

B. C. BINNING: DRAWINGS



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COVER: *Untitled*, unsigned, undated, ink and watercolour, 30.5 x 45.6 cm.

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B. C. BINNING: DRAWINGS

October 24 - December 9, 1979

ART GALLERY OF GREATER VICTORIA

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Acknowledgements

This exhibition would have been considerably different and, I think, poorer without the very generous assistance of Mrs. Doreen Walker. Her work on the Retrospective Exhibition, her archive of material on Binning, and kind support have all been invaluable.

It is, however, to the artist's widow, Jessie, that we owe the greatest thanks. Her willingness to lend these beautiful drawings has made this exhibition a reality.

Finally, we are grateful for the generous support of the Canada Council which has made this exhibition and catalogue possible.

IAN M. THOM
Curator

Introduction

The life around these little coves and inlets and so on that I love so much; often were the scenes of all kinds of little comedies and things that went on that made one smile. Nothing epic, but just a kind of human activity that is curiously comic in the way people posture themselves or sit or go about their everyday chores. — B. C. BINNING¹

To those who know and love the west coast, the drawings done by B. C. (Bertram Charles) Binning in the mid nineteen-forties have a special appeal. Born of Binning's own deep love for the sea, these witty and highly accomplished works reflect the joys of summers spent sailing, swimming, and picnicking in small, friendly coves along the west coast. In Binning's drawings the sun shines, a gentle breeze blows and men relax or gently go about their own business.

Although witty and amusing, technically Binning's drawings are distinguished by precision of line and adeptness in handling. His technical means are simple pen and ink and yet as Doris Shadbolt has pointed out² the linear style of these works is absolutely at one with the subjects. Lines of rope which curl and twist, flapping flags and pennants, and patterns of foliage all have a crispness and vigour which betray the artist's considerable skills.

The use of the subtly modulated line reveals formal debts to Matisse and Picasso but Binning has created, in these works, a style which is his own. Although at times the drawings may appear haphazard, this is in fact far from the case. Binning often stressed his formal concerns and his description of his working method for these drawings confirms their formal basis.

I took a great deal of trouble in selecting my subject and at one time I used to bicycle for that very reason and I'm afraid I became a kind of figure of amusement around Horseshoe Bay and Fisherman's Cove and Garrow Bay and those places — the man with the bicycle and the sketch pad under his arm and a carrier full of implements and lunch and so on. Racing from one place to another stopping and standing and staring and then probably shaking his head and going

on to another place and repeating the whole process again. Well, what I was doing really was simply this: I was trying to visualize exactly what the possibilities of the subject were. And by finally deciding on what I wanted to draw first of all — which subject I was going to choose — which may have taken me half the morning and then spending another hour or so looking at it very intently and deciding exactly how I wanted to do it. Now when I say exactly I mean, probably in general terms. The general composition and letting the smaller parts and details build up in a more or less haphazard way on the framework of the general composition which I had pretty firmly in my mind. One of the cardinal principles of my drawing is this whole business of selection and rejection. What is it you want to say exactly — what do you want to put down — and what do you want to throw out and being quite ruthless about this process, and of using only those parts that would enhance the design and my intentions — and ignore everything else, and indeed sometimes perhaps turning slightly to the left or to the right and picking up some odd objects there and transporting them into the picture itself by way of pen and ink. And so once the general composition was in my mind I began and went at the thing in a pretty bold manner. And then letting the thing grow from there. There was a certain growth in those drawings in that you had this general idea and you worked out your main composition as I've said — then you begin to fill in and enrich and give the whole drawing a kind of textural interest on this framework. And the other thing of course, as Chekov once said — art is knowing when to stop and there was a point when you had to very shrewdly say — okay it's finished. And to have the courage sometimes to stop there and not just carry on for the sake of carrying on. But it was this kind of way in which I worked and so the drawings never looked laboured — they looked — they kept — at least I hope they did — kept a kind of spontaneity because there was, really you had the confidence of knowing your minor discoveries would work all the while once you had established the main structure and so you let yourself go within this main structure and the main structure, I can assure you, was carefully thought out.³

It is this ability to elaborate upon the basic formal structure which is the key to the success of these drawings. Never dogmatic, Binning adjusted his means to the subject, not the reverse.

