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1959 - 1960

The O'Keefe Mural and altercations with the Union

The December 24, 1959 edition of the Globe and Mail showed a crowded foyer of carol singers in front of the Imperial Oil Mural and a large Christmas tree, the caption:

O COME ALL YE FAITHFUL—Imperial Oil Co. employees join neighbours of the company's St. Clair Avenue office building to sing carols before work. Employee carol group leads the singing in the lobby which contains one of Canada's largest murals and is decorated with a large Christmas tree. This is the third year for the sing-song.

Well it wasn't such a happy Christmas for us. As if pressure wasn't enough to meet the planned opening of the O'Keefe Centre for the Performing Arts, a bombshell hit York.

Apparently the International Brotherhood of Painters, Decorators and Paperhangers of America had discovered the artists working on the Imperial Oil mural too close to the finished work to make a case of forcing them to join their union and had been biding their time to strike. York Wilson was the biggest name in mural painting so if he became a member, others would be easy to enrol.

With this in mind the union sent their top men from New York to handle the assignment along with the Canadian vice-president, Harry Colnett. Wilfred List, a reporter of labour problems wrote in his column:

O'KEEFE CENTRE MURAL SHOULD BE UNION JOB LABOR GROUP CLAIMS

... The Brotherhood of Painters and Decorators is determined to eliminate this non-union pocket in the cluttered, bustling superstructure of the O'Keefe Centre. Mr. Wilson is just as emphatic in his resistance to the tide of unionism.

The Union claims that its jurisdiction covers the field of murals, scenery, costume designing and under some circumstances, even the hanging of draperies.

Mr. Colnett confesses that he doesn't understand the O'Keefe mural: It looks like a general hodge-podge to me... He agrees that the mural is a creative work, but argues that in the United States the brainchild of the artist is translated on the wall by members of the Scenic Artists division of the union.

The dispute may also be a serious one for the centre. The matter has been laid before the Toronto Building Trades Council, co-ordinating body of all construction unions.

There have been no spoken threats of a walkout by the other unions, but the fact that Mr. Wilson's non-union project is not in orbit with the rest of the job, has been strongly underlined.

O'Keefe officials, as well as top officers of Royal Canadian Academy and the Ontario Society of Artists, have been drawn into the dispute.

York Wilson replies: "Fine art is an individual and creative form of expression. I don't see how you can possibly unionize people who work as individuals. This is a serious matter as far as artists are concerned. If they can force me into becoming a member of the union, they can use the lever the same way on other people." Mr. Wilson says that he is concerned that the intervention of the union may retard future cultural developments of the type characterized by the murals.

"... This is more important than a dispute over one mural. If a body of people like this can dictate to creative artists,

it poses a grave danger to creative painting,” he said...

Day after day the struggle continued, reaching its height in January, 1960. Up-to-the-moment news appeared on the front pages of all newspapers, on the radio and television. It was the first item on the news each evening and became international. Letters to the editor began appearing as well as personal letters to York, some from union members to say they agreed with him but could not sign their names. There were many telephone calls, some including union as well as non-union members; some using disgusting language and threatening bodily harm.

Work was stopped for many weeks, but York continued to pay his assistants. He tried to keep them as busy as possible, mixing gallons of vinyl acetate medium ahead and other mural-related jobs.

Fortunately some humour crept in as well. A school with 5-8 year old children started doing murals by putting a number of individual efforts together and mounting them on the wall. The caption under the child-artists discussing their work reads: “None of the pupils has yet been asked to join the Brotherhood of Painters, Decorators and Paperhangers of America, claimant to mural artists.”

Reidford, G&M, shows two house painters, one painting the floor, the other painting the wall (who has donned an artist’s smock and beret), with the floor painter saying,

“Ok, Clancy, So You’re a Muralist.”

A cartoonist for the Star, Lewis Parker, had Rembrandt on a ladder painting the “Night Watch,” by numbers, with the

Shop Steward telling him what to do. The caption reads:

“Rembrandt! Thou Shouldst Be Living At This Hour:
O’Keefe’s Hath Need Of Thee.”

Grassick of the Toronto Telegram showed York Wilson running while fending himself with his palette as a shield, from a number of pursuing International Brotherhood of Painters, Decorators and Paperhangers pelting him with cans of paints and brushes.

