

artscanada

December 1969

\$2.00

A wide-brimmed hat, possibly made of straw or a similar natural material, is the central focus. The crown of the hat is painted with a landscape scene. On the left, a dark brown horse is depicted in profile, facing right. On the right, a reddish-brown horse is shown in profile, facing left. The background of the painting on the hat consists of a light blue sky and a green field. The hat is resting on a bed of dry, yellowish-brown grass. The overall lighting is soft, suggesting an outdoor setting.

GRASS ROOTS ART

Moon Mask
Haida, 19th century
Wood, height 30.5 cm.
National Museum of Man, Ottawa



this painted ceremonial mask is one of 185 items in the exhibition *Masterpieces of Canadian Indian and Eskimo Art* at the National Gallery of Canada until 11 January 1970. Canada's aboriginal art was acclaimed as "one of the great art forms of the world" when this exhibition was shown in Paris earlier this year

The National Gallery of Canada
Elgin St, Ottawa 4

Open 10 am to 6 pm; Tuesdays and Thursdays, 10 am to 10 pm; Sundays and public holidays, 2 pm to 6 pm. Open Mondays for the duration of this exhibition. Admission free.

This issue : grass roots art in Canada



The cover: Jan Wyers' canvas hat painted in oil with images of spring colts in new grass (Photo: Eberhard Otto). The hat, one of several that Wyers painted and wore when he was farming, is in the collection of R. L. Bloore, Toronto. (See article on page 24.)

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December 1969. Volume XXVI No. 6. Issue No. 138/139
Published every two months by the Society for Art Publications, Toronto; printed by Southam-Murray, Weston, Ont. **Single Copies** \$2.00 Canada; \$2.50 Foreign
Subscription rates \$10.00 per year. New subscriptions will begin with the issue current at time of order. **Back issues** Write for information. **Editorial contributors** Those wishing to submit articles are advised to write first to the editor. The Society is not responsible for the return of unsolicited material unless accompanied by a stamped self-addressed envelope. Articles published in the magazine do not necessarily reflect the views of the Society. **Change of address** Please send both old and new addresses, and allow one month to effect change. **Second class mail registration number 0701. Advertising rates** available upon application. **Publication address** Address all correspondence to artscanada, 129 Adelaide W., Toronto 1, Ontario. All articles are listed in the *Art Index*, New York, N.Y., and the *Canadian Periodical Index* of the Canadian Library Association, Ottawa. **Copyright** © 1969. The Society for Art Publications, Toronto. All rights reserved. Nothing may be reprinted without written permission.

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The Society acknowledges the kind assistance of the Canada Council and the Province of Ontario Council for the Arts.

The search for personal and national identity goes on. John Labatt Limited asked a student for her thoughts. Here is one of Jane Shier's responses.

In 1597 John Cabot discovered canada.

This interesting story used to be widely circulated in the public schools entrusted with the fair task of forming young canadian minds. Indeed for almost 400 years the Cabot myth was still being perpetrated although mainly in government-operated "high schools" as they were then known (although in fact these establishments discouraged rather than nurtured anything remotely similar to a high).

Now all young civilizations have fabricated myths in accordance with the image to which the nation aspires. The Cabot myth was especially appealing to the canadian soul; in Cabot the embarrassing gawkinsness of a foetal patriotism could be construed as the first flexing of national biceps. The discovery myth was well suited to a people constantly searching for territory far beyond any considerations

of agricultural necessity or climatic comfort.

The land which Cabot was said to have discovered was far more than a source of food or lodging. It came to represent power and to acquire a personality not unlike that of the natural deities of earlier cultures. Discovering canada became the basis of a religious activity which included the liturgical paraphernalia of a strongly organized church. Hymns were written in praise of discovery and in adulation of the discoverer, small animals and leaves were oddly enough elevated to the stature of symbol, and a flag was designed and hung over houses of worship. There is no indication of skepticism concerning the discovery myth for several generations.

