

George Stavrinos

Moonfall: The Life and Art of **GEORGE STAVRINOS**

by Bradford R. Hamann

INTRODUCTION

In 2007, when George Stavrinos was elected posthumously to the Society of Illustrators Hall of Fame, it had been almost 17 years since his passing. The short biography that appeared on the Society's web site attempted to summarize his life and work in less than 150 words.¹ The sparse outline of a career that was one of the most fascinating and meteoric of the last quarter of the 20th Century seemed inadequate at best.

George was only 42 years old when he died of complications of pneumonia on August 3, 1990, at Beth Israel hospital in New York City. His life was cut short by the AIDS epidemic that swept like a scythe through an entire generation. Survivors refer to the devastation as "The Great Sadness." But there remains an energy in George's art that transcends the sorrow of those and the intervening years, and which continues to resonate with his passion for life, and the love he carried for his friends, his family, and his art.

Among contemporary illustrators there are those who consider him one of their towering inspirations. George Stavrinos repeatedly demonstrated that illustration could be more than just decoration. An illustration could be imbued with dramatic content, it could be monumental in feel, and it could stand as "Art" in the truest sense of the word.

Today, a mere 22 years after his death, the vast majority of illustration students have seen not a single example of his work. The general public, with its unquenchable appetite for

the latest trend, has no recollection of him. It's a shame when an artist as gifted as George is so quickly relegated to the "once famous" category.

Loss is inherently a part of life. George's death at such an early age deprived the world of an artist who most likely would have gone on to even greater heights. We the public are the poorer for it. But the infinitely greater loss has been to his family and friends, those who loved him and who were in turn loved by him. One can ponder what he would be accomplishing today if he were still alive. But perhaps time is better spent by taking pleasure in the stunning body of work he has left behind. The fact that he gifted to his family, friends, and admirers such a large number of beautiful works, created over such a relatively short working career, should indeed be a cause for celebration.

SOMERVILLE

By the end of the first half of the 20th century, Somerville, Massachusetts, a town situated on the outskirts of Boston, had become home to a large and active community of Greek immigrants.

Theophilos Stavrinos (1900-1980) and Asemo Davos (1907-1998) had immigrated separately to America in 1917 after Turkish forces had overrun their homes in one of the Greek colonies, Smyrna, located on the Aegean coast of Asia Minor. Sailing to Boston, Theophilos arrived from Alatsata, a village just outside of Smyrna, and Asemo from Reisdera, another



Lydia, George, and Theophilos Stavrinis



Young George Stavrinis

suburb of Smyrna. Theophilos and Asemo eventually met, fell in love, and were married in 1926, setting up home in a roomy three-story house located at 46 Greenville Street. Their first child, Mary, was born in early 1927, and there followed the births of a son, John (1927-2006) and four more daughters; Sandra, Venetia, Demetra, and Lydia. George Stavrinis was born on March 13, 1948, the youngest of the Stavrinis children.

Recalls his sister Sandra, “When my oldest sister was having her first child, my mother was pregnant with Georgie. Mama was so embarrassed because she was 41 when she had George, and in those days you didn’t have a child at that age. But they loved that boy, I’ll tell you. Georgie was spoiled! He wasn’t a brat, but he got a *lot* of attention! We would buy him whatever he wanted!”¹

George’s sisters Sandra and Lydia fondly remember George as a small boy of three or four, lying on the floor and drawing. In a 1978 interview, George recalled, “As far back as I can remember, I was always drawing. Really, it was just part of me. I used to draw all the time rather than do much of anything else, as far as kids’ play goes.”²

George attended the Charles G. Pope Elementary School in Somerville and then Southern Junior High. Three times a week, George attended after-school lessons in speaking and writing Greek. George also attended Sunday school classes at the local Greek Orthodox church. George often provided murals for many of the church plays. His sister Lydia recalled that George



High School Yearbook, 1966

would sometimes use his mother’s plastic-coated tablecloths, which were backed with canvas, as the surface for his murals.³

In high school, George enthusiastically threw himself into the role of artistic director for many of the school’s stage productions, including a production of *Bye Bye Birdie*, for which he created a huge detailed painting for the backdrop, along with all the stage scenery.

George took his school art assignments very seriously. Lydia Stavrinis remains impressed by the single-minded focus he displayed when it came time to meet a deadline: “George always worked best under pressure. If he had deadlines,

he would wait until all of it was due and then he’d say to himself, ‘Okay, I need to do it!’ When we lived in Somerville, I had a bedroom up on the third floor, and one of the rooms across the way was his art room, with a large table and easel. I’ll never forget waking up in the middle of the night and finding him wrapped in a blanket in front of the easel, working like a maniac, because he needed to finish something for school or for a contest.”⁴

In his senior year, George served as president of both the Art Club and the Student Council, and was a member of the National Honor Society. He also served as a staff member for the 1966 edition of the senior yearbook *The Radiator*, and contributed a series of four full-page illustrations to the book. George graduated in the spring of 1966, and with the help of a scholarship from the Tiffany Foundation in New York, headed to Providence, Rhode Island, the following fall to begin studies at the prestigious Rhode Island School of Design.

Robert Fawcett (1903-1967)



“Must I remind you of your boast?” she asked. “Come, sir, admit it you have failed to recover the ruby.”

The Adventure of the Abbas Ruby - Collier’s Magazine August 21, 1953

Inquire for more information



PROVIDENCE

In the fall of 1966, George enrolled at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), situated in the city of Providence. Sally MacLeod, the woman who would eventually become one of George's favorite models as well as a lifelong friend, first got to know him well during their sophomore year. She was impressed with his genial nature and quiet presence. "There was a dimension of alert neatness about him, a self-contained quality that was somewhat powerful. He was extremely diligent. He devoted himself to his work with real satisfaction, bordering on delight. He was a very strong talent and aware of it, but never cocky in the least. It was understood by everybody in the design program that he was an exceptional but very decent and modest guy."¹

It soon became clear that George was the star of the class. Every week, when the students showed their work, all eyes would be on George. George thrived in Sewell (Sy) Sillman's color theory class, easily handling the assignments using Color-Aid paper. Sillman (1924–1992) had been a student of the color theorist Josef Albers (1888–1976) at Black Mountain College and had previously taught at Yale. Sillman was known for his stern and dictatorial style, but George, with his self-discipline and confidence, had no problem with the color class and the drawing course that he also took with Sillman. When Sillman asked the class to design leaf collages, MacLeod recalls that George's were "incredibly rich and subtle, a few steps beyond anyone else's."²

Almost 20 years later, when discussing his own drawing technique, George recalled how Sillman had urged the students to slow things down and spend time observing the subject. "Getting outside of yourself is part of the pleasure, just connecting with the eye, the hand and the paper. With any-



thing you do, I think it's more satisfying if it can be experienced on more than one level, if you can become absorbed."³

George also studied photography with the internationally renowned photojournalist Harry Benson and with Harry Callahan, known for his method of walking about the town each morning and shooting the scenes he came across. George approached photography with the same enthusiasm that he expressed for drawing and design.

Another student who George met during his freshman classes at RISD was Edward Rozzo, now a respected commercial photographer and currently Professor of Visual Culture at Universita Bocconi in Milan, Italy. Rozzo recalls being impressed with George's openness and sense of humor.

"He came from a working Greek immigrant family," recalls Rozzo, "and I came from an Italian immigrant family, so I felt

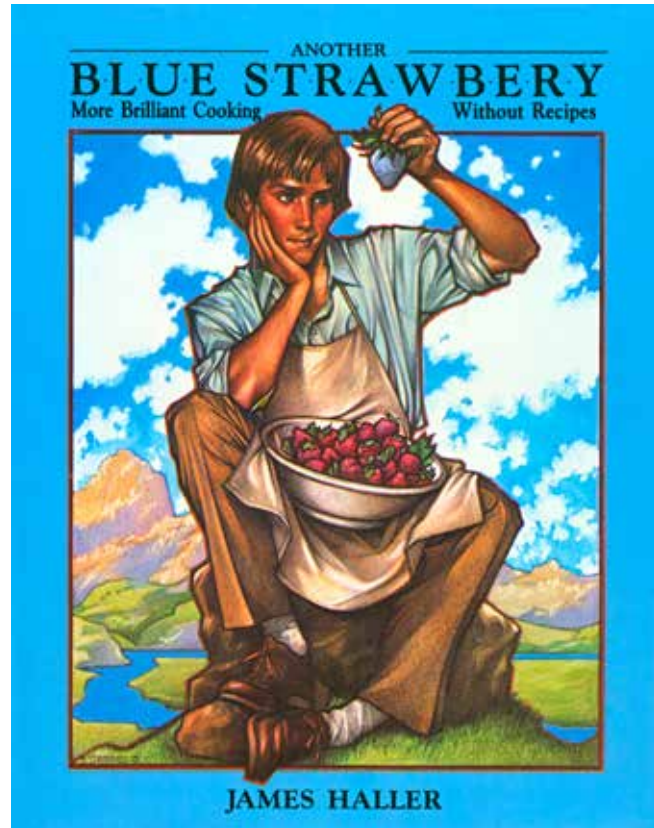
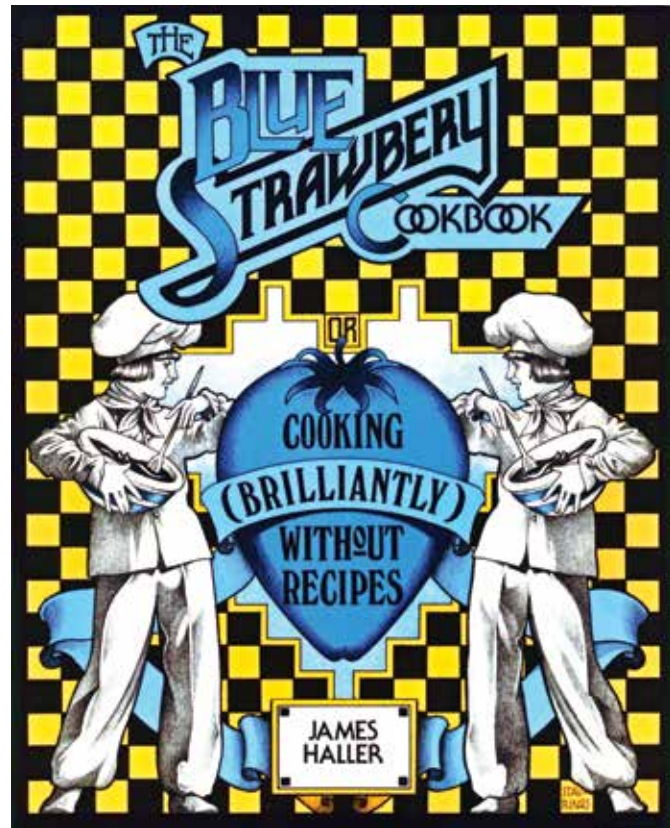


a certain affinity to George. He was an absolutely wonderful person, serious, good humored, intelligent, alert, a very fine friend."⁴

Despite the pleasure he took from photography, George saw himself as an illustrator and designer first. But throughout his student years and on into his professional career, photography remained a critical component for the creation of his art. According to Ed Rozzo, George never considered himself a particularly good photographer from a technical standpoint, but he was *fascinated* with light and composition. Even as a student, many of his drawings were done from photos he took himself. "In a sense," recalls Rozzo, "he felt the need to 'better' his photos, which he considered somewhat like a visual diary. He was interested in mood and graphic images which shows strongly in his illustrative work."⁵

During his summer breaks, George enjoyed heading up to Ogunquit, Maine. Long a popular summer destination for gay and lesbian vacationers, Ogunquit is known for its beautiful beach, its clean ocean air, and its lively night scene. It was also the home of "Poor Richard's Tavern," a popular restaurant where George found work as a "wait person." Lydia Stavrinou recalls that George "was so thrilled that he could work up there...it was one of these exclusive places, and he'd share a table with the other wait people, and he used to be so thrilled because he could make three or four hundred dollars a night in tips."⁶





In the summer of 1969, George met James Haller in Ogunquit. Haller was an out-of-work television writer, originally from Chicago. “George was then doing lots of drawings and sketches,” says Haller. “He had also done, at that time, a series of drawings that he had based on old photos taken around Somerville of his family and friends. I loaned him 50 dollars at the time and when he said he couldn’t afford to pay me back he offered one of the drawings in return. I wish I would have had the money to have bought *all* of them. I chose the one of his great aunt and grandmother, about 1912, a picture in the yard of their house. I had it framed and it still holds a place of honor.”⁷

The following year, Haller opened a restaurant a few miles up the coastline called The Blue Strawberry, which was located on Ceres Street in Portsmouth. The restaurant and Haller went on to great fame, and George provided the first sign for the restaurant and the cover illustrations for the first two books Haller authored, *The Blue Strawberry Cookbook*, published in 1978, and *Another Blue Strawberry*, published in 1983. Both cover illustrations show the strong influence of Maxfield Parrish, an American illustrator who George had come to admire back in his high school days.

Above the Blue Strawberry was a short-lived antique store that was called *The Windmill Cookie*. James Haller recalls that, “For some inspired reason I asked him to use two pieces of wood for the sign, in the event that if the store ever closed I could have one side for a piece of art. Naturally, I still have that.”⁸



ROME

At the end of his junior year, George was accepted into RISD’s European Honors Program and set off to spend the fall semester of his senior year in Rome, along with about two dozen other RISD students. It was to be a period that would allow him to spread his wings, both personally and artistically.

Recalls Ed Rozzo, “We each had a studio in Palazzo Cenci in the center of Rome, and we each lived in separate apartments near the Palazzo.”¹ The Palazzo Cenci is a massive 16th century Renaissance-style building, constructed on the site of the ruins of the infamous Circus Flaminius (221 B.C.). The spacious studios feature tall windows facing east, which allow early morning sunlight to stream into many of the studios.

George spent his time learning Italian and taking countless photographs in and around the city. Many elements of the architecture George photographed at this time would eventually be incorporated into his professional work. George also took a three week side trip to visit relatives, sailing to the town of Heraklion in Crete. He spent much of his time in Greece reading mythology amidst the ruins of the Temple of Knossos, and visiting the local museums.²

At the end of the semester, George regretfully headed back to the United States, leaving behind a city that had supplied him with imagery and inspiration that would fuel some of the most memorable work he would do over the next 20 years.



