

## DVD Extras

# Ronald (Gyo-Zo) Spickett: His Calgary Mural Paintings in Context

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**Textual Complement to video located at:**

**<https://dspace.ucalgary.ca/handle/1880/46797>**

The goal of this text is to provide historical information to complement the 2008 video “Figures in Time and Space.” This video presents the artist Ronald (Gyo-Zo) Spickett in conversation with Geoffrey Simmins, discussing two historically important mural paintings that he executed in Calgary, one in 1949, the other in 1969. These mural paintings are unusual in the context of Calgary art; although common elsewhere, such as in Mexico, and in some other Canadian cities (particularly in central and eastern Canada), murals in Calgary are rare. These murals are thus of considerable historical significance—which is why we wanted to complete a video on them. There is also another reason for undertaking a video on these murals: although both are located in “public” settings, neither is in an optimal location for public viewing. The first is located in a stairwell in the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology; the second is located in the John J. Bowlen Building, formerly a provincial courthouse, whose future is uncertain since the courts have been relocated.

The main goal of the project is to help Calgarians, here at the university and in the rest of the city as well, to understand and become acquainted with an important part of their artistic heritage. The video coincides with, and complements the efforts of, a 2009 retrospective of the artist’s work held at the Nickle Arts Museum at the University of Calgary (25 September-7 November 2009).

## **Ronald (Gyo-Zo) Spickett—An Overview**

Ronald (Gyo-Zo) Spickett (born 1926) has lived and worked in Calgary since the 1940s, when he came here from his native city, Regina, to attend the Provincial Institute of Technology and Art (forerunner of today's Alberta College of Art and Design, or ACAD). He enjoyed a distinguished career of teaching both at the Alberta College of Art and Design as well as the University of Calgary's Department of Art. In 1955, Spickett won a scholarship to attend an important school in Mexico. There he became familiar with the Mexican mural tradition. Spickett later traveled to Japan, and was inspired by the artistic traditions of that country. He also became interested in Zen Buddhism, and became an ordained Buddhist priest in 1984, when he adopted the Buddhist name Gyo-Zo, which means, "Everything he does is very spiritual." His name is pronounced with a hard G, and both O's are long—as in "go."

## **Murals in Canadian Art and in Ron (Gyo-Zo) Spickett's practice**

Two distinct waves of interest in mural painting among Canadian artists are relevant to this discussion: the first extended from c. 1900 to 1930; the second started after World War II and extended through the mid-1960s. France and the U.S. influenced the former; Mexico influenced the latter. Art historian Marilyn McKay has shown that from Confederation until the 1930s, murals served to emphasize and strengthen public civic values in Canada.<sup>1</sup> French artist Pierre Puvis de Chavannes (1824-1898) and the City Beautiful Movement influenced murals executed around 1900. Toronto's George Reid (1860-1947) exemplifies this trend. Reid executed mural designs for Toronto City hall in 1899 showing pioneers, and also personifications of

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<sup>1</sup> Marilyn J. McKay, *A National Soul: Canadian Mural Painting, 1860s-1930s* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002).

Discovery, Fame, Fortune, and Adventure.<sup>2</sup> During the 1920s, members of the Group of Seven executed several mural commissions, including William Rae and J. E. H. MacDonald's well-known work at St. Anne's Anglican Church, 270 Gladstone Avenue, in the western end of Toronto (1923-25).<sup>3</sup>

During the 1940s, Canadian artists' interest in murals reawakened, due to the international acclaim accorded to Mexico's famous muralists José Clemente Orozco (1883-1949), David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896-1974), and Diego Rivera (1886-1957).<sup>4</sup> Mexico's nationalistic school of mural painting influenced a number of Canadian artists, who, in emulation of their Mexican counterparts, typically chose subjects drawn from national life and history. Canadian artists who executed murals during the 1940s and '50s include Fred Ross (1927-) and Miller Brittain (1912-68). Ross was born in St. John New Brunswick, and studied at the Vocational Institute in that city and later in Mexico, with Pablo O'Higgins. Ross received, as Spickett later would also, an O'Keefe Award, and he traveled and painted in the United States, Mexico, and Europe. Ross executed a large and impressive mural that now is part of the permanent collection of the Beaverbrook Art Museum, in St. John. The National Gallery of Canada collection possesses a large number of Ross's works, several of which are mural subjects. For example, in 1947 Ross executed cartoons for the Fredericton High School, with the subject of "The Destruction of War and Rebuilding the World Through Education." Diego Rivera strongly influenced Ross, so much so that in 1950, on Ross's second visit to Mexico City, he met Rivera and received his permission to draw Diego while he was working on the murals at the Palacio Nacional in Mexico City.<sup>5</sup> Miller Brittain also designed sketches for murals—although he did not enjoy success in seeing them completed. In 1941, for example, he completed an ambitious series of eleven cartoons for a projected mural for the Saint John Hospital; these were judged

