

SEARCHING FOR CARLE HESSAY: THE IMMIGRANT ARTIST WHO SHAPED MY LIFE

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to introduce the works of European born Canadian artist Carle Hessay, not only because of their high artistic merit, but also because they speak so eloquently and profoundly to our own time. Much is unknown about this extraordinary artist and international traveller who was caught in some of the seminal events of the first half of the 20th century. My approach in trying to recover and integrate fragmentary evidence is multifaceted. I will (a) draw on my own knowledge of him during the last decades of his life, (b) refer to interviews with a diverse assortment people who knew him, (c) try to recover as much historical information from records and other documentary evidence as possible, and (d) examine some of the most important paintings that constitute his real self-portrait and convey his thoughts and feeling to us in the most accessible way. His work has a surprising and important current relevance for us today. (This article is based on a talk I gave to the Associates of the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria on September 13, 2024.).

Keywords

Canadian artist, Carle Hessay, Expressionism, Immigrant art, Landscape, War images, Futurist art

Introduction

Carle Hessay (1911-1978) was a European trained artist and musician, as well as an international wayfarer and sometime prospector. There will likely always be some mystery about this Canadian artist. Who was he and why is he important to us now?

Despite the many tragedies and vagaries of his personal fortunes, Hessay attended art courses in Vienna, Paris and Dresden. He was keenly aware of the various modernisms of the last century, including Abstract Expression, but it was the earlier influence of the German Expressionism of his youth that adds a unique quality and power to his work, especially within the genre of Canadian landscape painting. Then there is the element of his painterly craftsmanship. In addition to storing impressions he later transformed into landscape paintings that conveyed his deepest thoughts and feelings, his prospecting trips to the wilderness areas of the Pacific Northwest yielded the minerals he used to make into pigments. He had studied the chemistry of color and had an ongoing interest in the recipes of the old Renaissance masters. This adds another layer to his work, singular in Canadian art. Further, his international experiences and travels infuse his work with a historical perspective and visionary insight, provoking philosophical as well as emotive and aesthetic responses. Like the man himself, his paintings speak to everybody at every level. That is why I have undertaken this search, the results of which I am now sharing.

Oral histories and stories help to reconstruct some things about Hessay's life. Video interviews with people who knew him were filmed and edited by Chen W, giving a good insight into the sort of man he was (Chen W, 2022). Hessay interacted with people of all kinds and races. He was not given to blaming others or complaining. "Just because I have a belly ache doesn't mean I want to give you one," he would say. He didn't tend to volunteer much painful information about his earlier life, which makes it difficult to "assemble" the various fragments.

By investigating the background of many of his paintings I was able to place him in relation to some of the historical events in which he participated. He spoke through his paintings. They form his true self-portrait. Hessay's surviving works record his geographical, emotional, and spiritual odysseys.

Most of his surviving art works date from the last twenty years of his life. That is also the period during which I knew him.

First Encounter

It was in 1958 that I first met Carle Hessay. He was a customer at a restaurant in Langley, British Columbia where I waitressed after school. I found out he was an artist, and since art was my favorite subject, we started talking. He invited me to his studio. When I saw *Home in the West* (Fig. 1), I was completely enchanted with this idyllic, rural scene. I had an immediate sense of recognition that I was in the presence of great art, beyond anything I had seen before. When he saw my reaction, he took the painting off the wall and gave it to me (Woods, 2005, pages i and 2-3). No matter where I travelled and lived later, I always had *Home in the West* displayed in my room. With its golden rays suffusing a landscape of mountains, fields and trees, it is somehow iconic of what the heart most desires.

