

Painting on the Azores

A couple of years ago a friend of mine invited a Ukrainian painter to Holland in order to help him raise funds for an orphanage in the Ukraine. The visit was a disaster for various reasons but one event was of particular interest. Our artist had expressed a desire to do some painting en plein-air. So my friend arranged an easel, a canvas and some paint and dropped the painter at a beautiful spot, hoping to obtain a painting of one of his favorite landscapes. Some hours later the master returned with a painting of ... a Russian dacha covered in snow, painted completely from memory as he proudly admitted. Later when I saw the exhibition it became clear that this was an artist with a fixed repertoire, dachas in snow by the scores, dozens of landscapes with budding birch trees in spring. All painted from memory. For this painter making a picture was like singing a song: a process that could be repeated indefinitely with slight variations. Painting was an act of virtuosity, not one of creativity. There is nothing wrong with this conception of painting in itself. It is common in Chinese and Japanese art. Most of us on the other hand would share the sentiment of disappointment of my friend. What a missed opportunity! Wouldn't it have been interesting to see the Dutch landscape observed through Ukrainian eyes. Would a painting, that reflects an experience of the artist, not be infinitely more fascinating than one that is the result of a mere execution of a fixed recipe or an algorithm?

Personally, as a painter, I am extremely sensitive to influences of the environment. The story of my painting is a movie of my life. Friends recognize reflections of important events in my paintings even before I'm aware of them. This essay deals with the effects that my encounter with the Azores had on my work as a painter. When my wife Rini and I decided to buy a house on the island of Sao Jorge I could not anticipate that this would, in a period of ten years time, change my view on painting essentially.

The best thing that can happen to a painter is to be born in Holland, the worst thing he can do is stay there. Before I start to analyze what effects the encounter with the Azorean landscape and culture had on my work it is fair to say that most of all it made me realize that I was a Dutch painter. Painting has pervaded Dutch society in all its veins for hundreds of years. Between 1600 and 1700 there were about 1500 professional painters active in Holland who created about a million paintings for a population of about 1,5 million people. Paintings were everywhere and in a substantial part of the households. The competition was fierce and the quality often stunning. Dutch painting got off with a head start and never really lost its drive. The images created by Bosch, Breughel, Rembrandt, Van der Velde, Steen, Hobbema, Ruysdael, Potter, Hals, Koekkoek, Schelfhout, Israels, Van Gogh and many others have become part of our visual heritage. They appear in books, commercials, on posters, reproductions, cookie boxes, jigsaw puzzles, candy wraps and what not, thus shaping a gigantic collective unconscious library of shared images. When we look at the cloudy sky we see Ruysdael, when we look at the trees at the horizon we see Hobbema, looking at ships we see Van der Velde and Mesdag, when our children are playing, the visual experience is organized by Breughel and Hals and our family life still resembles the scenes painted by Jan Steen, Johannes Vermeer and Samuel Hoogstraten. When you are born in Holland you breathe painting. It is everywhere. In the village where I live I estimate that at least one in 10 people paints for a hobby. My father painted for fun, my aunt was a professional painter, several friends of my parents were successful professional painters, my two brothers and sister all paint. Lots of my friends are painters and one of my best friends is a successful art dealer. When I was in Washington recently I saw a little book in the store of

the National Gallery titled "13 Artists children should know". The first two painters on the cover were Dutch: Vermeer and Van Gogh. I know of no other small country that has such a dominant position in any form of art.

So you would think Holland is a happy place to live and work as a painter. Well no, quite the opposite. The history of what happened to Dutch painting in the second half of the 20th century still has to be written but the outcome is painting has become a part of Dutch identity that politicians and government officials love to hate. It is on a par with tulips, windmills, cheese and wooden shoes. Good for tourists and the export, but not something to be taken seriously and frankly a bit embarrassing. The roots of this attitude lie, I think, in the Second World War.

