

IX

1953 - 1954

A Glimpse of Morocco and More

We couldn't leave the Canary Islands without a glimpse of Morocco, just a short distance by air to Casablanca and the coast of Africa. It was July, we had three weeks before sailing for home, so we decided on a two week visit. We were warned that the heat would be intense but York had to go.

His instinct didn't let him down; the very different culture fired his imagination anew. The women were veiled, very mysterious; he felt their eyes said more than words. Their long, straight kaftans were always spotless; the men in pristine white, with soft yellow, glove leather slip-ons inside their shoes. There were camels, lots of bicycles, and mysterious, supposedly dangerous medinas with pocket-size shops.

We wandered alone in the Medina and everywhere while York filled sketch books with fast drawings. We went by bus to Fez, the only foreigners, and marvelled at Moroccan men wrapped from head to toe in wool in the unbearable heat! It was even hotter in Fez. We found it necessary to be back in our fan-cooled hotel room by eleven. We just lay nude, flat-out under the ceiling fan, taking occasional cold showers.

We ventured out at midnight looking for dinner at a sidewalk cafe. The temperature was still 95°F. On emerging in the morning a group of guides surrounded us, and York explained, "If one would like to take us to the Medina, wait while I sketch, knowing we would buy nothing, go by streetcar, not a taxi, I might hire one." They disappeared quickly - all but one named Abdullah. He had just finished his milk route in the Medina,

he knew everyone and would be happy to return with us while the artist sketched.

We boarded a streetcar, and Abdullah paid the fare for all three, York said, "You don't need to go that far," and we laughed. The Medina had huge piles of melons and other produce piled outside the gates. Burros were entering with loads, and narrow alleyways were jammed with people. York sketched furiously, Abdullah stood near, while I examined the hole-in-the-wall shops.

As burros passed with wide loads, we would flatten ourselves against the wall, as they scraped by. Children gathered to watch the artist work, and all of a sudden Abdullah walloped a young boy and sent him flying. Astounded, York said, "Why did you do that?" Abdullah explained, "He was going to rob you; he was at your back pocket." It was unbelievable - these little children had to be watched.

It was a remarkable morning, nearing 11 a.m. and the heat was unbearable. So back we went to the dubious comfort of our hotel room. I imagine Abdullah received a nice tip, and it was good instruction for the future. We followed the same routine the following day but without a guide. We ran into some American soldiers, posted outside of town, who said they were there in case of trouble. They didn't explain but said the temperature during the day was 135°F and even the natives were dying.

After a few days, we took a bus for Rabat, the capital, which seemed cooler. We got in touch with a Canadian friend married to a titled person and were invited for lunch. Of course she knew about York and his work. She did a lot of riding and kept her horse in King Hassan's stable. She took us to see her horse and all the King's fine horses. She seemed to have freedom to wander at the Palace, the guards all greeted her and stepped aside. She took us to see Hasson II's harem, a high-fenced area with many beautiful women and children.

Foreigners were not in the habit of riding the buses. Sometimes there

were crates of chickens or animals, but the Moroccans didn't stare, and the feeling was friendly. After Rabat, we returned to Casablanca.

On the return trip to Tenerife, the plane took us to the island of Gran Canaria and we took the overnight boat to Tenerife. It was a lovely voyage on these inter-island boats and the water was placid that day.

Our final week with the Pintos was a busy one, packing and saying our goodbyes. York had two custom crates made for his paintings and a crane lifted them on board a White Star line going to London, England. Many friends were dockside and furious waving sent us on our way. Of course, we said we would be back, but no one believed it. Now to see the galleries and museums of London - our first visit to this fascinating city. In a few days we would take the train to Southampton and board the Ryndam for New York, then train to Toronto.

We had carried a bank draft in case there was need for more money, thinking it would be simple presenting it to a bank in London. The teller said, "Do you have an account here?" - "No." "Well who do you know in London?" - "Gilbert Harding of the BBC." "Oh really, he's quite a character, speaks his mind, stirs up lots of mischief, but no good as a bank reference. Who else do you know?" - "Bernie Braden." "Oh, you don't know Bernie Braden, do you? He's so popular here, we all feel part of his family, he's marvellous but of course no good as a bank reference." "Who do you know at Canada House?" - "I don't know who's at Canada House but they will know me, just check them." The teller moved away, eventually he came back to say they would cash our draft.

