

SONIA CORNWALL
Fifty Years at the Onward Ranch
A Pioneer's View of the Cariboo



September 20th - October 6th, 2001

WESTBRIDGE FINE ART LTD.
1737 Fir Street, Vancouver, B.C. V6J 5J9

Bravo, Sonia! I love your work

I have known Sonia Cornwall since 1946. Her mother, Vivien Cowan, whom I met the year previously at the Banff School of Fine Arts, had invited me to the Onward Ranch. I fell in love with the Cariboo country and with all the Cowan family, and went back year after year to paint and pursue friendship. The Onward was a hive of artistic activity. Everyone (nearly) painted or made pottery. It was there I made my first piece of sculpture, a clay bust of an Indian girl. (Alas, it was not only my first but my last attempt to be a sculptor). Sonia soon began painting and pursuing art studies away from home. I have watched her progress over a period of fifty years.

Most of Sonia's paintings are relatively small in scale, but the feeling is big. She captures the vastness of the landscape, the drama of movement in skies, the massiveness of mountain forms. She learned a lot, as did I, from A.Y. Jackson, but what is so admirable in her development is that she goes beyond landscape and draws inspiration from human activity on the land. She had worked on her parents' cattle ranch and married a rancher. Her themes increasingly became the life on the ranch where the relationship of man to the animals he feeds and who feed him is intimate and profound. I see this way of life as heroic and I see heroism in a painter who takes on such challenging subjects. Sonia, by the strength of her feelings, has created a powerful art. Bravo, Sonia! I love your work.

Joe Plaskett, Suffolk, England 2001

SONIA CORNWALL
Fifty Years at the Onward Ranch
A Pioneer's View of the Cariboo

September 20th – October 6th, 2001

With special thanks to
William Matthews whose vision and
commitment brought this exhibition together

Westbridge Fine Art Ltd.
1737 Fir Street, Vancouver, B.C. V6J 5J9
Telephone: 604-736-1014

email: info@westbridge-fineart.com
www.westbridge-fineart.com

Director: Anthony R. Westbridge



Winter Sports, 1968
Oil on canvasboard, 20" x 30"

Sonia, a natural artist

Ever since 1962 on a lecturing tour in B.C. while conducting workshops with UBC Extension Department I had met Sonja Cornwall at her homestead near Williams Lake. Since then, and again and again, I am very happy to see her work reflecting so much honesty from her earthy surroundings.

The output of her oil sketches done around her daily life paths, the trees, the mountain, skies, the fields and streams, are painted with joy and love and give back joy and love. Sonia is a natural artist with the charms of a child to bring back (to) us such treasures found around her home – her cattle and red barn right here in B.C.

Herbert Siebner, RCA, Victoria, B.C.

My friend, Sonia Cornwall

In 1987, I acquired my first painting by Sonia Cornwall. A small plein-air oil, it expressed a poetic intimacy with nature that still touches my inner being. The painting pulled me in: contrasting blues and oranges evoked the drama of nature - the rolling hills about to receive the sky's gift of rain, the liquid sensitive brushwork attesting to not only the artist's confidence, but her fusion with the medium and the environ she portrayed. I wanted to know this artist.

Today I have a few more of Sonia's paintings, and established a friendship with her that continues to grow along with my respect for her body of art both past and present.

"I have always painted what I see," says Sonia, and she means it. It's a won-



Self Portrait
Oil on board, 16" x 12"

derful signature that much of her work lacks pre-tense: she provides the viewer with an honest impression of a pioneer ranching way of life in B.C.'s Cariboo country that is quickly disappearing with population growth and agricultural industrialization. There is a sense of time passing in Sonia's oil paintings.

Sonia was born in Kamloops, in 1919 to Charles and Vivien Cowan. Her father, Irish by birth, and adventurous by nature, was an officer with the N.W. Mounted Police in Edmonton. While tracking a murderer in B.C., he fell in love with the beauty and potential of the Cariboo region, vowing to return and settle. When he left the N.W.M.P. Charles became a guide for British travellers to Western Canada, then settled in Kamloops, where he became a property agent. Slowly he acquired the land in the Cariboo that was to become the Onward Ranch. He also encouraged



Floral Still Life
Oil on board, 16" x 12"

several British aristocrats, with whom he was friendly, to establish ranch estates in the Cariboo, which he managed for the absentee lords.

