



The Grande Dames of the Cariboo: Discovering Vivien Cowan and Sonia Cornwall and their intriguing friendship with A.Y. Jackson and Joe Plaskett

Julie Fowler

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Author Julie Fowler began a quest to find out more about an artist from the Cariboo named Sonia Cornwall (1919?2006). Through interviews, letters, original artworks, articles, exhibition catalogues, imaginings of conversations and occurrences, along with her own reflections on the experience, she pieced together a story of pioneering, love and the pursuit of art. But in searching for Sonia, Fowler found an unanticipated new friend in Sonia's mother, Vivien Cowan (1893?1990). Vivien became a larger part of the story than Fowler could possibly have imagined. Fowler had discovered a hidden gem. In 1945, Vivien Cowan spearheaded the Cariboo Art Society with noted Canadian Group of Seven painter A.Y. Jackson. She had met A.Y. Jackson earlier that year at the Banff School, as well as another Canadian artist of note, Joseph Plaskett. Both painters, along with many others, would visit Vivien and her daughters, Sonia and Dru, at their property near 150 Mile House, the Onward Ranch. Vivien became the Grande Dame of the Cariboo, hosting some of Canada's greatest talent and at the same time promoting the work of local artists and creators. In this genre-bending work, Fowler expertly and creatively weaves her search for an understanding of her own passion for art and her love of the Cariboo with a mesmerising story of creative life in one of BC's earliest pioneer communities.

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