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PHOTO BY JOHN BLACKBENTLEY

MURAL ROOTS

Charles Comfort and the Toronto Stock Exchange

By ROSEMARY DONEGAN

"This is a tame way of beginning what is really an exciting piece of news. Canada has acquired a set of murals." In his particularly restrained Canadian manner, Robert Ayre, the art critic for the *Montreal Gazette*, was referring to his delight in response to Charles Comfort's murals for the new Toronto Stock Exchange at its opening in March 1937. "Comfort has felt the big drama of Canada, its materials and its men... he has given them valid and thrilling form."

Ayre, like many other critics, was caught up in the renaissance of mural art in the 1930s—it was the great public art spectacle of its period. Seen as the revival of the ancient collaboration of painting, sculpture and architecture in public buildings, murals were lauded for their artistic and educational value by artists, critics and the media.

Mexican artists had inspired renewed interest in the genre. Murals by Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros and José Clemente Orozco, artists associated with the Mexican revolution, were the banners of Mexico's new emerging culture. Diego Rivera's flamboyant American commissions—the San Francisco Stock Exchange Luncheon Club, the 1932 *Detroit Industry* murals in the Detroit Institute of Arts and the controversial foyer murals for the Rockefeller Center that were subsequently destroyed—were written up in the popular press and were the subject of much debate in the art world.

In the United States, the WPA (Works Progress Administration) was going full steam ahead by the mid-1930s, commission-

ing murals for government buildings, particularly post offices. The 1937 Paris Exposition Internationale des Arts et des Techniques — with Picasso's *Guernica*, and the murals by Fernand Léger, and the Delaunays, Sonia and Robert — exemplified what Le Corbusier heralded as the new unity of painting, modern architecture and urban life.

Coincidental with the revival of the mural were tremendous changes in North American popular culture in the 1920s, which saw the development of mass advertising campaigns, full-scale colour reproduction on billboards and large-screen movies. Within the art world, murals were seen as an answer to the growing disjunction between the artist and society. Murals would provide a new mass audience for art, liberating the artist from direct dependence on the private collector, while simultaneously freeing him from the physical limitations of easel painting. Mural painting, as a monumental art form, repudiated the concept of "art for art's sake" and embraced the rhetoric of "art for the masses", although ironically, virtually all major mural commissions were for either corporate or government buildings.

Murals were not an entirely new phenomenon in Canada; there was a long tradition in the Quebec Catholic Church of inspirational decoration that produced masters such as Napoléon Bourassa and Ozias Leduc. In English Canada, murals were associated with government institutions, their function both educational and decorative. They tended to celebrate civic virtue and usually depicted historical events. Although few murals were



COURTESY TORONTO STOCK EXCHANGE

The active trading floor of the 1937 Toronto Stock Exchange building, now vacated but awaiting restoration. Opposite: the stainless steel front doors bear Comfort's industrial motifs.

actually executed, George Reid and a group of contemporaries submitted a proposal for the new Toronto Municipal Building in 1895 and the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa in 1904. These projects took their inspiration from Puvis de Chavannes and the murals in the Hôtel de Ville in Paris, and the more general influence of the British Arts and Crafts movement. The new public emporiums, like the Royal Alexandra Hotel in Winnipeg, the Princess Theatre in Montreal, and the David Spencer Department Store in Vancouver, had murals by artists such as Frederick Challenger and George Southwell.

Isolated examples of mural painting such as Fritz Brandtner's 1933 work commissioned by the Saskatchewan government for the World Grain Exhibition at the Regina Exhibition Grounds, remained primarily decorative in intent. But what was profoundly different about murals in the 1930s was their association with contemporary issues, particularly industrial subjects eulogizing the machine age. The depiction of the modern, mechanized life was intertwined in these murals with the major aesthetic debate of the early 20th century between realism and abstraction. Although murals tended to be rooted in realism, they incorporated many modernist styles and motifs.

The man who was to be the most prolific muralist of the period was Charles Comfort. An unusually virtuoso artist, Comfort had an amazing career. It started in 1914, when he went to work as an apprentice at Brigden's Limited, a Winnipeg printer, helping prepare the Eaton's catalogue. At the apex of his working life in 1960,

John Diefenbaker appointed him director of the National Gallery of Canada.

