



News

E.J. Hughes 'amazed' after his painting sells for \$920,000.

'The composition must be pretty well balanced,' B.C. artist remarks

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At noon Friday, E.J. Hughes did what he does at noon every day.

He went to the Dog House restaurant in Duncan for lunch.

"The staff were really glad to hear about the good news," the 91-year-old artist said. "Two of three of them are interested in wanting to know about art."

You would never know from talking to this man that one of his paintings had just been auctioned for \$920,000 (including the buyer's premium of 120,000), assuring him a place in the pantheon of Canada's most prized painters.

here were gasps and tears among the 400 people gathered in the staid ballroom in Toronto where the auction took place. There was a feeling of history. Then there was applause. The highlight came when the artist himself came on the speaker phone, a rare moment given that most artists are dead when their works command a price in the six figures.

The artist never dreamed his sombre but dynamic 1946 painting, Fishboats, Rivers Inlet, would sell for that amount.

"Isn't that amazing," said Hughes by telephone Friday from his home in Duncan. "That was way more than I expected."

In an interview, he reminisced a little about the time of his life when he did the painting. He had just returned from service as a war artist in the Second World War. "I was hoping to put in full-time as anything. I was not qualified to be a commercial artist or a teacher, so I made this large painting in Victoria, hoping it would be a good in a gallery."

In 1951, he finally sold it along with all of his other paintings to a Montreal gallery owner for \$500. "That was a lot of money in those days. Included in that, it would have got me no more than \$100."

Recalling the inspiration for the painting, he said that prior to the war, he had been a gillnet fisherman for a cannery in River's Inlet. He retained fond memories of the landscape during his time away. Upon returning, he had it in his mind to be a landscape artist. "I thought it would work with a coastal scene like that."

He looks back on this painting and can't find much fault with it. "The composition must be pretty well balanced."

He still paints a couple of hours every day in watercolour, a medium that allows him to remain seated while working.

At his age, he says he gets pretty tired and has to lie down a lot. Having sold the painting more than 50 years ago, Hughes won't get a penny of the \$920,000. He doesn't really mind, explaining that he has no debts.

The painting was sold at Heffel Fine Art Auction House's fall auction at Toronto's Park Hyatt Hotel. There were six phone bidders, including the winning one, as well as several bidders present in the ballroom at the Park Hyatt.

The new owner does not want his identity revealed, but Robert Heffel, co-owner of the auction house, admitted that the man lives in British Columbia and that the painting will be returned to this province from Toronto where it was part of an estate.

A painting by B.C. artist Emily Carr fetched \$1.1 million last May, but Heffel said the \$920,000 for Hughes's painting is probably a record for a Canadian artist alive today.

Following the sale, gallery owners and curators heaped praise on Hughes and painted the sale as a watershed in Canadian art history.

"It's wild, it's thrilling, it was quite amazing," said Vancouver Art Gallery chief curator Daina Augaitis.

Vancouver gallery owner Monte Clark said it is interesting that an artist who remained in Canada has commanded such recognition. Most have to step out of the country before getting that kind of a price for their work. "Finally, collectors are believing in Canadian art."

Equinox Gallery owner Andy Sylvester said the sale marks a shift in interest and confidence to West Coast art.

"There are tremendous artists here and it's nice those artists are being supported by collectors."

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