

XII

1957 - 1959

More European Travel

In the 1957 Stratford Festival catalogue a page showed a very creative drawing by York. It had been sponsored by Imperial Oil.

Hollinshed's Chronicles, 1577: ...as for stoves, we have not hitherto used them greatly, yet they do now begin to be made in divers houses of the gentry and the wealthy citizens, who build them not to work and feed in as in Germany and elsewhere, but now and then to sweat in as occasion and need shall require it.

An idea had originated with Imperial's art consultant, Cleeve Horne: Globe and Mail, Pearl McCarthy, December 7, 1957 Pictures by twelve Canadian artists, now on view on 14 floors of Imperial Oil's Executive building represent perhaps the most original and consistent link between art and industry that has taken place in Canada. The pictures on each floor would remain for three months. Then changed to another floor until each artist has been shown on all floors thus enabling Imperial Oil's personnel to become familiar with each artist's work.

As the months go by, York Wilson's murals in the foyer confirm their place of honour. It is irrelevant for the artistic visitor that they are the largest ever done in Canada although that fact meant tremendous thought as well as labour by the artist.

In the summer of 1957 we flew to Paris where we bought a small

Renault car for \$900, a special price for tourists when arranged beforehand. We planned a year in Italy, starting with Venice, but first drove through France, down the beautiful Loire valley and crossed into Spain from Biarritz. Continuing down the coast, we crossed into Portugal and San Sebastiano. Since we were near the famous Santander Caves with its drawings from prehistoric times, we visited the caves and had one of the experiences that stand out in a lifetime. Only three or four persons were allowed in at the same time in order to keep the temperature constant. We had passed by the Lascaux caves in France but they were already closed because of deterioration from a rise in temperature caused by too many visitors. I believe the same is true of the Santander caves today. These drawings have been preserved because their existence was unknown and the constant low temperature preserved them.

In the Santander caves there were elevations of rock, some just a couple of feet from the ceiling with drawings overhead. The artist must have been lying on his back studying the rock formations to make the drawings. In other parts of the cave, one could stand or barely stand to examine others. York climbed up on the rock himself and lay there studying the drawings. Obviously long studies were necessary as the natural forms of the rock were utilized, along with the artist's outlines clearly showing the existing animals and life at that period. The coloured pigment from charcoal, red or yellow earth had been applied with fat rendered from animals. Another remarkable feature was the amazing stalagmites and stalactites that had formed from a drip over millions of years. We felt so privileged to be so close to our distant ancestors!

We carried on hugging the coast the length of Portugal. Since I could read and speak Spanish, understanding the Portuguese signs as we drove along, it came as quite a surprise that I couldn't understand the spoken word. The written word is not too different from Spanish, but their pronunciation is entirely different, more guttural like German. We followed

the coast with York stopping to sketch. Later we turned inland to reach Lisbon.

We had friends in Lisbon, the Ronaldo de Silvas, the Brazilian Ambassador whom we had met in Toronto. We dined at different restaurants each evening as we drove south and reached the famous playground of deposed royalty, Estoril. In one restaurant we were quietly having our dinner when a waiter near us burst into a well-known opera. He was answered by other waiters from various parts of the restaurant. It was gay with everyone having a good time.

We left Lisbon for Toledo in Spain and found we were in storkland. This long, level stretch of highway seemed to have a stork nesting on top of every tree as well as the roofs. We were enchanted until we came to a clutch of geese on the road. Alas there were three or four who couldn't lift their necks from the road. Some fool had run over their necks! I was so shocked at such cruelty, I've never forgotten it.

We reached Toledo and spent a few days there enjoying the works of El Greco. There were several paintings of Saints in the church, and El Greco's famous mural "The Burial of the Count of Orgaz." York spent a long time in front of this mural. We visited El Greco's 'supposed' studio, as it wasn't known until long after his death that he had even lived there. We particularly enjoyed El Greco's "VIEW OF TOLEDO," standing on the very spot where he must have painted it.

