

YORK WILSON

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Wallack Galleries/Ottawa

Chapter Four

The Painted Walls

The painted walls

“Traditionally, the mural has been the ultimate test of a painter’s creative arsenal. It tests, in a major way, the artist’s capacities as a creator, designer, technician and organizer, as well as his staying power. Few Canadian artists have engaged in the execution of monumental murals, and among those few York Wilson is outstanding. His eleven wall designs, many of them on a massive scale, set standards for many of the artists who followed him.

Since his first tentative wall design for Roy Thomson’s Timmins Press in 1940, Wilson looked forward to more ambitious commissions. Much of his ensuing study and work was undertaken with this very much in mind. It was not until 1953 that the opportunity was to offer itself, in a closed competition for a mural design for McGill University’s Redpath Library in Montreal. The contest that he won from four other competitors, set very severe limitations upon the artist. In general, it had to relate to the development of McGill University historically, but also called upon the artist to incorporate six representational portraits of McGill luminaries, founder McGill, Bishop George J. Mountain, Sir William Dawson, Edwin Meredith, Dewey Day, and William Molson. Partly because of the conditions of the competition, the resulting mural is probably the most pedestrian of Wilson’s major commissions. Skillfully put together, and highly accomplished in its execution, it nevertheless lacks the power, drama and originality of those wall decorations where the artist was left free to base his forms chiefly upon the workings of his own creative imagination.

Wilson learned a great deal from the McGill mural. “I did it to win a competition”, said the artist. “I now believe it’s a mistake to enter competitions. When you attempt to create with someone dangling a

material incentive in front of you, with five other options, it is impossible to be relaxed and be yourself.” Nevertheless, this early mural gave Wilson the opportunity to develop forms on a large scale, and its popular success brought him to the attention of others when murals were being considered.

Set into the north wall of the Redpath Library, the 11 x 16 foot McGill mural was painted in the medium of pyroxalin. The artist chose his colours from those available at a local automobile repair garage and applied them to large masonite panels coated with a white ground which included marble dust. The actual painting was done in the large studio of the late C. W. Jefferys, with the assistance of Wilson’s daughter Virginia.

The following year, in early 1954, Wilson received a commission for what was to become probably his most important creative effort, the Imperial Oil building mural in Toronto. The theme of this giant painting, composed of two panels each 32 feet long and 21 feet high, is oil, its formation in pre-historic times and its application in modern society. Wilson was given a totally free hand in the design and concept of this mural, including its very theme. Almost a year was spent on the preliminary sketches, before Wilson even began his cartoons for the final concept. The huge preliminary notes done on brown paper in black brush, remain among the most powerful graphic work the artist has ever done. His research was tedious and total, and the creative conventions of the final wall painting were based on carefully established fact, down to the last fossil and geological formation.

In the mural’s complex pattern is related the story of oil and energy, from the fossil pits of pre-history to the jet propulsion era of today. The individual symbols may be found with ease. In the left hand panel are illustrated the raw materials, geology and exploration for oil. On the right is illustrated the evolution of



O'Keefe Mural, 1959, Detail of the 15 x 100 ft. Mural.



Boats and Venice, 1960, Oil, 26" x 36", National Gallery of Canada.

transportation, the design elements being ingeniously bound together by a linear pattern representing highways. Dominating the right panel of Wilson's mural is a giant hand, symbolizing humanity. Within its great palm is shown the material power of the atom, suggesting man's power to open or close the doors of his own destiny. As with almost all of Wilson's murals, the colour scheme moves from cold to warmth to extreme warmth to a return to cool greys. His main aim in this is to accelerate the design element as it moves from left to right. But in the Imperial Oil mural it is particularly fitting that the most luminous colours appear in the area which is concerned with humanity's future. It is a note of hope which provides the key to this monumental mural.