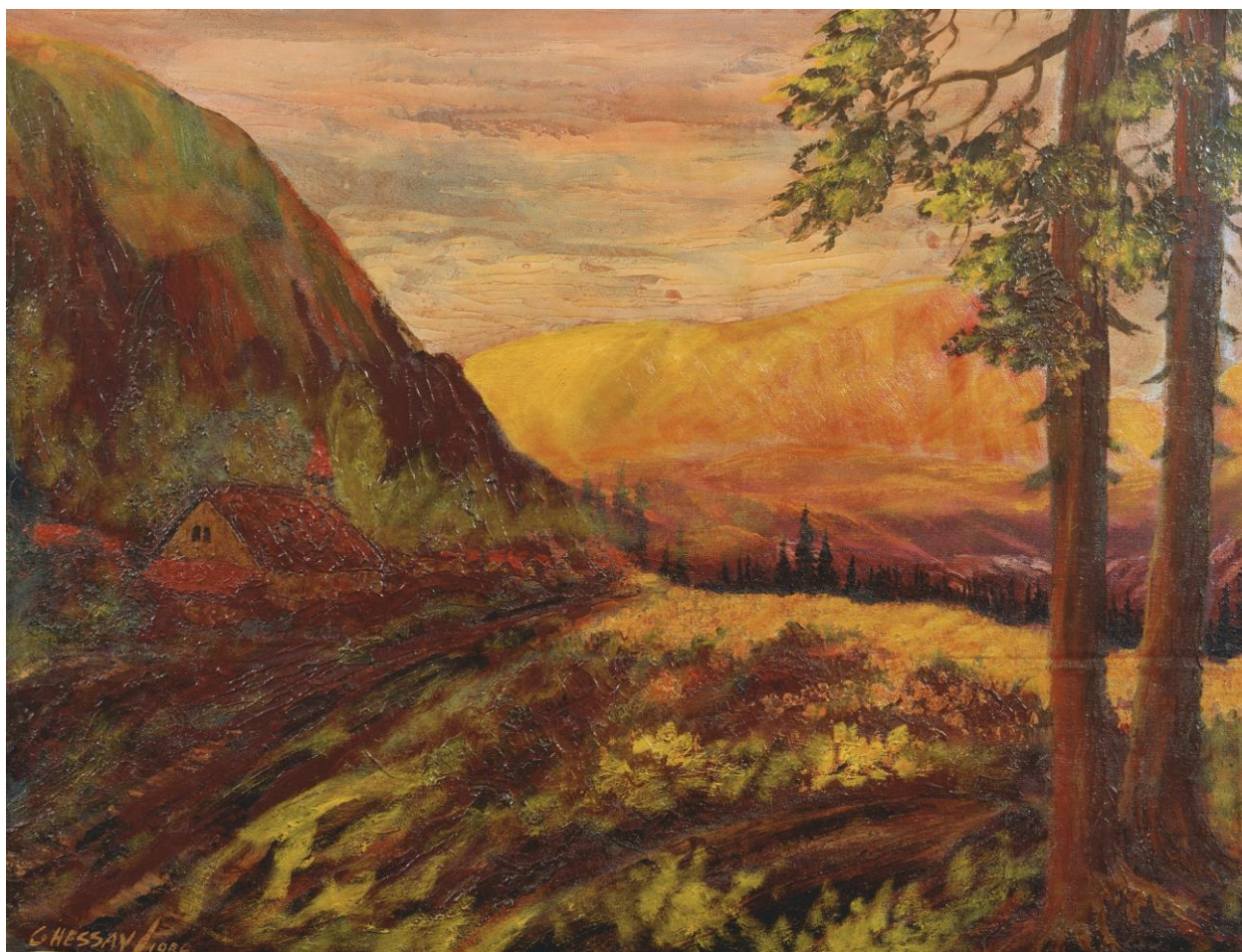


Fig. 1. Carle Hessay (1958). *Home in the West* [Oil on canvas; 20 x 26 inches]. Courtesy of the Carle Hessay Estate.

Upon reflection, this romanticized view of life poignantly reflects Hessay's own yearning for a settled home which, for him, was forever elusive.

He became a family friend, finding much in common with my parents who were of the same ethnic background. One of his paintings that was prominently displayed in our living room was the impressionistic *Flowers in an Austrian Vase* (Fig. 2). The joyful life force infusing the red and white flowers seems to explode into the room in exuberant abundance, even spilling over towards the viewer.

It was Hessay's addition and homage to the tradition of painting *Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase*, like the one by Vincent Van Gogh. The latter's placement of one tantalizing red flower in the floral arrangement (Van Gogh, 1890) might itself be an echo of the large red flower at the top right of Jan Breughel the Elder's *Flowers in a Wooden Vessel* (Breughel, 1606 / 07). It is a genre that was often understood as reflecting the vanitas theme because flowers are, by their nature, beautiful but short lived, illustrating the verses: "Vanity of vanities; all is Vanity" (King James Version, Eccles. 1:2). This was a theme with which Hessay was all too familiar, realizing early on that fortunes can change suddenly and that nothing is permanent. He was thrust into situations to which he had to adapt and reinvent himself to survive.



