



The Docent Of Beverly Hills

AN AFTERNOON'S TRIP THROUGH THE AGES

It was a typical day in Beverly Hills – gorgeous, sunny, and manicured. The well-heeled were making their cappuccino plans and thinking about wardrobe strategies at Bijan, but I was on a mission. It isn't every day that your parents celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary, and I had to find the perfect gift.

Directly across from Bijan was a sumptuous-looking window in the Rodeo Collection at Barakat. Walking in, my heels sank into plush, dark green carpeting, and my eyes fell upon a myriad of ancient delights. The owner gave me a pleasant smile and asked, "Were you looking for something special?" He had said the right thing. A fabulous vase in the window had caught my attention, and just to get things rolling I asked the price. "That one is \$48,000," he said in a soft spoken voice.

BY MARA PURL



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I gulped. Even for Rodeo, this seemed a little steep. Although I wanted to please my parents, somehow the total cost of my college education wasn't quite the budget I'd had in mind. Sensing my pallor, Mr. Barakat began to explain. "You see this particular piece dates to the 5th century BC. It was originally made in Alexandria, Egypt."

"I thought such pieces were reserved only for museums," I replied, while wondering whether I was about to embarrass myself or make a new friend. Reaching behind one of his marble and mahogany cases, he began to bring out catalogs describing in detail his many collections – the Pre-Columbian, the Egyptian, and the Classical Antiquities Collections – so he *has* a museum, in effect, but one which offers its treasures for sale.

My eyes now fell on some of the jewelry glowing beneath the glass. Ancient coins surrounded in gold, suspended from heavy chains, beads of lapis, emeralds, sapphires, or rubies. Maybe Mom would settle for a necklace sporting a coin with the noble face of one of the Roman emperors? "How much are these necklaces?" I asked. "Well, that one with the rubies is \$3,000." We were getting closer. "That simple one is \$300." We were now definitely in the ball park. But what about Dad? Somehow a necklace wasn't the perfect anniversary gift for a man, although the pair of Alexander the Great coin cuff links for \$1,400 was.

As we talked, something strange began to happen. I started to hear voices. There was an Egyptian figure, an *ushabti* only 8 inches tall, but surely he hadn't spoken. He'd been sworn to silence centuries ago. Then there was the Asian Kwanyin, the goddess of generosity. Well, she

was being generous with her comments, though I would swear her lips weren't moving. There was also the Mayan cylindrical vase depicting rituals of a game, the African fetish figure, the Roman cupid, and the stop-action athlete caught forever on the Greek vase. Suddenly a face that wasn't speaking appeared in front of me. An old, intriguing face. Across the mouth a veil was drawn. "What about that painting, Mr. Barakat. How much is that?" I asked. "I'm sorry that isn't for sale, that's part of my personal collection."

I could see why. "This is one of my favorite artists – Andre Szasz." He saw that I hadn't stopped staring at the portrait. "She is so haunting." He began to explain. "You see at once that she is old, but at the same time you see that all the ages are represented in that face, as if somehow she were the mother of all. She can't speak, but if you allow her to communicate with you, you begin to hear her voice."

I'd heard enough voices for one afternoon. But I did like the painting. "Let me show you a little more of his work." Mr. Barakat had sensed a weak spot.

We walked across the courtyard, and the Pre-Columbian/Egyptian/Roman/Greek voices began to recede. "I was looking for something for my parents 50th anniversary," I confessed.

"Well, let me show you this first – it's a piece Szasz painted on honeymoon sheets. Yes," he laughed, "it's true. We know he's been married several times. Exactly which honeymoon sheets he used we don't know. But in any case, *The Visionary* was painted on linen. For a moment it looks like a stylized head of Queen Nefertiti – as if Modigliani had painted it.

"But actually he's a master of his own personal approach to surrealism. For example, one of his wives described the woman in *The Foxy Lady* as one who has



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nothing in her head but the castle she wants to get, and it's her foxiness which will get it for her."

We moved along the gallery wall. "Even more extreme in its surrealistic representation is this one titled *Africa*." In it, a bird nests protectively in a tree on the Savanna, but the eggs she protects are themselves eyes wide open to the possibility of independence. "Now look at it again. You see the face?" Well, the eyes had been obvious, as had the full red mouth. But as he pointed out, the whole piece itself became another face, a kind of man/beast face, which perhaps comments upon the interconnection between all forms of life.

As we proceeded through the gallery, devoted entirely to this one artist, I began to get quite an art history lesson. Szasz was born in Hungary in 1926, and did his first drawing at four. At eight he decided to become an artist, a decision to which his parents were opposed. They eventually saw the light, however, when at 15 he had his first formal exhibition, and was reviewed by major Hungarian newspapers. In 1946, Szasz graduated from the University of Budapest's School of Fine Arts, and went on to illustrate over 700 books, including the *Rubayat*, now residing in the British Museum. Others among his works are displayed in museums in 20 countries, from Mexico to Poland, Canada to Czechoslovakia.

As I stand in proximity to his paintings, they begin to draw me in. They're arresting. I begin to wonder if one of the reasons is that Szasz is thought to be the greatest living surrealistic painter, and yet his techniques are those of the masters. What would it feel like to stand next to a Rembrandt and know that he was still painting? Perhaps not unlike the feeling of standing next to a Szasz. Dr. Raymond Stites, former curator at the National Gallery of Art apparently agrees. Of his *Rubayat* illustrations he says, "They rival the best from the burin of Rembrandt and are evidence of the imaginative skill of the man. Certainly they are at least the equal and, to my mind, surpass the etching of Pablo Picasso."

A telling statement - to jump from Rembrandt to Picasso while trying to describe one artist. "His portraits," continues Stites, "as deep and intricate in their design as the finest of Irish manuscript illuminations, stem from subconscious mental images whose origins lie deep in the prehistoric past."

Strange that such a far-fetched series of images could strike such a chord of recognition. His technique is a combination of oil-varnish, and with it he gets jewel-like colors, so much so that in one piece the jewel itself seems almost to be superimposed on the canvas. This one is his *High Priest*, in which all the colors are subtle to a fault, with the exception of the single garnet above the priest's forehead. "The priest seems to draw us into his medita-

tion, doesn't he? The garnet is reputed to have been the only source of light on Noah's Ark," he explains, and I begin to wonder what Mr. Barakat *doesn't* know about all things ancient.

He guides me to more paintings. *Crooked Nose* is a completely surrealistic world in which men and creatures all look more or less alike. "They are all looking at each other with recognition and distrust, don't you think?" And then, almost as though we were coming full circle, he guides me to *Fairytale Grandmother*. In this strange painting - oil on lucite this time - the grandmother is surrounded by strange creatures forming out of the mist. She has receded back into her own mystical world, but it seems she may have taken me with her on the journey.

I force myself to return to present time as I consider again the dilemma of my parents' gift. Anticipating my question, Mr. Barakat tells me that the etchings and drawings begin at about \$1,400, and the paintings sell for up to \$60,000. I begin to smile as I realize that my problem is solved. I've found them the perfect gift.

When he asks me, I'm ready with my answer. "What I've decided is that the best possible gift I could give my parents is a trip." "To where?" he asks excitedly. "A trip to everywhere in the world - a trip to the Barakat Galleries." And when it's time for you to make the trip, you'll find Mr. Barakat and his treasure troves at 433 North Rodeo Drive. It will be the most unusual trip to Beverly Hills you ever made.

