

T.F. RIGELHOF, EDITOR

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Philip Surrey, Artist: A Newsletter for Collectors

The Vancouver Years October 1929— October 1936

November 2015
Issue No.1

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

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1. THE VANCOUVER YEARS: OCTOBER 1929— OCTOBER 1936

A Note on Sources: If all that you know about Philip Surrey's years in Vancouver comes from the first ten or so minutes of Charles Hill's interview of September 14, 1973 (posted at the National Gallery's *Canadian Painting in the 30s*: CYBERMUSE) then you know less than you need to know to know what it is that you don't know. There are four other sources in the public domain: (1) the *Vancouver* section (pp34—53) of the 237 page untitled typescript of the 1st person narrative his wife Margaret claimed she wrote and that I refer to as *Margaret's Version* (2) the 4th and 5th unnumbered pages of notes Surrey typed on April 26, 1947 (3)

the page and a half note in Surrey's handwriting headed "From an old notebook dated 9 Dec 64 (now Nov 66)" (4) Surrey's studio Worklog (99 pages) for 1973/4. All these documents are in the Philip and Margaret Surrey collection at the National Archives. I've also made limited use of personal correspondence and private conversations.

The interview with Hill is easily misinterpreted. According to the Worklog, it took place two days after the Surreys returned from a one week visit with their friends Edwin and Lucy Cole in Boston. Dr. Cole, a psychiatrist at Boston General, had arranged for Margaret's electroshock treatments in Boston in October 1970 to alleviate the extreme anxiety attack she suffered when the FLQ kidnapped James Cross, the British Trade commissioner, and precipitated The October Crisis. (The Coles had also connected Surrey with his father's third wife and widow, Lela Surrey, who welcomed him into her life and shared her memories of her husband with his estranged son. She offered to name him heir to her substantial estate but he declined: he was what he'd made of himself.) Visits with the Coles were one of the great pleasures of their lives in this period but always intense. During the September 1973 visit, Surrey discussed both Margaret's mental health and his own with Edwin. Surrey was seeing the Montreal psychiatrist Dr. Daniel Silver for treatment of chronic insomnia and other personal matters. Surrey does not sound like Surrey on the interview tape: he has a cold, he's tired from the trip and he's in a drug and alcohol induced stupor. Dr. Silver prescribed Dalmane (aka Flurazepan hydrochloride, a benzodiazepine derivative, a sedative with a very long half life) for Surrey's insomnia and warned him against taking more than the prescribed dose and mixing it with alcohol. Both warnings fell on deaf ears. Surrey had been self-medicating on a bedtime concoction of Scotch and warm milk. The Dalmane produced the delayed reactions that characterizes much of the interview.

Surrey was having a bad day full of memory lapses for which he kept apologizing. But there was more to his lack of engagement with Hill's questioning than his medicated state. By nature (reinforced by rigorous training), Surrey had a remarkable *eidetic memory* – that's the kind of "photographic memory" that gives some people the ability to recall sights and sounds. It was an ability he shared with Mavis Gallant, his erstwhile assistant at *The Montreal Standard* and Margaret's lifetime friend. If Hill had done the homework

that most mattered to Surrey – prepared questions based on *Surrey's important paintings in the 30s* (“I know your -- not your early work at all. I know your later work,” Hill confessed) – rather than attempted to extract from Surrey confirmation of events in which he had scant interest and little emotional investment, then Hill might have uncovered the depth of Surrey’s relationship to F.W. Varley and the broad spectrum of influences – European and American – that animated Surrey’s artistic imagination in that period. Then again, maybe not. Surrey was conflicted about his Vancouver years.

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A Note on Surrey’s Infancy, Childhood, Adolescence & Training as a Commercial Artist:

