

*"For Frances and Murray"*



THE ADASKIN  
ART COLLECTION

*I like people who live dangerously when it comes to nice things.  
Why be a coward?*

MURRAY ADASKIN

## *Introduction*

Murray and Frances James Adaskin are both renowned in the Canadian music world: he, as a violinist in chamber and orchestral music, as well as a composer; she, as a soprano singer. One may remember their pre-war summer employment at the Banff Springs Hotel where, under the auspices of the CPR's energetic campaign to promote Canadian culture, Frances James was their reigning soprano star while Murray Adaskin became the leader of the nationally known chamber group The Banff Springs Hotel Trio. Or perhaps one recalls their work in the east at this time, when winters were spent based in Toronto. The Banff Springs Hotel Trio became the Toronto Trio, and in the late '30s was hired as the regular group at the Royal York Hotel. Murray Adaskin also played eleven seasons with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra; ten seasons of Handel's *Messiah* under the direction of Sir Ernest Macmillan; and fifteen annual performances of *St. Matthew's Passion*. Frances James, meanwhile, was establishing herself as Canada's most distinguished soprano through performances across the country.

Or it may be their work with the CBC that is familiar. Frances James entered the radio world with many performances on the CBC, engaged as the lead soprano in Canadian premieres of operas such as Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes* and Igor Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress*. Her performances began with the inception of radio broadcasting and could easily form a chapter in the development of Canadian radio. Murray Adaskin's performances with radio orchestras were a major part of his career during their Toronto years; in addition, his decision to begin composition in the '40s led him to study under such composers as Charles Jones, Darius Milhaud, and John Weinzweig. Their musical contributions to Canadian music are familiar to nearly everyone who listens to radio.

For those on the prairies, the Adaskins may be recalled as members of the thriving creative community in Saskatoon where, from 1952-73, Frances James was busy giving singing lessons and Murray Adaskin was the head of the music department at the University of Saskatchewan. For those even further west, the Adaskin name is well known in Victoria's musical community, as "retirement" has brought with it their enthusiastic involvement with the Victoria Conservatory of Music, the University of Victoria's music department, the Victoria Symphony, and private music lessons.

The Adaskins do not, however, belong solely to the world of Canadian music. They also belong to the world of Canadian art. During their hectic and successful careers as leading figures in Canada's music world they also became passionately involved in collecting art. As a result they became acquainted with, and in many cases close friends of, many of the leading figures in Canada's art world.

This exhibition is a celebration of the Adaskins' continuous involvement in Canada's visual arts since the early '30s. Their collection is voluminous; over 250 works, dating from the early '30s to the present day, are housed in it.

It is a collection that continues to grow. Shortly before this catalogue went to press, in fact, Murray Adaskin ecstatically produced two new paintings completed by his brother Gordon only a few months before.

This exhibition offers a selected view. Emphasis is placed on the works of artists with whom the Adaskins were most closely associated during their early years of acquiring art in Toronto such as A. J. Casson, Paraskeva Clark, Charles Comfort, A. Y. Jackson, Louis Muhlstock, and Will Ogilvie. Many of these friendships, which began when they were all struggling artists of one sort or another, continued over the years. Works by these artists, bearing later dates, attest to the strong link the Adaskins maintained with their artist friends when time and distance separated them. Keenly aware of the difficulties encountered by artists struggling to make a livelihood during the bleak years of the '30s and the early '40s, the Adaskins also championed the efforts of artists such as Jack Humphrey and David Milne.

The Adaskins themselves provided the bulk of the information for this catalogue. The material is based on a series of interviews conducted during the spring, summer, and fall of 1987. (Somehow "interview" does not seem to be the right word: I can still see Murray Adaskin whirling around the living room imitating Dr. Frederick Banting dancing in the wilderness. Is that really an interview?)

In a sense this exhibition is a collection of memories as well as art. Murray Adaskin speaks eloquently, humorously, and passionately about their experiences in Canada's art world. His voice speaks throughout the following pages with the wisdom of one who has experienced it.

This exhibition, then, deals with another side of the Adaskins' creative lives, with compositions of a different sort; with rhythms marked out on canvases, not scores; with painters, printmakers, and sculptors who, like themselves, sought to establish a Canadian cultural identity.

KATHLEEN NIWA, *Victoria* 1988

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PENDING TIME WITH MURRAY ADASKIN IS LIKE SPENDING TIME with a sunbeam, one with a penchant for snappy ties. When he becomes excited, which is nearly always, his eyes twinkle and his violinist hands arc through the air to emphasize a point. He will jump up to act out a narrative, which often concludes with the exclamation, "And then I just *collapsed* with laughter!" He then proceeds to do just that. He is Santa Claus and Charlie Chaplin rolled into one.

Searching back through his memories of the art world, he often turns to Frances for help in remembering dates and places, scraps of conversations; she readily supplies them. Their teasing banter is affectionate and they often finish each other's sentences. When Murray gets especially excited, Frances will admonish him to calm down; but she speaks gently and her eyes twinkle with amusement too. One afternoon, as Murray was passionately involved in relating an anecdote about a painting hanging over the staircase, Frances called from the kitchen, "Now *don't* fall down the stairs, will you!"

Art fills the walls of their home literally from floor to ceiling. Upstairs and downstairs, every room in the house is a mini-gallery. Elizabeth Wyn Wood's *One Tree Island*, hanging over the fireplace, is the focal point of the living room. Nearby a row of small Paraskeva Clark oil paintings line a wall, while her large portraits of the Adaskins hold a commanding position near the staircase. In a quiet corner, FitzGerald's *Apple in a Window* hangs near two Milne paintings. There are prints and paintings by the Group of Seven members Casson and Jackson in the livingroom, the hallways, the bedrooms; a Jackson print of the Quebec countryside hangs in the bathroom. Paintings by Murray's brother Gordon Adaskin and the Victoria artist Flemming Jorgensen are everywhere: "If we haven't got a Flemming, we've got a Gordon," laughs Frances. "They grow on us, and that's a good thing," adds Murray. There are drawings by Will Ogilvie; watercolours by Jack Humphrey; more Adaskin portraits by Myfanwy Pavelic. There is work by Charles Comfort, Louis Muhlstock, Joachim Gauthier, Maxwell Bates, and Peter Whyte. "Oh and the Chagalls," says Frances. "The Chagall prints are in the kitchen. We didn't have anywhere to put them so we put them in the kitchen."

The Adaskins are knowledgeable tour guides and if by chance a visitor would like to know more about an artist, they are only too happy to recommend—and supply—some additional reading: their extensive art collection is complemented by an equally magnificent book collection. It is not merely for decoration, either; volumes are often consulted to find a remembered quote, a particular photograph, a specific illustration.

There is a common bond linking the works hanging on the walls of the Adaskin home: Frances and Murray have met nearly every artist represented in their collection. Some, like David Milne, they knew only slightly. Others, like A. J. Casson, Louis Muhlstock, and Will Ogilvie, are very close friends.

Murray was with Philip Clark in Paris when Philip met his future wife, Paraskeva, and the two couples remained lifelong friends. Murray has known Charles Comfort “practically forever.”

It is because of these close friendships that the Adaskins hesitate to use the word “collecting” at all.

*Suppose you had a close friend who was a composer and every now and again he'd ask you, “Would you listen to this piece of mine that I've just written?” And you'd listen to it and you'd like it, and you'd want to hear it some more. And if there was a record or tape available there's nothing you'd want more in the world than to have one that you could play anytime that you wanted to.*

*These artists were our personal friends. If you were a painter struggling to earn your bread and butter, well, we would be anxious to buy something if you had an exhibition. That was our modest way of being able to help the artist too. But mostly we just loved these things.*

*We simply wanted to be surrounded by these friends whom we admired so tremendously. So we bought their work because we can't have our friends with us all the time.*

This sentiment forms the underlying philosophy of the Adaskin collection. For the Adaskins, the works are more than just pictures hanging on the wall. Each one has its own background history; each one can jog a memory to remind them of an exhibition, a friend, a summer holiday, a party. In a sense, the collection serves as a scrapbook of memories. Murray Adaskin speaks quite adamantly about this basis, saying,

*I never bought a picture for an investment. I bought a picture because I liked it. Or, if I liked the friend who painted it I bought it — even if I didn't care that much for the picture! You see, if you become a very wealthy person, and you go buy a Picasso, and you buy something else for \$50,000 or a half a million dollars and you've got the money to do it, gee that's no trick. If you have the money, any fool could do it. And you might even hate those paintings: you just know by that time that they're desirable. Well, that's a crazy way to buy paintings! The way to buy paintings is to go to the people who are struggling and living right around you.*

Yet the Adaskins are not indiscriminate collectors. They hold strong views about the requirements necessary for a successful work of art. The Adaskin “test of success” has certain stringent qualifications that are not easily defined but, as Murray Adaskin graphically relates, can be readily experienced.

