



Sam McLeod of The Free Press

A butter Butler at the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair in Toronto is attracting a lot of people, including Marg Callaghan of Etobicoke. Woodstock farm artist Ross Butler has been honored by the fair in a sculpture carved from 225 kilograms (500 pounds) of butter. Although the sign refers to Butler's 80th birthday, he is 79.

Oxford farm artist finds himself immortalized in butter at fair

By Dave Dauphinee
of The Free Press

TORONTO — The Royal Agricultural Winter Fair is putting on quite a spread for Woodstock artist Ross Butler.

Actually, it's a 225-kilogram (500-pound) spread — all in butter.

North America's premier farm fair has chosen to honor the 79-year-old Oxford County-born painter and sculptor of farm animals with a lifesize butter carving of Butler seated on a stool and holding one of his most famous models, the Black Horse.

The carving by Windsor sculptor Chris Rees, 32, is safely protected behind glass walls in a refrigerated area at the fair and has been drawing hordes of curious spectators.

"He's a wonderful artist," says fair general manager Andy Stewart of Ailsa Craig, explaining why the fair chose to honor Butler. "And he (Butler) is after all the one who started butter sculpting."

Butler and butter have gone hand in hand for decades.

He created 14 lifesize pieces in butter for the Canadian National Exhibition and the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair between 1947 and 1954. His 1952 lifesize sculpture of newly crowned Queen Elizabeth

created quite a to-do in Britain, where butter rationing was still in effect. Laura Secord and her cow, skater Barbara Ann Scott and a Mountie have been featured in his art.

Across Canada, Butler's oil paintings of farm animals are being rediscovered and there have been several recent showings in galleries in London and Woodstock. Three recent paintings sold for \$10,000 each.

But the real reason behind the Royal's salute to Butler lies in the impact he has had on agriculture, says Stewart.

In Butler's case, it has become a matter of life imitating art.

Many of his paintings, particularly those during the 1930s of farm animals, established an ideal look for which breeders should strive. Butler conferred with top people in each breed before creating his "true types."

The provincial agriculture ministry and the fair, in addition to the butter display and another of his sculptures, have also sponsored a large display of Butler's oils.

Some people believe it is time to revive Butler's art for the sake of educating school children, a role it played in the 1930s when the Ontario government commissioned But-

ler to create 250 works of art.

He completed only 22 pieces before the Second World War broke out and the commission was cancelled, but 1.5 million prints from his work were distributed in Canadian schools and helped create a lasting impression of farm life.

For that reason, Linda Hammond of Mount Elgin, president of the Oxford South Women's Institute, and her associates with the Oxford North Women's Institute can be found selling buttons and seeking donations at Butler's art display in the fair.

"We are trying to raise approximately \$200,000," said Hammond. "I think it can be done. It is important to everyone that it be done."

The object is to raise enough money to place a set of about 50 Butler prints in each of the 5,000 schools in Ontario.

"This is an opportunity to combine agriculture, education, art and heritage. We hope this project will not only give children an idea of what farm life is like, but also an appreciation of art and our culture."

More than ever, it is important to convey to children what life on the farm is like and she says Butler's art plays a key role in that education.