

My Life in Art

When I was in elementary and junior high school, I don't remember art classes. (I remember music, but no art.) Kids today bring home reams of artwork, but not then. In junior high school, there were shop classes: wood shop, metal shop and print shop. I had all three. There must have been a print-making class since their work appeared in our literary magazine, *The Knowlton Herald*. They did linoleum cuts, and some of the art was very impressive. I didn't take it, and I still have trouble understanding how you cut away material to make a picture. My son Lewis can do it.

Whatever drawing I did at the time, I did on my own, usually in class, like doodling. I would draw the back of the head of the person in front of me, and I would draw the classroom. The heads were easy, but getting the perspective of the room was much harder.

I should mention that there was art in our little apartment, which I simply took for granted. A French watercolor of a young woman in a field. Two small oils of a Dutch interior. And a marble bust of a woman on an ornate marble stand. There were hand painted plates from Limoges, and lots of cut glass. My mother had collected them in the '20s. I assumed every home had them.

My first exposure to clay was in summer camp, and right away, I loved the feel of it--holding the clay and shaping it into different forms—animals, the human figure, and heads. I liked making heads and working the clay into ears, eyes, a nose, a mouth, a chin. Clay had a water base and hardened. We were also given plastiline (sometimes called plasticine), which had an oil base and stayed soft. At camp, it was part of “arts and crafts.” I don't remember any instruction. The counselor was usually involved in teaching the kids how to make lanyards.

No arts and crafts in high school, though there were mechanical drawing and shop classes. And though there were studio art classes at CCNY, it never occurred to me to take one. We had “art appreciation” or art history, and learned about art from Egypt, Greece and Rome to the present day. I went to the art museums—the Metropolitan Museum, the Museum of Modern Art and the Museum of Non-Objective Art, which became the Whitney Museum. A friend, Phil Bernstein, introduced us to the art galleries on 57th Street, and, as a college student, I felt I knew art. And I also knew the artists I admired the most: Michelangelo and Rembrandt. About this time, I started collecting art books—usually remaindered, and cutting out the art reproductions from *Life* magazine.

In my late teens and 20s, I tried my hand at pencil drawing, interiors and landscapes—trees and fields and buildings. After my mother died, I remember sitting in bed late at night, listening to music, with a book of art reproductions and a small drawing pad on my lap, using a conte crayon, copying paintings and drawings. I was amazed at how much time it took--- how quickly the time passed, and how much more I saw in the work of art by trying to copy it. The exercise was therapeutic, and some of my drawings were pretty good.

In 1951, I went to work for Local 38 of the ILGWU, and learned that the union, as part of its educational program, had an after-work sculpting class. I asked if I could take the class, and was told I could. It was held in the studio of Arturo Sofo, at 134 McDougal Street in Greenwich Village. I still remember the excitement I felt when I first walked into the studio: a large room filled with sculpting stands, plaster casts of various pieces of sculpture, boxes of plastiline, and shelves with students' work. And 10 to 12 garment workers, young, middle-aged and old, men and women, who wanted to express themselves through sculpting. Our teacher was Arturo Sofo, a short, wiry man in his 50s, bald, always with a black beret. He was a respected sculptor, and a wonderful teacher.

For all of us, on entering the studio, the problems of the day were forgotten. We became sculptors. But first, Sofo had to tell us how to go about it. There was a lot to learn. What tools to get; how to build an armature; the proportions of the human body—skeleton, muscles; how to see and to translate what you see into a piece of sculpture. I went back to the Metropolitan Museum to look at those Greek statues (and Roman copies) again. Our first assignment was to copy the half size plaster cast of the Venus de Milo. Once we did that, we could go on to anything else. I found a sculpting stand, built an armature, put down a base of plastiline, and started to pile more plastiline on the armature. Eventually, it began to take the shape of a torso. Sofo would come over, look at it, and point out where I was going wrong. I would look at my figure, look back at the plaster cast, and, hopefully, see my mistake. I was learning what the human figure was like. It was great. I completed my first piece.

