

Robert Genn

April 15 – June 18, 2006



Dare Beach on the West Coast Trail, II

Robert Genn is one of Canada's most accomplished painters, having gained international recognition for his images of Canada. This retrospective exhibition of paintings, selected from private collections, focuses on Genn's work since 1985. Highlighted are his paintings of the Canadian landscape, as well as examples from his travels around the world.

At the age of four, Robert Genn saw Emily Carr, seated on a folding stool, at work making a painting. This chance view of Carr, the mature artist working outdoors, transferring the direct experience of nature onto her canvas, seems to have had a profound influence on the young boy who loved to paint and draw. Six years later, Genn had the opportunity to attend Saturday Morning Art Classes, where a young artist, John Lidstone, introduced students to contemporary art practices learned in New York. Lidstone took his students on many painting field trips to the different natural environments outside of Victoria. These two events in a young child's life seem to presage Genn's approach to life and art making – to continually travel and explore the world and to convey those experiences in his art.

Robert Genn's tireless investigation of the world and the possibilities of painting are both demonstrated in this exhibition. Canada is represented with images of BC's rugged West Coast, the Rocky Mountains, and northern Ontario. Pastoral and cultural scenes of France, Spain and Portugal are evidence of his international travels. Genn is encyclopaedic in his appreciation and study of artists and writers. He has travelled "in the footsteps" of artists, such as Gauguin, Van Gogh, Emily Carr and the Group of Seven. For instance, the painting *The Harbour at Pont-Aven, Brittany* depicts a village that was popular with Impressionist and Post-Impressionist artists, and is where Emily Carr studied and painted. His portrait of himself and his Airedale dog, *20 June 1998, Robert Genn and Emily Carr*, reveals his study of the works of artists as diverse as Velasquez and Matisse.

During his painting expeditions, Genn makes numerous drawings, does small sketch paintings and takes hundreds of photographs to capture the details and character of each site. These reference materials surround him in his studio as he develops the larger canvases. The results, as seen in the paintings on display, are works that are luminous studies of light and atmosphere, each having a profound sense of place. Whether a close-up view of a stream, or the expanse of a mountain chain, his landscapes have a quality of personal intimacy, expressing his passion for these places.

In organizing this exhibition, Robert Genn has reflected on these "old friends" as he calls them. You will find his comments on each work inside this exhibition pamphlet. We think you will enjoy the stories behind the images.

Brian Foreman,
Assistant Curator

Andalusian Pattern, 1999

Courtesy of Jenkin Showler Gallery

In 1999 we rented a 16th Century ecclesiastical retreat in the Sierra de Aracena, near Galaroza, Spain, an area that includes some of the “white towns.” Loaded with dazzling whitewash and cubistic echoes, this one, Aracena, was one of the few I committed to a larger painting. My system for the past few years is to make small sketches that later get worked up into the sort of large ones you see in this collection.

The Shipyard, 1985

Collection of Blackmont Capital Inc.

I stayed three days in Vianna do Costello on the northern coast of Portugal. This shipyard, nearby the hotel, swarmed daily with perhaps a hundred workers who literally made this dragger materialize. It reminded me of the segment *Building the Barn* in the movie *Witness*. Boatbuilding on the northern coast of Portugal has been active for more than two thousand years. Oak and cedar construction was still being used when I painted this one in 1986.

Commerce on the Duoro, Portugal, 1992

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Mohammed Faris

Carol and I drove the length of the Duoro River—from where it begins as a mountain spring near the French border in the Basque region of Spain, to its mouth in the wine and brandy country of Oporto, Portugal. Staying off the superhighways and moving along the banks of rivers gives an authentic perspective to a countryside. These riverside vendors ended up trading some of their tangerines for a plastic bag full of sardines.

The Harbour at Pont-Aven, Brittany, 1986

Collection of Michelle Rogers (image 4)

In the summer of 1986 we rented the postmaster’s house in Pont Aven. This town, “The Bridge over the Aven River” is famous for its many watermills and what has been called the “Pont Aven School of Painting.” Paul Gauguin and Vincent Van Gogh lived and painted here off and on in 1887 and 1888. The house we lived in is up on the hill in a windy place called *Quatre Vents*. I painted 60 paintings in and about here—some were the same scenes as were done by the ‘great ones.’

