



1966 Photo: James Lewcun Courtesy: Globe and Mail

Carmen Lamanna the legend the ledgers the legacy

by Adele Freedman

For a generation of Canadian artists, membership in this Toronto art dealer's exclusive stable was the highest honour the art world had to offer. But it had its perils.

Carmen Lamanna, who dealt some of the most important Canadian art of this century, died on May 23, 1991. Four days later his body was entombed in the wall of a Toronto cemetery. To artist John Scott, one of the mourners, "It looked like a punk version of Hamlet. They had a fork lift come, it lifted the casket up, and three guys in uniforms interred it — sealed a marble block into place. One had a shaved head and earrings in his nose. Everybody else was in immaculate clothing. You marched past a huge line of Lamannas. At the end stood Carmen's father, a tiny little man. They all looked at you so directly, like 'I know you were Carmen's best friend.'"

In addition to best friends, Lamanna left behind a legacy fraught with complication and a reputation verging on the mystical. God knows what adjective applies to his ledgers — paranormal? Invited to give the eulogy, Ian Carr-Harris, who showed with the Carmen Lamanna Gallery for twenty years, felt obliged to bring up the time he wasn't paid his percentage of a sale. "It was only to draw out that Carmen wasn't an angel, but intense and committed," Carr-Harris explains. "He had a mystic attachment to the Intellect. He was mesmerized by ideas as opposed to the physicality of the world. He wouldn't let anyone stop him."

In the collection governed by the Carmen Lamanna Gallery Trust, formed six days before Lamanna's death, are works by some of the three generations of top-ranking artists Lamanna fostered. As he molded their careers, he forged his own legend. He had an eye, he had nerve, and he believed in what modernists romanticized as the spirit of the age. The world would come to him, he used to say, and for many years it did. Throughout the seventies, when European dealers and critics came to Canada, it was only Lamanna they wanted to meet. To some of his artists, Lamanna seemed a nineteenth-century romantic in the body of a man who, as the eminent Italian



1968 Photo: John Reeves

“He thought of himself as a ringmaster,” observes Toronto art critic Walter Klepac. “He was committed to his artists unconditionally even when nobody was interested in coming to the openings. He didn’t go by anyone’s rules.”

critic Achille Bonito Oliva once put it, talked like an Italian peasant. The international art impresario Jean-Christophe Ammann called him *Il Capitano*. Even his signature, a spiralling vortex, suggested a man with mysterious, even hypnotic powers of persuasion. In the words of the painter David Bolduc, one of Lamanna’s first house artists, “He was the padrone. It was his patronage that made the gallery wonderful. You were part of his fold.”

Some passing strange things took place in that enclosure. Painter Ron Martin recalls Lamanna telephoning him in 1973 to say he’d been put in direct communication with God while framing Martin’s *Water on Paper* works. Tales are still told of Lamanna’s all-night vigils over freshly hung exhibitions. Says Vincent Tangredi, “We would talk until early in the morning of the next day about one individual work.” In 1985, Lamanna almost paid his life for art, defending Reinhard Reitzenstein’s sculpture *Ear* from two men who stormed into the gallery looking for “the wop,” and broke his arm. His commitment was absolute. Says Sylvana Lamanna, the Lamanna offspring closest to the gallery during his lifetime: “The artists — those were his family. He treated them like children.” But exactly what kind of father was he?

Lamanna opened his gallery in 1966, fifteen years after emigrating with his father and a brother-in-law from their hometown of Monteleone, just east of Naples. The elder Lamanna, a skilled carpenter, found employment in a factory. Carmen, then twenty-four, worked in construction. It wasn’t for him. He went into the framing business, first for others, then for himself, putting the craftsmanship he’d learned from his father to more satisfying use. He started to sell the occasional still life and landscape — “cowscapes,” he later joked — on the side. Precisely what drove him to become a dealer in cutting-edge contemporary art is still a matter for speculation. But by the mid-sixties, he had enough “surplus money,” as he told a relative, to lease the Yonge Street premises that

became the Carmen Lamanna Gallery.

