

CONVERSATIONS



FRANK PROVENZANO

Four-wheel seduction drives collectors dreams

In the side lot at Larry Smith's auto body shop is a collection of dreams — and nightmares.

A sporty new silver Porsche looks as if its front teeth have been knocked out. Apparently, the dream-on-wheels suffers from a broken axle.

And then, there's an ailing Jaguar with a mangled fender, and a forlorn look of a cat stuck in a tree.

The exclusive hospital ward of delicately expensive imports at Smith's Autometric Body Shop in Pontiac is a refuge and tringe unit of last hope for owners of some of the flashiest cars on the road.

Smith is not only seduced by fender styles and what's under the hood. He also has the bug for what these four-wheel works of art inspire on canvas and in bronze.



STAFF PHOTO BY TOM HOFFMEYER

Touch of class: Larry Smith of Bloomfield Hills is chairman of the Concours d'Elegance art auction committee.

Drop-dead gorgeous

The Bloomfield Hills resident is chair of the art auction committee, which oversees the selection and formal bidding on works by 16 artists invited to display their automobile-inspired art as part of the Concours d'Elegance, a week-long celebration of classic cars presented by Meadow Brook Hall.

The works of art are on display through Thursday at the Somerset Collection. A ritzy display of classic cars will be held Sunday, Aug. 1 on the grounds of Meadow Brook Hall.

- Meadow Brook Hall Concours d'Elegance**
- "Invitational Art Exhibit," Somerset Collection, 515 Beaver Road at Coolidge, Troy — Through Thursday, July 29 and Aug. 1 at "Concours d'Elegance."
  - "Artists Award Reception," 7 p.m. Friday, July 30 — Chute Cargo's, 65 E. Huron St., downtown Pontiac
  - "Concours d'Elegance," 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Sunday, Aug. 1 — Display of 250 vintage automobiles, Meadow Brook Hall, on the campus of Oakland University, Rochester Hills
- Tickets: \$20 adults, \$10 children ages 13-17, no charge for children under age 12. Call (248) 370-3140 for information.

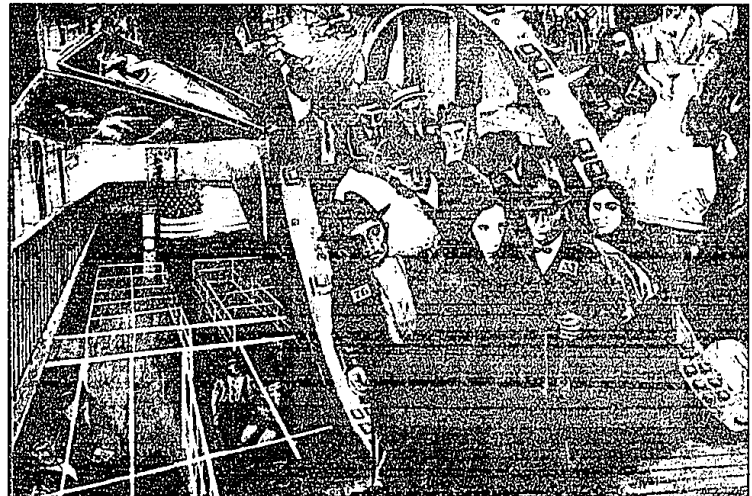
Not just a 'guy thing'

The notion that only "car guys" appreciate "car art" is not quite true, although a great majority of collectors are male.

Likewise, it's unfair to generalize about car art, which runs the stylistic gamut from highly realistic to impressionistic to abstract.

Please see CONVERSATIONS, C2

Ben Shahn... AN ARTIST FOR ALL TIME



DETROIT INSTITUTE OF ARTS

A new world: This "Study for Jersey Homesteads Mural" by Ben Shahn shows a group of immigrants coming down a gangplank onto Ellis Island in the mid-1930s.

BY LINDA ANN CHOMIN  
STAFF WRITER  
lchomin@ec.homecomm.net

Ben Shahn comes alive with every story his widow Bernarda Bryson Shahn tells. Her voice is smitten as a schoolgirl's as she talks about Diego Rivera excusing himself to retrieve his young assistant to speak about the mural he was painting at the Rockefeller Center in New York. The project turned into an international scandal and was never completed because Rivera sketched in heads of Lenin and Marx. But it did succeed in bringing together Bernarda and Shahn for a second time.

They first met when she was writing about Shahn's Sacco and Vanzetti paintings for the *Ohio State Journal*. The paintings, which focused on the executed Italian-immigrant anarchists, established Shahn as a social realist painter.

"Diego couldn't speak English well and said 'let me get my assistant.' His assistant was Ben," said Bernarda Bryson Shahn.

Like Bernarda's stories, all of the paintings in the exhibition, opening today at the Detroit Institute of Arts, recall a time in Shahn's life. Bernarda said she thinks the exhibition captures the essence of those years — from 1936 through the early 1960s. She saw "Common Man, Mythic Vision: The Paintings of Ben Shahn" last winter at The Jewish Museum, New York, which organized the exhibition of 43 paintings.

The exhibit, grouped in five galleries dealing with social realism, religious tradition, war, humanity, and the Saga of the Lucky Dragon, continues through Sunday, Oct. 31.

"I thought it was a wonderful show," said Bryson Shahn about the exhibit which traveled to New York and Allentown, Pa. before opening in Detroit. "It required a lot of work to find as many as they did."

A study for the Jersey Homesteads mural is one of Bernarda's favorites. It reminds her of the days she assisted her husband in creating the work dedicated to Jewish immigrants resettled in what is now known as Roosevelt, New Jersey. It's where Bernarda and Ben began their married life and where she lives today. The mural captures the plight of Jewish immigrants coming to this country in the mid-1930s.



