

Pickets & Primrose

HOME DECOR

- UNIQUE ACCESSORIES • RALPH LAUREN PAINT
- ANTIQUE, VINTAGE & SHABBY-CHIC FURNITURE
- CUSTOM ORDER FABRIC & WALL COVERINGS

300 MAIN ST. MILTON • 905-878-4747



the antiquarian

Celebrated local artist remembered Yosef Drenters restored Rockwood Academy

BY JENNIFER ENRIGHT

As a young artist in the early 1960s, Yosef Drenters of Rockwood had caught the imagination of the art world in Toronto. Many of his small scale Madonna sculptures rest in the drawing rooms of Rosedale. And he was made much of by the people who discovered his talent, and subjected to increasing demands on his time to produce more works.

At the time, Yosef was represented by Dorothy Cameron, an influential art dealer, whose "Here and Now" Gallery on Yonge Street showcased his work. She had tracked the young artist down after hearing that the celebrated artist Harold Town simply loved his sculptures. Yosef and Dorothy decided that she would represent him, and she continued to show his work until her gallery closed in the late 1960s. By that time, Yosef didn't make much of an effort to find another gallery to represent him. He'd become disenchanted with the more public side of life as an artist; it was something that didn't suit him personally.

The instant fame that he'd known in the '60s was hard on him. Yosef, who passed away in 1983 at the age of 54, "didn't like the attention or fuss that people made about him," recalls John Sommer, a friend of the artist's. Eventually, he attracted less attention, and fewer people knew about him and his work. Today, Mr. Sommer says there are probably many people in the art world who don't know about him, even though he produced some significant works.

Mr. Sommer, who operates Gallery House Sol from his home in Georgetown, says it was Yosef's particular gift that he recognized the importance of the pioneer experience and translated that into art; he could somehow capture what he describes as the "steadfast and reliable spirit" exhibited by those early

"DIDN'T LIKE THE ATTENTION OR FUSS MADE ABOUT HIM"

pioneers. Mr. Sommer says Yosef's most important works included not only the sculptures he created for Expo '67, but also the building he restored in Rockwood, known as The Academy. The Academy to Mr. Sommer is the embodiment of the pioneer spirit in stone. "If you go to The Academy, you can see this is one of his art works."

In the early 1960s, Mr. Sommer can remember hearing about "this crazy painter" from a mutual acquaintance and how this self-taught artist had decided to buy "a big old dump in Rockwood." The Rockwood Academy cost Yosef little money initially, but he ended up financing much of the work on the building himself. He was determined to restore the building, which in former days had been the site of a school, and without that determination Mr. Sommer

believes The Academy would have been demolished long ago. Mr. Sommer stressed that his friend could go to great lengths to ensure that his beloved building survived. When a development was proposed on land situated behind The Academy, Yosef purchased land behind his residence, with the financial assistance of his friends, to create a buffer zone between his property and the subdivision.

