

# XXV

In 1969 Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico City invited York to have a major exhibition of his geometric paintings plus a section of figure drawings in their International Salon. They acquired a large painting, Atotonilco, for their Museo del Arte Contemporaneo.

The Opening was a delightful occasion with Dr. Saul Rae, the Canadian Ambassador, giving unequalled support with a grand reception which included the Ambassadors and Ministers from other countries. One amusing touch was the friendly Russian Ambassador, Dimitri Diokonov, viewing the exhibition with his arm around York's shoulders; the two of them obviously enjoying each other immensely. The Press was phenomenal, the seven or more publications kept extensive articles going almost daily (many on the front page) for the whole month. I will quote one where York was asked to write about his work:

## MY WORK AND I

My work does not fit easily into any category because the paintings are geometric intellectual developments, while the drawings are informal visual impressions. My first exhibited paintings were concerned with subject matter, social commentary and general observations of our local environment. They went through a progression of changes, moving from completely figurative, through several degrees of abstraction to become finally non-representational.

However, I have continued to draw directly from the model most of my life, because I believe that an artist and particularly an artist dealing with intangibles should be technically capable of expressing himself equally well in figuration or non-figurative terms.

The recent direction started in the late summer of 1966. We were ending a year of travel and painting in the Far and Middle East and the experience had had a profound effect on me related to painting. It was impossible to put into words or even summarize mentally, the kaleidoscope of impressions I had absorbed. However, we stopped in Paris for a few weeks and while I dreamt a painting (in colour) unlike anything I had seen before and totally unlike my own painting. I spent the day following the dream making an exact replica from memory. The next night I dreamt another painting, which I again recorded. From that time on the work has been amplification of ideas started by those dreams. I now believe the myriad of impressions over a period of many years, congested by a concentrated year of new impressions in the East were all synthesized in the subconscious and came through, at first without reason but later with more obvious connection with previous experiences.

These recent paintings are abstract space and colour relationships that sometimes can be related to specific experiences. Sometimes they are related to a combination of many places and expressions. Space can be the intervals of music, the distance between buildings, the rhythm of poetry, the beat of marchers, the interval of waiting, the moon exploration, the tick of a watch; it can be audio space, visual space, tactile space, rock and roll space, string quartet space. The definition of space can be and is as limitless as imagination, colour in trees and landscape, sunsets and skin tones and music tones; it is the colour of Bach as compared to Liszt; the prism or the twelve tone scale; it is morning and night, hot and cold, high and low, colour can be fast or slow, happy or sad. The definition of colour

can be and is as limitless as imagination.

Because of the latitude of space-colour relationships each canvas will depend for communication on the audiences' previous personal experiences.

I believe that the audience is essential to the success of any painting. Contrary to many contemporary opinions, I believe that a painting should not have its full impact on first viewing. A painting should take a long time to know... it is not too much to hope that an owner might find something new, discover a fresh or different effect in a painting five years after acquiring it.

There are many intentions in painting; my hope is to introduce a viewer to a new visual experience, one that will be discovered slowly and enjoyed a long time. In an age of shock and disquiet, the visual arts can play a stabilizing role, while still reflecting visually the colour and mood of contemporary society.

York Wilson

The Art Historian, Dr. Theodore Heinrich says in his introduction in the catalogue and repeated in the Mexican paper, *Novedades*:

...the elements of Wilson's new style are simply illusionary: groups of parallel lines in superimposed forms; color surprisingly rich, but never strident: mat surfaces of vinyl acetate. This is not hard-line, nor op," even though there are no references of details of the normal visual experience, his paintings are highly evocative. Colors and rhythms suggest the strong sense of a physical place, that has permanence, like the consistent element in all Wilson's work. There is a full radius of the sensation of space...

*El Universal*: At Mr. Wilson's side was his wife Lela Wilson, a very cultured lady and fluent in the Spanish language, helpful in explaining the work of her husband to a distinguished group of people...

*Novedades*: His drawings are of a real master... I know

from my own experience how confusing it becomes when many reviewers write about the same work and amplify their personal opinions about it. Therefore we have the artist who prefers not to read any critics.