We enjoyed the Tate Gallery, the National Gallery, the theatre and some of the sights of London including the Tower of London, where the two Princes smothered in the Tower bore the family name of "York," the same as York's mother's maiden name, Maud York. We enjoyed lunches in Pubs, learning about "Bangers and Mash," (sausages and mashed potatoes), the double decker buses, the cockney accents spoken by the lady

conductors who called everyone “Dearie.” The A.T.S. McGhee’s (the businessman we met on the French train going to Madrid) took us to the London Festival Hall. We saw the swans on the Thames and learned the term “upping of the swans” when put in their winter quarters.

Soon we were off to Southampton to board the Ryndam. The strain of seeing the fragile crates lifted by the crane, imagining his paintings falling into the harbour, unnerved York. He immediately sought the ship’s carpenter and had new crates made on board. After a good crossing we arrived in New York and faced the difficult New York Customs, who demanded we ship the paintings separately (in bond) to Toronto. We argued, pleaded to no avail, being sent from one person to another. Finally I was sent to make arrangements, leaving York talking when he signalled me to wait. He caught up and said, “Keep going before someone stops us, I’ve just had a clearance.” We arrived in Toronto and all was well.

The year of York’s contract with the Laing Gallery was coming to an end. He suggested to Arthur Laing that he go back to the old system of works being on consignment, and tried to explain why. Laing was taken aback, feeling that he had done something special in giving York the contract. They had sold more than agreed and he was willing to raise the guaranteed amount substantially. Through the shouting York tried to explain that money had nothing to do with it, he just wanted to be free. It had to do with his spirit and reason for painting. This made no sense to Laing (then quite elderly), and he lost his temper and screamed, “Get your things out of here; I will have nothing more to do with you.”

So York bundled up the remainder of his work and drove directly to Roberts Gallery. They agreed, and York was with Roberts Gallery for the rest of his life. Blair Laing, Arthur’s son, soon came to talk things over, that all would quiet down and that he should return to their gallery. But it was too late, he was now with Roberts. Blair was a good friend and tried many times over the next few years to persuade York to let him handle his work.

He had international plans for him and had already spoken to the Agnew Gallery in London.

A definitive book on Canadian Drawings and Prints by Paul Duval was published in 1952 and included Wilson's drawing, Mexican Girl 1951.

Claire Wallace, a well-known coast-to-coast radio broadcaster of the day, gave a few glimpses on the air of Wilson's trip to the Canary Islands:

Have you always pictured the Canary Islands as full of yellow canaries... filling the air with colour and song? I've always figured it that way - but I was wrong! The Canaries pronounced Can-aw-ree-as got their name from the word "canine," a large dog used on the islands in the early days to hunt out the natives! Spain discovered and conquered the Canary Islands between 1316 and 1334. Next the Islands passed into the hands of the Portuguese but towards the end of the 15th century were recaptured by the Spanish. Very little is known of the mysterious Guanches, or natives originally inhabiting the Islands but it is known the Guanches didn't like the Spaniards; they hid in the mountains and caves and were only routed out by these huge dogs - which gave the Canary Islands the name.

I learned about the Canary Islands from York Wilson of Toronto, noted Canadian artist who, with his wife Lela, has just returned from a seven month trip, mostly spent in the Canary Islands, which lie about 1000 miles south of Spain and about 500 miles off the west coast of Africa. The Wilsons were six days sailing from Seville to Tenerife, one of the largest cities, having a population of 90,000. At first the York Wilsons lived in a hotel in Tenerife where York enjoyed the use of the billiard room for his studio. Then someone loaned them a house, complete with three servants, with total pay to the three servants for one month - just \$8.

Banana plantations comprise the main industry, fish is the main dish and octopus or squid a great favourite. Meals come at these times: Breakfast 8 or 9... dinner or main meal at 2 in the afternoon... a hearty tea at 6 p.m. Then people go to the theatre, or to musicals or out for the evening and, whether at home or not, have a cold supper of several courses between 10 o'clock and midnight.

Any young man in the Canaries would rather find water than gold - water is scarce and is needed in great quantities for the "fincas," or large banana plantations. Anyone locating water can retire for life. Tenerife has its own orchestra... it's own Art Gallery and, by invitation, Canada's York Wilson had a one-man exhibition.

