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Peter and Paul Church

Petr Petrovich Konchalovsky, oil on canvas, 1925

In March, 1917, Tsar Nicholas II abdicated in Pskov, a city rich in parish churches, including Peter and Paul built in 1373.

Among so many churches, why did the artist select this quaint edifice isolated among thick summer foliage?

He limits his color palate—glints of grey, red, and brown, but dabs and clumps of green and white create the surface texture.

The green onion-dome and lower roofs of the church mimic the hues of trees and grass, while white stucco walls merge with the cloud-driven sky.

The bells toll as they have for centuries, in this glade, this city, this country, which has given thumbs up or down to so many martyrs and patriots, yet, within these walls, many seek sanctuary.

Church, earth, and sky. Just that.
The Chicken Coop

Ernst A. Spuehler, watercolor, 1951

In the 1950s, my father was persuaded that the watercolor titled The Chicken Coop, by a local Midwestern artist, would, in time, realize a nice return on investment.

The painting in a gilt frame hangs in my living room, not because I feel an affinity to either the old shed, the rooster, or the wheelbarrow, but it was, after all, my father's, and the palette is not unpleasant. After attending a watercolor class, I thought to examine the work more closely. I saw, for the first time, sun dappling a dilapidated wood structure, half-hidden by a profusion of spring greens. Towering pink blossoms cast deep shadows on the white clapboard house nearby. Dark green wheelbarrow, its red wheels askew, latch high on the shed door, bad news for the rooster pecking outside, and eight small, round air holes, no windows; how dark and uninviting for the poor chickens.

Today, six-year-old Leah and I sit on the sofa and stare at the painting, consider the colors and the fate of those chickens. No doubt his great-granddaughter’s curiosity is a more favorable return than Dad could ever have hoped for.
Self Portrait with Death Playing the Fiddle

Arnold Böcklin, oil on canvas, 1872

Villa Bellagio*
San Domenica di Fiesole

Herr Böcklin,
I’ve been here six weeks now,
sit under the portico writing.
A small, feisty dog doesn’t approve,
escapes to nip at me,
oblivious to the caretaker’s broom.

I often watch Il Duomo nesting
in low morning mist,
while orange-tiled roofs, cypress and fir
angle down hillsides.
Potted lemon trees ring the courtyard
just as you drew them.

The crumbing Etruscan wall holds,
the path overgrown with lichen
and moss. Perhaps in the shadows,
one, maybe two,
of your ebullient mythical creatures.

A young man brings fresh-killed
chickens, not plucked.
Basta, I say, no more, but he returns
again and again.
How persistent he is, Herr Böcklin,
as I imagine you
in your studio, palette and brush
defying death.

*Böcklin’s home in Italy, late nineteenth century; author’s vacation home, 1967
Author Notes

Nancy Scott is the current managing editor of U.S.1 Worksheets, the journal of the U.S.1 Poets’ Cooperative in New Jersey. She is a collage artist as well as the author of two books of poetry, Down to the Quick (Plain View Press, 2007) and One Stands Guard, One Sleeps (Plain View Press, 2009); and two chapbooks, A Siege of Raptors (Finishing Line Press, 2010) and Detours & Diversions (Main Street Rag, 2011). Nancy was a caseworker for the State of New Jersey for many years, working with homeless families, abused children, and those with mental health issues, and her experiences have informed many of her poems. Her poetry and/or collages have recently appeared in online and print journals, such as Slant, Pemmican, Poet Lore, New York Quarterly, Mudfish, Sea Stories, qarrtsiluni, The Meadowland Review, and Journal of New Jersey Poets.

About the Work

I became interested in ekphrastic poetry (poems inspired by works of art) about ten years ago and used the last line from an ekphrastic poem I’d written as the title for my second poetry book, One Stands Guard, One Sleeps. Last year the genre reemerged as a workshop assignment, and I have since compiled a manuscript of like poems (working title is On Location) that brings together art, poetry, history and memoir. I really enjoyed compiling this manuscript, which includes the three poems in this issue of Segue: one after the work of a Russian artist, the other two after a Swiss and a German artist. In the spirit of people and place, a recurrent theme in most of my work, the manuscript also includes poems after work by French, Danish, Nicaraguan, Belgian, American, and Hungarian artists, and one poem after a collage I created.

The manuscript is dedicated to my grandfather, who was born in Russia and emigrated in his late twenties. The first part of the manuscript consists entirely of poems inspired by Russian artists. Since I was never able to discover much about my grandfather’s childhood (he focused on building a successful life in America, rather than harking back to the “old country”), it is probably not a coincidence that browsing a flea market for materials for my collages, I purchased several old Christie’s and Sotheby’s catalogues, which dealt exclusively with auctions of Russian works of art, primarily done in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. My grandfather was Jewish and was not permitted to travel freely in Russia, so he would not have been familiar with these paintings, though I believe he would have known about the historical events and recognized descriptions of the countryside.

With all three poems, I did research. For “Self Portrait with Death Playing the Fiddle,” after having searched the Internet, I decided I wanted a hard copy about Arnold Böcklin’s life and work. Finding scant choices written in English, I arranged to have one book imported from Massachusetts through our local library system. It took two months for the book to arrive, and although I could only keep it for two weeks, it was well worth the wait. For “The Chicken Coop,” I researched the artist online and found some information, which seemed irrelevant to the poem, whereas for “Peter and Paul Church,” I included historical information to flesh out the poem. Much like creating a collage, I gather material/information, assess it, then toss what doesn’t work.

A challenge for me in writing poetry has always been to control the craft. What is point of the poem? What am I trying to communicate? I tend to overwrite, but having developed a thick
skin over the years, I’ve also learned to cut, and cut some more, and if I get lucky, something unexpected and enduring will emerge. With a framework in place, I revise endlessly, switching lines and stanzas, changing line breaks, correcting syntax, examining every word, including “a” and “the,” to make sure I’ve said exactly what I want to say. I will let a poem simmer, occasionally for years, and find I’m still not satisfied with it, or, upon reflection, I will go back to an earlier version. In addition, how a poem sounds when it’s read aloud and how it looks on the page are very important to me. I also want the title to do some work. I hate poems titled “Untitled.” With these three poems, after I had created new titles with epigraphs referring back to the artist, I decided that the artists’ titles worked much better and borrowed them.

**Nancy Scott on the Web**

[www.nancyscott.net](http://www.nancyscott.net)


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