

## As If By Happenstance

Brother Clement, my high school art teacher, suggested I attend the Saturday Art Program at Pratt Institute.

Around the third week I began to feel bored - unchallenged really. The teachers, graduate students from Italy, didn't seem all that interested in or dedicated to their task. I began wandering through the halls, and it was as if by happenstance that I came upon an older man seated behind a large desk, seeming to use an empty classroom as a quiet studio. I was surprised that he welcomed me in and shared what he'd been working on. I was immediately struck and amazed by his talent - the skill and facility of his drawings. This was a professional illustrator in 1967, when hand drawn, realistic illustration was still a viable way to make a living. He was generously forthcoming with answers about his technique and process, sharing with me the portfolio of works that he had on hand. Many were portrait covers for Time and Newsweek. There were also drawings of astronauts which became U.S. postage stamps. "I spend 40 hours on a drawing for a magazine cover and receive \$1,000. I use a mechanical pencil with interchangeable leads that I always keep sharp. I begin with a hard 6H or 7H lead, work my way down to HB and then up again to a soft, quite dark, 6B lead and the drawings finished". He then held up the mechanical pencil and added, "with this, I can go anywhere in the world, fly on an airplane and it fits in my pocket".

While all that soaked in I'm saying to myself, 'If I spent 40 hours on a drawing, it would come out pretty good'. I was not yet 17 and forty hours was an eternity to me then!

So before taking the hour long bus ride back home, I stopped at the art supply store near Pratt to pick up the leads, holder and sharpener which were surprisingly affordable.

I was all set Sunday morning when the Daily news arrived. It's Sunday magazine cover that week featured a nearly full size portrait *photo* of Bob Hope. The Daily News I surmised, could not afford to pay for a hand-drawn portrait illustration each week.

The 40 hours I planned to spend on Bob Hope became 7 or 8 - still a Herculean task for me as I adhered to the process - the rendering of light and shade. Chiaroscuro, as it was called, was not linear, as I discovered, with *that* kind of beginning and end - rather, there was this ying-yang duality going on; an interconnectivity of two separate realms that depended on each other - light and dark molecules floating in a mystical equilibrium.

Picture a swarm of bees or the murmuration of birds. I was drawing light by avoiding it, and the light (or white of the page) was doing its own thing, intertwining, fusing together with shadow, yet remaining separate. Separate and unique structural entities were creating a dispersion on the page.

A strange, almost hypnotic form of meditation began to overtake and move me, as light and dark melded. It was like some kind of Hallucinatory Epiphany, an elevated awareness and new level of consciousness for me. I was rendering light and shade to imitate something seen, yes, but I also thought I was uncovering a previously hidden truth that no one else knew about. (but then again, I remembered, I thought the same thing about sex when I was thirteen)

In the next several weeks, I worked on several more Sunday Magazine celebrities. The drawings won some acclaim in the glass cases outside of principle, Brother Ryan's office that first semester of Junior year.

Brother Ryan was later accused of credible sexual offenses against minors but my own experience just amounted to being called into his office after my drawings were displayed. As he stood up from behind his desk (he was nearly 7 foot tall), and approached me, he grabbed both my shirt and neck tie together and lifted me off the ground. As he held me, elevated, against the wall, he said, "*Why didn't you tell us you were an artist; do you know how close you came to flunking out of here?*"- before dropping me like a sack of potatoes.

I should add here that I got into Xaverian *after* I was rejected and only after my cousin, who was an exemplary student, track star, and student vice president complained to Principle Ryan

After the Ryan meeting, I was assigned two art classes after lunch (which amounted to the remainder of the school day). On nice days I would tell young Brother Clement (who suggested the Pratt classes to me) that I'm going to Owl's Head Park to draw, and just take the bus home for the sheer criminal pleasure of bragging to my friends about it. What I also thought I was getting away with, was not reading any of the assigned books for four years,

I was like-wise proud of being skilled at becoming invisible and avoiding doing hardly any difficult work at all.

I still did not know very much about art. There was a new class in art appreciation my last semester at Xaverian, taught by my former English teacher Mr. Guardo. Having served in Italy during the Second World War, his nerves were easily rattled. He once became exasperated and undone after showing us a slide of Mantegna's Dead Christ - lying on a table, foreshortened, feet first, when many in class burst out in laughter, shouting out that Christ appeared to be a midget. I didn't laugh out loud, but he looked like a *little person* to me also.

Before graduating, I had registered to attend the School of Visual Arts in the fall for its 3 year certificate program because I had not gotten into any of the accredited Art schools with degree programs. I remember my interviewer at Pratt. Despite completing a home test, and the drawings I brought with me, he told me, practically as soon as I walked in the door, that my art was ok but because of my poor grades I'd flunk out after the first semester.. I don't blame him though, I probably had the reading level then of a below average 9th grader.