Again we spent time in the Prado in Madrid, going back to our favourites such as Pierro della Francesca, Fra Phillippo Lipi, the elder and others. York always spent much time looking at paintings by Pierro della Francesca. We were alone in the room when two young artists entered, quietly looking at the paintings. When they came to the Francesca, they stood looking silently for a long time, finally one said, "Jesus Christ," the other said, "Yeh." They were so moved it wasn't necessary to say more. Again we viewed the drawings of Goya. They had been moved from the

gallery under the eaves and were now in a better light.

It was July and very hot in Madrid and, nearing our wedding anniversary, July 13th. York asked, "What would you like to do for our anniversary?" Quick as a flash I said, "Fly to the Canaries." York said, "A wonderful idea."

We phoned the Pintos in Tenerife that evening. Carlos, the Doctor, said, "Come, we have moved as you know to La Laguna and have lots of room and a studio for York." We found a safe place to park our car for two or three weeks, suggested by our hosts, Sophie and Max Stewart, and were on the plane the next day for Tenerife.

Carlos met us. He was now head of the psychiatric hospital in Tenerife which wasn't far from his newly acquired ancestral home in La Laguna, just eight kilometres from Santa Cruz in hilly country. We celebrated with them as Carlos' wife Delia made one of her special, rare cakes, Carlos' two brothers, now married came with their wives and the Westerdahls among other old friends. The Westerdahls also invited us to stay with them, Eduardo having married Maud Dominguez. She had divorced Oscar Dominguez because of his wandering eye, and currently living with a French countess in France. To keep the peace, we divided our time with each family.

York discovered that Carlos still had his left over tins of duco paint and decided to make tables for the family, one for each of the three brothers. The latter two rushed out to buy the material, but had misunderstood what "masonite" was and came back with arborite, not good as the duco could chip from its shiny, hard surface. Fortunately Carlos, occupied at the hospital, hadn't yet acquired his and York was able to clarify that it must be masonite. York did one of his largest and finest tables (predominantly reds and black) for Carlos and Delia. He did the best he could with the other two on arborite roughening the surface before applying duco. They were so pleased with their treasures. However, a few years later

Carlos mentioned that the two tables done on arborite had chipped. José Manuel had stopped using his as a table, had it framed and hung on the wall.

The ancestral home where Carlos was born was very spacious and had one curious room, an arched ceiling, which had been the oven for a bakery at one time. Carlos called this his Beverage Room, has a bar and little displays of famous wines, used on special occasions when his friends came. He would serve drinks followed by dinner there.

One of Carlos' hobbies was vintage luxury cars, a Morgan Sports car and an English Wolseley with which he tinkered, hopefully to get them back into shape.

We had heard many stories about the strange island of Lanzarote and midway in our visit decided to go there for a few days after which we would move to the Westerdahls. We took a small plane from Tenerife which touched down in Fuerta Ventura. Landing was a little frightening, it looked as though we weren't going to clear a vast stony ridge. But landing at Lanzarote was even more scary. The plane bounced twice high in the air and on descending, we found the small airfield to be full of deep pot holes, one of which was right by the plane. We headed for Aracife, the capital, and their Parador on the water. Carlos had an old friend there, a druggist, living in Aracife. We found him immediately and gave him a letter from Carlos. He decided he and his wife would hire a taxi for the four of us and we would tour the island the following day.

The black sand and clear, strong blue water was an astounding combination. The island was completely built by erupting lava, quite hilly and covered with fine black sand. All earth had been brought from elsewhere over the centuries. It seldom rained, maybe once in three years so life was hard. We explored caves, some had the clear blue water with white blind crabs, living almost in darkness. Our new friend said the Guanches had hidden and lived in these caves to avoid the Spaniards. We walked up the

side of the volcano, the ground became so hot we had to move continually. The taxi driver surprised us when he dug in the sand and pulled out baked potatoes and eggs cooked by the natural heat! He replaced them with others and gave them to us to eat. This constant heat would produce all the heat needed on the island if it could be harnessed, but the cost was prohibitive. The greatest surprise of all was their vineyards, as we looked across a mountain slope of black sand we could see nothing. Coming closer there were great holes dug, earth put in and young trees or vines planted, then covered with sand to preserve any moisture. Their vineyards and orchards had been built up in this way over many centuries.

