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Painting in the Caribbean

When our friends the Richard VanValkenburgs and the Cleeve Hornes talked about hiring a yacht and sailing through the West Indies, it sounded like a splendid idea. Cleeve was born in Jamaica of English parents. An Uncle had left him a small island off Grenada where they usually returned for a winter holiday. Cleeve made all the arrangements with Nicholson & Sons who ran a travel service and chartered yachts from Antigua. We would fly to various islands and pick up the yacht at Grenada where the Hornes would meet us.

I looked over flight schedules and found one out of New York by Eastern Airlines to Puerto Rico for \$90 return. Our travel agent quoted a higher price, we pointed this out. Not believing it possible at that price she said she would check it out and came back to say we were right. The VanValkenburgs and ourselves booked the flight in February. On arrival we took a taxi heading for a certain hotel by the sea, which Evelyn VanValkenburg had discovered in a tourist folder; it sounded ideal with the sound of the waves lulling us to sleep each night. The driver didn't seem to approve and suggested other hotels, but Evelyn was firm. We didn't know why he disapproved.

It seemed fine, the rooms were clean and comfortable stretching along the seashore, and we booked two at the end of the row. People seemed exceptionally friendly, as Evelyn and I walked along the long stretch to the hotel entrance. We took meals all over the island wherever it was handy

for York's sketching and our sightseeing. We discovered Smith's Fancy, a friendly owner of a nice hotel which served excellent meals. Mr. Smith, interested in our travels, often joined us and decided to visit us in Mexico.

After about a week we arranged a flight to the Virgin Islands on BWI. Evelyn was ready first for our early departure sitting on her luggage on the verandah, which faced the long row of cabins. She was watching the early morning manoeuvrings. When we joined her, she said, "Do you know where we have been staying? It's a glorified whore house!" That explained the taxi driver's reluctance and the friendliness of the men.

York sketched in the Virgin Islands, including St. Croix, then we moved on to Barbados. We had a friend there with a winter residence, Jim Gairdner, the Toronto stockbroker. Jim wined and dined us regally driving us everywhere to view the island. Our next stop was beautiful Tobago and the hustle and bustle of Trinidad. Now for Grenada where the Hornes took us immediately to view our waiting yacht "The Harebell" in the harbour. Our captain, an Englishman, told us the "Harebell" had recently arrived from Germany where it had been mothballed since the war. The Hornes next showed off their favourite island, Grenada for York to make quick sketches, then we went to see the island Cleeve had inherited. It had been a base for whaling though the whalers had long since left. There was no one on the island, just derelict boats, cabins and rubbish. Cleeve had no idea what he would do with the island!

After a few days we boarded the "Harebell," stocked with provisions and ready to sail. There were only two double bedrooms with "heads," the nautical term for toilets. The third bunk contained two singles either side of the covered stairway on deck, so we tossed a coin. The Hornes and ourselves won the bedrooms and the "Vans" were delighted to sleep under the stars, though Evelyn was a late sleeper. To enjoy the deck we would tip-toe past her each morning carrying our breakfast trays from the dining saloon. Evelyn was a light eater at any time and pringled her food (a term

I learned from her which means pushing your food around on your plate, while appearing to eat it) and had earned the name "Bird-belly." Somehow in later years I seemed to have acquired this name (York's idea) but for a different reason, because I ate so much and remained slim, hovering around 115 pounds always.

We had a crew of seven, a congenial lot; our steward was as black as coal, a young minister of the gospel, which seemed ironic as he fought his way after the sun had reached the yard'arm on deck balancing a loaded tray of drinks. The cook often prepared a picnic lunch and we would go ashore to any island, inhabited or not, to eat our lunch. Our first stop was St. Vincent and the Grenadines and we looked for a little shade trying to stay near the beach. I spotted beautiful deep shade but Jean Horne warned that tree was poisonous, if you slept under it all night you would be dead in the morning! We always slept aboard the yacht but if near an interesting place we would anchor for the night in the harbour and go ashore for dinner, but if on board we always took our meals on deck which we found pleasanter. One day when lunching on the Windward Islands, we picked up large interesting shells, long tropical pods with huge seeds and the large fans of a sea plant. I managed to bring them home. We would take as much time as possible exploring the islands while York sketched. He especially liked harbours and fishing boats. We were enjoying a wealth of seafood and tropical fruits. Among our stops were Bequia, St. Lucia, Martinique, Dominica, the Leeward Islands, Guadalupe, Antigua, etc. We were conscious of the French influence on Martinique, the inhabitants were more energetic, better dressed and better looking. There was a small sailing boat aboard and often during stops for swimming, Jean and I would take it and sail for a spell.

