

George Hofmann
The Art Department in 1968

The Art Department in 1968 bore an eerie, but cheerful resemblance to the Army - like a helter-skelter, municipal version of the Army.

Bob Sikora (who happened to be the brother-in-law of Adolph Gottlieb - his wife, Gladys, was one of the 6 Dick sisters, daughters of an orthodox Jewish dairy farmer who had lived in Danbury, Connecticut - and her sister Esther was married to, and supported Adolph for many years by working as a New York City public school teacher) was the general factotum of the Department. Bob could get you anything: a window shade, chalk, a slide projector (when he wanted to), a tip on anything. Frequently he was at the bar at Oscar's Salt of the Sea, a big restaurant on Third Ave., at 67th St., where genial Oscar would serve New England Clam Chowder with Manhattan Clam Chowder swirled in, a singular and spectacularly simple combination that was like the discovery of the earth, a magical combination unduplicated since.

The sub-basement (at 695 Park Avenue) was Bob's back office - a lair of used furniture, secret deals and the sculpture studio, a maze of pipes and a warren of rooms that seemed to swallow up those fellows who went there, and their students, who miraculously seemed to be alive despite that, several days later.

Upstairs, Gene Goossen held sway, in a paneled office with a simple desk - and a iron hand. Gene decided things in secret, no one ever knew what was to be - and no one wanted to know: we were there to teach, and then disappear, to make art, and history, by showing. There were no faculty exhibitions because everyone showed, and Tibor de Nagy and the Green Gallery and then Fishbach, and later, to a certain extent, Bykert, belonged to the department. Later, Georgia Rave, a woman whose name said it all, was closeted with Gene, doing 'programming'. Susan Groehl, a graduate student then, filled in as secretary, in a clutter of papers and ashtrays - efficiently dealing with all and sundry, whilst Doris Kennedy sat in the two chairs lined up alongside the desk, holding court in her swaths of self-designed outfits - always purple, it seemed.

Leo Steinberg owned art history, in an affable and disgruntled way; he was in a constant rivalry with his nemesis, Gene, who always got the better of him, somehow.

A little, little man, Harry Stinson - no more than five feet, was the graduate advisor. When introduced to the newcomer, the oddball architect John Rawlings, 6'6", in the elevator, they looked at each other and burst out laughing.

Another of the old guard, like Stinson, a holdover from the days of Edna Luetz, was Margarethe Miller; she had been a student in the Thirties along with her twin, Anna McKenna. "The Twins" went on to teach in the '40s and '50s - Miller holding forth from a closet on the 16th floor, her 'office', riding herd on the art education girls, while McKenna ruled The Bronx - now part of Lehman College. There she hoarded art supplies, tyrannizing the newcomers, as a shadow empress, at once benign and threatening.

The occasional instructor could be found in the halls: Lyman Kipp, grinning, the earnest Bob Swain, harried Mark Feldstein, bemused Ray Parker, strolling, affable Tony Smith, the loping Rawlings. They disappeared into various rooms, to do I don't know what; students seemed hardly a presence at all.

The main scene was lunch at Donohues, a neighborhood bar on Lexington Ave., where Chris, the genial Greek waiter, served the whole dining room. There hamburgers and liquor were consumed, in equal amounts, and there, Rothko, whose studio was on 69th St., hung around, looking like an accountant. The intense Bob Huot punched me for reaching across him for the salt, after which we all sat down to lunch. Really private sessions were held at the 'downtown Donohues', at 64th St. and Lexington, so remote as to be not found. Other neighborhood hangouts were the elegant Chinese restaurant in Imperial House, at the corner of 69th and Lex., and, of course, the ever-popular Oscars - where the New England was eased into the Manhattan clam chowder at the bar - and where Oscar proposed, after Bob Sikora died, only to be turned down by the petite Gladys.

The College was the City: the building on Park Avenue merely Central, the extensions being: Donohues, Oscars, the Chinese restaurant, and the Bykert, Tibor de Nagy and Fishbach Galleries. When someone showed elsewhere - Philadelphia, or Hartford, or in Albany, it was as tho in another country - you pilgrimaged there. Home was the orbit of the east side and downtown (midtown)- nothing else much mattered. Oh, yes: Bennington, an outpost somewhere north, where everyone had once come from, a place in the distant past.

Edna Luetz, who had started the whole thing by hiring Robert Motherwell in the fifties (then later, Rubin, Baziotis, Lippold, Bultman - Ray Parker was already there) stood a little to one side, aloof and aghast - proud of having started it all, and horrified by the lack of deference shown her, retreated to her apartment on E. 69th St., where she received graduate students who were writing their MA Theses, a feature of the studio program in those days. In a story oft repeated by Rawlings, when greeted at the door of her apartment by the new president Jacqueline Wechsler - "Hello, I'm the president", Luetz replied, "Yes, I know dear", and swept in. This president, notorious for being a former nun, replaced the staid and dignified previous Presidents Cross and Meng, whose kindly miens now look down from the Library walls.

A feature of indoctrination, once a line position had been achieved, was the interview with Prof. Hobart Bushey of the Math Department. A steel desk was the scene, with a few metal chairs drawn up. Prof: Bushey: "There are two retirement plans - this one is the City's, and its features are X, and this one is TIAA, which is roughly the same, but private; you can choose between the two". Could anything have been simpler, or more telling for the rest of one's life?

Bob Huot was married to Twyla Tharp, a tough girl who was a dancer - they were among the first to live in a loft, on Franklin St. Many quickly followed. Tony Milkowski and his wife Sheila, a beautiful girl lived in the same building with Mark Feldstein and Laura; Kipp seemed to have various abodes down there, and other, like Bob Swain also migrated towards the eventual Soho and Tribeca. Vinnie Longo was a pioneer on 22nd St. Some lived in the country.