

INTERVIEW

Paula Giannini and Raoul Hague

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Q. You began your art schooling at the Art Institute of Chicago, Mr. Hague. What do you feel was the value of your training there?

A. I learned more from the students than the teachers in the classes. I wasn't very good in drawing. Art students in the museum school worked on the whole catalogue for Chicago's Natural History Museum, drawing the animals for them in 1922. I had nothing to do with it. I had no talent in drawing. But the place was wonderful . . . going through the basement of the museum to the classes. Artists were very serious. An old teacher – I don't remember his name – put a plaster cast in front of us, made us copy it. That was a crazy thing! In the basement of the museum on Saturdays the students used to place their work against a wall in a big hall. The teacher would come in – an old academician – with a cocked Fedora hat on his head, a cape and a cane. The students would place a chair in the middle of the hall and pull back respectfully. He would throw the cloak over his shoulder and with his cane he pointed to each painting, and the show was on.

The Art Institute had arranged with the management of the auditorium of the Opera House to hire students as ushers. Mary Garden was the manager of the Opera House then in the early twenties. I was the usher in her box. She used to send me backstage with notes to hand to singers like Claudia Muzio, Galli-Curci, Chaliapin. They were all fiercely made up. You can imagine the effect it made on me, a nineteen year old boy. There I saw Pavlova, the Moscow Art Theatre. Mary Garden was a tremendous personality. At 50 or 60 years old, she dressed and walked like a flapper, which was in fashion at the time.

Before my job at the Opera House, I met an Italian girl. She tried to teach me tango dancing. I remember the music was *La Paloma*. I don't know how, but we got bookings on vaudeville. We were 2, 3 months on tour around Chicago and Gary, Indiana. It was her idea to change my name from Heukelekian to Raoul – Raoul and Maria, tango dancers. But I was very, very poor and I broke away from her, and at that time I met artists, all from the west, and through them I got into the Art Institute. After a few years all of us moved to New York City. Those western students were very wholesome boys, now dead, all of them.

In the city, my first studio was on 14th Street and Fifth Avenue. By then I was separated from the rest of the boys from the west, from Chicago. Calder's father's studio was right across from my place. Now I remember young Calder used to go in and out of his father's studio – chubby little fellow. Now the famous one.

Q. When was it that you came into contact with Flanagan?

A. In New York. I joined the Art Students league. I expressed myself much better in sculpture than I did in drawing. I don't blame that fellow at the Art Institute in Chicago who said, "Give up, boy. You just don't have any talent drawing." He was right. I can't draw, even now.

Zorach was teaching at the League. I was the monitor in his class. He attracted society girls who would come in the afternoon, taking their engagement rings off, modeling in wet clay from the nude model. They were very nice girls. There was a young girl student who was out of line with the rest of them. One afternoon she remained behind. I said, "I'll walk you home." We started on 57th Street. I thought I would put her on the 7th Avenue subway. Instead, she directed me east, crossing Fifth Avenue, and I thought it would be to the Lexington Avenue subway. At Park Avenue she stopped and pointed at a skyscraper. She said, "My uncle owns that tower." She was a Gould. But it didn't take long for her to lose those rosy cheeks and peasant look. She started looking like the rest of them – narrow waist, high heels, make-up, hair-do and all.

Still, coming to your question. I don't know how I met Flanagan. Someone must have brought him over to my studio. Flanagan and Zorach hated each other. Flanagan took me over the Queensborough Bridge to a big stone yard. We bought some stones there, brought a few to my studio, carried them up three flights of stairs. I found a hammer and a chisel and Flanagan sat on a Morris chair and started reading the newspaper. You know, when you are young you can do it. Now I can't work if anybody is looking over my shoulder. By the time he finished reading the paper, I had carved a figure out of limestone. Flanagan said, "Well, that's it. That's your life. You are a sculptor."

He was the worst alcoholic case I've met in my life. He would begin with a glass of wine, and then whiskey, then a glass of wine again, and then whiskey and then a beer. He knocked himself out. The taxi drivers in the middle of the night used to drop him at my door, stealing everything he had. Talk about taxi drivers! I had a studio above a taxi garage. Even in Woodstock, when he needed money for liquor he would sell his sculpture for ten or twenty-five dollars to the artists around. Many years later, Curt Valentin sent one of his men to buy the sculpture from the artists, paying two, three thousand dollars for a piece. One of them said he made a European trip with the profits from his ten dollar investment.

