

# VII

1951 - 1952

## Steady Progress

As we tried to live by sales of paintings, we cut back on our standard of living. York was doing much teaching. Except for summers at Doon, the rest were evening classes. He taught one night a week at the AGT and at OCA, and two a week at the Artists' Workshop, run by Barbara Wells. He guarded his painting time during the day. Alex Panton was then principal of OCA and asked York to teach there. York said he did not have more time for teaching when Alex said, "It is your duty." York was worried by this and reluctantly agreed to one evening a week. It was too much, he began to feel tired most of the time. Other captives for teaching were Jack Bush and Cleeve Horne.

One of Jack's students at the AGT was the stockbroker, Jim Gairdner. Jack felt Jim was a natural primitive and just wanted to keep him painting in his own way. This annoyed Jim, so he quit Jack's class and joined York's, but York had the same idea. Jim said, "Damn it, I'm paying to be taught and no one will teach me." He then tried Cleeve with much the same result. However, they all became good friends and Jim was so determined about painting that he built a studio on his estate, near Oakville. The mansion was formal with marble floors. Jim was quite a rough diamond. Apparently he had recently lost his first wife, which may have been the reason for his

devotion to painting. He told us that she had been a good sport and they had a happy life together. When she died, he planned a big party with all their friends. He had her dressed beautifully for the party and had her placed sitting in a chair with a drink nearby, looking as life-like as possible. He saw no reason why she shouldn't enjoy her own wake.

Jim's studio was perfect, the envy of every artist. He invited his artist friends for the cornerstone laying, asking Cleeve to do the honours and rewarded him with a silver trowel. He had filled the space with current newspapers and memorabilia of the era, to be opened 100 years later. When the building was finished, we were invited to celebrate. The studio had generous storage space for paintings, shelves of new frames and prepared canvases. He had a well-stocked bar, kitchen and bedroom. Everything was complete in this small studio/house, a distance from the mansion. In the large garden on Lake Ontario, the small bay had graceful tethered swans.

In 1953 Jim and his new wife Kay turned up in San Miguel. Kay was a widow, a lovely gentle person, so different to the sporty, hale Jim. We had them to dinner and served duck, freshly shot and brought by Sterling Dickinson. Unfortunately the ducks were a little fishy, I was embarrassed, but the Gairdners were good sports and seemed to enjoy them.

York talked about the work of his friend, Rico Lebrun, currently artist in residence at the Instituto Allende. Jim was anxious to meet Rico and see his work. This was difficult as Rico allowed no one in his studio except one or two artists. York explained to Rico about this wealthy philanthropist who had funded so many good causes and was devoted to painting.

Rico agreed that we could bring them the next morning. Rico did his studies on the floor on large sheets of brown paper, abstract drawings done with india ink and a brush. They probably made little sense to Jim, and he just stood there quietly looking. Eventually Rico began to pull out some small studies. A fish skeleton on a plate caught Jim's eye. This he recognized, and asked if he could buy it. Rico said, "It belongs to York; if he says you can have it, it's a gift." York was taken aback, wondering what Rico's motive could be, but quickly agreed. Later Rico explained that, if he did a favour for Jim, Jim might be moved to do something for art in Canada. The Gairdners were pleased with their acquisition, but I think a little uncomfortable since he was used to being the generous one.

The next morning, Jim called to say they both felt ill and needed a doctor. Dr. Olsina rushed to their hotel. It turned out that Jim had high blood pressure and Kay low, and that they should get to sea level as quickly as possible. A car and driver were summoned and they were on their way immediately leaving us a little worried.

When they reached home, Jim had the fish skeleton nicely framed and it hung in his office until slightly before his death, when he sent it to York with a note to say that it was now his turn to enjoy it. Unhappily Jim and Kay did not stay together long and Jim married his secretary. It took a while for her to get used to being Mrs. Gairdner. When Jim invited us to dine at the York Club, we noticed she was still calling him Mr. Gairdner.

Under the Franco regime in Spain many Spaniards left. Dr. Francisco (Paco) Olsina was one; he came to San Miguel and was instrumental in starting a hospital. His friend, the

Spanish writer, Paulino Massip, settled in Mexico City. His daughter, Carmen, often came to San Miguel to visit Dr. Olsina, eventually settling there and marrying an American, Jim Hawkins. Carmen started an excellent language school in San Miguel and I was one of her first students. She gave me a book "Don Quixote," the first I read in Spanish. Today she has been Director of Bellas Artes, in San Miguel for many years.

