

YORK WILSON

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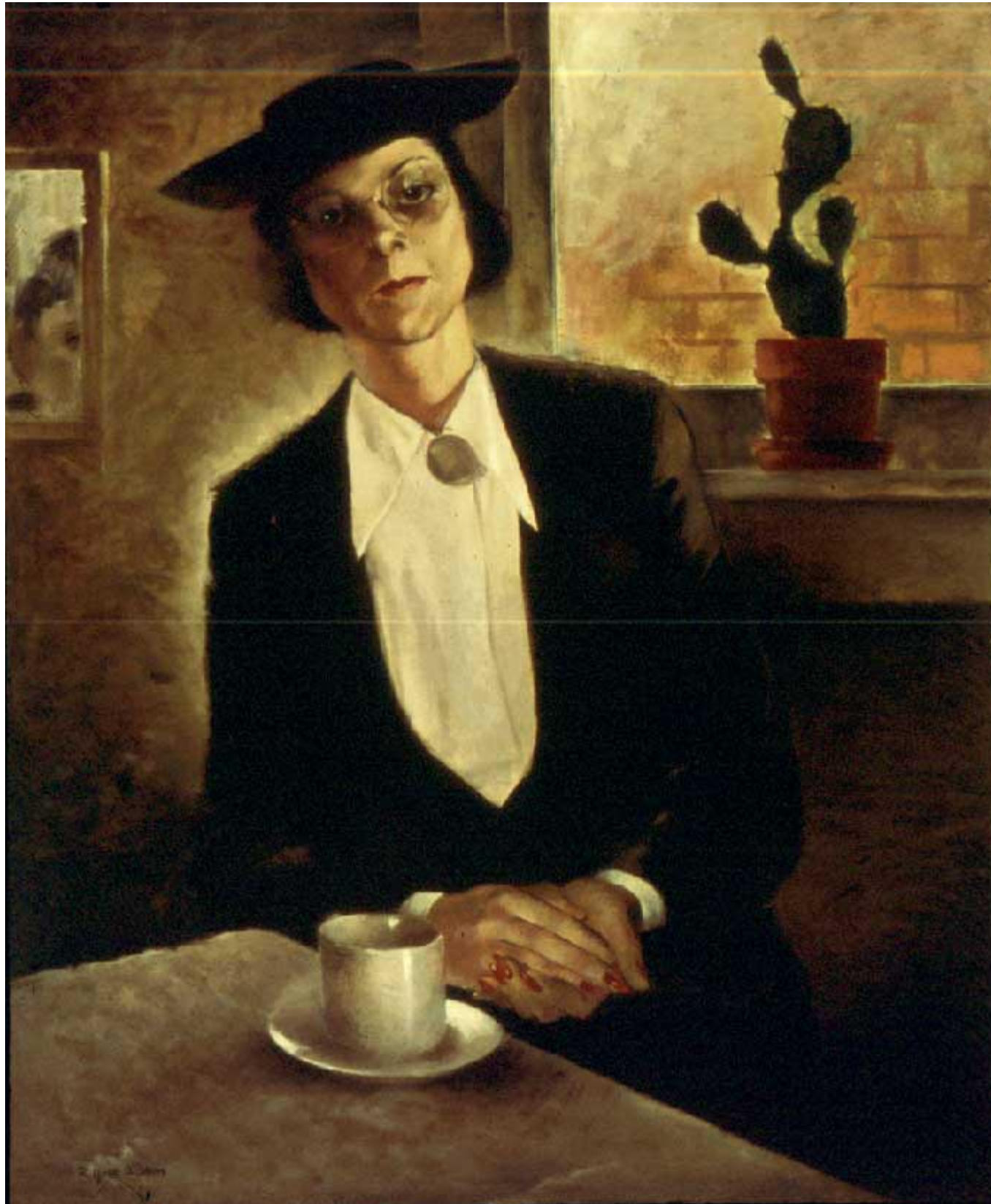
Wallack Galleries/Ottawa

Chapter One

The Preparatory Years



The Ward, 1926, Watercolour, 7" x 8", Mrs. York Wilson



Welfare Worker, 1941, Oil, 36" x 30", Mr. & Mrs. T. F. Berry.



