

YORK WILSON

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Wallack Galleries/Ottawa

Chapter Two

The Human Comedy

The human comedy

York Wilson's first exhibited works were two small watercolours, "The Ward" and "Richmond and York". These were accepted for exhibition at the Montreal Museum's Spring Show of 1931, and "The Ward" was invited later that year to be shown at the National Gallery of Canada. The painting "The Ward" would now be in the collection of the National Gallery if the artist had been willing to accept an offer less than the \$45 he was asking for the picture. That same year, he sent a group of works for exhibition at the 8th Annual Canadian Society of Graphic Arts Exhibition at the Art Gallery of Toronto. These included two etchings "W.S." and "Bill", a portrait of his father, a chalk drawing called "Reverie" and a watercolour, "Three Heads". He was not to exhibit again until 1939.

Although he did not exhibit publicly between 1931 and 1939, Wilson was busy drawing and painting from life and landscape, working in both watercolour and oil. During this time, he says, he was more comfortable in watercolour. He used his family regularly as subjects, and among the best surviving works of this early time are a portrait of his only child, Virginia, who had been born in 1930, and a portrait of his wife's mother in charcoal. All of these early paintings, whether in watercolour or oil, are small in scale.

Although he continued to paint landscapes, it was the human condition that increasingly commanded Wilson's attention as a potential theme. He was aware of the emergence of a group of painters in the United States who gave their prime efforts to portraying contemporary humanity in moods that ranged from compassion to satire. The works of such artists as Reginald Marsh, Jack Levine and Grant Wood were revealing the many sides of the American human comedy to the people south of the border, but in Canada virtually no one was engaged in capturing the face of Canada's people. There was no tradition to follow in this respect, except for the isolated instances of a few artists such as Cornelius Krieghoff and Robert Harris.

Although little was being achieved in this direction, there were rumbles about the need for painters to portray the face of Canadian society. In 1941, artist Pegi Nicol objected: “For years one wished our vigorous Canadian painters might focus a little on man. There were portraits in the yearly shows, but portraits are reflections of individuals. Man in his environment and doing have been considerably neglected as a subject. The Americans have their Marsh, Curry and Wood crossing their canvases with the people they know. Man moving and acting; persons by shape and form, by personality, and by feeling, juxtaposed against each other. This sort of painting has been decidedly missing from Canadian art.” York Wilson was one of the few Canadian artists to fill this gap. During his eight year career as a satirist and social commentator, he made effective pictorial points on themes ranging from businessmen to welfare workers and the cocktail circuit. Although his brush was occasionally loaded with acid, it was used more like a scalpel than a bludgeon. At times, indeed, his portrayals were more humorous than analytical.

During his early commercial art days at Brigdens and in Detroit, Wilson often visited the local burlesque houses. In Toronto, at that time, theatre was sparse indeed, and was conveyed almost exclusively by the Royal Alexandra, Sheas Vaudeville and the local Casino strip emporium on Queen Street. It was to the Casino that Wilson often took his sketchpad after work at Brigdens and when he decided to attempt the first of his large satirical canvases in 1938, it is not surprising that the theme chosen was burlesque. He worked for many months on “Burlesque Number 1”, fighting the problems of composition and scale of a major work which were new to him. His largest previous works were small oil sketches or watercolours. The difficulties encountered in this first ambitious venture were too much. It was a failure, according to Wilson, which only got “worse and worse” as he pursued it and after several months of futile, but instructive effort, he destroyed “Burlesque Number 1”.



Two Ballerinas, 1950, Oil, 16" x 22", Present Owner unknown.



Red Abstraction, 1957, Oil, 24" x 32", Mr. & Mrs. Earle C. Morgan.