Fig. 2. Carle Hessay (1964). Flowers in an Austrian Vase [oil on masonite board, 24 x 20 inches]. Courtesy of the Carle Hessay Estate.

Hessay himself had a Buddhist-like attitude and wouldn't take the flowers I offered from my parents' garden because he said they were more beautiful just left growing there. That was typical of him, just a small indication of his genuine kindness and compassion with all of creation. He put on no airs, but empathized with all hurt and downtrodden people, having himself endured and survived many vicissitudes. The one thing that aroused his anger was the exploitation of the helpless by the powerful. He was an advocate of social justice and environmental protection long before it became fashionable.

Beginnings and Early Times

After lengthy and exhaustive searches, the following is what I have been able to recover and piece together about Hessay's background as derived from government, institutional, private and other sources. Given the changing times and political upheavals in the first half of the 20th century, the evidence is fragmentary. To the degree that it was possible, I tried to corroborate the various particulars.

He was born Hans Karl Hesse on November 31, 1911, in Dresden, Germany. His family antecedents were doctors and medical researchers, but his father, Walther Hesse, from whom he became estranged, worked as a shipping agent for Norddeutscher Lloyd until World War II. According to immigration documents, Carle (Karl) was the son of his father's second, much older wife, Johanna. An early photograph (Fig. 3) shows Hessay, on the left, playing chess with his older half-brother Walter (whom he was later to visit periodically in New York, as I recall, until the latter's death in 1970). Until he first came to Canada, Hessay had a good German education which included Art, History, Languages, and gymnastics.



Fig. 3. Carle Hessay playing chess with his half-brother, Walter (n.d.) [Photograph]. Courtesy of the Carle Hessay Estate.

Just before his sixteenth birthday, however, as records show, Hans Karl Hesse, together with his mother Johanna Hesse, left Germany on October 25, 1927 on a CPR steamship named the Montrose that arrived in Canada on November 5, 1927. One of his paintings captures what must have been the overwhelming experience of arrival. *Survivors / Immigrant Mother and Child* (Fig. 4), depicts a boy and his mother. In this scene, the shaded mineral green colors of the background extend to create a psychologically disturbing waviness and instability to the pavement in front. A few interspersed streaks of red unexpectedly animate but also unsettle the space with its strange, distorted perspectives. The isolation of the two small figures emphasizes how out-of-place they seem in this surreal new world. Surrounded by the intimidating enclosing structures of bureaucracy outlined in black, are they coming or going?

In many ways, given the title, this scene is not so much reflective of just a personal history—it universalizes what was and still is currently and increasingly true for so many immigrants and refugees.



Fig. 4. Carle Hessay (1964). *Survivors / Immigrant Mother and Child* [Oil on board, 17.5 x 24 inches]. Courtesy of the Carle Hessay Estate.

Changes and Permanent Displacements

And that brings this narrative to the next turn in Hessay's youth and one that forever changed his life. It is difficult to recover actual records for the next couple of decades, and so oral evidence and the subjects of his paintings become crucial.

As was the custom in Europe, boys were frequently sent to boarding schools, and many still are. In Hessay's case, the experience was traumatic. Somehow through his father's family connections in New York, it was arranged for the young teenager to be sent to a school run by monks in Vienna. Hessay ran away twice, once to Turkey, where he was found, returned, and "severely punished" (his words).

The second time Hessay escaped to the Dutch coast, where he joined orphans working on fishing boats. He remembered scaling fish in Arctic seas. An insider's experienced view of icy cold is rendered in his painting, *Tied Up for the Winter* (Fig. 5).

He again uses startling slashes of red that, in this case, dramatically accent and contrast with the frigid sea in the foreground. Despite the red, the whole scene appears to be frozen in a sheet of ice, as if frozen in time also, with no signs of life anywhere.



Fig. 5. Carle Hessay (n.d.). *Tied Up for the Winter* [oil on metallic sheet, 18 x 24 inches]. Courtesy of the Carle Hessay Estate.

As Hessay told it, a sympathetic captain who knew of his interest in art allowed him time to attend art school during off season. This he was able to take up seriously as time went by.

