

TR COLLETTA

ARTWORKS MAGAZINE

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Roller Skates II – 40 x 46 – oil on linen

“It feels like I am in a movie about my life but I don’t have the lead...” a fascinating statement of clarity from TR Colletta – one that allows him to see abundant abstractions in every rigid reflection. He understands that the journey to his core is a compass-confusing maze. So rather than barreling through barriers and speeding down streets to nowhere, Colletta has chosen to enjoy the twists and turns of time. “The artistic process for me is a lot like jumping across a lake on lily pads,” Colletta quips. “You hope there’s one in front of you to jump to before the one you’re standing on sinks.” His hopscotch through life goes something like this: Grammy-award-winning singer and former church organist/bagpipe player turned full-time painter with an unquenchable thirst for history, who grew up Catholic in Buffalo but ended up breathing better in the free, yet graffiti-stained air of San Francisco. All that absorption has added substance, but it has not made him fat. Colletta’s brain is clever, his brush loaded with insight and his strokes riddled with secrets worth knowing. Understanding what lies beneath means digging deep without fear of the chords that will be struck along the way.



Quality Vending – 54 x 36 – oil on linen

Colletta calls his paintings “contemporary exercises in recognizable memories.” The objects themselves are the initial draw. They have a familiar color, shape and style, and although they make room for differing experiences, most have universal functions. For instance, we push a pencil or bang on a typewriter to help us string words together. But communication need not end with the script created. And that’s the brilliance of a Colletta canvas. After first identifying with the representational, the subtle surrealism begins to seep to the surface. In a piece called *Strike One*, Colletta investigates the cost of “free” speech. He painted three parallel, yellow “American” pencils. The middle one has a worn eraser and is broken in two places. It’s the equivalence of a bitten tongue wondering how many chances it gets to say the “wrong” thing.



Strike One – 24 x 62 – oil on linen

Regardless, we know words don’t come easy; oftentimes they don’t come at all. Prose is what writers do. But what happens when the brain farts and the only letters that make sense are the “P” and the “U?” Colletta vowed to create a visual to explain the virus known as *Writer’s Block*. However his head-scratching piece features only a pristinely oiled typewriter. It seems as though this black beauty should serenade an old author with sweet sentences. But even this magnificent machine has felt the touch of frozen fingers. Look at its keys! They all have question marks on them! The sheet of paper rolled in it has been hit with just one small stroke: ?



Writer’s Block – 40 x 40 – oil on linen

Dick Wolf created “Law & Order.” Solving crimes is what he does. But even Wolf can’t beat the system when mental handcuffs lock him down. So he bought Colletta’s canvas and hangs *Writer’s Block* on his wall praying for its execution.

Colletta is the Agatha Christie of art: clues, clues and more clues. It’s a visual journey that doesn’t necessarily end with a solved murder. But it does make statements and pose interesting questions about what may be killing our society. Take guns for example. At first glance, *Trigger Happy* appears to glorify them. Hell, our fascination with weapons dates back to childhood – watching old Westerns and playing cowboys and Indians. Colletta dusts off that nostalgia with two silver-plated pistols tucked neatly in a 1950’s-era Roy Rogers leather holster. The rusty buckles give the piece even more true grit. But just below the brass adorning the belt is a message about control. The odd-looking orange bullets have white tips and yellow caps. That’s right, the ammo is actually candy corn – sweetness before shooting.



Trigger Happy – 48 x 60 – oil on linen

What's the root of all evil? A glimpse at *National Cash Register* seems to have the answer. The gloomy total of \$66.60 makes it easy to understand who's opening and closing the till. In *Texan Economist*, a one-armed bandit slot machine comes complete with a blazing Smith & Wesson. The goofy, ten-cent machine has hit a jackpot but with backwards dollar signs. "I almost put George Bush's face on it," Colletta admits. "I was so angry when he bankrupted the treasury the first year he was in office. I didn't do it, though, because I thought it would be pushing it." So true to Colletta's M.O., he hinted at it instead. As for right and left-winged pundits, Colletta has a soft jab for them, too. He painted an old radio broadcast microphone with the motto "Voice of America" labeled all over it. The steam rising from the metal gives the piece its title, *Hot Airwaves*, suggesting we consider not only the message being promoted, but also who's saying it and why.



