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85. The Romance of Nickel, [detail], 1937

Muscled Workers, Speeding Trains, and Composite Figures: Charles Comfort's Murals

THROUGHOUT THE 1920s CHARLES COMFORT worked hard to establish his career as an independent painter and to earn a living as a commercial artist. He carefully positioned himself between the commercial arts industry and the visual arts community, exhibiting regularly with the various art societies (as discussed in other essays). However, the series of murals that he produced in the 1930s would bring these elements of his work together and shift his practice from the commercial arts to the fine arts as a muralist, art teacher, and administrator, culminating in his being appointed the Director of the National Gallery of Canada in 1960.¹

When Comfort moved to Toronto from Winnipeg in 1925, he continued to work for Brigdens as an art director and production supervisor. By late 1929 he was so well established in the Toronto industry that he was able to leave Brigdens and negotiate a contract with Rapid-Grip Ltd. for \$9,000.00 a year, a large sum for the times.² However, with the Stock Market Crash in November 1929 and its reverberating effects on Canada, Comfort was out of work by early 1932. He attempted to return to Brigdens, but with the Depression in full force, there were no salaried positions available. Later that year he opened up an office with Will Ogilvie and Harold Ayers in the Studio Building on Severn St. and undertook various illustration and advertising contracts. He managed to put together a living as a free-lancer, combining illustration work, private teaching, art direction, painting contracts, and public lectures. Successful in attracting clients, he did work for *The Canadian National Railway Magazine*, *Saturday Night* magazine, Imperial Oil, and the International Nickel Company of Canada (Inco) among others.

Comfort's advertising career provided the philosophical underpinnings of his mural work; he believed that the commercial artist should never lose sight of the client. As he articulated in a lecture given in 1931:

A good rule is to be a little ahead of the crowd, but not too far ahead lest you also get ahead of the buying public. Be original but not as original as can be. Some enthusiasts take up a new idea like modernism and run away with it. They lose sight of the primary purpose of advertising, and the main fact that art when applied to advertising is, after all, merely a means to an end, and that end is the selling of goods. Photographs or paintings, realistic or modern. It is never a question of what you or I like best in art, but always of how effective this drawing will be in attracting and finally compelling the public to like and buy your goods.³



Will Ogilvie inspects
the North American
Life Mural, August 1932

Charles F. Comfort
/Library and Archives
Canada/PA-175351

Comfort brought the same pragmatic approach to his mural work, an understanding of advertising and the client, which he adapted through a synthesis of form and style to the architectural scale and public role of mural painting.

II.

His first mural project was a temporary decoration for Toronto's Arts & Letters Club in 1926 with a humorous and incongruous twist on the capture of General Wolfe in Quebec.⁴ In 1932 he was commissioned to produce a wall-painting for the lobby of the North American Life Assurance Building by the architect F. Marani.⁵ Comfort's early murals were rooted in older traditions of wall-painting in Canada.⁶ In Quebec, Catholic churches and religious orders often displayed large wall- or easel paintings. In contrast in English Canada, the Arts and Crafts movement had introduced wall-paintings into private homes and public places such as hotels, libraries, theatres, department stores, and schools. Most of these murals were narrative, painted on canvas and installed on interior wall surfaces; they were usually decorative in nature.

Without doubt, the strongest impetus for mural

painting in the 1930s was the Mexican fresco murals of Diego Rivera, David Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco. After his mural commissions at the San Francisco Stock Exchange, the Detroit Institute of Art, and the notorious destruction of his Rockefeller Center mural in New York in 1934, Rivera had become an international art celebrity. The Mexican muralists had created a new visual history of the Mexican people, valorizing and celebrating the indigenous peoples in accordance with the government's policy of *mexicanidad* ('Mexicanness').⁷ Their powerful narrative – a highly symbolic rendering of a national history in fresco, with their intense spatial organization, colour, and vibrancy – inspired many Canadian and American artists to explore a new approach to mural painting.

