

YORK WILSON

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Wallack Galleries/Ottawa

Chapter Three

The Mexican experience

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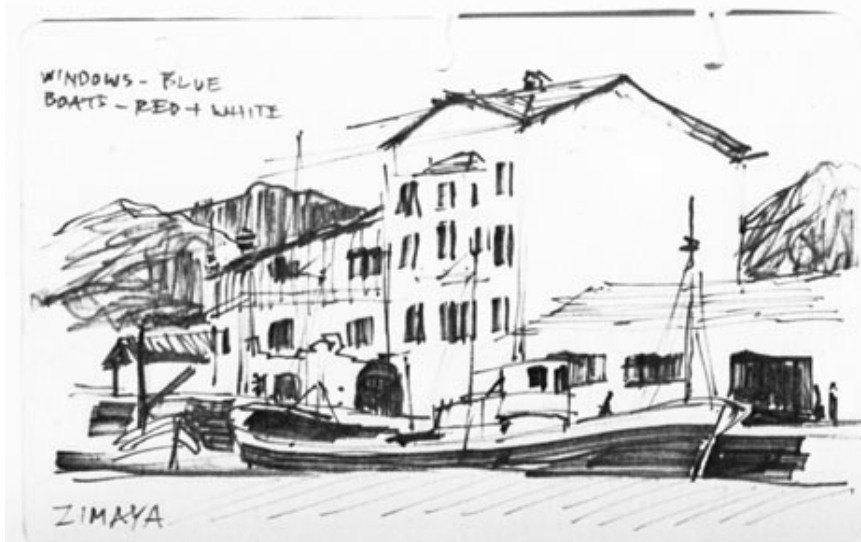
In 1949, Wilson discovered Mexico, the major catalyst of his career. He had been introduced to Mexico by fellow Canadian painter, Leonard Brooks, at a luncheon conversation at Toronto's Arts and Letters Club where Brooks talked enthusiastically about the creative potential of that country. Brooks had gone to live in Mexico in 1946, and his talk of his experiences there warmed Wilson's interest. The timing was perfect. York was anxious to retire from commercial art and concentrate on painting. He was now 41 and the time was ripe to make the change and, in his mind, Mexico offered the propitious next move. By September of 1949, Wilson had cleaned up all his commercial art commitments, and was bound for Mexico with his wife and 19 year old daughter Virginia.

When he made the break, Wilson had saved enough money to last for only one year, and admits that he was "scared as hell". But he felt if he did not make the move then he probably never would. Government regulations only allowed him to take \$500 out of the country at the time, so on his way to Mexico he stopped off in New York City for a week to do a series of illustrations on arctic themes for an Esso Petroleum publication. For this work he was paid \$1,000 in U.S. funds, and with a total of \$1,500, the Wilson family drove on to Mexico for a six month stay. Thus began a lifetime of world travel and creative painting.

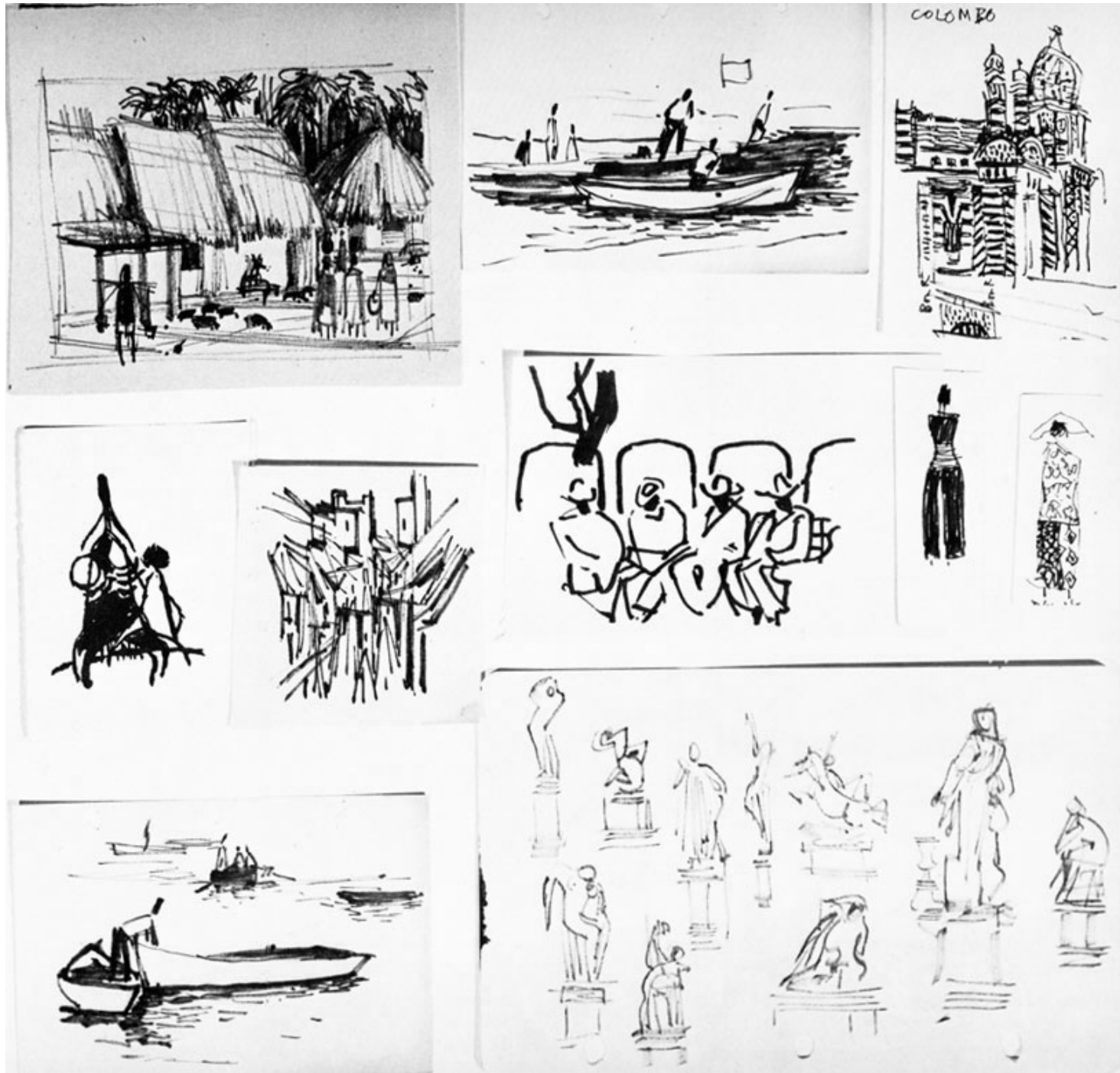
The pictorial impact of Mexico was immediate on Wilson from the time he crossed the border. "From the minute we hit the desert and the mountains in the north" recalls Wilson, "I wanted to stop to paint almost every mile of the way. I was overwhelmed by the new forms and colour, the clarity of the atmosphere and the format of the landscape. I knew it was the most fabulous visual experience I had ever known until then. Nothing has since changed that feeling." By the time he had reached the family's final Mexican destination of San Miguel Allende, Wilson already knew he had found a new creative home.

