

An Artist and a Dream

First Flora B. Giffuni dreamed of becoming an artist. Then she dreamed of an art community that welcomed pastels. Luckily, the lady has the habit of turning dreams into reality.

By Urania Christy Tarbet

3 Faces (previous page; 18x24)

By showing the head from three different angles, Giffuni adds an element of mystery to the figure. "It presented a non-static concept from the usual frontal portrait pose," she says.

Flora B. Giffuni may not be an imposing figure, but if ever anyone proved that one person can make a difference, it's the 88-year-old founder and past-president of The Pastel Society of America (PSA). I spoke with Giffuni while visiting New York City last September, and I was mesmerized by the strength of character and commanding presence of this petite lady who has enriched the lives of thousands of pastel artists, not only in the United States, but around the world.

Giffuni graciously invited me to visit with her in her apartment at the National Arts Club (NAC). The NAC building is a historical landmark, located in New York City's Gramercy Park. The NAC bought the Tilden House (once home to New York's governor, Samuel Tilden, in the 1800s), and erected a 13-story building contiguous to the main stone mansion, with studios to be occupied by member painters, sculptors, writers and musicians. The Club's Grand Gallery is one of the largest exhibition spaces, outside of a museum, in New York City.

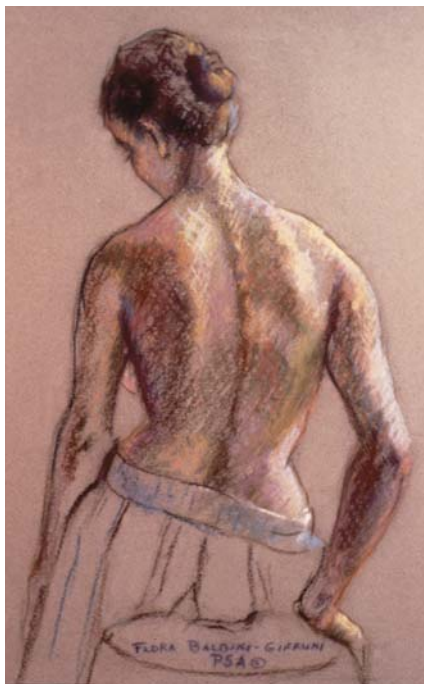
Besides containing Giffuni's home and studio, the building also houses the headquarters of the PSA.

Paintings and sketches by Robert Brackman (1898-1980), a mentor, friend and teacher to Giffuni, grace the walls of her home, as do many of her own paintings. Along with the paintings, she has about her many awards and memorabilia—signs of a life devoted to the arts.

In my conversation with the artist, she talked about her life—a path that has been filled with dreams, ambitions, hopes, disappointments, fulfillment, accomplishment and hard work.

Artistic Ambitions

Giffuni was born in Naples, Italy, in 1919, and emigrated to the United States with her family at a young age. Giffuni remembers always having had a deep fascination, love and respect for art, and she dreamed of becoming an artist. She could see, however, that it would be an uphill battle for a woman to achieve acclaim in art, which was, at that time, still primarily seen



