

DER I.F.A.

John Frederic Der was born on a Saskatchewan farm at Canora. He was an only child. *"After seeing me, my parents decided that was enough."* His early childhood unfolded without any difficulty, in total freedom, with a sole object in life.... To run barefoot outside or to draw planes, various things, etc... *"My parents were farmers and worked hard. They were kindness itself. My father was a very intelligent man who succeeded at anything he tried and my mother was the same. I was five years old when he left the farm to become a policeman in Canora. I was ten when my parents broke up, and my mother took me to Toronto where she became a nurse.... By reading everything she could lay her hands on dealing with the subject. She was really very courageous."* Curiosity characterized John as a child and his trait was to attract him to drawing. *"I have happy memories of our neighbour. He had little cats....kittens....* which he would draw. When I saw those drawings, which he gave me, I was very much impressed because his drawings were so realistic, accurate down to the tiniest detail, very professional. That always *reminded in my mind."* John entered primary school at Canora and pursued his studies in Toronto. He wasn't a very good student, spent whole days dreaming of the farm, the fields and the woods. At fourteen, he became disenchanted with life in Toronto and since he was strongly built, tried to get into the Army but was soon found out and turned down. Forever attracted by wide open spaces, he went into the merchant marine at the age of Fifteen....first on the Great Lakes and later ... on the *"real sea"*. *"That was the time in my life when I worked the hardest,* seventeen hours a day. I think that even today some dirt is still imbedded in my hands. I stayed at sea until I turned twenty... But I had met my future wife when I was sixteen, on a spree in Montreal, so when I quit the

merchant marine, we married.” He had never stopped working on his drawing during all the years since his meeting with his artist neighbour but couldn’t see, at the time, how he could put his natural gift of his to work to earn a living. After working at several jobs in offices and in sales, he decided to show samples of his drawings to the Canadian Seamen’s Union and was hired as a cartoonist for their journal. He didn’t pay any attention to the suggestion and advice giving to him with respect to the subjects to cover and worked only on those subjects that interested him without any consideration of any possible political fallout his cartoons might have. Of course, he was boycotted and was soon out of work. Having developed the habit of drawing every day, he registered at the Fine Arts Museum for the specific purpose of learning how to paint. “I had first-class teachers: *Lismer, Marion Scott, Goodridge Roberts, etc... In those days, they had a dammed good school! I stayed there three years but found it increasingly difficult to provide for my family with the one hundred and eight dollars a month I was getting a veteran (D.V.A). Believe me, that wasn’t a lot of Monday! When the 25th of the month came around, you were really broke*”. To improve his financial situation, he applied for and got two jobs as a cartoonist, this time however with the Montreal Star and as a free-lancer for a television program which soon ended so he was once again penniless. He then became an insurance agent and remained in that field for thirty years. At the same time, not wanting to give up painting, he joined the Atelier 39 group. Two years later, he definitely quit his work in insurance.

“I suddenly realized that basically I was an illustrator and applied to painting the caricature approach which now characterizes my work. It is important for me to interpret the human condition but even more important to express feelings. I have nothing to prove and am very happy as I am. Now, I can’t look at things more objectively but I have trouble putting up with the lack of talent.... Oh! How I would like to be able to draw better, to be a better painter...” In saying this, he seems to forget that even the

best of the best artists on earth always dreams of being... better. John Der is an eminently sympathetic individual whose good nature is ever present. His handshake is warm as is his smile which seems to say:
“How happy I am happy to see you”

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