San Miguel is a town of some 25,000 people nestled in the mountains at 6,400 feet, north west of Mexico City. It is a town of great beauty that has been designated by the Government as a national monument. Its dramatic physical site, narrow cobblestone streets, colourful patios and an internationally known art institute have attracted artists, writers and musicians from many parts of the world. There is a considerable permanent Canadian and American cultural community, which Wilson was soon to join. He rented a large house with a swimming pool on Calle Recreo for \$40 a month. It came complete with orange trees, pecan trees, a large garden, and a gardener and maid. It took Wilson several weeks in what he describes as “a kind of lotus land” before he could settle down to serious painting. “The place was unbelievably hospitable” he remembers. “At every dinner party there was continuous music from the local mariachi bands—and that is one of the things that made San Miguel then so memorable—continuous music. It symbolized a kind of simple harmony which permeated the town.

He wandered the shadowed streets accustoming himself to the multiplicity of textures, colours and tones, all of them new to his eye. He would sit for hours with Leonard Brooks in the midst of the local market place to study the local populace in their sarapes and rebozos. The costumes introduced him to new shapes and forms, and, from them, he was to introduce new design elements into his painting. Their white angular fabrics dominated many of the sketches and canvases done during that first six months in Mexico. In fact, almost all of the works done during that time are composed exclusively of white, greys and earth colours, with an occasional introduction of blue and green. He was aware of the galaxy of colour about him everywhere, the rose, orange and scarlet hues thrown together against vivid lime greens and throaty purples, but he was not yet ready to translate the colour from his consciousness on to his palette. Mexico saw the birth of



Drawings from Sketch-Book, Various sizes, The Artist.



Drawings from Sketch-Book, Various sizes, The Artist.

Wilson as one of the most inventive and individual colourists of all Canadian painters, but it was to take several trips before this was to come to the fore.

Despite Wilson's excitement in his new environment, the formal quality of his paintings during his first six months in Mexico related closely to his work done previously in Canada. He attacked his fresh, foreign subject matter cautiously, and took few drastic liberties with either the figure or the landscape. It was a slow deliberate process from his first, realistic Mexican nudes to the more formalized "White Figures of Acambay" painted in 1951 and now in the collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario. In "White Figures of Acambay" there is just a hint of the rhythmic, future abstracts his Mexican experience was to bring. The long connecting curves and angular patterns, together with the deliberate counterpoint of the dark faces and baskets, make this painting a truly transitional one. Although almost all of Wilson's canvases of the time were executed in traditional oil techniques, he did start to experiment with pyroxalin just prior to his return to Canada in February of 1950. After that, he was to continue to use pyroxalin, a fast drying industrial paint, for most of his work during the next eight years. Used on panels specially prepared with a coarse sand texture, these works have a surface quality which separate them from Wilson's earlier work.

From San Miguel, Wilson made a number of sketching trips to Lake Patzcuaro and its island Janitzio, where he did a number of effective compositions depicting the unique butterfly nets used by the fishermen in that area. He also made a visit to the Pacific port of Manzanillo and to Mexico City. Besides doing some sketching in Mexico City, Wilson also exhibited at a large outdoor show sponsored by the City's local newspaper *Excelsior*; his first appearance in a Mexican show. One famed attraction that he did scrupulously avoid was the famous mural work to be seen on the public walls throughout the City. He did this, he recalls, in order to avoid being influenced at first confrontation by such giants as Tamayo, Diego Rivera, Jose Cle-



Small Wall of China, 1966, Oil, 30" x 40", Lieut-Col. & Mrs. K. L. Campbell.

