

XVII

1960 - 1964

French Canadian Interference in Paris

We continued touring weekends with Lionel Roy so that York could sketch in the small French towns. Lionel's interest in art was so real that York presented him with a sketching box, brushes and paints. Lionel was in seventh heaven, he jumped right in, seemingly without inhibitions and using vibrant colours. The results were like a gifted child. He became so interested he couldn't wait for weekends and began painting at home as well.

By February we headed for Morocco, stopping off in Madrid to enjoy the Prado again and our friends, the Max Stewarts. On arising next morning we found Madrid covered with snow. By the time we left for the Prado, it had turned to deep slush. We bought our tickets at the entrance but decided to have lunch first and were assured our tickets would be good later. However on our return the Prado was closed for the rest of the day, it being too dark to see the paintings which could only be viewed in daylight.

We left for Tangier and Casablanca the following day, finding it still raining we moved on to Marrakesh and the first sun we had seen in weeks.

We were nicely settled in our hotel with York working when Dorothy Osborne, a minister from the Canadian Embassy in Paris, turned up. We went for a walk with Dorothy and ran into the Max Stewarts from Madrid looking for our hotel. They were already settled in the Mammunia (Winston Churchill's favourite) so we had a dinner party at our hotel close by that evening. As York wanted to work we flew to Agadir two days later with

Dorothy who wanted to rest. There wasn't much left of Agadir after a great tidal wave, but we found accommodation that night, making arrangements with a taxi to leave for Tafraout in the Atlas mountains the following morning.

Starting early we found the road had been washed away in many places so we helped the driver to carry stones to build it up where needed so the car could pass as we were the first car through. Many lost their lives in Agadir and streets of buildings had disappeared, now replaced with tents. Many countries sent relief, the Germans had sent blankets which were being hawked on the black market the next day.

We finally reached Tafraout and a nice hotel run by a French couple. They welcomed us as they had had no guests for days. They served us beautiful meals, often joining us and taking us out in their car after dark, shining their car lights into the roadside to show us the jackals. Sometimes the jackals would venture into the village and snatch a small child. During daylight we walked everywhere, along the roadside where veiled women, dressed in black silk, tilled the fields. They wore unusual shoes, red in colour with a high piece at the back which apparently kept the sand out of their shoes. We learned this from our hosts at the hotel, who sent for the cobbler to make some for us. I decided I would like yellow but was told yellow was for men. He would make a yellow pair for York and a red pair for me. There was no choice as this was tradition. He just looked at our feet and said he would bring them in a couple of days. I said, "Don't you wish to take measurements?" He replied it wasn't necessary he knew our sizes by looking at our feet. He returned as promised and they fitted nicely, though a little snug for me.

Our hosts said these women working in the fields often had very wealthy husbands with shops in Marrakesh who returned home on weekends. York told me as we walked along the road that sometimes the young girls would lift their veils to smile for him. We walked up and down the

mountain hills wondering what lay beyond the next rise, discovering the primitive village of Tafraout and great rocks with prehistoric markings. York made many drawings and sketches there. After a couple of weeks the three of us returned to Agadir. Much had been accomplished in the meantime, the road had been repaired and a great building program was underway in Agadir. Dorothy left us in Agadir to return to Paris.

We looked for the bus station having decided to wend our way slowly up the coast, briefly visiting each town to sketch, Mogador, Safi, Mazagan, Rabat and Fez where we spent the remainder of our time before returning to Paris.

In August the Peires joined us on a trip through Belgium and as far as Otterlo, Holland where we met the Director of the Otterlo (Van Gogh) Museum, Dr. A.M. Hammacher and his wife Renilde Van Denbrande, later to become Director of the Musée Boymans in Rotterdam.

Nearing the end of 1962 we were conscious of a few things which only in retrospect could begin to understand. We did not know that feelings had deteriorated so badly with French Canada at home. We read in the Paris papers about bombings in Quebec, this seemed incredible! This was Canada, our native country, such things were unknown to us. So many French Canadians in Paris were our good friends. Everyone now knew about York's upcoming retrospective exhibition offered by France, unknown to us some were sabotaging it. We no longer heard from Robert Eli, Director of Quebec House. A cleaning establishment with several French Canadian clients began to snub us; Marcelle Ferron, long a close friend, said one evening in her unique English: "We're going to war on you one day," in spite of requesting a painting from York to raise funds to help get the church out of the schools in Quebec. A strange meeting in the artist Bolduc's studio and not understanding what it was all about was clarified later, that York's presence there was to prove a point, but 'what point?' The most serious thing was we hadn't heard a word from René Garneau about the

N.G. in Canada collecting York's earlier works. All arrangements had been left in his care and were to be made by him. York called leaving his number, and called, and called but his calls were never returned. It was almost 1963 and the date of the Paris exhibition was the latter part of that year. York became so upset he found it difficult to paint. But never having been one to push or promote himself, it never occurred to him to mention it to our many other close friends at the Canadian Embassy.

