

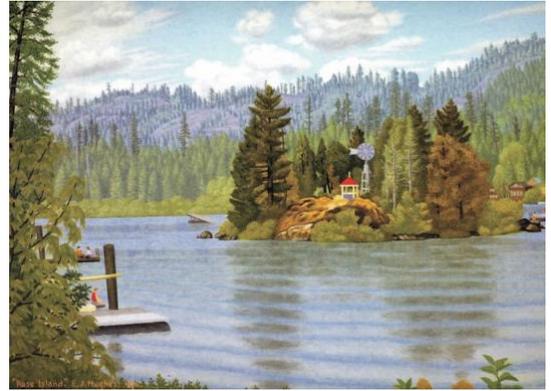
Book excerpt: E.J. Hughes' window on the Island

Robert Amos / Times Colonist

December 16, 2018

Rose Island by E. J. Hughes, 1976. Oil on canvas.
Photograph By Courtesy of TouchWood Editions

The reputation of E.J. Hughes in British Columbia is second only to that of Emily Carr, and over his career he painted scenes from all over British Columbia. He especially loved Vancouver Island, and lived most of his 93 years at Shawnigan Lake and Duncan. But due to a unique agreement he made with one man, Max Stern, in 1951, almost every painting he ever created was sent directly to the Dominion Gallery in Montreal.



Since 1946, Hughes had moved house in Victoria five times. But even in sleepy Victoria, the noise of the neighbours and their dogs drove him to distraction. By 1951, he was planning an escape, and an advertisement for a property on Shawnigan Lake caught his eye. Shawnigan is a charming lake about seven kilometres long, accessible from the south by the precipitous road over the summit of the Malahat Pass. Real estate was cheaper at Shawnigan, and Hughes was shown a property by the lakeshore, accessible by the meandering Shawnigan Lake Road that crossed the property, running between the house and the waterfront.

Fern, his wife, now disabled by muscular dystrophy, stayed in the estate agent's car while Hughes took a look around. He was enchanted by the quiet of the place. Never very practical, he didn't notice that the only running water was from a faucet out back nor that the big old house was heated with a wood stove. Experienced buyers might have considered the amount of groundskeeping that the encroaching forest would entail, but Hughes didn't think of that. Shawnigan Lake seemed perfect, and despite the drawbacks, he and Fern lived there happily until 1972.

One day in 1951, an unexpected visitor came to Shawnigan Lake and changed the course of their lives. Max Stern had come to Western Canada to see if he could find a successor to Emily Carr, whose work had been so popular at his Dominion Gallery in Montreal. He visited Lawren Harris in Vancouver — it was Harris who had introduced Carr to the Dominion Gallery in the first place.

While they were having lunch at the Faculty Club at the University of British Columbia, Stern noticed Hughes' painting *Fishboats, Rivers Inlet* (1946), which was on loan to the club. Harris was happy to recommend Hughes and set Stern on his way to Victoria to find him.

As it turned out, Hughes had lived at five different addresses in Victoria and then left without a trace. Enlisting the aid of newspaper writer Gwen Cash, Stern eventually traced Hughes through the RCMP detachment at Shawnigan Lake and arrived unannounced at the artist's home. After an appropriate look at the paintings in the studio, he told Hughes: "I like your work. I'd like to buy it all." Stern sat at the kitchen table and drafted a brief contract by which, for \$500, he bought the contents of Hughes' studio — "Fourteen paintings and four sketches in oil, as well as 32 pencil studies and four miscellaneous items."

The sale made Hughes very happy. But there was more. It came as a surprise to him that, as Fern pointed out to him later, Stern wanted to buy everything he made in the future. As each painting was completed, Hughes was to send it to Montreal, and the Dominion Gallery would pay him directly.

This simple contract was in effect until Stern's death in 1988, and continued until the Dominion Gallery ceased to exist in 2000. Over the years, Hughes dispatched every new painting, and almost every piece of earlier work he had, to the Dominion Gallery. This arrangement might be unique in Canadian art.

With this new arrangement, Hughes could give his full attention to creating the paintings. He didn't need to sell his work, and he never attended the opening of any of his shows. Over the years, he gave Stern full authority to represent and reproduce his work, and referred all career matters to this trusted dealer and adviser. As he lived in isolation with no artist friends, Hughes had no one but Stern to talk with about art, and their correspondence amounted to 610 handwritten letters. This was essentially Hughes' only contact with the wider world. In the 36 years they worked together, Hughes and Stern met only four times.

It is true that, in the beginning, Hughes was paid a pittance for his remarkable works, and Stern immediately sold them to the National Gallery of Canada, the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Department of External Affairs — the most prestigious clients in the country. But Hughes' needs were few, and he trusted Stern entirely. As the years went by, the Dominion Gallery constantly increased the prices it chose to pay him until, in the end, Hughes was receiving cheques for tens of thousands of dollars for individual works of art.

Stern's eye and his experience in the art market gave him the liberty to make direct — some would say interfering — comments about Hughes' practices. In 1953, he sent back *The Car Ferry at Sidney* (1953) requesting that Hughes cut off two inches from the top of the canvas, which the artist obligingly did. This painting was then immediately sold to the National Gallery of Canada. At other times, Stern made comments to Hughes, always in a tactful and gracious way, about colour choices, preferred subjects and compositions, and Hughes paid attention to his valued adviser.

