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Peter Hastings Falk, an art historian, coordinated the gallery show of Arthur Pinajian's work at Antiquorum in Manhattan.



# Paintings From Garage Find Appreciation in Gallery

## An Artist's Work Nearly Ended Up In a Trash Can

By JAMES BARRON

For years, they languished in a Long Island garage, old canvasses piled in a stack. Then they came close to being thrown into a garbage truck.

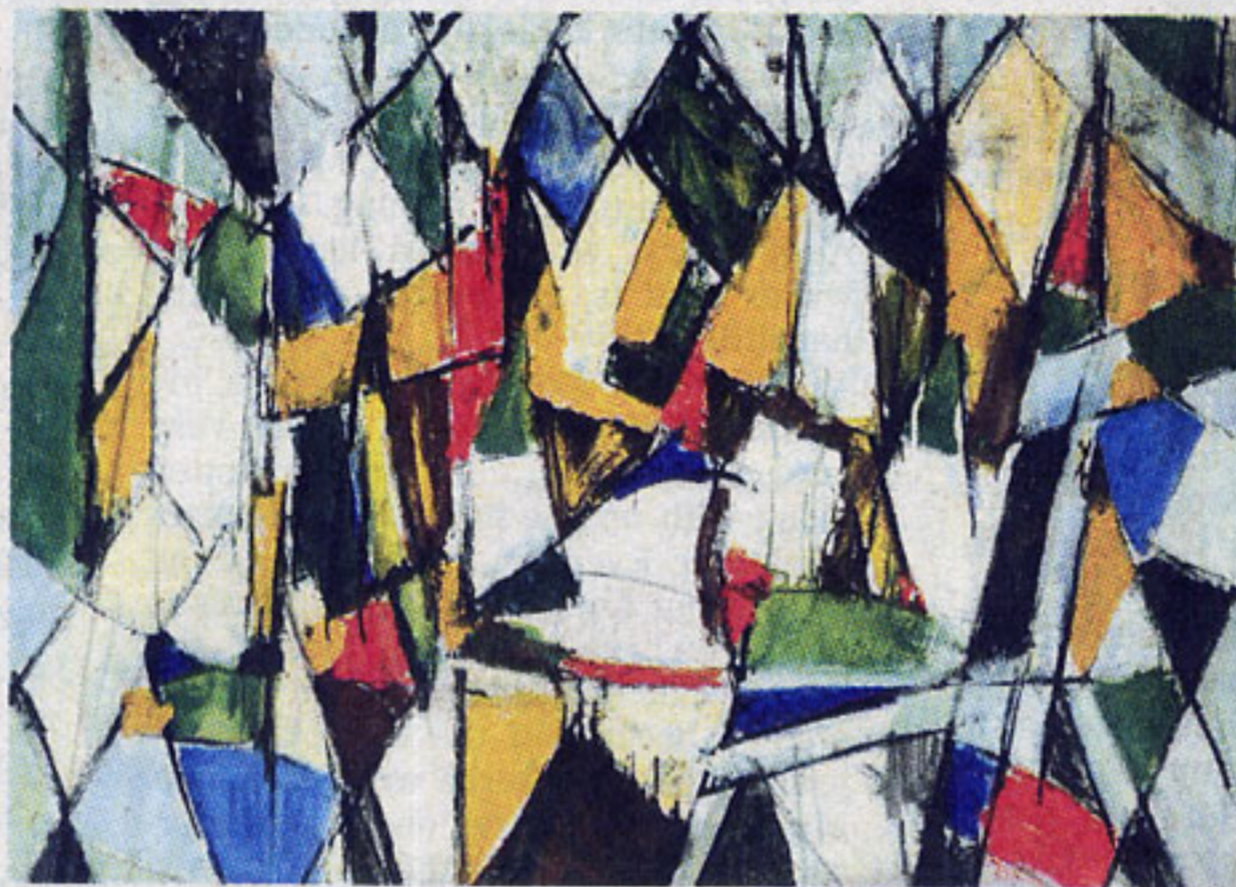
For the last month, some of them have had a temporary home that could not be more different: the whiter-than-white walls of a Madison Avenue gallery, with the spotlights in the ceiling aimed just so.

