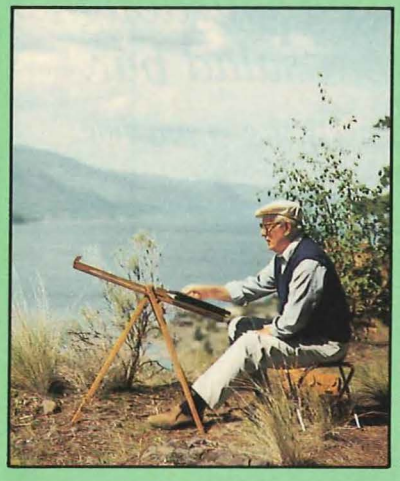
JACK HAMBLETON'S LEGACY

Jack Hambleton was instrumental in introducing fine art to the Okanagan, as both a collector and artist. His presence left the Valley a richer place.

BY ANN-CHARLOTTE BERGLUND



W. E. DUCHART

HIS PAST THANKSGIVING, THE HAMBLETON FAMILY GATHERED beneath a young spruce at their Sheridan Lake cabin in the Cariboo to bury the ashes of their husband, father, and grandfather, artist Jack Hambleton, whose heart had stopped the previous May beneath that same tree at the age of seventy-two as he chopped firewood, ending the distinguished career of a man who was a true pioneer in the art world of the Interior.

The British-born Hambleton, from Preston in Lancashire, came to Canada in 1924 when he was eight, along with his parents and brothers. Hambleton liked to say that in the art world and as an artist he was self-taught. For an artist to wait for inspiration, he believed, was a waste of time. One must simply paint and keep on painting. He experimented with many techniques, but favored watercolors and, later in his career, acrylics. To the students he instructed in

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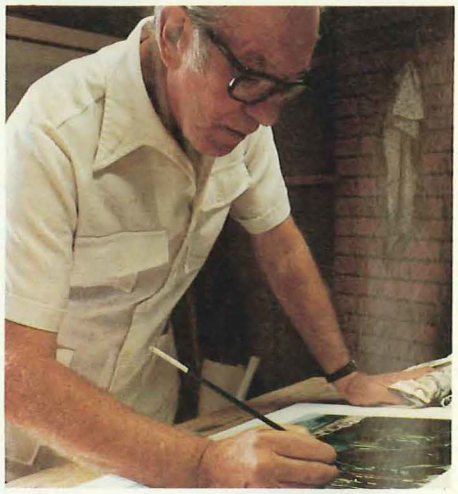
numerous art courses around the Valley, he often said, "Don't frame the first thing you paint. Paint and throw away and paint and throw away until . . . "

His close artist friends, a funloving group that shared laughter and inspiration, included Robert Genn, Egbert Oudendag, Rick Grandmaison, and Peter Ewart.

"The most fun I have is when I am painting, and the biggest kick in the world is setting out somewhere making sketches," Hambleton often said. As an artist, he travelled the world. Best known for his paintings of boats and their reflections in harbor waters, he was neither a sailor nor an expert on ships, but as an artist was taken with boat forms and what the intricate play of water and light did to them.

His painting of the Norwegian ship



The artist at work.

Vasaborg in Vancouver's harbor was chosen by B.C Tel for the 1960 telephone directory's cover. Lorna Hambleton tells the story of how a woman phoned the Hambletons to say that she had heard about the covers and wondered if her son, who was a civil servant in Ottawa and dearly loved painting, could help to paint the large number of covers. Hambleton, she says, gently explained printing procedures to the lady, assuring her that only one painting was needed.

Hambleton arrived in Kelowna in 1964, a forty-eight-year-old recognized painter who had left his fifteen-year secure position as art director for a graphic arts company in Vancouver to open his own commercial gallery here. On their way home from a Calgary art show the previous year, Jack and Lorna had passed through Kelowna. They were attracted by the area, and Jack felt that the time was ripe to introduce western Canadian art to the Okanagan.