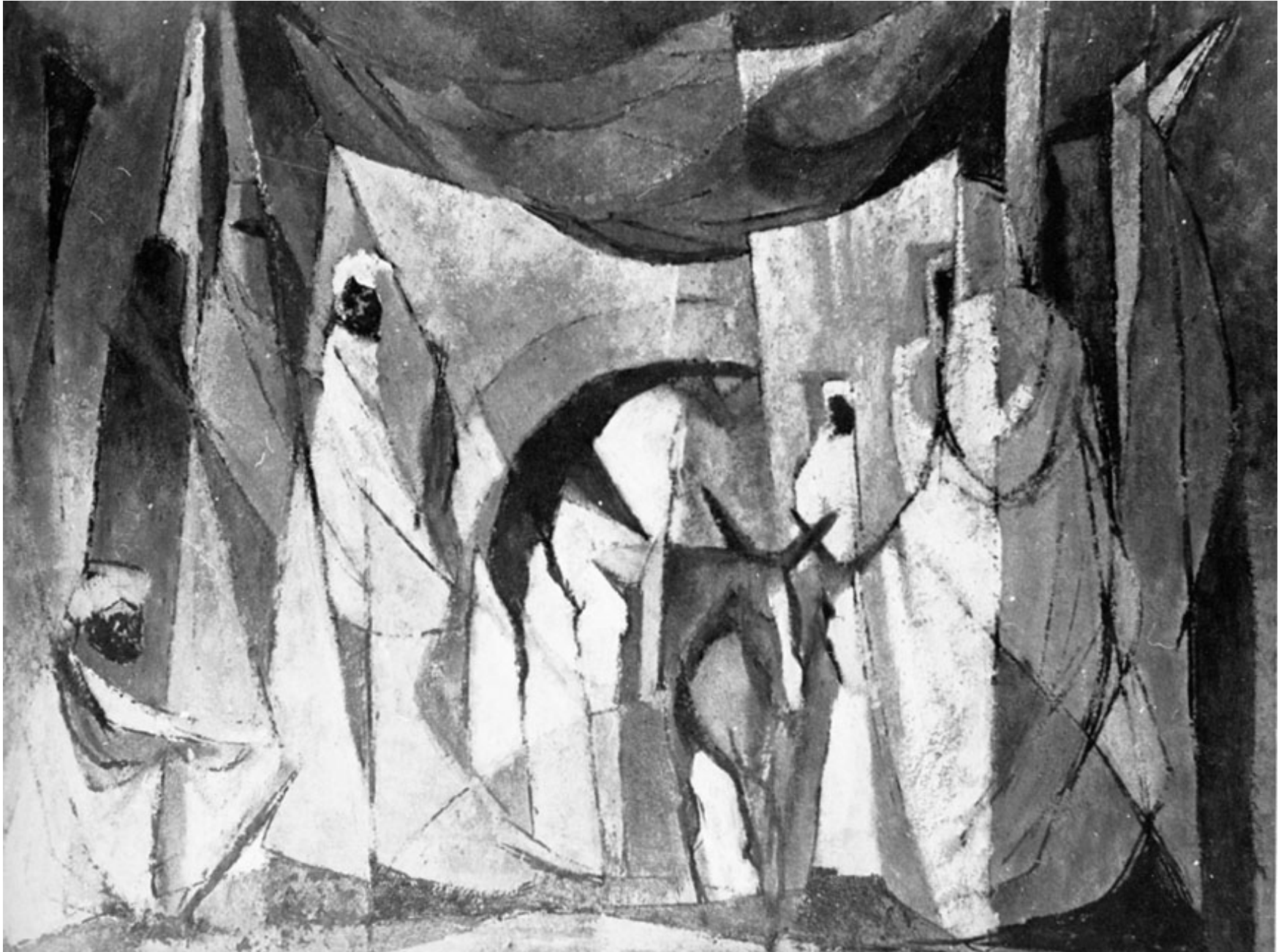


Pachuka, 1969, Acrylic, 52" x 70", Metropolitan Life Insurance Co.

mente Orozco and Alfredo Siquieros. This was a temporary, but very real sacrifice, because the creating of murals was something that was very high on the artist's list of ambitions.

Wilson and his family returned reluctantly from Mexico in March of 1950, but he was anxious to prepare a major exhibition for the Laing Galleries in Toronto. That show, which opened on May 26, 1950, was a major event that included 35 of the artist's Mexican canvases and sketches and was his first one man exhibition since his solo debut at Eaton's Gallery in October, 1948. Wilson was understandably nervous about the show. The subject matter was exotic for Toronto at that time, and he could only wonder at the local audiences response to cacti, white robed Indians and white walled villages. As it turned out, the exhibition was a notable success, both commercially and critically. Pearl McCarthy wrote in the Toronto *Globe and Mail*: "York Wilson's paintings are a heartening experience for Canadians sizing up their country. They are the product of his months in Mexico and show that, while benefiting by everything that Mexico has to offer, from dramatic subject matter to new technical processes, this Torontonian had artistic character enough that he could maintain the unity and integrity of his own talent. That talent, as now seen in maturity, has size and bears out the promise of his years of preparation for mature leadership. There is not a superficial picture of mere atmosphere or the spooky emotionalism that overcomes some artists who come up against the folkways and religious pageantry of Mexico. At the same time, form is never merely an intellectual exercise, but the framework of warm picture-making. The faces, figures, above all the mountainous landscape of the country, have both depth and drama."

