

Artist to Collect
Andy Donato





above, Old Red, acrylic on canvas, 12" x 16"
previous page, Brickwork, acrylic on canvas, 12" x 16"

A Little Bird Told Me

written by Lorie Lee Steiner

5 days a week, like clockwork, you can turn to the Editorial page of the Toronto Sun and chuckle, sneer, gasp, rage or roll your eyes at a fist-sized square of pictorial commentary, signed with a 'little bird' and the single name, Donato. While you may not always agree with the sentiment, renowned political cartoonist Andy Donato never

fails to make an impression – and that, dear readers, is why he continues to be a favourite morning feature for countless Canadians after almost 5 decades.

Dividing his time between urban Toronto (9 months) and balmy Tybee Island, near Savannah Georgia (Jan. – March), 76 year old Donato never tires of sharing his take on the headlines of the day. Even during his annual winter 'vacation,' he favours the Sun with one satirical contribution per week. But only on Sunday. That's the deal. The majority of his Tybee time is spent indulging his true passion – painting.

Beating the Odds

Andy Donato's brilliance as a painter has captured the attention of art collectors around the world; being touted as "having an uncommon touch with the common, often finding beauty within the ordinary."



Graffiti Lane No.1, acrylic on canvas, 12" x 17"

Born in Toronto in 1937, the son of an Italian immigrant who operated an old-world grocery store on Danforth Road, Donato's early talent with a paint brush earned him the right to attend night art school at Danforth Tech at the age of 13. Unprecedented for someone so young. "Since I was 12 years old, I wanted to be an artist. It's all I thought about," recalls Donato. Ever the jokester, he adds, "Well, a long time ago I did a stint with stand-up comedy, but art has always been my focus."

Donato began his career in 1955 as an illustrator for the Eaton's department store empire, and was eventually hired as a graphic artist for the now-defunct Toronto Telegram. His first political cartoon came in 1965 during the House of Commons debate on what would become Canada's official flag. It ended up being published both in Time magazine and the Encyclopedia Americana. He knew then the career

path he wanted to follow. But, since the odds of cartoonists getting newspaper jobs were running at about one in a million, he had little chance. Or so he thought.

Says Andy, "I was given the opportunity to fill in for Al Beaton, the cartoonist, when he was away, which only increased my desire. When Al suddenly passed away in 1967, I was given a 3 month trial but the editor in chief didn't like my work so they made me art director and sent me back to my old job. That's when I began to paint very seriously."

Throughout the Telegram years, Donato spent all his spare time in front of an easel, with impressive results. "I had my first one-man show at Toronto's Kar Gallery in 1969 and it was a sell-out. After that, I had one show every year in Toronto and also New York, London and South Africa."

When the Telegram folded in 1971, its founding publisher, J. Douglas Creighton, convinced Donato to join him and 60 others in joining the up-start



left top, 1940 Buick, acrylic on canvas, 16" x 24"
left bottom, Sandwiched, acrylic on canvas, 16" x 24"

above, In the Tybee Sun, acrylic on canvas, 16" x 12"

Toronto Sun, an adventure which today has that same Toronto newspaper as the flagship of the largest newspaper chain in Canada. It was Donato who designed the original Sun, created its familiar logo and continues to be its primary political cartoonist. He has never lost his touch. This year he was again nominated for a prestigious National Newspaper Award as the country's top cartoonist.

"I can't thank Doug Creighton and Peter Worthington enough for giving me the chance to join the Sun and do cartooning full time," says Donato. "With a growing family I needed the job and I loved the adventure. I went there to be art director and to draw 2 cartoons per week. When the Sunday Sun started I did 3 per week, and then when our other cartoonist moved on to the Montreal Star I was up to 5 a week. And I'm still doing them except when I go south in the winter to concentrate on my painting."

Work, Laugh, Love

Drawing on a wealth of past and present adventures for inspiration, Donato notes, "As a journalist, I have had many interesting experiences – from covering elections, to leadership races, sports events and meeting prime ministers and stars. I'm always inspired by other artists, as well as my city of Toronto and Tybee Island. And when I travel, any place new excites me."

"I've always felt having a good studio to work in was important because it can have such an influence on your work. My studio has several of my paintings on the walls as a reminder of what I can do. I love to look at art magazines and see just how many great artists there are out there working, especially the ones that do western art."

Advice is something Donato used to give out freely to newbies in commercial art. But now, with technology passing for artistry, he doesn't feel he



Spare Door, acrylic on canvas, 14" x 23"



above, October Sun, acrylic on canvas, 9.5" x 13"



right top, Blue Garage, acrylic on canvas, 12" x 15"
right bottom, Crazy Gate, acrylic on canvas, 13.5" x 10"



has much to offer on the subject since much of the drawing is computer assisted. "I'm not anti-computer," he explains, "I use one myself for research – if I need a detail for a side view portrait for example, I call up 'Stephen Harper' and find all the images I could ever want. Ditto for 'dump trucks'."

