

The Bar Art of Stephen Gardner

"The public house is a first aid post to which human beings receive treatment for injuries sustained in the battle with life"

As an Englishman, drinking culture has always been a big part of me life and when I came to New York some 23 years ago as an illustrator looking for new challenges, it was in the multitude of Manhattan's bars that I first started to feel a sense of belonging.

This body of work began in 2005 as part of an MFA program I undertook at the Fashion Institute of Technology. I had gone back to school to reinvent myself as an artist and illustrator as I had come to a kind of creative crossroads. One of the very first assignments we were given by our drawing professor Melanie Reim was to carry a sketchbook with us at all times and have a theme to the work. I immediately chose "bars" as my theme and set about drawing with the kind of

Fanelli's

enthusiasm that I hadn't felt in many a year. Indeed I had forgot the joy of drawing from life and the fact that I was able to combine two passions, drinking and drawing made it all the sweeter. I remember another of my colleges chose "bridges" for his theme and very quickly started to struggle and come a particularly cold November he wasn't out sketching bridges; he was sat in a bar with me.

I started the process by going into what ever bars I came across, ordering a pint and just sitting and drawing what was in front of me, I've always loved the characters that bars produce people watching is just a great part of New York life in general but I very soon realized that all bars were not created equal and that some bars were unbelievably rich in both décor and history. I started to gravitate to New York's old bars, the ones that just dripped with story telling opportunities, the bars that had survived the prohibition era. The first one on my list being McSorley's, I think it would be possible to fill me life drawing and painting it that bar alone, it is a veritable living museum but I also started to think about all the other great old bars I'd visited over the years such as Pete McManus, Chumley's and the Ear Inn and as I would talk to friends and fellow bar flies I was given many



"Becca"

other suggestions of great old bars to visit. For a bar to fit my definition of great it has to have a neighborhood vibe, an indigenous population, if you will, nobody in New York wants to drink with tourists, that's why they invented Houlihan's. Finding these real bars became a mission and once you start to look there was just so much material to work with. Soon I became something of an expert in the bars and their respective histories.

After filling a multitude of sketchbooks I began to convert some of my more successful drawings into paintings, the first one being "Early Bird at McSorley's" for which I received the Stevan Dohanos from the Society of Illustrators in 2009, this was the first painting award of my career and I needed no further encouragement. I felt for the first time in what had been a rather unpredictable career as an illustrator that I had finally found my own voice.

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I have subsequently taken it upon myself to document as many of these old pubs and taverns as possible and it seems a though there is a never ending supply. In my 23 years of living in this city I have seen so many changes, not all for the better and some of my favorite drinking holes have already gone, most recently Bill's 90's Café on 54th and Madison lost it's lease after 88 years and now this former "speakeasy" has been stripped and gutted to make way for a new "speakeasy" style bar, I'm very sensitive to what I see as the homogeneous crap that seems to be creeping in to the city. I certainly don't enjoy the "Disneyfication" of 42nd street, there used to be some real character there and now it's all corporatized and sanitized. It seems that the character of the city is being throttled out of existence in favor of some corporate ideal. Don't it always seem to go that you don't know what you got till it's gone?

A few years ago we lost Chumley's in the west village another survivor of the prohibition era but it could not survive the ravishes of time. I had the privilege of sitting and sketching in this particular tavern on many an occasion, it was one of my favorite place to take my English friends when they visited, there is just no way to recreate the atmosphere and the feeling of history in these places anymore than you can create a 30 year old scotch in a week. Gone, yes but not forgotten.

I consider it my challenge and my purpose to try and capture these places and to convey my love for both the bars the traditions that they represent. As for the paintings themselves, my aim is always to try to be, as true to the nature of each specific bar as possible in terms of lighting color and clientele, I will sit for hours and observe the customers and the bartenders and try to do justice to what I'm experiencing. Each place has it's own signature and idiosyncrasy, it's own style and story-

What more could an artist ask for?



Milano's



Rhoman's



White Horse Tavern