

BLOOD

There is no greater sorrow on earth than the loss of one's native land.
—Euripides, 431 BC

A MUSEUM'S LOSS

The security guards watched attentively as the painting from the Metropolitan Museum of Art arrived at Sotheby's on York Avenue in Manhattan. Jon Corbino's *Flood Refugees* (plate 2), painted during the artist's Guggenheim Fellowship in 1938 and bought by the Met in 1950, had been de-accessioned and would be sold at auction on March 25, 1997. It was estimated to bring \$2,000 to \$3,000.

When the painting was originally acquired, Francis Henry Taylor, the Met's director, wrote to Corbino that he was particularly delighted to purchase *Flood Refugees*, but he resigned in 1954 and subsequent leaders had different ideas. De-accession is not unusual. Museums often sell work when the focus of their collections changes. The Museum of Modern Art, for example, has over the years shed more than twenty works by Pablo Picasso.¹

Flood Refugees was brought to the stage as the auctioneer announced, "Lot 166." The bidding was brisk, and when the gavel finally fell at \$46,000, a private collector was the new owner. In 2002, *Flood Refugees* appeared in the traveling exhibition *Coming Home: American Paintings 1930–1950*, from the Schoen Collection and is now on long-term loan to the Georgia Museum of Art.

Even though the painting brought twenty times its estimate, it was far below the nearly \$1.3 million Edward Hopper's *Squam Light* (24 x 29 inches) brought at another Sotheby's sale a few months later; yet the artists had exhibited together in a two-man show in 1956 and received similar accolades from the same critics. Today Hopper is a name recognized even by amateur art enthusiasts. Corbino is not as familiar, but his journey through twentieth-century America was remarkable. He had his own interpretation of the iconic themes in art, felt an enduring love for his country, and used events in American news stories—floods, earthquakes, and civil rights—as the material to shape his work. A chronicler of the American circus, regionalist, and muralist for the Section of Painting and Sculpture (U.S. Treasury Department), this "Rubens of New England" (*Life*, 1938) struggled with personal demons and a capricious public.

EARTHQUAKE

In the beginning, there was little to indicate that Giovanni Corbino would become one of the premiere painters of mid-twentieth-century America. Gaetano Corbino's son, born on April 3, 1905 in Vittoria, Sicily, was already a casualty of personal and political wars. Late in 1904, twenty-six-year-old Gaetano (b. August 5, 1878), a self-proclaimed anarchist, left Salvatrice Collura, his nineteen-year-old pregnant wife (b. July 4, 1885), and sailed for Argentina to escape possible political reprisals. She wouldn't see him for more than eight years.

Needing money for his trip, Gaetano sold his wife's dowry—the house in which they lived—to his sister. Traditionally a symbol of sincerity and good faith, the squandered property was the worst of insults to a Sicilian family, and so civility between the Corbinos and Colluras was impossible. As if to compound the problem, when Gaetano's sister died, she left the house to her son in Brooklyn.² On the day Giovanni Corbino was born, the disgrace to the Collura clan and Salvatrice's humiliation became tangible. The little boy would be loved, for he was a Collura, but he would be a constant reminder of the offense to the family.

Ten years before Gaetano left Sicily, the anarchists he supported called for the end of the Italian monarchy, and many were arrested, often on trumped-up charges. Gaetano joined a group comprised of both anarchists and radical socialists that espoused a philosophy they dubbed “revolutionary syndicalism.”³ Syndicalism continued to call for the working class to abolish the state (the symbol of capitalist order), and to institute a social order based on workers organized in production units. Direct elections of workers to the councils would oversee production and distribution of goods.

It was, at best, a loose antiauthoritarian system. The group approved a mass general strike on September 4, 1904. For four days, the entire country was paralyzed, but the state did not fall. Afraid of reprisal, Gaetano found a ship leaving for Buenos Aires and booked passage with a traveling companion named Maria Ferrari. Nothing is known about their relationship.

Salvatrice's first trip to the United States occurred when Giovanni was six. Gaetano, who had arrived in New York in the summer of 1910 after earning money by selling textiles in Buenos Aires, wrote that he was ready to receive his wife and child. When he explained that they would have a new life—husband, wife, and son—Salvatrice didn't hesitate to accept his invitation. There was no word of Maria Ferrari. On the voyage to New York, Gaetano traveled with another woman, Teresa Capitina, but her name doesn't appear in any other documentation of his life.