In the late sixties and early seventies, Lamanna’s epoch-making roster included Bolduc, a colour and feeling man; minimalist sculptors David and Royden Rabinowitch; gestural painter Ron Martin; Murray Favro, maker of faux guitars and machines; and Paterson Ewen, master of routed plywood and paint. The second generation encompassed Robin Collyer, Ian Carr-Harris, General Idea (the three-man artist collective of A A Bronson, Jorge Zontal and Felix Partz), Shirley Wiitasalo, Vincent Tangredi, Robert Fones, Colette Whiten, Mary Janitch, Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge, who among them exhibited photo-based works, text-based works, feminist sculpture, Maoist agit-prop and performance art. To emerge in the postmodern eighties were John Scott, John Brown, Joanne Tod. “I exhibit what has value to me personally,” Lamanna pronounced, “on the assumption that it may have value for others.”

When it came to selling, it was the institutions Lamanna went after. As Carr-Harris says, “He believed in ‘the institute,’ as he always called it, rather more than he believed in private people. It represented the state, the collective will.” Lamanna considered himself something of an institution — “a national service doing what museums weren’t doing,” in the words of Roald Nasgaard, then chief curator at the Art Gallery of Ontario: “He wasn’t entirely wrong.” Lamanna sold to the National Gallery of Canada, the Art Gallery of Ontario, and, most importantly, to the newly founded Canada Council Art Bank. He shaped a scene, impressing it with his personality. “He thought of himself as a ringmaster,” observes Toronto art critic Walter Klepac. “He was committed to his artists unconditionally even when nobody was interested in coming to the openings. He didn’t go by anyone’s rules.”

He didn’t follow the usual rules of business, either. When he started, Lamanna sold on consignment, the usual thing, taking forty to fifty percent of sales. But beginning around 1970, in addition to his commission, he characteristically claimed ownership of fifty percent — according to value

— of everything an artist produced, an unprecedented arrangement that went on for more than two decades. Sometimes his terms were spelled out in a contract, sometimes they weren’t. As Lamanna’s artists were to discover, no two agreements were exactly alike. You either trusted Lamanna, or you didn’t. You either put the gallery’s interests above your own, or you didn’t. Says Favro: “This is what’s known as the Carmen Lamanna dream: ‘What’s good for the gallery is good for the artists.’”

It was on the rare occasion that an artist decided to leave the gallery that Lamanna claimed his fifty percent of that artist’s inventory, the assumption being, according to Vincent Tangredi, that “if Carmen had invested ten years promoting, storing, exhibiting, and documenting your work, obviously he’d want something back.” Artists had no recourse other than to submit, unless they could afford a lawyer — and had the patience — to fight for the return of their assets. Even so, Av Isaacs, his neighbour at the gallery’s original Yonge Street location, recalls there were “four or five years in a row when one or another of Carmen’s artists was bringing legal action against him, but no one could lay a glove on him. He claimed that half of everything was his.” Lawyer Clayton Ruby, who acted for Paterson Ewen after Lamanna’s death, was shocked by what he terms his “little foray into the art world”: “I asked one prominent artist: ‘How do you sign a contract that gives away fifty percent of everything you painted, whether Lamanna sold it or not?’ The artist said: ‘What you don’t understand is when I signed, nobody wanted my work.’”

Lamanna certainly wanted it — for his personal collection, estimated to stand at between five hundred and six hundred works, including not only the divvied-up proceeds of inventories but also gifts, trades, and works astutely purchased from gallery artists such as Martin, Carr-Harris, Favro, General Idea, Ewen, Collyer, the two Rabinowitches, Tod, and Bolduc. As well, Lamanna acquired works by Brice Marden, Joseph Kosuth, Richard Hamilton, Francesco Clemente, and Donald Judd, even a couple of Russell Spanner chairs.