When a piece was completed, it was cast in plaster by an associate of Sofo's who was a "master caster." Sofo did not have the facility in his studio to do casting. When the piece was cast and returned to us, we would finish it, filing away the seam where the pieces were joined, and then giving it a patina. Sofo showed us how to paint the cast so that it would look like bronze or marble. I was pleased with my Venus, and then went on to do a head of Sylvia. Since I could not have Sylvia posing each week, I had photographs taken of her—front, sides and back—and had them blown up to life size. I built the armature, and worked from the photographs. When I completed it, and it was cast, and I gave it a marble-like patina, My second piece of sculpture. Way to go.

After I completed Sylvia's head, I was ready to tackle Michelangelo. I had a book with photographs of Michelangelo's Tomb of the Medici. I picked out one of a seated figure. It looked doable. An old man with his right hand on his heart and his left hand at his side, draped in a toga, It was hard, sculpting the face and hands, but I did the best I could. It still sits in a place of prominence in my home. I love when people admire it, and look surprised when I tell them I did it. When I visited Italy, I went to the Tomb of the Medici with great anticipation to see my "old man." It is true that it is one of the smaller pieces, but there it was. I stood in front of it, transfixed. I foolishly told a guard that I made a copy of it, and he said casually that Michelangelo did not sculpt it. It was done by an assistant. He really knew how to hurt a guy.

I loved those two years of sculpting in Sofo's studio. However, it came to an end in 1954 when I was finally drafted. Though I wasn't sure what I would be doing in the Army, or where I would be assigned, I thought I might have the opportunity to sculpt, so I bought 10 pounds of plastiline from Sofo and took it along with me, just in case. There was a wood shop at Fort Dix, so I built a sculpting stand, and took that along as well. From Fort Dix in New Jersey to Camp Rucker in Alabama to Camp Gordon in Georgia, I shlepped those 10 pounds of plastiline and the sculpting stand. A year and a half, and I never took the wrappers off the plastiline.

When I returned to New York after my discharge, I returned to the ILGWU and to Sofo's studio. It was wonderful being back, and I graduated to bas-reliefs. I did a bas-relief of my daughter Carol, and when the Jewish Labor Committee received a grant to establish the William Green Memorial Library, I sculpted a bas-relief of William Green for the library, both under the watchful eye of Arturo Sofo. By the late 50s, the ILGWU and Sofo came to a mutual parting of the ways. Sofo sold his wonderful studio and moved to Oswego New York, and the ILGWU was making major changes as well.

The sculpting stand and the plastiline were now in the basement of our apartment house in Brooklyn. One of our neighbors, Henry Zelwian, was a real artist. He taught art at Boys High School. Henry was a serious painter of landscapes, still life and portraits. We bought a wonderful painting of the flatlands in Brooklyn from him, and he did a portrait of Sylvia. She was now immortalized in plaster and oil.

We continued visiting art museums and galleries, and after we moved to Brooklyn, we added the Brooklyn Museum to our museum-going. It had some great sculpture by Lachaise and Maillol. And we would take Carol, and then Lewis, and would push Martha in a stroller. The move to DC meant no more New York Museums, but we now had the National Gallery and the Phillips and the Corcoran, and then the Hirschhorn. I took a sculpting class at the Corcoran, which turned out to be a class where you assembled found objects and called it sculpture. I kept an open mind, but it felt like a children's class to encourage creativity.

Turns out that my children were creative. Carol as a dancer and later, a photographer, Lewis as a print-maker and Martha as a potter. Whenever we went on vacation, I took a sketch pad along, and would sketch the cabin in which we stayed, and the landscape. And I took lots of pictures. As the kids got older, I bought each of them a 35mm camera—a Pentax K-1000--and they all became good photographers. For a while, I took photography seriously, learned how to print and enlarge my photographs, and thought about setting up a darkroom, but didn't pursue it.

In 1979, when I moved to Boston, I found the Boston Center for Adult Education, and their sculpting class. The Center was located on Commonwealth Avenue in the Back Bay, only a few blocks away from my apartment on Beacon Street. That same feeling—forgetting the troubles of the day—returned when I entered that studio. The instructor was a talented young woman who graduated from Boston University with a Master's in Fine Arts. Our class differed from Sofo's in that we worked in clay, which was fired.

