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Philip Surrey, Artist: A Newsletter for Collectors

A Field Guide to Surrey's Artworks

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PHILIP SURREY, ARTIST: A NEWSLETTER
FOR COLLECTORS
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T.F.R.

An Editorial: Surrey Was the Eyes of an Era and it's Not Over

If you own a Philip Henry Surrey painting, pastel or drawing in mixed media, you are uncommonly fortunate. Between 1929 and 1989, Surrey produced only a few hundred works – excluding his single medium (graphite, charcoal, chalk or crayon) drawings. Counting and cataloguing the precise number is a work in progress with no end in clear view: Surrey kept inexact records of how much he produced and no records at all of how much he destroyed as “unsatisfactory.” He was a severe critic of his own work and a thorough one who allowed only a small number of unfinished works to outlive him and even fewer sub-standard ones: in an era that lacked household paper shredders, he recycled what he could and burned what he couldn't. To say this is not to suggest that all his works are of uniform value and accomplishment: it is to say that each one he preserved succeeds, on his terms, as a careful observation of something not immediately obvious to most people but something with the potential to establish a mutual connection between the dead artist and the quick viewer. Put another way, he preserved whatever reinforced an intuition that in some profound way *electricity* both illuminates the past and emancipates us from it.

As I write this, I'm looking at page 2 of *The Westmount Independent* of June 28, 2016 – a full page paid advertisement by the Alan Klinkhoff Gallery that's illustrated by Surrey's *Ste Catherine St. at St Clement*, July-August 1973. It's oil on board and measures 16x12 inches. It was the work of many hours over many days – labour that made no economic sense whatsoever. But Surrey was able to pursue his art with



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reckless disregard of economic consequences because on June 23, 1964, his employer John McConnell did something wonderful for Canadian Painting. He relieved Surrey of his regular duties as Features Editor at *Weekend Magazine* and kept him on staff at full salary as a part time consultant until his

retirement pension took effect in October 1975. Twelve years of life as a full time painter were handed to Surrey, out of the blue and he put them to very good use.

Even though Surrey made substantial amounts of money from his artworks in the years following his “release” from journalism, the artistic practices he adopted, adapted and innovated ran counter to the marketplace. Ste Catherine St. at St Clement is an obscure street corner in Viauville, the furthest east Surrey seems to have painted on the island of Montreal. It’s east of the Olympic Stadium and south of the new Planetarium and not at all obvious as a locale for one of his paintings. How did he find his way there? My best guess is that he’d parked his car on a residential side street rather than pay the parking fees being charged at the Olympic Stadium while attending an Expos game. But the more important question is how did he find his way to creating such an elegant work so timeless in so many ways that you can forgive the androgynous figure in the foreground for wearing bell bottoms and platform footwear? Well, one of the things he did was move the sinuous helix of staircases around the corner from St Clement where they still stand to Ste Catherine where they never were. His paintings are many things but they aren’t literal.

For Surrey, a picture had to have *presence* to be any good: otherwise, it was mere interior decoration no matter its price tag, the celebrity of its painter or the prestige of the wall upon which it was hung. *Presence* (in late twentieth century French art criticism – Yves Bonnefoy, specifically) means the transfiguration of time and space by the moment and the event: viewing a *good picture* is always an intimate encounter with who we are or what the Other is. It contains within itself a shock of recognition, an indrawing of breath, a silence that articulates itself in physical reaction. Surrey, a zealous pedestrian and notorious jaywalker, crossed streets like a matador and, in his studio, used his forefinger like an *acero* when pointing to where a work “hit the mark.” Hitting the mark – like a bullfighter, a cricketer, an actor, that was the thing that made an artwork satisfying, successful and worth preserving no matter how humble its materials or small its size.

Surrey was as modernistic as any 20th century “modern painter” in embracing the notion that this emotional rapport with a picture has everything to do with the arrangement of colours on a flat surface

but parted company with most other artists on the issue of monumentalism: nothing deserves special attention because of its size or the self-importance of its subject matter or, worse, its underlying *theory*. He had no quarrel with Abstract Expressionism *per se* but foresaw the danger of its chief practitioners and promoters espousing triumphalist capitalist values and creating a self-perpetuating oligarchy of painters, dealers, collectors and public galleries enclosed within a Manhattan ghetto plagued by grandiosity, narcissism, tomfoolery and flimflam.