“A lot of dealers collect their artists, but not like Carmen did,” says Nasgaard. “He had some very, very good artists, some of whom will take their place as the best of their generation. Carmen collected with an eye to the financial future of himself and his family, but that’s only one part of it. He took the art very seriously indeed. His life was that gallery. He was devoted to the presentation of those artists. He was putting together this collection — to give to a museum? To use in an independent way? The simple answer would always be furthest from the truth.”

Lamanna could be relentless when he was going after what he felt was his — perhaps even the country’s — due. It took Bolduc four years to get his divorce from the padrone. In 1975, owed \$7000 by the gallery, Bolduc finally asked Lamanna what was going on, only to be told: “Well, Dave, you’re not in fashion anymore.” Furious, Bolduc hired a lawyer. As negotiations stretched on and on, Mira Godard exhibited some of Bolduc’s paintings in Montreal. Lamanna

promptly demanded fifty percent of sales. It never went to court, but an “enormous amount” of Bolduc’s early work stayed behind in Lamanna’s collection.

It’s A A Bronson’s view that Lamanna the dealer and Lamanna the collector were locked in conflict. “Carmen was a collector disguised as a dealer,” Bronson says. “He sold only enough to keep going. Because he worked on the principle of fifty-percent ownership, at the point where he decided to get his half he would then have inventory from which to choose things for his collection.” General Idea, who signed on with Lamanna in 1970, parted company with him in the late eighties, frustrated because “he tried his best to prevent works from leaving the country, which greatly hindered our careers outside of Canada.” Joanne Tod recalls the impossible financial conditions Lamanna set a Paris dealer who wished to show her work. “Carmen wanted an international reputation for his artists,” she insists, “but he didn’t want to relinquish control. He wanted to possess the work and the artists too.”

Speaking figuratively, Bronson charges “child abuse”: “Carmen was the father, they were the children. As soon as they tried to be adults, he would get very mad at them. It was the classic dealer-artist thing, but to an extent never seen before.” When General Idea needed to borrow works for shows with dealers in other countries, Lamanna “refused to give the discount to make it possible.” So to build and protect their international stature, General Idea were compelled to keep two inventories, one for Canada, the other for Europe. Their 1984 touring General Idea exhibition, which began in Europe and travelled to the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Musée d’art contemporain in Montreal, included works from both inventories. According to Bronson, “as soon as the European works came to Canada, Carmen laid claim to them” — unsuccessfully.

When General Idea gave notice, Lamanna moved in for his fifty percent. To the small but important works he had purchased from General Idea exhibitions down through the years were added, says Bronson, well over a hundred works in the way of alimony. They included General Idea’s *P is for Poodle* installation and all the original entries to the 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant which importantly bridge art and archives. Like Bolduc’s, General Idea’s split from Lamanna was long and arduous. Watching from the sidelines, New York art critic Allan Schwartzman was appalled: “He just wore them down and wore them down, adding to his list of demands, slapping them with bogus charges. These people gave in just to end the process. They had no assets to sue with.”

Many of the artists, however, wouldn’t have sued even if they could. John Scott, who joined the gallery in 1980, exhibited in his very first solo show a drawing called *Carnivore*, modestly priced at \$200. A friend of his wanted to buy it. “Carmen told her she wasn’t ready,” says Scott. “She was pissed. I couldn’t understand what he was doing. After the show was over I got this letter saying it had been purchased by an anonymous collector for the Museum of Modern

Art, who wanted it reframed. Of course it wasn't the Museum of Modern Art. Carmen bought it. He charged me for reframing it — for Mrs. Lamanna. I ended up with a check for \$37.50." Yet the thought of following Bolduc, Molinari, the Rabinowitches, General Idea, and Ed Zelenak out of the fold didn't once cross his mind. No matter that by the time Scott came on, Lamanna was no longer the only game in town. The rules of the art world shifted in the fast, corporate, big-buck eighties, and the boast of waiting for the world to come knocking at your door suddenly seemed quaint. Clinging to his outmoded role as impresario of the avant garde, Lamanna wouldn't budge. Nor would Scott: "You got to be part of a big chunk of history. Carmen was Canadian art for a whole number of years. There were other viable galleries, but none had the same weight. But by the end I had curators come to the gallery and ask about my work, and Carmen would say: 'Who's John Scott?' He wanted to push the work of his more established artists. Still, it's kind of bleak when your own dealer pretends not to know you."