If one word were chosen to best qualify fine drawing perhaps "clarity" would do. Clarity of mental and emotional intention, clarity of interpretation and clarity of means.⁴

Binning's own words succinctly describe these drawings. The message is a clear and happy one and the means of interpretation are simple and strong. These drawings are rich and full yet free of distracting clutter or bombastic message.

The artist's desire for clarity led to a concern for spatial and surface organization which is found in all the drawings. Binning's complete mastery of perspective allowed him to adjust it according to his needs. Objects are depicted in the manner which renders them most clearly legible. He works "up and over the picture plane"⁵ but also to either side and below.

This technique and the exuberant and yet elegantly controlled line combine to create drawings of admirable skill and great beauty. They have the lyrical, immediate quality which is so much a part of summer, boats and the beach.

Serious in their skillful use of varying perspective, smooth, elegant line and careful composition, the drawings transcend these technical concerns to express Binning's own fondness for human foibles, quixotic boats and the sea itself.

Of his own work Binning once said "the medium is used as a commentary on what I see."⁶ It is obvious that he liked what he saw.

IAN M. THOM
August 1979

NOTES

¹ Interview between B. C. Binning and Doreen Walker, U.B.C. Fine Arts Department, Vancouver, June 13, 1972.

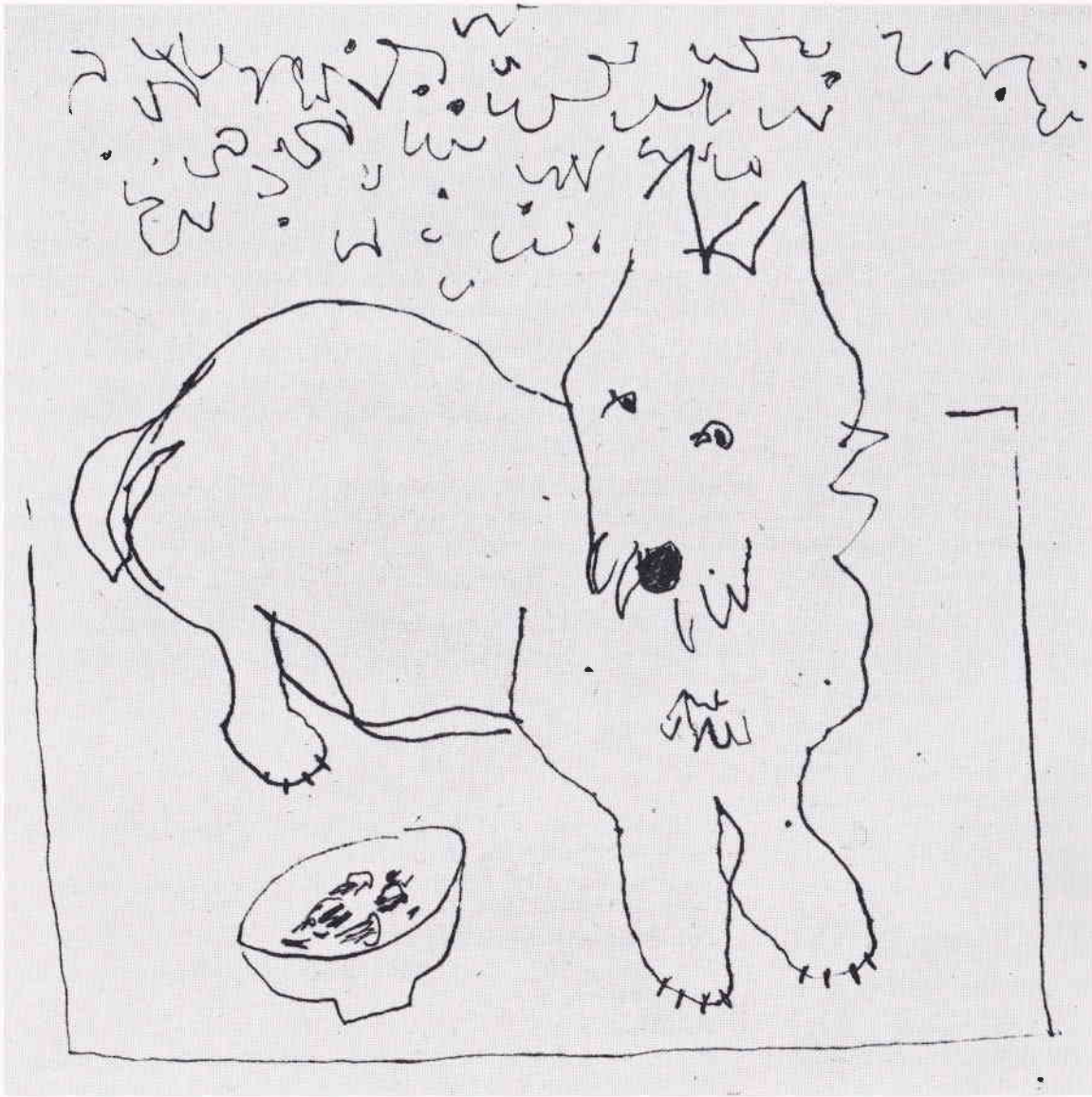
² Doris Shadbolt, "The Drawings of B. C. Binning," *Canadian Art*, vol. III, no. 3 (March/April 1946), p. 96.