The key point of this Newsletter is to describe some of the principal impulses underlying Surrey's selection of a subject for an artwork and how one could lead to another and how individually and collectively they influenced his choice of formats and media. In the September Newsletter, I'll illustrate in greater detail some of the ways several subjects and formats came together during the summer he spent painting on Île Bizard in 1966 and suggest some relationships to both the political vision that propelled him and the poetics that layered his painting.

A Field Guide to Surrey's Artworks

Part 1

Ste Catherine St. at St Clement is one of a short series of paintings of spiral staircases that Surrey created between 1970 and 1975. You don't have to look very far to find (what I assume to be) the first in the series: it too is a recent acquisition of the Alan Klinkhoff Gallery: *Rue Henri-Julien*, 1970, oil on board 16x24 seems to have been painted in October—November 1970, at the height of the October Crisis as a *homage* to his close friend Jean Paul Lemieux (1904—1990), who may well be the driver portrayed in the parked car, and to one of Lemieux's primary influences, the artist and cartoonist Henri Julien (1852—1908) whose gouache portrait of *Un Vieux de '37* had been (mis)appropriated by the FLQ. When the maxicoat over a miniskirt look was introduced into Canadian women's fashion in the autumn of 1970, a chain of department stores ran advertisements for "The Long and the Short of *It*" and what

Henri Julien says to me is that for Surrey, the long and the short of it was that Quebec's future in Canada or outside it would be decided by the choices young women made. It would be a half dozen years before they (and many of their mothers) would decimate the Catholic Church in Quebec by simply walking away from it over the issue of birth control, a more revolutionary act than anything any political faction had ever espoused as more than a whistle in the wind.



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Between 1973 and 1975, Surrey extended this series of spiral staircases to include *Curly Staircase* aka *Adolescents and Staircases* aka *Adolescents*, which in its final iteration is 30x40 oil on canvas, completed in February 1973.



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Ten months later, from mid-November through to mid-December, Surrey set to work on *Crépuscule Bleu* (Blue Evening) 40x60 acrylic on canvas before taking a holiday in Mexico. When he returned to his studio on January 2, 1974, he immersed himself in his Mexican sketches as a distraction during the final weeks of Goodridge Roberts's life which ended on January 28. "Goodie" had been his best friend since 1938 and the friendship had survived through the many upheavals in Roberts mental health. Surrey did little painting for the next two months, occupying himself with mounting a show and sale of drawings at Concordia University and designing the oddest of all his artworks – the cartoon for a tapestry to be woven in Belgium of a Christian Nativity scene in which he includes himself, Gilles Corbeil, other friends, a skidoo and his dachshund Willy. The tapestry is now in the permanent collection of the Quebec Museum of Civilization in Quebec City. Surrey was very disappointed that the weavers were unable to replicate his colours. He prepared a second cartoon in case it was ever woven again but its whereabouts are unknown. The best known reproduction is a black and white photograph:



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It was April before Surrey returned to *Crépuscule Bleu* and painted it with unusually intense concentration



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It was his normal practice to work on two or three paintings at the same time but he devoted 8 days in April and 7 more in May to bring it to completion. He signed it on May 24th and varnished it on May 26.

The success of Surrey's sale of drawings led Gilles Corbeil to pay more attention to Surrey's works on paper and a series of circumstances (worth a separate newsletter) led Corbeil to encourage Surrey to turn his attention to a producing three silkscreen prints and a lithograph – *Crépuscule d'été*, printed under the direction of Ara Kermoyan of Art Global on Arches paper with a plate size of 15.5x23.75 inches in black and white in an edition of 60 copies, some of which Surrey hand tinted in watercolour. It's a brilliant elaboration of *Crépuscule Bleu* with elements of *Adolescents*.



