

Letters to Canada: Jack Chambers' Correspondence with Charles Greenshields, 1955-1962

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Article abstract

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TOM SMART, THE BEAVERBROOK ART GALLERY

Résumé

Les lettres qu'écrivit l'artiste canadien, Jack Chambers, à Charles Greenshields de Montréal, lors de son séjour en Espagne et en Angleterre, entre 1955 et 1957, rendent compte de ses deux années consacrées à l'étude des Beaux-Arts. Elles témoignent des idées que développait Chambers quand à la relation entre l'intention de l'artiste et sa maîtrise technique. Pour décrire la création artistique, Chambers avait recours à la métaphore d'une graine qui,

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Jack Chambers writes that while living in Spain in the 1950s he “underwent a series of births.”¹ He matured as a young man and developed as an art student, becoming proficient in the technical dimensions of his studies at the Escuela Central de Bellas Artes de San Fernando in Madrid. The letters and photographs, sent from Spain and England to Montreal lawyer and art patron Charles Greenshields, present a first-person account of his studies and illuminate a little-known episode in the history of art patronage in Canada (Figs. 1-7).² They reveal Chambers' attempts to synthesize his ideas about art and express them in writing to Greenshields, whose own convictions about art led him to establish the Elizabeth T. Greenshields Memorial Foundation in 1955.

Like many conservative Montrealers of the early 1950s, Greenshields was incensed with the growing popular and critical acceptance of abstraction and in 1955 added his voice to a mounting cry for its removal from galleries in the city.³ His Foundation was a product of the Cold War belief that continuance of a democratic Western society depended on the preservation of its institutions. In relation to art, Greenshields felt that naturalism should not be abandoned to abstraction. Those whom he called “moderns”—non-figurative and abstract artists—were interrupting continuity in the development of “traditional” art, whose antecedents were the “Old Masters.”⁴ In his opinion, the moderns lacked even a rudimentary knowledge of craft and were seeking to “uproot and demolish” tradition.⁵ He was suspicious of the acceptance of abstraction, believing that it was subversive and symptomatic of a threat to political structures; the danger it posed was analogous to that of “our opponents in the wider world sphere of clashing ideologies . . . [where] the destruction of old established standards has been their first step toward the attainment of their evil ends.”⁶ The reason for creating his Foundation was to counteract abstraction by making it possible for young art students to learn to paint and draw in a non-

abstract manner.⁷ He seems not to have been responding to a particular exhibition, artist or manifesto, but rather to what he perceived as the erosion of artistic standards and society exemplified in the acceptance of abstract art.

Greenshields was not alone. His opinions were influenced by published attacks on American abstract art and art criticism by Huntington Hartford and Max Eastman. He read and later ordered a large quantity of offprints of Hartford's “The Public Be Damned?”, first published as an advertisement in six New York City daily papers on May 16, 1955, and Eastman's “Non-Communicative Art.”⁸ Both Eastman and Hartford charged that the validation of abstraction by American art critics in the early 1950s did not reflect popular consensus. For Hartford, abstraction was infected with “diseases” of obscurity, confusion, immorality and violence; the “germ” of abstraction, he felt, was creating an environment in the United States that potentially could lead to dictatorship.⁹

While not using the same metaphor to describe abstraction, Eastman believed that the lack of “intelligible communication” in painting and art criticism signified the surrender of “mental and moral integrity to crude primitive and unilluminated states of passion which threatens [*sic*] our whole Graeco-Christian civilization with ruin.”¹⁰ As with Hartford and Eastman, Greenshields also called for a return to recognizable subject matter in art and clarity in art criticism, which he substantiated through the establishment of the Foundation in May 1955.¹¹