By the time Comfort had moved to Toronto in 1925, he was deemed to be an important young commercial artist. In 1931 he opened a commercial studio in partnership with Harold Ayres and Will Ogilvie. Comfort was well respected and was seen as a very practical common-sense sort of man, which probably accounts for his ability to attract and keep major corporate clients, such as Inco. In his commercial work he used a basic, clean and geometric design, reducing subject matter to its simplest terms. (It is important to note that the schism between commercial and fine art that developed with the notion of the avant-garde in the visual arts, was not as problematic in the 1930s; artists frequently took on commercial work while simultaneously pursuing their own art.)

Comfort's first mural was done in 1932, for the North American Life Building in Toronto, and it was partially as a result of this commission that he was appointed director of mural painting at the Ontario College of Art in 1936. He was very active as a member of virtually all the arts societies, and exhibited regularly in their annual exhibitions. He was one of the youngest members ever admitted to that liberal, but nevertheless male, bastion of the Toronto cultural community, the Arts and Letters Club.

Comfort's politics, at least in the early stages of his career, were left of centre. He had started work as a water boy on a paving crew at the age of 14 and had largely educated himself. In



COURTESY TORONTO STOCK EXCHANGE

Comfort's interior panels capture the spirit of the 1930s: a belief in progress and modern industry. Opposite: the exterior stonecut frieze and, below, the west wall of the trading floor.

the 1930s, he was associated with the more progressive elements of the Toronto arts community, including *Canadian Forum* and *New Frontier*, a magazine loosely affiliated with the Communist Party. However, his work lacks the engagement and experimental edge of Fritz Brandtner, Miller Brittain and Paraskeva Clark, whose paintings explicitly and creatively address the social questions of the period: poverty, trade union organizing and the rise of Fascism.

In his portraits and landscapes, Comfort's style, although flat, was expressionistic and verged on the melodramatic. Comfort had been an active promoter of "the modern manner". In a 1931 essay in a collection entitled *Open House*, edited by William Deacon and Wilfred Reeves, he explained his own perception of the artist's experience as a process of elimination, as forms and ideas are discarded, others retained, multiplied and rendered more precise, until they crystallize into personal symbols, producing an art in which the artist's emotional power is manifest.

In 1936 Comfort was approached by the architectural firm of George & Moorhouse, through the associate architect, Sam Maw, to design interior murals and exterior decoration for the new Toronto Stock Exchange on Bay Street. The architecture of the Exchange, although it clearly has modernist aspirations, relies on a series of geometric devices and traditional motifs in its almost stripped-down classicism, now referred to as Art Deco. Constructed out of reinforced concrete, it was designed to accommodate the later addition of two extra storeys. The street facade has five centre columnar windows extending vertically from the horizontal frieze that spans the trading floor level.

The exterior frieze shows an industrial procession — labourers and white-collar workers, farmers, miners, travelling salesmen, bankers and scientists — moving in a tightly structured geometric pattern from right to left in a band 22.5 metres long and almost 2 metres high. Designed by Comfort, it was executed by stonecutter Peter Schoen. Through a combination of pneumatic machine and hand-cut work on the Indiana limestone, Comfort created foreground/background contrasts and deeply etched line-cuts to produce a flat-surfaced bas-relief. The design — "cut" as opposed to "carved" — although technically very simple, relies on stylized linear detail for its effectiveness.

A rather ironic detail in the bas-relief is the top-hatted stockbroker, whose hand appears to be in a worker's pocket. The juxtaposition of the two figures was apparently unintentional and went unnoticed in the press when the building was opened. However, over the years it became an item in the popular mythology of the Exchange. An inside joke among brokers, Comfort's accidental drollery reaffirmed for stock-market critics the conviction that the profits of the market came from the backs of workers.

The trading floor, located on the second floor of the exchange, is 12 metres high, free of columns and finished with detailing of stainless steel and natural maple. The lower walls are granite d'or marble, and the upper walls are finished with acoustic tiles. The major design element is a range of five bands of lighting, with flashed opal glass, that extend up the end walls and continue across the ceiling, uniting the large space to form contrasting bands with the four painted panels at each end.

