

Gateway

Everything Emily

See through Emily Carr's eyes on a walking tour near the painter's home

By Suzanne Morphet

BUNDLED UP AGAINST a damp West Coast wind, Joan Looy leads the way through Victoria's Beacon Hill Park. We reach a copse of red cedar, including one massive specimen with about 10 trunks soaring skyward. Rays of sun part its branches. Looy stops abruptly.

"When we stand here and look in," she says with a grin, a copy of the book *Emily Carr: An Introduction to her Life and Art* tucked under one arm, "we can really see why she didn't use nice little English watercolour techniques to capture a scene like this."

"She," of course, is Emily Carr, and Looy, the owner of Victoria's Victorian Garden Tours, is showing us glimpses of the natural world that inspired Canada's greatest female artist. I've always pictured Carr deep in British Columbia's coastal rainforests, far from civilization. But here we are amid the manicured flowerbeds, artificial lakes and bridged streams of an urban park. So I'm jolted to learn that Carr would have known this very stand of trees and admired the same red trunks with stringy bark.

"There wouldn't have been a concrete path, but absolutely, she would have seen those trees," confirms Jan Ross, resident curator of Emily Carr House, the painter's childhood home and now a national historic site just two blocks from the park and a short stroll down Government Street from the city's Inner Harbour. Ross will navigate Carr's old neighbourhood on a new walking tour which gets rolling this spring.

Even though I've visited Beacon Hill Park and the surrounding streets countless times, I had never seen them through Carr's eyes. I never realized that I could. Carr was born in Victoria in 1871 and died here in 1945, but neither resident nor visitor would readily know it.

Until now, that is. Victoria's major cultural institutions are collaborating to shine a spotlight on Carr. The Art Gallery of Greater Victoria got things underway last summer when it launched a special exhibition three times the size of its permanent Carr display. "On the Edge of Nowhere," which runs until 2013, traces Carr's artistic journey from her roughly crafted pottery to dramatic landscapes such as *Sea and Sky*.

There's also a new larger-than-life-size bronze statue of Carr, which was erected last October. You can now see Emily sitting with Woo, her monkey, perched mischievously on one shoulder and her dog Billie by her side. The trio sits on a busy street corner next to the Fairmont Empress Hotel, kitty-corner to the provincial legislature.

After you meet the middle-aged likeness of Carr, cross the road to the Royal BC Museum to see "The Other Emily," a special exhibit that runs until October 2011, exploring Carr's life as a young woman and even speculating about a mystery man in her life.

Not to be outdone, the Victoria Symphony is staging two Carr-inspired musical evenings this fall, with five new works by nationally known composers. A fitting finale to the Year of Emily.