"The last thing Carmen said to me," remembers AA Bronson, "was that when I realized what his ultimate project was, I'd be sorry I left the gallery." Whatever that project was, Lamanna kept it to himself, just as he kept from the gallery artists that he was dying of lung cancer. Susan Watterson, the former director of Art Metropole who came close to taking over the gallery after Lamanna's death, claims he wanted ultimately to display his collection in a permanent facility. Toronto investment banker Alan Schwartz, a collector himself, is equally convinced Lamanna was thinking of giving the collection to an institution, on certain conditions about how it would be shown. "He and I talked often of his dream for the collection," he says. "Carmen wanted it to stay together, to be seen as one man's vision."

Lamanna didn't have the time to think it through. Only two months elapsed between his diagnosis in March, 1991, and his death in May, four days after his sixty-fourth birthday. One of his last acts was to transfer the collection in its entirety to the Carmen Lamanna Gallery Trust. The document establishing the terms of the trust was hammered out in haste as Lamanna lay dying in Princess Margaret Hospital. A lawyer read it out loud in Lamanna's hospital room on the afternoon of May 17. It named as trustees Lamanna's two sons Frank and Rocco, his nephew Carmen Colangelo, and a friend, Angelo Caranci. Carmen's daughter Sylvana, twenty-five, who was also present, was stunned. "I stood up — I said: 'Dad, don't you trust me?'" Lamanna couldn't have responded even if he'd wanted to. He was in an oxygen tent, she remembers. His mouth was taped. "I kept saying: 'Who made up the document?' It was the first I heard of it. I didn't like the sound of it. I felt excluded. I wasn't sure who the trust was for. The trustees knew all the implications — was it for them to benefit? If so, why?"

As it turns out, Sylvana had good reason for concern. Her

father's collection is in the hands of people who have little experience with art, and still less with the workings of the art world. Frank Lamanna, thirty-five, owns a shoe-repair store. Rocco Lamanna, thirty-three, is an engineer. Angelo Caranci, an architect, got to know Lamanna in the early seventies when he worked in an architectural office around the corner from the gallery. He and his wife Orienda turned up at openings. When Lamanna moved the gallery to King Street in 1987, Caranci designed the renovation. Carmen Colangelo, who has the deciding say in any dispute, is an internal audit manager with IBM who by his own admission wasn't close to his Uncle Carmen. But he responded to the news of Lamanna's illness by offering to help in any way he could. When a doctor advised Lamanna days before his death to set his affairs in order, Lamanna invited Colangelo and Caranci along with his own two sons to consult with his lawyer. "I was awestruck," says Colangelo.

The beneficiaries of the Carmen Lamanna Gallery Trust are Lamanna's wife and his four children, including son Albert, twenty-nine, who is emotionally disabled. The trust remains in place until twenty years after the death of Lamanna's first child. The art collection is defined as consisting of "paintings, drawings, sketches, sculptures, photographs, magazines, books, research materials," a reminder that Lamanna, a painstaking archivist, is known to have considered documentation as vitally important as artworks. The trustees aren't supposed to sell off any art for purposes other than paying "debts and liabilities connected to the trust property, or management of the trust," and are charged to generate income "by leasing and exhibiting the works, providing library services, research materials, photography services...." Monies thus raised go to pay the trustees "remuneration and fees," and to provide the beneficiaries with an annual or semi-annual stipend. It was Lamanna's "express wish" that the trustees (of whom two are, of course, beneficiaries), give each of the beneficiaries (of whom two are trustees) "certain works of art at their earliest convenience." So far, says Sylvana, the beneficiaries have received neither stipends nor artworks.