BACK HOME/BOSTON/PHILADELPHIA

Shortly after graduating from the Rhode Island School of Design in the spring of 1970, George fell ill with mono-like symptoms and ended up spending several months, often times immobile, at his parents’ home. During his confinement George’s creativity remained unfettered, and he began producing a series of wearable wooden pins with pictures and photographs mounted onto them, which he sold as costume jewelry. As a result, he received a notice from *Women’s Wear Daily*. Recalls Sally MacLeod: “George had a very sharp instinct for the commercial and had gotten the idea of collecting period (1930s and 1940s) color illustrations of products, cutting them out and gluing them onto brightly painted wooden disks that must have been skill-sawed to the shape of each cut-out, shellacking them lightly, and then applying pin things to the back. They were all sizes. I have one: an Ipana toothpaste tube, six inches high, signed on the back with his initials. It’s impeccably well-made. It looks as if George doctored the illustration with gouache to make it bolder. This must have been time-consuming! These pins were very Pop-y, colorful and eye-catching, and he was getting so many orders he enlisted my help.”¹

After making a full recovery, George moved into a spacious Back Bay apartment in Boston and quickly found work as a freelancer for WGBH-TV, Channel 13, providing the station



with photography and illustration work. George also supplemented his income with a part-time job at Reading International, an independent bookstore located in Harvard Square. With George's help, his friend Paula Wittner also managed to acquire employment, and she fondly remembers that even the bookstore aisles couldn't contain George's *joie de vivre*. "When George and I worked there together," recalls Paula, "and I was installed at the raised cashier's booth, I had the occasional pleasure of a floor show—as I was the only one who could see him dancing in the aisles."²

George remained dissatisfied with the lack of editorial assignments he had received after showing his photography portfolio to potential clients in the Boston area. His cover and interior photographs for *After Dark* magazine in 1971 are rare examples of George's published photography. Among the earliest commercial assignments George received after graduating from RISD was one for a Harvard Square vintage



clothing store called Dazzle, owned by a well-known local entrepreneur, Don Levy and his wife Daryl. Dazzle offered a wide array of merchandise, including clothing and conceptual kitsch. One of George's first assignments for Dazzle was a 1973 poster featuring two figures in top hats and tails dancing in front of an art deco skyline under a full moon. The biggest project George completed for Levy was the design of a billboard for the store. George's art featured a family dressed in 1920s-style fashion, seated contentedly before a

lunette window with a view of an English pastoral scene.

On the advice of friends and with the promise of work as a muralist, George set out for Philadelphia in 1972. He began producing graphics and murals for restaurants, stores, and other small businesses, often living on site while he worked, and trading artwork for room and board.

A poster he created for Flamingo, a women's clothing store, shows clearly that George was aware of the work



of Pushpin Studios, and in particular the work of Milton Glaser.

Victor DiMezzo, who owned and operated the hair salon Trafalgar, was more than pleased to supply George with regular commissions. "I met George through the owner of Flamingo. It didn't take much for me to see what a talent he was, so I basically let him do whatever he wanted to do."³

George created a stream of business cards, display ads, and posters for Trafalgar. "We gave out *hundreds* of his posters," recalls DiMezzo. "You'd come in for a haircut, and you'd get a poster. George got big promotion from Trafalgar. And I really didn't do it for me or the shop. It was for him. For his artwork. Posters by Stavrinis. Whoever did that!?"⁴ Victor was even kind enough to have George listed as a full-time employee so he could receive health insurance.

George also had the opportunity to create a large three-

panel mural for the interior of Trafalgar. After Trafalgar closed in 1980, DiMezzo had the mural converted into a folding screen, and still keeps the screen in a place of honor in the bedroom of his Philadelphia townhouse. "I wake up every morning and think of George, because I'm surrounded by his work," says Victor wistfully.⁵

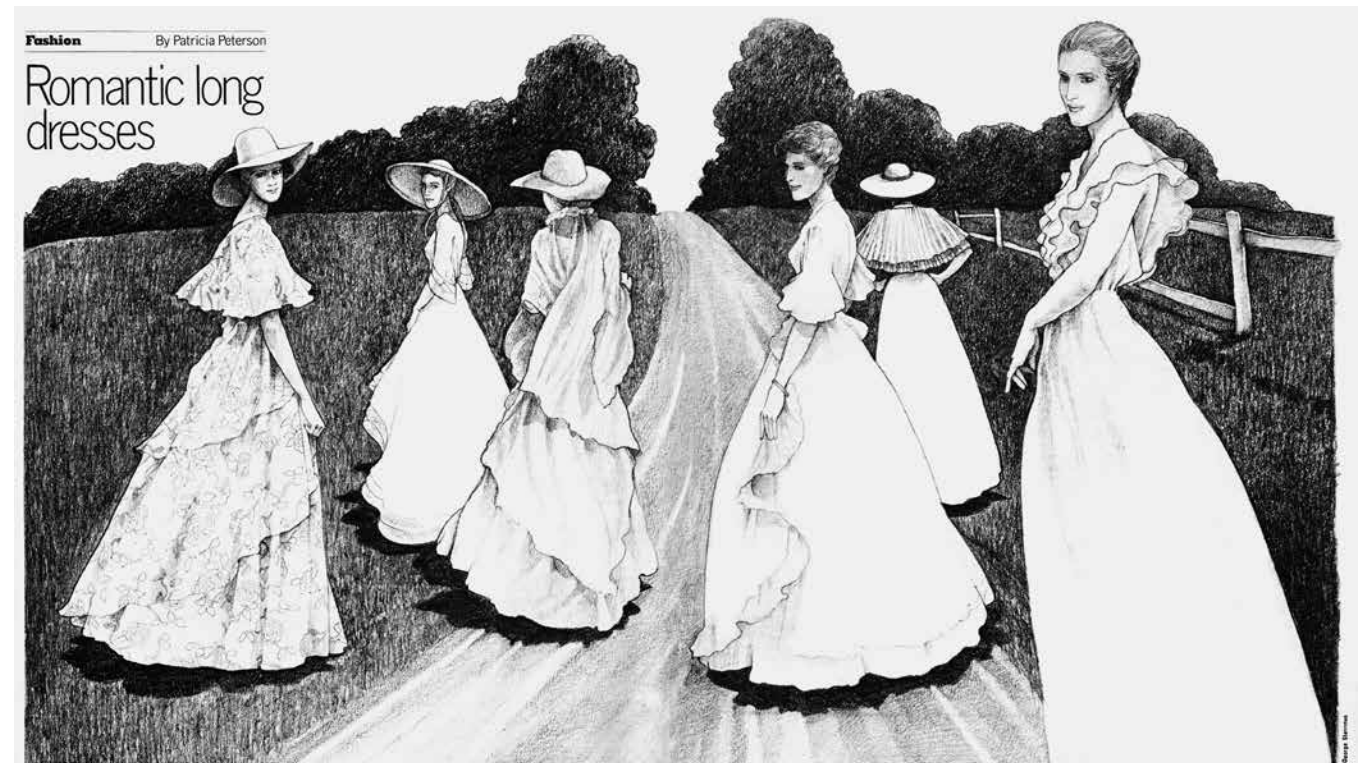
After two years in Philadelphia, George again began to feel that he had reached the limit of the kinds of assignments he could find in the area. He began mapping out his next move, this time with an eye to New York City. As a result of the work he had received from DiMezzo and others, George had been able to put the finishing touches on a portfolio that he felt confident would get him noticed in New York.

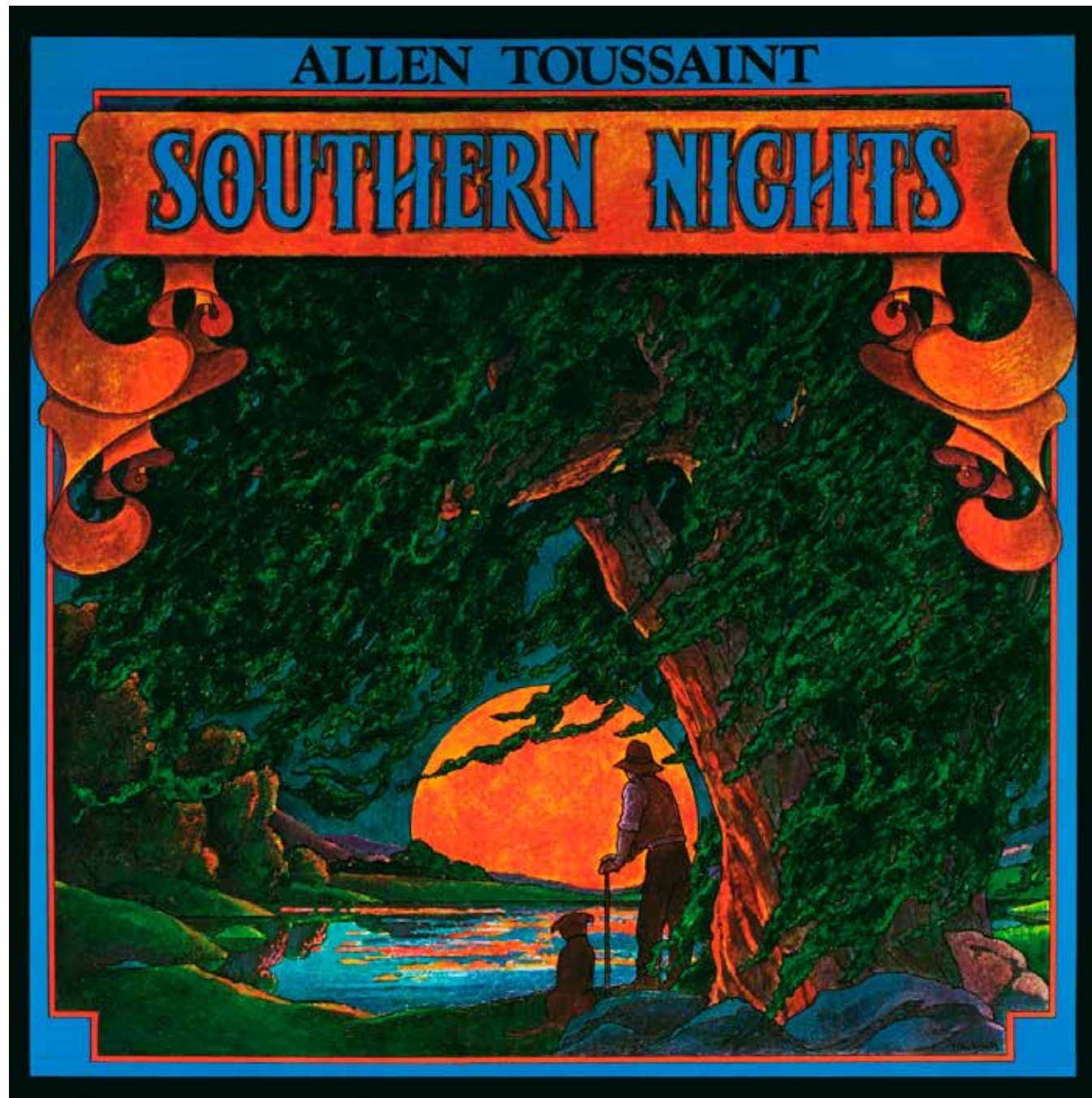
So George bid farewell to the City of Brotherly Love, and prepared to test his mettle in The Big Apple.

NEW YORK

George arrived in New York City in November of 1973, with little more than a month's expense money in his pocket. George moved in temporarily with a friend and began crisscrossing Manhattan with his huge portfolio of samples. It didn't take long for him to score his first New York City assignment from Bob Melson, the art director of *The New York Times Book Review*. George quickly went on to provide the *Times* with illustrations for the Travel Section and *The New York Times Sunday Magazine*. These assignments were not well-paying ones, but the exposure that he received more than compensated for the modest fees.

In March of 1974, George's very first fashion-themed spread appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*. These figures were reminiscent of the family photo-based drawings George had been working on earlier. Rosemary Torre, an instructor of illus-



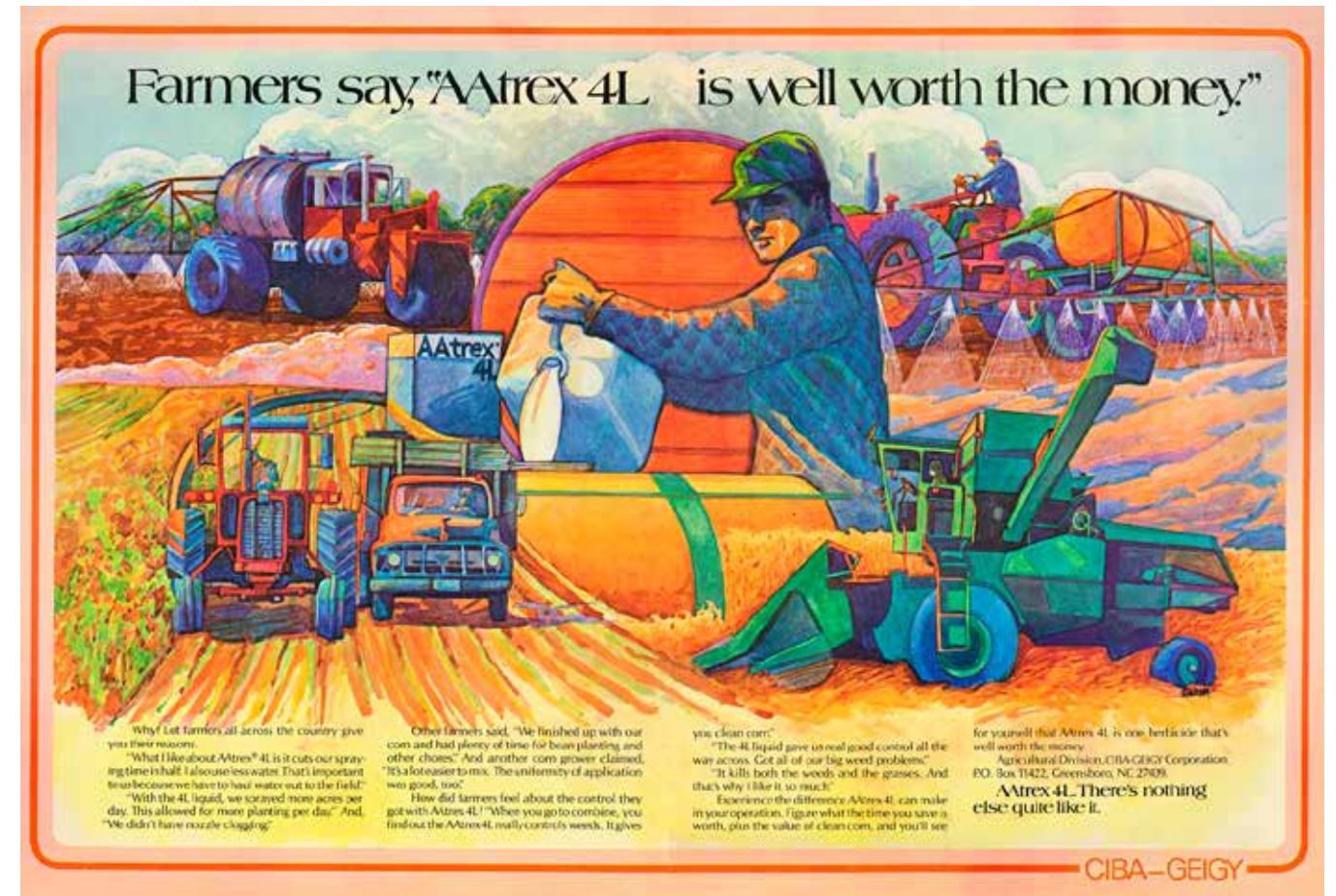


tration at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City, remembers coming across this drawing in the newspaper: "It was these strange little figures, these women in white dresses. And they were rather squat for fashion illustration. He didn't elongate the figure then. They almost had an Americana look. But very well drawn. And really very pleasant. Very lovely."¹

In April of 1974, George arranged to present his portfolio at the prestigious Pushpin Studios, and showed his work to Seymour Chwast and Milton Glaser, the two co-founders of the studio. As a result, George was offered a job on staff. George's portfolio, with its air of nostalgia, including samples inspired by Parrish and J.C. Leyendecker, appealed to Chwast and Gla-

ser, whose own work was based on the updating of various graphic and illustration styles of the past. Wishing to maintain his status as a freelancer, George turned down the staff position but agreed to be represented by Pushpin. As a result of his association with Pushpin, George was able to expand his client list to include *New York Magazine* (where Glaser served as design director), Bonwit's department store, *Psychology Today*, Pan Am, Columbia Records, CIBA-Geigy, Capezio, *Viva*, *Oui*, and *Gentleman's Quarterly*.

