Rebels and Realists: 100 Years of the Victoria Sketch Club

Curatorial Statement

This exhibition marks the Victoria Sketch Club's existence as the longest-running Canadian arts group west of Ontario and provides the opportunity to honour a range of personalities and artistic contributions. The kind of art produced by Club members, mostly amateur artists, says much about the tastes, values, and interests of their creators and the society in which they lived. Most of the earliest Club members were British immigrants, steeped in the 19th century landscape tradition in art, but there were those who stepped outside these boundaries, interpreting their surroundings in new and innovative ways. While the Club has had its ups and downs, to this day it remains a vigorous community with a strong membership base.

Exhibitions such as this provide an important teaching and research opportunity for both graduate and undergraduate students. This collaboration with the Sketch Club, community partners, and individual lenders has been invaluable.

We present here only a taste of the hundreds of members who have exhibited with the group over the last century, ending with some of the best-known members of the 1950s to 1970s.

Caroline Riedel
Curator of Collections
Victoria Sketch Club President’s Message

Four years ago, while viewing the annual show of recent paintings by members of the Victoria Sketch Club, Martin Segger, Director of the Maltwood Art Museum and Gallery, reminded me of the wealth of art work created by former members which is still available in the community. He gently planted the idea to explore that resource in the context of the Club’s 100th anniversary in 2009. Further informal explorations with Martin and Caroline Riedel, Curator of Collections, eventually led to a formal proposal by the Victoria Sketch Club and approval of the “Rebels and Realists” exhibition.

We are very grateful to the University of Victoria, and to Martin and Caroline in particular, for the time and resources put into this project on our behalf. In spite of a very busy schedule Caroline personally visited all the locations suggested to assemble this wonderful collection of art works and memorabilia. Her creative enthusiasm as Curator of this exhibition was inspiring and has resulted in a most valuable opportunity for the community and especially for current members of the Victoria Sketch Club, to become acquainted with the significant contributions made by our artistic “ancestors” to the development of the arts in Victoria. The “Rebels and Realists” title of the exhibition is a particularly apt description of the creative struggle between various artistic approaches that is probably still relevant today. “What goes around comes around!”

We also owe a debt of gratitude to Club Historian John Lover, who recently published a book about the Club’s history, and who has worked tirelessly to assist and advise Caroline and her staff to make this exhibition a success. Some of his efforts to track down family members and other collectors of paintings made by former Club members, could fill the pages of another small publication.

Last but not least, we thank the many public institutions and private collectors who helped make this exhibition a success.

Pieter van der Leeden
President Victoria Sketch Club, 2009
Beginnings: The Island Arts Club 1909-1911

The Island Arts Club formed in 1909 with the intent to "bring together artists and those interested in art; to hold public exhibitions of art and craft work; and to stimulate general interest in arts and crafts." Founding artist Mary Daniell wanted to "wake up" a community that she thought to be extremely apathetic towards the arts (Lover, 4).

The 56 charter members were typical of the upper class society who settled in Victoria. Most were of British ancestry, and brought with them an appreciation of romantic and picturesque English landscape art as epitomized by J.M.W. Turner and John Constable, as well as the work of topographic artists, mainly military draftsmen, working before photography was widely used to record the landscape. The ability to paint and sketch was part of a wealthy and cultured person's education, and the pursuit of the arts was considered to be a genteel amateur pastime. Many of the founding Club members had trained at recognized art schools in England, and wealthy families such as that of Sir Henry and Lady Sarah Crease passed this interest on to their children.