He believes the hardest part of being an artist is selling your art, which is why he advises beginners to "Work, work, work and marry rich. Think of it as a hobby that pays, but often not enough to make a living. The most important thing is desire; paint because you love it and always keep your sense of humour." Blessed with an impish sparkle in his eyes, infectious smile and genuine, home-grown wit, Andy Donato is a prime example of 'practice what you preach.'

Method & Magic

It is his unique *modus operandi* that separates Donato from most other artists who paint in a realist style. "Everything I paint starts off in pure

textured white gesso, modelling paste or gel. Over the years I've experimented with all sorts of media but acrylic and watercolour are my favourites. Oil stays wet far too long for my methods, and even with acrylic I have to hasten the drying. Every painting starts with something you see with your eyes and then transforms into something you feel inside you. Like how the snow has drifted in a lane, or how a wet street reflects the buildings around it. If you are an artist, you hope this never stops. You want it to be endless."

When starting a new project, Donato first paints the sky, then adds a tree over the sky with gesso. "This is where my trademark style comes in," he explains. "I hold a hair dryer over the tree, heating the gesso to create texture – like bark. After the texturing is done, I flow the colours overtop."

When he can, Donato likes to set up his easel in the midst of a streetscape or in the woods and paint the scene in watercolour. He also takes photos for detail reference. But as much as he



left top, West End Hoarding, acrylic on canvas, 17" x 24"
left bottom, Graffiti Lane No. 2, acrylic on canvas, 12" x 17"



right top, Yellow Reno, acrylic on canvas, 17" x 24"
right bottom, Snow Showers, acrylic on canvas, 12" x 17"





left top, First Snow, acrylic on canvas, 8" x 11"
left bottom, No parking, acrylic on canvas, 24" x 36"

above, Blue House, acrylic on canvas, 12" x 17"

loves the outdoors, his studio is where the magic takes place. "In Georgia, I rent the top floor of a building as studio space and produce as many as 25 paintings in 3 months."

Back home in Toronto, he works in a small room over the garage, while his wife, Dianne Jackson, (a talented abstract artist and Donato's best art critic and supporter) has a large studio in the walk-out basement. "I used to be down there," he explains, "but she needs more room because of all her equipment. I'm not overly organized, but she's worse! And now that she's into encaustic painting there are hot melting materials to contend with, so I'm happy where I am."

Bending Reality

After so many years as a cartoonist, Donato invoked those same artistic instincts into his current style of urban landscapes, which he coined 'Bent Realism.' "I've always been a realist, but trying to draw actual details from a photo became too technical and ultimately frustrating. So I began 'distorting' things, bending a building to make it more like a character – but still real. I like to play

God," he chuckles, "work from an actual scene and move buildings around, alter trees, add an outbuilding that wasn't there but would fit so nicely in that backyard."

And what's ahead on the creative horizon? "My most recent gallery show was called 'Donato's Yard & Garage Sale. Seriously," he laughs. "This way, I'll never have to come up with a new name, it'll just carry on as Donato's 2nd Yard & Garage Sale ... and so on from there."

Under the Influence

"As a young boy, I was inspired by a man named Lloyd Peters who was a commercial artist and a customer in my father's store," Donato recalls. "I spent a day in his downtown studio and watched other artists at work and I was heavily influenced by them." He credits his early teachers, Vince McGill and Fred Savard, as other major influences, and artists like Duncan MacPherson and Ken Danby for setting incredible benchmarks.

It is said, Donato's ability to read light and see contours and shadows also makes him one of the more deadly putters on a golf course. Word to the



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DONATO



above, Heavy Rain, acrylic on canvas, 12" x 16"
previous page, Wet Snow on Queen St. W., acrylic on canvas, 12" x 17"



right top, All Boarded Up, acrylic on canvas, 12" x 17"
right bottom, Sunny Lane, acrylic on canvas, 12" x 16"



wise – never bet on him three-putting any green. Off the links and out of the studio, his favourite way to relax is a night out with Dianne, sharing a delicious Italian dinner and a bottle of Shiraz.

Admitting to feeling twenty years younger than his actual age, life for this prolific artist just keeps getting better. With the 50th anniversary of his first published cartoon coming up in 2015, the same year as his 60th anniversary working as an artist, Donato has aspirations to publish limited edition books – one featuring his favourite paintings, another his political cartoons. As he so eloquently puts it, "I really enjoy what I do. There's so much material out there. I've always said it's the most fun you can have with your clothes on."

And the Bird?

News flash. Donato's signature winged accomplice has made its way onto the canvas. Though you might not recognize it. "In my latest paintings, you'll find it

in the sky or in a tree, and it's more of a feathered bird than my 'toon drawing," says Donato.

"Does it have a name?" I ask.

"Yes," replies Donato. "It's Aaron. Growing up, my daughter had a little white budgie called Aaron, so the family called my guy Aaron too. I just call him goddamn bird."

On that note, we'll say a heartfelt thank you for the years of smiles, Andy Donato, and wish you many, many more!

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