AN AMERICAN PRIMITIVE AND SOPHISTICATE

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During the course of the nineteenth century many, perhaps hundreds of, American artists went to Europe to study. Some of them stayed there for long periods and quite a few managed to prolong their sojourn into permanent residence in Italy, in France, or in Germany. Although these painters and sculptors never returned to the United States no one ever considered them to be anything but American artists. Nathaniel Hawthorne and other writers and some of the more thoughtful tourists remarked on the fact that these artists all seemed to be haunted by the dilemma of being suspended between two worlds—attached to both America and Europe yet belonging to neither—and much has been made of this rather gloomy psychological problem. On the other hand little has been said of those European artists who came to settle permanently in the United States in the middle of the nineteenth century.

One of the most prominent men in this group was Giuseppe Fagnani, who came, not as an unknown immigrant but as an already famous portrait-painter with a brilliant reputation. He was an Italian by birth but he became a naturalized citizen of the United States. Though he came to this country as a young man, married an American lady from Massachusetts, and settled permanently in New York in 1851, he seems to have always been considered, in his adopted land, as a foreigner. In spite of this he actually spent the greater part of his life as a professional artist in America. But, quite unlike the American artists settled abroad, Fagnani led a happy, busy life here, untroubled by any of the darkling qualms which agitated American artists in Europe.

Hardly anyone remembers Fagnani these days, yet from 1849 to the day of his death in 1873 he was one of the most popular and successful portrait-painters in Manhattan. Even so you will not find him prominently listed in the formal histories of American painting or in the biographical dictionaries of American painters. Yet during his residence of some twenty years in New York he turned out about fifty portraits a year.

In the long list of portraits painted by Fagnani in America appear the names of many of the most prominent business men, lawyers, ministers, educators, and art patrons of the day. In addition to these there are listed the names of many ladies and gentlemen, members of the solid and imposing old families of the town and state of New York. Among the political and military powers of the mid-century who sat for Fagnani were Henry Clay and Daniel Webster (of course), General Lewis Cass, President Zachary Taylor (painted on his deathbed), President Millard Fillmore, General John C. Fremont, General Phil Sheridan, Congressman Joseph Grinnell of...
Massachusetts, and, last but not least, the Reverend Eleazer Williams, who claimed to be the "lost Dauphin," Louis XVII, King of France.

Fagnani was born in Naples on December 24, 1819—surely under a lucky star. As a child in school he always won the drawing prizes. Eventually this little boy who was always drawing was brought to the attention of the Prince di Milielle, who encouraged him in his work and introduced him to Baron Smucker, Chamberlain to the Dowager Queen Maria Isabella, widow of Francis I, King of the Two Sicilies. The baron introduced the boy artist to the queen, who was enchanted with the lad and the portrait in crayon he drew of her. She granted him a small pension and placed him in the school of the Royal Academy in Naples.

When Fagnani had completed his studies in 1840 he received, as the special protégé of the queen, many commissions for portraits of the nobility and members of the diplomatic corps at the Neapolitan court. His royal patroness ordered her portrait to be painted and presented it as a gift to her daughter, Maria Christina, Queen of Spain. Later that year she sent Fagnani to Vienna to paint her relative the Archduke Charles. On this journey Fagnani paused in Florence, where he received fifteen commissions; in Milan he painted nineteen counts and marchesas; in Trieste six; and in Vienna the archduke and twenty-seven of his noble friends engaged his fleet and flattering brush.

In 1842 Fagnani received permission from his royal patroness to go to Paris. For this trip she armed him with letters of introduction to her daughter, then the Dowager Queen Maria Christina of Spain, living at the French court as an exile. Maria Christina gave the artist a number of portrait commissions and induced him to go to Spain after she had returned to Madrid. On his arrival in Spain Fagnani was "at once launched into the exclusive but charming society of the Spanish aristocracy," and there he met Sir Henry Bulwer, British Minister to Spain, who became his lifelong friend.