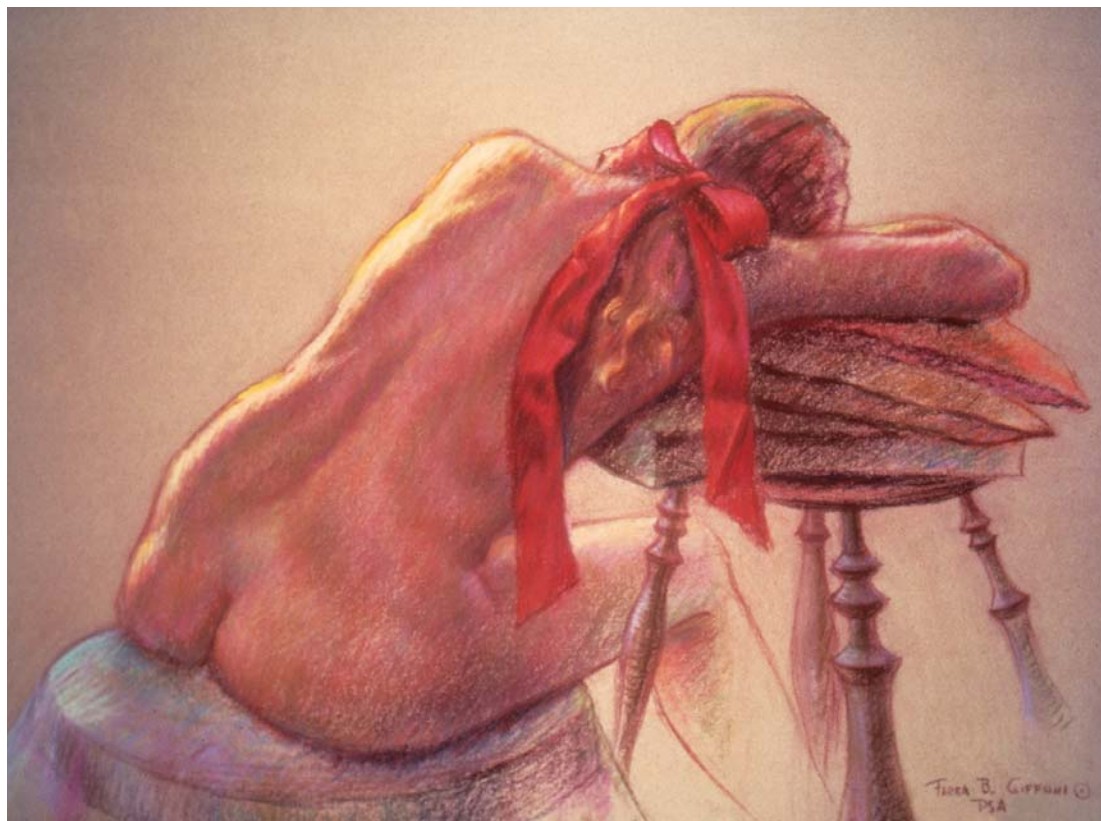
Nude Back (30x24)



Summer (24x18)



Torso—Front (30x24)



***The Red Ribbon* (18x24)**

Giffuni's attention to rhythm, flow and balance is evident in this pastel. This begins, she explains, with the diagonal of the figure and is further enhanced by the choice of color and placement of the ribbon within the Golden Mean.

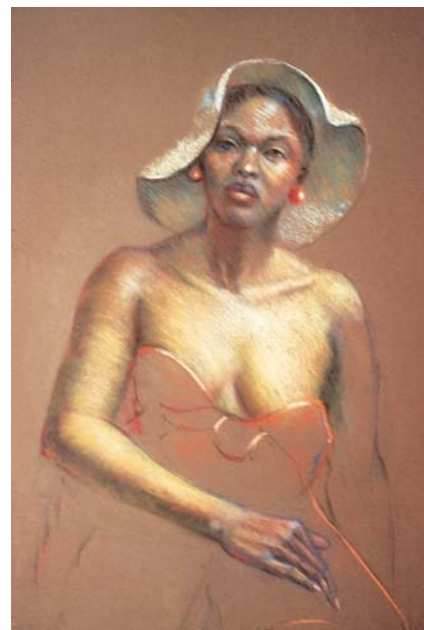
as a man's world. But the first battle for the young girl, it turned out, was closer to home.

Giffuni's father, a medical doctor, hoped his daughter—the only surviving child of four children—would follow in his footsteps to become a medical doctor. Giffuni, wishing to please her father, did enroll in a pre-med program, but studied for only one year. "It didn't work!" she says. "I adored my father, and I tried, but it didn't work ... I hated it!" Telling her father she wouldn't continue was one of the hardest things she'd ever had to do, but the experience contributed to Giffuni's self-confidence. "There's great merit to growing up solo and being the only child," she says. "You have to make your own decisions and fight your own battles." Such courage followed Giffuni into her adult life, when she frequently summoned this determination to forge ahead with her plans for her art and for pastel.