© Nicholas Simpson

Then, in an abrupt u-turn, he revisited Rue Henri Julien and reimagined it with winter nearing its end, the young woman walking straight toward the viewer but her eyes turned to two lads playing street hockey or perhaps something beyond them in a 12.5x18.8 inch silk screen print titled *Lumières lointaines* (*Distant Lights*) printed in an edition of 75. This reproduction does it little justice. It is the most beautiful of all his prints.



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Surrey's spiral staircase series exists within a larger one of Montreal pedestrians approaching intersections or crosswalks and that series is part of Surrey's dominant subject: Montrealers outdoors illuminated by multiple sources of electric light. For some, this is the only Surrey subject that truly matters and it is true that if Surrey is ever widely accepted as one of last century's great painters, his case will rest on his Montreal exteriors. But Surrey prided himself on portraiture and there are a substantial number of Montreal works that are character studies of people indoors – series that concentrate on men in taverns, people eating everyday fare in neighbourhood restaurants, men playing hockey, couples playing mixed doubles on Westmount's municipal tennis courts – or people taking public transit. In

constructing my database, I'm splitting off Westmount—Saint-Henri from the rest of the city because Surrey's deeply rooted attachment to these adjoining neighbourhoods adds a qualitative difference that's worth documenting separately. But there is more to Surrey's art world than his Montreal island works: Canada's urbanites habitually define themselves in terms of summer vacations and winter travel as well as everyday residence. For Surrey, forming connections with both the people and the landscapes of Baie St Paul, the Gaspé, the Maritimes, the Townships and New England beach resorts were natural extensions of being a Montrealer. So too were trips abroad to Europe and south to Florida, the Caribbean and Mexico. In the end, I've concluded that there are six major divisions in his work and nine minor ones that are worth separating to facilitate cataloguing and to spotlight special features in the breadth of his work that have been overlooked or confused. Thus,

- | | |
|-----------------------|--|
| 01 Manitoba | 07 Île Bizard |
| 02 Vancouver | 08 Baie St Paul, Gaspé, Sorel |
| 03 Montreal Exteriors | 09 Townships and Maritimes |
| 04 Montreal Interiors | 10 Arctic |
| 05 Saint-Henri | 11 Martinique, Mexico |
| 06 Westmount | 12 America and Europe |
| | 13 Prints, Posters, Book Illustrations |
| | 14 One-offs |
| | 15 Nudes |

When Surrey completed his apprenticeship with Brigden's of Winnipeg in 1929, he was resolved to earn and save as much money as quickly as possible as a commercial artist so that he could live inexpensively as an art student in New York for two or three years and, with luck, settle there permanently. Having read and reread Margery Ryerson's *The Art Spirit*, her collection of notes taken in Robert Henri's classes at the Art Students

League, his dream was to become the kind of urban painter that Henri, a teacher of Joseph Stella, Edward Hopper, Rockwell Kent and others, urged artists to be. Refusing to recognize any distinction between art and life, Henri viewed artists as something like journalists who needed to be vulgar, seeking out whoever or whatever inspired love and joy and capture it instantly and intimately wherever it was found. He encouraged others to do as he did and sketch in oils on tiny wooden panels that fit inside one coat pocket with a minimal kit of brushes and oils in the other. Henri's advocacy of spontaneous, raw depictions of the toughness and exuberance of city life thrilled Surrey.

Only nineteen but prodigiously gifted, Surrey's next employer, Cleland-Kent Engraving Company of Vancouver, assumed he was a senior artist on the basis of his portfolio and hired him – sight unseen – without enquiring into his age at a weekly salary of \$42.50 vs the \$35.00 that was Brigden's top offer. Sudden wealth after years of poverty, enticed Surrey into living extravagantly and foolishly for a few months until he recovered his senses and began taking classes with F.H. Varley. Varley pressured him to paint landscapes because they came so effortlessly to Surrey but did teach him how to (as the Group of Seven had done with considerable success) paint oil sketches on small panels *en plein air*. By the time Surrey arrived in New York, both his palette and his portable paintbox were too unwieldy for its crowded streets. In its place, he substituted “speed lining” – a technique of reducing “whoever or whatever inspired love and joy” to a few graphite pencil strokes and a series of quick notations on facing pages of a 4x5 sketchpad. The effectiveness of this technique depends on the visual memory of the artist and Surrey's was exceptional from childhood and nurtured to a higher power by disciplined self-instruction: in New York, he often attended three drawing classes in a day and then spent more hours drawing on his own.

