

# World renowned artist calls King home

By Larry Johnston

**KING** — Picture the rugged hills of Greece. Two hundred oxen harnessed together drag a huge block of white marble toward the sea.

The method has not changed since Michaelangelo. The largest block of marble ever quarried, 17 feet long, 23 feet wide, weighing 400,000 pounds, is painstakingly moved for one of the world's leading sculptors.

"I sell imagination," says Count Alexander von Svoboda. While Michaelangelo was patronized by popes and princes, the sculptor's work is now commissioned by captains of industry looking for tax breaks.

Von Svoboda maintains his home and studio in King and another studio near Florence, Italy. He travels all over the world seeking out materials and ideas to satisfy his clients.

That 200-ton slab of marble was destined for the head office of the Georgia Pacific Corporation in Portland, Oregon.

With a scale model fashioned in his King Township studio, von Svoboda had won a competition over Henry Moore and two other sculptors, for a contract in seven figures, the largest commission in modern times.

But he still had to find a block of marble large enough to do five larger-than-life human figures in "The Quest" and that required an exhaustive search. (Michaelangelo avoided this by finding his block first and then deciding what to do with it.)

Once the block was found and quarried, and moved it would take a team of skilled craftsmen, each with his own language and belief, two years to complete. "If there was one mistake, one flaw in the marble, my sculpture would have been nothing."

In the midst of the work near Athens, the Greek political situation worsened.

Fearing he could not carry on, von Svoboda rented a freighter and moved the statue across the Adriatic.

There was more trouble when it reached the United States by ship. The sculptor checked the crane and found the cables were not strong enough.

Before they were strengthened, the docks were shut down by a longshoreman's strike. Two helicopters couldn't lift the statue.

Finally through negotiations, using lawyers, von Svoboda got special permission to take the statue off the ship.

Von Svoboda's other major works include "perpetuity" for Georgia-Pacific, made from the circumference of a giant redwood tree and bronze, and the British Columbia Centennial fountain, depicting the province's ragged coast with granite, black marble and mosaic.

Von Svoboda is one of the few artists acknowledged to be able to use mosaic on a large scale, and is acknowledged worldwide as a designer of churches, including the interior and art work of the Sacred Heart Church in King city.

"There is a story in every work," said von Svoboda. There was the man who came straight to his door from the airport and asked von Svoboda in very broken English to do a job for him. He turned out to be a priest from the Barbadoes asking him to build and design a church. The artist flew to the Barbadoes and took on the work.

There was the executive who flew him to San Francisco in a private jet to discuss the design for a \$3.5 million house. Von Svoboda came back weeks later with the design.

The executive said the design was what he wanted and left Von Svoboda to do the rest. "I am not an architect. I hire an architect."

To do all this, von Svoboda has had to become more than an artist. He is the soul of a corporation, Svoboda International Designs Ltd.

His designs are conceived in his studio here. They are shaped into reality in Florence where up to 30 craftsmen may be working at one time. He always finishes his art work himself.

He looks like a businessman. Clean-shaven, with his hair respectfully short, wearing gold rimmed glasses, any banker would be proud of von Svoboda. Dealing with the people he does, he said, you can't dress like a hippy.

At a press conference last week, except for the mandatory artist's cravat, he dressed like any King executive would on his way to the country club.

His life was not always so easy. Born in Vienna in 1930, his family was wiped out financially in wartime upheavals. He was left with nothing to inherit but the title. "I was a refugee, a DP, he said, dredging up a term most people have forgotten.

With his studies in art schools in Vienna, Paris and Rome behind him, he emigrated to the promised land of Canada in 1950 and found it was anything but.

"I took odd jobs, collected garbage," he said once he went three weeks without a meal. He finally got 75 cents and went into the local greasy spoon (it was in the Ronscevalles-Queen area of Toronto.)

He ordered the most filling thing on the menu, for 75 cents, spaghetti.



Photo by Johnston

## Alex von Svoboda

World famous sculptor and designer Alex von Svoboda also paints. He is sharing "Suzy Wong" and about 40 other water

colors of people and places around the world with his neighbors in a show at the York Fine Art Gallery opening Thursday.

He realized too late he covered it with hot pepper seeds. It tasted terrible but he ate the whole thing, tears streaming down his face.

For 10 years, von Svoboda would work until 3 a.m. and get up at 6 a.m. Artists can't just work when the spirit moves them, any more than heart surgeons can, he said.

An artist is a craftsman first and first he must learn the craft and work at it.

All von Svoboda's work is commissioned except for the paintings he has done of his impressions of people and places around the world, a Chinese girl, a Hawaiian beach, an Arizona desert.

He found it amusing, he had to admit, when the girl from the local art gallery at Snowball Corners called him. She had heard he did some paintings too, and was wondering if he would like to show them in her gallery. Would he

drop in for a visit?

He might.

She was persistent and the meeting was arranged for three days later. She finally sold him on the idea of sharing his art with his neighbors in his beloved King Township.

The show at Mary Gilbert's York Fine Art Gallery, featuring 40 of von Svoboda's paintings opens Thursday.

Von Svoboda could choose to raise his family anywhere, but he has been living near Schomberg for 16 years, where he is a director of the local fair, and the historical society, and his four children attend local schools.

Somehow he has had time to develop a hobby, raising quarter horses and he has been a judge at the leading international quarter horse show.

But what he likes about King is the "hominess. To my neighbors, I am just Alex."

## Henderson had retreat place

**KING CITY** — Douglas Campbell Henderson, 63, whose King City property served in part as a retreat for the public for the past five years, died last week of a blood clot after a cancer operation.

Mr. Henderson was assistant controller of operational services of the Etobicoke board of education, and was with them for 25 years.

He and his wife lived on a 240-acre farm, and at one time stayed in a log cabin on the property, milking cows and growing vegetables.

They later built a modern house on the land and allowed people, singly or in groups, to live in the cabin for short periods.

The idea was to provide a retreat in which people could help fulfill themselves, as well as contribute to the betterment of mankind.

A native of Oshawa, he studied forestry at university, served with the Royal Canadian Navy in World War 11, and was a salesman with York Knitting Co.

For many years he helped set policies for all Canada while with the national committee of the YMCA.

Mr. Henderson leaves his wife, Dorothy; a daughter, Georgia Parsons; and two sons, Gordon and Alan.

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## TOWN OF RICHMOND HILL PUBLIC MEETING

A public meeting will be held at 8:00 p.m. on **Wednesday April 27th, 1977** in **16th Avenue Public School**

To hear a presentation and to submit comments on the Southeast Industrial Study which encompasses lands between Bayview Avenue and the future Highway 404 and between Highway 7 and 16th Avenue.

Councillor M. Graham  
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