

A self-effacing

VIEWFINDER | E.J. Hughes almost gave up painting until

BY KEVIN GRIFFIN
VANCOUVER SUN

During the course of a career that spanned seven decades, E.J. Hughes became one of the province's best-known painters.

Hughes was born Feb. 17, 1913 in North Vancouver. He died at age 93 on Jan. 5 in Duncan, of cardiac arrest.

"The loss of E. J. Hughes is a tremendous one for the province," said Ian Thom, curator of Hughes's last show in 2003 at Vancouver Art Gallery and author of E.J. Hughes.

"His remarkable images have transformed the way many of us view our native province. The integrity and length of his commitment to his subject (the landscape of British Columbia) has few parallels in the history of art and he achieved that rarest of goals — a personal vision which maintained the highest artistic standards and was also of almost universal appeal.

"Canadians, and British Columbians in particular, are fortunate that this gentle, self-effacing man has left us a wonderfully rich visual legacy which celebrates the beauty of the natural world and our relationship to it."

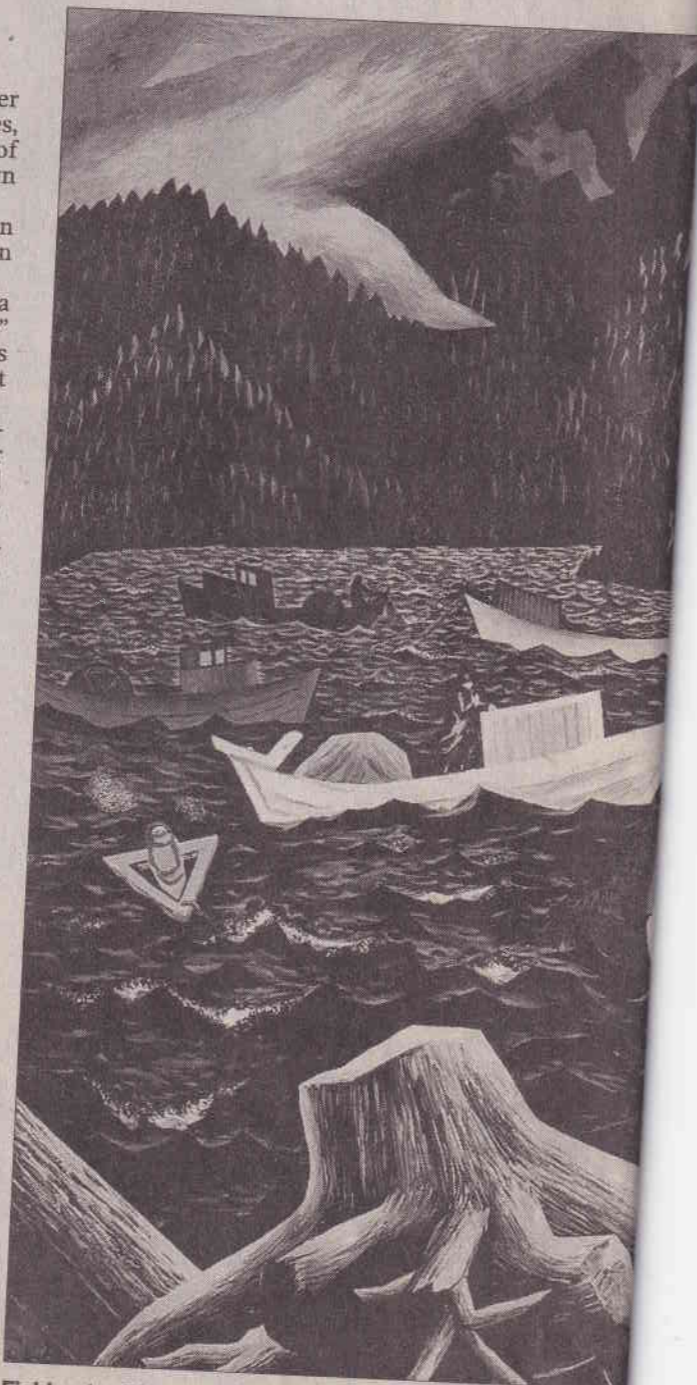
But when he was a young man, Hughes almost gave up painting, he said in an interview with *The Vancouver Sun* in November 2004.

"I was running out of money," Hughes said. "I was going to have to give up art and get some other kind of employment."

What happened was that in 1951, he came to the attention of Max Stern, owner of the Dominion Gallery in Montreal who seven years earlier had taken a chance on Emily Carr. At a time with few art galleries in Vancouver, visits by prominent gallery owners in Ontario and Quebec were important for local artists.

Stern was in one of the dormitories at the University of B.C. when he saw *Steamer Arriving at Nanaimo*, by an artist he'd never heard about.

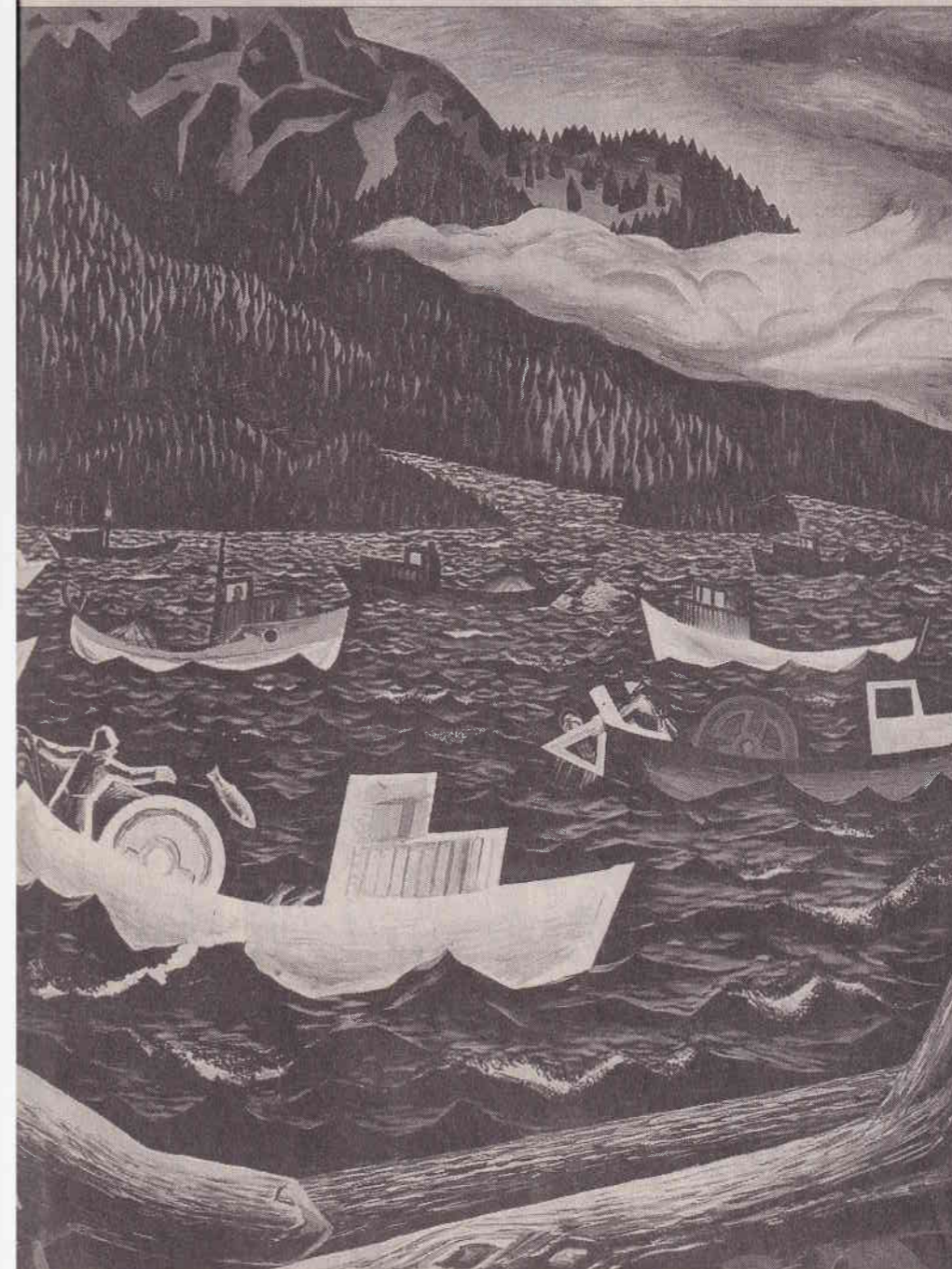
"I was so deeply impressed by the quality of this work that I decided then and there to include it in my



Fishboats, Rivers Inlet, 1946, oil on canvas, sold at auct

artistic genius

l a financial saviour arrived at the last minute



n for \$920,000 in 2004, to become the highest-priced work by E.J. Hughes.

for the painting exhibition, Stern is quoted as writing in Thom's book E.J. Hughes said even though he did

forthcoming exhibition. Stern is quoted as writing in Thom's book *E.J. Hughes*, "and thus give him a chance to become known to the world of art and — I hoped — to collectors all over the world."