During this period, George was experimenting with a variety of mediums, from pencil and pen-and-ink for his black and white work, to colored dyes, watercolor, and colored pencils



for his color work. His versatility, technical skill, and ability to switch between styles allowed him to take on a staggering range of assignments. During the mid-70s, his ability to handle a huge workload was equally amazing. Finished art for magazine covers, interior art, spot illustrations, advertisements, and record jackets poured from his drawing table at a prodigious rate, and with a consistent and loving attention to the smallest of details. Two record jacket illustrations show George's ability to make stylistic adjustments as the project demanded. The 1975 album *Southern Nights* by the rhythm-and-blues artist Allen Toussaint, is rendered in a loose, painterly and dreamlike style, perfectly fitting Toussaint's Bayou-based blend of blues and funk. A year later, George, under the art direction of Paula Scher at CBS, delivered a much tighter, Norman Rockwell-influenced rendering of a boy asleep in front of a fireplace next to a Christmas tree, for the Mormon Tabernacle Choir album *White Christmas*.

In a large double-page spread illustration that George produced for CIBA-GEIGY in 1975, he tackled watercolor, with his usual enthusiasm. This color-drenched illustration, with its central figure of a farmer tipping a container to add an additive to control clogging in his sprayer hoses, evokes a sense of nostalgia through its photo album vignettes, soft-edged rendering, and warm saturated palette.

That same year, George showed his uncanny ability to capture a sense of the past, with his black and white graphite illustrations for Peggy Mann's children's book, *Last Road to Safety*.





Mann's text recounts the true story of Jewish refugees fleeing Rumania during World War II. His portrait of a young girl standing solemnly against a wall, numbered ID card hanging around her neck and a badge identifying her as a Jew, contains as much pathos as any work he did throughout his career.

As work continued to pour in, George took up residence at 76 West 86th Street, on the corner of Columbus Avenue, on the West Side of Manhattan. Located on the top floor of a six-story pre-war building that had been constructed in 1910 and designated a city landmark, the apartment would remain George's home for the rest of his life.

The building's marble staircases with their stately wrought-iron railings, along with its high-ceilinged hallways and landings, would ultimately find their way into many of George's compositions. Sally MacLeod was very impressed with the personal imprint he put on the apartment:

"It was pretty dazzling: putty colored walls, matching carpet, and big low sectional couches, contemporary but comfy. He had asked one of his sisters to crochet some bold striped pillow covers, which feature in a couple of drawings. The wooden Venetian blinds were nearly always down, but cracked

open to give a soft, private, filtered light. Leaning against the walls were several huge, almost life-sized full-figure oil portraits, early 20th century. The apartment was all very luxe, but understated, very serene, almost cloistered. On the coffee table a huge ceramic vase—made by a friend, he collected them, some of them feature in drawings—would be stuffed with lilies, probably from an admirer."²

Perhaps the most treasured piece in George's personal collection was a J.C. Leyendecker study for the painting of collegiate rowers which graced the cover of the August 1932 cover of *The Saturday Evening Post*.

One of the people whom George would come to know, not only as a neighbor and fellow illustrator but as a close friend, was the young Mel Odom. Odom had arrived in NYC in 1975, fresh from his hometown of Richmond, Virginia. After studying fashion illustration at Virginia Commonwealth University, Odom traveled to England for graduate studies. After returning to the states, Odom had quickly worked up a small portfolio of about six drawings. On his first weekend in New York, while visiting some friends, he managed to connect with an agent who loved his work. He left his entire portfolio with her



and returned to Richmond, but almost immediately the agent called to say she'd gotten him his first assignment, with *Viva* magazine. *Viva* was an adult women's magazine that *Penthouse* publisher Bob Guccione and his wife Kathy Keeton had started in 1973. Its erotic content, full frontal nudity, and its subject matter, which covered everything from women's fantasies to fashion, beauty and a wide range of interviews, was the perfect publication for Odom's seductively beautiful art with its smoothly sensual modeling.

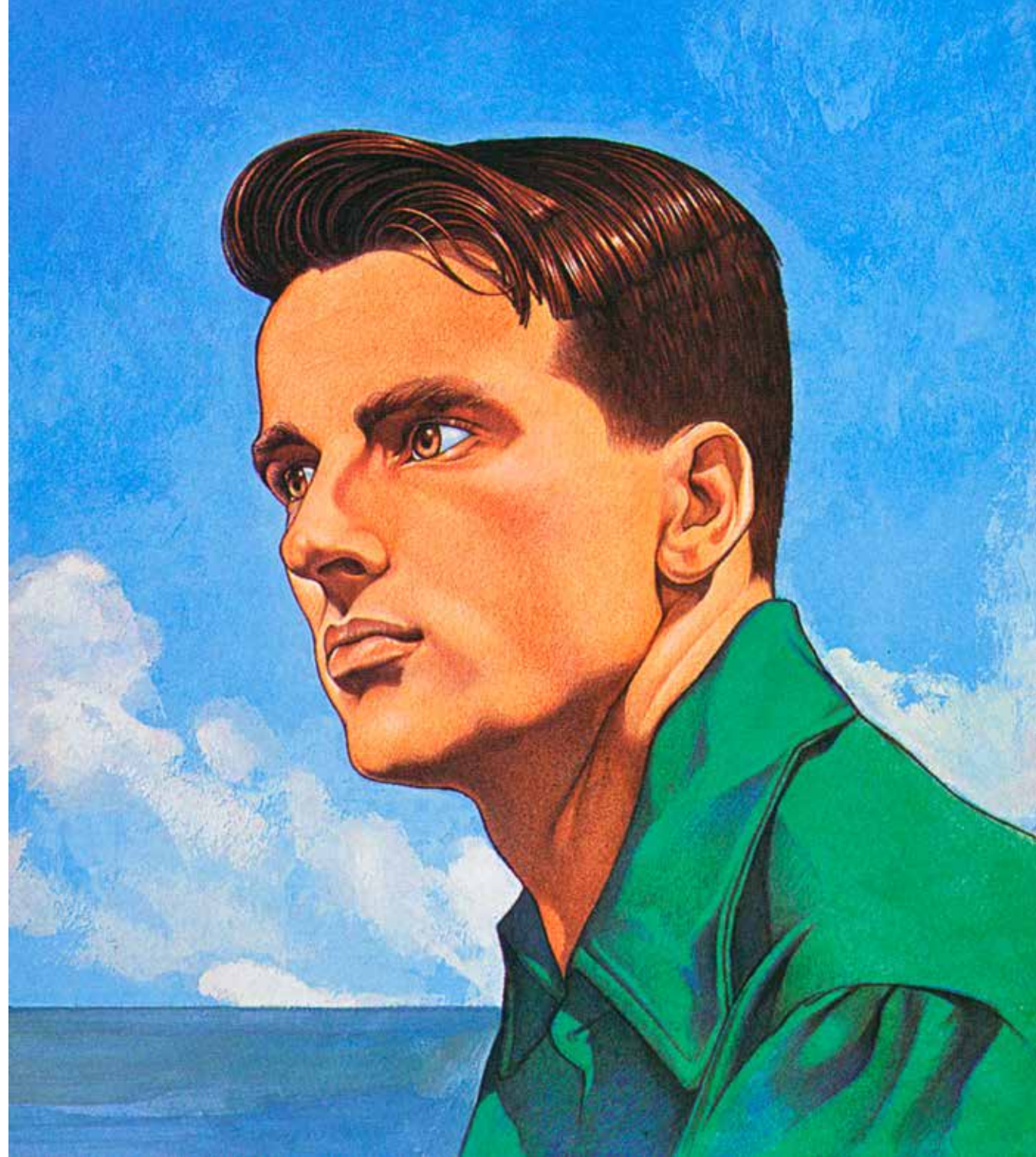
"I just packed up and moved the next week to New York. I lived with an actress friend of mine and her fashion model roommate, and then I moved to the West Side in 1976. And that's when I met George."³

And the place where Mel met George was at one of the regular parties thrown by *Blueboy* magazine. *Blueboy* was a ground-breaking gay men's magazine that began publishing out of Washington D.C. in 1974. It soon moved its operation to Miami, and under the art direction of Alex Sanchez quickly established itself as cutting edge, with its mix of beautiful photography and stunning illustration. Since so many of *Blueboy's* contributors were in New York City, the publishers and staff

would regularly fly north to host parties for all the writers and artists.

"Lots of illustrators," recalls Odom. "Antonio [Lopez], Michael Vollbracht, George. Just lots and lots of really cool illustrators, because *Blueboy's* draw was that not only could you do homoerotic images, but they left you alone to do your best work. They wouldn't get in your way. You could do anything as long as it was gorgeous. And even if it didn't exactly apply, they'd make it fit, because Alex was very much about the art direction of the magazine."⁴

One piece that George created for *Blueboy* in 1976 was a beautifully detailed trompe-l'œil featuring a collection of memorabilia rendered in a combination of pencil, colored pencil and watercolor. Old photographs, bundled letters, postage stamps, sheets of music, a theater ticket, antique wallpaper, sunglasses, a cigarette case, a game box with tiny lettered blocks that spell out the word "murder," and even a tiny toy figure sliding off of a miniature sled are lovingly composed and caressed with strokes that faithfully recreate the colors and textures of each item. He even paid tribute to one of the great illustrators Howard Chandler Christy (1873–1952), by reproducing



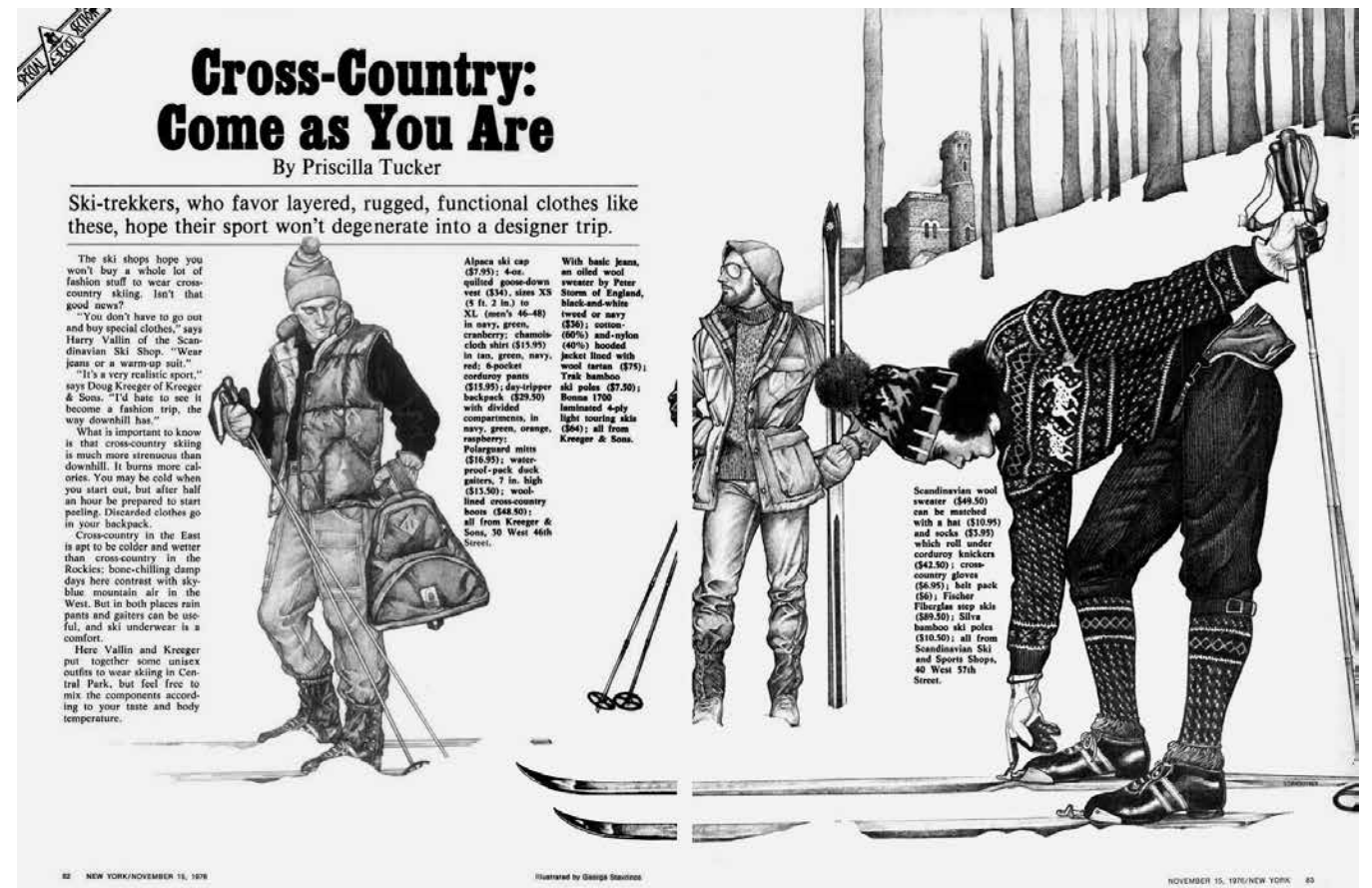
in miniature one of his Lucky Strike ads from the early 1930s. Stavrinou wasn't concerned in the least that this work might be reaching only the relatively small and specialized audience of *Blueboy* readers. The low budget, (probably around \$300, according to Odom),¹⁵ did nothing to hold Stavrinou back from throwing himself completely into the work. Stavrinou loads on the detail, clearly enjoying the opportunity to lose himself in the pure pleasure of drawing.