Camels are beasts of burden in the Canary Islands - camels and women! In the volcanic hills and mountains around Santa Cruz live

many cave dwellers — people who live in caves as their home. At night, fires cooking their meals in front of their caves give the impression of a village of fireflies in the mountains. Every stick of furniture has to be carried by the cave dwellers themselves... and guess who carries the heavy stuff? Women. York Wilson said it was not unusual to see a large piece of furniture going up the mountain trail, balanced on a woman's head. Her husband, walking ahead, might deign to carry a drawer. York Wilson laughed and said that's the way it should be in any civilized country. Hmmmmm!

The Canaries may not have canaries in abundance, but they do have exotic flowers blooming all year round, and tomorrow I'll tell you how once a year flowers are used to completely carpet roads.

In November Wilson had a one-man exhibition at the prestigious Watson Art Gallery in Montreal. The exhibition comprised of 31 works, in duco, from the Canary Islands trip. The Montreal Press recorded the exhibition well with many reproductions, Paul Duval said: "...testimony to Wilson's new stature as an artist," and Robert Ayre wrote, "**...York Wilson Attains His Objective...**" La Vie and Canadian Art reviewed the exhibition mentioning that two works had been acquired by the National Gallery... Una Familia and Santa Cruz de Tenerife.

A page of Saturday Night (larger format then) showed several reproductions, a photo of Wilson and an article by Paul Duval:

YORK WILSON: AT HOME ABROAD

Most artists of note begin their careers at a very early age. Once in a while, however, a late starting exception comes along to prove the rule. Toronto's York Wilson is such an exception. Wilson was past thirty before his first important painting, Burlesk No. 2 was exhibited. No shrinking aesthete, the robust Wilson has found the material for his canvases in a wide variety of themes and locales. Ballerinas, burros, businessmen and race track habitués are a few of the varied sources for this artist's catholic approach to nature. As it did for Rubens, Gauguin and Morrice, travel seems to stimulate Wilson's creative abilities.

This year, Wilson's busman's holiday took him to Santa Cruz de Tenerife, one of the Canary Islands, lying off the west coast of Africa. Last month, the canvases resulting from that trip went on exhibition at Montreal's Watson Art Galleries. This solo show revealed that, in little more than a decade, the artist developed from a spirited and competent reporter of the passing scene into one of Canada's most

original and vigorous creative painters.

The exhibition in Montreal uncovered a fresh advance in the development of a talent which has been remarkable for its steady continuity of growth. It is in his use of color, in particular, that Wilson has extended his pictorial repertoire. In earlier years, Wilson had utilized hue simply as a matter of descriptive fact; since then, he has gained an understanding and control of tone and color to underline the meaning and mood of a theme. Today, he is one of the country's outstanding colorists.

One of the most important things for an artist is to have his work invited to one of the prestigious international exhibitions, such as, the Carnegie International, 1952, at the Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh. Their curator, Gordon Washburn, came to Canada and selected six Canadians: B.C. Binning - Paul Emile Borduas - Stanley Cosgrove - Marthe Rakine - Goodridge Roberts and York Wilson. Mr. Washburn personally selected Wilson's Margaritones, from an exhibition at the Laing Galleries. Canadian Art comments:

Canada in Pittsburgh... first time in 20 years, Canada represented...

On December 10, 1952, Wilson was invited to give yet another demonstration in oil, in the Sculpture Court at the AGT.

It was now nearing Christmas and the playwright Herman Voaden asked York if he would do their Christmas card. York willingly did this gratis and our card showed trees in various climes, like... Pines, Palms, Cactus and the greeting in three languages. Wilson was now appearing in Who's Who in Art in several countries and this year England added his biography. Through the Eaton Fund, the AGT were able to purchase another duco painting - White Figures of Acambay.

Globe and Mail, January 1953, Lotta Dempsey: We'd like to make a Person to Person call to York Wilson, the artist, whose latest paintings seem to be reaching even new heights of expression and whose strong, sensitive creativeness is helping to bring us fresh praise from abroad for Canadian art and themes.

The Western Art League, London, Ontario: “DOES abstract art really make sense?” That’s a question even artists ask — and a couple of them will be required to answer... York Wilson and Selwyn Dewdney...

A few days earlier York spoke to the Sarnia-Lambton Art Association; an interesting speaker, he was always in demand.

In selecting the work of Canadian artists for the CNE Art Gallery, the six-man jury took their job very seriously, with Lionel Thomas coming from Vancouver - Lemoine Fitzgerald from Winnipeg - three Toronto painters, York Wilson, Sydney H. Watson, Cleeve Horne and the art critic, Paul Duval. They all assembled in Toronto a month prior to the CNE’s opening in mid-August.

