

# York Wilson

His Life and Work, 1907-1984



Lela Wilson



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## His Life and Work



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1907-1984

Lela M. Wilson  
Edited by Sandra Dyck

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Back cover photo: York and Lela on the opening night of the O'Keefe Centre for the Performing Arts. Toronto, 1960.

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FOR YORK

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## ABBREVIATION USED

AGT	Art Gallery of Toronto
AGO	Art Gallery of Ontario (from 1966)
AIO	Art Institute of Ontario
CGP	Canadian Group of Painters
CNE	Canadian National Exhibition, Toronto
CPE	Society of Canadian Painter-Etchers and Engravers
CSGA	Canadian Society of Painters in Water Colour
MMFA	Montreal Museum of Fine Arts
NGC	National Gallery of Canada
OCA	Ontario College of Art, Toronto
OSA	Ontario Society of Artists
RCA	Royal Canadian Academy of Arts
SSC	Sculptors' Society of Canada

Note: The publication date of some newspaper articles referred to in this biography is absent because the articles are not dated in York Wilson papers.

## FOREWORD

It was a simple request. Lela Wilson sought a slide or colour transparency of For Peace, a mosaic mural designed by York Wilson and installed in Carleton University's Unicentre. I knew from the university art collection records that there was such a mural, and that it was likely that there was a slide of it somewhere on the campus, if not in the files of the collection, then in the teaching slide collection in the Art History Department. The slide was located, a copy made and sent off. And thus began our adventure with York Wilson and the devoted steward of his legacy.

I look for opportunities to build upon the University's past involvement with the visual arts. Here was an opportunity to follow-up. I met Lela Wilson at her home, the home and studio they built in Toronto. The entrance door is a work by York. Inside the house the evidence of his prodigious energy was everywhere, accented with the objects that they had collected over the years. The deep colours on the walls belonged to the same families that occurred in the paintings. This was a total environment, evidence of a unique partnership shared by the artist and his wife for over 50 years. It was a distillation, as I soon became aware, of the legacy of a singular career, little acknowledged by the next generation.

Lela, the steward of the legacy, showed me to the studio. It was filled with well-framed and systematically stored paintings and drawings. The studies for the mural projects, especially *The Seven Lively Arts* for the O'Keefe Centre, dominated the high walls of the studio. There was the library. There were the filing cabinets containing voluminous letters, clippings and other documents, the work tables, and the typewriters, manual and electric, that Lela had laboured with in her compilation of the narrative of their life. Packed in a stationery box, the computer print-out was evidence that the several hundred pages of text had been entered on a computer, making the process of revision less onerous, but there was no computer to be seen to carry out the necessary work. Lela had made several attempts to have the story published, without success. In the course of our discussion about the desirability of showing the mural studies at Carleton University Art Gallery, it became more and more evident that the mural projects were the central feature of York Wilson's success. They were discussed in detail in the memoir; perhaps we should try to make the publication happen if the exhibition of the mural projects came to pass. It did.

Sixty-six years after York Wilson first exhibited his art and thirteen years after his death in 1984, the story of York and 'la's life together will be told. It is a personal memoir, presenting the things that were important to them:

finding a way to guarantee time to paint full-time; working hard to insure that there was a healthy art scene through leading the art societies of the day; supporting the few public art galleries; doing public talks; writing articles; and, struggling to rise above parochial visions.

York Wilson's early years as a commercial artist gave him and Lela an entrepreneurial edge in the world of the fine arts. Aided by Lela and assisted by Virginia, their daughter, Wilson made contacts, followed up with chance acquaintances, researched and used new media, completed commissions and systematically supplied his dealers in Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa and Hamilton with works for scheduled exhibitions. Businesslike and energetic, Wilson was certain to be wooed by the artists' societies to take on leadership roles. The same quality served him well in his dealings with corporations wishing to commission what at the time were among the largest commissions ever made to a visual artist. Approached methodically, from the research to the planning through to the final execution, the projects were all completed to everyone's satisfaction, including the mist's.

Rooted as they were in Toronto, York and Lela risked leaving the comfortable local art scene, sometimes for six months at a time, sometimes for a year or more. 'While these absences served the artist well in furnishing new inspiration for his work, it did distance him from the daily engagements so necessary to keep others' perceptions balanced and jealousies at bay. The art, of course, was of primary concern, and the right choice was made. The circumstances of petty parochialism will pass, but York Wilson's art will be always there to remind people of the material and spiritual achievement. And that achievement will be known, in all its richness and variety, because Lela Wilson maintained the records and the archives and dedicated herself to telling the story that follows. It is a story that is important, told first-hand, not by a professional writer who pulls out all the stylistic and rhetorical stops, but by someone who lived the life "the design of the partners" as one friend observed.

*Michael Bell, Director  
Carleton University Art Gallery*