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L'Appassionata: An American Story

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Of the thousands of students who attended my courses and seminars, the vast majority remained anonymous. Some fifty or so with whom I became temporarily better acquainted were for the most part students who whined about having received too low a grade. Only five or six were of such remarkable intelligence, preparation and enthusiasm that they attained the highest positions in the art world and became life-long friends . . . but they weren't really my students. From the beginning, their acumen, their sensitivity made me regard them as colleagues. Of students who were really students there is only one whom I remember with pleasure and gratitude: Helen Broadhurst.

When she first presented herself she looked very young—no more than twenty—and resembled many of the bland-faced undergraduate women in my classes who wore twin-set sweaters and cultured pearls. I soon pieced together that she was a little over thirty, was married, lived in a small town near Boston noted for its electronic industries and that she was embarked on a successful, highly remunerated career as researcher for a big firm dealing with computer accessories.

Though I could tell that she was usually self-confident, she now seemed a little hesitant at finding herself on foreign, possibly unfriendly territory. To break the ice, she handed me a note from the Dean explaining that the bearer, Mrs. Broadhurst, had requested permission to attend my introductory course (a ridiculous, pretentious enterprise listed in the university catalogue as: "From Giotto to Pollock . . .

European and American painting, sculpture and architecture from 1300 AD to the Present") that she had his permission and that now it was up to me to decide whether I wanted extra auditors or not. Her having asked the Dean's permission and then asking for mine was in itself unusual. With more than two-hundred students enrolled per semester, a few auditors hardly mattered. Non-enrolled auditors simply came into the lecture hall, sat wherever they pleased and watched the slides with pretty pictures go by on the screen. In the winter any number of homeless men and women came in to keep warm. Nobody thought of interfering with them. Only if one of them snored too loudly would an assistant of mine rattle him. I told Mrs. Broadhurst that she certainly had my permission and that she might have spared herself the trouble of asking for it because things were quite informal in the department of art history.

"I like to do things right," she said.

My first reaction was: "What a prig!" but instantly I realized that I was wrong. There was no tone of complacency in her voice. I was intrigued and though I didn't know it, my adventure with Mrs. Broadhurst had its beginning.

"May I ask you why you want to audit an introductory course in art history?"

With some hesitation, long pauses and several false beginnings I learned that recently, for the first time since her grade school class was taken there, she had visited the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and had come away perplexed . . . even a little angry. If the statue of Pharaoh Khephren was art, then the painting of a couple dancing by Renoir couldn't also be art. And some of the paintings left her with the impression of having been hoodwinked in some unpleasant but indeterminate way. At first she thought that both perplexity and anger would vanish in good time. After all, what was the Museum of Fine Arts to her? But both perplexity and anger only increased. Was she angry at some of the paintings or was she angry at herself for not understanding them? Since she was the kind who didn't like to be baffled, she had

decided to do something about her bewilderment. She ended by saying that she was sure that attending my course would resolve the situation.

I was amused. Never before had I come up against anyone so completely unfamiliar with art . . . so completely bereft of the need to pretend even a minimal interest in art.

"Don't be so sure. You might be more confused by the end of the course than you are now."

She shook her head decisively and gave me a brief but penetrating glance.

"No, I don't think so. I can tell that you are serious as a teacher."

"Serious only as a teacher or just plain all-around serious?"

She frowned for a moment and in her curiously innocent way said that what I was when I wasn't teaching was no business of hers.

I distinctly remember feeling a little hurt by such indifference.

From the first day of that introductory course, I saw her three times a week sitting in the second-row-center of the huge auditorium, taking endless notes. The nastiest weather New England could supply wasn't nasty enough to keep her away. Now and then she would come up to the lectern after a lecture, waiting patiently for the regularly enrolled students to quit asking me whether the mid-term exam would be "true-false" and whether their mid-term would count for fifty or only twenty-five percent for their final grade. It was obvious that she would have liked to ask me any number of questions but didn't think that as an auditor she had a right to demand more information than she was given in lecture. She usually restricted herself to saying something like:

"Thank you so much for your lecture. I never heard of Duccio before. He is wonderful. Just wonderful!"

Toward the end of the semester she presented herself once more in my office . . . this time with a great number of forms signed by the Dean.

"Dean Miller said that it isn't normal procedure but if you

and Professor Connelly give me permission I could enroll in your course on Flemish and Dutch Baroque and Professor Connelly's course in Modern European painting."

Naturally I gave my permission. I was still amused by her earnestness, which I knew would come to nothing.