He left his studies at the Dresden Academy of Fine Arts when the Nazis came to power. He tried his hand at various ways of making a living during the following years of the Great Depression. He seems to have been a bit of a travelling vagabond during parts of this period, variously returning to working on the boats, doing medical drawings in Africa, and painting cartoons at the Disney studios (apparently the ink used was quite toxic). Later he worked in a commercial arts studio in Vancouver, British Columbia. It is difficult to reconstruct a timeline for this period of his life.

A number of Hessay's paintings allude to his oceanic travels and the many places he visited. His *Port City*, for example, was chosen in 2022 as the cover image for *Late Modernism and Expatriation* (Arrington, 2022, cover and p.vii). Fittingly, it is about "international nomads," as stated on the back cover.

Wars, Aftermath, and Future Times

When the Spanish Civil War started, he ended up joining the fight against the fascists. He did a series of paintings about his experiences in that war. In a moonlit scene, Dolores Ibarurri, an inspiring woman orator known as *La Pasionaria* ("The Passion Flower"), speaks to the troops at the Jarama River campaign (Fig. 6). It ended in defeat when the forces of the dictator Franco won by the end of February, 1938. In its sad, ethereal atmosphere, this painting seems to be conflated with La Pasionaria's formal farewell speech. When all was lost, she thanked the troops and promised: "We will not forget you" (Ibarurri, 1938, October 28).



**Fig. 6. Carle Hessay (1976). *La Pasionaria at the Jarama River* [Oil on canvas, 24 x 36 inches].
Courtesy of the Carle Hessay Estate.**

Hessay himself was captured, but because he knew several languages, including Spanish, he was put to work by the guards translating letters. This allowed him greater freedom, so he organized a small escape party. They stole a boat and crossed over to Africa. He remembered the extreme throat-parching heat of the desert conditions. He caught a ship back to Canada in 1938 (MacDonald, C. S. 1979) and returned to Vancouver.

When World War II started, he joined the Canadian Armed Forces and was deployed on the continent. He became a Corporal and was awarded 3 campaign medals, according to his War Service Records. After the war, he lived for a time on Passage Island, across from Nanaimo, British Columbia. He had wanted to buy twenty acres there with his War Service Gratuity, but as official letters indicate, somehow the money got diverted.

In the early 1950s, he came to Langley, British Columbia, where he found restoration of spirit at the home of John Hemingway (not the writer), a former gymnastics student who had become a friend. Hemingway himself subsequently trained Canadian gymnastic champions, including Sandra Hartley, who now lives in Victoria, British Columbia.

Hemingway lived down the road from me on Simonds. His daughter, Peggy, was my age and went to school with me. As soon as Hessay could afford a vehicle, on weekends he would leave his studio in the poorer end of Langley and head for the interior wilderness areas of the province.

Often on his trips, he met Indigenous people, as Sheila Van Loon (formerly Lawrence), his former partner, recalled (Van Loon, S. YouTube). *Indian Village* (Fig. 7) shows a small native community nestled in the background behind a parting of trees.



Fig. 7. Carle Hessay (date?) *Indian Village* [Oil on fabric, 24 x 48 inches]. Courtesy of the Carle Hessay Estate.

A strong spiritual force pervades the scene, as if it is lighting up and unscrolling in the sky above. Even the rocks below seem to be animated. As art historian Leonard A. Woods recalled, First Nations peoples would accept Hessay “just like that, because he put no barriers” between them (Woods, YouTube).

Woods also observed, concerning Hessay’s landscape paintings, that: “If you do not look within, if all you see is a landscape, you are not seeing the picture at all” (Woods, YouTube). Similarly, Dr. Williams, an English historian, considered that what Hessay presents is a deeply spiritual response to landscape, whether pristine or affected by human interference (Williams, Email 2024, August 10).