Often the critic unintentionally suggests things that seem to him apparent in the work, that is out of keeping with the artist's intention and appears to make something ludicrous about the whole performance.

I hesitate to comment on the work of York Wilson. York Wilson is not participating in the collective madness to do photographic things nor does he wish to paint as a propagandist or an anarchist. Unlike so many others there is no nausea, fear or bitterness in his painting, he avoids the ugly and repulsive and on the contrary thinks of grace, harmony and a calm atmosphere.

His art is not the representation of a beautiful thing but a beautiful presentation of a thing.

The "Dean of Critics," Jose Crespo de la Serna wrote in *Novedades* about the drawings: ...Drawings of nudes are admirable because he had the happy event of grouping them, without apparent end to composition in the same space... His drawings are of a true master...

The actual serigraph *Kuching* was the basis for the Poster (turned on end), and appeared throughout the City. INBA, Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes toured the exhibition to San Miguel de Allende which opened in January 1970 with the same catalogue and Posters. The problem in both places was that the Poster continually disappeared and after replacing a few they had to give up. It was a mystery how they disappeared in Banks and stores under the watchful eyes of the staff!!

After the exhibitions we joined two American artists, Dorcas and Oliver Snyder and drove to Zihuatenejo for a few days of sketching.

“The Spark” The Central Hospital, Toronto came into being through the dreams of two Hungarian Doctors (brothers), Dr. Paul and Dr. John Reikai. A hospital where Canada’s vast number of new Canadians could be treated in their own language. 35 languages were spoken among the Doctors and staff. Professor John Wevers, chairman of the Board of Governors chose York Wilson to do a representative mural for the entrance. Since patients were drawn from many countries, the theme of the mural, though abstract, is “From the Four Corners,” which York represented in four parts, North, South, East and West, the key being in colour and form. Dr. Paul Reikai expressed his feelings to Lotta Dempsey of the Toronto Star:

...Keynote of Central’s spirit is expressed sensitively in York Wilson’s mural, which makes an impact on anyone coming in the front entrance. It expresses a theme in rich and colourful abstract form. That is the four corners of the world from which patients, staff and doctors have arrived...

One of our greatest friends, Sam Zacks, who had fought valiantly against cancer, passed away in April, 1970. He and his wife Ayala, did more for art in Canada than anyone else. We never got over the great loss.

The Collection, *L’Oiseau Qui N’Existe Pas*, in the Musée (National) d’Art Moderne (now Georges Pompidou) was based on, Author and poet, Claude Aveline’s poem, “The Bird Who Doesn’t Exist.” Aveline invited 109 international artists to paint their version, two from Canada, Wilson and Etrog.

The Collection went on tour, its first stop was Musée des Beaux-Arts, Le Havre, France. The AGO’s catalogue, “The Canadian Collection,” lists eight works by York Wilson: Local Dance `43 - Peons `50 - White Figures of Acambay

`51 - Janizio Island `54 - Nymph `55 - Venetian Vista `58 - Orpheus `60 - Le Figaro `61.

When the Principal of the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto and well-known Opera Conductor, Dr. Ettore Mazzoleni died in a tragic car accident, York felt the death of his great friend so deeply that he did a painting, Tribute to Mazz '68 for himself, later giving it to Mazz' widow Joanne. This was the inspiration which started the fine collection of paintings which Joanne Mazzoleni gave to the Royal Conservatory of Music in honour of her husband. Later Joanne added another of York's geometric period which she acquired from the New York exhibition. York wrote a "Tribute" in the catalogue presented at the Opening of the Exhibition:

When I first met Mazz I liked him immediately but, for no particular reason. He was the kind of person that unconsciously sparked an immediate reaction. At first Mazz gave the impression of being conservative and, in some ways he was, but one became more and more aware that his thoughts and ideas, even his dress, when not in the public eye, were unusual, sometimes inventive, but certainly never conservative.

