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John Wycliffe Lowes Forster 1850-1938

On Saturday, September 20, 2003 the Ontario Heritage Foundation unveiled a provincial plaque in Brampton, Ontario to commemorate artist John Wycliffe Lowes Forster. The bilingual provincial plaque reads as follows:

JOHN WYCLIFFE LOWES FORSTER 1850-1938

Born in Norval, this internationally renowned artist attended Brampton Grammar School before apprenticing to Toronto painter John W. Bridgman, with whom he later formed a partnership. After studying in Paris, France from 1879 to 1883, he returned to Toronto, becoming a member of the Ontario Society of Artists and of the Royal Canadian Academy. Throughout his career, J.W.L. Forster painted over 500 portraits and historical tableaux of leading citizens and political, religious, business and historical figures from Canada and elsewhere. Upon his death, Forster bequeathed his collection and funds to establish his lifelong dream, a portrait gallery of historic and eminent Canadians. He is buried here in Brampton Cemetery.

JOHN WYCLIFFE LOWES FORSTER 1850-1938

Né à Norval, cet artiste de renommée internationale a fréquenté la Brampton Grammar School, avant de faire son apprentissage auprès du peintre torontois, John W. Bridgman, avec lequel il forma plus tard un partenariat. Après avoir suivi des études à Paris, en France, de 1879 à 1883, il retourna à Toronto et devint membre de l'Ontario Society of Artists et de l'Académie royale des arts du Canada. Pendant toute sa carrière, J.W.L. Forster peignit plus de 500 portraits et tableaux historiques de citoyens émérites, de personnages politiques, religieux et historiques et d'hommes d'affaires du Canada et d'ailleurs. À sa mort, M. Foster légua sa collection et son argent en vue de la réalisation de son rêve de toujours, la création d'une galerie de portraits de personnages canadiens historiques et éminents. Il repose au cimetière Brampton.

Historical background

Early talent

John Wycliffe Lowes Forster (usually J.W.L. Forster) was born on December 31, 1850 in Norval, Ontario. His grandparents had immigrated to Canada from England in 1828 with six children, including Forster's father Thomas who married Martha Wilkinson in 1847.¹ Martha, who was reputedly descended from John Wycliffe, named her second son after the English philosopher.

By the age of two, Forster began to demonstrate artistic abilities by skilfully shaping the letters of the alphabet. As he grew older, he began sketching the faces of teachers and classmates on chalkboard with careful accuracy. Eventually, Forster passed the county teachers examination. He did not begin teaching but enrolled in Brampton Grammar School. Unfortunately, the daily eight-mile walk to school took its toll. He suffered a physical breakdown, which curtailed his plans for university.

Studio days

With the encouragement of his parents, the 19-year-old Forster went to Toronto to develop his artistic talent. He became the apprentice of Toronto painter John Wesley Bridgman, noted for his professional crayon portraits, copies of historical paintings and portrait photographs.² In 1871, Forster won first prize in the amateur class at the annual fair of the Upper Canada Agricultural Society for his portrait of Bridgman.

The following year, Forster and Bridgman began collaborating on portraits. Their work included a portrait of Mohawk chief Joseph Brant, painted for Lord Dufferin, and others displayed in the first exhibition of the Ontario Society of Artists.³ Forster made his first trip to New York City later that year, visiting the Metropolitan Museum of Art and other collections. Forster formed a partnership with Bridgman that lasted from 1874 to 1878.

In 1876, Forster stepped onto the international stage, showing his work at the Philadelphia Sesquicentennial Exhibition alongside other Canadian artists including his partner, Bridgman. After the exhibition, Bridgman stayed in Philadelphia, giving Forster the opportunity to "work

¹ For more details on the Forster family see Rowena Cooper, "Local Artist Deserving of Recognition. J.W.L. Forster 1850-1938," *Brampton Heritage Times*, 3 (April 2002).

² Sometimes incorrectly Bridgeman (active 1861-1907); see J. Russell Harper, *Early Painters and Engravers in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), p. 44.

³ Letter, J.W.L. Forster to his mother (Toronto, 9 September 1873). J.W.L. Forster Papers, Special Collections Centre, Toronto Reference Library, Toronto. Brant (1742-1807); Frederick Temple Blackwood, 1st Marquess of Dufferin and Ava (Governor General of Canada 1872-78).

out portrait problems on my own.”⁴ One of the portraits he completed during this period depicts prominent Toronto businessman William Gooderham Sr. and his son William Jr.