Richmond and York, 1926, Watercolour, 7" x "7", Mrs. York Wilson.



Lela's Mother, 1938, Charcoal, 13.5" x 9.5", Mrs. York Wilson.

The preparatory years

Once in a while an artist appears who seems to be a natural. Without tutoring, without any visible artistic environment, he seems to develop in an organic, inevitable way. York Wilson is such an artist. York Wilson's formative years were totally untouched by visual art. His family had no interest in the subject, nor was there any traceable talent among his ancestors. His early years revealed no hint of his future career.

Ronald York Wilson was born in a white clapboard house at 722 Dufferin Street in Toronto on December 6th, 1907. He was one of three children to be born to William James and Marianne Maude Wilson, both of whom came from England. His parents shared a common interest in theatre and music. William Wilson was born and educated at Sudbury, Suffolk, where he was born August 12th, 1874. He received very little cultural input from his postman father, Charles, or his mother Susan, but there was an uncle, whose name unfortunately has been lost to family records, who owned a local concert hall and there young Will Wilson was able to attain a lifetime affection for the works of William Shakespeare. His son York fondly remembers the long quotations from Shakespeare his father would recite at the Wilson home. As soon as he was old enough, Will left Sudbury to become a shoe salesman in London. There he courted Maude York, who he married on March 28th, 1901.

Maude York brought a new dimension into the cultural life of Will Wilson. She had been born in Tunbridge Wells on April 22nd, 1877. Her father was a tea taster who owned a small chain of stores, but after her mother died when Maude was merely twelve years of age, she was brought up by an aunt who was the mother of famed conductor Leopold Stowkowski. Maude remained with the Stowkowskis until her mar-

riage, a marriage into which she brought a warm appreciation and true understanding of music. Will and Maude Wilson lived in London until 1905 when they emigrated to Toronto.

York Wilson's earliest boyhood memories are of his father's droll humour, horse-drawn street cars, of World War One parades, particularly the Victory parade and the usual memories of school days, at Kent and Regal Road Schools, in West Toronto. He recalls being an apt and diligent student, but he was often bored and skipped classes with what, to his parents, was an alarming frequency. But he enjoyed the extra-curricular activities at the school and, although there was no art instruction in his classes, York excelled in music and won several musical memory competitions held by the local Board of Education. He remembers music as the major family art interest, "My mother gave piano lessons to my sister, brother and a few local students. We sang in the church choir, and managed to attend the occasional orchestra recital. The first money that I earned, when I was about twelve, was spent on two classical records, a terrific extravagance at the time. I continued to collect classical records through my teens.

It was not until he attended Oakwood Collegiate in North Toronto that Wilson was encouraged to develop his latent gifts for graphic art. He was singled out as the potential artist in his class and given a number of special projects to execute for the school. During this time, he also exhibited a growing scholastic ability, always standing among the first four or five students for academic achievement, but invariably failing for conduct. "I was a bloody nuisance" Wilson now recalls. Despite his good marks, his teachers found him an unsettling influence. He was constantly causing disruptions, and it was suggested that he should leave Oak-



Hedley Rainnie, 1944, Oil, 30" x 24", Dr. & Mrs. O. S. Pokorny.



Beauty Contest, 1946, Oil, 30" x 36", Winnipeg Art Gallery.

wood for some other school. His parents took this advice philosophically, and possibly were relieved that he now might be able to assist the household financially, through his increasingly evident skills at drawing and painting.

The Wilson family was less than moderately well off. Its members lived very simply and frugally. Although York's father was never unemployed, he never made a large salary, and his son assisted with part time jobs from the age of ten. York sold the *Sunday World* and *Star Weekly* on street corners and took a variety of jobs. He helped behind the counter at cake and butcher stores and did deliveries on his bicycle after school and Saturdays. On Sundays, he sang in the choir twice a day at the Earls Court Methodist Church. It was an earnest and busy life and young Wilson found little time on his hands for leisure.

