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 century.”

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

NERINA SIMI, A Staircase in the Country, c. 1940, oil on canvas, 16 3/4 x 9 1/2 in., private collection
locked at 9 a.m. and if you were late, you dared not
one privileged enough to be there. The door was
day distractions and keenly appreciated by every-
other world, wondrously bereft of modern-
could grasp their destinies before they did.
about people: just by observing artists at work, she
to each student's progress. She had a sixth sense
plan, which would vary in actual length according
still life. Simi's program was based on a five-year
pose lasting two weeks, occasionally longer.
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
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 every-
one 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 sched-
ule 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 stu-
dent 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 distinc-
tive visual languages to emerge among Simi's stu-
dents. 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 expe-
rience. In the studio, the most formal kind of Ital-
ian 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 stu-
dent, working in the shadows of her accomplish-
ments 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 stu-
dios, but a quiet voice has followed us home, whis-
pering 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
Tippett, Thérèse von Holstein Rathlou, Kari Wendel,
and Nelson H. White.

(FONT PAGE) NERINA SIMI, The Basket-Maker in Sardinian Costume, c. 1940, oil on canvas, 15 1/4 x 19 1/4 in., private collection

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