

Art in British Columbia — The Historical Sources

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The dictum that cultural history is the last genre to be considered by the serious historian is exemplified in British Columbia. There is no history of the art or architecture of the province, no study of its literature, none of its music or drama. No biography has been written of Emily Carr, the province's most outstanding artist, and among literary figures, only Malcolm Lowry has been subject to serious enquiry. Recent and current scholarship, however, is beginning to cover some of these cultural gaps. Vancouver's architecture is the subject of work by Harold Kalman, early domestic architecture is under thorough investigation by E. M. Gibson, and several students are scrutinizing the work of Samuel Maclure. Some research seems to be underway on isolated literary topics. Music and theatre remain neglected, but the artistic past is being better served.

At the moment there are only a few serious studies of the province's artistic history. J. Russell Harper's *Early Painters and Engravers in Canada*¹ is a valuable reference. The same historian's *Paul Kane's Frontier*² is the only catalogue *raisonnée* of an artist's work. James B. Stanton's *Impression of an Age*,³ an exhibition catalogue of early art, contains valuable information which can be supplemented by his typescript "Inventory."⁴ More important, W. Wiley Thom's thesis on the fine arts in Vancouver, 1886-1930,⁵ thoroughly covers its topic. Aside from these significant guides, only a few individuals have shed light on past artists. Colin Graham, former director of the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, has written introductions to several relevant exhibition catalogues. Others are active in gathering materials. Evelyn McMann

¹ (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970).

² (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971).

³ Occasional Paper No. 1, (Vancouver: Centennial Museum, 1969).

⁴ "An Inventory and Catalogue of Historical Paintings & Drawings Done in 19th Century British Columbia," typescript, 1969, copies in the Provincial Archives of British Columbia and the Vancouver Public Library.

⁵ "The Fine Arts in Vancouver, 1886-1930" (unpublished Master's thesis, University of British Columbia, 1969).

of the Vancouver Public Library has compiled an extensive index of British Columbia artists; J. W. Mossop, recently appointed visual records archivist at the provincial archives, is reorganizing their valuable collection of art works and manuscript material, while Vancouver city archivist, Lynn Ogden, adding the Centennial Museum's collection of art to his own, is planning occasional exhibitions in the foyer of the Major Matthews building. Research is underway by Peggy Imredy, under a Canada Council Explorations grant, on Charles Marega, sculptor of the lions of Lion's Gate Bridge and other important monuments. Dr Franz Stenzel of Portland, already responsible for books on Cleveland Rockwell and James Madison Alden, is completing a survey of early artists of the Northwest which will be published in 1976.

This quickening interest has come almost too late. There is a paucity of source material available to the historian attempting to recreate British Columbia's artistic past. The art itself is widely scattered in anonymous private collections. Aside from the provincial archives and smatterings of work in the Vancouver city archives and Centennial Museum, there are no major public collections. The Vancouver Art Gallery, aside from its important holdings of Emily Carr, and the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria have very small holdings until the 1950's. There is a great deal of early work scattered in public institutions across the country and abroad, but much seems to be lost or simply in unknowable hands.

Written sources — correspondence, unpublished manuscripts, newspaper clippings — are even scarcer and many of them are located in collections outside the province. Too often a more historically aware institution, such as the Glenbow-Alberta Institute or the National Gallery of Canada, has sought out important material or received it because of its reputation for historical interest. The John Vanderpant papers, for example, are now on loan in Ottawa. Forgotten in his own province, his daughters are pleased that someone has remembered Canada's outstanding photographer whose Robson Street galleries were a centre for Vancouver's artistic and musical community during the 1930's. While the historian is delighted that such material has been placed in a public institution, it is also regrettable that the papers of another British Columbia artist may have found a permanent home thousands of miles away. Translation to Ottawa not only decentralizes the historian's material, but places it further beyond the reach of the interested public.