Stern paid Hughes \$500 for several paintings.

"He came in the nick of time with his contract," Hughes said in 2004. "It was my chance to work full-time on painting."

It was a relationship that lasted more than 35 years until Stern died in 1987.

By 1987, 20 years after his first retrospective work at the VAG, Hughes was being paid about \$10,000 a painting. The most he ever received from one painting was \$25,000 from Stern.

Over the years, his paintings steadily increased in value until they reached a high point in 2004, when *Fishboats, Rivers Inlet* went for \$920,000, including the buyer's premium, at the fall Heffel Fine Art Auction.

Hughes said even though he didn't make a cent off that auction sale, he realized that the publicity would help sell other paintings.

"I'm glad to see that Hughes paintings are getting more recognition. I'm glad that I'm living this long to see this happening and having recognition right across Canada."

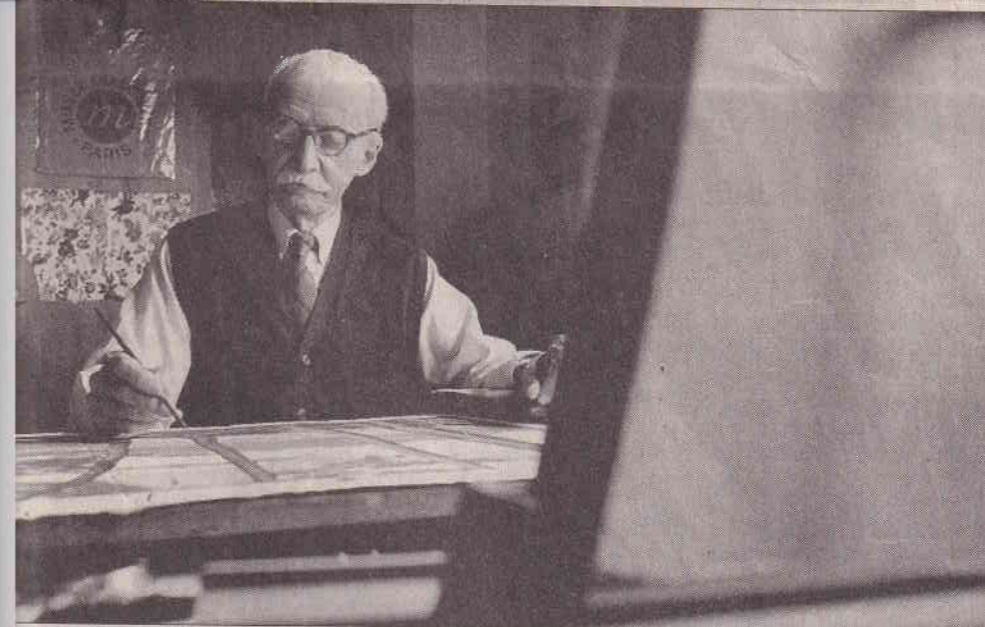
Asked why he referred to his paintings in the third person throughout the interview in 2004, Hughes said: "I don't want to sound boastful talking in the first person. There's still a lot of improvement to be done in my work before I could call them first-rate works of art."

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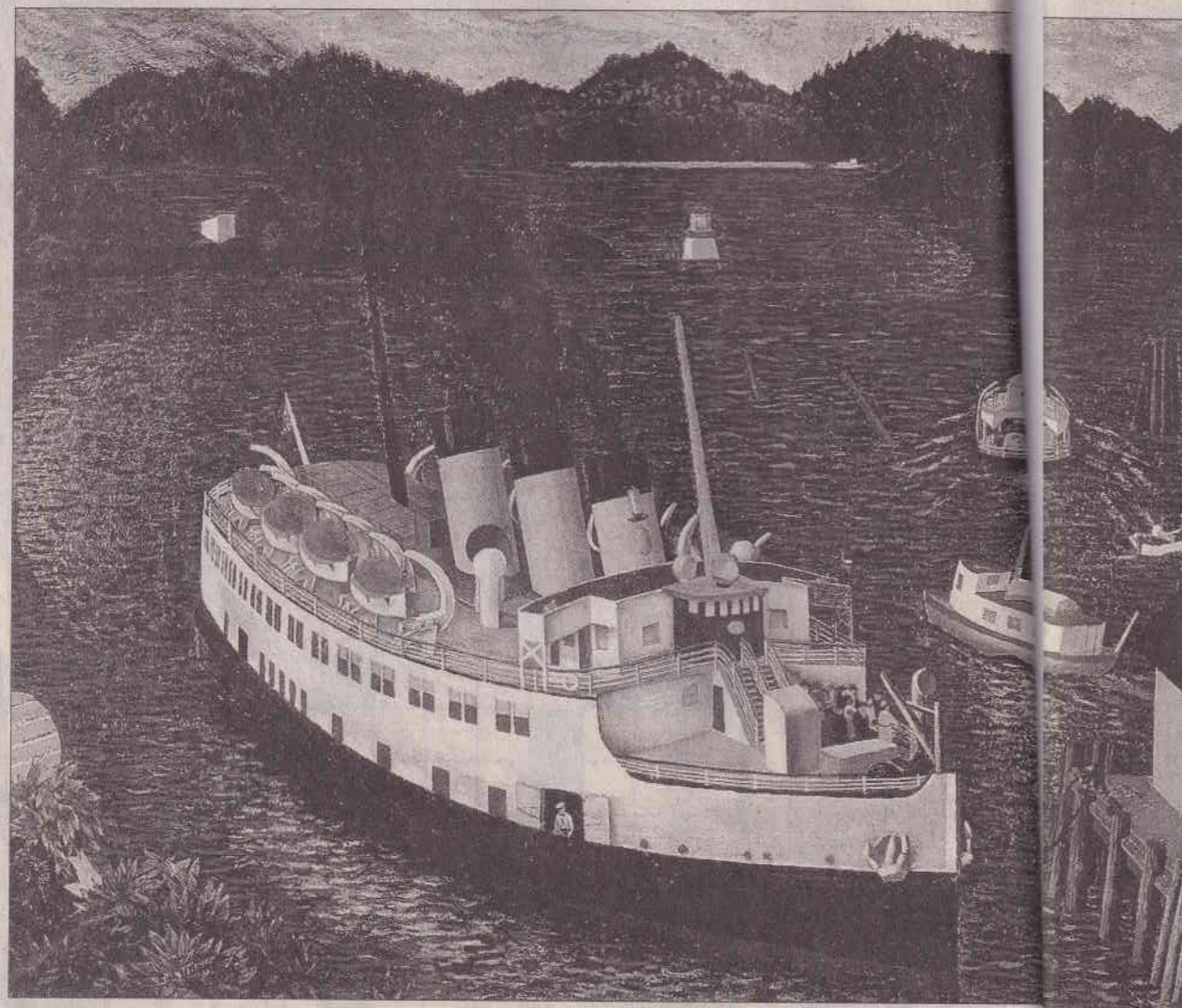
You can view more E.J. Hughes paintings on our new digital edition. Free to full-week print subscribers or sign up for a 7-day free trial.

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E.J. Hughes paints in his Duncan studio in 2004.

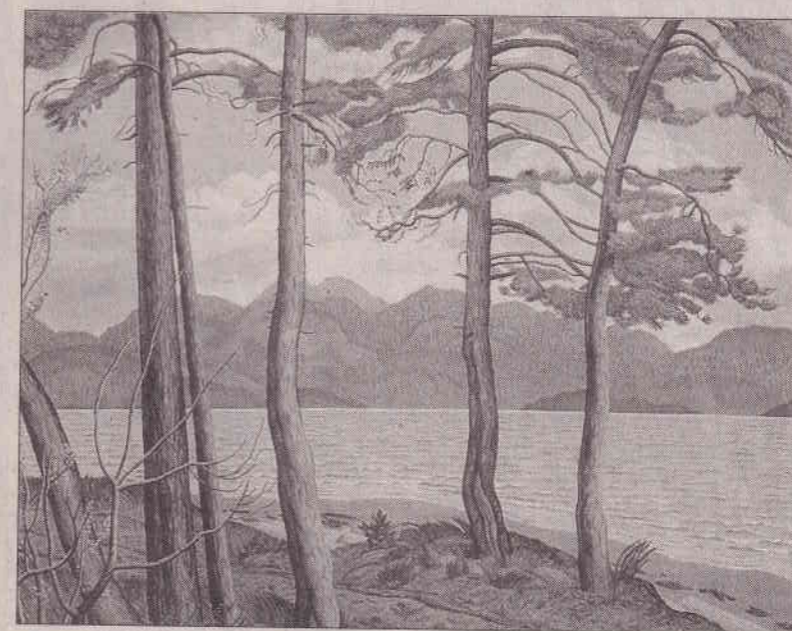
DARREN STONE/VICTORIA TIMES COLONIST FILES



Steamer Arriving at Nanaimo (above), 1950, oil on canvas (private collection).



