

THE ART OF STREET PAINTING ROME, NEW YORK 1981- 1985

In Italy I discovered the art of ‘Madonarro’ – one who paints Madonas for alms on the street- STREET PAINTING. What was ironic is I had come to Italy to learn how to draw from museums and I learned to draw by becoming a street painter. In 1981 I started a European tour to teach myself classical drawing from the Masters, which turned out to be a three year quest. I began in Florence coping from the Uffizzi, the Academia and the Pitti Palace and drew portraits of the tourists for money. After six months sick of the tourists and crowded museums I went to Rome and toured the splendors of the ‘Eternal City’ making drawings in the sculpture galleries at the Vatican, the Berninnis at the Burgesses and more. I left Rome for Naples and spent two years copying Greek classical statuary from the Archeological Museum and paintings from the Museum at Capodimonte, which was one of the first museums in Europe housing the Farnese Collections. This led me to Greece, to Praxitale’s Hermes, Corinth, Delphi, and more trips to the Archeological Museums of Athens and Piraeus because of the fine quality of Hellenistic statuary.

By painting figures on the street, I rapidly developed a sense of proportion and perspective that made me rely on an internal sense of measurement that became built-in because the figures were so large there was no way of seeing the whole figure finished at once. Painting on the street required that you painted in a mannerist style; finishing as you go or no one could comprehend what you were doing. It was important to get something recognizable down fast. Taking the core shadow, dividing the light from shade and filling in with local color then outlining as quick as possible. The style was also Baroque because of the high figures and compositions. The easiest way to begin was to copy a tradition painting. Some artist chose the Mona Lisa or the Botichilli Venus; I began with the Raphael and ‘The Incarceration of St. Peter in Rome’. At the beginning I was terrified, so exposed. What was I doing out there? The Italians are so appreciative of art and generous after the spending a week on that drawing I was able to pay my rent, buying a leather jacket and I had enough money to by a plane ticket back to the states.

I painted with a dynamic street painter who had won the International Madonarro Festival in Mantua, an expatriate from Santa Barbara, California; Kurt Wrener. He made beautiful accomplished chalk drawings with many life-size figures on the sidewalks of Rome and every night he would cover them up with plastic and continue on them the next day. They where so vivid and in your face they left an indelible impression in your mind. Imaging waking up to an ice covered street where the thin layer of ice you were about to step on was cracking open and people, painted figures were falling through the breaking ice being pulled down by dragon-like creatures before your very eyes. It is a

terrifying moment until your senses collect and you realize the world is not totally mad. At that time the record amount for one day, as a street painter was \$800 from people donating into pots on the sidewalk.

After a season of street painting in Rome I came to New York City. It was 1984. Looking for the perfect pavement in the big Apple was trail and error. I began on 42nd street at the New York Library in front of Daniel Chester French's statues of lions where there was a expansive sidewalk. I knew it was time to move when one amiable onlooker looked at my depiction of Moses and ask me if what I was painting was hanging inside the Library. There was cultural barrier. I tried in front of the Plaza, but the traffic pattern was not right, so I tried the Metropolitan Museum, where surely their people would understand art. After starting the head of Adam on the lower sidewalk, two black linebackers with uniforms picked me up by the elbows I was on my way down town if I didn't stop; they were saying, " You can't do graffiti on the street" and were in no mood for an argument.

Back on the search I tried in front of St. Patrick's Cathedral but the payment was rough with many different colored aggregate stones mixed into the cement, yet a few blocks up across the street at St. Thomas's on 53rd Street, were these giant ten foot slates for sidewalk. Perfect chalk boards on the street, how cool was that for an artist. Originally these large slates had been shipped down the river from Kingston to form the sidewalk and what I also became aware of was that the sidewalk is part of the Roads and Parks Department of New York City. The city owns the sidewalks, yet it is the responsibility of the building owner to maintain the sidewalk in front of his building.

I had found the perfect surface in the middle of New York City. I set up and began drawing a scene form the Sistine Chapel and after no incident with the authorities I pulled out a piece of plastic and taped it down over the drawing in the middle of the sidewalk on Fifth Avenue in the middle of New York City. Insane but I did it because that is what we used to do in Rome. The next day I came back and the plastic was gone and the drawing pretty much trampled to smithereens. I began to pick out the drawing and pull it together when the Vicar of the Church addressed me, later I found out it was Vicar Andrews of whom I had only two unusual conversations, the first that day and the second two years later when he got rid of me. He first came up to me and asked me if it was I that put that plastic down on the sidewalk and I said I had. Well Vicar Andrews told me that there had been some rain in the evening and a little old lady had slipped on the plastic while trying to get on the bus on 5th Ave and " if that little old lady sues I'm gonna have your ass!" Needless to say that was the beginning of a very tumultuous period on the sidewalk in front of St. Thomas Church for the next two years. I chalked almost half of the Sistine Chapel on that pavement. I chose the Sistine to protest the very controversial cleaning of the Chapel by Italian restorers that was

happening at the time. Giancarlo Colallucci, the head restorer of the Vatican team, who had experimented with a solvent Ab57, a soda reactant, and had had great success on some previous frescos, namely 'The Coronation of Charlemagne' by Raphael in the Vatican stanzas where by he convinced the Vatican he could clean the Sistine. I had met Colallucci on the scaffolding and beheld the magnificence of Michelangelo from only inches away. The impression of the uniform brushstrokes and the heroic size of the figures; the abrasive sandy texture of the newly restored area as apposed to the shiny almost murky areas that had yet been cleaned and the day-glow colors that popped out of the cleaned parts. The same drawings I would later do on the streets. Colallucci's idea was by starting at one end and using this solvent like oven cleaner for three seconds and wiping it off with distilled water stripping away everything that wasn't 'bon fresco' his job would be done. Unfortunately life is not so simple and he removed every correction, color glaze or tonality that was put on 'a seco'. Colallucci had overlooked that Michelangelo was reinvented fresco technique to adapt to the size of the opera; where Raphael was painting one square foot a day in 'bon fresco' with a team of assistants, Michelangelo was painting two square meters a day by himself for he had fired all his assistants for fear they might divulge his new methods. Only Pope Julius the Second got a premature view of the ceiling by Papal command.