For about one and a half century, ever since the defeat of Napoleon in 1815, Holland had been a sedated self-righteous isolated society, a bit sad about the loss of its great past but generally happy with its position in the world. After the turmoil of the second world war the Dutch had to redefine their identity. We decided we were traders and business men and over the years we became one of the biggest investors in the USA. America was the way to go. Unfortunately American intellectuals and artists had just decided, under the inspiring guidance of Clement Greenberg and other émigrés from Europe, like Willem de Kooning, that they wanted to 'dominate the art world'. There was one problem. America had no painterly tradition of any importance. This again became apparent to me when I visited the National Portrait Gallery in Washington. Compared to the rich stock of portraits of people from all walks of life that one finds in an average provincial museum in Europe there simply are very few really good portrait paintings in the most important museum dedicated to this subject in the USA. There is nothing that comes even close to the work of David, Delacroix, Van Dyck, Van Gogh, Picasso or Modigliani. American artists tried hard, but to paraphrase an English proverb: it takes three generations to create a painter. No deep psychological insight is required to evaluate the destructive intellectual forces that are turned loose when a group of intellectuals decides to dominate a trade it does not really master. The first thing that had to be done was to denounce any 'empty' virtuosity. The fact that the communist and fascist governments in Europe had fostered artistic craftsmanship, helped greatly to sell the political correctness of this position. Figurative painting had outlived itself and was passé. No further development was possible. True modern painting had to be abstract. Figurative painters that meticulously worked to develop their skills were simply bourgeois renegades that had lost contact with the true pace of history. Greenberg published his essay "American-Type Painting" in 1955, the year that I was born. It was like throwing a stone in the pond and 10 years later the ripples it caused, began to affect the Dutch artistic climate. I still remember the panic that fell on skilled painters in our circle of acquaintances when their work was rejected by art critics and government officials, *because* it was painted well. If you could see what it was it could not be real art. In a couple of years professional skilled painters saw their business crumble down. The skills they had spent a lifetime to develop suddenly were politically suspect. The effect on Dutch painting can be compared to the cultural revolution in China or the Berufsverbote in Germany. By the time I was ready to go to art school in 1976 all formal training for painters was abandoned in favor of the ambition to develop the 'artistic personality' of the students. Art should be experimental. Museum curators began to collect American art, Dutch artists began to imitate it. Here is the essence of the tragic demise of Dutch painting. It adopted a role model that is essentially hostile to its identity. I decided to study philosophy instead.

Over the years the situation has not improved. Currently directors for Dutch museums are preferably scouted in the American art world. The mastering of American-English is currently an official function requirement of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. Our museums have become branche offices of the international art market. At the same time the art world has totally lost contact with society. Massive steel and concrete constructions are parachuted by government committees as 'conceptual artworks' in city centers and parks. The most important museums in the country are closed down for years because of megalomaniac reconstructions. The Dutch art world never realized how vulnerable it made itself until the new rightwing government announced massive cutbacks in the cultural sector in 2010. In the last few years artist-bashing has developed into a favorite pastime of populist and rightwing politicians. The idea that people should be supported to develop their talents has been traded in for the notion that individuals have no right to indulge in their hobbies at the expense of society. Even classical musicians are depicted as freeloaders and profiteers by rightwing politicians. Holland has become a sad place for the arts. It has lost its identity twice in the past decennia.

You have to look at yourself with the eyes of a stranger in order to discover the wonder of normality. I only realized how special a drawing talent is when I started to travel in the Islamic countries, which have no tradition of figurative painting at all. In Egypt I drew the muleteers who let their animals drink from the Nile. They were fascinated by the skills of this man that could recreate their image on paper with a simple pencil and treated me with the deference of a magician. The captain of the Nile cruiser later offered me a job as the official portrait painter of the vessel. I ended up drawing portraits of the whole crew but happily turned down the offer.



My first encounter with the Azores was (literally) accidental. In the year 2000 I participated in a single handed sailing race across the Atlantic Ocean in a very advanced forty foot race yacht. About half way I got caught in a force twelve storm with waves of eight meter high. My mainsail was torn to pieces, my boom broke, my life raft was washed away. I spent eight hours at the helm avoiding the

breaking seas, some of them so fierce that they easily could have turned my boat upside down. In short ... I almost died. I decided to retire from the race. I sailed to Horta at the island of Faial under jury rig.

I'm aware of the biblical and Homeric narrative cliché where the hero is caught in a storm sent by disgruntled gods and is washed ashore in a strange land, but in this case the story has an additional dimension. I have been sailing for more than 50 years now and on some occasions I have been caught by fatigue and deprivation to such an extent that I started to hallucinate. This is no doubt the explanation for the sensations I experienced during this episode, but it does not explain the deep impact they had on my life and work afterwards. I really experienced the large waves breaking over my boat as agents that willfully intended to harm me. I could identify completely with Odysseus struggling against the wrath of Poseidon. The waves were, in my eyes, representatives of an angry god, who did not tolerate me in his reign. This is a shocking experience for a person that considers himself a rational 21st century intellectual. It is like the trees and animals suddenly start to talk to you. It was in this state of increased sensitivity that I arrived in Horta. The first thought that struck me when I set foot on shore was: this is the place. I want to stay here forever. The weather is nice, the people are friendly, the landscape is gorgeous. I want a little cabin near the sea. It needs to have only one room and a simple cot. There I want to spend the rest of my days writing and painting.