The summer after I graduated, my father planned a family vacation to Italy along with me and my two younger brothers. It was one of those 'see everything in 8 days' type tours. The package covered Milan, Verona, Venice, Bologna, Pisa, Florence, Rome, Naples, Capri and Pompeii .

When mom gave a surprise birthday party for dad before the trip, his presents included a bowling ball bag filled with marbles from his bowling buddies and a 3 foot tall, fairly accurate rendition of the Venus de Milo - gifts intended to make fun of his bowling abilities and the upcoming trip to Italy.

Italy that summer proceeded like a whirlwind. Mid-way during the trip, when I found myself in Rome... The front pages of its newspapers blasted out the headlines and photos of the Moon landing. It caught me by surprise, but as amazing as that was, it didn't phase me as much as the experience I had in Florence the day before, which somehow seemed more important and from which, I was still in a dreamlike state.

I had never been in an art museum before entering the Uffizzi - which may surprise some, my being a native New Yorker soon to enter an art school of higher learning. It was also one of the few times on the trip that I had an afternoon off to wander independently.

Up the stairs, I passed 3 large, Byzantine style madonnas. I was nonplussed by their flatness. How was I to know that I would later *revere* Cimabue, Duccio and Giotto. Why couldn't I see that those 13th Century artists had given it their all, the best they could, with all they had and under circumstances unknown to me? I was living in my own Dark Ages.

Next, a small, painting caught my eye by the way the rocks were painted, or rather invented, pretending to look like mountains and populated by small figures mysteriously dispersed. Then I came upon Botticelli's mural-like Birth of Venus. A nearly life-size nude woman standing on a floating scallop shell, attempting to, modestly and nonchalantly, cover herself with her long flowing, windswept hair. Two embracing winged figures on the left, floated through the sky, surrounded by wind swept roses, I found out later they represented wind gods. They were expelling gusts of wind, to prevent a woman on the right from covering the nude Venus with a

garment. I was impressed by the Movement in Venus' hair and her resemblance to my girlfriend at the time. I liked the painting very much but I didn't love it. Don't get me wrong, I knew that *line* was important but I thought of it back then as the mere container of form that was better off not being so obvious, But... the Botticelli turned out to be the perfect primer for the next thing I was about to see.

Fra Filippo Lippi's Madonna and Child With Angels was not a large picture. The figures were perhaps three-quarter life size, but something magnetic about it drew me in.

I had gone to the museum thinking, '*Why exactly were all these people interested in this thing called Art?*' I was determined with a penetrating stare to uncover the mystery of the attraction.

And here's what happened:

I was obviously drawn to the Lippi painting because of the love displayed between mother and child, but it was the child's calm, pensive, yet resolute appearance - his sense of independence, that had matched my own mood. Certainly, the Christ child's head was the focal point, owing to the attention Lippi gave to it, *not to mention* its disproportionate size. But as the lights and darks melded into an organized recognizable image, a strange, almost hypnotic force overtook me - just like the Hallucinatory state I was in when I was doing those magazine portraits.

Suddenly, the windows of space between mother and child pulled me into the landscape beyond; like stepping stones to an atmospheric infinity. Mary wore an elaborate veil, delicately folded and lace-trimmed - so transparent that the landscape behind it, but also the flesh of Mary's neck and ear were seen through it.

The veil sat on her braided, pearl studded hair like a crown, one large pearl on her forehead appeared to sit on the distant horizon. Halos of perfect ellipses, rings of light in space, overlapped a hard, stone window frame, so realistically painted that her shadow on the frame suggested the low angle of Winter light.

The painted frame fooled my eye into believing there was a real naturalistic landscape behind the group who stood in front of it. Oh, I didn't mention the two young attendant angels? One, peering up beneath the Christ child looked exactly like my friend Bobby Herrera's little brother. The other angel held the Christ child (Mary's own hands were folded in prayer). He stood to the right, breaking the fourth wall, and looking mischievously at us with the amused confidence of being in the right place at the right time. I can only explain the experience as a concordant transference. I felt I was there - inside the painting's space.

I don't know what else I had seen at the Uffizzi that day. I only knew I had seen enough. I don't know *why* it was that *that* particular painting that did it for me, giving me a feeling similar to that first Hallucinatory Epiphany. It could also have been another, and smaller Botticelli, or the Raphael Madonna in the postcard that I bought from the hawkers outside the museum. And I don't know how to describe the feeling I carried with me while leaving the museum.