Philip Surrey was born on October 10, 1910 in Calgary. His parents, Harry Surrey and Kate de Guerin, had a farm near Strathmore but didn’t like farming and soon moved back to Vancouver where they’d met. They tried living in San Francisco and Sydney, Australia before going to England to show their son off to Kate’s brother and sister and Harry’s mother before moving to Java. Surrey lost track of how many different places they’d stayed – generally in grand hotels. His parents seemed to move every couple of months before the Great War took them to India where they both served in the military, Kate in British Naval Intelligence as a codist. In 1919, his mother took him to England to prep for his entrance to Marlborough, his maternal grandfather’s old school and his uncle’s. His parents separated and divorced and his mother brought him to Manitoba in the spring of 1921 afraid that Harry might attempt to kidnap him. After a year of domestic work, Kate was able to obtain a provisional teaching certificate and placements in country schools for the next few years. In 1923, while he was still 12, his mother found him bed and board in a Winnipeg rooming house, bought him a bicycle so that he could earn money as an errand boy, enrolled him in Kelvin High School and left him to grow up on his own. He excelled at school work and athletics and was taken into the family of one of his teachers until he graduated in 1926. Surrey’s earliest known

drawing appeared in the Kelvin High School Yearbook of 1916. If he contributed drawings to earlier Yearbooks or other school publications, they have yet to surface.



Because of his talent for drawing, Surrey was taken on as an apprentice in the Art department of Brigden's of Winnipeg, the engravers of the western editions of Eaton's catalogues where he had subsisted on first \$5, later \$7.50, then \$13.50 a week. During this period, he took drawing classes with George Overton and Lionel Lemoine Fitzgerald at the art school attached to the Winnipeg Art Gallery.

In mid-October 1929, on the heels of his 19th birthday and the completion of three years training, Surrey boarded a westbound train with a simple plan. Surrey had brushed aside an offer of \$35 a week to stay on at Brigden's. He'd been offered a more senior position in the Art Department at Cleland Kent Engraving in Vancouver that paid \$42.50 a week on the basis of a portfolio he'd put together under the direction of Fritz Brandtner (who had joined Brigden's the previous year). Brandtner got along better with Surrey than other co-workers because of Surrey's greater openness to German Expressionism and ability to converse in German. His new employers knew his work was stunning – better than any of the six artists

they had on staff – but had no idea he was so young. He wanted to make and save as much money as possible until he could afford to move to New York, live in Greenwich Village and study at the Art Students League while he learned whatever the dominant members of the Ashcan School thought he needed to know in order to carry their work forward in his own direction. In Winnipeg, he'd discovered *The Art Spirit: Notes, Articles, Fragments of Letters and Talks to Students, Bearing on the Concept and Technique of Picture Making, The Study of Art Generally, and On Appreciation* by Robert Henri (Lippincott 1923). Henri viewed artists as akin to journalists: both needed to be in the streets, bars and taverns seeking out whoever or whatever inspired love and joy and capture those moments. Henri urged students to 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 depiction of the toughness and exuberance of city life thrilled Surrey. Now, read on:

October 1929—July 1930

Surrey's simple plan became complicated once he reached Vancouver. There were many distractions and unanticipated discoveries: mild climate, remarkable geography, downhill skiing, ski-jumping, daring young women, his own prodigious skills as a commercial artist and the heady experience of living as a social equal among the kind of people he'd met in the first half of his short life. A half century later, Surrey wrote:

“From my birth to 9 years old I had lived in one sort of world [in the Grand Hotels of the Far East and India] where there were always servants and I belonged to the upper-middle class. Overnight my life changed and I was washing bottles and working for farmers [in rural Manitoba]. Now . . . I was transported back to something like my original place.”

Surrey became so caught up in his new job, going to parties, dating, buying good clothes and a used car that it was March 1930 before he regained any sense of his original purpose. He moved to a one room apartment on Bute Street, opposite the Parakantas Building which was sub-divided into artists' studios – including F.H. Varley's – and made contact with local artists by eating and drinking where they did. That first spring, he took a half dozen or so drawing classes with Varley who taught him to draw with charcoal on manila

paper and encouraged him to use thin, firm outlines to sketch the lighted side of the model and broad soft lines to mark the edge of the shadow, a different approach from the emphasis on subtle contouring that he'd learned in Winnipeg while taking classes with Fitzgerald. When he showed Varley the watercolor on Cox paper of the Spanish Banks on English Bay he'd submitted to the BC Society of Artists but was rejected, Varley thought it promising and recommended regular Saturday afternoon life drawing classes [in his studio?]. Surrey didn't record how many he attended – just that he showed up more often than Varley who figured he'd fulfilled his obligations to his students by hiring models representing aspects of the ethnic diversity of Vancouver with a preference for the Japanese and Chinese and then looking through what they'd drawn when he wasn't around and giving the odd pointer when he was.

