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Pot Pourri

An interview with York Wilson in the *Globe and Mail*,
1976:

“There are too many considerations at work when I do a mural. Where it’s going to be, who will look at it. When I do a painting, it’s for myself. There’s no one between you and God, and there aren’t any excuses.” Excuses are inexcusable to Wilson, who knows that art is very difficult work. He doesn’t think artists are born, but that they have to learn to “look and see the world.”

“Picasso once said that when he was a child he could paint like Raphael, but that it took him years to paint like a child.”

Wilson has been “unlearning” his bad habits for decades. Doesn’t hold much affection any more for his earlier works of “social comment.” “I had too little knowledge then of what art was.”

Believes abstraction is “the more important task because it’s a complete statement of my own.” Quote from Plato’s *Philebus*, which extols the beauty of shapes, not the shapes of people, but the lines and curves that “give pleasure on their own, quite free from the itch of desire.”

Laziness, repetition, security purchased at the price of anaesthetizing one’s talent - these are all maladies York Wilson shuns with vigor, sets himself new challenges. “Maybe that’s why I enjoy travelling so much, especially in countries whose language I don’t know, and where I don’t have friends. I’m always curious to see if I can make

it on my own.”

(A painter told me in 1990 that this changed her life - she keeps this pinned on the wall of her studio.)

Some years after York's death in 1984, I came across an interview with the excellent printmaker, Otis Tomasauskas, who worked with York at the "Open Studio" when he was doing a few lithographs in 1977:

When I started out, the macho notion of the master printer appealed to me, but I came to see through that. When I was 21, I was working with the painter York Wilson, who, at the age of 74, was still full of good concepts and was constantly experimenting. That surprised me because I had worked with a lot younger artists, including some pretty great Canadian artists, who were amazingly rigid. Wilson asked if I knew what was shown by the size of a print edition. I thought it indicated some kind of power. He said it indicates the artist's greed. I thought about that, and concentrated less on making large editions. Pure experimentation with the image in relationship to my knowledge about the medium became more important...

A solo exhibition opened at the Roberts Gallery October 23, 1974.

Globe and Mail: This evening an exhibit of recent paintings by York Wilson will open at the Roberts Gallery. Beforehand, his daughter Virginia and her husband, Jon Kieran, are giving a cocktail buffet at Mr. Kieran's office... Toronto Week: Roberts Gallery... The grand old-timer of Toronto art galleries shows York Wilson's most recent work in acrylics and collages...

During this busy Fall, I too was occupied preparing the annual exhibition, 1974, of well-known artists' works for the

Toronto Symphony's fundraising "Dream Auction Art Exhibition." My daughter, Virginia, was a great support in giving us ingenious lighting for these events.

The Sarnia Art Gallery must be given credit for mounting exhibitions of some of the artists who followed the Group of Seven. In 1995 the National Gallery is still bringing out yet another book on the Group while never having given the equally worthy artists following the Group their proper recognition in Canadian art. Some of these artists have been accepted internationally with the world's best, except in Canada, and York Wilson is a case in point!

The Wallack Galleries in Ottawa presented a York Wilson exhibition in November, 1975 and the catalogue had a reproduction of Etruscan Impression. This is York at his best in abstraction and the Wallack Galleries quickly bought it for their own collection.

The Ottawa Citizen had a good and lengthy review with photos but there was little that hadn't been said before, except:

"I used to hate pink," he says: "hated it for years. But then I gradually came to see that pink could do all sorts of things other colors could not. And now I like it."

The Art Gallery of Windsor included four of York's major works in their annual "Art For All" sale.

I presented my annual Toronto Symphony Silent Art Auction, 1975 of 28 major artists at the Delbello Gallery on Queen Street and Lyona Boyd, the talented guitarist, gave the opening address. The night of the final sale we moved it to the Ballroom of the Harbour Castle Hotel. Because of the quality

of work I was able to offer, most exceeded their reserve bids.

I would like to give credit to the Delbello Gallery for their generous assistance many years and the artists for their support. 1975 included Geoffrey Armstrong, Ronald Bloore, Ray Cattell, Robert Daigneault, Ken Danby, Eric Dymond, Philippa Faulkner, Lemoine Fitzgerald, Paul Fournier, Loi Hathaway, Carl Heywood, Philippa Hunter, Virginia Kieran, J. Fenwick Lansdowne, Sheila Maki, Doris McCarthy, Eric Nasmith, Guttorn Otto, Alfred Pelan, Gordon Peters, Leslie Reid, Mac Reynolds, Jean-Paul Riopelle, Oswald Schenk, Ruth Tulving, John Ward, William Winter.

Jill Maxwell, a student, Art Credit course, University of Toronto, did her Spring Term Paper on York Wilson, 1975, (Professor, Barry Lord). Her two pages of questions arrived in Mexico too late to be of help; her paper is full of misinformation, encouraged by Barry Lord with more misinformation. Copies of her letter and York's answers follow.

802 Ferndale St., Oshawa, Ontario, Can. Mon. March 10, 1975

Dear York Wilson,

This winter I'm studying a Canadian Art credit course from Barry Lord at Scarborough College, University of Toronto. After seeing your Retrospective show at the Robert McLaughlin Gallery here in Oshawa Dec. 11-Jan. 12, I decided to do my spring term paper on you and your work.

I wish that I could interview you, but Mexico is a bit too far for that. However I've read some statistics on you, I've assumed a lot of things about you and I've also left a lot of gaps! I hope you'll take the time to reply to my questions.

Although you were employed at Brigdens during the 20's,

30's, and 40's and painting, you didn't start painting full time until 1950. Why did you wait so long? What was it—encouragement, money, self-confidence or other factors that made you leave Brigdens to paint full time?

Your work has changed from early realism to abstract, and now non-objective (Design for Square #2). Can you explain this? Do you in fact relate your changing style to changing times or changing patrons?