*When a thing has personality, and has that touch of magic, my brother and I use the word “hover.” If a piece of art hovers, then look out for it. If it looks as though it's like a bag of potatoes on the floor, without hovering, you're not going to like it eventually. And when a thing grows on you, after living with it, that's the way to really recognize quality in a piece of art, don't you think?*

*Lawren Harris used to call that something “the bejesus.” He used that term a lot. And he'd say, “Well if it doesn't have the bejesus, it doesn't have anything.” And you can suddenly realize what he meant by that. It had to be something that hit you in the solar plexus . . . once you saw it, you'd never be the same again. When you*

*look at a good work, or read a good book, you're never the same again. Let's face it, something has happened to you. Especially if it's the real thing, if it has that bejesus, it has to have that touch, that wallop, you see. Well I think that goes for painting, it goes for literature, it goes for everything you do.*

This initial wallop in the solar plexus is just the beginning; a truly successful work must "grow." Murray Adaskin suggests an initial trial period to determine the compatibility between art and owner.

*I think with many people it's not a bad idea to live with a picture for a while and see what it does to you. If a picture begins to irk you then I'd say that, if you've lived with it long enough for that to happen to you, chances are it's not a good picture. If you live with it and it's well done, every day you'll come in, in the morning, and you'll say, "Oh, I didn't notice that before," or "Yes, that gives me a nice feeling." And that is a wonderful discovery.*

*The same thing happens with music . . . The ones that are played the most often — Beethoven, Brahms, Mozart — are all good people, but you know all the pieces backwards. You've heard them a million times. It's wonderful, but you can't live with even good things forever and not feel that you need a rest from them. So it's nice if you have access to, every now and again, a new piece by Aaron Copland, or Stravinsky, or Bartok, or any of the new young people today.*

Occasionally a work will not stand up to this test of lasting compatibility for the Adaskins. Works which they "outgrow" often become presents for friends. It is an agreeable solution because, as Murray happily relates,

*You can give it to some young friend who hasn't yet got interested in collecting art, and that starts them off!*

The Adaskins themselves were "started off" early in their marriage. In retrospect it seems almost inevitable that they became interested in art. They were continually surrounded by artists wherever they lived, whether it was Banff, Toronto, Saskatoon, or Victoria.

In the early years of their marriage the Adaskins spent the summer months providing musical entertainment at the opulent Banff Springs Hotel, the luxurious CPR hotel of the Rocky Mountains. Throughout the Depression the Banff Springs valiantly continued to be a sumptuous resort until it, too, could no longer ignore the realities of Canada's grim economic situation and World War II: it was temporarily forced to close in 1941.<sup>1</sup>

During the '30s, however, the CPR sought to supply the Banff Springs guests with culture through an ambitious programme that included the employment of artists who would, in effect, import culture to this mountain haven. Frances James and Murray Adaskin were part of the artistic troupe who regularly filled the hotel during its hey-day; as a result they also came into contact with many of the other "cultural messengers" — the other musicians, the painters, and photographers who contributed to the cultural development of the hotel.

The musical couple soon found their artistic horizons broadened through the friendship of another creative couple residing in Banff, Peter and Catharine Whyte. Peter Whyte was a Banff native who, while studying at the School

of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, met and fell in love with fellow student Catharine Robb. After their marriage, they returned to Banff, an occasion Murray Adaskin recalls with some humour.

*Catharine was an art student who came from Boston from a very, very wealthy family. And Peter went to that same school in Boston to study and met her there. And eventually they were married. And her mother had just bought them a Pierce Arrow Roadster. They never used it, except to drive from Boston to Banff! When they got to Banff, they were embarrassed by the fact that all these townspeople who knew Peter since he was small — his father owned the grocery store there, you see — and here he comes back with a very wealthy bride. They put it up on blocks and I saw it many times. They built a little shed around it. And for all the years that I knew them, there was that car in pristine condition! Now this would be in 1930, so you can imagine what a Pierce Arrow Roadster looked like . . . oooh, with silver fittings, gorgeous thing: never been used, except for that one trip! So what did they use? They bought a station wagon, the early first station wagons that they used to use in Africa on safaris, like jeeps! They drove that!*

The Whytes are now synonymous with Banff. They were both artists who drew and painted the Rockies, often accompanying J. E. H. MacDonald on sketching trips. Peter was also a close friend of the local tribe of Stoney Indians and did many portraits of them. Among their close friends were the painter Carl Rungius, the watercolourist Walter J. Phillips, and the CPR photographers Nick and Willie Morant. Although they themselves were not officially employed as CPR artists, several of their paintings were purchased by the company.

The Adaskins remember many hours spent with the Whytes and one incident in particular is recalled with great fondness.

*We knew them very well. We were intimate friends of theirs. In fact, Fran knew Peter before he knew Catharine. They had a gorgeous log cabin that they had built themselves. And when we would give concerts at the Banff Springs Hotel I was in white tie and tails, and my wife was in an evening gown, and we would often go to their place. We'd take one of the taxis from the hotel down to their place.*

*It would have to be after nine o'clock in the evening. We'd spend an hour or two looking at their paintings. They both painted; they were both very good painters. (In fact, she was a very good painter. But he was a good painter too. But she never showed her paintings; she always showed his. It's very funny.)*

*So one night we were there, and they said, "Why don't you spend the night here? We've got sleeping bags." And they had a gorgeous fireplace in this log cabin; you smelled the pine. And so we thought we would. So we got into sleeping bags, took our clothes off — we didn't have pyjamas or anything — and we spent the night right in front of the fireplace. They went upstairs to their quarters.*

*Then we got up in the morning to have breakfast, and the only clothes we had — well, I had my white tie and tails and shirt, and we had to get back to the hotel in the morning in our evening clothes! So of course, everyone would think, "Oh-oh! Franny and Murray were . . .!" To get into the big Banff Springs Hotel with all the wealthy guests around, and here come the two musicians in the morning looking a little bleary-eyed in their soup and fish, so to speak . . . so we found a way of getting in through a back tradesmens' entrance. The workmen would go into that*

*entrance. And we went up stairways and halls that I'd never seen before! But we got to our rooms; nobody saw us. So that was one of our experiences with the Whytes.*

The friendship between the Adaskins and the Whytes grew over the years, and in 1954 Murray dedicated his *Serenade Concertante* to the Banff couple. Peter's death in 1955 was a blow to the Adaskins; Murray recalls his funeral vividly and with great sadness.

*I remember we got into the church and we were all seated except for the first two or three rows, which were empty. And all of a sudden, the Stoney Indians arrived in all their full regalia. And they marched in. Well I tell you, I wasn't close to tears, I was in tears. Because I knew what this would have meant to Peter. He was a great friend; he was an adopted son of the Stoney Tribe, and I think Catharine later became one, too. And then we all went over later to the old log house where Fran and I had years before slept on the floor in front of the fireplace. The Indian chief was there and I said to him, "It would mean a great deal to Peter to know that you came to his funeral." And he said, "Oh, I had to see my son safely home." It was one of the most moving experiences with those people. That's why I love the native people so passionately and for that reason.*

When Catharine Whyte died in 1979, *Serenade Concertante* was played at her funeral because she had loved it so much.