"So I met George and he was a neighbor and he was interested in what I was doing. And I would bring drawings over and show him when I'd completed something that I thought was worth sharing. When you have a friend as talented as

George, it keeps you on your toes. You don't want to show him *schlock!*"¹⁶

Odom was in awe of George's ability to produce the volume of high quality work he churned out weekly, while still actively taking part in the whirl of parties and clubbing that defined the times. Says Odom, "He threw great parties, but when he would work, he would just go into this work zone. He would do that and he would just disappear for days on end to get things done. I *still* don't understand how he did it."¹⁷

His 1978 *Blueboy* portrait of actor Montgomery Clift was as powerful and bold as any of the theater posters that illustrator Paul Davis (b.1938) was creating for theater productions around New



York City. George was clearly attempting to channel some of the drama and power inherent in Davis's work.

George had succeeded in establishing himself as a dependable, fast-working illustrator in the city he'd always wanted to live in. And now, his success was about to shift into an even higher gear.

FASHION

In November of 1976, George created a black and white spread for a feature on ski fashion for *New York Magazine*. This was the first of George's realistically rendered fashion illustrations, and it foreshadowed the amazing work that was to come. The drawing style is dramatically different than the fashion drawings he had done for the *New York Times* just two years earlier. In the *New York Magazine* spread, the clothing and equipment of the three ski-trekkers are drawn in high detail using graphite pencil. Showcased are the intricate patterns on display in the female figure's ski hat, classic reindeer sweater and wool high socks. The white space of the snow-covered landscape contrasts effectively with the areas of intricate detail.

George continued to astound with the range of assignments he took on, including a 1977 interior spread for *Oui* magazine. The densely-detailed illustration created to accompany an article on an Ivy League prostitution ring impresses with its impish sense of humor and naughtiness. A surviving pencil sketch featuring Sally McLeod portrays a figure that did not make it into the final version.



That same year, his work graced the dust jacket of Susan Howatch's novel of love among the wealthy, *The Rich are Different*. George's lush color palette and Parrish-inspired landscape is framed by Beaux Arts style columns. A serene marsh on the back of the wraparound jacket perfectly balances the crystalline reflecting pool on the front panel. A chauffeur stands solemnly at attention next to a Rolls Royce in the foreground, and a man and woman holding hands gaze longingly into each other's eyes at the end of a path leading to a stately mansion in the background.

After severing his ties with Pushpin in 1977, George began producing fashion illustrations for Barney's, a men's clothing



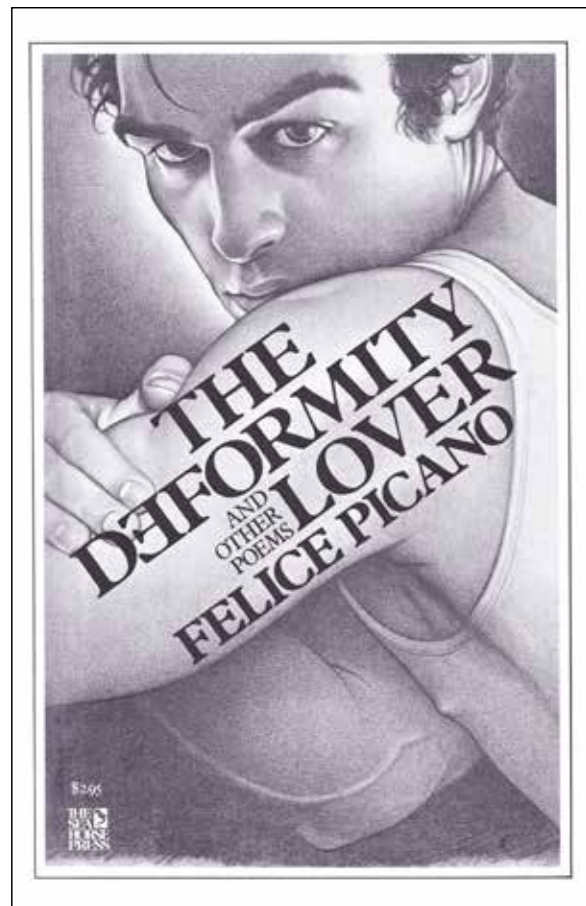
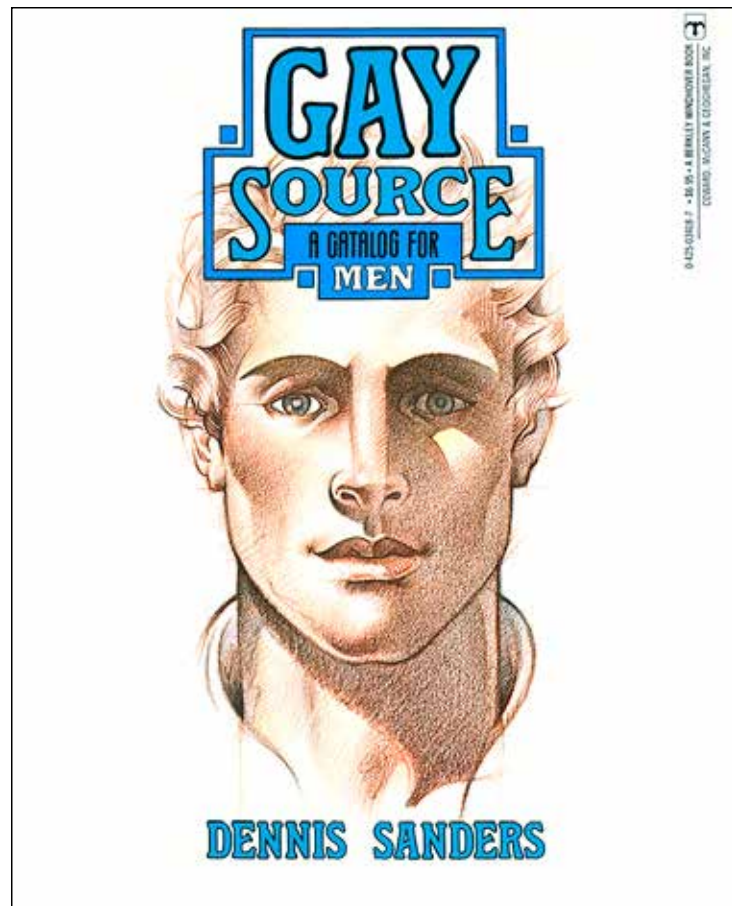
store in lower Manhattan that had previously been known primarily as a bargain outlet. Fred Pressman, who had taken over the reins of the store in the late 1950s from his father Barney, had been engaged for several years in a campaign to raise Barney's profile to that of a chic upscale center for men's fashion. In conjunction with an outside ad agency, George's work quickly became the face of Barney's new look. George now discovered himself fully immersed in the world of fashion, something he found pleasantly surprising.

For a 1978 ad for Barney's, George's continuing ability to draw inspiration from his friend Sally MacLeod is clear. Transcending mere commercial fashion illustration, George has created a striking portrait of his friend. With only an assortment of Polaroid photos as reference, George gives his audience an intimate and revealing look at both the inner strength and cool exterior of his subject as she sits regally on one of George's oversized cushions, surrounded by Rick Dillingham pottery. Taking advantage of the play of light that leaks through the simple linen curtains and onto the wall, George treats his viewers to an intriguing slice of an unfolding mystery. Figuring out who this woman is, and what kind of mysterious plot she might be enmeshed in, is part of the fun.

In 1979 George again enlisted MacLeod's help to illustrate an article on schizophrenia for *Cosmopolitan* magazine. George draws his inspiration from Roman Polanski's nightmarish 1965 film, *Repulsion*, starring Catherine Deneuve as a young woman spiraling down into dementia. In one of the film's most chilling scenes, hands burst from the walls of a narrow darkened corridor inside the apartment where Deneuve is experiencing her breakdown. George not only recreates but amps up the horror of the original scene by photographing Sally in a series of dramatic gestures and strained facial expressions. Not only is the woman in



George's illustration threatened by the shocking emergence of an army of grasping hands from the wall, but she must deal with the whisperings of an eerie group of doppelgangers. With her vacant stare, George has captured the catatonic and hopeless situation faced by the afflicted woman. Firmly in control of his color palette, the central violet of the woman's chemise plays against the eerie greens, blues, and grays, and hits the perfect chromatic pitch of madness. George as film director is in total control. George is no longer satisfied with portraying exquisitely composed images. He is determined to deliver an ever-increasing level of dramatic content and narrative.



In the early ads for Barney's, George was normally given very strict instructions regarding the type of woman who needed to be portrayed, what her hair style was, what age and what kind of persona she should project. Lisette Gagne, a singer, and model Teri Kates, posed for George over the years, but Sally MacLeod appeared most often in George's illustrations. George would pose Sally and alter her facial features as necessary. But despite the success of the ads, there was a sense that they were becoming too restrictive, too predictable. As George recalls: "There was heavy art direction on the major ads; other times I could just go off on my own, trying things, discovering. Men's fashion was something I hadn't planned to do, hadn't thought I could do. It was all new and I was flying."¹

"One day, Mr. Pressman called me into his office. On his desk was a pile of our ads. He had noticed a difference in them. He said, 'These I like, but these I really like. Can you tell me why?' I told him the ones he liked were those I just did, that the others were planned for me by the agency. He said, 'Well, then, don't listen. Just go off and do them!'"²