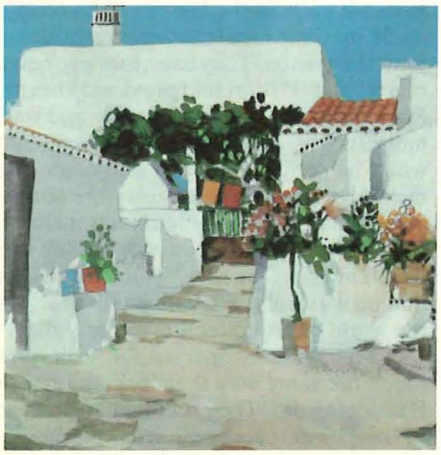
It's different today, but twenty-five years ago it was considered risky to forego big-city security and take chances in the unknown Interior. The Hambleton's neighbors in the closely knit Lynn Valley artists' colony in North Vancouver worried as Jack and Lorna set out with their four children, the youngest six and the eldest seventeen.

They need not have worried. The Hambletons flourished in their new venture. Lorna says that it was not only from Jack's

paintings and gallery sales that they managed to provide well for themselves. Jack, she says, "had an inborn business sense and was lucky with his real estate investments. He was a methodical man who always kept accurate records. And as a gallery owner, he never lost a painting." (It's general knowledge in the art business that works sometimes get lost in gallery shuffles.)

The first gallery on Bernard was stocked with fine art works and also offered exotic gift items new to the Valley such as enamelware from Denmark and Gordon Fraser cards and paper.

After only a year in Kelowna, Hambleton managed to purchase the lot on Chandler Street by the Stetson Village Motel for 3,500 dollars. The large Hambleton Galleries were completed within the year, and the official opening was the July 1966



His work shows a love of form.

social event in the city. Jack expanded the space in 1977, but after suffering two heart attacks (one in 1975 and another in 1977), he decided that the time had come to leave the business and spend more time painting, travelling, and golfing.

Lorna is presently working through her grief by sorting through Jack's large collection of works in the couple's Kelowna home. "I look around me and see all he did that I love so much," she says, "and I believe that I appreciate his talent even more now that he's gone."

Lorna reminisces about her husband Jack's philosophy. He always had, she says, "a soft spot for the less fortunate and considered himself a socialist. He always dressed casually, and I think that fit in with his real dislike of phonies. He picked them out right away, and he was usually right. He used to say that he liked strong people who knew where they were going."

She remembers that he could never paint or sketch when she was close by; she had to busy herself at a distance. Being married to an aritst is often difficult, she says, but their nearly fifty years together were "wonderfully happy. Of course, artists are selfish. Jack's work always had to come first, and I was the kind of wife who always catered to him. I didn't know any better. But when he retired, I trained him to at least bring his dishes to the kitchen," she smiles softly. "And he always said that he

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could not have done it without me."

Jack's love of the art world is reflected in the working lives of his children. Jeff, Joan, Jane and Jay kept in close touch with their father and loved him for "his mad sense of humor and his big heart," Lorna says. For many years, Jeff had a picture framing business in Kelowna. Now he, his wife Susan, and his brother Jay operate the rapidly growing Hambleton Agencies, a frame and art wholesale company in Vancouver, assisted by sister Jane.

Hambleton Galleries in Kelowna is run by Helen and Gordon Wilfert. The Wilferts on New Year's Eve 1977 read an ad in Vancouver offering the Kelowna art gallery for sale. They knew nothing of the art business except for being interested in art collectors, and they had visited the Okanagan only briefly, but Gordon wanted to call it quits in the big city. The couple made up their minds to buy the business from Hambleton. They have, they say, never regretted it. Wilfert had previously been a marketing man in the steel trade and was, interestingly, the same age as Jack (48) when he resigned his job and made the move. He is very conscious of the contribution that Jack Hambleton has made to the art world. "When you talk of Jack and the Okanagan," he says, "you must realize that he was truly instrumental in bringing the world of art collecting to the Valley."