Wilson's more than three years labour on the mural was interrupted by a severe heart attack and the final wall painting was done with the assistance of two artists, Jack Bechtel and Bob Paterson, and the aid of slide projections, each one of which represented a 16 foot width of the completed mural. From that projection the outlines of the design were traced in India ink on to the wall. The final painting was done in vinyl acetate, a plastic medium which is completely permanent and can be painted on any surface. Vinyl acetate dries rapidly, and once dry can be scrubbed without damaging the surface of the painting. Wilson's mural was the first to be done in Canada with this medium, and he continued to use it for most of his other wall paintings. Despite the interruption of his heart attack which took place in December, 1955, and hospitalized the artist for six weeks, and delays in building construction, Wilson and his assistants finally got to work on the concrete wall in July, 1956 and completed the vast mural in six months' time. It was officially unveiled early in 1957.

Wilson's Imperial Oil mural is truly a noble achievement, still without parallel in this country. View-



Central Hospital Mural, 1970, Acrylic, 10 x 13 ft., Central Hospital, Toronto.

ing this splendid work, with its motifs poised in perfect balance between naturalism and abstraction, it is difficult to believe that Wilson had painted his first pure abstraction only in 1953. This is a magnificently marshalled composition, its lean, interlocked forms moving in a seemingly inevitable way across the picture space. The colours themselves still seem to be reminiscent of the Mexican experience, with their sonorous earth shades and tempered golds. The overall effect of the Imperial Oil mural is one of enormous vitality contained within a classic calm. It is a romantic vision of power, but one which after more than twenty years retains its dramatic impact. Like all vital art, it has proven itself beyond the immediate appeal of fashion, or ephemeral commercial content of the moment. It is a work of great authority, worked out with painstaking care and without the easy appeal of stylistic tricks.

During its period of existence, Wilson's mural has compelled both laymen and fellow artists. The late Lawren Harris wrote Wilson after seeing the mural, "Although it is certainly not my customary habit to write so called fan letters to my colleagues, in this singular instance I feel moved to do so. The reason being that on my way here (to Vancouver) I made a point of stopping over in Toronto with the express purpose of seeing your Imperial Oil Building murals. I am happily convinced that this break in my journey was completely justified and rewarded, for said murals proved to be beyond my fondest expectations. You have succeeded in a gigantic undertaking, the very thought of which would undoubtedly terrify the great majority of your contemporaries in your own profession."

The Imperial Oil mural well illustrates Wilson's own stated credo: "I believe that a muralist has an obligation to the potential audience. The muralist should be giving full consideration to that audience and he should bend his own personal expression to make a mural that will have lasting meaning for a large number.



Venetian Façade, 1972, Acrylic, 66" x 41", A. M. Graham.

The physical location and the size and nature of the viewing audience must also be taken into consideration. In this respect, the Imperial Oil mural which is meant to be seen day by day almost every day by the comings and goings of employees and visitors poses a different problem from that of a mural meant for the interior of a theatre which is to be seen only during intermissions, entrances and exits. The intensity and the amount of detail come into play in such contrasting instances. The theme of the mural, if it has one, must offer people visual clues to help facilitate their sharing of the artists creative experience. In this, mural commissions differ from the painting of more personal works where the artist is free to experiment as narrowly or broadly as he pleases.”

During periods of preparation for the Imperial Oil mural, Wilson carried out a six-panel design for the prayer room of the Salvation Army Headquarters in Toronto. Executed with the assistance of his daughter Virginia, the theme of this decoration was the six verses of the twenty-third psalm. On this occasion, the artist used completely abstract forms so that the mind of the visitor to the prayer room would not be cluttered up by worldly images. Chromatically, it was designed with cold colours at the bottom of the composition leading to warm and high luminous ones toward the top. Not a large commission, the Salvation Army mural measures 9 x 15 ft, but it proved a valuable preliminary exercise for the Imperial Oil mural which was immediately to follow. About the Salvation Army mural, Pearl McCarthy wrote in the Toronto *Globe and Mail*: “The colour as well as the form, justifies that much abused word ‘significant’. It is a theme which nearly everybody in the western world has visualized, but there will be a new vision for anyone who sees this Canadian artist’s work.”