We then flew back to the Canaries landing first in Las Palmas before taking a small plane to Tenerife. We were held up in Las Palmas, Gran Canaria, because there had been a Fiesta the day before. The police had not turned up at the Airport to clear our passports. We were told they were still drunk. After a couple of hours of waiting penned up in a room, the Airline personnel gathered the passports taking us to a hotel overnight. The police were back on the job the following day.

We bid the Pintos farewell and moved to the Westerdahls about lunch-time. We were surprised to see a pistol on the table which Maud picked up, pointed it at the ceiling and fired. In came the maid. Loaded with blanks, her explanation was that it was demeaning for the maid to be summoned with a bell! It seemed that Maud had a good sense of humour that matched Eduardo's. They had been married the year before and Maud was well along in her pregnancy.

A dining room inhabitant was a gecko (a small insect-eating lizard) which came from behind tall plants and made his way across the wall, secure that no one was going to disturb him since he lived there as a member of the family. It was fun watching his meanderings easily accomplished with the suction pads on his feet. The name echoes his cry.

The Westerdahls were close friends of Pablo Picasso and stayed with

him when visiting France. They told us many intimate stories about Picasso, such as Picasso's first flush toilet, which had been installed on the day before they arrived. Picasso rushed them straight to the bathroom to show them the great wonder which he kept flushing, laughing and saying, it flushes every time! Another story, he didn't like his socks washed, and would hide them. Maud said they would stand up on their own. He had his goat sculpture in front of his house and they all had their pictures taken sitting on it and gave us copies.

Eduardo's lovely Guanchen mother had passed on and he had sold the house and were now in another. It shocked us that his former companion, Hilda Camacho had also passed on. Nothing was ever explained, but we guessed after their long years of friendship, Eduardo's transfer of affection might have had something to do with it. Hilda's son Fredi, a deaf mute was now an architect as well as a painter. He was still watched over by Eduardo and was now able to make a few sounds.

During our short sojourn with the Westerdahls York did a drawing portrait of Eduardo which is now in the museum dedicated to Westerdahl. I don't think Eduardo liked it as it was too realistic for a man who had been responsible for the first Cubist exhibition in the world to be shown in Tenerife. Too bad York hadn't done a collage portrait as he was to do later of Ettore Mazzoleni and Sir John A. MacDonald. That conception came later.

During this trip Eduardo was on the Air and in the Press again about York Wilson. He did a full page interview, saying York Wilson was back after five years for a few weeks to be with his old friends prior to spending a year in Italy. He described York's great mural for Imperial Oil, the Crawley film and the tri-monthly exhibitions of artists' works on the floors of the 16-story building. His articles on art were so knowledgeable about world painting, one cannot help but be conscious of how little most of our art critics know. Eduardo Westerdahl was continually teaching art in the broadest sense possible.

We bid our Canary Island friends farewell again and flew back to Madrid. It was August and when the plane door opened it was like stepping into a furnace. Our friends, the Max Stewarts, met us and on reaching our car, we decided to keep going and be in the hills that night in order to escape the unbearable heat. Our car was not air-conditioned but by evening we were on much higher ground to the north, thankful for a good night's sleep in the cooler air. Our Parador also ran a youth hostel nearby and we found it interesting to see the small, clean but spartan rooms for these young travellers. We went cross-country to Barcelona, passing a huge, natural cathedral in the rocks where one descended some hundred steps to reach the floor of the chasm and looked up in awe at this towering, grand work of nature.