It wasn't until the summer of 1963 that York managed to get in touch with René Garneau and René's reaction was to ask, "Well have you been in touch with your friend, Charles Comfort to arrange the collection of works in Canada?" York was speechless, finally said, "Of course not, that was your job." René said that he would write right away!!!

The N.G.'s 5th Biennial was to be opened by the Queen in London, England, at the Commonwealth Centre on September 19, 1963 and York was invited to exhibit. He sent a large painting Egyptian Dimension. We decided to go for the opening and René Garneau said, he hadn't heard as yet from the N.G.; since Charles Comfort will be in London, you could get a direct answer.

The exhibition looked well, an official from India gave an interesting dissertation on art. Charles Comfort spoke and invited any visiting artists to stand by their paintings. The Queen opened the exhibition and graciously toured, discussing the work with each artist able to attend. Comfort then suggested that we join him for dinner. During dinner, York brought up the subject of the retrospective in Paris. Charles had never heard a word about it! York described the arrangements and Charles said, there isn't much time but he would see what he could do. We later saw a letter Comfort had written to William Withrow, Director of the AGT, looking for assistance. However no funds were forthcoming from anywhere and that was that. It seemed incongruous as it was as much an honour for Canada as for the artist.

The shock was tremendous for York, it was hard to believe that his country wouldn't support him in this rare foreign honour! He began to plan what could be done under the circumstances and decided on the smaller Gallery, Musée Galliera, showing only his work from the Paris sojourn. He immediately wrote to Imperial Oil and the O'Keefe Centre asking if they would send his large cartoons for the murals. They both replied they would be pleased to do so at their expense.

René Garneau then began pressing for Quebec House to fill the remaining space. They jumped at the idea and would fly over the paintings of five Quebec artists. This new arrangement astounded the committee and Mme. Dane, Director of Musée Galliera said, "We don't understand why you want these other painters, when we offered you the whole Gallery!" York was at a disadvantage as he could not say that Canada would not support him. The committee said, "This is York Wilson's exhibition and he must have the main salon, there is not room for five painters from Quebec, only three. There are just four small salons surrounding the main salon and we would like a painter represented who is working in Paris and York suggested Jack Nichols."

Jack Nichols was working in Paris at the time on new prints, but he decided there wasn't time for him to prepare an exhibition so he backed out. Joe Plaskett, from Vancouver seemed a logical choice, he had ample work there as he now lived in Paris and it encompassed a larger part of Canada. Earlier a Quebec painter, Alfred Pelan had been given a similar honour after working for nine years in Paris.

York could have filled the small salons with drawings, sketches and gouaches, but he was depressed. When things are adverse it is York's habit to turn his back and just keep painting.

Canada in general doesn't handle her talented people well, one has to get outside in order to get that sort of nourishment that helps excel. Lionel Roy knew the score at the Embassy and Quebec House and we realized

later that he may have been instrumental in it coming off at all, but being a diplomat, though our closest friend, didn't talk much, but hinted at what might be happening.

René asked York to design the catalogue and posters, large ones for key positions throughout Paris, small ones for shop windows and foyers, but York's heart wasn't in it, he also finds it difficult to make himself the main figure. He was also conscious of the Embassy having no allotment for this - he had even to be reminded that his name should come first.

Two Paris art critics wrote essays for the catalogue, Jacques Lassaigne and Frédéric Mégret. Jacques Lassaigne was often among our group of artists and we got to know a little about him. He wrote books slanted toward Québec he told us one evening and showed us a letter from President de Gaulle thanking him for the good work he was doing re Québec. This work of course was to encourage a Québec libre! It's puzzling why he would have been chosen by Garneau to write for the catalogue unless pressure was so great on our Canadian Embassy that they had little choice. However his article was the first one in the catalogue and was all about the Québec painters, reserving a slight mention of Wilson and Plaskett in the final paragraph.

