

# Lamanna: A belief in art's power to illuminate t

BY JOHN BENTLEY MAYS  
Visual Arts Critic  
Toronto

A FEW years ago, the Roman art critic Achille Bonito Oliva said to me: "You live here. Tell me. Who is Carmen Lamanna? He speaks Italian like a peasant, he uses old-fashioned words you only find in comic books. He's fantastic! In Europe, he's the only Canadian art dealer anybody's heard of, and everybody's heard of him. But who is he?"

Goaded by Bonito Oliva's question, I interviewed Lamanna shortly thereafter. During a long summer evening spent with him in a cafe by the harbour's edge, I heard many tales I'd never heard before: about a happy boyhood with his father, a wood-carver and art dealer, in the south of fascist Italy; about the bicycle he whittled from scrap wood during the Second World War; about the dozen obscure years he spent, after his arrival in Toronto in 1951, whittling picture frames and restoring what he called "cow-scapes" for well-to-do clients.

I did not find out then, or ever, who he was or just what flipped the switch inside this burly man in 1966, turning him abruptly from just another restorer into the most intellectually adventurous and controversial art dealer ever to set up shop in Canada.

Or just what drew this modestly educated, otherwise conventional Roman Catholic immigrant — he was never anything other than a practicing Catholic — to the most unconventional, unmarketable art being made in Ontario in the late 1960s and the early 1970s.

Few other dealers in Toronto would have been prepared to deal seriously with, some 20 years ago, the mixed-media work of the young Robin Collyer or Ian Carr-Harris, the late-modern painting of Paterson Ewen or Ron Martin, the demanding sculptures of David Rabinowitch or Royden Rabinowitch or Murray Favro, or the installations of General Idea.

But in these, and other relatively unknown young artists, Carmen Lamanna glimpsed what he thought to be greatness and took them on. Somewhere in the formative history of virtually every one of Ontario's best and most interesting artists of the 1970s, you find Carmen Lamanna.

Why — or just why *him* — I never found out. And with his death this week in Toronto, our last chance to swim upstream with his help — from the facts of his life to the high, hidden springs of his insight and conviction — is gone. But the facts themselves remain, as large and unmoveable as the man himself, and as unavoidable as his presence in the Canadian art world throughout most of the 25 years of his career.

At first, he was not taken seriously by the more conventional Toronto art dealers. Then, after his abrupt adoption by the Canadian art-world intelligentsia, he was not much liked by them.

Is that so hard to understand? For all his soft, plain speaking, and his unassuming manner, he bore about him an unmistakable air of superiority that was bound to disquiet art dealers of less specialized taste. He believed himself to be Canada's most serious art dealer. He believed his artists, along with a handful of select outsiders like Betty Goodwin and Michael Snow, were the only serious living Canadian artists.

In a profession that's all about getting and spending and impressing those with money to spend, Lamanna disdained, or appeared to disdain, both game and players, and was always more at ease among the poor intellectuals of Queen Street than the rich collectors of Bay Street.

In return, he became a Canadian commercial dealer that curators and critics of the 1970s could like and were willing to support.

At least part of this perceived kinship between Lamanna and the intellectuals was a matter of smoke and mirrors. He was never really one of them. In the 15 years or so that I

knew him, I never heard him say anything about art that was strikingly original, or notably rich in insight. His genius lay, not in the realm of ideas, but in an ability to spot talent of a high, unconventional order, to commit himself unreservedly and jealously to its nurture, and to inspire absolute personal loyalty in both the artists and critics who fell under his spell.

As you might expect, there was a dark side to the intense interplay of loyalty, need and jealousy for which the Carmen Lamanna Gallery was

well known. The many noisy bust-ups between artist and dealer are as much part of the Carmen Lamanna story as the successes.

He could not bear the thought of sharing his artists with other dealers, in other Canadian cities or other countries. As he told me on more than one occasion, he saw no point in devoting himself to an artist for years, only to have another art dealer reap the financial and personal benefits. Such a view assumes that wealth and fame are somehow multiplied in the art world by restric-

tion of artists' opportunities to show and be seen. My experience suggests that precisely the opposite is the case. But you don't need to take my word for it. The fact that even the most remarkable mid-career artists currently in the Carmen Lamanna stable — I am thinking here especially of Ron Martin and Robin Collyer — do not have solid, burgeoning careers outside Canada is surely due, at least in part, to the climate of unwise allegiance which Lamanna encouraged among his artists.

But this is merely saying that Car-

men Lamanna had the usual human faults, not denigrating the absolute consistency of his long witness to intelligent professional art dealer in before Lamanna had even himself so completely with advanced Canadian visual time and no Canadian dealer or since, has shown quite a courageous disregard for forces, the stylish opinions makers and the fickle desirers.

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APPRECIATION / *A woodcarver's son with the courage to take on the seemingly unmarketable artists he thought were serious*

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But this is merely saying that Car-

men Lamanna had the usual share of human faults, not denigrating the absolute consistency of his career-long witness to intelligent art. No professional art dealer in Canada before Lamanna had ever allied himself so completely with the most advanced Canadian visual art of his time and no Canadian dealer, before or since, has shown quite the same courageous disregard for market forces, the stylish opinions of tastemakers and the fickle desires of collectors.

Above all, and at the expense of

everything else, he believed with radiant and unalloyed faith, in visual art's power to illuminate the darkness of our time and to rend the veil of ignorance hung thick around us by the manipulators of mass society and mass information. As he said during our last interview: "I am serious about art because it recharges me, and gives me a better understanding of society, people. Because art is salvation, a great thing, like religion and law. Because art is the best, most challenging medicine for the mind."