

**THE MAGIC PENCIL**

**BY**

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**PRESENTED TO THE CHIT CHAT CLUB**

**SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA**

**JANUARY 10, 2017**

**DEDICATED  
TO**

**MY MOTHER  
JESSIE PETTY CRUCIGER**

**&**

**MY SISTER  
WALLACE-ANN**

“The vote is unanimous, all *ayes*,” said the head of the Acquisitions Committee for the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco as he finished counting the votes. He continued, “So it is agreed that the museum shall purchase the Carl Andre sculpture.” He then looked around the table at all of us, smiled and said, “Now if there is no further business, we are adjourned until September. And I want to wish all of you a wonderful summer.”

All the members of the Acquisitions Committee and the curators of the museum rose from the table. Goodbyes were exchanged, and slowly all left the conference room in small groups of twos and threes. I, however, paused for a few minutes and, upon looking up, found that I was the only one left in the room. It was an understatement to say that I was thrilled to be on the Board of Trustees of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, and, in particular, to sit on the Acquisitions Committee. What luck, I thought to myself. But, was it really? Perhaps it was due to a lifetime interest in art. If that were the case, when did my interest in art begin? Certainly, it was a very long time ago, but could I remember just when it might have started and how it had evolved? I decided to sit down for a moment to think about that. I closed my eyes, and long ago memories started to unfold before me.

One of my earliest memories of art was looking at the pages of my mother’s thick textbook that she had used in her Swarthmore College’s art appreciation class. I was only five or six years old at the time when I would seek out the book after school. While my twin brother was out playing in the yard, I would sprawl on the floor of the den of our house with the thick tome opened to an old master’s painting, gazing in rapt attention that my contemporaries reserved exclusively for watching cartoons on television. The images varied in subject, but certain themes seemed to recur: a mother with an infant child, a suffering man on a cross, a face of a beautiful woman, and, to my subconscious preadolescent Freudian delight that I could not quite understand at the time, an unclothed body of a beautiful young female. Although some images were quite disturbing to my young and impressionable mind, such as those painted by Hieronymus Bosch and a few others, most pictures took my mind and emotions to places quite wonderful and extraordinary. “What are you doing?” my mother would yell to me from the kitchen. Of course, I would offer the typical child’s response, “Nothing.” “I don’t believe you,” she would call back, “you must be doing something!” “Just looking at pictures,” I would chirp.

Like most children, I tried my hand at making art. We all had good instruction in those golden days of kindergarten, first, and second grade. I would return from school with my “art pieces” crushed into my lunch box, a device that doubled as my art portfolio. “Look, Mom, I made a picture of a snowman for you,” squealed I proudly as I produced the rolled up piece of cheap paper that was my canvas. My mother would coo appropriately at the three puffs of cotton glued to the paper and ornamented with black crayon marks for the snowman’s eyes, nose, mouth, hat and, at that now long gone time of political incorrectness, obligatory pipe embellished with smoke emanating from its bowl. My great masterpieces would be displayed on the refrigerator door and rotated with the seasons: in fall-- trees with multicolored leaves, in spring—bunnies, bees and the requisite Easter egg, and in winter—snowmen or snowflakes. Summer, however, would

offer for me, and the other budding Giotto's and Giacometti's, Picasso's and Pollock's in my class, a well-deserved sabbatical from the easels and brushes. The only exception was my very, very best friend, Carl. He never took a day off from art for one extremely good reason: Carl was a real artist.

Indeed, he was, and we all knew it. And fortunately for us, he was very modest about his great skills. But there was no doubt that Carl could draw better than all of us combined on our very best creative day, and that included the art teacher, too. Of course, Carl had an unfair advantage: both his parents were professional artists. Some in the class resented him for this genetic accident but I did not. I delighted in being his best friend, a relationship that often allowed for visits to his home. Unlike my home that looked like the Hollywood set for the popular TV programs "Father Knows Best" or "Leave It To Beaver," his was cluttered with statues, clay busts, and lots of easels holding unfinished paintings on real canvases, not the cheap paper I was given for my masterpieces. And my olfactory and auditory senses were not unrewarded either. Upon entering his bohemian home, I was assaulted with the smells of oil paint and espresso, as well as the marvelous mellifluous melodies of operatic sopranos and tenors.