He had interesting opinions on all subjects and, in expressing them with witticisms, that were sometimes droll, sometimes facetious, sometimes barbed, but more often astute critical observations, couched in deceptively simple terms. Mazz was never too busy to take part in a hoax, so when I wanted a musical enigma for the O'Keefe Mural, he was the obvious collaborator. Typically he set to work as though it were an important commission. In a few days he had worked out an enigma sufficiently profound to have remained, as yet undiscovered. The hoax is particularly successful in that I have forgotten the exact enigma myself and will have to do considerable research to find

it.

Mazz had a great number of friends in the musical world and elsewhere, because he was one of those unusual people, whose thought processes and his quite intriguing way of sharing them, made him a desirable addition to any group, whether it involved two or two hundred people. What he meant to each of us as a friend, is something that we can only know and cherish as individuals.

During the New York exhibition in 1968, Jean Grant of Ottawa, Canada, read the review in the New York Times, she phoned the Rose Fried Gallery asking to speak with York, fortunately he was there. Jean Grant had in mind giving a mural to Carleton University, Ottawa, in honour of her late husband. She knew she wanted York Wilson to plan it but didn't know how to get in touch with him. On his return many months later, Jean Grant came to Toronto to discuss it. York suggested a mural "FOR PEACE," in the mosaic medium, for the new University Centre Building, then being constructed by the well-known architect Matthew Stankiewicz (Matt) who had built the Canadian Pavilion at "Expo 67" in Montreal.

The mural was to be installed in the lounge, a strip along one wall at eye level, four feet high by 55 feet wide. "FOR PEACE" is represented by symbols created by many nationalities over eons of time such as the "Y" shaped structure in reference to man's supplication to God, the inverted "Y" suggests an answer. Alex Von Svoboda of Con-Arts studio, an internationally-known expert on mosaics would assist York with the installation of the finished mural. since students can be pranksters, Alex suggested using a special hard cement to hold the mosaics so they couldn't be removed.

On completion of the building with the mural installed, Buckminster Fuller came for the two-day opening to give the keynote address followed by a black-tie banquet the following evening to address the students. “Bucky” (as he is referred to) mounted the podium after dinner saying: “Before I begin I must answer a call of nature” and disappeared for several minutes. However when Bucky starts to talk there never seems to be an end and after the first hour we had to slip away to return to Toronto.

The items in the Ottawa Press seemed mostly concerned with the 4-1/2 million cost of the building (95% paid for by government, should read as taxpayers...) and Buckminster Fuller’s \$3,000 fee... which prompted a letter to the editor from the architect Stankiewicz which reads in part:

...as a taxpayer I share your concern... costly frills... There are so many other worthwhile ways of spending \$4-1/2 million. For instance such as it would fill the National Gallery with a herd of stuffed camels or truckloads of felt... a substantial down-payment on an obsolete destroyer or go a long way to refitting another aircraft carrier. The mind boggles at the possibilities...

(Items of waste by the Canadian Government)

The Director of the new University Centre expresses his feelings on having a first glimpse of the mural:

...I have now formally taken up residence in my new office... needless to say I take several prowls each day... To my delight last week I was present when your own beautiful mural was installed, and to say that I am impressed and pleased is an understatement! In all conscience I cannot pretend to be knowledgeable about abstract works of art, but when I stood in the main lounge and looked at

your mural for the first time I felt very keenly a sense of delight in the form and colour before me. I would like you to know that I think the work is beautiful and extremely relevant to our centre.

A solo exhibition opened late October at the Roberts Gallery with the reproduction on the invitation piece of the geometric Kabuki, interestingly enough it was purchased by the Japanese firm Nissho-Iwaii Canada Ltd. Kritzwiser, art critic for the Globe and Mail, noticed a subtle difference in the geometric paintings, a loosening of paint, a suggestion of image and found the paintings done in New York were cool and formal compared with the Mexican work.

Daily Star: ...Over a period of 20 years, abstract painter and muralist York Wilson has been one of those artists who has gained the respect and confidence of people in North America who ordinarily tend to be sceptical of modern art.

A show of his latest paintings at the Roberts Gallery... indicates what it is that has made him much admired in Europe as well recently, particularly in France.

A couple of years ago the Museum of Modern Art in Paris devoted a one man show of his work which opened to rave reviews claiming the quiet cautious Canadian as a kindred spirit.

