

Just after World War II, a young grade school pupil who liked to paint was set up by her mother to take private oil painting lessons with a well-established Victoria artist. She travelled from home in Oak Bay to Tolmie Avenue, off Quadra Street, on Saturday mornings in the summer where instruction took place in a back yard studio.

This was all a big adventure for a shy young girl who recalls her teacher as a quiet, studious and conscientious gentleman who methodically taught the basic approach to oil painting. She was shown the various colours, their place in order on the palette, the use of oil in mixing the paint and turpentine for cleaning the brushes and introduced to still life subjects such as fruit and jars. Though initially feeling somewhat intimidated by this rather reserved individual, the young pupil came to like him and appreciate his abilities as artist and teacher. She also got the impression that he was of modest means and made to struggle hard to make a comfortable living.

The young student was our own Ann Nolte, and her teacher was a Scotsman of some repute by the name of William (Will) Menelaws. The experience, along with the later influence of such luminaries as Ina Uhthoff and Arthur Lismer, laid the basis for Ann's development into a distinguished painter of landscapes and portraits.



Menelaws, born in Edinburgh Scotland in 1883, was a product of the Edinburgh College of Art, and a gold-medal winner at the Royal Scottish Academy. He also spent several years studying architecture. Moving to Canada, he joined the Island Arts and Crafts Society (IACS) and contributed to its annual exhibition every year, with one exception, from 1912 to 1940. During these years he also exhibited at the Seattle Art Museum and the BC Society of Fine Arts.

A key member of the Society's Sketch Club component, Menelaws was a prolific and versatile artist in pen and ink, watercolour, oils and tempera. He even ventured into impressionism during the 1920s, but he is perhaps best remembered for his fine portraiture and his landscapes. He became well known and highly respected as a teacher, both from his studio and in Victoria area schools, notably at Glenlyon from 1938 to 1954 and for thirty years at Oak Bay Senior High, to which the Victoria Sketch Club later donated an annual art prize in his name.

In the 1940s Menelaws became part of the group, which included several other IASC artists, seeking to sponsor an art gallery in Victoria, an ambition which came to fulfilment in 1951.

Although maintaining his links with the Victoria Sketch Club, his teaching duties limited his exhibition time after WWII. However, his one-man show at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria in 1962, prompted Colin Graham, Director of the Gallery, to dub him "Dean of Victoria artists."

He was awarded life membership of the Victoria Sketch Club in 1964, the year he departed to live with relatives in Port Angeles, Washington. He died there two years later.



~John Lover