

T.F. RIGELHOF, EDITOR

Page | 0

# Philip Surrey, Artist: A Newsletter for Collectors

---

A Field Guide to Surrey's Artworks (continued)  
Part 3

**November 2016**  
**Issue No.5**

PHILIP SURREY, ARTIST: A NEWSLETTER  
FOR COLLECTORS  
T.F. Rigelhof, Editor  
t.rigelhof@sympatico.ca

Issue No.5

November 2016

The materials in this newsletter represent the research and express the point of view solely of the editor or those of clearly identified contributors. They are intended for the private use of readers and not for further publication without the explicit consent of the editor, except to correct factual content on any website or hard copy on which the reader exerts an influence. Any illustration of a Surrey artwork is a low resolution compression of a photograph of the work and is included only to provide guidance and avoid confusion between works of similar subject matter and/or title. Assistance in locating a more exact image is generally available on-line except sometimes in the case of a recent rediscovery. They are posted with the permission of Nicholas Simpson on behalf of the Estate of Philip Surrey. Reproduction of and all works protected by Canadian and international copyright laws and are ©Nicholas Simpson. Rights are administered by SODRAC.  
T.F.R.

### **An Editorial: What's Poussin Got to Do with It?**

When Surrey was at the New York Art Students League in 1936-37 he bought, for about 25 cents, a beautiful colour reproduction of Poussin's *Tancredè et Herminie* and immediately saw the merit in Cézanne's remark that he would like to re-do Poussin from nature. Twenty-one years later, Surrey did just that when he painted *The Accident, Variations on a Theme by Poussin* (illustrated here in one of the mixed media studies sold most recently by Galerie Jean-Pierre Valentin).



©Nicholas Simpson

On 13 March, 1974, in a letter to Eudice Garmaise who was using this work in one of her art classes at Dawson College, he wrote, that this had always been one of his favourite paintings:



“*Tancredi et Herminie* and the subject is from a poem by Tasso. Herminie and Vafrin have found Tancredi unconscious after his duel with Argante whose body lies in the middle distance (and is only roughly indicated here). Herminie cuts off some of her hair to bind up the wound. The composition is dominated by her big white horse at right, now a car . . . . The horse at left, also now a car is probably Vafrin’s mount but I preferred it to be the vehicle with which Argante assaulted the hero. The wheel was formerly Tancredi’s shield.

I made several studies in black and white and one in watercolour which is now in the University of Montreal collection, then an oil 24x36 which did not satisfy me and I destroyed. Finally, I repainted it a little smaller with a tighter composition, closer, I think in colour and mood to the original – which I’ve never seen – but I think my reproduction is a good one.”

It would be a number of years before he attempted another variation on Poussin – or, at least, one he identified as such but in the summer of 1966, he was drawn to reinterpret some other European painters, most notably Gustave Courbet, while pursuing his own artistic aims. It was a remarkably productive summer for Surrey and illustrates several different sources of inspiration at work in his painting. The records he left of it in his studio workbooks yield a wider and richer view of his artistry at work than that recorded in Part 2 of my Field Guide.

---

## A Field Guide to Surrey’s Artworks (continued) Part 3

On May 23, 1966, Philip and Margaret moved out of their Westmount home to a good-sized summer house on Île Bizard, a small island close to Montreal on Lake of Two Mountains (*Lac des Deux Montagnes*), the delta of the Ottawa River in Quebec at its confluence with the St. Lawrence River. The two residences were 30 kilometers from one another but in 1966, they were worlds apart, connected by a short bridge so narrow that automobiles had to yield the right of way to one another. Because of this limited and difficult access, the island’s little village with its tall church and surrounding farms were almost as untouched as the Lower

Saint Lawrence but threatened by a new bridge and suburban developments. Their friends Jack and Marjorie Close lived on the island year round on a secluded estate built by prosperous Americans in the twenties and repossessed by creditors, a casualty of the Great Depression that the Closes had revived on a more modest scale.

The Surreys moved into the estate's guest house as summer tenants. This wasn't the first time (nor the last) when they would spend part or whole of a summer in the countryside but it differs in some significant ways from other summers. For one thing, Île Bizard was closer to Montreal but more distant from other friendly painters and the guest house was much more spacious and well-appointed than the kind of rustic cabins they favoured. In fact, it was much too large for them (it had its own redundant servants' quarters) but that meant that Surrey had much more studio space than he had at home – more than enough room to set up his purpose-built cradle for 32x48 and larger paintings, his regular easel and multiple drying racks. He brought so many supplies with him that it took them three days to complete the move. The air was marvellous, they swam daily, and they visited with the Closes regularly. Surrey painted between 2 and 8 hours a day and Margaret had her books and the company of her dachshund, Daisy. The nine pages of Workbook #1 covering the period record seven separate business trips to Montreal, a week spent salmon fishing in an undisclosed location and a two day trip to Mont Laurier. Otherwise, Surrey painted and painted and painted.