Later in 1938, Wilson began a second version, “Burlesque Number 2”. Based on backstage activity at the Casino, this painting has a Degas—like character in its composition, with the distant brightly lit stage viewed behind the closeup silhouetted forms of two strippers. Wilson acknowledges he was also influenced by Dame Laura Knight and her circus pictures. Influenced although he may have been, “Burlesque Number 2” is a remarkable performance for the second canvas of an artist’s career. It eloquently conveys the vividly contrasting lights and shadows of the backstage where Wilson was allowed to sketch freely. (The comedian on stage in the background is a composite of such figures as Phil Silvers, Red Skelton and other performers who gave him brief poses while they were performing at the theatre.) The dramatic light and shade of “Burlesque Number 2” was carried over by Wilson from his work as an illustrator. The painting’s lost and found forms make an almost staccato spatial design. The images are strongly modelled in short, crisp brushstrokes, supplemented by occasional highlights with a palette knife. Wilson here is clearly more involved with the play of light and the modelling of images than in local colour. His palette is limited mainly to earth colours with occasional accents of a more brilliant hue. This was Wilson’s first painting to be publicly exhibited with a major society exhibition, the Ontario Society of Artists at the Art Gallery of Toronto, in March 1939. The painting was an immediate success, and few artists have received such attention for their very first major canvas. It was invited by the Canadian Group of Painters for exhibition at the New York World’s Fair in the Fall of 1939. Wilson, it seemed, had touched a new vein in Canadian painting on his first exploratory venture. “Burlesque Number 2” is now in the collection of the Tom Thomson Memorial Art Gallery at Owen Sound, Ontario.

Wilson’s second canvas, “Welfare Worker”, was even more successful. Painted in 1941, it was an

instant, if controversial, hit at the 1942 Ontario Society of Artists' exhibition, and remains probably the artist's best known work to this date. Unlike the more reportorial "Burlesque Number 2", "Welfare Worker" is an exercise in social criticism. "I was impressed with the fact that my model knew absolutely nothing about hardship", recalls Wilson. "She was going about giving advice to impoverished and often drunken people with absolutely no knowledge of their way of life. I made a point of showing her smooth hands and emphasizing her long lacquered fingernails. They had obviously never done a day of manual work." Wilson repainted those hands five times before he was happy with the effect of softness and grooming. "Welfare Worker" has plenty of obvious but effective symbolism. The artist intended the cactus plant in the background to convey the aridity of the homes being visited. The resident of the house is reduced to a fragmentary mirrored portrait before the dominant, black clad figure of the welfare worker. The costume was purchased specifically for the purpose of this painting and, surprisingly enough, an actual welfare worker agreed to pose for it, wearing her mother's *pince-nez*.

"Welfare Worker" has always been a controversial painting, receiving both bitter criticism and wide applause. When it was shown at the Winnipeg Art Gallery, a group of local welfare workers tried to have the painting removed from the exhibition. In 1949, it was featured in a National Film Board film devoted to social work. The breadth of the painting's impact across the country is suggested in a letter from Leslie McFarlane, requesting permission to use it in a National Film Board feature: "We are planning early production of a documentary film on the social service setup in British Columbia. They are developing a type of social worker a good deal different from the type satirized so brilliantly in your 'Welfare Worker'. I came across a newspaper clipping of the painting in the office of one of the workers in a village on Vancouver Island. It occupied a place of honour on the wall as a warning to the worker against ever becoming acid or



Imperial Oil Mural, 1957, Vinyl-Acetate, 21 x 32 ft.



Imperial Oil Mural, 1957, Vinyl-Acetate, 21 x 32 ft.



Imperial Oil Drawing, 1957, diluted India Ink on cement.

snoopy. It seems to me that your painting casts illumination on the contrast between the old—but unfortunately still flourishing—type of social worker and the practical, sensible and sympathetic type emerging here, and its use in a film would point out this new attitude very sharply. Congratulations on a satiric gift rare in Canadian Art.” This was to be only one of the many communications received by the artist about this compelling social commentary, one that has lost none of its impact through the ensuing years.

The palette of “Welfare Worker” is limited almost exclusively to black and warm earth colours. The artist admits to having Vermeer in mind while composing the picture, but its abstract quality also presaged the future non-figurative works by the artist. The crisp, deliberate counterpoint of the cup and saucer, cactus, black bonnet and white dicky set against the simple angular structures of the window mirror and foreground table convey a subtlety and skill of design unexpected in so novice a painter as Wilson still was in 1941. It also suggests the importance of his earlier experience as a commercial artist in layout design. Strangely, this potent portrayal remained in the artist’s collection until 1975 when it was purchased by an Ottawa private collector. It is to be hoped that one day it will enter a public collection, where it may be widely appreciated as a major work of Canadian painting during the 1940’s and as an eloquent social reminder.

