

Italy Early and Late: Paintings by Peter Ruta

C.I. (February 21, 2015)



An exhibition of paintings by Peter Ruta. On view through February 27, 2015 Mon-Fri 10-5
Peter Ruta was born in Germany in 1918. His father was a Leipzig cabaret director, his mother the intellectual daughter of a Jewish publishing family. In 1923, following the first Hitler putsch, they emigrated to Italy with their two small sons. Ruta grew up in Milan and on the Italian riviera, in Ruta



(whence the family name, adopted postwar) Sta. Margherita and Chiavari. A bookish child, he read Marx and Freud as well as Dante and Manzoni. As a schoolboy he dutifully stood watch at the monument to Italy's Great War dead but his refusal to rejoice at the Abyssinia campaign in 1935, earned him a beating from Fascist classmates. In 1936, he emigrated again, alone this time, to New York City.

In New York he worked long hours in the stockroom of a distributor of fine art reproductions. His interest in painting aroused, he enrolled in night classes at the Art Students League. In the late 1930s he studied with Jean Charlot, who had brought Italian fresco techniques to Mexico a decade earlier. Ruta knew Italian fresco. Charlot sent him to Mexico to see the work of Rivera. Back in New York, Ruta painted his first mural, still visible today in the basement of the League. Fresco, an early influence, gave his work a lasting grace and spaciousness.

In 1940 the tiny New York art world was flooded with refugees from Europe. Matta, Cagli, the musical Rietis, Basaldella and the American original Edward Melcarth became Ruta's friends, models and mentors. The Russian brothers Leonid and Eugene Berman, painters of melancholy neoromantic landscapes, made a lasting impression. Drafted into the US army in 1942, Ruta turned down the position of division artist and asked for a combat assignment. In February 1945 he was badly wounded in the retaking of Bataan. A new discovery, penicillin, saved his life.

By 1947 Ruta was back in Italy, in Settignano where Leo Stein, Gertrude's estranged brother, dying of cancer that summer, told him tales of American expat life in Italy ca. 1912. In the 1950's, as Ruta recalls, the whole New York art world moved to Rome or Paris in the summer. The socializing began on shipboard and continued at the Deux Magots or on the via Margutta. Matta and Berman were close again. Toti Scialoja and Titina Maselli were lively new acquaintances. In Venice Edward Melcarth preached Venetian baroque to younger American painters. Ruta took heed. The baroque trope of drapery -what secrets hidden in its folds ? -figures prominently in his paintings to this day.

Peggy Guggenheim was a witness at Ruta's first wedding in Venice in 1948. He helped Guggenheim hunt for the palazzo she intended to buy and defined himself as a painter in opposition to her dinner table circle of surrealists. Actress Stella Adler was a close friend in those years. Tennessee Williams was always good company.

Positano in the 1950s was a poor fishing village with a good war record, cheerfully accepting of its eccentric foreign guests, artists, intellectuals, younger sons of Europe's displaced royal families. In 1952 Ruta rented a two story stone house on via Pasitea, with its own cistern and an arbor on the terrace where black grapes grew in profusion. The rent was \$200 a year. (The house is now part of a Best Western hotel where rooms go for \$200 a night.) He joined the town's legendary community of artists, what an art historian would later call "un'avanguardia marginale": Kurt Craemer, Han Harloff, Bruno Marquardt, Karli Sohn-Rethel, the ceramist Irene Kowaliska. Refugees from Nazism and postwar upheaval, they gave him, the perpetual émigré, an anchor. Sketching from the model, male, per forza, at Craemer's house each night, moved Ruta to paint a series of powerful dark portraits, shown at Schneider Gallery Rome in 1952, one of many early shows in Italy and the US.

Abstract Expressionism ruled the 1950s New York art world. In Positano Ruta was free to develop his own unique fusion of seemingly disparate elements: Venetian baroque, the geometry of Craemer's Bauhaus antecedents, his own early love of Italian fresco, fortified by Mexican variants.

Mediterranean light bleached his palette, clarified his composition. Ruta, the "lyrical luminist" was born in Italy, in long late afternoon conversations with sea and sky.

The sixties broke the spell. Ruta travelled to Asia and Eastern Europe to produce two books of architectural photography and served as editor of ARTS magazine in New York, covering all the hot trends - Op Pop Conceptual, experimented for himself with Pop paintings based on front page news photographs. A dead end, he decided. From 1970 to 2000 he painted cityscapes from the roof of his downtown New York apartment house, landscapes in Chiapas and New Mexico, New England and southern France while raising a family, a son and two daughters, with his second wife, author Suzanne Ruta. In 2000 and 2001 he shared a communal studio on the 91st floor of the North Tower, World Trade Center, losing his last best work in the 9/11 attack. The Museum of the City of New York showed thirty years worth of his New York City paintings in 2004. The Leipzig Stadtgeschichtliche Museum marked his 90th birthday with a lifetime retrospective in 2008.



Rome in 2000, after a thirty year absence, was a revelation. Ruta caught the bus to Villa Doria Pamphili or Piazza del Popolo each day, as a stream of perfectly poised gouaches flowed from his experienced hand. From 2002-2006 he enabled the unpicturesque view from a terrace high over via Aurelia: Prati rooftops in the shadow of the Cupolone, in a series of large paintings. In 2007 he was lured back to Positano by Enzo Esposito, born 1945, ardent scholar of the town's artistic history. Ruta's rediscovered early work has shown lately at Esposito's Gallery Mediterraneo in Positano, at il Catalogo Gallery, Salerno, at the Ceramic Museum of Thurnau, Germany and, a large ambitious exhibition in 2012, at Villa Rufolo, Ravello.

Now in his nineties, Ruta paints complex, exuberant still life, "indoor landscapes" during winters in New York. In spring and summer he paints outdoors again in Positano and Tramonti, where new friends and patrons have opened their hearts and their houses to the indefatigable maestro. The Provincia di Salerno museum plans a major retrospective for 2016.

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