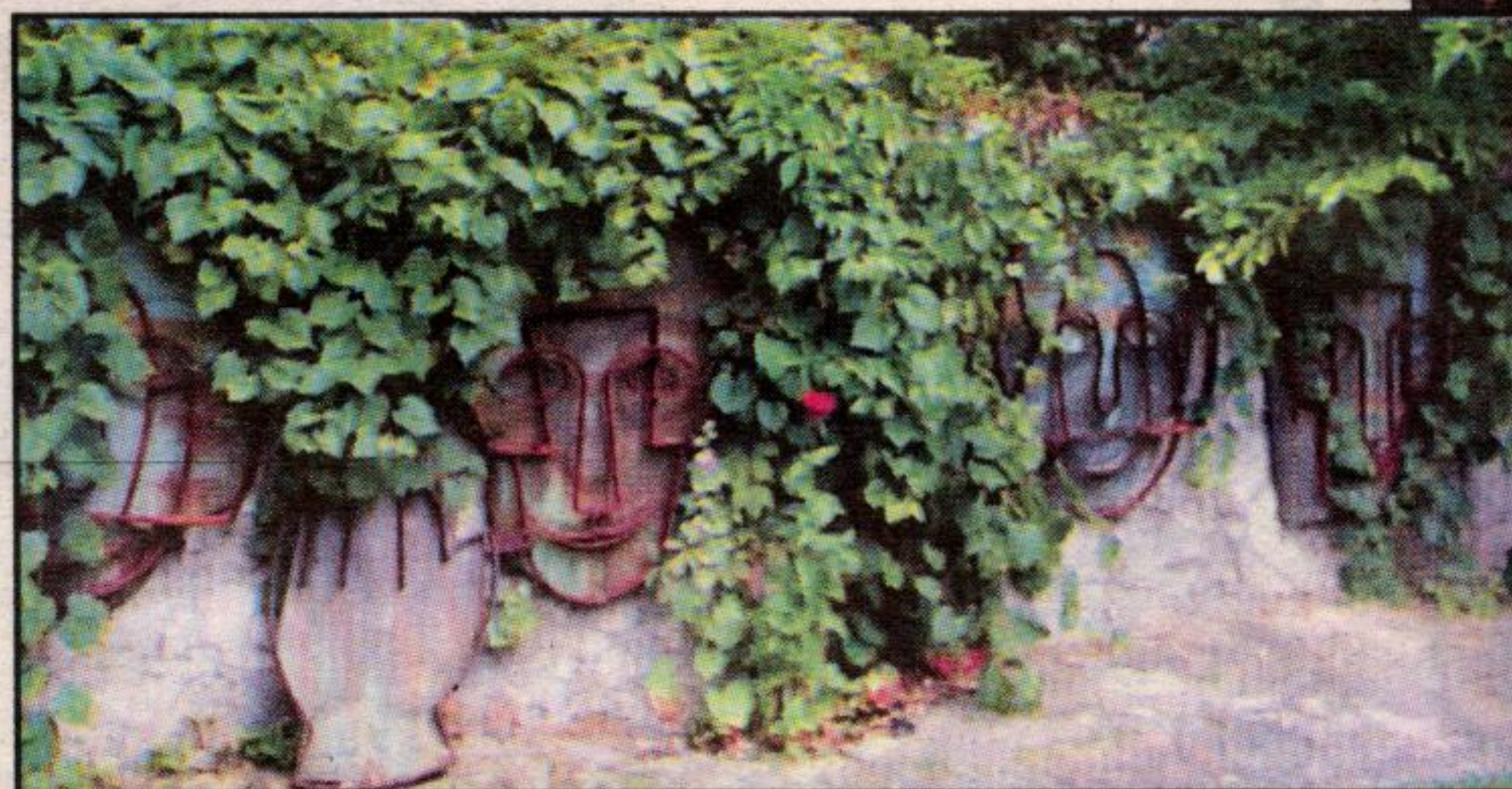
He had years of work ahead of him just restoring his new home. In the early 1960s, when Mr. Sommer first visited The Academy, the building's portico was missing, most of the windows were boarded up or broken and the middle of the roof looked like the slung back of a horse; he remembers the middle section of the building being about "a foot lower than the sides." "He (Yosef) had to bring the whole structure up. He had a winch in the basement, which was under the central beam. The beams had sagged down. So he brought them up."

Yosef set about restoring the building bit by bit; but some of his efforts proved too much even for him. The gymnasium was riddled with so many holes in the walls that he felt he didn't have the financial resources to do the job properly. Mr. Sommer says the Ontario government ended up providing Yosef with a grant to

"THIS CRAZY PAINTER...HAD DECIDED TO BUY...A BIG OLD DUMP IN ROCKWOOD"

restore this part of the building, and Yosef was so grateful that he willed the site to the Ontario Heritage Foundation, the present-day owner of the property. Today, Yosef's younger brother, Andreas, lives on the property under the terms of the will and acts as caretaker.

Until his death, Yosef spent much of his life working to restore this piece of rural history, but at the same time he never abandoned his work as a sculptor. In 1967, he was selected by a jury appointed by the Ontario government to create two sculptures, one of which was for the Ontario Pavilion at Expo. Yosef's



All that remains of the Expo '67 sculpture are these four metal faces of the pioneers, the wood has rotted away.

plan was to create an oversized work in wood and metal depicting four members of a pioneer family staring out from the inside of a barn-like structure. Entitled *Pioneer Family*, the work was a moving depiction of our country's early settlers, according to Mr. Sommer. "When I saw it at Expo '67 I could see these incredibly big figures under the barn roof."

"BEFORE YOU CAN TURN SOMETHING INTO A MUSEUM YOU NEED MONEY"

Sadly, once Expo was over the sculpture was dismantled and left exposed to the elements in a government work yard in Mimico. Eventually, pieces of the sculpture were sent back to The Academy. But by then the wood from the barn had rotted away leaving only the four metal faces of the pioneers. These faces can be seen at The Academy today.