Of greatest import to the art community is paragraph eight, which stipulates that twenty years after the death of Lamanna's first child "the Trustees shall offer a donation of forty percent of the value of the remaining works of art to The Art Gallery of Ontario, and/or The National Art Gallery of Canada [sic]," with the balance of the property to be sold "as to obtain the highest monetary profit" for division among the beneficiaries or their children. Paragraph seventeen says: "This Trust shall be irrevocable. However, if it is not feasible...the trust property shall be distributed in the same manner as set out in Paragraph 8." To this "riddle inside a mystery," as Schwartz terms the document, Lamanna put his famous signature. It looks shrivelled and sad.

The big problem with the trust document is there's no way to raise substantial revenue from leasing paintings and providing photographic services. Since 1992, the trust has made only seven loans to institutions. Everything else

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1982 Photo: John McNeill Courtesy: Globe and Mail

crumbles on that weak foundation. To keep the collection together, it can't be sold off. But it has to be sold off to pay the expenses incurred in keeping the collection together. The trustees have been selling artworks at the rate of two a year to cover expenses — insurance, the mortgage on Lamanna's storage facility on Geary Avenue where the collection has been consolidated — and will continue to do so. Last year, for example, they put a 1971 Gershon Iskowitz canvas on the auction block.

In addition to the trust document, Lamanna also made a will stating he left everything to his wife and four children. The executors of the estate, as opposed to the trust, are Frank, Rocco, and Sylvana. (This makes Frank and Rocco trustees, beneficiaries, and executors.) His estate consisted of ledgers, debts, the remaining lease on the gallery's King Street premises, and the Geary Avenue building. As executors, it fell to the three Lamanna children to close off contracts with the more than twenty artists Lamanna represented at the time of his death, and to determine the future of the business. But Frank and Rocco decided Colangelo and Caranci should do it for them.

Colangelo and Caranci then embarked on two sets of negotiations concurrently. The first was to sell the gallery. The family, with the exception of Sylvana, who thought no one could take the place of her father, wanted the gallery to continue. Before he died, Lamanna had himself sounded out three possibilities — Orienda Caranci, wife of the architect; Toronto private art dealer Lonti Ebers; and Susan Watterson. Since he didn't disclose that he had cancer, there seemed no cause for urgency. A month later, he was gone.

Colangelo and Watterson began negotiations. Watterson beat down the family's asking price — \$250,000 cash (not all up-front) — to \$100,000 plus a hefty percentage of sales over the first four years. "There was no inventory. I was getting some of the fixtures, fittings, the remaining lease, Carmen's

name over the door, the artists — I was looking for assurances they'd stay on for three years — but no files." Finally, Watterson pulled out, arguing her then husband Roald Nasgaard's position at the Art Gallery of Ontario could lead to conflict of interest. The truth is she "just didn't want to do it." With Watterson gone, the family entertained a wide range of options. Ron Martin and Vincent Tangredi came forward with proposals. The names bandied about were far-ranging: Linda Genereux, then a Toronto freelance critic; former *Vanguard* editor Russell Keziere; New York dealer Elizabeth Koury; Richard Rhodes, then a curator at The Power Plant; and AGO curators Philip Monk and Christina Ritchie. Nothing came of any of it. But though Philip Monk wasn't about to become a dealer, he did later make the estate an offer in his capacity of curator of contemporary art at the AGO: "I was trying to find a donor to purchase the collection. I didn't know the extent of the collection, but knowing something of what Carmen bought or acquired from artists over the years, I realized he had a substantial and important collection. The collection also includes archives — incredible records." Monk gave the family six weeks to agree to consider the donation sale. Preferring to take their chances, Colangelo and Caranci declined. Monk remains convinced that "if they'd been reasonable about how we evaluate a collection as a whole, everybody would have benefited: the public, the donor, the family." Says Colangelo: "It would have been irresponsible to even entertain completing the arrangements in that short amount of time. It was mission impossible. The opportunity went away, and that was that."