Wilson painted more than a dozen human comedy canvases between 1939 and 1949 while continuing his career as a commercial artist. These works contained varying degrees of satire. One of his gentler attacks is “Public Library”, painted in 1941, in which the subject, posed for by the artist’s wife, could easily be taken for a sister of the earlier “Welfare Worker”. The design is based on a deliberate geometric arrangement, the crisp dark triangle of the woman complementing the angle of the back of a chair and a cube formed from books. Like many of the early social comment studies, “Public Library” was painted in the third floor studio of the



Venice in Red, 1958, Oil, 32" x 22", Mr. & Mrs. Clair Stewart.

artist's home at 28 Hambly Avenue in Toronto's eastern beaches area where he resided for seven years until the fall of 1942. "Public Library", along with another painting "National Affairs", was exhibited in the 1942 Ontario Society of Artists exhibition at the Art Gallery of Toronto. "National Affairs" might today be taken as a comment on male chauvinism. In it, two rather dissolute male figures are seated at a kitchen table surrounded by beer bottles arguing fruitlessly in a cloud of smoke. Behind them, a woman is patiently washing dishes with her back appropriately turned to the viewer. On the basis of these two paintings plus the earlier "Burlesque Number 2" and "Welfare Worker", York Wilson was elected a full member of the Ontario Society of Artists in the Summer of 1942, a remarkable achievement for one whose career as a painter was merely getting under way.

Public recognition grew rapidly for Wilson during the next decade. His subjects and treatment captured the imagination of news editors and his work was as widely reproduced as that of any Canadian artist of the period. He was exhibiting regularly with both the O.S.A. and the Royal Canadian Academy. He worked steadily, and produced a prolific amount, considering that he was also busy making a living at commercial art. Canvas after canvas conveyed the foibles and fetishes of the Canadian population. There was the wartime "Blood Donors" of 1942 showing an array of people with thermometers in their mouths, "Early Closing", another wartime commentary, which portrayed a wartime "dimout" along a Toronto street, the first of a series of nocturnes the artist was to execute during the next few years. Then there was "Local Dance", as vigorous in its execution as it was in subject matter. Purchased by the Art Gallery of Toronto in April, 1943, "Local Dance" was the first painting the artist ever sold, apart from small sketches. This painting proved as popular with the press as it did with the Art Gallery. *Saturday Night* commented in April 17, 1943: an artist who can make his figures move (something unusual in Toronto) is R. York Wilson in his gay



Marfil, 1951, Pyroxalin, 32" x 24". Mr. K. W. Peacock.

sextet of jazzers titled “Local Dance”. There was also “Zoot Suits and Gypsies” portraying a group of indolents hanging around Queen Street gypsy fortune tellers and, in vivid contrast, “Head Table” of 1944 which reveals the varying expressions of boredom present at a formal businessmen’s dinner. “Head Table” was exhibited with “March Past”, a racing picture, in the Royal Canadian Academy exhibition of 1945, the year in which he was elected an associate of the Royal Canadian Academy and also Vice-President of the Ontario Society of Artists. “March Past” represented a new departure for Wilson. In it, for the first time, he uses a full palette of brilliant colour. Vivid jockeys’ silks dance a brilliant counterpoint against an expanse of lime green, sunlit grass. The artist claims to have lost money betting every race while doing his research for the “March Past”, but the resulting canvas, now in the collection of the Beaverbrook Gallery in Fredericton, New Brunswick, was worth it. “March Past” was painted from sketches made at the Woodbine Racetrack in Toronto’s east end, and it represents one of the few considerable paintings on the subject ever done by a Canadian artist.

Although it has often been said that Canadians cannot laugh at themselves, official art circles certainly laughed with Wilson. By 1946, he had become President of the Ontario Society of Artists. In 1944, he showed in a group exhibition at the original Roberts Gallery on Grenville Street, in a two-man show at the Women’s Art Association with Jack Bush, and held a solo exhibition at the Hart House Gallery of the University of Toronto of 37 canvases and sketches. The following year he showed with three other artists, John Alfsen, Hedley Rainnie, and William Winter at the Fine Art Galleries in the Eaton’s College Street department store, which was to become his dealer for several years.

