

A Landscape in Flux: Emily Carr's Zunoqua of the Cat Village and the Moment of Colonization

by Constance Roberts

The Need for a Canadian Art

When Emily Carr ventured into the woods of British Columbia in 1932, she was a side note, a Canadian artist living in the boonies. The epicenter of artistic production, where the latest innovations occurred, was on the opposite side of the country. In Toronto, Ottawa, and the surrounding parklands, the artist coalition called the Group of Seven—including the noted painters Franklin Carmichael, Lawren Harris, and Arthur Lismer—strove to establish a new art. A Canadian art.

While her artistic contemporaries in the east explored established parkland, Carr chose to explore the woods and greenery of British Columbia, which were as entangling as the political forces at work. Carr emerged from the woods of Quatsino Sound with a sketch and a lasting impression of an imposing statue in a First Nations village. She combined the two on canvas to create *Zunoqua of the Cat Village*, a painting that distinguishes Carr from her eastern contemporaries with its vibrant representation of the elimination of First Nations people in British Columbia. Carr's painting does more than record an individual experience. It preserves the moment of destruction of First Nations culture as a result of white colonization in British Columbia.

Emily Carr memorialized this sketching trip to the “cat village” in *Zunoqua of the Cat Village* (see Fig. 1). In the painting, undulating waves of grass emerge from the verdant, shadowed forest, chaotically crashing against any surfaces opposing its movement. It aggressively rushes towards the front of the canvas. Impeded by the front edge, it swirls back and angrily flares up as it hits the walls of the two buildings. In its momentum, the animated force issuing from the mysterious depths of the forest drags lurking cats out of their hiding spots in the shadows of the tree trunks. The eerie ochre eyes of the cats, prominent against the charcoal and inky hues of their fur, stare out ominously from amid the crashing waves of grass. Before the emerging waves, a lone figure turns away from the impending danger and totters, tilting ever so slightly backwards. The

canvas edge crops his legs from the scene, but his arm presses a weighty block against his side. The arm pulls his body forward, frozen as it swings so that his fingers continue beyond the edge of the frame. His empty, black eye sockets face the same direction, refusing to acknowledge or surrender to the undulating waves. His mouth gapes open, mid-gasp or mid-sentence, with purple lips framing a black void. The figure itself is entirely unanimated; only the eye of his serpent headdress, the head of which dangles above his shoulder, glints animatedly. Set against starkly and unnaturally lit mahogany wood, the black pupil stares directly at the viewer, posing a challenge.

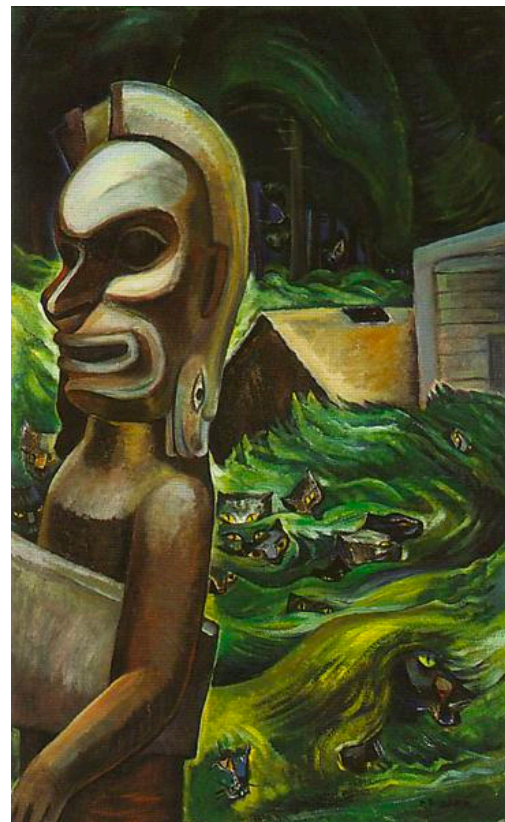


Fig. 1. Emily Carr, *Zunoqua of the Cat Village*, 1931, oil on canvas, 112.2 cm x 70.1 cm, Wikiart, <https://www.wikiart.org/en/emily-carr/zunoqua-of-the-cat-village-1931>.

