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Roquebrune, 1962

GINGER DANTO

My sister and I were little. We rode in the scratchy backseat of a mustard-colored Citroën sedan. No seatbelts. It was 1962, the south of France. The countryside was raw, the villages small and closed, the only sign of life smoke coming from the chimneys. Grandmothers were home cooking. Men were in the fields.

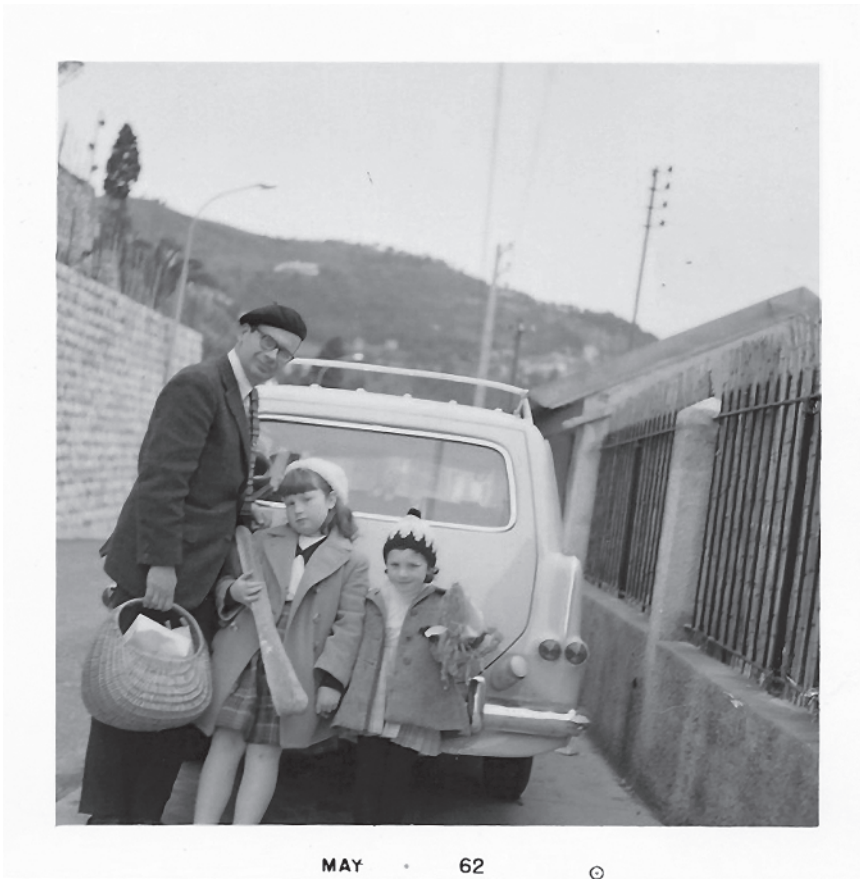
For my father's first sabbatical year from Columbia University, my parents settled in the tiny, sloping village of Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, probably because of the house, that had not just a kitchen with a terrace and a view of the sea, but a spare upper room where my father could write. It was the Côte d'Azur before it was the Côte d'Azur. Life was slow, simple. Celebrities were still only interested in the yachting playgrounds of Monaco and Monte Carlo.

My father was by then keen on philosophy: it was his subject as an academic, the analytical his trade as a professor. But art and art making still held sway from his formative career as an artist of moderate success in our hometown of New York City. That was where he made woodcuts, in the apartment where we grew up, with the dusty perfume of woodchips everywhere littering the floor, splashes of ink on the wood panels and sheets of luminous rice paper for printing, rolled and ready for use.

He didn't have any of this when we traveled, however, much less a studio. Just a blue black Olivetti and a battered briefcase, the same one he carried around on campus. But among the books and manuscripts was invariably a sketchbook, or a portfolio of Sennelier paper, with somewhere a bottle of ink, a pen, and a set of watercolors.

Reading my father describe his early life as an artist, particularly his famous discussion of giving it up, I was surprised to see him say categorically that he never used color. Or that color didn't interest him. That his medium was all prints, all black and white.

Certainly, the woodcuts were his signature and what afforded a certain income, beyond his professor's salary, that he admitted "meant a lot." But when we traveled as a



young family as we did summers as well as sabbatical years, to France and Italy and parts of New England, my father went beyond drafting mere sketches, in pencil or pen and ink, to filling these with color—dots and dashes of light, luminous pastel—pale washes of color reminiscent of the very Cezannes that in their ultimate perfection eventually closed the door for him, he said, to ever making art again.

I remember the reflex he had when we would stop somewhere for lunch, of taking out his sketchpad, and while my mother unpacked a picnic of salads in little waxed paper boxes from the local *épicerie*, with the requisite baguette and log of sweet butter, he would sit and make a study of whatever scenery we found ourselves in. Or, if that proved uninspiring, he would ask one of us to pose, and in my infinite ennui as a child more interested in playing with my stuffed animals than sitting perfectly still, I suffered there on some rock or bench as my father sketched and squinted and I must say—smiled—until we were both released by the communal call to eat.

He worked very fast; it was my sister Elizabeth who remembered this, who at age ten or eleven accompanied him around Rome in the afternoons to this or that architectural site for what my father called “analytical sight-seeing.” As the resulting architectural pen and ink effigies were not leisurely studies but rather attempts to interpret

information drawn from books by Janson and Rudolf Wittkower, the Columbia art historian who became a close friend, and whose “Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism,” my father wrote in his 2013 intellectual autobiography, “had the greatest philosophical influence on me of anything I had read about art.”

In this exhibit there are other edifices, notably Borromini’s San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane, where the artist was interested in the convex and the concave. “The idea that it was something invisible that gave structure to the visual turned me around completely in my way of looking at art,” my father wrote later on, recalling these epiphanies, that for him had echoes in Oriental philosophy, for example, and that occurred on these repeated Roman excursions in the footsteps of the Baroque.

What I remember is that once he was home – whether the ramshackle villa in Roquebrune or the apartment in Rome – he disassembled his road sketches of fresh ink or swaths of color, leaving them to dry on some surface that would soon enough be reclaimed for more domestic use: the maid’s ironing, somebody’s homework, a meal or an evening glass of wine shared with my mother.

In an essay written to accompany an online exhibit of his woodcuts established several years ago by his alma mater, Wayne State University, my father wrote of his oeuvres: “I had no interest in just making art, I wanted them to enter life, and hang on other people’s walls. I wanted them to be a part of life.” And so they are, decades later, courtesy of CAFA and a dedicated consortium of colleagues, to be seen by people from all over the world, a thousand miles from where their life began.

The essay is reprinted with gracious permission from CAFA, Beijing, China. CAFA published a catalog on the occasion of its 2014 Arthur Danto symposium and exhibit.