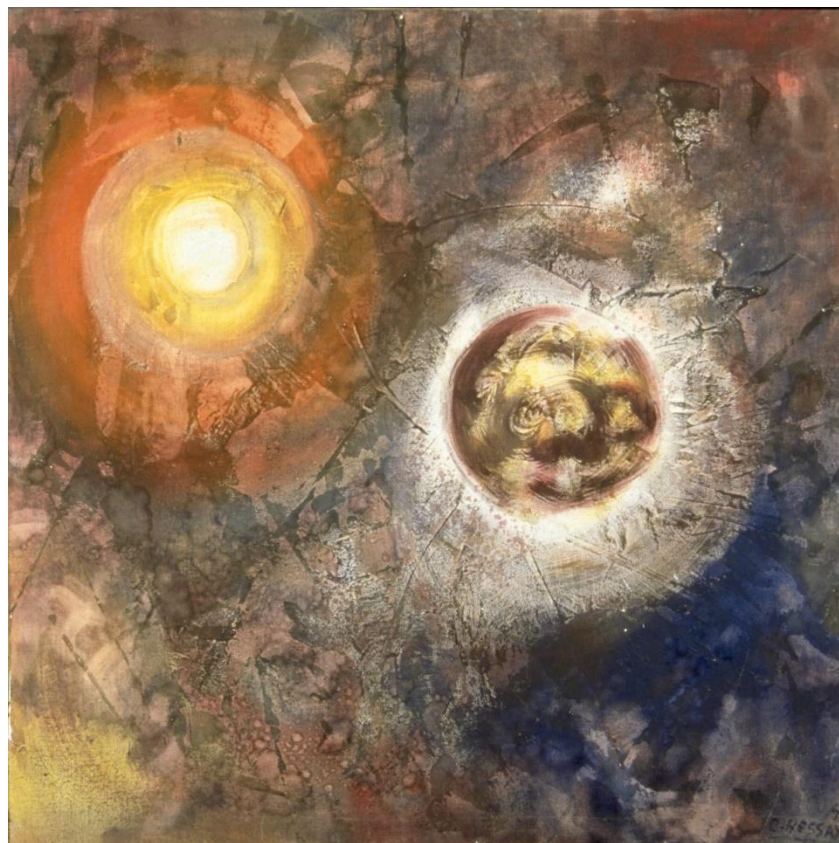


Fig. 8. Carle Hessay (1974). *Creation of Earth # 2*. Part of the Hollow World series. [Oil on canvas, 36 x 35.5 inches]. Courtesy of the Carle Hessay Estate.

Hessay began to look to the future. In 1974, he participated in a Canada Council Explorations program and painted a series of futurist Hollow World images. In Hessay’s own words describing the paintings—and it reflects his own philosophy—he wrote: “If man should survive, develop and learn the secrets of the cosmos, he will, in time, have an Utopia. Many gifted men and women will pool their resources for the building of a new world” (from an accompanying statement).

The earth will be hollowed out to create another planet (Fig. 8). While Hessay projected all this into the future beginning around the year 3,000, such scenarios are now becoming less fanciful as the commercialism and dominance of space are accelerating at an incredible speed by technological advances and political ambitions.

Images from this series, with accompanying poems by Canadian writers, were accepted for the juried show, *Canadian Art Inspired by the Universe* exhibition in 2009 at the Herzog Institute of

Astrophysics.

Afterwords

Carle Hessay died dancing at a New Year's party at the Sasquatch Inn in Spuzzum, British Columbia on January 1, 1978. It subsequently burned down on January 30, 2001 (Grise 2001).

Afterwords, a selection of his paintings was exhibited at the Langley Centennial Museum. One of the speakers was Leonard Woods. He observed that a Carle Hessay painting is immediately recognizable by the strength of its character. In *Meditations on the Paintings of Carle Hessay* (Woods, 2001), Woods wrote commentaries on the paintings from the exhibition, including *Home in the West* (Fig. 1).

Father Dunstan Massey of Westminster Abbey in Mission, British Columbia also spoke about the artist's work. Previously, Hessay had given him instructions about fresco making, according to the methods he had studied in Dresden. The first of the frescoes by Father Dunstan was *The Temptation of St. Benedict*, 1974 (Elbers 2023). Hessay was pleased with it and praised it as "technically perfect." Father Dunstan Massey regarded Carle Hessay as a visionary who saw "deeper into the sorrows and the tragedies—and he lived with it—and it comes out in his paintings" (Dunstan, YouTube).

Both Leonard Woods and Father Dunstan Massey have since passed away.

Conclusion

Carle Hessay, who considered himself a world citizen, said he was painting for posterity. His legacy to me was inestimable both personally and professionally. In examining some of the paintings for this article more closely, I began to appreciate even more his artistic sophistication in conveying his thoughts and feelings about humankind in a way that is strikingly relevant today.

Acknowledgements

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Figures

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