The Railway and Traveling Artists

Carr was not the only white artist depicting First Nations culture. However, she resisted the purely stylistic appreciation of the itinerant artists traveling west, who hoped to capture unfamiliar and idealized scenes for those back east. In 1886, the Canadian Pacific Railway completed a line of track that “provided a direct link with eastern Canada.”¹ In addition to white settlers, artists could escape west in search of new inspiration. Their depictions of First Nations culture were not a result of intensive research or lengthy interactions but of brief sojourns into the wilderness. The ethnographer Marius Barbeau condones and explains their cultural appropriation in his 1932 essay, “The Canadian Northwest: Theme for Modern Painters.” He describes the villages of indigenous people, both those inhabited and those depopulated, as part of the scenery of western Canada and therefore available without constraints for artistic interpretation. In particular, he describes the “definite impressions of the picturesque Rockies, of the fine wood carvings of the Northwest Coast tribes and their totem poles, which constitute a striking feature of this continent.”² He conflates the natural features and the culture of the First Nations people into one entity, a unique Canadian landscape.

He writes as though the decaying and vanishing landscapes of the West Coast people were a vanishing Canadian aesthetic that eastern artists had a duty to preserve for the posterity of Canadian art. Barbeau urges artists to leave behind the parkland of eastern Canada in favor of the undiscovered west, a source of artistic material in First Nations villages and totem poles. Barbeau presses his point and cautions against delay: “(the) present-day Indians are no longer as their ancestors used to be: they have changed as radically as have their surroundings”³ but nevertheless notes that “artists gifted with insight and imagination can penetrate the surface.”⁴

¹ Gerta Moray, “Emily Carr and the Traffic in Native Images,” in *Antimodernism and Artistic Experience: Policing the Boundaries of Modernity*, ed. Lynda Jessup (University of Toronto Press, 2001), 76.

² Marius Barbeau, “The Canadian Northwest: Theme for Modern Painters,” *The American Magazine of Art* 24, no. 5, (1932): 331.

³ Barbeau, “The Canadian Northwest: Theme for Modern Painters,” 337.

⁴ Barbeau, 337.

When necessary, Barbeau incentivized eastern Canadian artists to travel west. He not only posed friendly challenges but also petitioned for funding on the artists’ behalf. For Jackson and Holgate, two members of the rising Group of Seven, he “arranged for [them] to visit the Skeena on passes provided by the C.N.R. in the summer of 1926.”⁵ Working together, corporations and individuals used the new railway to lay claim to every aspect of British Columbia—natural resources, cultural property, and anything else within the province’s boundaries. The joint effort led to the aestheticizing of First Nations culture.

The exemplar Barbeau hopes other artists will note is Langdon Kihn, a New Yorker whose paintings disconnect First Nations culture from its living history and land, presenting it as items without lineage or legacy. Barbeau accompanied Kihn west on one of his sketching trip in 1922. This trip clearly left a lasting and pleasant impression on Barbeau, as he mentions the people he and Kihn met in the beginning of his essay. He reminisces: “(when) Langdon Kihn ten years ago sought pictorial themes among the Indian fisherfolk of the Northwest Coast and the prairie hunters of Western Alberta, it was his good fortune to invade a colorful field.”⁶ The personal pleasantries aside, Barbeau considered the novelty that First Nations culture offered to eastern viewers as exotic and intriguing. Kihn’s works, including “Indian portraits and totem-pole landscapes...attracted much attention ...when they were exhibited in Ottawa, Toronto and Montreal.”⁷ Surely, other artists wanted their work to receive the same acclaim and attention. However, the desire to capitalize on the less familiar First Nations culture led artists and curators to categorize it as a stylistic innovation from the past. Viewers in the east did not need to concern themselves with the daily affairs of those shown in the works of art; they needed only to appreciate the aesthetic worth of the art while visiting an art gallery.

One work of Kihn’s that epitomizes the decontextualization of First Nations culture and

⁵ Charles C. Hill, *The Group of Seven: Art for a Nation* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1995), 190.

⁶ Barbeau, “The Canadian Northwest: Theme for Modern Painters,” 331.

⁷ Barbeau, 331.

dress is his portrait, *Juliette Gaultier de la Verendrye* (see Fig. 2). Juliette sits on a fur-covered throne in the center of the canvas wearing the traditional dress of First Nations people. She gazes outward, and her hands lay gently on her lap, one holding a drum-like instrument while the other grasps a piece of wood detailed on its end. The tactility and reality of Juliette's depiction prevents her from becoming a doll. Kihn renders her in a fleshy, three-dimensional manner. Her face and hands are emphasized because of carefully placed highlights, such as those along the fingers. She lives and breathes. In contrast, Kihn flattens the clothing and focuses on its design. The designs on the chest are neatly rendered: a buckskin-colored square with the shape of a man cut out; two large handprints placed over the chest; medallions with five pointed designs cut out. However, the fabric does not drape over the three-dimensional form of Juliette. Rather, the clothing is a costume; it is flattened just as a paper cutout to clothe a paper doll. The lack of a setting underscores the artificiality of the scene. The background is cold, marbled gray; it is not a real location or environment. Kihn's portrait not only subjugates First Nations dress to the whims of a white woman but also confines First Nations dress to seldom-worn costume. The scene presents a masquerade.

