

Preface

The Vonnegut Coincidence

In 1987, Kurt Vonnegut published *Bluebeard: The Autobiography of Rabo Karabekian (1916–1988)*, a novel about an eccentric painter whose life bears an astonishing resemblance to Arthur Pinajian, the real-life artist who is the subject of this book. Both Pinajian and Karabekian, also known as Bluebeard, were Armenian Americans, raised by parents who survived the 1915 Turkish genocide of one million Armenian children, women, and men, and who then made their way to the United States where they brought up their families during the Great Depression. Both Pinajian and Bluebeard began their careers as illustrators in New York City and had some early success. Both men served with the United States Army during World War II in the European theater, each earning a host of ribbons and medals, including the Bronze Star. After the war, they abandoned their careers as illustrators for higher artistic pursuits, joined the Art Students League in New York, and hung out with the Abstract Expressionists at the Cedar Tavern in Greenwich Village. Both eventually moved to Long Island’s East End near the ocean, where they kept their paintings tightly locked away in a barn/garage.

Vonnegut’s artist defined himself as a “Fiasco in which a person causes total destruction of [his] own work and reputation through stupidity, carelessness or both.” Pinajian left instructions for his collection to be discarded in the town dump. Neither artist’s paintings would have been shown publicly but for outside intervention — in Bluebeard’s case a nosy friend; and, in Pinajian’s case, some nosy art historians, namely, us.

So is Pinajian the real Bluebeard? We like to think so, but this we know for sure: the story of the very private life and art of Arthur Pinajian is an extraordinary one. We invite you to enjoy the flashes of genius that illuminate every stage of his sixty-six-year career.

— PETER HASTINGS FALK