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<sup>2</sup> See: [http://www.toronto.ca/old\\_cityhall/old\\_cityhall\\_tour.htm](http://www.toronto.ca/old_cityhall/old_cityhall_tour.htm) (accessed 3 September 2008).

<sup>3</sup> For St. Anne's, see: <http://www.stannes.on.ca/> and <http://doorsopen.360capture.com/showcase.php?id=2&url=http://www.toronto.ca/doorsopen/index.htm> (accessed 3 September 2008)

<sup>4</sup> Desmond Rochefort, *Mexican Muralists: Orozco, Rivera, Siqueiros* (New York: Universe Publishing, 1974).

<sup>5</sup> There are three Ross drawings of Rivera in the National Gallery of Canada's collection.

to be too controversial in subject and the mural never went ahead.<sup>6</sup>

Three other artists who produced murals during the same period as Spickett deserve mention. The most prolific and successful Canadian muralist at this time was York Wilson (1907-84).<sup>7</sup> Wilson, who lived with his wife in Mexico for several years during the 1950s, painted at least thirteen large-scale murals for Canadian public and corporate clients, the earliest in 1940, the latest in 1973.<sup>8</sup> Among these, certain attained national acclaim, such as Canada's largest mural, the "Seven Lively Arts," painted in 1960 for the lobby of the Hummingbird Centre (formerly the O'Keefe Centre) in Toronto; and the 1957 mural the "Story of Oil," in the Imperial Oil Building, 111 St. Clair Avenue West, Toronto.<sup>9</sup> Artist Kenneth Lochhead (1926-2006), better known as a teacher and an easel painter, also enjoyed some success as a mural painter. Lochhead executed a mural for Gander Airport, titled *Bird in Flight*, begun and completed between the spring and end of June of 1959.<sup>10</sup> Charles F. Comfort (1900-1994), one-time director of the National Gallery and a prolific artist who worked in a number of different styles and subjects, also executed some large-scale murals. For the National Library in Ottawa, Comfort created two murals, *Legacy* and *Heritage*. They measured some eleven by three metres each.<sup>11</sup> Thus it is clear that while Ron Spickett was among the pioneers in the West when it came to murals, this tradition was also strong elsewhere in Canada, and may have inspired Spickett to seek similar commissions in Calgary and region.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The Brittain cartoons are now in the collection of the New Brunswick Museum, St. John, and are described and illustrated in Tom Smart, *Miller Brittain: When The Stars Threw Down Their Spears* (Fredericton, N.B.: Goose Lane Editions, 2007). See also: Barry Lord, *The History of Painting in Canada: Towards a People's Art* (Toronto: New Canada Press, 1974), 186-189. At least one of the cartoons is now in the collection of the National Gallery in Ottawa.

<sup>7</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of Wilson's career and work, see: <http://www.yorkwilson.com/murals/introduction.htm> (accessed 3 September 2008).

See: <sup>8</sup> <http://www.yorkwilson.com/murals/chronology.htm> (accessed 3 September 2008).

<sup>9</sup> These murals are described in detail at the following site: <http://www.yorkwilson.com/murals/seven.htm> (accessed 3 September 2008).

<sup>10</sup> See Donald W. Buchanan, "An Artist from the Prairies Designs a Mural for Gander Airport," *Canadian Art* 60 15 no. 2 (April 1958): 126-127. See also: <http://www.ganderairport.com/infrastructure.htm> (accessed 3 September 2008). Atypically, this mural was executed (at least in part) in egg tempera—not typically a medium that lends itself to mural applications.