If suavity and unobtrusive refinement are the hallmarks of what French artists have been doing since the war, these paintings show that York Wilson is right up there with them... always carries out these pictorial blandishments with integrity, with sound balanced craftsmanship and his achievement has been a consistent quality for two decades.

The Birla Academy of Art and Culture, Calcutta, India had their inaugural ceremony of the Gallery of International Mod-

ern Art, November 12, 1970. The U.S. Ambassador, Kenneth B. Keating performed the inauguration. The catalogue includes artists from many countries and one lone Canadian, York Wilson, with eight works in the collection. It is planned to tour the exhibition throughout India as a teaching medium. York spoke to the Arts and Letters Club mid-October, his subject, "Reminiscences in Prospect."

In 1971 York presented the book of Japanese poetry which he had illustrated to the Arts and Letters Club and they enjoyed the fact that he inscribed it "To the Oriental Department of the Arts and Letters Club." He also did art work for their annual Spring Cabaret.

The Canadian Irish Studies Committee at the University of Toronto invited York along with Marshall McLuhan to speak and open an exhibition of the Irish artist Miceal ONuallain. It was a hilarious opening with the witticisms they tossed back and forth. It took place during the Fourth Canadian Seminar in Irish Studies.

York had been a little disappointed in the quality of the OSA exhibitions and temporarily resigned from the Society for which he had worked so hard in the past. York University presented a fine exhibition of African Sculpture borrowing heavily on our collection and used our excellent Guinea, Baga "Crocodile Mask" on the cover of the catalogue.

In support of Art Societies, a Review of the RCA at the MMFA, Montreal Star:

At one time the annual Royal Canadian Academy exhibitions were reflections of establishment. A once a year event with the emphasis on the already well accepted. Not so anymore. For more than two decades they have gradually grown wider in their scope, more catholic in taste,

and increasingly of the present day... the 91st annual... The Academy has gone way out. Works that previously would have been too far removed from tradition are in. In the minority, admittedly, but here. Accepted. As for representational painting, once the mainstay of the shows, the few inclusions seem almost a token gesture.

What the Academy has endeavoured to do is give an as up-to-date as possible cross-section of what is happening in Canadian Art... The dominance on hard edge... Those abstracts that are not hard edge often border on being so. Among them is one of the most outstanding of the exhibition—York Wilson's Tribute to Lawren Harris, a beautifully sober work that recalls in a completely abstract form the latter's Northern landscapes of the late 20's...

With no grant this year (for the first time in their history) they are in debt to the tune of several thousand dollars...

This seems a most unfortunate state of affairs; the Art Society exhibitions have kept Canadians informed nationally of the work of their artists.

We left for a month in London and Paris in late May, 1971, taking one of the cheap charter flights which worked out fine. We joined Mac and Elsie Samples in London and stayed in Chelsea in the now famous house of Sir John and Lady Casson. The plaque of the ancient Chelsea Pottery Works had been on the house next door, but when the Victoria and Albert Museum dug up the Casson garden they found so many pieces which pinpointed their garden as the site. The Museum shared a few pieces with the Cassons. The Cassons are renowned in the world of theatre, John is the son of Lady Sybil Thorndike and their daughter Jane is known to Canadian audiences at Stratford.

York's younger brother, Art, (a war veteran) died at age

57. My Uncle Ernest passed away and we sent a donation to fund a 'Memorial' in the form of a new hospital room.

We checked in at Canada House and the Cultural Minister, Ian Christie Clark offered York an exhibition there for the following April. Called on the British Council and had a delightful visit with Miss Luce and John Hulton but were disappointed in their offer for the Venice Biennial of "conceptual art," a few footsteps on the desert sand and a few steps on a stairway, but they kindly gave us a list of galleries for York to check regarding his own work. We received a nice welcome at most galleries, Harry Miller at the Redfern offered their 6000 list of names for York's exhibition at Canada House, but few galleries handled work that York felt was in his direction. The visits were pleasant, most were interested in what this international artist had to say and kept him talking but York knew he wasn't promoting himself and his inability to do so bothered him. We saw a few good plays such as Ingrid Bergman in a Shaw play, Abelard and Heloise, Son et Lumière at St. Paul's, Playhouse Theatre (a dinner theatre) and saw many delightful friends. The weather was cold, drizzly and rainy most of the time which prompted York to note in his diary that he wouldn't want to live there.