"I will want to take the exams and do all the written assignments. I know that it means extra work for you . . . but I would be so grateful. I always like to know where I stand."

I was on the brink of saying something like "why bother?" but fortunately kept my opinion to myself.

It took me at least another year, by which time she had completed five courses—not brilliantly but nevertheless satisfactorily—before I began taking her measure. At first her essays never reached the point of revealing originality of mind, yet they improved steadily and she definitely did learn how to look at a painting, how to observe subtle differences within a work of art just as she also knew how to put what she saw together with the historical circumstances under which a given painting or sculpture was executed. All things considered, her work did not differ greatly from the other, much younger and usually much better prepared students. She always stopped by my office to thank me for even the briefest critique jotted on her papers.

Up to that moment, her presence in my classes had been a pleasant, slightly comical diversion. It was in the spring of her second year as a regularly enrolled student that she handed all of us a startling surprise, which made us sit up and pay attention. Without a word to me or to my colleagues, without consulting us, Helen Broadhurst's application to graduate school appeared on our desks. At first, I laughed and tossed her application aside in order to devote myself to the more than forty applications from other candidates. But the sheer recklessness of her wanting to go to graduate school kept me from going through the other applications in the proper frame of mind. I picked up her application once again and finally had to admit that there was no bureaucratic reason to deny her admission. She had success-

fully completed all the essential course work. The essay in which she told us of the reasons for her wishing to go on with art historical studies was a little on the naive side for someone her age but if one forced oneself to suppress knowledge of the difference in age, her essay certainly stood comparison with the essays written by all the other candidates. All that was lacking in her file were letters of recommendation. Instead, Helen had attached a brief note stating that she had been unwilling to disturb her former professors by asking them for letters of recommendation because her candidacy would surely be discussed in faculty meting and at that time each one of us could give his or her opinion of her worth. She planned to give up her present employment in order to devote herself to her studies full-time. A Community College in her township was going to open its doors in two years and she hoped to be able to find a teaching position there.

"The sooner I can start teaching art history, the happier I will be," was her concluding statement.

Indeed, there was a great deal of discussion at the next faculty meeting. Some of my more rigorously ethical colleagues said that we should refuse her because by accepting her we would in all probability exclude some far better student. Others—and I was among them—thought we owed her admission after letting her take our courses. The final decision I am ashamed to say was based on a philistine argument: since she was financially independent and asked for no scholarship support from the university we risked nothing. We all liked her in the somewhat condescending manner in which one treats a country cousin. "Spunky" was Connolly's description of her attitude. Secretly or maybe just subconsciously, we all thought that after a year of graduate school she would drop out by the sheer weight of her inadequacies and then we would be rid of the whole Broadhurst problem without needing the courage to act cruelly but justly.

Thinking it over later that afternoon, I grew restless as I recognized ever more clearly the hypocrisy of our action. I

decided to act. She must be stopped from giving up an excellent career to follow a foolish delusion. I phoned her after supper, invited her to have lunch with me at the faculty club tomorrow and went to bed with a tranquil conscience. It would be enough to suggest to her that she could develop her interest in art as a hobby without losing the security offered by her job to make her give up her foolhardy plan.

I had my first premonition of failure when I saw her enter the dining room of our faculty club. Rather than look around to see whether I had preceded her, she cast a glance at the dining room itself, its waiters, the counter on which salads were on display. Her smile clearly told me that she was looking forward to the day when she would enter a faculty club not as a guest but on her own recognizance—that this would someday be her own Walhalla.

I broached the topic immediately after ordering lunch.

"Is it wise for you to give up your job before you can be sure of making a career of art history?"

"But I am sure of making a career for myself and I wish I could tell you how I look forward to it!"

She paused for a moment. "Do you doubt my being able to make the grade? That I won't be able to keep up with the other students?" Her tone was straightforward—neither cocky nor lachrymose. "I know that they are younger and better equipped. But I think I can catch up."

"I'm no prophet. I can't predict what you will or won't be able to do. It just seems risky to give up a job that you know you can do well in the hope of being able to get a job in an entirely new field. May I be indiscreet? Just how much do you earn at your job?"

She didn't hesitate for an instant: "Hundred and thirty-five thousand."

I gasped.

"Good heavens! Do you realize that I make seventy-seven thousand and that's after years of teaching, publications, promotions and God knows what else."

She looked at me as if she hadn't quite heard me and nod-

ded her head.