Fagnani remained painting portraits in Spain for several years but returned to Paris in 1847 where he figured in the brilliant salon of the Marquise de Boissy (Lord Byron's Countess Guiccioli). In 1849 Fagnani's friend, Sir Henry Bulwer, was appointed British Minister to the United States, and he invited Fagnani to go to Washington with him as a member of his official suite.

Very few, probably none, of the other foreign artists who came to America in the nineteenth century arrived in the United States in such grand style or with such an effective fanfare of publicity as that which attended the arrival of Fagnani whose coming was marked by the booming of diplomatic guns along the Potomac. His American career began on December 23, 1849, when he stepped ashore in Washington from Her Majesty's sloop of war, *Hecate*, which brought Sir Henry and his entourage to America. At that time Fagnani was a handsome young Italian, thirty years of age, with a terrible facility for painting flattering portraits.

Since Fagnani early became accustomed to the glittering society around the courts of Europe, by the time he arrived in America he was well equipped to deal diplomatically with the most imperious dowagers and the most puissant statesmen. He knew everyone in Europe and could amuse and flatter his sitters in four languages, relieving the boredom of posing with bits of lively gossip and fascinating tales of the private lives of the crowned heads of Europe.

He could turn out a likeness in two hours. He had the dexterity which enabled him to place upon canvas a photographic likeness, but his gentleness of temper and his eager desire to please made it easy for him to sweeten and improve upon nature. He could transform an ordinary eye into "a great lustrous orb" and give the plainest set of features refinement and elegance. Naturally the people who sat to him were delighted with the result; he had learned the art of pleasing the most critical mamma of the homeliest belle.

Although Fagnani was said to be enthusiastic over the works of Titian when he first saw them in Venice, apparently they had little if any effect on his work, and though he was heard to make approving comments on visiting the Prado in Madrid he was never known to paint anything but "society portraits." No quaint peasants for him. No landscape, still life, or study of any kind
seems to have tempted his eye or hand during a span of thirty-three years of constant painting. In New York Fagnani became painter to the social rulers of Manhattan at the time when American society was just beginning to consolidate and organize for the Great Jamboree of the post-Civil-War period, over which Ward McAllister presided as master of ceremonies.

Judging Fagnani from his work, it is possible to say that he was not an artist of the Italian or the American school, as his paintings are quite representative of that slick and almost characterless international academic style of the mid-nineteenth century—a realistic portrait style that flourished everywhere at the time. Perhaps it is this universal lack of distinctive painterly quality that gives his work, and that of his compatriots, its present-day appearance of seeming to be closely related to folk art. His portraits have a naive air—they are, so to speak, American primitives of high society portraiture.

Fagnani himself seems to have been a man of great charm and simplicity. He was “a loyal friend, a devoted husband, an indulgent father.” He was generously endowed with that irresistible Italian charm and an unaffected desire to please—both very marked and very valuable elements in his character. From the time when he was a mere lad of thirteen until the day of his death he never lacked patrons; in fact more than once he had to take extended vacation trips to escape from the burden of constant engagements that chained him to his easel. Most of his patrons were active in smoothing his way to success. It was part of Fagnani’s fantastic luck that so many of these people were social or political powers who were eminently able to be of assistance to him.

Though Fagnani exhibited quite frequently at the annual shows of the National Academy of Design apparently he was never received into the brotherhood of New York artists. Perhaps it is significant that the Union League was the only club or group of which he was a member in New York, an organization which, while it maintained a polite interest in art through its art committee, is one that has never been notable as a gathering place for Bohemians.

Nor is it wholly without significance that, two days after his arrival in America, influential friends got permission for him to set up his easel in one of the committee rooms of the United States Capitol, where backwoods congressmen menaced his mahlsticks and brush handles with their automatic penchant for whittling. Within a few months he opened a studio in New York in the vicinity of Union Square, then an elegant neighborhood of substantial mansions inhabited by the social leaders of the community. Although he was then a stranger in a strange land his introductions carried so much weight that he was deluged with commissions. In his first year in New York he dashed off seventy portraits, ac-
cording to the record, or more than one a week.

