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Legitimate modernism: Charles Comfort and the Toronto Stock Exchange

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LEGITIMATE MODERNISM

CHARLES COMFORT AND THE TORONTO STOCK EXCHANGE

BY ROSEMARY DONEGAN

As Pearl McCarthy wrote in *The 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."¹

It was this kind of high regard that Comfort was earning for himself in the mid-thirties and it made perfect sense when associate architect Samuel Maw and the building committee for the new Toronto Stock Exchange chose him to prepare the drawings for the exterior carved stone frieze and subsequently to design and paint eight mural panels for the trading floor.

MURALS: THE NEW PUBLIC ART

During the period following World War I, tremendous changes in North American popular visual culture saw the development of large-screen movies, mass advertising campaigns and colour billboards. In major cities, billboards dominated intersections and in the countryside they lined the edges of the new highways, selling everything from soap to radios and automobiles. A by-product of the new motoring rage, the introduction of large-scale colour billboards had an enormous impact on the general public as well as on the advertising industry.

Within the art world, murals were the great public art spectacle of the period. They were

Stainless steel doors with medallions designed by Charles Comfort.

seen as a revival of the ancient collaboration of painting, sculpture and architecture in public buildings. Both artists and critics alike lauded and extolled the artistic value and potential educational role of mural art, particularly in the form of historical murals.²

For artists, murals were the answer to the growing disjuncture between the artist and society. Murals would provide a new mass audience for art, liberating the artist from dependence on the private collector and, at the same time, from the physical limitations of easel painting. Left-wing critics saw mural painting as a monumental art form, capable of repudiating the concept of 'art for art's sake' and establishing a new art form and new public images, a genuine 'art for the masses'.

In the forefront of this international mural movement were the Mexican artists. It was they who had inspired renewed interest in murals, particularly in traditional fresco painting, as a tool of political activism. Their murals rooted in the Mexican Revolution, Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros and José Clemente Orozco were seen as part of Mexico's emerging new national culture. Rivera's flamboyant U.S. 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, which were destroyed in 1933 – were widely written up in the North American popular press.

In the United States, the Works Progress Administration was going full steam by the mid-thirties commissioning murals for government buildings, particularly post offices. Artists such as Thomas Hart Benton and Grant Wood worked on local mural projects across the United States. The 1937 Paris Exposition Internationale des Arts et des Techniques, including Picasso's *Guernica* and murals by Fernand Léger and Robert and Sonia Delaunay, exemplified what Le Corbusier had heralded as the new unity of painting, modern architecture and urban life.

In Toronto, the acceptance of murals as a form of public art was established by the turn of the century. The British Arts and Crafts movement was among the early influences, with an impact on the Civic Art Guild and artists like George Reid and later J.E.H. MacDonald. Restaurant and theatre murals, such as those in the Round Room at Eaton's College Street store or in the Winter Garden Theatre, were common. However, their intent remained primarily decorative. More traditional applications of large-scale painting like circus paintings, dioramas in museum

displays and paintings for agricultural fairs, for example, Fritz Brandtner's 1933 murals for the World Grain Exhibition in Regina, endured and were revitalized by the new movement.³

What was profoundly different about murals in the 1930s was their association with contemporary issues, local history and particularly industrial subjects such as factories, machines and the worker.⁴ The depiction of modern mechanized life was intertwined in these murals with the major aesthetic debates of the period: between regionalism and internationalism, between realism and abstraction. Although murals of this period tended to be rooted in realism, they incorporated many modern stylistic motifs associated with cubism.⁵

A PRECOCIOUS TALENT

Charles Comfort (1900-1994) was an unusually versatile man. Not only was he a well-known painter and muralist, but he was also an administrator, teacher and commercial artist. He began his working life in 1914 as an apprentice working on the Eaton's catalogue for Brigden's Limited in Winnipeg. 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 1919, he was an up-and-coming young commercial artist. In the late 1920s he was making \$9,000 a year working for Rapid-Grip Ltd. while simultaneously teaching watercolour classes and taking time off at his own expense to travel and paint. In 1931, he opened a commercial studio in partnership with Harold Ayres and Will Ogilvie. Comfort appears to have been well-regarded in the field of commercial art and was considered a very practical, common-sense sort of man, which probably accounts for his ability to attract and work with major corporate clients such as the International Nickel Company of Canada (Inco), Imperial Oil and General Motors (Oshawa).

