



## 120 Emily Carr

BCSFA CGP 1871 – 1945

### Swirl

oil on canvas, signed Emily Carr and on verso

titled and inscribed \$150- / 9/3 / O, V / Owned by:

1. Mr. Robert de Lotbinière Harwood and Miss Helen D. Darling /

2. Helen (de Lotbinière Harwood) Rogers and 9342

faintly on a label remnant, 1937

27 × 22 ¾ in, 68.6 × 57.8 cm

### PROVENANCE

Collection of the Artist

A gift from the Artist to Lawren Stewart Harris, 1941

Acquired from the above by Robert and Phyllis de Lotbinière

Harwood, Vancouver, circa 1945

By descent to the present Private Collection, Seattle, 1970

### LITERATURE

Doris Shadbolt, *The Art of Emily Carr*, 1979, reproduced page 158 and listed page 214

Maria Tippett, *Emily Carr: A Biography*, 1979, page 242

Christopher Varley, *Emily Carr: Oil on Paper Sketches*, Edmonton Art Gallery, 1979, the related oil on paper *Windswept Trees*, collection of Maltwood Museum and Gallery, University of Victoria, listed as circa 1935, reproduced, unpaginated

Doris Shadbolt, *Emily Carr*, 1990, reproduced page 192

Mary Jo Hughes, *Emily Carr: On the Edge of Nowhere*, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, 2010, the related 1938–1939 canvas *Juice of Life* reproduced page 60

Sarah Milroy and Ian DeJardin, editors, *From the Forest to the Sea: Emily Carr in British Columbia*, Art Gallery of Ontario and Dulwich Picture Gallery, 2014, the related circa 1937–1938 oil on paper *Windswept Trees*, University of Victoria Art Collection, reproduced page 232 and listed page 296

### EXHIBITED

*Canadian Group of Painters 3rd Annual Show*, Toronto, November – December 1937, traveling in 1938 to the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

Vancouver Art Gallery, *28th Annual Exhibition of the BC Society of Fine Arts*, April 29 – May 15, 1938

Vancouver Art Gallery, *Emily Carr*, October 12 – 23, 1938, traveling to the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Department of English, faculty room in the library, catalogue #7

National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, *Emily Carr*, June 29 – September 3, 1990, catalogue #161

EMILY CARR'S CANVAS *Swirl*, from 1937, is part of a group of outstanding paintings she made at the culmination of her late style. It held such a special place in her heart, as we shall see, that it became her personal gift to her valued friend Lawren Harris. We are led into the picture by the hint of a path that stops at the forest's edge. Dead tree stumps and small new trees mark the stages of life, while at the centre a young cedar with swirling branches rises above cascading foliage, flanked by sturdy tree trunks whose crowns are out of sight. Behind them are





FIGURE 1: EMILY CARR  
**Windswept Trees**  
 oil on paper, circa 1937 – 1938  
 33 x 21 1/2 in, 83.8 x 54.6 cm  
 University of Victoria Art Collection

Not for sale with this lot

mysterious spaces traversed by light and wind. Curving, undulating lines sweep the composition into a unified whole, suggesting the action of wind and a surging life force.

Ever since turning solely to landscape painting in 1931, Carr had worked constantly to develop a bold modern pictorial language that could convey her attunement to the vast geography and distinctive vegetation of British Columbia's west coast. By 1932, she was experimenting with sketching directly with her brush on paper, first in black and white and then using oil paints thinned with gasoline. In 1933, she had bought her famous caravan, which enabled her to camp and immerse herself in the landscape around Victoria, with its woods, cliffs and sky. There she produced scores of rapid oil on paper sketches, from many of which she created studio canvases afterwards. Through the interplay between sketch and canvas she had dissolved the monumental, closed forms of her forest paintings of 1928 to 1930, adopting a newly fluid style that expressed a subjective vision of the life and movement in nature.

By 1935, Carr was producing carefully worked out and finely finished canvases that retained the sense of spontaneity of her sketches, while also infusing the landscape with the force of metaphor. Style and subject came together in works of perfect resolution to produce some of her best-loved masterpieces, such as *Scorned of Timber*, *Beloved of the Sky* (1935) and *Above the Gravel Pit* (1937). It is with this group of paintings that *Swirl* belongs. Each picture becomes an eloquent image of a revelation granted to the artist by earth, trees and sky.

The intensity Carr projects into this forest scene is due partly to the pivotal moment at which *Swirl* was painted. In early January of 1937, she suffered her first heart attack, one so severe that she was kept in the hospital for a month. On March 9, she was still so weak that she wrote despondently: "I don't want to paint yet. I get too tired just sitting."<sup>1</sup> This would mean the end of her inspirational caravan trips.