<sup>11</sup> As documented at: <http://www.collectionscanada.ca/5/7/a7-4100-e.html> (accessed 3 September 2008).

<sup>12</sup> Although murals generally fell into disfavour during the latter 1960s, certain towns have since become associated with murals, notably: Chemainus, B.C. Pembroke, and Winnipeg. See, for example: <http://www.chemainus.com/> and

Spickett's earliest mural dates to 1949. He was then still a student at the Provincial Institute of Technology and the Arts (PITA, now SAIT). I.H. Kerr (1905-1989) taught mural painting. By the late 1940s Kerr conceived of an ambitious program of murals for the school. In the 1948-49 *Tech Art Record* (the school's annual yearbook), Kerr contributed an illustrated article describing the mural program. "These be stirring times—the walls are coming to life!"<sup>13</sup> he began, and then explained that "advanced art students who complete satisfactory sketches are now mounting scaffolds to liven our walls with color" [sic]. After explaining that the scheme had the approval both of the principal and the minister of education, he related how the mural subjects had come to be chosen. The subjects chosen were discussed in class and were relevant to Alberta life and history—according to Kerr, "Alberta's history, natural resources, industries and agricultural background," as well as the "Institute's activities, educational, cultural, athletic." Kerr took pains to explain that "A mural is not simply a huge painting. It is primarily a wall decoration and one keyed to its architectural setting. This calls for a sense of basic structure governing the forms of design. The flatness of the walls must not be destroyed through an illusion of depth. Extreme naturalism is out of place."<sup>14</sup> Kerr went on to say that by year's end, "we hope quite a number of panels will demonstrate a variety of technical treatments. So far (in February) only the burning zeal of Ron Spickett and Roy Kiyooka have served to make the Institute 'mural conscious'....in time, no doubt, Tech will rival the Sistine Chapel."

This early Spickett mural was inspired, albeit indirectly, and through reproductions and reputation, more by U.S. precedents than Mexican ones, in particular, murals by the American artist Thomas Hart Benton (1889-1985). Benton's murals captured the spirit of frontier America, starting in the 1930s and extending

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<http://www.themuralsofwinnipeg.com/> and <http://www.chemainus.com/arts/murals/Chemainus-murals.htm> (accessed 3 September 2008).

<sup>13</sup> I.H. Kerr, "About Murals," *Tech Art Record*, 1948-49, n.p.

<sup>14</sup> Kerr, "About Murals," n.p. Clearly, some of Kerr's remarks were more applicable in theory than in practice. The stairwell locations of the murals were unfortunate and bore little relationship with the architecture. And while Roy Kiyooka's football subject could be related to the Institute's activities, Dennis Webb's illustration of what appears to be a fearsome Maya sacrifice bears little relationship with Calgary, Alberta, to say the least.

until 1960. Benton's sweeping Regionalist style, which deliberately elevated ordinary people to heroic status, seems to have been the main point that inspired the Alberta artists. Discussing his own Canadian mural projects in 2006, Gyo-Zo remembers being inspired by the *Opening of the Land in Oklahoma*. This work wasn't realized until 1960, however, at the Harry S. Truman Library in Independence, Missouri. Perhaps it was another work; Benton executed many murals.<sup>15</sup> There are really no stylistic comparisons to Benton's work, which tends to exaggerate and attenuate figures in a unique manner, not one that either Spickett or the other Alberta artists copied. The Abstract Expressionist movement, one of whose main practitioners, Jackson Pollock (1912-1956) had been one of Benton's students, supplanted Benton's Regionalist sensibilities.

By the spring of 1949 Spickett had duly completed his mural at the Provincial Institute. Its theme was early Alberta pioneers, who are shown interacting with a group of three aboriginal men on horseback, while others busy themselves with work around a fortified encampment.<sup>16</sup> This seems to be the earliest example of Spickett's longstanding interest in horses and riders. In terms of technique, Spickett used oil painting combined with chalk or talcum, which a local paper reported was used to 'flatten' the picture and reduce the glare.<sup>17</sup> The many different figures are skillfully executed. The only critique one might advance about it is that the figures, while well executed in their own right, fail to interact with one another convincingly. One could also certainly observe that its location in a stairwell does not provide for an optimal viewing experience. Nonetheless, it was an ambitious mural and Spickett used it as a springboard for later mural projects. Spickett went on to realize several other murals in Calgary, all of which are lost. His largest and

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<sup>15</sup> For example, in 1936 Benton completed "The Social History of the State of Missouri," which is located in the Missouri State capitol building. This famous mural was widely known during the period. See: <http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/Exhibit/5437/Benton.html> (accessed 3 September 2008).

