

Alfred Chadbourn in living color

By Edgar Allen

"Never trust an old tank commander,." Alfred Chadbourn warned as he gunned his Toyota Wagon down an unplowed alleyway on the Portland waterfront. "They'll do it to you everytime. " And sure enough, within seconds, we were stuck in a blind alley.

Chip Chadbourn is one of Maine's best known painters and teachers. He is an artist in the European tradition and his rich, bright canvases full of light and color and life present distinctive visions of Maine filtered through an inheritance from masters like Pierre Bonnard and George Braque. He is a colorful man and he produces colorful art. Over a large bowl of bean soup in a Portland cafe he recently talked about his art and his life. His conversation is filled with laughter and self-deprecation, a sense of the absurd, and a mordant wit.

"I was born in Turkey in 1921 while the Turks were busy driving the Greeks out of Smyrna. My father was in the diplomatic corps, and my brother was born in Petrograd during the revolution. My mother said that whenever she got pregnant she knew there was going to be a war."

At the age of one, Chadbourn and his family moved to the Perigord district of France where his mother and father set up an American school in a 14th century chateau which had once belonged to Henry II. Chadbourn grew up in this richly historic setting, and French became his first language. It was an international atmosphere at Chateau Neuvic with expatriate celebrities such as Isadora Duncan as frequent house guests.

All went well in France until the Depression and a disastrous trial in which his father lost the chateau. An errant rocket from the elder Chadbourn's Bastille Day fireworks had struck and killed a local resident. "My father, who was always doing the wrong thing it seemed, made the fatal mistake of hiring a big shot Paris lawyer to defend him. That, coupled with the fact that the French have no great love for Americans, cooked his goose."

When things fell apart at Chateau Neuvic, Chadbourn's father left for Russia and his mother took him and his brother to Monte Carlo where he says, "it took her six months to win enough at roulette to get them back to the States."

Chadbourn's formal education was in Pasadena, California where he attended high school and the Chouinard Art Institute. Then World War II broke out. "Since I spoke French, I naturally figured they'd send me to Europe. I suppose some guy looked at my record, saw I was an artist and decided I was just right for a tank regiment. I don't think I'll ever forgive them for sending me to the Pacific."

To this day, Chadbourn bears a deep, thin, diagonal scar across the palm of his right hand. The scar is the legacy of hand-to-hand combat in a foxhole beneath a disabled tank on Leyte in the Philippines. "The tank blew a track on a hump in the road and we were just sitting there useless waiting to be overrun. So we climbed down through the escape hatch underneath and when the artillery fire started we dug a hole to cover up. Those damn tanks were always blowing a track," he complained. When the attack came Chadbourn's right hand was sliced into "mincemeat" fending off a Japanese bayonet lunge. He bears a scar, but his assailant was not so lucky.

During the time that his hand was healing, Chadbourn tried to teach himself to draw with his left hand, but gave it up after a month. "Fortunately I got a crackerjack surgeon-major, and he did a perfect job putting my hand back together so I don't have any disability. I sent that guy a Christmas card for years afterward."

Though he claims not to be proud of his checkered military career (he was busted in rank twice), Chip obviously enjoys the humor of his misadventures after all these years. "One night a buddy of mine and I had dates in Hawaii and we had a little too much to drink. The girls wanted to go for a ride in a tank so we decided `why not?' Chadbourn wound up driving a 32 ton tank into a drainage ditch surrounding the Dole pineapple fields.

In the years following the war, Chadbourn took advantage of the G.I. Bill to study painting in Paris. Through a friend who was doing fashion drawings for Vogue, he was introduced to Michael De Brunhoff, Vogue's Paris editor, who in turn introduced Chadbourn to the novelist Colette. "I was about to have my first show in Paris in 1949 at the Mohrien Gallery, and Mr. De Brunhoff told me that Colette lived directly above the gallery, so I went up there and also met Jean Cocteau, the playwright and poet." Cocteau liked Chadbourn's work, bought a painting and lent his sponsorship to the exhibition. It was a great start for an unknown American living in France on \$105 a month.

Chadbourn's dashing landscapes, lively food paintings and refined still lifes still show something of the influence from the work of George Braque, who, with Picasso, founded cubism. "In those days Braque was just about the last of the greats still painting in Paris. Picasso had gone south and Matisse was doing cutouts, but I was in love with Braque's work." Through an architect friend who had built Braque's house, Chadbourn met the artist. Braque subsequently sponsored Chadbourn's second show in 1950 at the Creuze Gallery.

Inspired by French art, Chadbourn returned to the U.S. when the G. I. Bill ran out. There he found that he was ill-prepared for life in New York. "At that time during the fifties it was all abstract expressionism - people like Franz Kline and DeKooning. I tried that stuff but I felt dishonest, like a phoney, so I gave it up. Eventually I took a job as a janitor at the Yale Club so that I could work nights and paint during the day. I'm a daytime painter," he explains.

Chip Chadbourn sports a wonderfully rakish handlebar mustache and looks for all the world like a world weary *bon vivant*. When he refused to shave off the mustache because it offended the Yale Club clientele, he was summarily fired. "There are some things in life that are sacred," Chadbourn declared, "And my mustache is one of them."

