

A Family Heirloom by Jane Gomperts Rosenthal

Family heirlooms don't always come in neatly wrapped packages tied with a bow, and this one was no exception. When my mother was cleaning out her apartment after my father's death, the last item she retrieved from the hall closet was a parcel wrapped in plain brown paper tied with a string. She carefully untied it and showed me a 16" x 20" charcoal etching on cardboard sketched by my Uncle Sam of an immigrant woman being turned away by the authorities at Ellis Island.

I told her I wanted it because all my life I had a strong connection to my uncle whose home and studio I had visited throughout my childhood. An immigrant from Kovno, Russia, which is now Lithuania, my Uncle Samuel Cahan born on January 11, 1886, was my father's brother-in-law. He emigrated with his parents to America when he was two years old. His family settled in the Lower East Side on Hester Street in New York City. To support the family, his father sold newspapers.

At the age of twelve he sketched the sinking of the Maine in chalk on the sidewalk. One of the bystanders, who happened to be the editor of The New York World, decided to hire him as an apprentice newspaper artist. He quickly developed a reputation as a courtroom artist because of his ability to reproduce quick sketches of witnesses and defendants. Before long he progressed to doing illustrations of full cover pages for the Sunday supplement magazine.

When I was growing up in Brooklyn, we always gathered together with my relatives for Thanksgiving dinner, and my Uncle Sam dressed for the occasion in a blue suit or sport jacket with a pressed white shirt and tie. Our family arrived by subway, and Uncle Sam greeted us while my Aunt Flora put the finishing touches on the turkey and apple pie in the kitchen. My first introduction to art happened in his apartment and studio on East 57th Street in Manhattan. While the turkey was roasting in the oven, he would show us his latest paintings and explain the scenes and portraits mounted on the walls. These ranged from an etching of Albert Einstein to an impressionist painting of Portofino in Italy. As a teenager I admired the harbor scene and hoped one day to own a picture like the one I saw in his collection.

I thought my uncle was very brave and enterprising. One time he was threatened by a gangster to turn over the sketches he had made of witnesses in the famous Sacco-Vanzetti trial or face losing his life. He handed them over but later reproduced them from memory when he returned to the office. The editor decided to send him on a long ocean voyage to Europe to protect him from retribution.

While aboard the ship he began to sketch menus and was asked to design a new logo. This marked the beginning of a new career painting the portraits of passengers and crew members.

As his skills continued to develop he began to produce and exhibit fine art etchings and paintings. Many of his subjects were Lower East Side Jews and immigrants such as "The Pretzel Vendor." His work has been exhibited at The Jewish Museum in New York City.

Many years later as an undergraduate at Hobart and William Smith Colleges I was a delegate to the Model U.N. and represented Portugal. In preparation for U.N. meeting the delegation visited the Portuguese Embassy and there on the wall was a beautiful watercolor of a park scene painted by the artist, Sam Cahan. I was so excited that I called my uncle and told him how much I liked the painting.

My uncle had a long memory. When I became engaged he gave the painting to me as a present. Inspired by my uncle's gift, I began to collect art. The first piece I bought as a newlywed was the boat painting of the harbor in Portofino that had hung on the wall of my uncle's home.