The cognitive dissonance that captured me, as a Dutch painter arriving on the Azores in mid-summer, has never stopped to fascinate me. The landscape was completely new and there was very little in my mental pictorial library that helped me to interpret what I saw. A striking feature of the landscape in Horta is the towering profile of Pico. I have traveled in Japan, and of course one of the most pregnant representations of volcano's is the famous woodcut series of mount Fuji by Hokusai. But I must admit that the first thing I thought of when I saw Pico was the proverbial volcano with its characteristic torus of clouds that one finds in the adventures of Donald Duck.

Azorean society still has a certain pictorial virginity. Whenever one paints in Holland, France or Russia there are always masters looking over one's shoulders. One can hardly look at the Dutch landscape with an innocent eye anymore. Van Gogh, would have painted that farm this way, Rembrandt that way etc. One is always in silent competition with the old masters. This competition is absent for most subjects on the Azores (except of course in the omnipresent "Emigrantes" from Domingos Rebelo). This is for me as a painter a nice experience. It means that I can invent the pictorial grammar apt for the subject as I paint.

Then there is the light. It is hard and unforgiving. The atmosphere, consisting of tropical air that descends from the stratosphere, is free of any industrial pollution that makes the light diffuse in most civilized areas. The sun stands high in the sky. The white paint of the houses almost hurts your eyes. Shadows appear to be black holes devoid of visual information. It is totally different from the cool light in the Dutch skies or the warm Mediterranean light filtered by thin layers of Sahara dust. Yet, the lower layers of air are saturated with water vapor that filters out all color and leaves only shades of grey and blue at the horizon. Then there is the intense blue of the Ocean. I have never seen such deep, completely unpaintable, blue before. It is so different from the opaque grayish waves that hit the coast of Holland.

Another problem for the painter are the rocks and the lava. Nowhere one finds so many shades of black as in the Azorean landscape. Nowhere one finds such richness of different shapes as in volcanic

lava, varying from large crystalline rock formations to patches of wrinkled stone that seem to be squeezed out of a giant bottle with black boiling peanut butter. How on earth can one represent such a variety of colors and forms in simple paint? The whole of Holland is nothing but a river delta. The land is wet, muddy, fluffy and soft, just like a brush loaded with paint. It does not hurt or scratch you when you walk through it or bump into it. And it's very paintable. The rocks on the Azores do hurt. They are razor sharp like solidified glass. All over the islands one sees sulfur springs and traces of fairly recent lava flows. The landscape is rich and fertile but also indifferent and even hostile. Under the thin crust of the earth lurk the certain dangers of a new catastrophe. To the average Azorean the idea that nature needs protection is quite alien. About half of the historical records of the Azores deal with floods and earthquakes. Nature is still in control of the human existence here, and people feel that first of all they themselves should be protected from its whims, before they start to be concerned about its wellbeing.

My first stay on the Azores lasted only a couple of weeks. My wife Rini joined me. Later we returned with the intention to buy a house. Under the moderating influence of a practical spouse the dream of a little cabin turned in to a moderate three bedroom villa at the idyllic port of Manadas where we have lived off and on for about 11 years now. The magic of the Azores never stopped to fascinate us.



