

INTRODUCTION

This volume is intended as but a selection of the graphics work of the prolific artist, Robert Cimbalo. The large lithographs, for instance, here represented are just a few of the perhaps one hundred and fifty he has done. I have selected sixteen of the Dante illustrations of the series of fifty; the drawings here are a small part of a body of over a thousand. And what is here does not represent the bulk of his work of the last thirty years, which has been concentrated in oils and craypas. Cimbalo, who had been widely known early in his career as “The Printmaker,” is now celebrated nationally as the painter and illustrator of scenes of Italian-American life, especially of the period 1940-60. That Cimbalo awaits a second volume.

Robert Cimbalo and I shared the growing up in the Italian-American enclave of East Utica, New York; he the son of Santo Cimbalo of Cellara near Cosenza, and Rose Gagliardi Cimbalo, from Tiriolo, near Catanzaro. He worked as an ironworker (his father’s profession) for a while, served with the army in Korea, and then went on to study at the Pratt Institute of Art in Brooklyn, New York, under Fritz Eichenberg, Richard Lindner, and Philip Pearlstein. He then spent two years at the studio of Roberto Bulla in Rome, Italy, where he met and worked alongside Giorgio De Chirico, Emilio Greco, and Renato Guttuso. After earning a Masters in Fine Arts at Syracuse University, Cimbalo created a Graphics Arts Department at the Munson-Williams-Proctor School of Art in Utica, New York in 1968, where he worked and taught for twelve years. In this period, he embarked on a series of some eighty large works entitled “Embraces,” exploring human relationships, works of enormous power and variety.

At a one-man exhibition of Cimbalo’s work in 1969, I mentioned to him that one of his woodcuts (p. 53) could be a perfect illustration of the Paolo and Francesca episode of Canto 5 of Dante’s “Inferno.” The remark led to a collaboration, which resulted first in the limited fine-arts edition, “East Utica,” published in 1971 by the Munson-Williams-Proctor Museum, and culminated in 1983 with the exhibition of thirty-four large drawings based on scenes from Dante’s *Inferno*. These drawings have been widely exhibited. Six are reproduced in my anthology “*Illustrations to Dante’s Inferno*.”

He accepted a teaching position at Utica College (then a branch of Syracuse University) in 1980, where there was neither press nor graphics curriculum. He continued doing drawings and illustrations for various books and magazines, but also took the opportunity to paint in oils and craypas and to depict the roots of his Italian-American heritage.

The small selection of lithographs, etchings, and woodcuts here presented can yet give haunting expression to both the great energy and deep pathos of these symbols of the human condition as seen by the young artist: the child on page 17 caught beneath its parents, who suffer together, Caliban (p. 16) of Shakespeare’s *Tempest*, weighted under by the earth around his neck, the artist’s father waiting for death in his last days (p. 21), the somber kitchen of the artist’s aunt (p. 23) on the day she died.

No one can speak better of Cimbalo's wildly inventive illustrations to Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood* than the great publishers of *New Directions*, James Laughlin and Robert MacGregor:

Both James Laughlin and I have been quite fascinated by your drawings illustrating UNDER MILK WOOD by Dylan Thomas. We think by all standards they are imaginative and yet wonderfully apt...

Robert MacGregor. Aug. 31, 1967

Unfortunately, *New Directions*, while publishing the greatest poets of the twentieth century, never added illustrative material to the poetic texts. Cimbalo's drawings catch perfectly Thomas's characteristically grotesque humor, the tragi-comedy of life as he sees it with his blending of harshness and softness of attitude.

The drawings for Dante's *Inferno* bear the stamp of witty literalism, as for instance in the handsome face of Geryon of Canto 17 with his scorpion's tail, the bare behind of "Malacoda" ("bad-ass") of Canto 21, and the literal horror of the Ugolini-Ruggieri scene of Canto 33, which is without empathy for either sinner.

Cimbalo's *Inferno* drawings elicited this response from John Ciardi, the great translator of the *Commedia*:

Let me say that I am much taken by these illustrations...the general feeling of gloom and of spiritual-anatomic distortion is rich and right.

John Ciardi. Sept. 16, 1985

The drawings of section four are predominantly from among more than 150 drawings done from 1998 to the present for *Fra Noi* ("Between Us"), the distinguished Chicago Italian-American monthly, done to illustrate Italian food and folk culture. They represent the transition in Cimbalo's artistic focus to a return to his heart's core, neighborhood and family, the streets and the workplaces, the immediate and the contingent, the feel of the houses and their interiors, the backyard gardens and gatherings, the rituals of the passing years in a culture that was also passing though we hardly knew it. The drawings by Cimbalo for other magazines and books (listed in the "Bibliography") only intensify the poignant drama of a life caught in all of its complex chiaroscuro.

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