogue, *The Brock Hall Collection of Canadian Paintings at the University of British Columbia*, September 1957.
3. Max Stern to Hughes, June 4, 1981.
4. Max Stern, introduction to a Hughes exhibition at Dominion Gallery, Montreal, 1982.
5. Transcript of introductory comments to a Hughes exhibition, Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton, NB, November 24, 1984.
6. "Five BC Painters," *The Seven Lively Arts*, CBC Television, September 1961.

ESTIMATE: \$1,250,000 – 1,750,000



EDWARD JOHN (E.J.) HUGHES
Abandoned Village, Rivers Inlet
pencil on paper, 1938
Private Collection

Not for sale with this lot



EDWARD JOHN (E.J.) HUGHES
Abandoned Village (Composition Study)
pencil on paper, 1947
Private Collection

Not for sale with this lot