

# A CONTEMPORARY ART IN AN ANCIENT MEUN

by Elizabeth Smith

Tom Forrestall's next painting may be of a rusty-gold coloured cock. The cock has been in the family since early summer and Will Forrestall wants his father to do a painting of it. Mr. Forrestall is getting used to having it around and gradually beginning to like the idea of painting it.

That's the way Tom Forrestall is with all his paintings. As he says, "I like to get used to things. Have them around for awhile. Think about them for awhile." He has to know the subject of his paintings intimately before he can start to capture them on the panel in the minute detail of his technique, magic realism. But more than just visually knowing his subjects, he has to have some feeling about them. Most of his paintings are based on memories that have grown to importance until they are expressed on the panel. After all you must feel deeply about something to have the discipline to spend hours and hours on the detail that is necessary to complete a Forrestall painting.

The latest, almost completed Forrestall picture is hanging on his living-room wall. It hangs there so that he can work on it a little more if he feels it is necessary. This painting, like most of his recent work, is in an unusual

"Panel shapes are something that I've been dealing with for quite a while. Sometimes I design the shape first and wait for something to use it for and sometimes I design the shape to fit an idea. One could say the purpose of it is decorative - two shapes, two separate pictures. Of course it puts more emphasis on the coat. But also that's my house, my relatives are there, and that's who the coat would remind me of."

In Fredericton the Forrestalls have a comfortable life. They live in half of an enormous green house they own on shady University Avenue. Mr. Forrestall often rides his bicycle along under the elms. Besides Tom Forrestall and his wife, Natalie, there are the five children: William, 12; Monica, 11; Renée, 9; John, 7; and Curphey, 4. The youngest is named after Mrs. Forrestall's family name from the Isle of Wight. There is usually a large variety of animals, but at the moment they have only the cock, a dog and a couple of goldfish.

Forrestall paintings are very quiet and still, but being in the midst of a large and busy family is important to him. He has no studio as such, but works on one side of a multi-purpose family room off the kitchen. The easel is separated from the television, the goldfish

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shape. This one is sort of a hole-less figure eight. A rough fabric military coat lies crumpled on the grass where it was thrown. The brass buttons glisten in the sunlight. Above and behind is a windowed segment of a white clapboard house with the branch of an evergreen tree hanging down (cover picture). Tom Forrestall is pleased, perhaps eager, to talk about the work. It is obviously very important to him. The house is his summer home in Nova Scotia, but it is the old coat that he really loves.

"A friend of mine has an antique shop near our farm in Nova Scotia. About two years ago I saw this old coat hanging in his barn. I thought about it all winter and all spring. I could hardly wait till I got back. It's an old army coat from the West Nova Scotia Regiment. This summer he sold it to me for one dollar. I brought it home and threw it down on the grass, I made sketches of it for days. Now the coat is very valuable to me. I love that coat. I know every inch of it.

"Around the end of the war, I remember these monstrous coats and boots as soldiers came home from the war."

The picture is super real, it is a little more clear than it would actually be seen from that distance. But just as the detail is a little more intricate, the colours are a little less vivid. The greens would be a little brighter if we were really looking at the coat lying on the grass. Forrestall plays down the element of colour in his paintings.

"There's not much colour in the paintings," says Mr. Forrestall. "I can't avoid colour but I feel it only gets in the way. I try to avoid the decorative element that colour imposes on the thing. I'm always afraid that colour will make it too decorative

On the realism he says, "It's real in each individual part but things are left out or emphasized. The coat may not look that clear but I had to play up the old brass buttons, the coarse feeling of the cloth."

In a way this painting is really two paintings connected by adjoining frames. The coat is self-contained in the bottom half of the painting, the composition of the top is self-sufficient, but something relates the parts, something more than their spatial relationship. Tom Forrestall says,

and the stream of children by a large wooden table covered with things, mostly to do with painting. But the division of the room is really not effective.

