

Cariboo Cowboy
The Life and Art of
Sonia Cornwall
(1919 - 2006)



ISLAND MOUNTAIN ARTS GALLERY
Wells, British Columbia



ISLAND MOUNTAIN ARTS GALLERY,

in partnership with

STATION HOUSE GALLERY,

LANGHAM GALLERY

and

PENTICTON ART GALLERY

presents

Cariboo Cowboy

The Life and Art of

Sonia Cornwall (1919 - 2006)

Island Mountain Arts gratefully acknowledges the financial support of the Province of British Columbia through the Ministry of Healthy Living and Sport, and the assistance of the British Columbia Museums Association.

ISLAND MOUNTAIN ARTS
2323 Pooley Street, Wells, BC

STATION HOUSE GALLERY
1 MacKenzie Ave N, Williams Lake, BC

LANGHAM GALLERY
404 Front Street, Kaslo, BC

PENTICTON ART GALLERY
199 Marina Way, Penticton, BC



British Columbia
Museums Association
SINCE 1957



The Old Cariboo Road, 1970
Oil on board, 12 x 16 inches

Curator's Statement

For those of us who have never known a life of cattle drives, riding the range and living off the land, the paintings of Sonia Cornwall provide a glimpse into that historical and mythical occupation of cowboy. Cornwall not only painted this nearly extinct way of life, she lived it. Her fierce connection to the rolling Cariboo grasslands and the rough-and-tumble world of ranching is ever present in her powerful paintings that date from the 1930s to 2006, when she passed away at the age of 87.

Cariboo Cowboy: The Life and Art of Sonia Cornwall (1919 - 2006) documents Cornwall's lifetime career as a dedicated artist and rancher with a selection of over thirty paintings that reveal a compelling world of stampede camps, dramatic landscapes and endless grazing cattle.

Cornwall received little formal training, though she did spend a few months in 1946 at the Provincial Institute of Technology in Calgary studying under such teachers as Jock MacDonald. However from what her sister Dru Hodgson said in a recent interview, Cornwall's time there was mostly spent hitchhiking to the countryside to paint plein-air, rather than being confined to the classroom.¹

Beyond this brief stint at art school, Cornwall needed to go no further to get artistic mentorship than the magnificent 11,000 acre Onward Ranch where she grew up. Visitors there included the legendary founding member of the Group of Seven, A.Y. Jackson who would stay for weeks at a time to paint and sketch the breathtaking Cariboo landscape.

Cornwall's mother Vivien Cowan, who was also an artist and teacher of note, initially invited A.Y. Jackson to visit after she had met him while studying at the Banff School in 1943. Jackson was enamored with the Cariboo and returned on several occasions. During his visit in 1945, he helped Vivien to establish the Cariboo Arts Society, one of the first societies of its kind in the province. It is still going strong.

Cornwall stayed in correspondence with Jackson until his passing in 1974, often mailing artworks to him for critique. Pleased with her progression as an artist, he submitted one of her pieces to a juried group show of Canadian art in Hamilton, Ontario in 1954.

Another prominent artist that spent time at the Onward Ranch included Canadian portrait artist Liliias Torrance Newton who arrived at the ranch not long after she had completed a commissioned portrait of



Ranch Buildings, 1948
Oil on board, 16 x 18 inches

Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip. Zelko Kujundzic, artist, teacher and founder of the Kootenay School of the Arts, was also a frequent visitor, often teaching pottery and art to the locals, including residents of the nearby Sugarcane Reserve. Other artists who gravitated towards this artistic haven among the grasslands were Joseph Plaskett, Jack Hardman, Takao Tanabe, Molly Bobak, Cliff Robinson, Herbert Siebner, Peter Aspell and Jim Willer.

Joseph Plaskett made numerous trips to the Onward Ranch, having also met Cornwall's mother at the Banff School in the 1940s. A member of the Order of Canada, Plaskett, now ninety years old, is one of Canada's most beloved painters and has many a fond memory of his visits to the Cariboo:

I remember my first visit to the Cariboo. I must have gone by bus from Vancouver and the road from the Fraser Canyon up was just a gravel road in those days. It was another world that you entered immediately; it seemed so romantic seeing all these corals and fences. It was an enchantment and always an inspiring country to paint.²



1959 Stampede Camps, 2002
Oil on board, 12 x 16 inches



Storm Over the Lake, 1972
Oil on board, 12 x 16 inches

Sonia Cornwall existed in a fertile and exciting arts environment with access to a phenomenal wealth of artist mentors. She also received constant encouragement from her mother who first put a brush in her hand when she was only five years old.