In a rash act of generosity that Surrey regretted for the rest of his life, he invited his mother to retire from teaching job in rural Manitoba to live with him in Vancouver, the city where she had met Harry. During his Brigden years, Surrey saw little of her. He was used to doing as he pleased and lived well on his income. It didn't occur to him that Kate expected him to bear all her expenses. He hadn't thought things through, had fallen victim to emotional cajoling:

“In her . . . letters she had spoken of her fatigue, how she hated the life there, how wonderful it would be if sometime she could come to live with me and ‘keep house for my darling son.’ A woman I did not know very well had come to share my existence.”

Kate arrived in Vancouver in June 1930 at the end of her teaching year. He found a two room suite for them in the attic of 1250 Davie Street.

August 1930 – December 1931

In August, Surrey encountered Claire Préfontaine, a friend from Winnipeg. She was running a lending library on South Granville where she'd met and befriended Varley's children – Dorothy, John, Peter and Jim. One Saturday afternoon, Claire took him to the Brock Estate where the Varleys lived in the guest

house in a garden stretching down to Jericho Beach. Meeting him at home, Surrey was entranced: Varley was the most attractive man he'd encountered since losing his father.

“With Fred one felt at once the electric dynamism of the man. He was never a person one could ignore. I fell at once under the spell. As I got to know them I realized how unhappy a family it was. Fred never should have married, certainly never had children. Sometimes he would say to me, ‘I have no wife, I have no kids. It's all nonsense, perfect nonsense.’ Any money he had he spent on himself, mostly on drinks.”

Between that first meeting at his home and Varley's departure from Vancouver for Ottawa, Montreal and Toronto in February of 1936 (to participate in 'The Retrospective of Paintings by Members of the Group of Seven 1919—1933 that opened at the National Gallery on February 20, in Montreal on April 17, in Toronto on May1) Varley became much more than a friend. For Surrey, what had begun as exchanges between drawing master and student evolved into his first lessons in oil painting and painting *en plein air* (with Varley's son John) to a relationship that is far too complex to be encompassed by any one term – Varley became Surrey's idol, father figure, surrogate older brother, drinking companion and a lovesick fool who required assistance in the studio.

That autumn, Surrey enrolled in evening classes at the Vancouver School of Art and Design: Painting with Varley and Design classes with Jock Macdonald. Both courses met twice a week. While still taking formal painting and design classes, Surrey began painting with John Varley *en plein air* (which involves painting outdoors what the eyes actually see) with Fred's encouragement. Surrey outfitted himself with a sleeping bag and borrowed John's sketch box and had a carpenter copy it and make up a supply of small plywood panels. They went to the North Shore by ferry and hiked up Mount Hollyburn and spent weekends hiking and painting. When John was unavailable, he travelled with Ivan Denton. On their return, Fred provided comments. It was from the drawings and oil sketches made on these 1930—1931 hikes that Surrey conceived *The Pool* in 1932. They often slept overnight at a ski shack. On Sundays when he wasn't on Hollyburn, Surrey and his mother visited the Varleys. Kate and Maude had become friends. If Fred was in the mood to paint, Surrey sat out on the veranda, painting alongside him and picking up pointers. By then,

he was so influenced by his mentor's personality that Surrey's boss told him, "You're getting to look more like Varley every day."

His social highlight of the week was spending an evening at Vanderpant Galleries with John Varley as the Vanderpant and their guests listened to new additions to a large record collection. John Vanderpant (1884—1939) was the most important photographer in Vancouver at that time and successful. His business premises on Robson Street contained studio, art gallery, antique shop and a music room spacious enough to hold poetry readings and lectures on art and Eastern mysticism. Once the Vanderpant came to know and like Surrey on his own merits, he was welcomed into an elite group that met in the Vanderpant's home for live musical recitals including some with Fred Varley playing their piano: he was a gifted pianist and at age 14 it had been a toss-up whether he would become a professional artist or musician. Varley's passion for playing Beethoven sonatas and Bach fugues rekindled Surrey's childhood dream of taking piano lessons: given their itinerant life, his father had insisted on him learning the violin.