As an artist, Comfort was very active in the Toronto arts community and was a member of virtually all the arts societies, exhibiting regularly in their annual exhibitions. At twenty, he was one of the youngest members ever admitted to that liberal, nationalist but nevertheless male bastion of the Toronto cultural community, the Toronto Arts and Letters Club. His personal politics, at least in the early stages of his career, were left of centre. By the 1930s, he was associated

socially with the more progressive elements of the Toronto arts community and had had illustrations published in *The Canadian Forum* and *New Frontier*.

Comfort was an active promoter of 'the modern manner' and his work displays a cubist-inspired realism, although his imagery tends to reach for the dramatic. In a 1931 essay in the collection *Open House*, he describes his perception of the artist's experience as "a process of elimination.... Forms and ideas are discarded as being obsolete or inadequate, others are retained and completed, multiplied, and rendered more precise, till with a maturing vision these crystallize into personal symbols of highly specialized meaning in which the imitative character is attenuated or lost. Here emerges an expressive art [that] manifests in artistic form the peculiar interest that man has for man."⁶ His 1932 large-scale watercolour portrait of the artist Carl Schaeffer, *Young Canadian*, is a good example of his ability to work with both landscape and portraiture.⁷ Haggard and unemployed, Schaeffer is posed on a split-rail fence in a bleak Ontario landscape, evocatively and dramatically commenting on the waste of people and their creativity in the Depression.

Comfort's first mural was completed in 1932 for the North American Life building in Toronto. It was partially as a result of this commission that in 1936 he assumed the position of director of mural painting (albeit in a department of one) at the Ontario College of Art.

A PROCESSION OF INDUSTRY

In early 1936, Comfort was approached by the architectural firm of George & Moorhouse, through the associate architect Samuel Maw (a fellow member of the Arts and Letters Club), to design the exterior decoration for the new Toronto Stock Exchange on Bay Street. The exchange, constructed of reinforced concrete, has modernist aspirations while being fairly traditional in its built form. The street façade is defined by the interior trading floor, which has five centre columnar windows extending vertically between two horizontal bands, the lower of which is the stone frieze over the two entranceways.