A regular columnist, Maggie Grant wrote the following:

ARTIST SUPPLIES IDEA BUT NOT PERFORMANCE

I haven’t seen much about York Wilson in the paper the past few days, and I can’t help wondering how he is getting along in his battle with the Brotherhood of Painters, Decorators and Paperhangers. You know what I’m talking about of course. Mr. Wilson as one of Canada’s leading artists, was hard at work on his huge mural for the O’Keefe Centre when he suddenly found himself beset by the above organization, which insisted its members must do the actual brushwork. If they could paint houses they could assuredly paint a mere mural, seemed to be the burden of the argument.

It will be interesting to see who wins this novel debate, I mean, as a member of the newspaper writer union. I’ve had it in the back of my mind for some time to drop around the various publishing houses, produce my union card, and serve notice that henceforth I will write all their novels for them. I’ll bet Thomas B. Costain never thought to join a union, so why should he be allowed to write his own books?

Now, the Brotherhood of Painters, etc. didn’t quibble about York Wilson designing this mural, only about his executing it. So I imagine it would be quite permissible for Mr. Costain and other novelists to submit outlines to publishers, as long as they didn’t do any actual writing.

Given plenty of plots, I could dash off one or two novels a

week, I'm sure. I'm not quite so confident when it comes to poetry, though. I think in this case it might be wise to call in someone with more experience in the field than I. ASCAP is said to have a stable of 5,300 songwriters, and this must include a fair percentage of lyricists who would be happy to oblige.

At risk of being dubbed a scab, I'll provide an illustration of how this would work. Let us say that Thomas Gray has been moved to write an elegy in a county churchyard. He does not, of course, set pen to paper.

Instead, he calls in the lyric writer assigned by ASCAP and recites:

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea
The ploughman homeward plods his weary way,
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

The lyric writer then takes Gray's idea and clothes it in suitable words:

Oh ring dem bells because the night is near!
Oh hear the mooing of the cows so dear!
Here comes my man so tired that he c'd die,
Oh my its purty here beneath the sky!

Sounds quite different doesn't it? Yet the sense is the same, which is what matters.

As for music, composers would merely whistle their airs to ASCAP arrangers, and let them do the rest. To reach the greatest audience, everything would be written in the key of C, with ukelele arrangements included.

Many meetings were held, the participants often becoming abusive. The union representative threatened to pull out the other unions, thereby stopping work on the Centre which was already behind schedule; he also claimed "anyone can paint that junk." Further delay on the building became a serious worry to the O'Keefe officials. They had previously been

on Wilson's side but now began pressuring him to join the union. However he was adamant. He knew the union would encroach more and more on the freedom of artists, even into other aspects of their work. He jokingly said that Art Galleries wouldn't be able to hang a picture without calling a union member to drive the nail. His old friend Ettore Mazzoleni, Opera Conductor and Principal of the Royal Conservatory of Music, said impromptu musical sessions could no longer happen unless they were paid or a visiting musician couldn't participate without an idle, paid union member sitting in, making it more expensive and killing spontaneity. One thought of the good old days when the ebullient Sir Ernest MacMillan would sit down at the piano at the Arts and Letters Club and play. It added so much pleasure to the luncheons and festivities.

The Times of London wrote a most thoughtful article about the early "Guilds," in which they claimed: "The old Painters' Guilds and other unions were clearly both helpful and unhelpful to artists..." We heard that the U.S., Italy and other countries ran articles following the drama and discussing the problem of unions.

Many artists thanked York for his fight against the union, saying that with their young families or straightened circumstances they wouldn't be able financially to do what he was doing, fighting for a principle. They appreciated his being out front protecting them. Said York finally in answer to his colleagues: "I'm tired of being out front, I wish someone would get in front of me." This brought the Art Societies to their senses and the RCA-OSA-Sculptor's Society and the CGP all banded together to back Wilson. They decided to get a lawyer

and miraculously hired the right one, Bora Laskin, later to become Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada. Laskin had worked on both sides of union problems and said, he had been wondering why they hadn't come to him sooner. He warned York and his two assistants not to go near the Centre without their steel helmets, accidents can happen. This union had a history of dirty fighting.

The Art Societies began to speak out, Charles F. Comfort, Director of the National Gallery and president of the RCA, said:

“a mural is not within the jurisdiction of a union, as much as I respect unions.”

Franklin Arbuckle, vice president of the Academy, termed Mr. Wilson

“one of Canada's greatest artists. I think it's a shame he's being bothered this way.” Allan Collier, president of the

Ontario Society of Artists, said:

“If Shakespeare had worked over a plot, then turned over the plot lines to union craftsmen to put in story form, I don't think we would have Shakespeare's dramas today.”