Hot Airwaves – 60 x 34 – oil on linen

One of his latest works is a landscape of Golden Gate Park. From a distance it seems like the ideal place for birds to chirp. But viewed from up close, it's clear that the atmosphere is covered in jigsaw puzzle lines. Three pieces appear to be missing. Maybe they've been swallowed up by carbon emissions or buried under a heap of hazardous waste. Subtle commentary in a not so subtle world. "We're taking chips out of nature all the time," Colletta says. "Rather than overt political statements, I like the work to be a bit more benign, so it can live in people's homes and not be so in your face, in your face, in your face."

In 1996, Colletta bought a condo a block off of Market down from Union Square. It screams San Francisco: the hustle and bustle of a working city surrounded by the ragged faces of homelessness. Romantic restaurants are short walks away, while a stone's throw in either direction will crash through the window of a newly opened pot clinic. Colletta's pad is a cozy two-

bedroom with lofted ceilings and just enough space to paint. Every day, all day that's what he does. Mix in a dry martini or a scotch at night plus a nice workout at the gym and that's how most days are crossed off on his calendar. However, the path that led towards this comfortable routine has been anything but.



Eight Ball II – 48 x 60 – oil on linen

Thomas Colletta grew up in Tonawanda, New York. It's upstate and a bit uptight. Church was mandatory, and buttoned-up behavior was expected for Tom and his five siblings. Mom had a piano, and a young Tom found his voice through music. He picked up the French horn during his junior year in band and soon leapfrogged to first chair. Tom graduated college with a B.S. in Graphic Design, but engineered his course load to include classes in music and history. Summing up the latter interest is simple: Tom drove around with a photograph of the queen's coronation in his first car, and at the age of 19, he traveled through Europe in a three-piece suit instead of a backpack. Around that same time, Colletta began composing his own music. He later sang professionally with the Connecticut Choral Artists (CONCORA), and even picked up the bagpipes. "My first parade was St. Patrick's Day," he reflects, "and I marched over a manhole with my kilt. I felt like Marilyn Monroe in 'The Seven Year Itch.' It was like a whole new world." Music not only colored his wardrobe plaid, it also paid the bills for a long time on the East Coast. Colletta spent 14 years as a church organist. He loved the sounds blaring from the pipes each Sunday. But 52 weekends a year as on-call memorial service musician had taken its toll. It wasn't just Chopin's "Funeral March" that was bringing him down; self-discovery had left him singing an unfamiliar tune. So, at the age of 40, everything he knew was about to change.



Party Line – 44 x 54 – oil on linen

"Gay did not exist in my Catholic family in New York in the sixties," Colletta states matter-of-factly. "Even in my own psyche it did not exist." But after twelve years into a marriage with a wonderful woman, Tom's mind caught up to his chemistry. "Living in a closet is a waste of time," he says with some lingering pain in his eyes. "I never did live in a closet knowingly, though. When I finally woke up, albeit late, the bewilderment was rather intense. It was a tumultuous experience going through a divorce and figuring out what it meant to be a gay man." After a rough year alone in New York City, Tom packed the three-foot long, to scale model of the Titanic he'd built along with its glass cabinet, shoved them in the car and drove cross-country to California. Crossing into the Golden Gate meant freedom, but fully embracing it was a challenge like no other.



TR with Whoopi Goldberg , Kord and FIREMEN Triptych NYC 2008

In the eighth grade, Tom's parents bought him a set of oils, and that year he painted a bunch of fruit and won "Honorable Mention" at the community art fair. Thanks to that ribbon, he's had a brush in his hand ever since. No formal art school training, though, just some private lessons and countless hours of trial and error. He began signing his canvases TR Colletta a long time ago, thinking the initials stood out better than some guy named Tom. But what really sets his work apart is not an autograph – it's the meticulous attention to detail, the way light and shadow dance with each other and the expression willed into his subject matter. Colletta worked at a photography studio for a few years in Niagara Falls after he got out of college. Tricks from that trade taught him how to diffuse backgrounds and pop out a third dimension on his canvases. When he lived back east, Colletta painted as often as he could, mostly urban and architectural landscapes, plus some portraits, too.