³ Interview, Binning-Walker, 1972.

⁴ B. C. Binning, "The Teaching of Drawing," *Canadian Art*, vol. V, no. 1 (Autumn 1947), p. 21.

⁵ Shadbolt, *Ibid.*

⁶ Binning as quoted in Donald W. Buchanan, *The Growth of Canadian Painting* (London & Toronto: William Collins Sons & Co., 1950), p. 78.



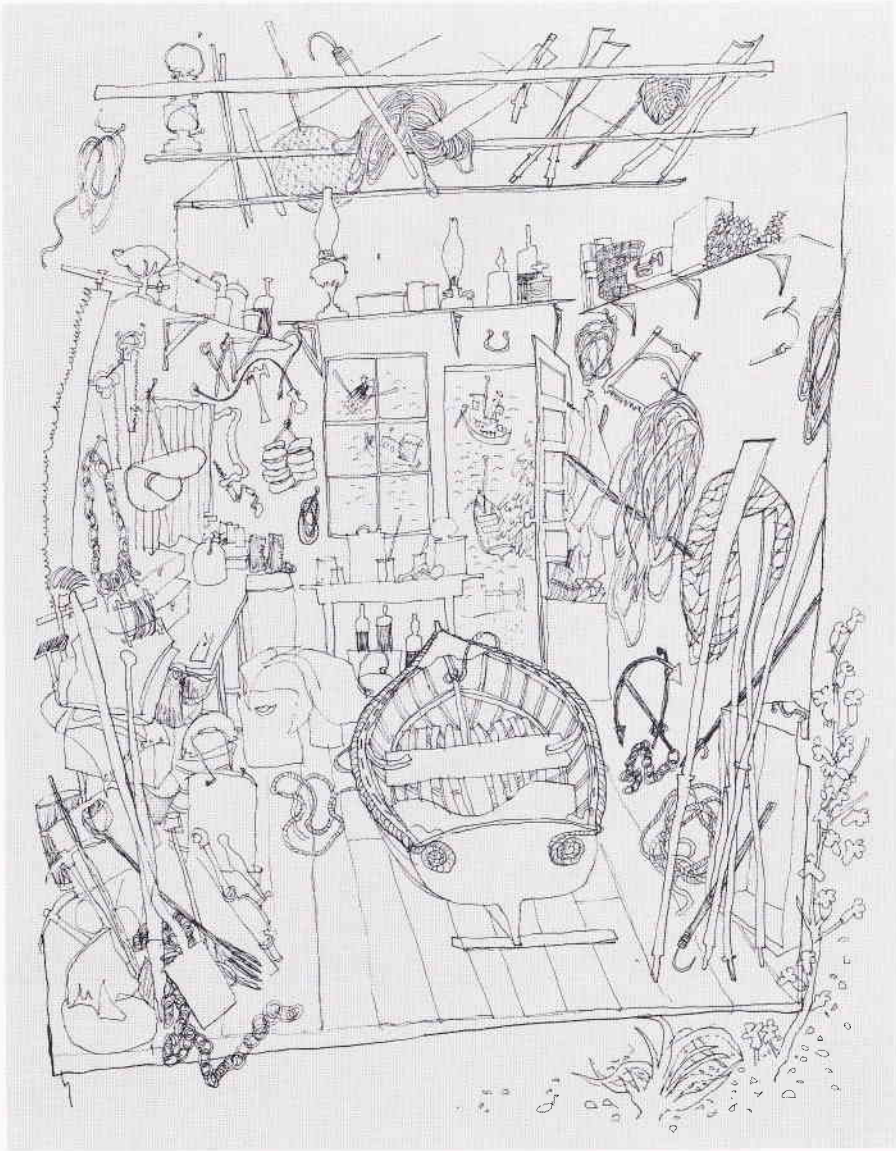
2 *Lucy*, unsigned, undated, ink, 20 x 15.9 cm.