Whether it was nature or nurture that resulted in Carl's artistic skill, I did not know at the time or to this very day. But what was absolutely clear to me was Carl's seemingly effortless ability to produce inspirational art with a pencil. Just after recess we would file into our 2<sup>nd</sup> grade classroom and be given 10 minutes of free time before the next "real" academic endeavor, such as spelling or arithmetic, was thrust upon our not so very eager little minds. Most of us would grab a piece of paper from a stack located on the corner of the teacher's desk, run to our seats, and draw. I sat next to Carl who would proceed on a daily basis to produce, seemingly by miracle, a perfect image of a galloping horse or an exact duplicate of Captain Nemo's submarine "Nautilus" as depicted in the popular Disney movie, "Twenty Thousand Leagues Under The Sea." I, on the other hand, would begin by drawing, painstakingly I hasten to add, in the right hand corner of my blank paper a circle with lines emanating from it. "What's that?" Carl would ask. "The sun, of course," said I proudly. He would just smile, turn to his desk and add more fabulous embellishments on his masterpiece du jour. Determined, I would proceed to draw a horizontal line parallel to the bottom of the page to represent the land. If time permitted I would try to render the likeness of a tree that, to be honest, turned out looking more like a lollipop with a thick handle. In the meantime, Carl would be whistling an operatic aria while effortlessly creating his masterpiece of "graphite on paper." "Why," I would ask myself, "if I could do well in arithmetic and spelling, could I not do the same in art?" I even developed blisters on my knees from prayer, but, alas, no help came from on high. I remember thinking to myself one day, "It MUST be Carl's pencil that makes him such a wonderful artist...a magic pencil!" Deciding to test my hypothesis when my mother had given me a nickel for some ice cream for lunch that day, I bought his pencil. "What a bargain," I remember thinking to myself, as the recess bell rang summoning us to the classroom. Now, with his "magic pencil" in my hand, I ran into the classroom, grabbed a piece of paper, put it on the paper and waited for a miracle. Carl, on the other hand, sauntered to his desk, produced a new pencil from his drawer, and proceeded to create

another masterpiece, while, of course, consuming a popsicle purchased with the nickel I had just given him.

Undeterred, albeit at that moment calorically challenged from being “popsicle-less” (and after all, I thought rhetorically, aren’t all budding great artists starving too?), I looked down at my blank paper and started to draw with the magic pencil—sun in the right hand corner, land below and a tree that, to my dismay, looked again like a lollipop. It was a painful epiphany to my very vulnerable and fragile artistic ego. Yes, in but a few strokes, I realized that there was no “magic” in the pencil. Sad to say my inability to draw was not due to a failure of equipment but an unquestionable lack of talent. I suppose, in retrospect, it was at that moment that I decided that if I could not make art, at least I could appreciate art.

So my life took an “about face” in that direction. Because of my father’s job with Esso in petroleum engineering, our family lived overseas in such exotic places as India, Africa, and the Middle East. None of the art I saw in those places could have been found in my mother’s textbook of western art masterpieces, yet I was still fascinated with what I saw. The mosques with their exquisite Arabic calligraphy, the Hindu and Buddhist temples with their colorful depictions of the holy, the ancient ruins at Persepolis with its dramatic stairway, the ancient ziggurat at Susa with its artfully scratched cuneiform bricks, the brightly colored rondovals and beadwork of the Zulus in South Africa.....all were a fabulous feast to my very young eyes and wide open receptive mind.

