

Obituaries

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AGATHA SCHWAGER, 70 » ARTIST

She was true to herself and a mentor to others

Artist, who worked with watercolour, oil, batik, photography and ink, drew on her life experiences for inspiration

BY PHILIP FINE

As a child, Agatha Schwager lived through Nazi-occupied Holland. As a visual artist, she lived through it again with an exhibit that used innocent childhood memories from her war-ravaged hometown. In her early thirties, struck with tuberculosis, she lived in isolation for three months in a Sudbury sanatorium. That episode also found a second life in an exhibition, which featured a series of X-ray-like drawings of her chest, with lungs peopled by those who had been with her in the sanatorium.

In the same way that she once re-purposed a pile of nickel slag in Sudbury so that it became the perfect backdrop for a batik fashion shoot, her work could take something disturbing as its starting point and distill the emotionally redeeming elements.

Schwager died on May 2 in Montreal from a heart attack at the age of 70, the day after a collection of her ink paintings went on exhibit in that city. The gallery's guest book took a sharp turn from one-word exclamations written on the night of the vernissage to the following days' longer passages that talked of her spirit remaining present in the works.

The art market seemed to have little effect on the direction she took. "She was not interested in hanging out at gallery openings to make connections," said her husband, sociologist Walter Schwager. In her entire career, she mounted only 13 solo shows and would normally sell about five or six paintings each year. Nevertheless, she lived both an artist's life and that of a muse to many others.

She nurtured several artists, including photographer Michael Chambers and multimedia artist Johannes Zits from Toronto, and painter Ann Buttrick from Gabriola Island, B.C., as well as several would-be artists. They appreciated her thoughtful approach to technique, her insistence that they "carry on" and not get bogged down, her willingness to talk about new ideas and her approaches to art that were both novel and respectful of the old ways of doing things.

Chambers, Zits and Buttrick are part of a grief-stricken group longing for the friend on whom they would call when they hit an impasse.

"A hundred pair of eyes close and we each dream long sequences of Agatha stories," said Buttrick. "Agatha spread the kind of atmosphere where anything was made possible."

Her chosen medium for the last few years was Chinese-inspired ink paintings. With each done in one sitting, Schwager brought beauty to the canvas with Zen-like brushstrokes. In that last exhibit, her pallet ranged from the palest of greys to velvety blacks. While her technique



Above: Agatha Schwager in 2007 at an exhibit in Montreal called *Forces of Nature*. Her latest work reflected her interest in Chinese brush painting.



Left: Schwager (centre) in 1950 in The Netherlands during a royal visit. Her experience during the war provided fodder for some of her earlier work.

paid homage to the Chinese masters, her compositions refused to be confined by the rules they set forth. The paintings gave off a sense of flight and fire.

Her work over the years also included watercolour landscapes of New Zealand and the Canadian Shield, colour-treated photographic portraits, batik clothing, oil paintings, improvised drawings and CD album art.

With studied and practised visual art techniques, and with her unconscious given permission to let loose, she could put out work that would isolate the power of an ocean wave or attempt to find the essence of a person.

She had a disdain for pretentiousness and always thought of others before she thought of herself. This meant

that even though she sold pieces to private and public collections, including the Canadian Museum of Civilization, she made a bigger impact on her fellow artists than she did on the art world.

Born Agatha Spreij on Feb. 24, 1940, in Arnhem, The Netherlands, her early childhood was spent under Nazi occupation, surrounded by much deprivation. She was the oldest of three children. A hungry Agatha scraped the peels of the bananas that had been fed to her little sister Gerthe, who needed them for the stomach ailment she suffered. She was exposed to several traumatic images, including her neighbour's house being bombed, corpses on the streets and Allied parachutists dying in the skies above her during the Battle of

Arnhem.

After the war, the Canadians who liberated her town gave her – and her teddy bear – rides in their Jeeps. With her town in ruins and the Marshall Plan in effect, her father Jan Spreij, an architect, was much in demand.

At 17, Agatha met Walter Schwager, who had moved to Holland from Indonesia two years earlier, in 1955. They met though her classmate, who was Walter's niece, and their first date was on April 1. She was nervous that it would be an April Fool's joke. It wasn't and they hit it off. But her parents, who were conservative Protestants, refused to let her date the Eurasian youth.

Soon after, Agatha enrolled at the Arnhem Academy of Fine Arts and it was while she

was throwing snowballs in the school's courtyard and Walter was back in town for Christmas that they saw each other again. At 19, she landed a job in The Hague at a commercial art agency that created ads and she moved out of the family home. Walter was studying at nearby Leiden University. Her parents found out from her landlady that she was not always coming home at night. Nevertheless, her relationship with Walter continued and two years later, in 1961, they married.

Not long after, Walter got his first teaching job and the couple moved to Christchurch, N.Z. Agatha began painting landscapes while exploring watercolour techniques. She also began experimenting with darkroom techniques and portrait photography.