The new mural movements espoused the re-union of painting and architecture, separated since the development of easel painting in the Renaissance. Some even claimed that mural painting would save the artist from the isolation of the studio, the limitations of the canvas edge, and the inward looking, private language of abstraction. Modern architecture, particularly modern institutional architecture, was seen as the perfect scale and location for artists to find a wider general public. The faith in murals, as a social and political form, was widely advocated and was an aspect of the larger concept of the artist in society.⁸ As Arthur Lismer commented in an article in the *Royal Architectural Institute of Canada Journal*, dated 1933, murals "...are signs that our democracy, which is still adolescent, is slowly achieving a new renaissance through more coordinated activity in the designing of structure and its decoration."⁹

Within this context of mural painting Charles Comfort was asked by Samuel Maw, associate architect with the firm of George & Moorhouse, and a fellow member of the Arts & Letters Club, to design an exterior stone frieze for the new Toronto Stock Exchange on Bay Street. The major objective of the new Toronto Exchange was to create an image of stability, rekindling faith in the stock market after the disastrous crash of 1929. Comfort's design for the exterior frieze depicted a procession of Canada's industries marching together in a strong forward movement.¹⁰ There were 31 life-size figures moving in a tightly structured geometric pattern from right to

left in a bank 22 metres long and over 1 1/2 metres high. Comfort produced a full-scale cartoon, which was then attached to the wall, perforated and drawn on the surface, relying on stylized figures in low relief contrasted with etched-line details, creating shadows and depth. The design was cut, rather than carved, with a combination of pneumatic work and hand-chiseling on the Indiana limestone.

Comfort's Stock Exchange frieze symbolically integrated the capitalist, represented by the figure of the stockbroker, as a productive element alongside the labourer, the salesman, the white collar worker, the farmer, the scientist and the miner, as part of *the natural order of things* in the world of work. As a symbol of the lifting of the Depression, it represented the public image of the power of industry, with both capital and labour working together to exploit Canadian resources. A rather ironic detail in the frieze over the north doorway is the top-hatted stockbroker whose hand appears to be in a worker's pocket. According to Comfort, the juxtaposition of the two figures was unintentional.¹¹ However over the years, it became an insiders' joke among the exchange brokers and is part of Toronto's popular mythology.

Although the murals in the interior of the Stock Exchange were originally to be commissioned from four different artists, by the time the contract was awarded in January 1937, Comfort had been selected to design and paint all eight mural panels (each 11.2 x 4.9 metres). The murals depicted the industries of Canada whose stocks were traded on the Exchange floor: construction and engineering, mining, smelting, refining, oil, pulp and paper, agriculture, transportation and communications. Muscled workers, speeding trains, pouring vats, electrical towers, and industrial structures unify the tightly constructed vertical panels. For the human figures, Comfort re-used the stylized figures from the exterior murals, which created a strong forward movement in the horizontal frieze. In the vertical interior murals, the strong graphic lines of the figures, their repeated stance, the reach, and the warm, rich, earthy colours, all serve to unify the individual vertical panels into a whole. Within the overall space, Comfort's murals complemented the scale and the detailing of the Trading Floor, neither dominating nor competing with the architectural style



(which we would now refer to as Art Deco). As the vertical murals were designed to be seen from below, the individual panels have a tendency to break down into pure planes and forms when observed in isolation.

In between his completion of the exterior and interior murals for the Stock Exchange, in the fall of 1936 Comfort was commissioned by Inco to paint a mural for their mining display in the Canadian Pavilion at the upcoming 1937 International World's Fair in Paris.¹² The final 6.1 metre long *Romance of Nickel* (cat. 85) depicts the process of nickel and copper production, merging them into a seamless landscape of the New Ontario. The mural is dominated by the inverted Y-form of a heroic hard-rock miner, whose aggressive stance emphasizes the power and thrust of machines and miners. A second figure of an earnest scientist gazing into his microscope is surrounded by the icons of modern life: skyscrapers, bridges, crank shafts, streamlined trains and automobiles, radio towers, and airplanes representing the rational objectives of technology and industry. The mural combines symbols of technology with French *moderne* design, and elements of what one could call Stalinist heroic realism, industrial futurism, and corporate beneficence. It speaks of progress, the future, and jobs at a time when Canada and the mining industry, which had been particularly hard hit by the 1929 Crash, had just crawled out of the worst of the Depression.

Toronto Stock Exchange, exterior stone bas relief (in situ at the Design Exchange, Toronto)

Photography: George Lobb





III.

