**Absinthe and the Walls**

by Florence Moonan

There was nothing grand about the entrance to 2 Stockton Avenue in New Hope, Pennsylvania. The angled front steps could be tricky when delivering artwork, and the inner chamber was challenging with its two flights of stairs and the heavy door that greets one at the top of the climb. Once inside, however, a welcoming vibe emanates from the spacious gallery. The heavily plastered walls stood stark and bare silently waiting for the magical installation. Four large deep-set windows poked through the walls and flooded the upstairs with bright sunlight that revealed amazing views of the canal and village below—a New Hope Impressionists dream. I was delivering ‘Spirit House’ that day, a birdhouse on wheels for New Hope Arts Birdhouse Auction Fundraiser that turned out to be a fabulously unique and fun event that marked the start of my lasting connection with the New Hope Arts Center. I must confess, the feeling I got that day was “grand”.

While deciding what to submit for the Elevating the Arts Virtual Exhibition I kept thinking about walls—especially the deconstruction and reconstruction of new walls for the arts center. The energy and spirit that flowed in that space and between the walls, the history, the memories and the stories. Stories often come to mind with the mention of a word, a color, a song, a glance. One trigger can take us away to a forgotten time or place. The colors, textures and shapes of ‘Absinthe’ led me to select this venetian plaster painting for the online exhibition because of its story. The following excerpt is from a paper I wrote for a college course called Eat, Drink, Man, Woman: Gender History on November 21, 2000. I have also edited the content. The painting ‘Absinthe’ came about 12 years later.

***La carte, s’il vous plait***

. . . We left our apartment and made our way down the curved flight of marble stairs that wrapped around the open ironwork elevator. We stopped to purchase a bottle of red wine then headed underground for a quick jump on the metro. I arrived in Paris 10 days ago to stay with my nephew Ken for a few weeks. This was my first visit to the City of Lights and Ken’s friend Richard invited us to dine with a few of his American friends.

Large wooden doors opened onto a courtyard protecting the entrance to the building. Richard’s hearty laugh reached our ears before his large frame greeted us at the door. I liked him immediately. Introductions were made as Richard poured another round of chilled champagne for his guests. The conversation turned to Joan, his houseguest, who had recently returned from business in Strasbourg. In a few days, she and Richard would be motoring to Burgundy together for a brief vacation. While the guests were listening to her stories of Strasbourg, Richard rose and headed toward the kitchen. I excused myself and followed. He was bent over the sink rinsing lettuce in the cramped area dedicated to cooking.

“I wanted to thank you for giving up two of your season tickets for *Figaro* last week.” “Ah, yes.” He let out a knowing laugh.“What? Did Ken already tell you about the fiasco at the Bastille? The strike?” We both laughed. “Well, at least there was a performance—no costumes or scenery, but a marvelous performance. *And,* we were ushered to empty orchestra seats since most ticket holders were taking refunds. I helped Richard place the shrimp and avocado with dill sauce then he beckoned everyone to the table. I almost choked on my last piece of shrimp when Ken began talking about my first restaurant experience with an escargot utensil. So it wasn’t an eyelash curler! The merriment and stories continued throughout dinner as everyone relaxed and relished the good feelings that often come while sharing a meal. It was now time for dessert. We all swooned as Richard presented poached pears with Chantilly. What more could one expect.

It was then Richard offered the illegal green elixir. Incredible, I thought, as I sat sipping absinthe a favorite of Parisian artists and writers of the late 19th and early 20 century. We listened intently as Richard read from a book on the history of the building on rue de Lille where he lived six months of the year. Max Ernst and Dorothea Tanning had once lived in this very apartment. Tanning’s paintings of dream-like figures floated across my mind. This was too good to be true. The bright green color was entrancing to my eyes. I felt its heat as it traveled down the back of my throat. This experience with the green fairy was surprising. I began to imagine myself the subject in a Degas painting cavorting with the spirits of Tanning and Ernst in a mystifying landscape.

It was nearly midnight when we said good night. We decided to slowly walk home. The late night air covered my face like a veil. The month was September and the nights were still warm. We crossed over the Seine and before long found ourselves in front of Place Vendôme. I shuddered with the realization that less than two weeks ago Princess Diana and Dodi shared their last meal here at the Ritz. Ken took my arm and led me on. I smiled to myself as I thought of the number of times Ken encouraged me to go on as we walked the streets of Paris. How many times had he said, “It’s just around the corner. It’s not far.” The streets were deserted at this hour and we would soon be safely home after our intoxicating evening.

The following day Ken and I lunched in the gardens of the Picasso Museum. An amazing street harp musician was playing behind me as I leaned against the entrance to the Museum while Ken snapped a photograph and I silently

reaffirmed my commitment as an artist . . .