In the early 1970s, the Schwagers moved to Canada where Walter would become the Dean of Social Sciences at Laurentian University in Sudbury. Agatha moved to Toronto in 1979, earning both a BFA and MFA from York University, while Walter remained in Sudbury and spent his time off in Toronto.

While at York, she presented *The Memory Room*, a series of conté sketches that brought to light those early memories and dreams from her childhood in war-time Holland. Many of her close artistic relationships were formed at York as were her views on politics, anthropology and art history.

"She was a thinking artist," said Zits, who said Schwager was always researching and exploring. He said she could spend days perfecting a brush stroke and was one of those people who could tell the difference between an early abstract painting that came from Europe and one that was done by an American.

Zits said he and his partner Ed Pien were part of her extended family.

"It was a happy house," he said, filled with her drawings, her grandchildren's art, the smells of cooking, and surrounded by her expansive and lively garden. Her two children eventually became professional jazz musicians, with son Reg becoming an award-winning guitarist and daughter Jeannette Lambert a singer and filmmaker, which meant there was also a lot of jazz music and musicians at the house.

Aside from her husband, two children, their spouses and her two grandsons, Schwager leaves her sister Gerthe Tesson and brother Peter Spreij.

» Special to *The Globe and Mail*

EGON RONAY, 94 » FOOD CRITIC

Gourmet wrote guides that helped raise standards in British food

BY DENNIS BARKER

In the second half of the 20th century, the standard of food available in British restaurants and through public catering improved enormously. But the name associated with this transformation more than any other was Hungarian – that of the critic Egon Ronay, who died on Saturday.

Short, dapper and trim, he was personally courteous and great fun. Nonetheless, in any professional discussion as to how eating could be made better he could also be extremely pugilistic, always looking to increase awareness through stimulating controversy.

When journalists joined him in the events he organized, exploring all sorts of food, the unworthy thought of a luxurious freebie was always subordinate to the expectation that something potentially newsworthy was in the air.

What made his name a byword for sound culinary judgment in the public mind was



Hungarian born food critic Egon Ronay, seen in 2006, helped Britain embrace fine dining. LEWIS WHYLD/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

the publication of the Egon Ronay guides, a brand reinforced by the round Egon Ronay signs in hotel and restaurant windows. Selling the titles to the AA in 1985 proved to be the greatest regret of his business life, and after various setbacks he re-

gained control of the publishing rights in 1997. The title wording alone of the 2006 *Egon Ronay's Guide to the Best Restaurants and Gastropubs in the UK* points to the revolution that he did so much to promote.

Born into a Budapest family

on July 24, 1915, Ronay was educated from 10 to 18 at the school of the Piarist Order. At home, the prevailing culture was that of the restaurant business. His grandfather inherited a restaurant soon after the start of the century, and his father ran a chain of five high-quality establishments.

After gaining a law degree at Budapest University, he trained in the family firm's kitchens, and abroad, finishing at the Dorchester Hotel in London. He had hoped to further his law studies at Trinity Hall, Cambridge, but the Second World War kept him in Budapest. In December, 1944, Russian forces arrived to force the Germans out: The Ronay business proper had been destroyed, but Egon made the most enterprising gesture he could by selling cups of coffee from the shell of the largest restaurant.

In October, 1946, he was back in London, and managed three restaurants in Piccadilly that were owned by a family friend. Soon after ar-

iving, Ronay was shocked to see how sugar was dispensed in a buffet at Victoria Station – with a teaspoon on a string next to the tea-urn, to be left for the next user. He also quickly came to appreciate how the British class system served to suppress the discerning palate: "The first thing I discovered was that public school food was abominable and its victims were taught to be uncomplaining. And the product of that system was the British customer. They had no taste for food and the restaurateur had no audience to play to. His customer was an object of contempt. And British food got the reputation it deserved." Ronay realized that his catering mission to London was obvious.

By borrowing £4,000, in 1952 he was able to take over a tearoom at 6 Hans Road, Knightsbridge, close to Harrods department store.

It was noticed by Raymond Postgate's new publication, *The Good Food Guide*, and Ronay came to realize that ca-

tering is work, while business is money. The Michelin guides were doing well in France, *The Good Food Guide* was enjoying some success in Britain, and so, in 1957, he researched his first book, published it and sold it himself.

He solicited sponsors and recruiting enough "inspectors" to fill 1,000 pages of hotels and restaurants in Britain. By 1980, there was a part-time staff of 50.

The worst job belonged to six permanent inspectors who were each expected to eat 11 meals, drive, go by train and eventually fly hundreds of miles every week, living out of a suitcase. "It's a great life," Ronay once remarked, "for at least a fortnight. After that it gets to be hell."

Survival in his chosen field was his great achievement. Producing an annual guide is expensive, though he was a legendary manager of finite resources. He kept afloat by virtue of continuous corporate sponsorship.

» *Guardian News & Media*