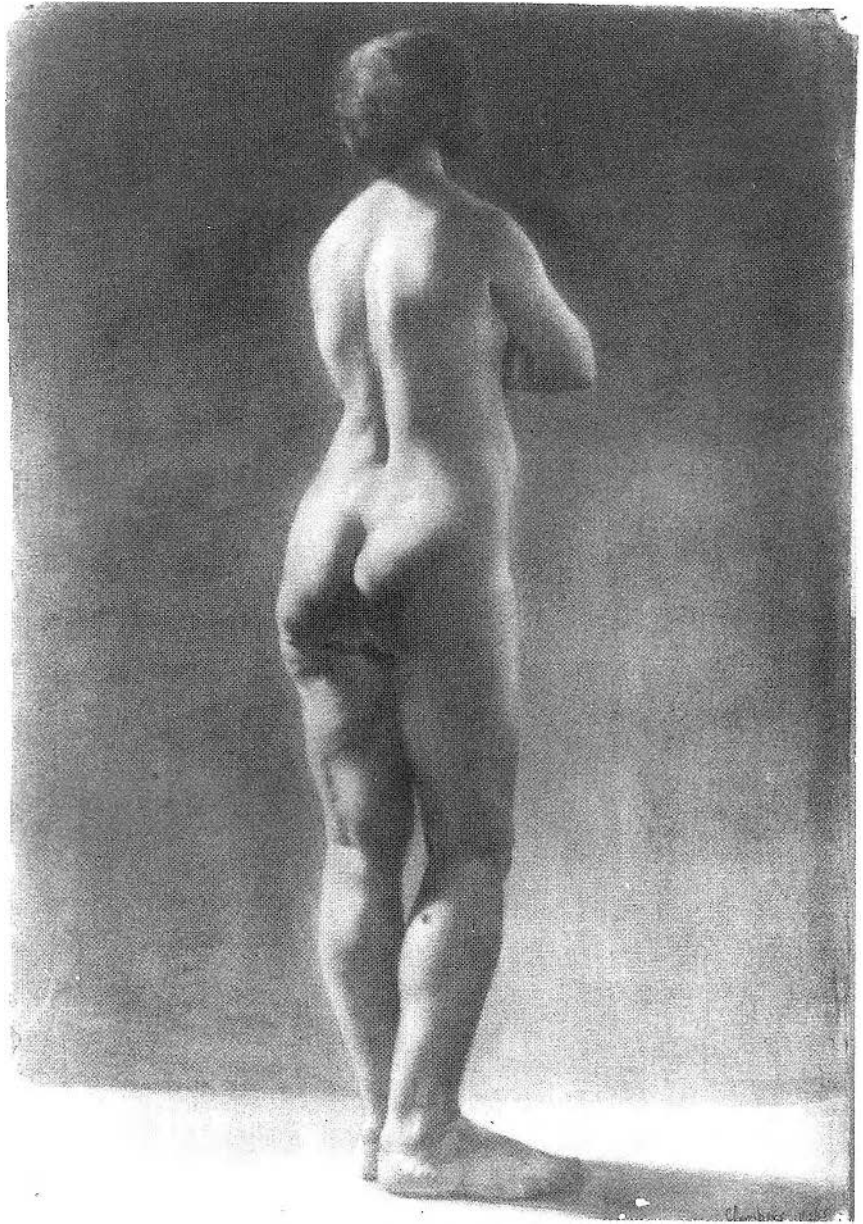
After reading of the establishment of the Foundation in *The Times* of London in 1955, Chambers wrote to Greenshields from Spain what is certainly a carefully crafted epistle to appeal to the Montrealer's tastes in art. Greenshields was a patron offering funds and, as an impecunious art student, Chambers did not let pass the opportunity to relieve his burdensome financial worries. The opening sentences of Chambers' first letter to Greenshields show that he was aware of Greenshields' position. He writes that he

Figure 1. Figure study, drawing, 100.0 x 70.0 cm. Signed and dated brc.: Chambers 17/12/55. Location unknown.

too felt "that the humiliation put on classic art by 'modernism' must be remedied"; in applying to Greenshields for a grant, he asked for help in his "own opposition to it."¹² In tailoring his letter to convince the lawyer that he was eligible for a grant, Chambers went on to describe the art historical tradition in which he saw himself as one in which Velázquez represented "the high-watermark of painting of anytime."¹³

Behind Greenshields' stridency and Chambers' opportunism lay entirely different grounds for considering abstraction suspect. Chambers' decision to leave London, Ontario for Europe in search of artistic training, a quest that eventually led him to Spain and the Escuela, was motivated by the wish for a more rigorous curriculum than he believed was available in Canada.¹⁴ His ambition was to gain technical competency in artistic disciplines based on drawing, painting and sculpting, proficiency with the figure and with landscape, and with technical processes which would provide a foundation for sustained development as an artist. It was an artistic grammar he sought; fluent expression and virtuosity would follow after mastering its rules.¹⁵