After York's invitation to leave Oakwood Collegiate, his mother took a portfolio of his drawings and paintings to the Central Technical School and arranged to have him enrolled there in the second year art course. Wilson attended the Central Technical School for two years, his only formal training. Among his instructors were Frederick Challener, Peter Haworth and Alfred Howell. York was sixteen when he left Central Tech. In the summer of 1924 at his parents' insistence. They felt that the family was in too straitened circumstances for him to continue at school and suggested that he look for some salaried job.

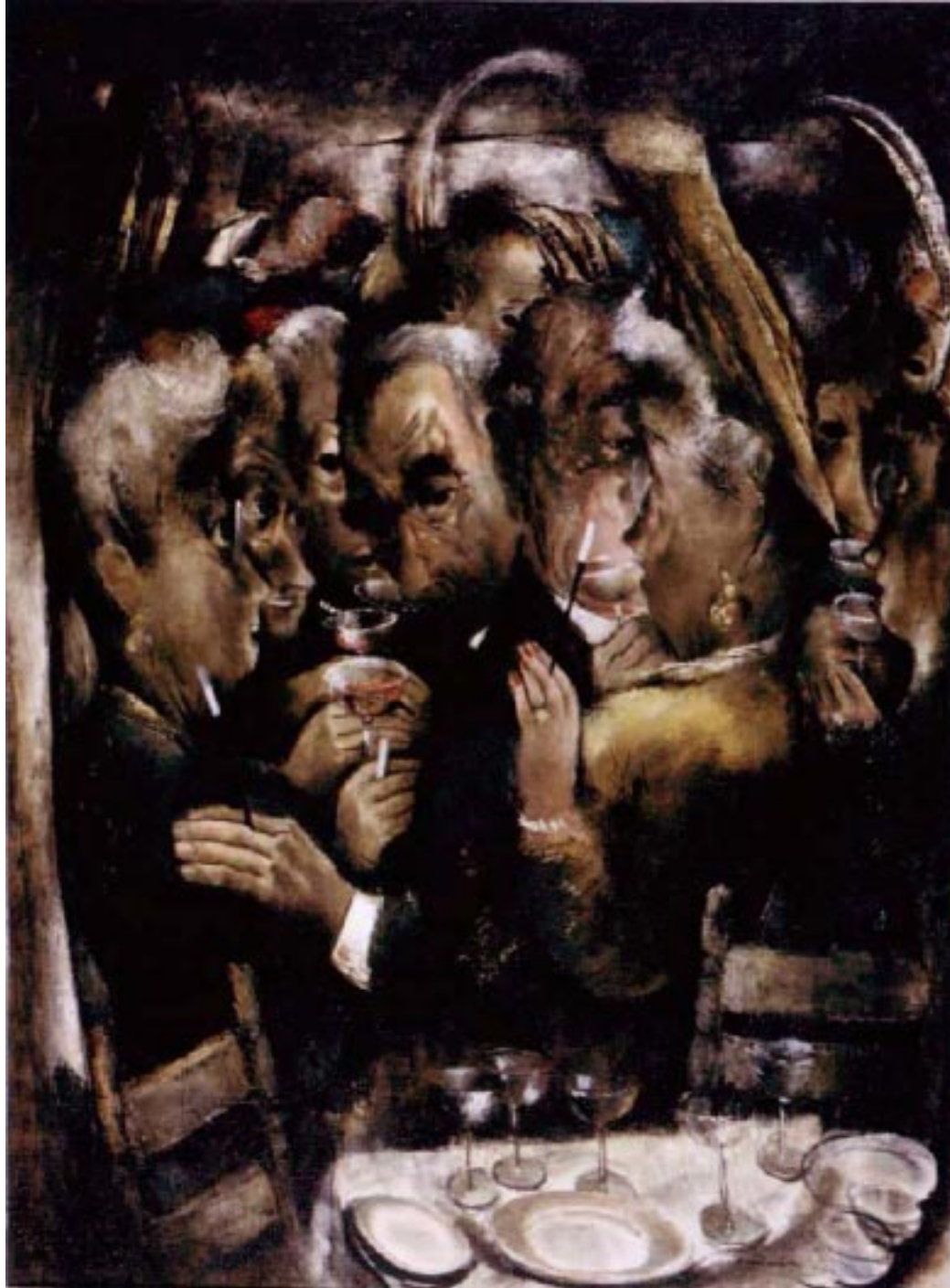
Samples in hand, young Wilson canvassed the local commercial art houses and engravers. He did not have to travel far. At the second stop on his search for employment he was hired by Brigdens Ltd., one of the city's largest art studios. One of the conditions for his employment was the signing of a four year contract, the