After years of living apart from her spouse, Salvatrice was convinced that being with Gaetano in America was her chance for a good life. In Sicily, she was forced to watch sisters and cousins succeed in family life where she had failed. She knew that no matter how much love her parents may have had for her and for her son, they would be the reminders of an affront. Every day that Salvatrice awoke without her husband, her son's father, was a day to be endured. Her chance at a family—her own family—was in America with her husband. There was no question of divorce. Gaetano was her hope.

Giovanni always remembered that December day at the station, when his grandfather Collura faded into the distance as the train pulled away from Vittoria. When he was older and had become Jon Corbino the artist, he could still recall a few images of Giambattista: a man with black and silver hair who rode a chestnut horse, the

lupara always at his hip, the fierce looking mastiffs with docked tails trotting beside him. Giambattista was a wealthy man who owned three houses in Vittoria, a villa in the country, and a profitable vineyard. He was by all accounts considered hard but fair, and respected (if not feared) by the people of Vittoria. Everyone, including his grandson, obeyed his orders without question. And so on a rather cold day in late 1911, this tall, formidable man shook Giovanni's little hand and told him to be a strong boy for the sake of his mother.

The ride to the ruined city of Messina, destroyed almost completely by an earthquake two years earlier (December 28, 1908), was exciting for the young boy who didn't quite realize why one of his aunts cried so much when they said goodbye. He would never forget the speed of the train and the passing views—a craggy brown land rushing by high above the blue-black waves of the sea. But when they approached the sickle-shaped Messina harbor to catch their boat to Palermo, he grew frightened by the rubble of buildings, a city of dirt and dust and stone, with Mt. Etna looming in the distance.

"The city was in ruins," Corbino told a reporter years later. "The train tracks had not been repaired and it had been raining. We had to drag all our trunks and luggage through the rain and mud in the dark from the train to the dock" (SB). It had been a horrific quake. American consul to Milan, Bayard Cutting, arrived on January 2, 1909 and recorded his thoughts in his journal: "The scenes are awful—houses open, with corpses in every room."⁴ Estimates of the dead soon reached more than 70,000 of the 150,000 residents.

The destruction burned deep into a young boy's psyche. After Corbino had become a leading figure in the New York art world, an *Art Digest* reporter suggested that these early images of devastation, regardless of how they might have haunted Corbino's dreams, made powerful art. "Here is nature at its worst—relentless, inescapable and fraught with fury."⁵

On December 8, 1910, Salvatrice and her son left from Palermo on the *Italia*, a small 4,800-ton ship that carried 1,400 passengers. The manifest for the trip reads "Giovanni Corbino, aged 6" and "Salvatrice Collura, aged 28."⁶ The ship arrived in New York harbor on a frosty Christmas morning, and for the first time they saw America—the massive Statue of Liberty holding her torch above her head as a beacon to weary travelers, then the city itself with smoke curling above the factories that glistened in the sunlight. The voyage had been rough and long, the stink from seasick passengers an inescapable part of the terrible trip. In this new land at least Giovanni would be able to feel solid ground under him instead of the heaving ship. A lady next to him tied a scarf around her head, protecting herself from a biting wind. An old man, ill from the voyage, shivered in his threadbare coat. Giovanni's ears were numb, and his fingers ached.

He held tight to his mother's hand, feeling the crush of people who didn't seem to notice him. They pushed their way through the lines, finally to meet an official who asked his mother what seemed to be endless numbers of questions. He smelled smoke, like his grandfather's cigar, and the sour scent of urine. When he poked his head around Salvatrice's skirt to see if he could find his father, he remembered that he didn't know what the man looked like. A doctor checked their eyes, and listened to his mother's heart.

Salvatrice cast worried glances at him, and then at the official in the blue suit who was frowning and making quick notes on a piece of paper. Her grip got tighter suddenly as another man in uniform escorted them to a small, crowded room that

smelled like old, musty hay. Someone called his mother's name, and she answered. She was crying when they took her away, and that frightened him. She said they would be together again, as soon as his father came to get them, but he would have to stay in another place without her for a little while. He would need to be brave and fearless, like his grandfather.

But he was not. Corbino always remembered the terror of a small boy sitting alone and afraid on a bench, surrounded by grown men. In the morning, a lady official brought food for the inmates. He took a bite of the cold fried egg that had been put on a tin tray with a piece of toast and a cup of coffee. He was hungry but noticed a big, rough man sitting next to him who had already eaten his own food. Giovanni lifted up his tray and the man took everything. "I did it so that he would be nice to me."