Though confined to home for the foreseeable future, Carr had her store of sketches to work from. On April 20, she reported having four paintings "on the go," including "an exultant wood"—the painting we are considering here.<sup>2</sup> With *Swirl*, Carr would sum up not only her most recent stylistic development, but also the significant forest motifs she had developed in the past 10 years. In the foreground a surge of undergrowth—a "rushing sea"—assures us of the fecund ground under our feet. The motif of a young tree set amidst sheltering older trees had become a symbol charged by Carr with a visionary quality in paintings like *Grey* (1930) or *The Little Pine* (1931). In her journals Carr often refers to trees as personages—dancing young trees are children, graceful cedars flaunt their petticoats, old pines become wise elders. The central tree in *Swirl*, a cedar with streaming branches, conveys a burst of exultation amid the circle of aspiring younger trees and the sturdy trunks of older ones. The dead tree stumps at the right are a reminder of death—the destruction Carr had observed and painted in the logged-over terrain of the Metchosin hills. With *Swirl*, Carr was reaffirming life and her own fragile recovery.

Carr's composition was based on an oil on paper sketch she made during one of the two previous years in camp at Metchosin, *Windswept Trees (Untitled)* (figure 1), dated circa 1936 by Doris Shadbolt.<sup>3</sup> The sketch, like the subsequent canvas, conveys the movement of wind, but the forms are lightly brushed in with swift feathery strokes. Nature for Carr was her site of revelation, where periods of contemplation and the active empathy of sketching offered discoveries about herself and the order of the world. "The woods are brim full of thoughts. You just sit and roll your eye and everywhere is a subject thought, something saying something," she wrote on September 8, 1936.<sup>4</sup> Returning home to the studio, she would sort her sketches and touch them up so as to clarify the meanings she had found through them. Some sketches might stand up as works in their own right; some would become the source for canvases that developed the key ideas Carr found in them.

Her canvas *Swirl* thus became a deliberate statement. The hectic chaos of the sketch becomes ordered. The undiluted oil paints, with their opacity and more saturated colour, give weight and solidity to the forms. The painting gains intensity from the calculated colouristic richness, with blue and yellow in what might be a sunlit grassy bank at the right and deep violet in the cliff-like shape at the left. The heightened contrast between light and dark areas, many of them quite abstract, creates a sense of spatial recession.

Another significant change from the sketch is that Carr has transposed it to a canvas with different proportions. Her predominant choice of format was a ratio of roughly 1 to 1.5. Placed vertically, the canvas or sketch paper accommodated tall forest trees; when horizontal, it could hold wide skies and vistas. With *Swirl* we have a shape closer to a square. Instead of the upward movement Carr so often evoked, the effect here is of a contained balance between vertical and horizontal. The swirling central tree is a pivot, as numerous lines sway and weave around it to enlist the viewer's eyes in an active and never-ending dance over the surface. Carr was intrigued with the result and repeated the same format and lines of sweeping movement in a freer, even more abstract version of the motif in the canvas *Juice of Life* (figure 3).

Carr's ability to combine emotional investment with thoughtfully applied technical skills makes her greatest paintings compelling and memorable. The painting *Swirl* creates a strong immediate impact while revealing deeper layers of complexity. After 1937, she continued to adapt her style to convey her changing experience. When she made a final sketching trip in 1942 to Mount Douglas Park, from which she painted *Quiet* (figure 2, sold by Heffel in May 2004), she chose the same repertory of motifs as in *Swirl*, but by fine-tuning her line, rhythm and colour she created a new mood of solemnity, of acceptance of mystery at the end of life. *Swirl* was her "Ode to Joy."

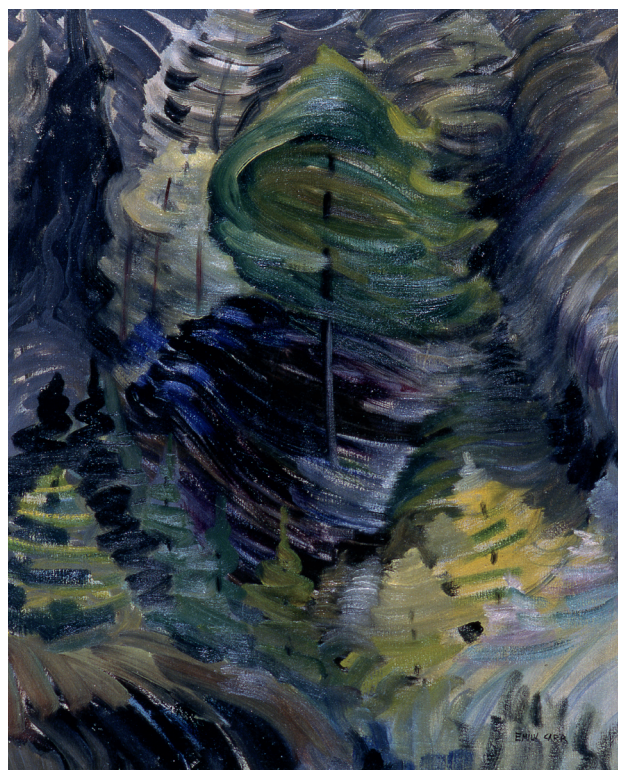
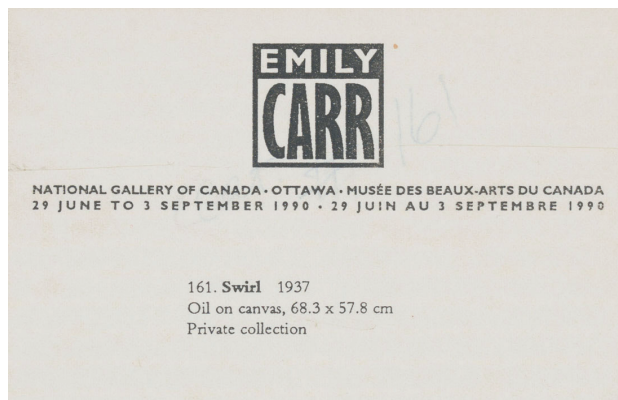
The painting went on to have an interesting history. In September 1937, Carr had a visit from Toronto businessman and Art Gallery of Toronto board member Charles Band, who owned several of her paintings and wanted to meet her. He selected