January – December 1932

Surrey's success at work gave him the self-confidence to welcome 1932 by buying a small house at 4213 West 14th for \$1350 and he had a studio built on to the back. That's where he glued canvas to cardboard and enlarged his oil sketches of the mountains. Looking back to his Vancouver years late in life, Surrey found it difficult to believe how successful he was at work, how everything came to him and how much he could crowd into his life all at once, including serial relationships with women but his relationship with his mother was always uneasy. Kate decided to follow in the footsteps of her mother Elizabeth Crosse who had some critical and commercial success as a watercolorist in Germany and England in the late 19th century. While Surrey was at work, Kate went to the beach, sun bathed, chatted and painted in a way he found so amateurish and embarrassing that he destroyed all her works when she died. When he came home

“tired, not having had a moment to paint myself, she would be waiting beds unmade, no dinner ready, paintings spread out and wanting ‘criticism’, meaning praise. She . . . felt I was insufficiently

admiring, and would make ‘humourous’ comments on my serious work. She called it ‘chaffing’ me. I did not find it amusing.”

Kate also revelled in expressing hatred of his father, but the more she attacked Harry the less Surrey blamed him for getting out. She also confided a great deal too much about her unsatisfactory sex life with Harry: she had not been a shy virginal bride. He knew he shouldn’t listen but he felt sorry for her since she was, he thought, on her own too much of the time. He was out a great deal except when he was painting but did take her with him when he visited the Varleys. Fred called her ‘mother’ and enjoyed her company. Someone – Dorothy Varley ? – got Kate interested in Little Theatre and through someone she met there, she re-connected with the British Israelites, the group she’d joined when she’d first arrived in Vancouver in 1909. Neither activity improved her housekeeping but both kept her out of the house and out of his hair.

Surrey’s oil *Portrait of my Mother* and a drawing *John Varley* were accepted by the local jury for the Seventh Annual Exhibition of Canadian Art at the National Gallery, held in May 1932. Throughout the summer he worked at bringing together everything he’d learned painting in the mountains but just two of the larger landscapes (24x30 inches) satisfied him – *The Pool* and *North Shore Mountains*. He then began working with a new 12x15 sketchbox, painting on plywood panels. His social life expanded at this time to include Jack Shaw, Marie Planta, Leslie Planta, Harry Täuber, George and Dorothy Sparling. Socializing did something to fill the gap caused by his sudden and profound dissatisfaction with what he’d been painting. He experimented with abstraction but failed to see any merit in what he produced and destroyed all of it. Since no one he knew – not even Varley who was famous – could make a living from sales, the reward for his work was the pleasure he got from doing it. Abstract painting brought more frustration than pleasure.

By the summer of 1932, the Depression made its impact felt in Vancouver with massive lay-offs. As a committed member of The Socialist Party of America, Surrey tried his hand at Social Realism but the results were too polemical. He painted over works that focused on Vancouver’s unemployed but saved a major drawing. Then, one night standing in a dance hall, he found himself calculating what colors would give the effect of the lighting. He didn’t paint it but it led him to return to making sketches and studies of the kind he’d made walking Winnipeg’s streets late at night. He discarded many and sold a few of the best

for a dollar each: the very best one, *Going to Work* (1935) – which reflects massive unemployment indirectly by portraying a solitary worker – he kept for himself. (The National Gallery acquired it in 1976) He sensed that his future as an artist was where he'd first located it – in city life captured according to Robert Henri's dictums. In the meantime, he wanted to lighten the color of his works. He experimented with Varley's colors.

January 1933 – January 1934

At the beginning of 1933, Harry Täuber, a new and fascinating acquaintance, suggested that he read Amédée Ozenfant's *Foundations of Modern Art* (New York, 1931), the English translation of *Art* (Paris, 1928). Surrey borrowed it from the Vancouver Public Library and was so captivated that he bought a copy with his Christmas bonus. Ozenfant pointed out that all lines, shapes, colors derived their effect from experiences in the real world. In an earlier work, *Après le cubisme* (Paris, 1917), Ozenfant and his collaborator Le Corbusier demonstrated that patches of color remain distinct and influence one another by proximity – a technique they called *purisme*. *Purisme* was more than color theory: It insisted that all lines, shapes, colors derive their effect from our experience of them in the real world and not, as Theosophists and mystics of other stripes had it, from the pursuit of a fourth dimension. Embracing *purisme* placed Surrey in the paradoxical position of seeing that it was possible to create paintings that were abstract in design and figurative in content. Such ambiguous paintings could, he sensed, elicit emotionally provocative ambivalences in viewers. Surrey remained so attached to Ozenfant for the rest of his life that his copy of *Foundations of Modern Art* is the most broken backed book I own – a complete wreck of a thing from constant consultation over more than half a century in his studios.