Wilson cemented his reputation as a mural designer with a group of works between 1959 and 1970. The



Design for a Square, 1973, Acrylic-Collage, 30" x 40", Mrs. John Wallack.

most important of these, and the largest of all his works, was for the O'Keefe Centre for the Performing Arts in Toronto. Measuring 15 ft high and 100 ft wide, this mural was dedicated to the seven lively arts, Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, Music, Literature, The Dance, and Drama. This mural is a festive affair, brilliant in colour like no wall painting by Wilson up to that date. It glows with brilliant yellows, vermilion, rich blues and browns. Each one of the arts has its own individual frame within the larger composition, but each is interwoven with the other by ingenious crossover techniques in design. This is unquestionably Wilson's busiest mural, packed with recognizable symbols and rhythmic attributes to the history of the various arts involved. In the painting panel are shown cave paintings from Altamira, Egyptian hieroglyphs, the Descent from the cross by Pietro Lorenzetti and a non-objective work from the present period. The sculptures include an early Hittite bas-relief, the Venus de Milo, a sphinx, a totem pole and a non-figurative steel sculpture. The architecture begins with the Parthenon and leads up to a large area of gothic spires to a skyscraper of today. Music shows primitive drums, string and wind instruments, a bar of opera music and a scene from a Wagnerian opera. In the section on literature a sailing ship symbolizes travel and adventure, an equestrian battle indicates history, and a Chinese proverb is a reminder of the oriental contribution to literature and there are abstract shapes indicating abstract thought. For the dance there are sun dances and primitive war dances, an Indonesian dancer representing the east and a corps de ballet from Swan Lake showing the classic themes. In drama, Wilson touched upon a few high water marks of the art: masks from Oedipus Rex, a scene from Hamlet and a religious parade from the medieval period. In choosing these motifs, Wilson is not concerned with mere storytelling in pictures, but in weaving various symbols into what is basically a triumph of pure design.

In painting the O'Keefe mural, Wilson encountered the most crucial human confrontation of his



Abstract Group, 1959, Wash Drawing, 8.25" x 16", Mr. & Mrs. A. Atkin.

career. He had barely begun work on the giant commission, when the International Brotherhood of Painters, Decorators and Paperhangers of America demanded that he and his two assistants, Robert Paterson and John Labonte-Smith, take out cards as union members. The union insisted that in the United States similar work was done only by members of their union. Wilson, pleading the position of the creative artist, refused to agree. “Fine art is an individual and creative form of expression” he claimed. “I do not see how you can possibly unionize people who work as individuals.”

For more than a month, a bitter battle ensued. Wilson, and supporting art groups, hired a lawyer in his defence. The union countered by threatening to stop all work on the mural. “We have contracts protecting specific conditions and rates of pay for artists doing this type of work”, said union vice-president Harry Colnett, “and we have served notice that we want the mural finished by persons carrying a union card.” Wilson refused to accept a union card even as a courtesy. He feared the eventual inroads of unions into the world of creative art. “They are bringing pressure to bear in the hope that they will be able to unionize all mural painters”, he charged. “They admitted they had intended to move in while I was working on the Imperial Oil mural. They said they didn’t because I had finished it before they were organized and they had nothing to gain. I think they intend to dominate mural painters, and the step after that could easily be on the easel painters, and so on.” The debate filled pages of newspapers both at home and abroad. Two long editorials appeared in the *London Times*. The subject offered a field day for cartoonists. After two weeks of wrangling, Wilson threatened to complete the mural alone. However, by February 13th, 1960, one month after the battle ensued, the matter was settled out of court. The union and lawyers for the artist agreed to let him and his two assistants fulfill their contract to the O’Keefe without having union cards.

