

Art Appreciation

by Barry N. Malzberg, Jack Dann

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Glop.

There went another gallery-goer, an overweight middle-aged woman, camera slung over the right shoulder, blue sunglasses, a peaked cap, long purple fingernails. The kind of woman you'd fantasize being eaten by a painting, perhaps. The kind of woman -- a tip of the hat to Mencken here -- who made you want to burn every bed in the world. Glop. Glug. Into the Gioconda smile.

The Mona Lisa seemed to wink at Evans and Evans struggled against the impulse to wink back. That would have made him a collaborator. He was definitely not that. He witnessed alarm. Horror, in fact.

Glop. Tourists disappeared head first into the maw of La Gioconda. This woman was the fifth within the hour. How long had this been going on? he asked himself once again, as if repetition could bring enlightenment. Had it been going on since the opening? Since Leonardo had painted the sphinxlike wife of the merchant Pier Francesco del Giocondo? Could he have been her first adultery? There was a certain licentious satisfaction in that thought. Indeed. Leonardo da Vinci unleashes the atom bomb of archetypes. Hateful man. But, alas, he could certainly paint.

All of this had its comic aspects, of course, and the indignity of exit was provocative, but you were really dealing with tragedy here. Evans had to keep that in mind. This was his Blue Period, as he had decided to call it only a little while ago when the tourists started to slide away. It was no improvement upon the Yellow Period, which seemed to have gone on for several decades up to this point, but it looked as if it was going to be instructive. Alone in the gallery now, bereaved, he supposed, Evans could feel waves of satisfaction coming from the famous painting, along with the hint of a belch. Well, what was he supposed to do? Arrest the painting? Turn in La Gioconda to the authorities? What did you do with something like this?

There was a whole clump of guards just outside the gallery, standing sullenly, pacing around; they represented, Evans supposed, a kind of authority. Should he go to them, point out that La Gioconda was gobbling tourists, waiting until only Evans and a straggler were there, then snatching the incautious traveler who came too close to the frame and inserting the surprised victim into a mouth grown not ambiguous but suddenly huge? The screams from the tourists, however brief, were intense enough to travel, but the guards had shown no reaction. The dangers posed by this kind of cannibalism seemed immense. Still, there seemed no proper way to deal with the situation. "Excuse me," he could say to one of the union guys carrying batons and small radios, "I don't mean to interrupt your conversation, but there's some very strange stuff going on here; I don't quite know how to tell you this, but -- "

Well, but what? This wasn't the kind of thing you could tell a stranger. The terms were imponderable. The worst sign would be indications of interest and credulity. That would mean that he was being humored while reinforcements were called in. Drastic things would happen. Evans himself might stand accused of killing tourists, *corpus delicti* or not.

Still. "Still now," he said to the Mona Lisa, the painting on special international loan, placed high on the wall opposite, buttressed by heavy frame and protected by guys in the anteroom with batons and receivers, "I've got my eye on you, lady. You're not going to get away with this, lady. Evans is on the job and sees exactly what's going on here, which is why I'm keeping a safe distance. You're not getting away with anything in front of me," he pointed out quietly, meanwhile trying to maintain a reserve, a glacial calm. He knew he was safe if he stayed more than six feet away. "This is my Blue Period," Evans confided in a whisper. To a theoretical stranger he would appear perfectly insane, he knew, but there were no strangers in the gallery itself, just Evans and the painting. Oh, how they squealed and kicked in their dismay. It was a grim thing to see. "I didn't intend it to be this way," Evans went on, talking to the painting as if it were an actual, a reasonable woman rather than an assassin. "I had plans, you know, but the economy got tight and now I have to fill up the days any way I can. You're not going to get away with this though, lady. We're going to take measures."

In truth, Evans knew this was pure bluff. He had no plans whatsoever. Shortly, the absence of the eaten would be noted and bureaucracy in its fumbling way would try to deal with the situation, but there was no way that this could fall within its lexicon. Detectives might get to the Guggenheim, but how could they possibly implicate a painting, even one which was priceless? She wore an expression of utter innocence and had a terrific provenance. Her scheme was not only diabolic, it appeared foolproof. But, futile as it might be, Evans at least was on the case. "You're going to be stopped," he said harshly. "We're going to bring this to a conclusion." One of the guards outside moved to the doorway, put a hand on the sill, leaned, peered in, an uncomfortable moment of glances brushing. Evans shrugged, shook his head, then stood. There was no point in appearing crazy, although this museum like millennial New York itself was filled with mumblers. He would fit right in. Everything fit right in, one way or the other.