Flanagan committed suicide. Oh yes. He had an accident in the city and a bone was taken out of his temple. He was a suffering man. He had a young apprentice living with him. One day this boy dropped in on me in the late afternoon. He said, "Flanagan wants to see you." Flanagan was living then in a rear house in the Chelsea district. This was 1939. Hitler had started raising hell across the ocean. Flanagan had placed two tobacco cans on the table, and a bundle of clothing. He asked us to take the cans to the Catholic Charities, in a building behind Saint Patrick's Cathedral, and the bundle to the settlement house on Allen Street, under the Williamsburg Bridge. Next morning, the apprentice was at my door, saying, "I found him dead." Flanagan had committed suicide. How thick can youth be? Flanagan was very much liked by the younger sculptors. Gorky never thought much of him and his work. But Curt Valentin, who had a good eye too, chose Flanagan.

Q. Do you think it was a personality difference with Gorky?

A. No. Personality had nothing to do with it. Gorky had a very progressive mind and eye, even though he imitated Picasso and Cézanne in the early thirties; he had an eye which elevated him to surrealism in later years – and he could draw.

I met Gorky through a very beautiful Armenian model who was posing at the Art Students League when I was the monitor there. She was Gorky's sweetheart, living with him. Gorky was a jealous man. Ruth was having an affair with José Limon, the dancer. One day Gorky tracked them to a Broadway hotel. He kicked the door of their room down, grabbed her by the arm, carried her down and put her in a taxi, drove to his place. Of course Limon was a big man and he could have leveled that Gorky. After that, the relationship between them was broken. Later, I used to walk with her in the Village streets. She was always looking behind in fear that Gorky would be following. Then she told me the story, that she had been barefoot, with only a negligee over her. Gorky many times showed me a portfolio of drawings, watercolors, of Ruth. They were exquisite. Gorky was tall, very tall, very handsome, even for today. He showed me all those drawings which were destroyed in the fire in Connecticut. I did not see Gorky after the Second World War.

Q. You started in stone and did not stay in stone . . .

A. I used to carve in stone in the summer. In the winter, in the city, I carved in wood. But when I came here to Woodstock, the bluestone was impossible to work in so I stuck to wood year 'round. In the city, Gorky came to my studio and liked my work very much. But the next morning he was at my door again. He didn't enter my studio. He said, "I made a mistake. I changed my mind. That is not good art." I took that, and remained friends with him.

Q. You did not change from stone because of something in the wood?

A. No, no. I can't find stones here that I can work with. You can't do with stone what you can do in wood, by undercutting, transforming the shape completely. The Baroque artists such as Bernini could shape stones almost as if they were modeling in clay. I can't do that.

With the Second World War, I was drafted in the army. In the city I did not know what to do with all my sculpture pieces. Hervey White who lived in the Maverick offered me his cabin to keep my sculpture in while I was away in the army. So this is the way I came to live in Woodstock.

When I was five years old, my uncle one afternoon took me to a place like a store with a stove in the center. An old man was sitting there. He had a paper book and he was cutting the pages. He had a pot on the stove and now and then he would stir it. His walls were lined with sewed, unbound books. It was peaceful there. What a difference from the bedlam of our house, with six children, the mother and aunt and all.

I have drifted to this old man's peaceful way of life in a cabin. I live in a cabin now. I chose this house because I saw his image here. Even in the army, I saw a cabin near the mule stables. It

looked like the one in the Maverick and the one in the old country. With three beds, a stove, and some pinups on the walls. I asked the stable-sergeant, "Can you use me?" And he said, "Yes." He was very anxious to have me. I didn't know what I was in for. I shoveled shit the rest of my army stay.

Those mules, oh they're fantastic animals! There were ninety of them. At night I couldn't stay away from the stables. Mules standing on four legs, with their heads almost touching the ground, would scream like a woman in childbirth, and draw deep sighs, and wheeze. But it was the cabin. I chose that again.

Q. Is it the density, the impenetrability, the weight of wood? Is it the mass?

A. Yes, I cut the mass into fragments and I move in it. One can orchestrate in the wood – I don't have a clear idea when I start. I am not a conceptual artist. So you begin. You stare at it, and finally you have to do something. You are not making a story out of it. You make a cut. From then on it follows. Like the jazz musician, music comes out of you. You make one cut, then you become intimate. That thing becomes humanized, a being. It becomes part of my life for the next three or four months. I do my chores around it. I drink evenings, looking at the progress of my work during the day.

One day a young sculptor came over to see me, showing his work, which he said looked like mine. "There it is, sharp edges, convex, concave, like your work." That shocked me. It's not that. I never have done that. I haven't got a mathematical mind. I am not an intellectual.

Q. Are there any surreal elements in your work, even in the direct method of carving which might echo the surreal idea of automatic drawing?