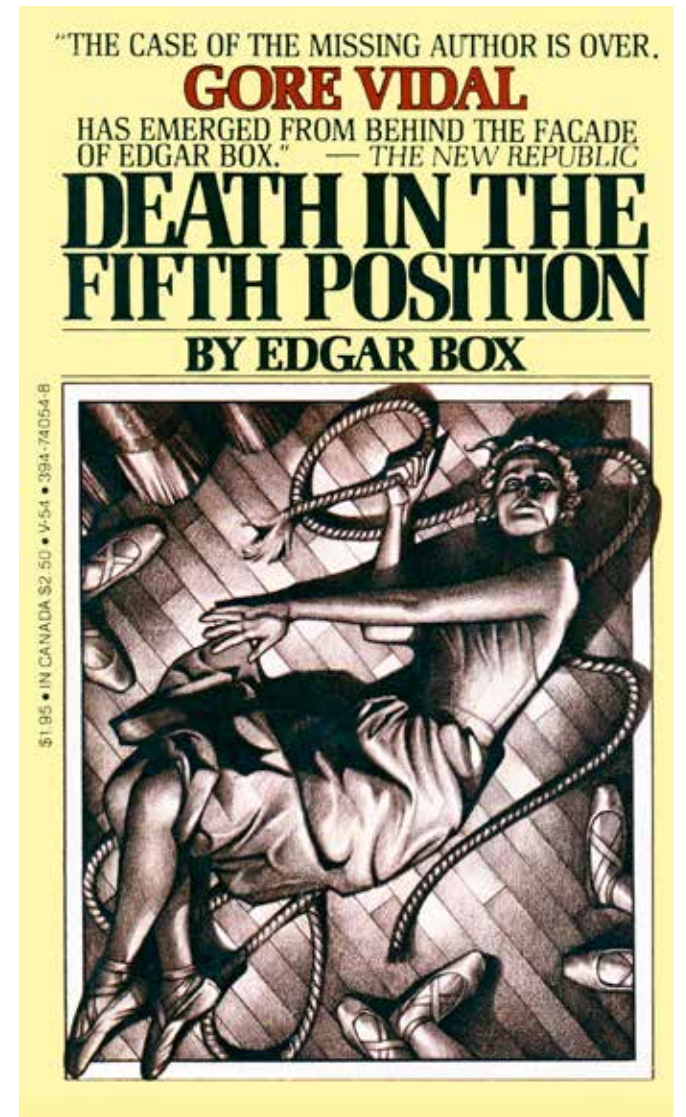
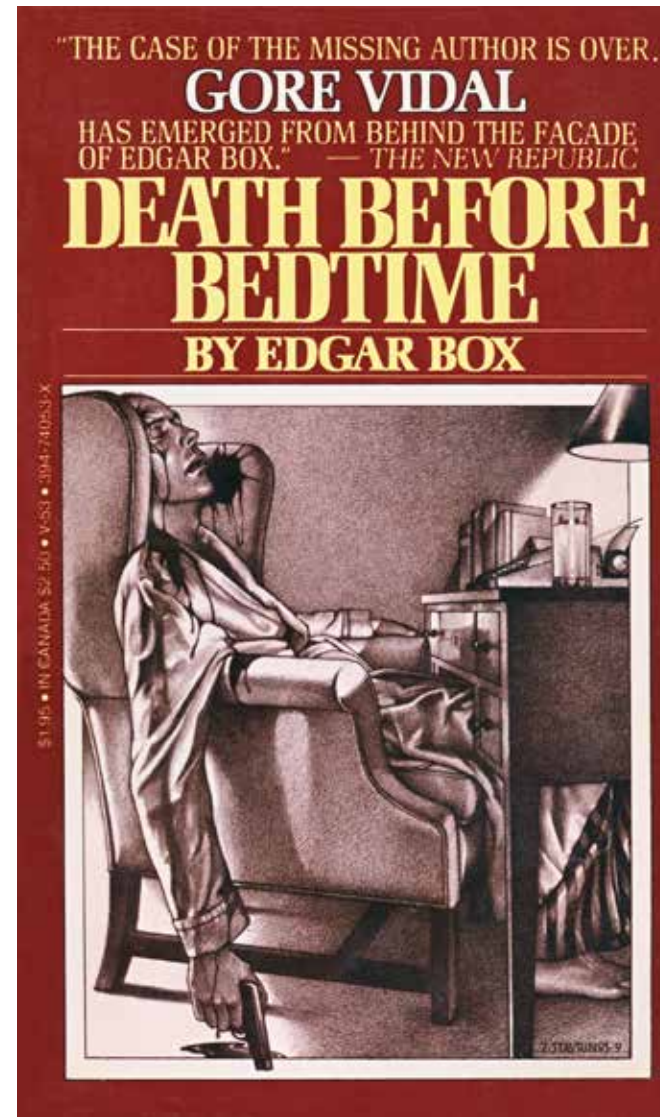
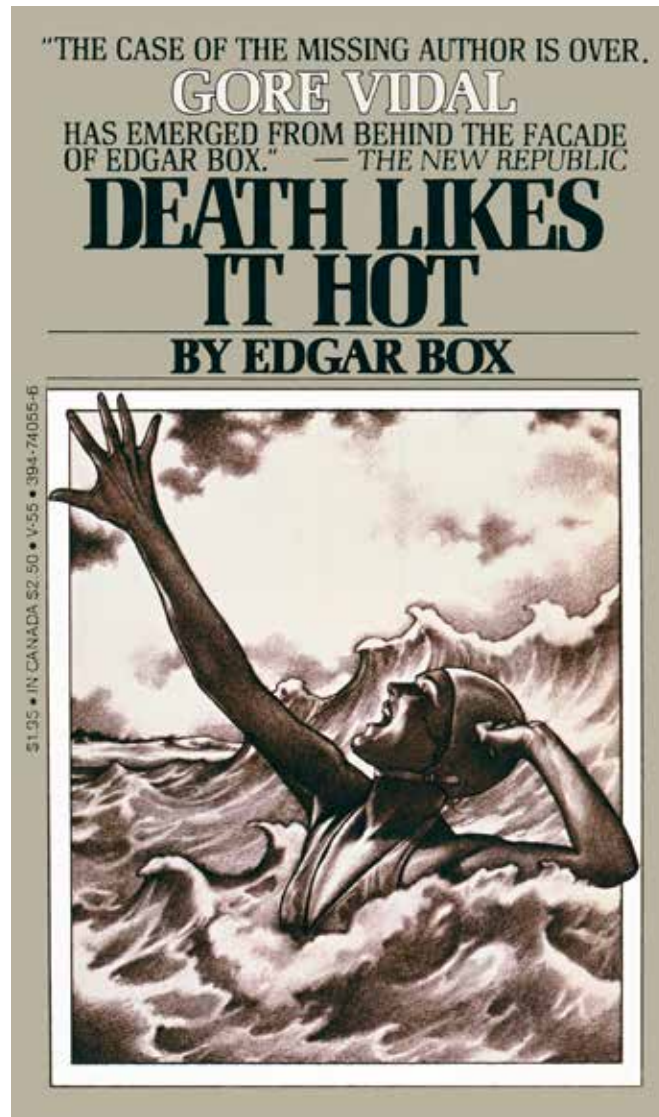
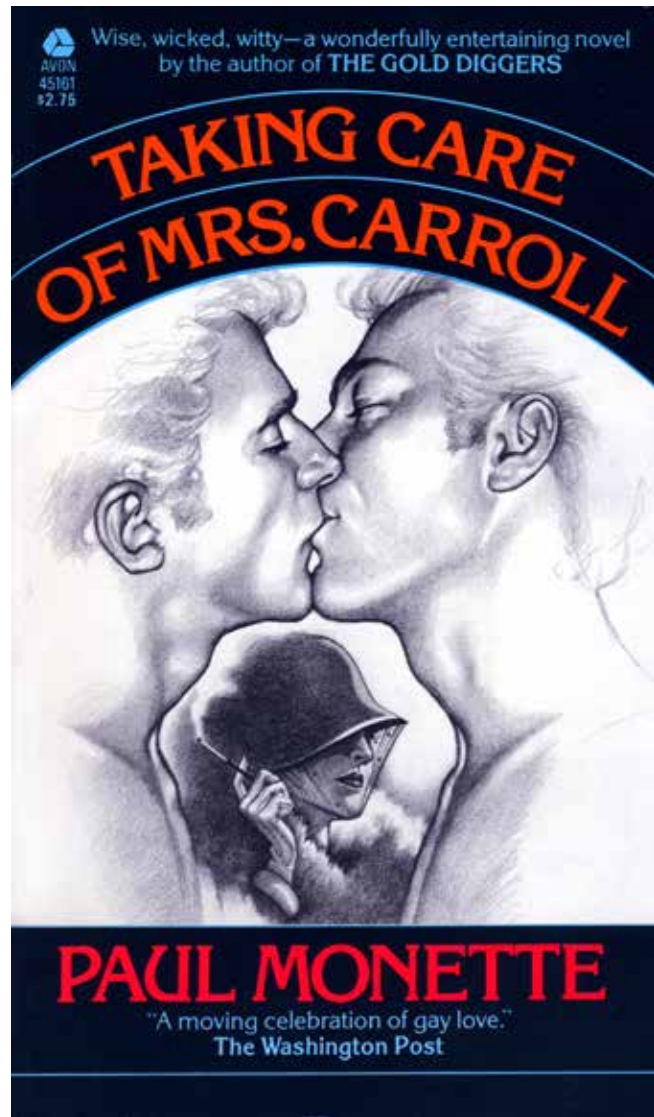
George appreciated being given full reign over the work, and it provided him with the confidence to take greater creative risks. Over the course of two years George produced a steady stream of striking images for Barney's.

An important project to which George contributed during this period was *Gay Source: A Catalog for Men*, edited by Dennis Sanders and published by Berkley. An oversized 290 page

trade paperback, *Gay Source* was a compendium of information of interest to the modern gay man. The volume was generously illustrated with 34 pieces of George's artwork, about half of which had previously appeared in such publications as *Blue-boy*, *Gentleman's Quarterly*, *New York Magazine*, and *The New York Times*. The book was elegantly designed by Frederick Myers and was the perfect showcase for George's work. The illustrations ran the gamut from simple renderings of patent leather shoes to complex compositions involving multiple figures, with themes as diverse as Greek mythology and famous gay composers throughout the ages. Stylistically, the illustrations represented a range from earlier editorial illustration to some of George's more art nouveau inspired work. Myers had first seen George's work in *Gentlemen's Quarterly*, and in 1978, Myers discussed working with George: "The pure accuracy of George's drawing is uncanny. A lot of what we used in the book just seemed to fit, even though we only ordered [new] drawings for the chapter and main headings. And everything worked beautifully. His style, the super realism combined with a romantic flair, is so right, so perfect. I would have no qualms about using his work again, even though he's almost overworked."³

Another project of significance was George's 1978 contribution of the cover art for the first publication to be released by The Sea Horse Press. The soft-cover book was a collection of poems entitled *The Deformity Lover and Other Poems* by Felice Picano. The Sea Horse Press holds an important place in the





history of gay-oriented publishing in the United States, and was only the second small press entirely devoted to gay thematic content.

George also began contributing covers to books published by Avon, including *The Gold Diggers* and *Taking Care of Mrs. Carroll*. In both cases George had contributed illustrations to the excerpts from the books when they first appeared in *Blueboy* magazine.

George's work also appeared on the covers of a three-book series of paperback reprints of mystery novels authored by Gore Vidal in the 1950s, using the pen name Edgar Box. Reprinted by Avon Books in 1979, the three black and white cover illustrations show Stavrinou clearly enjoying his role as pencil-wielding film auteur, as he directs scenes that resonate perfectly with the film noir quality of Vidal's prose. A swimmer fights against a deadly undertow. A man slumps dead in a winged chair, pistol still clutched in his hand. And finally, in a fabulous scene viewed from overhead, a murdered ballerina's vacant eyes stare blindly up at the viewer, as the dancing slippers of her fellow performers form a circle about her.

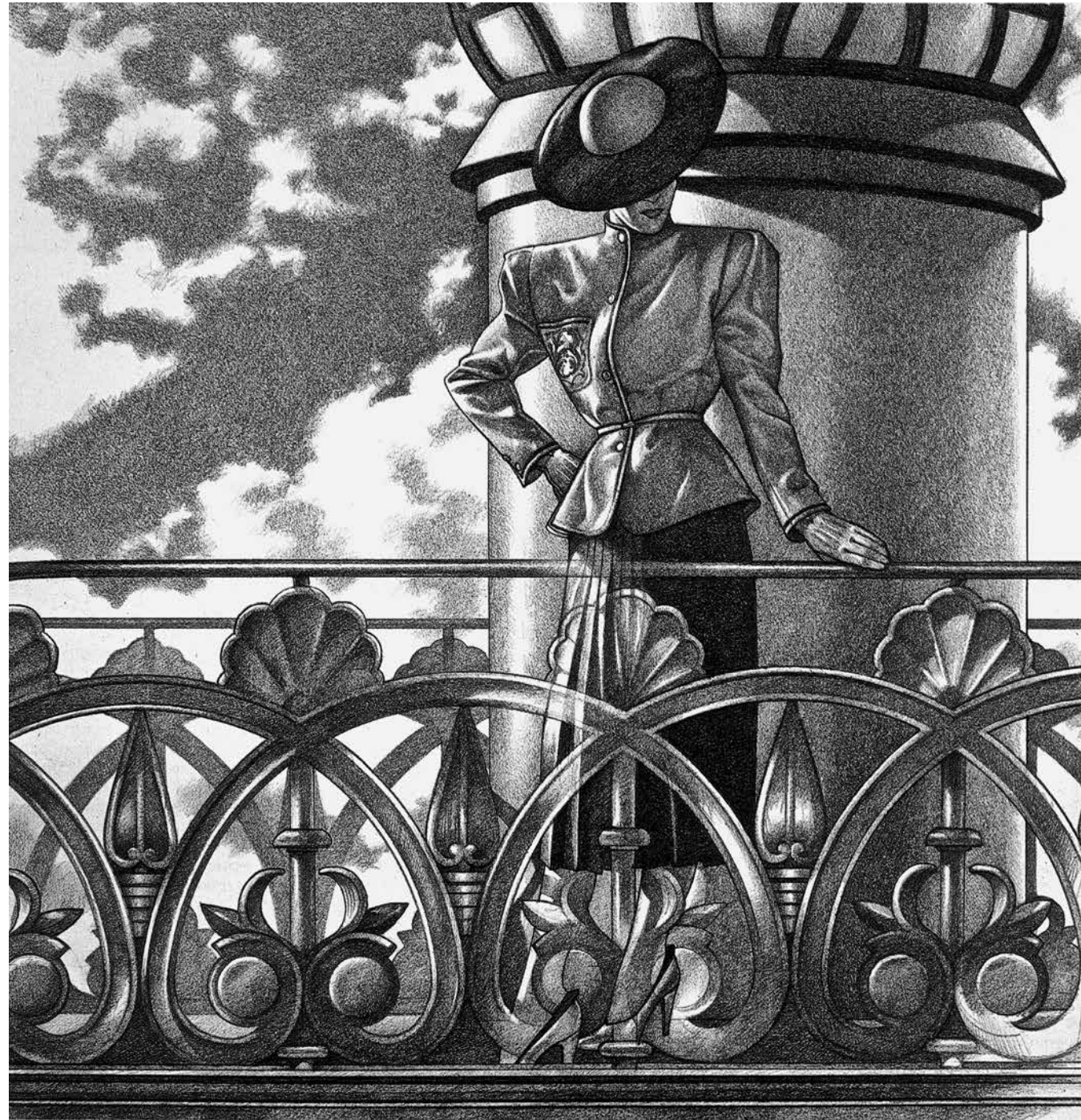
With their classically constructed composition and their strong sense of narrative, George's fashion illustrations were quite unlike anything seen before in the industry. They were an anachronism and the polar opposite of the work of other cutting edge fashion illustrators like Antonio Lopez and Michael Vollbracht. George's work presented a nostalgic return to another time, recalling a period characterized by elegance, sophistication and movie screen glamor. Looking back, it's almost hard to believe how well George's drawings were received at the time. Antonio's figures pouted seductively and challenged the viewer, and his color and line work were infused with an electricity that jumped off the printed page. In stark contrast, George's models kept their distance and gazed out at their audience with a riveting but firmly detached cool. George wasn't having any part of the decadence that was wonderfully on display in the world of fashion at the time. When asked in a 1985 survey of New York fashion illustrators to choose his favorite fashion photographer, George cited Norman Parkinson (1913-1990) as his other favorite photographer.⁴ Parkinson had been a prominent British fashion photographer for decades whose work had ap-

peared in both French and American *Vogue* as far back as the 1940s.⁵ It may have been in Parkinson that George found his true mentor when he transitioned more completely into the world of fashion.

Going back to his student days at RISD, George had always had the eye of a photographer and it was Parkinson's lush and atmospheric portrayals of men and women traveling through the world of fashion and high society, and his pioneering work with on-location shoots, that grabbed George's artistic soul. George clearly was attracted to the aura of elegance, the sense of mystery, and the stories behind the images that Parkinson sought to provide with every photograph. Dramatic shafts of light, the demure downcast eye, and the strong compositions, which often included classic architectural settings, were just a few of the elements in Parkinson's work that George appropriated in his own original way. Similar to George's best work, a Parkinson photograph provided but one frame of an implied plotline that continued on beyond the single frozen image.

