Greenwich painter learned well from the Old Masters

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rreshoffs off Castle Hill"
r Layne Arguimbau / Contributed photo

Peter Layne Arguimbau smears a dab of iron oxide

knife.

“Look at it,” he says. “It’s a beautiful tonal sepia soup.” He mixes in a bit of powdered light-blue pigment and meshes the two substances together with his fingers. Suddenly, as if he were an alchemist, he achieves a fierce blue color with tremendous depth. He picks up one of his paintings, of a young woman with luxurious dark, wavy hair that seems to glisten in the light. “This is the same blue,” he says, pointing to the center of a mass of hair. It looks black to me.

A nationally recognized artist of marine paintings, Arguimbau is so much more than the simple biography of him that has appeared in numerous publications and gallery press releases over the years. His seascapes of yachts are much prized by collectors, but less known is his other work: woodlands, still life, portraiture, animals and religious subjects. All of his oil paintings glisten with luminosity and translucence. He is also a consummate artist, from mixing pigments with oxides in the manner of the Flemish masters to painting his seascapes from the cockpit of his catboat, the Molly Rose. He creates iron, zinc, sulfate and magnesium oxides to powdered pigments to achieve incredible nuances

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Arguimbau was born in another century — or at least his artistic soul was. Intensely passionate about the Old Masters, he never fails to mention them in conversation. Once he gets started, relax in a soft, cushiony chair with a cup of tea, because you are in for quite an art history lesson, like a student preparing a doctoral thesis.

Arguimbau talks about dead colors and primary colors, subjective and objective traction, negative space, classicism, the five planes of light, glass-blowing and illumination, violin varnish, lye, gesso and resin. The paintings of the Old Masters, and by extension his own work, never stop reflecting light, he says, bemoaning the misguided work of restorers of legendary works of art.

Crisscross the centuries as Arguimbau's running commentary skims through the disciplines of philosophy, science and world history. His narrative bumps into the Hellenistic period, Jesus, Emperor Constantine and Martin Luther King. He leads you from the 16th century Guild of St. Luke with its hundreds of artists and artisans to the 17th century American frontier, which leads to the Hudson River School of Art in the United States and finally to the Art Students League in New York. It's a mighty cram course in the sweep of art and civilization from fresco and tempura to oil painting and just a sentence or two about abstract art. Try not to get lost.

Arguimbau weaves exact dates through his history course, because he needs his lesson to pivot on the evolution of oil painting from the Renaissance in Europe to the Renaissance of oil painting in America. The Renaissance never died, he emphatically states. It resurfaced in this country. Rembrandt, Rubens, Van Eyck, Caravaggio, Canaletto and Velazquez in Europe, Sir Charles Eastlake in England, and John Frederick Kensett in America seep into his speech with such regularity, you get the impression that when he picks up his brush to apply paint to the canvas in front of him, he sees himself alongside them in their ateliers.

On a recent evening speaking to an assemblage of friends and collectors, Arguimbau was dressed in a black vest and a white shirt open at the neck, his steel-gray hair still streaked with lingering strands of black. Sporting a small mustache and a soul patch beneath his lower lip, he seems a true descendant of painting.

Arguimbau says his father, portrait painter Vincent Arguimbau, tried to dissuade him from following in his footsteps. “You’ll never earn money as a painter,” his father once told him. But young Peter was a rebel. As a kid he identified with Ty Hardin’s TV cowboy character, Bronco Layne (he keeps a well-worn magazine with Hardin on the cover near his easel). He dropped out of college after one year and as a young adult, and looking very much like he had just arrived from Woodstock, he painted sidewalk art in front of St. Thomas Church in New York City. He made so much money doing that, he says, he had to take a cab home because he couldn’t carry all the coins given to him by passersby. Arguimbau signs his paintings “Layne” because it’s all about the painting, not about him, he says. Sent by his father to study with the legendary Frank Mason at the Art Students League in New York, Arguimbau would continue his studies in Italy working in restoration studios. He traveled extensively through Europe studying classical realism.

Arguimbau paints in an 1850s romantic chestnut ba
from his home. There are at least 1,000 paintings ha
shelves as thin as moldings that sweep through two
the floor, leaning against the aged boards of the bu
by the former owner is suspended from the ceiling.

The cow shed is his wood shop, where he makes about 80 percent of his frames. It looks like a mess to the undisciplined eye, but then you note the electric table saw and the stacks of molding he uses to make the frames piled high on shelves. There are panels of wood Arguimbau has milled from logs on his property. Just outside the double doors of the barn is a painter's dream landscape of woods, water, lawn and lush plantings.

Each new composition — many are commissioned — is an adventure for him, but always, each one is three-dimensional, with deep colors not found in tubes produced by the thousands by the manufacturers. He begins his day by mixing paints, something he has done since he was 8, and makes it look so easy. His easel faces a window that admits northern light controlled by a shade.

Arguimbau's work commands prices in the tens of t
points out he educated his two children through pr
earnings from his paintings. He says he is writing a

for years. Just how do you capture all that he wants to say between the covers of a single book?

Rosemarie T. Anner is a frequent contributor to the Sunday Arts & Style.