While summer months were spent in the west, the Adaskins headed east for the winters where Toronto became their home base. For Frances James, winters were a busy time filled with many performances in Toronto, Montreal, and Ottawa; appearances on radio broadcasts; and annual tours that alternated between eastern and western Canada. For Murray Adaskin it was also hectic. He performed with the Toronto Trio, the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, and numerous radio orchestras.

The Adaskins did find time to socialize, however, and much of it was done in the company of other cultural enthusiasts. The Adaskins were members of a large, loosely-knit group of creative people in Toronto who actively followed international developments in painting, literature, drama and music. It was a progressive, experimental community promoting Canadian cultural efforts while also extending the boundaries of those endeavours beyond the borders of the country.

There were writers such as Morley Callaghan and Merrill Denison; Murray Adaskin's fellow musicians in the Toronto Trio, Adolph Koldofsky, Cornelius Ysselstyn and Louis Crerar; his brother Harry and the members of his group, The Hart House String Quartet; his other musical brother, John; Dr. Harold M. Tovell, chairman of the Art Gallery of Toronto's Exhibition Committee; the cellist-photographer Marcel Ray; baritone Campbell McInnes and his son Graham McInnes, the art historian and critic who, through his writing for *Saturday Night* and his book *Canadian Art*, had first-hand knowledge of the burgeoning art world; art collectors and supporters such as Dr. Banting, Charles Matthews, Vincent Massey; and Alan Jarvis, who later became director of the National Gallery.

The Adaskins went to openings and exhibitions at galleries such as the Roberts Gallery and Laing Galleries which promoted the work of many of their friends. They attended concerts and exhibitions at Hart House, and

birthday parties at the Arts and Letters Club. They spent many evenings sitting Douglas-Duncan-style on the floor of Duncan's apartment, viewing the latest David Milne acquisitions. As Murray Adaskin remembers,

*All these people liked music, and the result was that all the groups mixed together all the time. And we went to their shows, and they came to our concerts. I don't know why you don't see quite the same thing today, it's a very strange thing. Fran and I, we find this hard to understand . . . A. J. Casson: his face just goes blank, blank like a wall, the minute he starts listening to music! Just meaningless! But you know, he's the only one that I can put my finger on, right off the cuff, who's like that. But nevertheless, he knew all the musicians and the musicians knew him, because he grew up with the artists that loved music, the Group of Seven and that whole group. We were all friends, and very close friends.*

The artists formed the nucleus of this band of culture lovers. Art, life, and politics were discussed by painters such as Bertram Brooker, Paraskeva Clark, Charles Comfort, Gordon Davies, Frank Erichsen-Brown, Lawren Harris, A. Y. Jackson, Will Ogilvie. They were joined by sculptors such as Elizabeth Wyn Wood and her husband Emmanuel Hahn, Florence Wyle, and Frances Loring.

There were parties galore. There were dinner parties honouring artists such as A. Y. Jackson upon his return from a successful painting trip; there were parties to view new paintings; parties to (hopefully) sell paintings. As Murray Adaskin remembers,

*No party was a real party without Will Ogilvie. Will was a handsome, charming gentleman, the "old-school" type of gentleman. And before he was married, no hostess would give a party without having Will as The Extra Man.*

The Adaskins attended one party, given in honour of Dr. Norman Bethune, that grew particularly heated. Bethune had left Spain in 1937 and returned to Toronto to set up the Medical Aid Committee for Spain<sup>2</sup> and Paraskeva Clark threw a party for him.

*Bethune was a compassionate, outspoken, fiery character. He came back [to Canada] because he had discovered how to bring blood plasma right to the front lines. But he had no ambulance or anything. So he came to raise some money to buy an ambulance with the proper equipment that could do this for him. And of course he ran into all the conservative people in Toronto and oh, it was just terrible! We were at a party that Paraskeva Clark gave for him, because Paraskeva Clark had a little bit of an affair with him, and at this party, Bertram Brooker was there, for one person, and I remember Campbell McInnes, the singer, was there, and Fran and I were there, and oh, many others — Gordon Davies, and people like that. And Paraskeva and her husband Philip, you see.*

*Bertram Brooker and Norman Bethune got into almost a fist fight! They first got talking on the Spanish Civil War. You have to remember and understand the history of that. Nobody really knew what that was all about. And the people who did know were so upset about it that they started what they called the International Brigade from the United States, from Canada, from England, young men from all*

*over the world, went into this Brigade to help the Spanish Socialists. It wasn't Communism, it was really Socialism, but at that time Socialism meant Communism to conservative people.*

*Bertram Brooker was a marvellous fellow; he was in the advertising business, he worked for a big firm and did the art work for them, you see. He was a very good artist and, actually, among the English-speaking artists, he was the first person to start doing abstract art. A very vocal person, very articulate.*

*They got into an argument about Communism, this, that, and the other thing, and why were they fighting, and what was all this about, and why should we help them, and so on. It really was the battlefield for the Italian Fascist people and the Nazis to test their weapons. That's really what it was all about. So by the time that was all over, they were all set but America, England, France — they were all blah. France didn't even help her neighbour. It was really a terrible thing. And that was the time Picasso did that marvellous Guernica and then he swore he'd never go back to Spain again. And the same thing with Pablo Casals, the cellist.*

*And I thought there was going to be a fist fight that night. It was a terrible experience. Fran and I were terribly upset about this because we weren't yet accustomed to this hot-headed political thing. We were young; we didn't quite know. . . .*

Philip and Paraskeva Clark were lifelong friends of the Adaskins and in an indirect way Murray Adaskin was even responsible for bringing them together. On his first trip abroad to France in 1929 to study violin, Murray Adaskin was accompanied at the last minute by his friend Philip Clark. He had originally intended to go with fellow violinist Adolph Koldofsky, but Koldofsky changed his plans rather unexpectedly.

*He [Koldofsky] talked me into going with him; he was going to study with Ysäye, the Belgian violinist, we planned this whole thing. When it came time to go, he was offered a job at Banff, which I had turned down because I was going with him to Europe! And I suddenly got a postcard from Winnipeg — from the train, you travelled on the train in those days — saying, "Murray, I hope you have a good time in Europe, I'm awfully sorry, I'm going to Banff." Well I was so shaken by that! But it didn't break our friendship, really.*

Philip Clark offered to accompany Murray Adaskin instead. At the time, Clark was studying for his chartered accountant exams at McGill University, and France seemed like a suitable environment in which to prepare himself for the examination ordeal.

*Philip was also a friend of mine, a really close friend. So he said, "Look, I'm going to be at this all summer; why don't I go along with you and do it there?" And I was so glad. We all thought he was a bit nutty coming out on this trip with me, because I was going to be busy, but Philip was passionately fond of art in every sense, and music too. He was quite a good musician, he played the piano well. He wanted to be a pianist. And that's why he came with me. Oh, he wouldn't miss anything of this nature if he could help it.*

*I was so glad. I didn't know how to exchange Canadian funds, or American funds for, say, pounds and shillings. And then when we got to France it was francs! So I just simply gave him all my money. Philip was meticulous. His whole lifetime,*

*right till he died he kept books and charts because he was a real accountant. We lived in various places because we were following my teacher who went to a summer place in a little village in France, about seventy miles south of Paris, and all the pupils went there.*

*So I could practice, and in another room Philip could do his papers. It was absolute Hindustani as far as I was concerned. I couldn't believe a human being could figure this out. He was a very brilliant person.*

Philip Clark met Paraskeva on this work-holiday. Born in Leningrad, she had studied at the "Free Studios" set up by the Soviet government between 1918 and 1921. She worked in theatre decoration at Leningrad's Mali Theatre, and married her first husband, Oreste Allegre. The couple had a child and were preparing to move to Paris when Oreste drowned. Paraskeva nonetheless left for Paris with her young son in 1923.<sup>3</sup> Philip Clark met the fiery Russian painter there six years later when he and Murray Adaskin, out shopping for a wedding anniversary gift for Murray's brother Harry and his wife, walked into the art-glass store, Maison Décorative Interieure Moderne, where she worked.<sup>4</sup> In June 1931 Philip and Paraskeva were married in London and moved to Toronto. Philip became the controller of revenue for the province of Ontario.