When we said goodbye to "Harebell" and the crew at Antigua, it was a relief to be on terra firma again and the Vans and ourselves had a game of golf near the harbour. In a few days we flew back to San Juan, Puerto Rico

to board our plane for New York. There were too many passengers and the airline was offering bonuses to anyone willing to take a later flight. Finally we were off but it was one of the most frightening flights I've had. A hurricane developed and we seemed to be in its eye, the plane was tossed about quite helpless against the elements, however we made it safely.

Back in his studio in Toronto York would gather a few of his sketches and place them around him for the atmosphere and many interesting semi-abstract canvases resulted from that trip. Caribbean Port was shown with the RCA in the Musée de la Province de Québec and Grenada Harbour was one of the five paintings (among the Italian canvases) shown at the Stratford Festival. Caribbean Town and West Indian Scene were shown at the Art Gallery of Hamilton's annual exhibition and the AGT's 13th Annual showed St. Lucia Harbour, Beach at Bequia and Medieval Figure. The Halifax Citadel Museum showed a Mexican Landscape in their 2nd annual exhibition. The CNE had an exhibition "Private Collector's Choice," Charles Band's suggestion and he sent Portofino, one of York's Italian paintings which was borrowed each year by the committee for the Couchiching Conference to hang over the fireplace of their meeting room. After several borrowings Charles gave it to them. Egmont Frankel loaned Pieces of Early Rome. Red Abstraction went to the CGP at the AGT.

A big showdown had been brewing against abstract painting beginning to be shown more and more in the exhibitions. Seven members resigned from the OSA in protest headed by the portrait painter Kenneth Forbed who said, "French Art Trash..." and "Art Today is Sick of a Foot Disease..." It seems York Wilson was selected as the protagonist, defending abstract painting and the Toronto Star took the front page of one of its sections with photographs, reproductions of paintings and opinions from both sides of the debate. To quote the exchanges:

Kenneth Forbes had said, "Mr. Wilson asserts that Picasso has done some of the finest literal drawings and paintings of this century. I say

there is no evidence of this other than irresponsible statements and that it is the most extravagant over-statement of this century. Perhaps that is what Mr. Wilson means by imagination. I admit I do not possess that brand..."

The Toronto Star introduced Wilson as follows:

York Wilson is a Canadian painter who is presently serving on the Canadian purchase committee at the Toronto Art Gallery. Here are his views on the so-called 'clumsy, rotten junk,' as labelled by artist Kenneth Forbes in referring to the works of Picasso, Van Gogh, Cezanne and Matisse presently being displayed in the gallery.

First of all, these paintings must be displayed in the collection at the gallery because the artists are outstanding in this era. Otherwise how are future generations going to be able to see the works of our era? This just has to be.

In the Toronto gallery they are very careful. They have committees to select and buy foreign, Canadian and American works. These committees are made up of professional artists, businessmen and archeologists.

Each man has specific knowledge in each of his related fields. They just don't buy paintings indiscriminately.

It must be remembered that most good galleries try to cover all periods of painting, plus all aspects of painting in each period. This is necessary for students.

The galleries are run by people who have received specialized training... they are not just plucked off the street and told to run an art gallery. It's a lifetime work for curators.

It is not accidental that the four artists mentioned are represented in all the most important art galleries throughout the world—even in Russia.

All over France and principally Paris, galleries have many examples of the works of these people—as many as they can afford to keep—and they are not for sale at any price.

Another thing, the paintings of these four great artists appear in private collections and represent millions of dollars. They are owned mainly by astute businessmen who recognized the value of such works. These men are not stupid.

It seems to me these private collectors have proven their sound judgment in accumulating their wealth and also their paintings.

Paintings are like stocks. The good ones get more valuable and the bad ones fade away.

It's apparent to me these paintings are good enough to stay valuable. Now in support of these specific people:

Picasso I would say, conservatively speaking, more than 2,000 books have been written about Picasso. Mr. Forbes is hardly in a position to damn this great artist whom thousands of writers have chosen to write about.

I find it hard to believe anyone can damn his work. Here is a genius. He is one of the great men beyond great men of our era. Picasso received an award at 15 for a painting. It was not the work of a gifted 15-year-old boy, but a brilliant painting and I know, because I have seen it.

