# Historica Canada Education Portal

## Big Raven by Emily Carr

### Overview

Expose your students to the question of historical evidence and what makes an item or artifact a primary source or secondary source. This lesson will use small pieces of scholarship in the form of an academic paper to provide students with some foundation from which to analyze their positions on the use and determination of primary historical resources. The larger question to be considered is where Carr's works fit in Canadian history.

### Aims

### Prescribed Learning Outcomes

*You should expect students to be able to:*

– apply critical thinking, including questioning, comparing, summarizing, drawing conclusions, hypothesizing and defending a position, to make reasoned judgments about a range of issues, situations and topics
– assess the economic, social, political and cultural impacts of contact with Europeans on BC First Nations during the period of the land-based fur trade up to Confederation
– analyze the varied and evolving responses of First Nations peoples to contact and colonialism

– evaluate the importance for Aboriginal peoples to determine the use of their artistic traditions and historical artifacts

**Concepts in Historical Thinking:**

Use primary sources as evidence in constructing knowledge about the past

*You should expect students to be able to:*

• identify the position of the author
• contextualize the painting; i.e., establish the appropriate cultural and historical background of the piece

**Background**

Emily Carr has been both chided as a usurper of First Nations culture and lauded as a pioneer who helped bridge the gap between First Nations and European culture. Carr's preoccupation with the culture of the Coastal First Nations west coast coincided with the beginnings of a rising tide of awareness and self-identification by indigenous people who had long been considered part of a moribund culture. Concurrently, the dominant society began to acknowledge that native issues needed to be addressed. Carr was harshly criticized for her appropriation of native images in an age when the demand for "political correctness" was strong, but there is no question that her presentation of those images has heightened her social relevance. In the same way, her passionate engagement with nature and its portrayal coincided with a growing popular awareness of environmental issues and an accompanying sense of loss associated with the disappearance of the natural environment.

Additional background could include definitions of colonialism and appropriation (definitions are provided below). Also, a cursory understanding of the lives of the Coastal First Nations peoples with particular reference to the role of the trickster raven character would be beneficial.

*Definitions are from the Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism. Eds. Joseph Childers and Gary Hentzi. Columbia University press (1995).*

**Appropriation:** In common parlance, appropriation refers to the taking of something, often without permission, for use exclusively by one's self. The use of the term in Cultural Studies is quite similar. In that context, appropriation designates an act whereby a form of cultural capital is taken over for one's own use, typically without the owner's permission. Often, the original meaning of these cultural elements is lost or distorted, and such displays are often viewed as disrespectful by members of the originating culture.

**Colonialism:** Colonialism is the direct political control of one country or society by another and refers first of all to historical episodes, like the long history of British rule in India. The concept of colonialism has also been of great interest to political theorists, who have sought to understand it both as a social and political phenomenon in itself and as the product of a necessary "imperialist" stage in the development of advanced capitalist countries. These latter theorists, usually Marxists, have tried with limited success to demonstrate that at a certain point in the development of capitalism it become necessary to export capital and seek new markets among less-developed societies, which are consequently more vulnerable to occupation and exploitation. The overthrow of colonial regimes has initiated a substantial body of writing

that analyzes the colonial experience from the perspective of indigenous peoples.

**Activities**

**Time Allowance:** Three 50-minute classes

**Procedures:**

*Part 1: Background Discussion*

Have students look at a reproduction of Emily Carr's Big Raven. Use the following questions in a discussion format to compel students to look more deeply into the works of white artists and the issue of appropriation.

1. What is your initial impression of the painting?

2. It was painted in 1931; how does this add to your understanding?

3. It was painted by a woman; how does this add to your understanding?

4. It was painted by a white woman; how does this add to your understanding?

5. The inspiration for this piece came from a visit Carr made to a mission school in Ucluelet in 1898 or 1899. The painting evolved from a watercolor image of a Haida totem pole Carr painted at Cumshewa, Queen Charlotte Islands in 1912. She painted Big Raven after a trip to New York in 1930, during which she was profoundly affected by the work

of Georgia O’Keefe. How does this add to your understanding?

6. Emily Carr was given the name Klee Wyck by the Nuu-Chay-Nulth, an important rite in Aboriginal culture. Does this symbol of acceptance help us understand the nature of Emily Carr’s work?

7. How does Big Raven help us understand First Nations culture, particularly the role of the trickster in Pacific Coast Peoples?

8. How do you feel about Canada Post reproducing this painting on a commemorative stamp on the 100th anniversary of Carr’s birth (which was December 13, 1871)?

9. For consideration: Carr's work is obviously not Indigenous and does not claim to be Indigenous, nor does it involve Indigenous means of production. (I.e., the traditional ways that First Nations created art.) It is clear from her writing that Carr was inspired and influenced by Indigenous culture, and that she really thought that she felt and understood it. Given these factors, do you consider Carr’s work an appropriation of another culture?

10. For consideration: Carr’s contemporaries and critics of her time referred to how she reflected the “Indian spirit.” Given the context and the time (1920s and 30s), do you think Carr’s work was an appropriation or an exploration of First Nations culture?

Discuss Emily Carr's life with your students, and ensure they have an understanding of the concept of cultural appropriation. Then, have the students answer the following questions. The discussion should be emergent and allow students to postulate individual positions and further questions.

1. Knowing something about the “proper” background and upbringing of Emily Carr, do you think she is in a position to produce “authentic” Aboriginal work? Do you think that is what she was trying to do?

2. Is this painting a primary source concerning Emily Carr, an important figure in BC history, and a piece of art that captures Canadiana in the tradition of the Group of Seven and their effect on the rest of the world? Or is this a secondary source of First Nations history?

*Part Two: Debate Preparation*

The purpose of this lesson is to allow students time to analyze research and prepare arguments in preparation for a debate discerning whether or not Emily Carr’s work (specifically *Big Raven*) is an example of a primary work of Aboriginal culture (albeit through the eyes of a European descendant) or an example of cultural appropriation and therefore colonization.

1. Break the class into two major groups on either side of the debate topic. E.g.: "Be it resolved that Emily Carr’s painting Big Raven is a primary source of First Nations history."

2. Have students compile information supporting their side of the debate using library resources, the Internet or reproductions of relevant information (teachers may ask students to provide research for homework).

3. In their groups (larger classes may divided up into sub-groups) have the groups compile their arguments providing references.

*Part Three: Debate*

1. Divide the groups into each half of the room. Allow the students to present their arguments one at a time.

2. Upon completion of the argument have each student complete a paragraph outlining his/her understanding and position of the argument. Paragraphs may either support or dispel the debate topic, or take a more modest position based on the research and analysis presented in the debate.

**Resources**

Emily Carr's *Big Raven* - The Canadian Encyclopedia

Emily Carr - The Canadian Encyclopedia

Emily Carr At Home and At Work

Nisga'a (Canadian Museum of History)

A collection of raven legends of the peoples of the Pacific North West.

Historical Thinking Concepts