Do you paint from within- what you like and feel or do you paint to and for your patrons? Is it what they want? In the monetary sense, you're a very successful artist. You're envied by many who claim you "paint what the people want." Do you support or deny this?

You travel so you must have an inquiring mind. Is your outlook compatible to that of your patrons?

Is it good business to have studios in countries other than Canada?

I liked all your paintings in the Retrospective show. I'm a colour person, so that aspect excited me first of all. I think that colour is very important to you and that you use it to convey an idea i.e. the orange in "Small Wall of China 1966." Tell me what colour or lack of colour means to you.

However the content of your paintings— so present in your early Canadian social commentaries had with time, travel and success virtually disappeared. Why? Don't you feel as "involved" in your paintings when they're done outside Canada?

Very little has been written about you. You're kind of a mystery man. I'm looking forward to your reply to help me to understand you and your paintings.

Yours sincerely, Jill A. Maxwell

(Mrs. T.R.)

Until May 15/75: Pila Seca 35, San Miguel de Allende, Gto., Mexico, March 23, 1975

Dear Jill:

Thank you for a very interesting letter - written March 10th., arrived here March 19th., which is exceptionally fast. I am pleased to answer your questions, that indicate that you have already done some intelligent thinking about the project.

There was a catalog with the Retrospective Exhibition, which you obviously did not see, in which a few of your questions were answered, in a commentary by myself.

A lot of information could be of use if you are able to get a copy of it from either Joan Murray (the Director of the Robert McLaughlin Gallery) or from Jack Wildridge at Roberts Gallery, 641 Yonge St., Toronto.

You can assure either of them that I will replace the catalogue when I return to Canada May 15th.

Following are the answers to your questions, in the order listed. My Art Training was the second and third years only of a four year course at the Central Technical School, Toronto.

Re Brigdens... At 17 years of age, I worked as an apprentice at Brigdens Ltd., Toronto, earning \$5.00 for a 44 hour week. After two and half years at Brigdens, one year at Sampson Matthews Studio, Toronto, then two and a half years at Studios in Detroit; returned to Canada in 1930 and worked as a Free Lance Commercial Artist until 1949. The reason for the long Commercial stint was entirely money. Even in 1949 there were probably less than 20 Artists in all of Canada earning even a meagre living as Fine Artists. Artists as well known as 'Group of Seven,' earned their living as Teachers or Commercial Artists.

To be a full-time painter was my ambition from the beginning and I worked to that end at all times. In the years from 1924-1949, all possible time, week ends and evenings was spent drawing and painting. It was 1932 before I had the courage to submit works to a juried exhibition, the submissions were accepted and I exhibited spasmodically until 1938. By 1938 I felt that I had something to say and

began to paint larger things and to exhibit regularly. About 1943 I was beginning to enjoy a small amount of recognition and was beginning to sell a few paintings, and so began to spend less days on commercial work and more days each week on fine art. Also by that time, I was taking time off for Spring and Fall sketching trips each year. By 1949 I had had paintings in 47 Exhibitions, 5 of which were one-man exhibitions and, was selling enough paintings to suggest that it was time to make the move into Fine Art exclusively. The reason, then, for my long period of commercial art was entirely economical.

Re the change from Realism to Abstraction...

The changing styles had nothing to do with changing times and most certainly nothing what-so-ever to do with Patrons. My Art training had been so limited, that it was years before I learned, that a painting could and must be, more than a recording of a visual experience, somewhat after the manner of a photograph. For several years before I found my way to abstraction, I was feeling a need for a new dimension to my painting, but was unaware of what I was looking for. In 1950, the painting 'Sunlit Street,' was the major turning point in my painting. Before this time, I could appreciate abstract painting, but was unable to find the exact point of departure for myself. It was while doing a sketch for this painting that the meaning of abstraction became amazingly clear. The whole scene in front of me, became visually a related environment. The mountains had the same basic form as the roofs of the houses. The rebozos on the figures in the street repeated the same form. The markings on the street and in the sky and all the elements of the scene, seemed to compliment one another. Even though today, this painting seems to be very slightly abstracted, never-the-less, for me, it was the key to abstracting form. This later led to my ability, to also abstract colour. From 1958-1966 my painting became more and more abstract, at times obscuring the subject matter almost completely. In 1966, there was a change overnight

to a style unlike anything painted previously. My geometric period was the result of two dreams. My wife and I had arrived in Paris in July 1966, on the last leg of our round-the-world trip, that had started in Japan the year before. My mind was brimming with new impressions, that had not yet settled down, and which may have been the cause of the dream. However, one night I dreamed about a geometric painting, in colour. There was no storyline to the dream, just the painting. I had never been much interested in this kind of painting, and the dream was unlike anything that I had ever seen. The next morning, before breakfast, I did a pencil sketch, then after breakfast, decided that the colour was important too, so did a colour version. It took me all day. The next night, I dreamed of another geometric painting. The following day, I went through the same procedure, pencil sketch before breakfast, then all day, doing a colour sketch. I didn't dream again, but as a result of those dreams, from July 1966 until sometime in 1971, I was unable to paint in any other style. My geometric phase stopped as suddenly as it had started, and since that time, it has been impossible for me to do anything like it again.

To explain the sometimes 'non-objective' sometimes 'abstract' paintings from 1971 until today is also impossible. In guessing where the recent paintings come from, I would say that they are a culmination of abstract thoughts, colour impressions, forms consciously and sometimes unconsciously observed that have occurred over the years. These impressions seem to belong together, regardless of their unrelated origins, and constitute the subject matter of my current painting.

Re - do you paint from within?