First Nations Culture as a Frame

The idea that First Nations culture offered artistic material to be used as a white artist saw fit did not occur solely in works of art but extended to the display and dissemination of works through public exhibitions. The idea manifested itself most apparently in the 1927 exhibition *Canadian West Coast Art: Native and Modern*. Marius Barbeau conceptualized the exhibit as "a stimulus towards the discovery of one of the most valuable artistic fields we have in Canada."⁸ Despite advertising the exhibit as two-fold, equally emphasizing "native" and "modern" works, the curatorial staff did not invite First Nations people to attend the exhibition or participate in its development. All the "(house) poles, masks and ceremonial objects, as well as apparel and carved chests and argillite, were borrowed from the newly renamed National Museum, the Royal Ontario



Fig. 2. Langdon Kihn. *Juliette Gaultier de la Verendrye*, 1927, color pencil with silver leaf, Canadian Museum of History. <https://www.historymuseum.ca/blog/the-complicated-case-of-juliette-gaultier-de-la-verendrye/>

Museum and McGill University."⁹ The exhibit was designed by and for white audience.

Both Langdon Kihn's portrait and the Exhibition of 1927 presented First Nations works as objets d'art and not cultural artifacts. Sally Price argues this approach falsely credits the eye of the connoisseur for discovering the artistic merit of an item and undermines the intent of the original creator. Price distinguishes between the reception of objet d'art and the reception of cultural artifact: "For displays presenting objects *as art*, the implied definition of what should 'happen' between object and viewer is relatively constant; the museum visitor's task-pleasure... is conceptualized first and foremost as a perceptual-emotional experience, not a cognitive-educational one."¹⁰ Viewing an objet d'art does not require cultural edification. Instead, a visitor approaches a totem pole or an oil painting assuming she can understand both equally well.

Displaying First Nations culture as a new artistic discovery not only wrongly credits connoisseurs but also alters the worth of the objects themselves. Price argues that the value of an object from so-called

⁹ Hill, 191.

¹⁰ Sally Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 83.

⁸ Hill, *The Group of Seven*, 191.

primitive cultures changes based on its categorization as either an objet d'art or an ethnographic artifact. The former is valued for its appearance, the latter for presenting a culture foreign to the viewer: "Through a 'rather than' construction, aesthetic experiences and beauty are not *joined with* ethnographic evidence and social curiosity, but opposed to them."¹¹ An object is either a cultural artifact, which warrants historical context not provided in either Kihn's painting or the Exhibition of 1927, or a hidden treasure discovered by eastern Canadian artists.

The exhibition presented objects removed from context, preventing the average Torontonians from differentiating the aesthetics and cultures of the First Nations people from that of the white colonizers. Modern painters shaped the exhibit and were the main attraction. They loaned their works to the gallery, and even Carr exhibited her work. In addition, she designed the catalogue cover, decorating it with a rendering of a totem pole.^{12,13} The organizers did not want to edify the public. Eric Brown clarified the exhibition's aims in the preface to the catalogue, writing that the objects were "an invaluable mine of decorative design which is available to the student for a host of different purposes."¹⁴ The exhibition wanted to preserve the objects and their designs so that modern artists could create a Canadian art.

The arrangement of the 1927 exhibition explicated the appropriation of First Nations culture as material for a new Canadian art by framing modern paintings with First Nations objects. Throughout the exhibit, sculptures and textiles were placed in the center of a wall, dividing the wall in two display areas.^{15,16} In one instance, a sculpture of a bird was centered on a wall; its wings arched over the adjacent spaces, implying a horizontal frame in addition to the central vertical

frame.¹⁷ At the far edges of each wall hung either a pair of single oars or two pairs, framing the display area.^{18,19} Within the enclosed space hung either individual paintings or small groups of paintings. The First Nations art became an ornate yet functional interior frame. As a frame, the objects' placement subjugated their importance to the importance of the modern paintings, which adopted the objects as subject matter and design motif. Such use was not unique to this exhibition. Barbeau notes at the end of his essay that the Château Laurier was designing a new wing to feature "an inner room a hundred feet long, and wide in proportion, with eighteen large supporting pillars and a vaulted ceiling, to be done in the Indian style."²⁰ Curious visitors could now experience the designs of the First Nations people—appropriated, culturally artificial, but stylistically similar—without the hassle of traveling.

