

## “THE THIRD ELEPHANT”: JOSEPH MUGNAINI TALKS ABOUT ILLUSTRATING RAY BRADBURY

By John C. Tibbetts

Los Angeles, 2 December 1990

Joseph Mugnaini was born in Viareggio, Italy on July 12, 1912. A few months after his birth, Mugnaini arrived in the United States with his family. Settling in Los Angeles, he studied at the Otis Art Institute. Following service in the Army during World War II, he returned to Otis as an instructor and taught there until retirement in 1976. His published books include *The Hidden Elements of Drawing* (1974), *Joseph Mugnaini: Drawings and Graphics* (1981), and *Expressive Drawing: A Schematic Approach* (1988). Mugnaini died in Los Angeles on Jan. 23, 1992. He is celebrated in the fantasy community for his many collaborations with writer Ray Bradbury. His image's splintered, facet-like forms, decorative arabesques and scrolls, gnarled dwarfs, gaunt women, gabled houses, strange moons and flying clouds were an inseparable part of the Bradbury universe.

I will never forget the bristling energy and vitality of Joseph Mugnaini. I can still see him, scowling amiably at me from beneath his hat brim, bursting into hearty laughter and expostulations as he talked. His hands were always in motion, and after finding some note paper in my hotel room, he happily scrawled away, the restless lines dashing and skittering across the surface in quick, rapier-like jabs and thrusts. He seemed to be conducting with the pen, as an orchestra leader would gesture and cajole sounds from his players. His dynamic lines seemed to gather themselves of their own accord into forms which coalesced into living images.

At the time of our last meeting he was anticipating the opening of a retrospective of his works at the Orange Coast College Gallery in nearby Costa Mesa, California. The retrospective encompassed forty years of work--illustrations for books, for films, and prints from the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian. Perhaps it was this event, among other things, that made him so receptive to talking about his career.

### INTERVIEW

JOHN C. TIBBETTS: Take us back to some of the first images that ingrained themselves into your boyhood consciousness.

JOSEPH MUGNAINI: The first image of my childhood I can recall is of a soap box. I was five years old and my mother had told me to go to the grocery store to get some “Rub-No-More” soap. On the package was a picture of a mother elephant washing her baby with the soap. Within that picture was another soap box, on which was displayed another elephant and her baby. And in that was another picture. . . . Well, I could never get past the third elephant. I'm still trying to get beyond that third elephant!

JCT: Your family is of Italian descent?

JM: I was born in Viareggio, on the coast of Tuscany, Italy on July 12, 1912 and was brought over here, to Riverside California, before I was one year old. I spoke Italian before I spoke English. But I picked up English very easily and it is my language now. We came to Los Angeles when I was about twelve years old. I began to study art rather late. I grew up during the Depression and, between stints working as a truck driver and furniture finisher, went to the Otis Art Institute. I studied Drawing and Painting with a guy by the name of Ralph Holmes, who painted California eucalyptus trees. That was about all he painted, I think! I learned a lot by myself and with the other students. I think they were more important than the faculty members! During the War I was an instructor of photo reconnaissance in the Intelligence Service in Germany. After the War, I went back to the Otis Art Institute on a G.I. Bill. After about three months, I became a teacher. I began to show my work around. I showed some things in a national show at the Library of Congress and I won a First Prize in graphics. The year after that I won it again. Three years in succession I won the Pennell Prize. My first illustration project was a set of lithographs illustrating Bullfinch's *Age of Fable* for the Limited Editions Book Club. Meantime, I became the head of the Drawing Department at Otis, where I've been for about thirty years until 1976, when I retired. As for other teaching I've been a Visiting Professor at the University of Colorado, and I've also taught at Temple University, the University of California, Sonoma, the University of California, North Ridge, and in workshops everywhere.

JCT: You promised me you would talk about your old friend and collaborator, Ray Bradbury.