June 20, 1998, Robert Genn with Emily Carr, 1998

Collection of Marlene and Rob Sutton (ill. 8)

One morning in 1998 I realized that I hadn’t tried a self portrait for at least ten years. I set up the mirror and got my face and one hand as well as I could. I used a photo for Emily, our first Airedale, and then put in my messy studio. I thought the rectilinear ‘square’ composition suited my nature. The typical R.G. painting that appears in the lower left is part of an unsatisfactory one that I cut up and glued down.

In the Halls of the Mountain Kings, 2003

Collection of Michael S. Rogers (image 5)

In 1990 I became interested in mountains for at least the third time in my life. At first I was attracted by the blocky patterns and arbitrary designs that often fill the upper half of these subjects. While backpacking in the Rocky Mountains I was often presented with changeable and localized weather conditions. Looking further for this kind of action, my daughter Sara and I painted the length of the Mackenzie River over the summers of 2001 and 2002.

Bastion Peak, Turret Mountain and Mt Geikie, Tonquin Valley, 1998

Collection of Chuck Lawson

Sara, Richard and I hiked in here in the first week of May, 2003. Dorothy and Emily both had backpacks as well. The Tonquin Valley in Jasper National Park is one of those spots that mountain painters need to discover. The term I use is “alpine meadows.” An alpine meadow could be anywhere—up in the mountains or in a sleepy town in France. It’s just a super paintable place with compositional and design challenges that keep you on your toes.

Storm in the Lower Victoria, 1998

Courtesy of Heffel Gallery Limited (image 2)

Whenever I start a painting I ask myself what kind of “condition” the subject might be affected by. Sometimes this condition is apparent from the start—what I call “ready mades,” other times it develops during the painting event, still other times it is concocted later in the reflective mood of the studio. Light, wind, weather, change, atmosphere, etc., are often the conditional tools that a painter has to work with.

The Long Winter, 2005

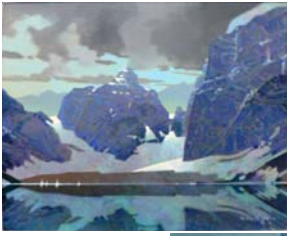
Collection of Dr. & Mrs. R. Dykstra

I started painting totems in my teens on various trips on our coast—often following in the footsteps of Emily Carr and Walter J. Philips. To me, the most effective poles are the Haida and Tlingit of the Queen Charlottes and the Alaska Panhandle, as well as those in the Skeena and Nass areas. These old village sites and their visages, whether authentic or re-visualized locations, are loaded with a solemn spirit and a tragic energy—decay, abandonment and rebirth.

Low Tide, Klaskish, 2005

Private Collection (image 3)

In Spain they have a name for a backlit painting: *Contraluz*—against the light. For me the device is an effective way to enliven and give focus to somber scenes and plain compositions. More than anything it seems to me that this convention gives a sense of hope and optimism. Sometimes, as in this one, I started with a compositional ‘no-no’—a centrally-placed horizon—and tried to work my way around it.



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On the West Coast of Vancouver Island, 1995
Private Collection

I spent my 59th birthday near this place with family and friends. The West Coast Trail is one of the toughest and most rewarding of all the big hikes—it's something everybody should do before they die. But I also agree with Sir Winston Churchill, who said: "When I die and go to heaven I want to spend the first million years painting—so that I can get to the bottom of the subject."

Dare Beach on the West Coast Trail, II, 2001

Collection of Michael and Andrea Roberts (image 1)
I've struggled a lot with sea stacks and the problems of depicting our inter-tidal zones. For this one I felt I needed a simple colour scheme and a simple pattern. Sometimes I find that 'paucity'—the absence of too much information, can be a useful exercise. This one was done in the studio after the fact from a sketch. In the sketch I swear you could smell the clams—in this one you might just be able to smell the cigars.

Crescent Park Pattern II, 1978

Collection of Blackmont Capital Inc.