Trees on Savary Island (right, above), 1953, oil on canvas (Montreal Museum of Fine Arts).



Indian Church, North Vancouver (right), 1947, oil on canvas (private collection).

Titan of B.C. art captured coast's compelling reality

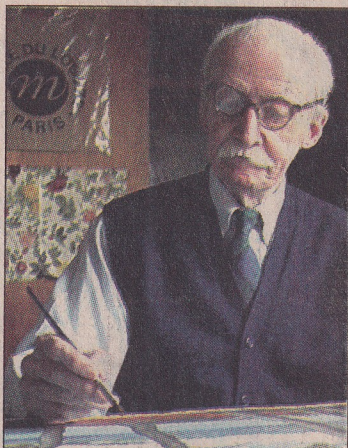
BY KATHERINE DEDYNA

VICTORIA — E.J. Hughes, who painted the landscapes of coastal B.C. for more than 70 years, died Friday of cardiac arrest in a Duncan hospital.

He was 93.

Hughes was often mentioned in the same breath as Emily Carr as an incomparable chronicler of British Columbia. His paintings of such subjects as Nanaimo Harbour, tugboats in Ladysmith and the Comox Valley hang in galleries across Canada and fetch hundreds of thousands of dollars.

He was also one of Canada's official war artists during the



DARREN STONE/CANWEST NEWS SERVICE

E.J. Hughes captured the reality of coastal B.C. in his paintings.

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Huge talent was recognized early

From A1

Second World War.

Hughes was named to the Order of Canada and the Order of British Columbia in recognition of his achievements.

In 2003, the Vancouver Art Gallery mounted a six-month retrospective of his work entitled *E.J. Hughes: Work from the Early 1930s to the Present*.

"Hughes's art is British Columbia," wrote Jacques Barbeau in his book *A Journey With E.J. Hughes*. "The raw strength of his coastal scenes, the silent majesty of his ferries, the vigorous representations of the fishing and forest industries, and the tender rendering of his inland scenes provide a virtual encyclopedia of this magnificent province."

"We'll never see his like again," said Robert Amos, art critic for the *Victoria Times Colonist*. Amos said Hughes was the most important artist of his time, defining B.C. more than anyone since Emily Carr.

"Perhaps the single most extraordinary thing about it was that his work was immediately important and approachable to the common man and yet was recognized for its inherent artistic qualities by even the highest of the intelligentsia," Amos said.

Sidney philanthropist Eric Charman says he considers himself lucky to have known Hughes and to own five of his paintings.

"His work is equal as far as their effect and value to Western Canada and the nation to all the works of the members of the Group of Seven," Charman said Friday.

Much of his focus was on quintessential B.C. sights that are now vanishing — fishing fleets and log jams and steamships. His work is a

legacy for the future, Charman said.

In spite of the acclaim he received, Hughes was funny, Charman said. When the now-closed Auld Kirk Gallery in Shawnigan Lake showed his work, he quietly arrived and signed the guest book with the pithy phrase "Room for improvement," Charman recalled.

Auld Kirk co-owner Nancy Roseborough of View Royal knew Hughes for more than a quarter-century. "I'd say he's the best friend that Shawnigan ever had." Even though he was represented by a Vancouver gallery, he was loyal to the Island and wanted to support it.

The strength of his paintings lay in their reality, she said. "He painted everything exactly as he saw it."

Edward John Hughes was born Feb. 17, 1913, in North Vancouver, although he spent part of his childhood in Nanaimo.

His talent was recognized early. One of his teachers was Frederick Varley of the Group of Seven, and another member of the iconic group of painters, Lawren Harris, recommended him for the inaugural Emily Carr Scholarship.

In 1951, he was discovered by Montreal art dealer Max Stern, who bought all his paintings and formed a unique relationship that freed Hughes to paint without financial fear.

Hughes spent much of his life living on Vancouver Island, a great deal of it near Shawnigan Lake. He spent his last years in Duncan.

After Hughes lived a lifetime of relative obscurity, in the past three years two books of his work were published: Barbeau's *A Journey With E.J. Hughes* and *E.J. Hughes* by Vancouver curator Ian Thom.

Hughes had no children. His wife Fern died in 1974.

Canwest News Service



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E.J. Hughes, whose paintings hang in major galleries, was awarded the Order of Canada.

THE VANCOUVER SUN
**NEXT
WEEK**

MONDAY | ARTS & LIFE

No cracked actor: At 60 years old, David Bowie, unlike many of his peers, is still an innovator, not embarrassing himself and still a Starman.



TUESDAY | WESTCOAST NEWS

Beginning Tuesday in Daily Special, Douglas Todd will examine the state of academia in British Columbia in a three-day series focusing on the province's universities.



THURSDAY | SPORTS

Western Hockey League teams have one last chance

MONDAY | BUSINESS

Selling Whistler in China: Immigrants from Hong Kong love the high-end properties of



E.J. Hughes' *Low Tide at Fulford Harbour*, painted in 1982

E.J. Hughes: Painter of the Raincoast

by Patricia Salmon and Leslie Forsyth Black

THE ROMANTIC view of an artist as a solitary figure existing only for and in his work is not widely held in this age of the verbal and public painter, but Edward J. Hughes is just such a solitary figure; a quiet man who speaks only, eloquently, through his paintings. Hughes has painted for almost fifty years. He leads a secluded life on Vancouver Island, recording the landscape of his native province with a unique vision, combining intense fidelity to the physical structure with vivid hues in finely balanced compositions outside the mainstream of modern abstraction.

Hughes has never wavered from his initial commitment to paint the beauty of his land, with his private perception of that beauty. In his early landscapes he sought to capture decorative elements that occur spontaneously in nature, becoming obsessed later on with the atmosphere, the essence of the air between. After each brief excursion into other subjects, he has been drawn back inexorably to landscape painting.

EDWARD J. HUGHES, a member of the third generation of the Hughes family to reside in British Columbia, was born in North Vancouver in 1913,

but spent the first decade of his life in the small, lively town of Nanaimo, surrounded by the forests and coastal waters that later were to be his primary subjects. He was the eldest of the four children of Edward Samuel Hughes and Katherine Mary McLean. His father, a professional musician, insisted that the children take music lessons but Edward never considered a musical career. He has said since,

Every week I would carry my great leather roll of music to my piano lesson. I hated it. I was far too slow and just couldn't stand my own mistakes. To me a piano lesson was worse than the dentist. I even hated the leathery smell of the roll.

Young Edward showed an early interest in drawing, however. His mother recalls,

Edward could draw almost before he could speak. I remember him drawing a small picture of a boat on pointy waves with smoke coming out of a funnel.

She fostered this interest by supplying him with colouring

books, but Edward rarely used them. The young boy was frustrated by the pale, uneven colours that wax crayons produced on the paper. He preferred clean black-and-white drawings.

Edward's early life was exceptional in only one respect: he liked to be alone. He shunned group activities and never had more than one friend. He spent most of his time sketching or reading boy's books. He had a youngster's enthusiasm for comic books and regularly read the *Boy's Own Annual* and *Chums*. Their illustrative comic-book style is reflected in his first original drawings.

Most young boys used to entertain heroic visions of military life, but it must have come as a shock to Edward's parents to find that their reclusive elder son was seriously interested in soldiering. He dreamed of attending the Royal Military College at Kingston, and began preparing for a military career. He joined the Seaforth Highland Cadets, the one group activity he enjoyed. Instead of being alienated by the discipline, he was exhilarated by marching, precision drills and target practice. He still keeps two small trophies he won for his skill as a marksman. He was approached locally to take what seemed like a very attractive position that, on closer investigation, turned out to be the operation of a Lewis machine gun aboard a coastal rum runner. He consulted his mother. He recalls,

I was so excited. It was at the beginning of the Depression and the money was very good. Mum didn't want me to go, though.

She was privately horrified, but carefully explained to Edward that he was still too young for the assignment. It was the one argument that he could accept. Swallowing his disappointment and pride, he passed up what seemed to him a golden opportunity.

