



MATT MCCLAIN/THE WASHINGTON POST

HANGING AROUND: Judith Martin with artist Victor Edelstein at the National Portrait Gallery, where his painting of her is on display.

PORTRAIT FROM C1

Cosmos Club in Dupont Circle and then made it part of her repertoire, tells of choking at our dinner table. With her husband and me safely seated at the other end, Robert had approached the matter by whispering, "I've left a note in your coat pocket. Don't let on to Judith."

Argento, whom we had met only briefly, although we subsequently became friends, recounts in his autobiography, "Catalogue Raisonné as Memoir: A Composer's Life," how Robert had badgered him for 20 months until he agreed to write the music. Unfazed, Robert retorted, "Where would we be if Waldstein hadn't badgered Beethoven?"

Edelstein was already a friend, and we exchanged luncheons and dinners with him and Annamaria on our frequent trips to Venice, where they were living before moving back to England three years ago. One time, on the eve of a trip, I read a rave review of a show in New York of his pastels of Roman fountains. Being familiar with the problematic Italian postal system, I telephoned upon our arrival and asked Annamaria if they had seen the new issue of *Art and Antiques*.

"It arrived yesterday," she said, "and now Victor thinks he's Giotto." (The review had concluded by comparing "a simple line" with which Victor had indicated a background tree to Giotto's having demonstrated his mastery by drawing a perfect circle without lifting his pencil.)

I failed to connect our enjoyment of his work with my husband's strange new habit of photographing me whenever we got dressed up. If I had realized that he was shooting the results off to Victor, I would have taken so long to decide what to wear that we would never have gotten to wherever it was that we were dressing to go.

Before he became a full-time painter, Edelstein was a renowned couturier in London, designing clothes for, among other notables, Princess Diana. Washingtonians may remember one of her favorites, the blue silk velvet dress, at once simple and spectacular, which became known as the John Travolta dress (and was sold for a record sum after her death) because she wore it when she danced with the actor at the White House. Although Edelstein closed his couture house in 1993, other dresses he did for her were pictured in Harper's Bazaar only this spring, in connection with a layout suggesting that Catherine Middleton will emulate the stylishness of her fiancée's late mother.

The birthday present could not long remain a secret; even I could hardly be made to pose for it without suspecting what was up. Besides, Robert told me to bring several evening dresses to Venice, which is not a particularly formal town nowadays (not counting foreigner revelers in 18th-century costume who stop me on the street to ask where I got my white hair). He even magnanimously

Miss Manners, speechless, at the Portrait Gallery

offered to take them in his suitcase, in violation of an agreement to pack separately that was made on our wedding trip. That was when I had realized that if he kept urging me to wear the dress packed on top in our shared, overstuffed valpack, rather than the one I had asked him to extract from the bottom, the marriage was doomed.

A large portrait that Victor had done of a family of children had struck Robert because it was rather Sargent-esque, but, at the same time, made clear that those were modern children. A mixture of traditional and modern was, Robert felt, characteristic of me. When he was in medical school, he had often taken refuge at the nearby Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, and he envisioned an updated version of John Singer Sargent's full-length portrait of Mrs. Gardner. I had used another full-length portrait of her, in which Anders Zorn captured the exuberance about Venice I shared, on the cover of my book about the city, "No Vulgar Hotel."

Accordingly, Victor had prepared a long vertical canvas. But when I arrived, he remembered that, vertically, I was not all that long. He chopped part of it off and turned it on its side.

Meanwhile, I remembered that I was not Isabella Stewart Gardner. In an honest portrait, I would not look like a society lady, not even a wild one like Mrs. Gardner, but like the working writer that I am. And if I didn't have wisps of hair escaping from my chignon, my own mother, who was always trying to tuck them back in, wouldn't have recognized me. So I posed wearing a blouse and skirt, with my reading glasses in my hand, sitting at a table full of books.

Another piece of realism: Now that the picture was horizontal, showing me sitting to one side, something was needed to balance the composition. To symbolize my devotion, not to say addiction, to Venice, Victor suggested a gondola from his collection of intricately accurate models of Venetian watercraft. But gondola meters start running at 90 euros, so we never take them. Out came the model of the public water bus, which we do take.