Chambers' training at the Escuela was fundamentally directed toward developing a facility with the conventions of naturalism. After successfully completing the compulsory entrance examination at the Valencia campus of the Escuela in September 1954, Chambers transferred his enrolment to Madrid and entered a preparatory course at the Escuela (Curso Preparatorio, 1954-55).¹⁶ Its curriculum included classes in drawing from plaster casts of antique sculpture and drapery studies, and he took preliminary courses in sculptural modelling and colour. His proficiency in clay modelling earned him first-class standing and an exemption from paying tuition in the sculpture class the following year.¹⁷ Based on Chambers' descriptions of the work he was expected to do in the studios and his assurance that he would remain a student for two years,¹⁸ Greenshields concluded that Chambers was "making a real effort to master the fundamentals of [his] craft," and he was awarded one of the first grants from the Foundation in



September, 1955 — a one-year grant — in order that he might "proceed with [his work] with a free mind" during the Primer Curso (1955-56).¹⁹ Chambers' only obligations were to keep Greenshields informed by letter of his progress at the Escuela, to submit photographs of his recent student exercises, and not to turn his hand to abstraction.²⁰

Chambers' studies that year (Primer Curso, 1955-56) consisted of drawing the figure from life, anatomy, colour, and a course given by Professor Ramon Stolz on pictorial processes and painters' materials.²¹ Photographs of Chambers' figure studies sent to Greenshields show a sensitivity in modelling tones and creating chiaroscuro effects, as well as an un-

Figure 2. Figure study, drawing, 100.0 x 70.0 cm. Not signed nor dated. Location unknown.



derstanding of proportion and musculature (Figs. 1-2). In spite of difficulties in drawing and painting the figure — “my big problem,” he writes, “is in working with masses and losing the timidity in me which looks for details and secondary problems in relation to what is important for the drawing” — Chambers assured Greenshields that he was able to overcome the technical challenges.²²

In the studio of Ramon Stolz that year, Chambers was encouraged to experiment with textures and materials in painting grounds in a manner similar to that practised by Spanish artists then gaining international attention.²³ Most notable among them were Antoni Tàpies (b.1923), Joan-

Josep Tharrats (b.1918) and Modest Quixart (b.1925), practitioners of abstraction and *art informel* who called for artistic freedom unrestricted by academic conventions.²⁴ Their use of painting materials to modify processes of preparing grounds exerted a pervasive influence throughout Spain and was felt within the Escuela in Stolz's studio. In Madrid, Chambers was also influenced by the paintings of Francisco Lozano Sanchis (b.1912); those of his friend, Antonio López García, a student at the Escuela; and students in Stolz's studio among them Alfonso Cuni of Barcelona, who was then experimenting with textured painting grounds using marble dust and rabbit skin glue.²⁵

After completing the first year in May 1956, Chambers travelled to Clare in Suffolk, England. There he met Henry Moore, Graham Sutherland, Michael Ayrton and John Nash, who were living in the area.²⁶ The summer in England allowed him the opportunity to paint from the Suffolk landscape (Fig. 3), work on portrait commissions (Fig. 4), and to reflect upon his studies in Spain. At the end of the summer, Chambers wrote to Greenshields that he had completed some thirty-two paintings and drawings that were included in an exhibition that featured the work of Moore, Sutherland and Ayrton.²⁷ Chambers' earnings from sales of paintings and portrait commissions over the summer were augmented by a grant from Greenshields, not the Foundation, in the fall of 1956. As a conse-

quence, he continued to write to his benefactor throughout his second year (Segundo Curso, 1956-57).

Unlike the letters of the previous year, these reveal a more confident attitude by Chambers, though they are written in an introspective voice. Chambers describes his views concerning the relationship between the method of drawing he was learning and organic growth. To create a drawing or painting by describing overall rhythms and balancing masses and volume before laying in details was, in Chambers' eyes, a process analogous to the growth of a plant. He expressed this theory by using the metaphor of a seed: as the life of a seed is the miraculous course by which a flower

Figure 3. Landscape, painting, 55.8 x 71.1 cm. Signed and dated b.l.c.: Chambers 7-56. Location unknown.



grows to maturity, so the idea is the vital core of a work of art. He writes:

Simplification gives the work boldness and unity and is an essential beginning because a painting is also developed in the natural sequence of any creative act: — unity and vigour as a body for subtlety and detail. If the development of a thing is always in the same sequence: — life or seed, shoot, sapling, tree; then it has leaves and branches and birds and nests on the branches also; but all these details are “attracted” after the tree is up and none of the details in any way of their own go into the “making” of it. Then natural sequence is a law of nature. And the same natural law in humans is imitated in everything they do. So in a painting the same rule should hold true.