Matisse: At one time Matisse was the great hope of the French Academy. His early work was strictly realistic. He stopped this style because it was insufficient to fulfil the needs of the type of poet of the brush he turned out to be.

Van Gogh: It is almost impossible in words to answer why he was great. He paints from the inside, out. As Dizzy Gillespie has said: "If you ask you ain't got it.

Cezanne: His work was a completely new kind of vision. He was

unable to explain it himself for a great part of his life although he finally managed to work the great idea out. Again you can't talk higher mathematics when you haven't got a basic understanding of arithmetic. I feel it's just that people haven't looked at his work enough.

Finally, these four men, and a great many other artists were conducting experiments: they were innovators. They are completely essential to this particular era of painting and I'm sure their work will never be forgotten.

Meanwhile, York had been planning and making studies for the O'Keefe mural for more than a year and had his cartoon ready for approval by the Committee. A reproduction appeared in the *Globe and Mail* September 29, 1959, with the caption:

FINAL SKETCH of the largest mural ever undertaken in Canada by a Canadian artist, York Wilson, is displayed yesterday in his studio. The mural will be painted on an area 100 feet long by 15 feet high in the main foyer of the O'Keefe Centre. Here, Mr. Wilson and T.E. Arkell, Centre President, study a picture of the Centre now under construction. Stretching behind them is the sketch divided into sections dealing with various periods in the history of painting, sculpture, architecture, music, literature, dance and drama.

Lotta Dempsey added in the *Toronto Daily Star*:

BIG MURAL AT CENTRE BEATS 'EM ALL
York Wilson is about to tackle the biggest painting ever done in Canada.

I went over to see the internationally-famous artist yesterday as he was getting set to start work on the 100-by-15 foot mural in the new O'Keefe Centre—largest ever undertaken in this country.

This would be like preparing to brush-stroke your way in a five-yard swathe across the ice at Maple Leaf Gardens: a good third of the way down a football field; or along more than half a New York city block. Wilson seemed unperturbed as he began moving his sketches—just approved by the art committee of the centre for the commissioned work—from studio to the foyer of the yet-unfinished \$12,000,000 building at Front and Yonge Streets.

For he now is an old hand at the precarious task of painting great expanses from a perch on a 30-foot high scaffolding.

The slight, intent figure of the painter, became a familiar sight to hundreds who watched from St. Clair Avenue West a few years ago as the brilliant Imperial Oil Mural grew to sweeping line and color under his deft hand.

Bob Paterson, who assisted in the Imperial Oil work and Jack Labonte Smith, the artist whose paintings are signed Labonte, will work on the mural under Wilson's direction on the O'Keefe job.

It will be close to 18 months from the day the Toronto-born painter started his first sketches for submission to the art committee, until the finished brush stroke is made.

Nine months of this period will be spent on the mural itself. The sketches are photographed and the artists work from these in recreating the design to five times the original size.

Wilson will be on duty on the scaffold at least six hours a day, and a considerable amount of work will be done weekends, when the building is free of workmen.

The artist has created one of the most exciting and most brilliantly fused panoramas of the Seven Lively Arts that could be imagined.

"I didn't want to moralize or lecture anybody," said the articulate and affable painter. "The mural is designed as a decoration, to bring to mind a variety of experiences related to the lively arts."

Each panel has a dreamy suggestion—sometimes quite boldly outlined—of its subject from earliest times to the present.

There will be room for discussion as the thousands who will come to the new art centre study the mural. For example, in the Theatre panel the artist has a strong outline of the Oedipus Rex mask, a symbol of early drama; a religious parade representing the medieval period and Hamlet as the most contemporary form.

“I felt there was nothing new since Shakespeare in the field of drama which could be used as a recognizable symbol,” he says, simply.

Ballet is chosen as the “recognizable” symbol of contemporary dancing. Architecture begins with the Parthenon, has a Gothic arch and a skyscraper outline. In sculpture, Wilson has followed an early Hittite bas-relief, Venus de Milo and Sphinx with a totem pole and a contemporary non-figurative steel piece.

In literature, man and woman represent the largest area of the literary theme; a sailing ship symbolizes travel and adventure, etc. Music shows drums, wind and string instruments, shapes a bar of music from a well-known opera as well as a scene from a Wagnerian performance.

The Royal Canadian Academician, whose paintings are in public and private collections here and in the U.S., England, Spain, France, Italy, Switzerland and Mexico, will be too involved in the tremendous project during the coming year to spend much time on his canvas work.

His murals are widely known, appearing in the Redpath library at McGill University, the prayer room of the Salvation Army headquarters here as well as in the Imperial Oil building.

