In 1930, Emily Carr, buoyed by critical acclaim on a national scale that had come her way at last --- although still somewhat “a prophet in her own land” -- consented to undertake a rare public speaking event sponsored by the Women’s Canadian Club in Victoria. This event featured a solo show at Crystal Garden, depicting fifty of her renditions of West Coast indigenous totems and village scenes, and designed to add power to her argument on the need to appreciate “modern art.”

Carr had good reason to be encouraged by the interest generated, demonstrated by the high attendance which constituted a record in the annals of the Club. It also gave her a platform to articulate her cause, and in the opinion of one newspaper art critic she did so “in her searchingly clever, humorous, and analytical talk.”

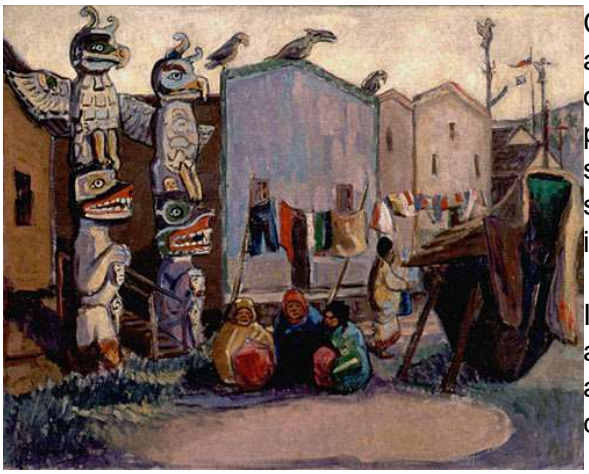
A constant theme was the importance of the creative rather than the merely photographic in art. She suggested that no matter how ugly or crude results seemed to be, it still had merit if it tried to express some real spiritual truth.

Carr went on to decry the Old-World form of expression with its sentimental ditties and canvases as being unsuited for the expression of New World ideas. “Even the cows do not look the same,” she maintained, recalling having told an English artist that a fence in one of his pictures would not keep out a Canadian cow. “And if this country produces a different cow spirit, is it not reasonable that it should produce a different art also?” The fact that some critics that Canada was not a paintable country was an admission of the need for a new mode of expression.

She issued a plea for creative art, even if not liked, not to be ridiculed. Carr used the example of indigenous art to illustrate this danger. She often heard it said that indigenous carvings were grotesque and hideous. However, these artists used distortion to strengthen their expression, their interpretation of the spirit of the thing. To them everything possessed a spirit of its own. The totem pole was the foundation of indigenous art, and their emblems were usually animals, artistically exaggerated to give a sense of true character; and there was great respect for them, due to the belief that these creatures symbolized the spirit of ancestors and were thus endowed with spiritual powers.

“The plea I am making is that you should show greater tolerance in your attitude toward creative art. See if it has sincerity before you condemn it,” urged Carr. She admitted that the immediate effect of creative art was often irritating. However, it was more entertaining and stimulating to be unpleasantly affected than to feel nothing at all.

Artists had the advantage over the camera in that they could call attention to things which they wanted to emphasize and ignore the others. Unless a picture represented something of the artist, it could not live. In painting a mountain, it was not enough to make it photographically exact. One must interpret something of its effect, its impenetrability, as well as its form. To achieve this effect, the artist must resort to a measure of distortion, which was often mistaken for caricature. But this exaggeration raised the subject out of the ordinary into the sphere of the spiritual. This property of distortion accounted for the living, and vital qualities possessed in the works of the Old Masters. It was not a question of the artist’s inability to draw.



Carr touched on the effect of the right distribution of line and colour in guiding the eye hither and thither. Of the use of the third dimension in opening up the atmosphere of a picture and giving a feeling that the objects in it were surrounded by air and space. Even feelings, sounds and silences might be intimated if the artist's vision had imagination.

It was Emily Carr's firm conviction that "today we have almost lost the ability to respond to pictures emotionally, and modern art endeavors to bring back this ability to our consciousness again."

~John Lover