We reached Barcelona and looked for the work of the great Spanish architect, Antonio Gaudi. There is an impressive facade of a cathedral, left unfinished through lack of funds, an apartment building with an undulating facade and a children's playground. Apart from crazy wonderful shapes, the surfaces were covered with pieces of broken dishes. One man's dream like the idea of the Watts Tower in Los Angeles, but this is genius. At first no one took Gaudi seriously and when he was killed in a motor accident no one knew who he was and he was buried in a pauper's grave. However I know many architects who have travelled to Barcelona just to see his work and marvel at such creativity.

We then started north toward France, along the beautiful Costa Brava crossing at Perpignon, which took hours being a holiday weekend. There wasn't a room in Perpignon for the night, nor in the next one or two towns. It was getting late, we had no dinner and were getting desperate so we asked an attendant who was filling the tank of our car, if he knew of anything. He said the town was full but try a certain lady who rented rooms, it was nearly midnight when we knocked on her door and explained our plight. She had nothing either. However she said, a permanent tenant, a

medical doctor, was away for the weekend. Maybe we could spend the night in his bed and no one would be the wiser! This we accepted and got a bite to eat in the communal kitchen from bits and pieces we had in the car. We touched nothing, our bags on the floor and we slipped into his bed. Shelves all around the room were stacked with medical supplies. Thank goodness for the ingenuity of a Frenchwoman!

We had trouble getting rooms all along the French Riviera, often going inland to a village. We were able to visit all the Museums along this fascinating route of the Grande Corniche and on entering Italy we followed the northern route to Venice, stopping briefly in Verona (Romeo and Juliette country) before reaching our destination. As no cars are allowed in Venice, we parked in a large garage built for this purpose. We lugged all our supplies to the close-by Vaporeto (water bus) stop and headed for the pension Da Cici on the island of Salute, not far from the famous church Santa Maria della Salute. Mr. Cici had a room for the interim until we found a studio with living space. Eduardo Westerdahl had given us the name of an art critic, Matilda Mamprim, who might be able to help us. We contacted her and luck was with us. She knew of the perfect studio on the second floor of a building overlooking the Giudecca Canal where ocean-going ships from all over the world passed in front of our windows and balcony. It was available immediately. The studio was tremendous, running from the rear to the front of the building with two-storey high ceilings. There was a small bedroom, bathroom and kitchen. A few on-the-spot sketches made the previous few days and York was at work.

In Canada we had agreed to meet Maestro Ernesto Barbini (the famous Canadian Opera Conductor) on a certain day and hour on the Rialto Bridge, two days after our arrival. He said he wanted to introduce York to Venice, he knew all the best sketching spots as his father had been an artist. As planned there was Ernesto in the centre of the Rialto Bridge and after embrazzos, he proceeded to show York some of the sketching spots. York

didn't admit he had already sketched and in one spot at the bend of a small canal had found other artists' dabs of paint on some of the stones.

Life was very pleasant in Venice, no traffic and clean air. We walked everywhere from one piazza to another or jumped on the vaporeto. Gondolas had become too expensive and we rarely used them, except to splurge when going to the famous Teatro Fenice. Ernesto took us by gondola to the island of Murano to see the glass blowers and the beautiful Venetian glass. En route the gondolier was singing and Ernesto said that is such and such an opera by so and so. The gondolier disagreed saying it was something else. Ernesto persisted but the gondolier again disagreed. I spoke up (in Italian) to say, "Do you know who this gentleman is? He is Maestro Ernesto Barbini, conductor of opera at the Metropolitan in New York and now in Canada." The gondolier scoffed, "If he's a conductor of opera, I'm Guiseppe Verdi." And that was that! At the glass factory Ernesto was recognized; apparently some of his ancestors had been glass blowers and at one time "Barbini" money had been the currency of the day. It was fascinating watching the glass blowers making beautiful shapes in various colours, working deftly (of necessity) with molten glass. The showroom was full of gorgeous pieces.