<sup>16</sup> By coincidence, I visited the mural in October 2005, and met there an artist named Gertrude Hudson (née Anderson), who was a student there two years behind Ron Spickett. She also executed a mural there at SAIT, a naturalistic mural showing birds, and had restored it in 2003. She remembered that Illingworth Kerr was the main figure involved in the promotion of murals at PITA.

<sup>17</sup> "Student Murals Depict Alberta's Heritage," *Calgary Herald*, n.d., n.p., copy Ronald Spickett *fonds*. This technique was confirmed in an email to the author, Helena Hadala, 21 October 2005, reporting on a telephone conversation with Gyo-Zo of that same day.

most ambitious mural, however, was not executed until 1969—at the Bowlen Building in Calgary, in 1969. This is the second mural discussed in this video. Local art critic Nancy Tousley contributed a detailed article on the mural. Commenting on Spickett's decision to depict a wide range of Alberta citizens—pioneers, horsemen, immigrants, children and scientists—she remarked: "Spickett has used the long expanse of the painting to suggest the passage of time by blending images that refer to the present with the images of the historical past. At the centre is a group of western Canadian horsemen wearing big hats. Symbols of the West, the horsemen also refer in a more general way to the rider as a 'symbol of search, control and harmony, and the relationship of man and nature.' To the left of the riders is a group of figures representing children at play, which Spickett intended to 'suggest free exchange of ideas, development, competition, co-operation and curiosity.' The figures on the right suggest the roots of Alberta's culture in immigration and the technological and scientific progress that shapes the future."<sup>18</sup>

It is perhaps instructive to compare the Bowlen Building mural with his earlier PITA mural. Both depict Alberta pioneers; both use men on horseback important visual as symbolic reference points; both tell the story of Alberta pioneers via a combination of narrative elements. But during the twenty years that separate these two paintings, Spickett had added much to his repertoire. Perhaps the single most notable change is in style: in contrast to the rather static yet realistic figures of the 1949 PITA mural, the Bowlen Building bears witness to a much more fluid sense of figural treatment and of space itself, which, as already argued, stemmed from his mid-'60s figural work. The figures fill the space and create a powerful rhythmic pattern across its surface. The figures themselves are much more varied in terms of groupings and gesture: some reach upwards, some squat and look to the ground; tender vignettes reward the careful viewer (particularly the way that a child reaches her arm to hug a mustachioed man with suspenders). The colours are varied, albeit somewhat muted; olives and oranges combine with black and selected passages of blue. Then too, the artist has expanded his conception of "western." In the PITA mural, West meant western Canadian; the

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<sup>18</sup> Nancy Tousley, "Large mural honors our human resources," *Calgary Herald*, undated article, copy in Ronald Spickett *fonds*.

mural really is about the Calgary region. But in the Bowlen Building mural, West means something much larger, embracing what seems to be the Western world itself. There seem to be Mexican figures in the midst of the locals. It's as if the world—geographical as well as artistic—has come to visit. To put it another way, the later mural is of symphonic dimensions and scope, whereas the earlier mural was simply a pleasant single folk melody: one might compare the former to the folk melodies by which Mahler was inspired and the latter to Mahler's symphonies, which quoted extensively from folk melodies, but transformed them utterly in a new symphonic context. Be that as it may, this mural stands as a significant example of a once widespread tradition of mural painting in North America. It was also Spickett's single largest work, suggesting what he might have realized had mural commissions been more numerous. In 2008, the Court of Queen's Bench and The Provincial Court of Alberta relocated to the new Calgary Courts Centre at 601 5th Street SW, leaving the future of the Bowlen Building, and the mural, uncertain.

Thus we hope that you enjoy hearing Gyo-Zo speak about the creation of these two murals, as well as discussing more generally his approach to painting figures in space. Enjoy!