The vigour and constructive vision (that is having a sensitive eye for sighting rhythm and balance) is ... the “life-in-seed” of the intended growth of a work (al-

though these, as a primary creative quality, must be ethical products conceived, realized and developed in the painter himself firstly, before he can imitate them) . . . But if [the artist] hasn't the technical vocabulary . . . he won't be able to imitate his “vision” properly . . . [or] satisfy his strength . . . The more an artist concerns himself with the “life-in-seed” of his work . . . the [more the] work will of itself, like a tree, attract the realness of details.²⁸

By the end of the second year, Chambers had come to realize that artistic creation was an intellectual as well as a technical exercise. Proficiency with technique was subordinated to the expression of an inner vision; it was an important resource, but one secondary to the creative process.

Although the correspondence stopped in the spring of 1957, Chambers remained at the Escuela until 1959. Following his graduation, he practised as an artist in Spain.

Figure 4. Portrait study, painting, 55.8 x 43.2 cm. Signed and dated blc.: Chambers 56. Location unknown.



After returning to Canada in April 1961, he radically altered his approach to painting and based it on an adaptation of the pictorial process that he had learned from Stolz and on the metaphor of organic growth.²⁹

In his autobiography Chambers describes the two-part painting process of works like *Slaughter of the Lamb* (Fig. 8) and *The Artist's First Bride* (Fig. 9) as beginning with the creation of a textured surface in a manner similar to that taught by Stolz.³⁰ Although in essence this process was similar to an Automatist method used by Miró,³¹ Chambers never fully embraced it as a means of unrestricted expression of the unconscious. Rather, he felt compelled to structure consciously what appear to be randomly applied colours of the paint surface by describing figurative or allusive forms. Chambers writes that after an initial coating of marble dust and glue was dry, he adjusted the relief surface with sandpaper before covering it with gesso. Before this second layer was completely dry, he spilled a thinned enamel house paint which he allowed to spread uncontrolled over the surface as he tilted the support. These steps were repeated un-

til he felt that the colour areas could be "interrogated," a process in which he emphasized forms, strengthening or reducing colours and shapes until images were developed from the "selected chaos of the spattered surface."³²

This process of painting, in which figures and grounds are integrally related, formed Chambers' painting method from 1961 through 1963. Paintings such as *Shepherds* of 1963 contain jarring displacements of figures and religious imagery, juxtapositions of figures and animals, disparate in scale, set within and against the landscape seen from various points of view. In *The Artist's First Bride* (Fig. 9), figuration appears both as part of the ground, yet distinct from it, as if the imagery had grown from the ground, but remains an intimate part of it; its origin in the "chaos" is compellingly evident.

The seed metaphor deployed in Chambers' letters and the definition of imagery in his two-part painting process have a shared basis in the metaphor of organic growth. The concept of the growth of a work of art from an idea to its finished form is common both to his written statement and the process he used. It was to clarify for himself the creative process, and perhaps also for Greenshields, that he chose the metaphor of a seed and several years later discovered its visual analogue in a painting process. But although metaphor and method have a congruency, Chambers was not painting in the 1960s in the manner he professed in his letters in the 1950s.

Chambers' correspondence with Greenshields resumed briefly in 1962 when Greenshields wrote enquiring about the possibility of purchasing a painting for the Foundation's art collection.³³ He must not have known about the changed relation to figuration that Chambers had developed in his painting. Its basis in abstraction was anathema to Greenshields whose preferences in art remained unchanged. His polite refusal of four paintings comes as no surprise.³⁴

1 Ross G. Woodman, *Chambers: John Chambers interviewed by Ross G. Woodman* (Toronto, 1967), 5.

2 Chambers writes of his Spanish years in his autobiography, *Jack Chambers* (London, 1978), 53-60 (hereafter cited as *Chambers*); and gives his impressions of Spain and his art education there in Woodman, *Chambers*; A contemporary assessment of his Spanish work is published in Luis Trabazo, *John Chambers* (Madrid, 1961). The present article is distilled from my M.Phil. thesis, "The Landscapes of John Richard Chambers, 1953-1978," Uni-