*He had a good salary, reflects Murray Adaskin, and it was a good thing too, as Paraskeva, of course, could do anything she wanted, and boy, she did, too!*

Paraskeva did not find the transition to Canadian life easy. Already a mature artist, she was not terribly impressed by the fledgling Toronto art scene, which she felt was dominated by decorative landscape painting.<sup>5</sup> As Murray Adaskin recalls,

*She came to Canada and thought Canadians were wet behind the ears, and innocent, and not sophisticated. They weren't as innocent and they didn't lack that much sophistication, but Paraskeva still felt that way.*

In addition, her training at the "Free Studios" allied her with Leftist causes and she found the political environment in Toronto to be frustratingly conservative. As Murray Adaskin remembers with a chuckle,

*She was crazy as a coot and terribly outspoken. Insulting, oh she could be insulting! At the end of her life she lost one friend after another, and all the painters started staying away from her. Oh, she would say terribly insulting things to people: she didn't mean a thing, really. I never paid any attention to her; she could say anything she wanted to me. Fran and I were very close friends of theirs. And I loved Philip especially.*

*She came once, to an exhibition in Toronto, and this was still in the early days, and this was really a shock to everyone: she arrived in an evening gown — some of her things were being shown — she and her husband arrived, and when she took her coat off, she had a gown that came straight down the front and was bare down to her belly button. And practically nothing in the back. And of course everybody nearly died. She was a very tiny woman, very chic. I wish I had a picture of that.*



OGILVIE 65  
*Composer's Workshop,  
Variation on a Theme*

She did, however, begin painting once again in Canada, and, as Murray Adaskin says, *she brought a breath of fresh air to the Toronto painters' scene.*

Some of the Toronto artists received fresh air, both literally and figuratively speaking, from another source: the Adaskins' summer cottage on Canoe Lake, in Algonquin Park. Built in 1945, the Adaskins' cottage was not only a summer retreat, but also a centre of creative activity. Murray used the uninterrupted summer months to work on his compositions. They were visited by artist friends such as Paraskeva Clark and Will Ogilvie, who spent much of their time armed with sketchbooks and paints, engrossed in capturing the rugged environs of their surroundings.<sup>6</sup> The area appealed not only to the Adaskins' summer guests, but also to other members of the Toronto art scene. Their nearest neighbours were Charles Matthews and his wife, two of the earliest and most devoted collectors of Group of Seven works. They, in turn, were regularly visited by A. J. Casson, who soon became a familiar figure at the Adaskins'.

The Canoe Lake area is steeped in Canadian art lore and legend for other reasons as well. It was a favourite painting spot for Group of Seven members A. J. Casson and J. E. H. MacDonald. Lawren Harris built a cabin near the present-day Portage Store.<sup>7</sup> Not far from the Adaskin cottage, the drowned body of Tom Thomson had been found in 1917. A cairn erected in his memory is nearby; Casson made a rubbing of the stone inscription for the Adaskins (cat. no. 14), and Paraskeva Clark painted the area (cat. no. 28).

It was also here that Murray wrote one of his major orchestral works, the twenty-three minute *Algonquin Symphony* in 1957-58. As Gordana Lazarevich states, the work "stands today as a major Canadian work of the twentieth century. With its superb colourful orchestrations, its allusions to Canadian context and bird calls, it is a masterwork at par with some of the paintings of the Group of Seven."<sup>8</sup>

Original conditions at the cabin were, for the Adaskins, happily primitive: it could be reached only by boat from the Portage Store, past the village of Dwight. It had no running water and no electricity. Lamps, refrigerator and stove were gas-operated. Filled with wooden hand-carved furniture and heated by a pot-bellied stove, it was a rustic retreat.

A one-room log cabin situated at the water's edge served as Murray Adaskin's studio. It was here that he wrote his compositions on a Heintzman upright piano, which was annually tuned by a man who

*had a key to the cabin and an order to come every spring to tune the piano . . . I could work all night and not disturb anybody. It was just marvellous.*

There have been renovations as the Adaskins got older. There is now *running water, a tower of water*, an attached bathroom, and an extended verandah. Yet even with these "luxuries," the Adaskins find the adventuring life in the Ontario wilds too difficult. The cottage is now used by other members of their family, most recently by Murray Adaskin's younger brother Gordon. Sadly, the cottage is built on leased park property and through a park restoration program is destined to be destroyed within the next twenty-five years.<sup>9</sup>

The Adaskins began collecting art during one of the most difficult periods in the history of Canadian art. The thirties were hard years for both artists and collectors alike.

CASSON 14  
*Tom Thomson Memorial*



For the artists, it was a frustratingly isolated period. The initial wave of enthusiasm imbued in the Group of Seven's patriotic cry for a truly Canadian art during the '20s had somewhat abated. While the '40s would bring the dynamic explorations of the Automatistes, the '30s were not marked by one clear direction. In the '30s the spirit of nationalism would be toppled by one of internationalism, and Montreal would succeed Toronto as the focus of artistic progress. But these developments were slow; for many artists the '30s were a time of uncertainty, of wavering between reaffirmations of earlier trends and striking out on new paths.

In Toronto particularly, the influence of the Group of Seven could still be felt through the continuing landscape painting tradition, as evidenced in the work of artists such as Paraskeva Clark. But for other, younger artists, an awareness of art currents in the United States, Britain, and France found some of them having little in common with the Canadian artists who "had their feet in the soil," as A. Y. Jackson described it.<sup>10</sup> The gently-lined, glowing landscapes of David Milne, who returned to Canada after nearly twenty-five years in the United States, are worlds apart from the strong, boldly painted Group of Seven works.

It was a decade of struggle not only for individual artistic identity, but also simply for survival. Being an artist in the '30s was probably the surest way *not* to make a living. Although David Milne dryly remarked, "Artists stand depressions quite well, depressions look so much like their regular branch of prosperity,"<sup>11</sup> it was a particularly harsh time. Jack Humphrey summed it up this way: "The painter in Canada is apt to be more reminiscent of the mouse in the bowl of cream except that he swims in something more like a bowl of skim milk. His island therefore never solidifies."<sup>12</sup>

In 1930 Carl Schaefer earned twelve dollars from the sale of his work; in 1931 that figure plummeted to zero. Three years later his income "soared" to \$145, still hardly enough to survive.<sup>13</sup> Goodridge Roberts turned from oil to the less expensive medium of watercolour in 1932, but living on \$1.50 a week was still bitterly hard: he "lost five teeth, his strength for several months" and had to lie down in the fields to regain his strength while painting. But, as Jacques de Tonnancour bluntly stated, Roberts "survived... He was a painter; that was his strength."<sup>14</sup> Hampered by a lack of contacts, funds, and exhibitions upon his return to Canada in 1933, David Milne considered the dismal possibility of selling his entire output: "\$5,000 for a lifetime's work."<sup>15</sup> In 1937 a Jack Humphrey watercolour could be bought for \$5 and, as Charles Hill notes, "if it had not been for the continuous efforts of Walter Abell he would have become totally destitute."<sup>16</sup> Louis Muhlstock drew on wrapping paper and painted on potato sacks; his only consolation was that the Depression provided him with a surplus of "free" models: crowds of unemployed men who had come east in the vain hope of finding work, swarmed in Feltcher's Field, a park on the outskirts of Montreal.<sup>17</sup>

*Everybody felt the Depression*, notes Murray Adaskin. *For us, in Toronto, we managed. But it was worse in the west.* It was certainly a harrowing time for artists living in British Columbia. In 1937 Emily Carr had a heart attack, directly linked to her overworked condition and financial stress. Jock Macdonald and Fred Varley, who taught at the Vancouver School of Decorative and Applied Arts, left the school when their salaries were slashed by 60%; their new venture, the British Columbia College of Arts, closed after two years due to financial difficulties. In 1936 Varley received aid from the National Gallery and went east; the following year Macdonald had a physical breakdown.<sup>18</sup>

Exhibiting work was not always easy. The Canadian Group of Painters was a national body that did support many artists, but with its strong parental guidance from the Group of Seven, maintained a preference for those artists who championed similar links to the Group's patriotic search for a Canadian painting identity. Toronto artists controlled the group and sided with the Group's nationalist bias. The Royal Canadian Academy declined in importance because of its stubborn refusal to exhibit contemporary work.<sup>19</sup> Together with the Ontario Society of Artists, it lost much of its impact after a conflict in 1932 between the National Gallery and senior Academicians. The Ontario Society of Artists championed commercial artists who churned out shallow "Group of Seven" work.

