

# The Painted World of Conrad Furey

Written by David Barry



Conrad Furey is Hamilton's best known artist. Billionaires, conservatives, and socialists have purchased his work. The Bronfman family, John Crosbie and past Ontario Premier Bob Rae are all proud owners of Furey's paintings. Conrad's work can also be found at Dofasco Canada, Hibernia Corporation, St. John's, Newfoundland, Art Gallery of Hamilton and Carlton University. Furey is now an important National Artist.

Life has not always been easy for Furey, who grew up in Baie Verte, Newfoundland. Born in 1954, Conrad is the seventh of eleven children. His father was a logger, a fisherman and a trucker. He also worked in the mines. The family didn't have a lot of money. Conrad fondly remembers nagging his mother for money to buy art materials so that he could do school art projects.

After high school graduation, Furey worked in Labrador for the Iron Ore Company of Canada. He later worked in a bakery. Next he experienced the drudgery of toiling in a mine; this encouraged him to go back to school. He enrolled at the Trades College in St. John's. Furey wanted to be more creative than commercial. Subsequently, he studied at Sheridan College in Brampton, Ontario, but he only finished one year. He was later accepted at the prestigious OCA in Toronto. He didn't go. Furey now believes that he is basically a self-taught artist.

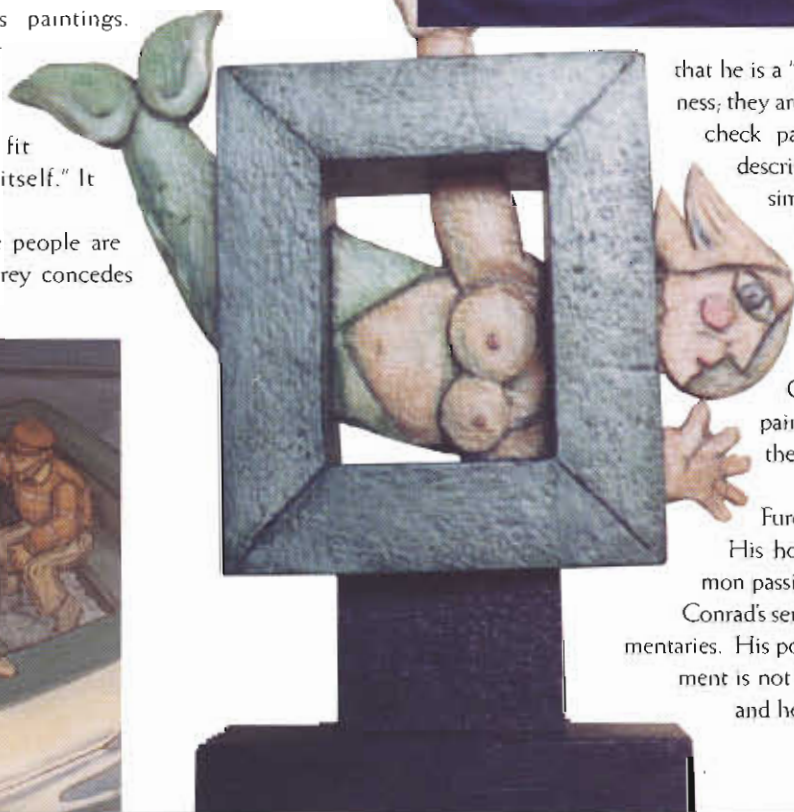
Conrad somehow ended up in Hamilton, where





he met Bill Powell at the Knight II Coffeehouse. Furey worked in Powell's gallery for studio space. Immediately, Conrad's painting revealed a distinctive style. His cutvilinear lines are a hallmark of his work. Furey says, "Compositionally, my work needs movement for me to feel right about it. Movement gives me energy." There's little evidence of realistic anatomy or perspective in his paintings. Furey admits that his perspective is distorted. He says, "It's just making it fit in. I let it resolve itself." It does.

His child like people are highly stylized. Furey concedes



that he is a "primitive." His figures have a commonness; they are often rotund proletarians usually clad in check patterned shirts. Their faces are non-descript, as shown in *THE OUTING*. Furey's simple pastoral landscapes frame the figures who diligently go about their day's work; they chop wood, empty fishing nets or engage in other Newfoundland themes. His playful mermaid paintings are completely enchanting. Conrad also executed a series of iceberg paintings which are currently topical due to the success of a certain Hollywood movie.

The 1992 Olympic Games inspired Furey to do a number of sports paintings. His hockey pieces lovingly capture our common passion.

Conrad's serious side comes out in his pollution commentaries. His point is clear: "the message is our environment is not unlimited." Yet Furey is always hopeful and he says, "There's

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a lot of humour in my work. It's also uplifting. I'm not depressed." His stunning SPEAKERS reveal his humour, and they are unquestionably the coolest electro-acoustic devices on the planet.

Conrad works in every imaginable medium. His beautiful stained glass windows decorate St. Michael's Roman Catholic Church in Oakville. Furey's bronze sculptures are part of the permanent collection of the Art Gallery of Hamilton. He started out painting in oils, but switched to acrylics in the 1980's. He also has done soft sculptures of shirts and pants. In recent years, Conrad has been doing more relief pieces and cylindrical wood structures. His wooden assemblage WALL, was commissioned by Hamilton's art patron Irving Zucker. Complete with moving parts, it covers an entire wall of the Children' Hospital at Chedoke-McMaster in Hamilton.

Marc Chagall, Henry Moore, Max Beckmann and Pablo Picasso's work have all influenced Conrad's art. When asked where he gets his ideas from, Furey says, "It's an instinct, it's like walking, you have subconscious things going on all the time. I like to do things, yet I frequently revisit old themes."

Furey preps his paintings by applying brown washes. He usually doesn't do preliminary sketches,

he starts painting right on the canvas. Conrad wets the canvas so that the paint moves easily. He often uses paint straight from the tube, as illustrated in JIGGING. It's his glazing that unifies the colours. Furey says that his palette is instinctive, "a little of this and that. A painting is a combination of all the mistakes you have made."

Furey has never doubted his ability as an artist. He says, "I felt that if I worked hard at my art and promoted myself, then being an artist wouldn't be unlike any other self-employed person. I treat it like you can't sit around and expect things to come to you. I have always been able to pay my bills. I've lived off what I've brought in with my art. My wife Theresa and daughter Leah have been very supportive."

Presently, Conrad is working on a mother and child family series. His work can be seen at Retro Grove at James and Augusta Street in Hamilton.

For commissions and more information, Furey can be reached at:

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