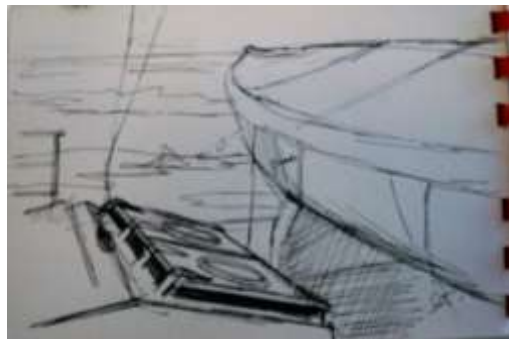
The best examples of “first sketches” and “jottings” he seems to have left us are in the pages of the sketchbooks he kept of his Arctic journey of in the summer of 1958.



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Out of a sequence of three minute works such as these emerged something as perfect as this: *Aboard CGS D'Iberville in Fog*, 1958, Oil on panel 5 x 7



© Nicholas Simpson

Recollecting his arctic journey while reading his notebook account of his journey to the ice fields, he copied into his autobiography the following words:

“Art interests us because it is the essence of another person's experience of life. Each individual is alone, cut off. Each wonders how others cope with life. A work of art is particularly rich and complex statement, valuable because packed with meaning. Our curiosity about how others manage their money is only a tiny part of our curiosity as to how they manage all their affairs. Like icebergs, four fifths of our personalities lie below the surface; of the fifth that shows, only part can be expressed in conversation. The only effective outlet for all deeper feelings and thoughts is art.”

You don't need to go beyond this picture and these words to grasp an affinity between Alex Colville and Surrey – two artists who preferred one another's company to all others on those rare occasions when they found themselves in the same room – usually in Ottawa, usually at a public event..

Surrey recorded painting a couple of hundred of such little gems in his studio logs of which 2/3rds are urban scenes recreated in his studio from pencil sketches: the remainder are rural, connected with car trips to favourite summer places or trips outside the country and in roughly 50 instances were painted outdoors. Some collectors would happily own nothing else, a market that ballooned after an exhibition of the Arctic works was mounted in Gilles Corbeil's Crescent Street gallery in January 1976 in the one man exhibition: *Paysages d'nuit et d'Aujourd'hui*.

While Surrey was making an inventory of things stored in his basement weeks earlier, he discovered severe warping and cracking in 5 of the Arctic oil sketches he'd painted on 6x8 plywood panels (salvaged from packing crates by the *CGS D'Iberville's* resident carpenter once Surrey had exhausted his supply of pre-prepared Masonite panels). He immediately repainted them as 6x9s and enjoyed doing so to such an extent that he took out his old sketches and painted more "new" ones. When Corbeil came by the studio, he was surprised by the quality and the quantity – Surrey had roughly 40 in all, old and new, to show him. Corbeil's infatuation with them caught Surrey off-guard: Corbeil had previously shown little interest in his small oils.

The show was a great success. Before this exhibition, the small oils were mostly hoarded by Surrey (who kept more than three dozen at a time in a special rack in his studio) as a sort of reference tool he employed whenever he felt a new work might profit from an older "element." A few, however, had been included in his 1965 and 1967 shows at Galerie Martin: *Nymphs and Faun*, for instance which is obviously less a directly observed reality than a whimsical attempt to work as many different kinds of stripes into a very small surface. But it goes beyond whimsy, challenging the viewer who is not wearing striped clothing game to see these nymphs and faun as the other and the viewer wearing striped clothing to find an affinity.