His mother realized now that her restless son might be lured into dangerous pursuits, so she encouraged him to enroll in a program of evening drawing classes. Years of sketching on his own had made him ready for formal instruction and he found it rewarding. The teacher, Mrs. Verrall, insisted on proficiency in pencil drawing, principally still lifes. Hughes remembers long hours spent labouring over one drawing entitled *Kitchen Chair*. After mastering pencil techniques a few of the students, including Hughes, were permitted to begin classes in oils. The new medium delighted him.

Hughes began seriously to consider painting as a career. He studied art books in the Vancouver Public Library for hours on end. Gainsborough and the Renaissance painters captured his interest and ignited his desire to become an easel painter.

His father was hired to provide background music for vaudeville and the silent films at the Orpheum Theatre, and the family moved from North Vancouver to Kitsilano, into a large new home. The family future looked bright, but the year was 1929 and the Stock Market crash set off a chain reaction that soon engulfed Vancouver and brought young Edward's training in oils to an abrupt stop. The Depression struck suddenly and viciously. Theatre musicians were among the hardest hit, for the new talking pictures were already threatening their existence. The Hughes family had to give up the fine house in Kitsilano and move to Princeton, where Edward and his father found work in the mine.

For young Hughes, the Depression meant abandoning any thought of attending the Royal Military College. Gone too was a long nurtured private dream. He secretly had hoped to combine his two passions, painting and the army, by becoming an army artist.

THE YEAR 1929 marked a profound change for Canada. A review of the government agencies and

foundations established during the following years reads like a checklist of national institutions: the Royal Mint, the Bank of Canada, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, the Dominion Drama Festival, the Governor General's Literary Awards, the National Film Board. In painting, members of the Group of Seven were still influential, with their emphasis on the Canadian land. The abstract experimentation popular in Europe did not find ready acceptance in Canada; rather, the grim reality of life during the Depression provided the dominant focus for artists and writers. Some of the most moving paintings of the decade include Prudence Heward's portraits, Jack Humphrey's children, Carl Schaefer's farmhouses. In literature too, the harsh economic conditions figure prominently in works by Anne Marriot, Claudius Gregory, Morley Callaghan and Irene Baird.

The Vancouver School of Decorative and Applied Arts was an exciting place to be during the Depression. Hughes felt fortunate when sympathetic uncles offered him financial support to art school, and, determined not to be a burden to his uncles, Hughes immersed himself in his studies. His drawing and painting instructor was Frederick Horsman Varley, member of the Group of Seven. Hughes recalls:



Self Portrait (drawing), 1978

Really he was a great painter; in fact, I rank him third of the painters at that time. Tom Thomson's colours have never been equalled. Jackson I would put second for his interpretation of the landscape. Then Varley, even though he painted mostly figures at this time. The way he used colours to express feeling and his grasp of the model's character was amazing. But as a person and a teacher, I somehow never understood him. He would stride about the classroom loudly exhorting us. "Get the mood, get the mood," he would say. I never really knew what he meant.

J.W.G. MacDonald was also an instructor at the school. He had studied at the Edinburgh School of Art and had come to Vancouver in 1926 to teach design. MacDonald was a vigorous, enthusiastic teacher. His friendly, outgoing manner made him a great favourite with the students, and the strong underlying patterns evident in many of Hughes' early landscapes reflect the influence of MacDonald.

Hughes also valued help received from other less famous teachers. Grace Melvin, who taught design and crafts, specializing in decorative work and illustrations, encouraged Hughes' love of bright, clear colours. Charles

1. Scott, director of the school, an able and active administrator, always gave time to teaching despite a busy schedule. Hughes remembers Scott as a selfless, dedicated man and a gifted teacher. Scott and Grace Melvin encouraged Hughes to continue into post-graduate studies, and they arranged financial support for the final two years.

The curriculum at the art school was built around basic techniques. In the first and second years, the students took drawing and design; their only choice was between clay modelling and architecture. Hughes elected sculpture, taught by Charles Marega, who later made the lions for the Lion's Gate Bridge in Vancouver. In the third and fourth years they could major in drawing and painting, design and commercial art, sculpture or architecture. Hughes specialized in painting for the last two years of the diploma course and continued in this area for his post-graduate studies. He says now:

I have done no sculpture since art school. I admire sculpture and think the work of Rodin is magnificent. But for me sculpting always seemed too much of a craft. There are so many steps before you can see what you have done. Painting is so immediate. You can work more directly with colour.

He further remembers,

In our last years at the school John Varley, Orville Fisher, John Avison and I decided to let our hair grow long. I don't know why. I guess we thought we were a bit smart. For a long time no one mentioned it. Mine just kept growing longer but Orville's was curly and grew straight up and out. One day, walking along the hall, we met Jack Booth, who watched us go by, then said, "Hey Fisher, where did you get your fur cap?" We weren't sure if he was kidding or not but we all went to the barber's.

Edward thought seriously about becoming a teacher. In his post-graduate years, he taught Saturday morning children's art classes and soon discovered that he was unsuited for it. Teaching exhausted him emotionally, and he spent an inordinate amount of time preparing for each class.

It was awful. The classes were Saturday morning. On Sunday I was all right, but on Monday I began worrying. It increased all week and by the next Saturday I felt a wreck. The children were talented, but I had such trouble making them behave. The minute I turned my back, the little monkeys would start throwing balls of clay at each other.

It was his only attempt at teaching. Many artists rely on teaching to supplement their income, but for Hughes it was just not possible. When he taught, he was unable to paint.

HIS FORMAL training behind him, Hughes had to earn a living. Together with Paul Goranson and Orville Fisher, he began work as a freelance commercial artist. They rented space in downtown Vancouver in the Bekins Building for fifteen dollars a month. While waiting for commissions, they made dry point etchings and tried to sell them at small exhibitions. Many of Hughes' etchings from this period foretell his later paintings. Times were lean and Hughes recalls the trio's jubilation after an unusually successful sale:

We closed the office a bit early that day and went

to a nearby beer parlour. We celebrated with several beers, followed by some very cheap wine. Then we walked around Vancouver, laughing our heads off. Then we went back to the office and all that night we were very sick. The next morning I couldn't move. Fisher and Goranson opened the office as usual. When they heard a customer coming, they quickly tucked me under the counter out of sight. I remember lying there. My mind was perfectly clear. I just couldn't see.

Their first major commission was six panels for the walls of the First United Church in Vancouver. All three painters had a strong commitment to realism in murals. They drew lots to determine the assignment of the various panels. Hughes was delighted when he drew the Nativity scene for the central panel, and struggled to reconcile the spiritual, transcendental qualities of the Virgin with the physical strength of a young Jewish mother. Existing preparatory work for this portrait indicates he was successful.

The three felt honoured to receive this commission, although the pay consisted only of meals and a small cash allowance. Execution of the work was lengthy, full of setbacks. The cream manilla paper on which preparatory sketches were drawn attracted rats that inhabited the building. They had a constant battle to keep their work from being devoured; some of Hughes' sketches then bear the marks of the rats' teeth.

In 1936 they received another commission; to decorate the W.K. Oriental Gardens in Vancouver's Chinatown. Although the pay was better, their patron insisted they copy favourite scenes from an old Chinese calendar, and working conditions were not ideal. Renovations were being made only a few feet from where the artists worked. Even then, Hughes found noise so disruptive that he could hardly work. This experience may have convinced him that he must paint in solitude.

In 1938 the group did a mural for the Malaspina Hotel in Nanaimo, painted in oil on shellacked walls. It portrayed the history of Nanaimo and the surrounding area, featuring early explorers: Lieutenant Malaspina, Captain Galiano, Captain Quadra and Captain Vancouver. Unfortunately their mural has been covered by later construction.