I've painted this subject several times in several sizes—the pattern always seemed appealing. The subject has also been made into a serigraph print. The scene is less than a kilometer from our home near Crescent Beach. This one was done I think in the winter of 1978 when the Crescent Park pond was less overgrown. David, Sara and James played here when they were little—and Dorothy and I still walk around the pond pretty well every day.

Islet with Three Pines, Parry Sound, Ontario, 1989

Collection of Mr. & Mrs. Mohammed Faris

Time and again I've tried to get the feeling of islets. This place, based on a sketch near Parry Sound, is more fantasy than reality. Three years ago I was commissioned to do someone's islet in Lake of the Woods. It turns out there are 14000 islands in that lake, and I've now been back four times in four seasons. There are still lots of unpainted, near perfect islets in Lake of the Woods.

Sunny Afternoon at Gallup Creek, 1988

Private Collection

This place is on the right hand side of the road as you head up to Mount Baker in Washington State. Streams in counterlight that run towards the viewer appeal to me. Perhaps it's the "golden enrichment" or maybe just the jumpy design of the rocks combining with the autumn leaves. Apart from the fact that I love the process of painting, I really see my paintings as a group of errors that nevertheless seemed worthwhile putting together at the time.

Whistler Pond, November, 1995

Collection of Tanis Culley (image 6)

Every day, driving the kids to the chairlift, I passed by this place. One time I pulled over and took a pile of photos. It turned out to be another "hot spot"—loaded with simple design motifs, foreground colour, dark and light contrast, subtle variations. In the painting game, one feels like a hunter—except that you don't actually 'shoot' anything or remove it from the environment. What would we do without snow? Snow solves all problems.



Artist's Statement:

I'm one of those old fashioned guys who has spent a lifetime looking for things to paint. It's not so much looking for things to inflict my style on, because that changes, but rather trying to scratch an eternal itch of curiosity—"What do I want to do today?" and "Can I do it?" I guess you could say I admire work that takes skill and technique. John Singer Sargent, Joacum Sorolla, Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, members of the Group of Seven, and others are my current role models. These, of course, may change. The bottom line is that I'm interested in process—the order that a painting is composed—what to include—what to leave out—the eternal education of pigments—how light works—the multitasking nature of the painting event—in the long run the forms and patterns that make a subject interesting to me. I've always been conscious of my short span of concentration. Travel softens this for me because it mixes time and space. During the last few years I've been to so many wonderful places. Believe me, there's just nothing like turning a corner and finding something that's worthwhile getting the brush around. Sometimes I think it's a kind of exploitation. But I don't despoil anything, and I seldom leave a mess. Painting is like hunting or fishing except that you don't take anything from the environment except your own struggle.

Part of the appeal is to monumentalize. This is often done in the second or third try back in the studio. The studio is home where one is as happy as a cow in her stall. Bumping around in this stall, connections are made. This exercise, this reworking and synthesizing is one of the truly great satisfactions. For a visual person, and I'm not alone in this, it's the way we function—the way we tramp through life—doing the best we can with what we have been given. Making stuff is our game. I'll never stop believing that creative folks are the most blessed. Winston Churchill said that the way to be happy is to find a task that requires a sort of perfection that is impossible to achieve—and then spend your life trying to achieve it.

I'd especially like to thank the collectors who have loaned work for this exhibition. Without collectors it would not be possible for artists to develop and grow their abilities, let alone follow their dreams. This collection represents only a few of the paintings that will be included in a retrospective book to be published this fall. Right now it's tentatively called *The Art of Robert Genn*. Some of the works shown here I've not seen for a while. It's like bumping into old friends. When I look at older paintings I have one of two reactions. If they're not so hot I indulge myself in the fantasy that I might be getting better. If they are above average and move me again in the way they first did when I painted them, I have the unpleasant feeling that I'm getting worse.

About the Artist:

Born in Victoria, British Columbia in 1936, Robert Genn studied at Victoria College, The University of British Columbia and The Art Centre School in Los Angeles, California. His work is in private collections worldwide. A long-time resident of Surrey, this Senior Academician with the Federation of Canadian Artists is also well known for his work in mentoring and encouraging other artists. His website "The Painter's Keys" is a valuable resource for artists, and his popular twice weekly email letter is widely subscribed by over 150,000 artists.

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