At one time I was terribly interested in child art. I believe that the teaching of drawing to children provided me with a major source of influence for my drawings. I used to watch them intently at the way they went about things: I admired the straightforward motivation that they had in doing any statement in visual terms. The kind of directness was infectious . . .

(Binning as quoted by Doreen Walker, "The Rich Architectonics of Binning," *Vie des Arts*, vol. XVIII, no. 72 (Automne 1973), p. 96).



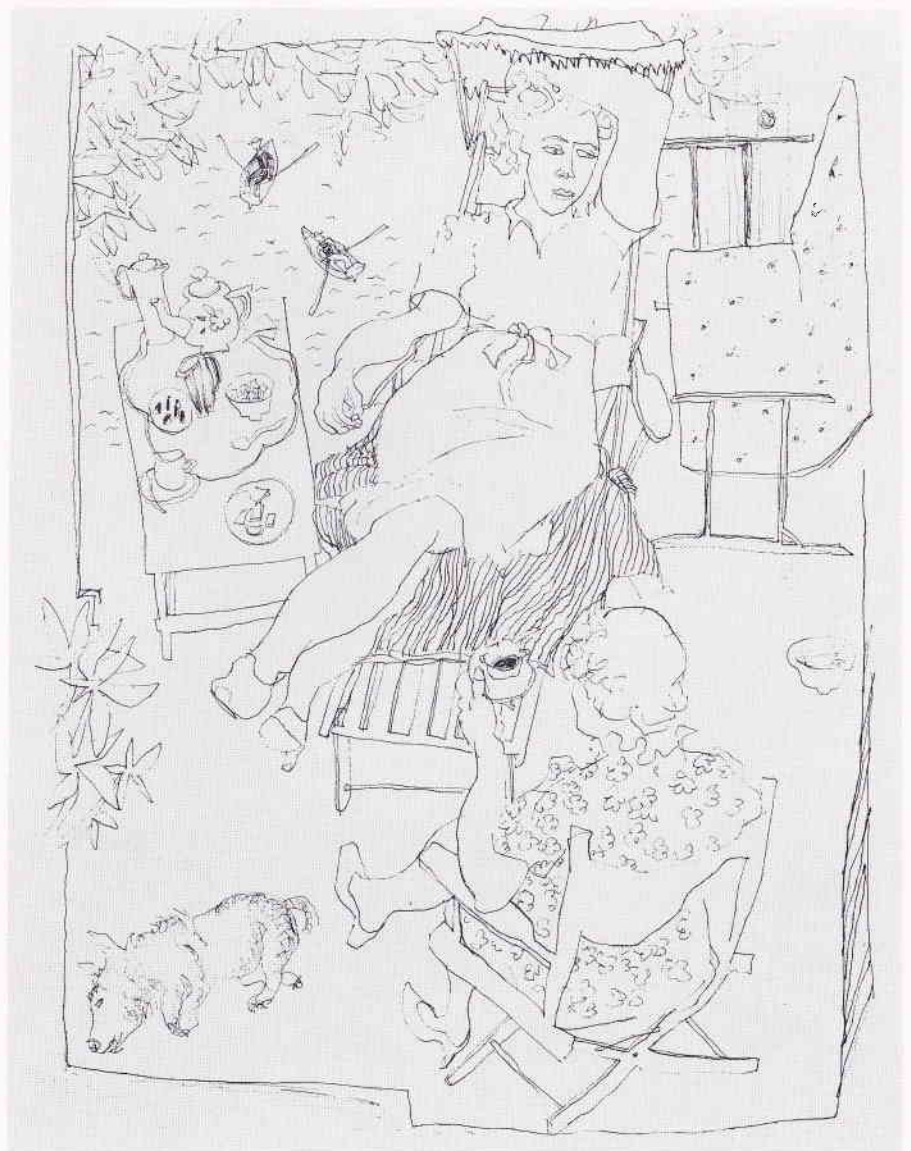
5 *Untitled*, unsigned, undated, ink, 30.4 x 39.2 cm.



12 *Untitled*, unsigned, undated, ink, 60.9 x 45.5 cm.