York exhibited less in 1950, probably because of the drain of teaching. He was given an inscribed, silver cigarette box in appreciation for three years of active service as President of the OSA. He was still on the council of the OSA, RCA, and exhibited with the CGP, sending Mexican Pattern and Cocktail Party to the CNE. The AGT replaced society exhibitions with "Exhibition of Contemporary Painting" and The Mill was accepted, inspired by an old mill near the Doon School. Hart House, University of Toronto, held an exhibition of portraiture which toured and York sent Jack Kent Cooke. The National Film Board completed their documentary on Social Services in British Columbia which included Welfare Worker. York taught yet another class an evening a week for business men on Centre Island. An interview with the G&M: Wilson says, "Art Renaissance Is On In Canada." York had two solo exhibitions, one at the old Homer Watson Gallery at Doon and one at the new Laing Galleries. G&M reports:

WILSON PAINTINGS FEATURE OPENING OF LAING GALLERIES ...The first building to be designed specifically as a commercial art gallery... signs of the times... opening exhibition was a Canadian... 35 recent canvases by York Wilson... a heartening experience... has artistic character enough to maintain unity and integrity

of his own talent... That talent seen in maturity, has size and bears out the promise of his years of preparation for mature leadership. There is not a superficial picture of mere atmosphere or the spooky emotionalism that overcome some artists who come up against the folk ways and religious pageantry of Mexico. At the same time, form is never merely intellectual exercise, but the framework of warm picture-making. The faces, figures, above all the mountainous landscape of the country, have both depth and drama. Probably not the least of the virtues in Mr. Wilson's work is the fact this brilliance is consistently combined with taste...

The other two papers carried complimentary criticisms also. The Jack Kent Cooke's treated us to a fine dinner before the opening to the Laing exhibition, driving us around the city in their big open sports car, depositing us in style at the Gallery. Cleeve and Jean Horne wired congratulations from England:

"Here's to a great turnout, sellout and blowout on us and all that sort of thing."

"The Lamp," a publication of the Standard Oil of New Jersey ran five illustrations of York's. Western Home Monthly ran York's interview with Siquieros comparing Mexican and Canadian art. He spoke at the Heliconian Club to a group of women artists. York did a drawing for "UNICEF's Save the Children Fund" which "Saturday Night" reproduced:

**DRAWING MATURES IN CANADA - BLACK AND WHITE:** Since the high renaissance, drawing has been considered the basis of painting and the graphic arts. For centuries it has been—and, for the most part, still remains—the foundation of all art instruction.

Any intelligent appreciation of painting presupposes some acquaintance with drawing. For, in drawings are to be seen the artist's style and personality stripped of the pretentious and elegant overtones with which he often decorates his canvases. To the trained eye, drawings can be as frankly revealing as handwriting or doodling. Great painters have not always been great draughtsmen, but history's leading draughtsmen have always been men of remarkable character. For good drawing does not permit of vacillation; it is an art of decision and commands a constant vigilance of hand and eye.

Recently there has been a greatly increased interest in drawings, a fact which augurs well for art appreciation...

Wm. Watson of the Watson Art Galleries in Montreal offered to represent York in Montreal and York sent a few paintings. He was well received, many artists said, he was long overdue. A solo exhibition followed in 1951. It was the beginning of a happy relationship with the Watson Galleries, the Montreal public and the local critics.

The first exhibition showed Mexican themes, Quebec landscape and ballet. The glowing reception he received was heart warming. All three subjects were lauded even recalling some of the humorous paintings shown with the RCA at the MMFA. Robert Ayre, the well-known art critic, says it all:

He has a great appetite for the color and rhythm of life and he is an extremely accomplished painter, healthily enjoying the exercise of his faculties as much as he enjoys what he sees in Canada and in Mexico: and what he transforms, for he is not a literal painter...

The Canadian painter, Michael Forster, who spent time in Mexico wrote:

Montreal Standard: CANADIAN SEES MEXICO...  
Exhibition... Watson Gallery... long overdue here...  
working with fine command both duco and oil...

Le Devoir: Influence heureuse de l'étranger... un  
tempérament vigoureux... L'Art Ardent de Wilson... cette  
peinture est sincère et plein de force...

ART - York Wilson, RCA... Shows Paintings Here... the  
work is that of a sincere painter of very evident gifts...  
The Most Significant Artist of Our Day...

During Wilson's first trip to Mexico in 1949, he had been surprised to find some artists using automobile paint for fine art. Apparently Alfaro Siquieros painted with anything he could get while spending time in a Mexican prison, including pyroxalyn (better known as 'Duco'), made by the Dupont Company for use on cars.

York experimented with this and found it must be applied to a rigid surface such as wood or masonite. He didn't like the high gloss of duco and found that by adding sand, celite (ground sea shells) or marble dust made it matt as well as giving it texture. It dried quickly eliminating the waiting for oils to dry before putting on another colour. There was always the worry with oils of bad chemical reactions of certain colours or in over-painting when the under colour wasn't dry, causing cracking later. He came back knowledgeable and enthusiastic about duco paint, interesting his colleagues and introducing it generally to Canadian artists.

This interested the AGT and they bought their first pyroxalyn (duco) painting, York Wilson's Peons in 1950. Lotta

Dempsey, journalist, wrote:

...take a good look at York Wilson's painting of butterfly net fishermen at Patscuaro, Mexico. You'll find the men of the sea in this remote part of the country interesting, with a type of fishing done nowhere else in the world. But the painting is another point of interest, in that the artist used car paint—or—duco—on the job.