Indeed one of the founding members was Crease's daughter, Josephine. Her father Sir Henry was the first Attorney General in British Columbia. Josephine was a driving force behind the society and meetings were often held at the family's Rockland mansion Pentrelew. A longstanding friend and sketching partner was Maude Lettice, who exhibited with the club for over 40 years. Their contemporary, Kathleen O'Reilly was the daughter of Peter O'Reilly, a public servant and former Indian Reserve Commissioner for British Columbia. Architects Samuel Maclure and P.L. James were competent watercolourists, and many of the Club's subsequent members were or became their clients. Margaret Kitto, one of the few women able to support herself through her art, established the Deco Art Studio in Victoria, where she gave art lessons and painted local scenes for postcards. Over the next decade, incoming members like Thomas Fripp, Emily Carr, W.P. Weston, and C.J. Collings departed from the British watercolour tradition and applied their own style to the unique qualities of the west coast Canadian landscape.
The Island Arts and Crafts Club - 1912 to 1916

During this period Club membership rose from the original figure of 56 to upwards of 120. It attracted artists of the calibre of John Kyle, William J. Semeyn, Maude Lettice, A. R. Hennel and a young award-winning Scot named Will Menelaws. Many influential figures in Victoria were supporters, and the annual exhibitions – heavily British in tradition and subject matter, and now expanded to include the crafts – proved extremely popular. Less conspicuously, a sketch club was formally organized to meet weekly for outdoor painting in summer and indoor practice in winter, a component of the organization destined to be its most enduring.

While most of the Club’s members were amateur artists, there were a few professionals including Margaret Kitto and Emily Carr. Carr re-joined the Club in 1913 after returning to Victoria from France and teaching in Vancouver. Reactions to her new Fauvist inspired works were generally negative. Club President Dr. Edward Hasell wrote in the Colonist that Carr was “suffering from an attack of Neo or Post-Impressionism” which would leave her “permanently squint-eyed” (Hembroff-Scheicher, 9). Despite ongoing criticism, over time Carr became one of the Society’s biggest drawing cards for its annual exhibitions. Sophie Pemberton was briefly associated with the club during these years as she was living in England at the time, though she did visit and go sketching with many of the members. Pemberton is often cited as B.C.’s first painter to reach international recognition. She exhibited with the Club later in the 1920s as Sophie Dean Drummond when she returned to Victoria. Other landscape artists include Thomas Bamford who was a surveyor-draughtsman with the provincial government. He received art training in England and recorded much of B.C.’s wilderness areas while on survey expeditions. Will Menelaws, William Percy Weston and John Kyle, were art teachers and involved in the Club for decades. Thomas Fripp was one of the first in the group to express a difference between the rugged massive Canadian terrain and the way that British artists romanticized the landscape.

At this time the Club was very active. They received loan exhibitions from the Royal Canadian Academy and the National Gallery of Canada, kept a library, and sponsored a regular program of lectures. In 1913 the Club, and in particular Josephine Crease and John Kyle, established a School of Handicraft and Design, with faculty from London, Paris and Amsterdam. Though short-lived it handed down its influence to the public school system, which took over similar instruction. In addition to plein-air sketching, new Club activities as reported by the Colonist
newspaper included "drawing from Nude." This was unlikely as even in the progressive art classes of Ina Uthoff in the late 1930s the "nude" models still wore bathing costumes to their knees.

By 1914 the Club had established a strong social emphasis with bridge and Mah Jong parties in the grand homes of Fred Pemberton's Mount Joy on Foul Bay Road and Lady Crease's Pentrelew in Rockland. Lavish gatherings with elaborate musical programs were part of the annual show and raised significant funds.

Yan Q.C.I.
Emily Carr
Watercolour
1912
The Island Arts Society underwent a change in 1922. After merging with the Provincial Arts and Industrial Institute it took the name the Island Arts and Crafts Society. This period of the Society's history was abuzz with activity. The Society sponsored lectures and lantern slide shows put on by Society members or by guest artists, with subjects such as domestic silver from England and the antiques of Scotland. These lectures and shows were immensely popular and helped the Society gain a wider audience in Victoria.

The 1920s were a golden age for the Society, with several of its members putting on solo exhibitions of their work. In 1924 Emily Carr exhibited a series of interpretative pastels focusing on Indian totem poles. In the same year Will Menelaws, inspired by Carr's radical new style, began to experiment with his own painting by tackling Impressionism in his work. In 1925 several Society members held solo shows in various rooms of the Union Bank Building. Maude Lettice and Gwladys Woodward each held shows that showcased their fine watercolours, while Thomas Bamford's show revealed his skill in both watercolour and oil. Josephine Crease held her own private show, which focused on her scenes of British Columbia.
The Island Arts and Crafts Society scored a major victory in 1924. After years of calling for an art gallery in Victoria, their voices were finally heard. A permanent gallery was built onto the Crystal Garden. Construction was funded by the Canadian Pacific Railway. It was opened by Lieutenant Governor W.C. Nichol, who was also the Honorary President of the Society. Several Society members went out of their way to secure some of the most beautiful and best known works of art in Canada for the show. The Times, called it one of the most valuable shows ever to be displayed in Canada.