Carr challenged the established dichotomy of either objet d'art or ethnographic work by embedding cultural context within *Zunoqua of the Cat Village*. It is a painting by a white artist, showing colonizing forces destroying the imagery of the First Nations people. It ascribes to the multivalent method of viewing Price advocates. Price argues that understanding a non-western work of art requires acknowledging both "the 'eye' of even the most naturally gifted connoisseur ...[that] views art through the lense (sic) of a Western cultural education" as well as the "discriminating 'eye' [of the creator]—similarly fitted with an optical device that reflects their own cultural education."²¹ The brushwork and color choices result from Carr's European training; the rendering of sculpture reflects the "discriminating 'eye'"²² of the First Nations' carver. Her painting intertwines the objet d'art with the ethnographic object, ensuring that her position as a white artist seeing a First Nations carving is clear in the painting.

¹¹ Price, *Primitive Art*, 87.

¹² Hill, *The Group of Seven*, 191.

¹³ EX0085 12/12, November 11- December 31, 1927, Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art, National Gallery of Canada. <http://bibcat.gallery.ca/screens/ex85.html>

¹⁴ Hill, 191.

¹⁵ EX0085 9/12, November 11- December 31, 1927, Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art, National Gallery of Canada. <http://bibcat.gallery.ca/screens/ex85.html>

¹⁶ EX0085 8/12, November 11- December 31, 1927, Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art, National Gallery of Canada. <http://bibcat.gallery.ca/screens/ex85.html>

¹⁷ EX0085 9/12, November 11- December 31, 1927, Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art, National Gallery of Canada. Accessed October 30, 2017. <http://bibcat.gallery.ca/screens/ex85.html>

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ EX0085 8/12, November 11- December 31, 1927.

²⁰ Barbeau, "The Canadian Northwest: Theme for Modern Painters," 338.

²¹ Price, *Primitive Art*, 93.

²² Price, 93.

Emily Carr and the Group of Seven

The 1927 Exhibition placed Carr as a side note to the dominant Group of Seven. Their work overshadowed hers, as they established a national style from their regional eastern work. Although history lionized the Group of Seven for founding a national Canadian art, Lynda Jessup argues that the artists actually created a regional style propagated by the National Gallery of Canada as a national style. The artists in the Group of Seven advocated an anti-modernist style, believing it could “combat the decline in taste that caused the public to abandon older models of beauty and utility.”²³ The artists disparaged contemporary society. Nevertheless, they participated in it fully. Both the artists and Canadian nationalists went on sketching trips into the parks and wildlife refuges around eastern Ontario. Both groups appreciated the scenic wildlife as a unique Canadian experience. The artists, who associated “the idea of Canada as a northern wilderness and the health of the so-called Canadian race”²⁴ returned laden with sketches and paintings that imbued the landscape with the artist’s emotional response. The artists hoped the mementos would edify the general public and heighten their ability to discern beauty from vulgarity.

The Group partnered with the National Gallery to create a series of exhibitions that solidified their regional style into a national style. The Groups’ paintings were successful because they were accepted within the context of British imperialism. The success of developing trends in art depended on the arts’ “evaluation in an imperial context.”²⁵ The Group of Seven avoided representing the negative effects of colonization, an essential aspect of Emily Carr’s work. As a result, their work appeared in exhibitions such as “the 1924-5 ‘British Empire Exhibition.’”²⁶ Frequent showings, such as “the 1926 Group of Seven exhibition at the Art Gallery of Toronto... followed in 1927 by the ‘Exhibition of Canadian

West Coast Art, Native and Modern,”²⁷ solidified the Group of Seven’s position in Canadian art. The mutually beneficial relationship between the Group of Seven and the National Gallery excluded artists of other themes and regions and established the Group of Seven as the proponent of a national style.

Because Emily Carr’s work questioned the colonialist values that the Group of Seven upheld, her art was largely excluded from national recognition. While Emily Carr employed similar practices, her excursions were not to scenic parkland but First Nations villages. While the Group of Seven depicted the landscape as a sight of emotional experience, Emily Carr prominently displayed the culture that the white population of British Columbia hoped to forcibly remove.