For a long time I did a lot of drawing. Because I enjoyed the economy of the medium and I liked to make it as economical as possible by using simple line and trying to enrich the whole surface of the paper with nothing but a kind of linear play that beguiled the eye in that way.

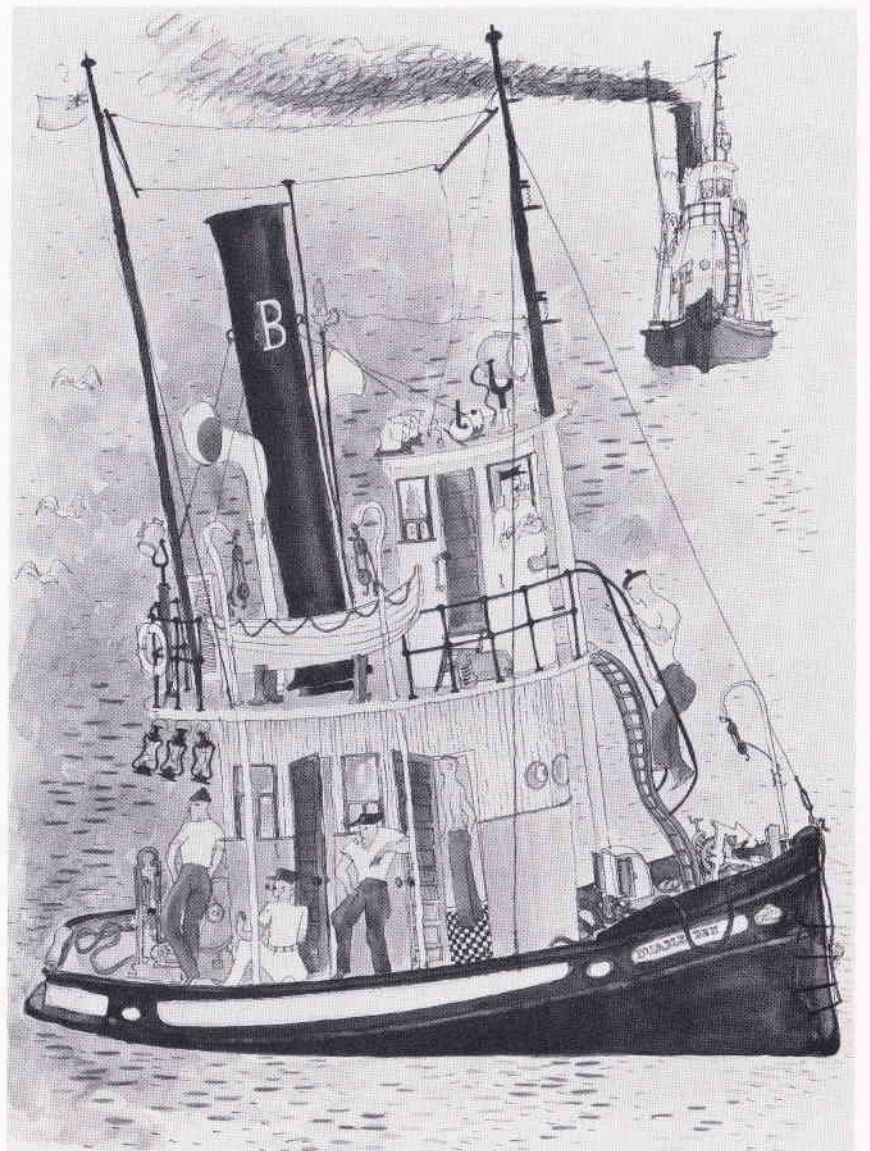
(Binning in an interview with Willard Holmes, March 14, 1973.)