The summer of 1966 is among the most instructive four month periods of Surrey's six decades of painting. Because it was relatively free of external cares, his workbook entries for the 114 days (plus three for moving in and two for moving out) are concise and focussed "dailies" worth investigating and chart the progress of two major works worth a fresh look in the Golden Anniversary of their inception.

To place this period in context: Surrey was blindsided by the commercial success of his December one man show at the Galerie Martin five months earlier. Operated by Gilles Gauvreau and Paul Martin, the gallery's two exhibition rooms were housed in a half-basement directly opposite the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts at 1380 Sherbrooke Street West (a building that fell to the wrecking ball when the Museum built the Jean-Noël Desmarais Pavilion in 1991). The show was hung on the gallery's pristine white walls by Surrey's friend Betty Goodwin, whose taste was impeccable. Evidently, she did a beautiful job that thoroughly pleased

Surrey and the gallery owners. Surrey was displeased, however, to discover that a few of the gallery's favoured clients were given options to purchase before the show was fully hung. He thought he'd made it clear to Gauvreau and Martin that no one was allowed to buy anything until John McConnell had made his personal selections. The issue was amicably settled: his employer and patron was delighted and not nearly as surprised as Surrey that there was such strong interest in what he had been painting in the 18 months of full time artistic endeavour following McConnell's relieving him of most of his duties at *Weekend* and sending him home to paint on full salary. A large, cheerful, happy crowd of collectors attended the vernissage and the show sold out quickly. An added bonus was the surprise appearance of John Lyman (who was staying at the Ritz Carlton Hotel and confined to a wheelchair), when he was carried into the gallery by two male attendants. He was put in the centre of the inner room and held court. Surrey noted in his memoir that "all kinds of people [Lyman] hadn't seen in years came up to speak to him and it was simply the best evening he had had in a very long time." Lyman's appearance at his exhibition not only healed a breach in friendship of thirteen years standing between them but was so companionable a reunion that Lyman wanted Surrey and no one else to write the Preface to the catalogue of his own forthcoming retrospective.

The success of this show had consequences that reached beyond the depletion of stock in Surrey's studio and the reinvigoration he felt: he'd begun planning the show as a kind of farewell – he'd felt "all painted out." By the end of the exhibition, it was beginning to dawn on him that his best work was yet to come. Still, it was good to reappraise the past and Guy Viau, Director of the Musée du Québec, asked Surrey for permission to mount a retrospective. Being in a museum, the pictures did not have to be available for sale so most of the works could be borrowed. The show ran from February 23 to March 20, 1966 and featured 34 works from 1942 to 1966, including three of the *Place Ville Marie* paintings that created a sensation at his December show. They were among a dozen from his personal collection.

1. *Taverne Gilt Edge* (1942) Coll. Paul Dumas
2. *Taverne Youville* (1944) Coll. Stanley Handman
3. *Secrétaires* (1948) Coll. Dr. Miguel Prados
4. *Soda Fountain* (1950) Coll. Kathleen Fisher
5. *Pietons* (1952) Coll. Mme. Talbot Johnson
6. *Carré Dominion* (1952) Coll. Dr. E.C. Burman

7. *Joueurs de baseball* (1954) Coll. Gilles Corbeil
8. *Bicyclistes* (1954) Coll. Maurice Corbeil
9. *Saint-Henri* (1956) Coll. G.R. Parkin
10. *Chambres touristiques* (1957) Coll. Goodridge Roberts
11. *Ecole des Beaux-Arts* (1959) Coll. Gabriel Desmarais
12. *Magasin du coin* (1959) Coll. Samuel Getz
13. *Hôtel Russell* (1960) Coll. Charles Rittenhouse
14. *Carnaval à Westmount* (1962) Coll. Sir George Williams
15. *Bacchantes* (1963) Coll. Maurice Oulimar
16. *Place Ville-Marie* (1964) Coll. John McConnell
17. *Paysage urbain* (1965) Coll. Seminaire de Joliette
18. *Cabines en Gaspésie* (1956) Collection particulière
19. *Jeunes filles à Percé* (1957) Collection particulière
20. *Rue Saint-Antoine* (1958) Collection particulière
21. *Traffic en hiver* (1962)
22. *La cabine téléphonique* (1964)
23. *Lumières lointaines* (1965)
24. *Le Taxi* (1965)
25. *Place Ville-Marie I*
26. *Place Ville-Marie II*
27. *Place Ville-Marie III*
28. *Cinq Heures*
29. *Windy Day*
30. *Avenue Grosvenor*
31. *Le garage*
32. *Taverne "Regent"*
33. *Commuters*
34. *Sergine* (Etude pour les joueurs de baseball)