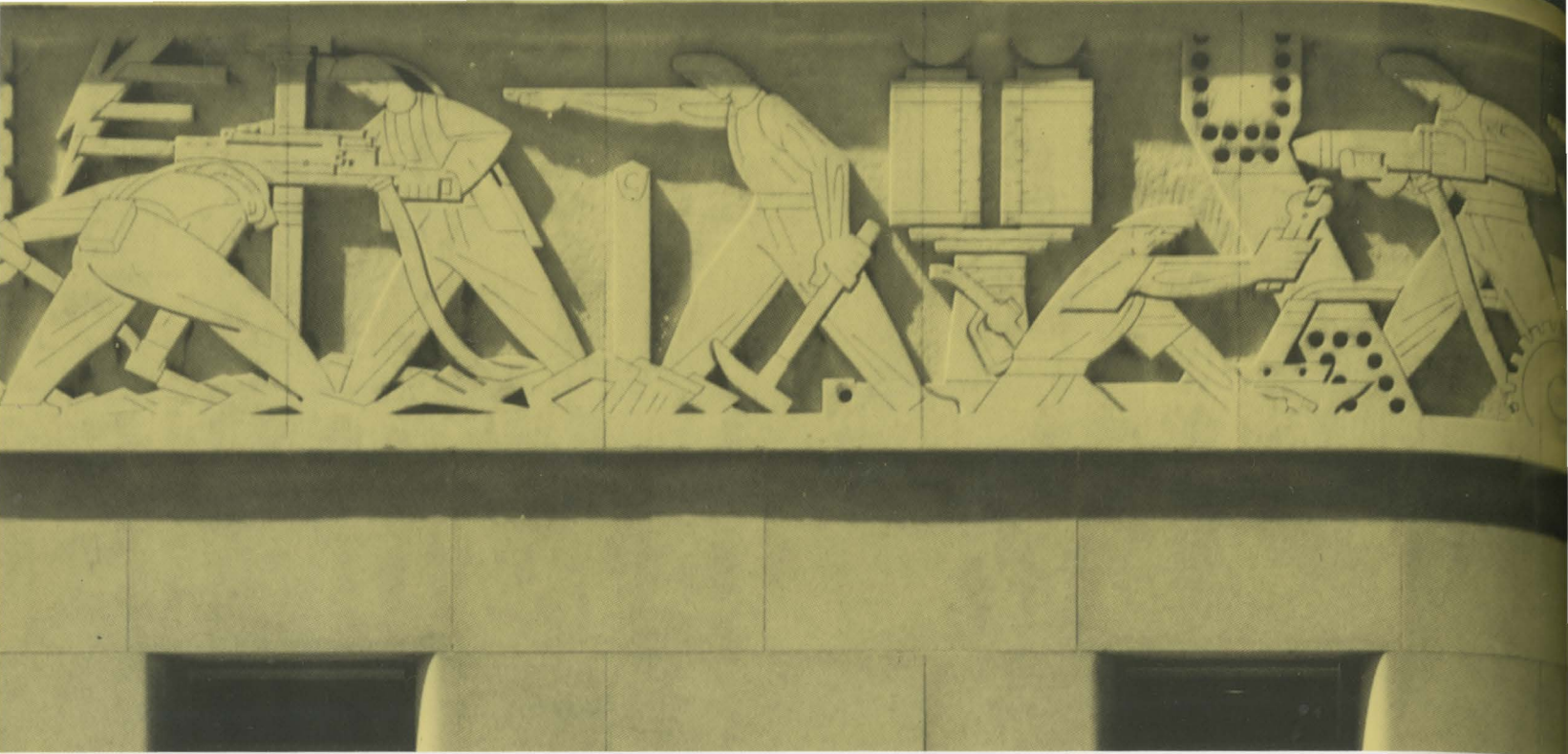
The new Toronto Stock Exchange was intended as a public symbol of the lifting of the Depression. The need for a new building was generated when the Toronto Stock Exchange and



*Cutting the limestone
frieze with pneumatic
drills, 1936.*

the Standard Stock and Mining Exchange amalgamated in 1934. One of the major objectives of the new exchange was to create an image of stability and to rekindle faith in the stock market, particularly in the mining industry stocks, after the 1929 crash. As the souvenir booklet published to commemorate the opening on March 20, 1937 states, “public approval of an organized security market has made imperative the erection of the new building with all its improved trading facilities.”

Comfort’s exterior frieze depicts a procession of Canada’s industries – labourers and white-collar workers, farmers, miners, travelling salesmen, bankers and scientists – thirty-one life-sized figures moving in a tightly structured geometric pattern from right to left in a band twenty-two-and-a-half metres long and over one-and-a-half metres high. Through a combination of pneumatic work and hand chiselling on the Indiana limestone, the flat-surfaced bas-relief frieze employs a shallow background contrasted with deeply etched line cuts. The design is cut as



Charles Comfort,
Toronto Stock
Exchange exterior
frieze of Indiana
limestone, 1936.

opposed to carved and is technically quite simple: it relies on stylized linear detail and changing shadow to read the shallow bas-relief.