In second place Frédéric Mégret's article followed:

York Wilson

Entre ses deux ateliers, l'un boulevard Pereire et l'autre Parc Montsouris, l'homme de Toronto vit si peu à Paris depuis quatre ans qu'il en ignore pratiquement le carrousel pictural. Mais à 52 ans, York Wilson a ressenti, lui aussi, le besoin de l'air d'ici.

Rien de plus "naturelle" dans son raffinement que la peinture de York Wilson, et rien de plus variée que sa démarche d'une toile à l'autre. Son cas de créateur, il le remet chaque foi en cause, qu'il reconstruise le paysage savouré au Mexique ou qu'il analyse à l'aigu l'émotion éprouvée l'été au-dessus d'un parc parisien. Nulle doctrine ne saurait retenir le peintre dans un champ clos et commode. Comme nulle recette n'inquiète, qui annonce toujours l'inévitable sclérose. Non, devant les compositions de York Wilson, chaudes de leurs couleurs et fraîches dans le même temps de leurs glacis subtils, on éprouve toujours la sensation (mais où?) du déjà vu. C'est parce

que l'homme de Toronto peint le libre visage, toujours recommencé,
de la lumière.

Jean Cassou sent his good wishes:

Tous mes vœux pour tout ce qui se passe dans votre atelier en
fait de bonheur et ça fait de peinture.

Jean Cassou

List of works shown by York Wilson in cms:

| | | |
|--------------------|-----------|---|
| A propos d'Afrique | 195 x 390 | Orage |
| 97 x 130 | | |
| Roi Christophe | 195 x 130 | Totems |
| 100 x 73 | | |
| Endymion | 130 x 195 | Hollande |
| 100 x 73 | | |
| Chioggia | 130 x 195 | Dorp |
| 73 x 100 | | |
| Chimère | 130 x 195 | Turramurra |
| 100 x 73 | | |
| Réalité | 130 x 162 | Zodiac en Fête |
| 100 x 73 | | |
| Melun | 130 x 162 | Marché aux Fleurs |
| 73 x 100 | | |
| Volendam | 130 x 97 | Ydra |
| 65 x 81 | | |
| Toccata en orange | 130 x 97 | Jeux Perse |
| 60 x 73 | | |
| Parc Montsouris | 130 x 97 | Etrusque |
| 61 x 46 | | |
| Venezia | 97 x 130 | Esquisses des Peintures Murales (2 panneaux) |
| 160 x 254 | | |
| 160 x 254 | | |

The day came to hang the exhibition. York's work had been picked up, mostly large ones, 100 point canvases (52" x 80") and one triptych, A Propos d'Afrique, titled by Michel Seuphor. We centered it on the large wall opposite the entrance. The cartoons for the Imperial Oil and O'Keefe murals were already there and we were able to give them their own unique area. There were about 26 major canvases in the main salon and the exhi-

bition looked magnificent. York had studied the space earlier and being a pro at hanging exhibitions, it was quickly hung.

We then noticed Joseph Plaskett had completed his small section but Robert Eli and his assistants had accomplished little, still trying to decide which gallery to put each of the three Quebec painters, Alfred Pelan, Jean Lemieux and Jacques McEwen. Eli was inexperienced, it wasn't easy, the small salons were long and narrow, the walls about six feet apart, difficult for larger paintings! York and I offered to help, Robert looked confused and uncomfortable; I'm sure he thought of us as the enemy, when in fact we thought only of having the exhibition look its best and being a credit to Canada. Also these painters were friends of ours and naturally we wanted to do our best for them in their absence. Robert hesitatingly agreed, not having much choice as obviously things were in a muddle.

York looked over the works offered by each painter and the spaces, then recommended where he thought each painter's works would look best. Pelan had only small works but many, so York suggested a longer space, without openings (one didn't need to stand back for small paintings) and the extra length meant better spacing and not overwhelming. Pelan's colours are strong and two parallel walls had to be hung. I'm sure Robert thought it to be a lesser space, without doorways and that Pelan was the more important painter. We thought so too, but it would compliment his paintings more having the longer space. Jean McEwen had larger works and the centre of the three galleries had a wide doorway, making it possible to stand back for viewing and his smaller works on the facing wall. Lemieux had fewer and medium to small paintings which fitted nicely in the smaller gallery. York explained his thinking every step of the way to Robert Eli, so he would understand we were trying to work with him for the advantage of all.