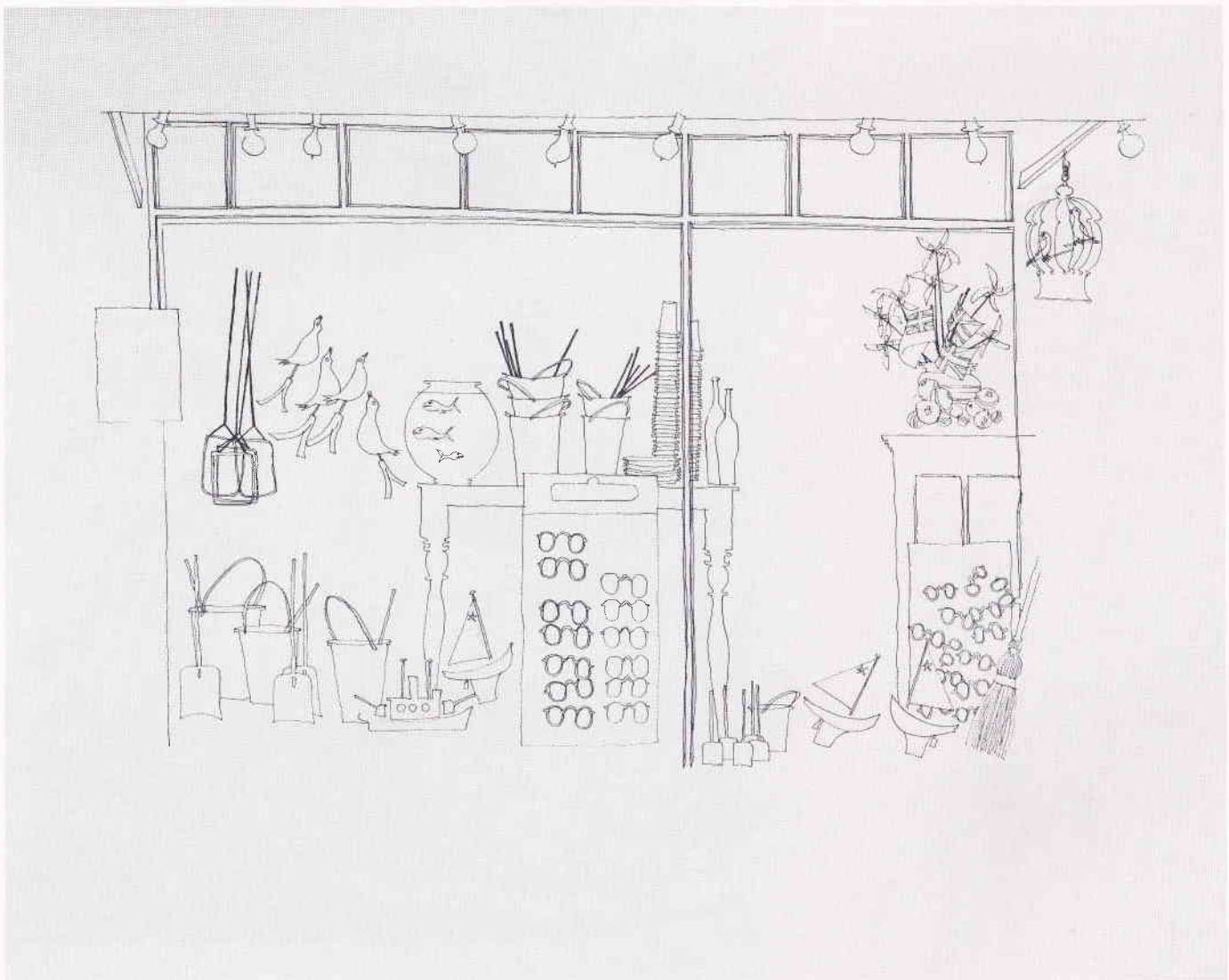
15 *Untitled*, unsigned, undated, ink, 60.9 x 45.5 cm.



16 *Self-Portrait*, unsigned, undated, ink, 60.9 x 45.5 cm.



18 *Bumble Bee*, unsigned, undated, ink and watercolour, 60.7 x 45.7 cm.



30 *Untitled*, unsigned, undated, ink, 45.4 x 60.8 cm.



31 *Untitled*, unsigned, undated, ink, 45.5 x 60.8 cm.

Catalogue

All works are from the collection of Mrs. B. C. Binning.
Measurements are paper size, height preceding width.