The house at 4213 West 14th was too small. Surrey sold it without loss and rented a larger house in May. After stating with precision every place he'd lived in since arrival in Vancouver, he kept his final most important locale a secret in *Margaret's Version* but its easily located in any Vancouver Directory of the period – 4519 West 1st. As soon as he moved in, he bought a radio-gramophone, a clarinet, a piano, and a violin in the same month. He began making up and playing duets and trios with John Varley and teaching himself to

play piano well enough to get through Bach's Prelude No. 1 in C Major and the fugue No. 5 in D Major. In July, at a party at Marie Planta's, he met "the most beautiful woman he ever knew." In *Margaret's Version*, she's called "Sheila." She was older than Surrey, married to a wealthy and powerful man and had two young children. Her husband had business interests in several locales and was often away. As chance would have it, she was a near neighbour, no more than 6 blocks distant from Surrey's house on West 1st.

"In a way we lived in a sort of dream. Sheila said she would never forget September 1933. It was complete infatuation on both sides. I spent night after night with her and got home in time to shave, have breakfast and go to work. My mother seemed completely nonplussed by all this and, I think, did not allow herself to question what was going on. Once Sheila's husband came to see me to tell me to keep away from his wife Later, he paid to have me beaten up but that failed when a porch light went on next door and my three assailants jumped into their car and were off. His lawyerdid his best to persuade me to stop seeing Sheila but it was hopeless. I was too madly in love to think. Sheila and I spoke little of the future. I think we both knew at bottom there was no future. How could I take on a woman and two children plus my mother?"

What did Sheila see in Surrey that led her to risk so much? John Vanderpant's portrait, recently auctioned, gives some sense of his sex appeal:



In *Margaret's Version* (the source of all direct quotations I've used), Surrey claims that “after two years we gradually stopped seeing one another and by the time I left Vancouver in 1936 our affair was over and she had gone back to her husband” but Surrey’s two brief sets of notes – the typed one from April 26, 1947 and handwritten ones from 1964 suggest a different scenario: he and Sheila met in June, became lovers by September. Sheila’s husband came and threatened him before the end of the month but Surrey told him he wouldn’t give Sheila up. There’s no record of what happened in October. In November, Sheila’s husband threatened to turn her out of her home and then followed through on the threat by changing the locks after her mother arrived to care for the children. Sheila then took a room at Maria Planta’s house – the house was large and Maria had been letting out rooms to Harry Täuber and others. Surrey became a nightly visitor. He ate Christmas dinner with his friends the Van Sickle’s and then he and Jack Shaw drove Phyllis Planta to Seattle (where she had a grandmother) and took her to a live performance of *Romeo and Juliet* starring Katharine Cornell and Basil Rathbone in Seattle’s Metropolitan Theatre. It was an excellent way to get Surrey out of town while “Sheila” enjoyed Christmas with her children. It was also a last chance for Surrey to spend time with his new best friend and Täuber’s most adept student, Jack Shaw, who was off to Germany to study movie set design. [Shaw became so good at it so quickly that on his return, he moved to Hollywood and won an Oscar as part of the design team on *Gone with the Wind*.]

Surrey came back to the news that Sheila’s lawyer had begun arranging her return to her husband in the first week of January 1934. The “three thugs” visited him on January 10th. The following day Sheila told Surrey she was pregnant. After ten days of thinking through the impossibility of their situation, she went home to her husband and children on January 21st. On January 25th, Surrey received a letter from the

husband's lawyer who seems to have negotiated some arrangement everyone could live with for the rest of the year. Surrey's notes go no further but do identify her by name. When she died, Sheila's obituary mentioned only the two children she already had when she met Surrey. Her pregnancy? Miscarriage? Termination? An infant given up for adoption? Whichever the case, Surrey's preoccupation with painting adolescents in the mid-70s may well be powered by the thought (if not the reality) of being a grandfather to the extent that that the boy in the Expos cap who appears in two major paintings represents a grandson.