Although the Stock Exchange murals and the Inco commission for the Canadian Pavilion at the Paris World's Fair were a great success, Comfort had serious financial problems in the late 1930s. He was having trouble finding commercial work and was more interested in murals and teaching. Money was such an issue that Comfort resigned from the Arts & Letters Club, as he was unable to pay his fees and was in arrears. This was acutely embarrassing for Comfort, as he had been active in the Club since the early 1920s. Many of his contacts for professional work had come through associates at the Club, and it was a symbolic centre of Toronto's cultural and intellectual community in the 1930s. It was during this period that he took over teaching a course in mural decoration and kindred uses at night and on Saturdays at the Ontario College of Art. In 1938 he started teaching part-time at the University of Toronto, which allowed him to stay in Canada and not to take up a position in commercial art in New York. Comfort, who was primarily self-educated, was a conscientious teacher and spent a considerable time researching the history of murals, painting techniques, and later art history.¹³

Over the next 25 years, Comfort continued to search out mural work. In early 1939, through a rather circuitous route, he was hired by the CNR to paint a mural for the lobby of the new Hotel Vancouver for a fee of \$1,800.00.¹⁴ The design, approved by CN, focused on Captain Vancouver and his subalterns being received with Potlach gifts by three natives in the foreground. Comfort commented ironically that in

the mural Captain Vancouver "...is being peacefully and ceremoniously received by the natives of the district (a circumstance about which there is much doubt)."¹⁵ When completed in May 1939, the mural was installed in the Hotel Vancouver lobby with favourable notice and remained there until 1968, when the hotel was renovated. In 1942 he received a large public commission to design exterior stone bas-reliefs and interior murals for the Dorchester St. Central Station in Montreal, focusing on the history of transportation.

In 1951 Comfort painted an almost 20-metre long mural *British Columbia Pageant* for the Dominion Bank at the corner of Granville and Pender in downtown Vancouver. This rather heroic allegory of British Columbian history started with the Spanish explorers, included Captain Vancouver and crew, various aboriginal and Euro-Canadian figures, plus Emily Carr, and was spatially organized using various West Coast aboriginal motifs, such as Tlingit totems and Haida poles. In 1951 when the mural was unveiled, Paul Duval described Charles Comfort as "the nation's top mural artist..." and saw him playing "...a leading position in this vital, though neglected, field of architectural art."¹⁶

In 1955 Comfort, along with fellow veterans, Will Ogilvie and Andre Biéler, were invited by the Department of Veterans Affairs to produce three murals for the new Veterans Affairs building on Wellington Street in Ottawa. Comfort's mural depicts the three branches of the Canadian military during the war: the Navy in the midst of a night time naval battle; the Army involved in a ground battle of men



and tanks; and the Air Force Lancaster bombers in night-time raids over central Europe. These are accompanied by five smaller panels which are layered over the larger scenes at the lower edge of the mural. Reading like photographic capsules, these vignettes capture the contemporary role of Veterans Affairs in the 1950s: demobilized soldiers; a military group portrait including a nursing sister; a meeting of the veterans' pension board; and a classic advertising image of a father returning to his suburban bungalow greeted by his wife and child, with his new car in the driveway.

The Veterans Affairs mural, although largely unknown, has a number of interesting aspects. Comfort grappled with time and abstraction by creating a series of floating scenes and vignettes, while seriously constrained by the limitations of the architectural space. The mural is highly narrative and figurative in style. Rather than introducing highly symbolic figures like his historical murals, his utilization of photographic framing and visual quotations from contemporary life in the 1950s adds intriguing elements to the highly formal piece.

His last major mural commission was for the new National Library of Canada which opened in 1967. The two paintings, *Legacy* and *Heritage*, at either ends of the Reading Room, were designed to be low key and not distracting to the readers, while providing a historical context for both intellectual history and Canadian arts and letters. The murals focus on a series of historical figures illustrated in a soft grisaille technique floating in a soft green/grey visual field.

IV.

As a public art form, art and ideology overtly intersect in murals through their content and style, as well as through the vision of the patron commissioning the work. And although the mural revival of the 1920s and 30s was hailed as a new form of public art and in many instances a political educational tool, public response over the years toward the murals has proved to be somewhat contradictory and invariably complicated.¹⁷

In Canada, like the US, murals tended towards historical themes of famous thinkers, explorers, founding fathers, dead politicians, classical heroes, early transportation, etc. Virtually all of the murals commissioned in Canada avoided contemporary issues, particularly the devastation of the economic and agricultural depression of the 1930s.¹⁸ The occasional futuristic themes of economic prosperity through technological invention such as Comfort's work were limited. Most importantly these figurative murals were designed to be legible so they could be read as a narrative. By the mid 1950s, figurative historical murals would be eclipsed by the interest in abstraction, exemplified in the dynamic expressionistic mural that Harold Town completed for the St. Lawrence Generating Station in Cornwall, Ontario as part of the St. Lawrence Seaway Project in 1958.

