



112 Emily Carr

BCSFA CGP 1871 – 1945

Alert Bay (Indian in Yellow Blanket)

oil on canvas, signed and on verso titled, dated 1912
on the National Gallery of Canada exhibition label, inscribed
with the Dominion Gallery Inventory #62d and \$150.00
(painted over) and variously and stamped Dominion Gallery
34 ½ x 14 ½ in, 87.6 x 36.8 cm

PROVENANCE

Dominion Gallery, Montreal
Acquired from the above by Abraham Albert Heaps
(1885 – 1954), Ottawa, 1946
Victor Podoski, Ottawa, circa 1955
By descent to the present Private Collection, Ontario

LITERATURE

Doris Shadbolt, *Emily Carr*, National Gallery of Canada, 1990,
listed in addendum, unpaginated, and a similar 1912 canvas,
Alert Bay (with Welcome Figure), reproduced page 106

EXHIBITED

Dominion Hall, Vancouver, *Paintings of Indian Totem Poles
and Indian Life by Emily Carr*, April 1913
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, *Emily Carr*, June 29 –
September 3, 1990, catalogue #22

WITH THE BRILLIANT colours of this painting, Emily Carr declares her allegiance to the Fauve doctrines she had recently absorbed in Paris. Her teachers there were disciples of Gauguin and Matisse who valued colour for its ability to simulate on canvas the effects of strong sunlight and for its expressive powers. *Alert Bay (Indian in Yellow Blanket)* shows Carr's mastery of these techniques as she gives colour its full rein. Equally important, the painting declares her belief in the primal force and superiority of Indigenous art forms, a belief shared by many early modern artists who wished to revitalize a European art they saw as enfeebled by its emulation of photography. When Carr had shown her teacher, Henry Phelan Gibb, some of her watercolours of Northwest Coast Indigenous villages, his advice was: "Your silent Indian will teach you more than all the art jargon."¹

Carr first saw the Kwakwaka'wakw village of Alert Bay (which has now reasserted its Kwakwala name, 'Yalis) in 1907, on a brief stop on a cruise to Alaska with her sister Alice.² That trip awakened her to the possibilities of recording her province's Indigenous villages and their totem poles in paint. In the summers of 1908 and 1909, she returned alone to sketch at 'Yalis, completing at least 16 watercolour views of the village street and its poles, several of which she exhibited to high praise at the Vancouver shows of the British Columbia Society of Fine Arts, of which she was a founding member.

It was on one of these watercolours (figure 1, *Alert Bay*, circa 1908) that Carr based her oil painting *Alert Bay (Indian in Yellow Blanket)*. Her new rendering of the subject in 1912 reveals a breakthrough in her developing vision. Her watercolours of 1908 – 1909 were topographical views of the village street at various points along the boardwalk. Their colour range was muted. The vistas, peopled with an assortment of men, women and children going about their lives, recede into an ordered perspectival space. They are always distanced, implying a detached artist and



FIGURE 1: EMILY CARR
Alert Bay
watercolour on paper, circa 1908
21 ¾ x 14 ¾ in, 55.3 x 37.5 cm
Private Collection

Not for sale with this lot

viewer. Not so with this 1912 oil painting. The foreground pole is brought right up in our face, the space of the street is compressed, and Carr has eliminated details such as the right wing of the pole's raven that was painted onto the house front. She creates a bold, flattened composition of well-balanced elements. Our attention is focused on the pole and on a male figure moving just past the raven's colossal beak towards us. He bars our access to the street and challenges us with his gaze. His brightly coloured blanket and the headdress of cloth circling his head make him a commanding presence, a man of consequence. Leaving her down-to-earth ethnographic and illustrative approach, Carr proclaims the pride and greatness of Indigenous culture.

Already in 1908 – 1909 she had been fascinated by the spectacular crest pole in this painting, for she had placed it in the foreground in at least two watercolours. It was the tallest and oldest pole in the village, erected in the mid-1890s by Wa'kas, a 'Namgis chief, to display his hereditary crests and privileges (see figure 2).³ Its lowest figure was a raven with a huge beak that



FIGURE 2: Wa'kas pole in 'Yalis (Alert Bay, BC) erected mid-1890s
Photographer unknown
Courtesy of the Royal BC Museum and Archives, D-01355



FIGURE 3: **EMILY CARR**
Alert Bay
watercolour, graphite on paper, 1912
30 1/4 x 21 3/4 in, 76.7 x 55.3 cm
Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Emily Carr Trust, VAG 42.3.109
Photo: Vancouver Art Gallery

Not for sale with this lot

opened to act as a ceremonial entrance to the house. Above that was a bear, then a *huxwhukw* or cannibal bird, then the figure of a man representing an Owikeno ancestor of Wa'kas who had defeated Baxwbakwalanuksiwe', the man-eating supernatural monster. The pole is topped off with a wolf and a killer whale carried aloft by a thunderbird, Wa'kas's family crest. The *huxwhukw* and the ancestor are characters in the myth central to the Kwakwaka'wakw Hamatsa society, re-enacted as the initiation rite for young men during the winter ceremonial.⁴

On her first visits Carr scarcely realized that 'Yalis was not originally a traditional Indigenous village. It had sprung up since 1870, when white entrepreneurs had established a salmon saltery and then a cannery on 'Namgis territory, and persuaded the Anglican missionary Rev. Alfred H. Hall to relocate from Tsaxis (Fort Rupert) and to attract local people as a necessary workforce.⁵ The settlement grew to boast the conveniences of a cannery, a sawmill, and a mission church and school as people came in from Kwakwaka'wakw villages on the many islands scattered in Johnstone Strait and Kingcombe Inlet. The clan chiefs each constructed a bighouse for their people, although they still

maintained their own traditional villages and territories nearby. By 1894, 'Yalis became a regular stop on the coastal ferry route.

