

Robert Fulford: Britain's wartime goof was a gift to Canadian art

Perhaps the biggest surprise in Oscar Cahén's life was when Britain arrested him as an 'enemy alien,' imprisoned him, then shipped him to Quebec



Renowned Canadian artist Oscar Cahén, one of the leaders of the Painters Eleven, came to Canada only because Britain had him arrested during the Second World War and shipped to an internment camp in Sherbrooke, Que. *Getty Images*



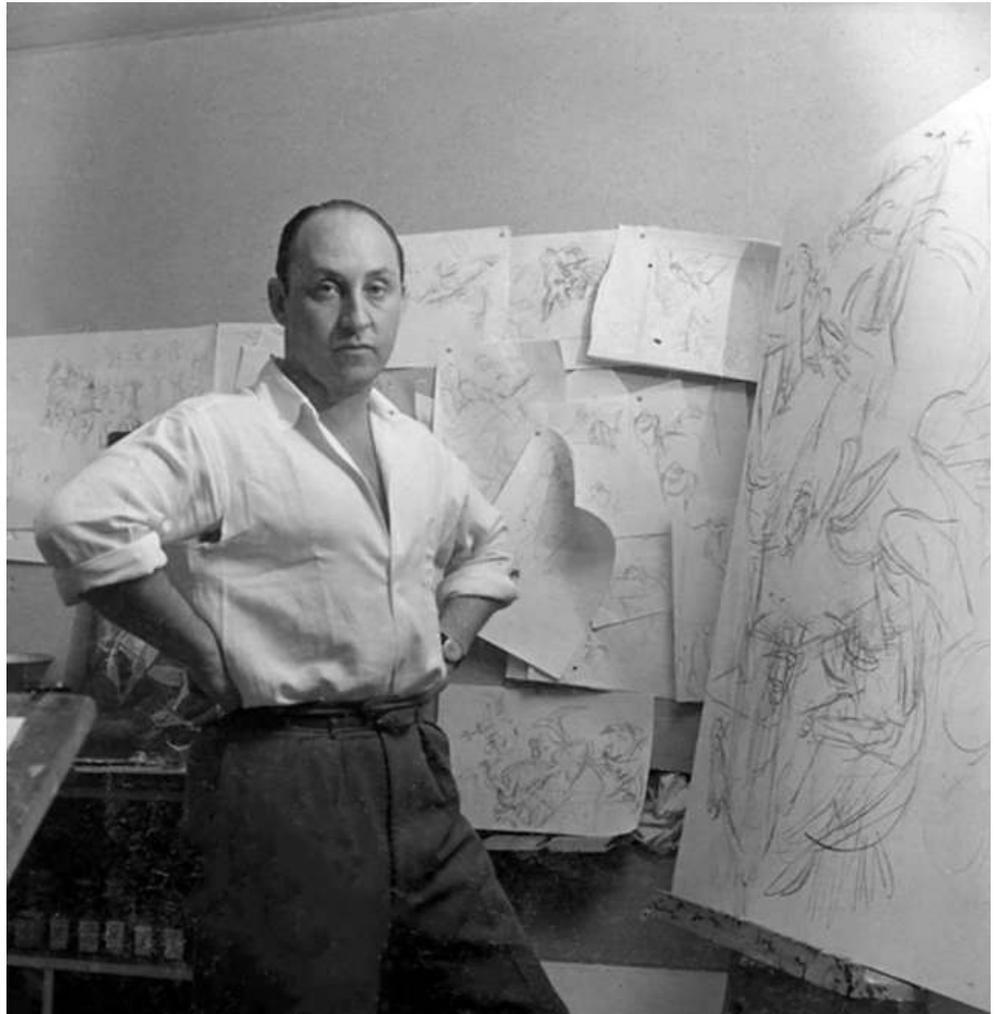
ROBERT FULFORD

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There were plenty of surprises in the life of Oscar Cahén, the much-admired artist. As a newcomer from Europe he surprised the Toronto art community by the way he developed as a painter — developed so well that he helped lead Painters Eleven, the rebellious Toronto group that brought the exuberance of abstract art to Canada in the 1950s.

He also surprised the professionals when his talent for magazine illustration quickly made him the star contributor to Maclean's magazine. Light-hearted illustration became his day job, supporting his more adventurous painting.

But the biggest surprise in his life was the time when Britain arrested him as an "enemy alien" and imprisoned him. It was a bureaucratic mistake from which he and many others suffered. It was also one of the more bizarre incidents in Canadian history.



Canadian artist Oscar Cahén is seen in an undated photo. *Page Toles/The Cahén Archives*

In the early stages of the Second World War, the British government decided to intern all German males living in Britain, on the grounds that they could be dangerous if Hitler's troops invaded. So the police, following orders, rounded up hundreds of them.

Cahén, born in Copenhagen, was treated as a German because that was the nationality of his parents. So he found himself headed for a prisoner-of-war camp. There were many Germans in England but a high proportion of them were also Jews, including Cahén, all doing their best to evade the Jew-hating Nazis. They found it ironic that they of all people were suspected of an affinity for Hitler's Germany.

Bureaucracy could not be denied. The British arranged to have 80 of their prisoners, including Cahén, crammed into a ship bound for Canada. They were interned in Sherbrooke, Que., in a factory converted to bunk-beds barracks. Their Canadian captors were sympathetic and a visiting British official persuaded the Canadian government that the internment was unwarranted. They could be released, providing they had a place to go. Most of them eventually chose to stay in Canada — Emil Fackenheim, philosopher and rabbi; Gregory Baum, theologian; Helmut Blume, later head of music at McGill University; Max Stern, Montreal art dealer; Erwin Schild, rabbi at Toronto's Adath Israel Synagogue.



A Maclean's magazine cover from 1952 illustrated by Oscar Cahén. *Art Institute of Canada*

Some of them remained interned for about three years, out of touch with their families and worried about them. The whole process could have been traumatic, and sometimes it was, but it was also educational. Eric Koch, later a CBC executive and a prolific author, told an interviewer: "It was a hugely important phase in my life. We were together with people who were extraordinarily erudite and good teachers, and one could spend time with them under conditions that were favourable to learning."

Classes were improvised. Some internees served as teachers, some as students, some as both. Edgar Lion, a 20-year-old engineering student, taught geometry to Peter Oberlander, who later became a renowned

architect in Vancouver. In the 1980s, Koch wrote a book, *Deemed Suspect: A Wartime Blunder*, describing the causes and effects of this monumental goof.



An abstract by celebrated Canadian artist Oscar Cahén. *Art Galley of Ontario/Twitter*

Jaleen Grove, in her sensitive text for a recent book, *Oscar Cahén: Life & Work* (Art Canada Institute), explains how he left the barracks earlier than most. A journalist, Beatrice Shapiro (later Fischer), interviewed him and made connections for him in Montreal. Soon he was working for the *Montreal Standard* and an advertising firm. From there he went to Toronto as art editor for *Magazine Digest*. His illustrations were winning prizes and his paintings were attracting attention.

His career was brilliant, though tragically short. In 1956, at age 40, he died in a car accident. The book about him is intended to revive a reputation that's grown dim. Sponsored by his son, Michael, and dedicated "This book is for you, Dad," it's superbly produced and wonderfully complete — a fitting tribute to a talent that flowered briefly, then was suddenly gone.