Head Table, 1945, Oil, 30" x 40, Ronalds Advtg. Agency.

terms of which stated that he would receive five dollars a week for the first six months, seven dollars per week for the second six months, ten dollars per week for the third six months, progressing to fifteen dollars after two and a half years. Though he may not have made a fortune, Wilson found Brigdens an important learning experience. He began by cutting mats, running errands, washing brushes and doing all the various chores that any apprentice to commercial art must have endured at that time. Lettering became his strong commercial talent. He bought a book on type by Goudy, and learned lettering by copying every page in the book in India ink during weekends and evenings. Within a year, he was one of Brigdens' top lettering men. At the same time formerly hidden creative urgings caused him to spend more hours sketching out of doors during his lunch break and spare time. He also managed to squeeze in a few night life classes at the Ontario College of Art under John Alfsen and at a co-operative life class in the Yonge Street Arcade, where each of the participants paid twenty-five cents a night toward models' fees.

Thomas W. Mitchell was the manager of the creative department of Brigdens during this period, and under him were some twelve artists. Among these were such well known painters as Charles Comfort, André Lapine, Will Ogilvie, and Fred Finlay. These artists encouraged Wilson in his personal sketching as did F. H. Brigden himself. Like the Group of Seven's Grip Ltd. and Rous & Mann before it, Brigdens was a pool of significant creative talent. The advice of Charles Comfort, in particular, had a singular influence upon Wilson. Comfort helped him with colour and in many other ways set the direction for the young artist's early career. Comfort's suggestions of a colour palette (yellow ochre, ultramarine, veridian, raw umber and vermi-

