

Recognized as a cartoonist, neglected as an artist



JUDITH AND KOLOPHERNE

Robert LaPalme is difficult to describe because he was active in so many fields. He is mainly known as an editorial cartoonist and because of this his other accomplishments are often overlooked.

"What Robert LaPalme should be remembered for are his wonderful, singular attacks on Maurice Duplessis," said Terry, "Aislin" Mosher in the *Montreal Gazette* in 1997. In that vein LaPalme once drew a cartoon picturing Duplessis as a pimp selling Québec to Uncle Sam.

As well as drawing editorial cartoons for *La Presse*, *Le Devoir* and other newspapers LaPalme also acted as the artistic director for Expo 67, painted a huge street mural in Ste-Adèle and had three ceramic tile and polished cement murals originally exhibited at Expo 67 permanently hung in

the three separate Montréal subway stations. One of his murals also graces Montreal's Botanical Gardens. He also worked for Radio-Canada hosting both a comedy program on radio and a television show.

Along the way he found the time to paint roughly a hundred paintings, become a member of the Royal Canadian Academy and received the Order of Canada for his contribution to Canadian art and for being a, "Cartoonist whose talent and sense of humour have been enjoyed in many different forms for many years." In 1962 he was appointed the founding director of the *Salon of Cartoon and Caricature* held in Montréal. A position he held for 25 years. The salon was the largest editorial cartoon competition in the world.

LaPalme was born in modest circumstance in Montréal in



FIRST WOMEN IN WAR, THE AMAZONES

1908. He was raised in Alberta and returned to Montréal at the end of World War I. His early working life was that of a jack-of-all-trades. He worked as a crucifix maker, florist and an usher. He had always drawn but failed an entrance examination for the Montréal School of Fine Arts. He began to doodle and was selling his cartoons regularly by the age of 25 when he moved to New York to study art for two years. On his return he exhibited at the Montréal Museum of Fine Arts and in galleries in Paris, Rome, Rio de Janeiro and Toronto.

LaPalme has been described as the Picasso of Canadian cartoonists and his style was geometric, cubist and abstract in nature. These elements would also form the basis of his style as a painter, where, stripped of the confines of drawing cartoons LaPalme would often expand his work to mural or fresco-sized pieces. Among his paintings are three important series, the signs of the zodiac, the history of war and the history of medicine.

In them, there is a high degree of abstraction and the viewer needs to look at them two or three times in

order to see the pictorial elements in them. The colours swell in rich harmony and his style has depth and maturity. At first glance everything is harmonious, balanced and happy. On further viewing people and their stories emerge from the canvas as if from a musical rhythm.

One of LaPalme's shows in the 1940s, *There Are No Secret Weapons*, done in gouache, traveled to New York, Toronto, Sao Paulo, Rome, Paris and Ottawa. LaPalme was an artist of his time. He mixed with Alfred Pellan the great Québécois abstract surrealist and studied the work of Leger, Matisse, Miro, Mondrian, Picasso and Braque among others. These influences helped him define his own style and ethos.

LaPalme was a public figure, both for his art and his politics. The skewering of egos and politicians stayed with him to the very end. Shortly before his death in 1997 he said, "I'm leaving an unhappy world where the noise from Formula One engines is louder than the cries of 50,000 children starving to death in Rwanda."

LaPalme was a good friend of Montréal Mayor Jean Drapeau. With him he attempted to persuade the French



FIRST JEEP, THE CHARIOT

government to dismantle the Eiffel Tower and ship it to Montréal for the World's Fair in 1967. When this failed the mayor and the artist tried to have a glass tower built in Montréal.

In many ways LaPalme was a ren-

aissance man. A serious artist who was socially engaged he played a role in public affairs and stayed in the public eye as a hectoring conscience. His cartoons were famous and award winning. His pure art, on the other hand,

is neglected and worthy of more consideration.

Robert Lafontaine