Canadian art received little support from public galleries in this period, largely due to budget cuts. Another problem was encountered by those artists who did not pledge allegiance to the Group of Seven; preference for works following in the Group's tradition marked purchases both at the National Gallery and the Art Gallery of Toronto.<sup>20</sup> Private galleries offered some support for contemporary Canadian art in Toronto, although it was a slow process. Mellors Galleries (which later became Laing Galleries), and the Galleries of J. Merritt Malloney were early promoters of Canadian art.

Yet even when work could be seen, it could not always be bought; collectors and would-be collectors often found themselves financially strapped. Murray Adaskin dolefully recounts one occasion when financial difficulties made the purchase of a Tom Thomson painting impossible for him:

*The Laing Gallery in Toronto, they were a very famous gallery, and still in existence. And the son of the owner lived in the same old building where we had this old apartment, this \$32-a-month apartment. And we met. We didn't know each other too well, but we knew each other, and he was the son who worked for his father. He said, "I really wish you'd come over to my father's gallery, there's something there I think would interest you."*

*So six weeks later I found myself in the Bloor Street area and I went into the gallery — and there was a Tom Thomson oil. It was like a jewel, it was just one of those jewels: rich thick paint, lovely colours. Two hundred dollars.*

*So I went to my bank. I had saved \$50. Now, I'm talking about the '30s, where, when they raised our rent from \$32.50 to \$35 we were kind of upset about it. And so that gives you an idea that it meant a lot to spend that kind of money. So I went to my bank manager and I asked him, "Could you lend me \$150? I've got \$50 and I need another \$150." And he asked me what I needed it for, so I told him. And that didn't mean a thing to him!*

*And so he said to me, "Well, what collateral do you have?" At that time I didn't know what the word "collateral" meant; I had never heard the word. Why, how, would I hear "collateral"? So I asked him what that meant, and he told me, and I said, "Oh golly, if I had collateral, why would I come into the bank to borrow money from you?"*

*Well needless to say I didn't get the money, and I didn't get the picture. That's the one thing I've wept about secretly.*

The financial woes of artists and collectors in Toronto were somewhat lessened by the formation of the Picture Loan Society in 1936. Essentially an artists' co-operative, the venture originated under the direction of Douglas Duncan, who put up the initial capital. Rik Kettle, Erma Lennox, Norah

McCullough, Gordon MacNamara, Pegi Nicol, and Gordon Webber helped him find space and arrange for exhibitions. At the outset, the Picture Loan Society was formed in recognition of the difficulties younger artists faced due to lack of exhibitions and sales. The society followed the basic premise outlined by a similar venture in England, the Picture Hire Limited.

By this plan, artists would receive a small income from the rental of their pictures. Both artists and borrowers were charged a modest membership fee, and the Society took a small commission on rentals and sales. Potential purchasers could live with a work for a time before deciding whether or not to buy it; the artist, meanwhile, was guaranteed some income while waiting for sales.

During the war the founding Picture Loan group gradually broke up, until it became Douglas Duncan's responsibility. For many artists, it was his steady support through the Loan Society that helped launch them on their careers. Carl Schaefer, Will Ogilvie, Lemoine FitzGerald, Jack Nichols, Paraskeva Clark, and David Milne all realized the benefits of exhibiting with the Picture Loan Society; for some years it was the only gallery in Toronto specializing in contemporary Canadian work. Art students, fledgling art patrons, university groups and schools, directors and curators became aware of many Canadian artists through their association with the society.<sup>21</sup>

Murray Adaskin remembers Douglas Duncan and the Picture Loan Society with great fondness and many chuckles. The gallery was situated at 3, Charles St. West in Toronto and, as he recalls, was practically impossible to find for the uninitiated. It was located on the third storey of a dingy downtown building that also housed an accordion school and two dance studios; the street entrance gave no floor direction, and hours of business were not posted. The double flight of stairs leading up to the Picture Loan rooms was so formidably steep that prospective buyers occasionally could not face the hike up.

If one did brave the steep trudge, the gallery itself was even more disconcerting. As Murray Adaskin flatly states, *It was a mess. And it got messier and messier as the years went by.* The display space was a narrow hallway with four rooms opening from it. Paintings and prints were everywhere: hung on the walls, stacked on the floor, piled against baseboards, hidden behind doors.

Murray Adaskin describes Douglas Duncan (rather tactfully) as *not really a great businessman*. Duncan was actually notorious for his haphazard business practices: books were not kept up to date; cheques would remain uncashed, hidden under piles of clutter; purchased works were often not framed or delivered to their rightful owners for years. His sister, Frances Duncan Barwick, once leafed through a pile of his papers and found three letters to her from friends, correctly readdressed to her Parisian address by Duncan, but not forwarded: they were nine years' old.<sup>22</sup> As Murray Adaskin remembers,

*Oh, he left things in an awful mess. When he died, Douglas owed money to all these painters, and they no longer could get their paintings back because they had already been dispersed and sold and never paid for! And then they found cheques that were four years old and never been cashed! Oh, many of the accounts were no longer in existence by that time.*

Duncan's erratic business methods were generally overlooked, however, by those members of the art community who were grateful for his continual promotion, support, and recognition of struggling Canadian artists. Murray Adaskin explains,

*You see, he was a man of vision, a man of great taste. And he did it because he loved it. It was a passion.*

The Adaskins remember Duncan as a quiet, affable man who spent much of his time squatting down, “hunkering,” aborigine-style, on the floor; it was a position he found comfortable and, as Murray Adaskin recalls, allowed his visitors to look over his 6’3” self at the pictures, a much more important view:

*He’d come into a room, and the first thing he’d do was sit on the floor, with his legs folded underneath him. He had no fat on him at all. He always sat on the floor. And he never had an ounce of fat on him. . . .*

Murray Adaskin has two strong memories of Douglas Duncan. The first is associated with his 1929 study trip to France with Philip Clark:

*In 1929 when I was in Paris with Philip Clark (this was before we met Paraskeva) we went to an opera one night, Philip and I. Bumped into Douglas Duncan. I didn’t know him well, but Philip knew him well. We had a little chat, and Douglas asked us where we were staying and so on, and he knew that we were doing it all on a shoestring, you see. This was his home there. And the next day tickets arrived: Could we use these tickets for another opera? Well, we couldn’t afford to go two nights in a row to an opera! But Douglas Duncan, that’s just the sort of thing he would do. And Philip and I went like kings, sitting in the best seats in the house! Normally we’d be in the back at the rear of the theatre. But that’s the kind of fellow Douglas Duncan was.*

The Adaskins also recall many hours spent viewing what Duncan called his “accretion”<sup>23</sup> of art work. Duncan had two apartments; one was used solely to house his art, and through an adjoining door another apartment served as his living quarters, also crammed with paintings, prints, drawings and sculpture.

*The whole idea was, we’d go there and he’d show us the latest Milne pictures — there would be maybe fifty — and we’d sit down on the floor and he’d place them all over the walls and we’d look at them. . . . Do you know where I first heard Stravinsky’s *Soldier’s Tale*, which he wrote in 1918? This would be the late ’30s when I first heard it, and it was Duncan who played me a record that he brought me from Paris, the first recording that ever was made of it. . . . When he’d heard that I had never heard *The Soldier’s Tale*, he found it hard to believe. Here I was, a musician, and he was not a musician, but he had all those things. So there were people of great taste in Toronto then. . . .*

Although the Adaskins did not ever rent from the Picture Loan Society, they did purchase one of David Milne’s paintings, *Trilliums and Columbines*, (cat. no. 56) from Douglas Duncan. They also benefited from Duncan’s expertise in the art of bookbinding, which he had perfected during his years in France. When Duncan noticed that Murray’s two-volume set of *Bach Unaccompanied Sonatas* was getting torn, he whisked it away; two years later it was returned, bound in red leather with elaborate gold lettering.