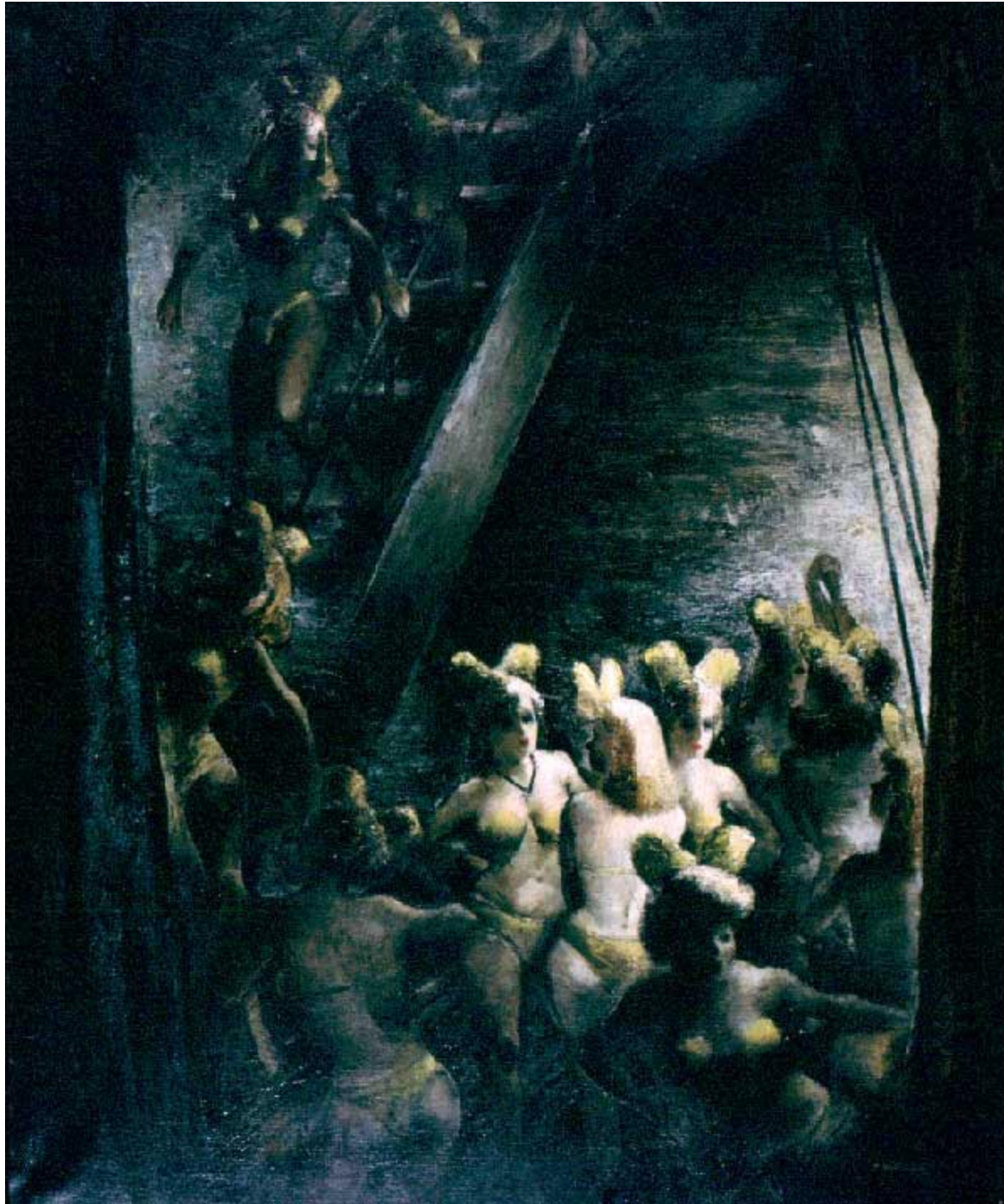


Cocktail Party, 1949, Oil, 40" x 30", The Artist.

lion) can be seen reflected in Wilson's early watercolour, "The Ward". This, like many other early sketches by Wilson, was painted from the rooftop of Brigdens at 108 Richmond Street West, where on many summer and spring afternoons he perched, with his paints, overlooking the core of the city.

"The Ward" reveals an already well developed sense of design and tone. It also effectively conveys the character and structure of downtown Toronto of that era. Wilson did hundreds of drawings and watercolours of the laneways and streetscapes during his stay at Brigdens. On weekends, he also travelled to outlying areas of the city to paint landscapes with a fellow employee Edwin Smith and later with Jack Bush who worked at the nearby Bomac Engraving Ltd. Rarely did any of these early watercolours take more than an hour to complete, but each of them was rendered with a precision and deliberate control of the medium which was characteristic of Wilson from his very beginnings. The watercolour, "Richmond and York", was painted within a few days of "The Ward" and shares the same joy in articulating rectangular patterns.

After two and a half years at Brigdens, Wilson asked for a five dollar raise, which was refused. Brigdens insisted that he was bound by a four year contract until the young apprentice pointed out that the agreement was inoperative because he had signed it when he was under age. Confident that he could manage on his own, he left Brigdens and freelanced for the next six months. He readily succeeded in getting work from a number of local stores but found the pressures of continuing negotiations left him little time for his own painting. He then called upon Sampson Matthews Ltd. where he asked for and received eighteen dollars a week. Among his fellow employees at Sampson Matthews was Frank Carmichael who had already established himself as a



Backstage, 1946, Oil, 48" x 40", The Artist.

leading Canadian landscape painter. Wilson remained at Sampson Matthews for only nine months. He left when his ambition was nurtured by stories of much higher salaries paid to commercial artists across the border. Admiring his young employee's determination, Charles Matthews gave him a recommendation which read "To Whom it may Concern: I would not hesitate to recommend this man and his work to anyone in the world whatsoever.