Artists do not generally leave published memoirs or journals from which the historian may unravel their lives. There are, however, a number of useful works of this nature for British Columbia. Of the earliest artists

on the coast, Captain James Cook's John Webber and William Ellis, only Ellis has left us a narrative,⁶ and it, published against Admiralty orders, is poorly written and of little use aside from its rather bad engravings. Spanish artist José Cardero, active on the coast in 1791 and 1792, wrote *Relacion del "Sutil" y Mexicana*,⁷ an account as aesthetically perceptive as the journal of Vancouver's surgeon-naturalist Archibald Menzies.⁸ The later wave of inland exploration, beginning with Alexander Mackenzie, provides some aesthetic perceptions of the country, including those of David Thompson, the first man to sketch the Selkirks and Rockies.⁹ Captain Henry J. Warre, a British officer sent to investigate the defence of the Oregon territory, has left a short published account of his journey through the Rockies and to Victoria,¹⁰ which must be supplemented by the extensive unpublished diaries and notes in the Public Archives of Canada. Kane, covering much the same territory a year later, recorded his experiences in *Wanderings of an Artist*.¹¹

The colonial period's artists were almost as prolific. Edmund T. Coleman, artist and goldseeker, wrote a prize essay on the vista from Beacon Hill, a rare document illustrating the moralistic landscape aesthetic of the Victorian era.¹² Frederick Whympers left his record of travels in the Cariboo, the interior of Vancouver Island, Bute Inlet, and Alaska. In his absorbing *Travel and Adventure in the Territory of Alaska*.¹³ A few naval artists, like Commander R. C. Mayne,¹⁴ wrote of their adventures in the colonies, but little of their own work. Regrettably we have nothing

⁶ *An Authentic Narrative of a Voyage Performed by Captain Cook and Captain Clerk*. . . 2 vols; (London: G. Robinson, J. Sewell and J. Debrett, 1782).

⁷ The provincial archives possess a translation by G. F. Bonewick of the Spanish original of 1802. Authorship is wrongly attributed to Espinosa y Tello.

⁸ C. F. Newcombe, ed., *Menzies' Journal of Vancouver's Voyage, April to October 1792* Memoir No. V; (Archives of British Columbia, Victoria, 1923).

⁹ J. B. Tyrrel, ed., *David Thompson's Narrative of His Explorations in Western America, 1784-1812* (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1916). Three of the sketches, now in the University of Toronto Library, are reproduced as endpapers.

¹⁰ The text of Warre's *Sketches in North America and the Oregon Territory*, originally published in 1848, has been reissued with an introduction by Archibald Hanna, Jr. and plates from the American Antiquarian Society's drawings; (Barrie, Mass.: Imprint Society, 1970).

¹¹ The first edition is 1859; the most recent reprint is included in Harper, *Paul Kane's Frontier*.

¹² "On the Beauties of the Scenery as Surveyed from Beacon Hill," *Prize Essay and Poem of the Literary Institute, Victoria, V. I.* (Victoria: J. E. McMillan, 1868).

¹³ (London: John Murray, 1868).

¹⁴ *Four Years in British Columbia and Vancouver Island* (London: John Murray, 1862).

from W. G. R. Hind, the most important of the colonial artists, though J. Russell Harper has attempted to recreate his life and work.¹⁵

The linking of British Columbia by rail to eastern Canada brought many central Canadian artists to the province. Procuring free passes from the Canadian Pacific Railway, these artists roughed it with their easels on the glaciers, peaks and lake shores of the Rockies and Selkirks, canoed up Howe Sound and visited the totems of Alert Bay. Such adventures gave the errant Ontarians much to report in lectures, the *Toronto Week*, or local newspapers. The accounts by Thomas Mower Martin, Lucius O'Brien, J. A. Fraser and F. M. Bell Smith¹⁶ provide colourful descriptions of the landscape, the natives, and their fellow artists. Another visitor, though not from central Canada, was Edward Roper, an English artist and author, who in 1887 chronicled and illustrated his journey *By Track and Trail through Canada*.¹⁷