Working man's rights: Labor organizer John Lewis is the focus of "East Side Soap Box," a 1936 painting by Ben Shahn.

"We were both working for the Resettlement Administration in Washington, D.C. when the mural was painted," said Bryson Shahn. "Ben's father grew up working with his hands so Ben associated with people who worked with their hands." His father and grandfather were woodcarvers.

Shahn related to the Jewish immigrants he painted, because his family emigrated to the U.S. from Lithuania in 1908. Leaving behind his grandfather to whom he was especially close, and his father, exiled to Siberia for anti-tsarist activities, was a traumatic experience for Shahn. His father eventually joined the family in the new country.

The Saga of the Lucky Dragon, displayed in the fifth gallery, is based on illustrations published by Harper's in a three-part article about Japanese fishermen exposed to radioactive poisoning during an American bomb test in 1954. When Shahn created the works in the early 1960s, they pleased him immensely.

"At the time he thought it was his most important work," said Bryson Shahn. "The Saga of the Lucky Dragon was a crown of his thinking and more mature painting."

Please see SHAHN, C2

**Common Man, Mythic Vision: The Paintings of Ben Shahn**  
Where: Detroit Institute of Arts, 8200 Woodward Ave. For more information, call (313) 833-7900.  
When: Through Sunday, Oct. 31. Hours are 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Wednesday-Friday, and until 9 p.m. Saturday-Sunday. The museum is open until 9 p.m. on the first Friday of every month.  
Admission: Free, with recommended museum donation of \$4 adults, \$1 children.

Local collectors are smitten with Shahn

BY LINDA ANN CHOMIN  
STAFF WRITER  
lchomin@ec.homecomm.net

Lois Pincus Cohn considers Ben Shahn an artist for all times. The Bloomfield Hills resident says it's one of the reasons she admires his work and would like to share it with others.

Pincus Cohn and her husband Judge Avern Cohn are among the nine private collectors who have lent work to "Ben Shahn and Detroit" opening today at the Detroit Institute of Arts. The 11 paintings, spanning the years 1931 to 1958, complement "Common Man, Mythic Vision: The Paintings of Ben Shahn."

This exhibit includes Shahn's study for the post office mural in the Bronx, an image from the Dreyfus Affair, two studies for the Social Security Building murals, and a series of prints on Sacco and Vanzetti.

The Cohns lent their gouache painting titled "Mason," Shahn's portrait of a working man.

"I like Ben Shahn because he evokes an era in the 30s and 40s and evokes a social consciousness," said Pincus Cohn, owner of Artspace, a Birmingham gallery. "In 'Mason,' you begin to understand the pain of the Depression years. Shahn was Jewish and liberal in his politics, and believed passionately in light and dark forces. He painted a universal realism. His paintings are very moving. He painted the human condition."

Hugh and Carolyn Greenberg lent two gouache paintings — "Les Expert" and "Carpentier" that they bought in the 60s and 70s. The Franklin residents own several of Shahn's works.

"Shahn's a great craftsman and humanist," said Carolyn Greenberg. "I relate to his people. He has a social and political consciousness that dovetails with our sensitivities. Ben Shahn has not received as much attention as he deserves. It's wonderful that they're exhibiting his work."



Old-world ways: Ben Shahn typifies how Jewish immigrants clung to their Eastern European ways and dress in the 1953 painting "Bookshop: Hebrew Books, Holy Day Books."

PROFILE

DSO's Spisto is heading home to New York

BY FRANK PROVENZANO  
STAFF WRITER  
provenzano@ec.homecomm.net

Finding time for lunch hasn't been easy for Louis G. Spisto.

By all accounts, in a year-and-a-half whirlwind after arriving at the Detroit Symphony Orchestra from the Pacific Symphony, Spisto has succeeded in enhancing the public perception of the DSO.

Lunch? Obviously, that's had to wait.

When he took over from former DSO President Mark Volpe, who moved on to the Boston Symphony, Spisto inherited a prestigious arts organization that had just recently become "financially credible."

While at the time, the orchestra had plans for trips to Japan and Europe, there was a clear mandate for the new president set forth by DSO board members.

"There weren't any programs in place, nor was the image of the DSO effectively communicated to the public. I looked at my position as a miniaturist," said Spisto, who met with the *Observer & Eccentric* over lunch at 220 Edison, a restaurant in downtown Birmingham. "I'm always on call."

The ministry is moving.

Recently, Spisto has been called home. Back to New York, where he grew up in Brooklyn and Staten



STAFF PHOTO BY JERRY ZOLLNER

**Leaving:**  
Louis G. Spisto, president of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, will become the executive director of the American Ballet Theatre in New York.

Island, where Spisto will live near his many family members and friends.

Heading East

In early September, Spisto will become executive

director of the American Ballet Theatre, arguably the finest dance company in the world. He has been hired to expand audiences for ABT's New York performances at the Metropolitan Opera House and City Center. He'll also be in charge of finding a way to increase concerts in the United States and around the world for the company's 80 dancers.

Spisto might be heading East, but there are sure signs he hasn't pulled up all roots in Detroit. Last year, ABT established a formal relationship with the Michigan Opera Theatre to make the Detroit Opera House its Midwest home.

In many ways, joining ABT is an extension of the groundbreaking marketing programs Spisto enacted with the Pacific Symphony and the DSO.

Creating a marketing strategy to connect with a wider audience for dance, according to Spisto, will be the "toughest of all."

Everyman demeanor

To know first-hand the depth of Spisto's ability makes his departure difficult to accept, especially when his creativity, leadership and everyman demeanor are needed to deflate elitist attitudes that sometimes dissuade prospective ticket buyers from

Please see DSO, C2