A. No. I do enjoy surrealist work like Magritte and Dali. But I have never let myself go into surrealism or dramatic action, working in the big trunk of the wood. I consider the wood has got half of the relationship with me. I can't dominate the material. It is a very close association. It has all sides -- that is my struggle. It has to get together. What I do in front depends on what I do in the back.

I wish you would stop that kind of questioning! It is very hard to explain.

Q. Leo Steinberg, in his writing, has said that your work is almost a classic revival, because unlike the perfection of the classic ideal which has all its limbs, your work respects the fragmentary, the ruin.

A. Yes. I had a letter from him a couple of years ago, about work much later than what he saw in the early fifties. My work has changed quite a lot. I sent him some photographs. He liked them very much. I have not heard his latest comment on my work. I respect him.

Q. People have seen sexual references in your work.

A. Well, you cannot miss it. There are, if you want to see it, sexual forms in nature. It is very easy for them to see. I am interested in natural forms – mountains, caves.

Q. It's nothing you put in?

A. From what I see? No. After all, in the city I was expressing myself differently, and differently in the country still. Of course I'm affected by the things nature has done, to the rocks, to the trees and water. They do things to each other. They create a tremendous visual drama. I don't take notes. But what I see works in me. People seem to see sensuous qualities. Those qualities are from here, from the mountains.

Q. The piece you are working on – it looks wounded, it looks anguished – it's bleeding, raw. That is, as you are working on it; and yet the finished pieces are all contained, and at rest.

A. Yes. You go into the woods and take an axe and wound the tree. It's very hard to look at. But the tree will not die, will heal itself. Even if the tree is cut down it doesn't die. They have a way of working. They breathe and sweat, and that's why they check and why we have cracks in the tree. Well, you can burn them to ashes. They'll disappear. That's what you see in the studio, what you call wounds. I made incisions in the trunk and you call this a wounded tree.

Q. Do you have any associations, like with the human condition when you see a felled tree?

A. Oh no. I don't have anything to do with politics.

Q. No, not politics, just the fact that this was alive and now is dead.

A. There is a battle in the forest. One growth trying to kill or choke another, like animals. There are some fantastic shapes in the mountains. I know the ocean is tremendous and most artists, modern artists, have chosen the ocean. But I have chosen the mountain brook. It talks, it whispers, and the Greeks listened to them. There is an old lumberer who lives next to a creek, born and grown up there. His talking is like flowing water in a creek bed. Yes, I know the ocean's arrogance can be tremendous. As I said, I like the gentleness of the brook.

Q. I think Mediterraneans generally respond to the gentler things in nature, the hills and the rivers, rather than the mountains and the oceans – the more intimate, feminine.

A. Yes, yes. That's true.

Q. Somewhere I read that you feel that your great interest in literature retarded your progress in the plastic arts.

A. Well, I have lived most of my life alone. Don't listen to radio, and never had a television. I go to the libraries (Vassar), get about five, six books, read most of them. That makes my television program. I read books for my own enjoyment. In the twenties, when I was young, I used to read heavier books, like Nietzsche, Spengler, Schopenhauer. Not now, though. In the twenties we started with H.G. Wells. And then Melville and Conrad. N.Y.U. literature students used to come and visit me in my studio on 18th Street. We talked about Whitman. In the thirties a friend of mine got me in touch with Henry Miller. He used to send me lists of books to read.

Q. Henry Miller did?

A. Yes. I remember the books he suggested. *The Egyptian Book of The Dead*, *Seraphilia Seraphitus*, and *Louis Lambert* by Balzac. He kept me going. I met Jimmy Cooney who published *Phoenix Magazine*. He introduced me to D.H. Lawrence's works and then we got to Joyce in the thirties and Proust. As the years went on, we got Gide and Kafka.

I moved about four times in the city at that time. Each building from which I moved was torn down. Those buildings, I got them cheap, because they were ready to be torn down. I lived on the top floor, third floor, and I had to move all my stuff up and down each time – stones and all. I had a studio on Lexington Avenue and 25th Street, over a book store. Goldsmith was the owner's name. We made friends. His wife used to give teas in the back room for Columbia University professors. And they used to sell me books of English mystics – fantastic kinds of writers. But then I straightened myself out by discovering French writers – Gourmont, Laforgue, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam. Their minds are clearer. Yes, Flaubert you mentioned. Yes, of course. And Stendhal. He is the freshest of all. I felt, reading him, that I was breathing a cool Mediterranean breeze.

Besides browsing in bookstores, reading in libraries, general book learning, there is a knowledge gotten by walking the streets. It is a special way of seeing. Those are the scholars made on the city streets. I like to mention here those whom I happen to know who use their eyes in a special way, starting with Gorky, Robert Frank, Charlie Egan, Peter Larkin and Bradley Tomlin.