In 1979, George returned from his eight-month break and began an association with a new client for whom he would do the work that launched him into the fashion world's stratosphere, the New York retailer Bergdorf Goodman. In June of that year, George signed a six-figure contract with Bergdorf, agreeing to provide them with a weekly full-page illustration along with "as needed" art for catalog and brochure use.⁶ Moving from Barney's to Bergdorf presented a



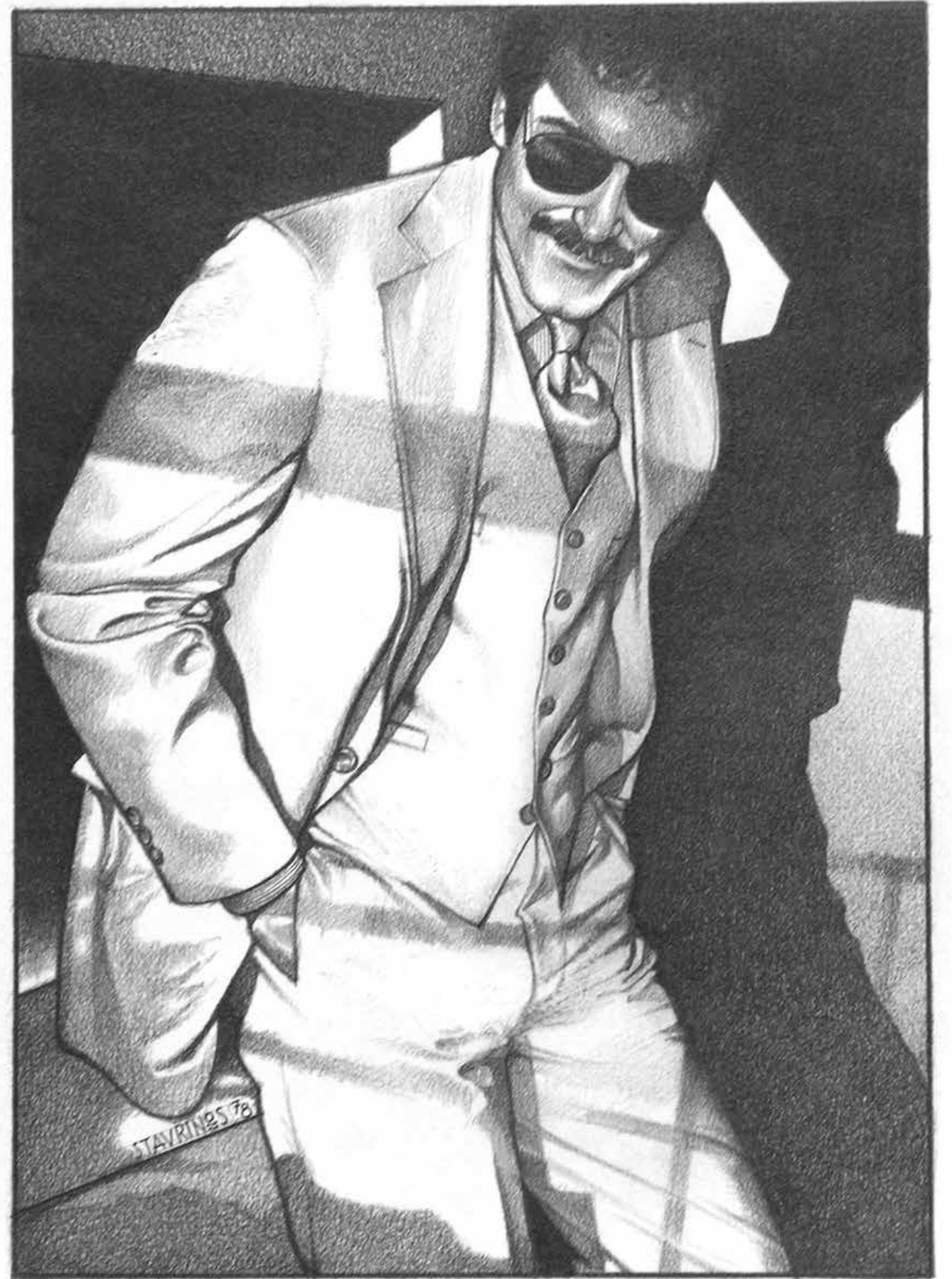


striking contrast and new opportunities. George was leaving behind a stalwart of men's fashion merchandising, and partnering with a store that represented the pinnacle of women's fashion. Dawn Mello, who was serving as Bergdorf's fashion director, recognized the design abilities of her illustrator and gave George nearly total artistic control over the creation of the new ads. George recalled that Mello simply told him, "We want you to do your drawing for us."⁷ And so it began.

George's earliest work for Bergdorf still relied on heavy rendering and the coverage of every square inch of the paper's

surface. Architectural elements still dominated many of the drawings. One in particular, done for Bergdorf in 1979, featured model Teri Kates posed atop the Statue of Liberty's torch. Kates would be George's primary model for the Bergdorf ads from 1979 through 1981. Originally, the figure had been placed in a 1950s era office environment containing a curving desk and Venetian blinds. But while watching Hitchcock's 1942 film *Saboteur*, George was impressed with the climactic scene that took place atop the statue, and decided to place his figure in an entirely new environment.







28 Illustration

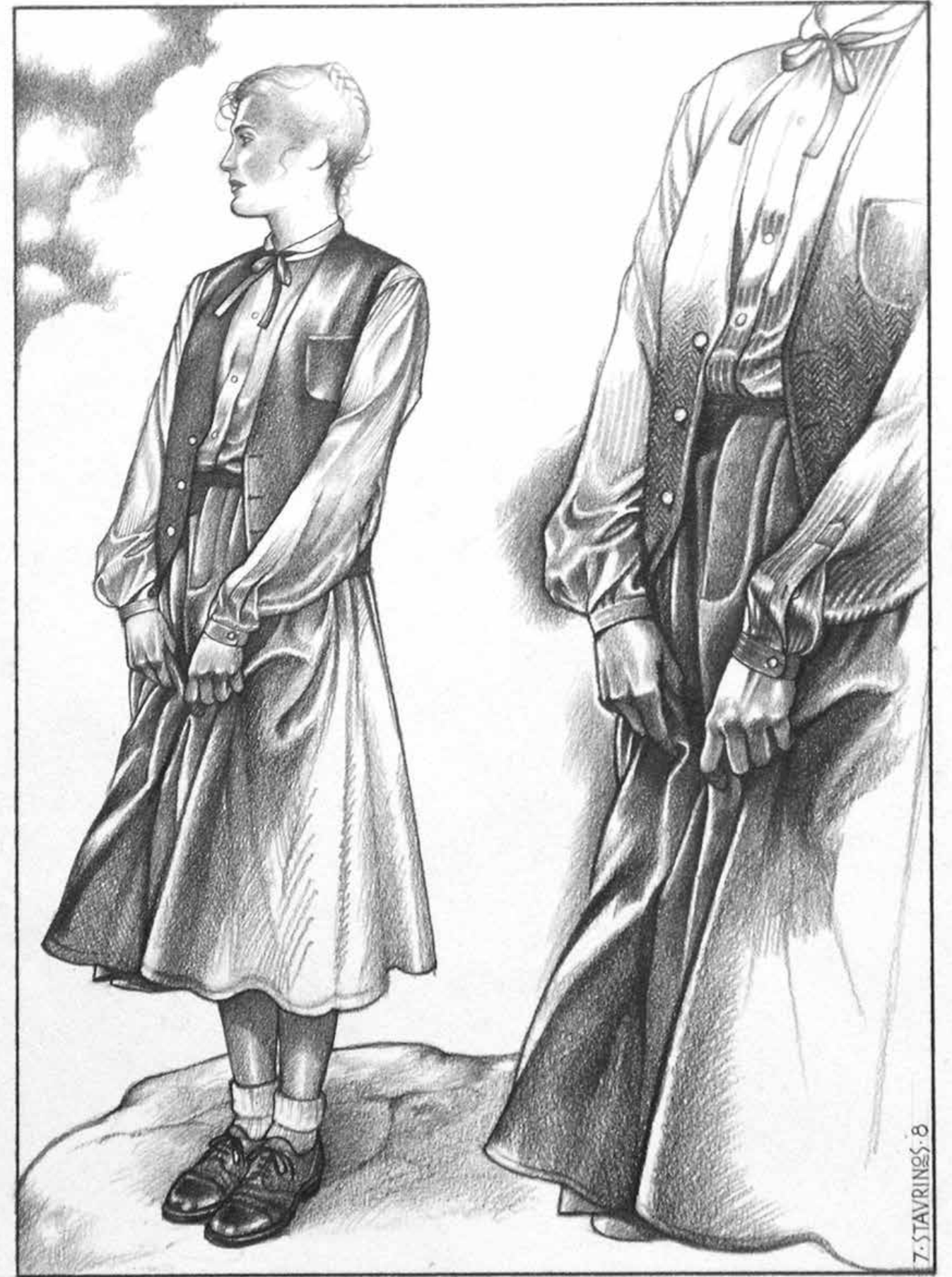
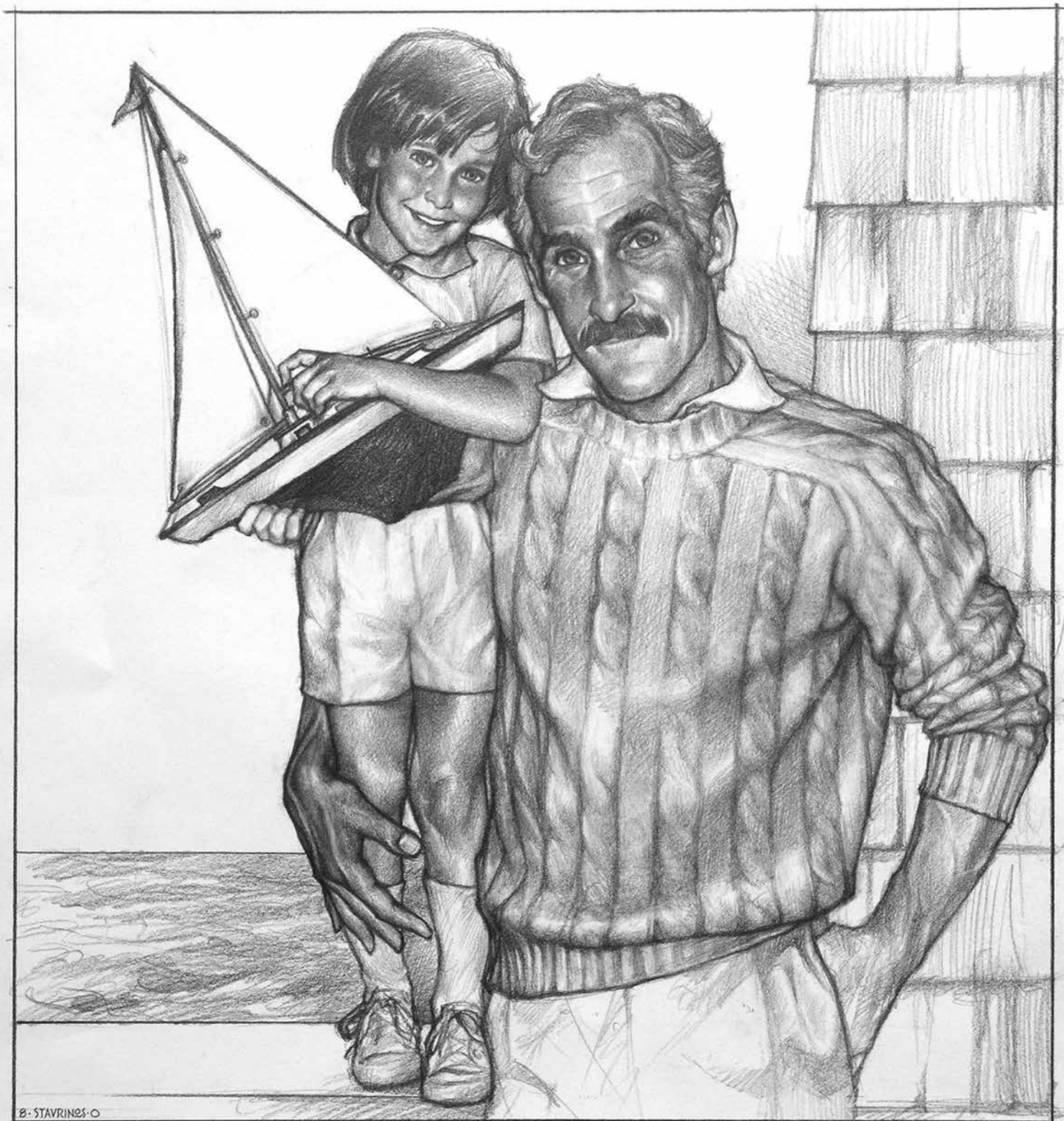


Illustration 29



B-STAVRINOS-O



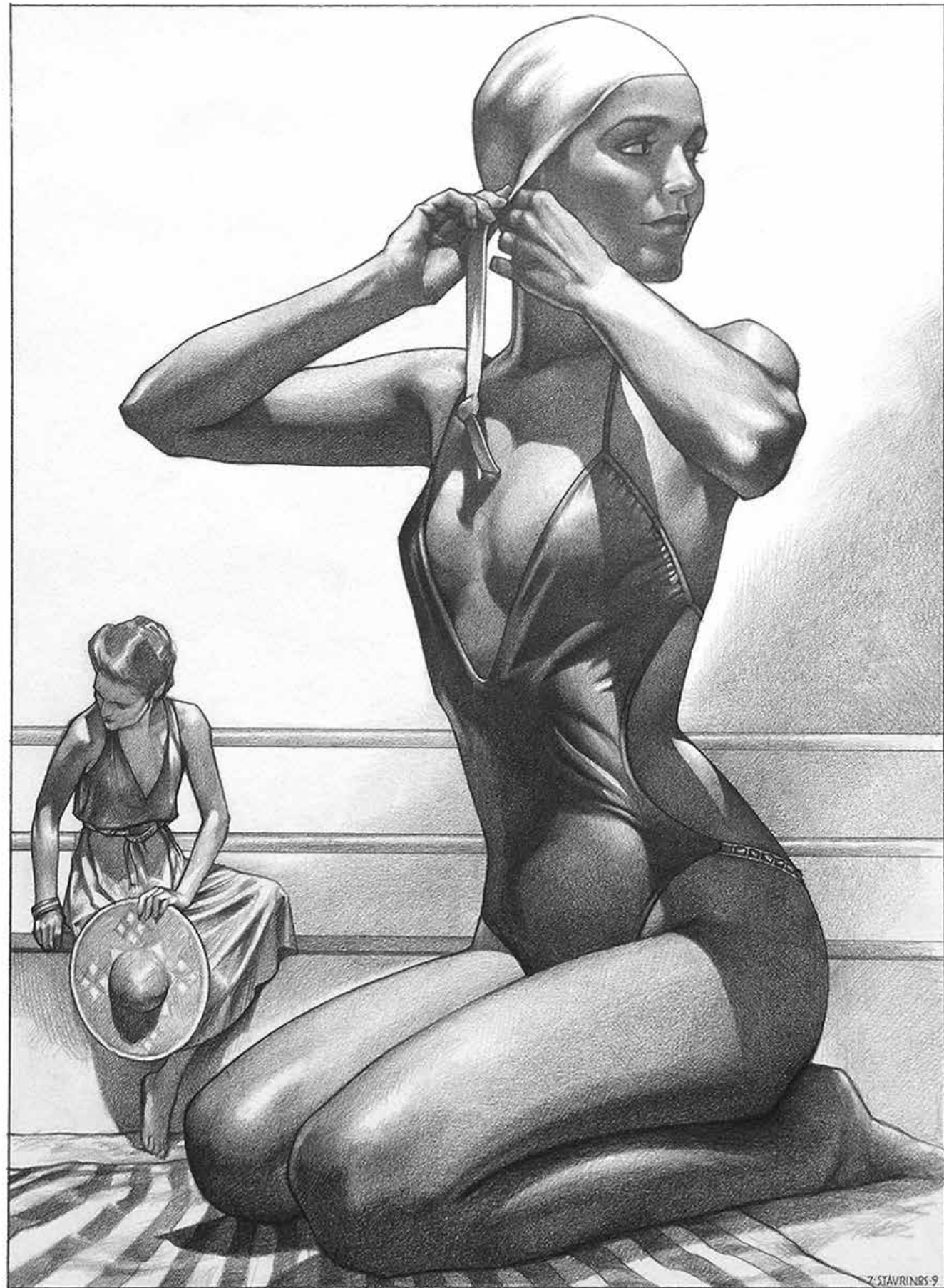
B-STAVRINOS-O



32 Illustration



Illustration 33



34 Illustration



By the fall of 1980, George began to feel the need to shake up his standard formula and modify his compositions. Bit by bit he began expanding the white space in his drawings, and playing areas of heavy detail against those executed with a lighter touch.

