



Artist James Simpkins laughs after getting caught using the wrong end of a paint brush while being photographed.
Photos by John Rennison, The Spectator

Jasper's creator

James Simpkins' lovable bear became a Canadian darling after it was introduced in Maclean's magazine in 1949. Half a century later, the artist lives in Dundas and is thinking about taking art lessons.



By SUZANNE BOURRET
The Spectator

A late afternoon sun casts shadows over the wall behind James (Jim) Simpkins' bed in his studio apartment. One shadow shows the profile of a famous Canadian bear reflected by one of the many toy figures standing on the nearby window shelf.

Jasper the cartoon bear, it seems, has been in hibernation in Dundas.

But, just like Warton Willy, another Canadian icon, Jasper has come back to life this February to let everyone know he's still bearing his grin.

Simpkins, the creator of the large, lovable bear with the goofy face who became a national pet after he was introduced by Maclean's magazine in 1948, moved to Bertram Place, a Dundas retirement centre, nearly two years ago. He's near his wife, Ethel, who is a resident at St. Joseph's Villa, and his daughter, Sandra Boyle, who lives in Dundas with her family.

Walking into his small studio apartment where his bed and drawing board are only a few feet apart under two large, bright windows, is like taking a walk down old cartoon alley.

Children's books about Jasper are scattered here and there. There are Jasper cartoon pocketbooks, Jasper toy figures by Irwin Toys and Jasper postcards.

Two Jasper frisbees hang on one wall and others are hung with Jasper pictures — three Maclean's magazine covers from the mid-1950s, a big poster of a young Pierre Trudeau with Jasper in costume and one of Simpkins, who looks like a young version of Walt Disney, with Jasper. The Jasper cover he did for The Montrealer in 1962 has a New Yorker look to it and there's even a little auto history — the big cartoon ad that appeared in the Toronto Star and the Toronto Sun of Jasper with his two cubs comically advertising Vega, a Chevrolet that came out one year and died the next.

Simpkins is not about to let anyone forget about Jasper. There are a couple of cartoons under the title of The Monthly Chuckle taped to the elevator wall of the retirement home.

Earlier pictures of Simpkins shows him with the rakish look of a David Niven in a crisp shirt with pointed collar and ascot. Even now at 89, he still has the look of an artist with his beige cords and neatly cropped Van Dyke beard. His eyes are

bright, his step is light and his spirit is as lively as his humour. He walks around Dundas stopping for a morning coffee and is a regular at the library where he gets children's books because of their wonderful illustrations.

He often walks from the retirement home on Hatt Street up to the Villa a couple of times a week to visit his wife.

"He is phenomenal for his age, both mentally and physically," says Lynn Upson, Bertram Place administrator.

And he still draws and plots cartoon ideas.

"I've got one idea for The New Yorker. I want to get back in the stream of things. If you're a cartoonist and you have all your faculties, there's no reason why you should quit."

Simpkins works away at his drawing board anytime he gets an idea.

"I jot it down so I won't forget it."

"Sometimes I get ideas so fast that the next one is crowding in on it."

JASPER continued: E4

Miniature Jaspers produced by Irwin Toys and a fan line the window in James Simpkins' room.



James Simpkins keeps some of his artwork displayed at the entrance to his Bertram Place Retirement Centre apartment. Right: A Maclean's cover features Jasper.