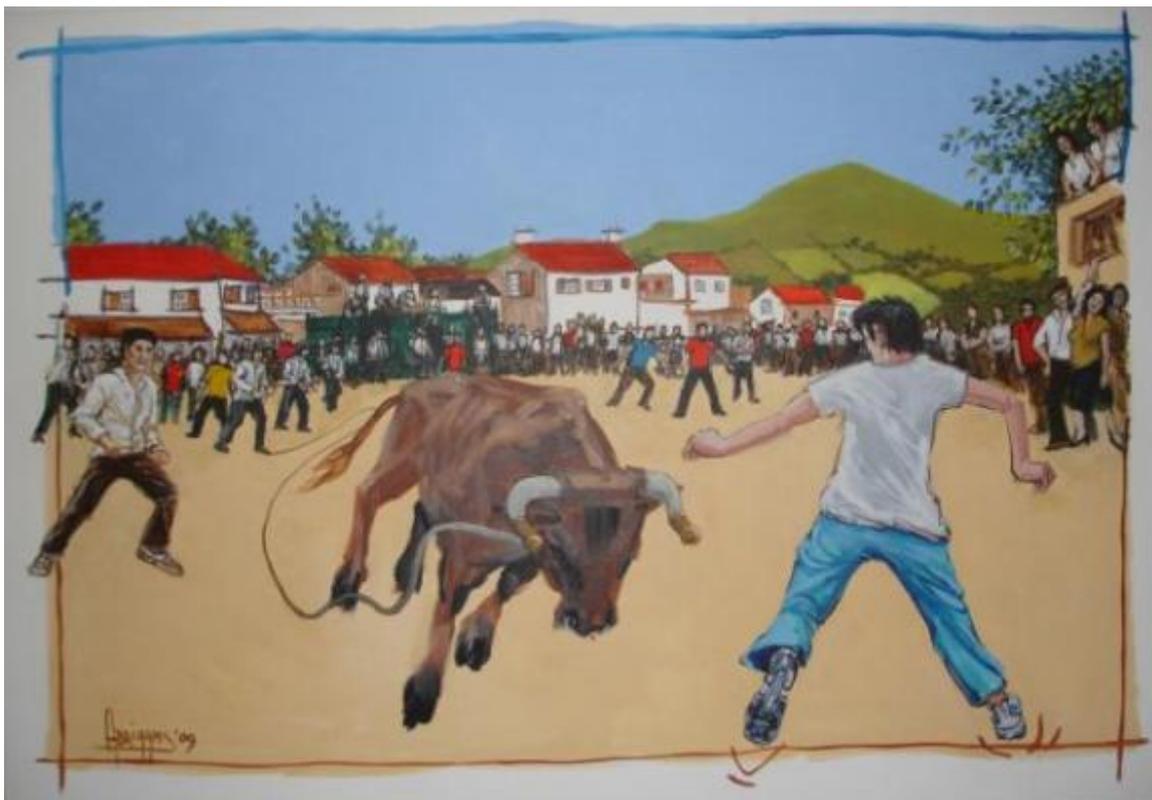
A very good friend of mine really believes that the fact that I ended up in the Azores living in Cais das Manadas opposite the church of Santa Barbara is no coincidence. There are, he believes, important cosmic energy nodes at the Azores. One of them is in the center of the church that is a holy place much older than Christianity. In a previous life I have been a priest in Atlantis and fate has driven me

back to take up my responsibilities when the time is there. I am deeply moved by this, but I do not quite know what to make of it. 'In my previous lives I did not believe in reincarnation either' is my standard reaction, and we find this both a surprisingly adequate attitude (but for different reasons).

There is no doubt that the church is a very special spot. It feels sacred to one who has such sensitivities. In 1499 the six year old Barbara Silveira was the first to enter the new church. Her body is buried under a side door of the church. The place is charged with a mystical presence honed by centuries of devotion. In the lava before the church one can still find the imprint of the footsteps of the statue of Santa Barbara, that returned to the church on its own account, after it had been taken away by a Portuguese nobleman that wanted to build a church elsewhere. At least that is what the legend tells us. The church is also a fine specimen of Azorean religious art and bears none of the traces of good taste and moderateness that poison so much of the art in the north of Europe. Apart from this exuberant rather naive religious art there is almost no painting tradition on the Azores.

I installed a small studio in Manadas but the first years I did not paint much there. The adventures on the ocean deeply affect my style of painting in Holland. I painted large non-figurative canvasses that where only atmospheric impressions of the sky and the sea. Gradually more structure emerged in the paintings. A friend of mine that owns a gallery called them fata morgana's and they sold quite well. After a while I abandoned the project because I saw no further development.

At the Azores I simply painted for fun. In the beginning I did a lot of landscapes, mostly 'en plein air'. Sometimes Rini had to hold my easel to prevent the painting to be blown away by the wind. More than once I had to pack up before finishing the painting because of the rain. Later I became interested in the people and their customs, particularly in the Touradas with, on one side, their merry harmless social and athletic character, and, on the other side, their deep roots in older mythical cultural layers. I know that there is a debate amongst scholars about the question whether young athletes in classical Crete really jumped over bulls, as is depicted in the frescos. Now that I have seen young men perform this trick on the Azores the frescos seem to be much more plausible and



realistic.

