

CLASSES WITH REMBRANDT, GOYA, MICHELANGELO — AND SOME NUNS

SUSAN MANCHESTER was just 20 years old in 1962 when her mother drove her from their Santa Barbara home to the L.A. Airport and put her on a flight to New York City, where she boarded the SS Cristoforo Colombo for an eight-day voyage to Italy.

She was traveling alone, knew nobody on the ship, spoke rudimentary Italian, and had no one waiting on the other side of the Atlantic.

“The world was simpler and safer then,” remembered Manchester, a Carmel-by-the-Sea artist and former York School art instructor. “I was naïve, but confident enough about my choices that I didn’t entertain much fear.

“I wanted to study art in the seat of the Renaissance and assess the ancients,” she said. “I always had this desire not to be underestimated or mistaken for a frivolous student of the arts.”

Studying the originals

With parental approval and encouragement from instructors at UC Santa Barbara, she enrolled at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Florence, where, for over a year, she studied drawing, painting and printmaking in an environment steeped in the history of Leonardo da Vinci and other masters.

“I was not very skilled, but I worked at it through continuous drawing, etching, and painting classes,” Manchester said.

With permission from the head of the school, she spent every morning at the Uffizi Gallery Library of Prints and Drawings, looking at original drawings by Renaissance artists, including Rembrandt and Michelangelo.

“I studied the paintings of artists like Caravaggio and Goya, as well as the etchings of my teacher, Giorgio Morandi, a celebrated painter and printmaker.”

‘Signorina Rembrandt!’

Manchester first encountered the legendary Morandi — “The Maestro” of Accademia di Belle Arti — when he slipped quietly into the classroom and stood behind her as she pulled an etching off the press.

“It was my own version of a Rembrandt etching, ‘Tobias and the Angel,’” she

remembered. “He looked at my etching and called me ‘Signorina Rembrandt!’ He was an elderly man, and I didn’t even realize who he was until the other students ran over and told me.”

For the young student, the experience in Italy was life-altering, and her education there still impacts the art she creates today

Carmel’s Artists

By DENNIS TAYLOR

in a second-floor studio at the Church of the Wayfarer.

Manchester spent that Christmas in Rome with Marguerite Courtney, whom she called “La Mama.” She was the mother of a fellow art student.

“La Mama was friends with a young Augustinian monk who arranged an audience of about 100 people with Pope John XXIII,” she said. “The pope spoke for about 30 minutes in three languages, blessed us, and then was kind of yanked off the stage. He liked to talk!”

The monk then took Manchester and La Mama on an impromptu tour that included the pope’s private apartment, gardens and his private chapel, where they found themselves standing between two breathtaking Michelangelo frescoes, “The Conversion of Saul” and “The Crucifixion of St. Peter.”

“It was, of course, mind-blowing for me,” she said.

Mexico to Santa Barbara

Manchester, the youngest of three children, spent the first three years of her life near Mexico City, where her father, a Stanford graduate, was negotiating a deal for the U.S. government. She learned Spanish before she could speak English.

Fun fact: When Manchester was a toddler, her mother took her to have her ears pierced by Wilhelm Loeser, a physician who had been exiled from the United States for altering the fingerprints of American gangster John Dillinger. “It’s my only claim to fame,” she quipped.

The Manchesters moved from Mexico to Pasadena, then Santa Barbara, where

See ARTIST page 26A

ARTIST

From page 23A

Susan's mother — unimpressed with the public school system — enrolled her daughter in a convent school operated by French nuns.

"I had no religious background at all, but we all learned to chant in Latin, and we prayed in French," she reflected.

"That school was in an old Italianate villa on a beautiful piece of property," she recalled. "And since my family wasn't Catholic, I wasn't at all worried about going to hell, so it was all pretty fascinating to me."

Her mother embraced Santa Barbara's cultural offerings, particularly theater, art and music. The Manchesters owned a grand piano and a bass piano.

"My mother was the type of woman who did things because she didn't know that she couldn't," Manchester said with a laugh. "She was the first woman in Santa Barbara to have a talk show on the radio and interviewed a lot of interesting people — authors who hyped their books, people who believed in UFOs — all kinds."

Drawing is her 'true north'

Manchester earned her high school diploma from Marymount School, a Catholic academy where her art interests were usurped by five hours of homework most nights.

But she began drawing again after enrolling at UC Santa Barbara.

"I'm also a painter, of course, but drawing has always been my 'true north,'" she said. "I actually do some of my best drawings while I'm talking on the phone."

At 21, Manchester returned from Italy a more serious artist. "My art vector was set in Florence," she said.

Santa Barbara's art community lacked "edge," Manchester decided, so she moved to North Beach in San Francisco, near the San Francisco Art Institute, where she studied with figurative artist Gordon Cook.

"But I didn't stick around for a degree," she said. Her Florentine training and eagerness to learn helped her land a job as an architectural draftsman. That experience

brought her to the Monterey Peninsula, where she worked three years for Burde Shaw & Associates.

Monterey also is where she first noticed David Allen Smith, a residential architect who worked on the other side of the business complex. They were married in 1974 and celebrated their 50th anniversary this year.

Sketches at the Smithsonian

After leaving Burde Shaw, Manchester found her first job as an artist when she was hired by the Hopkins Marine Station to help create illustrations for a 1992 Stanford University Press publication, "Marine Algae of California."

The textbook is still in use, and Manchester's original drawings are now at the Smithsonian Institute and are frequently borrowed by institutions all over the world.

In 1980, she was invited to upgrade the art program at York School in Monterey, where she served as department director and taught four days a week for 14 years.

"That teaching job gave me time to create my own drawings and paintings and build a body of work," said Manchester, who showed her art for 10 years at the Edith Caldwell Gallery and other San Francisco galleries.

She has been represented in Carmel-by-the-Sea since 2011 by the Winfield Gallery (Dolores between Ocean and Seventh) and shows at the Andra Norris Gallery in Burlingame.

"Not to dramatize it, but making art is my lifeline," said the artist. "When I enter my studio, the weight of the world evaporates. I've had some spectacular experiences in both the local and grand-scale art spheres, for which I am eternally grateful."

Manchester's portfolio features delicate drawings and soft-palette paintings, including portraits, figures, still-life botany, and what she calls "the floating world" — feathers and winged creatures.

She is creating work for a multi-artist exhibition planned for this fall at Winfield Gallery. For additional information and to view images of her art, visit susanmanchesterart.com.

Dennis Taylor is a professional freelance writer in Monterey County. Contact him at scribelaureate@gmail.com.