Mr. Wilson has gone right out on a limb about the new medium, expressing the opinion that one day it will replace oils to a large extent; and certainly the rough, thick, heavy effect it is possible to get is fresh and exciting...

During York's third summer of teaching at Doon, everyone was anxious to know about the new medium 'duco.' A number of his Mexican canvases were hung in their annual exhibition during the summer.

York spoke to the Niagara District Art Association and the paper reported:

...the artist devoted considerable time to analysis and constructive criticism...

The CBC did a film on Canadian artists in San Miguel de Allende, featuring York Wilson, Fred Taylor and Leonard Brooks.

York took great pleasure in doing works of art for special occasions. He did a book of paintings for the retiring president of the AGT, Harold Walker, QC.

"Salute to a Retiring President" paintings were allegedly by many well-known artists, Picasso, Degas, Cleeve Horne, Jean Horne, York Wilson, Benny, Tom Thomson, Modigliani, Syd Watson, Rouault, Braque, Gauguin, Renoir, Dufy, Klee, Kandinsky, David Milne, Eric Gill, Marc Chagall, Seurat and Panton.

This was a major work, just the sort of thing York did quite often for his friends, chuckling along in the heat of creation: Thomson was Thomas Thomson, the painting 'East Wind' - Dufy's remarks 'Long time no see' and David Milne 'Sorry I didn't ever get to the Gallery.' The book was presented at a farewell dinner and the paintings being in the style of each artist, for a moment Harold thought it was legitimate. One hopes the book ends up at the AGO.

In March, 1951 York gave a painting demonstration with a ballet model for the AGT, commenting as he painted. It went along fine but in the latter half he became so engrossed in his work that he completely forgot his audience. I realized what had happened but there was nothing I could do. At the end everyone seemed pleased enough for the opportunity of watching an artist in action. Later he confided that he no longer believed in demonstrations, that the artist is compelled to do things for effect, things he wouldn't do ordinarily, disturbed him. But being such a strong supporter of the AGT he did another demonstration in the sculpture court in December, trying his level best to be completely honest with his painting and answer questions later.

The 79th exhibition 1951 of the OSA created quite a furor, too many modern works and four members resigned including Archibald Barnes, Manly MacDonald, Kenneth Forbes and Angus MacDonald. It is most unfortunate such things happen, in any group there should be room for all directions of art and, times do change! It was reminiscent of the early struggle of the Group of Seven, accused of painting things like the inside of a drunkard's stomach. Today their work is very conservative. Some of the terms used this time were

“monstrosities and meaningless doodling. The jury of selection was a serious group of painters: J.S. Hallam, Yvonne Housser, J.W.G. MacDonald, B. Cogill Haworth and York Wilson, with Cleeve Horne officiating as president.

Viscount Alexander opened the exhibition. An amateur painter himself, he enjoyed discussing art with the artists and did so on many occasions with York. A large work of York's, Toluca Market in the new medium duco was awarded the J.W.L. Forster prize. Viscount Alexander took special pleasure in presenting it to York and a photo was taken of them discussing the painting.

Canadian Art ran a photo of York Wilson interviewing artists during the OSA opening at the AGT. The gallery believed the attendance (well over 2,000) to be the largest in the gallery's 51 years. During these years art was really reaching the people, largely through the art societies with the support of the galleries. But credit must be given to a particularly lively and talented group of artists who brought the societies to life.

Often at art society meetings, artists did cartoons of each other and many have survived. This year there was one of J.W.G. MacDonald by J.S. Hallam and one of president Cleeve Horne by York Wilson which appeared in the Globe and Mail.

The OSA exhibition went to London and York Wilson was the guest speaker. The 'Special Section' displaying various media attracted the public and the Press. A London paper explains some of the media:

In this special section, which is a sequel to previous 'teaching' exhibits sponsored by the OSA, some of

Canada's finest artists have illustrated the various media used by the painters. Explanation in words are supplied for all of them. The artists have not been satisfied merely to illustrate. The best work ever done by some of these artists is hung in this section, which says much for the seriousness with which Canadian artists view the OSA objectives... L.A.C. Panton in tempera... Jack Martin has a superb example of tempera and oil, in which the base is oil and chalk.

### Notable Mixed Media

The popularity of tempera and a mixed technique using tempera is notable in the exhibition. Straight tempera is illustrated by Fred Haines, that is, raw, dry pigment mixed with egg, linseed oil and water.

Bill Winter has accomplished an old-fashioned-looking work with oil glaze on gesso which is a combination of whiting and glue size. The gesso went on in layers first, then the sketch in black drawing ink, finally the paint.

Good, old-fashioned beeswax was used by Charles Comfort for an impressive work which combines that ingredient with dry pigment. The technique is called "encaustic or was."

Housecleaning time would be fine for painting (?) like Jack Martin, Rody Kenny Courtice or York Wilson. A picture by the first has bits of linoleum and other pickups from scrap heaps; the technique is called "collage."

