by Greg Clarke

Art director Bob Hackborn is a pioneer. And although the image of a pioneer seems somewhat incongruous in the '80s, the era of the re-decade where most everything seems compiled from fragments of the past, Hackborn is the real McCoy – someone who was there at the start of Canadian television and is still plying his trade.

One wouldn’t know it by looking at the expertly classic work he’s done for Donald Brittain’s forthcoming The King Chronicle but Hackborn is someone who has experimented widely within the television medium since the very beginning. In Hackborn’s case, the beginning was in the mid-'50s when he came to the infant CBC after graduating from the Ontario College of Art. “Going into scenic design seemed like a natural step,” he says, looking back on the early days of Canadian television. “Nobody else was doing it. At the time, the environment at the CBC was both highly creative and experimental because no one knew what they wanted. We ended up developing styles which were unique to television.”

Hackborn and his associates based their work on a myriad of influences. “We were young artists working in television for the first time,” he remembers. “At first, we tried to do things like on American television. Dramatic shows, for example, were quite traditional in their use of period settings, but I think we became quite bold very quickly and our variety programs became more and more imaginative. Nicolai Soloviov, a Russian who had worked with Eisenstein on Alexander Nevsky, was working at the CBC then. It’s like a direct line. It really appeals to the romantic side in me.”

After 30 years, it wouldn’t be surprising to see that romantic edge wear off and be replaced with pragmatism and cynicism: traits which too often seep into one’s outlook after so many years in the business (in any business, for that matter). But Hackborn still approaches his work with a great deal of freshness and enthusiasm. “Things have changed a lot here over the last 30 years. Often for the better, sometimes not. I’ll always appreciate the wide variety of work available at CBC. I’ll do drama, children’s shows, even news. It’s all very interesting – you’re not necessarily categorized or slotted.”

Perhaps the most striking characteristics of his work (aside from the inherent originality that is found in all of his work up to and including The King Chronicle) is its adaptive nature. “My job is to develop visually the content of the script. You try not only to understand what the director’s trying to say, but also the mood he is trying to create. That abstract notion comes to life in the drawings and later in the sets themselves.”

Despite the creative release which Hackborn enjoys while working on his various projects, he is always faced with factors over which he has no control. “No matter what you’re working on, whether it’s Fraggle Rock or Mackenzie King you have to understand and accept one condition – you’re always working within certain constraints. Because every shot has these constraints, set designers are always concerned with the practical.”

“I have such a romantic attitude about The National Film Board. I wandered around the building and when I saw names like Norman McLaren on doors, it really meant something to me. Colin Low did a film called Corral which I still think is one of the great films of all times.”

Hackborn often sees his role as that of a problem solver, and he seems very much to relish the challenges he confronts. “I give myself these problems, but it’s fun working with them. They’re self-imposed and sometimes you feel terrified. But then you solve them, and it feels great. I really get high on a project. If I don’t, it becomes routine and I’d just as soon quit.”

The problems and constraints of course, vary from project to project. For Fraggle Rock, Hackborn was recruited during the second season and many of the sets had already been designed and built.
"As an art director you know what kind of visual character you want to evoke and you do it as best as you can, you try to get as close as you can to that quality. Whether you achieve it all the time or half the time or even if it’s just a couple of scenes that you’re very satisfied with, it’s rewarding."

"Fortunately, Jim Henson is very open to visual styles and effects," recalls Hackbom. "Bill Beetem had already designed the house and all the rocks. We were able to design new stuff, but we had to work our way around the existing caves. The old stuff was constantly rearranged and reused, like a jigsaw puzzle." Hackbom pauses briefly and then mutters: "Those rocks, all those rocks," as if nothing more could be said to sum up his work on 31 episodes of Henson’s subterranean muppet show.

On some shows, the limitations are often extremely severe. In the case of the CBC production of the Stratford version of Twelfth Night, the set had to be modified for television, but the bulk of the set remained unchanged from the stage production. “That sort of thing makes it easier in one sense because the style is already established, but when you have to expand on it, you’re dealing in a very strict set of parameters.”