At the same time as they were trying to sell the gallery, the family, guided by Colangelo and Caranci, were negotiating with the artists. It turns out that parting from Lamanna after he died could be as trying as leaving him while he was alive. After the massive task of taking inventory, Colangelo, Caranci, and — when they attended — the Lamanna children,



1987 Photo: Thomas Szlukovenyi Courtesy: Globe and Mail

at the same time. For a modest annual fee, the trustees could hire a knowledgeable art world professional to run the collection.

called meetings with every artist: "Here's your inventory, here's your contract, here are the expenses incurred on your behalf." Then the dealing would begin.

The majority of artists were so anxious to get on with their lives, they did as requested. Not so Paterson Ewen, who refused even to meet with the family and their two advisors. Ewen's work was valuable — his plywood paintings sold for more than \$100,000 a pop — and the family knew it. Says Ewen: "In the end, they claimed I owed them more than \$400,000." Threatening a lawsuit, Ewen finally hired Toronto litigators Clayton Ruby and Harriet Sachs. "The family just backed off," says Ewen. "I got all the stuff back." Colangelo told me over lunch: "If Paterson Ewen had come down like all the other artists did, we could have settled in a cooperative manner. We never had that opportunity. He wouldn't talk at all. He just said 'talk to my lawyer.' The thing that really disappoints is here we have a dealer and artist with a twenty-five year win-win relationship. Then to treat Carmen's family — and whoever they chose to represent them — like this? We inherited certain situations. If the situations had deteriorated, it started before we came on."

Robert Fones was asked for four pieces of his work — his choice — and half the money he received from a commission at SkyDome. He offered a fifth work instead. "What did I owe for? Storage for twenty years. Fair enough." From Joanne Tod, they wanted a donation. She refused. Vincent Tangredi actually got some pieces back: "One of the sons called, saying 'If you don't come and pick them up, we'll put them out in the parking lot.'" Murray Favro describes his ordeal: "The forms I had made for the guitar were out west. They were supposed to come back to me. They were returned to them instead. I had to give them a guitar to get the forms back."

The artworks acquired in these negotiations may legally belong to the trust collection, or they may belong to the estate collection. Says Sylvana, "It's still very confusing." What is clear is that at the moment there are two collections — the trust collection and the estate collection — sharing the Geary Avenue building and the Geary Avenue mortgage. As well, Colangelo and Caranci have been paid more than \$150,000 in compensation for 1536 hours of professional

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services rendered. Payment was made largely in works of art that they acquired on behalf of the estate in its negotiations with the artists. It seems clear that, with no foreseeable source of revenue to cover its ongoing expenses, the trust will have to continue selling works of art in order to pay for its own maintenance. Consequently, piece by piece, the collection will gradually erode.

Private property or national treasure?

Lonti Ebers thinks the former — "those are the breaks." Bolduc and Bronson, among others who would dearly love to retrieve valuable early works, or at least see them become part of museum collections, think the latter. Lamanna seems to have thought both.

"What a pity this great personal collection has disappeared," says Alan Schwartz — "firstly for the artists themselves, some of whom believe it's rightfully theirs and can't get their hands on it; secondly, because much of this seminal work has disappeared from view altogether." Of course, there's a way in which the family could do right by Lamanna and Lamanna's artists, while providing for themselves at the same time. For a modest annual fee, the trustees could hire a knowledgeable art world professional to run the collection. The first task, and the most formidable, would be to catalogue and document the collection, making it available for loans and for research purposes. The next step might be to hire expert counsel to advise on the donation of the collection to museums, there being many creative — and financially beneficial — ways of accomplishing this. The trustees are banking on the value of the collection going up and up and up, but that's not always the way it happens. Should the trust continue to be run as it is, there may be little left of the Lamanna collection, other than photos and files, twenty years after the death of his first child — and nothing to commemorate Carmen Lamanna and his extraordinary instinct for art. Myths last only as long as people can believe in them.

Adele Freedman is a Toronto writer and architecture critic.

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