After developing the initial design, Comfort produced a full-scale cartoon, which was then attached to the wall, perforated and drawn on the surface. The stonework was executed by Peter Schoen, assisted by George Chadwick. Schoen, who had trained in Germany as a traditional stone carver, won the competition over twelve others and completed the mural in less than two months. Commenting in 1936, Schoen said: "Modernity demands speed and even in rock carving we had to obey. Chipping limestone with a hand chisel can't be done very quickly but now we have a method that more than doubles our speed. Instead of a hammer we now use air pressure to give the chisel cutting power and we can carve the rock as easily as a keen knife will cut a piece of wood."⁸

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. The juxtaposition of the two figures was



unintentional, according to Comfort, and appears to have gone unnoticed in the press when the building was opened. However, over the years it became an insiders' joke among the exchange brokers. In Toronto's popular mythology and for stock market critics, Comfort's accidental drollery reaffirmed the conviction that the profits of the stock market come from the pockets of the workers.

Comfort's stock exchange frieze symbolically integrated the capitalist, represented by the figure of the stockbroker, as a productive element alongside the worker, the farmer, the scientist and the miner, as part of 'the natural order of things' in the world of work.

IN THE MODERN MANNER

Free of columns and detailed with stainless steel and natural maple, the twelve-metre-high trading floor was the heart of the new exchange. The major design element was a pattern of five bands of fluorescent lighting concealed behind flashed opal glass, which extends across the