A day at the Tate Gallery drew remarks:

The collection is a great selection of best pieces of best names—the American section, Morris Louis is best, Jasper Johns ridiculous, others ho-hum except Rothko and Klein—Tate made his money as the inventor of cube sugar, according to a cab driver.

We spent an afternoon at the National Gallery, visited the Marine Museum, an afternoon at the British Museum which

elicited remarks in diary: “Warrants much more time. The Elgin Marbles alone are worth the trip.”

On June 12 we headed for Paris by Hovercraft to Boulogne and train to Paris, plans were messed up because of a strike so went to Amiens hoping to connect for Paris! At least Paris was sunny after rain earlier. We saw the François Thepots, François was on vacation from the Ontario College of Art in Toronto and during the summers he tried to maintain his art connections in France. It rained late evening and the next day, the weather in Paris is similar to London. Our friends the Luc Peires were away for Luc’s exhibitions in Milan and Stuttgart so we moved into their studio/home on Rue Falguiere, picking up the key from the shoe repair next door. This is where York’s two important dreams of geometric paintings had their upsetting but later joyful beginning and we were immediately at home.

In our eight days in Paris we rushed around seeing friends, exhibitions, Louvre, Museum of Modern Art, York’s notes:

Tremendous Rouault show at Modern—most impressive, genius. Marmottan Museum: saw Monet bequest (65) very sincere paintings.

We tried desperately to reach Mme. Coquil Prince at Atelier du Marais, our tapestry maker but she was away.

York’s diary: This trip am more aware of the differences of the Canadian, American, English and French. The American, particularly the young, are most scruffy, long-haired and extreme. The Canadians less scruffy but long-haired, bearded and hippy. The English are less scruffy, extreme in dress but more stylish in both hair-do’s and clothes. The French don’t have long hair, neither extreme or stylish in dress, less flamboyant and more concerned

with smooching than being 'trampy' with it.

A letter from the AGO informed us that they had acquired two more works through the gift of Sam and Ayala Zacks: Blue Music (geometric) and a small collage and mixed media York had given to Ayala. Rothmans of Pall Mall invited York to open their collection of Contemporary French Tapestries at the O'Keefe Centre, September 13, 1971, stopping here on a nation-wide tour. There were 13 pieces by the late Jean Lurcat who restored this art to its rightful place after it had been dormant for over one hundred years. Some of the other celebrated artists included were Dom Robert, Le Corbusier, Wogensky, Borderie, Calder, La Grange and Prassinis. At that time I was in the hospital with unbearable pain, still not diagnosed but turned out to be Polymyalgia Rheumatica, little known then and still unknown how or why a person gets it and no cure in sight. It can only be treated with large doses of cortisone, gradually diminishing over a period of time but it does ease the pain immediately and the disease of aching muscles mostly clears up in a year or two, sometimes longer but does seem to leave one with arthritis.

York had a solo exhibition at the Wallack Galleries in Ottawa with fine reviews:

Ottawa Citizen: ...intelligent abstracts... rich colour... far away places...

Le Droit: Exposition stimulante... on se rend compte d'une évolution continue...

Ottawa Journal: Vitality, colour highlights work... few contemporary artists have a wider appeal or work with such professional competence...

The Napanee Secondary School decided to have seven

murals installed in different areas of the school by senior art students and invited York Wilson to select seven from 42 of the designs. His comments would be videotaped as he discussed and explained his reasons for his selections. Later two art instructors brought the students to Toronto for a mural tour. York hosted them at his studio, explaining his own work and answering questions then carried on to the O'Keefe Centre continuing the discussion in front of his mural there.