Yes - I paint from within, but I believe much more from within the head than within the heart. The heart type of paintings are reminders of a usually pleasant, personal, visual experience. Whether it is a landscape, a sunset, a country fair, a lovely child, an elderly patriarch, or what-

ever, there is always an objective visual or emotional experience relived. The 'head' type of painting, is an aesthetic visual experience, a unique, invented visual experience that has not existed before. Its message should be entirely visual and can only be destroyed by translation into another medium, i.e. literature or speech. I have no interest what-so-ever in what patrons want, and in most cases find critics' opinions of my work something I can do without. Related to 'my regard for patrons' opinion,' I would like to mention a 'change of style' incident. In the late forties, I was for a couple of years painting only ballet subjects. These ballet paintings were very popular, and sold immediately, until it reached a point, at which buyers were arranging for the next painting, before it was produced. At this point I realized, that if I continued to paint ballet, the public would make it impossible for me to paint and sell any other subject. With one or two unfilled orders, I stopped painting ballet, thereby annoying the patrons to such an extent, that they stopped buying; refusing to buy paintings of any other subject for about two years. There have been less obvious indications of disapproval each time my style has changed, but I suggest these two examples indicate my attitude to public opinion.

Re - in a monetary sense...

I would like to correct an impression held by many people, that I am one of the fortunate ones, that does not know what a struggling young artist has to go through. May I re-cap a few points: was able to have only two years of art training at a technical school; attended art classes at night, it being necessary to earn a living during the day; worked at commercial art as a necessity for 25 years; worked for \$5.00 a week as an artist, rather than at \$30 or more at something else; re-started as a full-time painter in 1949 with an income less than one third of what it was in 1948. It is true that in a monetary sense I am a successful artist, but I resent very much, any envious people, who infer

that success came from other than long hours of work, seven days a week. To suggest that 'I paint what people want,' is to show a complete ignorance of the facts. May I further point out, that all my travel, etc. have been paid for in full, by myself; in my biography there is no listing under the heading of honours (so-called honours), Canada Council or other grants.

I don't understand the question, re travelling and my outlook being compatible to that of the patrons. I travel because there is a kind of knowledge that cannot be gained in any other way. Particularly in the case of the visual arts, it is necessary to observe and store visual experiences, from their source, and an education in the history of the arts, is impossible without extensive travel. The person, especially the pseudo artist, who believes any real knowledge of art history can be gleaned from books and reproductions is already beyond help.

Re - is it good business to have studios outside Canada? Good business does not come into the question, as far as working outside Canada is concerned. For me it is continually stimulating to work in a new environment from time to time. The atmosphere, the language, the people, the light, the food, the sound, the entire ambience, lends a fresh direction to the mind. Working in any one place too long, whether it be Toronto, New York, Rome, or anywhere, tends to deaden the senses, to lessen awareness, to slow down creativity. For me Mexico is the best climate in the world, but it is necessary to get away from it to realize, that one has been enjoying an unusually high percentage of sunny days, of exotic fruit and vegetables, of flowers blooming continuously, etc.

Re colour -

Colour is the ingredient most important in the visual arts. A painting cannot be right unless the colour is right, and whether the colour is expressing an emotion, or expressing the mood of a landscape, or is used to compose a non-objective design, it has to be right. This is one point where

the audience is of paramount importance. The colour will be right for that part of the audience, with which that specific painting communicates. Since people's taste in colour is so diverse, no painting will communicate, in colour, to 100% of any audience. Consequently my aim in colour, is, as far as possible, to expose my audience to as many new colour experiences as I can, and hopefully increase the percentage of people that appreciate it. I find lack of colour in a painting deplorable. My criticism of much of 'Magic Realism' is that it lacks creative colour. What colour is used, is a facsimile of the existing lack of colour and gives the audience only a review of an existing thing, rather than an experience of non-existing creative colour.

Re the content of my paintings -

When I began painting, I believed the content was something like story-telling. My paintings were illustrations of what was on my mind at the time. They could be described verbally and completely understood. After a time, I found a need to express something, that could be understood only visually. I unconsciously began to avoid painting anything that could be expressed in words. I found that it was possible to see colour more clearly, when no image was present to confuse it. Colour and form relationships can only be appreciated fully, when no object intrudes to distract the mind from a completely intellectual experience. Marshall McLuhan touches on it with his 'Medium is the Message.'

Re involvement in my painting -

I think that I have become more involved in my paintings, in fact, so involved that only those people, who have observed the development of my work, over a period of years, fully appreciate my painting today.

I hope these comments answer your questions and will be helpful in writing your paper. I would appreciate having a copy of the paper when it is completed.

Yours sincerely, Y o r

k Wilson

Thurs. June 5/75

Dear York Wilson,

My term paper has finally been marked and returned to the Scarborough Campus by Barry Lord.

I picked it up yesterday and will mail it now. I have the feeling that Lord doesn't like you!

I'd like the paper back. Joan Murray may have some place for it in her collection on contemporary artists.

Will you please correct my errors and omissions. I'll also enclose a copy of your earlier reply to me mailed from Mexico.

I'm anxious to hear your criticism of this paper.

Sincerely,

Jill Maxwell

Roberts Gallery opened a York Wilson exhibition October of fine abstract paintings 1976. The Arts and Letters, Monthly Letter:

Roberts Gallery, The art world in Toronto is really pulsating. Arnold Edinborough, at Wilson's opening commented how stunned an eminent New York critic was by the Southeby auction and the AGO... the dynamic exhibition... Someone at the club was heard to comment that he thought abstraction was dead. But that was before he went to see York Wilson's show. He was reconverted...

Our daughter Virginia Kieran was sighted by the Globe and Mail (with photo):

...was given the highest civilian award of the provincial police, for cornering a drunken hit-and-run driver...

