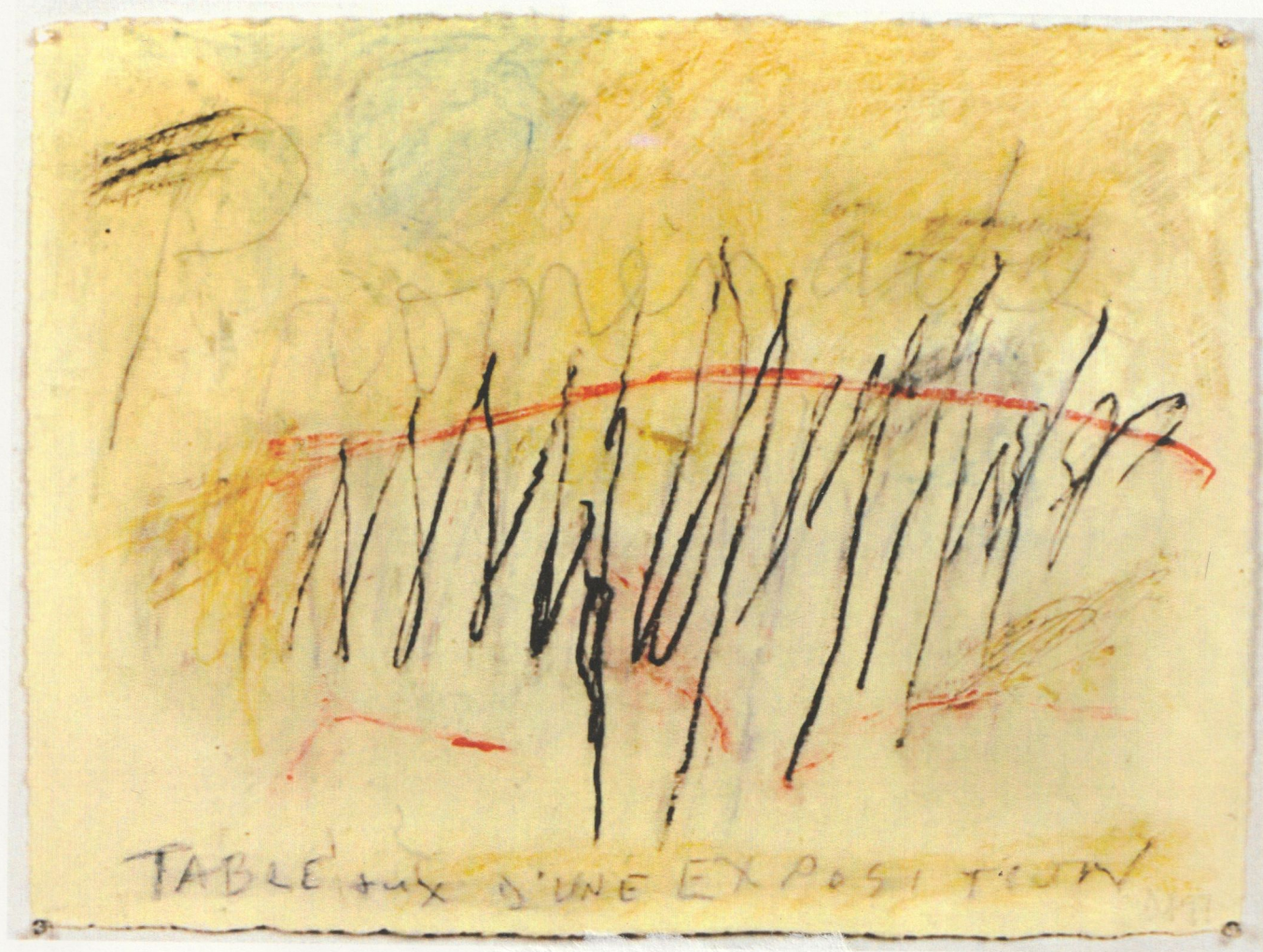




... poems, chamber mus., and songs.

Pictures at an Exhibition (*Kartinki s vystavki*).
Pf. comp. by Mussorgsky, 1874, being mus.
representation of 10 pictures at a memorial
exhibition for Russ. artist Victor Hartmann, who
died in 1873, with a 'promenade' as linking
passage. Orch. versions by Ravel, Henry Wood
Stokowski, Elgar Howarth (br

FATHER'S ARCADE

At our house, come Sunday, there was likely to be a gathering of my father and several of my uncles for a playing of, what Pop called, the classics. Thinking back, this seems an odd assortment of guys to be into laughter-filled music. This was the swing era and, except for Pop, these guys tended to be a little older, heavier men and a little more serious. They spent most of their time in the kitchen, and I remember them standing there, their hands on their hips, looking at each other and nodding. Naturally, I was partial to these uncles, especially when they showed up for the Sunday class or wearing hiking boots. It's a vivid recollection, because I collected these high-top boots with the jock-strap-shaped patch inside the calf and the dark brown leather stockings were marking the spot where the boots would be.

