

What About Woo?

Emily Carr's Monkey

Written by Kerry Mason

Of all Emily Carr's hundreds of pets, the most famous of all is Woo the Javanese monkey. On a trip to a local pet store in Victoria, Emily spotted a baby monkey, which had just arrived in a new shipment. The shop owner, who knew Emily well and saw how she had fallen in love with the monkey, suggested a trade for one of Emily's Belgian Griffon puppies. Emily was thrilled.



Woo by Emily Carr (Credit: BCA PDP00603)

The monkey arrived just as Emily's sisters were sitting down for lunch with her. Even though Alice and Lizzie had witnessed Emily's vast passion for animals since childhood, they were still at first shocked and appalled at her adding a monkey to her household. While the fairly heated conversation took place the little monkey managed to tip over her cage and by reaching out a foot on one side of the cage and her hand out the other she was able to propel the cage around the dining room much to the amusement of all.

The first night in Emily's studio the little monkey moaned, "woo, woo, woo" and so she was named. Although Emily's tenants at first had grave reservations about a monkey in the house, Emily maintained that there was never a complaint. In fact she wrote, "Ladies donated small mirrors from old vanity cases, cherries, grapes, candies, monkey-loved dainties. Woo found her way to all hearts. Merry unexpected Woo!"

Emily describes Woo as "Trim, alert, dainty, her actions were smart and quick, her coat shone with health. She kept her greeny-brown coat immaculate." Emily, knowing that monkeys are at risk of colds and even tuberculosis at colder climates, decided to keep Woo warm by dressing her. Through trial and error Emily finally created the perfect garments for her. They were short, wide dresses of wool or heavy cotton with a thick canvas apron worn over top, which prevented Woo from eating her tweed dresses. Woo chewed off all buttons and undid hooks so Emily, resourceful as ever, designed belts and buckles which did up at the back at Woo's neck and waist.

Woo watched Emily sewing with interest and finally decided that she too would like to take up needlecrafts. Emily gave Woo a square of fabric and a needle and thread. Woo began, stitching from top to bottom and then from bottom to top. But oh, the frustration when the thread kept snagging and knotting! Emily removed the thread and gave the needle back to Woo who then could sew for an hour or more quite contentedly!

Woo lived and travelled with Emily from 1921 to 1937. Woo scampered alongside her on walks, and went camping with her. The little monkey got herself into endless mischief – from eating Emily's oil paints to chewing her rugs – and delighted the neighbourhood children.