

The man from Monteleone

The story of Carmen Lamanna, a \$27-a-week picture framer who made good

By GAIL DEXTER

Star staff writer

Walk past the elegant Carmen Lamanna Gallery any weekday night and you'll see a light shining from somewhere in the back: That's the workshop where Carmen Lamanna, who came to Toronto as a \$27.50 a week framer 17 years ago, makes the ornately carved gilt frames for which he's famous.

But to the younger artists who gravitate to the Yonge St. gallery the attraction is not the owner's frames (which come in prices up to \$25 a foot) but the gallery's reputation as a show place for the work of some of Canada's youngest, most ambitious and avant-garde artists—David Bolduc, Gary Lee Nova, Royden Rabinowitch, Milly Ristvedt and Jean Noel.

Well, on Dec. 19, Lamanna is introducing to Toronto a group of their New York contemporaries with an exhibition by eight young but already established Americans—an exhibition so impressive it might well have been presented by a public museum.

It isn't that surprising, really. In two short years, Lamanna has created, out of nothing, a gallery of daring purpose and exciting promise, a gallery that has figured prominently in National Gallery and Canada Council talent hunts. How?

"By the sweat of his brow, that's how," says Dorothy Cameron, who owned the gallery before Lamanna. "Carmen never stops working. He has a real commitment and that's why he's succeeded. He's made a stand for one kind of art; he's not putting on a fashion show. He has an eye for quality."

"He's a complete enigma to me," says Avrom Isaacs, who runs a gallery two doors down the street.

Lamanna was born in 1927 in Monteleone, a town near Naples, the son of a framer and restorer. After school he would work in his father's gallery, learning carving and the restorer's craft. There was no modern art in Monteleone, but Lamanna remembers liking modern things.

He was 21 when he arrived in Toronto—an old photograph shows him as he was then, a little happier, not quite so heavy but with the same hands, those large workman's hands—and turned down a lucrative job (\$65 a week) working on the construction of the subway.

"My uncle, who got me the job, was furious," he recalls. "But I knew it wasn't my kind of work. I wouldn't be happy. Instead, I'd save \$10 or \$15 a week from

my pay to buy art, old prints or books that I'd restore and sell.

"Anyway (Lamanna still speaks with a heavy Italian accent and prefaces most of his statements with the word "anyway") I always wanted to start a gallery. A lot of people offered to help, but I wanted to be on my own. A year and a half after I was here, I'd saved enough money for a down-payment on a house."

Lamanna still lives in the house (located in the west end of the city) with his wife Connie, whom he brought over from Italy in 1953, and their three sons. It's an odd house—old, furnished in heavy mahogany and plastic-covered plush sofas (the kind of furniture your grandmother would have). But the paintings on the walls... that's different. There are paintings by his gallery artists, of course (he buys them to cheer up the artists when sales are low), a wonderful sketch by John Meredith, a fine Jack Bush and some older Canadian landscapes which Lamanna likes because they are from a different era. (Lamanna's taste in music is no less catholic. Mixed in with the inevitable operas are Janis Joplin with Big Brother and the Holding Company.)

"Anyway," he continues, "in 1960 I opened my own framing shop (across the street from his present location; it's a vacant lot today) with \$2,300 capital. I didn't have enough money to buy a power saw so I made my own; that's the one I still use. It was tough at first. For a while we lived off Connie's unemployment insurance. I remember one night when I couldn't go home because I didn't have the carfare. A customer came in for a piece of glass. I sold it for 75 cents, just enough to buy bus tickets. Anyway, by 1966 I had made a lot of money (just how much he doesn't want to say) so I could open my own gallery."

The gallery's first year was distinguished. Lamanna came to it he knew he could count on the assistance of Mrs. Donald Reid (the wife of the National Gallery's assistant director) and an old friend in Montreal who had the gallery and would be glad to show Lamanna his work.

That's how 21-year-old David Bolduc came to have a one-man show at the Carmen Lamanna Gallery in 1967. The show stunned collectors, curators and critics with its originality and excellence and brought young artists to Lamanna's doorstep.