Even as Surrey became entwined with Sheila, the world around them began to unravel. In the winter of 1933, the Vancouver Board of Education threatened to close the Vancouver School of Art and Design unless costs were cut. Varley and Jock Macdonald quit and formed their own school, the British Columbia College of Arts, with Täuber, a Viennese stage designer and former pupil of Franz Cizek – the founder of expressionist art classes for children. While living at Marie Planta's, Täuber had been offering private classes in German Expressionism, Russian Constructivism and stage design. He directed and managed the marionette players who presented productions of *Petroushka* and *The Witch Doctor* at The Vancouver Art Gallery in February 1932. Täuber, Varley and Macdonald's BCCA was modelled on the teachings of Rudolph Steiner and attempted to unite in one converted automobile dealership as many forms of art instruction as possible. It opened in September 1933 with 66 day students drawn mostly from VSAD. It operated without government subsidies of any kind and was bankrupt in less than two years. Surrey wasn't able to offer any financial assistance to the others because his employer cut staff until he was the only commercial artist left and was being paid by piecework. In a really good week he'd earn double what his salary had been but there were also weeks when he earned the equivalent of one day's pay.

February 1934 – October 1936

Varley moved his family to a small, ugly bungalow in North Vancouver and then abandoned them when the school went belly up. He was harassed by creditors and found refuge in an unusual house at Lynn Valley: it was a wooden box, cube-shaped with front and back porches tacked on. The whole upstairs was unfinished but between the upright 2x4 studding, on all four sides, was glass from a foot above the floor to a foot below the eaves. No other dwelling was visible, only mountains, trees and flowers. There was a cookstove and a box stove for heat, a table, two or three chairs and a piano. Maude was not allowed to visit but Varley allowed his son John and daughter Dorothy to come and didn't object if Surrey brought his mother. Surrey painted two watercolors of Varley from memory: one, playing the piano with his mother and Dorothy listening, another of him on the back porch against a background of trees and mountains.



The Lynn Valley House, Summer 2015

When Surrey visited Lynn Valley, Varley encouraged him to paint landscapes but he painted portraits instead. This too was a legacy of his enchantment with Sheila. Unlike Varley, who was so infatuated by Vera that he had difficulty focussing on anything else in his painting, Surrey felt free to encounter other women in themselves and not as objects of erotic desire. He also used portrait painting as a way of experimenting with design and color in fine detail: portraiture was his equivalent of a photographer's close-up lens. *Portrait of Phyllis Planta* marks a key transition.

2. REDISCOVERY: PORTRAIT OF PHYLLIS PLANTA (1933)

Surrey's *Portrait of Phyllis Planta* (55x44.5 cm) was in storage from her death in 2000 until the summer of 2015. It requires cleaning and stretching. (The image below has been deliberately lightened to catch more of expressiveness in face and hands but this has compromised the impact of strong reds and blues, already constricted by the compressed file formatting.) It remains much as it was when the artist gave it to his 16 year old model in 1933. The portrait on the reverse, a slightly earlier and slightly smaller one of a woman whose identity is unknown to Phyllis Planta's heirs, was never papered over. It's obviously in less need of restoration. The dealer who handled the sale, secured the canvas against further slippage by adding 4 small metal brackets. Neither he nor the current owners have removed the painting from its moorings to see if the second painting is signed or the sitter identified.



The emotional impact of both portraits is immediate and powerful but as different as Surrey's colors and designs. Together, they mark a major transition in Surrey's painting at a transformative moment in Vancouver's art scene. *Phyllis Planta* (1933) is his earliest known use of Ozenfant's *purisme* and the *Unknown Woman* (1932) likely his most extraordinary experiment with Varley's coloration. In terms of

Surrey's maturation, *Phyllis Planta* illustrates the triumph of Jock Macdonald's formal instruction in Design and Harry Täufer's personal mentoring in Modernist architecture and Russian Constructivism over Varley's charisma and coloration.

Varley required students to buy individual copies of A.H. Munsell's pamphlet *A Color Notation An Illustrated System Defining all Colors and Their Relations* (Geo. H. Ellis 1905) expounding a three-dimensional system that separated hue, value and chroma (color purity). Munsell's color sphere was grounded in good science (the measurement of visual responses to color) and widely adopted by geologists in soil research. Surrey never quite grasped its finer points but that didn't matter. He knew more than he needed to know as soon as he grasped that Varley, Lawren Harris and their fellow Theosophists leaned on Munsell for empirical justification of their *a priori* conviction that they could detect the "aura" of a sitter or a site. In the Theosophical scheme of things, first articulated in C.W. Leadbeater's *Man Visible and Invisible* (Theosophical Publishing House 1902), pinks, yellows and blues were at the high end of spirituality, greens denoted amiability and adaptability, browns were indicators of negative social behaviour and the animality of mankind was in the red zone. Grey to black was the zone of depression, malice, hatred. Brilliance and depth of colors were measures of the strength and the activity of the "noumenal quanta" that every individual's psychological state generated, creating "halo effects" that affected the hue of everything in their surroundings. That, at least, was John Varley's explanation for what may have been a simpler process: the colors Varley favoured – especially in his portraits of women – after meeting Vera Weatherbie (1909—1977) were Vera's doing. In a November 7, 1959 interview with McKenzie Porter in *Maclean's*, Varley admitted "without knowing it she made me see color in new lights."

