

Artist to Collect

Henry Wanton Jones





above, Zig Zag Flip Flop, oil on masonite, 30" x 36", 2004
previous page, Cardenas, oil on masonite, 40" x 48", 1992

right, Combe, oil on masonite, 48" x 32", 1998



written by Debra Usher

Henry Wanton Jones, known to his close friends as "Jimmy", is as much a mystery today as he was when he first started painting. He loves being elusive and prefers his paintings be interpreted like those of Balthus, feeling the explanation lies in the message that happens between the viewer and the painting. Throughout his whole career, he has been staunchly independent, going his way not following the road of others.

Henry W. Jones was born in Waterloo, Quebec in 1925. Growing up he was called "Junior" – a reflection of him being the youngest child and that his father's name was Henry Walter Jones.

Years later, as a young window dresser at Eaton's in Montreal, he had signed a piece of paper "J. Jones" for Junior Jones and when he was asked quite by chance whether this 'J' stood for Jimmy, the opportunity to shed "Junior" was irresistible, so he answered bluntly that, yes, he was Jimmy Jones. To this day he is still Jimmy amongst his legion of friends.

Art is the only Explanation

Jimmy is a man of many talents and a true master – he paints and sculpts with equal ease. When asked years ago by a reporter why he painted – the answer was easy. He replied, "If only I knew. I paint because I do."

Thus explains the dichotomy that is Henry Wanton Jones (Jimmy). He is complex and at the same time simple; choosing to let his works interact with the viewer as opposed to explaining them. As in the case of Balthus, where there is little known of the man the details emerge when we look at the paintings.

In much of Jones's work, what catches the eye are three main colours; green, white, red. A trio sometimes presented simply, here and there, but often joined together in succession like three bands. Many have interpreted these three colours to represent Italy, but they are wrong. They are the colours of the flag of Mexico where Jimmy spends almost every winter.

Years ago his sister, aged 37, then his father and then his mother all died of cancer quite quickly.



left, My Two Loves, oil on masonite, 36" x 24", 2000

above, After the Ride, oil on masonite, 30" x 24", 1996



above, Julie and Billy at OKA, oil on board, 24" x 30", 1987
right page, Fountain, oil on masonite, 37" x 40", 1984

From this series of family tragedies, Jimmy developed his unique sense of humour, after becoming a laughing stock at the hospitals. "All my life I thought I was sick," he quips. Because of this his still lifes are full of playful winks. They also illustrate an obsession with impending disaster, capturing the sensation felt when one or more eggs are placed at the extreme edge of a table, half leaning over the gap between the table and the floor ... They feel strangely attracted to the floor, a hair away from falling. This playful chaos allows the viewer to feel that something is going to happen in the next minute. He paints the impossible and makes you believe.

In most of his paintings objects appear other-worldly and Jimmy admits, "I do not paint the facts, I paint the forms – I paint what exists in the heavens and nowhere else." His whimsical canvases feature his signature horses and riders, nudes, self-portraits, still-lives, equestrians, masked strangers and dogs, all filtered by a hybrid Mexican - Canadian twilight. They present a blend of eerie humour coupled with passion and desire, a dark eroticism that one cannot escape.

His first credo is the omnipotence of the form. Jimmy says about the strange objects he creates with oils, "I paint the Big Dipper in his heaven, where he exists – nowhere else. I just paint horses because I love them. I also paint women and sometimes still lifes. It's true that there have always been horses and dogs in my life, and that, until recently, I rode regularly."

The Mexican Experience

One morning when he went out into the countryside in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico

Jimmy had an epiphany that caused what he would paint to change. Walking around and passing close to a peaceful hacienda he witnessed something of significant importance. He returned the next day and the day after that. What he saw there seduced, impressed and inspired him to create a series of large drawings and oils.

The scene that inspired and continues to inspire him was that of a horse and a woman who appeared to be sleeping on the horse. But she was not asleep, on the contrary. She was compelled, patient, always in equilibrium, sometimes on the back, sometimes on the belly, constantly executing a chain of movements and stretches. The magnificent animal showed the same calm. Later, it was the horse's turn to stretch his legs; he trotted, galloped and finally jumped over all sorts of obstacles.