Apparently the first rumblings were from discontents who questioned

not whether Cabot discovered it but whether in fact canada had been discovered. Nevertheless the traditionalists continued to assert the truth of the discovery in loud songs, and most of the citizens still applauded.

The opposition continues today and of course there are still strong pockets of believers throughout the land. Unfortunately much of the spontaneous beauty of the discovery myth has been clouded over in milky issues of national rights and identities.

Lately the skeptics have showed some interest in reviving the pre-social aspects of the discovery of canada in visual ways. These skeptics turn variously to farming and travelling and sometimes to art. They think that canada never has been discovered but that there is a little of John Cabot's blood in every child.

"If I could do it, I'd do no writing at all here. It would be photographs, the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food Booksellers would consider it quite a novelty; critics would murmur, yes, but is it art; and I could trust a majority of you to use it as you would a parlor game.

A piece of the body torn out by the roots might be more to the point."

James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* first published, 1936

The house was set far back from the road on short stilts of large rocks and discarded boards. Even from a distance every weatherbeaten plank and rusty nail was in sharp detail. Vines clung to the west side of the rotting porch and to one of the shuttered windows which appeared as eyes on each side of the porch. Half the shakes on the roof had slid away and left bare the rigid oaken beam beneath. Crab grass and wild flowers surrounded the house. Is it dead?

We will learn to smile as we look toward the sun.

Michael Ethan Brodzky

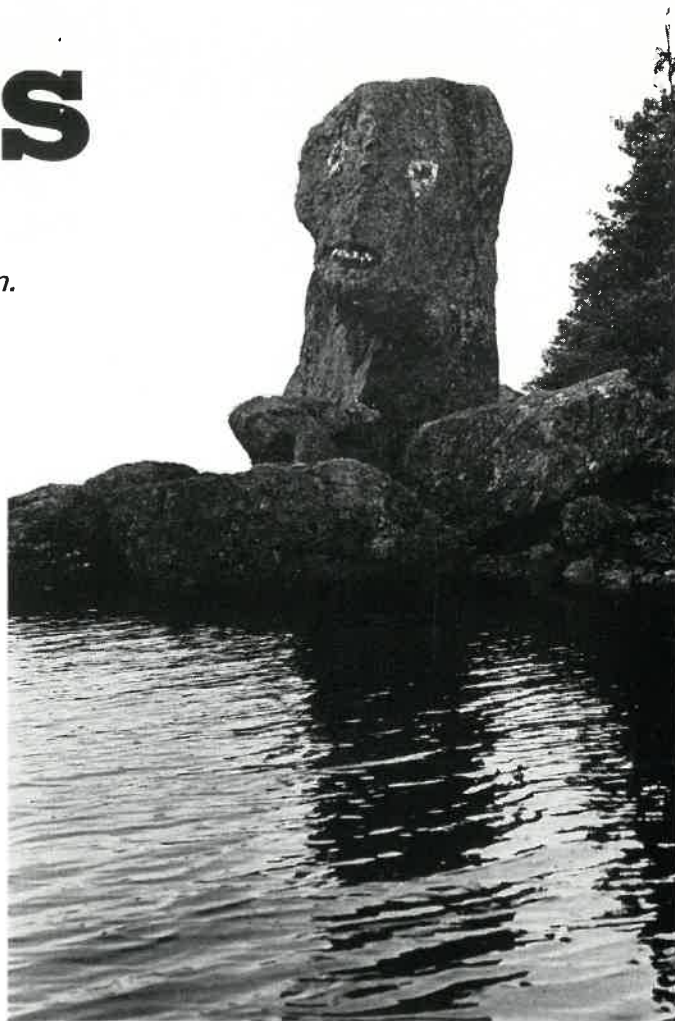
The thematic portion of this issue is concerned with two quite different aspects of indigenous Canadian art. The first part is devoted to art — which though it may have some slight association with the ethnic background of the artist — is highly personal, often visionary, frequently fanatically religious or political, eccentric. The work is groping or sure — sometimes technically perfected, sometimes not. It is the production of men and women who, like all significant artists, work under compulsion to create; but unlike most other artists, they work without benefit of clergy. Juxtaposed with this is Canadian Indian and Eskimo sculpture that is worthy of comparison, as Ronald Bloore points out, with that of Egypt and China. In con-