Wilson left for Detroit in October, 1927, aged almost nineteen and full of confidence. The first place he visited in Detroit was the Meinzinger Studio in the local General Motors building. When asked what salary he was expecting he brashly asked for fifty dollars a week and was told that he would be hired within two weeks. Though his salary was now much better, the young artist found that the expectations of the Meinzinger Studio were much higher than his former employers. He now punched a clock every morning at 8 a.m. and worked overtime every other night until midnight. Despite these heavy demands, Wilson's stay in Detroit provided an important learning experience in terms of both commercial and fine art.

Before arriving in Detroit, Wilson had seen little fine art other than that painted by his working colleagues. This lack of art history education was to be remedied by Edwin Smith, his friend and former Brigdens apprentice who was also working in Detroit. Smith took York to the Detroit Institute of Art and the Art Institute of Chicago and was Wilson's first mentor in modern art. Wilson was exposed to the work of Cezanne, Rouault, Matisse, Seurat, van Gogh and the rest of the impressionists and post impressionists. Although he was only a year older than Wilson, Smith was able to point out to him the special qualities inherent in the work of such painters. "Probably more than any other person, Ed. Smith opened up the



Toluca Market, 1950, Pyroxalin, 48" x 84", Mrs. John Goba.

endless world of painting to me”, Wilson now acknowledges. “I had no idea that art could be so varied, and rewarding. I realized for the first time that art was much more than drawing or painting an exact likeness. The science and aesthetics of picture-making, the excitement and mystery of it all, made me feel that I knew, for the first time, what I wanted to do for the rest of my life.”

After six months at Meinzinger’s, Wilson felt confident enough to demand a raise in pay to sixty-five dollars a week. When this was refused, he took employment at another commercial studio, Reid-Smith for that salary. At Reid-Smith work was more varied. Besides doing lettering and layout, York was able to put into practice his increasingly skilful command of figure drawing. Thus began his full time career as an illustrator, which lasted almost 20 years. Wilson remained at Reid-Smith for more than a year and a half until the Spring of 1930, when he became a victim of the great depression. Commercial houses in Detroit were either laying off most of their artists or closing down. After a short period of desperately walking the streets searching for any work that might be available, Wilson decided to return to Toronto. That summer, he was living once again at his parents home on McKay Street.

Wilson found Toronto as void of jobs as Detroit, and picked up what few dollars he could doing freelance work. Competition was tough, pay was low, and he decided that he might do better if he took on a partner to widen his contacts. He joined forces with a designer, Wesley R. Flinn, and they rented space in the Wilson building at 100 Front Street West, a popular address for commercial artists. Flinn and Wilson stayed together for two years, gradually gaining important contacts with advertising agencies and engravers. Wilson



Indian Harbour, 1946, Oil, 30'' x 40'', Mr. & Mrs. W. C. Harris.

turned more and more away from lettering and layout and toward illustration. He began to get commissions from such national magazines as *Macleans*, *Chatelaine* and the *Canadian Magazine*.

An important role in Wilson's early career as an illustrator was to be played by his wife, Lela. York had met Lela Miller on a local skating rink when he was eighteen and she was fifteen, and he was first impressed by her talents as a speed skater. At the time they met, Lela had arrived in Toronto from Aurora to attend business college. They went together until York left for Detroit within a year of their meeting, and **it** was not until 1932 that they met again and started dating. By July 13th, 1933, they were married. They were a typical depression couple, having exactly eighty cents between them. They spent the wedding night in a friend's apartment, and then returned to their respective homes. Three weeks later, York received a cheque for fifty dollars and they were able to rent a bedsitting room and kitchen on King Street for one dollar a day. They were to have lean pickings for some years, and managed to survive financially only through a close and sometimes unusual collaboration.