Mr. Charles Rus – 42 x 32 – oil on linen

"I took my first piece to a gallery in 1979, and it sold. It was a painting of the old statehouse in Hartford, Connecticut," he laughs. "From then on, anytime I needed money I did a painting of the old statehouse in Hartford, Connecticut, like Monet and his Rouen Cathedral." Despite selling well, it would be another 16 years before TR Colletta would call himself an artist. He felt he had to earn the title first.



Fire Alarm – 52 x 42 – oil on linen

In San Francisco, Colletta committed fully to his craft. He took temp work as an errand boy to help pay the bills, but every other second of his waking hours was spent painting. At the time, his signature style was striking architectural landscapes of old, East Coast Victorians. While they were technically sound, San Francisco galleries didn't want them around. So TR found himself in an artistic limbo – a painter with things to say but no audience willing to listen. “You want to have a voice and you want to express yourself, but it's not art until it connects,” he explains. “In other words, all art is self-expression, but not all forms of self-expression are art.” Then in 1995, three years after he landed in the Bay Area, TR finally stumbled upon his professional intersection. It was a red Department of Electricity fire alarm on a downtown street corner with “break glass” and “pull hook down once” instructions written on it. The object seemed to be symbolic of so much: a call to action, a reassurance of direction and even a saving grace. “I had been looking for an image to make my work a little more contemporary,”

Colletta reflects. “I felt the fire alarm incorporated various elements of my life: obviously painting, but with all the fires the city had experienced, there was also an historical component to the object, and most importantly, I felt it represented possibilities.” Included in that realm, the courage to call himself an “artist” for the first time. Colletta's investigation of objects bounced around from industrial to recreational and even experimental: electric meters, mailboxes, telephones, pinball machines, diner jukeboxes, movie popcorn makers and flying gumballs. With newfound room to explore, there was no capping his creativity. “I found that by turning a baseball a certain way the stitching creates a yin/yang,” he says. “I lit the piece from top to bottom and then put an emblem on the top to get a dark spot in the white area, and I put a reflection on the bottom in the black area.”



Eastern Division – 54 x 54 – oil on linen

Turns out Cy Young Award winning pitcher Barry Zito is into Eastern thought and liked the piece so much that he bought it on the spot. It was a lucky strike, but other experiences in his career have been as surreal as his work. In May of 2001, Colletta revisited the subject of fire. He created a triptych out of three firemen's hard hats – one yellow, one black, one red, each 32 inches wide. Then in August, Colletta created another fire alarm, this time a wall mounted device with an ominous hand reaching out from inside the breakable glass. He called it *The Calm Before...* Then, in September 2001, Colletta began work on

a New York-style ticker tape machine. That piece was resting on his easel the day the World Trade Center towers tumbled.