Nineteen forty-six was to be a very busy year for Wilson, during which he concentrated on portraying

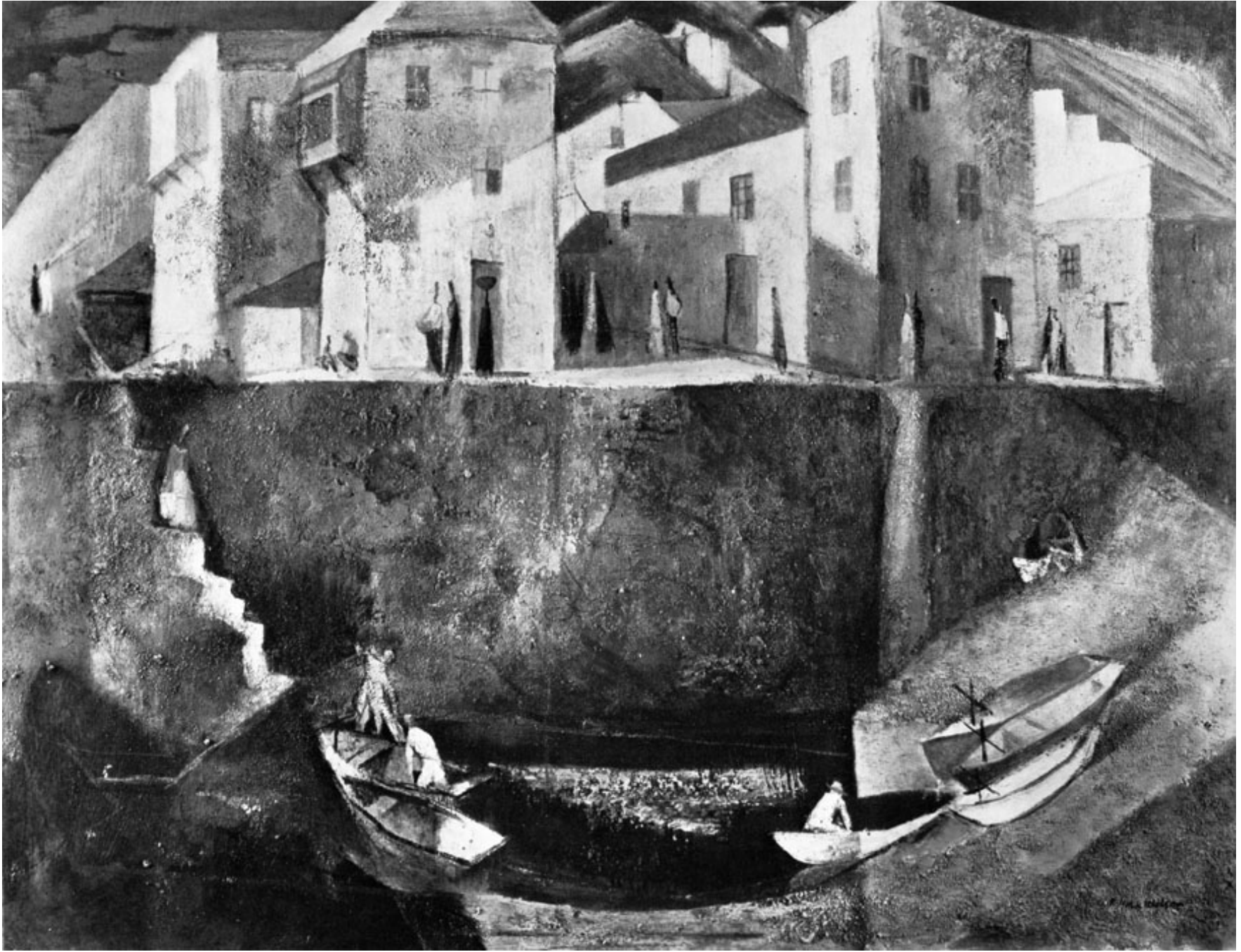


Chioggia, 1958, Oil, 51" x 77", Imperial Oil Limited.

variations of the feminine scene. He returned to the theme of burlesque with the most ambitious of his burlesque paintings, “Backstage”. In contrast, was “Young Ladies” representing three private-school girls in afterclass conversation. In it, there is an abstract pattern of black formed by the slender tunics and stockinged legs of the book carrying students. “Young Ladies” is now appropriately housed in the Branksome Hall private girls school collection. The most successful painting of 1946, however, is unquestionably “Beauty Contest” now in the collection of the Winnipeg Art Gallery. Here is that controversial American institution captured in all its glitter, colour, and banality. The four eager contestants in the limelight are flashing all of their considerable physical talents before the three silhouetted male judges in the foreground. It is a picture of enormous vitality, and a memorable period piece. Wilson has put all that he has learned about light and colour up until this time into this painting. The brilliantly tinted bathing suits continue the artists concern with colour, first revealed in “March Past”. The accents of flashing white teeth, fireworks, and canvas tops capture all of the sequined and popcorn atmosphere of a big country fair.