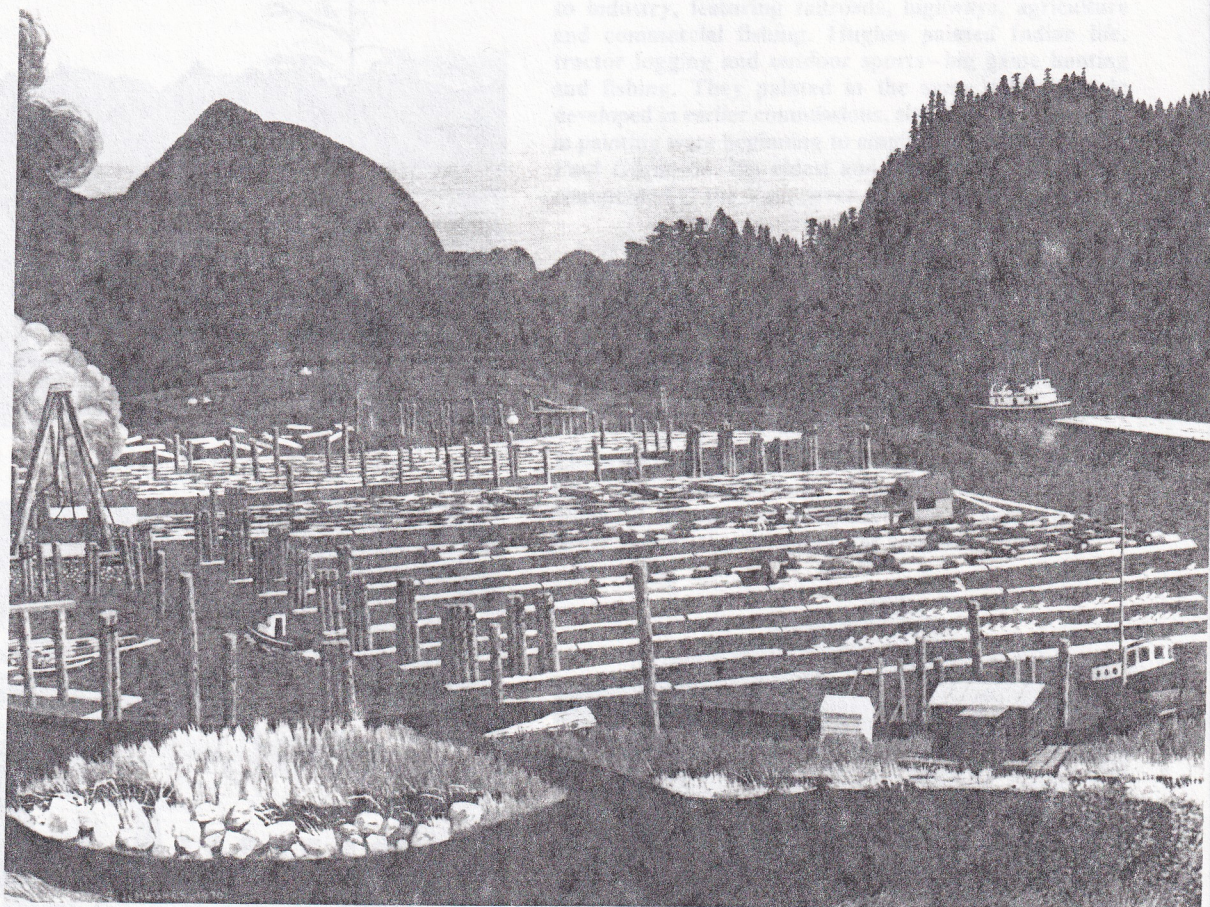
Although survival during the Depression years was difficult, the young painter became determined to marry, after meeting Fern Smith in the autumn of 1937. On October 15, in Stanley Park, he was sketching a group of trees near Second Beach when Fern walked by with her dog and stopped to look at his drawing. They had a relaxed, easy conversation and he asked if he could walk her home. This was the beginning of the relationship that was to sustain Hughes for many years. Soon after, Hughes persuaded Fern to sit for a sketch. The pencil drawing *Fern in Stanley Park*, a delicate line drawing, reveals the vibrant inner strength of this quiet woman.

During the summers of 1937 and 1938, commissions were so scarce that Hughes rented a fishing boat and nets. Although born on the coast and raised near the ocean, he was unsuited to be a fisherman. During his first days out alone on the boat he remembers being desperately seasick and adds,

The fishermen were paid per fish. The exception was the large red salmon which was paid by the pound. Everyone hoped to catch a large red salmon. One night I caught this really large fish; it must have been well over forty pounds. I could scarcely lift it into the boat. I thought it was too big to turn in as a single fish so I kept it to eat. I cut it into pieces and gave some away to other fishing boats. They thought I was crazy—it was a red spring



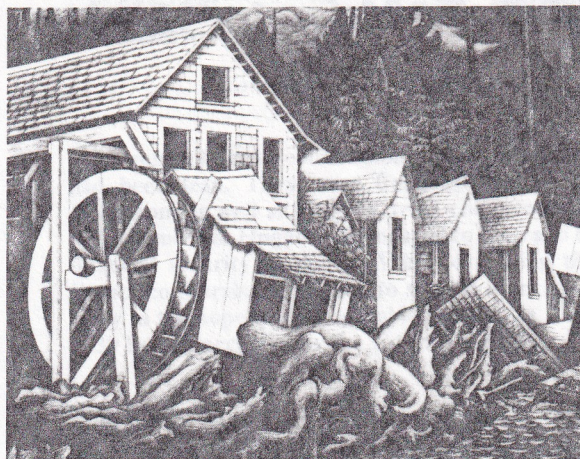
Christie Pass, Hurst Island, 1962



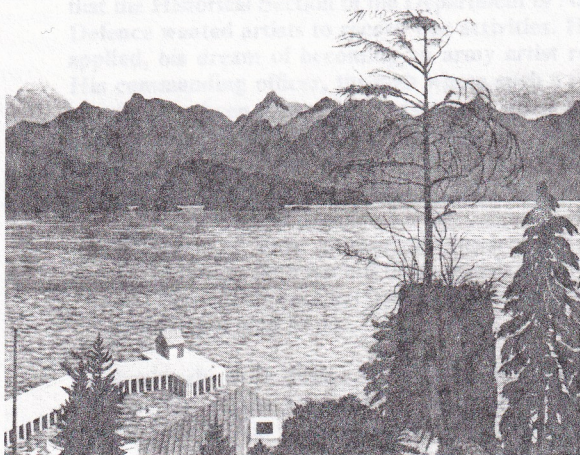
View from the Old Coal Dump, Ladysmith, B.C., 1970



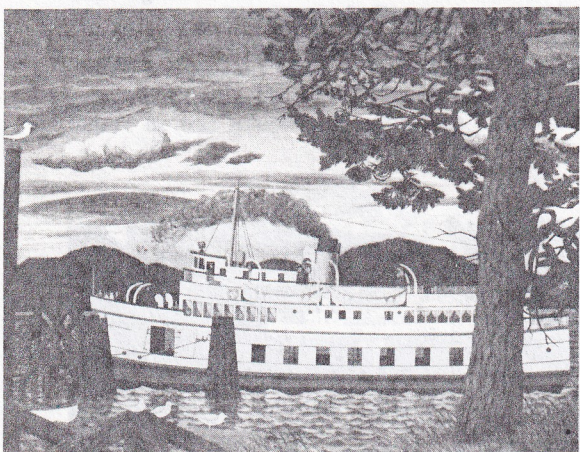
Fern in Stanley Park (drawing), 1937



Abandoned Village, 1947



Hopkins Landing, Howe Sound, 1952



The Car Ferry at Sidney, British Columbia, 1952



Edge of Wood, Gabriola Island, 1965

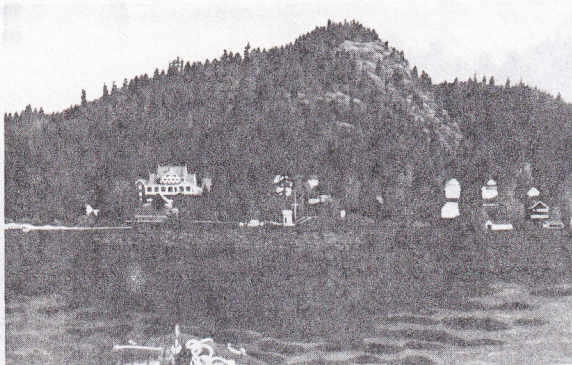
salmon. That fish must have been worth more than I earned the whole first month.

In several months, Hughes cleared only a few hundred dollars, but he considered himself lucky. Some men didn't make any money or ended the season with a loss after paying boat rental charges.