Pulp and Paper



Agriculture

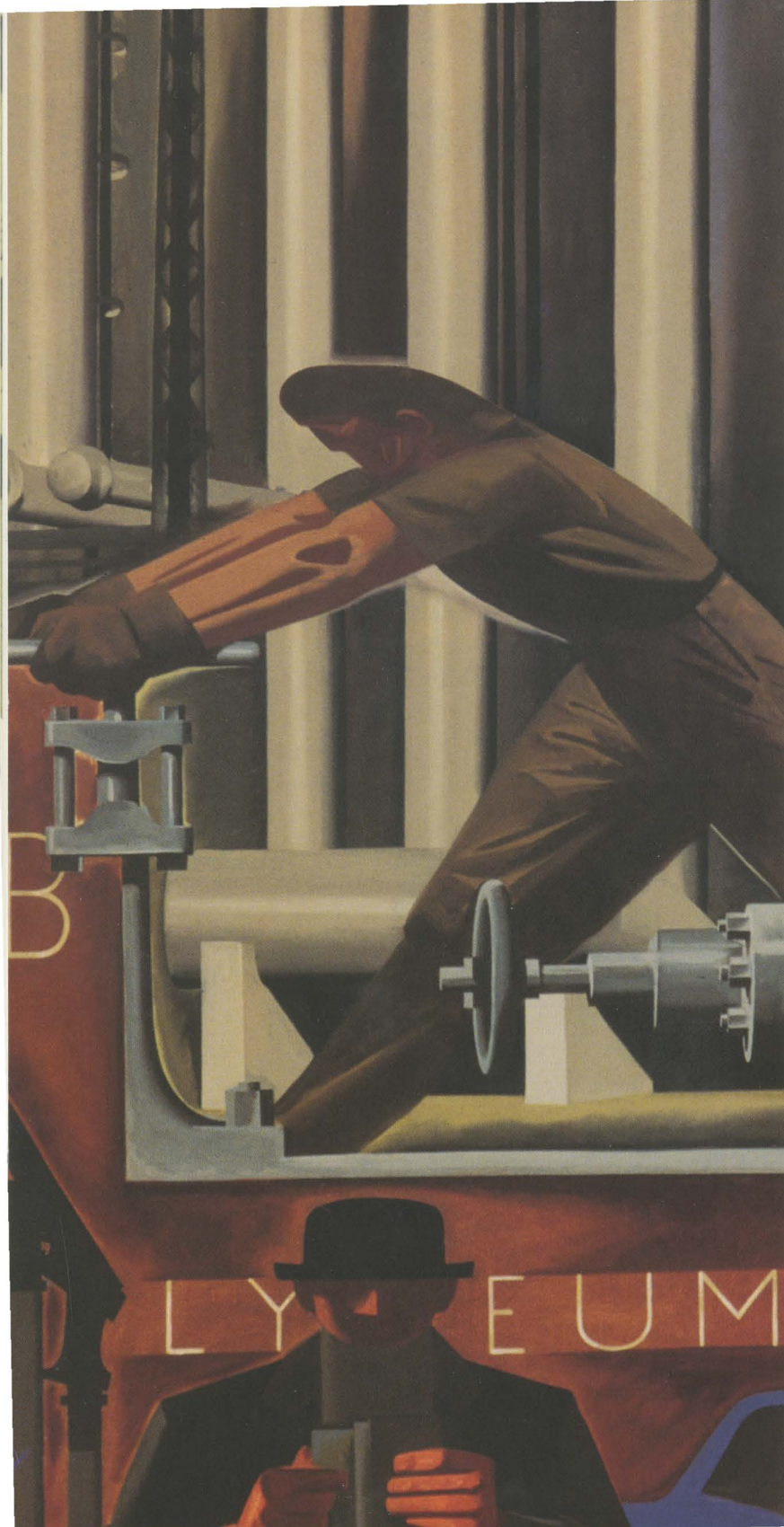


Mining



Construction and Engineering





Detail showing the Y stance combined with a forward reaching movement, from the Oil mural.

ceiling and down the end walls. This is balanced by a series of thin metal bands that encircle the room, uniting the large space. Comfort's eight vertical murals were installed on the east and west walls between these lighted bands.

Painted in the "modern manner," according to the official press releases, the eight canvas panels represent the industries of Canada whose stocks were handled on the trading floor: construction and engineering, mining, smelting, refining, oil, pulp and paper, agriculture, transportation and communications. The predominance of the mining industry reflects the importance of the amalgamation of the formerly separate Mining Exchange with the Toronto Stock Exchange.

In his proposal to Maw, Comfort indicated that his intent for the murals was that they should be bold and dynamic in conception while being grave and restrained in treatment. Originally the architects had proposed that four artists be invited to produce sketches for panels.⁹ However, by December 1936 Comfort had been selected by

the building committee to design and paint eight mural panels (each 4.9 metres x 1.2 metres), on which he would be assisted by Harold Ayres and Caven Atkins. Each panel was to deal with about four operations within the particular form of industrial production represented.

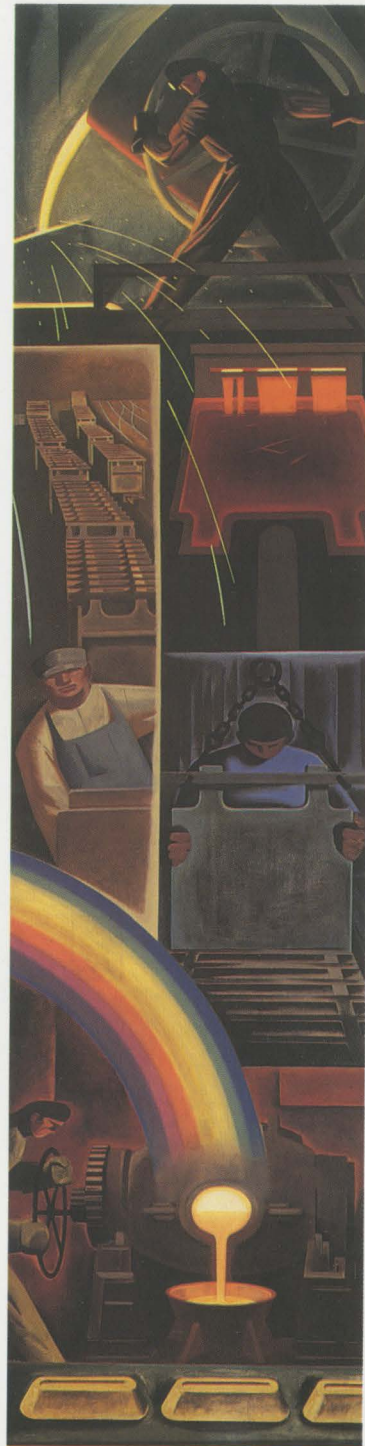
Muscular workers, speeding trains, pouring vats and industrial structures are unified on the panels through a litany of stylized figures in motion, which nonetheless have a curious static quality. For the figures, Comfort utilized the same stance and body movements as appear on the exterior stone frieze. The stance, sometimes combined with a forward reaching motion, can be visualized as an inverted Y. On the horizontal stone frieze, the repetition of the individual figures produces a strong impression of movement, a procession of industry. For the vertical murals in the interior, the inverted Y stance becomes a shallow partitioning device.¹⁰

