

Quebec artist is appealing to the masses

Frédéric Back will put entire oeuvre, including Oscar-winning films, on Web to benefit others

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MONTREAL—He's stooped with age and nearing the end of a 60-year career, but one of Canada's most prolific visual artists is hard at work on perhaps his grandest creation: putting his entire oeuvre on the Net.

Frédéric Back, the painter, illustrator and Oscar-winning animator, decided to make thousands of sketches, paintings and études accessible – free – not long after his wife of 58 years suggested he take over the top-floor flat of their west-end Montreal triplex as an exhibition space and workshop.

Beyond the lofty ideals of education, democratizing art and the understandable wish to preserve a life's work for posterity, Back said he has a more prosaic motivation.

"The essence is that I just want this stuff to be of use. ... I want it to benefit the largest number of people possible," said Back, a diminutive 84-year-old with a clipped white moustache and grandfatherly bearing. "I've survived some health problems. I guess I want to earn that survival. Too many people retire and don't do enough with the liberty it affords."

The project to digitize Back's prodigious output will take another year to complete; in addition to painting, the French-born Back has done set decoration, stained-glass pieces and drawn three Oscar-nominated short films, winning twice: for *Crac* (1982) and *The Man Who Planted Trees* (1988).

Indeed, the sheer number of materials accumulated during six decades of nearly compulsive drawing surprised everyone.

"In 2004, when we went down to the basement to look at all the materials, we realized there were about 5,000 pieces. There were stacks and stacks, boxes full, some of it 50 years old," said Süzel Back-Drapeau, the artist's daughter and one of the driving forces behind the website. "We asked him what he wanted to do with it all. Give it away, start a museum? He just said he wanted it to be accessible, useful."

The web initiative gave Back and his team another idea, so they've created illustrated pedagogical kits, which will be available on the site free, beginning today, to provide ready-made materials for teachers. The kits are to teach students about art and some of Back's preoccupations: the environment, language and the importance of culture.

"One of the key things is that it had to be free, and that it had to encourage the students to interact," said Back-Drapeau, who last year consulted a group of pedagogical experts to get input on the kits, which include original drawings from Back. The kits are also meant to prompt students to do their own artwork and upload it to the site.

Back was born in 1924 in Sarrebruck, an enclave in the Alsace region of France that today sits on the German side of the border. He spent his youth bouncing around France, studying and working as a farm labourer.

In the mid-1940s he began corresponding with a young Québécoise named Ghylaine Paquin, and decided to come to Canada in 1948.

Some of the paintings he made during his sea crossing and the train journey to Montreal are still in his collection.

Within three days of meeting his pen pal in person, Back proposed marriage. The couple has been together since.

Back's prodigious output is a function of his bewildering talent, but also of his training and commitment as an "artiste engagé" (or committed artist).

"It's a long tradition. There have been many artists who have testified to their preoccupations ... My teacher used to always say 'draw, paint everything you see, do it because it will all probably disappear,'" Back said.