A waste paper basket might well yield the materials of Mrs. Courtice's "collage," formed of varied textured paper. "Duco" is the name for Wilson's which has a lacquer from gun cotton covering, a collection of linen, sand, gravel and broken glass.

The Art Digest, US, April mentioned: OSA, Modernism... experimenting new media... York Wilson won the J.W.L. Forster Award...

Pearl McCarthy, the art critic for the G&M mentioned, in part: ...that the education departments of Ontario, Nova Scotia, Manitoba and Saskatchewan have agreed to give credits to their teachers who have completed certain periods of summer study at the Doon School of Fine Arts. This is the school established in 1948 by Ross Hamilton in the old Homer Watson house on the Grand River near Kitchener.

A.J. Casson, president of the RCA; Cleeve Horne, president of the OSA; L.A.C. Panton, newly appointed principal of the Ontario College of Art; Francis Loring; A.Y. Jackson and Professor Charles Comfort have agreed to act on the advisory board, under the chairmanship of York Wilson. The staff this summer is to include Herbert Palmer, Yvonne McKague Housser, Leonard Brooks, Gordon Payne, Jack Bechtel.

The Cleeve Hornes and ourselves decided to celebrate Alex Panton's new appointment as Principal of the College of Art. We had a dinner at our house on Apsley Road. Unknown to the Pantons, we four decided to dress as school children, girls in white middies and navy blue pleated skirts; boys short pants and caps, all had an apple for the teacher. We sat at the great man's feet. This was part of the humanizing process, developing a little fun in Alex and the Pantons loved it.

The Art Gallery of Hamilton had their "Mile of Pictures" in uptown stores and York sent a ballet, Arabesque, which was displayed in Henry Birks and Sons windows. This was a fundraising scheme for the gallery, taking a small commission on sales.

Paul Duval wrote an article for "Saturday Night" entitled "At Home In Sun or Studio." It showed a little of York's family

life; a picture of York painting a landscape, relaxing in his famous recreation room (paintings on the walls by many known artists) with Alex Panton and Cleeve Horne; a family scene with York playing his flute with daughter Virginia at the piano and me. He stresses some of York's interests: the human comedy, landscape artist, ardent flautist, flair for Mexico, high sense of the ridiculous.

Canadian Industries, suppliers of the Dupont Company's 'duco,' were delighted that York had found a new use for their product. They ran an article in their C.I.L. Oval magazine for December, titled: COLOURS BEAUTIFUL and a large reproduction in full colour of Toluca Market. The article carries a remarkable account about paints and colours used in fine art from prehistoric times until today. It includes York Wilson's discovery of 'duco' in Mexico and bringing back the information to Canada, a photo of the Governor General, Viscount Alexander discussing the painting with York. Another help from industry was that C.I.L. offered to keep Wilson supplied with duco paints for life.

Two more duco paintings went to the RCA exhibition at the AGT, White Figures of Acambay (purchased by the AGT) and Guanajuato, an interesting university town a good hour distant from San Miguel. The town is huddled together in a steep valley with only one main street running the long length of the city, the hills rising steeply, solidly built with common walls. Many of the streets are so narrow, only for walking and one is called "The Kiss," as one can touch both walls. The streets rising gradually from below highlight the buildings all the way up the high hills, making it a great attraction for artists. The colours of the houses are carefully chosen by a committee.

One must have permission to change colours. It is truly artistic; the university, a few streets up is obvious from a distance with its 100 or more steps at the entrance and its crenellated roof.

Every year the plays of Cervantes are enacted in the streets which run to the centre like the spokes of a wheel, allowing for exits and entrances. Grandstands of seats are quickly thrown up.

An orchestra and a large group of singers in colourful red costumes called Cervantinos grace many scenes. Both tour often coming to San Miguel. Another orchestra that plays very ancient instruments, with period music, comes to San Miguel annually to play in our Angela Peralta Theatre named after an early nightingale. Some instruments not only look strange but sound strange and are displayed along the front of the platform. The musicians pick them up as needed.

There is a large well-arranged food and craft market in Guanajuato. Another big attraction (not for the queasy) is the "mummies" in an underground pantheon lined with ancient dead figures, taken from their graves. The dry, sandy soil preserves the bodies and though shrunken with the skin like parchment, they are quite lifelike. It is said they are removed when payment for upkeep ceases.

Donald Buchanan, an editor of Canadian Art magazine asked York to review the book by the Mexican José Gutierrez on the new media, duco, silicon and the vinyls. This took time as he needed to replace the Mexican names for ingredients with Canadian names and where obtainable. York was pleased to do this, he was already giving information to any interested artists. Later Donald asked him to do a book on the new media. York pleaded lack of time and Donald never forgave him, and

became an unfair enemy.

The Royal Architectural Journal, December, 1950, featured an article by York. I would like to include it though lengthy as I feel it gives the picture of art at that time in Canada.

#### FROM ONTARIO'S EASTERN BORDER TO THE ROCKIES

A great deal is happening in art in Canada. Things have been happening continuously since the first rude awakening that came so suddenly to the Canadian art-conscious public about 1920.