It was time to go out on Fifth Avenue and ponder his next moves, anyway. Couldn't stay hammered in with La Gioconda all day, not without attracting undue attention. There was more space out there; he would work something out. Trust not in Evans to abandon the situation, he thought hopefully. He would do something to avenge those innocent lives, protect others. Just as soon as he could figure out some means of approach.

The Yellow Period (he had not called it that then, had merely thought of it as his life itself) had apparently ended; Evans was vaulted into a new and difficult circumstance. Once, not so long ago either, Evans thought he had the whole project

worked out, a series of activities (lack of activity, perhaps), which was a process of real accommodation. You couldn't be a remittance man all your life, not if you wanted to lead an active, useful existence in millennial times. You had to get out there to the mainstream, compete in some way. Furthermore, he had always been interested in painting, not creation exactly but certainly art appreciation, had felt that someday he would really pursue it. Take in all the museums, the better galleries, follow the more important exhibitions; and then when his head was filled with all of the finest in art, he would register at the School for Visual Arts and try some work of his own.

Well, why not? Look at what had happened to Pollock, Kandinsky, Van Gogh, Roualt. Bums all of them, Picasso too and that mystic Chagall, founded lives, preposterous choices which to everyone's surprise had worked out. Picasso had derived his first major success by painting whores from his favorite cathouse in the shape of squares. There were thirty-year-old punks around who had been striping up subway cars not so long ago, now picking up big money from the downtown crowd. Evans had at least as much to offer as they did; he knew he had the talent. It was just a matter of bringing it out.

So the renovated Guggenheim with its imported La Giaconda seemed a good place to start. There had been a lot of controversy about using the Guggenheim for the site of the Mona Lisa loan; a lot of critics had thought that it should go somewhere else, someplace larger, more important. If not the Metropolitan, then at least the Frick.

But the Guggenheim needed an attention getter to bring its audience back and make a statement for the contributors. In their fervor to make this coup, the Guggenheim administrators broke, or perhaps bent, museum rules about acquiring and exhibiting only modern art. No small amount of emoluments, kickbacks, pleas, grief, sexual promises, and maneuvers even less desultory had been employed to lever La Giaconda from the Louvre for a six-month enlistment. It was worth it all for the prestige and publicity. La Giaconda was something of a cliché, a joke really Evans had perceived from his assiduous researches, certainly not to be taken as seriously as might have been the case earlier. Priceless maybe, but a tourist phenomenon. So La Giaconda had ended up in the Guggenheim and so had Evans, starting his grand tour of what he liked to think of as his post-Yellow period, but he hadn't counted on the Yellow turning Blue so rapidly; he hadn't counted on La Giaconda grabbing solitary tourists while guards complained to one another in the hallway when the gallery was momentarily empty, except for the keenly observant Evans. That had not been part of the plan.

It was a disconcerting business, that was for sure, and Evans was hardly positive that he was handling this properly. It probably was not a police matter, though. His instincts on that seemed reasonable. People had been put away permanently, he suspected, for far less than the kind of reportage he was resisting.

Out on Fifth Avenue, watching traffic, Evans considered his ever-narrowing

options. Not much movement on a cloudy Tuesday morning; even the remittance men were sleeping in. He discussed metaphysics with a pretzel vendor, wrote two letters to an old girlfriend in his head, the first filled with euphemism, the second desperate and scatological. He looked at a woman walking her poodle, feeling a thin and desperate lust, and shook his head. Undone by his own mindless need.

“Good, isn’t she?” the pretzel vendor said politely. “You see a lot on these streets, don’t you?”

“More than I would ever know,” Evans said hopelessly.

“Know what?” the vendor asked. “Know who? As long as you figure that they were just put there to torment us, you’ve got the right handle on the situation. It has nothing to do with getting and keeping.”

“But what is getting and keeping?” Evans asked and then, before the conversation could get out of hand, backed away from the vendor. “We’ll talk about it later,” he said. “It doesn’t matter.” The vendor shrugged. I should just go home, Evans thought, go back to remittance-man’s heaven, go to my studio condominium in a reconverted downtown loft, get away from all this before I start to take it seriously. After all, none of this is my problem. If they want to come by and get taken away by a demented painting, that’s their business. I’m not involved. I just happened to be on the premises. The only point is this: They aren’t snatching me. As long as I’m not being picked up, what’s the difference?

