

The Discovery of Arthur Pinajian

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Quite unexpectedly in early 2007, my fifty years as an art history scholar and connoisseur of twentieth century painting and photography came into sharp focus. At that time I began an extraordinary journey that has required and tested the core of my training and scholarship. It has proven to be an experience of exhilarating discovery rarely available to scholars of any stripe, and one of which I am pleased and excited to have been a part. My intent in this introduction is to provide some insight into why I became involved with the work of Arthur Pinajian, an unknown deceased artist, and how I ultimately reached the conclusion that his legacy deserved my enthusiastic support.

This journey began one morning when my brother-in-law, Jim (F. James Datri), called from his home in the village of Bellport, Long Island, in New York. He wanted to know if I would be interested in talking with a friend of his who had come into possession of an unusually large stash of art and needed help in deciding what to do with it. Thomas (Thomas V. Schultz) had found the artwork in a cottage that he and his business partner Larry (Lawrence E. Joseph), were buying in the village as an investment. Included were paintings, drawings, sketchbooks, diaries, letters, and all sorts of artist's ephemera. Thomas had found these items moldering in the garage — the paintings alone were estimated to be a few thousand in number — and he immediately called Larry, who quickly arranged to take legal control of the estate property sight unseen. Once he was able to fly in from the West Coast, he was very glad he had. The two men knew they had something unusual, but they were not sure what. After a period of reaching out in various directions it became clear to them, and to their friends, that an experienced eye was needed to help sort through the alternatives. Was the art of any quality? Was the artist ever a known figure? Should the paintings indeed be salvaged? Or should they be put in the Dumpster to which they had

originally been consigned?

My wife's family has lived in Bellport since her early childhood and her brothers Jim and Frank (Franklin A. Datri) are still there, so in deference to that history and the fact that this was a Bellport artist, at the very least a courtesy involvement seemed the "right thing to do." Expertising paintings for the major auction houses, museums, and private collectors is something I have done for years, so it was easy to agree to look at some photographs of the works and to offer my preliminary assessment of their quality and marketability. I spoke with Larry and Thomas (who originally questioned the wisdom, or lack of same, in discarding the works), who agreed to send me some representative photographs.

Upon my initial review of the first few hundred images I must admit that I was only mildly impressed. I saw an artist with some talent, but not one of lasting significance. It was his weaknesses that were most evident: his lack of anatomical understanding, his occasional use of garish color, and his unstructured compositions. There were some engaging pictures, to be sure, but nothing that would excite the art world and make a lasting contribution to the work of the period. Nothing that would change the canon of art history — unless, of course, these first examples were *not* representative of the collection as a whole. Larry asked if I would accept a commission to review the entire body of work in order to find out.

I knew that to undertake this effort would involve a significant time commitment and that it would dominate my life for several months to come. After serious conversations with my wife, Christine, we agreed to take it on together; I would contribute my expertise, and she would take care of the details. Our charge was to act as consultant for the project, to look at "everything," and to identify the top tier of 250 or so prime works, followed by the next tier. As more paintings and notebooks were uncovered, that original charge was expanded a number of times.

We worked mostly from photographs but also looked at many originals, and each day brought a new discovery. Our relatively old computer (four years) was stretched to the limit as we received thousands of pictures, one batch at a time. Larry had rented a space where all the material could be sorted out and stored until decisions were made about what to do with it. In that space Thomas and Michelle Lent, a talented young woman hired to assist with the immense amount of work required to sort and document the art, labored daily. Tucked among her responsibilities was the role of photographer. Michelle took the first comprehensive set of photographs of the collection, and she did an outstanding job. She provided a steady flow of material for my review while Thomas carefully boxed and sent us the notebooks, diaries, sketchbooks, letters, and other ephemera. Our dining-room table was covered with paintings for weeks, and the rest of the house looked like an artist's studio for many months. Toward the end of this period a former student of mine, Dr. Christine Oaklander, accepted a two-day commission to go to Bellport. Her assignment was to do a "condition report" on the paintings that had been selected for further consideration. There was significant restoration work to be done on the oldest oils, and Christine's evaluation was very helpful in pinpointing where that would be most constructive. Jonathan Sherman of Sea Cliff, New York, was identified by me as an appropriate individual to handle the first restorations. He also wrote a very helpful "overview" report.

At this point we had begun to think ahead, and I introduced Larry and Thomas to several individuals in the art world who might be of help in taking the collection to its next stage. An old friend came to mind as one who might be the perfect match. Peter Hastings Falk is a man of many talents. He is a writer, a publisher, an art expert, and a person who has successfully developed or restored the reputations of many deceased artists. I asked him to take an unbiased look at Pinajian, disregarding my own evaluation, and to determine for himself what course of action was in order. After finding himself

independently in full agreement with my appraisal, he began in-depth conversations with Larry. They soon found a bond in their mutual experiences at Brown University — and the rest, as they say, is history. As the weeks passed, we became more and more excited, and our every moment was absorbed by what we had come to call “the Pinajian project.” A steady flow of communications between Bellport, Los Angeles, Madison (Connecticut), and Wilmington (Delaware) kept everyone informed. It was stimulating and fun, and we gratefully acknowledge our debt to Jim for introducing us to what has become a unique and rewarding experience.