The Union's Canadian representative, Mr. Colnett said:

“In the U.S., an artist makes out a sketch and this is translated in mural form by members of the Scenic Artists division of the union.” “Ridiculous,” Mr. Comfort retorted. “We all respect the area of jurisdiction unions have. On the other hand, this is the work of a creative artist. He must put it on the wall himself. Union men would make a tragic mistake by trying to do what Mr. Wilson can only do himself...”

Emphatic in its support of Mr. Wilson, the OSA said its object

“is the encouragement of original art in Ontario. We are

sure that this is not the primary object of the brotherhood, and we are opposed to a union that attempts to organize and dictate terms to a creative individual.”

Toronto Telegram:

BE REASONABLE MR. W.

by Frank Tumpane

York Wilson, a well-known Canadian painter, says he won't join a union because, as he puts it, "you can't unionize people who work as individuals."

Well, he may be right; but there's a lot of evidence that says he's wrong.

An outfit called the International Brotherhood of Painters, Decorators and Paperhangers has been trying to woo Mr. Wilson into its ranks because he is painting a mural at the new O'Keefe Centre. Mr. Wilson, however, is shrinking from the embrace. He doesn't want anything to do with the International Brotherhood of Painters, Decorators and Paperhangers.

Maybe the name scares him.

It's incongruous, at that, to think of a leading Canadian artist as a member of the International Brotherhood of Painters, Decorators and Paperhangers.

But no more so, I suggest, than to think of Glenn Gould as belonging to the same union as Elvis Presley; and he does, Oh yes, he does, all right.

Both Mr. Gould and Mr. Presley are members of the musician's union—Mr. Gould because he is one of the world's great pianists and Mr. Presley because he allegedly plays the guitar as accompaniment to those raucous squawks and churning mumbles that, among his deluded devotees, pass for singing.

If Mr. Wilson is fearful that joining a union will destroy his individuality, what of Mr. Gould, who is surely one of the artistic world's most pronounced individuals, in both personality and technique?

What of Arthur Rubenstein, another great pianist?

If Mr. Gould and Mr. Rubenstein were not members of

the musician's union, they couldn't step on the stage of Massey Hall to play a concert. Yet the art of neither seems to have suffered.

What, to carry the matter a little further, of the individuality of an actress like Katharine Cornell, who is a member of Actors' Equity, a theatrical union, and who couldn't play in Toronto at the Royal Alexandra (or at the Broadway theatres) unless she were a member?

Membership in a union doesn't destroy individuality—or even diminish it.

If Mr. Wilson had said he didn't want to join the union because the union could not provide him with benefits, he would be on sound logical ground. He might be mistaken; but his argument would be reasonable.

Mr. Wilson doesn't need any union to speak for him; he is perfectly capable of speaking for himself. He doesn't need any union to bargain for him; he can bargain for his own fees.

One reason for spurning the International Brotherhood that Mr. Wilson failed to mention (perhaps because it never occurred to him) is that this union is one of the building trades unions.

And, by and large, the unions connected with the building have a reputation for arrogance, capriciousness, featherbedding and contempt for the public that is unmatched by any other group of unions.

The word for their public relations is terrible.

However, I can offer one final rebuttal of the notion that membership in a union destroys individuality. It hasn't destroyed mine and I am as individualistic as anybody around these parts. In fact I hold as strong opinions about my work as Mr. Wilson does about his.

If the union to which I belong—The Toronto Newspaper Guild—attempted to dictate to me what I should write, I would tell its executive board to leap into the nearest lake.

And you know Toronto—there's always a lake handy.

York Wilson—or any other painter—has no grounds what-

ever for saying that membership in a union would entail dictatorship over his manner of expressing himself in his art form.

I don't care whether artists join unions. They can all join or they can all stay out without disturbing me in the least. But if they choose to stay out, I wish they'd stay out for reasons that make sense.

In reply to Mr. Tumpane, Al Collier, President of the OSA wrote on OSA letterhead:

After reading your York Wilson column I must try to correct some of your misconceptions.

