

Annora Brown of Fort Macleod

J. Doris Hunt



The Winnipeg Tribune, 1957

Annora Brown with 'Travois', oil, 1954

Annora Brown est à la veille de ses quatre-vingts ans. Cet extrait d'une biographie non publiée examine les motifs qui ont dominé le travail de ce peintre de paysages de l'ouest Canadien.

Annora Brown was born in southern Alberta in 1899. Her deep love for the prairie landscape, her interest in the culture of the Plains Indian and her passion for the wildflowers of the Canadian West have dominated her paintings, ink drawings and writing for over 60 years.

She was the only woman among the founding members of the ASA, and was among the first group of Alberta painters to exhibit at the National Gallery. Her book, Old Man's Garden (Went's 1954), which contained botanical scholarship, history, folklore, legend and her own illustrations, was the first book on Canada's western flora. The Glenbow-Alberta Institute in Calgary owns 200 of the wildflower paintings she produced over her professional career.

Since 1965, Annora Brown has lived in British Columbia, where, on the verge of her eightieth birthday, she continues to paint and write.

The following article contains two excerpts from Annora Brown of Fort Macleod, Her Life and Art, an unpublished biography by J. Doris Hunt who, as a practising painter, has been closely associated with Annora Brown since 1932. The excerpts discuss Brown's response to the prairie landscape and focus on her pioneering use of the grain elevator as a motif.

At the very beginning of her career as an artist, Annora had been attracted by the grain elevator. Telephone poles and elevators were the only vertical elements breaking the vast horizontal expanse of prairie and sky. Of these two, only the elevator was massive enough in form to be in scale with the surrounding space. It existed either singly or in a variety of

groupings that created endless opportunities for composition. Besides its appeal as significant form, the elevator was also loaded with symbolism. The single elevator was as valid a symbol of the great lone land as Thomson's Jackpine; the groupings symbolized the achievement of the settlers in conquering the wilderness, the productivity of the prairie soil, the link that joined the West to the rest of Canada, and Canada to the world.

Still, the neighbours asked, 'Why don't you paint windmills?'

Annora made friends with three Lethbridge painters, Mike Pisko, Ted Faiers, and Percy Henson, who were as passionate in their devotion to the prairies as she was. They sketched together, shared their enthusiasms, and discussed their feelings for grain elevators. Annora submitted (to an exhibition of Alberta art) a painting which depicted elevators silhouetted against the sky in the afterglow when the world was dark except for the clear orange and red strip in the sky where the sun had set. The show finally came to Lethbridge, and the four friends were highly amused to discover that each had contributed an elevator picture to the collection.

By the mid-forties, when a touring exhibit of some thirty pictures included sixteen paintings of elevators, Annora felt that the theme of the grain elevator had become hackneyed, and turned more of her attention to other landscape themes, where prairie meets mountains, and the dramatic moods of sun and storm.

The elevators, however, would not be denied! One summer just at the end of the war sketching trips were limited by the shortage of gas and the infirmities of age suffered by the car, Edward. Somehow, no composition seemed complete without a glimpse of elevators and, finally, after spending a swelteringly hot afternoon painting a close-up of the whole group of Mac-

leod elevators in the brilliant sunshine, we¹ exclaimed in our exhaustion, 'That's the end! Never, never, will we. . . !'

We were at supper when the downpour started. Annora, who was slicing bread, winced as a streak of light flashed from the end of her knife. An explosive crash rent the air as flames consumed an oil storage tank near the station. Then she said calmly, 'I don't care how tired you are. When the rain stops we are going out to paint puddles. People say it never rains in Alberta.'

Minutes later, she backed Edward out of the garage, remarking, 'Of course you know where the best puddles are — in the ruts of those trails near the elevators.'

To avoid miring in the mud and water, we parked on the same weed-covered knoll that we had occupied earlier, and gazed at the dark, glistening elevators, the sky, now clear at the horizon but still filled higher up with tatters of storm clouds in violent movement, the whole mirrored in the pools of water which covered the roads. Annora's painting must have existed already in her mind's eye for she set to work quickly. By eliminating all but one elevator, and concentrating upon the rendering of atmosphere and of spatial relationships, she painted, not another elevator picture, but a sketch of sky and water that captured much of the elemental force of the scene.

The finished painting,* which I saw several years later, overawed me. The control used to select the elements and to eliminate all clutter from the design, the single stark elevator acting as a focus, surrounded by vast space in all three dimensions, the relationships conveyed by the light from the low prairie horizon, giving colour as it reached the clouds of the high sky, the clouds themselves reflected in the puddles, all communicated to the spectator the sense of being within an ordered, subtly but palpably structured space. By including the small figure of the horse and rider picking their way between the puddles, the artist demonstrated that it was a space of great magnitude.

Early in 1951, Gerald Riddell, Canada's first permanent delegate to the United Nations, died with tragic suddenness at the height of his career. As a memorial a group of his shocked classmates decided to present to United College a painting, preferably of western Canada. When my contribution was requested, it transpired that several paintings from locally known Winnipeg artists had already been solicited by the selection committee. Since no work by any of these artists had ever made the same impact on me as Annora's strong statement about the West, I requested her to send the puddle painting immediately for the consideration of the committee.

The reception was astounding.

'It's an elevator!' said the librarian. 'I couldn't possibly work with anything so ugly as an elevator hanging on the wall.'

'An elevator is quite unsuited for a memorial,' added another.

A learned professor pontificated, 'The grain elevator is a symbol of the sordid commercialism that has sterilized the culture of the West.'

Someone sighed, 'If only she had painted a windmill. . . .'