The mixture of freedom and sunshine, undreamt colours and forms lured Wilson and his wife back to Mexico within a year. They spent another six months living in San Miguel from March to September, 1951. Between those Mexican trips, Wilson worked up some of his San Miguel material into major canvases.



Fez, Morocco, 1953, Pyroxalin, 24" x 32", Mr. & Mrs. Joseph Harris.



Aguas Calientes, 1970, Acrylic, 46" x 61", The Artist.

Unquestionably, the most important of these was “Toluca Market”, which, at 48” x 84” remains one of the artist's largest easel paintings. It has a brooding presence, in which a bouquet of blazing white Calla lilies shines forth from the dark, strangely aquamarine depth of a market place and almost obliterate the foreground figure of a flower seller. Everything surrounding the flowers merges into a dim tonality, and here we see the beginning of the artist's nascent abstraction in the shawled figure and the use of the vertical pillars which lock the varied figurative elements into place. Now working in his home back at 8 Apsley Road in Toronto, Wilson could think through and marshal the design elements of his compositions in a deliberate manner, difficult to achieve in the midst of his on-rushing, on-the-spot Mexican impressions. “Toluca Market” is a signal picture in Wilson's career. It is as monumental in concept as its scale demands and it presages the future grand designs of Wilson, the muralist. Quick recognition came to the painting when it was awarded the J. W. L. Forrester Award for figure subjects at the 1951 Ontario Society of Artists Exhibition.

In April, 1951, Wilson held his first Montreal one-man exhibition, at the Watson Art Galleries. It was a large show, composed of works painted during the previous few years, as well as Mexican material. There were ballerinas, Quebec landscapes and a few of the human comedy canvases. The present author, in a foreword for this exhibition, wrote: “Apart from his genre activity in the studio, Wilson was simultaneously engaged in painting on-the-spot landscapes. In Ontario's Algonquin Park, Caledon Hills and through the Gaspé and the Gatineau he set up his easel to record brisk impressions of the Canadian countryside. None of Wilson's past painting expeditions, however, have had an impact upon his work comparable to the Mexican trip of 1949-1950. In the Mexican town of San Miguel and its environs York Wilson found fresh themes and forms that brought to his approach to painting an enriched understanding and range. It was not only the graceful sarape and rebozo clad figures that enriched his compositions; six months of sustained work and



River Laundry-Mexico, 1954, Pyroxalin, 24" x 32", Mrs. M. Chipman.

reflection in Mexico allowed Wilson to come to closer grips with the problems of creative painting. He was able to give careful thought to concerns of colour, texture and forms, impossible while closely engaged with commercial commissions back home. As a result, the canvases this Canadian artist brought back from the south revealed a growth in his development as a designer and technician out of all proportion to the period of his sojourn. More important, he had discovered a close, new, and quite personal integration of form and theme which was not apparent in his earlier work. He had gained a fresh understanding of the use of colour and space as equivalents of mood, rather than as mere descriptive facts. Some artists have lost their painting personalities amidst the Mexican art renaissance; in Wilson's case, however, it is hardly too much to say that he found himself as a creative painter there."

Critical response in Montreal agreed with this and the reception was warm. Michael Forster wrote in the *Montreal Standard* of April 21st, 1951: "This is the first chance that Montreal has had to see a gallery full of pictures by this well-known Canadian artist, and judging by them, he should have been introduced here long before this. Working with fine command in both duco and oil, York Wilson builds up loose, rich textures that convey the enjoyment he obviously derives from being a painter. The impact of southern colour and culture has not led him to imitating Mexican painting, that snare into which lesser devotees fall. Instead, it has helped bring into focus the emotions and the point of view that have always been his. When you consider the theatricalism that lies in sarapes, rebozos and wide—brimmed hats, it is a relief to realize he has preferred to explore an attitude that is his own.

In the *Montreal Star* of April 28th, 1951, Robert Ayre remarked: "Wilson has a great appetite for the colour and rhythm of life and he is an extremely accomplished painter, healthfully enjoying the exercise of his faculties as much as he enjoys what he sees in Canada and in Mexico; and what he transforms, for he is not a



Head-Dress for Shubad, 1972, Acrylic-Collage, 15.25" x 22.25", James W. Kerr.

literal painter. He goes halfway to meet the abstract, in pictures like “Vultures” and “Wild Horses” and in some of his landscapes. He has his own way of looking at the Laurentians, bringing to them a dark density I have not seen in any other painter.

Among the most important Mexican works in the Watson exhibition were “Ciudad De Mexico “Tropical Bathers”, where Wilson used a rare note of pink, “Los Posos”, “Tbe Dongu Road”, “River Laundry”, and “Guadeloupe”. The success of the Watson show helped finance the Wilson’s return to San Miguel a month after its closing.

On this second trip, York and Lela spent five months, from May until September. It was a period of creative consolidation. Wilson devoted much of his time to in-studio work from the model, strengthening his draughtsmanship and furthering his increasing interest and skill in abstracted natural form. Occasionally, he took sketching trips with fellow Canadian artist, Walter Yarwood. Much of the time he spent with Czechoslovakian-born painter, James Pinto, who was to have a very significant influence upon Wilson in the understanding and use of abstract colour. Lela studied Spanish at the local institute and, generally, the Wilsons were settling down to becoming warm afficianados of the Mexican scene and way of life. The 1951 Mexican trip also resulted in a number of Wilson’s most successful canvases up until that time. Outstanding among these were “White Figures of Acambay” and “Guanajuato”.

