



110 Emily Carr

BCSFA CGP 1871 – 1945

Cordova Drift

oil on canvas, signed M. Emily Carr and on verso titled on the National Gallery of Canada and the T. Eaton Fine Art gallery labels, dated 1931 on the National Gallery of Canada label and inscribed *Fw/1946/Liner*
30 x 36 in, 76.2 x 91.4 cm

PROVENANCE

The Fine Art Galleries, T. Eaton Co. Ltd., Toronto
Private Collection, Toronto, circa 1950
By descent to the present Private Collection, Toronto

LITERATURE

Doris Shadbolt, *The Art of Emily Carr*, 1979, reproduced pages 150 and 212, the related work entitled *Cordova Bay* listed and reproduced page 212
Doris Shadbolt, *Emily Carr*, National Gallery of Canada, 1990, reproduced page 169

EXHIBITED

Vancouver Art Gallery, *Emily Carr*, October 12 – 23, 1938, traveling in 1938 to the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Department of English, faculty room in the library, catalogue #27
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, *Emily Carr*, June 29 – September 3, 1990, catalogue #131

CORDOVA DRIFT IS unique among the predominantly tree- and forest-themed paintings Emily Carr made in 1931 to 1932, and it shows her poised on a threshold between her formal period and her late period of direct and exultant communion with nature. The painting is powerfully dramatic—forest trees toss and sway, as a grey squall blows in from the upper left corner. In the foreground lie gigantic logs with writhing roots, flung up by a violent sea. The sea itself forms a triangular dagger of bright and gleaming blue, suggesting a momentary break of sunshine. A single slender young tree stands a little way forward from the forest as though answering the sea's call. In the distance, a small shack on pilings huddles in the shelter of the headland, recalling Carr's comment on shacks she had seen the previous summer as she sailed up the west coast of Vancouver Island to Yuquot: "grey and forsaken and broken... fragile, temporary in contrast to the solidity and enduring of the sombre forests."¹

When Carr conjured the power of the elements in this painting, she was at a critical point in her career. Her image of forest and shoreline looks back with yearning to the adventurous journeys she had made in the past three years to northern First Nations villages. Those experiences had inspired a prodigious outpouring of monumental paintings such as *Indian Church* from 1929 (collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario) and *Vanquished* from 1930 (collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, figure 1), in which she represented the villages and totem poles with studied geometric and Cubistic forms and gave them dark, stylized forest



FIGURE 1: EMILY CARR

Vanquished

oil on canvas, 1930
36 x 50 in, 92 x 129 cm
Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery

Not for sale with this lot

backgrounds. Alongside these First Nations images, she had also created a number of forest interiors in answer to Lawren Harris's challenge that she move on from the totems and paint the landscape of her region. All those recent paintings had evoked a narrative of the Northwest Coast as a site of remote and mysterious grandeur.

Yet while *Cordova Drift* looks back, it also looks forward with its sweeping, animated movement to Carr's vibrant paintings of sea and sky that conveyed her experiences of transcendence in the coastal landscapes near Victoria such as *Across the Straits* (figure 2), painted after 1933, when she acquired her caravan for sketching trips. Significantly, *Cordova Drift* also marks an important shift in the implied narrative underlying Carr's paintings. The turbulence and vulnerability evoked by this canvas convey the individual vision and experience of the artist herself.

Considering the intensity of the painting and the associations it brings up, it is surprising to learn that it resulted from a sketching trip at a summer cottage close to Victoria. Carr's companion on that trip, the only artist she ever invited to work alongside her, was 25-year-old Edythe Hembroff-Schleicher, who had returned in 1930 from five years of art training, first in San Francisco and then in Paris. Noting the similarity in their studies, Carr had immediately summoned Hembroff-Schleicher to tea and to her studio. A warm friendship ensued. Hembroff-Schleicher, who later became a detailed chronicler of Carr's activities, left an



FIGURE 2: **EMILY CARR**
Across the Straits
 oil on paper on board
 23 x 35 in, 58.4 x 88.9 cm
 Private Collection

Not for sale with this lot



FIGURE 3: **EMILY CARR**
Seascape
 graphite on paper
 5 3/4 x 9 1/4 in, 15 x 23.1 cm
 Collection of the Royal BC Museum, PDPO5633

Not for sale with this lot

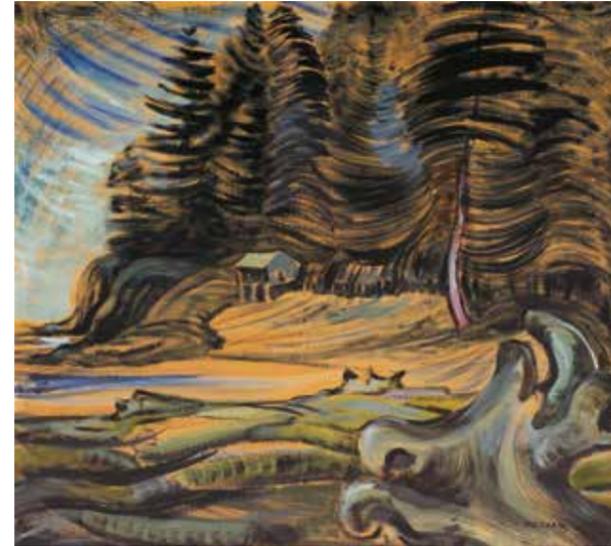


FIGURE 4: **EMILY CARR**
Shore and Forest (Cordova Bay)
 oil on paper on canvas, 1931
 24 x 26 3/4 in, 61 x 67.9 cm
 Collection of the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria

Not for sale with this lot



detail lot 110

eyewitness account of this sketching trip of nearly three weeks, the first they made together:

We chose Cordova Bay because of the free roof provided by my family's summer cottage, situated half way between beach and road on a steep slope of heavily wooded property. But the woods around Cordova Bay were not silent or remote enough for Emily. Civilization seemed to intrude everywhere, and we soon gave up trying to find suitable "woody" material and turned to beach and shoreline for inspiration, usually sketching from the verandah... On the whole [Emily] was disappointed in the sketches she took home from this trip, but she nevertheless developed a few fine canvases from some of the beach and log studies when she reworked them in the studio. *Cordova Drift* is the best of these.²

Hembroff-Schleicher's recollections, as well as the painting itself, reflect the tensions in Carr's life at this time—between threatening self-doubt on the one hand and confidence in her painting medium on the other, once she could focus all her resources on a chosen motif. Carr was obsessed with the doctrine that a painting should go beyond mere representation and express an idea. She reflected in her journal in November 1930 that "the innermost thoughts are the only things that count in painting."³ But the work of creating a pictorial language that could express those thoughts was not easy.

Since 1928, Carr had committed herself to continuous stylistic search and experiment. Her contact with American artist Mark Tobey and the Seattle art community in the mid-1920s had already revived her interest in Parisian painting, introducing her

to the legacy of Cubism. Her introduction to the Group of Seven in 1927 then inspired her to emulate the vistas of light and space that thrilled her in Harris's paintings. During the year before she painted *Cordova Drift*, Carr had visited Toronto as an invited contributor to the Group of Seven's April 1930 exhibition. On her way back, she had ventured to New York and seen modern galleries there. She retained in her memory Georgia O'Keeffe's studies of flowers, plants and trees rendered with refined modeling and flowing lines.

Although she had again received praise from the Group, success to Carr always seemed fragile and temporary. Her Toronto experience felt daunting—seeing her canvases on the walls beside the bold Rocky Mountain landscapes of Arthur Lismer and J.E.H. MacDonald and the strong colours of Montreal's Beaver Hall Group artists, she thought her own work had looked "mean and small."⁴ Later on in 1930, John Hatch, curator of the Seattle Art Institute, had accorded her a solo show, a signal recognition of her local standing. She had sent off 32 of her recent monumental canvases of First Nations motifs and had even received a short review in the *New York Times*.⁵ But by the end of January 1931, dismayed that Hatch had failed in his attempts to get further bookings for the show from West Coast museums in the US and angry that he had not returned her paintings, Carr wrote: "I am a bundle of nerves. Reaction probably, from the storm within over Hatch's letter... Was I unfair to him? After all, why should he bother with my rotten stuff at all? ... I shall never paint anything good."⁶ Stuck on Vancouver Island far away from modern art centres, was she again beached, like the logs in *Cordova Drift*, like the totem poles defeated by the elements in *Vanquished*? The drama and tension conveyed by *Cordova Drift* surely channels Carr's

conflicting sense of vulnerability yet determination, as she continued on the difficult path of searching and experimenting.

Cordova Drift is an exceptional work on that path. Carr was still testing a bewildering multiplicity of ideas and sources in the search for own voice. She was reading books and magazines on modern art in order to compensate for her isolation.⁷ She still looked to Tobey, whose response to the Seattle show had been to tell her to "get off the monotone, even exaggerate light and shade."⁸ Carr's letters to Harris and her journals helped her clarify her thoughts. She tried out her compositions at this time in a variety of media—quick pencil sketches to capture encountered scenes, more elaborate pencil and large charcoal studies of the specific forms of trees and rocks, and charcoal and dry brush on paper versions for potential canvases. In several of Carr's sketchbook drawings, which may have been made from the Hembroff cottage looking across the Salish Sea to the low coastlines of the San Juan Islands, she used gestural pencil lines to indicate contours and space (see *Seascape*, figure 3).⁹

When painting *Cordova Drift*, she first brushed in similar perspectival lines fanning out from beneath the rock to indicate the breadth of the bay. There are also several dry brush studies, with added colour, that relate to the canvas, for example *Shore and Forest (Cordova Bay)* (figure 4).¹⁰ These were among the earliest of Carr's oil on paper sketches made with flowing, animated lines. Carr's final goal in the mid-1930s would be to carry through the freedom and spontaneity conveyed by her sketches into her studio canvases. *Cordova Drift* is important because, although it is a highly finished canvas, its passionately animated handling looks forward more clearly than most other works of the time to her breakthrough, while it retains the solemnity of her earlier work.

Carr's vigorous brushwork unifies the entire surface, weaving in touches of brilliant colour. On one of the pencil sketches made around this time, Carr noted the words "Rhythm weight space force." Those words sum up exactly what she achieved in her painting *Cordova Drift*.

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. Quoted in Doris Shadbolt, *Seven Journeys: The Sketchbooks of Emily Carr* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2002), 75.
2. Edythe Hembroff-Schleicher, *Emily Carr: The Untold Story* (Saanichton, BC: Hancock House Publishers, 1978), 125.
3. Emily Carr, *Hundreds and Thousands: The Journals of Emily Carr* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2006), 43, dated November 23, 1930.
4. Hembroff-Schleicher, *Emily Carr*, 350.
5. Carr, *Hundreds and Thousands*, 47, dated December 5, 1930.
6. Quoted in Susan Crean, ed., *Opposite Contraries: The Unknown Journals of Emily Carr* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2003), 34.
7. Doris Shadbolt, *Emily Carr* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1990), 57–63.
8. Carr, *Hundreds and Thousands*, 45, dated November 24, 1930.
9. Shadbolt, *Seven Journeys*, 131–33.
10. Another is *Cordova Bay*, 1931, oil on paper (collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, #42.3.60). See Doris Shadbolt, *The Art of Emily Carr* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1979), 212.

ESTIMATE: \$2,000,000 – 3,000,000