Figure 5. *Second Last Painting*, 1956, painting, 71.1 x 91.4 cm. Signed and dated br.: Chambers 56. Location unknown.



versity of Toronto, 1986, written under the supervision of Dennis Reid. I also wish to acknowledge the assistance of Dr. J. L. Barrio-Garay; Judith Rodger; and am grateful to Dr. D. G. Mackay, Chairman of The Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation, Montreal, for permission to use material in the Foundation's files and to publish the photographs. I would also like to express my appreciation to John and Diego Chambers for their permission to reproduce photographs of their father's work. The Canada Council and the Ontario Arts Council provided funding for research.

3 For brief summaries of the contemporary artistic milieu in Montreal, refer to: François-Marc Gagnon, "Quebec Painting 1953-'56: A Turning Point," *artscanada*, XXX, (February/March 1973), 48-50 and Dennis Reid, *A Concise History of Canadian Painting* (Toronto, 1974), 218-237. Greenshields' bias was shared by others, for example by Gérard Pelletier, who some eight years earlier publicly criticized abstract art in Montreal.

4 Charles G. Greenshields, *The Elizabeth T. Greenshields Memorial Foundation: Charter and Letter of Gift* (Montreal, 1955), 9, 12-13. Hereafter cited as *Letter of Gift*.

5 *Letter of Gift*, 13.

6 *Letter of Gift*, 13.

7 *Letter of Gift*, 15. Greenshields writes: "I am constrained to exclude specifically any grants to students, artists or sculptors who show clearly a disposition to use the purely abstract or non-objective method in their work without having first mastered the traditional means of artistic expression."

8 Huntington Hartford's "The Public Be Damned?" (New York, 1955), was first published as an advertisement in six New York City daily papers, May 16, 1955; revised and re-published in, Hartford, *Art or Anarchy? How the Extremists and Exploiters Have Reduced the Fine Arts to Chaos and Commercialism* (New York, 1964), 3-22. Max Eastman's "Non-Communicative Art," appeared in *The Freeman* (May 3, 1954), unpaginated.

9 "Public Be Damned?", Hartford continued: "I believe the diseases which infect the world of painting today — of obscurity, confusion, immorality, violence — are not confined either to this single art or even to the arts in general. These are the diseases which, if the disaster of dictatorship ever overtakes our fair country, will be a major cause of it, and since the germs exist in a pure, unadulterated form in the realm of painting (as if they had been isolated and placed on a warm, moist canvas to multiply) I suggest . . . that it is time . . . [we] do something

Figure 6. *Still Life*, drawing, 116.0 x 90.0 cm. Signed trc.: Chambers. Location unknown.

about it! . . . form your own opinions concerning art. Don't be afraid to disagree — loudly, if necessary, with the critics.”

- 10 “Non-Communicative Art,” n.p.
- 11 *Letter of Gift*.
- 12 Jack Chambers, Letter to Charles Greenshields, June 30, 1955, Chambers Correspondence, The Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation, Montreal, Quebec.
- 13 Letter of June 30, 1955 to Greenshields.
- 14 Chambers found the creative opportunities in London to be limited. Following the example of many Canadian artists, Chambers travelled in 1950 to Mexico City where he registered in the evening school of the Escuela de Bellas Artes. His disappointment with its level of instruction prompted him to return to London shortly thereafter.
- 15 In Chambers' application to the Greenshields Foundation, 1955, he writes, “I intend to complete the official course here at the Bellas Artes in Madrid . . . The reason I have chosen this program is for the disciplinary academic training which work at the school offers in preparing myself as an artist. My ambition as a student is to . . . become technically competent to serve the degree to which I would continuously develop as an artist, and that to my mind will require much work and study.”
- 16 Information from Chambers' transcript, now in the files at the Facultad de Bellas Artes, Universidad Complutense de Madrid.
- 17 Chambers Correspondence, The Canadian Embassy in Madrid, to Charles Greenshields forwarding the testimony of Andres Crespi Jaume, September 7, 1955.
- 18 In his letter of July 13, 1955 to Greenshields, Chambers writes: “The school will be open again in October and I shall be studying the following classes: portrait painting for three hours each day; a one-hour class of the preparation of paints and canvas (a sort of biology of color and their effects on one another); a two-hour study of anatomy; and finally a two-hour class of figure drawing from 7-9 in the evening.
 “When school ends in May I shall spend the summer copying at the Prado and drawing sculpture and life models.
 “The second year course is something the same as the first and preparatory courses. The day begins with a three-hour painting class, an afternoon class of either engraving, perspective, mural painting, restoration, history of art and auxiliary studies [such] as these, and a two-hour drawing class in the evening.