And we had live models! Did I have a good time! Not only was there the thrill of creating “a work of art,” but I could look at naked ladies at the same time. Occasionally, our instructor brought in a male model. Oh well.

It was in this class that I began to learn about the importance of understanding the skeleton, and the body’s proportions—head, torso legs, arms. The model stood, or was seated, on a platform, which rotated, and the students did their best to reproduce the pose. It was important to work on the whole figure, constantly turning the model and your piece. I tended to work quickly, and usually completed a figure in one session. When our instructor had enough pieces, she would have them fired. After a couple of years, I accumulated a lot of pieces, and began to give them away to my children and friends. When Fran and I married and we moved to Brookline, I continued to take classes, but after a year or two, I gave it up.

In our new home, I set up a workshop in the basement, and finally took the plastiline out of its package. I made a few small figures (without a model) and left them on the sculpting stand, gathering dust. When David was around five, I suggested that he might like to play with the plastiline, and we tried sculpting animals together. We did it a couple of times. A few years later, Fran enrolled David in a children’s art class at the Museum of Fine Arts taught by Leila Rosenthal, and a few years after that, David graduated to her father, Ralph Rosenthal’s sculpting class. Coincidentally, I took an adult class with Ralph which I enjoyed very much. It was a new experience, sculpting a piece, and then breaking it up. I returned to sculpting from photographs. No models. In fact, Ralph encouraged his students to use their imagination. David spent several years with Ralph, and enjoyed sculpting (as I did) and made some fine pieces. I get a kick out of the fact that all my children have surpassed me in their artistic endeavors. I refuse to take credit for their accomplishments. I believe it is their talent, not my genes.

After I retired, I learned about the Evergreen Program at Boston University. For \$20 you were able to take any class at BU that you could get into, limited to three classes. I couldn’t believe it. Looking over their catalog, I felt like a kid in a candy store. What an opportunity to take all those college classes that I could never fit in. Flipping the pages, I found the School of Fine Arts, and there they were: classes in sculpture! Three hour studio classes twice a week. Wow! I then looked for another class—in English, history, art or music appreciation, religion, economics--that I could take either before or after the sculpting class, and registered for both of them. I followed this routine for several years. The prices kept going up, traveling to and from BU was getting harder, and I took every sculpting class they gave, at least two times.

In my first sculpting class in Sofó’s studio, I was the youngest person among a group of older garment workers. Now, I was clearly the oldest person in a class of undergraduates. But I was finally getting the hang of it. If you are going to be a sculptor, you must learn how to use the tools of your trade: the material you will be sculpting—clay and plaster--and the utensils you will use to sculpt them. It took me a while to understand how to work the clay so there were no air holes, and how to keep the clay wet from one week to the next. How to mix plaster so that it is not too thick or too thin. How to build an

armature. How to make a mold, and how to take it apart. How to repair a plaster cast if there is a break. How to finish the cast. I used many of the same tools that I bought when I was in Sofo's class, tools for both clay and plaster. I made a few bas-reliefs as I did with Sofo. I did lots of torsos and figures from life, as I did at the Boston Center.

But I began to feel that, not only was I not improving, I was actually regressing. I reluctantly concluded that "liking to sculpt" is not enough. I seemed unable to progress beyond the fundamentals. With each piece, I had to relearn what to do. Someone said that art is 10% inspiration and 90% perspiration. I had neither. And it was getting harder to get to my sculpting class at BU.

The Brookline Senior Center started a drawing class. I signed up, and attended for a couple of years. The instructor was very encouraging, but I could see that my work left something to be desired. Something was missing in both my sculpting and drawing, and that something was talent. You've got it, or you don't. I will "potchke," from time to time, as the spirit moves me, recognizing that I am no artist. I will devote most of my creative energies to writing my memoirs, recognizing that I am no writer.

"Fish gotta swim. Birds gotta fly. And I've gotta write this stuff 'til I die."

January 31, 2010