- 1 *Self-Portrait*, unsigned, undated, ink, 30.3 x 19.6 cm.
- 2 *Lucy*, unsigned, undated, ink, 20 x 15.9 cm.
- 3 *Ducks*, unsigned, undated, ink, 45.9 x 61 cm.
- 4 *Untitled*, unsigned, undated, ink, 30.2 x 45.4 cm. (Drawing of woman on verso.)
- 5 *Untitled*, unsigned, undated, ink, 30.4 x 39.2 cm.
- 6 *Untitled*, unsigned, undated, ink, 30.4 x 39.2 cm.
- 7 *Untitled*, unsigned, undated, ink, 30.4 x 39.2 cm.
- 8 *Untitled*, unsigned, undated, ink, 45.5 x 39 cm.
- 9 *Sailor Beware*, unsigned, undated, pencil and crayon, 13.6 x 11.9 cm (irregular). (Drawing fragment, woman knitting on verso.)
- 10 *Untitled*, unsigned, undated, ink and pencil, 30.3 x 22.9 cm (irregular).
- 11 *Untitled*, unsigned, undated, pencil, 30.4 x 9.5 cm.
- 12 *Untitled*, unsigned, undated, ink, 60.9 x 45.5 cm.
- 13 *Untitled*, unsigned, undated, ink, 45.6 x 60.9 cm.
- 14 *Untitled*, unsigned, undated, ink, 60.7 x 45.3 cm.
- 15 *Untitled*, unsigned, undated, ink, 60.9 x 45.5 cm.
- 16 *Self-Portrait*, unsigned, undated, ink, 60.9 x 45.5 cm.
- 17 *Wilmurdel*, unsigned, undated, ink, 60.9 x 45.7 cm.
- 18 *Bumble Bee*, unsigned, undated, ink and watercolour, 60.7 x 45.7 cm. (Charcoal drawing of a tug on verso.)
- 19 *Untitled*, signed and dated (lower left): B C Binning/[19]45, ink, 45.5 x 60.9 cm.
- 20 *Untitled*, unsigned, undated, ink, 45.4 x 60.8 cm.
- 21 *Untitled*, unsigned, undated, ink, 61 x 45.6 cm.
- 22 *Untitled*, unsigned, undated, ink, 60.8 x 45.3 cm.
- 23 *Untitled*, unsigned, undated, ink, 9.9 x 15.2 cm.
- 24 *Untitled*, unsigned, undated, ink and watercolour, 30.5 x 45.6 cm.
- 25 *Untitled*, unsigned, undated, ink, 45.3 x 60.8 cm.
- 26 *Untitled*, unsigned, undated, ink, 40 x 53.3 cm.
- 27 *Untitled*, signed and dated (lower right): B. C. Binning [19]45, ink and watercolour, 45.5 x 60.9 cm.
- 28 *Untitled*, unsigned, undated, ink and watercolour, 15 x 19.7 cm. (The drawing, which is one-quarter of a larger sheet, 30.3 x 39.2 cm, has a larger preliminary version on the verso.)
- 29 *Untitled*, unsigned, undated, ink, 45.1 x 60.8 cm.
- 30 *Untitled*, unsigned, undated, ink, 45.5 x 60.9 cm.
- 31 *Untitled*, unsigned, undated, ink, 45.4 x 60.8 cm.
- 32 *Untitled*, unsigned, undated, ink and watercolour, 22.6 x 30.3 cm (irregular). (Drawing fragment, female figure on verso.)
- 33 *Untitled*, unsigned, undated, ink and watercolour, 30.3 x 22.6 cm. (Drawing fragment, female nude on verso.)
- 34 *Untitled*, unsigned, undated, ink and watercolour, 23 x 30.2 cm (irregular). (Drawing fragment, female figure on verso.)

Chronology

- 1909 Born, Medicine Hat, Alberta, February 10, 1909
- 1913 Moved to Vancouver
- 1927-32 Studied at the Vancouver School of Decorative and Applied Arts under Charles Scott, Frederick Varley and Jock Macdonald
- 1934 Appointed Instructor at Vancouver School of Art
- 1936 Studied at the University of Oregon, under Eugen Steinhof, on a Carnegie Scholarship
Married Jessie Isobel Binning, August 19, 1936
- 1938 Studied in London. Under Bernard Meninsky at the Central School of Art; under Mark Gertler at the Westminster School of Art; and under Amédée Ozenfant and Henry Moore at the Ozenfant Academy
- 1939 Studied under Morris Kantor at the Art Students' League, New York
- 1941 Won the Beatrice Stone Medal for Drawing
- 1944 Sold two drawings to the National Gallery of Canada
- 1949 Appointed Assistant Professor, School of Architecture, U.B.C.
- 1955 Appointed Associate Professor and Head, Department of Fine Arts, U.B.C.
- 1957 Awarded Canada Council Grant
- 1958 Travelled to Japan
- 1961 Appointed Professor
- 1962 Given the Allied Arts Award, Royal Architectural Institute of Canada
- 1963 Awarded Canada Council Senior Fellowship
- 1968 Resigned as Head, Department of Fine Arts
- 1971 Made an Officer of the Order of Canada
- 1973 Retrospective exhibition held, Fine Arts Gallery, U.B.C.
- 1974 Retired from U.B.C.
Awarded Doctor of Letters, U.B.C.
- 1976 Died, Vancouver, March 16, 1976