Studying abroad

By the age of 29, Forster had saved enough money to study abroad for three years. His first stop was London, England where he spent a few months with Canadian landscape painter Charles Stuart Millard who was teaching at the South Kensington Art School. Then Forster was off to Paris where he studied at the Académie Julian under Gustave Boulanger and Jules-Joseph Lefevre in 1879, under William Adolph Bouguereau and his associate Tony Robert-Fleury between 1880 and 1882, and under Carolus-Duran in 1882.⁵

By 1881, two of Forster’s portraits had been admitted to the prestigious spring *Salon* in Paris.⁶ That same year, he sketched landscapes in the Barbizon region southeast of Paris with fellow Canadian painter William Blair Bruce, and for a time also shared a studio with Edwin S. Calvert, an Irish/Scottish landscapist. J.W.L. boasted at the time he had sold three pictures (probably landscapes) to collectors in Australia and received several portrait commissions in France.

Speaking of his Paris studies, Forster said, “my dream and ambition through the years had been to paint historical pictures, but comment was persistent by both masters and fellow-students on my mental and temperamental adaptation for portraiture.” His teacher Robert-Fleury declared. “C’est votre métier; et je vous conseille de le suivre. Vous êtes portraitists, vraiment.” [This is your vocation and I advise you to follow it. You are a portraitist, truly.]⁷

Professional career

Having completed his formal training, Forster returned to Toronto in 1883 to open a portrait studio of his own. A portrait of Dr. William Caven for Knox College was among his first commissions. Forster also taught students including J.W. Beatty, Curtis Williamson and Frank Armington, and was an examiner in fine arts at Hamilton Ladies College and Brantford Ladies College. Forster was also a major promoter for the establishment of an art school in Toronto.

He was elected a member of the Ontario Society of Artists in 1883 and regularly contributed to annual O.S.A. exhibitions between 1884 and 1925. In 1884, he was admitted as an Associate of the Royal Canadian Academy and began exhibiting during its annual shows. He also exhibited at the Art Association of Montreal (later the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts) from 1889 to

⁴ J.W.L. Forster, *Under the Studio Light. Leaves from a Portrait Painter’s Sketch Book* (Toronto: Macmillan Company of Canada Limited, 1928), p. 13.

⁵ “Biographic Data for the Records of the Art Museum of Toronto” (completed by J.W.L. Forster, signed and dated 30 August 1913), J.W.L. Forster Artist File, Edward P. Taylor Reference Library and Archives, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

⁶ J.W.L. Forster, *Under the Studio Light*, op. cit., p. 33. Other sources state that it was in 1880.

⁷ J.W. L. Forster, *Under the Studio Light*, op. cit., p. 33.

1914, and in various Provincial Industrial Exhibitions and the Canadian National Exhibition from 1902 to 1931.

In England during the 1890s, Forster exhibited at the prestigious Corporation's Art Gallery in Manchester, the British Colonial in London and the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool, among others. Forster also showed in the United States at the 1893 World Columbian Exposition in Chicago, the 1901 Pan American Exposition in Buffalo, where he won an honourable mention, and the St. Louis Purchase Exhibition in 1904.

By the mid 1890s, Forster was obtaining important commissions from the Ontario government. Forster painted retired Lieutenant-Governor The Honourable John Beverley Robinson in 1895, beginning the tradition which continues today of painting Ontario lieutenant-governors. Another early Ontario government commission, the portrait of The Honourable Christopher Finlay Fraser, is considered to be one of Forster's finest works.⁸

History paintings

When the Ontario Legislative Building opened in 1893, "a series of historical sketches were made [by Forster] and submitted to officers of state as an appeal for the decoration of state buildings."⁹ During the next decade, under successive provincial governments, Forster completed four historical portraits – Major-General Sir Isaac Brock, Major-General James Wolfe, Major-General Aeneas Shaw and Colonel John Graves Simcoe.¹⁰

Forster thoroughly researched his historical subjects, travelling in 1897 to Brock's home in St. Peter Port, Guernsey, England, to study the hero of the War of 1812. With an introduction from John Beverley Robinson, he visited the Miss Tupper, nieces and heirs to the General. Using as a model a watercolour and pastel portrait of Brock (attributed to William Berczy) owned by the Tupper, Forster made a preliminary sketch (now in the collection of the

⁸ Fraser (Provincial Secretary and Registrar, 1873-74; Commissioner of Public Works, 1874-94). The tradition of official portraiture at Queen's Park also includes Premiers of Ontario and Speakers of the Ontario Legislature. The Government of Ontario Art Collection owns 28 Forster portraits. See Fern Bayer, *The Ontario Collection*, (Markham: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1984).