This scene gripped Jimmy and he developed an irresistible urge to paint horses because of that beautiful morning walk in Mexico. He explains, "I later discovered that she was part of the Olympic team – who was doing stretching exercises, but on horseback. I stopped to admire at length. It was an incredible sensuality and I confess that I went back several mornings to watch my Amazon. And since that time, I have never stopped painting horses ... and Amazons."

Jimmy Jones's palette has an incomparable range, made up of bright colours reminiscent of the Mexico he loves so much. The games he plays with light are unique, and he particularly likes the lighting of the night, not far from what filmmakers



Atelier au squelette, 48" x 56", 1993





Monumental Unveiling (Monument), oil on masonite, 30" x 28", 2005



Gentlemen, Please II, oil on board, 28 x 30", 2002

call "American Night." His paintings sometimes show a sexuality that would grate on a few. "Much less so, for some time now," he says. "Art lovers are more sophisticated today. They fixate less on those details, so they are better equipped to appreciate the work as a whole."

Young at Art

As a young artist, Henry W. Jones embraced the idea of being "with his time." He believed he needed to follow the same trends as everyone else and he slipped without further delay into the abstract. In 1963, when he won first prize at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts in an exhibition of the Canadian Group of Painters (beating Arthur Lismer, Lawren Harris, Goodridge Roberts, Fritz Brandtner), he was finally provided with the fuel he needed to regain his consciousness and rediscover his brushes.

For eighteen years, parallel to his career as an artist, Jimmy taught at the George Williams University, now part of Concordia University in Montreal. Far from being a chore, he loved awakening the taste for art in young people and directing them in their first efforts of creation. For him it was both a source of stimulation and satisfaction. With such a love of art and a desire to share his knowledge, he puts himself as a master of yesteryear, more like the Renaissance man than the modern artist.

Henry Wanton Jones is a rare being whose art is at all times intelligent and daring. The images he creates are full of rapture, courage and generosity

of spirit. There is a tenderness and love of life and being that glides through the journey of the players on the canvas.

Jimmy believes that an artist is born; being an artist is not learned, it does not just happen. Talent, on the other hand, develops. It is practiced, it is refined. In the mid-forties, he found himself at l'Ecole Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal, where he had the extraordinary opportunity to have artists such as Lismer, Gordon Webber, Eldon Grier and Jacques de Tonnancour as teachers. He also attended art classes at Sir George Williams University. A few years later he returned to both of these institutions, but then as a teacher.

Henry Wanton Jones studied at the Art School of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts under Group of Seven alumnus, Arthur Lismer. He has held solo exhibitions in prestigious galleries in Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver. In 1956 he began exhibiting with the Canadian Group of Painters.

In 1963 he won First Prize at the Canadian Group of Painters Exhibition held at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. He has taught at McGill University and Concordia University (then Sir George Williams) and is represented in many private and public collections in North America.