The year before the birthday for which the portrait was intended, we were fortunate enough to make four

trips to Venice. Most afternoons, when everyone else in town was napping, I would trot over to Ca' Albrizzi, one of the splendid houses of Venice, where the Edelsteins occupied the mezzanine apartment. The long, dark vestibule on the ground floor of the building is lined with sconces resembling disembodied arms holding torches. (In his film "Beauty and the Beast," Jean Cocteau, yet another Venetophile, shows such sconces coming eerily to life.) The piano nobile, above their apartment, is crowded with life-size plaster figures swarming over the ceiling and walls. The day I went upstairs to see it, representatives from Prada were there to rent it for a Biennale party.

Still, with anyone else, it would have been agonizing to be pinned indoors with all of Venice outside. But being at the Edelsteins' was like living in a Noel Coward play. Fortunately, Victor didn't require me to keep my mouth still, so we talked constantly. And I coaxed from him bits of his life story:

He began drawing houses, rooms and stage sets with costumes when he was about 8, "as a form of escapism from school and suburban life." His family had a wholesale fashion house in London, manufacturing clothes from Parisian toile and patterns, but "I suppose I saw 'Funny Face' too many times," he said, "and I imagined doing things differently from them and far more creative."

Apparently, he managed to preserve both the distraction and the skepticism when he began training to become a dress designer, because "I was sacked all the time, really because I think I was difficult, often in a bit of a trance and my various bosses knew that I didn't think much of them."

Things went better at Biba, where he admired his boss, Barbara Hulanicki, and at Dior in London, except for the time that boss registered discontent by punching him. It seems that Victor had expected to be signaled to start the show when Princess Margaret arrived. She was already there, being kept waiting for 10 minutes, until his boss rushed back in an uncontrollable rage.

"Lucky that was in less litigious times," said Victor. "I just took it like a man and started the show."

Then he became his own boss, first

with a ready-to-wear business and then a couture house whose clients included Anna Wintour, Princess Michael of Kent, Princess Yasmin Aga Khan and Tina Brown, as well as the Princess of Wales. *British Vogue* wrote that "Victor Edelstein is pure couture" and a *Tatler* cover trumpeted, "Victor's Laurels/Edelstein and his Princesses," a story about his adoring clients, who said they didn't mind — actually enjoyed — fittings, apparently much the way I enjoyed the sittings.

Meanwhile, however, Victor had started painting, in addition to his drawing and some theatrical designing including "Rhapsody in Blue" ("The dresses were blue — there now, I've surprised you!") for a ballet. Immediately "I knew that painting was what I really wanted to do, and my interest in fashion and running a company began to decline." He closed the company in order to study painting, first in London with David Cranwick, then in Florence with Charles Cecil.

Annamaria did so as well. She had been editor of Sotheby's yearbook "Art at Auction," head of the British Rail Fund's art investment project and an art dealer specializing in old master drawings, but she, too, retired to become a painter. They had a house in Andalucia, where they painted, but they had always dreamed of living in Venice. And that is where we found them, she painting still-life and now landscapes, Victor painting portraits, interiors and landscapes, both of them always seeming to be frantically trying to get organized for scheduled shows in Paris or London.

In turn, my husband now became an art patron. The job description, he believed, required fussing about the face. Victor had portrayed me with a calm smile, rather than whooping with laughter at his jokes, which was a more common expression of mine during the sittings.

Robert did not consider the look wicked enough. It was more like the bland smile I muster when people who mistake me for the Manners Meter Maid whose joy it is to pounce rudely on the unwary, announce that they had better watch themselves in front of me. And when the less timid sort inform me that manners don't really matter because it's really what's in the soul that really counts.

For a few months, new versions of the face were e-mailed from Venice to Washington for his inspection. Then one day, Annamaria declared, "Now he's got it. He is not going to change it."

Finished and framed, it arrived in Washington. "I know that expression," said our daughter. "It's 'Don't think I don't know what you're up to — I haven't missed a thing.' Many a time it's been directed at me."