trast with the naiveté expressed in the work of some of the grass roots artists in this issue, Indian and Eskimo art is sophisticated, powerful, and informed with an awesomely complex world view. For their generous assistance in making this expanded issue possible, we wish to thank Mr and Mrs M. S. Yolles of Toronto. And we express deep gratitude to all of those who assisted us in our research on grass roots art, among whom are the following: Norah McCullough; R. L. Bloore; William Townsend; Ian MacEachern; Gail Taylor; Pierre Thériberge; Beverly Lambert Kelly; Kenneth Lochhead; Moncrieff Williamson; Norman Hallendy; George Swinton; John Climer; Eberhard Otto; Greg Curnoe.

MARITIMES

Views of painted rocks, Belleisle Bay, Kings County, N.B., anon.

Ian MacEachern did the photographs for the section of the issue devoted to the Maritimes, Quebec, and Ontario. Together with Gail Taylor — who wrote the text for the Maritimes and Quebec portions — he sought out and interviewed a number of the people whose work is reproduced here. MacEachern and the poet, David McFadden drove around Southern Ontario — following leads which we furnished them, discovering much that we did not know of.





“a real man and his tools are synonymous”

Mrs Barbara Morash lives in a two-storey house that scans Little River, a rambling village in Digby Neck, Nova Scotia. She lives very much with herself, and abides by a precept that virtual poverty can be the only mitigation of most worldly ills. Accordingly, she subsists on a small harvest of berries and vegetables reaped from the land surrounding her home, and “. . . works like a horse, so [she eats] like one: barley, rolled oats and oatmeal.” A woman of remarkable vitality, she insists that people should “get back to the earth,” as all life originates and is sustained by the soil. “A real man and his tools are synonymous,” she says. “Tools are the measure of manhood.”

Mrs Morash's home is an extension of herself, which she compares to Tennyson's allegorical *Palace of Art*. On walls, ceilings, doors, hallways and windows her visual translation of unsettling and definitive beliefs communicates something immediate, even to a stranger. The subjective nature of her art draws on a fund of references: a teaching career that took her from one end of Canada to the other, two marriages, a number of odd jobs, and an explosive sort of curiosity. “Living by myself and

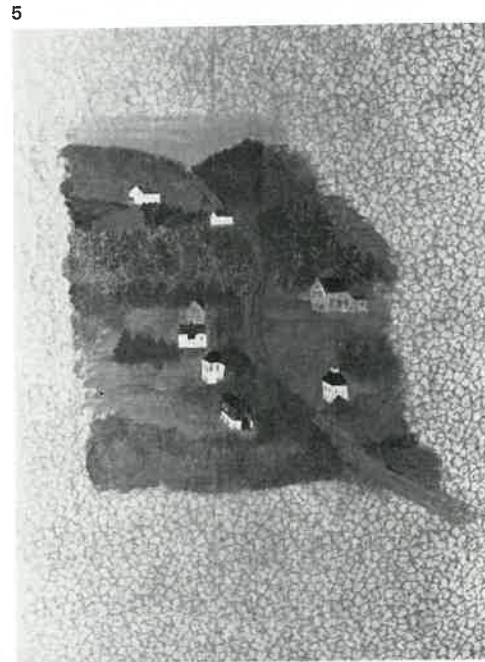
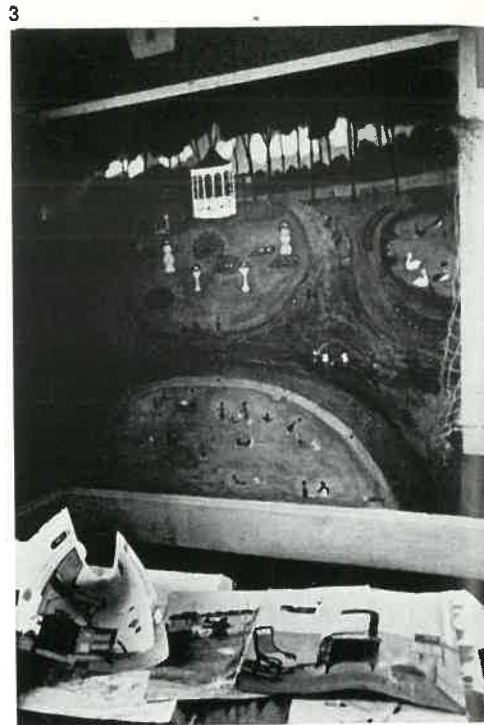
having no communication with people, I dig into things,” she explains. Her “things” include a passionate interest in languages; presently she is teaching herself Chinese, Russian and Greek, and has a fluent understanding of both French and Ukrainian.