Among the shows which Hackbom looks back to with fondness are those which allowed him to flex his creative muscles in more technical areas. At the root of film and television set design is perspective. This may seem quite obvious but the ways in which perspective manifests itself on the television screen are not. Through the use of matte paintings, the illusion of reality is maintained, but a good part of the frame is only a two-dimensional painting suspended a few feet in front of the camera. The lines of perspective have to be perfect or else the illusion is lost. “Matte had been done for years in films but, as far as I know, never on Canadian TV,” explains Hackbom.

Hackbom experimented with the process in the late ’70s and used it to comic effect in the 1980 Royal Canadian Air Force special in a skit involving a man hanging from a ledge many stories above the ground. “It was the second (matte
shot) I ever did, and when it worked out, it felt so good. (Producer) Peter Kelly liked it so much that I did about 1.2 of them for 1 Married the Klondike (1981)." That particular program required designs for a town in goldrush days, but instead of going through the prohibitively expensive process of building large sets of elevated trellises and sluices, they were instead painted on glass. "When the editors saw the rushes, they thought we had built the damn stuff. You can't get a better compliment than that."

Hackborn's visual investigations continue. Whether using the ultimate matte pans and tilts (by pivoting the camera on the center point of the lens rather than on the camera's weight point) as in the cent special by the Canadian Brass or creating a 'tracking' matte show using only Hackborn is intent on pushing the camera's technical capabilities to create the most imaginative visuals possible. Two of his most recent projects—Canada's Sweetheart: The Saga of Hal C. Banks (1985) and the recently completed The King Chronicle, both directed by Donald Brittain—seem somewhat surprising. The surprise is actually twofold. First, the two projects are historical docudramas, and in both cases, the set design is more standard in its use of traditional decor; no fantastical shots of the Canadian Brass playing in a medieval castle here, just meticulous reconstructions of drawing rooms from the past. Second, The King Chronicle, like Hal Banks before it, is a co-production with the National Film Board. Thus

"I've always wanted to own the NFB stuff I liked so much when I was at the art college. Now you can buy them on tape. Terrific! Now I've got a library I've always wanted. I can just pop the cassette in, City Lights, Modern Times, a lot of Chaplin stuff, Frankenstein. I really like Apology Now. That war scene—going up the river—was just such a style, like it wasn't real. But it was so beautifully done. Not that I'm a war fan or anything but it's a beautiful piece of art direction."

If Hackborn has any misgivings at all, they certainly aren't related to his distinguished career which continues to set standards which would satisfy even the most demanding professional. His main concern is that his knowledge, and that of his peers, has little chance of being passed on to a younger generation of artists in the industry. "They (the CBC) are letting people go and they are just hiring freelancers," lamented Hackborn. "That's one of the real shame, both here and at the NFB. People have these skills which have been developed and refined here, as well as at the NFB, over many, many years. But these guys are all getting old and are going to leave at some point. They won't be able to pass these skills on—there isn't anyone to give them to. It really bugs a lot of us here."

"Painting mattes, illusions, model tricks and all those kind of things were all oldtimers' crafts. When they began doing Earthquake and The Towering Inferno and movies like that in the early '70s, they dragged all those guys out of retirement to do the illusions for them. That was the beginning of the renaissance of these special effects movies that are so big at the moment. The techniques have been picked up by many young people now."

In 15 years or so, the set design department at CBC Toronto has dwindled from 25 people to less than half that number—Hackborn has taken it upon himself to impart his knowledge by continually increasing his lecture load. He is even eyeing the possibility of teaching a course in set design and art direction at some point in the future. And although he is saddened by the situation at the CBC, he finds some comfort in the fact that a current-day mainstay such as special visual effects, which had virtually died out by the mid-'60s, has been revived in a major way in the last two decades.

Hackborn still approaches his craft as a learning experience, with all the freshness of outlook that a young art school graduate might have had on his first day on the job. And though the CBC and the NFB have changed over the years, they still embody for Hackborn the pioneering spirit of Canadian film and television production which holds much promise. Hackborn helped create that spirit during CBC's golden age. If Mackenzie King is any indication, he is now helping fulfill the promise.