The second year painting class is with the figure and the drawing class is a composition of two figures (generally drawn in life-size)...

“That summer will also be spent copying in the Prado and drawing and painting the figure.

“This in some detail is my plan for the next two years at least.”

- 19 Greenshields, Letters to Chambers, July 4, 1955; and September 13, 1955, The Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation. The sequence of successful applicants in the first year of the Foundation is not entirely clear. In a letter dated October 8, 1970, Greenshields writes to Chambers stating: “The original grant which was made to you . . . was actually the first one made by the Foundation. . .” Records at the Foundation offices indicate that in 1955 John Fox and Claude Picher received grants in ad-

Figure 7. Figure Study, painting, 100.0 x 81.0 cm. Not signed nor dated. Location unknown.



- dition to Chambers. Yet Fox recalls that he received his grant from the Foundation in the summer, 1955: \$150 a month for two years which allowed him to leave for Europe on October 14, 1955. Stanley Lewis received the first of his three annual grants in 1956.
- 20 A requirement of the first application Chambers made to the Foundation was that he submit five photographs of recent work and a photograph of himself. Those of his work were to include a figure painting, a drawing of the nude figure, a "composition," a landscape and another work of any subject (Application to the Foundation, 1955, in accordance with #16). He continued to submit photographs through 1957.
- 21 The text for the last was Max Doerner's *The Materials of the Artist and Their Use in Painting with notes on the Techniques of Old Masters* (New York, 1934). Chambers refers to this book in a letter to Greenshields, September 30, 1956. I am grateful to Dr. J. L. Barrio-Garay, a former student at the Escuela one year ahead of Chambers, for kindly providing this information.
- 22 Chambers, Letter to Greenshields, November 3, 1955, The Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation.
- 23 I am grateful to Dr. J. L. Barrio-Garay for providing this information.
- 24 In lectures given at the Santander Summer University in 1955, Tàpies defended the imaginative use of materials and processes to allow the free expression of the unconscious. He proposed that his theory was an alternative to the contemporary academic practices taught in Spanish art schools, including the Escuela Central de Bellas Artes de San Fernando. Refer to Antoni Tàpies, "La Vocació i la Forma," *La Pràctica de l'Art* (Barcelona: Edicions Ariel, 1970), 19-28; and José Barrio-Garay, *Antoni Tàpies: Thirty-three Years of His Work* (Buffalo, 1977).
- 25 Alfonso Cuni was developing processes of preparing coloured grounds on wooden panel supports as described in Doerner, *Materials of the Artist*, 29-31, 37-42.
- 26 Chambers, 74. Chambers lived in Clare, Suffolk from June 1956 until at least the end of September 1956.
- 27 Chambers, 76. The exhibition is reported in, "200 Works of Art on Show: Notable Exhibition at Stoke-by-Clare," *East Anglian Daily Times* (September 1, 1956), in which Chambers is mentioned as one of the many exhibitors.

- 28 Chambers, Letter to Greenshields, September 30, 1956, The Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation.
- 29 Chambers, 88.
- 30 Chambers, 88.
- 31 James Johnson Sweeney, "Joan Miró: Comment and Interview," *Partisan Review*, XV (February, 1948), 212. Miró describes his process as in "the first stage free, unconscious, but after that the picture is controlled throughout in keeping with that desire for disciplined work I have felt from the beginning."
- 32 Chambers, 93, 133-137.
- 33 Greenshields, Letter to Chambers, January 15, 1962, The Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation.
- 34 Greenshields did however purchase an untitled landscape of Chinchon, dated 1959.

Figure 8. *Slaughter of the Lamb*, 1961, oil on wood, 82.6 X 167.6 cm. Private collection.



Figure 9. *The Artist's First Bride*, 1961, oil on wood panel, 81.3 X 88.4 cm. Collection of the London Regional Art and Historical Museums. Purchased with assistance of a Wintario Grant, 1979