I realize that you are a columnist and more interested in opinions than facts but surely there is enough of the reporter still left in you to make some research necessary. You place your position in the Guild beside the possible position of Wilson in the Brotherhood and find them comparable. Would you be content to create an idea for a column and then have the Guild choose a man to write it for you. The Brotherhood has flatly stated, in my presence, that any of the members of their Scenic Artists Branch could take Wilson's sketch and could execute the mural as well as he could do it. Are you not aware that the Brotherhood insisted that Wilson join their union and hire one of their members to work on the mural?

I am afraid that only intelligence would help you in comparing Glenn Gould's position and that of York Wilson. Gould is a top-notch performing artist, re-creating others' compositions. Does Wilson fall into that category? Most of us feel that the Musicians' Union has fought to maintain the mediocre and we feel that that is exactly what the Brotherhood of Painters, Decorators and Paperhangers would do. I am sure that the OSA will remain strongly opposed to their organizing efforts.

Another tactic used by the Brotherhood was to quietly persuade Wilson's assistants, Bob Paterson and Labonte-Smith

to join the union, promising many benefits, such as more money and shorter working hours. Its efforts met with a blank refusal, the two artists assuring the union that they would gladly work for nothing just to have the opportunity to work with York Wilson on the mural.

There were countless articles and letters to the editors and to York, as well as phone calls, mostly supportive but some abusive and threatening. The Union's final tactic was to give him an honorary membership. The papers came out with headlines saying, "Artist being given honorary membership..." Their information had come from the Union. Most people thought that Wilson had joined but many didn't read all the way to the end of their long tirade. The last sentence read: "Mr. Wilson said that he didn't wish to be so honoured!"

Bora Laskin had been working quietly undercover. He came to York and said that he thought it was about to be settled but not to appear to gloat as it might undo everything. He also asked that we disappear for a few days, not even to answer the telephone, nor let anyone, not even our closest friends, know where we were. They might try to get at you through your friends. We holed up in our own house, no visible lights and never answered the phone although it rang steadily, even all night. It was hard to get any sleep. After a couple of days Bora was in touch to tell us all was settled, now they could go back to work but, not to gloat to the press. He decided not to tell York how it was settled so he wouldn't be able to tell anyone.

This restriction created many difficulties, it made York appear so foolish when questioned by the Press. June Callwood invited both the union and York to discuss it on television.

The union didn't turn up so June took the part of the union asking some leading and difficult questions. York was almost tongue-tied not being allowed to answer sensibly because of Bora Laskin's directive. June had no idea the stress that York was under. He has never had a problem being articulate and specific; it was a pretty flat interview and York was thoroughly embarrassed. June and her sports-writer husband had been our friends for many years but York never felt the same about June again.

York was pleased that he was able to keep artists free from being forced to join a Union which did not serve the best interests of art. The four art societies, the Royal Canadian Academy; the Sculptors' Society of Canada; the Canadian Group of Painters and the Ontario Society of Artists shared the legal fees with York Wilson. A statement was prepared by an authority on labour legislation which is available from the existing societies.

When we had been told to disappear and the phone rang constantly, Bora Laskin was right. The newspapers knew something was about to happen but also the union had been in touch with friends of York's and had persuaded them that York should join the union. They had a special mission, they thought, and must reach him. Later when it was all over, A.J. Casson told York that a few nights earlier he had endlessly tried to reach him as he had important news.

The artists were now happily back at work and Lotta Dempsey of the Star, donned a yellow hard hat and came to interview York on the site. He apparently was trying to sign his name in letters four inches high, and said that he just couldn't make it natural.

He also told Lotta: "I'm pleased about the fact that so many of the workmen have stopped to ask me about the symbolic representations of painting, sculpture, the dance, the ballet, and so on. And particularly that several have wanted to know if the original cartoons are for sale. They'd like to have 'the small pictures' we were working from, in their houses. That's quite a compliment."

Among the dozens of letters to the editor some were quite humorous, such as this:

It's a great pity the Brotherhood of Painters, Decorators and Paperhangers wasn't organized in Rome in 1508. It could have spared Michelangelo the discomfort of lying on scaffolding four and one-half years while he executed the ceiling frescoes on the Sistine Chapel. Of course, it might have spared the world from a treasured masterpiece of art, too: but it would unquestionably have kept a few Roman housepainters busy for a year or so.

The Brotherhood is here now, thank goodness, ready to spare Toronto artist York Wilson the trouble of completing his 100-foot mural illustrating the seven lively arts, at the O'Keefe Centre. It has given him the choice of joining the union or letting card-carrying unionists finish the job. The difficulty is that Mr. Wilson refuses to do either. Artists are funny that way; dislike having even the best-intentioned people mess around with their paintings. Michelangelo himself not only didn't hire any housepainters or paperhangers for the Sistine Chapel, he even dismissed some professional artists he had brought along from Florence (unfair, unfair) and carried out the colossal task alone, except for mechanical help.

