



YORK WILSON AND CONTEMPORARIES

This exhibition is a result of a large donation that the AGA has received from the York Wilson Foundation in 2015. This donation included 22 artworks by well known Canadian artist, York Wilson, which added to the several artworks the AGA already has in its permanent collection. It became an obvious choice to feature this collection and celebrate York Wilson with this exhibition.

The intent of the exhibition is to showcase Wilson's artwork and accomplishments, and also to place him in a context with other artists he knew, was friends with, was exhibited with, or artists who shared some similar experiences during the time Wilson was active on the Canadian and international art scene.

Wilson was born in 1907 in Toronto. From an early age he was interested in art and showed talent. In 1922 Wilson enrolled in Central Technical School where he met then-Assistant Art Director Peter Haworth (painting included in the exhibition), who immigrated from England. Haworth and Wilson remained in touch, were friends and exhibited together in later years. Wilson studied at the Central Technical School for two years, which was his only formal art training.

From 1924 Wilson worked as a commercial artist at several firms in Toronto. He continued to take art classes in the evening at the Ontario College of Art. At that time, he met Franklin Carmichael and A.J. Casson, both members of Group of Seven.

In the late 1920s, Wilson left for Detroit where he worked as a commercial artist until the Great Depression, which is when he had to return to Toronto (in 1930). Upon his return Wilson exhibited for the first time with the Canadian Society of Graphic Arts in 1931. During the 30s York Wilson continued to work as a commercial artist, exhibit his artwork and he also married his wife Lela.

In 1942 Wilson became a member of the Ontario Society of Artists (OSA) and a President in 1946. During the 40s Wilson was friends with Jack Bush -- they sketched together frequently; A.J. Cason, A.Y. Jackson, Arthur Lismer, Frank Carmichael, Frederick Varley, Franz Johnston (Group of Seven artists) to mention just a few. Most of these artists are represented in the exhibition. The first painting in the exhibition by York Wilson shows his landscape executed in the style similar to the style of the Group of Seven painters. His painting, though, has people depicted in it, which is not typical of the Group of Seven landscapes.

In 1945 York Wilson was elected an Associate of the RCA. In 1947 Standard Oil, a New Jersey company, commissioned Wilson to record the move of their refinery from Whitehorse to Edmonton, over the Alaska Highway, by truck. The following year some of the paintings were exhibited in an exhibition arranged by Imperial Oil. In 1948 Wilson entered a competition for a mural at the Newfoundland airport

which was awarded to Kenneth Lochhead, an artist from Saskatchewan, also represented in this exhibition.

1949 was a year Wilsons visited Mexico for the first time. They spent time in San Miguel as did other artists from Canada. We have another artist in the exhibition depicting a landscape from Mexico. Mexico remained a place of inspiration for many Canadian artists in the nineteen 40s, 50s, 60s and on.

By this time York Wilson completely abandoned his career as commercial artist and devoted all his time to painting. In the early 1950s, Wilson traveled to Paris for the first time. On this trip they also visited Seville and Madrid as well as the Canary Islands and the island of Tenerife. On the way back they also stopped in Morocco followed by a visit to London.

York Wilson received probably the largest commission in 1954 to paint a mural for the entrance of the new Imperial Oil Building in Toronto. It took him a whole year to do preliminary drawings. He was also commissioned to paint the Salvation Army mural in 1955. The work on the Imperial Oil Building started in 1956; he had two assistants and the mural was finished in 1957. This mural received lots of praise including a praise from A.Y. Jackson. In the summer of 1959 York Wilson received a letter from Lawren Harris (Group of Seven founding member) who visited from Vancouver, which is where he lived at the time and saw his Imperial Oil mural, and wrote at the end of the letter: "I found that your vision and interpretation of the theme was equally matched by its exciting and excellent execution. To me, it is a most stimulating and compelling major creative effort, and one which very well could prove to be a milestone in Canadian art." All of this proves that the mural Wilson created was a huge success and event in Canadian art at the time.

Following the creation of the mural, Wilson and his wife traveled to Europe again, this time visiting Spain, the Canary Islands, Italy, France and Belgium.

During the 40s and 50s Wilson's painting were more and more geometric and less representational. (There is, indeed, an excellent example by Wilson and Bush showing the progression from representation to abstraction through the use of geometric shapes in which both paintings are executed.)

In November 1958 York Wilson was commissioned to complete mural for the lobby of the new O'Keefe Centre still under construction. The mural was 100 feet by 15 feet and the theme was *The Seven Lively Arts* with references to music, dance, painting, sculpture, architecture, literature and theatre. The mural was completed in May of 1960, and the greatly successful opening gala of the O'Keefe Centre was on October 1, 1960.

York Wilson worked on other murals and became mostly known for these.

During the next couple of decades, the Wilsons traveled extensively, and York painted in different places. Arguably the most significant was their stay in Paris in 1966 when Wilson had two dreams of geometric painting in colour which was so clear that he painted immediately upon waking. Wilson was

so absorbed in geometric painting that it became his style for some time following the two dreams. There are great examples of this period in the exhibition.

Wilson also traveled around the world and York painted different images from various places. We have an example of a wonderful painting, *Borneo Batik*, in the exhibition. In the 70s and 80's he returned to slightly modified version of the early geometric paintings.

The exhibition ends with two landscapes from Nova Scotia, painted in 1980, four years before his death in 1984.

The Art Gallery of Algoma is most appreciative of the York Wilson Foundation's generous donation of 22 of Wilson's works, only a few of which are described above.

Jasmina Jovanovic

Executive Director, Art Gallery of Algoma



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