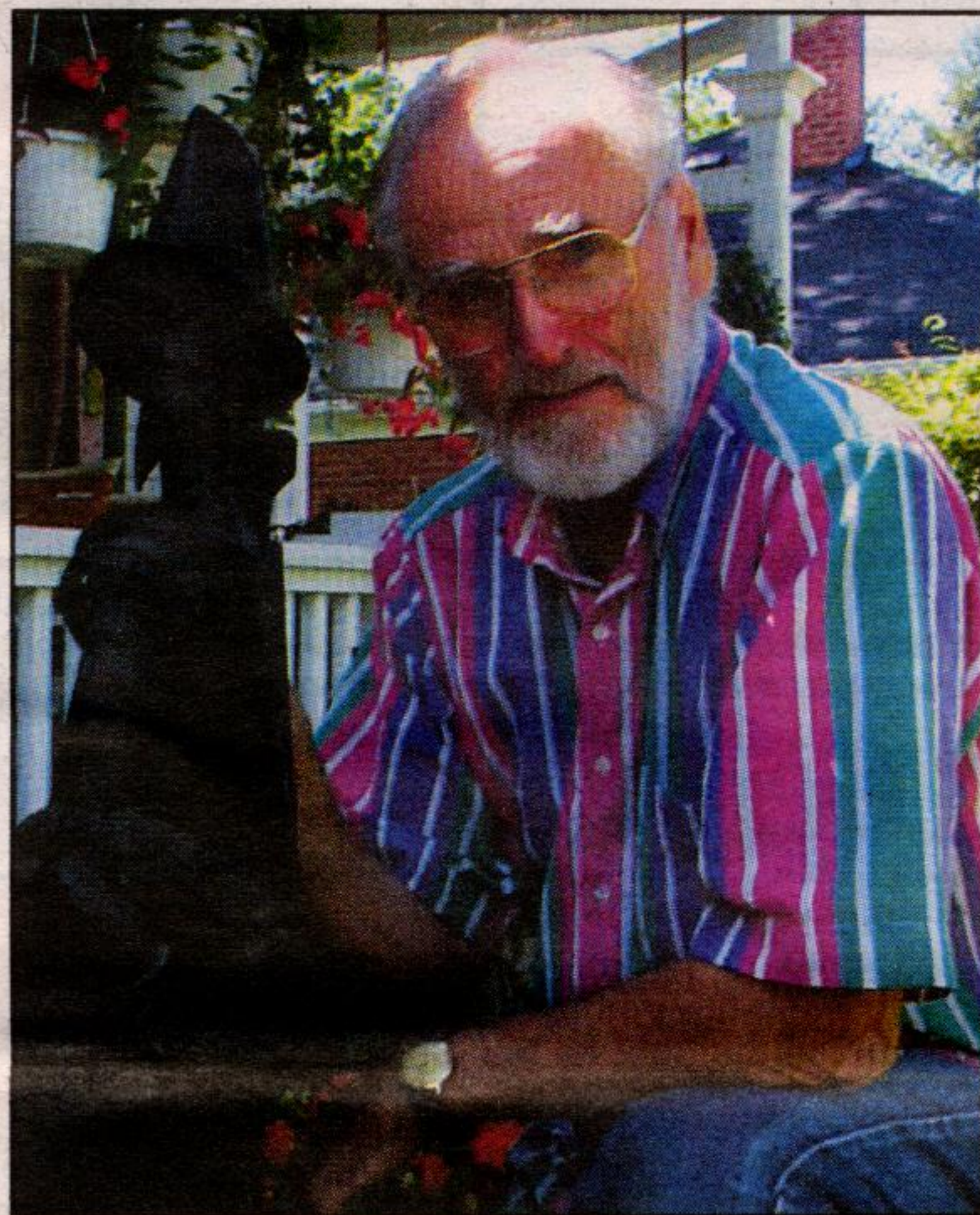
Mr. Sommer hopes that someday this powerful work depicting the spirit of the pioneers can be restored. He also hopes that people can work together, in some way, to assist the Ontario Heritage Foundation to make The Academy a public museum highlighting the work of artists in the Drenters family as well as Yosef himself. The Foundation may not have the financial resources at its disposal, but other sources of funding can be sought. "Before you can turn something into a museum you need money. You need a tearoom. You need washrooms. You need a sprinkler system. You need parking."

Mr. Sommer feels any effort to create such a museum would more than pay for itself by preserving not only a part of our architectural history but also a part of our cultural past. "In my opinion, he (Yosef) was one of the great Canadian artists. But he is not much talked about now."



The late Yosef Drenters worked tirelessly to restore Rockwood Academy, the site of a former school in the village. This is the building today.

PHOTOS BY JENNIFER ENRIGHT



John Sommer treasures this sculpture, *Mother and Child* by Yosef Drenters.