While most of their art associations centred around Toronto during the first two decades of their collecting, the Adaskins were not unaware of artists in other parts of the country. The struggles of the British Columbia artist

Emily Carr are vividly recalled by them, as they had the opportunity of meeting her in 1935. Prior to their annual summer engagement at Banff they went to Victoria, B.C., for a holiday. Shortly before leaving the Coast Murray Adaskin decided it was time to meet the artist, as they were acquainted with her work and eager to know her personally. Their visit brought a few surprises.

*We were the guests of very well known people there. When it came close to the time that we were leaving I said, "You know, I just can't leave this town without visiting Emily Carr." I knew a great deal about her, and I saw a lot of her paintings, although I had never met her. My brother [Harry] had met her, so they knew each other. But our friends said, "Emily Carr? Now why would you want to go visit her? She's crazy!" Now, these were intelligent, lovely people!*

*You see, what upset a lot of Victorian people about her was that they saw an old maid—which also, in those days, was a little suspect in the first place—and shopping carts hadn't yet been thought of. Or invented. So she bought an old baby carriage because the only animal she couldn't leave in the house when she went shopping was the monkey. And she always dressed the monkey; it was a girl monkey so it had to have a little skirt. She was very fussy about that. So neighbours would see this crazy woman pushing an old-fashioned baby carriage; it was really marvellously practical, because she not only had a place to tie up her monkey, but she could do her shopping, and the monkey wouldn't be upsetting everything in the house—because they are very destructive if left alone—and then she didn't have to carry anything. She dreamed the whole idea up of Safeway carts! (They wouldn't have thought of it, I'm sure, if people like that hadn't lived.) So they thought she was a little cuckoo: imagine putting a monkey in a baby carriage.*

*But they drove us to the house, and let Fran and me out of the car; they wouldn't go in. There was a woman that looked like the charwoman, I thought, working on the lawn, pulling out weeds. So I went over to her and asked, "Does Emily Carr live here?" And she said, "I am Emily Carr." And Fran and I almost collapsed. She had a band around her head, and a big apron almost to her feet. I said, "Miss Carr, we're leaving soon. This is my first visit here, my wife has been here before but I haven't, and we just felt we couldn't leave without coming to pay our respects." Well it never upsets anyone when you say things like that, and we meant every word of it.*

*She took us into her house, and of course she had a monkey, dog, cat, birds; I've never seen such a menagerie. This was the time that she had the big studio with all the chairs up on the ceiling, on a pulley. And as she would let a chair down from the ceiling she would take a swipe at it with her apron. "Oh," she said, "I just don't like being cluttered up in my studio." And it was a big room and a marvellous studio. So she was a very practical woman.*

*And she showed us hundreds of her paintings. Now, this was too early in my career to understand that all I had to say was, "Could I buy something from you?" But I just couldn't say to her anything that dealt with exchanging money for something. Now, I could have come home with a bundle under my arm, because I could have afforded the prices she was asking, which were nothing. Especially those charcoal drawings of hers. She showed us a lot of those. Later we saw them at an exhibition in Toronto, her first big exhibition. Well, I couldn't talk to her about prices. I couldn't say, "Now how much would that be?" I just couldn't. And yet I know now that was the most stupid, idiotic, juvenile thing I've ever done in my whole life. She had to eat: she ran a boarding house there for a long time.*

*Well then, we spent an enchanting afternoon with her; she was a lovely person to sit and talk to, it just bubbled out of her, and she had a quaint way of speaking. She writes just the way she talks. So when we were leaving she said, "How long are you staying?" She said she was going out in her caravan for her usual month holiday. A truck would come and latch on to her caravan — it was like a gypsy wagon — and take her to wherever she wanted. And she'd tell them to come back in two weeks, or three weeks, or whatever. And so she said, "Well, if you'd like to come out while I'm there, I'll put you in touch with a student of mine."*

*So she came and picked us up and again our friends thought we were crazy. At the time we didn't know where it was, where we were taken, but we think now it was in the Metchosin area; it was up in the bank of a hill. No houses or anything, just wonderful parkland. And there she was, with her wonderful wagon. She had a bunk for herself and then little places for each animal to sleep; every animal had its own place. And they all obeyed her. She could talk to a bird, you know; she had a way that was scary with animals. You wondered how this communication could take place.*

*This was a glorious experience that we had. We spent a whole afternoon there. And I remember we were sitting up on the bank, beside her caravan, and all the animals were staked out — the monkey actually had a line on it, with a stake in the ground — and all the other animals were there. And, well, I've seen pictures of early painters where they will show, perhaps, Jesus as a child, surrounded by animals, and you feel that it's all just wishful thinking. It's not true; it's all there. It's no more wishful thinking than a halo around a very distinguished personage. Because there is a halo: if you look, there is a kind of light emanating from the person. Well in those days, they drew a halo. What else can you do? There was no better way; there still isn't today. And I think she just had that rapport with these animals. She just adored them. Oh, she was a dream of a person.*

The Adaskins have what they believe is the last letter Emily Carr wrote before her death in 1945. While on a western singing tour, Frances James heard that the artist was in the hospital and sent her a bouquet of flowers. Carr, touched that her Toronto acquaintances had thought of her, sent a charming thank-you note via Lawren Harris.<sup>24</sup>

Although the Adaskins did not purchase anything directly from the artist, they did not allow their inexperience in collecting to deter them indefinitely. After Carr's death Murray Adaskin contacted Lawren Harris and Ira Dilworth, who were both largely responsible for settling the artist's estate, to enquire about a possible purchase.

*I went to Dilworth and said that if there was anything available to buy could we buy something of Emily Carr's, because we knew her, and we had failed to do anything at the time, mainly because we were just too shy to broach the subject to her. And of course she would've been so happy if we had. But I don't make those kinds of mistakes anymore. He said there would be several things. So he sent us a totem pole painting and the white Indian church, the famous one. Well, we owned the original of that.*

The totem pole painting was eventually given to Murray Adaskin's brother John and his wife, Naomi. *Indian Church* (1929) remained in their possession until the early 1970s when the Adaskins began planning their move to the west coast. Then, as Murray relates,

*I did the one foolish thing I ever did. I said to my wife, "We're going to be living on a pension. I don't know how expensive it's going to be to live there; the insurance keeps going up and up every year. I think we should sell the Emily Carr." We'd never sold a painting before — or since. We sold it. My wife, she doesn't even want to talk about it. It didn't make that much difference from a financial point of view. Now we realize how foolish it was. After I came here I thought, "Why didn't it occur to me to bring it home, and let Victoria people see it? Because I would have been bringing it home! She lived here!"*

The Adaskins watched many of their artist friends in the east struggle for recognition much as Carr did; it is with some glee, therefore, that Murray Adaskin recounts A. J. Casson's first brush with "success."

*His first big exhibition was in Toronto [in 1952]. For years you bought paintings for \$35; it was the same with A. Y. Jackson and all those fellows. But at this opening, it was raining at Roberts Gallery on Yonge Street, and Jack Wildridge, who owned it, thought, "Well, it's pouring rain in Toronto, no one will come." There was a lineup two blocks long in the street! When the doors opened, these people just came in like locusts, and grabbed, literally grabbed, things off the wall. And one lady had a picture behind her back and somebody said, "What did you get?" And she said, "I haven't seen it yet." But she was waiting in line to get to the cashier.*

*Well Cass was so disappointed and upset about this: he loved talking, you see. If you knew him long enough you heard all his stories fifty million times. And he said, "I didn't get to talk to anybody; nobody came near me." And of course nobody could get near him, anyway. I think they raised that night . . . it was somewhere in the neighbourhood of \$170,000. Well at that time this was an unbelievable amount of money. And then every exhibition ever since then has been like that.*

*But for a long time before that he worked for Sampson Matthews. He was their art director. Old Charles Matthews, who was his boss for so many years, was one of the members of the Arts and Letters Club. And when Cass had his birthday, the Club had a special dinner for him, and they asked several people to make some speeches for them. And of course they asked Matthews, who is a hard bitten old Scotchman with a pipe in his mouth; he was a very outspoken fellow. And he said, "You know, I've come to the conclusion that Cass is just a plain damn fool." So everyone, well: they had their wives with them; it was one of those dinners. They were just startled. There was dead silence. And he said, "I'll explain why I'm saying that, and I think you'll agree with me. The other day I got out all my old ledger books, and I looked up how much I'd paid Cass over the years" — he was with him for thirty-five years — "and I've figured out that that one night of his exhibition, he made more money than he'd made with me in thirty-five years. Now wouldn't you say he was just a plain damn fool?" And of course everybody burst out laughing. Those were the kind of corny jokes they'd make.*

In 1952 Murray Adaskin accepted the position as director of the music department at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon. It was a decision made with some trepidation: trading their hectic cosmopolitan lifestyles for one with a definitely more rural slant was met with some reservations. Toronto had been their home base and cultural focus for over twenty years.