I began to sketch the Touradas and when I decided in 2009 to have a little exhibition in the town of Velas, it was not more than natural that I would plan a bigger painting dealing with this issue. In the case of the Tourada painting I was interested in giving the painting a certain graphical character. Hence the use of contour lines and large fields of color. The sky is one blob of blue, the ground one blob of yellow. This draws the eye of the viewer to the center of the picture 'where the action is'. I wanted to paint the bull as directly as possible using only a limited number of strokes with a large brush, thus suggesting pure force and rage. The young men on the other hand are rendered in light contour lines that gives them an elegance almost like that of dancers. They stand out. All the other action in the painting (the houses, the spectators, the hills) are projected on a thin horizontal band in the middle of the painting.

The exhibition was a turning point in my Azorean career as a painter for more than one reason. The most striking result was that my good friend onésimo Almeida took an interest in my work. He bought a painting himself and suggested that the Tourada painting might be acquired by the museum in Angra do Heroísmo (which later happened).



Another effect was the assignment for three murals in café Flor do Jardim in Velas. I accepted this job purely to do the owner, Balthasar, a favor. Because he wanted to have painted copies of some old photographs I thought the project was artistically completely uninteresting. A mere decoration job, that was all. I finished the paintings in about one week (roughly two days per painting) and used a projector to draw the outlines directly on the wall. Speed and ease of execution were my main concerns. The result surprised me probably more than anyone else. The painted photos have a striking presence that is quite unexpected. An elegance that seems to be the result of a complete lack of ambition: the genius of casual creation. A quality that is abundant in the paintings of the much

admired Tiepolo and for which Castiglione coined the word 'sprezzatura': "an easy facility in accomplishing difficult actions which hides the conscious effort that went into them". By chance I had stumbled upon an important insight: painting is essentially superficial. Now a couple of years later the paintings are known quite well and people come to the café specifically to view them. The Plexiglas covers that Baltazar put over the paintings to protect them are more expensive than what I charged him originally.

In the meantime Rini and I have decided to settle more or less permanently on the Azores. For me this is also a conscious step in my career as a painter. There are two aspects of the Azorean society that makes it the ideal place to paint. It may be one of the few places left in Europe where there is any chance of restructuring the art of painting and make it economically and artistically viable. The first factor is freedom. In Holland the weight of four hundred years of tradition presses heavily on ones shoulders. Every brushstroke is evaluated against a canon of old masters. Every esthetic judgment is also an ideological statement. Since I'm sensitive to such issues it has affected my work. On the Azores such pressure is absent. People simply like a painting for what it is. One of the nicest things that ever happened to me is when a young couple that live up the street asked me to paint a last supper. Such a thing would be completely unthinkable in Dutch society that lost the capacity to see a painting as an object of devotion.



The second factor that favors the development of painting is time. The Azores is a place "onde o tempo tem tempo para ter tempo" (where time has time to have time). The Azorean society is slow. Painting is a slow art. It takes years to develop the skills and a lifetime to hone them. It may take days or even months to finish a painting. The result is simple visual joy for an indefinite amount of time. Nothing more nothing less. Painting in the 21st century is a modest art, like poetry or dance. It

has to reinvent itself and its role in society. The days that it served kings, emperors and popes are long gone. The reflection on painting as a craft has come to a standstill in the second half of the twentieth century, but there is so much left to discover. New insights from mathematics, computer science, neurobiology and cognitive science help us to unravel the secrets of good painting. We hardly understand anything of the complex processes involved in human vision. In this sense the study of figurative painting has not even started yet. In Northern European countries, with their obsession for efficiency and profit, painting seems to be a dying art. The Azorean society has kept enough contact with the past to foster and develop simple craftsmanship (for as long as it lasts). Here, where nature is hostile but lavish, an individual could afford to spend time to master such a craft.

Most painters will be forgotten and most paintings will end up in the dustbin. That's why I think a good painting should be able to take care of itself. This is very much like the responsibility a father feels for his children. He should give them an education that helps them to survive when he is not around to take care of them anymore. The one quality that will help a work of art to survive is beauty. This indefinable but very real quality will support them in their trip through the future. The best I can hope for is the following: Two hundred years from now a young couple enters a pawnshop. He picks up a little painting from a pile of rubble in the corner. 'What's that ? she asks. 'An old painting' he answers. 'Is it signed?' 'Yeah, here at the bottom. Difficult to read. Something like Apriaans. Doesn't ring a bell.' 'But it's really beautiful' she says. 'Yeah, this guy could really paint!'

Pieter Adriaans

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