At the time, few people saw anything significant in what appeared to be a skirmish between a few ambitious young artists attempting to hoodwink the public and amusing reviewers supplying the invectives. The vitriolic comments levelled at the work of these creative painters, seem in retrospect, to have been a grossly exaggerated reaction to what is now an easily understood interpretation of the Canadian landscape.

Today, thirty years later, a larger group spread over a large area are showing the results of that first break for freedom in the visual arts. Spotted here and there across the central portion of the country, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta, are individuals or groups of three or four carrying on, studying, experimenting and developing a more liberal approach to painting than was apparent heretofore.

There is little relationship between the painting of 1920 and that of 1950, but there remains the explorative spirit that has been quietly active over the intervening time and recently has appeared in a more tangible form. The painter today has, for the most part, moved indoors both physically and spiritually.

As would be expected, it is in the work of the younger men that the change is most apparent; those who in their formative years saw and readily accepted this more esoteric type of painting as the normal, rather than the

end. Many of these younger artists for some time followed the accepted pattern of sketching from nature and developing larger canvases from the spot sketches.

Gradually there has developed a move away from this singleness of theme and, to a degree, away from literal subject matter as the moving force in their painting. There is a broader sense of what constitutes a painting idea, a wider painting interest in the less obvious things that go to making an environment.

Less attention is paid to literal transcription; manner of presentation, structural form, and the general science of the visual arts has become a primary concern of our contemporary painters. Concurrent with this concern for the scientific has come a less obviously Canadian type of picture, which might be considered unfortunate if Canada is ever to have a place internationally in Art.

In a recent exhibition of Ontario painting in New York, the Americans commented on the absence of any indication that the show was Canadian. Of the thirty-eight pieces exhibited, only eleven landscapes, one of which was a snowscape, while fifteen exhibits were of figure subjects. Temporarily, at least, there will continue to be the feeling that our painters are not painting Canadian. The years of exhibitions presenting the Canadian scene objectively have led us to believe that anything spiritual in painting is consciously derived from elsewhere. Having begun to see our fellow man and having commented on him, not quite objectively as the commentary had been on landscape, has been looked upon as a form of expression foreign to a Canadian. Actually, it is a natural course of intellectual growth that is inevitable when the creative worker is utilizing what has gone before to enlarge his own knowledge.

Ontario painters are not following any foreign school but in seeing life around them in a fuller sense are finding, that in the arts at least, the forty-ninth parallel is not much more than a line on a map. The same applies to the

midwestern provinces where the trend is toward a more abstract viewpoint. The less inspiring landscapes of the middle west failed to create a school completely devoted to landscape as in Ontario, consequently the change there is less marked.

It is interesting to note that to avoid monotony of a flat horizon, the Prairie Province artist usually observes his subject from either lower or higher than normal eye level, thus a blade of grass becomes either a towering spire as seen from low down or an infinitesimal part of a patchwork quilt when seen from above. Even though the western artist deals with other subject matter and becomes quite abstract in presentation, the unusual perspective seems to be felt in the work.

Making a blanket statement to cover the work of even a small group in this vast area, is likely to convey an erroneous impression. Not only are these people thinking in an individualistic way, but the source of their painting ideas are very often far removed from their immediate locale, a number spending extended periods in United States, Mexico or Europe. This working abroad has a tendency to further remove them from the objective aspect of the home scene. Even though the subject material is from wide spread sources, there is still the tendency to group together those who originally were geographically associated.

We are apt to associate names like Luke O. Lindoe, Maxwell Bates, Illingsworth Kerr, Ronald Spickett, H.G. Glyde, Roloff Beny, Eric Lindner, John Markell and Eric Lindoe; because, although living apart, they come within one of the four or five areas into which the art of this country naturally divides itself. Actually, there is little relationship in the work of these people nor any apparent intention to achieve the same end.

Likewise, in Ontario we link names like Sydney H. Watson, Jack Bush, L.A.C. Panton, Jack Nichols, J.S. Hallam, Walter Yarwood, Henry Masson, Harold Towne and many others

whose work is totally unrelated, but has in every instance a laudable content and a pronounced personal direction of development.

In England, what we accept as currently representative work is again by free thinking individuals. John Piper, Graham Sutherland, Ben Nicholson, Victor Pasmore, Henry Moore, Stanley Spencer; men who have little more in common than a creative ability and their place of birth. The United States has no more definite trend than the others, John Marin, Kuniyoshi, Hans Hofman, Rico Lebrun, Peter Blume, Milton Avery, Max Weber, all important painters, all identified with American painting, but all with a definite purpose in mind unrelated to the other.

Who can say what will come from any of these groups or what sparks these experimental sessions. We only know that from time to time they happen and in many ways painting in Canada today parallels periods of development in other countries.

