

Lee Bradley's and the Pieta

Preface

Lee Bradley's was my mom's combined antique shop, art gallery, and restaurant (Lunch with a limited menu and dinner by appointment) in Long Valley NJ in a historical home. The Pieta was part of that entertaining time.

Lee Bradley's

It was a big change moving from Mendham to Long Valley. It was only 15 miles to the west, but seemingly worlds apart. I was just turning nine as I went from a backwoods explorer to living in a small old town. Dad went from the provider of the household to barely providing for himself, taking various bartending jobs. For a time, he worked at the Welsh Farms dairy in town, the only employer of any size, where he made sour cream on the overnight shift. Mom went from being a housewife to the primary support of our family, the proprietor of Lee Bradley's.

Mom rented a circa 1774 center hall stone colonial on a bit of a rise on a large property after you passed by after several row houses on the way out of town. It was a landmark; a place where George Washington slept a couple times during the Revolutionary war with three feet thick walls and tall windows. It was impressive, so kids in town looked at me as a spoiled kid in the big house, not the kid that lived in a rented house that served as a business and home, where I had to work and help. The home had four very large rooms on each floor with a wide center hall, with a large eat in kitchen, formal dining room with fireplace and two large parlors on the first floor.

The two parlor rooms on the one side of the hall had four tables in each room made from old wrought iron Singer sewing machine bottoms, seating four each. Mom served lunch, there, but only one to two choices for homemade soup and a couple types of sandwiches made only on freshly delivered French bread from a local bakery. The dining room was utilized for dinner and lunch parties, but by appointment only.

The tables in the parlors were surrounded with antiques and artwork, which also layered the deep windows and were in the nooks of the dining room, and the upstairs and downstairs halls. Many of the antiques came from regular visits to a weekly auction on Schooley's Mountain that wasn't far away. I looked forward to those trips to the auction, as I was buying stuff there too and selling things on consignment in Mom's shop. Most everything was Early American, which of course suited this house very well. I didn't retain much of the items bought and traded, just a couple of bottles and limited-edition lithographs from the late 1800's. I do wish I never parted with that French musket from the 1660's I bought at the auction.

The walls were filled with paintings, some of Mom's students, and others on consignment, including mine. I painted watercolor abstracts, usually sold in pairs, small at \$35 per pair. Mom specialized in paintings of mostly fruits, vegetables, and flowers, many painted on sections of the floorboards from the attic. By the time we left that house, the attic was a patchwork of plywood.

The Pieta

In early 1967, Mom had a gentleman stop in that had a painting that had been in his attic for some time and in his family over many centuries, the Pieta of Jesus on the Cross. He thought that it was done by Michelangelo. It was about three to four foot high in a large gold gilded frame that later appraised for many thousands on its own. After much negotiation, this gentleman agreed to let the painting be shown in the gallery for six weeks that summer, provided Mom conducted research on its background, confirm the identity of the painter so he could sell the painting thereafter. If not a Michelangelo, it was hoped that it was completed by another well-known painter of that time as many of that period did their own version of the Pieta.

My mom's nephew (and my cousin) was Penrod Scofield, a mural painter and illustrator who lived in Manhattan. He and his partner had friends at the Metropolitan Museum, including one patriarch of the museum, the horror film actor, Vincent Price. Think Thriller and MJ for the younger than me generation(s). He and a few others associated with the Met at the time visited the house one evening for dinner and I was the waiter. The evening they visited included many laughs, with Mom serving a great dinner of Hungarian Goulash (The queen's recipe) and other specialties. Mr. Price, with that sardonic smile, was seemingly so much like one of his mysterious characters and reminded me of his character in the Raven.

After arrangements were made for security guards, the painting was delivered to the Met and their experts confirmed a respected artist painted it in the 1500's, but unfortunately it was not Michelangelo or any of the top five to ten painters at the time. It was concluded that it was valuable enough that armed guards had to stay in the house while it was displayed over the next six weeks. The cost of the guards was to be paid from the proceeds of a \$5 admission charge, with the balance of the admission charges to go the restoration of paintings from the Florentine floods. There were many printed stories on the showing starting with a Morristown article than then got picked up in the Newark Star Ledger and in NYC, and then word of mouth spread from one art lover to another and more so one Christian visitor to the next.

Within two weeks, there were lines out the back door weaving into the back yard, with the painting shown in the front entry hall. People came straight up the hall for the viewing got a view to the left of the impressive dining room with a sign there stating, "Dinner by Appointment" and then were steered through the two parlors when they left in the hopes that they would buy an antique or painting from the shop as they exited.

The viewing was clearly a religious experience, with so many women clutching rosaries from the moment they got in line until pulling out of the driveway. One night, after hearing a noise, I came downstairs in the middle of the night and walked into the painting, or rather the heavy, pointed corner of the large protruding frame. I badly bruised a couple ribs, with uncomfortable breathing for some time thereafter. Nonetheless, it was summer, and I had full time work to do. Rain or shine, the lines kept increasing, with so many standing in the hot summer sun, and I responded, selling cups of lemonade and iced tea while I pitched things to buy in the shop, including my paintings. Within a week, I had to paint 3-4 a night to keep up with the demand.

When the viewing ended, the lines were at their peak. It seemed that the viewing could have continued forever. The demand of the public to be connected to Jesus who died on the cross for us was so evident in this historical masterpiece. Without parental prompting, I just didn't see it as a 13-year-old that summer.

Post Pieta and Other Times at Lee Bradley's

Lee Bradley's success was enhanced by the Pieta viewing and more private dinner parties were one of the results. The dining room was impressive with a deep hearth and hand-hewn trim off the large eat-in kitchen and sat 12-144. There were some well-known guests, including Perry Como a few times on the way to visit his daughter at Centenary College and the most well-known guest, Jackie O. Mom's memories of Jackie and mine differ. She recalled Jackie as difficult and miserly in negotiating the menu and prices for a couple of her dinner parties.

The waitress couldn't make it for her second dinner party, and I pinch hit. Mom spent an hour training me on the proper etiquette in between cooking. I was most proper and maybe even cute for a just soon to be 13-year-old. At the end of the night, Jackie tipped me a \$50 bill, so she certainly never seemed miserly to me. I recall my father over breakfast the next morning being so upset when I mentioned my trip, at least three full nights of his bar tips.

The momentum for the Pieta was short lived as on Labor Day weekend, Mom was out late somewhere near Morristown after a night of too much drinking. She drove off the highway over 50 MPH and sawed off a telephone pole, thrusting her through the windshield headfirst. Fortunately, she was driving her huge Pontiac Bonneville station wagon, or she would not have lived. As it was, she barely survived and for a couple days her life was in serious doubt. My father and I were contacted, and we went to the hospital on the evening before Labor Day, 1967. I did not leave that waiting room for a nip and tuck 24 hours of many surgeries for Mom, watching the Jerry Lewis Telethon almost all that time. From that night, I still have a fondness for the children of muscular dystrophy as a favorite charity and an understanding that we must always be thankful of what we have in fleeting lives.

Mom received a couple hundred stitches in her face and head, plus some broken bones. She never had eyebrows again, with stitches and then mascaras replacing them. She had glass embedded everywhere, some that worked its way out over the years. She had her head shaved and stitches zigzagged across her head. She was in the hospital for many weeks, with Lee Bradley's closed during that time. She came home just before Halloween and the trooper that she was greeting the kids at the door in what the kids thought was the greatest makeup job they ever saw. Mom recovered from this accident, but Lee Bradley's did not.