JM: Well, it's true I met Ray Bradbury when he saw a piece of mine in an exhibit in Hollywood. He saw it in a window. It was a lithograph of a train going over a bridge. It seemed to remind him of a book he had written, called *Dark Carnival* and of a story of a train that travels only at night. And so he called me up and wanted to know if I wanted to illustrate his new book. I said, sure. I had heard of him because he was a very popular guy. I think a lot of GIs who came out of the Army were reading his books. He called me up and a friend of mine went to pick him up and bring him over to my house. He got very excited and told me I was doing graphically what he was doing literally. We talked and I ended up illustrating *The Golden Apples of the Sun* for Doubleday. From that time on I did a lot of his books.

JCT: What sort of a guy was Ray at that time?

JM: At that time Ray was living on meager wages he got from stories. He's always been a very open, very enthusiastic sort of guy. It's impossible to talk to him without becoming enthused yourself. If you ever visit his office, you'll walk into a magical place. He has pictures and toys and all kind of things, and you have to crawl through there to make your way to his desk. My own studio is rather cluttered, too, with lots of different etchings, lithographs, and paintings. Anyway, when I worked with Ray

on *Golden Apples*, I made some sketches and went to see him. Then he made some sketches of his own. His drawings are very interesting, a little more sophisticated than somebody like, say, James Thurber. Then we made some decisions and went from there. It was a real collaboration.

JCT: Those first images for him were mostly pen-and-ink, weren't they?

JM: Yes, I used line drawings with a quill pen for that book because I felt that using simple lines would reproduce better on pulp paper. I kept the lines very controlled and precise to correlate with Ray's images. I also kept the picture size close to the desired size on the finished page so they would not lose too much in reduction. It worked out very well, I think. I remember working on some of those stories: The first one I did was for "The Sound of Thunder," and Ray got very excited about it. For "Fruit at the Bottom of the Bowl," I had to convey the idea of thousands of spiders. So I made a twirling sort of circular design on a piece of paper, something that was very loose and could be used to that effect. For "The Meadow," the angle of view was very important. I needed an impression of monumentalism, something that needed a sharp upward angle. I like to use extreme low angles. I did that a lot in the images I did later for *The Martian Chronicles*. In "The Pedestrian" I used lots of angularity. No curvilinear movement. The angularity of the bricks was carried through the forms of the city. "The Powerhouse" gave me a chance to work with desert forms. I love the desert and have done a lot of paintings of it. I like the geological structures. They are very dramatic. "En la Noche" is as abstract as a Mondriaan. The details are all categorized by a very simple rectangle shape.

JCT: Forgive me for asking, but did the job pay you well?

JM: I did the whole thing for practically nothing. I think I got \$250 dollars for all the drawings. Ray has some of the originals and I have kept some. Most of them will be on display at the Orange Coast College Art Gallery. Then we did *Fahrenheit 451* together. That was during the anti-communist McCarthy period, you know. I remember Sidney Kaufman, who was an editor at Ballantine Books at that time, who came out to California; and we were apprehensive about publishing the book. It was an attack on McCarthyism. But we did it and I did the jacket and the first illustration. It came out in paperback and hardback almost simultaneously.

JCT: I am particularly fond of your images for *The October Country*.

JM: I think a lot of people remember that, which actually was a revised version of Ray's earlier collection of stories, *Dark Carnival*. In "The Wind" I wanted more angular shapes. The shapes for the sky and clouds are almost lethal. If I had made little round shapes instead, the effect of Death would have been destroyed. The houses and trees in these drawings all come from a kind of graphic epistemology. For example, you look at this tree in "The Homecoming," you know I've gone back all the way to the

beginning of evolution when life began to separate itself into vegetation and so forth. Then you come forward in the evolving process to this tree. As a compositional element, the tree is also part of our visual journey to the house in the background. I love these kinds of houses. They intrigue me. Hell, they're like Gothic cathedrals, in a way—only these particular ones you don't find in France, but in Green Town or Pasadena! And, of course, I have a lot of fun working these basic architectural shapes into wild decorative fantasies, imaginary structures of my own devising.

[Note: As he talked, Joe doodled away with his pen, producing spasmodic lines that looked almost like seismic readings of our conversation. The images didn't resemble anything in particular, they just were there, constantly growing and changing (I have kept these images to this day)].