As recently as the last century, French painting went through several decades of change, with innumerable false starts, experimentation in many directions and an almost continuous state of uncertainty as to where the effort was leading. In retrospect and with each phase filed away, so to speak, in its own compartment, it is not as easy to see the parallel. As we re-read the details of the hopes and the failures, the criticism and often ridicule levelled at Impressionists, we realize that there is a similarity. Today, we can group names like Seurat, Degas, Manet, Cezanne, with very little effort, but a half century ago a comparatively limited audience could see that a group as unrelated in thinking as these, would be amongst those representing a French National Art.

So coming back to Canada and considering particularly the painters in the area from Ontario's eastern border extending to the Rockies, we find the identical situation here as in countries with whose art we are most familiar.

At home we expect to understand more readily the painting that is inspired by our own environment, we are inclined to take for granted an ability to visualize ourselves through the forms in which our painters see us.

When our artists present "Our Today" in a more esoteric way it is apt to be passed over as snobbery in paint, and as sometimes happens is in fact happening today. The artist continues on his way regardless of criticism; it is because he is being done the honour of being classed with Rembrandt, El Greco, Cezanne and the great painters who carried their work to a point not understood in their day. It might be wise to state here that there is no illusion to the effect that we are discussing Canadian counterparts of El Greco, but we are discussing those who devote their talents and their energies to an ideal without fear and with slight concern about public acclaim.

It would be a phenomenal accomplishment to list the names that will represent, for the future, the accomplishment of this era. certainly, there should be several, not because there are so many practising painters, but because a large percentage of them are concentrating their not inconsiderable talents in a workmanlike fashion toward a clearly defined goal. I say "workmanlike" because the Bohemian attitude that so often was used to cover up an indolent existence on the fringe of the arts, in the past, has been replaced by this less romantic, less colourful, but more scientific attitude.

One of the disadvantages of this more carefully considered, less exotic manner of working is that it attracts less attention, supplies less cocktail party small talk, and takes longer to reach the public. reaching the public, although an extremely dangerous consideration while painting, is ultimately essential. The public makes masterpieces. A painting may be potentially great at the moment of completion, but it is only after it has been seen and accepted by thousands of people that they eventually place it in the category in which it remains.

A word of thanks is due to a few art dealers who have unselfishly assisted by occasionally holding exhibitions that were predestined to yield less than cost in commissions. Whether the object of showing this more modern work was to bring prestige or was a philanthropic gesture on the part of the dealer is of little importance. The fact remains that in these all too few instances of displaying advanced painting, the dealer deserves credit for having arranged a mutually beneficial meeting between artist and public.

The public has seen very little of the current crop; there have been only a few of the derogatory outbursts that usually precede acceptance and there has been too little time for honest consideration or evaluation.

One opinion only, my own, is that because there is a very sincere effort to advance the quality of Canadian painting, and because there is evidence of considerable ability to support the sincerity, and because there is more concern with accomplishment than with kudos; later it will be apparent that significant progress was made in and around 1950.

Other opinions may not be as optimistic; although, in discussing Canadian painting with Americans, it became obvious immediately that the occasional exhibitions seen by them had been insufficient to leave any impression. They were usually agreeably surprised at what they saw and anxious to see more.

I spent a long evening with David Siquieros looking over kodachromes of a cross-section of Canadian work of all periods. He considered every slide carefully, asked questions about several and then discussed at length the merits and demerits of them as a whole. He felt that technically the work was excellent, that the examples showed unusual ability to handle the various media, but that the work lacked any co-ordinated idea. The Canadian seemed to be looking at the country objectively, making comments on things, painting landscape, or people with

no spirit and no national theme. We discussed the similarity of Mexico's position to our own bordering the U.S.A., and the submerging effect of this proximity to a large art active country. He described the Mexican fight for art recognition and the seven years spent painting propaganda with no time out for painting; he spoke proudly of their ultimate success in gaining sufficient recognition by the people to have a Minister of Fine Arts, and finally recognition in other countries.

It occurred to me that we, at home, have done little toward getting representation in the government; "without which," Siquieros said, "it is impossible for any country to make use of the art it produces, either at home or abroad."

As mentioned earlier, the value of using art for educational purposes is exemplified by the broadening of viewpoint through the circulation of the Group of Seven work. The broadening of viewpoint, contrary to general belief, is reviving the interest in space painting of all periods, and particularly in the early Italian schools.

For a few years we became so suddenly conscious of space that there was no room for nuances; a great deal of experimentation took place with only a vague idea of intention. A lot of abstraction was submitted to exhibitions that had little to offer beyond a disturbing quality, some generated discussion and a closer scrutiny of one's own standards of acceptance. Recently these experimenters have ceased to wander aimlessly; the reasoning and direction that each is taking has a related course, a more definite progression.

One painter selects landscape as his subject matter and while still concerned with space adds rhythm, a controlled depth and a more subtle form. Another develops along a figure symbolism direction, with constantly changing content but with a marked plan continually unfolding.