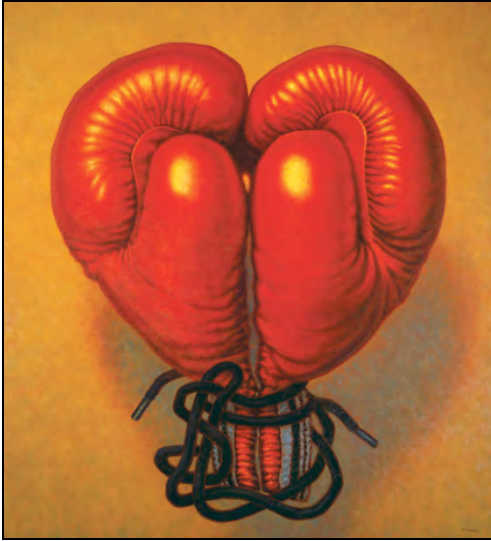


Hi Lo Pin Ball – 54 x 54 – oil on linen

In 2002, “Ghost” actress Whoopi Goldberg bought the fire hat triptych during Colletta’s first New York show. It was just another in a string of “spiritual coincidences” in his life. Years before he bumped into a random woman in San Francisco who seemed to know an awful lot about who he was and what he did. Seems she forgot to mention that she was a psychic until the end of the discussion. She left Colletta with one parting suggestion – a gallery that she thought would suit him perfectly. TR rollerbladed down there a couple days later but didn’t see how his art would fit. That was that until two years later when he saw a beautiful blonde man walking out of the Castro Theatre. “I tried to think of something to say but nothing came out,” TR says. “I kicked myself for being so shy.” But low and behold, three months later he saw the man again at the same theater. “You don’t often get a second chance in life,” he continues. “This time I went in and I handed him my card. I didn’t mean to be presumptuous, but in the Castro you can be pretty sure.” His name was Kord, and to TR’s surprise, he called. It was on the second date when Kord began talking about his job as a gallery administrator, and incredibly, it was at the exact same place the psychic had once recommended. Needless to say, the couple has been together ever since, some 14 years.



A gleaming Victrola record player is frozen in time on the easel in Colletta’s studio. For just a dime it spins a rhyme that sounds a lot like the story of his life. It’s a self-portrait of sorts. “My attempt at Chuck Close,” he snorts – where music and art collide on a canvas full of pride. The clue that’s final can be found on the vinyl as streaks of color glow to Harold Arlen’s “Over the Rainbow.” You see, why should things be cut and dry when they sound so much better witty and wry? Take boxing gloves, as yet another example. They’re used to dismantle someone, right? Sure, but even Cassius Clay has a heart – one that can best be seen when the red leather comes together thumb to thumb. But the tie that binds in this case is the lace. It twists and turns into a dollar sign creating the fine line between love and money. Colletta’s painting professes that there’s even more in store to a pay off punch when you figure out what you’re fighting for.



For Love or Money – 60 x 54 – oil on linen

From StamfordPlus.com

ARTS Bank donates mural to New Canaan Town Hall

By Bank donates mural to New Canaan Town Hall

Apr 21, 2011 - 5:58 PM

The entranceway to New Canaan's Town Hall Auditorium just became a lot prettier thanks to a painting donated by First County Bank. The four-by-eight-foot-long painting, titled "New Canaan Connecticut 1912," depicts a period scene of a New Canaan street. First County Bank President Rey Giallongo unveiled the painting and a commemorative



First County Bank President Rey Giallongo, New Canaan First Selectman Jeb Walker, Selectman Robert Mallozzi III and First County Bank AVP/Branch Manager (New Canaan) Michael Victor, in front of the painting on the first level of town Hall

plaque to New Canaan's First Selectman Jeb Walker and Selectman Robert Mallozzi III during a short ceremony held at town hall. The painting represents the intersection of Main Street and East Avenue in New Canaan.

The painting was commissioned by First County Bank in 1990 when artist T R Colletta had been asked to reproduce a street scene from New Canaan to be displayed in the branch located at 95 Park St. It remained there until August 2010 when it was taken down and stored during branch renovations.

"First County Bank is a company that lives and breathes a philosophy that's centered on making sound business decisions and personally and professionally finding ways to contribute to the well being of society," Giallongo said. "We are also a company that understands community. The donation of this

painting to New Canaan symbolizes our appreciation and gratitude to our customers. And we're happy to know the citizens of New Canaan and visitors to town hall will see what this beautiful town looked like when they view this painting," Giallongo said.

"It enhances the appearance of town hall," Jeb Walker, first selectman, said when seeing the painting for the first time. "We are very grateful to First County Bank for doing something like this for the town of New Canaan. It is a pleasant addition to town hall and I'm sure our citizens will appreciate it too."

"Wow, that's a blast from the past," said T R "Tom" Colletta, when reached by phone in San Francisco. "I am thrilled that the painting is going to get even more recognition and more people will get to see it."

The timing was perfect for this donation as First County Bank was finishing up last-minute touches to its branch renovations here.

"The new look and feel of our refurbished branch are the result of customer and employee feedback," said Giallongo. "The branch is where customers can touch, see and appreciate what our brand stands for. In many ways our refurbished branches are where the physical brand comes alive."