JM: The way I work is to take a pencil or pen—I'm working with a line in this case—and do a lot of scribbling until I accidentally strike an image that seems to reflect what I have conceived in my mind. I always say that you can study art and you can gain knowledge and experience, but the muse of art lives in the wilderness of the mind, an area that you don't understand yourself. But if you're lucky, you can go beyond the frontier and go to this unknown area and maybe come back with something. But it has to happen accidentally. Like a composer at the keyboard of a piano, knowing that something has to come out with sound--something that when you hit it, even by accident, you recognize it and put it down. Then, if I work out a very rough sketch, I put a piece of tracing paper over it and begin to develop it, reducing it down to a very simple line or mark.

I don't say I'm putting blackness onto paper. I say I'm working against the whiteness. I have only so much whiteness to spend, so to speak. I allow just so much of the whiteness to come through. I cut away the whiteness, just like a sculptor cutting into a solid piece of material.

If I were to take a piece of charcoal and put it on the paper, then it would begin as just a black and white situation. But, if I were to rub it slightly, then it becomes something different, something that is light and dark. It's an atmosphere, now. I've changed the damned thing just by doing that. Now you're conscious not only of a line, but of the pressure of the tool, the pen, or the brush; and of the speed with which it was applied. It's not a question of subject matter, but of the viscosity of paint and the strokes.

I never do any research. For example, I just got through painting the Grand Canyon. And I didn't go to the Grand Canyon. I'm not a jackass who just stands out there painting the Grand Canyon. I come home and I think about geological structure and I think this way. The Grand Canyon is in there. Know what I mean? I do keep notebooks, though. When you do a notebook, you hold a dialogue with yourself in the future. Later when you read the notebook, you're holding a dialogue with yourself in the past. And that's when you meet a stranger!

JCT: I have to ask you *Icarus Montgolfier Wright?* It's become something of a legend—especially since you can't find a print of it, anywhere.

JM: I know. I have my own print, thank God. Ray had written this story about a little boy who wanted to fly. And the boy dreamed he was Icarus and one of the Montgolfier Brothers and one of the Wright Brothers. Ray went to a film company, Format Films (which was doing “The Chipmunks” at the time) to see about financing a film version with me. James Whitmore and Ross Martin donated their time to the film. I did over a thousand storyboard sketches and hundreds of paintings in acrylic. It was nominated for an Academy Award and it won a Golden Eagle Award. By the use of the camera and editing we were able to get a lot of dynamics and contrasts and overlaps. There was a sense of motion all the way through. The movie came out around 1962, long before we went to the moon.

JCT: Before we wrap this up, please talk to me about some of your own concerns in art and society, generally.

JM: I'm an old fart. I'm on third base, heading for home. I've turned into a curmudgeon, I guess. I'm pissed off at what's happened to this planet. At the idiots who are destroying Nature. I'm making a statement that way. I'm doing a lot of etchings and making statements about how I feel that we're not respecting Nature. We've turned into a hedonistic society and nothing matters but our own selfish interests. As for what passes for art instruction these days, I regret that the colleges are not producing art; that they'd rather promote what I call 'cocoanut counting,' which is everything but art. Art departments are being emasculated and being done away with. The business men don't give a damn!"

[Note: Shortly before our last meeting in Los Angeles, Joe telephoned my hotel room. “I'll bring the film,” he announced abruptly, without any introductory explanation. “What film?” I asked, temporarily confused.

“The film—*Icarus Montgolfier Wright!*” he shouted. “You wanted to see it, didn't you?”

Really. It had eluded me for years. Now, as I blinked at my phone, I must have spluttered a bit: “You mean, you're willing to bring it *here--?*”

“—Yes, and I'll bring my own projector!”

And so he did. What a happy hour that was in the dim hotel room, watching that dazzling square of light on the wall, hearing Joe's growling voice above the whirring noise of the projector. . . .

That was the way it was with Joe. Even for people he scarcely knew, he shared his world unselfishly, unstintingly. He bounced his enthusiasm off you and you felt like a sounding drum.

Like his drawings, Joseph Mugnaini's life was a lively and dynamic line, a line that extended and grew, relentlessly tracking a distant and unknowable vanishing point. Now, since his death on January 23, 1992, I'm sure that restless line has at last traversed the regions beyond the third elephant.]