Wilson’s last two satiric paintings also involve women—”The Girls”, a group at a bridge party, and “Cocktail Party”, the first of his satiric paintings to show any marked degree of deliberate distortion. “Cocktail Party’s” exaggerated proportions verge on caricature, and its crowded, almost claustrophobic, composition is the most baroque design the artist had done to date. Volumes compete with volumes, each vying for attention like the subjects portrayed. It is certainly the most forceful and pungent of all Wilson’s satiric paintings, and a triumphant note on which to end that period.

While making his pointed comments about the human comedy, Wilson was varying his themes by painting ballet, portraits and landscapes. His ballet pictures were a natural sequel to his burlesque canvases. He felt that ballet had everything burlesque had to offer plus more challenging poses. He felt that whereas his



Puerto de la Cruz, 1955, Pyroxalin, 24" x 32", Salada Tea Co.

burlesque pictures were a kind of social commentary, his ballet studies were a pure expression of form and rhythm. With a nod to Degas, Wilson did his ballet subjects directly from models, mostly at his own studio but occasionally at the theatre, particularly the Royal Alexandra. In these works, he concentrated upon form and those contrasts of hard and soft edges for which he then had such an affection. Wilson's first ballet canvas was "Young Dancer", exhibited in the Royal Canadian Academy of 1946. The subject matter brought him immediate popularity while his satiric paintings went unsold. He continued to paint dancers until 1951, when he decided that the constant demand for them and the association of them with his name was preventing him from expanding his talent. After 1951 he never painted another ballet dancer, and suffered financial consequences as a result for the next few years.

To relax, Wilson went on sketching trips once or twice a year during the mid 1940's. He sketched in the Laurentians at Mont Tremblant, Brébeuf, St-Jovite and Wakefield, as well as in Ontario's Haliburton region and Algonquin Park. Almost all of these works were 12 x 16 sketches, executed on canvas board or masonite. The painting of them was important to Wilson as recreation, and only rarely did he see fit to enlarge the sketches into canvases. The few exceptions are "Road to Brebeuf", "Small Lake, SaintJovitte", "Mont Tremblant Station", and "Indian Harbour". "Indian Harbour" painted in Nova Scotia, resulted from Wilson's most ambitious sketching trip, taken in 1945 with his wife Lela and daughter Virginia, through Quebec, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. "Indian Harbour" is basically a monochrome composition, painted in grey greens and grey blues. In its design, the artist has taken liberties with nature and the dominant rock in the middle foreground is pure invention. Like so many of his canvases of this period, "Indian Harbour" is executed almost exclusively with palette knives.