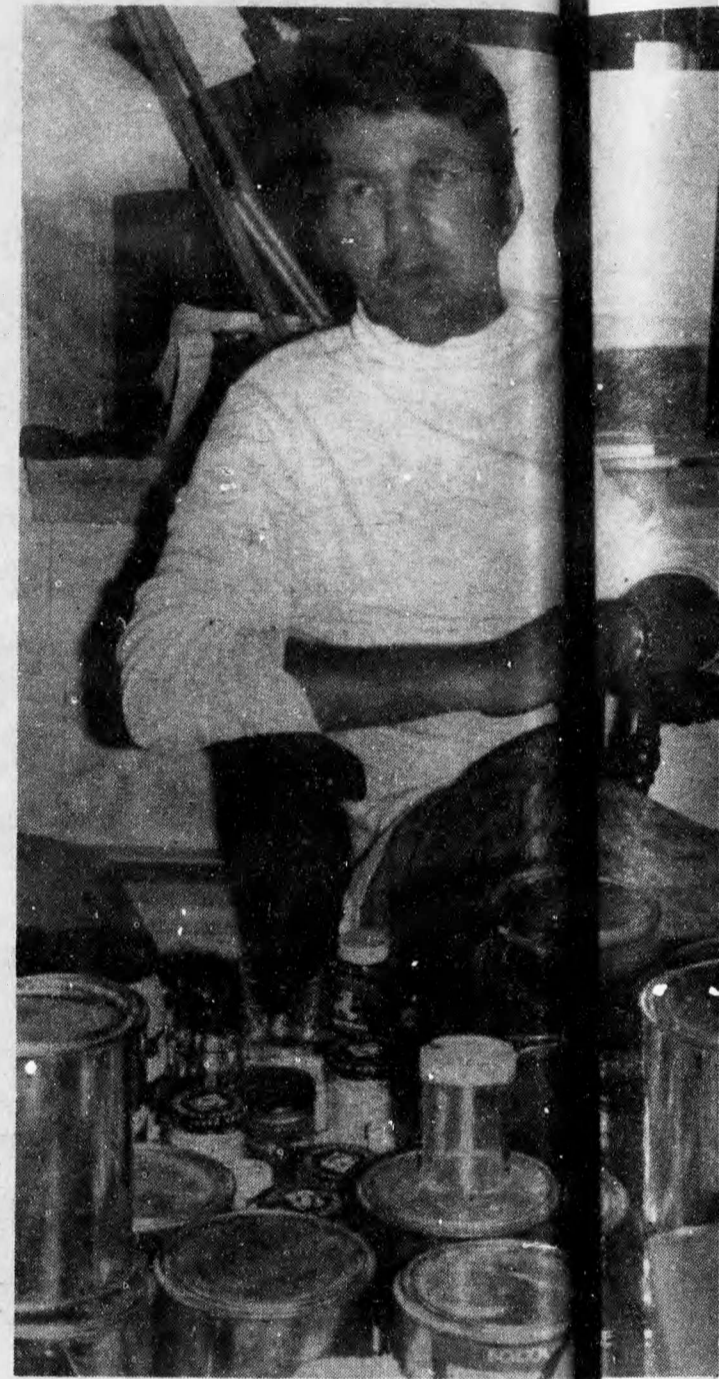
On the children's side of the room a red military jacket hangs from the ceiling. Opposite this, leaning against the window, are recent sketches of the same jacket. Tom Forrestall fingers the jacket, takes it down, examines it, studies the brass buttons and tries to decipher their Latin inscription. He notes the jacket is of the St. Catherine's Nineteenth Regiment. Finally he tries the jacket on and although it is much too small, you can see he really likes to wear it. The jacket is gradually becoming established in his life, connected to happy memories in preparation for a tempera board. He observes that one of the children will probably wear it on Hallowe'en. A week earlier he and a friend had a great laugh about the jacket with their mutual friend, Alden Nowlan. The coat fitted the friend quite well and he wore it to visit Mr. Nowlan.

Although their life in Fredericton is slow and comfortable, the summers in the country in Nova Scotia are even more so. There Mr. Forrestall can wander about in fields, sketching without provoking interest from the local inhabitants. He particularly likes to wander about the neighbouring farm.

"They're not interested in what I am doing there," says Mr. Forrestall. "I suppose they just say, 'There goes that idiot who paints pictures.' They're admirable people, independent. The trouble with living in cities is that we get very removed from basic things that matter. You sort of miss a side of life."

During the past summer he has painted a major work directly concerned with these people. It is another double panel, with rusty cans on one side and moose carcasses on the other (see page 3). The cans look like a whisky still, but Mr. Forrestall says they are just empty cans. The relationship between the two parts of work is not obvious and Mr. Forrestall admits it.

"You wouldn't know just to look at it - its sort of a contrast I suppose. The two moose were killed by those cans. They hadn't planned to go hunting at all and the moose sort of walked out of the woods. The moose came



Tom Forrestall rests behind a table full of the easel in

hunting them you could say."

His friends in the Nova Scotia countryside have a completely different culture than Mr. Forrestall and although they are not impressed because he is a painter, he is very enthusiastic and impressed with their way of life. He speaks with fascination about the little occurrences in their life and how different their reactions are to his. Part of the fascination stems from his memories as a boy growing up in the Annapolis Valley.

Speaking about first stumbling up the moose carcasses hanging in the barn, Tom Forrestall says, "The barn was very impressive. Easily eight feet high. The two carcasses were gently swaying. It didn't impress them. It was a very natural phenomenon for them. There again it sort of reminded me of my father and his hunting days.

"Incredible really. The stillness, especially of the barn with the carcasses hanging in it. The hay, the cracks in the boards of the barn with the light coming through."

Tom Forrestall met his wife, Natalie, when they were both studying art at Mount Allison University. After studying there for four years Mr. Forrestall received a grant from the Canada Council and he and his wife travelled around Europe visiting art galleries.

They travelled very cheaply. At one point they slept in a small tent with their raincoats thrown over it to keep out the rain. And of course they did some hitch-hiking. It was with memories of this trip in 1954 that Mr. Forrestall asked a hitch-hiker he met last summer to pose