Both baffled and angered, I protested that an elevator and a windmill are equally related to the grain trade, that probably no one thought a windmill beautiful until an artist had painted it, and that, in any case, the artists who had popularized the

windmill were themselves the product of a commercial society. Finally, reminding them that they were buying a picture, not the object that it represented, I departed with righteous indignation, retrieving the precious object from the land of the Philistines.

Determined to justify my opinion of the painting, I wrote a letter of explanation and sent the picture off forthwith to Ottawa, to another classmate, B. T. Richardson of newspaper fame. What a triumph was the reply! Wilfrid Eggleston wanted to buy the picture. Soon afterwards he devoted part of a CBC broadcast to the art of Annora Brown, and on Christmas Eve, he wrote:

We don't know one another in person but we have heard of one another. My wife and I felt we must write you to tell you what constant and deep pleasure we receive from daily admiration of your picture of the lone grain elevator. . . . My wife spent her girlhood in the Crowsnest Pass. My own early years were in the Nanton, Medicine Hat and Lethbridge areas. I first saw your work at President Newton's home in Edmonton, and liked it immediately. Was your model the single elevator west of Macleod (Peigan?) by any chance? It doesn't matter, it is a rich and most satisfying composition.

Annora's reply tells the story behind the painting:

No, the elevator is not the lone one at Peigan, though that has intrigued me often. It is one of the Macleod elevators and the sketch happened this way. I had a friend sketching here with me and every time we went out we seemed to gravitate toward elevators. No matter how far we went there was sure to be an elevator in our sketch somewhere. One hot afternoon we went out and really 'did' them. We sat near enough that we got the whole group and even the trucks going in and out. It took quite a lot of drawing and we came home hot and tired.

Then there was a cloudburst! You know what that does to a hot day. I announced that I was going out to paint PUDDLES. I was NOT going to do elevators. But, of course, the nicest puddles were in front of the elevators. To make it a puddle picture rather than an elevator picture I did just one elevator. I liked it best of all my sketches so I enlarged it. I am ever so pleased that it has found a place among friends.

Oh, I almost called it, 'It Does Rain Sometimes,' because at that time there were so many dustbowlish pictures of pale barren prairie going the rounds and eastern critics were saying that the artists had caught the 'colourlessness of the prairies.' The idea that the prairies are colourless always infuriates me.

Though economic success is not the major goal of artistic creation, it rewards the artist with the same satisfactions that place a value on all forms of work. A true work of art, however, has a multiplicity of meanings which stimulate varied types of response in its audience, and these, in turn, create varied rewards for the artist. Psychoanalytic study of the processes of artistic creation has abundantly demonstrated the vital necessity of a public. Wherever artistic creation takes place the idea of a public exists even though an artist most jealous of [her] his privacy may think of [her] his public in terms of only one real or imagined person. The acknowledgement by response is essential to confirm the artist's own belief in [her] his work. The articulate responses of people like the Newtons and the Egglestons give to the artist profound psychological satisfactions.

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Since oil paints had become readily available, and plywood and masonite made reasonable substitutes for the traditional canvas, Annora was able to indulge herself in the luxury of

1 J. Doris Hunt was visiting and sketching with Annora Brown at this time.

*This painting is now in the Emma Read Newton Collection

the rich colours and textures that could be achieved with this medium. Her work expanded to include more and larger oil paintings. They were painted in the studio, some from oil sketches, many from compositions sketched in pencil which often included verbal notations concerning mood, tone or colour. These landscapes of rolling prairies and mountain uplands, of sky and atmosphere, are more than a record of what the eye saw. By eliminating irrelevant detail, the elements of rhythm and harmony were disengaged from all accidentals, and unified in bold, fully integrated design. They are the pictorial equivalent of a deep personal experience of nature.

The actual discovery of a segment of landscape that will serve as a motif for painting is made by a response of the unconscious which detects in it an affinity, an inner bond, a common rhythm, that links the character of the scene to the spirit of the artist. Thus Annora Brown does not impose a design upon nature, as seems to be implied occasionally by persons who have described her work as 'formalistic' or 'decorative,' and who refer constantly to her training in design. The visible landscape is a manifestation of complex and dynamic inner forces which materialize themselves in forms that disclose the nature and strength of these inner tensions. If the artist is to grasp this symbolic sense of a landscape, it is necessary to distinguish between the predominant elements and the merely accidental, between the character of the whole and the character of the separate parts. When the predominant element is a cosmic one,

such as clouds and sky, sunshine, wind or storm, the effect is to unite all the elements of the composition in such a way that the influence of the cosmic element dominates and harmonizes the effects of the individual features of the landscape. The ability of the artist to disengage from accidentals the dynamic forces unfolding as forms, and to distinguish the unifying cosmic element, gives a landscape painting the significance of symbolism. When this is successfully achieved, the painting expresses not only the natural forces but the artist's inner sense of communion with nature.

This gift for mystical communion with nature, experienced for the first time in her meeting with God on the rockpile, encouraged perhaps by Lawren Harris's transcendentalism, nourished certainly by her Quaker tradition, is the quality that enables Annora Brown to make her paintings, not the mere record of a visual effect, but the revelation of the dynamic forces that create the mood and the character of the landscape. Rather than striving to seize the passing moment as the Impressionists did, her philosophy of landscape is more akin to Bergson's concepts of duration and creative evolution. The oil paintings of the forties result from the full development of her will not to impose design but to reveal it. The painting bought by the Egglestons, for instance, is more than the portrait of a lone elevator, more than a study of reflections in puddles: though unequivocally western Canadian in subject, it achieves universal significance as a symbol of life-giving rain.



Annora Brown, 'Puddles' oil, 1946-7.