Then one day - while looking for something good to eat in Chinatown, he ran into an old friend from the West Coast, the celebrated watercolorist Dong Kingman. Kingman told him that The Famous Artists School in Westport, Connecticut, was expanding and looking for artists. Kingman told him that he and Ben Shahn and Stuart Davis were all going to work, so Chadbourn applied too.

"That's how I came to spend 15 years painting birch trees for old ladies in Iowa," he apologizes with rueful good humor. "The Famous Artists School was okay for a while but when

they decided that they were going to become the General Motors of Art education, I knew my time was up. It started to become like working in a factory." But it was while he was on the faculty of the Famous Artists School that he won a Louis C. Tiffany Fellowship in 1959. The award enabled him to spend time painting on the Greek island of Hydra.

While in Greece Chadbourn got the opportunity to sail as cook on a charter boat which ran from Greece to the Red Sea. Alfred Chadbourn is a gourmet chef and his love of food and cooking is obvious in his painting.

"An Australian fellow chartered a beautiful blue boat with orange sails and he needed a cook," reminisces Chadbourn. "We picked up a party on one island that included the poet Gregory Corso and on another island we picked up Tennessee Williams." Chadbourn then goes on to describe a debauch which ended with the Australian captain putting the entire party ashore at Piraeus.

Another misadventure resulted in Chadbourn's departing Hydra and leaving all of his paintings behind. "I heard years later that someone had used my canvases to plug leaks in the ceiling, but it was no great loss to art I can assure you." Chadbourn never misses an opportunity to put himself down, but when accused of it he insists that "I just recognize the facts. I'm a child of the Depression."

So how did this wayward painter happen to come to Maine? "I came to Maine in 1971 from Connecticut. My old friend Jack Muench was resigning as head of the Portland School of Art, and I thought I might get a job there, but when I got here I discovered that they had hired Bill Collins and were planning more than I would have been capable of handling." Under Collins the art school expanded rapidly and achieved prominence in American art education. "It was then that I realized I was going to have to do something on my own."

At first Chadbourn taught painting at the Southern Maine Vocational Technical School and then moved on to teach classes at Westbrook College. Currently he paints and teaches classes in his own studio above the garage at his Yarmouth home. Chadbourn is a popular, generous and easygoing teacher, and there is a waiting list to get into his classes.

The Yarmouth studio is a warm and friendly place beneath the eaves. The walls are hung with Chadbourn's own work, posters of Picasso, Degas, Matisse, Cezanne, Braque and Bonnard. Student easels are perched about the room like stick figure birds, and in the corner is a barrel wood stove which heats the studio to a slow roast. Classical music lilts from the radio and the floorboards creak beneath your feet.

Chip Chadbourn's approach to teaching is informal and not the least dogmatic. His own work is solidly representational, but he is open to all styles and techniques, and prefers to communicate his enthusiasm and artistic attitude rather than his personal ideology. He genuinely likes to teach. "I think even if I ever got rich I'd still teach a couple of classes. It keeps you on your toes," he emphasizes. But teaching not only keeps him on his toes, it also involves him with his community, where many artists tend to suffer from isolation.

Chadbourn's casual teaching style comes across very well in his newly-published book, *A Direct Approach to Painting*. Published by North Light Publishers of Westport, Connecticut, the book is filled with examples of the artist's own works and is infused with his spirit. His "direct approach" is a "get your hands dirty" method, if it is method at all.

Chip is irrepresible when it comes to sharing ideas, information and enthusiasms which means, for example, that

while analyzing a painting of seafood in his book he cannot resist including the recipe for the dish he was making at the time. *A Direct Approach to Painting* is a lovely halfbreed volume-not quite a step-by-step how-to and not quite a monograph on Alfred C. Chadbourn, N.A.

N.A. stands for the National Academy of Design in which Chadbourn is a member. This year he won the Carlsen Award from the Academy for one of his still-lives. "There probably aren't thirty people to whom that, means anything," he says with characteristic modesty, "But it means something to me."

To hear Chadbourn tell it no one likes his work and no one buys it, but that simply isn't true. In 1979, through his brother who works now for Prince Rainier, Chadbourn was invited to Monaco to paint. His exhibit there was sponsored by Princess Grace and two-thirds of the show was sold. "If Princess Grace goes, everyone goes," says Chip, crediting his success to connections rather than his art.

But on its own merit his art has appealed to collectors such as Douglas Dillon, Walter Cronkite, Sir Lawrence Olivier, and museums such as the Los Angeles County Museum, the Boston Museum of Art, the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C., and the Chicago Art Institute. In Portland he is represented by the Barridoff Galleries and in Florida by the Hobe Sound Gallery. As a result of his book, he is anticipating a showing and representation in Washington, D.C. in the future.

Watching his nervous hands as he chainsmokes at lunch or watching him dash colors on a fresh canvas to demonstrate the creation of various gray tones to a young student, one is impressed above all with Alfred Chadbourn's energy. And it is energy in the form of color and light that shows through in his bold paintings.

"I once heard a painter say something and I have never forgotten it," he tells me as we prepare to leave the cafe. "He said 'I wish I had a bucketful of light: An that's just the way I feel. I wish I had a bucketful of light.'"

That said we return to the the stranded Toyota and tank commander Alfred C. Chadbourn plows through the drifted snow until we are free.

What was that about not trusting an old tank commander?

Reprinted, with permission, from the Spring 1981 issue of GREATER PORTLAND Magazine.



Photo credit: Jon Boniour