Scraps of paper containing fragments of political and economic essays, poetry and original maxims, are taped indiscriminately to walls and windows, sometimes wedged between her painting and just as often half obscuring it. Much of her composition, both visual and verbal, is social commentary, but it deals also in the classical themes of birth, love and death. All of it is lucid: much is simply unnerving. The sea and the soil are life to Mrs Morash, and both are dominant themes of all her sketches and paintings. Of inflation, she says, “people are much too lazy . . . they'd rather buy fuel than cut what is there in abundance”; of contemporary education, “they should go back to the home, where a child learns the essentials of living.” Religion is “. . . hypocrisy, hypocrisy . . . churches should be closed.” She specifically keeps Saturday as her Holy Day instead of Sunday, to signify disdain of organized Chris-

tian religion and those who “are presuming they're in partnership with God.” To combat the provinciality of Digby Neck's “small monarchies of wasted land,” she would like “. . . an army of Chinese, Indians and all mixed races” to invade the farms and work them cooperatively, in the manner of Neo-feudalism.

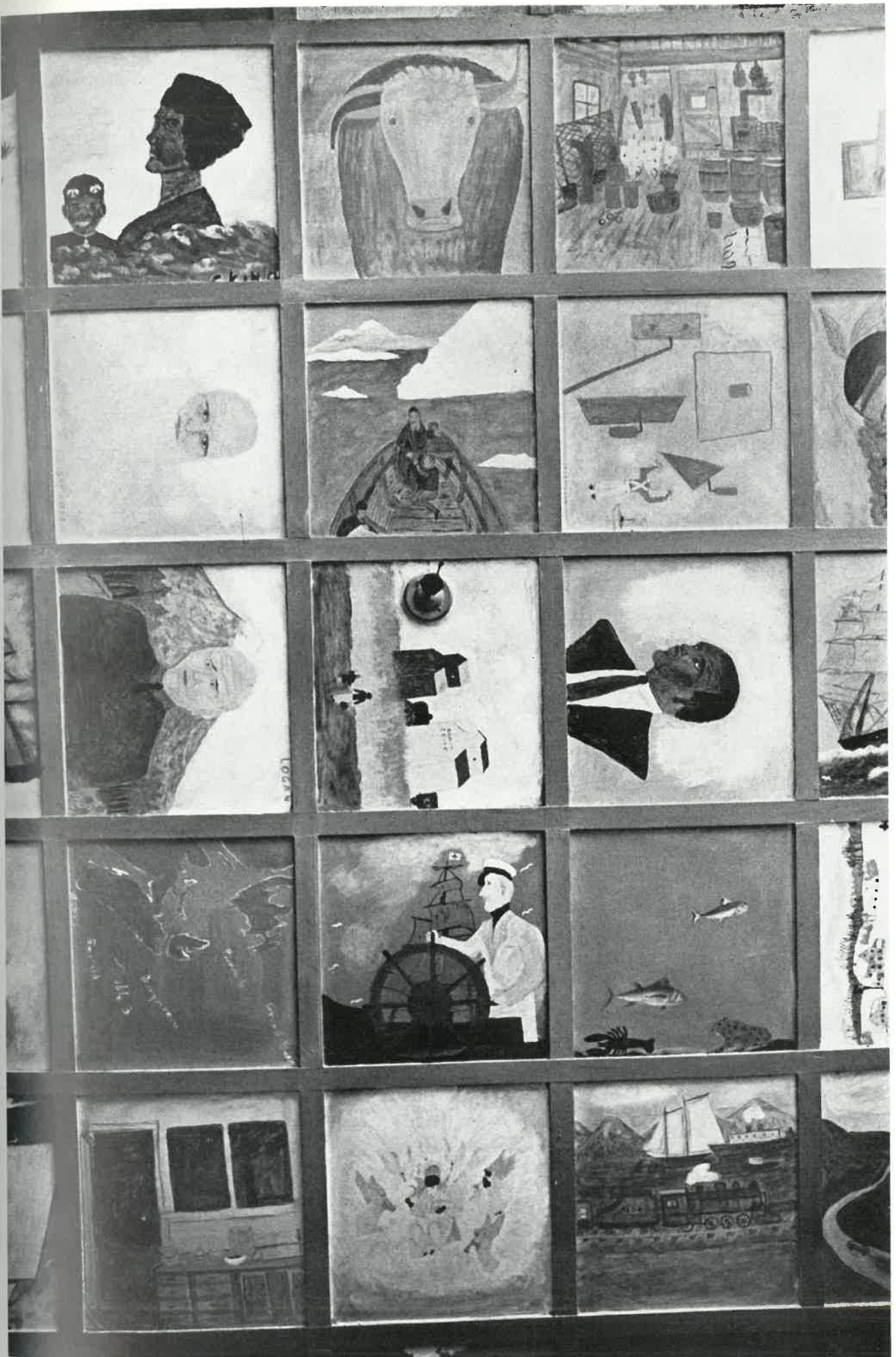
With the exception of a few art classes included in the curriculum at a Normal School in Toronto, where she took her teacher's training, she is untrained. The detail she so deliberately chooses to express an idea or mood, blended in subtle, muted colours, speaks of a rich imagination and gluttoned memory. Mrs Morash uses ordinary house paints for most of her work, and paints on whatever surface is available in the seven-room house, whether it is wallpaper, ceiling, door – or pieces of loose leaf paper.