A letter from a 9-year-old:

Mr. Wilson In school I had to write about a famous person I wrote about you I think you are a kind person and

a great artist When I grow up I want to be a great artist like you I wish you good health bless you and your family My teacher said you are to busy to read or answer my letter I savd my money to buy the stamp From Edward Cabral age 9 years old 176 E Clinton New Bedford Mass 02740 U S A
We love you in America xx

An art interviewer, Vivienne Wechter, from Fordham University with a regular program on New York radio interviewed York in San Miguel, Mexico, requesting he talk about his work. As usual to warm up, she said talk about anything and he started talking about art in general. She found it so interesting that she signalled to continue. On completing the tape she said she would get back to him later. We heard it had gone well in New York and a repeat was requested. However their paths didn't cross again so the tape specifically on York's work wasn't done. Fortunately there exist a few short examples with him talking about his work.

In 1977 the Leaside High School Art Department invited York to speak to the class in the High School Auditorium. In letters of thanks for accepting they stated:

...Through our discussions we would like to gain a better understanding of what is going on in the Canadian contemporary scene.

The Robert McLaughlin Gallery in Oshawa mounted a retrospective of the work of Dennis Burton in 1977 which toured to ten galleries across Canada. Among others Dennis (the recipient of a scholarship) studied in California with Rico Lebrun. Dennis quotes:

...Lebrun was an excellent draughtsman... I had been

through a whole new educational system... very demanding and different from OCA. Lebrun made us learn to draw the figure in two or three different ways... 'conceptual drawing'—one exercise... to have the model for five minutes and then leave, and for us to draw what we had seen... from memory. Another... to draw the figure's rear from the front view, or vice versa... to draw a flower... we were to be the flower to understand how to draw it. We started working this way... and wanted some sort of criticism. York Wilson came to see my work; Wilson had been sent a letter about me from Rico Lebrun, Rico had said York was the most important artist in Canada, and that he should help me... he thought I was doing terrific things and told me about how tough art was...

Wallack Galleries in Ottawa had been thinking about publishing a limited edition book (300) on York's work for some time and decided a colour lithograph should accompany it. This was to be the method used to obtain the costly colour plates; the services of Canada's most important art critic and art historian and all the other costly things that make publishing a commercial edition of quality art books almost impossible. The sale of the limited edition hopefully would cover the cost of the necessary ingredients to help make it possible to go ahead with the commercial edition at a reasonable price.

Claire Wallack of the Wallack Galleries was a brilliant entrepreneur of art and she and John Wallack began the task of getting the ball rolling on the myriad aspects of producing a major art book for publication in 1978. Paul Duval agreed to write the text while the Wallacks worked on the promotion and York started doing lithographs at the Open Studio. He completed four lithographs that year before he was satisfied that he had the right one to accompany the book. It was excit-

ing as the orders came in at the pre-publication price of \$300 for the set, but it was not easy going and we all worked hard to make the dream come true.

Wallack Galleries in Ottawa mounted their biannual exhibition of York's work in the Fall and the invitation piece showed a splendid reproduction of the exciting painting, "A Canaletto Day," an abstraction from York's Venice experience in earlier years. The Arts and Letters Club included a fine reproduction of York's painting Backdrop For a Corroboree for their 1977 calendar.

On Christmas day we flew to Mexico and on to San Miguel but only for a couple of days to join Dudley Baker and Fleta McFarland to drive to Guatemala in Dudley's van.

Dudley had been loaned a house and servants in Antigua, Guatemala, our destination. York found the Indian villages in Chiapas country, just before the Guatemalan border, interesting sketching and did some excellent watercolours. Once across the border we drove hard to make Antigua that night, passing through Guatemala City and arrived exhausted about 8 p.m. The cook had a delicious dinner waiting for us and then off to bed. York was up early exploring his surroundings from the roof, came rushing down to tell us the nearby volcano was erupting, smoke was coming out. The cook laughed and said, "smoke is always coming out," so we relaxed. After breakfast York was off to the Antigua market and with the backdrop of mountains it offered good sketching.

We had friends in Antigua and quickly met a few of the permanent foreign residents who felt they had a Shangri-la in Antigua (the old capital of Guatemala) and said don't tell anyone about it. Among our new acquaintances we met the Ameri-

can archaeologist who excavated “Tikal” and remained to retire in Antigua. He had a vast workshop full of fragments which he said would keep him busy for the rest of his life. The famous market at Chi Chi Castenango is the best place to see the crafts, clothing and every aspect of life in Guatemala. One comes upon the Lake Atitlan suddenly and is so impressed with the strong blue and beauty of the lake that one automatically stops. The Indian population is enormous and there seems to be a primitive, small loom and weaver in almost every yard.

On our return we stopped for York to sketch at Chamula in Chiapas territory, Mexico, as there was a Fiesta in a large park around the church. There was a ticket-taker at the entrance and we bought our tickets, but as we progressed in the direction of the church we were definitely made to feel unwelcome, and as we neared the church we felt it was dangerous to take another step and quickly left.

In 1947 York had sent Beauty Contest to the RCA exhibition in Montreal. When Rodger Selby, Director of the Winnipeg Gallery came to the studio in 1977 he selected Beauty Contest to represent York’s early work in the Winnipeg Gallery. On seeing paintings of the geometric direction he became very excited and proposed to York if he would give a number (such as eight or so) of the geometric paintings to the Winnipeg Gallery, they would permanently dedicate a York Wilson room.

It so happened that we had just offered our home, contents and finances, at time of death to Heritage Ontario as a York Wilson Museum. Having lived in Europe, particularly France for some time, we were conscious of the many small museums and felt Canada was up to that point also. We were both born in Ontario, felt York should be represented in his

own province, particularly Toronto where he was born. Larry Ryan from Heritage Ontario came to talk it over with us and had promised an immediate answer. We didn't feel free to accept Rodger Selby's tremendous offer and said we would let him know. We waited, and waited, a year went by and no answer from Larry Ryan or Heritage Ontario! York was very discouraged and about that time we read in the Press that Rodger Selby had resigned from the Winnipeg Gallery and returned to the States.