By showing her work in the 1927 Exhibition alongside the Group of Seven, Carr unwittingly trafficked First Nations imagery and subjugated her work to the Group of Seven’s. Carr’s works contain the inherent tension resulting from a white artist painting to preserve First Nations culture. Gerta Moray argues that interpreting Carr’s paintings requires a multifold approach to account for the contesting political and cultural forces and historical context. Carr was a born and raised British Columbian. When Carr was fifteen, she noticed the changes resulting from the newly finished Canadian Pacific Railway, including “the forcible assimilation of Native peoples...the eradication of their languages, beliefs and traditions through compulsory residential schooling, and the suppression of First Nations’ political protest.”²⁸ As the government enacted these policies, Carr developed a curiosity in her surroundings. She drew a series of documentary sketches of totem poles with “standards of accuracy that would satisfy current anthropological criteria.”²⁹ Carr wanted to create a record: “In 1913 she mounted a large exhibition of nearly two hundred documentary paintings in a public hall she rented in Vancouver, and she wrote a lengthy lecture that she delivered to the public at this show on two occasions in an attempt to explain the content of her images.”³⁰ Carr’s subject matter and

²³ Lynda Jessup, “Bushwhackers in the Gallery: Antimodernism and the Group of Seven” in *Antimodernism and Artistic Experience: Policing the Boundaries of Modernity*, ed. Lynda Jessup (University of Toronto Press, 2001), 132.

²⁴ Jessup, “Bushwhackers in the Gallery,” 133.

²⁵ Jessup, “Bushwhackers in the Gallery,” 136.

²⁶ Jessup, 136.

²⁷ Jessup, 136.

²⁸ Moray, “Emily Carr and the Traffic in Native Images,” 71.

²⁹ Moray, 75.

³⁰ Moray, 78.

manner of working resulted from her proclivity for art and her awareness of contemporary politics.

However, Carr's success as an artist depended on her participation in the white society and politics that undermined the culture of the First Nations people. She travelled to Europe for artistic training, as nothing comparable existed in British Columbia. Carr went "to France in 1910 and studied in Paris with a number of teachers associated with post-impressionism and fauvism."³¹ While there, Carr saw an opportunity to experiment, changing her rough sketches into paintings. Her natural interest in the totem poles around her home developed into "a conscious regard for the formal qualities of non-European art."³² Carr's formal training provided her new skills and a new regard for her subject matter; these skills eventually propelled her work into the national arena. And by entering the national arena, centered in eastern Canada, Carr could earn merit as an artist. British Columbia lacked innovative artists and a thriving art scene. Carr contrasted this dull environment with the energy of the Group of Seven. As Carr notes, "These men are very interesting and big and inspiring...I know they are building an art worthy of our great country."³³ She expressed her wish to participate, writing, "I want to have my share, to put in a little spoke for the West, one woman holding up my end."³⁴ Displaying paintings in shows such as the Exhibition of 1927 offered Carr an audience, exposure, and recognition otherwise unattainable.

Carr as Renegade

Although Carr wanted recognition for her work, she was also a highly opinionated artist. She often refused to subjugate her personal opinions to her work. Instead, she used her skills with pen and brush to unsettle the colonists entering British Columbia. While she sent her paintings east to appear in the Exhibition of 1927, she also opposed the etiquette of polite society and the denigration of First Nations culture that occurred in British Columbia. She traveled alone on her sketching trips. When the

white community worried about uprisings, Carr told a Vancouver audience, "I have spent long days and sometimes nights in lonely villages with no other protection than the worn teeth of my 13 year old dog. I never carry a revolver, being far more afraid of a gun than of an Indian."³⁵ Carr ignored the critics of her stories and, in 1941, published a memoir titled *Klee Wyck*. Although the book received the Governor General's Award for English-language non-fiction, the government still took issue with Carr's writing about her interactions with First Nations people, and "[a] number of passages have been expurgated from all editions of *Klee Wyck* printed since 1951."³⁶ Carr wrote the text to her own standards and not those of the potential audience. Her creative works, whether paintings or writings, explicitly expressed her opinions and political stances.