Much was made of the event, the art and the artist in the French media. It was officially opened by M. de Grandpré, deputy minister of Cultural Affairs and Surrey's close friends Jean Paul and Madeleine Lemieux hosted the opening night party.

The Québec City Retrospective was less distracting than his old friend Robert LaPalme's request that Surrey design a mural for one of the new Metro stations. Driven by an idealism not widely shared, LaPalme wanted to have murals by French-Canadian artists in the western stations and those by English-Canadians in the eastern end so that the "two solitudes" would be merged, at least artistically. Surrey plunged into the project

with great energy: he was assigned the Sherbrooke Metro Station and he was commissioned to create a work paying homage to the five Founding Societies of Montreal. It was naïve, to say the least, to assume that the St-Jean Baptiste Society (whose headquarters were a short walk from that Metro station) would accept a Westmounter's *homage*. Surrey's own naiveté was such that he made several preliminary drawings, drew and coloured a scale model cartoon, produced a full scale cartoon and spent a great deal of time studying the technical aspects of creating a large scale mosaic and consulting with ceramists without first securing a non-refundable retainer. Surrey didn't fail to see the humour in the absurd political situation Lapalme created by pitting a cosmopolitan painter against one of the most provincial of elites and simply walked away from the project, feeling that he'd learned much about the cultural politics emerging from Quebec's Quiet Revolution. But valuable time had been wasted to little purpose. Surrey either gave all his preliminary works to Lapalme or destroyed them: to date, no one seems to recollect ever seeing them.

Whenever Surrey was free of these and other commitments – his mother required an unusual amount of care and attention that winter, he wrote a Preface to the catalogue for John Lyman's retrospective as well as contributing an essay as to an unnamed centennial project – new work simply poured out of him from January 1 onward:

*Sherbrooke Metro Station*, full size cartoon, preparatory sketches, scale (1"-1') coloured sketch and 18x36 panel

*Boys and Girls Crossing Street #5*, 40x60 panel together with 24x36 preparatory drawings

*Garden*, 12x16 on panel + prep drawings

*Grosvenor and Sherbrooke*, 30x40 panel

*Tavern*, 12x16 panel

*Winter Night*, 12x16 panel

*Prince Albert Avenue at Night*, 12x16 on panel

*Pam Pam*, 6x8 acrylic on panel *Reflections*, 12x16 panel, 30x40 panel + prep designs

*Porch at Night #2*, 12x16 panel + drawings



*Girls on Prince Albert*, 16x12 on panel + drawings

By May, he'd turned his attention to completing works that had not been far enough advanced for showing in December; notably, *Faun & Nymphs*, 40x60 and *Night Lights*, 30x40 and *Porch at Night*, 32x48. Surrey also expended time and energy designing and building a cradle that could support larger panels and canvases to a maximum of 48x72 inches, preparing a large number of panels of various sizes and sketching possible designs and elements for the painting that was most on his mind:

During a visit to the Crosses the previous summer, a walk in the island's village gave him the idea to paint *The Young Ladies of the Village (after Courbet)/Les Demoiselles de Village* based upon Courbet's 1851 portrait of his three sisters.



*The Young Ladies of the Village (after Courbet)* 1966, 32x48 ©Nicholas Simpson

Acquired by National Gallery of Canada 1967.