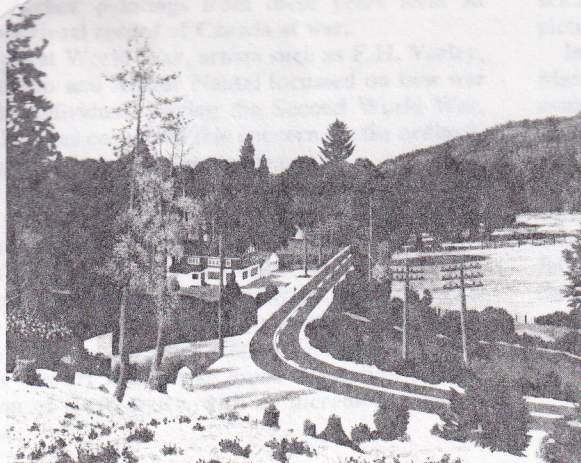
While fishing in 1938, Hughes received word from his colleagues that the provincial government wanted them to paint murals of British Columbia for the San Francisco World's Fair. He joined Goranson and Fisher in Vancouver, where they rented a large warehouse and began work on the murals. They were directed to show the commercial, agricultural and recreational aspects of B.C., set against the oceans and mountains of the province. Goranson did shipping, lumbering, mining and mountaineering scenes. Orville Fisher devoted his panels to industry, featuring railroads, highways, agriculture and commercial fishing. Hughes painted Indian life, tractor logging and outdoor sports—big game hunting and fishing. They painted in the same realistic style developed in earlier commissions, although current trends in painting were beginning to emphasize abstract design. Paul Goranson, the eldest and their usual spokesman, commented in the *Vancouver Province* at the time:

It is quite possible to have strong design without loss of detail. Lovers of the abstract have been leaving out detail unless it conformed with the composition they had in mind. It is our belief that the artist receives his inspiration from nature, and he does not have to leave out what is in nature in order to get good design.

The work was favourably received, but it was their last large commission. Their commercial association was dissolved, but they were together later as part of a much larger group—the Canadian war artists.



Old Baldy Mountain, Shawnigan Lake, 1961



Cowichan Bay Road, 1962

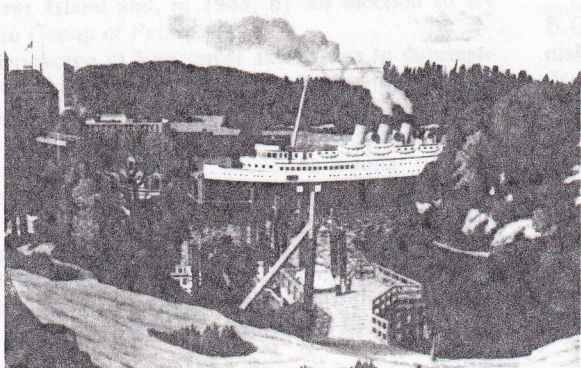
In spite of these commissions, their years together had been lean. They were frequently on relief, and Goranson, as well as Hughes, tried commercial fishing without success. Hughes was engaged to Fern and needed financial security to marry. While executing the San Francisco murals, he applied to several branches of the army in the hope of a more stable income. In August of 1939 he was accepted by the Coast Artillery.

WITH THE OUTBREAK of hostilities, Hughes, an artillery man, was posted to various batteries along the coast. While stationed in Vancouver, he heard that the Historical Section of the Department of National Defence wanted artists to record war activities. Hughes applied, his dream of becoming an army artist reborn. His commanding officer, through whom such a request should have been forwarded, was angry when Hughes applied directly to the Historical Section and reprimanded him. However, after viewing Hughes' work, he recommended him for the position. Hughes says:

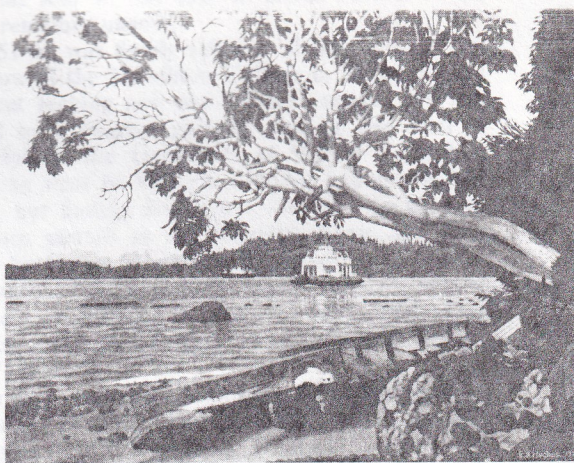
I was sorry to have gone above his head; it was good of him to help me but there wasn't much that could happen. He couldn't have demoted me. There was no lower step to go.

Hughes' early work during the war was for the Historical Section of the Department of National Defence. During World War I, the Canadian War Records Program had been established by Lord Beaverbrook, to record Canadian military activities overseas. In 1943, after agitation from the National Gallery and artists, the Canadian War Records Program was revived and Hughes became one of the first official war artists.

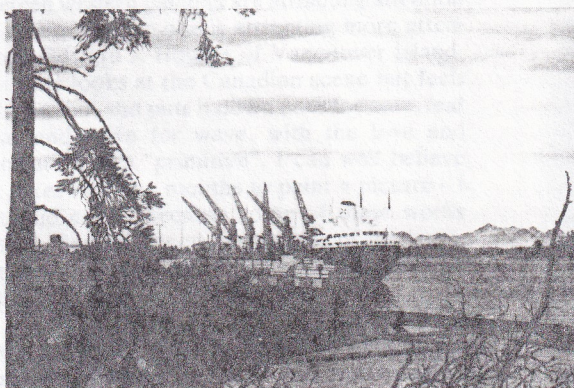
Edward Hughes married Fern Smith soon after the outbreak of war. They had only a brief period together before he was transferred to Eastern Canada, then to



Steamer at the Old Wharf, Nanaimo, 1958



An Arbutus Tree at Crofton Beach, 1973



The Freighter Ringstad at Crofton, 1971



Looking North over Finlayson Arm, 1973



Osborn Bay, 1978

...ence, with the Canadian Forces, to the
Hughes' paintings from these years form an
...ive visual record of Canada at war.
... the First World War, artists such as F.H. Varley,
A.Y. Jackson and Arthur Nantel focussed on how war
affects the individual. During the Second World War,
Edward Hughes continued this concern for the ordinary
man caught up in world-wide holocaust.

Freed from the confines of commissions, Hughes explored a variety of styles and techniques as he struggled to capture the scenes of war. He was influenced by other artists: Tom Thomson, John Constable, Paul Cezanne, the Renaissance masters—especially Raphael and Leonardo da Vinci—and the Mexican painters, Diego Rivera, Siqueros and Orozco. Later Hughes formulated his own style; his war art was not so much adaptation as total absorption of these styles, with an incredible range of technique.

HUGHES returned from the war determined to become a full-time painter. With government aid, he and Fern bought a large rooming house in Victoria. Fern would look after the boarders and Edward would paint. However, the noise and pressure of boarders so disrupted his painting that they had to abandon the enterprise. They moved to several smaller houses in Victoria, trying to get away from city sounds.

Hughes' flight from noisy neighbours, teeming traffic and barking dogs continued for several years. Fern, having finally exhausted the quieter spots in Victoria, finally found Edward the sanctuary he needed at Shawnigan Lake, twenty-five miles north. It was an environment that suited Hughes for over two decades.

These were happy years, marred only by financial struggle. The couple had a steady income of fifty dollars a month from the sale of their former house, which was augmented by the sale of an occasional painting; but Hughes could only complete one or two paintings a year. Even the move to the relative quiet of Shawnigan Lake did not increase his output substantially.

Their house lacked plumbing and was difficult to heat. Hughes' upstairs studio was warmed by a small wood stove. He still recalls how hard it was to remember to tend that stove. Totally preoccupied with his painting, he would let the fire go out. He would realize what had happened when he began to shiver with cold, and once again he would lay a new fire, a task he abhorred.

Throughout this period Fern's faith in his ability as an artist was unwavering. Hughes remembers:

In many ways they were difficult times. But through all those years, Fern never once suggested that there wasn't enough money, or that perhaps I could find a job. One word, and I'd have put aside my paintings and found a job. One word is all it would have taken; but Fern knew what painting meant to me and she never complained.

He was also encouraged by an Emily Carr Scholarship in 1947 that enabled him to sketch the west coast of Vancouver Island and, in 1948, by his election to the Canadian Group of Painters.

The landscape of Vancouver Island was to dominate his canvas from that time on. He began to paint the beaches, the fishing boats and the ocean views, and would return to them again and again. Lacking a car, he hiked to his sketching spots, becoming familiar with the nuances of the changing seasons.

The completion of a painting was double-edged. Hughes was pleased when he had successfully finished a work, but dreaded the prospect of selling it. He was—and is—a very private man, and dealing with the public was always a problem. When he had to sell his own works,

the problem was magnified. The more he worried about selling, the less he was able to paint. Several of his pictures remained unsold.

In 1951 he was finally relieved of this burden. Dr. Max Stern of the Dominion Gallery in Montreal had come west seeking new and talented artists. He was intrigued by a Hughes painting that he had seen in Brock Hall at the University of British Columbia. Excited, he went to Victoria with the address he had received, but finding the elusive Hughes was no easy task. Stern started at the boarding house and then followed house by house the Hugheses many moves throughout the city, to no avail. Finally, with the help of newspapers and the RCMP, Stern found the artist at his Shawnigan retreat and negotiated an exclusive contract for all of his work.