The Society held their 16th Annual Exhibition at the gallery in 1925. Emily Carr included a rare example of her pottery for this show, and the National Gallery of Ottawa loaned the Society several paintings by renowned Canadian artists. The loans from the National Gallery helped the show net a very large audience; over 600 people attended the show, which showcased over 271 works of painting and craft. New Society member Ina Uloth showed her work at this show, and won many admirers due to her skill with watercolour and pastel. While the early and mid 1920s witnessed the Island Arts and Crafts Society blossom, disappointment soon followed. Despite all their success with their 16th Annual Exhibition, subsequent shows and exhibitions were very poorly attended. Fred Pemberton, the Society's president in 1925 began to call for public support for the art scene in Victoria. Pemberton suggested that the Victoria Art Gallery should be a civic run gallery, supported by the city as a whole. The hope was that with city support admission prices could be lowered, which would in turn attract more interest and attendance.

By 1927 the Society's woes appeared to be a thing of the past. More than 1,000 visitors attended a group exhibition at the Belmont Building, a record high attendance for any Society exhibition to that date. Part of the success was attributed to the Society sending out invitations to well known Vancouver artists, Fred Varley and Charles Scott, both from the Vancouver School of Art. High attendance continued during the 1928 Annual Exhibition. The Society suffered a great loss in 1929 when one of its founding members, Samuel Maculre passed away. Despite this loss, the Society continued to flourish. The Annual Exhibition in 1929 had over 300 entries, and attendance for this show exceeded the 1927 mark with over 1,150 visitors. Over the course of nine days six paintings were sold, raising roughly $242.00 dollars, of which the Society took ten per cent.
The 1930s - The Modern Room

In 1932, the Society's Vice-President Max Maynard proposed a bold new direction to the annual exhibition, the addition of a "Modern Room." Emily Carr, Ina Uhthoff, Max Maynard, Jack Shadbolt, Edythe Hembroff, Ronald Bladen and John Macdonald exhibited a total of 24 works. This experiment was never repeated, but its inclusion was the first public acknowledgement of the division between the majority of the Society's personal achievements and the directions of contemporary art on a wider scale. At that time popular taste in art was ultra conservative. The British watercolour landscape tradition was still embedded. Even in the 1950s Colin Graham, first director of the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria and Ina Uhthoff, an AGGV board member faced resistance when showing "modern art" in AGGV exhibitions.
Right:
Works featured in the
Modern Room of the
Island Arts and Crafts Society's
Twenty-Third Annual exhibition,
hosted at the Belmont Building
October 2 - 11, 1932

Ronald Bladen
Head of a Girl
Head of a Man

Emily Carr
Indian Village, B.C.
Red Cedar
Thunder Bird
Tree

Edythe Hembroff
As a Tree Grows
Nu
Tulips
White Lady and Fruits

John Macdonald
Woodcut from a Drawing by Max Maynard

Max Maynard
Blind Houses
Burnt Tree Stumps, Cowichan Lake
Dancing Trees
Marigolds
Still Life

Jack Shadbolt
Flame Crescendo
Lino-Cut Greeting Card Designs
Pen Drawing
Rhythmic Roots
Snow Storms
Study
Tree Forms