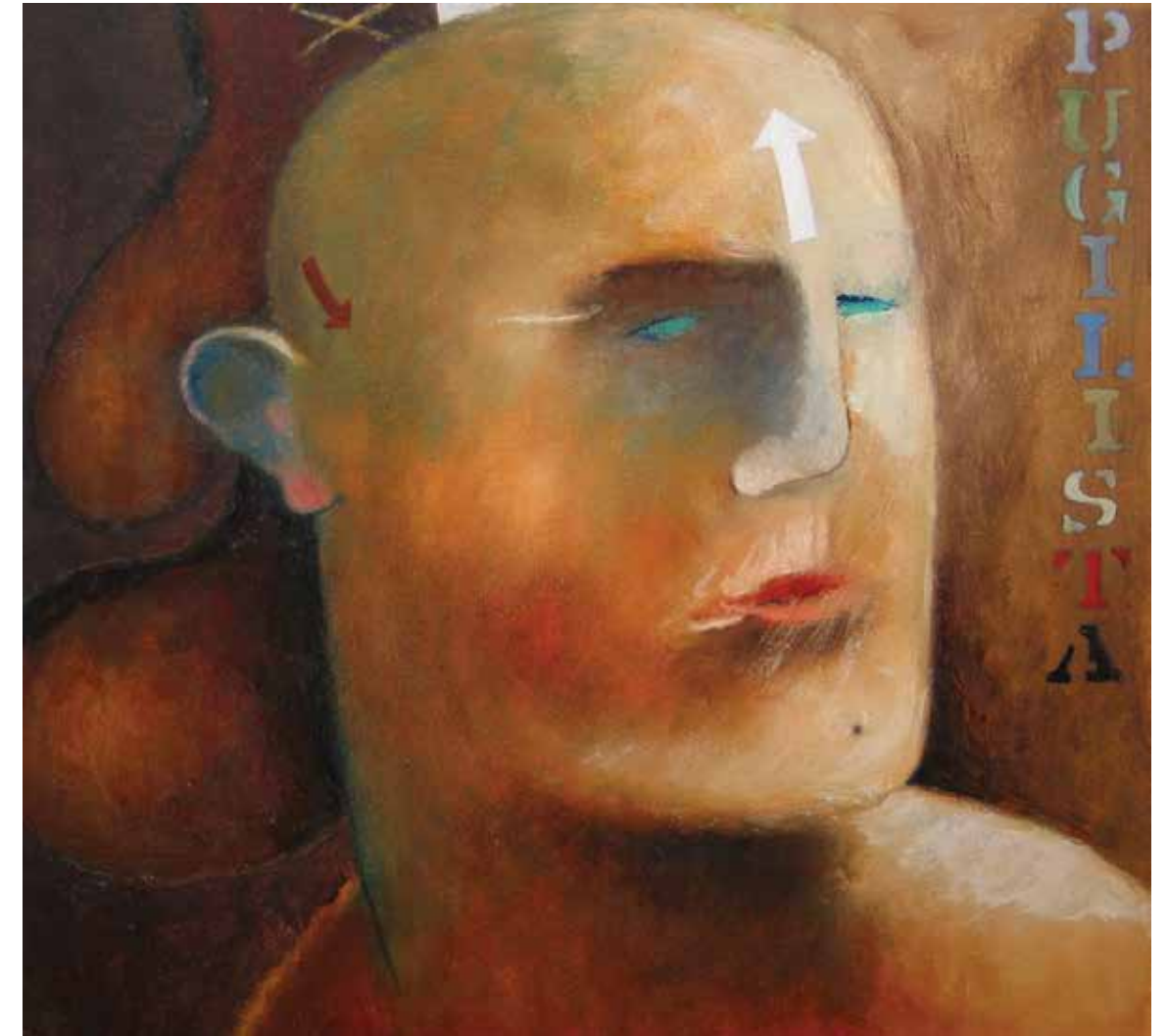
Exhibits and Shows

In 1950, Henry Wanton Jones participated in an exhibition of a group show, The Rebels, with Paul-Émile Borduas, Marcelle Ferron, P. Ewen and Jean-Paul Mousseau. This was his first professional show. Needless to say, in such company his painting was more abstract at that



Where are the Pearls, oil on masonite, 20" x 24", 1996





left page, Blue Chair, Cowgirl, oil on masonite, 30" x 22", 1988

above, Pugilista, oil on masonite, 10" x 10", 2011

time than it is now.

When Jimmy was just starting his career he had a small workshop on Stanley Street in Montreal. To survive he began making and selling jewellery, while at the same time painting. "Montreal was an exciting city then," says Jimmy. "Our corner of Bohemia had, in addition to the restaurant of that name, many occupying characters that turned out to be legends. Leonard Cohen was one of them – he was already writing poetry while singing in his studio, which became a great gathering place for discussion. A good friend, Pierre Larin, turned pottery. Our group, which was very cosmopolitan, also attracted some freshly-landed Europeans, including a German, Dill, who was a photographic genius."

Just a few years later he started his career in education that lasted twenty-five years. Jones states, "I taught drawing, graphics and sculpture, first at l'Ecole Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal, then at Sir George Williams. That one reaps from

teaching what you put into it is well known. I have drawn great joy, and all those years of young people interested in art probably helped keep me young in my mind, and reaffirmed my own desire to create."