The Brotherhood may have a little difficulty also in persuading the public that a creative artist should have his work done by tradesmen or craftsmen whether he likes it or not. The Canadian vice-chairman of the painters and decorators, Harry Colnett, explains smoothly that it's done

that way in the United States; the artist's conception is put on the wall by members of the Scenic Artists division of the union.

Allan Collier, president of the Ontario Society of Artists, replies this way: If Shakespeare "had worked over a plot, then turned over the plot lines to union craftsmen to put in story form, I don't think we would have Shakespeare's dramas today."

The man may have something there; but doesn't he care about full employment for the hack writers of Queen Elizabeth's time?

One dissenter from Hamilton had another twist in his letter to the editor:

I always understood that painters didn't have any corner on creative art. I can't see why the muralist should have any preference over the professional pianist, organist, or any other top-notch musician. Surely the mural painter is not any more of a creative artist than Sir Ernest MacMillan or Mr. Ernest Barbini, who I think, both have union cards. Surely there is nothing degrading in belonging to a painters and decorators union. I am convinced that they produce works of art which can perhaps be compared to some of the dreadful abstractions that we are faced with in modern exhibitions.

Again our correspondent from Hamilton has not realized the difference between top-notch performing artists such as Sir Ernest MacMillan and Maestro Ernesto Barbini who are re-creating others' compositions, whereas York Wilson is the unique creator of his mural.

ART WITH A UNION LABEL

The question before the house is whether a mural painting is a union job and whether mural artists should carry a union card.

For the affirmative: The International Brotherhood of Painters, Decorators and Paperhangers. For the negative:

York Wilson, artist, who seems to be saying that paper hanging is not one of the Seven Lively Arts, which is the title of the 100-foot mural he is painting in the O'Keefe Centre.

Mr. Speaker, Sir: The Brotherhood does not seem to know when it is well off. As a dues-paying brother, Mr. Wilson could attend meetings and speak for an hour on the impact of Braque on post-neo-impressionism when all the brothers want is 15 cents an hour more. He and his brother muralists might gang up and railroad the decorators and paper hangers out of office. He might get mad and stick the union label on pictures painted with his feet in snowshoes and the union would get the blame. It might of course get the credit, but that's being unrealistic.

Mr. Speaker, Sir: A cooling-off period is needed. Mr. Wilson should go hang papers for a couple of days and the president of the union should paint one of the seven lively arts. This would settle the dispute.

A summing up:

STIFLING THE CREATIVE ARTS

The present controversy between a prominent Canadian artist, Mr. York Wilson, and the Brotherhood of Painters, Decorators and Paperhangers is merely a symptom of the growing degeneration in our North American civilization. Here, the creative person—scientist, writer, composer, artist—is relegated to the position of the social outcast. This is understandable since we of the Western world appear to have no appreciation of fine culture, let alone of those who create it.

According to the modern conception of democracy, there must be a social levelling-off. Those possessing great energy, noble thoughts or creative talent are to be held back; indeed, they are to be feared! There are limits to how far a man can rise above the accepted standards. There is general opposition to every attempt to do truly excellent work. Everywhere, we see the self-appointed guardians of our so-called democratic standards—a paltry crowd who

openly display their profound ignorance as they stifle any advances in our culture. This situation is an outrage on the future of man.

In the above mentioned case, an organization of workers, who should be concerned solely with those affairs connected with their occupation, has interfered with the work of a creative artist. We are surely in a sorry state, when such a group can attack those who must make a contribution to our own national culture of mankind. The artist, in order to survive as an artist, must have opportunity to freely exercise his creative spirit.

St. Catharines / J.K.R. Chisholm

The trade union case that no adornment of the new O'Keefe building should be acceptable unless prepared by a trade union member is further evidence of syndicalist policy designed to make trade unions the absolute masters of what has been known as free society.

No sensible citizen questions that trade unions have a useful role to play in free society as long as they are conducted on genuinely democratic lines. Nowadays however, too many trade union leaders are obviously more interested in coercion and intimidation than in genuine freedom. Perhaps the dominating motive is fear that some unions would not survive on a free basis.

Toronto / Gladstone Murray