Vivien Tully was from Portland Oregon, and while visiting a friend in Kamloops, the educated, beautiful, genteel banker's daughter met and fell in love with Charles Cowan. They married in 1918. Vivien's strong interest in painting led to an artist's studio in the attic of the newly built Onward Ranch house. By the age of five, Sonia had been given her first set of oils and was sketching drapery and still life alongside her mother.

When Sonia was nine, she was sent to Kamloops to attend Miss Beattie's Private School. She revelled in the Saturday art classes, excelling in watercolours. Two years later, in 1930, she was sent to Vancouver Island to attend Strathcona Girl's School at Shawnigan Lake, where she took extra classes in art. Her art teacher for the four years at the school was Lowrie Warrener, who would later paint with the Group of Seven. During summers, Sonia was happy to be home, while the winters saw her mother and father and younger sister Dru relocate to Victoria for its warmer climate and social and cultural amenities. Her interest in art not only withstood the teen years, at fifteen it saw her sell her first oil painting. A summer's interest led to her studying theatre set design with Don May of Seattle's Cornish Theatre, influences that can be seen in later rodeo and auction paintings.

However, any aspirations for art she might have had gave way to cold reality in 1939. Her father lay dying in a Victoria hospital, which led to her mother suffering a nervous breakdown. With hospital and domestic bills mounting, Sonia per-



On the Feed Grounds, 1967
Oil on canvas, 23" x 28"



Counting Noses, 1988
Oil on masonite, 30" x 33"

suaded her mother to pack up the household and return to the Onward Ranch, where food cost nothing, and any outstanding debts could be retired. As a beautiful, privately educated nineteen year old, raised to catch the eye and hand of a wealthy man of select society, Sonia asserted her independence. She put family first, and decided to work the ranch. For the next eleven years, from an urban perspective, she was a cowboy/rancher.

The work was hard, manual, and the hours long. She worked outdoors alongside the ranch foreman and the hired hands. "I was probably better in the haying fields than as a cowhand" said my modest friend, although, she proudly adds that she was treated as an equal in the male domain of cattle ranching. Sonia loved the work. Her art became secondary. She was either too busy, or too tired to draw or paint. Winters offered little reprieve: each day after feeding the cattle, Sonia cut wood. She drove the tractor year round, and to get cigarette money she would hunt and trap for furs. Ranching brought her closer to nature and left her with ideas, images and experiences which were stored away for future use in her definitive paintings of the Cariboo countryside.

Sonia's mother Vivien was advised by her doctor to resume her painting after her husband's death. With their finances back in order, Vivien went to study at the Banff School of Fine Arts, where she met and became friends with A.Y. Jackson, who was teaching there. In 1943, Sonia met this icon of Canadian Art who

Onward Ranch, c.1958
Oil on panel
12" x 16"



became a regular visitor to the Onward Ranch. He later recorded Sonia at work in an oil he called *Sonia Ploughing*. Vivien's immersion in art rekindled Sonia's interest in painting. She was further encouraged by Jackson, who, over the next several years, would critique her work. In his absence she mailed six of her paintings at a time, for his opinion. "Not so much paint - too much like Tom!" recalls a laughing Sonia.

In 1946, Vivien packed Sonia and Dru off to Calgary's Provincial Institute of Technology to study art. Among her instructors was Jock MacDonald who taught design. The two sisters were disappointed, however. The art classes were dull and restrictive, and dominated by the recently delisted servicemen. After three months, they returned home to the Onward, and it's growing creative climate.

That same year, A.Y. Jackson became honorary president and founder along with Vivien Cowan, of the Cariboo Society of Artists - the second oldest arts society in B.C. The Onward Ranch quickly became an artist's stopover, and the new Society hosted many workshops. Artists such as Joe Plaskett visited the ranch, and over the years became a good family friend and regular guest at the Onward, and



Canoe Creek Village,
1978
Oil on panel,
12" x 16"



Storm Over the Village,
1975
Oil on panel,
12" x 16"

later at the Jones Lake Ranch. Sonia found the time to attend weekend workshops - her art education was coming to her!

Sonia married Hugh Cornwall in 1948. An R.A.F. pilot during the War, Hugh, 37, was also a rancher from Ashcroft. His grandfather, Clement F. Cornwall, was the former Lieutenant Governor of B.C. After their marriage Hugh began to run the ranch operations of the Onward. Sonia continued to work alongside her husband for two more years, until she became pregnant with their first of two daughters. Inside the house, Sonia continued to hard work not only as a mother, but as ranch cook for the family and up to fourteen hired hands. Despite all this, Sonia made time to attend the weekend workshops, and absorbed additional benefits from the various artists staying at the Onward. "You learn so much more when they stay with you," she says. Later, with the children off to school each morning, she committed herself to two hours of art studies, sketching or painting each day. By the mid 1950s she had begun to sell her work.