⁹ J.W.L. Foster, *Sight and Insight* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1941), p. viii. The paintings for Queen's Park are discussed in Fern Bayer, *The Ontario Collection*, op. cit., pp. 159-165. A letter, William Lyon Mackenzie King to Forster (House of Commons, Ottawa, 11 July 1895), J.W.L. Forster Papers, op. cit., thanks the artist for the "photograph of your excellent portrait of Sir Isaac Brock" insinuating that commissions in the federal capital were similarly being sought.

¹⁰ Brock (President and Administrator of Upper Canada, 1811-12) is Canada's first war hero, acknowledged for his important role in the Battle of Queenston Heights where he was killed. Portrait commissioned in 1900. Wolfe (Commander-in-Chief of the British Forces at the taking of Quebec, died at the Plains of Abraham, 1759). Portrait commissioned in 1901. Shaw (Member of the Legislative Council of Upper Canada, 1794); Adjutant General of the Militia in the War of 1812). Portrait commissioned in 1902. Simcoe (Lieutenant Governor of Upper Canada, 1791-96; founder of the Town of York, later Toronto). Portrait commissioned in 1903.

National Archives of Canada) and a painting that is displayed in the Royal Court House, St. Peter Port. Another painting of Brock in the Ontario government's collection is displayed in the Ontario Legislative Building. The Tupper sisters also owned the General's uniform that was "perforated by the musket balls which terminated his spectacular career," as well as the letter which Brock wrote to Sir George Prevost the night before the Battle of Queenston Heights.¹¹ Forster featured both the uniform and the letter in this famous portrait.

While in England, Forster took the opportunity to research a portrait of James Wolfe who led British forces at the Battle of the Plains of Abraham in 1759. He based his sketch on a portrait of Wolfe by Joseph Highmore that depicts him as a young lieutenant. Not completely satisfied with this image, Forster did further research in the Imperial War Records Office in London in order to make a more accurate rendering of the type of uniform Wolfe would have worn during his time in Canada.

Forster's portrait of William Lyon Mackenzie was acquired by Premier Ross at the behest of citizens who recommended that it be hung in the Legislative Building "in respect to his place in history."¹² Premier Whitney then ordered a portrait of The Honourable Robert Baldwin, Mackenzie's cohort in the struggle for responsible government. Forster also painted a portrait of Sir John A. Macdonald, a Conservative, as a counterpoint to an earlier portrait of Liberal George Brown.

Forster also proposed a series of murals depicting Ontario's heritage for the walls of the new Legislative Building. Although a commission for Forster was not forthcoming, he did complete several notable history paintings during his career including *The Departure of Canada's First Contingent for South Africa 1899* and *Welcome by the Parliament of Canada to the Members of the Colonial Conference at Ottawa 1894*. While Forster was busy in England researching his portraits of Brock and Wolfe, he was able to obtain royal permission to sketch Queen Victoria and her household in June 1897 during the Queen's Diamond Jubilee.¹³ The resulting painting, *Thanksgiving Service in St. George's Chapel, Windsor Castle for Queen Victoria and Household*, is one of Forster's finest historical tableaux.¹⁴

During this period, Forster also painted historical portraits of the Methodist James Wesley, his brother Charles and their mother Suzannah. The three works are in the collection of Victoria

¹¹ J.W.L. Forster, *Under the Studio Light*, op. cit., p. 140.

¹² Mackenzie (Member of the Legislative Assembly of Upper Canada/Canada West, 1828-31; 1835-36; 1851-58; first Mayor of Toronto, 1834-35). Portrait purchased in 1903. See Fern Bayer, *The Ontario Collection*, op. cit, pp. 162 and 372.

¹³ Letter, J.W.L. Forster to his mother (London, 18 June 1897), J.W.L. Forster Papers, op. cit. See also, Letter, J.W.L. Forster to Newton McTavish [sic] (Toronto, 13 August 1937), photocopy (of an original, location unknown), J.W.L. Forster Artist File, Government of Ontario Art Collection, Archives of Ontario, Toronto.

¹⁴ Collection of Victoria University, Toronto.

University, Toronto – the institution that houses the largest number of Forster works. Commissioned by the Social Union of the Methodist Church of Canada, he travelled to numerous locations in England to research images during 1900.