So it came as no surprise that when a choice of subject for a term paper in my junior year at an international prep school in Beirut, Lebanon, was given, I, without hesitation, chose the subject of art. To be more precise, I chose to write about Impressionism. But having lived the majority of my life in developing countries, I had seen very few actual canvases by these artists. So I relied for inspiration on reproductions in books, much like those that I found in my mother’s art textbook that had enraptured me as a very young boy. This time, however, I could read the commentary and history. I will confess that my thesis was not earth shattering to any expert of late 19<sup>th</sup> Century French art, and certainly nothing that would make the directors of the Met or the Jeu de Paume sit up and take notice. But I received an “A” for my effort, and that reward further fanned the flames of my interest in art.

For college I was stuck in Lewiston, Maine, certainly no art center of the world. Other than having an excellent liberal arts college, the town was best known at that time for having hosted the Liston-Clay fight in 1965. My sister, on the other hand, was in Cambridge attending Harvard for her M.A. With my parents overseas, hence no home to go to, I would spend holiday breaks with her. Having majored in fine art as an undergraduate at Swarthmore College, my sister was delighted to act as my tutor at the Boston Fine Arts Museum during those vacation times. No canvas missed our gaze. And I vividly recall our spending at least an hour examining and discussing Gauguin’s large painting entitled, “Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?” I also recall once asking her if she could give me a definition of art. She laughed and simply replied, “No.” And then she quickly added, “And only fools would try to do so.”

Despite her cynicism in defining art, I was thrilled to actually see some of the canvases I had referenced in my prep school paper: Renoir's "Dance At Bougival," Monet's "Water Lilies," and Degas's "Carriage at the Races." The colors in the reproductions paled in comparison to the real paintings. Likewise, I was often shocked at either how small or how large some of the paintings actually were because I never paid any attention to information about the true size of the canvases referenced in the textbooks.

Medical school certainly offered very little free time for an "art fix," especially for one such as I who had not been a pre-med major. But, upon finishing medical school and residency and moving to San Francisco to practice, I was hell-bent on making up for lost time. For vacations I would visit the museums of the major cities of the United States and Europe where I would spend hours in front of masterpieces. For me there was no such thing as a "30 Minute Louvre" which is best described as a one minute Winged Victory, one minute Venus de Milo, three minute Mona Lisa, followed by a 10 minute visit to the gift store, and a 10 minute stop in the café for a coffee. Of course, this schedule only allowed 5 minutes for transit time between venues. Those in running shoes and good shape could spend less time in transit and more time in the gift store or the café, usually the latter. By contrast, I was the sloth in the galleries. I would gaze at a Fra Angelico or Cimabue while tourists in their requisite baggy t-shirts, cargo shorts, and white sneakers zipped past masterpieces by Giotto or Vermeer, not giving them a single glance, but screaming to their spouse or to a catatonic French guard, "Where in the hell is the damn Mona Lisa?" Upon returning from Paris or Berlin, London or Florence, New York or Chicago, I would be asked, "How was the trip, and what did you buy?" "It was wonderful," was the answer to the first question, and museum ticket stubs were produced to answer the second question, much to the confused amusement of my inquisitor.

And so my life of art appreciation continued in that vein, namely going to museums and galleries as well as reading essays about art in *The New Yorker*, *New York Times* and the *New York Review of Books*, until one fine day a good friend of mine suggested to me that I might enjoy the Bohemian Club because, as he put it, "you seem to be really interested in art." He then asked me my age. When I told him that I was 47, he sighed and said under his breath, "There's no way, there's just no way." Not having had an application submitted for me shortly after birth, like many San Franciscans who are admitted to the club, he informed me that a regular application submitted at the ripe old age of 47 might, if I were extremely lucky, result in my admission when I was in my late 80's or early 90's. "However," he said, "I am chairman of the Jinx Committee of the Bohemian Club, and I have heard that they have a need for men in the set design department."

