



109 Emily Carr

BCSFA CGP 1871 – 1945

Community House, Quatsino, BC

oil on canvas, signed and on verso titled *Indian Meeting House* and inscribed 61 / S / A4 and indistinctly on a label, 1937
20 ¾ x 26 ¾ in, 52.7 x 67.9 cm

PROVENANCE

An Important Private Collection, Toronto
By descent to the present Private Estate, Nova Scotia

LITERATURE

Doris Shadbolt fonds on Emily Carr, listed and titled as
Indian Meeting House

EXHIBITED

Art Gallery of Nova Scotia (loan)

COMMUNITY HOUSE, QUATSINO, BC is an outstanding painting from Emily Carr's last period. During the years when her heart attacks of 1937 and 1942 restricted her travels, her art became increasingly visionary and expressively free in handling, a change that is reflected in this representation of a First Nations village she had visited many years before.

As her health challenges kept her grounded for a year in 1937, Carr divided her time between painting canvases from earlier sketch material and finishing up a collection of stories about her contacts with First Nations that would become her book *Klee Wyck*.¹ As she vividly relived her travels to visit Indigenous peoples and places in her imagination, she felt the urge to complement her word sketches with painted images. She chose images of specific poles, most representing bears, and one sole village scene, *Community House, Quatsino, BC*.

On April 20, 1937, Carr wrote in her journal: "I have been painting all day and have 4 canvases on the go—Nass pole in the undergrowth, Koskimo, Masset bear, and an exultant wood."² The first mentioned is the well-known painting in the Vancouver Art Gallery collection, which she evocatively titled *Forsaken* (figure 1). "Koskimo," I believe, is the painting we now know as *Community House, Quatsino, BC*.³

The picture's rhythmic unity springs from the style of Carr's immediately preceding landscape sketches, crystallized in her famous canvas *Above the Gravel Pit*, 1937.⁴ The effect she creates in *Community House, Quatsino, BC* is of a great sweep of space through a vast landscape. The monumental multi-family house is integrated into the design with flowing brush-strokes and with colours that echo those of the broad, sandy path that leads our eye from the foreground on to the distant mountains that rear upward till they are cut off by the frame. Together they form a great symphony, sculpted by the elements of wind and water and organic growth.

The previous day, April 19, Carr had written in her journal: "It seems to me that a large part of painting is longing, a fluid movement ahead, a pouring forward towards the unknown... A picture is just an on-the-way thing, not something caught and static, something frozen in its tracks, but a joyous going, towards what? We don't know. Music is full of longing and movement. Painting should be the same."⁵ Just such a feeling, of being swept on into unlimited vastness, pervades *Community House, Quatsino, BC*.



FIGURE 1: EMILY CARR

Forsaken

oil on canvas, 1937
Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery
Emily Carr Trust, VAG 42.3.12
Photo: VAG

Not for sale with this lot

This sense of unity is absent from the detailed watercolour sketch, made at the site in 1930, on which Carr's later canvas is based (figure 2, *Comunity [sic] House, Quatsino, BC*). Here, the house front with its painted, smoothly milled timber facade recedes in strongly foreshortened perspective away from the old hand-hewn timbers of its side wall. The perspective recession is reinforced by a large jetty or platform in front of it. Beyond the house is a smaller modern-style house and shed and, along the shore, a row of ancient house posts and beams, now denuded of their planking. Behind them the forest begins.

Carr's later canvas is greatly simplified. She aligns the house front more towards the picture plane and expands the forms of mountain, forest and shore, eliminating the jetty and allowing its corner posts to stand as a lattice that links the foreshore visually to the distant house posts and points up towards the sky. While the landscape is flattened, its powerful forms are charged with a



LEFT: FIGURE 2: **EMILY CARR**
Community [sic] House, Quatsino, BC
 watercolour on paper
 11 x 15 in, 27.9 x 38.1 cm
 Private Collection

Not for sale with this lot

RIGHT: FIGURE 3: **EMILY CARR**
House at Quatsino
 oil on canvas, circa 1937
 20 ¼ x 33 ¾ in, 51.2 x 86 cm
 Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery,
 Bequest of H.R. MacMillan, VAG 76.23
 Photo: VAG

Not for sale with this lot



constrained energy that thrusts beyond the frame in every direction. Seashore, village, forest, mountain and sky are united by an all-encompassing force.

With its pervasive unifying movement, *Community House, Quatsino, BC* also differs from another oil painting Carr made from her sketch, *House at Quatsino*, not long after her return, early in 1931 (figure 3, *House at Quatsino*, collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery).⁶ Here, the elements of houses, surging growth, forest and mountain each stand out with dramatic contrast but remain juxtaposed as separate items.

Carr had visited Quatsino Sound in August 1930. This was the last visit she would make to a remote Indigenous village on the coast. To get there had been difficult. She began her sketching trip at the Kwakwaka'wakw villages of 'Yalis (Alert Bay) and Tsaxis (Fort Rupert) on Vancouver Island's east coast. She then traveled north to Port Hardy, where she had to wait for the mail boat that would take her from Hardy Bay around the northern tip of Vancouver Island and then southward to the mouth of Quatsino Sound. The area had attracted the growing Canadian extraction industries but was too remote and mountainous for much permanent settlement.

