

In 1925, Lindley Crease, in a talk to the Island Arts and Crafts Society after a holiday in England, made a fascinating reference to a local artist, John Collins. Crease noted that when Collins' pictures were displayed here – he had contributed to the IACS Annual Show in 1912 – they were given little notice. Yet in an exhibition at Wembley, England, pictures he asked \$15 for in Victoria now fetched one hundred pounds sterling.

Crease was referring to Charles John Collings, born in Chudleigh, Devon, England, a largely self-taught artist, and frustrated architect. After exhibiting with the Royal Academy in 1893, and achieving some recognition, a restless Collings, at the age of 62, moved to Canada with his family in 1910. They settled on the remote Seymour Arm of Shuswap Lake, from where Collings found lasting inspiration for his artwork.

Satisfied with his pioneer life and solitude in the mountains he remained uninfluenced by the artistic trends of the day and developed his own unique perception of the vastness and intensity of the BC landscape. An ardent climber, he hiked the Rockies and the Selkirks and continued to travel through Western Canada until his death at 83.

He chose to sketch *en plein air* and finish his work in his studio, adopting the technique of using paper soaked in water and then mixing colours directly on the wet paper. Apparently, after painting a watercolour he would leave it between two panes of glass while the painting was still wet. After a period, he would remove the painting and dry it. The result of this process has been described as “a magical merging and defocusing of colours and shapes.”

Critics have found it hard to pinpoint his unique painting style. Because its coherence and consistency reflected traits of the traditional English watercolour tradition, one likened it to J.M.W Turner, but another saw influence of Japanese painting, a persuasive suggestion given that Collings was a keen collector of oriental art and crafts.



Given his isolation, it seems remarkable that he had attracted the interest of an English art dealer, Luscombe Carroll, who thought a visit to this “Recluse in the Rockies” justified the long and arduous journey to the wilderness of Shuswap. Beginning in 1912 Carroll featured Collings in a series of London exhibitions, entitled “The Canadian Rockies” which received critical acclaim. This success ensured that Collings would leave the management of his sales in such capable hands, and consequently he sought little contact with the BC art community, apart from occasional exhibitions in Vancouver. He also exhibited in Montreal, Chicago, and New York, where he achieved some popularity, but his paintings were sold

almost exclusively in England, and, as Lindley Crease’s remarks in 1925 would suggest. he remained almost unknown in BC for most of his life.

Given his preferred lifestyle it was fitting that Collings should die at his home on Seymour Arm, Shuswap Lake, in 1931.

~John Lover