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'CLEAN, SIMPLE AND ABSOLUTELY EVOCATIVE'



LYLE STAFFORD FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Art fans stop to enjoy *In the Eastern Lead — Baffin Bay* by artist Toni Onley in Vancouver last week. Mr. Onley, known for his serene yet powerful West Coast scenes, died in 2004.

Western brush paints Ottawa

Artist Toni Onley's estate donates 20 works for display in Canada's official residences

BY VIVIAN MOREAU, WHISTLER

British Columbia's loss will likely be 24 Sussex Dr.'s gain, as 20 paintings by West Coast artist Toni Onley head to Ottawa next month to be displayed in Canada's official residences.

Donated by the estate of the respected B.C. artist, who died in a 2004 plane crash, the paintings and prints, valued individually between \$3,000 and \$85,000, are the largest

B.C. collection ever received by the Canadiana Fund.

The federal body gathers and places Canadian art and collectibles in seven official urban and rural homes of the prime minister, governor-general and leader of the opposition.

The National Capital Commission won't decide which official residences will feature Mr. Onley's works until they are examined in Ottawa.

"It's very likely that one will end up in 24 Sussex Dr., given just the sheer number of them," commission spokeswoman Katherine Keyes said.

One painting that could end up in the prime minister's residence is a 1.5-by-1.3 metre oil of Kennedy Lake, near Tofino, that Mr. Onley painted in 1987. While on an art-scouting jaunt to Mr. Onley's West 6th Ave. archives in Vancouver last year, the fund's executive director was impressed by the painting.

"I was wowed over by the mysticism, the feeling of the mountains of Western Canada," Harvey Slack said.

Mr. Onley was a prolific artist, known for his ostensibly serene but luminously powerful West Coast scenes. Born on the Isle of Man, he spent his 20s in Ontario before moving to the West Coast, where he shook up Vancouver's early 1960s art scene.

With training in Britain's 19th-century watercolour tradition, augmented by abstract explorations from studying in Mexico, he was commissioned to do a 3.1-by-6.5 metre mural for the 1962 Queen Elizabeth (now Vancouver) Playhouse opening. Initially reviled, the canvas-on-canvas collage was later praised after his work was noticed

by the Tate Modern in London.

But it was his deceptively simple renditions of B.C.'s remote marine and glacier vistas that he captured in his Lake Buccaneer amphibious plane that garnered Mr. Onley acceptance and notoriety in the Canadian art world.

"It's been said by others that Toni Onley did for rocks and islands and the sky what the Group of Seven did for trees," said Ted Lederer, owner of Vancouver's Elliott Lewis Gallery. "He just had that ability to make things clean, simple and absolutely evocative."

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Artist 'would have been tickled pink'

ART from page S1

"You would look at one of his watercolours and it was just absolutely right."

The oil and watercolour paintings, along with silkscreen prints, are due to arrive in Ottawa next month. National Capital Commission staff will oversee placement of the works in the residences, and Mr. Onley's executor says Prime Minister Stephen Harper's wife Laureen, a graphic artist, is aware of the collection's impending arrival.

"And I'm sure she'll have some input," Dennis Robinson said.

It took several months to organize the 20-piece donation, Mr. Robinson said, the idea for which was suggested by gallery owner Diane Farris. Mr. Robinson had been fretting over what to do with *In the Lead* — Baffin Bay, a 1.8-by-2.4-metre oil that demanded a large viewing space. He is also worried about how to get the estate, to be settled within the next year, needed tax breaks for a collection that contains thousands of Mr. Onley's



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A framed portrait of Toni Onley, who died at 75 in 2004 when his plane plunged into the Fraser River.

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works and is housed in a privately managed archive.

Mr. Onley died at 75 in 2004 when his Lake Buccaneer plunged into the Fraser River near Whonnock. Mr. Robinson said the opportunity for Mr. Onley's paintings to be hung in a public building such as Rideau Hall would have pleased the artist, who was named to the Order of Canada in 1998.

"He would have been tickled pink," Mr. Robinson said.

Mr. Onley specified in his will that projects that would give his work fresh viewing opportunities were to be encouraged. And although his estate is facing litigation from Mr. Onley's two adult children, the artist's third and former wife says the donation is exactly what the gregarious artist would have wanted.

"I'm 100 per cent sure that he would have been so pleased," said Yukiko Onley, a Vancouver photographer. "He always enjoyed recognition and attention and would have loved to see that happen."

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