

salon focus

Something special to pierce your very soul

From his red socks to his life in Red China, Newton Rowell Bowles epitomized the term 'Renaissance man.' Fluent in five languages, with an ear for Chinese opera as much as for 'Rule Britannia,' he published two collections of poetry and traversed the world three times during more than 50 years with UNICEF. He was also an artist. Bowles painted upwards of 600 works, dividing his practice between his Manhattan home and his summer refuge on Grand Manan. The two streams – of urban oil and his wild, plein-air watercolours – are being exhibited together in a retrospective that paints a picture of a man who had witnessed horror but retained hope. Story by Angela Kippers



Rowell Bowles in 2006 at the age of 89 at his summer home on Grand Manan. A career international humanitarian with UNICEF, he returned every summer to Grand Manan, where he relished simple pleasures and creating art. PHOTO: MJ EDWARDS

A slice of rhubarb-custard pie waiting at the Moses household, wild strawberries ripening along the edges of Cemetery Road, and Stella Jones's gingersnaps. It was the simple pleasures that drew Newton Rowell Bowles to Grand Manan each summer, none more so than sitting in a field, paintbrush in hand, surrounded by the vastness of the Bay of Fundy.

It was in North Head, where Bowles painted – often en plein air, perched up on a platform he had built on his summer property to capture views of Flagg Cove and the Bay of Fundy in a sparse palette of grey, blue and black watercolours.

Bowles was the longest-tenured employee of UNICEF – serving for more than 60 years, since its inception in 1948. He was responsible for getting humanitarian relief across battle lines in war-torn regions throughout the world, often negotiating with enemies to cease fighting to do so. From 1965 to 1978, he helmed UNICEF's worldwide programming, overseeing its operations.

Among his many contributions was the creation of the mother-baby packs – the first kits with medicines for traditional midwives. Such packs now help prevent mother-to-child transmission of HIV in regions such as eastern and southern Africa, where nearly two million children live with HIV.

For his humanitarian and relief efforts, Bowles was named a Companion of the Order of Canada in 2001.

Bowles produced close to 600 works of art and penned a book that would guide international workers and diplomats into the next century.

He travelled the globe, visiting all but two countries throughout his 95 years.

But it was Grand Manan, a remote, 28-kilometre-long island off the coast of southern New Brunswick, that Bowles chose to call home for more than 40 summers, even before it was a popular retreat for folks "from away."

On Aug. 10, the Grand Manan Art Gallery will honour Bowles's legacy with the exhibition "Bay of Fundy, Day by Day: Newton Rowell Bowles, C.M. Retrospective," a collection of works by the

beloved friend and artist who died on Oct. 2, 2012, near family in Deluth, Mich.

Newton Rowell Bowles – known as Newton professionally and Rowell to friends and family – was born in Chengdu, Sichuan province, in central China, to missionary parents in 1916.

His father, Newton Sr., was a Methodist pastor and his mother, Muriel, was a nurse.

He lived in the country during a civil war and what is now referred to as the Warlord Era. Bowles's mother would often hide him, along with his three sisters, behind walls when the regional warlords were fighting.

"It was a horrific time," says Frederictonian Janet Toole, who with her husband, Barry, met Bowles while summering on the island. There was a constant military presence on the streets, she says. The Bowles family lived in a compound where it was safe and hospitable, but any time they left the compound they would be subject to this "incredible violence," she

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LISA PRESLEY, BOWLES'S NIECE

"When he would go to school in the morning, he would see decapitated heads on the streets and in the ditches."

In 1926, the Bowles family moved to the Toronto area, where Bowles continued his schooling, later attending Victoria College at the University of Toronto, then accepting an internship at a church near North Bay, Ont. He briefly considered a

career in ministry but abandoned the idea. He was in the midst of doctoral studies at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore when the Second World War began.

Bowles began his career with the UN in 1945. Rejected for service because of a bad eye, he asked the recruitment officer about post-war relief. He was directed to the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, which sent him to Shanghai as part of a team to distribute humanitarian relief.

Bowles came about his diplomacy honesty, speaking fondly of his father's ability to negotiate. His father once encountered pirates while travelling along a river in China. Newton Sr. was en route to catch a ship home to Canada, and, with a fondness for Chinese art and pottery, had his boat filled with beautiful works of art. The pirates seized the items, but Newton convinced them he was taking them to a primitive county, where its people had never seen such skilled craftsmanship. One by one, each piece was returned.

Bowles quickly rose through the ranks of the United Nations. When the operation ended in 1948, he returned to New York, only to be called a few months later to head the Asia division for a new agency, UNICEF. His role only expanded from there. From 1965 to 1978 he was worldwide program director for UNICEF, overseeing the operations of specialized agencies.

In 2006, at age 89, he was still working as an adviser, accepting a dollar-a-year payment. He continued writing reports about the effects of war on women and children well into his 90s.

In Bowles's book *The Diplomacy of Hope: The United Nations Since the Cold War*, he writes about the organization's evolution: "Unforeseen was a cry from developing

countries: help our children, even worse off than post-war Europe, and so in 1953 UNICEF was given an open-ended lease of life. ... How astonishing that UNICEF has taken on a pioneering role in international social development, operating in 100 countries across the globe."