The fact that Mrs Morash is still, at an indeterminate age, a coherent rebel, injects a sense of urgency and originality into her work that enhances the most mundane of observations. Towards that portion of the world suffering from smugness and cultural stagnation she directs: “Oh, I'd like to shake their tranquility, would I!”



1 Kitchen door *The Explorers*
 2 "The Aurora room." View of *Aurora Borealis* in Mrs Morash's bedroom showing star with 13 points on the ceiling, black and white swans signifying mixed colours of all nature, and cupids representing several races.
 3 Wall painting *Halifax Gardens* with sketches of interior
 4 "The Westport room." Wall painting of ferry that runs between Westport and Freeport in Nova Scotia.
 5 Painting on wallpaper
 6 Segmented ceiling paintings showing Mrs Morash and wall painting *Halifax Gardens*
 7 The upper perimeter of this room is devoted to astrological signs and symbolic implements, and portraits

Detail of
ceiling in livingroom



“A FAIRE FIELDE FUL OF FOLKE”

from William Langland's *Piers Plowman* late 14th century, B Text



Rounding a corner on the highway half-way between Aulac, New Brunswick and Cape Tormentine, en route to catch the P.E.I. Ferry, your vision is accosted by a large and rather peculiar gathering, a colony of unmoving and mute figures who sprawl over an embankment in front of a roadside hamburger stand.

These are Andy MacDonald's "people"—put together from Javex bottles, discarded remnants and other assorted oddments, and usually accompanied by a liquor or beer bottle. Arranged in a superb assortment of attitudes to resemble a pantomime in suspension, each figure has pinned to him a piece of cloth or plastic on which is written his most distinguishing thoughts. These wonderfully flamboyant people, holding conversations with each other, are infused with their author's witty perception. They also require a lot of care. After every rainstorm, the water must be emptied from their boots, their heads straightened after a high