Moray's multifaceted analysis of Carr's work examines her oeuvre as a whole. Moray contrasts Carr's trafficking of Native imagery—sending the paintings east without context—with the preservation of First Nations culture in her paintings. However, Moray's analysis does not examine the specific messages of individual paintings. If Carr's only interest was recording the First Nations villages for posterity, she would not take creative license with her depictions. Carr conveyed meaning beyond ethnographic facts through stylistic choices.

In *Zunoqua of the Cat Village*, Carr selects saturated colors and bold framing. The cats are black; the forest is emerald; the wood is rich mahogany. The scene is starkly framed. The statue occupies a little more than a third of the canvas horizontally and extends almost to the top edge; it frames the scene from within the painting. Behind the statue, the forest and undulating waves of grass overrun the remaining canvas. An ethnographic drawing would focus on the statue and the village, recording the details of the scene in natural lighting.

Instead, the painting animates the natural and inanimate objects, thereby anthropomorphizing the influence of white colonization on First Nation civilization into an elemental struggle. The sky is azure and the boughs of the evergreens musky green;

³¹ Moray, 74.

³² Moray, "Emily Carr and the Traffic in Native Images," 74.

³³ Quoted in Moray, "Emily Carr and the Traffic in Native Images," 83.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Quoted in Moray, "Emily Carr and the Traffic in Native Images," 76.

³⁶ Moray, 78.

it appears as though dusk is fading into night. The unruly waves of grass emerge surreptitiously from deeply shadowed woods. Despite the fading light in the back of the canvas, the waves of grass are disconcertingly spot lit. The harsh light condenses the foreground into the mid-ground through harsh shadows and transforms the lush, mossy green of the trees into a putrid, yellow mass in the foreground. As the mass of grass undulates forward, nature itself sickens. As the health of nature deteriorates, the lurking cats emerge in ever increasing numbers. Within the verdant woods, two cats peer around sturdy tree trunks; their eyes scarcely stand out against their black fur. As the grass pulls the cats forward, more of their faces emerge; by the middle ground, the eerie, ochre eyes of the cat gaze out menacingly. The cats are a hidden menace that lurk behind the façade of impenetrable woods. Just as the railroad brought new waves of colonizers into British Columbia, the waves of grass in the center of the canvas emanate from deep within the woods.

The aggressive momentum of the vigorous waves of grass and animated cats threatens the lifeless and immobile male statue. The bright light that turns the grass putrid also strikes the smooth, carved surfaces of his body. Where his arm blocks the light, the wood of his lower legs is luscious mahogany; luminescent red highlights on the brown wood convey a bodily warmth and vitality lacking in the cold stare of the cats. However, the harsh light drives away the warmth, relegating it to the bottom of the canvas, and transforms his forehead into an icy, purple-tinged swath of white. The white highlights every protruding surface of his face and draws attention to the desolation of his facial features. His purple lips freeze partially open, revealing a black void; his eyes are a black void, unaffected by the light that draws notice to every feature of his face. Only the white pupil of the eye of his serpent headdress remains animated, a mediator between the humanity of the statue and the animalistic power of the cats. The white spreads over his body, the lack of color revealing putrid yellow highlights that measure the progress of disease and decay. Against the background of a pestilence spreading across the canvas, the statue totters precariously and inconclusively. Firmly pressing his arm against a block of wood held to his side, he turns his back on the buildings of his village.

The canvas crops his legs from the scene, as well as his dangling fingers. Is he about to fall on his back and succumb? Or is he departing the scene of his own accord, ceding the space to the vigorous and vital new force? The reading depends on the audience.

Despite sincere intentions, Carr could not preclude her privileged position in Canadian society from her representation of First Nations culture. She strove to preserve the culture of First Nations people, and she partially achieved her goal in *Zunoqua of the Cat Village*. The scene does not focus on the aesthetic qualities of the statue; it focuses on the impacts of the colonizing forces on the statue and the environment. Nevertheless, Carr positions the statue and the buildings so that they frame the action in the center; the colonizing force is the main actor, and spot lit to boot. Using the First Nations artifact as a frame mimics the displays of the Exhibition of 1927, which Carr participated in five years prior to this painting. Just as a central carving and hanging paddles framed modern paintings in the Exhibition of 1927, the statue together with the two buildings divide the canvas into two cells: one cell contains the woods, the nexus of the destructive waves, and one contains the destructive waves themselves. First the waves engulf the buildings. Next, they will engulf the statue. If it were not for the boundaries of the canvas, the waves would threaten Carr and the audience as well. However, the prospective audience and Carr remain safe, and Carr remains able to record the moment, because they are all protected members of white society.

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