As the space problem gradually is being solved, embellishments are being introduced in the form of

texture, colour refinements, calligraphy or other of the elements that form a superstructure to interesting painting. What appeared to have been affectation in the work of Marin, Dufy, or Rouault have long since proven to be very natural personal mannerisms; but it has taken time to recognize this fact. Because many of our more progressive painters are barely past the formative stage, the realization that their idioms are not affectations will also take time. Discussing contemporary work becomes a contemplation of the past, a prediction of the future and an induction of what must be happening at the present time. If we were able to see one composite picture of a year's work, the subtleties of development would be apparent; but that being impossible, it is necessary to compare works a decade apart to appreciate the progress.

It can only be hoped that in 1961 it will be considered an astute observation in 1951 to have said; "In summarizing the review of the Visual Arts in this area, it is encouraging to observe that an increasing number are developing in a more modern direction and that the momentum generated by a small group in the Twenties has been relayed to the creative work of the Fifties, there has been, and is, a definite progression."

Footnote: The reproductions used include the work of only a few of the painters who are contributing toward this progression.

Reproductions include: "Still Life" by Sydney H. Watson - "Island Pieta" by Roloff Beny - "Ballet Fog and Rock" by L.A.C. Panton - "Flat Country" by Illingsworth Kerr - "Mennonite Market" by Hilda Marquette Ruston - "Flute Player Sun" by Jack Bush - "White Figures of Acambay" by York Wilson - "Heads" by John Markell - "Hutterites" by Ron Spickett - "Eastern Parkway, Brooklyn" by Maxwell Bates - "Logging" by William Panko.

York Wilson 1951

I believe years of jurying thousands of works add considerably to an artist's perspicacity and knowledge, though

often a thankless job. The fact Wilson was constantly elected by his peers as a juror is evidence not only of his ability but also his fairness of judgement.

Our Christmas card for 1951 was a beautiful drawing of a seated ballerina. The Junior Women's Committee at the AGT presented "Masquerade" as a fundraising evening. Mayfair: Costumed Guests & Artists pose as modern art & old masters... 4 of 5 honourable judges who sat on Jury... Hallam, Wilson, Housser, Watson...

The Seagram collection of paintings "Cities" still on tour went to Ottawa - St. Johns, Newfoundland - San Juan, Puerto Rico - Havana, Cuba - Mexico - Caracas - Rio de Janeiro - Sao Paulo - Buenos Aires - Montevideo - Rome - Madrid - Paris - London - Soest - Geneva - The Hague - Stockholm, and more. Wilson had painted "Regina" and "Sarnia."

January, 1952 started with a solo exhibition, Laing Galleries with canvases, 1951, six months in Mexico. A review by Paul Duval in Saturday Night shows Patscuaro (duco), and two of Laing's ads show White Houses of Acambay and Indias in White (both duco), the latter a companion piece to White Figures of Acambay in the AGT collection.

Gordon Washburn, director of Fine Arts at the 1952 Carnegie International Biennial, personally selected from the Laing Galleries exhibition York Wilson's Margaritones.

Canadian Art, Spring, 1952:

RETREAT IN MEXICO - A CANADIAN PAINTER ABROAD  
- L.A.C. Panton

To the majority of painters in Canada, life is a continuing conflict between the psychological compulsion to paint and the economic compulsion to earn a living. Only a

few artists in the country manage successfully to support themselves, much less family, on the proceeds of their painting alone. Some artists have resigned themselves to these conditions, and satisfy their overriding urge to paint at the cost of comfort and security. All of them depend for their income on a fickle and limited market more often disposed to safe investment in well-advertised names and socially approved styles than the purchase of art for its own sake and the personal pleasure to be derived from it. Though the public appetite for good pictures is growing slowly, and is beginning to accept in small quantities work of more modern and experimental character, the demand is still too small to permit even artists of considerable ability to entrust their livelihood solely to painting.

The artist lives to paint, but he must first live. In making his living, usually as a teacher or commercial artist, he does so, frequently, at the expense of his painting,—in the shortening of the time he can devote to it, in the reducing energy he can bring to it, and in the deadening of his creative powers and the crippling of his skill which are the inevitable results of these restrictions. The artist desperately needs time and quiet, and he must reconcile as best he can the time he wishes to give to his painting and the time he must devote to his earning activities. And, after economic demands have been met, even the short time which remains may be invaded and work interrupted by the inescapable claim of social life in an urban community. In the long run, these adverse conditions tend to sap his zest and to involve him in hopeless frustrations, to the point of extinction.

It was these considerations, in part, which led York Wilson to the decision to cut himself from all the distractions of a busy life in Toronto, in order to devote his whole time to painting. A brilliant and more than usually successful freelance advertising designer and illustrator, he had, for several years, enjoyed the generous rewards of his calling. During that time he had become interested in painting as

a fine art, an interest which appeared late in his career, but developed so strongly as to become his major activity. He found subject-matter in both landscape and the figure, and painted it in a fresh dashing style often distinguished by an ingenious organization, rich colour, and a strong sense of caricature. These characteristics proved to be no more than serviceable assets. The real problem of the painter lay beyond them. His anxiety to come to close grips with these problems seduced him into relinquishing a lucrative occupation in order to gain time for study and experiment. Since conditions at home denied him sufficient opportunity for the necessary exploration, he decided to go where he could carry on his studies without interruption.