"Set design department?" I queried. With pride he continued, "The Bohemian Club is an all men's club founded in San Francisco in 1872 by the likes of Jack London and other artists. It celebrates the four pillars of cultural pursuits namely, music, literature, drama, and art. It does this by staging events for its members either in the clubhouse here in the city or in a retreat north of the city called The Grove. The productions are done by the members. As a set designer, you will be designing, building and painting the sets for the club's plays." As my mind raced back to my artistic days in kindergarten, first and

second grade, I squealed, “But I am not an artist!” “Well,” said he, “for God’s sake man, even Rembrandt needed some help moving the ladders and cleaning the brushes.” I had to admit, he had a point in that regard. But, as I quickly recalled and did not utter, Rembrandt’s helpers not only could, but did, paint! In fact their participation in his studio resulted in some serious embarrassment at major museums when it was discovered that an expensive Rembrandt canvas had actually been painted by one of his helpers. Again, flashback memories of a circle with lines for a sun and lollipop trees flooded my brain. “I’ll get back to you on this,” he said cheerfully, while I stood frozen with fear, like the proverbial “deer in headlights.” As he trotted off into the vanishing point on the horizon, I thought to myself that if they asked for a portfolio, what could I possibly submit? My mother seemed to really like the snowman with the three puffs of cotton, and, when I actually thought about it, very charitably of course, my landscapes in the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade were not all that bad. But none of this artwork had been enshrined anywhere, and my art production since the second grade had been, well, nil. I wracked my brain for a silver lining to my fears and anxiety. And then it hit me. Ah, I thought, should I ever be admitted to the club, I would have a chance again to meet real artists, like Carl. Now that would be fun!

Six months later, I received a call from the head of the Set Design department of the Bohemian Club asking me to help paint the set for a play to be performed in The Grove that summer. Fortunately, I was not asked to produce a portfolio. Instead, I was asked to show up at a warehouse turned studio in appropriate attire for set painting. A good friend of mine, who was a long standing member of the Bohemian Club, thought he would be helpful by taking me to FLAX, a San Francisco art supply store, to purchase supplies that would give me some credibility when I arrived on the scene. He would not take a “No” for an answer, and, after a glass or two of wine, we headed for the art supply store. We spent an hour at FLAX, and I returned home with a professional artist’s bag containing some small but expensive brushes, colored pencils, a classic black moleskin notebook for quick sketches when the artistic muse moved me, a painter’s smock, and, to top it all off, a beret. “A beret?” my wife responded when I came through the door, “Who the hell are you trying to fool!” She was right, of course. So that weekend I arrived at 8AM at the set design studio to do my level best, albeit bareheaded and sans professional artist’s bag of supplies, and, of course, terrified that I might be discovered to be the artistic fraud that I knew I was.

But the artists could not have been nicer, just like Carl had been when I was a youngster. Two of them, Cris and Gregg, allayed my fears. I was not to be asked to paint a rendition of a Taj Mahal. Rather, I was simply asked to prepare the design flats for them with a primer coat using a roller and large house painter’s brushes. This I could do and do it with panache! By lunchtime my smock was covered with paint and my sneakers looked like Jackson Pollack’s after a particularly long day of “action painting.” “Gee,” I thought, “Perhaps, I have some artistic talent after all.”

That hope was quickly dashed on the hard rocks of visual truth when, after lunch, we were all asked to paint a Palladio-like building on each of our flats. “We’re going to create a village,” the head set designer said to the artists in a serious tone. The artists took

to the task like Carl had in the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, creating their masterpieces in no time flat while whistling and laughing between swigs of beer. Petrified, I surveyed my flat. No sun or trees were required. How tough can this be? We're just talking about a few straight lines. To give myself a fighting chance, I declined the beer and set out to work. When I was through there was not a straight line to be seen on my canvas. In fact, my building looked like one of Gaudi's buildings on steroids, leaning of course, just like the Tower of Pisa.

After that infamous day, I was relegated to ladder moving and brush washing. But, with unabashed pride, I confess that I became the best ladder mover and brush washer the set design department had ever known. Cris and Gregg, who became two of my best friends in the Bohemian Club, would patiently explain the nuances of composition, perspective, shading, and color when I would actually be given a brush to help in the production of the sets. I got a bit better at it, but not by much just like my early years with the "magic pencil." After several years of working in the Set Design department, I became a Regular member of the club, allowing a spot to be available for a real artist. But my experience profoundly increased my appreciation of art over those several years of having been in those paint smeared trenches watching professional artists create their visual magic.

