

John Der



Previous Page, *Venders*, oil on canvas, 20" x 24"
This Page, right, *Self Serve*, oil on canvas, 20" x 24"

An Ordinary Life

written by Debra Usher

John Frederic Der was a Quebec artist born in Saskatchewan in 1926. He was an only child and spent the early part of his life surrounded by kindness, good humour and the ability to explore the countryside.

Curiosity characterized John as a child and this trait was to attract him to drawing. "I have happy memories of our neighbour. He had little cats, kittens really, which he would draw. When I saw those drawings, which he gave me; I was very impressed because his drawings were so realistic and accurate down to the tiniest detail." They were so very professional and always remained his mind.

In the Beginning

John entered primary school at Canora and then pursued his studies in Toronto when his parents moved. He wasn't a very good student and 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 his age was soon found out and he was turned down. Forever attracted by wide open spaces, he went into the Merchant Marines at the age of fifteen - first on the Great Lakes and later on the 'real sea'.

He never stopped working on his drawing during all these years since meeting his artist neighbour. But he just couldn't see, at the time, how he could put this natural gift of his to work to earn a living. After working at several jobs in different 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 suggestions and advice that was given to him with respect to the subjects to cover and worked only on those subjects that interested him without any consideration of possible political





above left, *Fishing Quota*, oil on canvas, 30" x 36"

fallout his cartoons might have. Of course, he was boycotted and was very 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 very 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 as a veteran (D.V.A). Believe me, that wasn't a lot of money. When the 25th of the month came around, you were really broke". To improve his financial situation, he applied for and got two jobs



above right, *Net Minding*, oil on canvas, 16" x 20"

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.

An Insurance Agent

Finally he then became an insurance agent and remained in that field for thirty years. He was still

painting and drawing and 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 always then characterized my work. It is important for me to interpret the human condition but even more important to express





Previous Page, top left, *White Water*, oil on canvas, 24" x 30"
 bottom left, *Lookers*, oil on canvas, 20" x 24"
 right, *Temptation*, oil on canvas, 20" x 16"

feelings. I have nothing to prove and am very happy as I am. Now, I can look at things more objectively, but I have trouble putting up with the lack of my 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 artists on earth always dream of being even better.

Here he was at the age of 55 and John Der had finally become a professional painter. Like many other artists, he spent the first few years of his artistic career trying to find representation in the art world. But soon enough Der soon found his niche market and became a well-respected and sought after artist.



This Page, above left, *Odd Man Out*, oil on canvas, 16" x 20"
 above right, *Bar Hands*, oil on canvas, 16" x 20"

Ordinary People Living their Lives

John Der's work is, first and foremost, about ordinary people living their lives and experiencing the joys, sorrows and victories of that as everyone does. His keen and artistic eye was quick in finding the personality of his subjects and his agile hand was apt at translating their feelings and mindsets in

a way seldom found in the world of art. An engaging man and an artist of great sensitivity, Der's subjects were a little like him, gruff, happy, with a generous physique; their expression gentle, sad or confused but always honest.

Der was not the artist painting old houses, barns, fences, churches or ruin. His art has always been



left, *Greenhouse Effects*, oil on canvas, 24" x 30"

current and real. John Der saw Quebec as it was and is: alive, tender, passionate and always true. He also managed to season his work with finesse and lucidity.

Sportsmen, revellers, dancers and so many other ordinary people were immortalized in this giant's impressive body of work into which he transferred his own humour and "joie de vivre". All the canvases he graced with his talent and his oil paints are a reflection of who he was. His landscapes, a scarcer subject for Der, also show the artist's preoccupation for anecdote and the subject behind the paintings.

Der often painted characters rather like himself - friendly giants with ham hock hands, all seemingly sketched live by a raconteur of sorts whose great talent we are only beginning to appreciate.

Creating His Own World

John Der created his own country fairs. He painted a kind of rural life that mixed youngsters, parishioner, animals and habitants. In other words, a veritable fresco of types, customs and activities representative of the likeable, yet gritty world, which is Quebec. The bulk of his work is somewhat reminiscent of a certain Ruben's masterpiece exhibited at the Louvre in which the notions of movement and liberty are fully exploited.

John Der had a quality rarely found in artists here



above left, *Tombola*, 2017, oil on canvas, 20" x 24"



above right, *First Kill*, 2016, oil on canvas, 30" x 36"

- a sense of humour. In a genre that verges on quiet introspection, he remains smiling and friendly. His paintings deal with daily tasks, occupations and pastimes which are the fruit of his observations and knowledge of the rural way of life. This life although real can remain strange to the many urbanites among us.

Der's art stands out from the conventional art which many Canadian painters produce. Sometimes our art can be too stiff, timid or uniform in colour and subject. There is sometimes a certain moroseness which makes the work of Hudon and Der look revolutionary. They actually laugh, criticize and enjoy themselves!

The Art of John Der

At first glance, Der's compositions show common, larger than life figures in compact, glutinous groups. His characters are embraced, attached, grabbed. They have real 'mugs' rather than faces. Their hands are bloated, their feet shod in clogs. These people bend their elbows, stuff their faces, and chew the

fat. Their heads sport a shock of hair or a wig, as well as skull caps, berets, cloches, bonnets, helmets, caps and tuques. Their bodies are imposing and their gestures work with the force of gravity.

Der's painting reminds the viewer of sculptures. The influence of the sculpture likely comes from the artist's studies with John Byers. However,



left, *Tea Party*, oil on canvas, 24" x 30"

Der remained a marvelous drawer for whom line structured each scene. His is a supple, sensitive, omnipresent line.

Whatever the circumstances, Der's characters appear in pastel tones that make the viewer forget the medium is oil on Masonite.

John Der's work is still alive today, thanks to his continued presence in major galleries and collections but, also, because of his continued presence in the hearts of the people who knew and admired him.

In 1996, this engaging artist left us too soon, but though the artist is gone his work still remains. John Der left us incredible number of paintings, of which many already belong to collectors attracted by his unique way of translating daily life to the canvas.

John Der was an eminently sympathetic individual whose good nature was ever present. His handshake as warm as his smile which seemed to say: "How happy I am to see you."

To see more of the work by John Der please visit:

Balcon D'Art
St-Lambert, QC
www.balcondart.com
450.466.8920