We carried on to Burano where everyone seemed to be making lace, offering some of the world's finest. That evening we had dinner at a restaurant just off the Piazza San Marco where a singer was entertaining the guests, then passing the hat. Ernesto dropped such a large bill into the hat that she raised her head in wonder immediately recognizing him and cried, "Maestro." He told us later that she had started out as a young girl with a very good voice, but had fallen on hard times and was now reduced to this. It made him very sad, he was so sentimental and it made us sad too. The next day he took us to see the house where he was born, now owned by someone else, no one was in evidence. Ernesto opened the gate and we stepped into the front garden. He then pointed to a window, with tears

streaming down his face, saying that was the room in which he was born. Oh, these wonderful, sentimental Italians!

Ernesto introduced us to the Director of the Art Gallery which wasn't far from the Rialto Bridge and he took us to dinner that evening. The Director spoke English and had a great sense of humour and, with York's help, kept the table in stitches. The Art Gallery had to be seen in daylight as they didn't have electricity, many paintings angled at windows to catch the utmost light.

The night before Ernesto's departure we had dinner at his erstwhile home, still occupied by his maiden sister, Adele, who spoke limited English. The family cook had been lured out of retirement for the occasion, a great highlight for all.

Often we had long walks with Adele, who told us some of the recent history of Venice. One Sunday afternoon we were walking and were passing a large building, she pointed to the wall saying that during the war, when someone had killed a German soldier the Germans took ten hostages, lined them up in front of this building and "boom" "boom" "boom," fall dead! While passing a stand of what seemed like overripe tomatoes, I asked Adele who would buy such rotten tomatoes? She explained they are not tomatoes, they are "kaki," which turned out to be persimmons. They must be very ripe to be good or they pucker your mouth. That was our introduction to persimmons, a great favourite ever since. In 1965 we found them in Tokyo, Japan and enquired as to their name, which like Italian turned out to be "kaki." We are now beginning to find them in Canada and Mexico.

York's colour began to change with the reds of Venice. He was gaining confidence in using the colour red which had been difficult in the past. We went to the artists' hangout for dinner, Cafe Montin, across the Giudecca Canal on Salute. We had many friends there which led to invitations to homes and studios. We met Pegine, Peggy Guggenheim's daughter, who took us to meet her mother and see her famous art collection, a bit of the

surrealist world with painters such as Max Ernst. The last vaporeto for Giudecca left at 11 p.m. and many a time we raced the distance to the stop on Salute, barely making it, sometimes jumping on the moving boat.

By October the tourists were gone, prices were lowered and the vaporeto conductor began checking tickets. During the busy tourist season many Venetians among the great crowds slipped on without paying. The vaporeto stops were platforms mounted on huge drums, anchored but floating. One night during a storm the vaporeto stop next to ours disappeared. There were many old master paintings in the churches such as *Rafaelo* in the church of San Georggio, the next vaporeto stop in the other direction. On San Marco walking toward the Lido you passed the buildings where the great Venice Biennial is held.

By the middle of October the weather was cold, our tiny pot-belly stove in the middle of the studio gave out little warmth. Our bedroom was so cold, my feet would still be cold by morning and I hadn't slept. I learned to bathe them in hot water before retiring, once warm all was well. It even reached the point where we would go to a movie just to sit among other bodies to get warm.

We decided to pack up on November 1st and head for Rome. Of course we visited the towns en route, Ravenna for its mosaics, a fortunate moment as the high-up panels of mosaics in the famous church were all down at eye level for cleaning and repairs. York looked up the mosaic factories and learned a great deal about the different tessarae, glass, marble, ceramic, gold, etc.

We visited the famous church with its *Pierro della Francesca* murals in Arezzo and while in the Byzantine Museum in Peruggia we came out to find our parked car had a ticket. We had parked with other cars in the circle around the city hall. However it read:

“You are a guest of Peruggia, you are unlawfully parked but please

stay where you are as long as you wish, with the compliments of our city.”