This same stance is evident in some of Comfort's earlier scratch board advertisements for Inco in 1934-1935 representing nickel and Monel metal products.¹¹ As Comfort wrote in a letter in 1981, "No one dictated the theme or style to be employed [in the TSE murals], the style was in keeping with other work I was producing at the time. I doubt if, in the thirties, the term 'Art Deco' had been coined."¹²

Within the overall space, Comfort's murals complement the scale and the detailing of the trading floor, neither competing with nor dominating the architecture. As the murals were designed to be seen from any part of the room, they have a tendency to break down when observed in detail. The strong graphic lines of the figures, the repeated stance, the reach, all serve to unify the individual topics into a vertical sequence of processes. The colours are warm, rich hues: earthy natural shades of sienna, ochre, muted blue and red oxide, with strategically placed highlights of vibrant greens, reds and oranges.

Comfort's murals are an unabashed glorification of industry, but also of the physical work it entails. They symbolize the power of modern industry and, implicitly, of capitalism to rise phoenix-like from the ashes of the Depression. Comfort, as a teacher, was well aware of both historical and contemporary mural work, yet his murals have none of the raw emotional realism of Thomas Hart Benton or the depth and corporeality of Diego Rivera.

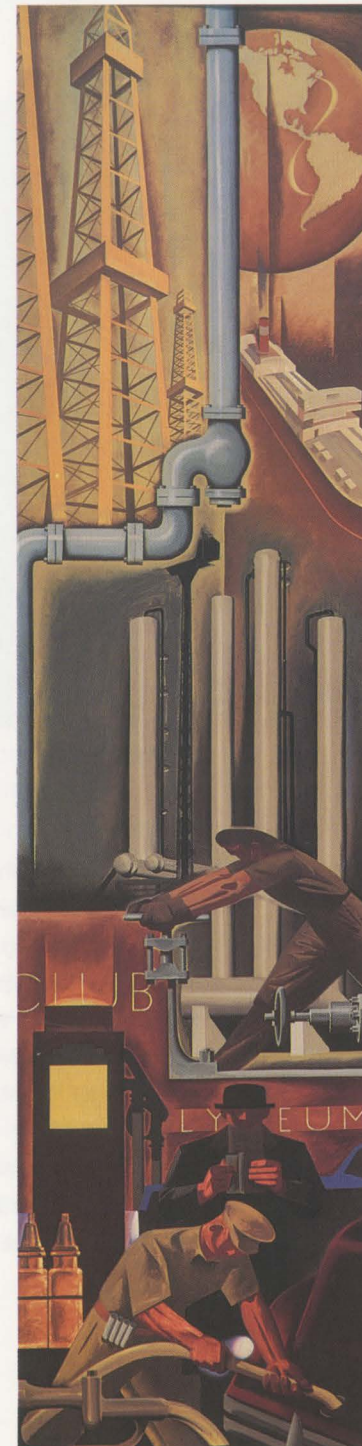
Refining



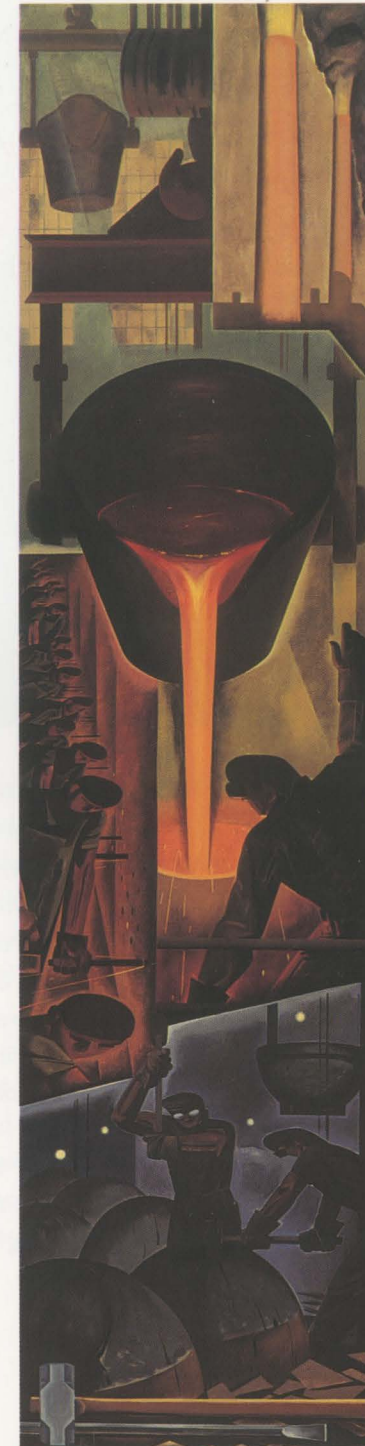
Transportation and
Communications



Oil



Smelting





Charles Comfort,
The Romance of
Nickel, oil on canvas
(2.13 metres by
6.10 metres), 1936.

A RHYTHMIC WELL-KNIT DESIGN

What exactly the murals meant at the time they were completed is difficult to ascertain. The official opening souvenir booklet refers to them only in passing and does not even mention the artist's name. The reception in the art press was positive. "This is a tame way of beginning what is really an exciting piece of news. Canada has acquired a set of murals." In his typically restrained Canadian manner, Robert Ayre, the art critic for the *Montreal Gazette*, was referring to his delighted response to Charles Comfort's murals at the 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."