In the same year an exhibition of western painters was arranged by the Dominion Gallery, which included E.J. Hughes. Robert Ayre of the Montreal *Star* reviewed the show. He wrote:

Nineteen western painters are attracting attention at the Dominion. No one is attracting more attention than Edward J. Hughes of Vancouver Island. He not only looks at the Canadian scene but feels it, with passion, and puts it down note for note, leaf for leaf and wave for wave, with the love and concentration of a "primitive". I can well believe that it takes him two months to paint a picture—I almost said carve, because some of these works look as if they had been carved out of linoleum. The result of his passion and labour is tremendous intensity.

With the assurance of a market for his paintings and the certainty of income as each work was completed, Hughes became even more involved in painting. It became the centre of his life and social contact, always minimal, became a rare event. He and Fern lived an isolated existence.

Nineteen fifty-four was a busy year. Eighteen of Canada's leading artists were chosen to paint murals of Canadian scenery for the Canadian Pacific Railroad. The murals, depicting the parks of Canada, were installed in scenic dome lounge cars used by the CPR for its transcontinental service. Edward Hughes' contribution to the CPR project was a painting of Tweedsmuir Park in northern British Columbia featuring Lake Eutsuk, his brilliant colours and decorative technique capturing the typical west coast clarity of the park. His training in mural decoration enabled him to easily and effectively present a panoramic landscape within a confined space.

In 1954 Hughes was also chosen by the Standard Oil Company to paint a series of coast scenes. He made a voyage aboard their tanker *Imperial Nanaimo* along the west coast of British Columbia, gathering material as the boat travelled the Inside Passage delivering products to small villages. In colourful pictures, he showed the life of the seamen and of the people who lived in the coastal communities.

Hughes was asked in 1957 to paint a cover for the B.C. Telephone Directory. This was the special Centennial Directory, and Hughes painted the arrival of the first stern wheeler, the *S.S. Umatilla*, in *Yale, B.C., July 21, 1858*. This gold rush scene was something new for Hughes—an historical painting. The public reaction was favourable and he was requested to do a second cover. *View of the Cowichan River in July* appeared on the directory for 1961.

In 1958 Hughes was commissioned to paint a mural in oils for the British Columbia Room of the Royal York Hotel in Toronto, which became *A View from Qualicum Beach*. This was by far the most lucrative commission

Edward Hughes had yet received, and he recalls:

I was forty-five years old, and for the first time able to afford a car. I bought one with an automatic transmission and our neighbour, Mr. Hamilton, agreed to teach me how to drive. Owning a car made a wonderful difference to our life. Fern's health had been failing for several years and by then she was unable to walk. How I enjoyed taking her along on my sketching trips!

The convenience of a car also made new sketching sites accessible that had previously been too far away.

For the 1966 centenary of British Columbia, Ocean Cement Limited contracted with Hughes to paint *HMS Discovery and HMS Chatham 1792*. In this picture, the ships are journeying north to Nootka. A dark background contrasts with the neutral tones of the ships. Hughes did several preparatory sketches in order to combine historical and topographical exactitude with an effective composition. The painting was the first in a collection, *Building B.C.*, which celebrated major events in the history of the province.

By now Hughes was receiving recognition generally, with Canada Council Awards in 1958, 1963, 1967 and 1970 to sketch the coast and interior of B.C. He also appeared on a CBC programme, *The Lively Arts*, that featured four other western artists—Jack Shadbolt, B.C. Binning, Gordon Smith and Takao Tanabe—besides himself. Hughes was elected a full member of the Royal Canadian Academy of Art in 1968.

The peaceful pattern of Edward's life was shattered by the sudden death of Fern in 1974. For the first time in his life he was unable to paint, and for six months remained idle. Slowly he returned to painting as his major solace, but the house which had shared with Fern held too many memories. Once more he started the restless search for a new home. He has had three houses since 1974, but the feeling of home eludes him. Hughes now lives in Duncan, an hour's drive from Victoria.

HUGHES has done a variety of paintings not usually associated with his style, many of which have never been exhibited. They include portraits, still lifes and cityscapes, but, of course, are far outnumbered by his landscapes.

Hughes made several portraits of Fern besides the pencil sketch *Fern in Stanley Park*. A sadder period was recorded in *Portrait of Fern*, 1941, after she had been gravely ill and their infant son Edward had died shortly after birth. Hughes expressed her courage and his gratitude at her recovery in this very finished pencil sketch. An introspective Fern is revealed in *The Painter's Wife*, 1945. Her windswept hair and quiet features are shown with a loose brushstroke. The couple had been separated during the war and this romantic portrait study was executed after their reunion.

Years later, in 1956, Hughes made his only self-portrait, entitled *Portrait of the Painter*, at the request of Max Stern. Like many painters he showed himself at work at the easel, but the actual self-portrait is only a small portion of the canvas, with Hughes gazing rather shyly at the viewer. The work was completed in the spacious studio of his Shawnigan Lake home and a prominent feature is the surrounding land seen through the window.

Hughes' preparatory sketches are filled with detailed studies of driftwood, boats and flowers, incorporated later into large finished canvases. Only rarely is an oil completed as a still life, featuring an inanimate object.

Cityscapes, in which actual land form is secondary, are a genre that Hughes has rarely handled; but the changes in his style over time parallel those in his

landscapes. Early works feature the juxtaposition of circular and angular forms with a dramatic variety of perspectives; later works are calmer and more classical. Examples are the busy *Street Scene, Courtenay* of 1949 and the peaceful *University Avenue, Toronto, Looking South* of 1957. Between 1949 and 1957, Hughes had not only physically retreated to Shawnigan Lake but had also withdrawn from outside social contacts. The distance that he puts between himself and the town can clearly be seen in his later paintings. He paints large cities clinically, faithfully recording the buildings and the topography; the most startling feature is the absence of people and activity. In his landscapes he frequently adds isolated figures at ease in their surroundings, but in the bustle of a city, he paints no one. He disliked sketching in cities because of proximity to crowds and the straight lines required for architectural renderings; his last cityscapes were executed on a cross-Canada trip in 1955-56.

The one consistent theme of the Group of Seven had been the domination of the land over man; the powerful rhythms of the land loom larger than the scenes of human habitation. Hughes, who studied under Varley, admires Thomson and even titles his paintings in the same descriptive manner as the Group of Seven, tends to grant man and his works a more significant position in the landscape, but one feels nonetheless the encroaching presence of the trees and forests, the overwhelming immensity of the sea. Foreground area frequently contains blades of grass or shrubs which the artist seems to have been unable to push out of the way. Grass grows along the beach. Towns and villages huddle along the edge of an island. Small boats seem even smaller on a large ocean. Highways and roadways are invaded by growing vegetation. In terms of space, the land and the sea have the upper hand.

Hughes had three distinctive post-war landscape phases. Paintings immediately after the war are noisy, jarring and demanding. During the 1950's they are quieter, more composed, featuring bright, clear colours; in the late 1960's, colours are softer and lighter as he became more interested in atmosphere; an object is bathed in light and surrounded by air (*An Arbutus Tree, Crofton Beach*, 1973).

A Hughes canvas is clearly, carefully structured; organized so that land, sky and water achieve a harmonious balance. Several paintings from the 1940's and 1950's have unusual simplicity; they are landscapes using elements of nature in their most basic forms, freeing the artist to explore colour, perspective and the effect of light on land, water and sky. Typical of this type of painting is *Hopkins Landing*, 1952. These works were to serve as preliminary studies for later, more complex paintings.

Osborn Bay, 1978, is just such a painting. The coherence of colour, atmosphere and composition bespeak an intense, quiet affair between artist and subject. Calm stillness and a skillful blend of horizontal elements produces serenity. Major tonal areas are balanced; there are regulated steps from foreground to background—the light, bleached driftwood, the dark sand, the clear water, the grey reflection, the dark mass of foliage, the bright sky. Repetition is avoided by a distant view on the left, by grey clouds in the sky. These elements are united by the decorative tree on the right that joins beach, sea, distant shore and sky. The crystal clarity feels fresh and charming.

The combination of clarity and stillness gives a Hughes painting a super-real, other-world aura. At a time when our best natural images are being exhausted by the voracious demands of commercial media, E.J. Hughes' unique vision renews the visual experience of everyday life in the coastal B.C. landscape.