It was like a pleasant existential shock.

I'd been carrying around a cork. I must have lifted it from one of the dining room tables and was using it as a kind of a worry stone. I turned it over and over in my pocket while I walked aimlessly along the Arno as thoughts of the painting turned in my head. I found myself finally in the middle of the Santa Trinita bridge. I looked at the river flowing out beneath me and after a brief hesitation and a promise to myself, or really a vow, that I would someday return to Florence, tossed the cork into the river and locked on watching it bob up and down until it was no longer seen.

When we got back to Brooklyn, I was surprised to find that all my friends and even my girlfriend, had left for Woodstock the day before. It was the first I heard of the event that was to become this historic concert.

That Fall, another strange and unprecedented thing happened in 1969... Besides the Moon Landing, Woodstock, and my Baptism in Art; the Mets won the World Series. Go figure!

A few weeks into my first term at SVA that Fall, Eavesdropping unobtrusively, I overheard a classmate talking frankly to one of my teachers about the difficulty he had in understanding so called *Modern Art*. The teacher, Bill Bollinger told him. "If you want to understand modern art, start by looking at Cezanne." Well, I was in the same boat about it. It was enough of a culture shock to go from brothers in a Religious order to a long hair and bearded bohemian teacher with tattered jeans. I just had this experience in the first art museum I had ever been to and was very doubtful that anything done after 1500 had any real value.

But I immediately went to the SVA library to prevent Joe Ascensio from checking out the Cezanne books first. That night at home, armed with two books, I read about his "petite sensations" and applied the same penetrating attention to the Cezanne reproductions as I had in front of the Lippi Madonna. Somehow, by his juxtaposition of one color against another, Cezanne created a sense of space and light through an interknit structure. It was as if by sealing off or suffocating the surface of the picture by covering it completely, he allowed it to live and breathe with objects, landscapes and persons, suffused with a rock solid yet artificial impersonal corporeality. I found out later this was called 'the integrity of the picture plane'. Cezanne hammered the last nail in the coffin that was Renaissance linear perspective. What it did for *me* was that it changed the way I looked at everything around me with a new kind of fascination for the physical materiality of things .

In '72, after my third year at SVA, I received a certificate. A teacher of mine was instrumental in my being awarded a scholarship to Skowhegan that summer, a summer art school in Maine where I spent 9 idyllic weeks as a resident. Just before I was to return home, I was awarded a scholarship to the NY Studio School by Skowhegan. When I called my parents to tell them about it, my mom told me I received a letter in the mail from the government about five weeks

prior. She said it might be important and would she like me to open it? It said that I was to report for my Army physical two days after arriving home. Viet Nam was still a mess then, and the NY Studio School wasn't accredited, so it wouldn't keep me out of the Army. My dad told me that maybe I should join the Navy instead of becoming a 'Dog' soldier.

The first few days at Skowhegan, there was a guy in our dorm that had just been discharged from the Navy. It wasn't a dorm really, but just resembled a barracks in the second floor loft of a barn-like structure with 10 beds. Well this guy only lasted a few days with us. I think he had a nervous breakdown. I couldn't understand it at the time because I thought Skowhegan would be the perfect antidote and place to be after having a nervous breakdown. I didn't understand that it was probably his experiences in the Navy that gave him the nervous breakdown.

I passed my physical with flying colors. The funny thing though, was, every kid at Fort Hamilton, in Bay Ridge during the physical, seemed be of Italian decent. Even our family doctor, Doctor Cassano, the doctor that delivered me, was there, examining kids.

I imagined that the next day, there would be all Irish kids there.

It turned out, my dad's friend, Frank Mazzola, who was the current Post Commander of The American Legion (post 1040), which happened to be around the corner from where I grew up, knew a congressman in Canarsie. I sent him slides of my artwork with a letter explaining the scholarship and then went to see someone in his office. This congressman knew a General, and I received this uncommon deferment that gave me leave, but in the event of a major conflict, I would have to serve. That didn't stop the Marines from calling me up every other week to try and convince me that, if I joined immediately, they would let me finish the school year. I always said, "no thank you."

The scholarship didn't stop my father from asking me to leave the house, but after a number of years driving a cab, doing some house painting, assisting the artist Salvatore Scarpitta and being the night attendant for Eduardo, an art student who became parapalytic from a diving



accident, I became sexton of a Presbyterian church on East 42nd St. It was really more like a glorified janitor, but for about five years, it gave me time to paint.

And 10 years after that first trip to Italy, I was awarded a Fulbright fellowship to study painting in Florence.

The Cork I threw into the Arno was waiting for me.