Cornwall's art reveals her evolution as an artist. This is apparent from the 1970s on when she and her husband Hugh began to turn the ranch over to their daughter Mabel Cornwall, which allowed Sonia to work full time on her painting. In a statement from 2001, William Matthews, a good friend and one time agent for Cornwall, described this time in her life:

The 1970s marked the beginning of a prolific output of paintings in oil, watercolour, drawings, wood block prints, and pastels that continues right through to the present. Her subject matter the Cariboo – its life and natural beauty. Her canvases and panels are filled with cattle and ranch scenes, auctions, rodeos, quiet village impressions, farmhouses, interior scenes, and the dramatic rolling landscape of the vast Cariboo region – its spirit infused with her, in her art.³



Bull Pattern, 2001
Oil on board, 12 x 16 inches

During this time she began to exhibit her work more frequently, showing locally in Williams Lake, but also at the Kamloops and Prince George Art Galleries. She was also represented in Vancouver at the de Vooght and Alex Fraser Galleries. Closer to the end of Cornwall's life, in 2000, art historian Eileen Truscott curated an exhibition of Cornwall's paintings at the Kelowna Art Gallery. In 2001, Westbridge Fine Art in Vancouver, which still continues to be her representative, had a major retrospective, and in 2004 the Grand Forks Art Gallery had an exhibition of Cornwall's work as part of a three-woman show of prominent Cariboo artists.

Though she gained such attention, Cornwall was not one to promote her work; she was most content to focus her attention on her painting at the ranch. Over time, however, her reputation grew and she had a legion of dedicated fans who would visit her at her ranch/studio to purchase paintings. Accordingly she would welcome artist, cowboy and admirer alike into her home and offer them a drink of gin, no matter what the time of day.

Sonia Cornwall has been called the 'Grand Dame' of the Cariboo arts community, and as artist Ted Lindberg wrote, "never one to seek

out personal attention or ego satisfaction, [but] nonetheless has quietly carved for herself an undeniable niche in the particular art history of this province.”⁴

The importance of her work must not be underestimated as both historical record and as part of Canada’s art history. *Cariboo Cowboy* brings to light but a small sampling of this prolific artist’s work.

Julie Fowler, Artistic Director/Curator
Island Mountain Arts Gallery

NOTES

1. Dru Hodgson. Personal Interview. 11 Mar. 2008.
2. Joseph Plaskett. Personal Interview. 14 Sept. 2008.
3. Williams Matthews. “My Friend Sonia Cornwall.” *Sonia Cornwall: Fifty Years at the Onward Ranch, A Pioneer’s View of the Cariboo*, Westbridge Fine Art, 2001.
4. Ted Lindberg. “The Interior World of Sonia Cornwall.” *Sonia Cornwall: Fifty Years at the Onward Ranch, A Pioneer’s View of the Cariboo*, Westbridge Fine Art, 2001.



Sonia Cornwall in her studio in 2001.

A publication for the exhibition
Cariboo Cowboy: The Life and Art of Sonia Cornwall (1919 - 2006)
Organized by Island Mountain Arts Gallery
Artistic Director/Curator: Julie Fowler

Exhibition Itinerary

Island Mountain Arts Gallery
Wells, BC
July 18 - August 11, 2008

Station House Gallery
Williams Lake, BC
September 29, 2008

Langham Gallery
Kaslo, BC
May 3 - June 14, 2009

Penticton Art Gallery
Penticton, BC
May 8 - July 5, 2009

ISBN: 978-0-9811425-0-0

© 2008 Island Mountain Arts
2323 Pooley Street
Wells, British Columbia V0K 2R0
Tel: 1-800-442-2787 Fax: 250-994-3433
email: info@imarts.com web: www.imarts.com

Photographs

All Photographs by Carl Anderson, 3eyes Custom Concepts
except *Ranch Buildings* and *Storm Over the Lake* by Jessica Hanna
Photo of Sonia Cornwall in her Studio by Paula Scott

Front Cover Illustration

Evening Light, 2002, Oil on Board, 12 x 16 inches

Design

Know Media, Wells

Printing

Industry Images, Vancouver

PRINTED IN CANADA



Poplar Gulley, 1989
Oil on board, 12 x 16 inches



March of the Cows, 1991
Oil on board, 12 x 16 inches