E. J. HUGHES is a regional painter and an eccentric. His regionalism relates directly to the unique and powerful geography of the Canadian west coast, — where mountains, extravagant growth, an epic sea edge and an insistent climate resist technology's efforts to obliterate nature or flatten her into a neutral and distant background for human activities. Apart from the years spent as a Canadian Army War Artist he has lived virtually all his life on this coast where he was born. It is only here and only in nature that he is himself and at home, as a person and as a painter. A cross-country trip he undertook in 1956 to paint the cities and country of Canada was a personal ordeal and an artistic failure. In every sense he is a painter of the west coast.

And he is an eccentric artist; he exists apart from the mainstream of twentieth century art and the historical and aesthetic self-consciousness which have been increasingly prominent aspects of it. His professed admiration for other artists over the years has included Giotto, Vermeer, Diego Rivera, Leonardo and more recently Thomas Girtin whose work has a quality he relates to his own goals. For the most part, that is, he relates himself to artists distant in time and different in their social contexts.

Today when the entire world has inescapably moved into a state of total and constant awareness and the artist as part of this whole is apt to find himself semi-paralyzed by his burden of knowledge, Hughes is one of the fortunate few who have, whatever the idiom, managed to *know* themselves and to keep that knowledge clear. *He is his own original.*

A true solitary for whom withdrawal is instinctive, he is ill at ease in the world of urban social or economic exchange and so he lives in a small village community on Vancouver Island with infrequent trips to Victoria only a few miles away, or to Vancouver, the major centre on the mainland. He would probably have had to give up painting many years ago were it not for an exclusive contract with a suitably distant gallery in Montreal which reduces his practical business contacts as a painter to an absolute minimum.

He learned 'how to paint' as it was still being taught with confidence in his student days at art school, — that is representation of the subject in the academic way through drawing and modelling by tone, and composition as a matter of hierarchic arrangement. He was very skilful at this as photographs of work done shortly after his graduation from art school show. He may still, according to his intent, call on this academic rendering technique relatively undisturbed by the intrusion of a more personal constituent, especially when he is dealing with a single close-up form as in his striking portrait of 1952. (No. 21.) It is recalled that as a student he was forever drawing tiny 'tin' soldiers — creating a fantasy play world which became reality in his role as a war artist. The careful and delicate early war drawings, several of which are included in this exhibition, speak of

*The Vancouver Art Gallery would like to thank
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the sensitive artist and also of the man who had a long developing fascination with the minutia of objects — of costume, for instance and of firearms in all their parts and mechanisms. (Interestingly he was at one time a Bisley championship rifle shot.) There is from the beginning his feeling for clarity, order and precision. And from the beginning the possibility of the hallucinatory super-reality of things which have been held long and hard by the unblinking eye.

It is when he takes up his position in the open, painting 'scenes' — settings with or without figures and with the action taking place at a distance — that the formal style which we identify with Hughes appears. The hard-edged stone by stone, wavelet by wavelet, blade by blade of grass form of realism, with its pattern distributed rhythmically and equally across the canvas, the carefully balanced sharp contrasts of tone, the flattening areas of unmodulated dense colour, the rather isometric handling of space which causes a shipping dock or a road bed to rear up and spread to its full extent: these are the continuing components of his style.

But however engaging may be the formal means and the decorative qualities he has developed, it is the individual experiences projected with such vitality which give his paintings their distinction and their meaning. Subject matter is very important in his work, both to him and to us. We accept at the outset the intrinsic picturesque and romantic nature of the coast setting, and then realize that Hughes is drawn to *postcard* subjects — a sweep of highway with a valley vista, a *Mountie*, a sunset, the coastal ferries. "To make art out of picturesque and popular subjects" he has stated as his intention; or even more modestly "in a matter of fact way to organize nature as well as possible in the rectangle provided". He has never lost his sense of wonder in the face of nature. He responds to all her histrionics, and accepts her accommodation of man.

So his work commences with a deep and practised love of what he paints and an exacting observation of it. Since the intention is to *realize* the thing loved as fully as possible, he pays attention to its detail, gives maximum delineation and precise colour and tonal differentiation to all its forms.

The resulting paintings are vivid records. The character of the image is earnest directness; all his creative energy has been concentrated on *realization* and there are no unconsumed stylistic flourishes for their own sake. "I don't think they're just photographs" he will permit himself to say of his own work but he is not inclined to venture too far into self-analysis. Indeed they are not just photographs but what they record is not merely the visual data of the subjects (though many of his admirers enjoy them as just that) but his own personal view of the world, innocent and fresh, slowly distilled into a particular coast image.

Hughes knows that in staying so close to nature in its detail and its picturesque habits he is courting banality.

But his success lies precisely in not skirting the banal, but in pushing his own inner vision of reality *through* it. In the resulting tension lies his characteristic quality.

It is doubtful whether he himself is aware of the particular flavour and psychological edge his work has. To begin with, it is a particular part of the coast world he chooses: not untouched primeval nature nor nature a subdued backdrop for man's activities. It is man (as individual) and nature still in vital and meaningful confrontation. They get along together but in a state of mutual resilience. The fishermen ply their boats in seas choppy enough to prevent their relaxing at their work; the farmer systematically gathers his crop against a background of rising mountains and majestic trees which will always remind him of the true scale of his efforts; the clean little town is no more pushing back the landscape than it is firmly held by the hard green hills. In the last few years man has figured less frequently in the paintings though he is there by implication. The limpid lakes or rising mountains are breathtaking and they have prompted the traveller to stop and pay respect. There is no explicit opposition between man and nature but nature clearly has the advantage should she care to use it.

In many of his works there is the disquieting sense of *tempus fugit* as the busy summer ferries, symbols of transience and passing adventure, move across the field of vision. Comparison of drawings with the related paintings shows the flattening and vertical stretching of space as a device which satisfies his need for fuller delineation at the same time that it heightens the mood of tension. Horizons loom high or tilt with faint menace. A storm threatens, darkness comes on and colours take on an unnatural brightness, forms achieve a character of heightened reality. The projection of revealed moment arrested and charged with the weight of time, is all the sharper in light of the flat prosaic density of the pigment itself. Often the vision, in which everything is seen with such open-eyed staring clarity, borders on the hallucinatory.

Perhaps most subtly disquieting of all is the implication that (as sometimes in a dream) we are spectators in this world. The pageant of life is always going on, but always out there, in the distance. Even the foreground rocks or driftwood forms, compositional devices to relate us to the picture space, have the effect of pushing the *action* more remotely from us.

Canvases of the last few years have a new quietness. Not only have the figures largely disappeared and with them the human drama, but the form units have become larger and surfaces less continuously active. For the first time light is used which belongs to the picture as a whole — a limpid glassy light often pitched high in colour — and it is this which creates the mood, still one of certain tension.

The paintings do not come easily. By temperament Hughes is a slow and painstaking worker. In the earlier years

from 1947-1951 he produced no more than four or five canvases a year, working on two or three at a time and on one perhaps over a period of six months, adjusting tones, shifting forms until everything seemed "to come just right". X-rays of these early paintings would reveal whole histories of changes in which the contour of a beach shifts from left to right, a boat appears or disappears as the case might be. These canvases tended to acquire in this way dense surfaces which give a quality of concreteness to the experience. In more recent years, responding to the responsibility of being a full-time artist earning his living by painting, he has increased his production to about twelve canvases a year, depending on size. He regrets this relative speed and looks forward to some future time when each canvas can control its own slow evolution into completion.

In achieving the point of rightness, little is left to chance. Spontaneity is not his manner. Up till about 1959 he approached each painting through a series of drawings, commencing with enormously detailed notes providing full reference for a theme, working on through to a final drawing whose tonal structure and composition was fully worked out. Once one of these drawings became the *cartoon*, it was ruled off into squares so that the composition could be transferred to canvas. Later, to speed up his working procedure, he abandoned the drawn cartoon and for about a year produced watercolours as an intermediary stage, trying to get composition and colour both. This period, 1960-61, is marked by matching canvases and watercolours.

His current working practise is to make drawings directly on the spot, probably from his car, full of minute colour notes, but looser than the previous studio cartoons. Every two years or so he will paint a batch of watercolours, but these are primarily a matter of relaxation and loosening up for its own sake.

Still young at 54 Hughes has much painting ahead. Looking back over twenty or so years of his work one sees that it is characterized more by its consistency and continuity than by change. And this pattern will doubtless continue for although the external world figures so prominently in his art he is no extrovert. The well-springs of his paintings are deep in his own psyche. Essentially a loner and a non-intellectual, he belongs to no school and will never found one. He will not receive the acclaim of the true contemporary who adds collective relevance to whatever other qualities he may have, but on the other hand his private revelation is of a kind to resist the wearing of time. He has created a permanent poetry of Canada's Pacific coast and reiterated the continuing validity of the individual creative spirit.

Doris Shadbolt