About that time, in the early fifties, Bradley Tomlin left Woodstock. That is when he said to me, "Hague, there is nothing in Woodstock for you. You are getting your books from the Vassar library. Keep it up." I borrowed books there for twenty-three years steady. I hitchhiked at first, then owned a motorcycle, then a Model A Ford, and finally a Volkswagen, to go to Vassar Library.

Q. Has your reading influenced your work in any way?

A. No. My reading, as I see it now, because I have no one to talk to, is like a lot of newspapers left out in the rain. Of course my reading could not influence my work. They are two different things. I am a man who uses his hand an eye more than his mind. All you see in this room – the knickknacks – I made them. I play around. Yes. And for the last forty years have been making large scrapbooks. Not about myself. I paste in them pictures and articles that have steered me. I have put Auden's quotation in one of the scrapbooks: "Private faces in public places, are nicer and finer than public faces in private places."

Q. I'm very impressed by your courage, not only in the way you live but in the way you have chosen to work. You come close to disaster, you take enormous chances in your work.

A. Yes. But I take changes very hard. I have to have a continuation.
I take chances, but wood stays there. You can always go along with it. You can make space in the wood, go in. You know, I don't add to it. I am always in there. By cutting away, I make additional space. But then I have learned to have accidents work for my benefit. If you are not afraid of accidents.

Q. How influential is the original form of the wood in which you begin to work? What makes you choose a particular block?

A. The size. It has to be large now, and I have chosen walnut most of the time because it doesn't check very much, and cuts evenly. And it stays very well compared to other woods. I know how the wood will react. The other wood is chestnut, but you can't get it very large. No, I'm not choosy, but I have to have the girth. At least 42 inches in diameter. I'm interested in height also. I can't handle more than 6 foot four-and-a-half inches in height. I'll take anything, either drum shape or a crotch.

Now they're using all that kind of wood I need. Here they are, making tables with walnut, highly polished.

In spite of what people think, I do not see the graining at all, throughout my working with the wood. I am not choosing the wood because of its graining.

Q. But you have made a table of it too!

A. Yes, I did make this, but it is not walnut, it's pine.

Q. Tell me again the story of de Kooning.

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A. It was in the early thirties. De Kooning had a studio on Union Square then. Gorky, de Kooning and I met. Elaine came along, and we went to the Metropolitan Museum, and Gorky took us on a tour. We stood in front of a painting, I think it was early Renaissance, painting of monks and nuns in Paradise, cavorting on green grass. Gorky looked at it, pointed at it and said, "Innocence, tenderness." And then we moved to another painting. This was Florentine, a girl at a casement window, standing in profile, and from outside a Renaissance young boy looking at her almost frozen gaze, and Gorky said, "Electricity." So it was a great tour of the museum.

After that we went to Central Park. We hired a boat at the lake, Gorky and I rowing. Elaine was sitting at the stern, holding her hand up, showing us her engagement ring. She had long legs and we could see through her skirt. Bill saw where our eyes were focused. He changed his seat and covered her. After we finished rowing, de Kooning put Elaine on a bus and sent her home. She was eighteen, very beautiful, and like nice girls she should go home for dinner.

The three of us decided we should go to Chinatown for dinner. We took the Third Avenue el and Gorky surprised me. He got sick. He couldn't take heights. He had to sit down and close his eyes. That boisterous man who was always punching everybody around, had a weakness. At Chinatown in the restaurant he recovered. There was a young girl sitting on a chair, very beautiful. I pointed her out to Gorky. I said "Do you like her?" He said, "No. I like a women who sits on one cheek of her ass." Afterwards, we walked all the way back home. And Gorky sang, and when he sang, he cried, and made a big show out of it. They were very good friends, Gorky and de Kooning.

We were talking about jazz musicians and the blacks. Right across from my house in the Maverick there was a very old man who was living in a cottage. Very handsome, very tall. (Black men, as they grow older, become handsomer than old white men when *they* grow older.) He had a garden. In the Maverick, the artists hired him to bury their outhouses. When he was out to do that job, his get-up, his clothes, were fantastic. He looked like a scarecrow. But then when he was ready to go to Woodstock for shopping, he dressed and looked like a Spanish Don. Black two-piece suit.

He used to read grocery packages or labels on cans of food before he opened them to eat, as if he were reading from *Genesis*. One day he used the word *ambiguity*. I said, "What John?" He repeated the word, *ambiguity*, very slowly, but looking directly into my eyes. That knocked me over because in the 'forties the word was being bandied around at the city bars, by artists and intellectuals. Where did he come across that word?

I would say that for myself I have gotten out of blacks more that I have gotten out of whites. Blacks have style, and have given style to Americans.

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