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CARMEN LAMANNA, an unlikely dealer, made art history in his gallery.

Lamanna is lamented as diviner of great art

There were few more unlikely art dealers than Carmen Lamanna. And few more respected.

When the burly son of an Italian picture framer died last Thursday of lung cancer, the Canadian art world lost a lot more than a gallery owner, it lost one of its prime movers, a unique character and an unerring diviner of the significant art of his time.

Lamanna was one of the handful of dealers whose activities from the late 1960s on defined contemporary Canadian art. It is no exaggeration to say that history was made at his gallery, of events that went beyond the often narrow limits of the



Art

Christopher Hume

visual arts.

That's not to say every artist he took on was a genius; he had his share of dogs like everyone.

And certainly few were less articulate in their appreciation of contemporary art. Lamanna was a man of few words, an enigmatic presence who left much unsaid.

What characterized Lamanna was his deep and abiding commitment to Canadian art. It was a word he used often, "commitmente," pronouncing it with four, maybe five, syllables. The worst thing he could say about someone — a fellow dealer, an artist, curator, or critic — was that he or she wasn't committed.

Lamanna's dedication to the art he considered important was absolute. He never sought the spotlight, nor even, it seemed, personal recognition.

It was always as if he were a spectator at his own party.

Born near Naples in 1927, he came to Canada in 1951. His uncle got him a job working on the subway, a job which he refused to work as a picture framer and wood carver. By 1966, he had saved enough money to open a gallery on Yonge St. He began with artists like David Bolduc, Milly Ristvedt, Gary Lee Nova and the Rabinowitch brothers.

Later, General Idea, Robin Collyer, Paterson Ewen, Murray Favro, Shirley Wiitasalo and many others joined his stable. In the early '80s, he added a number of young painters who emerged during the neo-expressionist period including Joanne Tod, Rae Johnson and John Brown.

What always attracted Lamanna to an artist, whether conceptual, neo-expressionist or whatever, was his profound belief in the transforming power of human creativity. He regarded artists as almost magical beings, and never failed to wonder in their work.

Despite his reverence for artists, he also had his share of troubles. At least one of his former charges tried to sue him.

Until Lamanna moved to King Street W. three years ago, his gallery was a fixture on Yonge St. north of Bloor. For 20 odd years, that pokey little gallery, along with the old Isaacs Gallery just two doors away, was Ground Zero for the Toronto art world.

Those who remember still can't pass by without seeing Carmen in their mind's eye, stocky and chain-smoking as he shuffled about in the bowels of the building. Or sitting in the gallery, a cigarette burned to the filter in his nicotine-stained fingers, while others came and went.

More than most Canadian dealers, Lamanna enjoyed international recognition.

Though Lamanna's family has said it hopes to keep the gallery going, it's hard to imagine the place without him.

Truly, his death marks the end of an era.