Wilson was to return to his beloved Mexico throughout his life, but the impact of those first two visits was truly pivotal to his entire career as an artist. They left him with a creative drive that he was not to relinquish. He was a stubborn enough individual to resist the obvious platitudes and romance offered by the country, but was able to build creatively on the very bones of its special colour, light and forms, and transfer what he absorbed from them to paintings done in other, far flung places of the world.



New Growth, 1956, Pyroxalin, 66.5" x 41.5", The Artist.



Corner of Venice, 1958, Oil, 32" x 24", Sarnia Public Library & Art Gallery.

In 1952, Wilson decided to put the disciplines and discoveries he had achieved in Mexico to work in a fresh environment. The lessons he had learned confronting the new visual world of San Miguel prompted him to believe that, for him, travel might prove a continuing creative impetus.

“I do not believe I would have evolved as a painter if I had remained at home”, says Wilson today. “When you stay in Canada you have no basis for comparison with what the rest of the world is doing. I find it refreshing to be where I am completely unknown as an artist. Although I admire Canadian painting, I do not feel that I am merely a Canadian painter as such. Remaining in the same place meant all of the social and cultural pressures which tended to make one insular in both one’s activity and thinking. Being abroad, I was more able to find myself as a person. I also found that I could explore the new concepts I had in mind much better when applied to a new locale than when referred to the preconceptions of more familiar surroundings. Travel for me has never been an escape, but rather a reaching into the creative unknown. Travel can be tiring and demanding, but for me as a painter I think it has been worth the effort.

“I feel comfortable in Toronto and it will always be my home base, but I don’t want to feel too safe when I am painting. I want to be a nervous painter, in search of new visual ideas and concepts. The meeting with fresh forms, colours and atmosphere bring a confrontation for me that I find inspiring. If one is constantly in a single location, it becomes too easy to sit back and become very much a part of the social milieu, and slip back into a comfortable cultural posture. From such a position, a personal style may easily devolve into habitual traits. I never want to become an artist by rote and as long as travel stimulates me into fresh creative directions I will continue to move around.”

It was with such thoughts in mind, that Wilson set sail with Lela from New York City on February



Kashmir Façade, 1972, Acrylic, 52" x 80", Dow Chemical of Canada.



Venezia, 1958, Oil, 40" x 30", Lord Beaverbrook Museum.

6th, 1952 aboard the Holland line vessel *Rhinedam* for Le Havre on his first trip to Europe. They arrived on February 14 and spent the next six days in Paris. As it has been for most artists, the French capital was a revelation for Wilson. He paid repeated visits to the Louvre, wandered the hallowed Left Bank streets, viewed the private galleries and stayed at the Hotel Excelsior, a small hostelry on the Right Bank. His Toronto dealer at that time, Blair Laing, took them to dinner at the Tour d'Argent where, Wilson meticulously recorded in his diary, they had duck l'orange number 227037. Blair Laing's faith in Wilson as a painter was reflected in his contract, unusual for that time. He guaranteed the artist \$10,000 a year in sales. If he failed to make that much for the artist, he agreed to buy up to that amount at the end of the year. As a result, the Wilsons received a regular monthly cheque which guaranteed their expenses. Although it rained most of the time they were in Paris, Wilson managed to do a few paintings before they took the night train for Madrid on their way to their eventual destination of the Canary Islands.

Madrid had an even deeper impact on Wilson, the painter, than did Paris. At the Prado, he saw what he still remembers as the greatest paintings of his life. He looked with wonder at the Goya drawings, Fra Angelico's "Annunciation" the Van der Weyden "Descent from the Cross", the numerous Hieronymous Boschs, the Velasquez masterpieces and the late Titian's. Interestingly enough, Wilson found El Greco less compelling at the Prado, although he thought that the artist's painting, "The Burial of the Count of Orgaz" in Toledo a compelling masterpiece.

The Wilsons left Madrid on February 27 by train for Seville from where they sailed for the Canary Islands on March 1st. They arrived at their final destination of Santa Cruz De Tenerife on March 6, after a short stop on the Island of Las Palmas. His initial impression of the Canary Islands was optimistic—"First view



Hong Kong Sails, 1972, Acrylic, 66" x 41", The Granite Club.



Oriental Interior, 1972, Acrylic, 66" x 41", Roberts Gallery.

of Canary's looks like good painting stuff—high hills or mountains and very cloudy dramatic sky—white buildings and castles on mountain top. Walked around Santa Cruz and find it very paintable—all angles, mountains and unusual architecture.”

Wilson found an ideal studio on his very first day at Santa Cruz and was already painting a view of the local harbour and a group of figures around a water trough by the next day. Two days later, he had completed his first Canary Island canvas, an 18” x 24” version of the water trough sketch. It already appeared as though Santa Cruz was to be hospitable to Wilson's creative impulses, and so it was to prove throughout his almost five month stay there. Wilson found the climate and the light of the Canary's very similar to Mexico. The Spanish islands lie just sixty miles off the north west coast of Africa, and have a total population of less than one million people. Many of these at Tenerife, Wilson found, were cave dwellers who impressed him with their carriage and dignity of character. He did many studies of these local inhabitants. He was also impressed by the ragged, sculpture like outcroppings which dotted the vast fields formed by the lava flows in the past, and by the cliff's of the Island which rose straight out of the depths of the sea.