In 1936 and 1937 Comfort was a very busy man. With the assistance of Caven Atkins and Harold Ayres, he produced a huge six-metre-long painting in the fall of 1936 called *The Romance of Nickel* for Inco. The painting was destined for the Canadian pavilion at the 1937

Paris Exposition and was undertaken between designing the stone frieze and starting the interior mural paintings for the exchange.¹³

The Inco painting's dominant image is a hard-rock miner working with a power drill. It uses the same basic stance and reach as found on the stock exchange stone frieze and in the interior murals, and refers directly to earlier Inco ads featuring the hard-rock miner with his drill. The visual imagery Comfort utilized in all of these projects developed out of research he undertook, in his commercial practice, into the various industries represented. Interviews, observations and photographs formed the basis for the Y stance that graphically carries the imagery.

A TRIBUTE TO CAPITAL

The schism between commercial and fine art that arose with the establishment of the avant-garde in the visual arts was not an issue in Canada in the 1930s. It was not unusual for artists to work for commercial industry while pursuing their own artistic expression in the semi-professional art world.¹⁴

Comfort's success as a muralist came from his dual practice and his ability to absorb contemporary art styles, like cubism, which complemented and enlarged his range of commercial work. Robert Stacey, in his description of the best billboards of the 1920s and 1930s, could well be describing Charles Comfort's murals: "[He] worked the designs rhythmically, relying on subtle repetition of basic forms, undiluted colours and muscular draughtsmanship to get the message across...[making] the most of the horizontal structures by broadening and flattening illustrated matter."¹⁵

Described by Comfort in 1937 as "a permanent one-man show," the murals and frieze at the Toronto Stock Exchange are his most accomplished work. The visual imagery he produced there has its own dynamic. The figures, buildings and machines blend to operate as symbols, elevating the power of industry and praising the mentality of the machine age. The images of industrial landscape and production develop into a decorative pattern that distances itself from any precise meaning. Comfort's murals are not concerned with the social or economic effects

of industrialization, unemployment or the tedium of industrial labour, but with the ideas of investment, development and scientific logic, and with a belief in progress.