Robert e-mailed the Edelsteins, "Judith has arrived and I'm in love."

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Curating 'Capital Portraits'

Carolyn Kinder Carr and Ellen G. Miles, curators of "Capital Portraits: Treasures From Washington Private Collections," scoured the city's homes for notable portraits that were behind closed doors and found 60 pieces by artists ranging from John Singleton Copley to Andy Warhol. These works are representative of Carr's remarkable finds:



NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY

"Mamie Geneva Doud Eisenhower," by Dwight D. Eisenhower

"Amateurs also paint, and we discovered this little portrait of Mamie that Eisenhower did. We took it apart in the lab and we suspect that he painted it while he was supreme allied commander of NATO and used a 1941 photograph of Mamie."



NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY

"Sarah Weston Seaton With Her Children Augustina and Julia," by Charles Bird King

"What interested us was two things. The painting, done in 1815, was done in Washington. Mrs. Seaton's husband and her brother ran the National Intelligencer newspaper — that's a nice Washington story. King was one of the few painters who hoped to capitalize on doing politicians. He stayed, worked for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and painted. Gilbert Stuart only stayed for two years!"



ALEX JAMISON PHOTOGRAPHY

"Ethel Mary Crocker (Countess de Limur)," by Giovanni Boldini

"What are you going to use to convey to the public that this is a wonderful show? This is an enormously inviting portrait. When we walked into that living room, it took your breath away."



ALEX JAMISON PHOTOGRAPHY

"Andrew Oliver Jr." and "Mary Lynde Oliver," by Joseph Blackburn

"Blackburn was an Englishman who came to America to paint in the 1750s. This pair was done in 1755 to celebrate [the couple's] marriage. Ellen Miles asked, 'What is going on in the background?' And in the portrait of Andrew Oliver there is a pigeon house — people collected them in those days."

— Jacqueline Trescott

MUSIC REVIEW

Midori & Co.: Together so fast and, alas, it showed

BY ROBERT BATTEY

Renowned violinist Midori, a former stunning child prodigy, now in her late 30s, has diversified and lowered her concert profile somewhat. She earned a master's in psychology from NYU, formed a music-education nonprofit, and is now chairman of the string department at USC's Thornton School. Her concerts include a healthy mix of chamber music and community outreach events. On Wednesday evening at the Kennedy Center's Terrace Theater, Midori teamed up with pianist Jonathan Biss, vio-

list Nobuko Imai and cellist Antoine Lederlin in a program of Haydn and Schubert trios, plus the Dvorak Quartet in E-flat.

This was clearly an ad hoc assemblage — Biss has a full calendar of solo and chamber music engagements, while Lederlin is cellist of an orchestra in Switzerland and the currently touring Belcea Quartet. The results, while never falling below a professional standard, were unimpressive. In particular, Schubert's monumental B-flat Trio cannot be just thrown together in this day and age, no matter how skillful the artists. The imprecise rhythms throughout the first movement (making no distinc-

tions between 16th notes and triplets), the ignoring of Schubert's detailed stresses and accents in the Andante, and the lack of any metrical feel in the Scherzo (every beat the same length and weight) bespoke haste in preparation. These were all fine players, but they presented little more than an expert read-through. There is a universe behind these notes, but we barely caught a glimpse.

Things were better in the Dvorak, Imai's mahogany sound filling out the texture, and her musical maturity helping to center the proceedings. Midori has nothing of the diva in her; she is fully engaged with her

ensemble and steps back whenever required. She is still a clean, accurate player, but the sound is not especially gratifying. There was a want of bloom and color, particularly next to Lederlin. His solos in the Lento provided the most wholly satisfying string playing of the evening. Biss's intelligent, detailed playing impressed anew, although in the Dvorak he was not completely successful in letting the strings through.

The concert was presented as part of the Chamber Music Across America series.

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TIMOTHY GREENFIELD-SANDERS

FORMER PRODIGY: The Japanese violinist Midori performed on Wednesday at the Terrace Theater.