The redesign of the branch system, a multi-year, multi-million dollar undertaking by First County Bank, creates an environment that delivers the best customer experience. By creating clear communications within the branch through verbal, visual and physical elements, the bank is better able to manage its space with strategies to enhance efficiencies and overall branch effectiveness.

"First County Bank was looking to design a retail space that was more inviting to customers ... that supports customer engagement," said Katherine Harris, executive vice president retail banking at First County Bank. By enhancing the overall interiors of the branches through the use of natural and energy efficient lighting, and knocking down walls, First County Bank has created user-friendly areas for customers and bank personnel to more comfortably conduct business.



The donated painting

Besides new colors, flooring, lighting, furniture, use of natural woods and other textured surfaces, the refurbished branches have concierge desks, online banking kiosks, coffee bars and sitting areas where customers can

read or watch TV on large flat screen monitors. “Customer feedback has been fantastic. They love it,” Harris concluded.

As a First County Bank business customer since 2001, Robert Mallozzi III, owner of Bob’s Sports and one of two New Canaan selectmen, said, “First County Bank has been a staple here in town since 1986 and while the renovations to its branch are an improvement, it’s the people there that make the bank such a great place to do business.”

In fact, First County Bank Assistant Vice president/Branch Manager Michael Victor asked Mallozzi who to contact at town hall about accepting the artwork and suggestions on where to display it.

First County Bank, headquartered in Stamford, Conn., is an independent mutual community bank with 15 branches in Stamford, Greenwich, Darien, New Canaan, Norwalk and Westport offering deposit products, mortgages, trust and investment services, business banking services and online banking. First County Bank, which celebrates its 160th anniversary this year, has more than 200 employees and assets in excess of \$1.3 billion. For additional information, please visit www.firstcountybank.com.

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MOVING PICTURES? — Crossing the same corner, Main Street at East Avenue, shown in the painting as it appeared in about 1910, Mary Fuller and Maureen Meaney of Picture Perfect, local framing concern, deliver some art for in-

stallation in the new First County Bank opening tonight at the former Portobello site in Elm Street. The painting, an oil on canvass, is the work of Tom Colletta of Manchester. — (Greenberg Photo)

THE ARTISTRY OF AMERICAN ICONS

An Interview with Italian-American artist Thomas Colletta

By KORD J. HAMILTON

Working quietly in San Francisco, Italian-American artist Thomas Colletta turns familiar objects of daily life into works of art.

In this interview, Colletta explores his Italian heritage and its influence on his artistic vision.



What is your background?
I was born in Buffalo, New York, and raised in the suburb of Tonawanda in an Italian-American family. I began painting when I was thirteen and also studied music (piano, pipe organ, french horn and composition.) After getting my degree in graphic design from the State University of New York (Buffalo), I also studied photography. In 1978, I began painting full-time and in 1992 moved to San Francisco. *How has your heritage contributed to your work?*

Well, it never hurts for an artist to have an Italian last name! It certainly worked for Da Vinci and the rest of the boys. I am a first-generation Italian American. My father was six when he landed on Ellis Island from Sicily. He married a beautiful, intelligent woman and has been devoted to her and his six children ever since.

They encouraged us to get a good education, but the greatest lesson my parents taught us was to measure a person's success by his or her character. They stressed honesty, industry, responsibility and sincerity — all very important qualities to have if you're going to follow an artistic vision. Fortunately for me, Mom and Dad were both exceptional examples of these attributes.