The Canary Island trip was very much of a working one, with its regular daily rituals. As Wilson noted in his diary: “Don't remember, but think it was a usual day. There are very few variations from the up at 8.30 routine—lunch 2.00—dinner 8.30 or 9.30—nothing more.” But although he worked hard and long hours, creative progress at first came slowly. “Pictures are going better, but can't seem to make the next move forward. Think they are more of a consistent standard than the last Mexico trip.” It was definitely a transition time in the artist's creative life. “In studio all day—finished more or less cave dwellers and think work is beginning to show progress. Want to get a little less literal in painting ideas, but am afraid of being carried into abstraction.” Abstraction thus still represented a peril to him, possibly a threat to the familiar figurative



Pieces of Early Rome, 1958, Oil, 36" x 26", Mrs. Egmont Frankel.

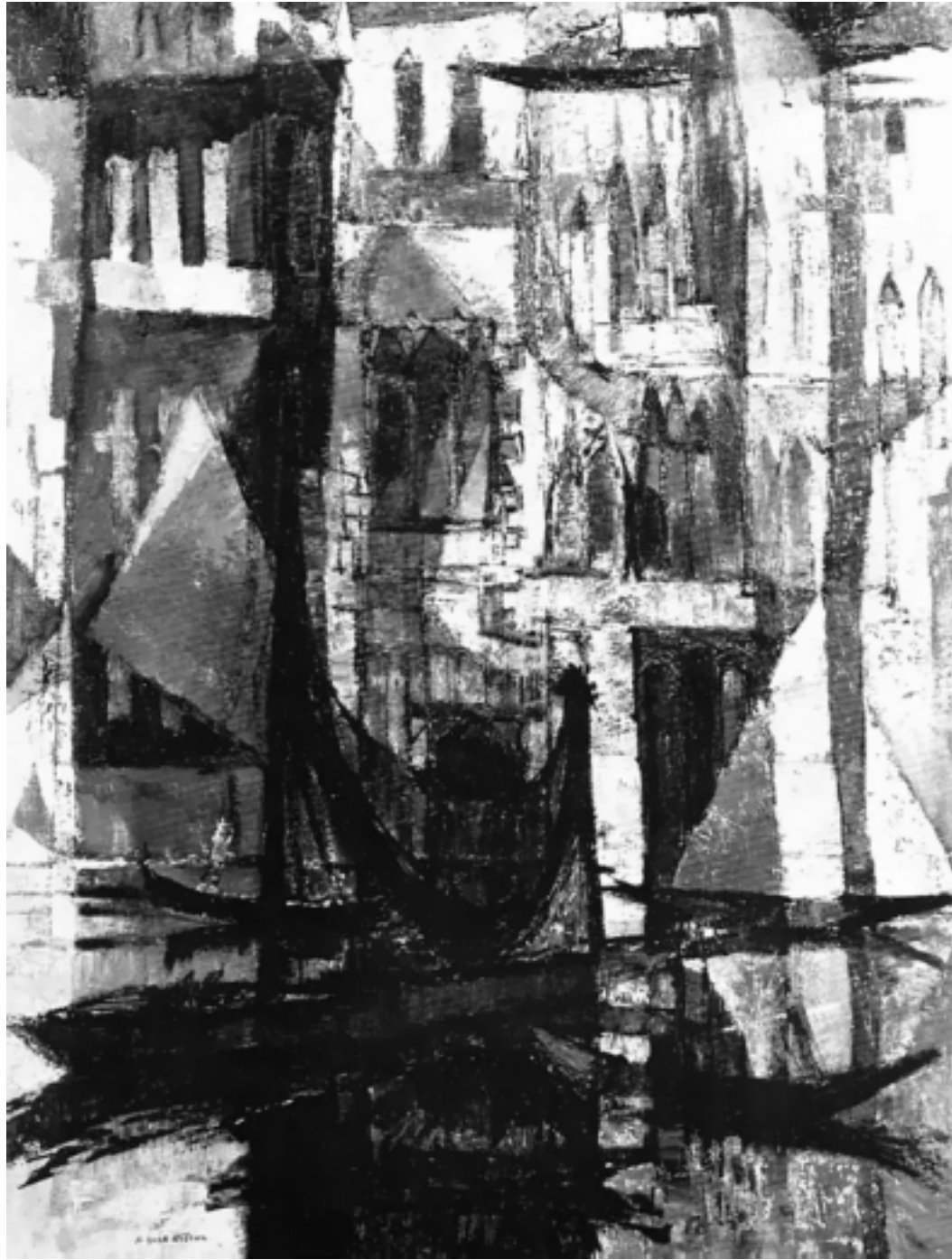


Tribute to Lismer, 1972, Acrylic, 31" x 45", Mr. & Mrs. Jon Kieran.

associations his art had always dealt with. It was this very conflict that probably carried him forward into such productivity during his stay at Tenerife. He could only resolve the conflicts in his mind within the studio.