*When we came from Toronto, I think we must have been a little — not snobbish, but with our noses in the air about coming to the farmland sort of thing. Well! That was soon knocked out of us, but soon. And we realized what a wonderful place it was. You know the people on the prairies are the kind of people that don't exist anywhere else in the world. There's something very special about them.*

Their fears about being stranded in a cultural wasteland soon disappeared. The Adaskins quickly discovered that members of the Saskatoon community were as equally determined as their eastern counterparts to promote a vigorous and sustained cultural life on the prairies. To a large extent the university provided the focus, impetus and inspiration for cultural activities. Concerts, musical events, art exhibitions, and festivals were continually supported by many people associated with the university. Yet, as Gordana Lazarevich relates, although the university was responsible for drawing these people together, "two people in particular represent a focal point around which many of these intellectuals congregated: Frances James and Murray Adaskin. . . For two decades the thriving group of intellectuals constantly enriched each others' lives, as well as those of the university and the community. It was this "Enlightened Circle," whose particular chemistry and personalities drew them into the spiritual sphere of the Adaskins, which in turn provided the stimulus for the Adaskins' work in the field of musical culture in the Canadian Prairies."<sup>25</sup>

One of the main forces behind the promotion of culture in Saskatoon during the Adaskins' years in the city was Fred Mendel. Mendel ran a meat packing plant and, with the direction of his daughter Eva, began collecting art. His interest in art led him not only to become a renowned collector of both European and Canadian art, but also to establish an art gallery in Saskatoon. The Mendels converted a space on the floor above the offices of the packing plant into a private gallery; during the Adaskins' first ten years in the city, there was no official art gallery, and Fred Mendel's exhibition space helped fill this gap. Under his initiative a permanent art gallery was also established, funded by government grants which were matched by a large donation from himself. The Mendel Gallery came to house his own collection of Canadian art which ranged from local Saskatchewan works to the Group of Seven to Emily Carr.<sup>26</sup> As Murray Adaskin recalls,

*He made Saskatoon the interesting place for us that it was. When we went there, the first person we met was Fred Mendel. And when we saw what he had, and who he was, and what he did, we realized that this was no ordinary place to be.*

The Adaskins both became involved with the Mendel Gallery. Murray Adaskin served on its Board of Directors during its early years. With a series of musicals, Frances James raised enough money through the "Frances Adaskin Art Centre Piano Fund" to purchase a grand piano for the gallery's Art Centre. For his part, Mendel's continuous promotion of Canadian culture was clearly revealed through an incident directly involving Murray Adaskin.

While Murray was on a trip to New York in 1938, a Stradivarius violin caught both his eyes and his ears; he soon realized, however, that such a purchase was impossible as he could not afford a \$10,000 instrument. He recounted his sad plight to an American friend, F. N., who had first met the musician during Murray's years at the Banff Springs Hotel. The American,

who was a wealthy patron of the arts, promptly purchased the violin for Murray, and sent the dumbfounded musician back to Canada with a letter indicating Murray's legal ownership of the violin.

Some years later while living in Saskatoon, Murray received a letter from his benefactor's lawyer, stating that F.N. had died and had bequeathed all his belongings to a friend; the violin was mentioned as one of those belongings. It would have to be returned immediately. Such a plan was unthinkable to Murray. He sent the 1938 letter of ownership to the lawyer, but added that he could destroy it if he wished; Murray would be only too happy to buy the violin back, if that were possible. The lawyer agreed, but once again Murray was faced with a price tag he could not afford. He turned to Fred Mendel for help, and Mendel immediately acted as guarantor for a loan. By this time in his life Murray Adaskin understood what "collateral" meant, and as collateral for the loan, he insisted that Mendel accept a Milne painting, *Trilliums and Columbines* (cat. no. 56) that he had in his own collection. Shortly after Murray had made over sixty per cent of the bank payments, Mendel announced that he would personally complete the remaining payments and returned the Milne painting to the Adaskins.<sup>27</sup>

The Adaskins' interest in Canadian artists continued during their Saskatoon years. They began supporting local artists such as Dorothy Knowles, William Perehudoff, Wynona Mulcaster, and Ernest Lindner; in addition, they invested in a number of Group of Seven paintings. Murray Adaskin's association with the University resulted in a friendship with another Canadian artist, Eli Bornstein. Bornstein had joined the university in 1950, when the fledgling art department had consisted of a mere two people. By the time the Adaskins met him, Bornstein's art reflected an interest in abstraction and construction, resulting in numerous experiments with constructed reliefs.

Bornstein was also a music lover and soon became interested in Murray Adaskin's work. The two quickly became creative kindred spirits. Murray Adaskin remembers that

*Eli had a rather difficult time during those years. His professional integrity made it hard for him. He felt isolated from both the public and the artistic community.*

For Bornstein, Murray Adaskin's open mind and eagerness to learn about new directions in art were gratefully welcomed; largely due to the musician's encouragement, in fact, Bornstein decided to remain in the city.

The artist and musician combined forces in February 1954 to stage a collaborative project, an exhibition concert in Convocation Hall of the University of Saskatchewan. Murray Adaskin, who was accompanied at the piano by the visiting Mario Bernardi, played two of his own compositions, *Canzona and Rondo* and the *Sonata for Violin and Piano*. Bernardi then played the composer's piano sonata and Murray Adaskin followed with his *Sonatine Baroque* for unaccompanied violin. Visual accompaniment for the concert was provided by the work of Bornstein: sculptures, watercolours, drawings, paintings, and prints surrounded the audience.<sup>28</sup>

In 1966 the two began another collaborative effort, this time in the Canadian Arctic. The Institute for Northern Studies, which operated an Arctic Training Centre at Rankin Inlet on the west coast of Hudson Bay, was affiliated with the University of Saskatchewan. Dr. Robert Williamson of the Anthropology Department at the University, was in charge of the Arctic Training Centre and suggested that Murray Adaskin visit the inlet to tape the

traditional Inuit songs, which he felt were slowly being lost through the influence of southern, modern lifestyles. Murray Adaskin knew that Bornstein would also be interested in such an adventure and the two spent ten days in the north.

*It was terribly cold and we shivered the whole time while we were there mainly because we did not bring the right clothing. We did not realize what type of clothing has to be worn in that fascinating wind-swept part of the world. Nevertheless this was a wonderful trip for us, and I reprimanded myself for waiting this long, until I was in my 50s to see our stunningly, strikingly beautiful Arctic. I came back with lots of tapes of songs sung by an old couple: the woman's name was Qalala and the man's Nilaula. The first piece that I wrote upon my return was an orchestral composition called Qalala and Nilaula of the North. Our object was to write an opera on an Eskimo theme and incorporate the folk music collected during the trip. Eli wanted to do the designs, sets and costumes.<sup>29</sup>*

Although this project did not get past the initial planning stages, Murray Adaskin already had experience in fusing his loves of music and art. As early as 1948, he composed *Epitaph* for Frances James, music written to accompany a poem by the French poet Guillaume Apollinaire. The poem was written as an epigraph for the French poet Henri Rousseau and engraved on his tombstone:

Hear us, kindly Rousseau,  
We greet you.  
Delaunay, his wife, Monsieur Queval and I.  
Let our baggage through the customs to the sky.  
We bring you canvas, brush and paint of ours,  
During eternal leisure, radiant  
As you once drew my portrait,  
You shall paint the face of the stars.<sup>30</sup>

Murray Adaskin had another opportunity to combine his musical and artistic knowledge many years later. In 1975 he was commissioned by the Chamber Players of Toronto to write a work for them. While preoccupied with this project, he and Frances attended the exhibition "Canadian Painting in the Thirties" in Vancouver, a monumental travelling exhibition organized by Charles Hill, which focused on the work of many of the artists the Adaskins knew personally.