There could have been reasons for Gaetano's absence. Perhaps Salvatrice's letter to her husband announcing her arrival date was lost. Perhaps officials misunderstood Gaetano, who never learned English, when he tried to locate them at Ellis Island. Was he looking for Salvatrice Corbino, not knowing to ask for Salvatrice Collura? Records found after Gaetano's death state that he arrived in the United States on the French steamship *Santa Anna* on August 17, 1910.⁷ The ship, new that year, was used specifically for carrying passengers between the Mediterranean and New York. Had Gaetano returned for a time to Sicily? His American sponsor was a native of Vittoria, Salvatore Migliorisi (b. 1889), 149 Monroe Street, New York City.⁸ Whatever transpired, whatever the confusion, Gaetano did not appear at Ellis Island in 1911 to collect his wife and son.

For two weeks, a six-year-old boy was separated from his mother, at the mercy of other detainees and officials, and then deported with her to Sicily. The idea of his father, never positive, became solidified as the epitome of neglect and disdain. He would not forgive Gaetano Corbino.

His father's betrayal stayed with Corbino his entire life, and was part of his public persona. In 1993, twenty-nine years after the artist's death, Regina Soria repeated the story in *American Artists of Italian Heritage*: "1911, first trip to the United States with mother, to join father, who did not meet them at Ellis Island. They were turned back and returned to Sicily" (65). Soria reproduced *Arcadia*, Corbino's own vision of the paradise immortalized in Virgil's *Eclogues* and Jacopo Sannazaro's *Arcadia*.⁹ In the distance, at the edge of the sea, a woman fights with a man on horseback as a young boy reaches for her skirt.

THE SECOND VOYAGE

After their ship arrived in Palermo, Salvatrice and her son returned to Vittoria by train. One can imagine the scene as her family greeted them at the station. For Giovanni, there must have been relief that his ordeal was over, and joy that his familiar life would begin again. Soon he would be playing with his uncle Salvatore, who was his own age, and his grandmother would feed him her biscotti and fresh milk. Everything would be as it was before.

Several weeks later, a letter arrived from Gaetano. No one knows its contents, but Salvatrice wrote back. Gaetano answered; Salvatrice wrote again and sent him a photograph of his handsome son. Over time, the correspondence became as it had been before the fiasco, and two more years passed uneventfully. Salvatrice resumed

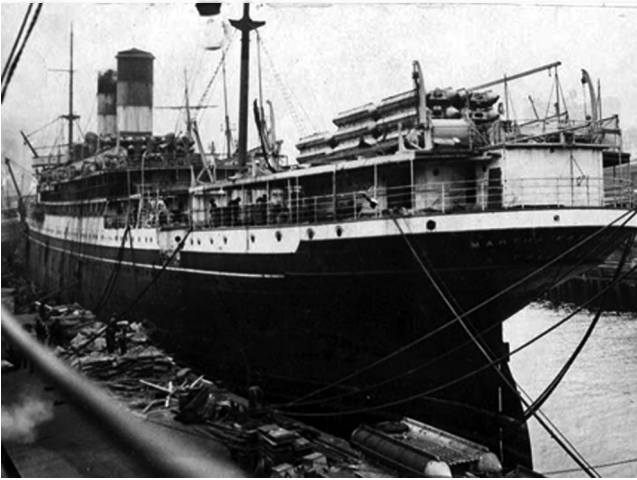


FIGURE 1.1. Jon Corbino, age eight, and the USS *Martha Washington*. Corbino Archives (CA), and The Naval History and Heritage Command, Washington, D.C.

her embroidery lessons. Giovanni went to school and played under the blue skies of Vittoria.

After a letter from her husband arrived in the early summer months of 1913, Salvatrice quietly planned another voyage. Gaetano told her that he was ready for her to join him and that he would never return to Sicily. If they were to be a family, she must come to America. She agreed. Once again, her son's world was about to be shattered.

Years later, Jon Corbino told his friends that he knew something was wrong when his mother began packing the same trunks that had accompanied them on the first voyage. Salvatrice said they were going to visit a relative; he suspected she was lying. His grandmother looked upset: why would she be worried if they were only going to be gone for a short time?¹⁰

There was no relative waiting for them when they arrived in Palermo, only long lines of people in front of the *Martha Washington*, its black and red funnel decorated by a thick white stripe. Built in 1908 in Glasgow at a weight of more than 8,000 tons, she was one of the bigger ships of the day with room for 3,090 passengers. She had

left Trieste two days earlier, arriving in Palermo so that additional passengers could embark, including the two refugees from Vittoria.