Early in his new Toronto career, Wilson had some serious differences with the art director of a leading periodical publishing company, which seriously restricted his future as a magazine illustrator. To circumvent this situation, he signed a group of samples with his wife's maiden name, and sent her to the publishers. As a result, with his work and her name, she became a popular figure in the local editorial offices and the Wilsons thrived as they never had before. As soon as the deceit was no longer necessary, Wilson returned, using his own name, to his role as one of the country's top illustrators.

While Lela was delivering the magazine illustrations, York was busy establishing his reputation as a



Margaritones, 1951, Pyrozalin, 32" x 24", Mr. & Mrs. Cooper Campbell.

leading commercial illustrator among the local advertising agencies. Ronalds Advertising, one of the leading agencies, rented him studio space in their offices in return for which he gave them first call on his talents. From 1936 until 1943, Wilson did the bulk of Ronalds graphic commissions. Theme, style and technique were enormously varied during these years. The work ranged from wartime appeals for victory bonds to advertisements for Yardley's perfumes. He created a series of cartoon strips, and delicate scratchboard displays for industrial instruments corporations. At the same time, he was creating cover designs for *Liberty* and *Maclean* 's magazines. He did jackets for Collin's White Circle pocket novels and oil paintings portraying Canadian pioneers for a local insurance company. It was rich and varied fare and Wilson served it up well enough to be represented in the distinguished American Art Director's Annual.

Wilson has never down-graded the importance of his early commercial art and the impact it had for his future as a painter. "Commercial art made it necessary , he has said, "for me to draw in any style and virtually in any medium. I had to draw to order in pen and ink, charcoal, oil paint, watercolour, tempera, scratchboard, to name a few. It was a kind of discipline you can't get any other way. The fact that you have to draw, day after day, eight hours a day, forces you into a discipline you cannot easily sustain any other way. You also have to learn to draw convincingly things you wouldn't draw under normal circumstances. You usually have to invent and create under pressure and carry out experiments you might otherwise never encounter. You have to adapt creatively to reproduction media and their limitations. You get into a routine of working over a period of years, starting at 9.00 a.m. and carrying on until day's end. I still think that a



White Figures of Acambay, 1950, Pyroxalin, 24" x 32", Art Gallery of Ontario.

routine of working is far more important than native talent and the disciplines of commercial art are a perfect balance to preserve one from preciousness.”

During his busy commercial art years of the 1940's Wilson was also trying to move closer toward a career in painting. Some of the commissions during this time approached fine art in their character. In 1940, he created the first of the many murals that were to mark his career. It was commissioned by Roy Thomson (later Lord Thomson of Fleet) for his Northern Broadcasting and Publishing Ltd. building in Timmins, Ontario. Painted in oil, the mural was about 6 x 6 ft. in size and showed a montage of buildings, northern landscape, leisure and industry, and was carried out in relatively muted tones of browns, ochres and blues. Another highly creative commercial project came to Wilson in 1947 when the Imperial Oil Company commissioned him to do paintings at White Horse, Northwest Territories of their activities there. There were few restrictions placed upon him in this venture, and he was able to complete a number of very vigorous sketches and two large dramatic paintings which later were exhibited throughout America alongside similar works by many of the United States' leading painters. Wilson was well prepared for his Imperial Oil job by a trip made a year earlier to the Arctic community of Churchill, Manitoba, when he portrayed the activities of a military expedition, “Muskox”, where the temperatures dropped to fifty below.

In 1943, Wilson left his studio at Ronalds Advertising Agency to move to larger premises of his own in the Steven's Building at 145 Wellington Street. His decision was dictated by a desire to do more creative painting, and for the next six years his time was divided between freelance commercial illustration and the creation of the canvases which were to establish his early reputation as a painter.