Globe and Mail, Pearl McCarthy: ...the Jury had done a wonderful job of selecting “Sound Canadian Work.”

The Telegram ran a mural competition to find a suitable design for their new offices, announcing: To select the winners, a three-man jury of distinguished Canadian artists has been set up. They are Charles S. Comfort, RCA, OSA... supported by Eric Adlwinkle, OSA and York Wilson, RCA, OSA.

The Financial Post ran an item asking the question: Do you see any special advantages in electing more women to Parliament and the Legislatures?

They invited answers from ten prominent men, six of whom answered in the affirmative with good reasoning and three felt it depends on reasons such as, “the best-brains-either male or female,” and so on. But my husband, York Wilson, gave an unequivocal “No” with typical male reasoning. God bless his long-departed soul!

The Art Society exhibitions reflected Wilson’s latest trip in his titles, such as: Moroccan Conversation Piece - Women of Casa Blanca - Medina at Fez - Near Oratava and so on. The Special Section in the OSA exhibition was: Chair & Variations, a most interesting experiment, all the way from figurative to different degrees of abstraction. The OSA had a **Memorial Exhibition** by J. Sydney Hallam, who had passed away in 1953. Syd Hallam was a close friend of Wilson’s and York wrote a tribute for the catalogue.

Syd's great humour and quick wit will always be remembered.

An accusation that surfaced from time to time in this period arose when the artist William Newcombe declared that Communist ideology influenced the choice of some of the 75-odd black-and-white paintings of the Canadian Society of Graphic Arts at the AGT. The Society selected a panel of five prominent artists and an art critic to examine the exhibition for signs of Communist influences. After careful examination of the exhibition, the panel, York Wilson - Sydney Watson - Paul Duval - Wm. Winter and L.A.C. Panton said that they found no evidence. The accusation caused a lot of lineage in the Press unfortunately.

One of the most ambitious painting programs ever to take place in Canada, known as "The Seagram Collection of Paintings of the Cities of Canada," commissioned some 20-odd artists to paint 29 of Canada's cities. The collection has gone on many good-will tours across America, Europe and Asia and as recently as 1993 was shown at the Mendel Gallery in Saskatoon continuing on a Canadian tour. Wilson was commissioned to paint Regina and Sarnia. Regina was felt to be too difficult for most artists, being surrounded by wheat fields, so Wilson was chosen. Here Wilson commented:

Within the city, the total effect is vertical — tall buildings and tall trees. Exactly at the city limits the country becomes absolutely flat. To convey the idea that Regina is literally an island set in a desert of wheat, it was necessary to present an aerial view. I painted from the roof of the Saskatchewan Hotel which made it possible to show the strange effect of the Parliament Buildings on the edge of the wheat fields. Because the country is so flat, the fields seem to stretch on forever. To hold the eye on the city instead of being drawn off into this great distance, I broke the perspective up by running darker shadow-strips of colour up and down across the canvas. Most obvious of these is the dark block on the left edge.

In May, 1953 New Liberty magazine reproduced 13 of the cities, in colour, including Wilson's Regina. His painting of Sarnia came later and the Telegram commented:

ONLY ONE ABSTRACT — Most recently finished of the paintings on view, but not ready for showing abroad, is York Wilson's Sarnia, the Dominion's oil refining centre. This is one of the most outstanding paintings in the collection, and also, in its interpretive quality, nearest of any in the show to abstract painting.

In June, 1953, the Winnipeg Art Gallery, supported by Winnipeg's Richardson Bros. Art Gallery, mounted a large exhibition of small works, from artists across Canada.

The Calgary Herald: More than 100 oil and watercolours ranging from experimental art to conventional creations.

The National Gallery held its annual exhibition in March and Wilson sent his Medina at Fez. Karsh photographed a group of young artists in Cleeve Horne's studio, including a work of art by each artist:

Cleeve Horne, "Jean" - Wm. Winter, "Acrobats" - York Wilson, Entrance to the Medina at Fez - Jack Nichols with a print of a young woman. The photograph appeared in Saturday Night.

The OSA Little Picture exhibition, at Eatons College Street Galleries had become a great source of interest as noted by the newspapers of the day.

The Telegram: Paintings by York Wilson and there are several of them — are easily the tours de force in the admirable OSA annual exhibition of Little Pictures... These are memorabilia of Mr. Wilson's productive and very successful months in the Canary Islands, in Spain and in Africa.