May 16/17, 1978 the Arts and Letters Club and the Heliconian Club combined for York Wilson evenings, his exhibition was on the walls, he spoke both evenings and Imperial Oil sent a film technician who showed the Imperial Oil film, "MURAL" on both occasions. With both evenings being oversubscribed, everyone was pleased to do double duty, including the kitchen staff who served excellent dinners.

Crown Life Insurance featured a fine reproduction, Mountain Cut, of York's from the Guatemalan experience in their annual report from their permanent display of more than sixty works by Canadian artists in their Home Office Building.

A fun cartoon appeared in the Toronto Star by "Barron" with York painting circles and stripes while surrounded by a lake and trees, the back of his smock says "Goguin," his paint box "Brack Super Collapsible Paint Box" and other fun touches including a sad-looking cat holding a sign which read: "Roll Over Harold Town."

Charles (Chuck) Matthews, an eager supportive member of the Arts and Letters Club proposed that York have an extra ten colour reproduction (no printing) run off for the Club to be sold by Chuck Matthews at an agreed price—say \$25-\$50

each, signed by York Wilson. These prints would come from the York Wilson book by Paul Duval, now in progress. Of course for ethical reasons, York could not agree to this!

The Kenneth Campbells (Mona) gave a garden cocktail party for the popular, retiring R. McCartney Samples (Mac and Elsie). Mac had been British consul-general in Toronto for more than nine years and was dean of the city's consular corps. The Campbells's guests contributed toward a goodbye gift, a York Wilson book to be published in November. We were pleased about this as the Samples were two of our dearest friends.

York gave his print Mayan to the Montreal Chapter of Hadassah to raise funds for Israel, and had the delightful surprise that it won First Prize. He also contributed again to the Canadian Opera Art Exhibition at the O'Keefe Centre and sent his oil Pachuca; and again York was invited to be the guest of the "High Table" at Massey College, University of Toronto.

In October, Roberts Gallery mounted York Wilson's exhibition, one of the finest shows of abstractions seen anywhere. York was at his peak, his lifetime search and experimentation had added up to paintings like the major Oriental Interior, which was snapped up immediately by a collector who had five other of York's major works plus the book and print. He certainly knew what he was buying and my hope is that one day they will end up in a museum.

The deluxe limited edition book, York Wilson, by Paul Duval, Foreword by Marshall McLuhan was finally ready and Toronto subscribers were invited to a Champagne party at the home of our daughter Virginia, and her husband Jon Kieran, in Rosedale, to pick up their books which were being signed by the three participants, York Wilson, Paul Duval and a few

were fortunate enough to obtain Marshall McLuhan's signature.

The book contains almost a hundred superb reproductions, mostly in colour; Paul Duval has covered York's various periods with understanding and perspicacity. I don't think the book could have materialized without Claire Wallack's vision and expert handling. It is beautifully designed by Fred Gotthans and produced by Chris Yaneff Ltd. Marshall McLuhan, who wrote the Foreword, was a man before his time and is only beginning to be understood today. I would like to share his scholarly essay with you:

In the nuclear age abstract or non-objective art is plainly prophetic. On the phone or on the air the user of electric services has no physical body. We are discarnate people, figures in an instantaneous and invisible ground of energy and vibration. This resonant and acoustic ground is discontinuous and man-made, deeply involving and subjective yet minus any point of view or personal stress. The work of York Wilson is a notable manifestation of the new awareness of nuclear man, the shift from sight to insight. The paradox of visually representative art, the art of copy, has been that the visual faculty had first to be abstracted from the human sensorium before the matching or copying of the environment could begin. The Greeks began it with their innovation of the phonetic alphabet. Twenty-four semantically abstract and meaningless sounds began the translation of the acoustic world of speech into the visual world of writing. This matching process of sound and sight had begun in Greece in the sixth century B.C., leading at once to the abstractly visual form of Euclid and to the copy art of Plato's time. After the ages of iconic and multi-sensuous art of pre-literate man, visual representation was itself extremely abstract and novel.

E.H. Gombrich reminds us that mimesis or copying the

pictorial effects of things, “the world of mirrors that deceive the eye,” this new skill, was a recent invention of Plato’s day which evoked his scorn as mere illusion. Plato was condemning “the great awakening of Greek sculpture and painting between the sixth century and the time of his youth toward the end of the fifth century B.C.” (p. 116). The ground for this great awakening had been created by the spread of the unique form of phonetic literacy in the same period. Prior to literacy there had been centuries of non-representative art, which induced Gombrich to remark “Making comes from matching.” The world of the audible-tactile is multi-sensuous and of age-old experience before the emergence of the alphabetic abstraction of the visual.

If a massive cultural innovation promoted the rise of visual and representational art in the fifth century B.C., an equal revolution in our twentieth century environment and perception must have occurred to create a bias in favour of non-objective art in the age of phenomenology. From the time of Hegel to Husserl, and from Faraday to Einstein, there has developed an increasing awareness of the ground behind the phenomena we perceive. Our new environment is electrical and resonant rather than visual, evoking a sense of primal involvement and touch, rather than the visual sense of objective spectatorship. In the new acoustic ground we naturally tend to relate by pattern-recognition of figures in a ground, rather than by the matching of object according to verisimilitude.

York Wilson is a key figure in relating us to both the old visual world of realism and to the new resonating world of touch and echo and pattern. His own words explain the transition we have experienced in the twentieth century from the pictorial to the iconic and the patterned:

“Sunlit Street was the major turning point in my painting. Before this time I could appreciate abstract painting, but unable to find the exact point of departure for myself. It was while doing the sketch for this painting that the mean-

ing of abstraction became amazingly clear. The whole scene in front of me became visually a related environment. The mountains had the same basic form as the roofs of the houses. The rebozos on the figures in the street repeated the same form. The markings on the street and sky and all the elements of the scene seemed to complement one another. Even though today this painting seems to be very slightly abstracted, nevertheless for me it was the key to abstracting form. This later led to my ability to also abstract colour.