But the argument seemed halting and unconvincing. It seemed to evade the issues, whatever those issues might be. Another good-looking woman, earphones clamped, stray notes of baroque streaming from the earphones like pennants, jogged by, heedless of Evan’s stare. He looked after her with confusion and a longing born of years of deprivation. She should snatch him up. She should do to him, Evans thought, what La Giaconda was doing with the tourists. Oh, how he yearned to run after her, find a cab maybe, catch up, plead his case. It wasn’t as if he was disfigured, or an idiot. It wasn’t as if he had nothing to say.

He had plenty to say! Look at what was going on in the gallery. That certainly would be a way to make contact. The jogger was wearing pink sweatpants and a red T-shirt; it made him crazy watching her slowly diminish, like a favorable weather condition being undone by cosmic dust. The clownishness of his desire overwhelmed Evans then as it so often did, and he shook his head, tried to push all of it away, and walked back into the museum, showing his hand stamp. I don’t know why I’m going back, he thought, I don’t know why I’m bothering with all this. I’ve seen all there is to see: five tourists gobbled, and every angle of La Giaconda. And two women, one in red and pink, the other avec chin, who wouldn’t look at me twice if I were up there on the wall with Mona. Maybe that was the point. Maybe that was what he was driving toward. He thought of the School of Visual Arts, what art itself meant to him. If he could only get on that wall, become a simulacrum of himself.

Hell, if Leonardo da Vinci could do it why couldn't he? Wasn't La Gioconda supposed to be a portrait of the artist? Hadn't Evans heard a gallery guide putting forth that very possibility to a group of disbelieving tourists? Hadn't someone in fact used a computer to prove a point-by-point congruence by juxtaposing La Gioconda with Leonardo's red-chalk self-portrait? Take one part Leonardo's face and one part of La Gioconda and presto! -- you have the world's most enigmatic smile, the simulacrum to end all simulacra, eternal art. One need only follow the recipe.

Glop. It was all too abstract for him. The gallery was still empty; the guards hanging around the hall nodded to him as he walked by. There in the corner, invisible from his first angle, was yet another pretty woman. Indeed, this was his morning for them. This woman looked somewhat like his jogger, all in red, though, a red dress, yearning waxen expression, a handbag clutched against her small breasts. She was arched like a bow, staring at the Mona Lisa. Somehow she had gotten into this room, gotten into the Guggenheim, gotten through all of her life up to this point without Evans having ever seen her. Maybe she had come from the upper corridors, examining Segal sculptures. Of whatever provenance, she was extraordinary; in his sudden and tottering mood Evans felt he had never been so struck by anyone. Sensitivity came from her eyes, from the angle of her handbag, from the intelligent, anguished tilt of her head as she searched the eyes of La Gioconda for meaning.

"Hey, he said quietly. "You shouldn't do that. I don't mean to intrude, I mean I'm not trying to come on like a masher or something, but you shouldn't lean into the painting like that, it's dangerous, you know what I mean? You're alone, something might happen -- " He was babbling, that was all. In any event, she did not hear him. Please," Evans said, "I'm just trying to be helpful; that painting is a masterpiece all right but it's very threatening -- "

Who was threatening? Who was acting like an idiot now? He stopped talking, sized up the situation with shrewd and caring eyes, then began to move toward her, thoughts of rescue in mind.

This is ridiculous, Evans thought. I'm making a fool of myself. It was humiliating not even to be noticed. If he was going to lose control like this, then he Who was threatening? Who was acting like an idiot now? He stopped talking, sized up the situation with shrewd and caring eyes, then began to move toward her, thoughts of rescue in mind. This is ridiculous, Evans thought. I'm making a fool of myself. It was humiliating not even to be noticed. If he was going to lose control like this, then he should at least shed anonymity, make some kind of impression. Was this the real problem? He had never really been observed, never been the object of love and focus and interest, never had a sense of real connection. No wonder La Gioconda wouldn't eat him. He couldn't even establish a relationship at the point of consumption.

"Excuse me," he said very loudly to the woman in red. "You shouldn't do that, please."

Now it seemed that he had caught her attention. She had fine tense lips, an openness of expression, an enormity of mood into which Evans felt he could suddenly plunge. He suddenly and truly loved her. As he stared at her in this moment of revelation, he had never been at such a distance in his life.

“Do what?” she asked. “What are you talking about?”

“The painting,” he said hopelessly. “I want to tell you about the painting.”

The woman put both hands on her pocketbook, backed a crucial step away from the Mona Lisa. Her cheekbones cast light, cast swift intelligence. Oh, he was definitely communicating, getting something through now. He had taken her a step away from the painting, and that was definitely progress.