*Gustave Courbet, Les Demoiselles de village*

It's important to note that with this painting of his three sisters—Zélie, Juliette, and Zoé—strolling in the Communal, a small valley near his native village of Ornans, Gustave Courbet (1819—1877) initiated a series of pictures devoted to the lives of women. When it was exhibited at the Salon of 1852, it was attacked as tasteless and clumsy. Its critics reviled the sisters' common features and country dresses, their ridiculous little dog and the overall lack of unity, including traditional perspective and scale. Surrey found much to emulate in Courbet and his commitment to painting only what he could see and his willingness to make bold social statements, especially in support of women's rights. And Surrey would have liked said of him the epitaph that Courbet claimed, "...when I am dead let this be said of me: 'He belonged to no school, to no church, to no institution, to no academy, least of all to any régime except the régime of liberty.'" A

further bond between them was that Surrey's earliest Montreal works had been criticized in identical terms as "tasteless", "clumsy", "common", "countrified" as well as "lacking unity, including traditional perspective and scale."

Before beginning his own *Les Demoiselles de Village*, Surrey set about coming to terms with the island's specific aesthetics between May 27<sup>th</sup> and June 26<sup>th</sup> – sketching multiple studies almost daily of his immediate surroundings working outward from the blooming lilacs at his front door and turning the best of his studies into 12x18 paintings on panel – *Lilacs & Window, Île Bizard; Back Porch, Île Bizard; Île Bizard Landscapes I-IV; River; Waves; Village Tavern* – and one 20x30 panel, *Riverside, Île Bizard* and began enlarging *Back Porch, Île Bizard* to a 32x48 acrylic and oil on canvas (a project he'd complete in March 1968.) And then, in a complete change of pace, he painted *Sunsets I-II* in oil on 6x8 panels *en plein air*



©Nicholas Simpson



©Nicholas Simpson

and *Landscape no. III, Île Bizard* in the same format.

On June 27<sup>th</sup>, the Surreys returned to Montreal to attend an opera. Driving back the following morning, an idea of how to paint the newly constructed Decarie Boulevard occurred to him and he produced two 6x8 panels as soon as he reached the summer house. Then and only then did he feel the self-confidence necessary to take on the composition for *Les Demoiselles de Village* the following afternoon after painting *Landscape no. IV, Île Bizard*, 6x8 panel in the morning.

Once begun, *Les Demoiselles de Village* commanded his full attention for five days and on the sixth day he rested. When he returned to his makeshift studio, he did a very characteristic thing and began an unrelated 24x36 painting, *Reflected Double Portrait* (of Margaret and himself), which would cause him many difficulties. After a week of salmon fishing (July 9—16<sup>th</sup>), he returned to Île Bizard, cleaned his brushes, warmed up with two more 6x8 oil sketches, looked at *Les Demoiselles* and found it unsatisfactory. He scraped, repainted and then turned away from it entirely in order to work on the *Double Portrait* by altering the underpainting and drawing several pencil studies before deciding that it too needed to be put aside. So he enlarged his oil sketches of *Decarie Boulevard* and *Tavern* into drawings and began a new work, *Bank Job*. That was his July.

During the first week of August, Surrey completed *Double Portrait*, painted a half size (i.e. 16x24) *Les Demoiselles de Village*, then spent the next week drawing many, many studies for the positioning of the man and child in the full sized painting. For relaxation first thing in the morning and last thing at night, he painted 6x8 studies of morning mists and evening skies as well as 6x8 studies for both his major works. By the 18<sup>th</sup>, he realized that he had to back away again and busied himself with 6x8 panels – three more landscapes, another sunset and two more of the river. Around this time, while he did more work on *Decarie Boulevard* which was now an 18x24 panel, he was drawn to its antithesis – *Gouin Boulevard* which ambled along the shoreline linking the new autoroute to Île Bizard, painting a young couple walking along it as a 12x18 panel. On August 30<sup>th</sup>, he drew his first composition for *La Plage*, a companion piece to *Les Demoiselles de Village*. The two panels should never have been separated because they are formally related (the composition of each is the reverse of the other but unified in color. Unfortunately, in 1967 when the National Art Gallery purchased *The Young Ladies of the Village (after Courbet)*, it either lacked the funds or the curatorial instincts to purchase *La Plage*. (This primitive photograph gives the merest hint of the beauty in the original) They don't seem to have been reunited since they were exhibited side by side in the Surrey retrospective, *Le peintre dans la ville*, mounted by the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal of 1971 that travelled to the Centre culturel canadien in Paris in 1972.