It was shortly after this discovery that I began to study picture construction per se. Prior to this time, a composition was limited to what could only be described as 'tidying up the elements.' But now there was a conscious effort to orchestrate each painting so that even without any recognizable subject the painting would be complete as a work of art. En route to the Canary Islands in 1952, we spent many days in the Louvre in Paris and the Prado in Madrid. It is a fact that during the time spent in these museums I developed an insight into abstraction through the work of artists like Ucello, Piero della Francesca, Breughel, etc. The understanding that I derived from them was much clearer than from my contemporary painters." Behind the dramatic account of a transition there is a rich story of experiment and discovery and dialogue that emerged in an art that is calm, serious, and splendid.

Those acquainted with York Wilson recognize his joy in the intellectual exploration of the very complex world we share. That is why his work opens doors not only on art but on science. Anyone reading Lewis S. Feuer's "Einstein and the Generations of Science" (Basic Books Inc., New York, 1974) will see how the work of York Wilson offers many vistas into the world of Linus Pauling and Sperry and Bogen. Each of his paintings and murals is an encounter with current science and technology, and with the intense conversations they engender. Feuer makes it clear that the abstract science of Einstein's generation was

built on a direct struggle to dislodge the old establishment of continuous and connected and rational space. The work of York Wilson represents a major endeavour to comprehend and to replace the established verities of visual space. Going along with this effort to update our awareness of the new scientific world was his sharing an intellectual dialogue with the educated people of his milieu. He also shared in the artistic benefits of his time of scientific change. As Feuer comments in words which apply to modern art:

“Generational rebellion is a powerful motivating force in the progress of science... In science generational rebellion widens the imagination, deepens the intuition, proposes challenging hypotheses, provokes laborious calculation and patient observation; but additionally, science has the common discipline and criteria of scientific method, which bind into a joint enterprise both intergenerational and intersubjective the diverse hypotheses and emotional standpoints.”

The painting of York Wilson is not based so much on new skills and techniques as on a new way of seeing and knowing the world. Such changes in perception go with long debates and questioning and doubting of our personal identities. The nisus toward creativity in art and science is generated by strong emotion. Einstein wrote:

“The normal adult never bothers his head about spacetime problems. Everything there is to be thought about it, in his opinion, has already been done in early childhood. I, on the contrary, developed so slowly that I only began to wonder about space and time when I was already grown up. In consequence, I probed deeper into the problem than an ordinary child would have done.”

York Wilson has been driven by the desire for precision, yet this has not diminished his capacity to individualize and to render his abstraction dramatic and majestic.

Marshall McLuhan

Professor and Mrs. O.J.Firestone collected many Canadian artists over the years which included 49 works of York's, mostly drawings of the nude female figure. Some of York's best drawings are in this collection. The Firestone home in Ottawa and their large collection was officially accepted by Heritage Ontario in 1973. In 1978 an exhibition and major catalogue was presented in Toronto at the Campbell House, an early Toronto residence which has been restored and maintained by Heritage Ontario on University Avenue. There are only 40 works of York's listed in the catalogue, but I believe Jack Firestone sold or traded some works in order to obtain others. Unfortunately there is a small study related to the Bell Telephone Mosaic among the works as I have carefully tried to keep all mural studies intact with a view to donating them to the right museum. There is a major oil, Paeon to Autumn, 1971, near the end of York's geometric period.

We spent less than two months in Mexico that winter and York brought back 66 watercolours. He planned the art work and decoration design for the Arts and Letters Club's Christmas dinner. Our first Mexican friend in San Miguel, artist Enrique Cervantes, died in February, 1979 and his wife Sonia asked York to write a few words for the catalogue for his exhibition at Bellas Artes in San Miguel de Allende.

From the standpoint of interest and acceptance a very successful exhibition of the Mexican watercolours was held in March, 1979 at the Manuge Galleries in Halifax. There were many reviews and broadcasts. Elizabeth Manuge wrote to say that a Dr. Feldeman, an Art Historian from Georgia University, thought York's work was marvellous and spent considerable time during which he remarked: "I see what he's doing

here and it came off very well,," "this one is really all together" etc. Among the reviews, most of it said before, but this one thought caught my eye: "...he feels comfortable in Toronto, but he does not want to feel too safe when painting. He wants to be a nervous painter, in search of new visual ideas and concepts."

The Head of the Art Department at York's old school, Central Tech, wrote to thank York for his participation in their "Art Festival Centech." The AGO mounted "100 years of the Poster in Canada" and toured the exhibition. York sent Palacio de Bellas Artes poster, but in rereading the invitation today, it would have been interesting if he had included others such as: Save The Children and Bond Drives during the war, etc. York sent Crowded Market for auction in support of The Three Schools when requested by Dennis Burton and Graham Coughtry. Whenever York was not well along came menus, show invitations or whatever with dozens of signatures from his pals at the Arts and Letters Club.

The Windsor Art Gallery mounted a carefully selected retrospective exhibition in November, ranging from early on the spot sketches in the Arctic in 1946 to works in 1979. It included Mexican Girl, 1951 (shown in Paul Duval's book on Canadian Drawings and Prints), a tapestry, the oval painting A Propos de Shaka (shown at Sao Paulo, 1963) and a geometric painting.

Windsor Star, David Quintner: ...One of Canada's most consistently brilliant and durable painters... What he has given us in his 72 years, as a muralist, tapestry designer, painter in watercolors, oils, gouache and acrylics, with pencil and conte, should assure him of perpetual studio space and eternal northeast light in the Canadian art fir-

mament...