Opportunities for commissions of the dimensions of the Imperial Oil and O’Keefe murals rarely occur,



The Magic Three, 1973, Acrylic, 26" x 34", Mr. & Mrs. Jon Kieran.

and the remainder of Wilson's murals were on a smaller scale. During 1965, Wilson completed a mural on the theme of medical history for the General Hospital of Port Arthur, Ontario. Of similar shape to the O'Keefe design, it reads from left to right in the same scroll-like manner, beginning with early superstitions and tribal rites, and ending with recent scientific discoveries. The Port Arthur mural dramatically underlines the depth and care of Wilson's research prior to undertaking a commission. Before planning it, he spent several months searching out and selecting relevant facts and artifacts from medical history. Dozens of these are incorporated within the richly decorative fabric of this mural, ranging from Aztec jasper pendants and cuneiform tablet prescriptions to modern radiographic equipment. The resulting design is a graphic, painless and highly entertaining visual introduction to its subject.

The Port Arthur mural was followed, in rapid succession, by commissions for Dow Corning Ltd., Toronto (1965), Bell Canada, Toronto (1965), the Ontario Government complex, Toronto (1968), the Central Hospital, Toronto (1970), Carleton University, Ottawa (1970), and Simpsons-Sears Ltd., Toronto (1973). Perhaps the most outstanding of these were the designs for Bell Canada, the Central Hospital and Simpson-Sears, each of which was completed in a different medium. The Bell Canada mural for the facade of its Adelaide Street building was carried out in mosaic, with the assistance of master mosaicist, Alex von Svoboda. It consists of five vertical 20 x 5 foot panels, each representing a different phase of communications— Written, Drawn, Musical, Verbal and Through Distance, the last centered by a symbol for Telstar. Wilson had been anxious to design a mosaic since he visited Ravenna, Italy, a rich home of the art, in 1957, and his handling of the thousands of tesserae, or small glass and marble chips, in this initial venture into the medium reflects his enthusiasm for it in a fresh and highly personal light.



Orpheus, 1960, Tempera, 27" x 16.25", Art Gallery of Ontario.