Like many Canadian artists in the 1920s and 30s Comfort used his murals to search for and construct a symbolic Canadian culture. As the Mexican muralists attempted to create a *mexicanidad* (a national people's history), Comfort and his friends in the Group of

**British Columbia
Pageant mural, 1951**
Courtesy of Simon Fraser
University, Burnaby



Captain Vancouver mural for Hotel Vancouver, 1939
Confederation Centre Art Gallery, CAG 73.12

Seven sought to develop a modern iconography of the Canadian landscape. Comfort's advertising background made him comfortable with commissioned work; he perceived his mural decorations as allegories, rather than documentaries to be read by the public in the historical sense.¹⁹

In their time Comfort's murals were virtually all received positively with little discussion of their content as their meaning appeared to be self-evident. More recently, the symbolic content of his historical murals, specifically the Hotel Vancouver mural of Captain Vancouver and the Dominion Bank *British Columbia Pageant* mural, have been hotly debated.²⁰ The historical figures and generic composite characters of aboriginal peoples developed by Comfort, representing his attempt to construct a symbolic history, have become contentious as new approaches to First Nations and post-colonial history have evolved.

Comfort's strongest murals – the exterior frieze and interior murals of the Toronto Stock Exchange and the *Romance of Nickel* – dealing with contemporary industry, technology, and the future, are visually coherent, stylistically mature and ideologically clear. In contrast, his historical murals today read like didactic scroll paintings, muddled clichés of historical figures. In his industrial images he adopted a two-dimensional Cubist approach to space that is much more formally and stylistically ambitious. His use of layered forms, floating planes, plus shapes and colours, avoids the perspectival accuracy of traditional figurative painting, while allowing the scale of objects and figures to be adjusted to the narrative and spatial limitations of the composition. These murals are an unabashed glorification of industry, an attempt to create new symbols of the businessman, the scientist, and the worker. They symbolize the power of modern industry and implicitly of capitalism, particularly the resource-extraction industries, rising phoenix-like from the ashes of the Depression. Charles Comfort brought his clarity of industrial imagination and his belief in the future to these murals in the 1930s: both vitally corresponded to the search for an image of a modern industrial Canada and in some manner, still do to this day.

WITH THANKS TO DAVID WALLACE, CHARLES HILL, SCOTT JAMES, DOT TUER, AND JERRY ZASLOVE.

Appendix: Charles Comfort Murals

- 1932 – North American Life Assurance Co., Toronto (destroyed)
- 1936 – Toronto Stock Exchange, Bay St., exterior stone bas relief (in situ in the Design Exchange, Toronto)
- 1936 – *The Romance of Nickel*, Canadian Pavilion, Paris World's Fair, 1937 (on loan to the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa)
- 1937 – Toronto Stock Exchange, interior mural paintings (in situ in the Design Exchange, Toronto)
- 1938 – Central Station, Dorchester Station, Montreal (partially destroyed, remnants re-installed in the Montreal Train Station, Place Ville Marie)
- 1939 – Hotel Vancouver/Captain Vancouver mural (now in the Confederation Art Centre, Charlottetown, PEI)
- 1948 – Sunnybrook Hospital, Toronto (destroyed)
- 1951 – *British Columbia Pageant*, Dominion Bank, Granville and Pender Sts., Vancouver (now in the collection of Simon Fraser University, Burnaby)
- 1955 – *The Canadian Armed Forces*, Ottawa (in situ in the Department of Justice, in the former east wing of the Veterans' Memorial Building, Ottawa)
- 1958 – Neurological Division, Toronto General Hospital (now in the collection of the University Health Network, Toronto)
- 1967 – National Library and Archives Building, Ottawa (in situ in the National Library Reading Room)
- 1968 – Academy of Medicine, Toronto (presumed destroyed)

