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HANDIWORK

“All men will resemble one another in the way they use their feet. But no one can tell what any given man will do with his hands. . . . The hand is the direct connect with man’s soul. . . . When a free spirit exists, it aches to materialize itself in some form of work, and for this the hands are needed. Everywhere we find traces of men’s handiwork and through these we catch a glimpse of his spirit.”

-Maria Montessori

“Man is a sculptor of himself, urged by a mysterious inner force to the attainment of an ideal determined form.”

-Maria Montessori

“It’s his hands I remember most,” she said. The woman leaned over her friend as they leafed through an artist’s catalogue in the last gallery. “More than anything else I remember my father’s hands.” I no longer remember whose work was exhibited. I’d like to say it was Auguste Rodin’s. Such a detail would work well here. His iconic sculptures of hands—powerful and moving--express the measure of his models’ feelings. Consider “The Clenched Hand,” in which the upright human hand resembles an animal claw, its anger and tension palpable through fingers spread wide apart and bent deeply at each joint. Consider, too, the tenderness embodied in the two raised hands in “The Cathedral.” In a sheltering gesture, their long fingers incline slightly toward one another, the tips of one touching the top joints of the other, creating a sacred space between them.

Though I know it wasn't Rodin, I try to imagine how Rodin would have sculpted my father's hands, how he would have envisioned the hands of the man who ushered me into a world of art, and initiated me into a consideration of beauty and wonder. Some fathers hike the wilderness with their children, or stargaze with them into the night. Mine took me to museums near and far where Memling, Tintoretto, and Renoir shimmered in our dark skies. There, as if outlining the configurations of the constellations, he sketched the shapes on a canvas in the air, his thick index finger the stylus. Through his eye, his eager intellect, and instruction, new worlds came into view—a distant, fairy-blue landscape in a 15th century Flemish painting, the soft swirl of ballerinas' tutus in Degas' pastels, the miniature wire circus figures created by Alexander Calder.

My father's passion for art, a kind of wide-eyed enthusiasm—Wow, will you look at that!—was perhaps better suited to a kid at a rodeo. He'd studied art extensively, and his tastes were wide-ranging. When I was 12 years old, he took me to an opening of an Andy Warhol exhibition. There, as if in a clearing in an enchanted forest between giant boxes of corn flakes and canvases of Campbell soup cans, I stood gaping, mesmerized, as my father explained that Warhol's work flouted the conventions of traditional art—that by co-opting and incorporating images of familiar objects, Warhol upended society's notions of what constitutes art. The entire exhibition dazzled me: its boldness, its color, its size. But my eyes were magnetized by the museum director's tie. A green silk-screened print of dollar bills. Dollar bills? Dollar bills! It was astonishing,

different than anything I'd ever seen. I couldn't stop looking at it, and, later, talking about it. I still see it with complete clarity.

How often my father and I stood side by side before a painting, his left arm weighing on my shoulder as he drew me close to explain what we were looking at. I felt proud that he and I stood apart from the others in the room, that he had created a shelter for us two—a private viewing chamber--and that he spoke to me alone. Yet, his voice swelled in the silent gallery. Was it excitement, or something else? I didn't know. I sneaked a look at the guard to see whether he was staring at us, or whether he'd approach to ask my father to quiet down.

I imagine my father telling me about an Italian painting of a saint, but it could just as easily have been a painting by Picasso in his blue period. He bends slightly, leaning down closer to my height. He thrusts his hand toward the painting.

“Look at this. What is this a picture of?” he asks me. I look up to see a stiff, skinny, cartoon-like figure peering out of the painting. I can't read my father's expression. How to answer? “It's a saint,” he says before I can even open my mouth. “People prayed to saints in churches. This would have been in a church, probably on the altar—the table at the front of the church.”

“What material do you think it is painted on?” I start to look for clues. Pictures are painted on paper, I think. “It's painted on a piece of wood, a panel of wood,” he fills in. “That was the easiest material for artists to find and paint on at that time.” His words excite and challenge--I have a lot to think

about, a lot to learn. In my mind, I start to repeat his words so that I can hold onto them, ingest them, make sense of them, as they skitter around me.

He pulls me closer--so close that I detect a whiff of the onions he ate for breakfast. Too close.

“Now, look at that gold background. Isn’t that remarkable? It’s real gold. It’s called gold leaf.” His words swoosh around me, like waves buffeting seaweed on the ocean floor, first gently, and then harder, and harder. “Artists at that time painted gold backgrounds in religious scenes. In fact, all of the art back then was religious. See if you can tell me why.” His words pour over me, submerge me. I need to come up for breath. “The church commissioned artists to paint scenes from the Bible because most people at that time were illiterate, they couldn’t read. So this way the priests taught the people about their religion.” As if underwater, I see my father’s mouth moving, but his words are lost to me. I long to swim free, and explore the bright colors beckoning me from afar—a painting of an angel standing before a young woman, a lily at her feet, or one of a man, sword in hand, standing over a writhing dragon. But my father’s grip on my shoulder anchors me. I cannot move. When he has finished explaining this painting, when he has decided what he wants to show me next, when he is ready, we will walk to another painting, his arm propelling me in the required direction.