Source material on the genteel ladies, retired colonels and hobbyist businessmen who painted their favourite views of Beacon Hill, the Cowichan Indian Reserve, Nanaimo or the Lions at the turn of the century is very limited. The most complete chronicle of the artistic scene from the 1890's to the 1940's is the diaries and letters of Victoria artist Josephine Crease in the British Columbia archives. They offer an insight into Victoria's art, from the early exhibitions at the Willows Fair through the establishment and maturity of the Island Arts and Crafts Society. From other prominent artists as the architect Samuel Maclure, the surveyor-draughtsman Thomas Bamford, the portraitist Sophie Pemberton, as well as early Vancouver artists like Will Ferris, H. J. DeForest, Edgar and James Blomfield, S. P. Judge and Statira Frame there is surprisingly little. The only published account of this period is Emily Carr's extremely biased *Growing Pains*, where members of the Victoria and Vancouver art societies are accused of insulting and jeering her work.¹⁸ Carr's other books, *The House of All Sorts*, *Pause*, *The Book of Small*, *The Heart of*

¹⁵ *William G. H. Hind (1833-1888)* (Windsor: Willistead Art Gallery, 1967); "William Hind and the Overlanders," *The Beaver*, 302 (Winter, 1971), 4-15.

¹⁶ Mower Martin, "An Artist's Letter from the Rockies," *The Week* (Toronto), August 30, September 18, September 27, October 4, 1889; O'Brien, "Grandeur of the Rockies," *The British Colonist* (Victoria), September 11, 1887; "An Artist's View," *Vancouver News-Advertiser*, January 1, 1889; Fraser, "An Artist's Experience in the Canadian Rockies," in G. M. Fairchild, ed., *Canadian Leaves* (New York Napoléon Thompson, 1887), 233-46; Bell Smith, "An Artist's Reminiscences," *Canadian Alpine Journal*, 9 (1918), 90-97.

¹⁷ (London: W. H. Allen, 1891).

¹⁸ (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1946), 228.

the Peacock and *Klee Wyck*¹⁹ are all to a degree autobiographical. In 1927 Carr began a diary, portions of which have been published in the poorly-edited *Hundreds and Thousands*.²⁰ The diary, together with letters and literary manuscripts, was inherited by Ira Dilworth and then by his nieces. This material, it is earnestly hoped, will soon be open to scholars. Inaccessible because of legal difficulties with the estate are the papers of Lawren Harris, a dominant figure in Vancouver from 1940 until his death.

With the founding of the Vancouver School of Art (originally the School of Decorative and Applied Art) in 1925, new artistic influences were brought to the community. J. W. G. (Jock) Macdonald and Grace Melvin were brought from Britain and F. H. Varley from Toronto to join Director Charles Scott as full-time faculty. Group of Seven artists — J. E. H. MacDonald, A. Y. Jackson, Arthur Lismer, Edwin Holgate — and Walter J. Phillips, watercolourist and woodcutist from Winnipeg, began to visit British Columbia in the 1920's. Some wrote of their experiences, MacDonald in a 1924 article²¹ and Jackson in his autobiography, *A Painter's Country*.²² Phillips wrote a great deal, all of which, published and manuscript, has been gathered together by John P. Crabb, a Winnipeg connoisseur. Few other artists have written of their experiences. Of the generation who came to maturity after the 1930's, only Jack Shadbolt has recorded his artistic life. *In Search of Form*²³ is a remarkable book, *sui generis*, and something which the historian wishes every artist would write.

Personal correspondence, that mainstay of historians, is deplorably rare for the province's artists. There are only a handful of letters from such prominent artists as Thomas Fripp, W. P. Weston and Statira Frame in the possession of relatives. No correspondence relating to Charles John Collings, perhaps the finest watercolourist in Canada, or Paul Rand, an artist reminiscent of the American Scene painters, seems extant. Some manuscript material of Sophie Pemberton and Ina D. D. Uhthoff is with their families. Most of the material on Jock Macdonald and F. H. Varley is outside the province. Valuable correspondence

¹⁹ *The House of All Sorts* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1944); *Pause: A Sketch Book* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1953); *The Book of Small* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1942); *The Heart of the Peacock* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1953); *Klee Wyck* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1941).