The inherent mistake came from the analysis of the paint layer by the Italian team. The gas chromatometer read the composition of the final paint layer to have lamp black suspended in a glue size or animal protein. This scientific fact led Colallucci to believe that the ceiling was dirtied by soot from the years of burning torches to light the chapel. Yet when studies of the atmospheric currents inside the chapel revealed that the hot air carrying the soot could reach only three quarters of the way never allowing the soot to reach the surface.

The incredible quandary is that Michelangelo used a stylistic technique to hasten his work also allowing unification of his masterpiece in a focused effect. The technique was simple but revolutionary. The concept being that in oil painting the artist lays out an ink drawing, where in fresco he pounces the cartoon onto the wet plaster, the difference is in oil painting one proceeds by reinforcing with darks and the lights and developing the form into a black and white image. When the form is established and dry the artist then paints on the local color and finishes by glazing subtle hues over the painting to unify the effect to his pleasing. However, in Michelangelo's case he has shortcut this rule because in 'bon fresco' there is only six to eight hours' working time before the lime sets up. What he achieved that was so remarkable was that he was able to pounce the cartoon, paint in the drawing in umbers over a large area and then colored in the shapes using bright color in bon fresco within the allotted drying time. By juxtaposing brilliant color of a light hue next to the same hue darker hue along the shadow plane anticipating that when the fresco was dry he

would glaze over with lamp black to unify the painting and turn the form. Michelangelo reversed the age-old process for fresco to be able to paint more swiftly and not have to shade and color every individual form in the traditional method laid out by his friend and biographer, Vasari (at that time bon fresco used the Florentine standard of which Raphael's workshop strictly adhered to). For this reason we are now left with a garish under painting of a cool lime green on the shadow side juxtaposed to the brilliant yellows on the light side or light pinks against violets in same form, notice the marble is a light gray violet devoid of the sanguine qualities of life. How unfortunate a trick of nature that this lamp black glaze suspended in hide glue put on by Michelangelo to unify the ceiling giving it this mysterious quality; was identified in the analysis of the paint layer as lamp black and thought to be the soot from the torches that illuminated the chapel when lamp black is made from collecting the soot from the lamp.

How differently we interpret things through technology and for this reason I was upset with this devastation and began to protest on the streets of New York City.

Within a short period I had several thousands of people a day looking at my drawings especially when the crowds for Mona rounding the block on to Fifth Ave in front of me. I met more people, had more solicitations, offers, ridiculous comments, than I would in a lifetime. People would hand me notes, ask me to paint there ceiling, a biker rode his motorcycle right on the sidewalk and asked me to paint his gas tank. I had a box where I kept peoples cards and when a friend asked me why I didn't take them up on it, I showed him the box full of cards. Another person in a very fine Italian suit and fine shoes (I got used to reading shoes then) asked me to come up to his Trump Tower apartment to do a mural on his wall. He had a view of my drawings from the fifty -fifth floor and it looked like a postage stamp on the street. The steps of the Church had become my New York office. Anything goes. I met my friends from all over that would come and hang. It was during this time that I met my wife. The New York Times wrote an article on me. Andy Warhol frequented the drawings. One day I see these giant shoes while I was drawing, they must have been size thirteen. It was Bishop O'Connor from St. Patties and he asked me why I wasn't doing these drawings in front of his Church. I told his payment wasn't any good. A girl came up to me, she was a body builder and said, ' I can't believe how you can model the human body, can you model my body'. One guy spoke in very bad English handing me a post card and said, ' you must come here, draw', it was a post card of Red Square. I did accept an offer for the winter holidays to decorate the Eden Prairie Mall outside of St. Paul, Minnesota with caulk drawings all expenses paid.

The culmination came when on this particular hot day in summer, this big crowd around and this guy comes flying down the sidewalk on his bicycle from the park and rides right onto the drawing and does a sliding donut. I'm looking at this

stupefied ready to bash this guy and then he whips off his shirt and starts pounding his chest yelling 'Heresy, Heresy, this is Heresy'. Well a few of the onlookers grabbed this guy and through him literally onto the street with no kind words.

This all ended on the second year on Easter Sunday when I was doing the 'Creation' with Adam and God touching hands. This assistant from the Church came out and threw a bucket of water on the head of God. And I looked over and there was Vicar Andrews standing on the steps saying, 'you've got to go'. I looked at him and said 'Why today? I've been doing this for two years now.' He said 'Look around. You've brought all these vagrants here; and I can't have this anymore. It is too much, you've got to go.' I looked around and there were a bunch of blacks doing some brake dancing, the whole wall along the church had venders selling books, photos, paintings, food, every inch to the corner was packed with people, it was a real scene. To this day I still meet people who saw the drawings.

By Peter Arguimbau

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