“I don’t understand,” she said. “What do you mean?”

Her face showed interest, but it was that of the student, of the appreciator of art, of the listener to a recorded guided tour. The handbag could have been a device whispering words of information as she rubbed it subtly against her face, her ear. All portent, no possibility. Evans thought of calling for a guard, then put that thought away. It was hopeless. There was simply no way of dealing with the situation. I should have followed the jogger instead, he thought. I would have had fresh air, and she would not have been in danger.

“I don’t know what I mean,” Evans said abruptly. “I’m just trying to tell you about that painting. You shouldn’t be near -- “

“Do you want something? What do you want?” Displeasure streaked her beautiful features now; she seemed to be plunging toward a turmoil of accusation. Evans could pick up on those signs, too. He had had plenty of experience at a difficult mid-Yellow point of life. “Why don’t you just go away,” the woman said.

Well, there was nothing to say to that. Evans had nothing to say. If he went away, which was a reasonable possibility, he would confirm her impression; but then he would leave her exposed to the Mona Lisa smash and grab. Meanwhile, the guards were no factor unless she began to scream. She could start screaming very soon, though. Evans had the feeling that he was working within narrow perimeters here. Although he had the smallest possibility of achievement, he had to plunge on. “You’re very pretty,” he said. “You’re beautiful in fact. But you’re too close to that painting. Move back another step.”

“Are you a member of security?” “Yes. If you will. If you want to call me that. I’m trying to keep you secure, can’t you see?”

“You don’t act like a security person,” the woman said, not pleasantly. Disgust seemed to be seeping, along with confusion, into her sensitive features. “I don’t think you’re on staff at all.”

“You don’t understand,” Evans said. “The painting is only on loan.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“It’s not permanently ours. It’s a bait-and-switch game. It picks up and reassembles in France, maybe. The population problem -- “

But now she had clearly reached an opinion as she backed slowly away from him. But at least she was moving away from the painting. Opening up space. That was the important thing. Evans followed her irresistibly. They moved in tandem toward the door. Now for the first time the guards seemed to take an interest; they peered in.

“One moment,” Evans said. “Uno momento, I have to tell you something. I wanted to say how beautiful you are. You’re a whole gallery in yourself.”

The woman turned, as if ready to break into a full run. At least I’ve saved her, Evans thought. This is a dangerous situation, very perilous, hardly explicable, but at least I got her out of this.

“So listen to me,” he said. “Before you go away, before you talk to the guard, before you complain, you’ve got to understand my angle here. It’s not just because you’re beautiful. It’s because -- “

Obviously, he had not put this the right way. She ran away, the red and brown handbag flapping like a decapitated bird. The guards were crooning to one another, then seemed to make a collective decision: They advanced.

Evans reversed his course, backed, moved toward the painting. There was simply nowhere else to go. “Hold it,” a guard said, “just hold it right there, pal, we want to talk to you.” Talk did not seem to be properly in his mind, however. The guard seemed enormous, a club extended like a baton from his right hand. He was conducting the others into a massed assault.

“Oh, damn,” Evans said hopelessly. He scuttled toward the painting. On his right shoulder, then, he could feel a burning touch, a grasp of enormous assurance and power and then smoothly, inevitably, he felt himself moved upwards. Glug, he thought. Glop. He was too high now to see the guards or to judge their reactions. He seemed quite out of control; and yet, at the center was an awful certainty.

He felt the pressure and the wind as he was drawn.

You don’t understand, he thought. “You don’t understand,” he wanted to say to the guards. He wanted to explain somehow, tell them about the fleeting, righteous woman, the vanished jogger, all of the vanished women of his Yellow and Blue periods; but the words would not come. “This is dangerous,” he wanted to say. “This is a dangerous place. I just wanted to save her, can’t you understand that?”

“It’s not lust, it’s humanity,” he wanted to say.

Glop.

No, it seemed that they could not understand that. Evans was plunged into a clinging darkness, damp, cold certainty pressing around him and then, shocking, he was falling. I wonder if there's anything down there, he thought. I always wanted to see Venice in its seasons, see the colors of the old Renaissance. Maybe that's waiting for me, maybe the others are waiting there, too, he thought. He thought many other things as well, but they do not fall into the scope of this present narrative. He is still thinking. He will be thinking for long time.

Alas, those further thoughts are not to be recorded.

He is not on exhibition, not exactly.

Evans is on permanent loan.