In the 1960's, with her children entering their teens, Sonia, encouraged by Hugh - who also sculpted in metal - devoted more time to her painting. A.Y.



The Old Water Tower,
Onward, c. 1940s
Oil on panel,
12" x 16"



Indian Camps, Stampede Time
Oil on board, 18" x 24"

Jackson's encouragement and critiques culminated in 1963 when her "Salmon Fishers" which Jackson submitted, was selected in a juried show of Canadian art in Hamilton. Sonia credits her neighbour and close friend Gwen Pharis-Ringwood, the playwright, with giving her the inspiration and determination to continue her art, despite the demanding duties of a ranch wife and mother. Gwen could relate to Sonia's life and became a subconscious hero to the latter. "I never felt that I was just a woman" says Sonia. She was also encouraged by several of her prominent artist friends, with whom she participated in workshops with. Among them were Jack Hardman, Zelko Kujundzic, Molly Bobak, Cliff Robinson, Herbert Siebner, Peter Aspell, and Jim Willer. On a visit to the Vancouver Art Gallery in the early 1960's, the art rental department had no less than twelve different paintings of the renowned Onward barn by various artists! Sonia had left the "Sunday painter" stigma, and immersed herself in art: "I wasn't happy if I couldn't paint or sketch."

In 1965 Sonia and her family moved from the Onward to their newly built home at Jones Lake where the large ranch house incorporated an artist's studio off the main entrance. As Ted Lindberg wrote, Sonia "became hostess to stray artists and intellectuals, and dogged flourishing painter."

The 1970's marked the beginning of a prolific output of paintings in oil, water-colour, drawings, wood block prints, and pastels that continues right through to the present. Her subject matter is 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 hers, in her art. During this period, Sonia's



The Auction – The Cutting House, c.1964
Oil on masonite, 24" x 36"

involvement in the arts community deepened. She opened her home to artists, and hosted many visiting art programs co-ordinated by the Vancouver Art Gallery.

In 1975, she became co-founder of the Station House Gallery in Williams Lake, which is today a vital centre for the thriving Cariboo art community. That same year, she was honoured when one of her paintings “*Spring Floods*”, was accepted into the Provincial Art Collection.

A series of one woman shows also began at this time, from regular exhibitions at the Station House, to Kamloops and Prince George Art Galleries, and other regional private galleries. In Vancouver, she was represented by deVooght Gallery, and Alex Fraser Gallery. In 1993, her importance to the Cariboo was recognized in a retrospective of her work at the Station House. In 2000, at the Kelowna Art Gallery, art historian Eileen Truscott accorded Sonia a position of prominence within the B.C. art community by curating a summer long exhibition entitled “Sonia Cornwall: Cariboo Ranch Scenes”.

Sonia brushes aside my remark that she is a pioneer. Raised to be a salon wife, she jumped the gender track and became a respected cattleman and rancher. As a painter, she incorporates her life experiences, her love and deep respect for the Cariboo, and the primary ranching life that defines the Cariboo. Few have so passionately committed themselves to the life and the land, portraying it so well on canvas. This exhibition reintroduces Sonia Cornwall’s art to Vancouver.

A retired rancher, writing in the guest book at the Kelowna exhibition pleases my dear friend with his inscription: “Thank you, Sonia, for portraying our way of life”.

William Matthews, June 2001. Vancouver/Gun Lake



Spring Hillside, 1964
Oil on masonite, 36" x 24"

Cattle at Harlequin Lake, 1968. Oil on board, 20" x 30"



Onward Ranch
Oil on panel, 16" x 12"



Onward Ranch, 1961
Oil on board, 14" x 18"



Workshops at the Onward Ranch

For several years, beginning in the early 1960s, the Onward Ranch was the venue for special two and three day art workshops given by visiting artists as part of the UBC Extension Department's B.C. lecture tour program. Sonia Cornwall, despite her family and farming commitments, made time to attend many of the workshops the education from which formed an integral part of her artistic development over the ensuing years. The following notes are Sonia's recollections of those workshops and an acknowledgement of the artists who led them and their impact on her creative development.

Cliff Robinson – on oil painting. That was when I didn't even understand painting terms such as "cool it".

Zelko Kujundzic – held pottery workshops and oil painting ones. At that time he had started and headed the Nelson School of Art. He taught us to be very particular in the furnishing of pottery (smooth rims and bases). Also raku work. Oils were to be big and bold – lots of palette knife work.