We were very fond of our friend, Alfred Pelan, and would only do our best for him, so we were saddened when we saw him again; he told us

that he had heard the show was very badly hung and his work did not look well. It's too bad so much sniping goes on, we have seen it over and over again. Quebec artists who were good friends, eventually shied away because of the false propaganda against the English. A case in point, Rita and Leon Bellefleur were such good friends in Paris, we discussed many intimate family affairs, a very relaxed atmosphere. Yet a few years later when Leon came to Toronto for his exhibitions at the Roberts Gallery, he came alone and always came to visit us. I asked why Rita hadn't come, he confided she felt the English didn't like her and she would be uncomfortable. With so much pressure in Quebec, it's bad to be seen with English-speaking people or for the Quebecois to be heard speaking English. This is very sad among Canadians, the poison that has been spread, even against better reason eventually one becomes suspicious, imagining things and setting one against the other.

Plans had been made for a Grand Reception, it had now become political. The Hon. Paul Martin, Minister of External Affairs was coming from Ottawa to open the exhibition. His French counterpart André Malraux would be there and many other important political figures. We were overjoyed and had invited many friends, especially artists, then at the last minute René Garneau told us there was such a large guest list we couldn't invite our friends, then finally agreed to not more than six. I think they would have been happier not to include us, if that were possible. It had become a purely political manoeuvre.

A Buffet, fit for a King, was set up in the main salon, surrounded by York's work. The guests were glittering in evening attire and the Speakers talked about our two countries and incidentally art. After the opening ceremonies, Pierre Dupuy brought André Malraux over and presented York - no sooner had the introduction been made when Robert Eli interrupted and manoeuvred York away - however it didn't sidetrack André Malraux who told Ambassador Dupuy, "This is one of the finest exhibitions I've

seen in a long time.” That approval mattered; let them play games and jockey for position!

Many of our good friends were there, Lionel Roy of UNESCO, the Ministers from the Canadian Embassy and other embassies, the City Fathers, Museum people and others.

Garneau arranged another opening for the following evening for our friends and gave York a number of xeroxed invitations. There were no refreshments, Garneau nor anyone else from the Embassy came, I don't suppose they even knew about it. It was a sparse group in that large salon but at least they were people interested in what was on the walls. During the exhibition interesting things happened; a good-looking black man came in, walked right to the triptych, A Propos d'Afrique, studied it carefully, searched out the artist and said: “I don't know why but that painting is about my people.” York asked if he had read the title and he said, “No, the painting itself drew me to it.” He turned out to be a sculptor from Gabon, Africa, in Paris on a scholarship. We invited him to visit us a few days later. At this time we were living at Rue de la Cité Universitaire No. 3, in an apartment on the 5th floor, overlooking Parc Montsouris - Braque had a studio on the other side of the park.

A group of artists came from Dijon to view the exhibition and were so excited that they invited three of York's paintings to their annual Salon, “Confrontation.” York hung along with Picasso, Miro, Clave, and so on. This Salon opened late January, 1964 just after the Musée Galliera exhibition had closed. Lionel Roy was also invited and we went down on the train together, but Lionel was rather quiet and formal, a great change, as we had been family for such a long time. He had purchased an odd small painting with a third off the price and we had given him the odd sketch. Before the Musée Galliera exhibition came down, Lionel had York meet him there, as he wished to purchase a major canvas, his collection would one day go to the Quebec Museum or Laval University (his Alma Mater).

He chose what York considered his major work asking for 50% off the price. York was a little concerned, his prices were far too low anyway, he wanted to think about it. I had quickly said, "That's not reasonable, 1/3 yes, but 50% is asking too much."

What I didn't know in my hasty judgement, not knowing whether the exhibition was going to take place or not, being brushed off by Garneau - we now realized in retrospect that Lionel had known the whole score but being a diplomat was not at liberty to tell us, and was working very hard behind the scenes on York's behalf. When York told Lionel he could only give him 1/3 discount, Lionel said, "But this is me, not just any friend, you will never know how I have fought for this exhibition!" Unfortunately it ended by his not getting the painting. I've regretted that and it was not possible to straighten it out on the Dijon weekend. He was deeply hurt and I really didn't know until long after we had left Paris the extent of his involvement on York's behalf. We didn't hear from him again.