A group of excited passengers boarded on August 31, 1913, and the captain had no reason for concern as the ship pulled out of Palermo to make its way across the Mediterranean Sea, south of Sardinia, through the Strait of Gibraltar, into the open Atlantic.

A few days earlier, winds off the west coast of Africa, near Cape Verde, converged and began a counterclockwise circulation. It happened all the time in the summer months. Usually the winds maintained low speed, traveling across the Atlantic as tropical waves and causing no more trouble than a few squalls on the land masses they struck.

But on this occasion, the low pressure spawned several large thunderstorms that were fed by warm waters, and strong winds formed around a loosely organized center. The storm, far away from the *Martha Washington*, became a hurricane on September 3 after it made its way across the Atlantic, skirting the Lesser Antilles. Then late on the night of September 4, it turned sharply north.

In the meantime, the unsuspecting crew guided the *Martha Washington* past the Azores. As the ship slipped through relatively calm seas, Salvatrice worried about repairing her relationship with her son. When they reached New York, how would he react to a father that had already deserted him twice?

The storm deep in the central Atlantic, reaching maximum winds of one hundred miles per hour, now took an odd turn due east during the night of September 5 and headed directly into the path of the *Martha Washington*. The next morning a black sky completely obscured the sun. Rain beat down so hard that it hurt the faces of the crew trying to secure equipment, and the captain ordered everyone else into the hold of the ship.

Tremendous waves broke over the deck, carrying away the starboard lifeboats. Water began to leak into the lower levels—the engine room, and even the hold, where 2,000 passengers were trapped. A frightened little boy never forgot those hours, and told the story to Marcia Corbino years later:

We huddled on luggage and crates that shifted with each crash of a wave. The smell of fear was overpowering. The women were moaning and praying, counting their beads or shrieking in terror. Everyone was convinced that we were going to die. When I couldn't stand it any longer, I climbed the ladder to the deck for some fresh air. The ship was bouncing like a ball on the tremendous waves. I lost my footing on the wet deck and was almost washed overboard by a black wall of water. A sailor rescued me, but he was very angry that he had to risk his life to save me. (CA)

Giovanni heard the wails of the ship's passengers, and then, unaccountably, a few hours later, peals of relieved laughter, but the young boy saw nothing amusing about the way he had been buffeted about.

Of the more than 2,000 passengers who shared the terror that September, most moved on with the business of living. For young Giovanni Corbino, though, it was an affront by the universe aimed directly at him. He had been on that trip before; the gods hadn't destroyed him then, and so they tried again. Years later he would quote Stephen Crane to friends and students: "A man said to the universe: / 'Sir I

exist!' / 'However,' replied the universe, / 'The fact has not created in me / A sense of obligation.'"11

When the *Martha Washington* sailed into New York harbor on September 8, 1913, she was battered but had not lost a single passenger. Later she would serve as a troop ship in World War I, but her first battle was won before the Great War had even begun. Passengers lined the railings, waving and calling to loved ones on the docks. News of the storm had spread and those waiting were understandably concerned.

Immigrant passengers who were planning to stay in America had still another wait to endure before they were united with friends and family. Salvatrice and Giovanni were ushered into a waiting area, where once again an immigration official asked Salvatrice questions, marking his paper as she answered. Then there was another room and more questions. Giovanni had seen it all happen before, and prepared to be separated from his mother. He didn't want to stay in America, but he couldn't imagine braving another hurricane, even to return to Vittoria.

After several hours, an official approached them. "Your husband is waiting for you, Mrs. Corbino." He spoke in English, and waved her on. Outside the room stood Gaetano Corbino. He embraced his wife, and spoke to her softly, but Giovanni couldn't hear what was said.

Gaetano had dark, thick eyebrows and a small mustache. He wore a stylish brown suit and black tie, and his fedora was cocked to one side, shadowing his right eye. This was the father Giovanni had seen in the photographs his mother showed him. The man walked up to him and took his hand. It felt smooth, not as big as his grandfather's. "Buongiorno, Giovanni," he said. "Sono il tuo papa."

Giovanni's legs, unsteady from the long voyage, buckled, and he stumbled. He thought for a moment that the storm had followed him.