The paintings are the work of Arthur Pinajian, a reclusive artist whom the art world had not known much about. Now, 14 years after his death, he has fans who mention him in the same sentence as Gauguin and Cézanne. The art historian William Innes Homer wrote that Mr. Pinajian had pursued art with "the single-minded focus" that those other painters had shown and that "Pinajian was a creative force to be reckoned with."

With the attention comes the possibility of something Mr. Pinajian never enjoyed in life: serious money for his paintings. Among the 34 works at the gallery are two oil paintings from 1960: No. 638, on the market for \$87,000, and No. 3868, for \$72,000.

The least expensive item in the show, No. 4013, from 1987, is an acrylic painting for \$3,750. (Size may have figured in the pricing. The oil paintings are three feet tall and more than four feet wide. The acrylic is only 11 inches tall and 14 inches wide.)

In a 2010 monograph, "Pinajian: Master of Abstraction Discovered," Mr. Homer wrote that Mr. Pinajian's work was surprising and that there was "a dichotomy in his personality." He said



THE ESTATE COLLECTION OF ARTHUR PINAJIAN



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there were two sides to Mr. Pinajian, "one embodying a lyrical, romantic view of nature, and the other, exposing the darker side of male fantasies."

The paintings in the gallery show, which is scheduled to run through Sunday at Antiquorum Gallery, at 41 East 57th Street, near Madison Avenue, fall into the first category, not the erotic images of the second. Peter Hastings Falk, an art historian and appraiser who coordinated the show, said the paintings on view followed the artist from Woodstock, N.Y., to Long Island, where Mr. Pinajian painted "from the same vantage points" around Bellport as William Glackens, an American realist painter.

On Long Island, Mr. Pinajian had an 8-foot-by-8-foot studio in a little house owned by his sister, Armen, who supported him for much of his life. His death in 1999 led to the discovery of the paintings. Peter Najarian, a cousin of the Pinajians who helped with

Arthur Pinajian had an 8-foot-by-8-foot studio in a little house owned by his sister, Armen, who supported him for much of his life. Above, an oil painting from 1960.

the cleanup, explained in Mr. Homer's monograph how he had defied Ms. Pinajian's orders.

"Oh, just put it all in the garbage," she told him. "He said himself to just leave it all for the garbagemen."

Throw it all away? Mr. Najarian could not bring himself to do that, although he had to discard "almost half the work" because it "had become so moldy it was beyond saving." Still, thousands of paintings remained.

Mr. Homer wrote that he heard about the trove from his brother-in-law, a Bellport resident who was friendly with the investors buying the Pinajian house after Ms. Pinajian died in 2006. "I must admit that I was only mildly impressed" at first, Mr. Homer wrote. But as he and his wife went through everything that Mr. Pinajian had left behind, "we became more and more excited."

Mr. Falk said that Mr. Homer had soon called him, and that he

too had had doubts at first about the painter. "I saw some sparks of brilliance," he said. "The question was, was there enough to warrant the time it would take. This wasn't even a rediscovery. That connotes an artist who was once well known but has been forgotten in successive generations. This was an artist who was completely unknown."

It turned out that Mr. Pinajian had done comic-book illustrations in the 1930s and had created the "first cross-dressing superhero" in a series called "Madam Fatal." He won a Bronze Star for valor in World War II, and after attending the Art Students League on the G.I. Bill, he began spending time in Woodstock.

Mr. Falk said Mr. Pinajian was there in 1969, when many artists hoped a big music festival would bring crowds to local galleries. "He had planned a breakout exhibition of erotic art," Mr. Falk said. "But the exhibition never happened because Woodstock happened elsewhere." The festival that came to define 1960s counterculture took place about 60 miles from Woodstock, in Bethel, N.Y.

Mr. Pinajian remained unknown, but not completely. For a while he kept up with a cousin who had been hired to teach at the Pratt Institute by George McNeil, an Abstract Expressionist painter and founder of the American Abstract Artists group. That brought him into a circle of the well-known artists of his generation, like Franz Kline, Philip Guston and Jacob Lawrence, and into the bars they frequented on DeKalb Avenue in Brooklyn and in Greenwich Village.

"This is an artist who let his own story emerge naturally," Mr. Falk said. "You take in everything from the history of comic books all the way to the New York Abstract Expressionists. We know that before he really became a hermit, he knew all these guys."