Comfort's dynamically contemporary murals for the Toronto Stock Exchange are part of a synthesis of architecture, painting and sculpture that has remained unique in Canada. The murals capture the symbolism of the 1930s, championing a corporate belief in progress and modern industry. In visual terms, they represent the legitimate adaptation of modernism to the agenda of business and the flow of monetary resources. A true monument to capital.

Endnotes

With thanks to: Jill Bridgeford, Louise Comfort, Lazlo Czer, George Falconer, Ken Greenberg and Charles Hill.

1. Pearl McCarthy, "OSA Giving Show of Little Pictures," *The Mail and Empire* (December 6, 1935).
2. George Reid and the Civic Art Guild made proposals at the turn of the century for the new Toronto Municipal Building and the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa. Reid later undertook projects at Jarvis Collegiate in Toronto and at a number of public library branches.
3. Rosemary Donegan, *Work, Weather and the Grid* (Regina: Dunlop Art Gallery, 1992), p. 36.
4. Rosemary Donegan, *Industrial Images/Images Industrielles* (Hamilton: Art Gallery of Hamilton, 1988).
5. Karl Ann Marling, *Wall-to-Wall America: A Cultural History of Post-Office Murals in the Great Depression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. 12.
6. Charles Comfort, "The Painter and His Model," *Open House*, edited by William Deacon and Wilfred Reeves (Ottawa: Graphic Publishers, 1931), p. 216.
7. Charles Comfort, *Young Canadian* (1932, watercolour on paper: University of Toronto, Hart House Collection).
8. "Stock Exchange Frieze Depicts Busy Industry," *The Evening Telegram* (November 14, 1936).
9. Letter (August 19, 1936), S.H. Maw to C. Comfort (Charles Comfort Papers, NAC, Ottawa).
10. The similarity and yet the difference between Comfort's stance and Michael Snow's *Walking Woman* is remarkable, but one doubts there is any connection.
11. In 1935-36 Comfort produced a series of scratch board ads for Inco. This series, entitled "Canadian Nickel in the Home," generally featured a specific household appliance (stove, hot water heater) made of Monel metal, juxtaposed with an image of work processes at the Sudbury area mines and smelter. See: photos (Charles Comfort Papers, NAC, Ottawa, and Inco Archives, Sudbury).
12. Letter (June 16, 1981), C. Comfort to W. Greer, Toronto Historical Board (Charles Comfort Papers, NAC, Ottawa).
13. Yet by 1938, like many Canadian artists, after three major public commissions Comfort found work so scarce in Toronto that he seriously considered moving to New York to find work. See: letters (July 1938), C. Comfort to H. Ayers, New York City (Charles Comfort Papers, NAC, Ottawa).

14. A very interesting series of letters passed between C. Comfort and the Department of Revenue in regard to the tax status of the exterior stone frieze. Comfort and his accountant were arguing that the design had been made by a fine artist, and was not for multiple reproduction; therefore it was like an oil painting and should not be taxed. The department argued that it was a commercial art project and should be taxed. The department appears to have won the argument. See: letters (December 1936 to January 1937, Charles Comfort Papers, NAC, Ottawa).

15. Robert Stacey, *The Canadian Poster Book: 100 Years of the Poster in Canada* (Toronto: Methuen Ltd., 1979), p. 78.

Mural conservation supervised by Lonti Ebers and executed by Jane Kelly Maurice, June Brammal and Laszlo Czer.