I know that my father meant to open a world to me, to share his passion for art. This contemplation of beauty may have been the one unadulterated pleasure he could pass on to me. For him, art was an oasis of calm--a place to wander solitary

and free without regard to the endless demands of a medical practice, and an unhappy family. In the presence of art—in museums or private galleries—as in a sanctuary of worship, he found a place to pause and renew himself spiritually. Art was his religion—a belief system, both miraculous and awe-inspiring. From him, I learned what art could bring to a life.

And yet, my father approached art with a certain rigidity, one primarily intellectual and analytical. Though he appreciated the beauty of a painting, a sculpture, even a Renaissance choir stall, and though I remember him uttering, “Aah, aah, that’s nice,” he needed first to understand it both in a conceptual and historical context. Looking at art was a serious endeavor, one demanding effort and rigor.

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I have watched my father’s hands many times, hoping that they would unlock the mystery of him. Large-veined and heavy, they do not belong to one who earned his livelihood by manual labor. I never saw him hold a shovel, but I remember him stooping once at the foot of a Japanese maple tree, tending to it, as he patted the mound of soil in which it was rooted. I remember, too, looking on as he wrapped a Giant Redwood sapling in our yard with burlap to shelter it from the cold. He’d ordered the seeds from California. We’d all thought him foolish for trying to grow the tree so far from its natural habitat. Concerned that the little tree would not survive the harsh winter temperatures of the Northeast, he erected a small tent around it. The tree thrived. When my parents moved from that house years later, it had grown many feet taller than the surrounding trees.

And still another memory comes. My father stands over a stunted tree on a worktable in a small glass greenhouse, the view through its many panes obscured by the dark sky. Nearly six feet tall, he towers over the nine-inch tree—a weeping hemlock or a Chinese elm. His engagement is complete, his gaze intent, his forehead lined with concentration. His work demands the precision of a surgeon though his bulky fingers sometimes trip over one another. He bends a branch slightly—not too much, for fear of breaking it—and, from a spool, unwinds a thin wire, which he twists to secure the branch. He forces another bough outward, mooring it, too, with the steel thread. A third, he clips to render a stump. A leaf no larger than a fingernail’s half moon falls to the table.

“Why does the tree look like that?” I asked when a child.

“It’s a miniature of a larger tree,” he’d answered.

“But why? Why does it grow like that?”

“It’s trained, shaped a certain way. It’s an art. A beautiful art.”

“It’s horrible. I hate it. Why can’t the tree grow like it’s supposed to?”

“You’re being silly. This is the way it’s done. It’s very exact. An opportunity to shape nature.”

“Why do you have to keep it small? Why can’t you just let it grow?”

“You’re being silly. Stop.”

“I hate it. Hate it.” As I ran from the room, I heard him say, “You’re wrong. You’re totally wrong.”

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Even at that time, I knew with complete certainty that my fury over my father's cultivating bonsai trees spoke to my deep identification with them. Back then, I couldn't have described the stranglehold my father had on these tiny trees--and on me. I, like them, stood helpless before him—objects to be acted upon at his whim, as we all were in those days. The wire wrapped around an errant limb pierced my upper arm. The metal thread used to train a branch sliced a trench through my thigh. Each twist of the wire blocked me from following a passion—acting, at one time--and commanded me instead to do something I didn't want to--study and practice law.

In my father's drive to control, he scrutinized everything, even something as minor as packing a suitcase, or changing a light bulb. He criticized me for not eating mushrooms and cheese when I traveled to France as a teenager, exhorted me to read the dictionary from start to finish, and chastised me for not writing "the great American novel."

I doubt that he realized then—or, maybe, ever—the consequences of his behavior. Were I to ask him about it even now, I know he'd insist that he was only trying to make things easy for me, to provide me with shortcuts to success. He didn't mean to hinder me, of that I'm sure. But, like the tree, I grew in on myself—dwarfed and shrunken, my exploratory thrusts aborted. His training, once set in motion, needed no reinforcement. Seeking to fulfill his image of me--who I should be, what I should do, how I should act—and following his teachings with

great devotion undermined any feelings of self-confidence I could muster. For years, I doubted my own worth, and talents. Even when I argued with him, and did what I wanted—getting married though he disapproved of my choice of a husband, leaving law practice—I paid dearly for following my own instincts. I questioned almost every step I took, finding little satisfaction in the freedom I had fought for and won.

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For a long while--in fact, until very recently--I could not reconcile my father's love of art with his cultivation of the miniature trees. To me, it seemed sadistic to purposely stunt a tree's growth in the service of "art," and, to impose such a strict and uncompromising aesthetic upon a living breathing species seemed inhumane. Recently, in researching bonsais, I came across this statement, "*A bonsai is not a genetically dwarfed plant and is not kept small by cruelty in any way.*"¹ Though the site went on to dispel "myths" that confuse "budding enthusiasts" and malign the pursuit for those unfamiliar with it, the site only ended up confirming my suspicion that there was something unnatural about the practice. The more it sought to justify bonsai cultivation as an acceptable endeavor, the more I realized that I was not the first to question its practitioners' motives. Reading further, I came to a sentence, which explained that, through working with bonsai, a practitioner can express his own aesthetic philosophy by manipulating nature. I began to consider bonsai cultivation in a different way--to

¹ www.bonsaisite.com/intro1.html

realize that this art, while governed primarily by the laws of nature, and by ancient and traditional rules and practices, nevertheless encourages creativity.

