

7-1-2002

Raw Classics: A.G. Rizzoli

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Recommended Citation

Jo Farb Hernandez. "Raw Classics: A.G. Rizzoli" *Raw Vision* (2002): 61.

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A.G. Rizzoli

Shirley Jean Bersie Symbolically Sketched/ Shirley's Temple, 1939, ink on rag paper, 95.9 x 60.7 cm.

In 1936 San Francisco draftsman A.G. Rizzoli (1896–1981) began producing large pen-and-ink renderings of utopian architectural designs. Such utopian images are found throughout the history of visionary architecture, but Rizzoli's elaborate buildings were unusual in that most were symbolic representations or 'transfigurations' of people he knew, intended to glorify a heavenly world of his own creation. They were meant to symbolize an actual metamorphosis of the person following death, as well as serving as an architectural personification of their essential attributes.

Rizzoli's buildings were confident illustrations of his own creed about beauty, stature, and importance, but also of his fervent belief that these were God-given ideals: they represented the kind of buildings that would grace the streets of paradise. Exact standards of proportion defined by what the Beaux-Arts school determined were universally correct 'laws' of harmony, symmetry, and balance infused his works. Nevertheless, his meticulously crafted drawings for this rapidly developing imaginary world juxtaposed Beaux-Arts architectural idioms with eclectic motifs of Roman, Renaissance, Baroque, Art Deco, and Art Nouveau styles. Added to this mixture were spectacular lighting displays reminiscent of a Hollywood premiere as well as more populist elements of commercial advertising suggestive of P.T. Barnum. This fusion of styles was an array not many could have successfully presented without parody, but this would have been unthinkable to him, given his self-assigned title of 'earthly architectural assistant and transcriber' to God. Proud of the grand design of his work, Rizzoli described it as an 'Expeau of Magnitude, Magnificence and Manifestation.'

Shirley's Temple (1939) is an elaborate drawing that juxtaposed Rizzoli's classical 'high art' objective with an obvious Hollywood reference. He idealized six-year-old neighbor Shirley Jean and 'symbolically sketched' her.

'In Deep Appreciation of the Kindly Interest She Has Shown for the ATE [the 'Achilles Tectonic Exhibit,' Rizzoli's annual in-house exhibition of his work]: As on one day she rang the bell, sighing tenderly: 'Can I come in and see your pictures....' Thereupon our Almighty Lord, creator of the First Degree Master Architect, and Master Builder, spoke with Gratitude. 'A Goddess in the making Shirley Bersie shall be from now on. On forevermore.'

Shirley's Temple, like Rizzoli's other creations, is an ambitious mixture of excessive ornamentation with an almost fanatic, formal regard for the classicism and precision of the architectural line. The actual building is an expansive gothic tower built on a wide base, with side elements referencing a Roman coliseum and mid-level corner turrets that seem rather modern. Three successively larger vertical towers flank the front elevation, each topped with a lithe female figure (Shirley?), fronting a somewhat surreal landscaped garden filled with statues on pedestals, formal plantings, strolling pedestrians, and gawking sightseers. Soldiers outfitted in the style of Her Majesty's Royal Guard, complete with lofty headdresses and bemedaled uniforms, protect the sides and entrance to the temple. Intricate architectural details on roofs, window treatments, and the overall facade almost overshadow a small white figure that stands at one of the entrances to



Courtesy Ames Gallery, Berkeley, CA.

the temple, as it does in the entry of many of Rizzoli's buildings. The figure may be a scale indicator or, alternatively, a representation of Rizzoli himself, defining his authorship and protecting his creation. Yet despite his personal investment in this drawing, he graded himself harshly on it, much as it would have been in a Beaux-Arts style architectural classroom: although his 'symbolization' merited a grade of 90%, composition, design, drafting, and rendering were assessed at only 75%, 50%, 50%, and 40% respectively. Sixty-plus years later, we would undoubtedly give him better marks.

Jo Farb Hernandez

Reference 'Divine Design Delights: The Life and Works of A.G. Rizzoli', in Jo Farb Hernandez, John Beardsley, and Roger Cardinal, *A.G. Rizzoli: Architect of Magnificent Visions*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams and San Diego Museum of Art, 1997).