Pictures at an Exhibition

by
Dan Abramson

The other day, my father's brothers, seemed more serious with. One of them always brought along a museum's brochure - a gallery card I say now that I've changed some and enough the art scene to say so a being a suite of mixed media paintings inspired by Modeste Mussorgsky's musical composition, 1874

Our house was to be a place where a gallery of the artist. My father seemed to be a serious collector and I remember the whole gallery of Pop's ritual playing of the classics. Pop would conduct his modest collection of symphonies and I was obliged to wear my red dress and the red hat that his mother's getting played and mother was being way and lost without me. Is there any reason then that I would get resent the scratch-raging of Tchaikovsky and the stately thunder of Beethoven? What did Liszt and Shostakovich and those dead composers have to do with the few things I wanted? Even the first Mussorgsky I remember, Night On Bald Mountain, had a threatening tone. I would say now, where were Bach and Haydn and Vivaldi when I needed them?

FATHER'S MUSIC

At our house, come Sunday, there was likely to be a gathering of my father and several of my uncles for a playing of, what Pop called, the classics. Thinking back, this seems an odd consortium of guys to be into longhaired music. This was the swing era and, except for Pop, these guys tended toward straw boater hats and spiffy two-tone shoes; they spent most of their off time going after girls. I can still hear my mother needling her brothers about "those floozies" they would bring around. Naturally, I was partial to those uncles, especially when they showed up for the Sunday classics wearing hiking outfits. It's a vivid recollection because I coveted those high top boots of theirs with the jackknife-sized pocket aside the calf and the bright red trim of heavy woolen stockings smartly marking the spot where pants tucked into boot.

The other uncles, my father's brothers, seemed more serious sorts. One of them always brought along a maestro's baton—a genuine one I'd say now that I've managed seats near enough the orchestra to witness a genuine maestro slashing the air with that nimble wand.

The coming of WWII, of course, effected everything and everyone. Our house was to never again hold a Sunday gathering of the uncles. My father assumed his brother's baton, and I became the sole gatherer at Pop's ritual playing of the classics. Pop would 'conduct' his modest collection of symphonies, and I was obliged to seem involved despite the sad fact that baseball wasn't getting played and marbles were being won and lost without me. Is there any reason then that I would not resent the scratch-raging of Tchaikovsky and the staticky thunder of Beethoven? What did Sibelius and Shostakovich and those dead composers have to do with the fun things I wanted? Even the first Mussorgsky I remember, *Night On Bald Mountain*, had a threatening tone. I would say now, where were Bach and Haydn and Vivaldi when I needed them?

Back then, Pop tried to make up for the gaps in his phonograph collection by creating fanciful narrations, far different from what album notes might tell and far more than I needed to know about Napoleonic wars or Swiss archery or the aerodynamic impossibility of apiarian flight. Since Pop was too old to serve in the war, he was sort of obligated to perform double and triple duty on the home front. With so many men and women in uniform, older and younger people had to take up the slack. Before long, money became less scarce than it had been. The trouble, in fact, seemed to have reversed itself: too much money, too little to spend it on. Classical music might have been the exception. Certainly Pop was bringing home a new encyclopedia-sized classical music album every time he got a paycheck.

Were Pop's paydays happy days for me? Well, maybe once at least, the first time he set down the needle on a particular new record and out came a most assuring trumpet proclamation, just a few bars, really, of something I'd now call heavenly authority. It was my first hearing of *The Promenade* and it shortly leads to a point where orchestra echoes trumpet and then takes over the piece.

That, of course, is *Pictures at an Exhibition*, most likely as arranged by Maurice Ravel in 1923, nearly 50 years after Mussorgsky wrote it. Quite possibly, it was a 1930 recording conducted by Serge Koussevitzky with The Boston Symphony Orchestra. But, in truth, there isn't anything I can say about *Pictures* that isn't already in print somewhere, or of a radio concert host's telling, or on the internet as one of the thousands of entries listed by Google's search engine site. Except for one thing:

It is the most sublime of my father's music. The one that remains, the one that has echoed through me ever since those childhood Sunday mornings.

What also remains is this.

Before he'd exposed me to *Pictures*, Pop developed his attendant narration. He would have known that Mussorgsky was memorializing the paintings of his friend, Victor Hartmann. He knew the titles of each of the movements among the interspersings of the promenade leitmotif. He surely knew that the composer was, through music, recollecting his stroll along the walls that held Hartmann's paintings and that the music



GNOMUS, 1996 30 3/8 x 23"
mixed media crayons, pencil, wax, collage
on Arches

expressed the composer's feeling for those painting as well as his sense of sorrow for his friend's early passing. And accurate or not, all of that became source material for Pop.

