



## 120 Emily Carr

BCSFA CGP 1871 – 1945

### Singing Trees

oil on canvas, signed Emily Carr and on verso  
inscribed 93 (circled), circa 1935  
21 x 17 in, 53.3 x 43.2 cm

#### PROVENANCE

An Important Private Collection, Vancouver  
By descent to the present Private Collection, British Columbia

TWO YOUNG FIR TREES fizz with electric energy against the billowing flow of a dark forest. *Singing Trees* is instantly recognizable as an Emily Carr from the peak of her mature signature style of the mid-1930s. The painting is the fruit of Carr's resolve to bring the loose and spontaneous handling of her oil on paper outdoor sketches into her more formal studio works. She covered the entire canvas with bold, distinct curvilinear brush-strokes that create a continuous sense of movement. The greyish white of the priming shows through in many places, just as the paper would show through in a field sketch. As a result, the composition seems to breathe. The canvas is small, but the broad handling gives the forms a monumental presence.

Since 1932, Carr's new oil on paper sketching method had enabled her to capture her responses to the landscape with increasing expressive fluidity. She noticed that viewers of her work responded more readily to the verve and energy of her sketches than to the formal stylization in her studio canvases, yet she hesitated about sending these sketches for public exhibition.<sup>1</sup> In her studio paintings, like her famous *Big Raven* from 1931, she had already conveyed a sense of movement through the curves and outlines of her sculptural forms, all coordinated by a carefully worked out design. But in the spring of 1934, Carr had a new insight:

I woke this morning with "unity of movement" in a picture strong in my mind. I believe Van Gogh had that idea. I did not realize he had striven for that till quite recently so I did not come by the idea through him... Now it seems to me the first thing to seize on in your layout is the direction of your main movement, the sweep of the whole thing as a unit. One must be very careful about the transition of one curve of direction into the next, vary the length of the wave of space but *keep it going*, a pathway for the eye and the mind to travel through and into the thought. For long I have been trying to get these movements of the parts. Now I see there is only *one* movement...<sup>2</sup>

This is a prescription for what she would do in *Singing Trees*.



FIGURE 1: **EMILY CARR**  
**Trees No. 1**  
 oil on canvas, circa 1932  
 29 1/8 x 22 1/2 in, 74.0 x 57.1 cm  
 Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery  
 Emily Carr Trust, VAG 42.3.40,  
 Photo: VAG

Not for sale with this lot

Carr moved gradually towards her goal during her summer sketching month in the Metchosin woods in her van, the *Elephant*, in June 1934. She wrote in her journal:

I see and strive for something further and am not so concerned with only design. I want depth and movement and find my older work empty. I am anxious now to put this newer stuff up against it and see if it holds... These are only sketches but I am trying to feel out to bigger things. How I shall manage my canvases I don't know... I want to express growing, not stopping, being still on the move.<sup>3</sup>

In her studio canvas *Singing Trees*, Carr achieved the effect of movement and growth not only through flowing lines but also through colour. At a quick glance we see the familiar browns, greys and greens of a forest landscape. On closer inspection, we see that Carr was reintegrating her early French training and using spectral colours to translate the rich and ever-changing stimuli of natural light into paint. No part of the canvas is dull or monotonous—every part is nuanced. A full range of hues inflects the local colours and unifies the visual field. In the upper left, streaks of orange echo the orange in the ground below, while blue streaks lead into the undulating folds of the forest. The muted greens and violets of the forest area recede, while the pink and orange gleams on the mounds and hollows make the foreground surge towards us. Marshalling all her painterly skills, Carr evoked a sense of space, air and wind moving through.

It is interesting to note that *Singing Trees* is not actually a direct transcription of a field sketch, but rather a version in her “newer” mode of one of her earlier forest paintings, also a small canvas—*Trees No. 1* (figure 1), produced around 1932. By selecting this painting for her composition, Carr could explore the further implications made possible by her newer style. She was also revisiting what had become a perennial theme in her paintings—the motif of the young tree. Her explicit references to this motif began in 1931, when she recorded having “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.”<sup>4</sup> Young trees became a frequent focus of her work, sometimes as symbols of rebirth within the cycles of life, connoting frolic and joy, or to suggest vulnerability calling forth protection, as in her iconic image *Grey*.<sup>5</sup>

*Singing Trees* still carries a hint of Carr’s approach to trees as surrogates for human experience. The left-hand tree is symmetrical and sternly upright while the smaller tree bulges and exuberantly twirls. It is hard not to think of Carr’s invented childhood persona Small, forever called to order by her prim and proper elder sisters. But in this painting a new and larger theme emerges. In her paintings from 1935, as epitomized in *Scorned as Timber, Beloved of the Sky*, Carr successfully fused her sketching and formal painting styles to signal her reconciliation with a visionary, transcendent universe. An important step towards that vision is *Singing Trees*. Carr confirmed her awareness of her



Emily Carr and her caravan the *Elephant* at the southwest end of Esquimalt Lagoon, May 1934  
 Photo: BC Archives, D-03844

journey and its resolution as she noted: “In the forest think of the forest, not of this tree and that but the singing movement of the whole.”<sup>6</sup>

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.

1. Emily Carr, *Hundreds and Thousands* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Co., 1966), 62, dated September 26, 1933.
2. *Ibid.*, 106–7, dated April 4, 1934. For *Big Raven*, see Doris Shadbolt, *The Art of Emily Carr* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1979), 81.
3. Carr, *Hundreds and Thousands*, 132, dated June 16, 1934.
4. *Ibid.*, 24–25, dated January 18, 1931.
5. For *Grey*, see Shadbolt, *Art of Emily Carr*, 103.
6. Carr, *Hundreds and Thousands*, 188, dated July 1, 1935; for *Scorned as Timber, Beloved of the Sky*, see Shadbolt, *Art of Emily Carr*, 127.

**ESTIMATE: \$500,000 – 700,000**