The CBC came to San Miguel, Mexico to do a film on York, Leonard Brooks and Fred Taylor showing their work, the town and the beautiful climate. During the filming the weather suddenly changed becoming windy, cold and even snow flurries, a rare event. We all had a good laugh at the perversity of the weather.

The McGill News, 1972, McGill University, Montreal, mentions the Redpath Library, where York's mural is on the upper half of a two-story high room. It is now a 'Drop-In-Centre'; a floor making two rooms must have been added as a reproduction shows the mural now at floor level. Their system of teaching has changed, they try to motivate students to create and run community projects thereby becoming part of the real world.

PHP, an international magazine published in Tokyo, invites people from all over the world who excel in their field of endeavour to write articles about their work. York wrote about "Shalimar Bagh, Kashmir," how his sketches serve as traveling biography, a kind of visual diary.

Sketching has become a means of recording a variety of visual reactions to places and people. These impressions assist in developing quite abstract paintings, often sev-

eral years later.

The sketch reproduced here was done while I was living for a short time on a houseboat on the Jehlum River, near Srinagar in Kashmir, looking across the river at other houseboats. The date was early April and, though the temperature at Delhi was 105F, the nights in Kashmir, at that time of year, were bitterly cold. Snow covered the mountains each night and melted during the comfortably warm days.

Kashmir is unbelievably strange and beautiful. The mirror-smooth lakes, the Shalimar Gardens, the strange medieval people and buildings, the mountains and blossoms—all combine to become visual poetry.

York Wilson

A large tract of farmland, east of Toronto, was selected by the Federal Government as a second Airport. The government had been quietly buying the land from farmers in the area when people became aware of the planned use. They formed a “People or Planes” Committee to fight this waste of farmland and noise in their community, raising money to do so. Artists were invited to donate paintings to be sold. An art exhibition of many top names in art was held at Brougham Community Hall in the area. York gave his painting Celaya Market. “People or Planes” were eventually successful and the government put the purchased land up for sale again.

York was community minded and took part in many projects such as “Miles for Millions” for the Metropolitan Toronto Walk Committee and volunteers would pay so much per mile for each mile walked. It was in aid of “International Aid and Development.”

It was an honour given to a few who made significant contributions in their own field to be invited by the “The Mas-

ter of Massey College” Robertson Davies, at this time, at the University of Toronto. One had dinner with the “Fellows” which included the accomplished on the University staff. It was most enjoyable for York and it was amusing to see a little touch of British tradition, some with a hankie tucked into their sleeve and the passing of snuff and the Port.

By 1972 the geometric period as such was coming to an end, York found it had left him as suddenly as it started and he found it impossible to do another. It was fortunate that the geometric period happened as he felt he had gained much, related to colour and form. He was coming into his final period, pure abstraction, which his work had indicated from the beginning. Kay Kritzwiser of the Globe and Mail writes about his solo exhibition at the Roberts Gallery:

York Wilson’s paintings are not so much a return to landscape as an emergence on canvas of the sights, sounds, colors and forms which have saturated the subconscious of the painter for 20 years. All those impressions come out now and give us Greece, Rome, Japan and Kashmir in a subtle essence. That’s why Corfu Music, Kashmir Facade, Things Roman are so pleasing. Wilson uses collage to give richer depth to several paintings and it works with golden results in Thanksgiving.

It prompted Joan Murray (still at the AGO in 1972 to write: I saw your show yesterday and wanted to tell you how delightful I found it—it struck me again that York is such a fine colorist—and the work I saw is so very elegant compared to many other artists today.

A letter from the Chairman of the Fine Arts Committee, James M. Thompson, at Carleton University advises that York’s mosaic mural is to be filmed by McLeod of Canada. I vaguely remember Mr. McLeod phoning York to say that the students

wouldn't let him in to film the mural and, could he do something about it. This letter says "Permission has been given" but I still have never heard anything further!

The Art Gallery of Sarnia acquired an excellent portrait that York did of Hedley Rainnie in his studio. L.A.C. Panton, a deceased past President of the Arts and Letters Club was remembered by an exhibition and members loaned their works by him. York had done the drawing portrait of L.A.C. Panton on retirement (a club tradition) which joined the frieze of exalted past Presidents.