

Beginning a Surrealist Legacy:

Robert Nelson's Influence at the School of Art

By Lindsay Inglis

In the early 1950s, a group of American artists came to Winnipeg to teach at the University of Manitoba's School of Art and radically modernized the curriculum. Among them was Robert Nelson, a young artist who nurtured close friendships with his students and brought a unique perspective to his teachings. While he only taught in Winnipeg for three years, his impact continued long after his time at the School of Art. As the only surrealist among a cohort of abstractionists, Nelson introduced surrealism to Winnipeg and had a profound influence on his students.

Nelson was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 1925. He spent his childhood drawing, often copying comic strips such as *Prince Valiant*.¹ Nelson had a keen interest in art from a young age; he frequently visited art galleries in Milwaukee and borrowed art books from his teachers.² Just after World War II, Nelson moved to Chicago to study at the School of the Art Institute. Along with printmaking and painting, Nelson also studied Art History at the School of the Art Institute,³ where he encountered surrealism for the first time.⁴ Many of his teachers, including Paul Wiegardt and Constantine Pougialis, frequently referenced surrealist theories in their teachings.⁵ Nelson developed close friendships with his professors, and strove to emulate their example when he became a professor himself.⁶ While Nelson never referenced surrealist theories in his own work, he was heavily inspired by Pablo Picasso. He was influenced by Picasso's Rose Period and also began experimenting with cubism, as seen in his work, *The Dancer*. After his graduation, Nelson spent a year in Europe, then taught basic drawing for a year at the School in Chicago before coming to Winnipeg in 1953 to teach at the School of Art.⁷

Nelson arrived in Winnipeg in his late twenties and was the youngest of the School of Art's teaching staff. He described himself as "not exactly the professorial type that students were used to seeing in other classes."⁸ Nelson's students were only a couple of years younger than him, which eased the way to close friendships between them. He identified with his students. "They were all young and pink and smiling, with funny looking clothes on," he noted, "and there I was, older, and pink and smiling with the same funny clothes."⁹ His student, Barrie Nelson, mentioned that Nelson stood out among the other professors, and reminisced that Nelson would always wear black corduroy suits with colourful vests that his wife made him.¹⁰ Nelson described his students as responsible, mature, and honest people; he called them an alert group and noted that they were receptive to other people's opinions on art.¹¹ He would sometimes hire his students as babysitters when he went out of town, and on a few occasions he got calls asking him to bail one of them out of jail.¹² When talking about his students and the choices they would sometimes make, he remarked, "they were in the business of living and I respected that."¹³

While School of Art students in the 1950s were living lives rich in experience, many did not have a lot of first-hand knowledge of contemporary art. Their only exposure to art came from popular culture such as comic books, magazine illustrations, and advertisements.¹⁴ The American teachers at the School of Art played a vital role in introducing their students to the work of contemporary artists and expanding their art historical knowledge.¹⁵ To assist with his teachings, Nelson established a weekly film night at the School of Art and often invited students to his apartment in the evenings, where they would discuss art, exhibitions, and art theory.¹⁶ He showed them his art books as well as his own art collection, which included Inuit sculpture and several pieces he picked up in Europe.¹⁷ As a young and optimistic professor, Nelson believed that people came to art school to learn from each other. While his students learned a lot from him, he acknowledges that he also learned a lot from them.¹⁸ Nelson even brought his students on a field trip to Chicago during his first year at the School of Art.¹⁹ This trip was the first time many students were able to see works by major artists in person. They visited as many galleries as they could, including the Art Institute and also visited a furniture factory run by Nelson's friends from art school.²⁰ Perhaps overestimating their good judgement, Nelson took his students to a party at that factory.²¹ The following day, several "disappeared" and Nelson had to run around the city finding them all.²² He never took another trip to Chicago with the School of Art, in part because he thought it was unfair to take students away from their studio time, and in part because he was terrified of losing them again.²³

Nelson resigned from the School of Art in the summer of 1956. He moved to Grand Forks and began teaching at the University of North Dakota.²⁴ For Nelson, the hardest part of leaving Winnipeg was leaving the students he had befriended.²⁵ When reflecting on his time with students in Winnipeg, Nelson professed: "I treasure their memories and the experiences I had with them."²⁶ They treasured him as well. Winston Leathers described Nelson, along with Richard Bowman, as being the most influential instructors during his time at the School of Art.²⁷ Former students Barrie Nelson and McCleary Drope went to visit Nelson in Grand Forks several times.²⁸ In 1958, two years after Nelson's departure, Ivan Eyre moved to Grand Forks to pursue a Master's degree.²⁹ He later explained that while the University did not have a strong Fine Arts program at the time, and he went because he wanted to be taught by Nelson.³⁰ Nelson later stated: "I consider the classes that I had in Winnipeg to be some of the best drawing classes that I had my entire teaching career, and I've taught for nearly fifty years so that's saying a lot."³¹

Though Nelson only taught at the School of Art for a short time, he made lasting impressions on his students. By introducing surrealism to the School of Art, Nelson left behind a legacy that continues to outlast his time in Winnipeg. He had a major influence on artists such as Ivan Eyre, who then went on to inspire another generation of surrealist artists at the School of Art.

1. Robert Nelson, interview with the author, March 22, 2017.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.
10. Barrie Nelson, interview with the author, April 5, 2017.
11. Robert Nelson interview.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ted Howorth and Bill Pura, "Printmaking in the 1950's [sic]: an Intimate View of Student Prints at the School of Art 1950-59." Gallery One One One, School of Art, University of Manitoba, 2004, <https://www.umanitoba.ca/schools/art/content/galleryoneoneone/print.html>
15. Ibid.
16. Albert Gillson, President's Report (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba, 1954) and Ann Cameron, Art in Winnipeg 1955 to 1959 (Winnipeg: Gallery 111, 1982), 15.
17. Robert Nelson interview.
18. Ibid.
19. Albert Gillson, President's Report (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba, 1951).
20. Robert Nelson interview.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. Dianne Scoles. "School Setting and Dedicated Staff Inspire 1950's [sic] Student Printmakers," Gallery One One One, School of Art, University of Manitoba, 2004, umanitoba.ca/schools/art/content/galleryoneoneone/scoles.html
25. Robert Nelson interview.
26. Ibid.
27. Oliver Botar, "The Hidden Landscape of Winston Leathers and Wayne Foster," Gallery One One One, School of Art, umanitoba.ca/schools/art/content/galleryoneoneone/wl05
28. Barry Nelson interview; Robert Nelson interview
29. Terrence Heath, Personal Mythologies/Images of the Milieu: Ivan Eyre, (Winnipeg: Winnipeg Art Gallery, 1988), 137.
30. Ivan Eyre, interview with Oliver Botar, March 12, 2017.
31. Robert Nelson interview.