Fortunately for Wilson, good studios came easily on the Island. During his stay, he worked at three different locales: first at a billiard room studio, then at the home of Mrs. Dyllis Davies for six weeks, and finally at the home of Dr. Carlos-Pinto Grote. It was at the Grote home that Wilson did the bulk of his painting. Carlos-Pinto was a psychiatrist, poet and critic, and through him Wilson met the cultural leaders of Tenerife, outstanding among whom was Eduardo Westerdahl, well known as an art critic throughout Europe and South America. Wilson spent a great deal of time with Westerdahl and the latter wrote a number of illuminating articles about the artist's work. He also organized a major exhibition of thirty-one paintings by Wilson at the Tenerife Municipal Art Gallery. In his foreword to that exhibition, Westerdahl wrote: "The problem that York Wilson poses for himself, in planning a picture, is essentially a European one. It is a theme of placing construction over the disorder of expressionism. He doesn't abandon distortion, but relates the elements with those powerful bands of light, that gives to the picture an intellectual hierarchy. Feininger is Euro-American, Tamayo is Euro-American and York Wilson is Euro-American also. In spite of his typical Canadian roots, one sees in his work elements in common with a universal background. He produces within the framework of contemporary art. He produces in an area of normal evolution and doesn't abandon the significance of the subject, except to enrich it with great abstraction and poetic order."

Almost all of Wilson's paintings created at Tenerife were executed in pyroxalin with a deliberately limited range of not more than half a dozen colours. The resulting compositions—and a few that were done on a side trip to French Morocco—represent the slow, inevitable path the artist was taking toward pure



Venetian Vista, 1860, Oil, 39.5" x 29.5", Art Gallery of Ontario.

abstraction. This struggle resulted in some evocative visual dramas from Wilson's brush, including the townscape "Santa Cruz De Tenerife", in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada.

The Wilsons sailed from Tenerife to London on the *Paraguay Star* on July 23, 1952. They left London almost two weeks later for Canada on the *Maasdam* from Southampton and arrived back in New York City on their way to Toronto on August 17th. During Wilson's absence, from Toronto, one of his paintings, "Margaritones", a Mexican theme, was chosen to represent Canada at the prestigious Carnegie International Biennial Exhibition at Pittsburgh. In November, after their return there was a one-man exhibition of thirty-one canvases and sketches at the Watson Art Galleries in Montreal. This was the artist's first sell-out show and all of the paintings on view were sold during the first day. The works, all from his recent trip to the Canary Islands, Morocco and France were equally well received by the local Montreal critics. One of these Robert Ayre, wrote in the *Montreal Star*: "The first thing to be noted is that he has achieved independence of the Canadian scene. Others have done this by ignoring it, those through staying at home, and going into their own (or somebody else's) worlds of abstraction. It is true, his Tenerife harbour, overwhelmed by mountains in icy colours, has a Canadian look, but this is an exception; most of the paintings belong to an alien world. There is enough of the illustrator left in Wilson to be excited by events in the visual world (rather than events in the mind) and to seek out the pictorial, but he has disciplined himself; he has curbed the exuberance which you see in earlier paintings and which might have gone rank in those exotic countries, and has indeed turned to asceticism.

"He has abandoned both literal representation and editorial comment in favour of the abstract qualities of the given scene. Chaste as he has become, preferring angularities to curves, triangles to circles, he is not



Sailing to Byzantium, 1972, Acrylic, 66" x 44", The Artist.

altogether free of tricks and the temptation to strike an effect as, in his search for structure, he breaks his picture in diagonal shafts of light and bands of shadows. It is important as evidence of a Canadian boldly remaking himself and breaking new ground. This in itself is stimulating, but so are the pictures themselves, for their variety of subject and composition, for their range of colour, rich though held back by his rough-textured sand.”

After completing a mural for McGill University, the Wilsons returned once more to Mexico in September of 1953. Two important events were to result from this trip, Wilson’s meeting with American painter Rico Lebrun and the painting of his first non-objective canvas.

Wilson went to San Miguel in 1953 with the specific purpose of meeting Rico Lebrun. He had first seen Lebrun’s work in an art director’s annual publication in 1928 and decided he was someone he wanted to know. During the ensuing twenty-five years, he saw more reproductions of Lebrun’s work and Wilson’s admiration for the man grew. When he finally met Lebrun, over dinner at a mutual friend’s home, he was not disappointed. The next evening, the Wilsons had Lebrun and his wife Constance over to their home for dinner. The two artists soon became fast friends. They had an admiration for one another’s attitude toward their craft, and shared a like ebullience for life, with a highly developed sense of the ridiculous. Wilson admired Lebrun’s brilliance as a draughtsman, his intense seriousness as an artist and his masterful technical facility.

When Wilson met him, Rico Lebrun was the artist-in-residence at the San Miguel Institute of Art. To that task, Lebrun brought a strong sense of tradition to balance his originality, and a strong concern for the suffering of his fellow men. No one, even Picasso, captured the stark tragedy of 20th Century man with more



Portofino, 1958, Oil, 30" x 40", Mr. & Mrs. Chas. Band.

dramatic impact. Lebrun had been born in Naples, Italy, in 1900 and died in Los Angeles, California in 1964. He had gone to the United States in 1924, and after a brilliant career as a commercial artist he emerged as one of the nation's leading figurative painters. His large triptych of the Crucifixion painted in 1951 for Syracuse University is probably his masterpiece.