The paradox, of course, is that these qualities don't necessarily make life easier. How does a person maintain integrity, while operating in an insincere world? Well, I find honesty in the canvases I produce. Insincerity in the arts is self-defeating and shamefully obvious. So my heritage is a great gift that has served me well on this artistic journey of mine. *Where did you study?*

Primarily, I'm self-taught. I never intended to paint for a living. It just came naturally. I took one art lesson as a boy, and then studied paintings in major museums all over the country. I also took several trips to Europe to explore the art and architecture there. Then, after painting

Opposite, Italian-American artist Thomas Colletta. Right, Gumball Machine II, an example of what Colletta calls "American icons," colorful, familiar objects that he records for posterity.

full-time for a few years, I discovered a small group of painters in New Hampshire who were painting in the style of the Boston school of visual impressionism — the style epitomized by John Singer Sargent, a favorite of mine. So I started to sojourn annually in New Hampshire. *Do you have a mentor?*

Composer Conrad Susa has been a tremendous influence on my life and art. (His latest opera, *Dangerous Liaisons*, will be performed by the Washington Opera next season.) Concepts of life, artistic ideals and the search for mystical truths permeate *all* of the arts, and are their driving force. Conrad helps me clear the cobwebs and get closer to these truths, whether he knows it or not. He's brilliant (and a fantastic cook, too!)

How do you choose your subjects?

Each subject is chosen for different reasons, but the common factor is that I like paintings to show the beautiful possibilities of our existence on earth, rather than the ugly or the horrible. My subjects vary, but mainly I'm drawn to architecture, portraits, the human figure and everyday objects I call "American icons."

Why architecture?

Architecture intrigues me because there is an interesting duality to buildings. They not only exemplify the society that designs them, but, once constructed, they also create the environment in which that soci-



ety functions. So I seek structures that exude character and then work with color, light, season, mood, etc., to create the painting.

What do you find most satisfying about doing portraits?

Working from live sittings, because no matter what physical traits a person may have, representing them on canvas transforms the image into

art. Also, every great artist in history did portraits, so it is fun to follow that tradition even though portraits are extremely challenging!

Tell us about your "American Icons" series.

I got the idea when I realized that we are surrounded by colorful, beautifully shaped objects that are invisible because they are so famil-



Left, Organist Charles Rus, a portrait by Colletta. Opposite, Vesuvio Bakery (the bakery still stands on Prince Street in New York City), and My Mother's Sewing Machine.

iar. To notice one, we almost need to bump into it! A gumball machine, a fire box, a parking meter — these “icons” populate the landscape of our daily life. My icon paintings are portraits that capture the character of these objects through color and design.

What makes a successful painting? That’s a really tough question. My financier brother in Buffalo would say a successful painting is the one with the biggest price tag, but for me, a successful painting is one that arrests me for a moment, and, almost without my realizing it, com-

pels me to look at it. (Assuming, of course, that the painting already displays integrity and craftsmanship!) I would like to create pieces that make a person stop and really look. Then, if I’m lucky, my paintings might trigger that complete dialogue that occurs between a painting and a viewer.

What do you mean by “complete dialogue?”

Well, art can be viewed on three levels. First is the appreciation of the image. Second is seeing beyond that image to the actual “painting” of the work — the technique, com-