The background and architectural details began to drop away. The facial features of his women began to recede, and George even allowed some of his underlying sketch lines to remain visible. Visual emphasis resided solely on the clothing itself. "Where there were architectural elements before, I am now trying to create an architecture of the clothing."⁸

In 1983, George created a series of fashion ad illustrations where the sculptural quality of his drawing focused solely on the clothing. The poses had become so formal that he might have been back traveling as a student through Heraklion in Crete, and sketching at the local museums there.

In 1984, George began a series of drawings that would prove to be one of his all time favorite projects. "My great pleasure has been the campaign for the New York City Opera," he said in 1986. "I had a two-year run during which I created drawings of 36 characters from the opera repertoire. A very interesting and different direction for me."⁹

By the mid-80s, George was accepting an increasing number of portrait assignments, ranging from a conceptual drawn-collage portrayal of John Cougar Mellencamp for *Playboy* magazine, to a simpler but energetic likeness of the swing-era jazz trumpeter Bunny Berigan. The careful attention given to

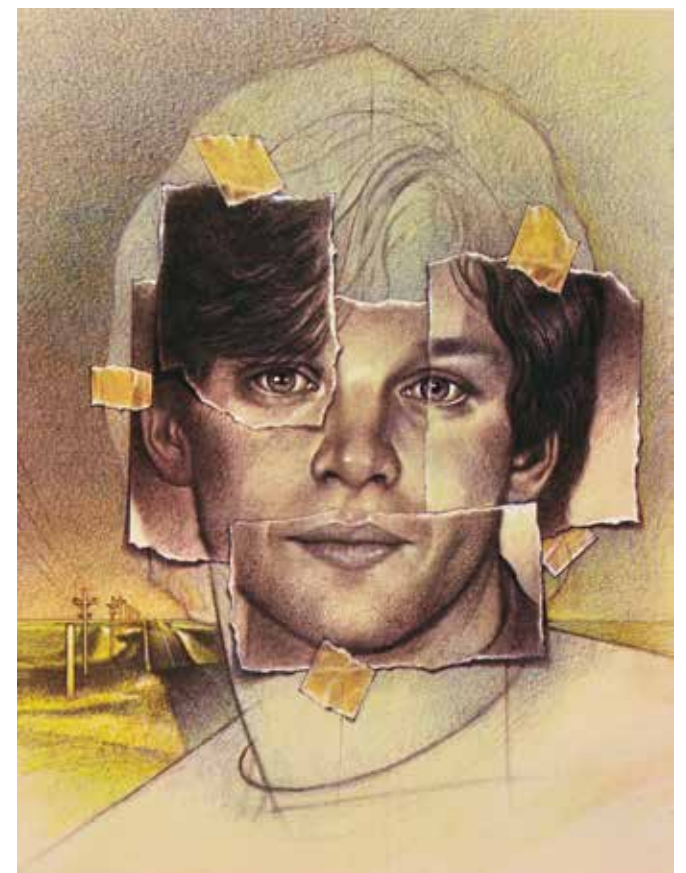


Illustration 35



Berigan's facial features gives way to an increasingly abstract rendering of his suit, and the background of the piece, all in tones of cool blue, harkens back to early Cubist art. These more fluidly drawn pieces have a lightness and a freshness that are quite different from the densely-packed drawings of George's earlier career. He had reached the point where he was less interested in piling on detail, than he was with combining an economy of expression with a more streamlined composition. Occasionally as needed, he could still generate a piece that exploded with detail, such as the promotional piece he did for Anheuser Busch and Las Vegas University. But this drawing stands out as more the exception than the rule. Most of the work George produced in the last years of his career seemed to reveal an artist who was being more careful about rationing his energies, while still enjoying the work.

UNION CITY

In 1979, when Marcus Reichert was ready to begin production of his film *Union City*, based on Cornell Woolrich's 1937 pulp fiction short story *The Corpse Next Door*, he didn't hesitate to call upon his friend George Stavrinis to fill the roles of art director, designer, and set decorator. In movie production, the set decorator is the person with full responsibility for decorating the set with all furnishing, drapery, interior plants, and anything seen on indoor sets. Reichert credits Stavrinis with substantial contributions to the look of the film, which is set in 1953 and shot on a budget of under half a million dollars. George had, in effect, been auditioning for the role of set designer for years, with the elaborate set ups and scenes he had been creating for his illustrations. Heavily influenced by film noir and the work of Hitchcock, *Union City* was the perfect project for Stavrinis.

Reichert, thoroughly familiar with his friend's sense of design and his instinct for finding just the right furnishing or

effect to create a mood, knew he was in good hands.

"George's sense of placement was extraordinary," says Reichert. "He knew exactly where to place everything, whether it was in his apartment, in a drawing, or on a film set. He also knew which objects to choose to enhance the atmosphere of the various scenes but, more importantly, to give us things with which to compose our images. In essence, he enabled me and Edward Lachman [Director of Photography] to make images that otherwise wouldn't have been possible. So, as an Art Director on the film, he was also very much the Set Decorator. I am a fiend for color, and of course George knew that, so he was altogether sensitive to what had to go with my background colors. The red lamp shades in the living room were an absolute stroke of brilliance. The still-life that hangs above the bed coincidentally also appears in one of the *Godfather* pictures. The color of the bed's headboard sings out beautifully against the velvety grayish purple I chose for the walls. The coverlet shimmers in the dark.⁴ George found that satin coverlet to bring out the strangeness of the color I'd chosen for the walls and of course he followed this through with each and every object. Genius!"¹

The sets that George worked on included several rooms of the apartment in the Union City tenement where the main characters live, and a small office. The entire film was shot on one floor of a walk-up apartment building. Working with the other members of the production crew, George managed to add just the right touches, using a real sense of economy.

Reichert recalls, "George did all of the shopping for the set decoration and arranged for delivery to Union City. He was there when necessary to make certain everything was in its proper place. He was especially good in making the office space credible, considering the entire film was shot on one floor of a walk-up apartment building. He knew what the film was about and what I was trying to achieve and he brought in the details



that made the "unreality" of the psychological interior landscape I was trying to realize a truly enveloping proposition. The billboard on the wall of the apartment building, which appears in the opening sequence with Sam McMurray and in the final scene over which the end credits run, was of course George's work."²

The billboard that Reichert references is glimpsed but briefly during the film, but is unmistakably George's work. Stavrinis also brought along friends who filled important roles in the production, including make-up artist (and occasional illustration model) Richard Dean. George enjoyed the work he did on the film, and was justifiably proud of it.

Unfortunately, the chance to work on another film never materialized. There had been discussions about George contributing to Reichert's 1978 short film, *Wings of Ash*, described as a dramatization of the life of Antonin Artaud and which starred Mick Jagger but, through circumstances, George never contributed to the film.

TEACHING

In 1980, George, along with Mel Odom and Sue Coe, was featured in the Summer Issue of *Illustration*, a thick digest-sized magazine published in Japan. Mel Odom recalled the suddenness with which their notoriety rose in Japan: "What was interesting about this whole phenomenon was that we became like rock stars in Japan, without doing anything to warrant it. It just happened to us."¹

In 1983, George completed artwork for an advertising campaign for the well known Keio Department Store in Tokyo, and partly as a result of this work, was invited to Japan to speak at the prestigious Tokyo's Gakuin Designers College. Gakuin had been established in 1963 and had begun a tradition of inviting high profile art and design practitioners from America to speak and give demonstrations at the school. Designer Herb Lubalin had been the first to speak at the college in the mid-sixties, and long-time *Playboy* art director Art Paul had spoken at the school in 1983.

George was very excited about the trip and flew to Tokyo alone in October of 1983. He received a welcome worthy of a movie star. His visit to Japan included lectures and presentations at five of Gakuin's branch colleges, including Na-



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goya, Osaka and Fukuoka. In summing up George's visit in the publication *Visions*, Kennosuke Adachi, President of Gakuin College said, "These meetings and seminars have made a great impression on our students and have encouraged them in their studies."²²

In July of 1987, at the invitation of Philip Hays, chairman of the illustration department at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, George traveled to California to be the guest artist for the college's "Illustration Workshop '87." The three-day workshop was the fifth of a series that Hays had launched, and each July a world class illustrator would be invited. On Tuesday, July 21, George began with a morning slide presentation of his work in the Art Center's Ahmason Auditorium. The presentation was followed immediately by the first of three workshop sessions which George entitled "Fashion as Fantasy." The workshop featured "a re-creation of the Stavrinis Style," the imagery evoking "feelings of romance, longing, and memories of a time that may never have existed, except in the imagination."²³ Photographs of the first day's session show George positioning models dressed in jungle fashion, a white



linen gown, a male holding a huge white sphere, and a pair of boa constrictors.

The following day, George created setups involving athletes, in a workshop called "The Body." With the help of a full-scale rowing shell and a cast that included gymnasts, rowers, and body builders, George presented a modern version of one of J.C. Leyendecker's *Saturday Evening Post* covers. In a review of the second day's session written for the *Pasadena Star-News*, arts editor Kathy Register described the workshop as more of an extravaganza. "While the *Chariots of Fire* theme boomed out of eight speakers, half a dozen scantily clad male models—two of them muscle-bound body builders—struck poses around a racing shell. As the lights played off oars, brightly colored tank tops, and rippling flesh, a gang of more than 200 students busily sketched, filmed, and photographed the vivid scene. Despite the absence of much clothing on center stage, a feeling of high-fashion runway excitement filled the crowded room."²⁴

The schedule for the third and final day featured a morning fashion show, complete with "professional runway models, showing a selection of famous designer original gowns," and an afternoon session focusing on "The Drama of Costume," which explored the "relationship of costume to sociological situations."²⁵

What does survive of the final day's sessions is a unique series of photographs showing models wearing haute couture fabricated out of brown craft paper. Whether these were substitutes for the originally scheduled designer gowns, or a fanciful addition to the day's lineup, is unclear. But the paper gowns are elegant and exude a clear sense of style and originality.

Back in New York, George had developed a special relationship with Rosemary Torres and her students at the Fashion Institute of Technology, and regularly visited her fashion illustration portfolio.

Rosemary remembers first meeting George at an event at the Society of Illustrators in New York City. "He was pointed out to me, and I had loved his work so I introduced myself and I asked if he would come and speak to the class. He was so accessible, so nice, he said, 'Of course I'll come.' He never taught at F.I.T., but he used to come to my class, which was a graduating upper division class. And he first came and showed his work, his own work. Beautifully matted, gorgeous covers, and I said to the kids, 'This is how you present your work.' He would look at their portfolios and give them helpful hints, and this was time consuming but he did that. He would spend an hour, or a couple of hours even, in the classroom, looking at their work and critiquing. You can imagine what a treat this was."⁶



Rosemary recalls a student asking George, "How do you come up with these ideas, these wonderful surrealist backgrounds and situations?"

George replied, "I let the clothes tell me. I look at the garment and let it suggest." Rosemary says, "For instance, if it was something with big sleeves that suggested wings, angel wings... then he would use angel wings somehow in his composition.

run, the owner said to me, 'I can usually predict the audience a show will attract. Not this one. Yours ran the gamut.' I was really happy to find my work was working the way I want it to—something for everybody."¹

By the mid-80s, George's commercial work had caught the attention of Steve Diamante, the young director of Ettinger Galleries, located at 155 Avenue of the Americas. Only in his

And he used lighting in a very interesting way, you know, darks and lights. He was accessible. Willing to help and to share. He never tried to hide his methods or his methodology."⁷

THE FINER THINGS

In October of 1981, George had his first exhibit of drawings at the Tatistcheff Gallery located at 38 East 57th Street in New York City. George spoke about the origins of the exhibit: "The owner [Peter Tatistcheff] wanted to test the market for advertising and commercial work with pieces from my Bergdorf Goodman campaign, which was getting a lot of attention. There has always been a hard line between commercial work and fine art as far as gallery owners are concerned. Towards the end of a successful three-week

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Harrison Fisher, "The Debutante," from *Fair Americans*, 1910.



H.J. Ward/Joe Szokoli, *Speed Mystery* cover, March 1945.



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mid-twenties, Diamante had developed a discriminating taste that included the work of George Stavrinos, and was convinced that there was a potential market for limited edition prints of the artist's work. In early 1987, not waiting for a formal introduction, he picked up the phone and called George with a proposal. "I knew he had been interested in making sort of a foray into the fine art world, because the world of illustration was slowly becoming dominated by photography. And I think that when I approached him and told him what we did and who we were, it piqued his interest enough that I got him down to the lithography studio. And I think he was very impressed with that."²²

After first gaining Stavrinos's cooperation, the next step was to decide what the first print would be. George had never worked with lithography before. What Diamante was proposing was the creation of a hand-drawn lithograph, which meant that George was going to have to produce an individual drawing for each of the colors that made up the finished print. The planning and execution of what would essentially be hand drawn color separations was a complicated and difficult task. A plate would be produced for each of the dozen or more colors and transparent inks would be applied one on top of the other, resulting in a multi layered and richly colored finished image.