When, in the late 1960s, a consortium of Victoria businessmen contacted Hughes and offered to buy out the contract and pay Hughes more than the Dominion Gallery did, Hughes refused to consider any change in his relationship of trust with Stern.

Excerpted from *E.J. Hughes Paints Vancouver Island*, TouchWood Editions, © 2018 Robert Amos

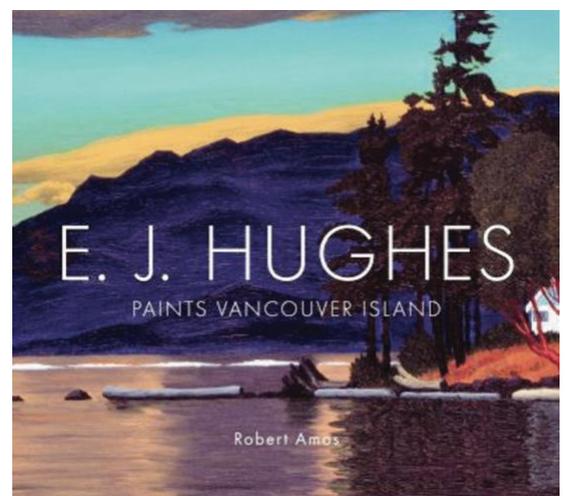
Book review: A brilliant look at an essential British Columbia artist

[Dave Obee](#) / Times Colonist

December 16, 2018

E. J. Hughes Paints Vancouver Island TouchWood Editions © 2018 Robert Amos

E.J. Hughes Paints Vancouver Island
By Robert Amos
TouchWood, 192 pp., \$35.00



E.J. Hughes was not just another artist who captured the beauty of coastal British Columbia; he was a modern-day Emily Carr, and considered by many to be the province's most important artist in the latter half of the 20th century.

Hughes was one of the rare artists who could appeal to the masses while satisfying the more particular art critics. His appeal was universal, possibly because his colourful works were highly evocative of real life. We could all identify with his paintings and watercolours.

They revealed the strength, the beauty and the majesty of Nanaimo, Ladysmith, Crofton and elsewhere on Vancouver Island, as well as the everyday views of ferries, fishing fleets and waterways.

More than any other artist, to me, his bold, colourful works recorded the place I call home — a home that shows an ideal Vancouver Island, and reflects a not-too-distant past.

For proof, consider this book, *E.J. Hughes Paints Vancouver Island*, by Robert Amos. Amos was this newspaper's art writer for three decades, and came to know Hughes and become familiar with his works and his accomplishments.

Amos was entrusted with papers collected by Pat Salmon, Hughes's associate and biographer. These papers helped Amos tell the story of Hughes, and explain his influences and his remarkable career, which was made possible when a gallery owner in Montreal agreed to take everything that Hughes could produce.

"This arrangement may be unique in Canadian art," Amos writes.

Hughes died in 2007. He was born in North Vancouver but spent almost all of his life on southern Vancouver Island, including Victoria, Shawnigan Lake, Duncan, Ladysmith and Duncan.

One of his teachers had been the famed Frederick Varley, who also was known for representing British Columbia. Well before his death, Hughes had become as vital to art in B.C. as Varley's Group of Seven was to all of Canada.

While Carr's art could be seen be dark and gloomy, Hughes's picturesque imagery used colour and authenticity to create excitement, and virtually leap off the canvas.

Hughes worked mainly in oils and acrylics until he was almost 80. Then, like many other aging artists, he switched to watercolours, because he could no longer stand at his easel. He quickly proved that his talent was not limited by a switch in paint.

Fourteen of those watercolours are included in this collection, along with 31 oils and 10 acrylics. The book also includes photos, annotated sketches and handwritten notes, all helping us to better understand the works included.

The works included here are from the 1930s to the 2000s, and show the early years of the distinctive Hughes style, then a gradual evolution — although to be clear, an E.J. Hughes from any date is still an E.J. Hughes.

The paintings are not presented in chronological order. Instead, they cover Hughes' view of the Island from south to north, from Victoria to the Comox Valley.

The book makes a strong case: Hughes clearly deserved all of the respect that he earned, and it should be no surprise that one of his B.C. icons — Fishboats, Rivers Inlet — recently sold for more than \$2 million.

Not everyone can afford to spend that much on a painting, but E.J. Hughes Paints Vancouver Island makes it possible for all of us to get our Hughes fix from time to time.

Hughes produced art for all of us. The reason for his appeal is simple: His paintings are easy to like and easy to digest.

With every turn of the page of this book, another view appears that is familiar, yet is also stronger and more emphatic than we might remember or imagine. We know the views, yes, but through the eyes and hands of E.J. Hughes, the locations transcend the ordinary.

Amos has produced a brilliant book, well-written, fascinating, with gorgeous illustrations. This book, quite sincerely, should be considered a must-have by every person who loves Vancouver Island.

This is more than just a book for art lovers — even though, in itself, E.J. Hughes Paints Vancouver Island is itself a work of art.

The reviewer is the editor and publisher of the Times Colonist.