





REMEMBERING SIGNORINA NERINA SIMI



Saturdays are usually uneventful in the Tuscan village of Stazzema, which is perched atop the foothills of the Apuane Alps. But exactly one year ago — on the sunny morning of Saturday, July 12, 2014 — an unusual mix of locals and visitors from around the globe gathered there to honor a legend. The impact of “La Signorina” Nerina Simi (1890-1987) on the teaching of painting, and especially of drawing, was long appreciated by those who knew her well, yet broader recognition of her achievement was clearly overdue. Thus the Comune of Stazzema, Soroptimist International, and the Club Viareggio-Versilia joined forces to honor Simi as a great artist and beloved teacher by renaming a public square for her and inaugurating a temporary exhibition of artworks made by 34 of her former students. (Though she spent her summers in tiny Stazzema, Simi taught for more than half a century in her studio at Via Tripoli #1 in her native Florence, 80 miles away.)

The celebration last July involved 18 of the exhibitors, now professional artists in their own right, who had traveled from 12 countries. Simi

began teaching in 1923, but those who returned for this celebration had primarily studied with her between 1960 and 1987, having found her without help from the Internet, but rather via word of mouth, landline phones, and posted letters. Those who stayed, studied, and committed themselves to her curriculum were thrust into an experience that changed their lives forever.

Simi was the daughter of the famous painter Filadelfo Simi (1849-1923), himself a student of the great French academician Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904). She spent eight years under her father’s tutelage, and at 19 enrolled in Florence’s Accademia di Belle Arti, where she earned her teaching qualifications in 1915. Upon his death, she assumed Filadelfo’s studio on Via Tripoli and began her own career teaching and influencing students. (For 40 years, she taught concurrently at La Quiete, housed in a villa once home to a branch of the Medici family.)

The great Florentine painter Pietro Annigoni (1902-1988) considered Simi not only a legend, but also “the greatest drawing teacher of the 20th

(OPPOSITE PAGE) Nerina Simi, 1979; photo: Richard Fremantle



NERINA SIMI, *A Staircase in the Country*, c. 1940, oil on canvas, 16 3/4 x 9 1/2 in., private collection

Nerina Simi critiques the work of the author, Charles Gilbert Kapsner, 1979; photo: Richard Fremantle



An array of dignitaries and former students attended last July's celebration in memory of Nerina Simi.





century.” When young talents appeared on his doorstep requiring disciplined teaching, he would immediately send them to her. “Nerina Simi can get results,” he claimed, even “where there is no talent at all.” Until the 1960s, most of her students were Italian, but gradually more foreign artists arrived, thoroughly frustrated by their home countries’ dearth of disciplined instruction, and by modernist influences. Their searches led them to Florence, and the luckiest of us found exactly what we sought at Studio Simi.

IN THE STUDIO

To fully appreciate La Signorina, it is better to describe daily life in her studio, rather than recount a chronology of dates and events. The studio epitomized the ambiance, subtle (and not so subtle) nuances, influence, and discipline she instilled constantly: *Forza e corragio* (“move forward with courage”) was one memorable quote Simi favored.

Classes ran from roughly mid-October through mid-June, six mornings per week from 9 a.m. until noon (the figure session); each pose lasted for 12 sessions. Four afternoons per week (2:30-5:30 p.m.) were reserved for portraiture, with each pose lasting two weeks, occasionally longer.

The curriculum also included cast drawing and still life. Simi’s program was based on a five-year plan, which would vary in actual length according to each student’s progress. She had a sixth sense about people: just by observing artists at work, she could grasp their destinies before they did.

Upon entering her studio, one was transported to another world, wondrously bereft of modern-day distractions and keenly appreciated by everyone privileged enough to be there. The door was locked at 9 a.m. and if you were late, you dared not

ring the bell until the first break at 10. The model posed for the first hour, then took 15-minute breaks at 10 and 11 o’clock, repeating this schedule in the afternoon. Those paying attention soon realized that arriving 15 minutes early was Simi’s idea of good practice; though she never said it, she believed that “to be on time is to be late; to arrive early is to be on time.”

During class, Simi would move from student to student, offering individual guidance and hands-on demonstrations on the student’s own sheet. She kept students in check, always aware of their varying abilities, and never offering too grand a compliment. Her favorite phrase, *Lei ha fatta abastanza bene dovebessete fare un altra volta* (“You did all right, but you must see if you can do it again”), flies in the face of today’s conferral of blue ribbons for nearly everything a student does. This individualized treatment enabled many distinctive visual languages to emerge among Simi’s students. Once you became somewhat seasoned, you might not receive comments every day, nor even the standard greeting of “Hello, how are you?,” yet at day’s end would surely come her stern, and instructive, critique.

Simi was fluent in Italian, English, and French, and thus fostered a multi-lingual classroom experience. In the studio, the most formal kind of Italian was spoken, and during class all was quiet except for the sound of charcoal being sharpened, or the crisp, beautifully articulated Italian phrases of La Signorina. She used more Italian words as her student’s linguistic ability improved, and ultimately no English was spoken at all. Thus her studio was not just a place to make art, but also to experience all of Italy — its language, history, cooking, and broader cultural traits. Simi often said, “Remember, I am your guide; nature is your teacher.”

A GLOBAL NETWORK

It was truly a privilege to have been Simi’s student, working in the shadows of her accomplishments and those of her father. Those who visited Stazzema last summer recalled her as our “art mother,” which is precisely what brought us back. The memories bubbled up among people who hadn’t seen each other in 30 years, or who had never actually met until that day, yet nonetheless felt a kinship.

Now we have returned to our respective studios, but a quiet voice has followed us home, whispering *Lei ha fatta abastanza bene dovebessete fare un altra volta*. Yes, Signorina, we will.

Charles Gilbert Kapsner (buonfresco.com) studied with Nerina Simi from 1974 to 1979 and also 1980-81. He lives and works in Minnesota, and is currently immersed in a large-scale project for the Minnesota State Veterans Cemetery.

Information: The artists represented in last summer’s exhibition were Michael J. Angel, Lilian Backer-Grøndahl, Gordon Breckenridge, Fred X. Brownstein, Laura Buxton, Catherine Cellai, Antonio Ciccone, Simona Dolci, Katherine Doyle, Stella Ehrich, Lucy Erskine, Joke Frima, Nancy Gladwell, Daniel Graves, Barbara Harrison, John Horn, Andrea Jameson, Jenny Joice, Charles Gilbert Kapsner, Andrew Lattimore, Marie Isabel Lockett, Damaris Lysaght, Alessandra Marconi, Linda Allison Merrill, Jill Ogilvy, Elizabeth Parsons, Anna Pallant, Anne Shingleton, Daphne Stevens, Jacqueline Taber, Pam Tippet, Thérèse von Holstein Rathlou, Kari Wendel, and Nelson H. White.