Thus, beginning in April of 1987, George began reporting daily to the Soho location of Atalier Ettinger. Diamante recalls, "George hated the process, but in typical George Stavrinos complete control, dominating style, he wouldn't allow anybody else to do it." Says Diamante, "We came by *Moonfall* because we had gone through his body of works, and were trying to find an image, rather than having George come up with something brand new, which he didn't want to do while tackling the medium for the first time as well. So we found an image

that all of us, myself, George, and Eleanor Ettinger, all agreed on as being sort of an image that transcended illustration and became more of a fine art image. *Moonfall* became the very first lithograph he ever did. And it was stunning. Stunning!"²³

In August of 2009, Mel Odom, who eventually joined George in having his work published by Atalier Ettinger, recalled some of the struggles George had with the process. "George's strength, his strongest strength, was in black and white work, and there [at Ettinger] he was doing color things. And I remember when he was working on a lithograph, that the color, arriving at the color, was very difficult for him. And I can even remember that it created some tension between us because I had always worked in color, mostly in color. And I didn't have the same hesitation he did in using color. And he was such a perfectionist."²⁴

"But George forged on," remembers Steve Diamante, "and he made it a resounding success. The first time we showed his work—there was an art fair called Art Expo at the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center. We premiered *Moonfall* and the proof for *Flying Tiles*, which was the second lithograph he had done. The edition size was 275 in total. And we premiered 14 of his original drawings and sold them all."²⁵

Recalls Diamante, "The proof for *Flying Tiles* wasn't even finished and George had done some hand coloring on it, but people were just so amazed by the work. It was an astounding success when we first premiered his work, and well deserved."²⁶ *Moonfall* and *Flying Tiles* were followed by another full color lithograph, *Paper Lanterns*, an obvious homage to the work of Maxfield Parrish.

The next lithograph that George produced was a black and white print entitled *Dawn of Victory*, for Macy's Fourth Annual Cystic Fibrosis campaign. Diamante says, "It was done as a fund raiser, and then an additional part of the edition was



signed and numbered and made available for sale as a fine art work.⁷⁷

On the surface the print displays a strong Art Deco sensibility, but in fact its most striking link may be to the imagery found in the ground-breaking film *Olympia*, produced by the Nazi-era film director Leni Reifenstahl. A small postcard featuring an image of an Olympic swimmer from the 1938 film had found its way onto George's bulletin board, so it was clear that George was not only aware of the film but entranced by the stark beauty of the black and white images of Olympic athletes who had competed in Berlin in 1936. Recalls Marcus Reichert, "Yes, he was fascinated by her films especially. So much of his imagery derives from film."⁷⁸

Dawn of Victory was followed by another black and white print, also created for a fundraiser, entitled *Winged Duet*. The print was created in conjunction with a benefit for the Actors' Fund for America, which has a subdivision called the Career Transition for Dancers.

After the completion of *Winged Duet*, George and team at Ettinger's sat down to discuss his next project, which turned out to be a suite of four black and white prints entitled *The Letter*. Recalls Diamante, "We had wanted to come up with the idea of a portfolio, because we had released up to that point three or four single edition releases. We wanted to come up with something where you could do a portfolio presentation suite of images. We knew it was going to be black and white because we wanted it to be a homage to what it is that made

George famous. And then one thing must have led to another, and finally I think it was George's idea for the inclusion of 'the letter' as a thematic linking concept. And he just knocked it out of the park!"⁷⁹

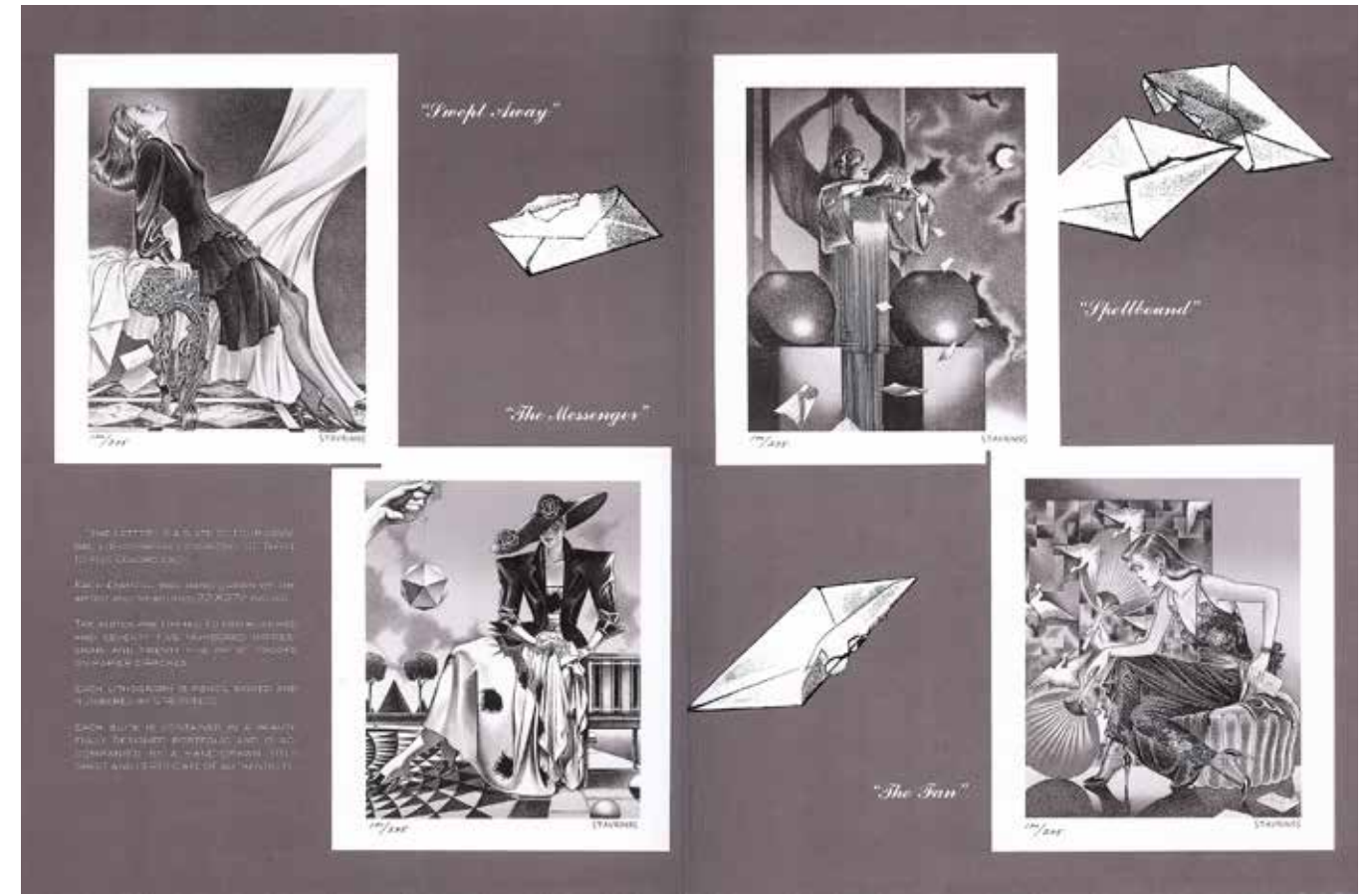
Unfortunately, *The Letter* would be the last lithography project that George would complete before he fell ill.

TECHNIQUE

"I studied graphics at college," said George in a short 1978 interview that appeared in the book *The Complete Guide to Fashion Illustration*. "When I left college and developed my portfolio, I found that the graphite work was taking over the rest, so I just threw everything else out. With pencil I get the most immediate form of what I want to do. I have more control than with painting, watercolor, and so on, and I get sharp detail!"

"My work involves painstaking detail—for a *New York Times* drawing I guess I work three days and nights. I tend to do a lot of sketches before the final. I can't knock it out, I have to work very hard to get that patina, the finished look."⁸¹

Despite the fact that George rendered his art using only a single F grade lead, Rosemary Torres, whose portfolio classes George visited at the Fashion Institute of Technology in 1984 and 1985 states that, "His work always looked like he must have used a variety [of lead grades] to get the different tonalities and texture. He would get wonderful texture in these things. And it was always that one F lead. He was amazing."⁸²



Jon Weiman, a young illustrator who lived in George's neighborhood and who developed a friendship with him, offered additional insight into George's ability to produce a wide range of tonalities, darks and lights. "I used to talk to him a lot about his tonal range. Because he was using this particular lead that was an F lead in a mechanical pencil. That's all he ever used, but he was able to get it as black as he wanted it. And [the surface] never was shiny. He was just able to do an enormous amount with a damn pencil! It used to just flip me out just watching him work, because a lot of it was very very delicately crosshatched. He never blended anything. It was wild. The delicacy of the way he worked was truly amazing. He was like a surgeon. He kept his lead sharp as a razor. He was working on Strathmore board almost exclusively. Pretty expensive 100% rag."⁸³

Part of the reason George limited himself to a single lead was speed. With a growing number of assignments adding up to a steady stream of tight deadlines, he simply wasn't about to waste time juggling different grades of pencils. In 1986, George spoke about his approach. "I find that I really lose a great deal of time switching back and forth between pencils, and that the F lead gives me all the flexibility I need to render texture, line and shadow. A question of seconds can add up when I'm on a tight schedule, as is usually the case."⁸⁴

George's procedure for producing one of the full-page ads he created for Bergdorf, as it was with most of his fashion work, began with a model, the costume, and a Polaroid SX-

70 camera loaded with color film. Working right in his apartment, with available light or simple lamp setups, he would pose his model with the care of a cinematographer. He would shoot upwards of 30 photos, varying the lighting conditions and the poses.

"The Polaroids were taken with great attention to detail," recalls Sally MacLeod. "George would slide a piece of paper under the lapel of a jacket, to clarify its shape. He might lift my skirt and pin it on a piece of cork board, to make it look as if it were wind-blown."⁸⁵

George catalogued and stored his thousands of Polaroid 'source files' in neat stacks held together by rubber bands and tucked into a stand-alone shelving unit. This was long before digital cameras came onto the market. In 1983, George expanded on his use of his photographs: "I used to be able to do ten photos of the detail of the clothing, but now I am doing a lot more because I try different lighting. I have a lot of natural light in my apartment. I start with the photos; then I do sketches, usually three or four. I see which one looks best and then I get out the paper."⁸⁶

Jon Weiman retains strong memories of the artists working methods:

"His studio was literally like an operating theater. Bright! He had very very strong lights on what he was doing. He would have three or four mechanical pencils sharpened to a razor and if one got dull, he just moved to the next one."⁸⁷

George's ability to produce a steady high volume stream of



top notch work impressed Weiman:

“Every *week* he was doing these pieces. Every *week!* I can’t imagine doing one of these pieces in a month, much less one a week! He was shooting for the next one when he was doing the one before. When I would go up to his place, he would have Polaroids, mountains of them, everywhere. And what was really interesting was, if you looked at the Polaroids, there wasn’t that much there. If you thought that this was all about photography, it wasn’t.”⁸

When George was called upon to create a color piece, he would switch over to Arches watercolor paper and after doing a light pencil sketch, lay down an under wash of various colors using Pelican or Japanese watercolor paints. He would then use Prismacolor pencils to develop his drawing. He would sometimes incorporate the use of Dr. Martin’s dyes to add color.⁹

Stephen Marc, who worked as George’s assistant for a one-year period spanning 1978 and 1979, recalls, “Clearly he was under huge deadlines and pressures from Bergdorf. I mean it was like, two quarter-page ads and a full-page ad every week plus special ads, seasonal ads or for Fashion Week, there would always be an extra ad then. So I mean, George was *mad* working. Those full-page ads for Bergdorf were *enormous*. Sometimes he’d get a whole section finished and then he’d put down putty and he’d lift the whole thing up because he wasn’t happy with the way it was coming out. It wasn’t like he was just churning the work out. The work *so* mattered to him. When he put STAVRINOS on a piece of paper, he owned it. So despite the deadlines, the intensity and the passion that he put into that work was the most incredible thing to witness.”¹⁰

LATE IN THE DAY

In June of 1989, George embarked on a trip to Europe, which included a visit to Italy and then to England to spend time with his friends Marcus Reichert and Sally MacLeod. As he stepped off the train in Northumberland, it was clear to Sally that he wasn’t well, but he didn’t want to talk about it. “He was his usual discreet self,” recalls Sally. “His trip to us in Northumberland was obviously a good-bye trip. When we parted at the airport, we all knew it might be for the last time. In fact, we saw him once more, in New York. He was subdued but as gracious as ever. We had dinner in a restaurant and when we came out it was raining. Marcus and I were worried and wanted him to take a cab home but George said he would walk. He said rather wryly, ‘Maybe it’ll do me good.’”¹

Marcus and Sally owned a Greco-Italiane house in North Carolina with a studio, a large unfinished room that protruded into the garden. George thought that he might set himself up there and teach himself how to paint in oil. George and Marcus spoke about his future plans.

“He wanted to make oil paintings. I of course vigorously encouraged him to go, but he never went. Offers were being made for more work. There was one especially tempting one from Neiman Marcus, but they insisted on owning the copyright to each image he would create for them. We discussed this on the telephone, George in New York and me in Northumberland.

It was a bad idea, partially because George really wasn’t strong enough to take on the work, but also because it would just be more of the same and we both knew he probably didn’t have that much time left.”²

George entered Beth Israel Hospital in downtown Manhattan over the July 4th weekend in 1990.

Ron Kolodzie, a designer and educator in New York who had known George for many years, remembered returning from an overseas trip to discover that George was already in the hospital. “I came back and he was sick and in the hospital. And then I went to see him and his sister was there and at that time he was having a really bad fever and we were putting ice on him to bring the temperature down.”³

On August 3, 1990, George passed away at Beth Israel Hospital while being transferred to an ambulance to be taken home to Somerville.

The *Boston Globe* ran an obituary for George on August 6, three days after his death, with the *New York Times* following suit the next day. On August 10, George was laid to rest in Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Two months later, on October 17, 1990, George’s friends and family gathered at The Loft at 126 Fifth Avenue in Manhattan to remember and celebrate his life and work. Slides of his beautiful art were projected on the walls and a special toast was raised in honor of one of the most talented and prolific illustrators of his time. 🍷

—by Bradford R. Hamann, 2013

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