"Yes, I've looked into all that, of course. I'm a very practical person, you know. I'll be lucky if I can pull forty thousand at the community college." Again a pause and with a light blush and with her eyes cast down she said in a soft whisper. "I want to try to be as happy as I know you are when you are teaching Rubens."

With a sudden shrug of her shoulders, she picked up her spoon and started in on her tomato soup with every sign of a healthy appetite. Obviously the subject of income was closed as far as she was concerned.

"Rubens!" For a moment she held her spoon in suspense and looked at me with her characteristically candid smile. "Rubens! You know I hated him before I took your course. I thought he was a coarse loudmouth who caricatured women. Then you showed us his portrait of Hélène Fourment in her wedding dress and I started thinking about what you said about the painting. Later on, it suddenly dawned on me that Rubens was . . . well, I still don't know how to say it or even how to think about it . . . but now I can see that he was everything but coarse. He is the most generous man there ever was. He had everything. Everything! Love, talent, standing, charm, intelligence . . . everything. And he didn't keep it to himself. He wanted us . . . me! . . . to share it with him. And he wasn't a loudmouth, but of course he had to shout a little to make people like me understand what he was giving us. Loudmouth! How could I ever have thought such a thing?"

Long before she had finished her soup I gave up my idea of persuading her to keep her job. In the past I had come across students who had made brilliant observations regarding Rubens' iconography, about the sources of his compositions, about his influence on Velázquez, about his interpretation of Genoese architecture. But I had never had a student who was so deeply, personally—childishly, if you like—grateful to Pieter Paul. She had won me over permanently to her side and I was ashamed of ever having wanted to keep her earning those enviable hundred and thirty-five thousand

a year.

Still, her application itself made it painfully clear that the whole enterprise was impossible. Just her background in foreign languages spelled disaster. A year of high school French and another year in college. A year's Spanish. No German. No Italian. She wouldn't be able to consult the most elementary manuals. Throwing away a position such as hers in order to learn more about Vermeer and Brunelleschi was madness but it was a madness that was beginning to take hold of me, too. Feebly I tried once again to make her think it over and she, without a touch of resentment, said that there was no need to think it over. She and her husband had agreed that she should study art history and there was no need to say anything more. Instead, she indicated that she would much rather I advised her how to turn the intervening time the better to prepare herself for graduate school.

I hardly knew where to begin and muttered something about her weakness in languages. Something would have to happen and happen quickly. She must choose a field of concentration and then acquire at least reading sufficiency in the language required by the field she chose. We drank our coffee almost in silence and parted quickly.

Except for her appearance in class, I had no more contact with her until after the summer vacation, a week before the academic year would resume. She stood in the doorway looking radiantly happy and even before I could ask her to come in she greeted me with a hideously accented but grammatically correct:

"*Buon giorno*, Professor Licht. *Spero che Lei abbia avuto una gradevole vacanza estiva*."

She had taken my meaningless words seriously and cast about for a field of concentration. After several visits to the Boston museums, she decided that she liked Italian art best and had taken herself off during the summer months to—of all places!—Busto Arsizio, a prosperous, culturally zero industrial town half way between Milan and the Swiss border. A cultural institute to which she had been referred by an

attaché of the Italian consulate in Boston maintained small classes in Busto Arsizio and other nondescript Italian towns where the chance of students speaking or hearing anything but Italian were minimal.

The summer also confirmed her original hunch. After an afternoon excursion to Milan, she knew that the study of Italian art was to be her destiny. Some instructor in Busto Arsizio told her that much of the literature on Italian art was in German and she had immediately signed up for a similar crash course in Ingolstadt for the next summer.

The two years required for her Master's degree passed . . . not necessarily with flying colors but sufficiently respectable to make it impossible for the graduate committee to reject her application for the Ph.D. program. Sporadic attempts to discourage her by suggesting that she had exhausted the knowledge of her past teachers and should broaden her outlook by studying at some other university failed miserably.

"I am still so ignorant," she told one of my colleagues brightly, "and there is still plenty for me to get out of the professors I've had all along."

By that time, I had begun to enjoy our encounters. Her enthusiasm for art and art history never flagged and she would let nothing stand in the way of making art the center of her life. At the same time, she planned each step with inspired practicality. A year after joining our doctoral program she was taken on part-time as an instructor in the Community College of one of Boston's proletarian suburbs. Not a moment too soon because a month or so later, the huge concern for which she and her husband had worked, declared bankruptcy and her husband joined the great number of unemployed workers.

"What with our nest egg and my earnings teaching at the college we'll be able to live quite comfortably. Isn't it lucky I switched to art history?"