Although a staunch Methodist and a Director of the Canadian Purity Society, Forster still enjoyed studying mystical, polytheistic oriental philosophies. He produced a number of allegorical portraits, among them Kismet and Iman. Forster always felt his *opus magnum* was Hosanna, a large work depicting Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, which he researched by travelling to Palestine.¹⁵ The artist commented that these "subject pictures I have painted between times to keep the enthusiasm of my specialty in even balance."¹⁶

"Big-wigs"

Forster also wrote prolifically on art, history, ethics and education – including an autobiography entitled *Under the Studio Light, Leaves from a Portrait Painter's Sketch Book*. In this book, he discussed the subjects of his paintings – prominent men and women from around the world who he affectionately called "big-wigs."¹⁷ Forster categorized his subjects by profession.¹⁸ His "Public Men" included the Canadian Governor Generals Earl Grey and Lord Aberdeen, several Prime Ministers of Canada such as Sir J.S. Thompson, Sir Wilfrid Laurier and The Right Honourable William Lyon Mackenzie King, and provincial premiers from across Canada.

The "Eminent Collegians" that Forster painted included: Reverend Dr. Egerton Ryerson, the founder of Ontario's educational system; Nathaniel Burwash, Chancellor of Victoria University; Reverend Dr. Charles Jas Stewart Bethune, Head Master of Trinity College School in Port Hope; and Dr. Willet Green Miller, first Provincial Geologist of Ontario.

Forster's "Men of Affairs" included: farm equipment tycoon Hart Massey; department store mogul Timothy Eaton; Canada's tobacco king Sir William MacDonald; and Ottawa lumber baron and founder of the Canada Atlantic Railway, John R. Booth. Forster also painted "Men of Imperial Minds" including Sir Sandford Fleming, inventor of standard time, and the military theorist Colonel Fred C. Dension, one of Forster's "Knights of Old Chivalry."

Among the notable women painted by Forster as "Guardian Spirits of our Race" were: Ellen Axson Wilson, the first wife of American President Woodrow Wilson; Mary L. McDonnell, the first President of the Women's Christian Temperance Union; Emily Murphy, known as "Janey Canuck," Canada's first police magistrate and a leader of the Orange Order; and members of high society.

¹⁵ Gertrude Pringle, "The Beginnings of a Portrait Painter," *Willisons Monthly* (Toronto, May 1927), pp. 450-451.

¹⁶ Letter, J.W.L. Forster to Newton MacTavish (Toronto, 26 September 1927), photocopy (of an original letter, location unknown), J.W.L. Forster Artist File, Government of Ontario Art Collection, op. cit.

¹⁷ Letter, J.W.L. Forster to his mother (London, 17 June 1902), J.W.L. Papers, op. cit.

¹⁸ J.W.L. Forster, *Under the Studio Light*, op. cit. The chapters in the book are by "category" of the sitter.

Forster painted dozens of portraits of missionaries, which he termed “Modern Crusaders”, including General William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army. He also painted many portraits of “Prelates, Priests, and Preachers” and “Artists in Prose and Verse”.

The Virginia flag

In the 1870s, Forster developed friendships with American Southerners who came to Toronto during the American Civil War. These contacts led to many commissions. In 1915, Forster was visiting Richmond, Virginia for the great Confederate Reunion that marked the 50 years of peace between the north and south when General Thomas Mumford commissioned him to design a flag for the State of Virginia based on its heraldic arms. In 1917, the Virginia flag designed by Forster was unfurled at the second inauguration of U.S. President Woodrow Wilson.¹⁹

Forster weds

In 1916, at the age of 66 and the height of his career, Forster married Emma Frances Aikins, daughter of the Canadian Senator and native of Peel County, The Honourable John Cox Aikins. Aikins served as Lieutenant-Governor of Manitoba from 1882 to 1888 during which time Frances acted as his official hostess. Frances was also a gold-medal graduate of Hamilton Ladies' College, a member of the Methodist United Church, and served on the boards of the Toronto Y.W.C.A. and the McAll Mission. In 1921, the Forsters purchased “Mapleholme”, the elegant 18-room house built by Aikins in 1873 at 27 Wellesley Street in Toronto. J.W.L. and Frances lived there until their deaths in 1938 and 1951 respectively.²⁰

The Emperor and Empress of Japan

Forster was the first foreign artist to be granted the privilege of painting the Emperor and Empress of Japan. The opportunity arose during the Eighth World's Sunday School Convention in 1920 when convention organizers commissioned him to paint Their Imperial Highnesses.