Bowles was cousin to former prime minister Lester Pearson, whose mother was a Bowles. He married twice, first to Augusta (Dusty) in 1946 and secondly to Jean (Pres) in 1970. He didn't have any children.

In his typical dry sense of humour, a week before his first wedding, he sent a telegram to his parents stating: "The bachelor dies Friday."

"Life was rarely dull when Rowell was around. We would hear rousing choruses of 'Rule Britannia' at the dinner table if there was either a lull in the conversation," Bowles's niece, Lisa Presley, said at his New York memorial. "He would never be at a loss for words, and he loved telling jokes."

"His addiction to red socks, something that few probably saw at the office, was well known in the family, and if you couldn't think of another present, he could always use more of those."

Rowell Bowles brought the world to Grand Manan.

He spoke Mandarin, German, French and Spanish, and he loved music, theatre and Chinese opera.

Fredericton-based artist Brigid Toole Grant, who has summered on Grand Manan for more than 40 years, says he was "a pretty good piano player" and would sometimes bang Chinese opera on the keys.

He was a copious reader, bringing stacks

of books – works on philosophy, politics and history – each summer. He would read well into the night. He rarely woke before 11 a.m.

Bowles painted from his meadow every day, first on his platform and later in an approximately 3.5-by-4.5-metre structure he dubbed a studio, which offered some protection from the elements. His works were serene with simple lines and form. He captured the various movements of the sky and sea and their interaction. "They were intimate," Grant says.

She recalls Bowles's late-summer afternoon "vernissages." He would invite close friends on the island to a showing of his work at the end of each season. Over tea, they would chat about the pieces. Sometimes Bowles would share his poetry.

Bowles first heard of Grand Manan through a co-worker named Vincent, from Calais, Maine, while working in Shanghai in 1947.

"I happened to mention that I'd like someday to have a place by the sea, and Vincent suggested Grand Manan. I just stored away the information at the time," he said in an interview with Grand Manan Museum director Mary Joan (M.J.) Edwards in 2006.

He came to the island in the late 1950s as a guest of Milton Gregg, a Victoria Cross recipient, who – among his many roles over the years – worked for the United Nations, and Frank Toole, chemist and former dean of science at the University of New Brunswick.

Bowles continued to return to the island, and, in the 1970s, he and Pres bought a small home in North Head, about a two-minute drive south of the ferry landing. The grey-shingled cottage, with a meadow that, off-season, lent itself to wildflowers,



A selection of Rowell Bowles's paintings. During his career with UNICEF, Bowles created about 600 works of art. Portraits and abstract 'heads' dominated his practice. He once exhibited a show of them at the UNB Art Centre in the 1960s.

overlooked Flagg Cove and would be a welcome respite for more than 30 years, until his early 90s.

After an accident with his car on the island in his early 80s, he gave up driving, which made the trips more difficult. Still, he managed to get himself to his summer abode by flying to either Bangor or Saint John and having a friend pick him up.

When he arrived, Nora Lee and Robert Moses would have a dinner waiting for him at their home. "It became a tradition after his wife, Pres, died," Nora Lee says.

Bowles adored Nora Lee's rhubarb-custard pie and white bread. "He always walked away with a loaf for his morning toast," she says.

Longtime friend Anneke Gichuru recalls Bowles's affinity for Stella Jones's gingersnaps. Many people on the island enjoyed Jones' cookies – enough that she sold them at the local, weekly market. At the end of every summer, upon his departure, Bowles would buy about three dozen and make them last for the entire fall, winter and spring, until his return.

"I'm sure he scheduled them," Gichuru says.

Bowles was a man of great determination and structure, Gichuru says. "He had his routines."

He was a runner, taking great pride in achieving a top time for his age group in half-marathons. In New York he would run from his Manhattan penthouse home on East 82nd Street, one block from The Metropolitan Museum of Art, to the UN office, between 42nd Street and 48th Street, about a four-kilometre jaunt. He ran until his knees wouldn't allow him to continue, well into his 80s.

He walked every evening while on the island, Gichuru says. "One didn't invite him for supper at the usual 6 or 7 o'clock time. You knew that if you planned to have him over, you'd be having an elegantly late meal," she says with a laugh.

"He loved to meet people. He had a

genuine interest," says Gichuru. "He liked to know people who were having an impact on life."

On Nov. 16, 2012, Rowell Bowles's favourite hymn, "Abide With Me," resonated from the almost five-metre-tall, deep-gold organ pipes of the All Souls Unitarian Church on Lexington Avenue in New York City, reverberating off the sanctuary's pastel walls. In the pews, more than 100 people gathered to remember the uncle, co-worker, friend, mentor and humanitarian.

"It is impossible to sum up a life in a few paragraphs, especially one so rich and varied as Newton Rowell's," began Rev. Vernon Nichol, who served with Bowles on the NGO Committee on Disarmament, Peace and Security. "He was a true Renaissance man with multiple talents."