He chose to go to Mexico, which is easily accessible at little expense, where living costs are low, where the landscape and native life have a romantic attraction for the artist, and where above all, life is placid and time of no importance. In two visits, totalling the larger part of a year, he settled in San Miguel, a small town remote from the tourist trade, with a few English-speaking people (the Canadian painter, Leonard Brooks and his wife Reva Brooks, among them), and recognized as an art centre where the artist may live undisturbed with his problems, remote from the complexities and excitements of life at home in Canada. A third trip abroad is in prospect and, by the time this appears in print, Wilson will be on his way to another Shangri-la, in the Canary Islands.

At first thought, these flights may be regarded as a mere "escape" from the troublesome realities of the painter's function in Canada. Or they may seem to be a search for novelty, as if the artist hoped to find, readymade, on foreign soil, the artistic wonders he could not create on his own. Many artists have hoped, but failed, to find this pot of gold at the other end of the rainbow. But these reasons, whether of, "escape" or quest for the fantastic, are not those which prompt Wilson to leave his homeland.

It has been said that the artist cannot shed the traditions and influences that have made him what he is. Wilson is deeply conscious of his Canadian birthright and his debt to other artists in his own country. But after long association with them, he feels himself yielding to all the subtle pressures exerted upon him by the art community of which he is part, and to the temptation to accept the standards approved by important groups of painters and critics. The artist in this country, he believes, finds it difficult, even hazardous, to paint Canada in terms which are not those adopted by others, and almost impossible to remain independent of current modes, their sponsors and supporters.

This is not to suggest that Wilson has no faith in the quality of his own artistic instincts, but it does indicate his suspicion and fear that his art can never be essentially his own, so long as he is conscious of these community pressures. It is imperative for him that he shed those acquired elements which threaten to confuse and inhibit the exercise of his own essential personality. His retreats to Mexico and the Canaries, therefore, are not only an escape from powerful influences, but also an opportunity for releasing his own spirit in a fresh start.

Having attained in Mexico the solitude he sought, he settled down to a period of artistic reconstruction. He re-oriented himself, not to the new and strange life around him, but to the new purposes which had taken possession of his mind. Painting was henceforth to be design, and design was to become not a device for merely decorative ends but an instrument of language, a means of stating these ideas which the artist holds to be peculiarly the province of painting. Representation, for its own sake in any terms, was to be abandoned. Novelties and innovations of caricature or technical bravura, which however startling or ingenious contributed to nothing essential to the original purpose, were to be excluded. Statement was to be ascetic, strictly within the limits of

plastic design, devoid of spectacular tricks and diverting trivia.

His more recent work in Mexico shows with what tenacity he held to his new creed. To an artist of Wilson's ebullient temperament, such a rigid self discipline must often have faltered before his appetite for the excitement and exuberance of his earlier paintings. For a time, these appetites were not entirely subdued. But gradually they were subordinated; fundamental objectives were slowly clarified, and emerged in carefully conceived pictorial structures, which have a real, but not rude, force. Occasionally design is over-emphasized, as if the artist were exulting in his command of a new vocabulary. But in all of his later works there is a thoughtful, even scholarly and sensitive, employment of plastic design as a subtle and expressive language, supported but not submerged by delicate or robust, but always rich colour and refined drawing. These are the work of a painter-poet who understands and respects the painter's means, and puts them in service to his own feelings with taste and distinction.

During the process of re-assessing his own pictorial objective, Wilson became interested in duco as a painting material. Much important work has been done in Mexico with duco, and its chemistry and the techniques which are appropriate to its use in painting are now well understood. With this information readily available, Wilson proceeded to carry out his new programme in the new medium. The combination was successful, and not only because he was able, later, to master the use of duco; for Wilson is a "fast" worker, and the initial difficulties of handling duco imposed on him the need for a more than usually careful consideration of his pictorial ideas. In the end he discovered an affinity between these ideas and his chosen medium, and his latest work shows with what satisfying simplicity this union has been effected.

Canadian Art, October, by Joseph A. Baird: (in part)

“American and Canadian Art Compared”

The recent exhibition of ‘15 Americans’ at the Museum of Modern Art in New York or the annual exhibition of painting and sculpture at the Los Angeles County Museum may be taken as fairly representative of American art as is the annual showing of the Ontario Society of Artists of Canadian.

In each case there is a strong central core, and a rich fringe, “in the manner of.” In New York the core is the monumental abstractionism of Bradley Walker Tomlin and Mark Rothko in painting, the elegant, mechanistic lyricism of Lippold in sculpture. In Los Angeles, it is the sombre splendour of Howard Warshaw and Francis de Erdely and the restrained, orientalism of Serisawa in painting, and the expressionist attenuation of Rosenthal in sculpture. In Toronto, it is the expressionist realism of Jack Bush and York Wilson’s cubism in painting, and the abstract simplicity of men like Elford Cox in sculpture.