Jimmy Jones was given his first solo exhibition by Agnes Lefort, in 1953. Of that experience, he says, "She opened her doors a second time in 1957 for me. What a wonderful gallery director that woman was. Full of anxiety, she never thought about the benefit to be gained from an artist. Her interest was, above all, to see him succeed and she made every effort to make this success happen." Subsequently, Jimmy has had numerous shows at various galleries in Canada but like a lot of artists, he always remembers the one that got him started.

Not only has Henry Wanton Jones been a successful painter, there was a time from 1965 to 1975 during which he only sculpted. As a sculptor, he also won more than his share of honours.



above, Libro Romantico, oil on masonite, 18" x 20", 2005



right page, Two Religious Competitors, oil on masonite, 30" x 24", 1987

This seems to have been forgotten given the broad spectrum of his paintings. His sculptures were exhibited at the Musée Rodin in Paris and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Montreal, among others. He was probably one of the few artists to participate in two exhibitions of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts during the same year – first as a painter, and then as a sculptor. He was also selected to create a 32-foot sculpture made of fiberglass and reinforced steel, "Love - Love", which was erected at Place du Portage in Hull. Jimmy spent six years executing this commission.

Painting Today

Jimmy prefers to paint in his studio and is usually working on five or six paintings at a time; one on the easel and four or five hanging and constantly being retouched. He likes to continuously refine each piece until he is satisfied, which usually doesn't happen since he is a perfectionist about his work.

Because of this need to constantly revisit his paintings he doesn't fall into the category of

prolific painters. He is fortunate that his pieces command large prices and due to a growing group of collectors he does not have to let his paintings leave the studio before he believes them ready – he tends to hang onto them for as long as he can – adding and reworking.

Due to his desire for perfection, serious collectors snap up his works quickly. As well as being part of numerous private collections, Jones's paintings are housed in the prestigious collections of the Musée du Québec, the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, the Winnipeg Art Gallery, the Robert McLaughlin Gallery, the Confederation Center Art Gallery and the Ministry of External Affairs. His works also adorn public buildings such as the Ministry of External Affairs in Ottawa and the Public Works building in Hull.

These days, Jimmy divides his time between the Laurentians and Mexico, following the sun. He spends summers at his home in Morin-Heights with his wife Julie, where he surrounds himself with an intimate group of friends.