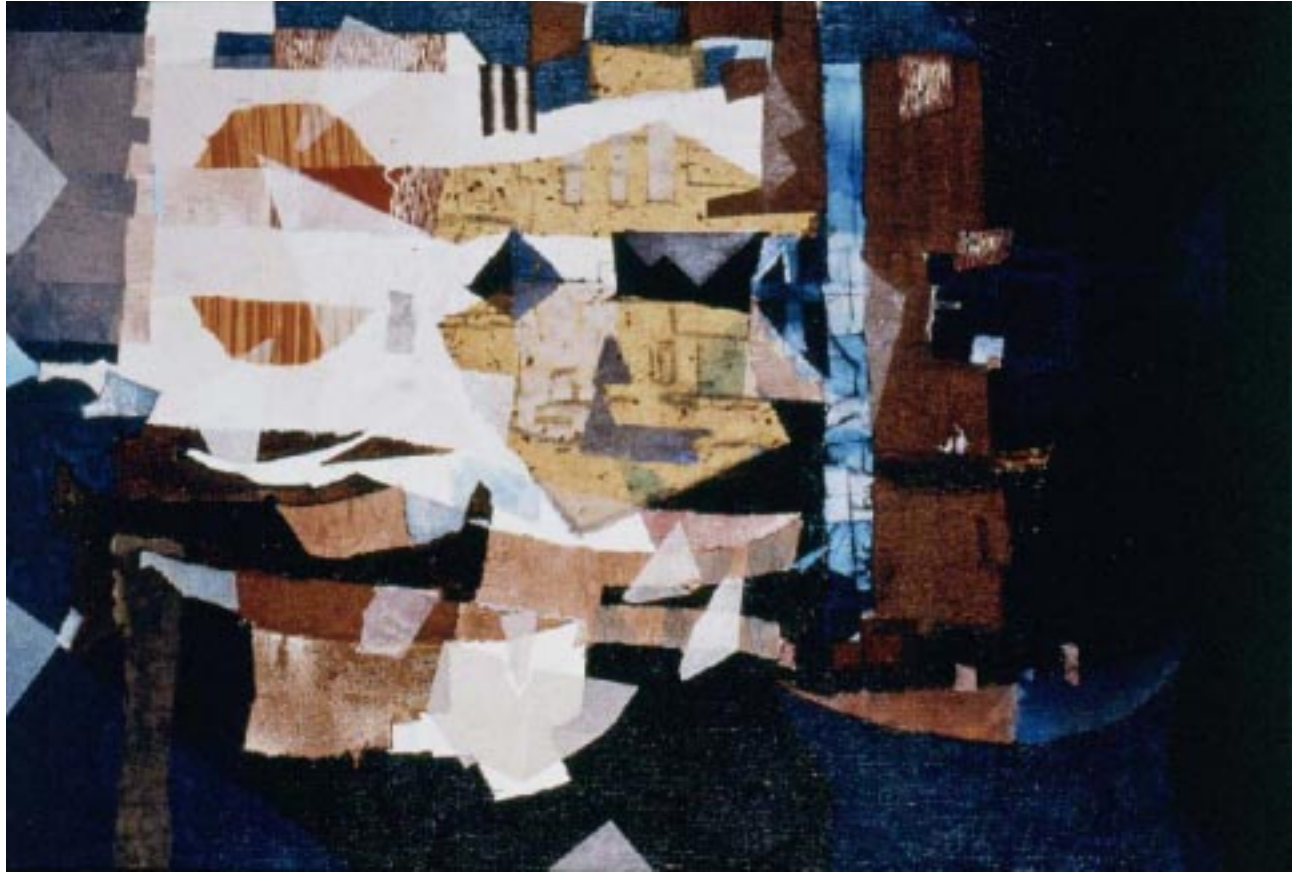
The purpose of Wilson's Central Hospital mural was to encompass the wide-ranging ethnic interests of a hospital where thirty-two languages are spoken. He chose to do so by dividing his design into four chromatic panels representing the four corners of the world, varying from the crisp, cold blue of the north, through the rising golden sun of the east, the greens of the southern tropics and a reddish setting sun on the western horizon. Interwoven into these chromatic areas are abstracted motifs suggesting the geology, vegetation and architecture of each area. This 11 x 12 foot mural remains as one of Wilson's most imaginative and compelling essays in colour and design. It successfully accomplishes its mission as symbolizing the wide—flung origins of the immigrants to Canada while achieving an authoritative and compelling act of pure visual experience.

The smallest of Wilson's wall decorations was the abstract tapestry "Game", which measures a mere 5 x 7 feet. Commissioned by Toronto's Simpsons-Sears Limited for its executive dining-room, **it** is an abstract of game birds and animals. Woven in Paris at the famed Atelier of Madame Coaquil-Prince, the final woven version of Wilson's work began existence as a 20 x 24 inch cartoon in gouache, and was blown up at the French studio by means of photography. "Game" was the largest and last tapestry designed by Wilson, being preceded by several others during the 1960's.