*I was struggling in my mind, you know it always takes time; you think about a piece for a long time and you dream up ideas and directions that you want to go in... and I tried to visualize what that type of [chamber] group sounded like and what a good piece could make them do if it was properly written for them. And this is what a composer always has to struggle with; I would say that's the hardest part. It's like facing a blank canvas. You haven't yet put your first brushstroke on, and where do you start?*

*So in the middle of all this, that exhibition came through to Vancouver, and my wife and I went to see it. And you know, when we walked in to the gallery, the first thing that struck me was that I knew every picture; practically every picture I had seen somewhere, most of them in the original studios of the artists. I was startled by it; it was a beautiful exhibition, really a wonderful exhibition.*

The event proved to be the catalyst that turned his compositional struggling into compositional inspiration:

*Since I knew a lot of the players, I thought, "Gee whiz, Massorsky wrote a piece called Pictures at an Exhibition. Which is a fabulous work! He wrote it for piano and then Ravel made a famous orchestration of it and didn't change a note of harmony. And in the score he had the whole orchestra, a big orchestra, but at the bottom of every page is the original piano part. So if you're studying it, you can see exactly what he did: marvellous.*

*Well, I've always liked that piece, I must say, and so I thought, "Well, that means one can do something pertaining to painters." Now, since I knew, I don't know how many of these people there, I couldn't — how can you write twenty-five movements or something?! It would take all day! And they stipulated a time frame for it; I can't remember what it is now. But it would be around, I would think fifteen minutes. And I thought, "Fifteen minutes goes awfully fast if you're writing a major kind of work." So I decided, "All right, I'll use three painters' names that are particularly close to me, and people that I've seen recently. So: Paraskeva Clark, Louis Muhlstock (whom I had, a short time before, rediscovered when I was in Montreal) and of course Charles Comfort, whom I've known since I was a little boy.*

*And what I did was, and I think in my programme notes I tried to explain it, was that each movement, which might be called andante moderato or allegro comprio, well, I've got the tempi words like that on each movement, but each movement is named after one: Paraskeva Clark, then Louis Muhlstock, and Charles Comfort. I explained that I wasn't trying to capture anything of their personalities in the music but that, willy-nilly, whether I knew it or not, since I knew them so well, perhaps there is something there. So I left it at that. I think people can take whatever they can get out of the music.*

The Adaskins' westward migration did not stop at the prairies. In 1973 they made one final move, this time to Victoria, B.C. The move coincided with their retirement, but it has been a theoretical retirement at most: they immersed themselves in the musical and artistic happenings of the city almost immediately. They have both taught at the Victoria Conservatory of Music, and Murray Adaskin has also taught an orchestraion class at the University of Victoria. In addition, Frances James has given voice lessons to students from the university, and Murray has also coached promising music students. Their unflagging support of the artists in their immediate milieu continues. Their Victoria walls now include works by artists such as Maxwell Bates, Myfanwy Pavelic, P. K. Irwin, Richard Ciccimarra, Jack Shadbolt, and Gordon Smith. The Adaskins' belief in Canadian art remains as strong as it was when they began collecting. Fifty years ago it was artists such as Paraskeva Clark, living down the hall from them in a Toronto apartment building, and A. J. Casson, spending hours on their dock at Canoe Lake, who received their support. Now West Coast artists, whom they have also met through exhibition openings, recitals, parties, and concerts, are experiencing that support.

*If you're going to get hooked on something, you might as well get hooked on something worthwhile, something that will grow on you. If they are young artists, if they're serious, then you'd better take them seriously, too. And by encouraging*

them, they're more apt to become something. If they don't get any encouragement, what do you expect? It's like the withering vine: no sunshine, no water. And we're the kind of people who water the plants, by doing that.

And like their eastern counterparts, West Coast artists have also experienced that peculiarly undefinable quality surrounding the Adaskins themselves: it is part understanding, part grace, part kindness, part love. And, yes: two parts mischief.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The history of the Banff Springs Hotel is told in Bart Robinson's book, *Banff Springs: The Story of a Hotel*, (Banff, Pull-Summerthought, 1978).
- <sup>2</sup> See: Roderick Stewart, *Bethune*, (Toronto, New Press, 1973), p. 90.
- <sup>3</sup> *Canadian Painting in the Thirties*, exhibition catalogue by Charles Hill (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1975), p. 94.
- <sup>4</sup> See: Harry Adaskin, *A Fiddler's World. Memoirs to 1938*, (Vancouver, November House, 1977), p. 205.
- <sup>5</sup> *Canadian Painting in the Thirties*, p. 94.
- <sup>6</sup> The Adaskins spent one summer in the Georgian Bay area, but decided it was not for them. "We didn't like the snakes," explains Murray. "Rattlers, big ones. The only part of Ontario where you'll find rattlers. We were dodging these things all the time. We were really frightened of them. We had a cat and we thought: oh gosh, they might eat the cat."
- <sup>7</sup> Gordana Lazarevich, *The Musical World of Frances James and Murray Adaskin: A Perspective on Canadian Culture*, p. 501.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 500.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 502.
- <sup>10</sup> A. Y. Jackson, Toronto, to H. O. McCurry, Ottawa, 9 June [1938], in the National Gallery of Canada. As quoted in *Canadian Painting in the Thirties*, p. 11.
- <sup>11</sup> David Milne, Palgrave, to H. O. McCurry, Ottawa, 7 January 1932, in the National Gallery of Canada. As quoted in *ibid.*, p. 14.
- <sup>12</sup> *Jack Humphrey. A Painter in the Maritimes*, exhibition catalogue, introduction by J. Russell Harper, (Fredericton, Beaverbrook Art Galley, n.d.), unpag.
- <sup>13</sup> *Canadian Painting in the Thirties*, p. 13.
- <sup>14</sup> Jacques de Tonnancour, *Roberts*, (Montreal, l'arbre, 1944), p. 14.
- <sup>15</sup> David Milne, Severn Park, to James Clarke, Yonkers, New York, 14 June 1924 (continued 28 June) in the Public Archives of Canada. As quoted in *Canadian Painting in the Thirties*, p. 78.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- <sup>17</sup> Murray Adaskin in conversation with the author, 2 June 1987.
- <sup>18</sup> See: *Canadian Painting in the Thirties*, pp. 55-58.
- <sup>19</sup> The Academy's social importance, however, remained strong. John Lyman, in fact, made membership in the Academy grounds for rejection of membership in the Contemporary Arts Society.
- <sup>20</sup> After 1939, a series of group exhibitions of artists from across Canada was finally held at the Art Gallery of Toronto and purchases were made from this series.
- <sup>21</sup> See: Frances Barwick, *Pictures from the Douglas M. Duncan Collection*, (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1975) and Alan Jarvis (ed.), *Douglas Duncan: A Memorial Portrait*, (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1974).
- <sup>22</sup> Barbara Moon on Douglas Duncan in *Douglas Duncan: A Memorial Portrait*, p. 48.
- <sup>23</sup> Alan Jarvis on Douglas Duncan in *ibid.*, p. 7.
- <sup>24</sup> Murray Adaskin in conversation with the author, 3 June 1987.
- <sup>25</sup> Lazarevich, *The Musical World of Frances James and Murray Adaskin*, p. 416.
- <sup>26</sup> See: Frederick Mendel, *The Book and Life of a Little Man*, (Toronto, Macmillan, 1972).
- <sup>27</sup> Lazarevich, *The Musical World of Frances James and Murray Adaskin*, pp. 311-313.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 481-482.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 482.
- <sup>30</sup> *Epitaph*, written for soprano and piano, was first performed by Frances James on 13 June 1952 for the International Service of the CBC.



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