Ina D.D. Uhthoff
Cedars

Left:
Rural Road Cowichan
Max Maynard
Oil on Canvas
1935
Gift of Michael C. Williams
University of Victoria
Art Collections
Windswept Trees
Emily Carr
Oil and Gasoline on Paper
C. 1938
University of Victoria
Art Collections
Gift of Major H. C. Holmes
At this time, only Emily Carr and Max Maynard had received national attention. By 1930, Carr's subject matter was shifting from First Nations to forest themes and the Modern Room had examples of both. Ina Uhthoff reportedly had some difficulty being accepted to this section of the exhibition. Though she was a versatile artist, juror Max Maynard chose only one of her works, while five of her paintings also hung in the more conservative section of the exhibition. At this time, Max Maynard and Jack Shadbolt had no previous formal art training, but they avidly studied the work of the Group of Seven, discussed art and literature, and went on sketching trips together. Maynard had exhibited previously in Seattle and at the National Gallery before 1932, but the Modern Room was Shadbolt's first exhibition. They admired Carr's interpretation of the west coast landscape and tried to strike up a friendship. But she soon regarded them more as competitors than friends, calling them, "despicable cads" who "came to me, not I to them" (Hembroff-Schleicher, 13).

The public reacted coldly to the new Modern Room. Maynard recalled, "Many genteel ladies came to the door, sniffed and turned away. The men, for the most part, were more positive: they entered in groups and made sarcastic comments to each other in loud voices. Most of these disparagements were directed at Emily Carr's paintings..." (Reminiscences 1981). He also wrote a document entitled "The Modern Point of View," dubbed "Max's Manifesto" by the group. Copies were placed for distribution in the exhibition, but suddenly disappeared when he momentarily left the room. No copies survive, but the contents discussed how art was not a matter of imitating and reproducing nature but tapping into the underlying patterns, structure and forms. Paintings in the Modern Room, according to Maynard were "creations rather than imitations." (Hembroff-Schleicher, 14). The reaction from the press to the 1932 exhibition was bland. The Society's annual exhibitions had support of the local Victoria Times and the Daily Colonist but reviews were always complimentary and listed as many of the participants as possible. This emphasis was typical of the general perception of exhibitions as social gatherings rather than a venue to view developments in contemporary art.

The experiment of The Modern Room was never repeated but its impact on some of the more conservative group members was substantial. Several of the long term members including Maude Lettice, and Gwaldys Woodward were reportedly "awakened" and tried their hands at more abstract and Post-Impressionist styles. Maynard, Shadbolt, and Carr all left the Club in the next few years. Carr would later criticize the Club for "hanging a millstone round the neck of art" and described exhibition openings as "affairs of tinkling teacups, tinkling conversations and little tinkling landscapes" (Carr, House of All Sorts, 1982). At the same time, the scale of the exhibits and the degree of public interest at the time affirmed art production and appreciation as a central element to upper class life.
Pain and Progress: Keeping the Torch Burning – the 1940s

Until the mid 1930s the Island Arts and Craft Society enjoyed unprecedented interest from the public and members alike. However, growing tensions in Europe and some setbacks for the Society caused the spirit of the group to suffer. The first major blow occurred when the Society was denied its proposal for an art gallery in Victoria. This was one of their objectives from the outset, and with the increasing costs of organizing the annual exhibition it was difficult for the group to continue to incur these expenses. Reverend Robert Connell became President and managed to keep the Society afloat. In the same year, Emily Carr, the beloved lone wolf of the group, endured her first heart attack and stopped exhibiting with the group. Jack Shadbolt and Max Maynard had also moved on, partly because their careers had taken them beyond Victoria, and partly because they were upset that the Society refused to have a subsequent Modern Room in their 1933 exhibition. Popular group members Thomas Bamford and Donald Cameron both died in 1941, and both Josephine Crease and her sister Susan died in 1947. Josephine had been one of the greatest advocates of the group from its outset. Yet, the Society survived with President, John Kyle at the helm from 1939 to 1951. He said in 1941, “This little group is helping to keep the torch of art burning in the capital city.”

Although the Society experienced financial troubles and low membership during the 1940s, it was not without progress. The remarkably talented exhibitors of the early 1940s included Charles Barker, Katharine Maltwood, Stella Langdale, Elizabeth Duer, Ina Uhthoff, Allan Brooks, Reverend Robert Connell, Will Menelaws, Maude Lettice, Elizabeth and Owen Goward, Betty Campbell Newton, Gertrude Snider, and Gwladys Woodward. In 1940, the Society sponsored Group of Seven member Arthur Lismer to visit Vancouver Island and to lecture. This was an exciting event, highly cherished by the members of the time.

