

AN ARTIST OF THE HIGHEST ORDER René Cera of Lenox

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René Alexandre Paul Cera was born in Nice, France, on April 15, 1895. He delivered messages to Renoir, sketched with Matisse, and painted for Marshall McLuhan but it is Cera's own life's journey, as reflected in his paintings, that is significant - not reflected glory from people along the way.

Although Cera had two gallery exhibits towards the end of his life and his works hang in several locations in the United States and Canada (including the Berkshire Museum, the Pittsfield High School library, Lenox National Bank, Canadian locations such as the Hamilton Art Gallery and St. Michaels College in Toronto, and several French and Canadian embassies), he remains a hidden treasure.

Cera's parents were both artistic: his father was a furniture craftsman and his mother, a dress designer. He studied art and architecture at his father's alma mater, the Nice School of Art, and ran messages from the school's director to Pierre August Renoir. Said Cera, "Renoir was a genius but by the time I met him, he was almost crippled by rheumatism and was painting with the brush strapped to his fingers."

At 19, Cera became an infantry soldier and was badly wounded. He recuperated for a year and joined the cavalry. At war's end, three years later, he was awarded the Croix de Guerre. Cera had continued to perfect his craft and attended life classes while on leave. He noticed that a fellow artist was producing especially beautiful works. It was Matisse.

Cera settled in Paris, where he lived in a 5th floor walk-up on oatmeal and tomato juice. At the same time, he participated in several international exhibitions of modern design at the Salon des Automnes. Cera was appointed director of the House of Martine, the architectural branch of Paul Poiret's business.

In 1928, Cera agreed to take charge of architectural design for Canada's largest department store chain, T. Eaton Company, for one year - and stayed for 32. His work can be found in the detail and fittings in a number of stores from Vancouver to Newfoundland. Photos of the "House of Tomorrow" he designed for the Calgary store were recently featured in a review of international design of the 1920s at the Montreal Museum of Fine Art. Also represented at this exhibit "Age of the Metropolis" were Edward Hopper, Le Corbusier, and Max Beckmann.

During World War II there was little architectural work available and Cera was placed in charge of the large window displays in the College Street store and employed numbers of young Canadian artists. He also found time to support his native country as President of the French Chamber of Commerce in Toronto. Because of his encouragement and support of the Free French, Cera was placed on the roster of the "French Legion of Honour." He received this award from Charles de Gaulle in 1956.

After Cera retired, he spent most of his time painting. Among several large murals dating from this period was "Pied Pipers All," which he created for the late Marshall McLuhan's Centre for Culture and Technology at the University of Toronto. This work echoes McLuhan's sentiment: "The media is the message."

An article written in the August, 1971 issue of *Mademoiselle* mentioned the mural but attributes it to someone else. McLuhan corrected this misconception, writing, "The 9' by 12' mural in the seminar room was not made by Buckminster Fuller, but René Cera, a French painter and architect. The theme of the painting is "T.V. in Action" with the tube in the centre and the psychedelic images surrounding it. The title is "Pied Pipers All" since Cera saw that the tube was alienating the young from a generation of elders who had no thought of paying the piper for the latest technological caper." McLuhan continued, "This is a splendid and impressive painting by a great craftsman whose prolific work has been bottled up in Canada."

McLuhan and Cera were friends, together with McLuhan's wife Corinne and Betty Trott, whom Cera married in 1966. (Mrs. Cera now uses the name "Liz.") In a letter dated January 22, 1952, McLuhan wrote, "Cera just left. He brought over one of his best pictures to us. Had made the frame himself specially ... He is a lot of fun. Very, very lively and facetiously egotistical in his talk. A walking mass of contradictions, paradoxes and conundrums which he likes to tumble out for everybody's amusement"

From the book *Daffodils in Spring - Life and Letters of Pegi Nicol MacLeod*, 1984, we catch glimpses of René Cera's ideas that shaped much of his painting. In a 1947 letter to MacLeod, Cera said, "I really don't know how good or how great an artist you may be because I don't really know which qualifications are indispensable to be acknowledged as an artist great or small, but I certainly know that it did me good to see the swarm of your warming canvases ... There is a simple, pure intensity of friendly fervour in those visceral representations of yours that leaves me confounded."

Cera also discussed Gothic cathedrals: "These things have the greatness of their human indispensableness. Cathedrals were built by ordinary people, small people, current people without the slightest possible trace of scepticism and since they were building their own house of worship, they had to put themselves in its very walls ... No aesthetic baloney in early gothic cathedrals, they represent the irresistible impulse of good, absolutely true human being as you are, Pegi ... I admire you with all my faith in the fundamental simple niceness of men."

Continued Cera, "I am grateful to you for making me think of the positiveness of life, not of the sterile formality of semi-classical modern art. Your stuff is made for our clean animality, not aimed at our fastidious understanding ... I like you Pegi because you are not smart. That is the reason why I like myself. I have managed to not become transcendent. I still realize the value of thinking with my skin, not with my mind."

McLeod wrote in a letter, "René has discovered the occupation of his latter days in the piano. He refuses to accept the charter of easy method books and is making new ones all of his own. He has come to the formation of scales and for his own satisfaction has made a whole set of fine designs."

Daffodils in Spring contains a description of Cera which echoes the sentiments of McLuhan, quoted earlier. "Cera's gravelly voice, earthy manner, Picasso-like face, and 'wicked' eye concealed an accomplished painter."

The Ceras retired to Lenox, Massachusetts in 1960. Their home is filled with over 300 pieces of René's work. Cera's early period evoke classical friezes, Picasso (Blue, Rose, and Clowns Periods), Monet and his middle period, Matisse, Picasso, and Leger. The later works, painted after Cera broke his hip and was unable to stand at an easel, suggest Braque and Klee. Cera's inspiration, no matter what the style, is his inner self.

In an article in the *Sunday Times Union* (September 18, 1988) Cera told Vinod Chhabra, "What is my inspiration? It is me! Only Me!" Cera explained, "I paint because I must. It is part of being alive!" He likened colouring loops in a drawing with a keyboard of a piano. "Music is emerging - sounds, silence, music. A concerto."

Cera's paintings, whether or not they contain recognizable objects, are filled with music and dance. "All the colors you can use already exist," he said, adding, "How you put them next to each other creates that disturbance, that vibrancy. It is no different from composing music or writing. It is choosing the right mix of music or words to convey the essence of your thoughts." Cera often spontaneously drew small designs "letting his brain dictate to his fingers" in bursts of tactile inspiration. These he enlarged and through color and texture, created tone poems on canvas.

Wendy Rabinowitz, in an article in *The Berkshire Eagle* (June 27, 1991), called Cera's later works "ablaze with a child-like innocence and freedom that is welded to a master's sophistication and technique." Rabinowitz termed the show at the Cormier Art Gallery "an exquisite jewel of a show. This small yet glittering exhibit of Cera's paintings and drawings represents a brilliant and prolific career that spans two continents and more than three-quarters of a century." Many paintings and drawings from this exhibit were also shown at the Berkshire Artisans Gallery of the Pittsfield Community Arts Center.

On April 20, five days after his 97th birthday, Cera died in his home. His widow took his ashes to France and sprinkled them in the Seine, at a spot where Cera once painted.