Mid-November opened York's solo show at the Wallack Galleries in Ottawa which included his first paintings of Borneo Batiks, a subject that interested him at the time. The bright, wonderful designs in the batiks worn by the women of Borneo, now Sabah and Sarawak, attracted him from time to time, when looking over his sketches made in those countries.

After many years a return to the West Indies to visit our friends Margo Moser (the actress) and Bill Cohen (a Connecticut Doctor) who had built a charming house overlooking a bay on the island of St. John, one of the U.S. Virgin Islands. York had several days of painting there and nearby islands.

In January, 1980, the Wallack Galleries, Ottawa opened a gallery across the street on Bank Street, Wallack Art Editions, devoted to Canadian and international graphics, Claire Wallack was in charge. Unfortunately it didn't last very long as the Wallacks separated. Many felt Claire Wallack was a great loss to the art world!

York was no longer very well, from time to time in and out of the hospital. A nice tribute came from his mural assistant, Robert Paterson:

Lives are interwoven like threads of a weaving, moving in and out, affecting and being affected by others as they go. My own life-thread was altered when I came into contact with York Wilson in the autumn of 1956 while as a student of his in an evening class at the Ontario College of Art. I was here introduced to a way of painting and thinking about art which was a new and exciting adventure. Unfortunately in mid-term he was obliged to resign due to illness and was replaced by another instructor. He was greatly missed by the class, and by myself in particu-

lar, for he had a very special way of getting people to think about their work and of encouraging them.

We were not to meet again until the following spring while attending a function at the Art Gallery of Ontario, and it was at this time that he spoke of a pending mural project and invited me to assist with it. This 'Imperial Oil Mural' was to become part of my life, as it had already been part of his for some time.

Together with Jack Bechtel as the other and more senior assistant, we began work in August, 1957. The three of us became a team with a common goal which was to transpose the ideas of the completed sketch to the huge wall in the lobby of the Imperial Oil Building. It was apparent from the beginning that the mural had been thoroughly thought out, with no detail concerning it having been overlooked. Apart from the actual content and the design, the materials to be used, and the appearance from a distance or from various angles in the lobby, were given great importance. Even the texture of the wall itself was a major consideration.

Little did I realize that the opportunity to assist on the Imperial Oil mural was to be involved with one of the more important works in Canada. Even at the time there was a pervading sense of historical meaningfulness, which added greatly to the excitement and intensity of the operation.

The 'sketch' which was the culmination of many months of research and creative input, provided the guide for what we were expected to produce in grand scale on the wall itself. It was required to be accurate in the nature of its 'information,' but also to be aesthetically pleasing and visually inspiring. It represented the desired effect as an end result was the over-riding motivation and challenge, and York seemed to have a clear idea of what this was to be. It was for Jack Bechtel and I to help out in more physical terms to achieve this end and in doing so we became emotionally involved with every aspect. Even the careful

mixing of the ingredients to make the vinyl acetate medium was a large part of the task at hand.

I was impressed with the experimental excitement of the testing and trying out of various ideas and materials. York struck me as almost being a 'mad scientist,' not content with the accepted materials and approaches to mural painting, but wanting to use this new paint which he had learned about in Mexico.

It is many years now since the three of us laboured for so many months on that wall, but the memory of it lingers. The conversations, the jovial moments, were as much a part of a day as was climbing up and down the scaffolding and mixing the colours. Work on the O'Keefe Centre mural a couple of years later continued our friendly working relationship and even enriched the high regard in which I held York Wilson.

I cannot add to this biography in solely a cold, documentary fashion. The contact with York and his 'perfect' wife, Lela, had too great an impact on my own sensibilities and outlook on Art and Life, to be casual or to speak only of the work on the walls. The stories about Mexico, Italy and France caught my imagination and opened up a whole new world to me, being at the time a naive lad from Sudbury. The artist-colleagues were introduced, and I even learned that 'tomatoes' referred to beautiful women! One day after lunch the conversation centred on New York City and since it was Friday, I decided to go there on the week end to see it for myself. York suggested that that wouldn't be enough time and so offered an extra two days in order to make the visit worthwhile. That was the beginning of a love-affair with that city which is on-going, having returned many times since.

While working on the Imperial Oil mural, I was especially interested in painting a certain section, but York had a particular interest in the same area, and he was, after all, 'the boss.' I offered a deal whereby I would work on it New Years day instead of taking the holiday, and that he

could paint it out later should he not be satisfied with it. A compromise resulted as he touched it up a bit after I had painted it, and so we were both happy in the end. That is the way things were as myself and the other assistant came to regard the work as 'our wall' and tried to satisfy ourselves with what we did, as well as trying to satisfy York.

The only un-nerving experience was when at the O'Keefe Centre, a union leader climbed the scaffold while we were working and insisted that we either join the Painters and Decorators Union, or else let union-members complete the mural. It was a serious challenge at the time, and took a lot out of us, although it was eventually resolved.

I always enjoyed the occasional visit to their home, which was unique and possessed many features which made it a very personal and warm place. The studio as part of one's home was a new concept to me at the time. There were countless situations which were 'new' to me including the genuine enthusiasm with which everything was greeted, from beach stones to old master paintings. The period of serious involvement with York Wilson and the murals will always remain a high-point in my life and harbour fond-memories.

Paterson

R o b e r t

York again supported the Canadian Opera's fundraising sale of art with three paintings in January and August, and fundraising for St. Christopher House (community support in many directions) in January. He gave a drawing, along with many other gifts from artists to Kay Kritzwier on her 70th birthday. A. Nardelli, a graduate student at Concordia University in Montreal, chose to do his paper on York's mural in the Redpath Library at McGill University. York took part in the art decoration for the A & L Club's Spring Review "Out Of Your Mind." He took part in an exhibition at Roberts Gallery

along with 22 Academicians handled by that gallery. He acted on the jury to select the “Arts Award, Ontario” students given each year by F. Javier Sauza of Mexico. A Sauza award includes the fare to Mexico, a course of study in the arts, living expenses and spending money.