One last hurdle had to be cleared and cleared quickly. Her Community College demanded proof of her progressing successfully with her work before they could renew her contract

and get her started on a tenure-track appointment. All her professors wrote elaborate letters in her support but what was really needed was the declaration of a doctoral thesis and an approximate date for its completion. A subject had to be determined that was suited to her talents and for once her usual ability to judge her capabilities deserted her. She insisted on doing research on Leonardo's frescoes in the Castello Sforzesco, a task which the most experienced specialist in Renaissance art would hesitate to undertake. I tried to reason with her but finally was forced to issue an ultimatum: either she would abandon the notion of Leonardo's frescoes or find herself another supervisor for her dissertation. Then, after discarding any number of possibilities, we agreed on the bronze doors of Milan cathedral as a subject that could be handled in record time and that was also suited to her love of archival research. It was a modest theme. Not one of the three artists concerned was much esteemed . . . least of all in America where the best of them, Pogliaghi, had never even been heard of. There was one great advantage in the obscurity of the artists and their work: she had the subject all to herself. There would be no rivals in the field.

At first Helen was unconvinced. The very fact that nobody in the world was interested in 19th and 20th century bronze doors discouraged her and she even laughed a little when I said that in my opinion, the oldest of the three doors was not only a certifiable masterpiece but also the only great work of religious art of the period 1850–1918. Pogliaghi, in my opinion, had managed to fulfill the highest demands of esthetics as well as the need for authentically religious expression.

She set out for Milan early that June vaguely dissatisfied but with her determination to make the best of a disagreeable situation. By mid-July I received a picture postcard of Milan cathedral's clumsy facade. It read:

"*Caro* Professor Licht, *Lei mi ha regalato una miniera d'oro*" ("Dear Professor Licht, you have presented me with a goldmine.")

She went on in her fastidiously correct schoolroom Italian

to say that the doors were magnificent and there was enough fascinating material in the cathedral archives to last a lifetime. The director of the archives couldn't be nicer:

"He calls me *l'Appassionata.*"

And a gold mine it was. She completed her dissertation on schedule and was soon afterward appointed assistant professor at her Community College. Not that there was anyone to assist. Helen all by herself constituted the college's department of art history. Her summers as well as her first sabbatical she spent in Milan exploiting her very own goldmine. In short order she published "The Bronze Doors of Milan Cathedral and their Political Background," "The Bronze Doors of Milan Cathedral and their Financial Background," "The Bronze Doors of Milan Cathedral and Fascist Cultural Policy," etc., etc. These articles were mostly published in respectable but extremely specialized Italian journals and I'm not sure that they were widely read. Still, they were accurate, competent and useful to academicians working in related fields. They gained her a place in Milanese academic and historical circles and there wasn't a congress or roundtable concerning modern Milanese art or Milanese ecclesiastical history to which she wasn't invited to present a summary of her most recent findings.

Slowly but inevitably we lost sight of each other with the exception of regular end-of-the-year greeting cards. Knowing that I was Jewish and scrupulously tactful, she always sent New Year's greetings and never once a Christmas card. It always saddened me that our friendship had come to its unavoidable, tacit end and I know with great certainty that it saddened her, too. I know that she regretted the distance between us as much as I did because of an incident that lies in the recent past:

I had been called to Milan for consultations with a publisher of art books. Only once during the two days of endless discussions did I have an hour to myself and as always when I was in Milan I quickly headed for Santa Maria presso San Satiro, my favorite church in all of Italy. It was close to rush-

hour and the crowds hastening to subways and bus stops slowed my progress. At the crossing of Via Torino, I was stopped together with a dense mass of Milanesi by a traffic light. Impatiently straining to get going again, I suddenly saw Helen also waiting for the light to change, standing at the very corner I was hoping to reach. The light turned green. I started to cross and collided with her striding in the opposite direction half way across the roadway. We embraced and then held each other at arm's length to look at one another. Helen—placid, self-contained Helen—gave me the most radiant of smiles and then burst into tears that were as wistful as they were happy. The light must have changed again for we suddenly found ourselves still with our arms around one another in the midst of Milan's churning traffic.

Somehow we made our way to safety and stood at the curb still smiling at each other. We gestured helplessly as a substitute for words that wouldn't come and that would have been inadequate in any case. For an instant her face threatened more tears. She flung her arms around me, then turned swiftly and walked off in the direction of the cathedral and its bronze doors, leaving me immodestly proud of having had such a student.