When Carr visited in 1908 and 1909, there were 10 bighouses, many with freshly painted facades of milled planks, and five with elaborately carved frontal poles. The government's Indian agent was based there and tourists visited off the boat. Carr arrived alongside the tourists but she stayed on, renting one of the huts behind the village long enough to tame a baby racoon that she purchased from an Indigenous man, and to make her numerous highly finished and detailed watercolours of the village.⁶

After her return from France at the end of 1911, Carr had moved from Victoria to the dynamic new city of Vancouver, and by February she had established a studio on West Broadway. At a show in her studio in March, she showed 75 of her French paintings and then turned to preparations for an ambitious sketching trip north. She aimed to visit Gitksan territories on the Skeena River, Haida territories on Haida Gwaii, and more remote Kwakwaka'wakw traditional villages. She also began to translate her earlier watercolours of 'Yalis into large canvases, with an eye to future exhibitions. It is at this moment that she must have painted



FIGURE 4: Chief Wa'kas replica pole carved by Doug Cranmer in 1987, standing in Stanley Park, Vancouver

Alert Bay (Indian in Yellow Blanket), with its intensely romantic new vision.⁷ With this canvas, Carr created a new synthesis between her modern French style and that of the Indigenous carvers, a synthesis based on her new skills with colour and form and on an intense subjective empathy. She would still believe in the need for ethnographic collecting and explanation, as witness the "Lecture on Totems" that she delivered to explain her paintings at her huge 1913 Vancouver show of "Indian paintings." But her quest henceforth would be for direct contact with Indigenous communities, her goal to explore their extent and achievement.⁸

In the summer of 1912, on her major painting expedition north, she returned to 'Yalis and seized an opportunity to visit some of the more remote Kwakwaka'wakw villages, among them Gwa'yasdams, on Gilford Island. In her "Lecture on Totems" she wrote: "The Indians were all off at the fishing [grounds], not a soul remained. Guyasdoms [*sic*] differs absolutely from Alert Bay, in that the latter is a show village where all the tourist boats call and the Indians cater to the tourist trade and to the spectacular. Guyasdoms, on the other hand, lies off the beaten track in one

of the old-time original villages, unchanged by fashion and civilization."⁹ Carr made only three large watercolours at 'Yalis on this trip, but one of those was a fresh look at the pole of Wa'kas to confirm the details and the proportions that had become too elongated in her successive versions (see figure 3).¹⁰

We have no problem today seeing Carr's high-pitched colour palette as a vivid transcription of a sunlit scene, but a painting such as *Alert Bay (Indian in Yellow Blanket)* was difficult for her contemporaries to accept. When Carr showed it in 1913, among nearly 200 paintings of Indigenous subjects, at the show she staged in the Dominion Hall on Pender Street, she experienced the public reaction as a catastrophic rejection. British Columbia was far away from progressive art centres and only a few people could glimpse the message she was trying to convey.

With today's perspectives we can recognize *Alert Bay (Indian in Yellow Blanket)* as an exceptionally intense painting made with confidence, speed and urgency, part of Carr's testimony to the Indigenous presence and its cultural significance for British Columbia. Her painting lives on, and so does the pole of Wa'kas, which was installed in Ottawa in the Museum of History in 1986 as the frontal pole for a reconstructed Kwakwaka'wakw bighouse. It was moved there after a long sojourn in Stanley Park and a replica, made by the famous carver Doug Cranmer, himself a descendant of Chief Wa'kas, still stands at Prospect Point today (figure 4).

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. For a full account of Carr's teachers in France, see Gerta Moray, *Unsettling Encounters: First Nations Imagery in the Art of Emily Carr* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2006), 90-94.

2. I shall use the name Alert Bay as the white-settler name for the location and 'Yalis for the Kwakwaka'wakw village there. Carr's paintings focused only on the Indigenous section of the settlement, not on the white facilities.

3. Cormorant Island, when Alert Bay was founded, was part of the 'Namgis First Nation's traditional territory though their main base was located at the mouth of the 'Namgis River, across the straits on Vancouver Island.

4. For the Hamatsa myth illustrated on the Wa'kas pole, see U'mista Cultural Society, "How We Got the Hamatsa," https://umistapotlatch.ca/enseignants-education/cours_5_partie_2-lesson_5_part_2-eng.php.

5. For the history of Alert Bay at the time of Carr's visits, see Moray, *Unsettling Encounters*, 85-89 and 124-31.

6. See Carr's story "Balance," in Emily Carr, *Heart of a Peacock* (Toronto: Irwin Publishing, 1986), 37-40, and Moray, *Unsettling Encounters*, 88.

7. The arguments for this dating are set out in Moray, *Unsettling Encounters*, 95.

8. For Carr's relationship to ethnography, see *ibid.*, 52-66.

9. Carr's "Lecture on Totems" is in Susan Crean, ed., *Opposite Contraries: The Unknown Journals of Emily Carr and Other Writings* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2003), 177-203, quote on 201.

10. Carr's later signature on this work includes an accidental misdating of 1910. In that year she was away in France.

ESTIMATE: \$1,000,000 – 1,500,000