²⁰ (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1966).

²¹ "A Glimpse of the West," *Canadian Bookman*, 6 (November 1924), 229-31.

²² (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1969).

²³ (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1968).

between them and National Gallery officials is in Ottawa, though the Burnaby Art Gallery has copies of correspondence between Macdonald and John Varley and G. H. Tyler.

Emily Carr is better served, at least after 1927 when exhibitions in Ottawa and Toronto and her contact with artists there gave her a renewed impetus to paint. That year she met Nan Cheney and the valuable correspondence of their friendship, located in the University of British Columbia Library's Special Collections, is a rich source. Ruth Humphrey published an edited set of letters in the *University of Toronto Quarterly*²⁴ and Edythe Hembroff-Schleicher's forty-nine letters have recently been acquired by the British Columbia archives. Twenty of these were previously published in her *M.E.: A Portrayal of Emily Carr*,²⁵ itself, along with Carol Pearson's *Emily Carr as I Knew Her*,²⁶ among the more valuable of the various recollections of Carr by friends. Other letters may be found in the National Gallery. The provincial archives possess some unorganized Carr letters and, reputedly, other manuscript material. No doubt there is more correspondence scattered among friends which may eventually find itself in an archive.

Similarly, there must be items from other artists which should be in a public repository. Hopefully living artists — of the generation of Shadbolt, Max Maynard, Irene Hoffar Reid, Beatrice Lennie, E. J. Hughes (and younger ones as well) — will leave to the historian a written as well as an artistic legacy.

With the scarcity of memoirs, diaries and letters, the historian must too frequently revert to newspapers, particularly the critics and reviewers of Vancouver and Victoria. The Vancouver newspaper reviews were sporadic until the early twenties when "Diogenes" (Bernard McEvoy) began a fairly regular column in *The Province* and, a little later, John Radford, became *The Sun's* columnist. Both were old-school conservatives. More liberal views are found in Jas. Leyland's writings for a short-lived column in the *Western Women's Weekly*, in Reta W. Myers' "In the Domain of Art" of the 1930's *Province* and then the reports of "Palette" (J. Delisle Parker) in the same newspaper. Contemporary with "Palette" were Mildred Valley Thornton in *The Sun*, Brownie Wingate in the *Vancouver News-Herald* and Ina D. D. Uhthoff in the *Victoria Colonist*. W. J. Phillips' weekly "Art and Artists" column in the *Winnipeg Tribune*

²⁴ "Letters from Emily Carr," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 41 (Winter 1972), 93-150.

²⁵ (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1969).

²⁶ (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1954).

also offers some interesting insights into British Columbia art activities for the period. Another valuable source is *The Bulletin* of the Vancouver Art Gallery, beginning in the early thirties and continuing, with changes of format and title, to the present. Occasionally useful articles appeared in national magazines such as *Saturday Night*, *The Forum*, and increasingly in *Canadian Art*, predecessor to *Arts Canada*. Of greater value are the annual and other publications of the Vancouver School of Art. *The Paint Box*, the early annual, is a beautiful publication filled with articles, stories, dramas and some very striking lino-cuts. *Behind the Palette*, a later mimeograph paper, is less impressive but frequently useful.

While exhibition catalogues rarely attempt to be definitive of an artist, in many cases they contain the only information available apart from newspaper reports. Small catalogues have been issued on Statira Frame, Charles Scott, Ina D. D. Uthoff, Sophie Pemberton, Paul Rand and Samuel Maclure.²⁷ More ambitious were those for the National Gallery retrospective exhibitions of Jock Macdonald and Jack Shadbolt.²⁸ Ann Pollock and Judi Francis not only unearthed new material for the Macdonald catalogue but dealt thoroughly with the artistic milieu in Vancouver from the mid-twenties to the mid-forties. The catalogue of Doris Shadbolt's centennial exhibition of Emily Carr must not be overlooked nor Maria Tippett's "Contemporaries of Emily Carr in British Columbia."²⁹ More general, the 1958 "One Hundred Years of Art in British Columbia"³⁰ catalogue is interesting if thin. More thorough was the 1969 *Impression of an Age* on early art.