© Nicholas Simpson

In these small works, Surrey is frequently raw, more openly passionate, hotter in his engagement with *presence* than in his larger, refined works to such an extent that he was called a primitive in some quarters. In 1980, Corbeil set a gallery price of \$875 on them but by 1984, Surrey was selling a few privately for \$1000. When Surrey painted *Nymphs and Faun* 24x36 oil on canvas in January 1966, he recorded making five full scale preparatory charcoal on brown paper drawings but neglected to mention this little oil study. Here as in many of works on panel, the actual dimensions fall short of the artist's intended ratio by up to half an inch in one or other or both directions. To analyse the ways in which mathematical ratios "construct" his work, a clear plastic sheet of one inch square gridlines needs to be placed over the work with the lower right hand square inch being the starting point in establishing the *designo* at work in the piece.

Between 1959 and 1962 while trying to recover the initial impact Henri had exerted, Surrey experimented with a 4x5 inch pocket pad and a small set of watercolour paints, producing works measuring a mere 3.5x4.5 inches, such as *Street Corner*, 1960.



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As the August Newsletter will show, Surrey’s “holiday paintings” when he was off-island followed different patterns than when he was at home in his Westmount studio and drew heavily of mediated experiences – earlier drawings, paintings and photographs, especially – but also essays, novels and movie directors and cinematographers. Surrey was influenced not only by the arrival of NuPastel and acrylic paints but also by the shift in cinema from Kodachrome to Fuji film.

A Field Guide to Surrey’s Artworks

Part 2:

In the 1980s Philip and Margaret Surrey collaborated in writing an account of his life. They never did get around to giving it a title. I think of it as “Margaret’s Version” because there’s strong evidence that she made the final changes to it. It’s a fascinating document (readily available from Library and Archives Canada) that leaves far too much unsaid on far too many aspects of Surrey’s professional lives as both a painter and one of Canada’s most important photojournalists. But it is compelling, coherent and adheres closely to what I was repeatedly told by both Philip and Margaret during the years I knew them about his general approach to painting and worth quoting in its entirety, with the permission of Nicholas Simpson. It

explains briefly but pointedly why there are multiple versions of some works and, thus, why we need to talk about both series and sequencings within them.

Living with Difficult Paintings

By Philip and Margaret Surrey:

Pages 156 to 159 of their *Untitled Memoir*

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Surrey in his Westmount studio designing *Crépuscule d'été* © Michel Bigué

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One great difficulty was and always has been my slow production. I cannot turn out pictures quickly. And my whole method, chosen partly because my painting life was one of continual interruption, had been geared to slow, careful works. And with my temperament, when it was not going well I fell easily, too easily, into gloom. Margaret got to know those moods very well. I would declare a picture was hopeless, put it aside and start another. We both knew from experience that in a few days or weeks I would look at it again, see what was bothering me and do some more to it.

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This often resulted in my having three or four canvasses going at the same time.

Margaret put down one day what she goes through when I paint a picture. We may have emerged from a movie, be returning from shopping downtown, going home from a party. My eye is caught by some effect of light and color; if there is no movement I know I can introduce it. We stop for two or three or five minutes while I scribble a few lines in my sketch book (I never leave the house without it), perhaps writing in the color and she knows that it may be the beginning of something. And maybe not. Always, though, a picture starts with something I have seen.

The scribble is organized on paper, a little bigger and stronger; sometimes in black and white, charcoal or black chalk and wash; sometimes in color, usually acrylic. There will be several more compositions tried, using the same elements and also adding or dropping some. By elements I mean vertical, horizontal, angular or curved shapes which describe the form of cars, buildings, people. They are lit by artificial light of various colors and, for me the twilight has a special charm. Two or three kinds of light from different sources increase the complexity but also the interest of the problem.

Composition, or design as I used to prefer calling it, is directly related to and dependent on the shape of the canvas. The proportions I use are 1:2, 2:3, 3:4, 4:5, 5:6 and twice 4:7 which is different from all the others. These proportions, in the same order, are used by

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me for canvasses 24x48, 20x30, 40x60, , 48x72, 12x16, 24x32 (TKTKTK).