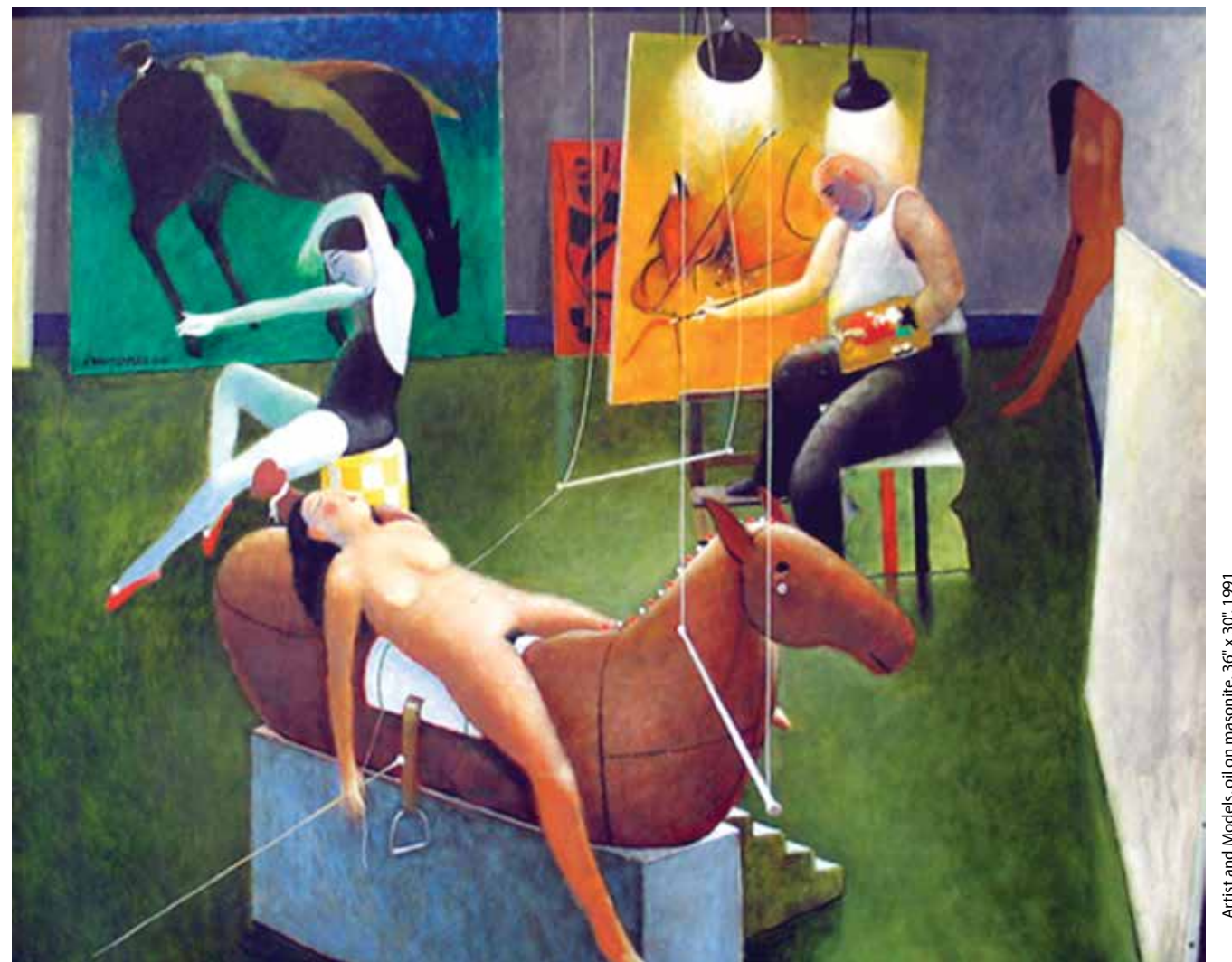
As soon as the cold north wind blows in, he



The Departure, oil on masonite, 36" x 30", 1991



The Glass Eye II, oil on masonite, 36" x 30", 1991



Artist and Models, oil on masonite, 36" x 30", 1991



left page, Artist and Model, oil on masonite, 30" x 24", 1989

packs up his luggage and heads south. His time in Mexico is therapy for Jimmy and the inspiration for his magnificently large paintings. He can paint a little or a lot and the physical work he performs with building and gardening keeps his hands in great shape. When he returns to Canada, he resumes his brushwork with a new energy. The return trip has a 'festival' feeling, when he takes the opportunity to visit different parts of North America, making new discoveries and adding to his collection of unique ideas.

Since 1976, Jimmy has devoted most of his time to painting and has exhibited widely across Canada. For over 50 years, he has been creating works of art in pottery, gold and silver jewellery, paintings and sculptures. He works in oil on masonite, watercolour and drawings in pen and ink, crayon and pencil. His sculptures are steel, fibreglass and ceramic. Over the years, Jones's work has evolved into well-

defined, colourful and distinctive still lifes and equestrian nudes.

Jimmy's major paintings are inherently sexual, audacious and mysterious. His subjects often depict ambiguous situations which include horses and lustful nudes, the artist and his model, masked portraits, nudes and still life. While his art is both spiritual and amusing, his later paintings, "the female nudes and their stallions", are tender and lightheartedly erotic in many luscious and ingenious variations.

Henry Wanton Jones is a very happy man, satisfied with the life he has led and the fact that he has always done what he wanted. For Jimmy Jones, there could be no greater pleasure in life than to devote himself entirely to art.

To view the work of Henry Wanton Jones, please visit Galerie D'Avignon in Montreal, www.galeriedavignon.ca or Gallery Gevik in Toronto, www.gevik.com.

below, Moon Watchers, oil on masonite, 24" x 30", 1996

