

Looking back from Europe

By Jenny Pearson

A Canadian artist, now working in London and southern France, talks controversially about the art scene back home.

Hugh Cronyn is the kind of artist who provokes art movements to their most withering generalizations, while commanding a stubborn admiration among those people who can look at a painting with fresh eyes. He is a loner. He is not concerned to be "international" in the fashionable sense of an Esperanto art which speaks the same language across continents. Rather, his paintings speak of places he has known and loved, but with an intensity that distills the experience of awareness itself — whether they reflect a London interior, an incandescent Canadian scene or the fields and poplars of southern France.

Born in Vancouver in 1905, Cronyn has been ploughing his own furrow for 50 years with the indifference of a Gulley Jimson to external considerations. Success has been strictly on his own terms, more in Europe than in Canada, where he has found dealers on the whole less sympathetic and art schools prevented by red tape from employing an artist who lacks a provincial qualification (this in spite of his having studied in New York, in Paris with Jean Despujols and Andre Lhôte, and in Toronto with Franz Johnson, one of the original members of Canada's famous Group of Seven).



Above: Self-portrait in the studio.

Below: North to North Bay, Canada, 1967.

Foiled in his attempts to find a means of supporting his family in Canada, he settled for working and teaching in England: first at the Architectural Association School of Architecture, where as director of art he served a three-year contract to rewrite the curriculum after the war (1946-49) and then as teacher of



Photo by T. R. Archibald

diploma painting at the Colchester School of Art. Now he has given up teaching and divides his time between the Lot valley in France and a studio in Hammer-smith village.

Cronyn bristles with impatience at the administrative narrowness which, in his view, inhibits the art scene in Canada. Perched on a high stool in his studio overlooking the Thames, he declared: "If you don't have this qualification, you can't teach art. If you're over 65, you're a senior citizen and no one takes you seriously any more. They keep you in compartments in Canada. My message is, don't be so insular!"

Rowing boats were flicking by on the river: and there they were, also, arrested in a jigsaw of colour on his easel. His connection with this part of London dates to pre-war days, when he had a series of ramshackle studios near the river and drank in the Black Lion with A. P. Herbert and Julian Trevelyan.

"Pale imitations"

His complaint against the Canadian art scene is two-edged: that it promotes home-grown artists without being sufficiently critical about the quality of their work, and that the painters themselves tend to be "international" to the point of palely imitating Europe rather than giving authentic expression to the experience of living and painting in Canada.

Historically speaking, his criticism of contemporary abstract painting has a recognizable parallel in the revolt of the younger artists at the turn of the century against the curious tradition, then prevailing, of painting the brilliant Canadian scenery in the muted style and sombre palette made fashionable by painters in The Netherlands.

He protests: "When one sees the paintings that get chosen for the Canadian Art Bank — like the little girl who places red spots on a canvas, asking herself 'Is that the right place for it: No, I don't think so, no, just a little bit to the right . . . ' — that is not Canadian art. It's an intellectual concept derived from a European idea of what art is."

As he talks, Cronyn suits the action to the word, dabbing the air with an imaginary brush. The zany acerbity, grizzled beard and peaked cap are suddenly familiar — a flash of Spike Milligan, the tone he uses to express his aversion to cats.

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