"At that time," says Bolduc, "no one would listen to Carmen. They gave him the brush-off. He had already begun to show Gary Lee Nova (an exciting Vancouver

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ver' artist), but no one paid any attention to him. During the past year, things have been really crazy; people are suddenly interested in the gallery.

"I think my influence is minimal. Carmen has a good eye and real intuition—like *AV. ISABRO*. Carmen makes all the decisions. It's his gallery and he's gonna fight it out to the end . . . ; and that's groovy."

Milly Ristvedt, a 26-year-old painter from Vancouver, first visited the Lamanna gallery to see the Bolduc show. "Gary Lee Nova got me interested in the gallery, but it was the fact that this dealer would give Bolduc a one-man show that impressed me. So I showed Carmen my paintings. He takes a lot of time looking at art. He doesn't make snap judgments. He must have been keeping his eye on art for years because he knows what's happening."

Starting the gallery wasn't as easy as it sounds. The artists didn't come in droves at the beginning. "You walk from artist's studio to artist's studio," says Lamanna. "You knock on doors all day, all night. Even then you may never find the kind of work you like. You wonder why the public doesn't respond. Does the public think these artists are easy to find?"

Last week Lamanna was door-knocking and talent-hunting in New York, looking for American artists to show in his Dec. 19 exhibition. Eventually, he hopes to exhibit his Canadian artists in New York.

"You know these New York artists sell well, but they were still interested in Toronto—they've all heard of the Mirvish Gallery, of course, and when they saw slides of what my artists are doing they were so happy.

"I saw 18 to 20 artists in three days. They all knew each other, mostly living on the East Side. Anyway, I chose eight: David Norvos, Paul Mogensen, Richard van Buren, Dan Christensen, Allen Hackin, David Diau, Kenne Showell and David Lee. When Toronto artists see it, they really blow their minds up."

Where do all the ideas come from, you wonder? You think of those baroque picture frames, of the two gold cherubs on the Lamanna mantelpiece, of the gilt madonna and child Carmen carved for his workshop when he first came to Canada. Lamanna himself is at a loss to explain his sensibilities.

"Some people think we follow fashion," he says. "It's not that because I'm always looking for lasting quality. It's a question of creation, not in the sense that it's hard to do; it's the originality of the artist's

idea. Even as a child I was always looking for hard things to do, to make. This new art is more challenging and more creative than anybody else today. I mean, the artist creates space, color . . . it's hard to put into words."

Lamanna is a man enthralled with the idea of artistic creation. To him, artists are special people. They are magic because they create, not from money or from wood but from their imaginations. That's why he treats them with so much respect.

When Royden Rabinowitch arrived 10 hours late with the sculpture for his one-man show, Lamanna was understandably furious; but he pitched in and helped repaint the damaged works. Today, he's finishing Rabinowitch's largest steel sculpture.

When Jerry Santbergen, an artist on whom Lamanna had placed a lot of his hopes, decided to quit the art game and hold his one-man show as a mock-funeral (pricing the paintings out of the market at \$3,000 a piece) Lamanna respectfully agreed. "An artist like Santbergen is so rare," explains Lamanna, "you have to be sympathetic. It's too easy to criticize; I'm in a position to be understanding."