Forster set up a studio in Tokyo's luxurious Imperial Hotel. Because Their Imperial Majesties never sat for portrait painters, Forster was provided with photographs of his subjects and also given the Emperor's uniform, medals, sword and regalia. He was also given the Empress's ermine and velvet trimmed gown and court jewels. The only glimpse Forster caught of the imperial couple was when they were boarding a train at Tokyo's Ueno Station. Nevertheless, after six weeks' work, the portraits were completed. They were unveiled during the

¹⁹ J.W.L. Forster, “The Flag of Virginia,” *Art and Archaeology*, vol. VIII, no. 4 (August 1919), pp. 233-235.

²⁰ Mrs. Forster died at the age of 97 and is buried in Mount Pleasant Cemetery, Toronto. See obituary, “Noted Artist's Widow Mrs. Forster Buried,” *Toronto Daily Star*, 14 May 1951.

convention and subsequently presented to the Imperial Household.²¹ The portraits were later exhibited at schools and institutions across Japan. The paintings are in the collection of the Imperial Palace in Tokyo.

National Portrait Gallery

On April 25, 1938, J.W.L. Forster died at the age of 87 following an automobile collision.²² His funeral was held two days later at Carlton Street United Church in Toronto. His friend The Right Honourable William Lyon Mackenzie King attended the funeral. Forster was buried in the Forster family plot in Brampton Cemetery, near his childhood home.

Forster's lifelong dream was to establish a portrait gallery of "historic and eminent Canadians". Upon his death, he bequeathed 15 of his portraits to form the nucleus of a national portrait gallery and \$10,000 for its creation.²³ The Forster collection includes the artist's self-portrait as well as portraits of his wife and mother. Among others are portraits of poetess Pauline Johnson, writers Dr. William Kirby and Dr. Bliss Carmen, and Beguogianini, the last chief of the Ojibway Confederacy. His financial bequest was to be used to expand the collection once the gallery was realized.

Although the Corporation of the National Portrait Gallery was patented in 1939, the Second World War slowed its development. In 1955, a plan was negotiated to exhibit Forster's collection in universities and elsewhere to promote awareness of the National Portrait Gallery. One exhibition was held in 1956 at the McIntosh Gallery of the University of Western Ontario in London.²⁴ The members of the board of the National Portrait Gallery transferred its paintings and the administration of Forster's donation to the Royal Ontario Museum.

Conclusion

Forster made important contributions to portrait and history painting in Ontario. He was a major proponent of art and art education in Ontario and the Government of Ontario Art Collection holds 28 of his paintings. Several of Forster's works, including Sir Isaac Brock, are prominently displayed in the Ontario Legislative Building. He was one of Canada's most outstanding portrait painters and his reputation extended around the world. He painted Queen

²¹ A lively account is found in J.W.L. Forster, *Under the Studio Light*, op. cit., p. 192. See also, "Toronto Artist's Work. Portraits of Emperor and Empress of Japan Presented at Tokyo," *Toronto Telegram*, 12 October 1920; and J.W.L. Forster, "Painting Japanese Royalty without Sitters," *Toronto Star*, 6 July 1929.

²² See obituaries, "Noted Portraitist J.W.L. Forster Dead. Accident Injuries Fatal to Canadian Who Painted Japanese Royalty," *Toronto Star*, 25 April 1938; and "Forster, J.W.L.," *The Globe and Mail*, 26 April 1938.

²³ Letter, Arlene Gehrmacher, Associate Curator, Canadian Historical Art, Royal Ontario Museum to Fern Bayer (Toronto, 23 May 2003). Major research on Forster's National Portrait Gallery is underway by Ms. Gehrmacher, with a publication forthcoming. See also, Donald Jones, "Painter Recorded our History," *Toronto Star*, 11 September 1976; and Robert Stacey, "Letter to the Editor, National Gallery Unlikely," *Toronto Star*, 21 September 1976.

²⁴ A brief description of the intended National Portrait Gallery's corporation is found in "Color on Canvas," *London Free Press*, 1 February 1956. It is unknown if other exhibitions of the collection occurred elsewhere.

Victoria, the Emperor and Empress of Japan and others. During his career, Forster created over 500 portraits and historical tableaux that represent a visual dictionary of the great personalities of his time and reflect the prolificacy, vision and talent of this internationally renowned painter.²⁵

The Ontario Heritage Foundation gratefully acknowledges the research of Fern Bayer in preparing this paper.

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²⁵ The exact number of works is unknown, as no catalogue of Forster's work has been published.