Less than six months before Marshall McLuhan’s death on December 31, 1980, the Toronto University talked about closing the Marshall McLuhan Centre for Culture and Technology, which infuriated York sufficiently to write a letter to the editor of the Globe and Mail:

The closing of the Marshall McLuhan Centre for Culture and Technology on June 27, is probably the biggest blunder Canada has made in many years.

Marshall McLuhan is one of the Canadian names that is respected and quoted all over the world. Many countries have made attractive offers to Dr. McLuhan, but he has remained faithful to a country that has no appreciation of Greatness.

It is ridiculous to say that there will be an \$18,000 saving by closing the Centre, when the Canada Art Bank spends at least that much for a couple of pieces of garbage annually in the name of Art.

There is no excuse or reason why we should let an international name, and a great person be ignored and forgotten.

I, personally have known people from Japan, United States, France, England and Mexico, who envy us this great Canadian.

Let us make sure that some tangible recognition of Dr. McLuhan is assured before it’s too late.

York Wilson, R.C.A.

Leonard Brooks,

March 1983

Nearly fifty years ago when he was introduced to me, York

Wilson (then known by his friends as “Ron”) was a professional, successful, young designer and commercial artist, and was making a name for himself with his spirited paintings of Canadian life and landscape. We wanted him to join the Ontario Society of Artists, and later the Canadian Academy of Art. He did, and rapidly became president and a moving force in the growing Canadian art world of active young painters.

A fine draughtsman and technician, with a facility that allowed him to paint intimate watercolors or huge, complicated murals, he laboured to produce a constant body of work, seldom repeating himself or allowing success to trap him in repetitions of style. Like most good artists he could afford to break the pattern expected of him, and to diverge his talents. Experimenting and searching, he explored and studied many of the new realms of expression rampant during the thirties and forties, and “abstract” sixties. Whatever he did, and at times he found himself down some seemingly blind alleys of effort, he did with enthusiasm and skilful tenacity. A “York Wilson” had its own authority and was always a sincere search for a means of visual expression in its finest sense. Figurative, Non-Figurative, formal or abstract expressionism, York travelled the world, breaking from the cosy security of his Toronto surroundings to study and work with the manifold ways open to the contemporary artist.

I, trying to do likewise, found him a great friend and joined him in many adventures in Canada, Mexico, France, Italy where our paths crossed, and we sketched and worked in our different studios.

Endowed with a warm sense of humor as well as his sensitivity and serious intent, we laughed and worked along the Venetian Canals, the Paris boulevards, explored the Mexican towns, mountains and tropical forests. Some of these adventures I have recounted in my books on art. On painting trips together, talking, joking, arguing and philosophizing.

York had traversed many paths of the art world searching for ways to express himself. Never dull, experimenting and exploring the many ways of traditional and contemporary means, he has done an immense body of work. At times, his buoyant energies have been used to do large mural projects, skilfully researched and conceived. At other times he has gone into a more private world of traditional expression, at other times to free, abstract expressionism.

It has been a privilege and a joy for me to have spent the time we have had together—never competing, enjoying each other’s successes. To paint something “good,” “worthwhile,” a little better than the last one, and nearer to what we hoped and knew could be the real thing—a work of art. Braque said: “Painting is a compromise with the impossible.” I salute York whose work over his lifetime has made that “impossible” less formidable for himself, for us, and others to come. He is fulfilling himself as a genuine, creative spirit and has contributed a legacy of work which has added lustre to Canada’s art image in the world. Leonard Brooks

San Miguel de

Allende, Gto., Mexico, 1983

YORK WILSON

You might think it would be easy to write about one who has accomplished a great deal, one who has steered such a straight course of achievement for so long so successfully with apparent ease and unconcern for shoals and obstacles of so many formidable kinds, but in the case of my old friend York Wilson, where does one begin? If you say, “At the beginning,” he might very reasonably and characteristically pipe up and ask, “What beginning? When?”, which would be natural for him to do. His motto might very well be “Deeds speak louder than words.” I do not remember when I first met him, whether I met him and then became aware of his work or if it was the other way around. And it doesn’t matter for he is in so many

ways indistinguishable from it. No one has ever seen paintings signed by him which might be attributed to anyone else. Yes, he has style, plenty of it, whether you refer to his line or design, his bangs or his ties. York is emphatically York and don't let anyone think that they might talk him out of any of his convictions! They are legion and fiercely held.

I remember being jealous of his successful arrangement to make his hazardous safari along the Alaska Highway for I had wanted to go there to record its construction. York just did it - and his many many murals and hundreds of canvases and drawings in different media, no fuss, very little talk, and before you knew he'd begun, he'd completed a great deal of very good, very difficult and lasting work, very well. It stands as his monument for all to appreciate.

Of the man himself it would be impossible to speak without reference to his enormous fund of humour. He must be known to be fully appreciated and one must have seen and heard him telling of "The Oriental Potentate" or others of his repertoire, - the snorts and the whistles, the groans and the grunts! Just as it is impossible to think of York without smiling and chuckling with him, it is impossible to think of him without thinking and smiling about Lela - about "The Wilsons," for they are a team, an inseparable force which it would be very difficult to think and speak of otherwise. All through the history of painting since Rembrandt there have been painters whom one cannot consider without also considering their wives and the supporting roles they played in those illustrious lives which certainly would not have been as renowned without them. Such partners are not a matter of luck and chance: they have been strong teams by design - the design of the partners, and the credit must be shared equally. All successful people are remembered and in the history of painting in Canada York and Lela will always enjoy special loving remembrance. Fred Taylor, 12.VII.82