Friend and colleague Peter Mason lauded Bowles for his determination and vision. "To be with Newton was to be reassured that idealism never dies, and the fire that makes us want to better the world never cools," said Mason, a senior adviser with the United Nations in New York. "I found it impossible to not be near him and not feel energized or inspired."

Bowles was also remembered for his diplomacy and mentoring skills. "Successive executive directors and executives sought him out for his wisdom and knowledge and wise counsel," he said.

Bowles rarely spoke to family and friends about his work with the UN.

Lisa Presley, who is also executor to Bowles's estate, says she didn't fully grasp her uncle's international accomplishments until this memorial.

"He kept that part of his life hidden," she says.

Despite his humanitarian achievements, Bowles wished to be known as the poet and artist," Presley says. "It spoke more to his spirit and his soul."

Bowles penned two poetry books, *Death*

and *Other Loves* (2007, Penumbra Press), which explored his grief for Pres, who died in the late 1990s, and *Red Poems* (2011, Penumbra Press), which captures everyday musings with wisdom and humour.

He took great pride in having his work shown across North America – in big centres such as New York, Montreal, Toronto and Miami, as well as smaller cities such as St. John's and Fredericton.

Bowles lived two very different lives, say family and friends. This dichotomy is exemplified in his artwork.

His Grand Manan works – all watercolours – are described as simplistic and

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ANNEKE GICHURU, FRIEND

peaceful, with influences of eastern culture. His New York works – all oils – have been characterized as bold, jarring, even disturbing.

Grant recalls first seeing Bowles's New York works in an exhibition at the UNB Arts Centre in Fredericton in the mid 1960s. Her father, Frank Toole, with the help of Bruno Bobak, director of the centre at the time, brought the show to the city. Grant, who worked there, describes being surrounded by "these looming heads."

"I felt as though I was being watched," she says.

The series of "heads" was a theme Bowles painted throughout most of his adult life. He painted the large works – many more than a metre square – late at night in his apartment studio.

Jane McNichol, a close friend and artist,

whose husband, Jim, stores Bowles's artwork in New York, says she believes all the "heads" he created are self-portraits.

"He was a complicated man," she says. "(The paintings) were all a form of self-exploration. They are pretty intense ... (s)ome works appear to be just two eyes and a shell, almost like something's going to emerge."

Despite the darkness of the New York-based art, Bowles was always fun and chatty, McNichol says. "He was outgoing, gregarious and a great storyteller." Near end of life, Bowles decided to do a series of works using bright colors, she says.

Bowles and McNichol were frequent visitors to the Metropolitan Museum. They especially enjoyed the Asmat room, which featured works by the Asmat people of New Guinea, as well as the African art wing.

"We were always looking for that special something that seemed to pierce your very soul," McNichol says.

Presley believes Grand Manan was necessary for her uncle's well-being.

"There were two different people inside him," she says. "There was the one that, I believe, was perhaps haunted by what he saw in the world, from what he saw in his early childhood. Then, with his work around the world, I'm sure he saw an entirely different part of human nature that most of us aren't forced to see."

Then there's the other man, she says, who lived on Grand Manan, who would let his spirit flow with optimism, which would allow him to return to his everyday work that addressed war, famine, illness and death.

"He wrestled with the darker demons that lived inside him," says Presley. "But he also lived that side that dealt with life and hope."

One of Rowell Bowles's favourite walking routes on Grand Manan was between his home in North Head and Whale Cove.

He would be gone from one to two hours, stopping frequently to chat with residents about gardening, which he adored, or to pick wild strawberries.

Deborah Upton Savedoff, who is past-president of Grand Manan Art Gallery and co-ordinator of the "Bay of Fundy, Day by Day" exhibition never met Bowles. "I just heard all these fascinating stories about this man. He was a pretty inspiring guy."

She was struck by Bowles's breadth of artwork – between 300-600 pieces – as well as his international contributions.

"Like so many creative, intellectual types – musicians, photographers, academics and writers – he found refuge here on this island," she says.

When Savedoff approached Presley about the concept for the show, she was met with enthusiasm. Presley made the commitment to get the works from New York to the island.

Savedoff says the upcoming show is about celebrating Bowles as an artist and a fellow Grand Mananer. But it's also an opportunity for his family and friends to grieve.

"It will be a nice closure for his family to be able to see his work in a place that he and his wife cherished," Savedoff says.

Family and friends will meet over the weekend to scatter Bowles's ashes. At his request, they'll be scattered into the ocean off the coast of Grand Manan, as Bowles, family members and friends did with Pres's remains to honour her memory years ago.

It's humbling, says Savedoff. "Of all the places in the world he travelled, this international man, who accomplished so much, chose Grand Manan as his final resting place." ❧

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A series of Bowles's watercolours that he usually painted outdoors from his property overlooking Flagg Cove in North Head, Grand Manan. The sparse, landscape-inspired watercolours were in direct opposition to the large, figurative oils he painted in his Manhattan-based studio off-season. The discrepancy in style speaks to the two natures of the artist, one who was witness to the horrors of the 20th century but lived life with hope.