When Surrey arrived in Vancouver, he brought with him the darker colors that had proved effective in painting Winnipeg by night. By 1932, Surrey found his colors had darkened even more and consciously lightened them to Varley's. *Portrait of an Unknown Woman* (1932) has much in common with Varley's *Vera* (1930) at the National Gallery both in color and in pushing the sitter to the edge of the canvas. But Surrey found it difficult to separate these colors from their place within the Theosophical canon and was trying to paint more physically and less metaphysically. Varley drew many women to him (even in his 70s) by seeming

to be tender, sensitive, understanding to such a degree that he engulfed them, absorbed them into himself. This put him in a more dominant relationship to his model than Surrey wanted. *Portrait of Phyllis Planta* re-establishes a more classical design. Even a quick comparison of *Phyllis Planta* with any of Varley's many portraits of young women shows that Surrey is drawn far more to physical strength and independence. Varley's portraits are all about women's heads and flattened bodies are attached almost as afterthoughts. Phyllis's body is square to the viewer, solid and no-nonsense. The larger and better part of Phyllis is unreachable to Surrey: it's there in her folded arms with hands holding elbows. Those hands stay with you as afterimage. Her distance and distinctness is preserved by her looking away from the man behind the easel to a larger world beyond the window. I'd say that Varley's *Studio Door* (1952) in Montreal's MMFA collection is a lion in winter's tribute to the cub who had once trailed after him: it is unimaginable without Surrey's *Red Portrait* in the National Gallery as a predecessor. To my eye, it's among the few fully human of Varley's paintings of women: Kathleen McKay, its subject, inhabits her body and her face expresses a personality all its own, untrammelled by Varley's psychological reductionism. McKay is herself and that's all she needs to be – unlike other Varley women, she's not playing the role of Virgin Mother, Muse, goddess, etc. Surrey – from *Phyllis Planta* forward – fights against all the feminine archetypes (if you think in those terms) and female stereotypes (if you think in these terms) in Western Art either by witty subversion or, more commonly, by sheer physical presence. *Phyllis Planta* encourages viewers to seek her out, discover who was and whatever became of her. Well, that's its effect on me and if that's its effect on you, I can tell you that Phyllis Planta was the youngest of Walter and Marie Planta's five children – 2 boys, three girls. Born in Australia, Walter Planta (1871–1948) grew up in Nanaimo, where his parents were teachers. According to Heather Harbord's *Texada Tapestry* (Harbour, 2011) "by the late 1890s, he was a laid-back, happy-go-lucky prospector who staked several claims on Texada Island. One day in 1901, he rolled back the moss from a rock and discovered a pocket of free gold seven feet long and six feet deep – the Marjorie Claim – which yielded an easy sixty-five hundred dollars" (roughly \$150,000 in today's currency). On his next trip to Seattle, he seduced and married Marie Rawle, a pretty 16 year old schoolgirl from Louisiana and brought her back to Texada. He eventually set her up in a house in Vancouver where their youngest son and three daughters were able to pursue musical and artistic goals (and Marie was able to support the family during the

worst years of the Depression by turning it into a boarding house). Phyllis was the kid sister of the art student Les Planta, two years her senior, who travelled to Nootka in 1935 with his teachers Harry Täuber and Jock Macdonald (with wife and children) when the older men were fleeing creditors following the collapse of the British Columbia College of Arts that they'd established with Varley. Phyllis Planta eventually became the author of a little gem of a book *How to Make Music on the Harmonica* that remains in print.

According to the story Phyllis told her children and anyone who asked about Surrey's portrait, she had been splitting firewood in the side yard of her mother's house when a man she half-recognized stopped and politely asked if she'd allow him to paint her portrait. She was surprised when he gave her the original oil after her mother's friend John Vanderpant made photographic studies of it.