Painted in the "modern manner", as the official press releases described them, the interior eight canvas panels, on which Comfort was assisted by Caven Atkins and Harold Ayres, represent the industries of Canada, whose stocks were handled on the trading floor: transportation and communications, mining, smelting, pulp-and-paper, refining, agriculture, oil, engineering and construction. Comfort organized each 4.8 m. x 1.2 m. panel by dividing it into scenes, each depicting an aspect of the industry represented, while each scene is an integrated part of the whole panel. Muscled workers, speeding trains, pouring vats and industrial buildings — a stylized litany of figures in motion — filled out each panel. Although the murals have a tendency to break down

PHOTOS BY JOHN BLANCHER BENTLEY





into patterns that make them difficult to read individually, they do work within the detailing of the trading floor as a harmonizing integral element. They neither compete with nor dominate the architecture. Described by Comfort in 1937 as "a permanent one-man show", they are his most accomplished work. His later mural projects are rather weak and uninspired by comparison. The murals are an unabashed glorification of commerce. They symbolize the power of modern industry and, implicitly, of capitalism, to rise phoenix-like from the ashes of the Depression.

Comfort's Stock Exchange murals symbolically integrated the capitalist, represented in the figure of the stockbroker, as a productive element, with the worker and the scientist as part of "the natural order of things". In the wake of the Crash of 1929, the Toronto Stock Exchange, both as a building and as an institution, had a straightforward objective: to represent its own interests and create public faith in the institution. Charles Comfort's murals obliged by elevating the power of industry and lauding the mentality of the machine age. Comfort had been influenced stylistically by Diego Rivera and Thomas Hart Benton, but in contrast to the murals of Diego Rivera, (who once told a dinner companion "We don't control the machines, the machines control us"), Comfort's panoramas are not concerned with the social or economic effects of industrialization, the slums, the unemployed or the tedium of industrial labour, but with the idea of scientific logic and a belief in progress.

Comfort's "dynamically contemporary" murals, including his 6-metre-long *The Romance of Nickel*, an Inco commission for the Canadian pavilion at the 1937 Paris Exposition, use the same basic imagery as his commercial work. The similarity of style, posture and figure can be seen in his advertising designs. Comfort's ability to absorb various contemporary art influences into his own graphic stylization produced a visual imagery that has its own integrity. His figures, buildings and machines operate as symbols that are recognizable and have meaning and overall intent. Yet they blend into a decorative pattern that distances itself from any specific meaning. As Pearl McCarthy wrote in the *Toronto Mail and Empire* in 1935, Charles Comfort "represents legitimate modernism, not the modernism which asks the spectator to choose between having naturalism or thought, or aesthetic principles, but one which amalgamates them. [His paintings] are real without being too literal, have a philosophical flair, and are ably painted. While there is an increasing public which wants more than literalism, that public also wants more than an idea with a frame around it. An idea plus Comfort's draughtsmanship makes a picture."

Comfort's work for the Stock Exchange provided a synthesis of architecture, painting and sculpture that has remained unique in Canada. The murals capture the symbolism of the 1930s, championing a belief in progress and modern industry. And in formal terms, they represent the legitimate adaptation of modernism to a specific purpose.

Important as they are to a knowledge of our artistic heritage, Comfort's murals have ironically become a bargaining chip in Toronto's real estate stakes — 50 years later an even bigger area for speculation than the stock market. Now owned by Olympia and York, but about to be transferred to Cadillac Fairview, the Stock Exchange building is technically threatened with demolition until a redevelopment proposal is approved by City Council. The proposal will request permission to construct a new office tower over the existing Art Deco building, forming the fifth tower of the Toronto Dominion Centre. Meanwhile, plans are under discussion to convert the trading floor into a design centre, which would house exhibitions, archives and a study centre.

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COURTESY TORONTO STOCK EXCHANGE

The murals show the graphic influence of Thomas Hart Benton and Diego Rivera, but also the distinct style of Comfort's commercial work. Opposite: a detail from the panel depicting construction and engineering.