The last one, 4'x7' is my largest painting and was the seventh in a series using the same subject, of people crossing a wide street buffeted by the strong winds we get in March nearly all over this country. It was completed in 1980.

My tentative compositions are developed using one or more these formats. Another factor is size and, usually, I begin modestly with a 9x12 in acrylic on paper or a 12x16 on masonite with either acrylic or oil. If it seems worth developing, that is putting more into it, perhaps adding figures and change their relation to each other. The next canvas will be larger and may be a different proportion.

Some years ago I bought two ten-yard rolls of raw linene canvas; Belgian 86" wide and Irish 43" wide. One inch iron pipe was slipped through held by brackets to a beam in my basement. Polyethylene film, stapled to the beam, made a little dust-proof tent over each roll. I keep a good number and variety of stretchers on hand, having the sides and ends fitted together before I buy them so I can be sure they are square and not warped.

The canvas is stretched with canvas pliers starting with one staple in the middle of each of the four sides. With a ruler or tape I put a pencil mark every two inches to each corner for placing the staples, always balancing each one with another on the opposite side. For priming I use acrylic gesso which tightens the canvas as it dries.

Now the next step is the underpainting.

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If the principal illumination is cold, I use a venetian red ground to glow through and give warmth to dark areas or shadows. If it is a warm light my ground is oxide of chromium to cool the darks. The acrylic ground dries quickly but I usually leave it overnight.

Color has been borne in mind from the first but there is real enjoyment in playing warm tones against cool. Dark areas are painted thinly, sometimes glazed so the ground color contributes to the effect. Light areas are thicker and highlights done with a loaded brush.

Though the picture usually starts with what I have just seen it may eventually include effects of high color or movement that I remember from earlier observations. Sometimes cars, trees, buildings, people from different sketches are combined; sometimes the place where I saw the action and color is so much changed, usually simplified, that it is no longer recognizable. But the painting will, I hope, be recognizable as one of mine.

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Talking to my students one day about painting I said that a sameness in color is to be avoided. I believe that no two paintings, even of the same things, need be or should be the same in color. The light is different every few minutes, every hour and every day and it gives us the color. Moreover, my observation is that very seldom, if ever, is even a flat surface the same hue all over because the light strikes it at a whole series of different angles and I usually choose to accentuate the variations I have noticed in order to add variety and interest.

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...one, consider it for awhile, lay it aside, start on another. Sometimes I bring a half-finished one downstairs and hang it, sometimes for weeks. Eventually I will see what needs to be done, take it back upstairs and do

some more to it. "The Baseball Players" hung over our dining room table for over a year with all the players nude. Then I went up to my painting room and clothed them.

I pondered a great deal about art and what it was. I find the following in an old notebook. "Art interests us because it is the essence of another person's experience of life. Each individual is alone, cut off. Each wonders how others cope with life. A work of art is particularly rich and complex statement, valuable because packed with meaning. Our curiosity about how others manage their money is only a tiny part of our curiosity as to how they manage all their affairs. Like icebergs, four fifths of our personalities lie below the surface; of the fifth that shows, only part can be expressed in conversation. The only effective outlet for all deeper feelings and thoughts is art."

From Margaret's diary: "Philip has just come downstairs and says the picture is no good, he can't seem to work out the composition he wants, he'll have to abandon the whole thing, he's wasted days and it's hopeless. I have had to learn not to succumb to despair when I hear this. It happens with nine pictures out of ten, then, having thoroughly frightened me, he goes upstairs and tackles it again. I, having seen the

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first composition of figures on the actual canvas, know that this is going to be one of his best pictures but I know it is better not to say so.

Finally comes the time when he comes downstairs and announces he thinks he has "salvaged" it. Then come further struggles until, at last, he is satisfied.

"John Lyman always used to say that he never met anyone like Philip for seeking out problems. "If there is a problem that's where he'll head." Often three-quarters of the way through he'll decide to put it aside for awhile and not look at it. He starts another and later gets the first one. "Not too bad," he'll say grudgingly. "Better than I thought it was." Having a picture in our house is like having a baby."

(to be continued)