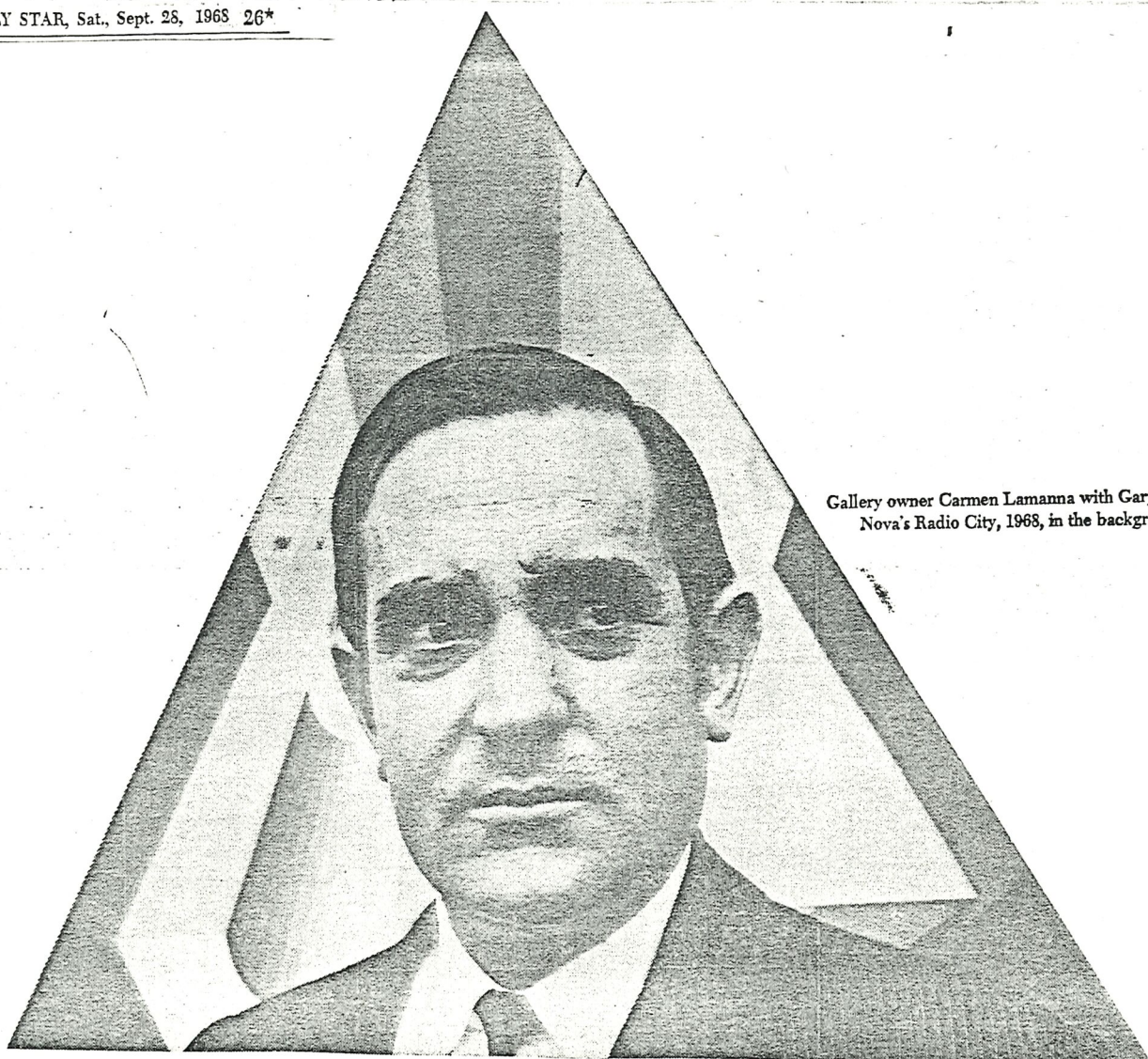
Karl Beveridge, a Toronto sculptor who exhibits with another gallery, says simply, "Carmen is the only dealer in the city with the guts to say 'this is what's good'—and then stand by it."

Nevertheless, Lamanna sometimes wonders if he's standing by the right decisions. He wonders if he's justified in letting his own obsession with art become his vocation.

"Carmen's a very moody person," says Ann Denoon, his secretary. "He'll get very upset when he feels as though he may have made a mistake."

"I'm too sensitive," says Lamanna. "I get depressed too easily by the business, by the laziness of the public. And I worry, lots of worries . . .

"My children ask me why I can't get a normal job and come home at 5 like other fathers. What can I say? Then I think that maybe life is too easy for them here. I try to keep them innocent, but then they don't know what it's all about . . . Anyway I want them to be involved with art and the gallery. I take them to visit the artists. I don't teach them woodworking. They need ideas more than money. It's funny, they always ask what they'll do when they grow up. I say why don't you do what I do. They say they like what I do, but they'd want to come home at 5 . . ."



Gallery owner Carmen Lamanna with Gary Lee
Nova's Radio City, 1968, in the background.