Jack Hardman – one printing workshop and one oil painting. He encouraged me greatly and arranged a show for me in The Little Gallery, New Westminster where Joe Plaskett occasionally showed.

Herbert Siebner – oil painting in a variety of methods. Many methods of mono-printing. Much of what I learned from him I practice today.

Little Ranch in the Valley, 1978

Oil on board, 24" x 36"



Peter Aspell – oil painting – strong colours – expressionism and how to mix our own oil paints.

Molly Bobak – oil painting stressing composition and practicing methods of well known artists.

As President of the Cariboo Art Society, I went on the theory that we ask any famous artist to give us a show, luring them with how paintable the Cariboo was and free bed and board. None that we asked said no.

We had shows from Herbert Siebner, Jack Hardman, Cliff Robinson, Sybil Andrews and Zelko Kujundzic. Later we benefited from shows sponsored by the Vancouver Art Gallery Extension Department. The traveling shows were started by Ted Lindberg and went to schools throughout the interior of B.C. and Vancouver Island. The first one was Emily Carr. What a treat to have Emily in your own town! The shows lasted for 12 years under vari-



From Our Window
Oil on panel, 12" x 16"

ous lecturers who always stayed with Hugh and I on the ranch, thus my art learning extended beyond the actual lecture. (Like the occasion) Chris Dudos showed Hugh and I his personal video of working on the "Pink Island" project under Christoff.

Sonia Cornwall, 2001

Cariboo Landscape, 1996
Oil on board, 16" x 24"





Resting in the Bull Pasture,
1971. Oil on panel,
12" x 16"



Early Spring in the Barnyard,
1987. Oil on canvas,
18" x 24"

*Early Spring in the Bull
Pasture,*
1999. Oil on panel,
12" x 16"





Grazing Horses, 1972
Oil on panel, 12" x 16"



Farm on the Reserve, 1980
Oil on panel, 12" x 16"

Autumn Horses, 1988
Oil on panel, 12" x 16"



Sonia Cornwall – A true pioneer!

You either like cattle or you don't. If you do, as I do, then you will understand the forceful impact that *Counting Noses* had on me when I first saw it. Along with *On the Feed Grounds*, it was my introduction to the powerful, often humorous, always sensitive exploration of the Cariboo that comes from the talented and expressive brush of Sonia Cornwall, the region's artistic 'grand dame' and one of its early pioneers.

Sonia was born in 1919 in Kamloops, B.C. the daughter of a property agent, travel guide, writer and one-time officer in the RCMP. She grew up on the Onward Ranch, an 11,000 acres cattle ranch in the Williams Lake area, and took an interest in art at an early age. A close friend of many prominent painters including A.Y. Jackson, who visited the Onward several years in a row during the 1940s, Sonia managed to break away from her ranching chores for a few months in 1946, seven years after her father died, and went to Calgary to study art at the Provincial Institute of Technology. However, for the most part she is a self-taught artist who took every opportunity to study and learn colour and technique from visiting artists such as Molly Bobak, Joe Plaskett, Herbert Siebner, Takao Tanabe and Jack Hardman who were all part of a University of British Columbia Extension Department Outreach Program. A devoted mother and wife, and an active ranch hand, Sonia always found a little time to paint until her family was grown and she was able to concentrate more fully on her passion.

What impresses me so much about Sonia's work is its freshness. Its unabashed pictorial, and emotional, naivete. It is not derivative. It cannot be labeled. And



Barnyard Group, 1975. Oil on masonite, 12" x 16"

while there are hints of other painters such as A.Y. Jackson (*The Old Water Tower*), and David Milne (*Onward Ranch, Winter*), the style is singularly that of a painter with a strong sense and understanding of life - its humour and its hardships - and the grandeur of the vast Canadian landscape that presents itself throughout the Cariboo region of British Columbia. It is the style of Sonia Cornwall.

Sonia's loose, sometimes impressionistic, but always bold and confident brush strokes capture the vastness and uniqueness of the Cariboo with clarity and effect. Her colours are rich, brash, ranchy! And her images are memorable. *On the Feed Grounds*, *Washing Day*, *Onward Ranch* and *Storm Coming* are full of drama, allegory and a dash of rural humour. And throughout all her images there is a wonderful sense of space and movement: the skies move, the hillsides move, the cattle and horses move - some with pleasing artistic license as with the head of the lead horse in *The Auction*.