Turning back to the collection itself, at this point I should note that at no time in my career have I come across such a complete and prolific collection of work from an unknown artist. It appears that Pinajian dedicated all of his days to his art. He was passionate and unequivocally committed. His work is surprising; it shows a dichotomy in his personality, and ultimately it reflects the soul of a flawed, yet brilliant, artistic genius.

I found that many of his best paintings showed enviable skill in color and design. Often, Pinajian’s most engaging works, though visually based on an existing canon, are remarkably original in conception. The artist digested the elements of modernism as represented by such movements as Impressionism, Expressionism, Fauvism, Cubism, Surrealism, and Abstract Expressionism. He then produced his own variations based on these sources, frequently in very creative directions. Some of his work, indeed, shows a language that reveals the depths of the unconscious mind and is thoroughly inventive. Appealing, too, is his “palette”; his admirable poetic color combinations (not the garish ones mentioned earlier) are linked to the tonalities of his better-known fellow Armenian, Arshile Gorky.

Pinajian makes an interesting psychological case study. There were two sides to his personality — one

embodying a lyrical, romantic view of nature, and the other, exposing the darker side of male fantasies. I found that a significant proportion of his work concerned itself with erotica, primarily female. Erotic nudes (as opposed to nudes in general) seemed to be an obsession, ranging from idealized figures conjured up from his imagination to popular images drawn freehand from photographs and magazines, and more than a few have real merit. Both sides of his artistic expression seem to have been essential to him, and a division of labor in his creative work was the result.

A word needs to be said about Pinajian's development. There is little or no linear progression in his oeuvre from early to middle to late. Excellent works are found in all periods of his life. At some point he came to understand the principles of structural color. In fact, it is noteworthy that he became its veritable master. This concept, exploited by Cézanne and Matisse, was an essential ingredient in modern art, and Pinajian applied it well. Already having concluded that he used this knowledge in much of his work, I discovered among his papers an essay that he had written specifically on this subject.

In addition to the primary collection of Pinajian's paintings (mostly in oil, acrylic, and watercolor), there is a large body of work on paper (brush and ink, colored pencils, graphite, and crayon). Some of these are on loose sheets, others in sketchbooks dating from the 1950s through the 1990s. Whatever their topics may be, these sheets reveal a variety of individual themes — landscapes, cityscapes, figure studies, portraits, abstract compositions, still lifes, analysis of the masters (old and new), and so on. They even include a handful of sketches of cowboys, a carryover from his career as an illustrator and cartoonist.

Alongside the many sketchbooks were found his diaries and loose sheets, some torn from the sketchbooks. Many of these include written remarks on the state of the arts in general and his perception

of his own role in their evolution. The collection of loose works on paper and in sketchpads testifies, like the larger prime selection of paintings, to his extremely fertile imagination and creative drive. He seems to have kept everything he ever did, thus leaving behind a full graphic record. True, some of this work is cryptic, even psychedelic, and challenges the viewer's ability to interpret it. But raising questions satisfied Pinajian as much as reaching definite conclusions.

Pinajian also philosophized about the creative process. Found in his journals are his ideas about the making of art. Thus, this heretofore unknown artist is important not only for the effective works he left behind but also for his understanding of the principles of modern art. He reflected verbally — and endlessly, it seems — on issues of pattern, design, and color, thus building a conceptual structure that would tame his instinctive outbursts. At heart, he was a philosopher of art, reflective and thoughtful in his analytical writings. When we look at these notes in relation to his paintings and drawings, we can appreciate the wholeness of the artist as a rational being not afraid to let his instincts run free.

Pinajian was a creative force to be reckoned with. Nevertheless, to our knowledge, during his lifetime few articles were written about him, and he exhibited and sold his paintings only rarely. After his death, the majority of his work was found stacked up in the one-car garage and attic of the Bellport cottage he shared with his sister. He pursued his goals in isolation with the single-minded focus of a Gauguin or Cézanne, refusing to give up in the face of public indifference. In his later years he could be compared to a lone researcher in a laboratory pursuing knowledge for its own sake. Perhaps he tried to do too much — too often compulsively drawing and painting without thoroughly paying attention to his execution. But his unbridled energy from time to time allowed him to produce works of real distinction.

When Pinajian hits the mark, especially in his abstractions, he can be ranked among the best artists of

his era. It is satisfying to contemplate his more successful works, and doubly so because they capture the excitement of visual modernism and exude a painterly integrity that is rare in our day. In his best work he harnessed his dynamic life force and struck a balance between inspiration and control, which is the measure of all good art.

His life is, above all, a model for those who feel that they must follow their calling despite a lack of public acceptance. During his lifetime, even when his works were passed over by critics and the public, he steadfastly forged ahead. When all is said and done, this oeuvre is important both because it represents an artist's life in its totality and because within it is found a prize legacy that will endure for posterity. Larry and Thomas are to be commended for sensing that they stood before an important but hidden legacy, and for their dedicated efforts to preserve this artist's work. The art world is richer for it.