



**Art and soul:** Drawing kept Réal Fournier focused and sane during a lonely childhood spent moving between orphanages and foster homes

# Adding a new dimension to the art gallery

*Réal Fournier's curvy cottages and bendy people come alive with 3D glasses*

BLACK-FRAMED GLASSES ARE perched atop Réal Fournier's head as he sits before a painting at Calgary's Webster Galleries. Fournier, 59, doesn't need the gawky Chromatek glasses to see, but rather to visualize. In a world where 3D is featured mainly on screens, Fournier, after decades of effort, brings extraordinary depth to canvases with nothing more than oil paint and brushes.

Even before he shifted to his "multi-dimensional" works five years ago, Fournier's paintings stood out. Brimming with intense colour and whimsy, they often depict scenes of snowy Quebec villages populated by kids tobogganing, skating or playing hockey. His simple, curvy cottages, bendy people and wobbly trees seem like meltingly tender remembrances of a tranquil childhood, even though his was far from idyllic. Webster Galleries has sold more than 1,000 Fourniers since 1992, and they command anywhere from \$1,000 to \$12,000 for the largest works.

A few galleries spurned his approach as gimmicky. John Webster, who has owned the gallery since 1979, bristles at that. "You'll always have purists and stuck-in-the-muds who want to pooh-pooh something. We ignore all that because the marketplace is saying, 'Yes, we love this stuff.'"

Any painting or image with strongly contrasting colours, especially blues, greens, reds and yellows, will have some elements advance or recede when viewed with the 3D glasses, but the effect is chaotic. Background objects float disconcertingly ahead of fore-

ground ones. It took 25 years, but Fournier brought order to the technique of painting in three dimensions by experimenting with sunlight refracted through a prism onto different-coloured papers. When he passed a red beam over pastel green paper, "whoop, it pops inside," he says, explaining how the light appeared to sink below the paper's surface. "Then I bring the red [light] over a green dark paper, it pops outside." To develop the technique, Fournier measured how much the light beamed through the prism came forward or receded with different-coloured paper. He can now create up to 21 layers in his paintings.

Calgary financial adviser Darren Heywood purchased six Fourniers in the past year. Though each came with 3D glasses, Heywood seldom uses them. "It's not really the 3D thing that is why we purchased them," he says. "I find his painting very colourful, very lively. I find myself actually staring into them, sometimes at work, sometimes at home. And there's always something different I see in them."

One element often present is a palpable childlike joy. Yet Fournier had a lonely upbringing after his birth in Victoriaville, Que.: his mother suffered severe postpartum depression and he was moved from relatives' homes to foster care to orphanages. At 8, he was

impressed by another boy he met at the Nicolet orphanage near Trois-Rivières. "If I am a painter now, it's because what I was seeing him doing was just amazing," says Fournier, who watched the child draw pictures from memory. "So it stimulated me to be better in my own drawing." Drawing pretty much kept him from going crazy. "It was a pretty tough time. You feel very alone. But it's a gift at the same time if you are able to find something that opens your spirit to a new world."

After becoming a teacher in the Témiscaming area, he traded job security for art in 1988, living off his pension, the sale of his house and partner Linda Gaudet's print-shop job. Nearly broke, he got a lucky break when a contractor

showed his works to Webster in Calgary. "I was thinking, 'Hmm, who is this [Fournier] guy?'" says Webster. "I'm not sure if good ol' cowboy Calgary is going to even like these things." It wasn't until Webster put the paintings

in the front window that they began to sell. In 1996, Webster invited Fournier and Gaudet to live above the gallery. Now his paintings are a prominent feature in the 10,000 sq.-foot space.

So why did a Quebecer's work take off in Alberta? Fournier has "a certain positive spiritual aspect to himself that people link up to," says Webster. And you don't need 3D glasses for that. **ANTHONY A. DAVIS**

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