Valuable as primary sources are the catalogues of the annual exhibitions of the various art societies of the province. Unfortunately many have been lost, as Evelyn McMann has found in her attempt to bridge gaps in the 1930's run of those from the British Columbia Society of Fine Art. Incomplete runs of the Island Arts and Crafts Society and of the Vancouver Art Gallery exhibitions are held respectively by the provincial

²⁷ *Statira Frame Memorial Exhibition* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1936); *Retrospective Exhibition, Charles H. Scott* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1974); *Ina D. D. Uthoff Memorial Exhibition* (Victoria: Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, 1972); *Sophia Pemberton Retrospective Exhibition* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1954); *Paul Rand, 1896-1970* (Burnaby: Simon Fraser Gallery, n.d.); Leonard K. Eaton, *The Architecture of Samuel Maclure* (Victoria: Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, 1971).

²⁸ *Jock Macdonald* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1969); *Jack Shadbolt* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1969).

²⁹ Shadbolt, *Emily Carr: A Centennial Exhibition* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1971); Tippett, *Contemporaries* (Burnaby: Simon Fraser Gallery, 1974).

³⁰ (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1958).

archives and the Vancouver gallery, while any catalogues which may have been issued by the Vancouver Sketch Club or the Palette and Chisel Club are not extant.

Minutes and records of the various British Columbia art organizations have survived rather well. The Island Arts and Crafts Society records are in the British Columbia archives, while minutes of the Art, Historical and Scientific Association, the British Columbia Art League and the British Columbia Society of Fine Arts are housed in the Vancouver city archives. The records of the two major galleries, Vancouver and Victoria, may be found in their respective institutions. It is unfortunate that the business records of the many private galleries, such as the Art emporium under Harry Hood's proprietorship and the Leyland Framing Galleries, seem to have been lost. The historian is able to say very little about patronage.

In the early 1960's Margery Dallas, an art enthusiast, held timely interviews with the now deceased Charles Scott, W. P. Weston, W. J. Phillips and Harold Mortimer Lamb, the first two of which are available as taped recordings in the Glenbow-Alberta Institute. Of particular interest is the lengthy Weston tape. Thanks to Weston's accurate memory, the artistic milieu of British Columbia is recreated from his arrival in 1909 to the early 1960's. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in Vancouver has also produced radio programmes which required taped interviews; most notable are those relating to Emily Carr and George Clutesi. The recorded interviews gathered by Judi Francis and Ann Pollock for the Jock Macdonald exhibition are accessible at the Burnaby Art Gallery and the National Gallery.

This preliminary description of source material for the artistic history of the province shows at once that there are numerous sources and even more numerous lacunae. Many of the gaps can never be filled, but with conscientious concern of the kind demonstrated by Evelyn McMann, Colin Graham and others, the sources can be extended and enriched. None of the public institutions which share a responsibility for the province's cultural heritage have yet met that obligation, although symptoms of their concern are increasingly frequent from the employment of a visual records archivist at the provincial archives and the appointment of an archivist at the Vancouver Art Gallery to the laudable series of exhibitions at the Burnaby Art Gallery.

It is also clear from the above description that much of the source material is outside the province. The National Gallery is the richest source. It not only has in its library files on many British Columbia artists,

but its archives contain much correspondence between the institution and regional artists.

There are signs of a quickening interest in the artistic history of British Columbia. The next year or two promises to bring books on Weston, Phillips and Jock Macdonald, something on Marega, in addition to the authors' monograph on landscape art and perception in the province and Maria Tippet's biographical study of Emily Carr. It is hoped that responsible individuals and institutions will redouble their efforts to conserve and acquire material, that manuscript collections such as the papers from the Dilworth and Harris estates will be made accessible, and that artists, their relatives and friends, will become more sensitive to the importance of sketch books, diaries, and letters. Culture may be last but it should not be the least realm for the historian of the province.