

# Figurative artist Fred Ross made New Brunswick his palette

ALLISON LAWLOR

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Nurtured by the dynamic artistic community of postwar Saint John, figurative artist Fred Ross thrived and went on to become one of New Brunswick's most important artists.

Encouraged by local painters Ted Campbell, Miller Brittain and Jack Humphrey to experience the larger world of art and ideas, Mr. Ross boarded a bus in 1950 and headed to Mexico, where he met Mexican painter Diego Rivera. While the prominent artist was working on a mural at the Palacio Nacional in Mexico City, Mr. Ross boldly approached him and asked permission to draw him. To his surprise, Mr. Ross was invited onto the scaffold where he sketched Mr. Rivera at work for nearly an hour. When he finished, Mr. Rivera asked to look at the drawings. Return home to Saint John, he advised Mr. Ross, to "use the rich, historical background of Canada as subject matter for future projects."

"It was a seminal incident in my dad's life and an affirmation of my dad's art," his son, Chris Ross, said.

Mr. Ross took Mr. Rivera's advice and returned to New Brunswick, making Saint John his lifelong home. On Aug. 19, he died at the age of 87 at Saint John's Turnbull Nursing Home, following a number of recent strokes.

"He found Saint John a really fascinating, unique place. He liked the people," Chris Ross said.

People, not only his wife and three children, but ordinary New Brunswickers, served both as his models and his inspiration. While his art was firmly rooted in place, it was informed by the art he admired, the Mexican muralists, the Italian Renaissance and painters such as Edgar Degas. "He would find in [ordinary people] this timelessness," said Tom Smart, a curator and author who put together the 1993 Beaverbrook Art Gallery retrospective *The Art of Fred Ross – A Timeless Humanism*. Although Mr. Ross had exhibited widely

since the 1950s, the retrospective secured his reputation nationally. "He was looking for humanity and humanism. What does it mean to be human? He was probing that in his art," Mr. Smart said.

Born in 1927 in Saint John, Frederick Joseph Ross and his twin sister, Theresa, were the youngest of five children. His father, Ernest, was a labourer at the Lantic Sugar refinery, eventually becoming union president. In 1944, Mr. Ross began his art studies with Mr. Campbell at the Saint John Vocational School. A decade later, he started teaching at the school and rose to become head of the art department, but resigned in 1970 to devote himself to painting.

With Mr. Campbell's encouragement, in 1946, Mr. Ross painted a large mural at the school depicting its annual picnic. Fundamentally a study in figure painting, the mural was applauded and resulted in a glowing feature story in the Montreal Standard that described him as "Freddie Ross, untrained 18-year-old."

Later that year, Mr. Ross was commissioned by the Fredericton High School to paint a memorial mural in remembrance of the 63 high school graduates who died in the Second World War. He was paid \$700. The work, called *The Destruction of War and Rebuilding the World Through Education*, was a set of two murals, each about six metres high and three metres wide. Intended to show the destruction of war and its reconstruction through education, the mural was unveiled in 1948 and secured his reputation as a talented Canadian muralist.

During renovations in the 1950s, the mural was placed in storage. Later, when the school's library floor was being repaired, the mural was unknowingly used face down as under-flooring. The mural eventually disappeared and was presumed to have been thrown out.

Years later, on his 65th birthday, Mr. Ross visited the New Brunswick Museum with Mr. Smart. They were working on the final parts of the retrospective exhibition due to open shortly at the Beaverbrook Art Gallery. At the museum, the registrar asked Mr. Ross if he would help her identify some large-scale drawings done on brown Kraft paper that had been discovered in a corner of the museum's storage vault. Unrolling one of them, the registrar asked whether they were artist Miller Brittain's?

The soft-spoken, gentle Mr. Ross started to shake and was momentarily speechless. Finally, he let out that they were his detailed drawings of the high school war mural. He had left them at the museum 40 years earlier and

forgotten about them. The drawings, which were later purchased by the National Gallery of Canada, would become essential tools in recreating the mural almost a decade later.

“Fred had a beautiful gift: He could draw like an angel. In my own life and career I have seen very few artists who were as gifted at drawing as was Fred Ross. I am astounded at how expressive his drawings are,” Mr. Smart said.

In 2010, New Brunswick artist William Forrestall approached Mr. Ross with the idea that he work as the Renaissance masters once did, with three studio apprentices, overseeing the work, to recreate the lost war mural based on his original drawings. Mr. Ross agreed.

“Like many great teachers, Fred was not easy to please,” said artist Amy Ash, who worked on the mural project. “To say he had a lot invested in the project – time, energy and heart – would be an understatement; he didn’t want to see it lost again through a representation he didn’t agree with.”

Mr. Ross was delighted when the recreated mural was unveiled on June 27, 2011, at the University of New Brunswick in Fredericton. “Seldom, if ever, does one get a second chance like this,” Mr. Ross said at the time. “I’m not aware of any other work in Canada, or anywhere else in the world, that has been resurrected in this way.”

“It was clearly an incredibly special moment for Fred,” said Ms. Ash, who remembers Mr. Ross holding her hand and congratulating her and her colleagues on their work. “I think, even after months of working on it every day, we were all shocked at the size of the thing looming above us.”

Aside from art, the other love of his life was Sheila Urquhart, a young dancer he met at a party shortly after she moved back to New Brunswick from England. Sponsored by the YMCA, Ms. Ross set up a ballet school and taught dance. The couple married in 1954.

“She was his muse, his model, his inspiration and his love. The beauty that radiates from his work is due in a great part to the sheer joy he found in his life with my mother,” Chris Ross said.

On the wall in his room at the nursing home where he lived at the end of his life hung a tender drawing of his wife, who died in 1998 after suffering from esophageal cancer. He called the drawing "one of the loveliest things I have."

Recognized for his ability to capture young people on the cusp of adulthood, the artist often called on Chris Ross and his two sisters to model for him. "Modelling was our household 'chore,' just something we were expected to do as members of an artistic family," the younger Mr. Ross said. "We didn't have to cut the grass, but we always had to model." Sheila Ross later ran the Ring Gallery on Saint John's Prince William Street, where Mr. Ross sold his paintings. The gallery was above Tim Isaac Antiques Art and Auctions, where Mr. Ross would often find old vases or other objects to use as props. Mr. Ross kept his studio above the gallery, on the building's top floor. He later moved to other studios within the city, and continued to work until about a year and a half before he died.

Wanting natural light, he always made sure his studios had large windows. They were fascinating, magical places where visitors would find shelves of art books, paintings, drawings and sketches tacked on the walls or scattered on tables or strewn across the floor. Props such as vases of flowers, ballet shoes, a Persian rug, or a top hat were in every corner, along with his old rocking horse and a rusting tuba.

He loved having visitors over to talk about art and the latest art opening. "He was very charming," said Bernard Cormier, Saint John's cultural affairs officer. "There was always a twinkle in his eye."

For his work, some of which is part of the National Gallery of Canada's collection, Mr. Ross was named to the Order of Canada and received an honorary doctorate from the University of New Brunswick and the Order of New Brunswick.

Mr. Ross leaves his son; daughters, Lorna and Catherine; grandchildren, Julia, Jeremy, Olivia, Thea, Liam and Aiden; and his sister, Theresa.