

Forest Light shines in Heffel auction

Emily Carr painting from 1937 is expected to sell for \$400,000 to \$600,000

By John Mackie, Vancouver Sun

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The Heffel auction on May 27 will contain great works such as the Emily Carr painting Forest Light.

Photograph by: Jenelle Schneider,
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In 1937, the president of Canada Packers bought a pair of paintings from Emily Carr.

“Today another cheque came, for \$225,” Carr noted in her journal. “It’s almost unbelievable. Mr. McLean of Toronto bought one little old canvas and one brand new. Everyone is tickled.”

The “little old canvas” was Skidegate, a 1928 painting now in the collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery. The “brand new” painting was Forest Light, which is still owned by the McLean family.

But not for much longer: Forest Light is for sale at the Heffel auction of Fine Canadian Art May 27 at the Vancouver Convention Centre West.

The pre-auction estimate is \$400,000 to \$600,000, but it could go for much more. Carr’s profile has been raised internationally by a critically lauded exhibition at the Dulwich Picture Gallery in London, where a writer for the Observer called her “Canada’s Van Gogh.”

“She is gaining more and more attention outside of Canada,” said Robert Heffel, who runs the Vancouver auction house with his brother David. “But I notice we’re getting more interest in Canadian art generally from abroad.

Emily Carr had the Dulwich show, which had quite a bit of press internationally, and Lawren Harris has a major show coming up at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. “Steve Martin is the co-curator of that show. I think those two exhibitions are bringing further attention to Canadian culture.”

There are seven paintings by Carr in the auction, but Forest Light stands out because it’s a “mature period” canvas from the 1930s. The painting is a blend of light and dark, with tiered triangles of trees beneath dark, foreboding clouds.

“It’s a deeper colour palate, with movement and volumetric forms and shafts of light,” said Heffel. “It’s everything you want in an Emily Carr canvas, a mature-period forest canvas.”

It has an impeccable provenance. James Stanley McLean had a celebrated collection of Canadian art, and lent the painting for several prominent exhibitions.

“It was exhibited at the Art Gallery of Toronto (now the Art Gallery of Ontario) in 1937 and 1943,” said Heffel. “Yale University had an exhibition of Canadian paintings in 1944 and this is one of two Emily Carrs they chose for the show. It was exhibited at The National Gallery of Canada in 1945.”

Heffel is also bullish on In The Woods, a Carr painting from 1931-32 that carries an estimate of \$100,000 to \$150,000.

“That’s almost a contemporary-looking painting, isn’t it?” he said. “It’s almost black and white, (there is) a very modernist feel to it.

“Emily Carr knew Mark Tobey, an American abstract painter based in Seattle. In 1928, he came to Victoria. Tobey was influencing her in terms of her work becoming more abstract, or less representational.

“The black and white aspect gives a real modern feel to the work. It does have colour, there’s blue, a grey blue and white on Manila paper. But it (still) looks contemporary today.”

There are 142 works in the auction, which have an overall estimate of \$7 million to \$10 million. They will be on display at the Heffel Gallery, 2247 Granville St., from Saturday through Tuesday from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.

The May 27 auction is split in two, with Canadian Post-War and Contemporary Art at 4 p.m. and Fine Canadian Art at 7 p.m.

One of the highlights of the contemporary sale is *La visite*, an elegant 1961 Jean Paul Lemieux painting of two women greeting each other.

“It’s a modern painting, but with the gold background and the two figures it kind of has a feeling of an Italian renaissance painting, a fresco,” said Heffel. “It’s flat and modern, but it also has an old feeling to it.”

The painting still has its original frame, but the Heffels’ framer Jamey Petty has “shadowboxed” it inside a beautiful new hand made frame that sparkles with gold leaf.

The Heffels put a lot of thought into framing, which can really enhance a painting.

“The Emily Carr canvas frame is a takeoff of a moulding that Lawren Harris used,” explains Heffel. “It’s a 1930s-style period frame, with gold leaf. (The frame) for the Carr oil on paper paintings is a copy of the moulding that’s on the Emily Carr paintings at the Vancouver Art Gallery.

“It’s hand-painted after it’s joined, so there’s no mitre (joint showing). That’s 23.5-carat gold leaf on the edge. The paintings just come out beautifully in these frames.”

La visite is estimated at \$250,000 to \$350,000. Many of the highest estimates in the auction are for postwar and contemporary paintings, such as a pair of Paul-Émile Borduas abstracts that are estimated at \$400,000 to \$500,000 (for *Chant d’été*, from 1955) and \$300,000 to \$400,000 (for *Tendresse des Gris*, from 1953).

The 1961 Jean McEwan abstract *Ochre Cell* carries an estimate of \$60,000 to \$80,000. It also has great provenance for a modern art collector — it belongs to the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.

“They have two McEwans in their collection,” Heffel explains. “They’re de-accessing one to benefit their acquisition fund. It’s sort of the way of the future for museums. They have to look at their collections seriously, and decide where to best utilize their capital to help build the collection.”