Giffuni switched her major and

obtained a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from New York University, as well as an M.F.A at Teachers College, Columbia University. She later did post-graduate work at the Universities of Madrid and Pisa, the Instituto Allende and the New York School of Interior Design. Soon after, she married and had three children. While Giffuni's work as an oil painter was flourishing at this time, she admits that it wasn't easy to do it all. "I would set the alarm clock for 2 a.m. and do my painting until 5 a.m.," she says.

When her children were school-aged, Giffuni taught art at the parochial school they attended in order to have money for her art supplies. She recalls the time when the nuns asked her to show her artwork along with the children's in a student art show. The show consisted of the students "pots and pans paintings" and Giffuni's nudes. "The nuns were shocked!" she says, smiling. "The section where my paintings were



***The White Hat* (30x24)**

"The unusual hat creates a mood," Giffuni suggests. "It also adds to the design, framing the face in a color that can reflect back into the skin, creating good color bounce throughout the painting."



Photo courtesy of Brenda Mattson.

Urania Christy Tarbet (left) and Flora B. Giffuni, who organized the first “Pastels Only” exhibition back in 1972, enjoyed last year’s celebration when the annual show marked its 34th year.

additional challenge was working in a medium that was, in large part, viewed as a “stepchild” in juried exhibitions. Not having a category of its own, pastel was often lumped in with watercolor and other works on paper in exhibitions. None of this sat well with Giffuni, who had become increasingly enamored with the pastel medium. “I realized how few people knew about or respected pastel,” she says. “It became my life’s mission to do something about correcting that problem.”

A Time for Action

The opportunity came knocking in the early 1970s. Giffuni was exhibiting a pastel in the American Watercolor Society show at the National Academy of Design on Fifth Avenue in New York. When pastels started winning too many awards, the society’s board members came to a decision that

they would no longer accept pastels. Giffuni and other pastelists were devastated.

“I was downstairs with other artists,” Giffuni recalls. “We were all bemoaning and crying about [the pronouncement] when my friend, Phyllis Borten, whose husband, Walter Borten, was then president of the NAC, said: ‘Why not start your own society?’ At first it was a bit overwhelming, I had just got through raising three children, and I didn’t even have enough time to paint!” But Borten’s suggestion was serious; she even offered to hang the show at the NAC building and provide administrative help to get it started. Giffuni decided to take up the challenge. Pastels needed a home, and she was being called to be the “architect.”

Mission Possible

The first thing Giffuni did was advertise for a “Pastels Only” show. When, in the show’s second year, the number of entries had doubled, she

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hung was cordoned off with a screen.” But they didn’t take her work down; they knew they’d lose a teacher if they did.


The Pathway to Pastel

During the late 1960s, while still seeking to enhance her skills, Giffuni was fortunate to find a kindred spirit in Brackman, a renowned artist and teacher. Like Giffuni, Brackman believed in the beauty of the human figure, and was also an advocate of vibrant color. It was he who provided her the introduction to the luminous medium of pastel. From that time forward, Giffuni gave up oils and dedicated herself completely to pastels—her new love.