3 Epilogue & List of British Columbia Works

To make enough money to keep himself going at Lynn Valley and buy groceries and necessities for his family in North Vancouver, Varley turned to "manufacturing" what he called "7-Ups" – fizzy landscapes he sold for immediate cash to the Easton's Galleries and filled a suitcase for buyers he hoped to encounter in Ottawa, Montreal and Toronto at The Group of Seven Exhibitions. To lessen the strain between the new directions Vera was leading his painting and what Group of Seven buyers expected from him on the basis of works two decades old, he recruited Surrey as a studio assistant whenever there was nothing for him to do at his regular day job. Surrey prepped canvases and panels. Because he was so skilled at replicating his own smaller works in larger formats, it's likely he enlarged some of Varley's older, smaller sketches in graphite on prepared canvas or board. He may even have filled in some background elements as well. There's nothing particularly notable about this – popular artists have always used studio assistants – except that Surrey developed such close familiarity with Varley's working methods that he detected fakes

that started coming to market following Varley's death that some gallery directors wouldn't remove from the marketplace. Varley's family joined by Surrey and Kate went to see him off to Ottawa at the train station in February 1936. They were the only ones. On parting, neither Surrey nor Varley expected to see so much of each other so soon in the future when their lives intersected in Montreal fourteen months later.

With Varley gone, Surrey felt the need to move on. He earned \$800 painting a wall size map of British Columbia in an office building. In October, he

“sold all my possessions – oil sketches 12x15 \$1 each, drawings 50 cents, my piano, my car, a new Austin, my furniture some of it antique, my classical records at 50 cents and so on and was ready to start life all over again. I was twenty-six. I was still in a continual state of irritation with my mother. For some time my mother had been writing to her sister, Eugenie, who was married to a doctor at Saint Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington. There was some talk of "joining forces" and . . . my mother and Eugenie might get on well enough to live together. (Supported by me, of course). And that I might have a chance to live alone again. I craved independence after six years of strain.”

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In his final year in Vancouver, Surrey completed two works inspired by his magical September with Sheila in 1933: *The Milkman* (Vancouver Art Gallery) and *Nox Nocti Indicat Scientiam*, (“Night Unto Night Showeth Forth Knowledge.”) (Private Collection). The title is a phrase within Psalm 19 (18 in the Greek notation) but Surrey is invoking the poem of that name by William Habington (1605—1659) which includes the lines 9--16:

No unregarded star
Contracts its light
Into so small a character,
Removed far from our human sight,

But if we steadfast look
We shall discern
In it, as in some holy book,
How man may heavenly knowledge learn.

Surrey's painting surpasses Habington, not as metaphysics but as a song of ecstatic remembrance:



Surrey's output as a painter during his years in Vancouver began with his watercolour of the Spanish Banks and portraits of his mother and of John Varley. Once he became a regular guest at the Varley's, he painted on small panels while sitting next to Varley on the verandas at the house at Jericho Beach or trekking with John Varley or Ivan Denton on Mount Hollyburn. An unknown number of these oil sketches were reworked in oil on canvas glued to cardboard. On the basis of the one example I know, cardboard, glue, canvas and oil paints are an unstable combination and it's easy to imagine them being discarded. When Surrey had a second, larger sketchbox built to accommodate 12x15 plywood panels, he seems to have

shifted his attention to portraits (*Olga* exists in this form) and the city sketches he sold for \$1 each when he was getting ready to leave Vancouver. The only Vancouver works for which full cataloguing data currently exists are 3 watercolours , 1 oil on canvas glued to cardboard (10x14), 1 oil and sand on 12x15 plywood panel and 2 charcoal on paper sketches in The Firestone Collection at the Ottawa Art Gallery, *Going to Work* at the National Gallery, *The Milkman* at the VAG. I'd appreciate any help anyone can provide in locating others – especially the portraits of at least a half dozen women. It's not known how many are on panel and how many on canvas. Surrey, for reasons best known to himself, destroyed all his Vancouver sketchpads and notebooks in the 1970s.

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That's this issue; the next issue tackles *Surrey and his Nudes*: It contains an excellent English translation of de Roussan's brief remarks on the essential differences between Surrey's drawings of women and his paintings of them and my commentary.

THE END OF ISSUE ONE