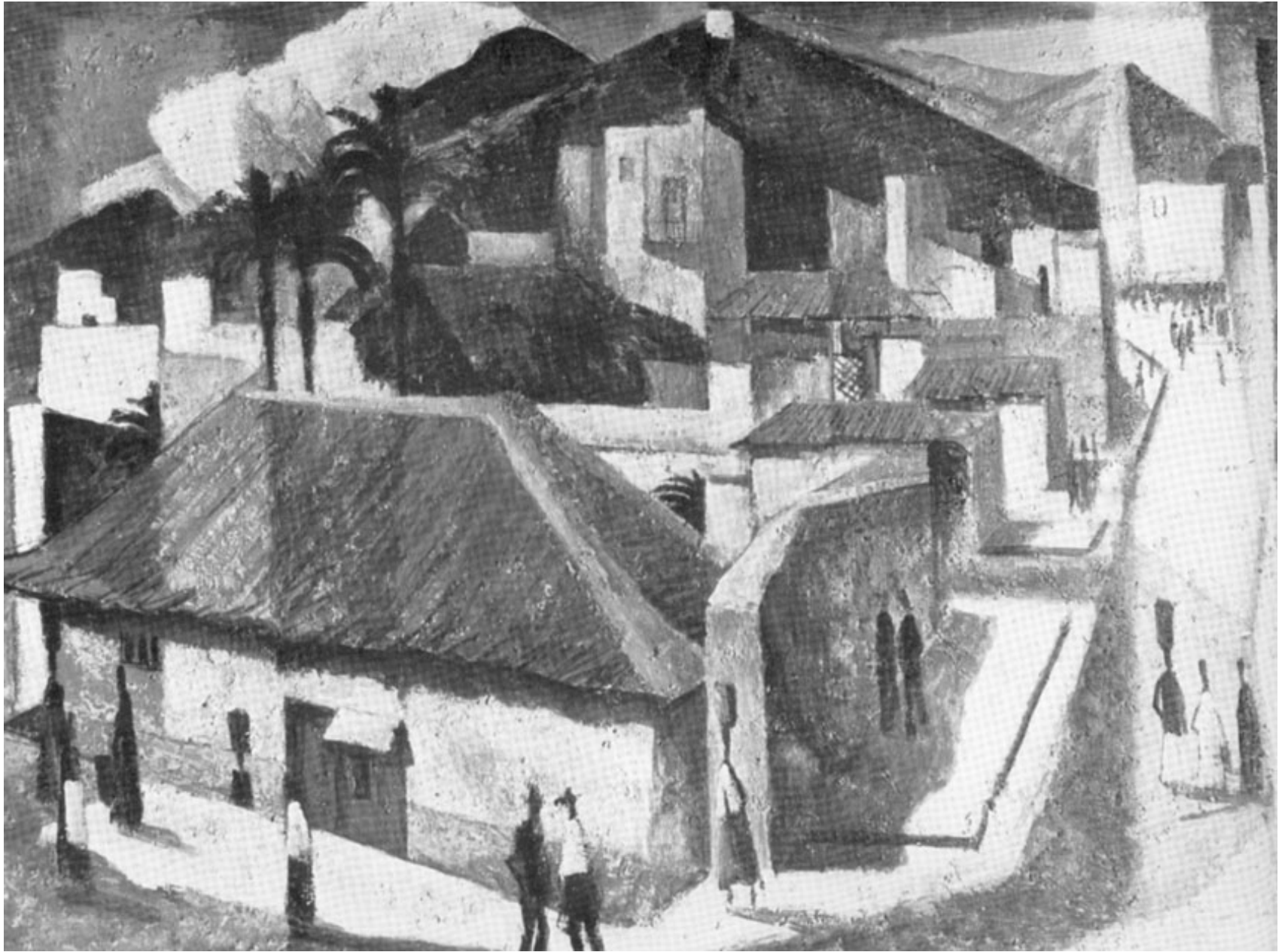
In discussing "Indian Harbour" in 1947, Wilson commented: "I paint more with knives than with



Near San Marco, 1958, Oil, 19.5" x 27.5", Mr. & Mrs. L. J. Wildridge.

brushes because there is a greater freedom, a better opportunity to eliminate detail and concentrate on an expression of broad effects. Contrary to general opinion, knife-painting is not confined to heavy impasto, but can be used just as effectively on areas that are little more than glazes. An artist rarely decides to be a knife— painter, any more than he decides to specialize in watercolour, etching or any other means of expression. Knife-painting is a means that is particularly suited to a certain type of expression and seems the most natural way for me to paint.” He also then claimed that among the major creative influences upon him were Monticelli, Degas, Bellows, Modigliani, AugustusJohn, and Kuniyoshi. Most of these influences he was to leave behind but they had a value at the time, more than 30 years ago.

The art scene in Toronto, and in Canada generally, during the decade between 1939 and 1949 when Wilson was achieving his early triumphs can only be described as a very parochial one. Art criticism generally consisted of straight human interest reportage and social notes. But, in fairness, the interest was there. A typical society page entry appeared in the *Toronto Telegram* for December 15th, 1942: “Messrs. Ron Wilson and Bud Feheley, well known Toronto artists, have spent a couple of weekends with Mr. and Mrs. E. Black, Second Line West, Caledon, this Spring and have painted several beautiful scenes in the Caledon Hills. Mr. Wilson says he might spend a whole year in the Credit Forks vicinity and would not run out of subjects.” It would have been difficult, in any event, for any critic to keep an accurate tab on Wilson’s varied work during the forties. As he, himself, said to a writer friend when asked what “direction” he was headed in: “I can’t tell you exactly where I am headed because I don’t know. I am anxious to get going because I haven’t been out that way yet.



Santa Cruz de Tenerife, 1952, Oil, 24" x 32", National Gallery of Canada.



Floristas, 1952, Pyroxalin, 18" x 24", Mrs. John Church.



La Seine, 1962, Gouache, 24" x 18", Mr. & Mrs. Henri Gustin.



Gouache Green, 1963, Gouache, 24" x 18", Mrs. T. Wainman-Wood.