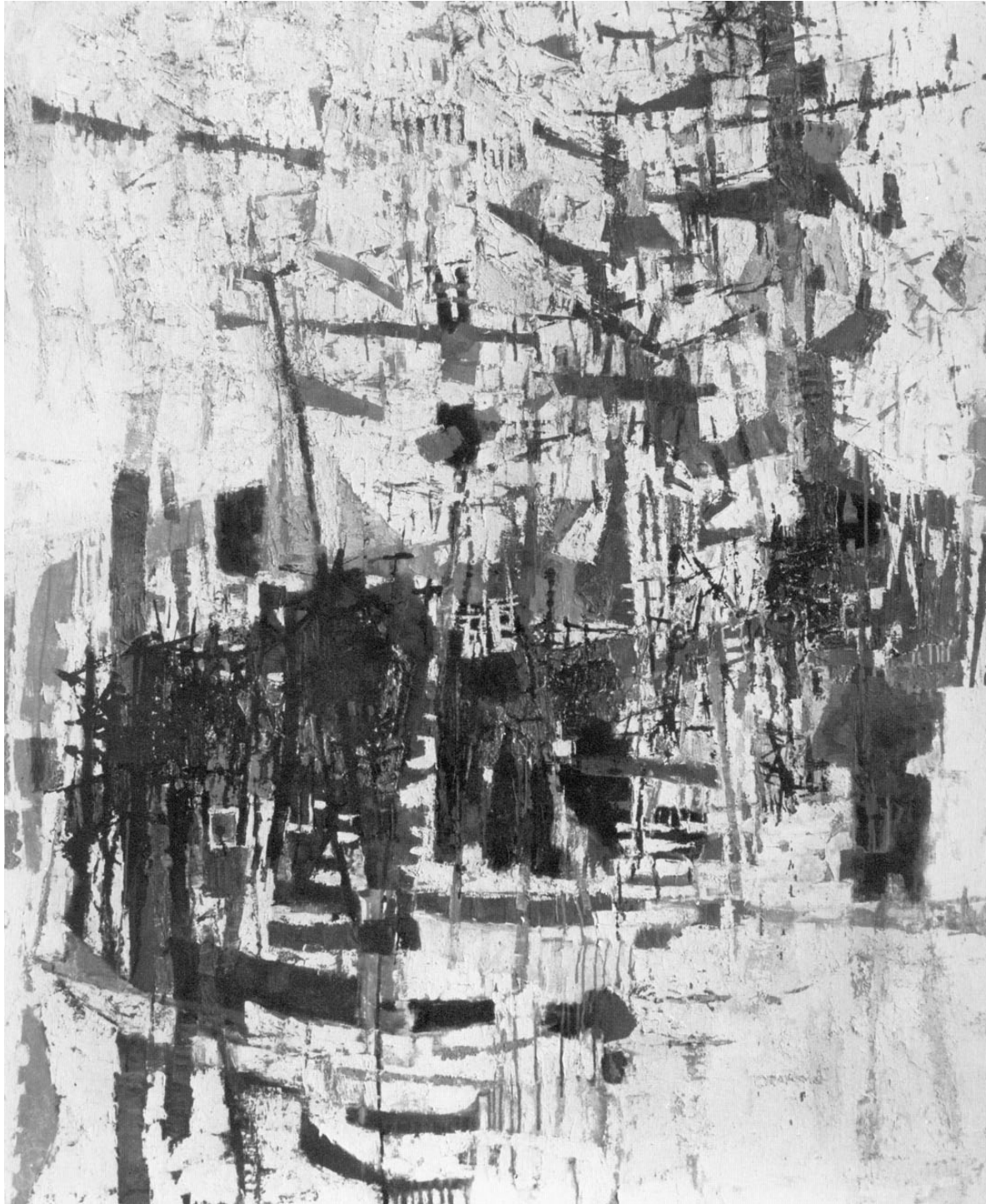
Whatever medium he created in, Wilson has been one of the most prolific of modern mural painters. Within Canada he has set standards for others to follow, regardless of their style or technique. Countless thousands of Canadians in offices, hospitals, theatres and on the street have been enriched by his emblazoned walls over a period of more than thirty years.