FIGURE 2: EMILY CARR  
**Quiet**  
 oil on canvas, 1942  
 44 x 27 in, 111.7 x 68.6 cm  
 Collection of the Audain Art Museum

Not for sale with this lot





TOP: National Gallery of Canada exhibition label

FIGURE 3: **EMILY CARR**  
**Juice of Life**  
oil on canvas, 1938 – 1939  
25 3/8 x 20 3/4 in, 64.5 cm x 52.7 cm  
Collection of the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria

Not for sale with this lot

three canvases for her to send to Ontario, where he thought he could find buyers for them. Among these was *Swirl*, and Carr's sketching companion Edythe Hembroff-Schleicher recounts that Carr told her, "Mr. Band fell for it at once and I rather hated to part with it."<sup>5</sup>

*Swirl* was subsequently exhibited in November 1937 with three other Carr works at the Art Gallery of Toronto in the *Canadian Group of Painters 3rd Annual Show*. None of her paintings sold, and Carr wrote wryly to Nan Cheney on April 20, 1938: "My stuff came home today have not opened it up yet but Band told me the three he took back he was shure he could sell. & here they are merily home again."<sup>6</sup> Carr was thus able to show *Swirl* in her first Vancouver Art Gallery solo show, in October 1938. Her reputation and sales in Vancouver art circles then took off, thanks to a growing circle of friends in the city working on her behalf, and Carr put a great deal of pressure on herself to paint new works for her yearly Vancouver Art Gallery solo shows that followed. Unfortunately this brought on a second, even more severe heart attack in March 1939, and a stroke in June 1940 that temporarily impaired her speech and further restricted her mobility.

In October 1940, Lawren Harris, her long-time cherished mentor and supporter, returned to Canada from his sojourn in the USA and moved to Vancouver. Harris soon teamed up with Ira Dilworth, the regional director of the CBC, who had been reading Carr's stories on the radio since January 1940 and was helping her edit the stories into publishable form. Dilworth finally secured the publication of her book *Klee Wyck* late in 1941. He was now Carr's second great mentor and supporter. Seeing her precarious health, Harris encouraged Carr's wish to bequeath a group of her best paintings to the Province of British Columbia, and he and Dilworth formed the Emily Carr Collection, initially of 45 paintings, to be held in trust.

It is at this point that the grateful Emily apparently decided to give each of them a gift—*Swirl* to Harris and *Juice of Life* to Dilworth. In a letter to Carr in June 1941, Dilworth thanked her for the gift of the picture and expressed delight that "Lawren's plans [for the Trust] are working out."<sup>7</sup> Writing to Dilworth in November 1941, Carr mentioned that Mrs. James P. Fell, a Vancouver collector, had tried to buy *Swirl* from Harris. Carr had vetoed this and declared, "I told Lawren 'Swirl' and 'Juice of Life' were favourites of mine & that was why I gave them to two people I loved. I wanted you both to have things I liked & was happy in the doing of, to remember me by."<sup>8</sup>

We thank Gerta Moray, author of *Unsettling Encounters: First Nations Imagery in the Art of Emily Carr*, for contributing the above essay.

1. Emily Carr, *Hundreds and Thousands: The Journals of Emily Carr* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Co., 1966), 283.
2. *Ibid.*, 288.
3. Doris Shadbolt, *The Art of Emily Carr* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin / Douglas & McIntyre, 1979), *Windswept Trees (Untitled)* reproduced p. 156, no. 137 and listed p. 214.



Lawren Harris and Ira Dilworth at the Vancouver Art Gallery around the time of the opening of the new Emily Carr Memorial Galleries, 1951  
Photo: Vancouver Art Gallery Archives

4. Carr, *Hundreds and Thousands*, 260.
5. Quoted in Edythe Hembroff-Schleicher, *Emily Carr: The Untold Story* (Saanichton, BC: Hancock House, 1978), 360.
6. Quoted in Doreen Walker, ed., *Dear Nan: Letters of Emily Carr, Nan Cheney, and Humphrey Toms* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1990), 78.
7. Quoted in Linda M. Morra, ed., *Corresponding Influence: Selected Letters of Emily Carr and Ira Dilworth* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 36–37.
8. *Ibid.*, 60.

Carr's *Swirl* has been in the same family since it was first acquired in circa 1945, and it returns to Canada from its home in Seattle, Washington, where it was much loved.

**ESTIMATE: \$1,000,000 – 1,500,000**