We left with a warm feeling for Perugia. On crossing the river “Po,” it brought to mind Don Camillo - **Piccolo Mondo**, one of the first books I had read in Italian and the river Po was often mentioned. We stopped briefly in Assisi, the birthplace of St. Francis who loved and protected birds. There were other interesting places but space limits.

Then on to Rome, the eternal city, to visit our friends Chuck and Bobby McIntosh who lived on Allesandro Fleming, named after the discoverer of penicillin. They were the young couple who had driven non-stop from California to catch the “Ryndam” on which we made our first trip to Europe in 1952. Chuck was an engineer with the American firm Booze, Allen and Hamilton who had loaned several of their engineers to Italy to help get business going again after the war.

It was a great reunion, so many tales to tell we stayed up most of the night. The next day we started studio hunting, checking the newspapers, nothing suitable seemed available, by the third day York was ready to take anything so he could get to work. He had his many sketches and his head was brimming with ideas. On the third day we went to see an apartment on Via d'Arpino in the Parioli district, a posh residential section near the Borghese Gardens at the head of Via Veneto. It had central heating (rather rare), large living and dining rooms, with a beautiful garden. York felt he could make a studio out of the dining room, opening the doors onto the terrace, even working outside, weather permitting. We rented it and moved right in. Our little Renault CV, still looked like new having sat unused in a Venice garage, we would now have to park it on the street.

It was an unusually warm winter, the flowers didn't freeze in the garden and it seldom rained. York was at work immediately, now on larger canvases mostly painting Venice while making notes and sketches in and

around Rome. Legend has it that Rome was founded by Romulus and Remus, the baby twins who were set adrift in a boat but rescued and suckled by a she-wolf and there is a bridge named after them near the spot where they grounded. Our midday or after work walks exploring Rome were often in the Borghese Gardens.

While York was working I would wander on my own, later taking him to see anything of interest. One day I looked inside the Banco de Lavoro and discovered murals by Afro; in my surprise I asked the manager a few questions. He seemed so delighted and told me about them, apparently it had been his idea to commission Afro but it had been a disappointment that his co-workers had shown so little interest in them. I took York to see them and he too was very impressed and met the manager, Fulvio Ara. We invited Fulvio to the studio, he became so interested in York's work that he often came back. It turned out that his wife had recently died, he was alone and his holidays would start shortly. He suggested we spend every day together during his holidays as he would like to show us Rome and the surrounding hill towns. After work each afternoon we joined Fulvio and walked and walked seeing every aspect of Rome, the churches, gates of Rome, the Spanish Steps, St. Angelo, the Appian way, the catacombs, the fountains, the Forums, Coliseum, the art galleries, art in buildings, the Arch of Constantine, the seven hills of Rome and so on. We often sat in the open cafes on Via Veneto watching the crowd go by, later dining in favourite little bistros. On weekends we drove to the different surrounding towns, where York sketched, learning interesting facts about each town. Frascati for instance makes an excellent wine, served in most restaurants but not exported as it doesn't travel well.

Palestrina had brightly coloured painted boulders lining the roadway on entering the town. We stopped to chat with a man on the street, saying what an excellent attraction the bright boulders were, they made us feel welcome. He said it had been his idea and introduced himself as the

Mayor. He took us to see a few points of interest and invited us to lunch with him. He told us about the ruins we had passed and said they didn't know they were there until during the war a bomb had uncovered part of them. We went to Gondolfo, the Pope's retreat, a beautiful area.

We learned the most amazing story at Lake Nemi. It had been discovered fairly recently that one of the early emperor's pleasure craft lay at the bottom of Lake Nemi. It was fragile and utmost care had been used to raise it. There were a series of lakes in those hills and a great engineering feat had been devised, to bore through the hill draining Lake Nemi into a lower lake. This completed they built a support around the craft, raising it to the surface. A museum had been built at the edge of the lake in order not to move it further than necessary. The job finished, they studied it, taking all measurements, photographs and endless notes, having discovered it was Hadrian's pleasure craft from the year 67. This gave them the method of building boats, the metals available and so on at that time, a treasure of information.