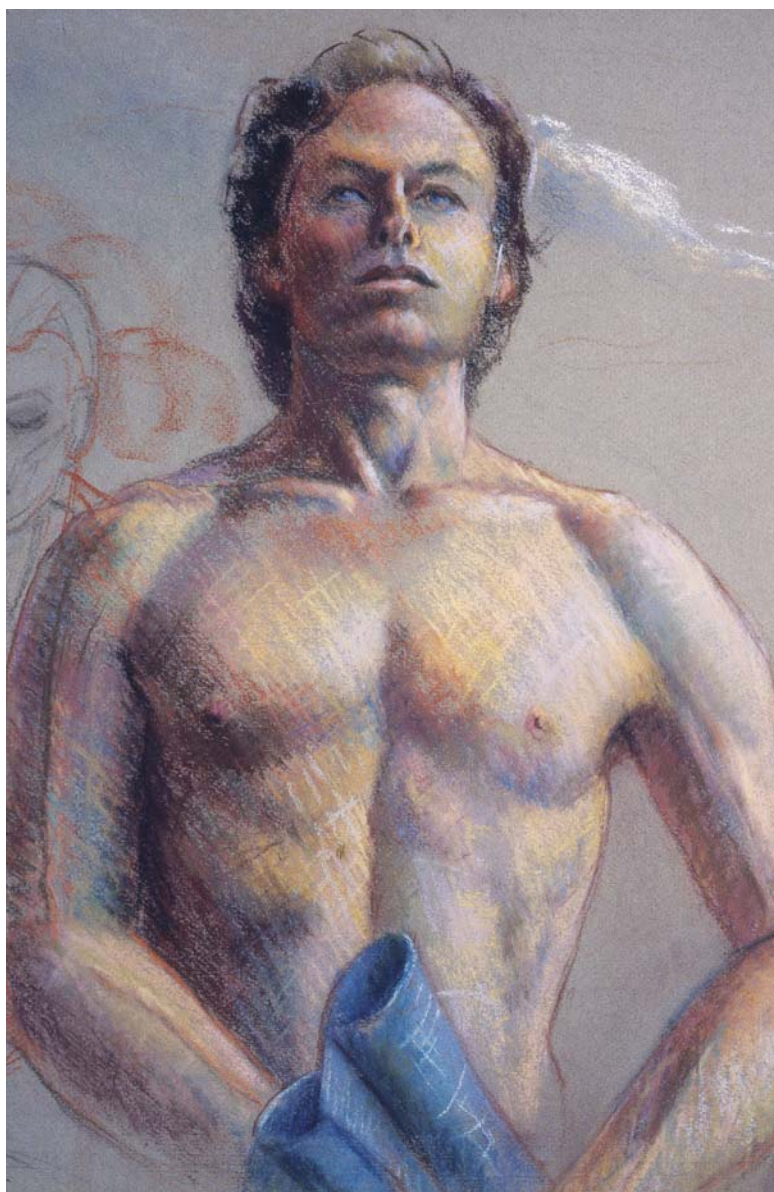
Giffuni recalls the difficulty that existed at the time for women artists in seeking gallery representation: “When I started taking my paintings to galleries, I never signed my first name.” It was another hill to climb in the already mountainous terrain of the young artist. The

year, the number of entries had doubled, she decided it was time to form a Board of Directors, and in 1972, they officially established the Pastel Society of America. Understanding that an important aspect of the PSA's mission must be to educate aspiring artists about the merit of pastel, Giffuni next guided the society to establish an art school within the NAC, where Giffuni still teaches. According to Aldon James, president of the NAC: "Flora was the 'Joan of Arc' we needed to establish, nurture, and sustain this support group for pastels on a national level."

Since Giffuni believed in spreading the word about pastel not only to artists, but also to the public, she dreamed about finding a permanent home for the display of works in pastel. In 2004, the Giffuni Gallery of American Pastels opened at the Butler Institute of American Art in Youngstown, Ohio. "Imagine the vision in establishing a gallery devoted solely to pastels," says the museum's executive director, Louis A. Zona. "The Flora Giffuni Gallery of American Pastel Art is today one of the most exciting museum spaces in the country and is committed to showcasing the very best in American pastel art." Now in its fourth year, the Gallery has featured more than 20 individual and group shows, contributing to ongoing education with regular displays and video screenings. "I would add," says Zona, "that Flora Giffuni's personal presentation of the history of the medium serves to further enrich the gallery's educational role."

When she looks forward, Giffuni sees this educational mission as pivotal to the future of the medium. "I would like to see pastel continue to rise in acceptance with museums, galleries and collectors," she says, adding: "It's so very important to pass on the knowledge to the young people—to keep pastel alive." Thanks to Giffuni's contributions, the terrain for today's pastel artist has completely changed, as Barbara Fischman, the current president of the PSA, affirms: "Through Flora's vision, persistence and dedication," she says, "pastel is now firmly established in our cultural heritage of the 20th and 21st centuries." 

Urania Christy Tarbet is the founder of the International Association of Pastel Societies (IAPS). The pastel artist and workshop instructor lives in the California Sierra Foothills.



The Builder (24x18)

A student of the human form, Giffuni believes anatomical knowledge is crucial for an artist: "Strong drawing is of utmost importance," she says.