Notes

1. Comfort was the first artist appointed as Director of the National Gallery; once appointed, he omitted any mention of his commercial arts career from his resume.
2. Contract Charles Comfort and Rapid-Grip Corporation, Toronto, Nov. 28, 1929, CFC Fonds, *Correspondence 1920–1938*, box. 31.
3. Comfort "A Value for Art in Advertising," 1931, CFC Fonds, vol. 34.
4. See *The Journal Royal Architectural Institute of Canada*, (Nov.–Dec. 1926), 252.
5. See *The Journal Royal Architectural Institute of Canada* (July 1933), 132.
6. See Marylin McKay, *A National Soul: Canadian Mural Painting 1860s–1930s* (Montreal/Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press), 2002.
7. See Laurance P. Hurlburt, *The Mexican Muralists in the United States* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989).
8. See Christine Boyanoski, *The 1940s: A Decade of Painting in Ontario*, 10–19.
9. Arthur Lismer, "Mural Painting," *The Journal Royal Architectural Institute of Canada* (July 1933) 127–135.
10. Comfort used a strikingly similar spatial design with the inverted Y figure and narrative structure on both the horizontal exterior stone frieze and the eight interior vertical murals of the Toronto Stock Exchange and in the mural *Romance of Nickel*. See Rosemary Donegan "Legitimate Modernism: Charles Comfort and the Toronto Stock Exchange," *Designing the Exchange: Essays*



Comfort working on National Library Reading Room Murals, March 9, 1967
Charles Comfort
Collection / Library and Archives Canada / e002505481

Commemorating the Opening of the Design Exchange (Toronto: The Design Exchange, 1994) and "Mural Roots: Charles Comfort and the Toronto Stock Exchange" *Canadian Art*, vol. 4, no.2 (Summer 1987), 64–69.

11. Irvin Lutsky "Designer denies that frieze depicts a worker rip-off," *Toronto Star*, Oct. 19, 1977. Interestingly, although Comfort lived in Toronto until 1960 he did not see the interior Stock Exchange murals installed until 1977.

12. After the 1937 World's Fair, Comfort's mural the *Romance of Nickel* appears to have been rolled up and returned to the Department of Mines in Ottawa where it was stored for many years. It was first exhibited publicly in Canada in 1987 in the exhibition *Industrial Images/Images Industrielles*, Art Gallery of Hamilton, 1987. The mural is presently on long-term loan to the National Gallery of Canada.

13. See CFC Fonds, *Murals in Teaching Notes binder*, 1938–1951 file.

14. See Letter Feb. 13, 1939, CFC Fonds, vol. 60, *Vancouver Mural*, 1939–1975 file.

15. See Letter Feb. 7, 1939, CFC Fonds, vol. 60, *Vancouver Mural*, 1939–1975 file.

16. Paul Duval, "BC Mural: Sixty Feet of Progress" *Saturday Night* (Oct. 6, 1951), 31.

17. See: Karl Ann Marling *Wall-to-Wall America: A Cultural History of Post Office Murals in the Great Depression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982) in which she discusses the difficulties and complications in the process of commissioning mural designs, producing the paintings in situ and the public reception to the paintings in post offices across the United States.

18. Other major historic mural projects such as Edwin Holgate's commission for the 1939 New York World's Fair or the Orville Fischer, Paul Goranson, E.J. Hughes mural for the Golden Gate Exposition in San Francisco in 1939, celebratory in nature, were not exhibited in Canada. The one exception would be Miller Brittain's murals for the St. John Tuberculosis hospital designed in

the early 1940s but never produced. Brittain examined some of the causes and effects of tuberculosis in contemporary society. See Barry Lord, *The History of Painting in Canada: Towards a People's Art* (Toronto: NC Press, 1974), 183–189. Also see forthcoming thesis by Kirk Niergarth "Art and Democracy: New Brunswick Artists and Canadian Culture between the Depression and the Cold War," University of New Brunswick, 2007.

19. "Notes re: Vancouver Hotel Mural, Mar 3, 1939," CFC Fonds, vol. 60, *Vancouver Mural* file.

20. In 1972 when the Hotel Vancouver mural was donated to the University of British Columbia, a series of heated interchanges regarding the murals historically inaccurate and stereotypical treatment of aboriginal people as subserviently kneeling at the feet of Vancouver was initiated. To avoid further controversy, the mural was later donated to the Confederation Centre for the Arts in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island. The Dominion Bank mural *British Columbia Pageant*, recently donated to Simon Fraser University, has also been seriously criticized at public forums for its inaccurate and insensitive portrayal of First Nations peoples. It is to be the subject of a forthcoming issue of *West Coast Line* in 2007.