Perhaps, I had overlooked the complexity of my father's interest, and of the art itself. Could it be that this man of few, if any traditions, sought this connection to an ancient discipline, which bestowed meaning on and provided a context for his individual effort, and which located him in a tradition that shared his sensibility? He, like so many others, could create his own vision of beauty within the parameters of the rules established by those who preceded him. His inheritance included the wisdom of generations of artist practitioners. The patina of the collective artistic perception and understanding offered him a kind of safety as he experimented with and explored the bonsai while also endowing his pursuit with a sense of importance, even legitimacy.

Growing up—still now, at times—I tended to think in “black and white” terms: something was either one thing, or another. I remember deciding once that the doctor, who had misdiagnosed a friend's condition, was a “quack” though my friend argued that his condition was rare and that the doctor had never seen it before. For many years, I assumed that, if a friend neglected to acknowledge my birthday one year, she didn't like me anymore. It never occurred to me that she might have been busy or forgotten. I'm not proud of this kind of thinking, but my proclivity for it has been shifting. I quit practicing law not so long ago because I grew tired of having to plead one side of an argument when I often saw both.

Similarly, as I look more closely at my father, I see that his bonsai cultivation was a practice of contradictions, an attempt to work with opposing impulses. The bonsai--dwarfed, constricted, and yet beautiful in its detail, its miniature scale, its delicacy--somehow spoke to my father, a man who often recited can-do aphorisms, but who, in truth, saw obstacles in many places. Though not a small man, in his prime, nor one who possessed subtle features, he may have considered the triumph of these trees amid the multiple impediments they endured--their size, the constant fussing, the necessary clipping and trimming--as a metaphor for his own struggles and challenges. I think of several species of plants and animals, which, despite enormous hurdles, nevertheless thrive. Some brightly colored saprophytic orchids grow without the benefit of photosynthesis by feeding on dead organic material. Camels can survive in the driest of terrains for at least a week without water, and several months without food. The Joshua tree's stark but spectacular outline testifies to its deprivation in a desert environment. Ansel Adams' photographs of these trees capture their angular, tortured beauty--their strangely bent branches and spindly brush-like tails--in silhouette against an expansive sky.

So, I'm trying to approach my father's bonsai cultivation with an open mind, allowing that this obsession expressed both an appreciation of beauty, and a need to control. I think how helpless he must have felt as he returned home each evening to his feuding wife and children. Perhaps through shaping the tiny trees, he was able to assert a measure of control he found in no other place in his life. Though guided by the rules of bonsai--how, when, and where to prune, how and

where to train a branch, which materials and tools to use--my father alone determined the tree's shape. At the same time, this quiet, contemplative art offered him a framework for seeing and engaging with beauty.

For my father, I think that the bonsais functioned as a kind of way station, an intermediate step to his immersion in making art--painting, sculpture, and photography--when he retired. Here, by designing and sculpting bonsai, he could wade gradually into the creative stream, casting a line into a protected cove.

I imagine him standing at his worktable, bending to make sure that his eyes are level with the base of the flowering quince. Straightening, he takes a few steps back. He bends again as he tries to gauge the correct distance between the base of the trunk and the first branch. From the table, he takes a pair of cutters, and forces the thumb and forefinger of his right hand into its openings. He edges the first two fingers of his left hand on top of the branch and his thumb under it. He guides the bottom branch between the cutter blades, and snips it at the trunk.

The lowest branch is now one-third of the way up the trunk, as tradition holds for shaping bonsai in the slanting style.² He runs his fingers through the leaves along the branch, amazed at the their infinitesimal size and perfect shape.

Uncoiling several inches of wire, he attaches it around the trunk's base, and threads it along the tree's trunk to train it at an angle. Perhaps this art allowed my father the freedom to express himself with confidence at a time when he could

² www.bonsaisite.com/stslant.html

not yet navigate the open sea of creativity--imagining, spawning, and realizing an artistic project.

If the bonsais gave him the opportunity to express his own aesthetic reality, then my father and I are aligned in that way. We both try to give voice to our unformed thoughts, to create something of beauty and meaning. I shape words; he, trees. We each work in silence, and alone. Sometimes, we are active--our movements slow and considered. Other times, they may be frenzied and furious. Often, we are still. To someone glancing into the room then, it might appear that we are merely sitting. Contemplating.

But, we are at work, our minds at play. My father considers how the tree would look if he trained a branch at a particular angle, and lopped leaves off a high limb. What if he allowed the tree to grow upright, or pruned it so that it tapers at the top, or, at the bottom? My father visualizes these possibilities--how best to achieve his dream of the perfect bonsai. Imagining him imagining, I see his hands. They move with grace as he clips a few unwanted leaves.

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