Selected Exhibitions

ONE MAN

- 1944 Vancouver Art Gallery
1946 Vancouver Art Gallery
Art Gallery of Toronto
1950 University of British Columbia Art Centre Gallery
1951 Dominion Gallery, Montreal
The Little Gallery, Ottawa
1954 Laing Galleries, Toronto
1955 Watson Art Galleries, Montreal
1961 Vancouver Art Gallery
Laing Galleries, Toronto
1970 Bau-Xi Gallery, Vancouver
1973 Fine Arts Gallery, University of British Columbia

TWO MAN

- 1951 Art Gallery of Toronto. *B. C. Binning-Stanley Cosgrove Exhibition*

GROUP

- 1946 Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. *The Exhibition of Canadian Graphic Arts*

- 1949 Art Gallery of Toronto. *Fifty Years of Painting in Canada*
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. *Forty Years of Canadian Painting*
1950 National Gallery of Art, Washington. *Canadian Painting*
(arranged by the National Gallery of Canada)
1951 Museu de Arte Moderna, Sao Paulo. *I Bienal do Museu de Arte Moderna de Sao Paulo*
1952 Department of Fine Arts, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh. *The 1952 Pittsburgh International Exhibition of Contemporary Painting*
1954 Venice. *XXVII Exposizione Biennale Internazionale D'Arte*
1957 National Gallery of Canada. *Contemporary Canadian Painters*
Milan. *Undicesima Triennale*
1958 Brussels. *Brussels International and Universal Exhibition: Canadian Pavilion*
Vancouver Art Gallery. *One-Hundred Years of B.C. Art*
Dallas Museum for Contemporary Arts. *A Canadian Portfolio*
1959 Wallraf-Richartz-Museum. *Zeitgenössische Kunst in Kanada*
1960 Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City. *Arte Canadiense*
1964 National Gallery of Canada. *7 Peintures de Vancouver*

- 1965 Art Gallery of Toronto. *Art and Engineering*
1967 National Gallery of Canada. *Three Hundred Years of Canadian Art*
National Gallery of Canada. *Canadian Painting 1850-1950*
Fine Arts Gallery, University of British Columbia. *Joy and Celebration*
1969 National Gallery of Canada. *The Simon Fraser Centennial Suite*
1978 the Gallery/Stratford. *Coasts, the Sea and Canadian Art*

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

- Dalhousie University Art Gallery, Halifax
Hart House, University of Toronto
National Gallery of Canada
Art Gallery of Ontario
Sarnia Public Library and Art Gallery
Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Mass.
Vancouver Art Gallery
University of Victoria

Selected Bibliography

(The material listed here deals primarily or exclusively with the drawings. For a more complete bibliography see that compiled by Doreen Walker in the catalogue of the 1973 retrospective exhibition.)

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"Coast to Coast in Art: West Coast, Vancouver: Drawings by B. C. Binning." *Canadian Art*, vol. I, no. 4, April-May 1944, pp. 169-70.
- 1946 Palette. "Boat Life on North Shore Theme of Gallery Display." *The Province* (Vancouver), February 21, 1946.
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- 1947 Binning, B. C. "The Teaching of Drawing" *Canadian Art*, vol. V, no. 1, Autumn 1947, pp. 20-23.
- 1949 Crawford, Lenore. "'Happy Art' Trademark of Binning." *The Morning Free Press* (London, Ontario), January 22, 1949.
Buchanan, Donald W. "Exponent of a New Architecture in Paint." *Canadian Art*, vol. VI, no. 4, Summer 1949, pp. 148-50.
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- 1973 Walker, Doreen. "Les Architectonies intenses de Binning." *Vie des Arts*, vol. XVIII, no. 72, Automne 1973, pp. 44-47 and 96-97.
- 1976 Woodcock, George. "The Business of Serious Joy, B. C. Binning, 1909-1976." *Artscanada*, vol. XXXIII, no. 1, April/May 1976, pp. 85-86.

BACK COVER:

Sailor Beware, unsigned, undated, pencil and crayon, 13.6 x 11.9 cm (irregular).