During the war when the Germans were retreating, they used the scorched earth method, burning everything as they went to slow up their pursuers. As they approached Lake Nemi, the Italians pleaded, explaining it was their history too, it was everybody's history, but to no avail, the museum and the boat were burned. Since all the information existed, photographs, measurements and notes, the Italians have since built an exact replica, using the metal pieces which survived the fire. It's such a sad story and points out the stupidity of wars.

York's bubbling personality always included everyone around him, he would start singing one of the popular songs of the day in Rome's restaurants, eventually the whole restaurant would join in. They became such merry occasions that the management often sent a bottle of champagne to our table with their compliments.

Sundays often found us visiting the museums in Rome, the Museum

of Contemporary Art, on Via Guiglia with its transitory exhibitions and the Etruscan Museum. There were many designs and colours which we had always associated with Greek Vases, hence an obvious connection. Sometimes our American friends would ask York to give them a tour on a Sunday morning to explain the more abstract works in the Museum, such as the Jackson Pollock exhibition. I had always thought Pollock's work of a certain period was completely abstract, but on closer inspection discovered hidden figures and faces in some. I was sorry as I found them more interesting without obscure touches of realism. Through the McIntoshes many of the American engineers and their wives had become our friends.

A group of York's artist friends, Casetta - Helani - Meo - Nikos - Vasghiem, invited him to share an exhibition at Galleria Appia Antica, where many of his paintings of Venice were shown. Quite a number of York's choice Venice paintings were left in Italy, some making their way to the United States eventually. A Toronto columnist stationed in Rome, Rosemary Boxer, managed to find York for an interview.

An American, Charles Moses had Gallery 83, at Via Margutta #83, where he showed the work of young Italian painters. We became friendly with Charles and many of his artists. On my return to Canada I imported some of their small works to sell in the AGT's gift shop I ran. Some of the items were hand-painted table mats and small, signed paintings on the covers of match boxes, miniature six inch squares. They readily sold.

Toward the end of our stay we decided to drive south eventually crossing to the island of Sicily at Palermo. En route we stopped at the Acropolis of Cumae, famous in legend as the seat of the oracle, the Cumaen Sybil, living in the oracular cave. The climb to the Acropolis was too much for York.

I decided to go up alone, a guide followed. We were almost at the top when I found hands from behind under my breasts supposedly helping me. I turned around in anger and he said, "But Signora I was only helping

you.” This kind of feigned nonsense is quite common in Italy. I’ve seen young men coming from the opposite direction, practically bumping heads with a young girl to peer down the front of her blouse. One time in the famous catacombs near the Appia Antica, the group were all given a candle to carry, I found myself way ahead of the crowd listening to the priest guiding us. He asked me to hold his candle for a moment, then said while reaching to fondle me: “Now both your hands are occupied,” I just dropped the candles.

We continued our trip toward Naples where we would cross by car-ferry to Sicily. Just before reaching Naples, at Pozzuoli, we were surprised to see the yellow earth bubbling and steaming with a sulphurous smell, apparently it was sulphur.

Staying briefly in Naples, we then crossed the Messina Straits to Palermo, seat of the Mafia. Next came Montreale with its beautiful mosaics,, then following the coast we came to Trapani, a medieval city with cobblestone streets and cyclopiian walls. According to Homer the Cyclops were one-eyed cannibal giants, identified with Sicily. At Agrigento we were impressed with the size of the magnificent Greek ruins, passing the famous caves and rounding the south shore to Syracuse. We tested Dionysis’ ear in the great Greek ruins, supposedly constructed to detect plotters by picking up the smallest whispers from a distance. We found we could whisper at a certain spot and the other could hear it.

