IRMA LOGAN: PAINTING LIKE GANGBUSTERS
by S. Joslyn Fosberg

Irma Logan is in love with paint. She thinks it's peanut butter and jelly and she plays with it. She mixes it, whirls it, dabbs on glowing, joyful color, handles color balances like a quick-footed juggler. She's in love with the real world, the one she sees with her eyes, and she responds to it. She takes off from a figure, or from just a cabbage, flung down on a chair, and represents them with her dancing brushes. With a pencil in her hand, she's capable of fine academic drawing, but once she's got hold of a color-loaded brush, she, like Bonnard before her, doesn't give a damn about "nice drawing." No matter if a leg isn't anatomically correct, she gets going on that form and answers to the necessity of picture-making. She paints lush fruits, lush flowers, vivid landscapes, and juicy nudes.

Irma Logan looks like one of her own vivid paintings in her raspberry-pink smock and green shoes, and her snipping, dancing big brown eyes. Irma Logan is 70 years old, and paints like gangbusters.

This tiny powerhouse was born in New Orleans before the First World War, the daughter of an antiques store owner. She started at Newcomb College in the '20s, when it was still on Washington Avenue. "The following year, we moved up to Broadway. The campus wasn't really completed. I remember the first May Day Junior-Senior Pageant, everybody parading around in costumes, and sinking up to their ankles in mud. No, it wasn't too different then than it is now. The classes were perhaps more democratic, not all debutantes. One of my best friends was from an orphanage. There was a girl, from Texas, wouldn't you know, who had an automobile, and we thought she was an awful show-off.

"I took my degree in chemistry, I had always been interested in science, and I was good at it. My father encouraged me to have a career. No, there wasn't that much prejudice against career women in those days. After the War, things had changed, opened up.

"I was always interested in art, too. I once modeled the head of a young man that my family particularly admired. Then we went to New York and sublet the house for the summer. When we got back, the tenants had thrown the sculpture out. I took a few drawing classes at Newcomb, but I didn't think I was good enough. I thought that to say I was an artist was presumptuous. In my junior year, I had completed my regular courses and I applied to the committee to take courses in both chemistry and art, but the committee thought my choice too weird. Woodward was teaching in the art school at Newcomb, but I didn't really know her, because I wasn't really involved in the art school.

"I went to graduate school at Columbia, along with Ted Crager (the literary light of the Basement Bookstore) but I never completed my degree. There were so many hours involved in lab work. I did manage, though, to sneak down to Hunter College for a couple of classes in drawing. I didn't try to paint, didn't think I knew enough about it. I had pretty much academic training, drawing from casts, drawing the figure. I don't think this kind of disciplined training hurts, I think it helps. I also went to all the museums and art galleries in New York, and had a lot of fun.

"I stayed in New York and taught school. At first, I was a substitute teacher. Then my suite-mate—the girl in the adjoining room, that was the name we used to dignify our cubby-holes, who was a settlement worker, got me a job in a settlement house, teaching the children of bonded immigrants. Bonded meant they were on trial until they had proved they were desirable. There were children from all countries, mostly Jewish and Italian, on the Lower East Side. I don't remember exactly what years I was doing this. Time is a deceptive thing when that much has gone by.

"Then my father died, and I came back here. I got a job at Touro Infirmary, checking the statistics for medical papers, and soon found myself running a medical clinic. I got a job at the Roosevelt Hotel as a statistician. I don't know why they thought I was a statistician. I ended up working at the Roosevelt for 30 years as Seymour Weiss' assistant.

(Friends of Irma's say flatly—"She ran the place.") "If there is anything I don't want on my tomb, it's that I was Seymour Weiss' secretary. What I did isn't my idea of what a secretary does. I handled the press promotions, advertising, the conventions. Gradually, I had to handle more and more of the responsibility, but Weiss would never let me have a title.

While she was there, she maintained some contact with the art community, and helped to wrangle some mural commissions for Leonard Pietrich and Paul Minas. In the meantime, she met her husband, Charles Hillary Logan, who was running a livable stable where she went riding. A few years later, she gave birth to her daughter, who is now an art historian.

"I worked right up to the night before she was born, and went back to work a month later. It was possible to do that, because in those days it was easy to get adequate and affectionate help. That portrait over there is of my cook, who worked for me for 30 years."

Even as we talk, even among the littered painting tables, palettes, easels, and smell of turpentine, soft-footed Willie, the demure black maid in white uniform, waits on us, bringing us wine and sandwiches. Being a Connecticut proletarian, I am a little uncomfortable with this, but the fact remains that if women are going to have careers, somebody's still got to do the housework.

"The trouble is," says Irma, "women think housework degrading, and most men wouldn't be a cook. Perhaps domestic service could be treated as a more respectable profession.

"After working 30 years for the Roosevelt, I was just plain tired, I'd had enough. It got to be just one sugar bowl after Mardi Gras after Spring Fiesta after another. I tired, and my husband, who was concerned about what I was going to do, had noticed that I was always drawing after work to amuse myself, so he sent off for one of those "Famous Artists" correspondence courses. It wasn't too good, but at least it got me started painting. That was in 1965. I took a few courses with Kendall Shaw, and George Dunbar, and then several women friends and I tried to sign up for a painting class at Newcomb. But it was full of undergraduates who needed the credits, so we were turned away. Then Hal Carney came to the rescue. He suggested we get a studio, and then he would come down every couple of weeks and criticize. So, my husband found this place for me.

Imagine! An artist's studio on the 13th floor of the Maison Blanche Building! Mr. Logans is building manager and helped to convert what was a furniture-spraying room into this charming atelier, with its dizzying panoramic view of the whole city! And Irma just paints away.

She had her first show at the Downtown Gallery, and has had exhibitions at Le Petit, and the I.C.B. Bank, and has won prizes at several juried exhibitions. She's no Grandma Moses hobby-painter, she accepted a couple of years ago at the NOMA Biennial.

Surprisingly, people buy my paintings. I've had quite a run on them. I'll do commissioned portraits if I like the person.

"I'm trying to work on the abstract elements in figurative painting. Interesting that you compare me to Bonnard, Hal Carney says the same thing, though I haven't consciously tried to copy him. I don't just paint colors—I have finally come to realize that form means a good deal. In this painting, I have tried to make the back mean something. The whole idea of the painting is the slope of the back—its rhythm and shape.

"All I want to do is make one good painting. I don't think I should give any advice to anybody.

"I think the New Orleans art scene is becoming very exciting, especially the improvements in the Museum, though I wish they would please not buy any more photographs. I don't think photographs belong in an art museum, they should have a place of their own. The photographer, instead of having to work to achieve technical skill in putting something down, has only to press a button. I think a good deal of the appeal of photography nowadays is that people appreciate the sentiment, the ideas, the subject-matter that they would not tolerate in modern art—or couldn't find.

"I paint every Monday, Wednesday and Friday from 9 to 12, and always imagine that I am out getting tea from getting out." And Irma Logan, age 70, picks up her brush to start again as I leave.

And hooray for you, Irma Logan, who, before anyone heard of women's lib, managed a career as wife and mother, a career as manager of the Roosevelt, and who waited patiently, for 30 years, to begin a whole new career as an artist. Or maybe it wasn't a new career. Maybe it was the one she was working toward the whole time.