There's no question, however, that the Promenade motif is Mussorgsky's vehicle to guide listeners through his interpretations of the Hoffmann pictures. First, we're 'shown' a frightening dwarf with thunderous footfalls. Then the haunting visage of a medieval castle is portrayed. And the vitality of the Tuileries Gardens of Paris. An enormous oxcart thunders in, then lumbers off toward the horizon, which leads to the sounds of chicks struggling to hatch from their shells.

Understand, it is Mussorgsky's lyrical reworkings of The Promenade that makes possible his fanciful segues. What follows next is a boisterous confrontation between two Polish Jews, one who is said to be rich, the other poor. From there, we skip to the farmers market at Limoges, the shoppers bickering over prices. Then, there are Roman catacombs where ancient human skulls shine feebly by lantern glow. A witch stemming from Russian folklore is revealed ascending from her peculiar hut supported by fowl's legs. And finally, the great gate of Kiev is imagined and triumphantly celebrated by Mussorgsky as though Victor Hartmann had actually won the architectural competition he'd entered in hopes of gaining the commission to design such a *grand porte*.

Today, however, we know of at least one account that places the Hartmann works portrayed by Mussorgsky's music as but a part of an exhibition of 400 works exhibited by the St. Petersburg Society of Architects in 1873, the year of the artist's death. Other accounts place Mussorgsky at an 1874 memorial exhibition of Hartmann's works.

Details of this sort, I confess, had little bearing on my own work. I simply allowed facts and myths and recollections to brew away in a single porridge. I suppose that I'd imagined Hartmann's work to be painterly in a late 19th century sense, impressionistic perhaps. It didn't seem to matter. Still, I relished any occasion when I could settle back and absorb a broadcast or recording of the 45 minutes or so of Pictures.



THE OLD CASTLE, 1997 30³/₈ x 23"
mixed media crayons, pencil on Arches

It was never my father's pictures that I would conjure. It wasn't even pictures in a usual sense. Hazes of line and color and sensation ran through my mind. And since I'd never actually seen a Hartmann, there was no point of departure to inhibit or bottle up my visions or emotions. Yet, I don't recall having had a desire or need to go ahead and create a suite of pictures. No, those listenings got me to memory lane. Nothing more.

It wasn't until about ten years ago, an unforgettable afternoon, that I was at once compelled to create my own Pictures. That was the day I learned that, among the things my father never taught me, and that I was somehow able to stay in ignorance of, is this:

Pictures at an Exhibition was not written for an orchestra.

Mussorgsky, the piano being one of his abundant talents, wrote the suite for solo piano. And it remained a solo piece until that Ravel arrangement for orchestra served to give wide popularity to what had been an esoteric delight. Yet, it wasn't until I happened upon a classical station's playing of a 1961 performance by Byron Janis that I gained awareness of this history. I can't tell you why, but Janis' recording had never been released, not until that CD, issued more than 30 years after the fact.

For me, the power and intimacy, the delicacy and agility of solo piano gave fresh meaning to the images being celebrated. The scenes began to take shape, so to speak; they began to take on color and they actually began to exist before they actually existed. I was seeing them as though they did exist. Then, having my own copy of the Janis CD, with his revealing notes, with his ability to maximize the piano's percussive quality, as Mussorgsky no doubt intended, Pictures as a project became irresistible. That is, what was stewing away in my mind needed to be let out, given a tangible existence.

During the following three to four years, I let myself be taken in by the rhetoric of Pictures until I felt that I was experiencing something Mussorgsky might have as he sat at his piano and wrote down his



TUILERIES, 1997 30 x 22 1/2"
oil, mixed media crayons, pencil on Arches

immortal score. Byron Janis felt that “there has been no greater work composed for the piano . . .”

Still, I had no need or intention, not even a curiosity, to reference a Hoffmann painting or drawing. (I’d learned that this could have been done at any library that might contain a July, 1939 *Musical Quarterly*.) No, the images that follow are the result of a usual process, at least for me, which begins with thumbnail scribbles that then progress to a larger scale where they may become false starts, revises, total ‘erasures’, complete changes of mind, etc , etc . . .

These ‘pictures’ eventually materialized as mixed media paintings, i.e. oils, crayons, pencil, collage elements, whatever, on heavy, hand made French paper. Quite often, the sound of Mussorgsky’s Pictures would be blasting through my studio as I worked and/or pondered—both piano and orchestral versions—and I would say that it was Janis’ piano that moved me, got my hands to move, sometimes both of them at once.

---Dan Abramson, September, 2003