The decline of the Island Arts and Crafts coincided somewhat ironically with the founding of the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, located in the former Spencer mansion in Rockland. The Club had tried for years to establish a permanent art gallery, first in the Crystal Gardens in the 1920s and as late as 1944 there was talk of purchasing the Crease family home in Rockland for an arts centre. That same year a group of sponsors including Uhthoff, Menelaws and Hobbs set up an art gallery called the “Little Centre” on Yates Street. It opened in 1946; and although it was small in size, it was a welcoming space and truly a feat for the sponsors. Carr had tried unsuccessfully in 1932 to establish a People’s Art Centre/Gallery in her own home.
1950 was the final year that there was a craft component in the Society’s annual exhibition. By 1951 the organization was in decline. There was no annual exhibition, and the resignation of President John Kyle, then 80, hit the Society hard. He died in 1958. The Province newspaper described him as “an outstanding educator and one of the most influential men in the history of British Columbia’s Arts and Crafts movement” (Lover, 25).
A New Name, A New Direction – 1950s-1970s

On March 17th, 1952 the Arts and Crafts Society was renamed the Victoria Sketch Club. It was felt that the new name would better reflect the group's activities: sketching outdoors during the summer months, and practicing their techniques indoors by drawing from models and still life in the winter. This had been an important component of the former Society as well.

It was true that the new Club lacked the big names of the past. Emily Carr was dead, Shadbolt and Maynard had moved on to greater things, and Ina Uhthoff devoted her time mainly to art education and administration of the new Art Gallery. However, the nucleus of the new body consisted of accomplished artists, such as Maude Lettice, Lillian Sweeney, and Gwladys Woodward, whose work had been in annual exhibitions going as far back as 1910.

The first official exhibition under the new name was held at the Dominion Hotel in August 1954. This small, two-day exhibition featured eleven artists; and while only four paintings sold, it marked a new period of success for the group.

Lillian Sweeney, a respected artist and wood carver, became the president of the Club in 1957. As the only surviving, charter member of the Vancouver Island Arts and Crafts Society, she was regarded as instrumental in keeping the organization together and on-track. Rose Willis was also recognized for playing an important role in maintaining relationships among Club members. In 1957 the group also won first prize for the best outside art group display at a West Vancouver exhibition. Alice Carey, Maude Lettice, Susan Gibson, and Nell Bradshaw all received honours for their contributions. Club secretary Gertrude Snider featured in the California invitational “Del-Art” show and reputedly exhibited the finest watercolour techniques in North America.

In 1958, club membership consisted of thirty members, and Maude Lettice was elected president. Over the next two decades, many of the Sketch Club members achieved ample professional success, exploring a variety of media and subject matter. Alice Carey specialized in portrait painting, while Rose Willis became known as the “flower artist of Canada.” Isabel Hobbs also won wide acclaim for her floral paintings, as did provincial Museum staff artist Betty Newton for her historical drawings and prints.
Well into the 1960s the Club was able to benefit from the experience of veterans of the old Society days, in addition to that of proven professionals like Alice Carey and Nell Bradshaw. This would inspire a further generation of talented artists. By 1971, when John Russell took on the role of president, there was a waiting list for Club membership, which can be seen as a clear sign of the organization's success.
### Featured Artists

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thomas Bamford</th>
<th>Margaret Kitto</th>
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<td>Reverend Robert Connell</td>
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<td>Lady Sarah Lindley Crease</td>
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<td>Susan Reynolds Crease</td>
<td>John Russell</td>
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<td>Reverend Cecil Cunningham</td>
<td>Emily Sartain</td>
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<td>Elizabeth Duer</td>
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<td>Archie Fairbairn</td>
<td>Kate A. Smith</td>
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<td>Thomas Fripp</td>
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<td>Florence Terry</td>
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<td>Elizabeth Goward</td>
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<td>Percy Leonard James</td>
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Works Cited


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