Our next stop was Taormina and in our Renault car we climbed the lovely hill right to the top and there was beautiful Taormina. A lovely old convent with magnificent gardens, now a hotel, attracted us but was too expensive. They told us about a fine pension with a view of Mount Etna. The meals were excellent and the owner delightful. He gave us the corner room with the best view of Etna. York did many sketches from the window and around town, including the ruins of the old Greek Theatre. We spent our evenings in sidewalk cafés, watching the gigolos perform. Good-

looking young men who checked hotels to get information about single, widowed wealthy Americans, then using various tricks to engage a chance meeting. It was an evening's amusement, betting - would she get into his car or go off on a walk to fulfil whatever enticing suggestion he had made? Sometimes the poor lonely dears never knew what hit their bank accounts. After a few days York had filled all his sketch panels and sketch books so we headed back to Rome.

There we bid farewell to our friends and headed for Belgium and the World Expo of 1958. We had been invited to stay with the Canadian Commissioner General, Glen Bannerman, and would meet our friends the Luc Peires. They always left their Paris studio for the cooler air in Knokke on the sea, their original home base in Belgium.

Rome : summer 1958 and after

It was lucky Afro happened to paint those two small murals for the side walls of the entrance to the Foreigners' Hall of the Bank. They had gone totally unnoticed till then, except by myself - one of my rare consolations for working in there - and by one of the Managers who, slightly puzzled, enquired one day why could not the decorators have tried their assembly of colours somewhere else: it looked untidy.

Then, one bright afternoon, this smiling lady came in. She looked charming and her eyes were bright and alert. Even more so when, having looked around, she stopped in front of the murals. Might she take a few photographs of those Afros? She was very welcome indeed to do that - I said - they had been looking forward to her attention too many years, while they only had unworthy mine. She smiled. This is how I met Lela Wilson and, soon after York.

He was keen on learning conversational Italian at that moment. I, on his painting. My English, as a consequence, improved considerably, that summer of '58, in Rome. His Italian reached a climax when he

learned superlatives. One especially struck a cord in his imagination. It was “sfondato” (fathoms deep or, litterly, bottomless), which is normally applied to the adjective “ricco” - rich. Superlatives: ricchissimo or, as an extreme “ricco sfondato.” But York preferred “ricchissimo sfondato” and was so happy with it that he went on applying sfondato to any superlative he could find - with highly interesting results.

York was working in an altogether small enough studio set up in the nice Parioli flat he and Lela had rented in Rome. He needed space. I remember walking with him along the Pincio terraced hill overlooking one of the oldest parts of Rome, in full view of alluring penthouses of interesting proportions. I would like to have a studio there, I said. I would like to have a Studio - period, stated York firmly. I saw his studio in Paris a few years later: it was vast - with a gallery running along two sides - and stacked all over with paintings and drawings and cuttings for collages. Not yet room enough.

But York was not inspired by Rome: only in the end, while he felt perhaps the time would shortly come up to leave, then, out - I think - of a sort of early nostalgia, he produced a few surprisingly true interpretations of the town: solid, with hints of the thick substance of the travertine columns, hot with the heavy dark mass of the trees and red summer sky.

But most of the time (did not once old Utrillo, shut in the isolation of his Hotel room, all windows closed against the sunshine of the French Riviera, paint away - happily smiling to himself, I imagine - sleet covered, grey winter streets of Paris?), most of the time, a previous, stronger nostalgia, brought York constantly back from this summer heavy town to the watery architecture he cherished, to liquid reflections, and white lace carved out of marble on gold facades.

While the noise of the ancient city rumbled away among the Roman

hills, Venice came naturally to visit York's mind. Black gondolas drifted over the everchanging shades of the canal waters. Fog set in, and, through it, slim undulating gray shapes and the faded colours of the laguna. One painting introduced yet another, without end, all leading into the fascination and the innumerable moods of the Venetian world.

Fulvio Ara, La Turbie: summer 1983