Carr recorded fragments of her journey in her journal, describing her arrival after nightfall, "slithering through the still waters of Quatsino Sound on the flat little mail boat bulging all over with mailbags and stuff. I sat on the back deck on a big mail sack with my back to a barrel. Koko in my arms, the two of us covered with my oilskin coat. The great September moon was playing hide and seek, an overgrown baby way behind the clouds: and then it moved back behind mountains and tall trees, leaving us in the dark."⁷ Carr arrived first at the small settler village of Quatsino,

and next morning she hired a canoe or rowing boat to take her on two successive days to the Koskimo village of Xwatis.

There is a striking contrast between the mood of openness to the sublime that Carr conveys with *Community House, Quatsino, BC* and the effect she produced in other oil paintings of Xwatis she had made immediately after her return in mid-September 1930. By November 1930 she had completed her dramatic painting *Zunoqua of the Cat Village*, showing a house post "up in the burnt part, strangled round by undergrowth." Carr had beaten her way there through the thick growth between the front row of houses and was confronted by a carved post she interpreted as Dzunukwa, the Kwakwaka'wakw wild woman of the woods.⁸ This figure had been a source of terror and fascination for her since a first encounter in 1912. In January of 1931, she was working on a second canvas, *Strangled by Growth*,⁹ and wrote of her intentions: "I want the ferocious, strangled lonesomeness of that place, creepy, nervy, forsaken, dank, dirty, dilapidated, the rank smell of nettles and rotting wood, the lush greens of the rank sea grass and the overgrown bushes, and the great dense forest behind full of unseen things and great silence..."¹⁰

It is interesting, then, that Carr did not choose to paint a Dzunukwa among these late works after her 1937 heart attack. With *Community House, Quatsino, BC* she evokes a different range of associations with the place, consonant with those we find in her other 1937 to 1942 paintings of Indigenous motifs such as *Forsaken*, or the famous *Skidegate Pole*, 1941–1942.¹¹ These images portray Indigenous carvings, or in this case a traditional Indigenous bighouse, as timeless monuments now enfolded within an active and dynamic landscape. They attest to Carr's belief that Indigenous peoples were deeply in tune with the natural world in

which they lived and had sensed a transcendent truth beyond it. In 1929 she had written about Indigenous cultures that "the artists have searched beneath the surface for the hidden thing which is felt rather than seen, the 'reality' in fact which underlies everything."¹² She gave these late paintings a declaratory force. With *Community House, Quatsino, BC*, painted in 1937, she made the house a memorial to a First Nations culture developed in harmony with the land.

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.

Community House, Quatsino, BC is consigned to Heffel from an important private collection in Canada, where it was held for many decades. This work was on long-term loan at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia prior to its offering at Heffel this spring. Mature paintings on canvas by Carr are rare to the market, as many mature paintings were included in the Emily Carr Trust, a foundational collection of paintings and artworks by Carr, bequeathed to the people of British Columbia shortly before her death in 1945. Carr is being celebrated in 2026 with a major retrospective at the Vancouver Art Gallery, *That Green Ideal: Emily Carr and the Idea of Nature*.

1. Published as Emily Carr, *Klee Wyck* (Oxford University Press, 1941).
2. Emily Carr, *Hundreds and Thousands* (Clarke, Irwin, 1966), 288.
3. Carr's naming of paintings from Quatsino Inlet can be fluid and confusing. Today's Quatsino First Nation combines the members of five ancient Kwakwaka'wakw tribes, including the Koskimo and Quatsino tribes. Carr visited their principal village, located on traditional

Koskimo territory and named Xwatis (Quattishe IR #1 in Carr's time). For the Indigenous history of the area, see First Nations Land Rights and Environmentalism in British Columbia, Fisheries, "Quatsino," <https://www.firstnations.eu/fisheries/kwakwakawakw-quatsino.htm>. For the settler colonial history, Hamlet of Quatsino, "History," <https://www.quatsino.org/history>.

4. See Doris Shadbolt, *The Art of Emily Carr* (Clarke, Irwin, 1979), 133.

5. Carr, *Hundreds and Thousands*, 286.

6. Carr wrote in her journal on February 1, 1931: "Worked all afternoon, first on 'Koskemo Village' x. 1., and then on x. 2., 'Strangled by Growth.'" Carr, *Hundreds and Thousands*, 26. *House at Quatsino* is similar in style to her 1931 painting *Cordova Drift*, reproduced in Shadbolt, *Art of Emily Carr*, 150.

7. Quoted in Susan Crean, ed., *Opposite Contraries: The Unknown Journals of Emily Carr* (Douglas & McIntyre, 2003), 26.

8. For Carr's various encounters with Dzunukwa figures, see her story "D'Sonoqua" in *Klee Wyck*, 47–58, and Gerta Moray, *Unsettling Encounters: First Nations Imagery in the Art of Emily Carr* (UBC Press, 2006), 327–29.

9. For these paintings see Shadbolt, *Art of Emily Carr*, 88 and 89.

10. Carr, *Hundreds and Thousands*, 26.

11. For these "last period" paintings see Shadbolt, *Art of Emily Carr*, 180, 181, 183 and 185.

12. Emily Carr, "Modern and Indian Art of the West Coast," in *Supplement to the McGill News* (June 1929): 18–22.

ESTIMATE: \$600,000 – 800,000