

Between Handcuffs and Paint Brushes

Chiara Zamin (September 23, 2007)



To invent an artistic place from nothing is not an easy task. Above all if you are trying to give a new identity to a city. A work more common in America than in Italy, but it is always a difficult task. In Rahway, a city in New Jersey a half hour from Manhattan, someone believes. A mayor/ entrepreneur, James Kennedy, who...

...has led his city for 20 years, with a developed sensibility for art and everything regarding art, has given free reign to some artists to beautify the old walls of the city with murals.

Amongst these artists there is an Italian American, father and family man, police officer and painter. His name is Charles Sabba. In all, his goal is to paint 50 murals.

Kennedy's project in reality goes way beyond the free expression of street artists: many areas of



Rahway are construction sites and open spaces. They are actually designated as “development zones” but in a short time there will be opening new restaurants, a big hotel, stores, and, to the joy of the creative, there will be a site (with 100 artist studios) where around 100 artists can exhibit. Even the names of the streets will change. Hamilton Street will become “The Artist’s Way”, together with Irving St.

Beneath an angry sky, with continuous, violent rain hitting the windshield of the auto, Charlie starts to introduce me to the ambitious project with the enthusiasm of one who has a strong will to make his city the most avant-garde possible. He desires it to become a new Chelsea. His murals have already caused a commotion amongst some residents, a large part of who are from an elderly generation. On one street is represented an Inca man. “Think...” He told me: “...that an elderly woman one day, passing in a car, stopped one of my police colleagues and let loose her anger, declaring: ‘But what are these murals, I don’t want African art in my city!’”

She wasn’t the only one that did not appreciate the new look. 10 or 12 residents, after seeing a mural of a large open eye with a dedication to the celebrated painter Magritte, swiftly telephoned the city hall complaining. Charles Sabba knows well how his co-citizens think, but it doesn’t disturb him; he smiles, a little amused, a little disenchanted. He wants them to “open their eyes and look beyond the cowboys and John Wayne.” He recounts in a joking tone that they would rather see their ancestors represented, the heroes of the west. The new artistic pole is not only for them. In fact, there are numerous New Yorkers that are buying apartments in Rahway, a small city that looks to become the most important artistic and cultural center in New Jersey.

For many years the mayor intended to attract large investors to Rahway for projects of this caliber. And finally arrived Jewish, Portuguese... the list of wealthy investors that Sabba lists isn’t complete, it is important for him that “We will have a place all our own. Liberty of expression, this is what counts, not that we are placed in a box. The artists would never accept that. America is a huge machine and we are the components that make it function, and when we get rusty, they change us. It is like this. I know.”

His America was even the land of promise for his grandparents who emigrated to the States in at the start of the 20th century. For Charles Sabba, Italy is like a first love he will never forget. “I stayed 2 years in Italy. I was a sailor in Gaeta, I met my future wife there. It was a beautiful period; it was perfect; we wanted to get married but after my service as a sailor, I couldn’t find a secure job (in Italy). So I returned to New Jersey and found a job back then as a prison guard.

On the low part of a building of Rahway, Charlie painted diverse flags: the U.S. flag, one I didn’t know (maybe it has to be that of Austrian farmers) and the Italian flag. The painted American flag is on a part of the wall that meets the sidewalk and someone commented that it appeared to be touching the ground and this is not accepted by Americans. “It is a mural. It is not a flag, it is a painting of a flag,” smiles Sabba, joking about so much rigidity. Above the flags are depicted the 7 new wonders of the world. He recounted to me that there are 21 candidates competing for the honor from various nations. The idea is to represent the most beautiful cities of the world. One votes to choose the most attractive wonder. “The Peruvians want to see Machu Picchu, but we Italians want the Colosseum!”

We arrive at a red light and see in the distance another mural: a distinctive, cultured man, with a derby hat and a cane, in profile. “But who is this guy in the painting? He looks like a Hasidic Jew,” exclaimed a citizen- as recounted to me by the artist-cop Charlie.

Fortunately there are the children. One of the kids, while looking at the mural that honors Lautrec- stated: “It looks like a Dali!”

Charlie is the type that in life all added up, enjoys himself. He has a splendid family with three daughters, works four days a week as a police officer and for four days he immerses himself in what he calls ‘his world’ and paints. He follows the philosophy of Gabriele D’Annunzio that life must be lived as if it were a work of art. He explained to me that at work, on those days that he puts on the police uniform, he doesn’t hide his artistic nature. His hand cuffs are gold-gilded with rhinestones, his bullet proof vest has been personalized by the touch of his paint brush. At times he even gets to



use his talent for the public's good. He explained that a few days prior, a robbery was committed and he was called in by a detective to draw a composite drawing of the criminal, with the help of the victim's input.

"This is the part of the job that I love more than anything. It is gratifying to know I can help others by using my artistic passion!"

This type of job permits him to have a flexible work schedule. He works four consecutive days and on the four days off is in his studio painting.

He has an art studio in his home where he creates sculpture, paintings on canvas, and portraits. He has already exhibited in galleries. His friends appreciate his art and some have made purchases. He is not an amateur without direction, although the opinions of some of his colleagues do not help his cause. In spite of the fact that Charlie never managed to live only on his art, he decided to give his artistic impetus academic preparation. At 19 years of age he was accepted into the DuCret School of Art in Plainfield, N.J., a three year school, where he studied drawing and learned the techniques of academic painting.

Last year he received a Bachelor Degree in fine art from the School of Visual Arts in the Chelsea section of Manhattan, a completed goal that Charlie is very proud of. "I believe in beauty and in art, this is my faith and even if sometimes it is hard because I do overtime at work, I have the support of my wife who has fully accepted my dual life. Some days I carry a gun and others I use a paint brush. My job is one with tremendous responsibility. We can find ourselves at certain times in very complex situations in which we would have to decide in a split second to shoot or not. For example, in the dark one can't fully know if a criminal has a weapon in his hands that represents a threat to all of us. Shoot or no? I have a wife and three kids at home...if I shoot and then it is discovered that the criminal didn't have a weapon I end up in prison."

"I have police colleagues who are very supportive and others who think that I am a deluded eccentric. Sometimes they see me as a strange person who doesn't like American football, but prefers Italian football, who doesn't like American coffee, but prefers cappuccino, who is interested in art."

Between one question and the next we end up in a beautiful French caffe' and while we enjoy crepe and ice cream with fruit, Charlie recounted to me yet another episode.

One evening while Charlie worked an extra job, guard duty at a senior citizen building, he brought along a book about Caravaggio. While he was observing a painting of a small cupid with his genitals out, a sergeant arrived and exclaimed, a little perplexed and scandalized: "What are you looking at?" He then went to tell the Lieutenant in the radio room "We gotta do something about the new guy. He is over there looking at naked Picassos!"

From the Caffe's picture window we observe pieces of the city in restoration. With this huge artistic-economic project in Rahway, Sabba can safely and bizarrely indulge on his artistic whims, even if he exclaims with a little melancholy in a soft Italian with an American accent: "what a beautiful life it would be if I could pass a little time in many different parts of the world, a little in Naples, a little in New York, and a little in India, like Francesco Clemente; It would be beautiful!"

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