Although diminutive in size, Lebrun had enormous vitality and was a compulsive worker. His output was enormous and the execution of it highly demanding. In San Miguel, he would arrive at his studio at 5.30 in the morning and often complete a 4' x 8' painting between dawn and noon. His regime was an inspiration for Wilson, who would begin work at 9.00 and work until 2.00 in the afternoon without a break. He and Rico would then get together for long conversations about art. They would often go duck hunting together with fellow painter Leonard Brooks and musician John Crown. The four of them would start out while it was still dark and complete the hunt by 7.30. During that time, apart from taking an occasional shot at a fowl, the four of them would drink laced coffee from their thermoses and sit talking about art. Wilson says his most exciting painting period came after these morning discussions. Certainly, the work he produced on this third Mexican trip was the most challenging he had achieved up until that date. The influence of Lebrun upon that work was a very real one.

“Rico was a genuine intellectual”, remembers Wilson. “He probably had the most realistic knowledge of art and art history of any man I have ever met. I think of him as only second to Picasso as the greatest contemporary draughtsman. He was always generous with his knowledge and criticism. We shared much of our lives and work together, and in many ways my life will always be inseparable from his.”

Certainly, Wilson's relationship with Lebrun stimulated the progress of his work. Its dramatic progress maybe traced between his “Margaritones” of 1951, and “Barn Window” and his very first non-objective,



Paeon to Autumn, 1972, Acrylic, 39" x 45", O. J. Firestone Collection, Ontario Heritage Foundation.

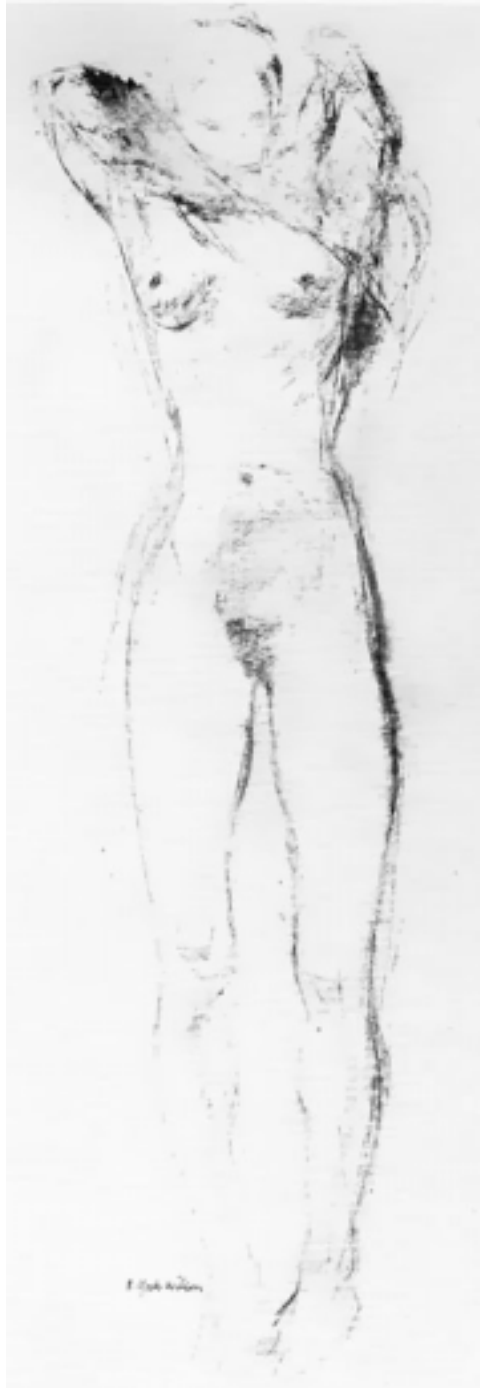
both of 1953. These three major works suggest the leap that the artist's expression took over a period of a mere two years.

“Margaritones” is still very much concerned with subject matter, although this concern is counter-balanced by a very deliberately wrought design structure. It is the meeting of these two aspects of Wilson's art that makes “Margaritones” such a compelling picture, at once strong and subtle. It is a stylish painting with a strong underlying formal composition. It presents an immediate pictorial charm, both in its delightful theme and the apparent vitality of its execution. It reveals the artist's current concern with the natural textures of the baskets, blossoms and textiles which the painting portrays. It also suggests an almost realistic richness and luminosity of hue, despite the fact that it is achieved with a severely limited palette of white, black and earth colours. In “Margaritones”, Wilson is clearly still under the magical spell of Mexican subject matter.

With “Barn Window”, unlike “Margaritones”, one suspects that Wilson chose the theme for its abstract elements rather than its naturalistic interest. Certainly, the theme pales before the structure of its formal arrangement. Here, there is no centre of naturalistic interest, but the visual excitement of its repeat pattern of grid-like bars and ovate windows marching the eye back and forth across the canvas. Its limited, forbidding palette of grim black and burnt reds, with just an accent of eerie green, projects an almost threatening aura which has virtually nothing to do with naturalistic colour. “Barn Window” was just one short step before Wilson's first purely non-objective canvas, dated the same year. This, too, is an uncompromising and darkling invention. Low in key, it presents a determined challenge to the viewer in its almost puritanical economy of means. Its shapes are barbed and harsh-edged, offering no easy entry for the eye or mind. It is a determined picture and an important one in Wilson's career. Neither easy nor happy, it was clearly a learning vehicle for its creator.



Rome, 1958, Oil, 24" x 32", Ayala & Sam Zacks.



Nymph, 1960, Charcoal, 29.5" x 9.75", Art Gallery of Ontario.



Peruviana, 1972, Acrylic, 18" x 24", A. L. Campbell.



Peruvian Duet, 1973, Acrylic, 18" x 24", Mr. & Mrs. L. J. Wildridge.