



Cabernet Paint

By Matthew Lickona | Posted Thursday, Jan. 6, 2005

In 1991, Detroit native Thomas Arvid backpacked across Europe with his girlfriend Vanessa. There, he says, "I was able to see artists working in the street. Later on in the day, I'd find them down by the square or the piers selling their paintings. I said, 'They're making a living doing that. That's what I want to do.'" So, without bothering about formal instruction, "I just decided to sit in my basement and paint."

The basement sat below the streets of Atlanta, and in 1995 Arvid climbed the stairs and started painting in public, at the city's Tu Tu Tango café. He began a series of paintings depicting what he thought of as American icons -- red American icons. "I was painting



Converse high-top tennis shoes, Radio Flyer wagons, and crushed Coke cans, and wine just fell into that list of 'things that are red.'" (It is surely hopeful news for the domestic wine industry when a casual drinker in Atlanta thinks of wine as any kind of American icon.)

Continues Arvid, "I started painting wine the way that I saw it: on a table, being shared. People fell in love with the paintings; they were buying them as I was working on them." One client gave him a bottle of Silver Oak and a bottle of Stag's Leap Cask 23, saying, "'Thomas, you've got to drink this wine and do a painting, and I'll buy it off you.' I was a struggling artist at the time, and I was drinking these great bottles and saying to my wife, 'This is out of control! This is what wine is supposed to taste like!'" Suddenly, Arvid became a less casual drinker; he had fallen in love with Napa Valley Cabernet. Less suddenly, he became a much more serious painter of wine. "The paintings start to sell and you keep on trying to add a wine painting to your series, and someone keeps buying it, and you start to forget about your icon series. You think, 'Hey, does anybody else paint wine like this?' I looked up winepaintings.com on the Internet, and there was nothing registered. I didn't know how to register, but I had someone do it for me. I was thinking, 'This is weird.' "

He decided to put his work -- close-up, casual in tone, larger than life, and photorealistic - up against the wine painters of Napa. But when he arrived in the Valley in the late '90s, he found the battlefield deserted. "Everybody in Napa painted vineyard scenes and clusters of grapes. I thought, 'Nobody else is doing what I'm doing.' I delivered six paintings to the first gallery I worked with in Napa. They sold all six overnight. I got a call the next day: 'Hire somebody to mow your lawn. Hire somebody to clean your kitchen.'" Arvid had arrived.

He kept at the painting-in-public. "People responded to it. They were just, like, 'This is so cool. I can't believe you did that in two hours. Can I just buy it the way it is?'" But now, instead of a café, he set up his easel inside a restaurant that was playing host to a Silver Oak wine dinner. "It turned out to be a huge success. They had this visual entertainment -- me working over in the corner. People would see me walk in with a big blank canvas. I'd do a very rough sketch, capturing the areas of where things needed to be. Then I started blocking in the positive and negative spaces. A wine dinner lasts about four hours, so that gave me a good block of time. I made sure I had a glass of wine next to me, and I worked pretty aggressively."

The method was far different from the technique he uses at home. There, he works to restage an image he has picked up from "collecting wine and being around it. I try to get the same feeling or movement I experienced. Then I photograph it. I work from multiple photographs, because there are different planes of focus that you need." But the restaurant environment had this advantage: "It let people see an artist at work." The process became his publicity. "I was able to sell paintings, and I was able to meet the rep for Silver Oak. He invited me to do other dinners for him; I was drinking great wine and working with a captive audience." For the past five years he has attended Silver Oak's semi-annual release parties, beginning a new Silver Oak-themed work each time.

Besides Silver Oak, his paintings often involve Napa Cabernets such as Opus One, Beringer Private Reserve, Far Niente, Diamond Creek, and Flora Springs, with occasional detours into Bordeaux and Champagne. "It's a personal choice," he says. "I tend to favor the California-style wines, that Napa Valley style. So that's what I paint -- 'paint what you know.'" Labels like Silver Oak are examples of what Arvid calls "special bottles" -- not the stuff most people drink every night, but not cult wines such as Colgin or Bryant Family either. "I tend to try to stay within the realms of reality. I've had those wines, but I don't tend to paint them. People don't have the personal experience; they don't connect with it. There's a special bottle of wine, then there's fantasyland." (The same goes for glassware; though Arvid loves the giant Reidel Sommelier glasses, he usually works with "more comfortable glasses, really middle-of-the-road.")

People connecting to his work through personal experience has been one of the secrets to his considerable success. Before Arvid closed his commission list -- he's booked for the next four years or so -- he noticed a pattern in his clients. "People usually followed the work a little bit in a gallery and then decided, 'We want one of his originals.' They would say, 'I drink this bottle of wine, and this one is my wife's favorite. If you could put these two bottles in the painting with two glasses being shared, it would speak of our life.' Then they left it up to me to put together the composition."

And however special the bottle, however personal the experience he was depicting, the appeal proved near-universal. People connected with the subject. "Forgetting the painting -- just consider the image of wine," comments Arvid. "If you see a bottle of wine on the counter...when somebody says, 'Hey, why don't you have a glass of wine with me?' the relaxation level rises. It means you're going to stay another 15 minutes and hang out with your friend. You sit down, you relax. That's what I feel is happening within my work. It's not just how you paint and what you paint. It's the story, what you're trying to project to people."