There is also a certain ethereal quality running throughout her work, a sense of tranquility and comfortable solitude, from the almost ghost-like images in *Winter Sports*, to the dream-like vista in *Our Lake*. And yet, at the same time, it is a documentary of a region, a people, a way of life that most of us only ever experience from the outside.

Sonia Cornwall is an in-your-face painter. She pulls no punches. It's real, it's there, it's the Cariboo, it is life on the ranch painted as only a true pioneer, a life-long resident, and a sensitive and talented artist could paint it. And it is great stuff!

Anthony Westbridge, July, 2001



Evening Horses, 1969. Oil on panel, 12" x 16"



Trees by the Lake, 1976
Oil on panel, 12" x 16"

The Interior World of Sonia Cornwall

The Cariboo region of British Columbia, where artist Sonia Cornwall has lived and painted for more than sixty years, was once viewed as a sequestered, if stark, Shangri-la, reached only by a hair-raising trek from the coast up the tortuous Fraser Canyon. It was another world.

The challenge of rendering this remote ranch country – this strange ocean of hills and grasslands, tree-brakes and benches – with its immense weather, its isolated towns and ranches, its working cattle and horses, would daunt an artist less attuned to the consciousness of a place where the land and the cycles of nature are paramount. Through sheer persistence and experimentation – Cornwall is largely self-taught – she has become its chronicler, capturing in her paintings something of the rancher's fierce independence as well as the practices and



Last Signs of Winter,
1945. Oil on panel,
12" x 16"

rigours of what may be a passing way of life. And she has done so in time garnered from her obligations and interests as rancher, community cultural mover, wife and mother, untiring hostess, and lifelong scholar.

Cornwall is a legitimately modernist painter. She has successfully internalized the analytical and reductivist lessons of early moderns, such as the Group of Seven and Emily Carr. She is cognizant of the spiritual and expressionistic imperatives as ancient as those evinced by the Lascaux cave paintings, and of the lyrical and colour-expressive liberties taken by the Blue Rider painters of more recent times. The unsentimentality of her themes and subjects simply preclude that which is merely decorative or picturesque. Her compositions reflect real life and experience, no matter how unkempt or unlikely: wild-eyed, behemoth Herefords; a banner-like clothesline above a muddy barnyard; a haunting, eagle-sentinelled lake; a dwarfed homestead all but lost in the deep mouth of a mountain trench.

Cornwall has never been a genteel “lady-painter.” Her painting is tough, directly stated, and although her earliest work seems at times like *plein-air* oil sketches, due possibly to the frugality with which she used her materials, in later decades it revels in the depth and painterly lustre made possible with the impastoed oil medium.

Never one to seek out personal attention or ego satisfaction, Cornwall has nonetheless quietly carved for herself an undeniable niche in the particular art history of this province.

Ted Lindberg

Spring Snow Drifts, 1971
Oil on canvas, 17.25" x 27.25"





Washing Day, Onward Ranch, 1996
Oil on masonite, 24" x 24"

Front Cover Illustration:
Our Lake, 1978, oil on canvas, 36" x 47.75"

Back Cover Illustration:
Storm Coming, 1992, oil on board, 33.5" x 24"

Sonia Cornwall

Biographical Notes

- Born:** Sonia Cowan, Kamloops, B.C., 1919
- Married:** Hugh Cornwall, 1948
- Studied:** Strathcona Girl's School, Shawnigan Lake, B.C., 1930-34
Provincial Institute of Technology, Calgary, 1946
UBC Extension Program Fine Art Workshops, Onward Ranch, B.C. through the 1960s-70s conducted by:
A.Y. Jackson, Joseph Plaskett, Herbert Siebner, Molly Bobak, Peter Aspell, Jack Hardman, Zelko Kujundzic, Cliff Robinson, Jim Willer
- Exhibitions:** 1963 – Juried Show, Hamilton Ontario
1975 – Station House Gallery, Williams Lake, B.C.
1970s – Shows in Williams Lake, Kamloops, Prince George, and Vancouver at de Vooght Gallery, and Alex Fraser Gallery
1993 – A retrospective exhibition at the Station House Gallery, Williams Lake, B.C.
2000 – Sonia Cornwall: Cariboo Ranch Scenes, Kelowna Art Gallery, B.C.
2001 – Sonia Cornwall, Fifty Years at the Onward Ranch: A Pioneer's View of the Cariboo, Westbridge Fine Art, Vancouver, B.C.
- Collections:** Provincial Art Collection
Private and Corporate collections across Canada