Surrey put so much energy into his *Young Ladies* from June to August and then again from October to December that hard as he worked on it between August 30<sup>th</sup> and mid-September much of the painting of *La Plage* was done between October and December. The move back to Grosvenor Avenue on September 17-18<sup>th</sup> couldn't be delayed despite fine painting weather. Because it's not always easy to tell from his notes (especially during the final six weeks of the holiday) if he is working on a painting or simply a study of an unsatisfactory element within it OR if he is initiating a new 6x8 or repainting an existing one, my confidence level is high but not absolute that by the end of his summer on Île Bizard, he'd painted the following minor works set on the island:

- #1) 12x16 panel, acrylic: *Landscape no.1* (27 May 1966)
- #2) 14x18 panel, acrylic: *Landscape no.2* (27-28 May 1966; 3 Sept; 29 Dec 1967; 1 Jan 1968)
- #3) 32x48 acrylic and oil on canvas: *Back Porch, Île Bizard* (30 May 1966; 24 Mar 1968)
- #4) 12x18 panel, acrylic: *Lilacs & Window, Île Bizard* (1, 4 June 1966)
- #7) 12x18 panel *Landscape no.3, Île Bizard* (7-10 June 1966)
- #8) 12x18 panel *Landscape no.4, Île Bizard* (7-10 June 1966)
- #9) 20x30 panel, acrylic, *Riverside, Île Bizard* (24 June 1966)
- #10) #12) 6x8 panel, *Sunset no.1, Île Bizard* (27 June 1966)
- #11) 6x8 panel, acrylic, *Sunset no.2, Île Bizard* (27 June 1966)
- #12) 6x8 panel, acrylic, *Sunset no.3, Île Bizard* (19 Aug 1966)
- #13) 6x8 panel, acrylic, *Sunset no.4, Île Bizard* (19 Aug 1966)
- #14) 6x8 panel, acrylic, *Sunset no.5, Île Bizard* (31 Aug 1966)
- #15) 6x8 panel, acrylic, *Sunset no. 6, Île Bizard* (31 Aug 1966)
- #16) 6x8 panel, acrylic, *Landscape no. 3, Île Bizard* (28 June 1966)
- #17) 6x8 panel, acrylic, *Landscape no.4, Île Bizard* (19 Aug 1966)
- #18) 6x8 panel, acrylic, *Landscape no.5, Île Bizard* (19 Aug 1966)
- #19) 6x8 panel, acrylic, *Landscape no.6, Île Bizard* (19 Aug 1966)
- #20) 6x8 panel, acrylic, *Landscape no.7, Île Bizard* (19 Aug 1966)

- #21) 6x8 panel, acrylic, *Moon on river no.1, Île Bizard* (21 Aug 1966)
- #22) 6x8 panel, acrylic, *Moon on River no.2, Île Bizard* (21 Aug 1966)
- #23) 6x8 panel, acrylic, *Landscape no.8, Île Bizard* (12 Sep 1966)
- #24) 6x8 panel, acrylic, *Cabin Repairs, Île Bizard* (18 July 1966)
- #25) 6x8 panel, acrylic, *Evening Sky no.1, Île Bizard* (19 July 1966)
- #26) 6x8 panel, acrylic, *Evening Sky no.2, Île Bizard* (14 Aug 1966)
- #27) 6x8 panel, acrylic, *Evening Sky no.3, Île Bizard* (14 Aug 1966)
- #28) 6x8 panel, acrylic, *Misty Morning, Île Bizard* (14 Aug 1966)
- #29) 6x8 panel, acrylic, *River with Moon no.3, Île Bizard* (23 Aug 1966)

Many of these paintings were supported, often extensively, by pencil and colored drawings. Numerous of them deserve more attention than they've been given by collectors because of Surrey's experiments with J.M.W. Turner's elevation of landscape from a predilection for provincialism to a cosmopolitan romanticism. There's no surer guide for leading a viewer from a narrow sense of these works to a sense of their broader importance than a comparative viewing of two of his three *Gouin Blvd* works: his initial 12x18 panel, acrylic from August/September 1966 to *Gouin Blvd #2 (in the style of Claude and Turner)* from February-March 1967.



But for most collectors, what is most interesting about what Surrey painted that summer will likely remain *The Double Portrait* (painted in both full 32x48 and half 16x24 formats; *Decarie Boulevard* in its three 6x8 panels, and its three larger iterations – oil & acrylic on canvas 18x24 (Aug 22—25, Sept 13—21), acrylic and oil on panel 24x36 (Oct 22—Dec 29), and Dec 1966), oil & acrylic on canvas 16x24 (December 23) and two works of which little can be said, *Bank Job* and *Tavern* because they have not been unambiguously identified.

**Editor's Note:** *The Field Guide* will be continued in the next issue: Part Four is “Philip Surrey as Curator of his Works”.