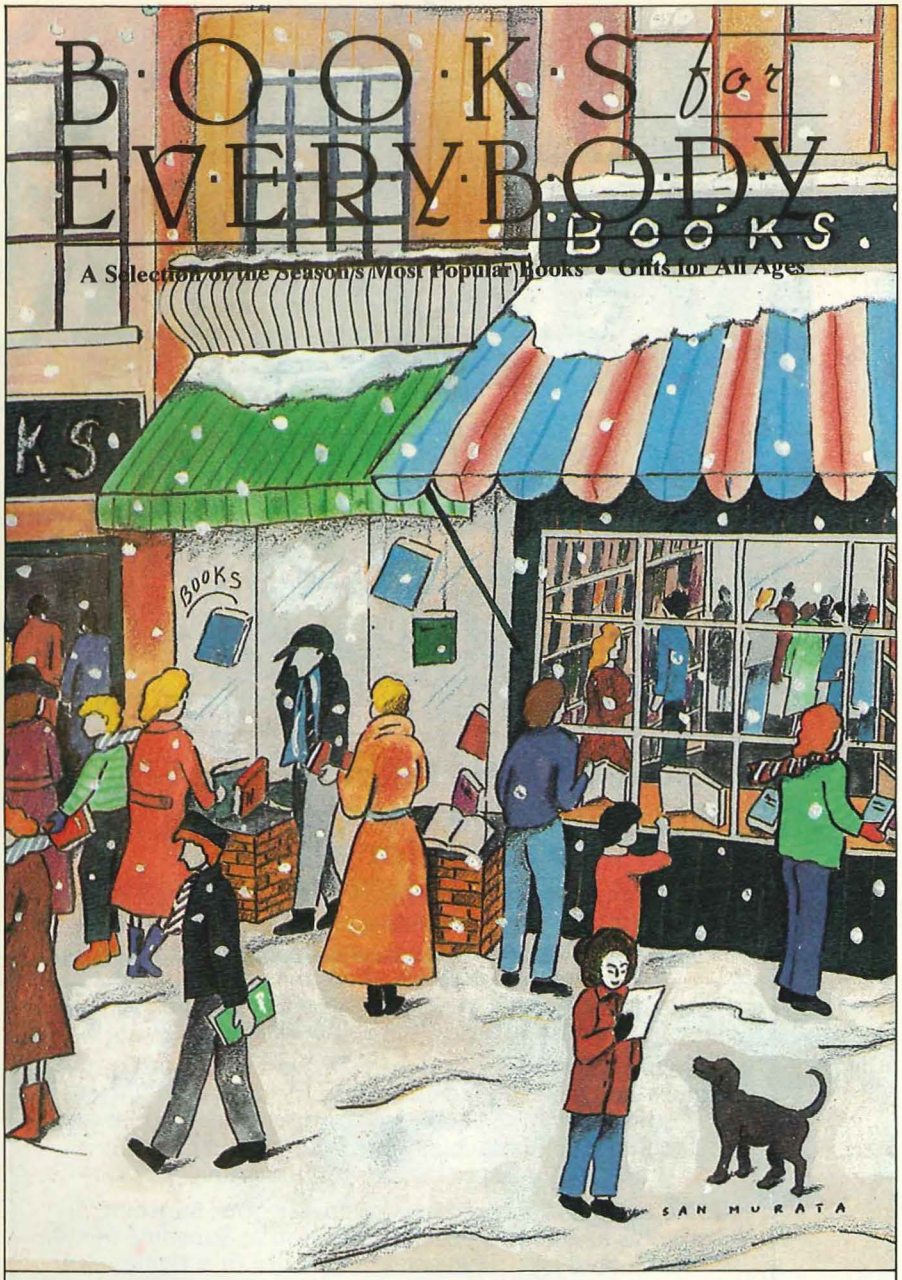
The Wilferts operate the gallery in much the same way that Jack and Lorna Hambleton did. They find that 60 percent of their customers come from the Valley and the remainder from elsewhere. In the summer, there are many prairie and eastern buyers, and the unique time payment plan introduced by Jack Hambleton is still in effect, offering an opportunity for people with average incomes to afford good paintings by paying them off in ten monthly installments without interest charges.

In the city he grew to love, Jack Hambleton is missed. Jacquie Taylor of Picture Perfect on Bernard says, "Every week when he went to Rotary, he used to drop by to see how sales were going." Taylor has been the exclusive Kelowna distributor for Hambleton's print *Marina*, a limited signed edition of 450 which is sold out and will not be available again. (The original *Marina*, a watercolor of Vancouver harbor sailboats, sold for 1,800 dollars.)

At Rotary meetings, Jack is also missed, and he is remembered for his calligraphy talents, evident on the attendance board that he lettered for the club.

On March 23, 1989, the Wilferts will open a very special Jack Hambleton show, with more than sixty of his paintings offered for sale (the retired artist was busy completing several works for the show and had brought the Wilferts three of his paintings only a few days before his death.)

This special exhibit will also mark the 25th anniversary of Hambleton Galleries, the living legacy of an artist and art collector who, unafraid, left the tranquil waters of security for the uncertain currents that meant he was able to follow his dream. ■



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