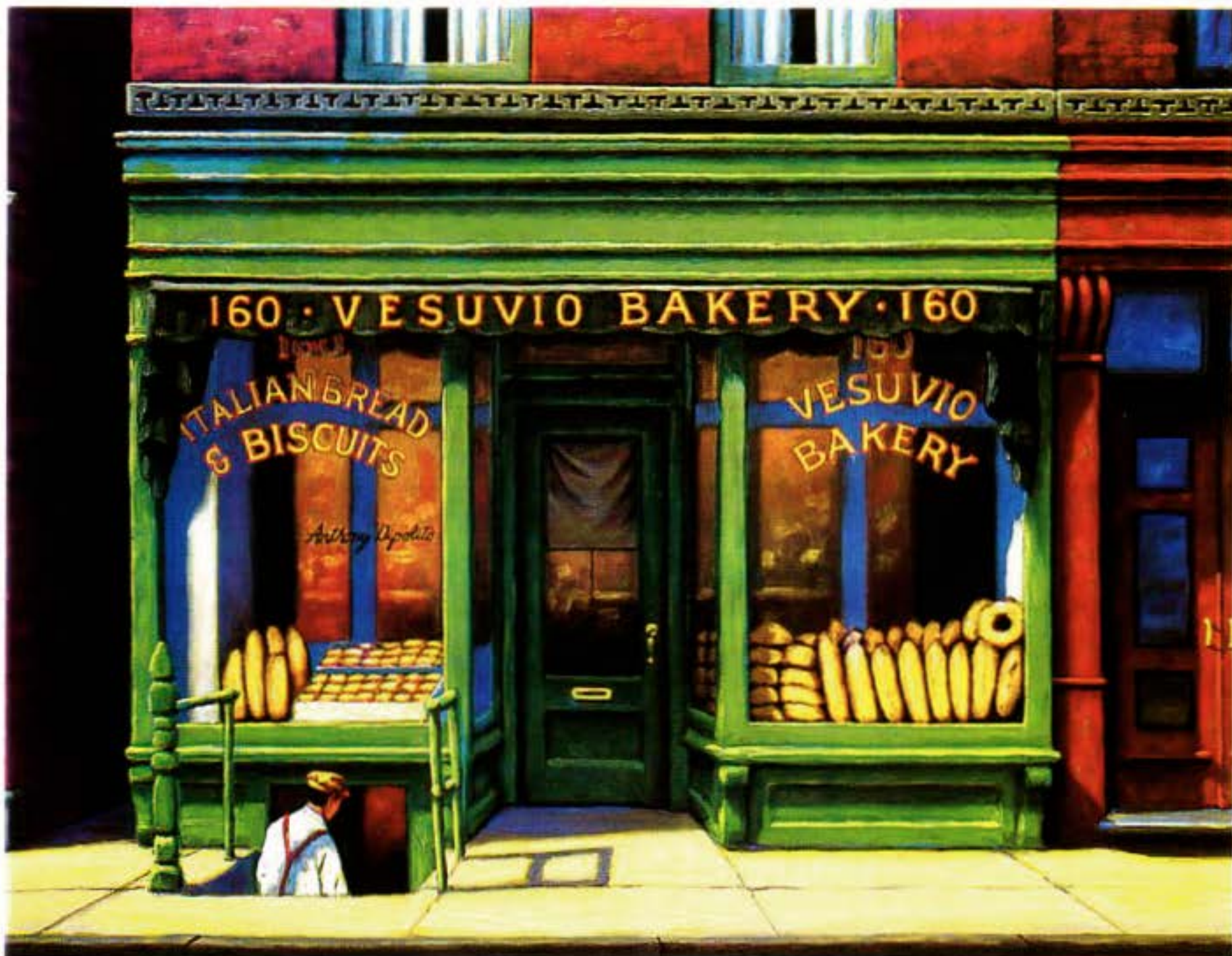
position, and so forth. The third level occurs only when the language of the artist speaks to the viewer, when the viewer not only enjoys the painting, but identifies with it, feels somehow in unison with it. That’s a complete dialogue. *What are some common misconceptions about being an artist?*

Most people think that an artist is his own boss. They don’t realize that we have to answer to clients, to the individual requirements of galleries and to gallery directors — who want to tell us what to paint and what will sell. Artists often acquiesce to keep bread on the table. Michelangelo did not *want* to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. He considered himself a sculptor, not a painter. But if your patron is the Pope, you can’t very well say no!

People also believe the romantic notion that we only paint when we’re “inspired.” If I only painted when I was inspired, I’d produce a fraction of what I do and get half as far on my journey. It isn’t a matter of painting when you feel the muse moving you — you have to get that muse moving by laying out the pallet and picking up your brush.

If you could invite artists, living or dead, to dinner, whom would you invite?

I would invite John Singer Sargent to talk about technique; Edward Hopper to talk about content; Robert Ryman to discuss vision; Gauguin to talk about color; Matisse to talk about his language — because it doesn’t speak to me. And it frustrates me to recognize one of



the greatest artists of our century who doesn't speak to me! I'd invite Titian to talk about mystery in art — his work has such power.

You look like you're thinking of someone else.

Well, I think I would also invite Groucho Marx, just to keep it light! □

Kord J. Hamilton is a gallery administrator in San Francisco. Thomas Colletta can be reached at 95 McCoppin Street (E101), San Francisco, California 94103 (415/864-5410).