A few years later I was invited to a very small dinner party in California's Napa Valley. The Director of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco was in attendance at that gathering. The dinner party was in full swing, and the conversation and wine were flowing. The Director was seated across from me at a table of eight, many who frequently attended the organization called the "Napa Friends of the Fine Arts Museums" of which I was a member. During a lull in the conversation, he asked everyone at the table, "What do you think is the most popular painting in San Francisco's Fine Arts Museums?" There was silence, in fact a very long silence. As he drew breath in order to give the answer I said, "Excuse me, John, I would like to take a shot at that one." All eyes turned to me. Now it was my time to draw a deep breath. I began, "I think it is the large wedding picture, called *The Russian Bride's Attire* by Makovsky." Again, a long silence followed. "You're right!" said the Director, "But how did you come to that conclusion?" Again all eyes turned to me and again I took a deep breath and said, "Well, about two years ago, Peter Schjeldahl, the art critic for *The New Yorker*, came to the Bay Area and gave a lecture at Mills College. I attended it out of interest in art and a perverse interest to finally learn the correct pronunciation of his name. I was eager to go because I had enjoyed reading his art essays over the years. During the Q and A period, someone in the audience asked him what he believed was the crucial ingredient for a painting to become great. Schjeldahl immediately replied that, in his opinion, all great works of art--works that speak across generations--have to contain a compelling narrative or story." I continued, "In the painting of the bride and the attendants surrounding her there certainly is a compelling narrative readily apparent to all who view the canvas. So that is why I believe *The Russian Bride's Attire* would be one of the most popular painting at the DeYoung Fine Arts Museum." The Director, having taken all that in, nodded approvingly, smiled, took a sip of wine, and the dinner party continued, albeit on different topics. I, however, wanted to ask the Director a myriad of questions such as:

*What should the role of the museum be today? Should it merely reflect what the contemporary culture wants to see or be an arbiter of cultural taste showing works that may be judged less accessible? Or both? How best should collections be hung? Do the traveling "blockbuster shows" take away from the celebration and scholarship of the museum's private collection? How, in this day and age of extreme private wealth and stratospheric art prices, can a museum acquire significant works of art? How does one encourage the public to give their art to the museum? Is it best to de-accession many works in the museum's collection in order to acquire a few great pieces ----- in short celebrate the "less is more" approach that one sees at museums like the Frick and the Neue Gallery in New York?*

I might add that there were many more questions that bubbled up in my mind. However, I wisely chose to keep those questions to myself having remembered my wife once whispering a great truth to me while we were on the first day of a three-day bus tour of ancient art in Greece. As our fellow tourists sat mutely looking out our bus windows I was just about to ask our guide my fourth or fifth question in a row when my wife squeezed my arm and whispered in my ear: "Marc, dear, you know this will be a very long three-day trip with this small group if you don't realize that there is a very thin line between being really interested and being totally obnoxious!" I quickly closed my mouth and remained silent, at least for that day.

Well, about 10 months after the Napa Valley dinner party with the deYoung Museum's Director I received a letter asking me to sit on the Board. Needless to say, I enthusiastically accepted without hesitation.

"Excuse me, sir, but will you be leaving soon? I have to clean the room," a voice asked that awakened me from my daydream with a start. I looked at my watch. Gosh! It had been just a few minutes since I had closed my eyes and thought about my long journey in the art world! I smiled, embarrassed, and said, "So sorry! I'm leaving now. And please forgive me if I made you wait." Rising from my chair, I stuffed my papers and pen into my briefcase. "Oh! Will you be wanting this?" asked the janitor as he held up a small pencil that had been left on the conference table. Laughing softly, I said, "Only if it's a magic pencil!"