Fagnani appears upon the American scene as a pioneer—the first of his type, that of the ultra-fashionable European society portrait-painter. He was the first painter of this sort to explore the American wilderness and to pan gold from the shifting social quicksands of Fifth Avenue in the decade that preceded and the decade that followed the Civil War. Perhaps it is only coincidence that he arrived here in 1849, the year of the Gold Rush, but it is one that in his case has a certain symbolic value.

After Fagnani had blazed the trail to the social heights of the New World other European portrait-painters were emboldened in later years to follow his example. Men with a bit of the spirit of adventure, the necessary social graces (or the proper amount of brass), a good wardrobe, a few letters of introduction addressed to the right quarters, and some familiar studio equipment (perhaps only a few favorite brushes). They came, staying only for a few months, and returned to Europe with as much as $60,000 for the work of a season. Most of these men, like Fagnani, are now forgotten, but in their day "they struck it rich" and New York became known as the El Dorado of portrait-painters.

The American tours of European society painters in the later years of the nineteenth century were looked upon with real pain by the American portraitists of the time. Publicly they made few comments on this unpatriotic and extravagant folly. But the studios, clubs, and academies where American artists gathered were often alive with angry talk of these neglected natives, painters who were being made only too well aware of the cash value of a foreign reputation, a title, even so lowly a title as "Chevalier," a success at the Paris Salon, or a reputation gained solely by being commissioned to paint an official portrait of some princely nonentity. Doubtless some of these traveling painters were competent and serious artists, but others were nearer to being mere pastry cooks who could serve up satisfyingly sweet ladies with marzipan faces, merengues of lace, froстings of satin, and ropes of candy pearls.

The most amusing project devised by Fagnani was his series of portraits of beautiful American women, a set of nine paintings of American society belles dressed and accoutered with appropriate trappings to represent the Nine Muses of classic antiquity. These charming ladies, thus immortalized, were to be Fagnani's contribution to the argument that American women were more beautiful than their European sisters, an argument which titillated the connoisseurs of female beauty who gathered in clubs, bars, drawing-rooms, and smoking cars throughout the nation.

The women, of course, enjoyed immensely this hypothetical international beauty contest, and Fagnani had no trouble in finding nine pretty ladies willing to bolster his argument in favor of
American beauty with their quite substantial charms. When the series was completed in 1869 it was exhibited in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia with great acclaim as America’s answer to European critics. Though the ladies in the pictures were clothed in anonymity and in classic robes under the names of the immortal Nine, a sharp-eared Boston reporter, by hanging about the exhibition rooms, learned the real identity of each of the goddesses and forthwith revealed their secret in print:

Clio, Mrs. William M. Johnson
Urania, Miss Josie Blodgett
Calliope, Miss Lizzie Wadsworth
Euterpe, Miss Minnie Parker
Erato, Miss Kitty Sullivant
Polyhymnia, Mrs. Francis E. Barlow
Melpomene, Signora De Luca (née Kennedy)
Thalia, Miss Nellie Smythe
Terpsichore, Mrs. George Ronalds

At the various exhibitions of the Nine Muses an interesting little booklet was sold containing some poetic effusions and an explanatory text which is a “period piece” in itself; it reads, in part:

“Chevalier Joseph Fagnani of New York refutes by a series of portraits of American women, the assertion of a foreigner . . . that we have not a purely classical face among us . . . . Ladies of the very highest social position have granted him repeated sittings. From Massachusetts to Louisiana . . . each section has lent its loveliest to aid the artist in his self-imposed labor. It was no easy task to present nine modern beauties as the daughters of Mnemosyne, to clothe the lifelike portraiture of the acknowledged belle in the classic drapery of the old mythology . . . and at the same time to surround each with such an atmosphere of purity and dignity, that the sanctity of private life and the shrinking modesty of a virtuous womanhood should still be unprofaned. The success with which this has been accomplished shows a rare discretion and refinement of feeling on the part of the artist . . . , the critics seem awed to silence by this array of beauty, and we have been spared the comments of professional item hunters.”