But this will be the daddy of them all.

Wilson’s success is another indication of Canada’s increasing maturity as an art appreciation centre as well as the centre of a community

of outstanding artists.

Work carried along nicely on the mural with York and his two assistants while the usual exhibitions took place across Canada. Wilson had a solo exhibition at Roberts Gallery; he exhibited with the RCA at the Musée de la Province de Québec and Le Soleil reproduced Port des Caraïbes. The winter number of Canadian Art had an article by Charles Comfort, Director of the National Gallery in Ottawa, "Academies in Transition," with a reproduction of Wilson's Venice. Meanwhile in Tenerife, the art critic, Eduardo Westerdahl's collection was on view at their civic gallery, Bellas Artes, included was York's Fuente Morales which showed a group of lecheras (milk maids) gathered around the fountain for a little gossip.

The Board of Trade Journal for December shows a reproduction of the sketch for the O'Keefe mural followed by an article which in part describes the sections more aptly:

CANADA'S LARGEST MURAL

Painting - this section shows earliest painting from the Lascaux, Altamira and other caves; Egyptian painting; the decent from the Cross is an example of religious painting from the Renaissance period and a non-figurative work is an example of present day painting.

Sculpture - shows an early Hittite bas-relief; Venus de Milo of the classical period; a sphinx, a totem pole and a non-figurative welded steel piece of a contemporary type.

Architecture - begins with the Parthenon; a large area of Gothic shapes; an interior of no particular period and a skyscraper of today.

Music - shows the drums; an early form of musical notes; various wind and string instrument shapes; a bar of music from a well-known opera and a scene from a Wagnerian performance.

Literature - a man and woman represents the largest area of the literary theme; the sailing ship symbolizes travel and adventure; the eques-

trian battle indicates conquest; the Chinese proverb is a reminder of the oriental contribution and the abstract shapes on a scroll are related to abstract thought.

Dance - the war dance and sun worshipper dance symbolize two of the earlier dance forms; an Indonesian dancer represents the orient and the corps de ballet of Swan Lake is the nearly contemporary dance.

Drama - the Oedipus Rex masks are used as a symbol of early drama; a religious parade represents the medieval period and Hamlet is the most contemporary form shown.

No attempt has been made to moralize. The mural is a decoration intended to bring to mind a variety of experiences related to the lively arts.

The task of selecting the artist, as well as approving the final design, was the responsibility of a special committee of leading Canadians whose names are synonymous with Canadian art. Members are - Dr. Martin Baldwin, Director, Art Gallery of Toronto; Mr. A.J. Casson, RCA, Chairman of the committee; Dr. Charles F. Comfort, President, Royal Canadian Academy; Mr. Charles P. Fell, former Chairman of the Council of National Gallery of Canada; Mrs. T.P. Lownsbrough, immediate past Chairman, Women's Committee, Art Gallery of Toronto; Earle C. Morgan, Architect; Mr. S.H. Watson, Principal of the Ontario College of Art. This committee will continue to offer advice on a program of artistic adornment for the new theatre...

Many students came to watch the work in progress, some from a distance, some with "grants. "The American "World Book Encyclopedia" in its 1960 edition noted:

An Abstract Mural by York Wilson in the Imperial Oil Building in Toronto, below, depicts the story of oil from its beginning millions of years ago to the present time. (A reproduction of the work in progress)

1689 Allison Road,
Vancouver 8, B.C.

July 14th, 1959

Dear Mr. Wilson:

Although it is certainly not my customary habit to write so-called "fan" letters to my colleagues, in this singular instance I feel moved to do so. The reason being that on my way here, I made a point of stopping over in Toronto with the express purpose of seeing your Imperial Oil Building murals. I am happily convinced that this break in my journey was completely justified and rewarded, for said murals proved to be beyond my fondest expectations, which were based upon previously-seen small color reproductions.

You have succeeded in a gigantic undertaking, the very thought of which would undoubtedly terrify the great majority of your contemporaries in our profession. I found that your vision and interpretation of the theme was equally matched by its exciting and excellent execution. To me, it is a most stimulating and compelling major creative effort, and one which very well could prove to be a milestone in Canadian Art. I look forward to spending further time in its presence when opportunity presents itself.

Belatedly, I offer and add my sincerest heartfelt congratulations to the many such sentiments you must surely have received on behalf this work of such aesthetical and material magnitude.

With all best wishes and kindest regards.

Yours very truly,
Lawren P. Harris.

