

# James Henderson

## Western Artist

**J**AMES HENDERSON was born in Glasgow in 1871 and died in Regina, Saskatchewan on July 5, 1951. Having lived for 80 years, Henderson left a lasting memorial — landscapes of the Qu'Appelle Valley which he loved so well and an historical legacy in the form of portraits of the Prairie Indian.

Born the son of a Scottish sea captain, James was expected to follow in the family tradition and — "Take to the sea". Instead, very early in life he showed signs of preferring a sketch pad, and in this choice his father was neither helpful nor sympathetic. To achieve his ambition, James served an apprenticeship as a lithographic artist in Glasgow for a term of seven years, and during this time he attended evening classes at the Glasgow School of Art. He then moved to London where he continued his training and became chief engraver for the firm with whom he was employed. He continued, however, to study and develop as an artist.

In 1909, James Henderson migrated to Canada, stopping in Winnipeg for a short period and then moving on to Regina, where he worked at different forms of commercial art. During this period he accepted commissions to paint portraits among some of which were: Mayor Robert Martin of Regina; The Hon. Hugh Richardson (who presided at the trial of Louis Riel in 1885); and Mr. Justice Brown, then of the Supreme Court of Saskatchewan and later Chief Justice of the Court of King's Bench.

Henderson visited the Qu'Appelle Valley area from time to time. The beauty of that part of the country so appealed to the artistic sense of this man that in 1916 Henderson and his wife moved to the valley establishing themselves in a little cottage on several acres of land and later building a studio on this property. And here he continued to live until his death.

Although the life of the artist was relatively uneventful, it was a satisfying one. He revealed the loveliness and beauty of the Qu'Appelle Valley in his canvases, showing it in all its moods. His Indian paintings, however, can be considered a priceless record because so much of the tradition and legend that formed the life and background of the Canadian Indian has gone from the scene. Henderson did not just paint Indian portraits. He made a serious study of the characters of the people, spending much time with the tribes on their reservations — the Cree, the Assiniboine, the Sioux. Knowing them so well, Henderson was able to paint them in varying moods — proud, defiant, wistful, often tragic, but with a touch of splendour. James Henderson was known to the Western Indians as 'Wiciteowapi Wicasa' — "The Man Who Paints Old Men". In 1927, The National Gallery of Canada invited him to exhibit his work at its annual exhibition of Canadian Art. The Gallery subsequently bought three of his works — two Indian Portraits and a landscape, 'Afternoon in the Coulee'.

The University of Saskatchewan honoured Henderson by conferring upon him an honorary degree of Doctor of Laws — in recognition of his contribution to the cultural life of the province. The degree was conferred in absentia because he was too frail to attend Convocation in May of 1951. His name was presented by Doctor



RED BREATH — Sioux portrait, c. 1920. Oil 30" x 24".

Gordon W. Snelgrove, Head of the Art Department and Professor of Art, who referred to him as the "dean of Saskatchewan artists . . . esteemed throughout Canada as a painter of the first rank".

Arthur Hayworth, in the Saskatchewan History, 1958 answers the question, What is Henderson's place in Canadian art? in the following excerpt: "His Indian portraits are an important part of Western history and they are also of permanent interest as works of consummate skill. His landscapes, faithful interpretations of nature with more than a touch of magic, are in the great tradition of the Canadian as well as the British and European nature-painters. In a country such as ours, where the love of nature is so deeply embedded in the minds of young and old, they will always have hosts of admirers. It may safely be predicted that this artist's name will stand high in the annals of Canadian art for many years to come."

—J. E. Climer