A nameless New York poet wrote of the Muses:

“And not less lustrous than the stars which gleam
On thy proud flag, America! behold
Thy peerless daughters on the canvas beam,
By the rare power of far-famed art extolled;
And of the Nine, if some rude critic deem
One of the pleiad worthy to uphold
Above her rivals, say that none outshine
A constellation which is all divine.”

After Fagnani’s death in 1873 a group of his friends purchased his Nine Muses—he had steadfastly refused to part with them at any price in spite of many importunate offers. The paintings were then appropriately presented to that home of the Muses the newly opened Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Although Fagnani laid this elaborate offering
at the feet of American beauty it remained for one of them—one of his own Muses, no less—to betray him in later days long after the busy artist had gone to his rest. She wrote to the Museum to inquire what had happened to her portrait, and in her letter she damns the whole lot with a few words spoken from her vantage point of maturity and modernity. In 1911 the Muse Polyhymnia wrote:

“Hearing that the ‘Muses’ had been taken down and thinking that they were perhaps to be destroyed, I asked if this was the case that the one for which I sat, should be given to me. I never owned the picture. Mr. Fagnani asked me to sit for it, and I believe the series was bought by the Trustees after Mr. Fagnani’s death to help Mrs. Fagnani. I think they all look like ladies on prune boxes and they have very little value, but if the Museum wishes to get rid of them, I should like mine, and perhaps the other ladies would feel the same way.”

The Nine Muses have, however, always been carefully preserved by the Museum, but as time passes the pictures appear more and more strongly to show their true character as society folk art, genuine American primitives, and the Muses do indeed look like the ladies on prune boxes. Though they have lost their standing as “works of art,” they have the “quaint” period charm of 1870 advertising art. It is easy to see their relation to those entertaining primitive canvases that were always displayed outside of circus tents, and indeed these paintings were a part of the grand tragico-comic side show put on by American society in the Gilded Age.

Although Fagnani’s life work as a fashionable portrait-painter (he is said to have produced 1,432 portraits in thirty-three years) has very little serious artistic value, he was however, a pioneer in the American art world of his time. His sophisticated social life contrasted with its naive artistic results forms a fantastic record.

Perhaps the serious historians of American painting are correct in passing Fagnani by without so much as a nod in his direction—not even a sneer, one might say—for his work as a painter had absolutely no visible artistic influence on the tight little right little New York world of painters and painting in his time or later. However, Fagnani does have a place in the history of the arts in New York, a position of some curiosity since its significance derives from facts and circumstances almost totally divorced from any artistic, aesthetic, or painterly considerations. A professional painter who finds himself in such an ambiguous position is perhaps bound to be neglected when painting rather than history is the matter of principal concern.

Characteristically enough the three most important factors in the formation of Fagnani’s career were not the masters under which he studied or the painters of the past he most admired but social figures and political forces. First and most influential was Isabella, the Dowager Queen of the Two Sicilies; second was Fagnani’s great friend, Sir Henry Bulwer, British Minister to the Court of Spain in 1844, when Fagnani was painting the members of the court of Madrid. And last but not least was the Union League of New York, of which Fagnani was an honorary member. This paradoxical trio spun the wheel of Fortuna for him. He has the unique distinction of being socially a sophisticate, historically a pioneer, and artistically a primitive.

It may be said that though Fagnani was a successful professional portrait-painter all his life he was not an artist at all. He was, rather, an international diplomat of the brush, a social ambassador without portfolio. A painter who floated happily upon the social and political upper crust of two worlds without desire or talent for any explorations in art that were more than skin-deep. It shows now in his work. Shortly after his death his pictures went into eclipse to emerge many years later as historical documents having little or nothing to do with art. Divorced from the fugitive warmth and charm of his personality, his portraits now turn to posterity only a thousand forgotten faces, like clay lamps extinguished by the final snuffer of flying time.