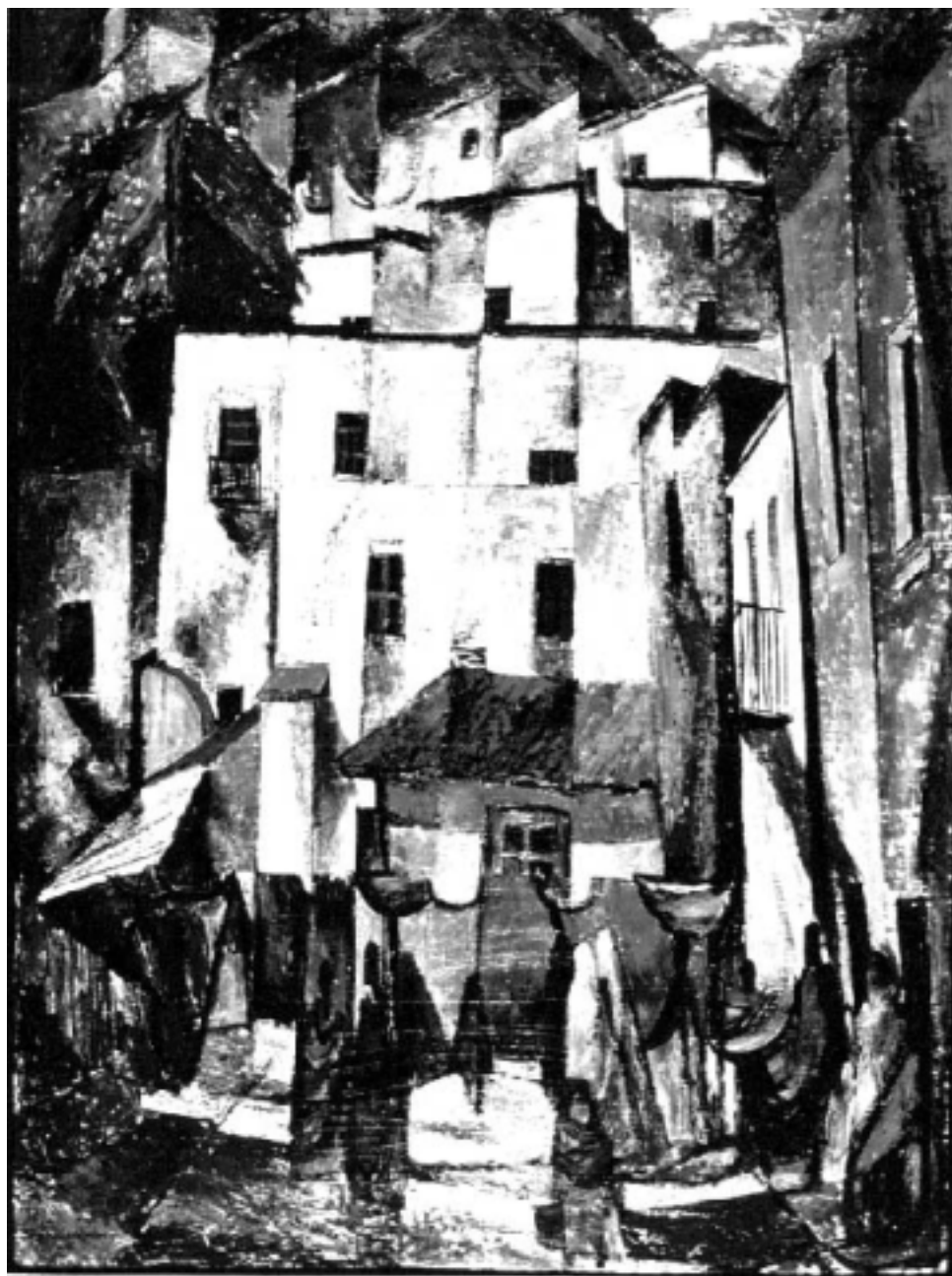
Barn Window, 1953, Oil, 18" x 24", Mr. & Mrs. W. E. Fleury.



Non-Objective, 1953, Pyroxalin, 24" x 26", The Artist.



Sunlit Street, Acambay, 1950, Oil, 18" x 24", Dr. D. Park Jamieson.



Guanajuato, 1951, Pyroxalin, 32" x 24", Mr. & Mrs. J. B. Parkin.