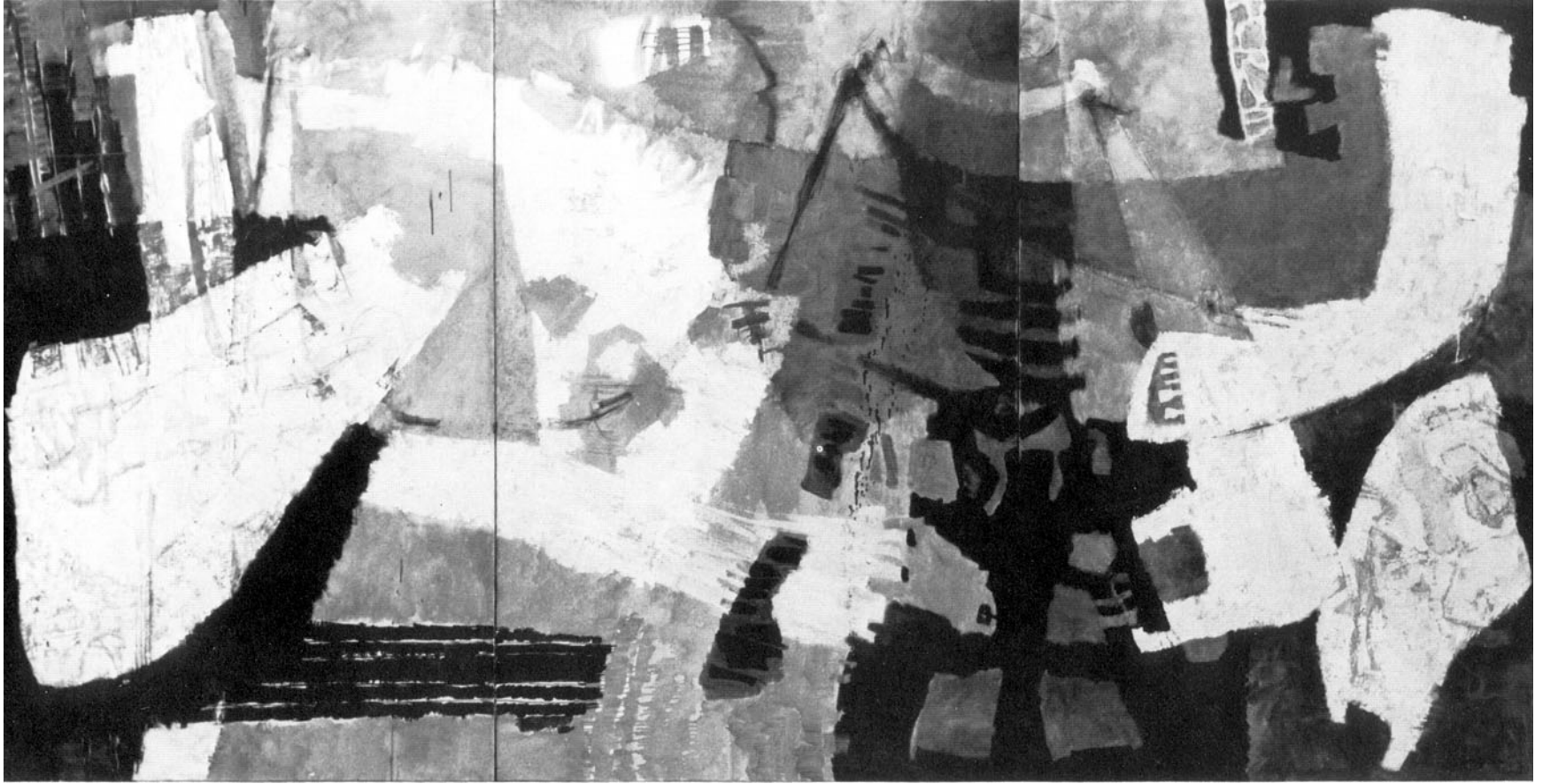
Mediterranean Reflection, 1973, Oil, 24" x 32", Private Collection.



Benitzes Harbour, 1973, Acrylic-Collage, 32" x 44", Mr. & Mrs. F. Berry.



LePanto, 1962, Oil, 64" x 51", London Public Library and Art Museum.



A Propos d'Afrique, 1962, Oil, 77" x 153", The Ontario Club.