The Dijon weekend was a busy one, apart from many little receptions the artists were so enthusiastic about York's painting, they cornered him every spare moment, asking questions and discussing art; they invited him to be a member of Salon Confrontation. One of his paintings had been purchased for the Dijon Museum. When the cheque arrived, signed by André Malraux, we considered framing it, but eventually had to cash it - what a pity!

François Thépot, School of Paris, a great colourist and disciple of Mondrian, introduced York to his Galerie Orient-Occident where they invited him to show his work. The Salon l'Oeil de Boeuf had an exhibition in Nantes showing York's oval canvas, an oil, Encore A Propos de Shaka. It was later purchased by the Art Gallery of Hamilton, Canada in 1983.

Our departure from Paris was highlighted by the English artist, Derek Middleton, in an uproariously humorous way. He prepared and presented York with a hand-made book painted in watercolour with the help of Luc

Peire and Lionel Roy, titled:

York Wilson - In Art for Art's Sake - or How to Succeed Without Really Trying - Directed by Lela Wilson - Producer, Luc Peire - Artistic Adviser, Lionel Roy - Sound Effects, Verity - From the Worstselling Novel by Derek Middleton - York Wilson's Beard, courtesy of the Toronto Mop Co. Inc."

The following pages included timely scripts followed by clever, witty watercolours depicting York's life from childhood to the present. Other artists began exchanging their works with York: Luc Peire, Kolos-Vary, Michel Seuphor, Annia Staritsky, Middleton, Edmund Alleyn and the sculptor Harold Cousins, who had earlier exchanged his sculpture, "The Forest" for one of York's paintings. Now he presented us with what seemed like the maquette for, "The Forest" but turned out to be the 'baby,' just completed, as our departure present.

The Quebec magazine, "Vie des Arts," Spring edition, 1964 covered the Musée Galliera exhibition. York's A Propos d'Afrique (double spread) a triptych, 195 x 390 cm, was reproduced. The caption:

York Wilson est le grand privilégié de l'exposition. On lui confié la cimaise de la salle d'honneur. C'est un peintre qui devait plaire aux Parisiens. Ses toiles sont organisées, équilibrées, lumineuses, avec mesure. Elles restent pourtant lyriques et colorées avec des espaces concrets et pleinement habitables, malgré le signe du non-figuratif. Mais où donc est caché cette émotion tactile qui ordinairement fait vibrer?

Claude Beaulieu

The paintings of the other four artists (one each) were brought into the main salon and photographed in front of two walls of the York Wilson exhibition also in colour.

Shortly before leaving France we went to Belgium accompanied by the Michel Seuphors for the great honour our friend Luc Peire was receiving from his native country. The Museum of Brugges was celebrating its inclusion of the work of Luc Peire, thereby opening the door to contemporary art. The excitement was picked up also by his home-town of Knnoke

where we were invited as platform guests along with Luc and Jenny Peire, during the many long speeches and presentations by the City Fathers; then wined and dined in several homes. We visited the Peire's' very modern home and studio; the soundproof bathroom was so discreet that one had to push a button to slide a wall-panel open to enter. It was furnished with the latest designs, such as the white, pedestal table and chairs by Eero Saarinen, the first vertical, venetian blinds I had seen and so on. The garden boasted of sculptures by his friends such as Subirachs of Spain.

While in Belgium York had three colour plates made of his paintings, La Seine - Parc Montsouris and Gouche Bleue. Luc introduced York and his work to his Dealer in Brussels, Galeri 123 who asked to handle his work. The Galerie had an immediate sale when Graeme Wilson heard that Green Red Black had gone to the Brussels Gallery, he got in touch quickly requesting they send it to him in Hong Kong. Graeme said he had tried to buy it before, but York had said it wasn't for sale.

We were fortunate to be in Belgium during the great Festival at Damme. Viewers walked along the canal in the evening to watch the performances in the fine old castles on the opposite side. The lights would go on in each building in turn, revealing glamorous people in period costumes dancing or a scene from the past. The lights would go out and one walked along to the next building and the lights would come on revealing something else. Damme has always been famous for eels, as well as being a specialty in local restaurants, they shipped them all over the world. The Peires told us the area had long been fished out, but the custom continued (unbeknownst, with imported eels). The four of us ordered different dishes of eels so we could taste all four (delicious!).