

HCC ART GALLERIES

HCC Permanent Art Collection Oral History Interview

Interviewer: Al Miller

Interviewee: Renato Rampolla

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Al Miller (AM):

My name is Al Miller and I'm here with Ron Rampolla and we're talking about his father's work for our upcoming permanent collection show as well as our archives. I'm going to start with some questions about your father and then questions about you.

Renato Rampolla (RR):

I just want to mention I always use Renato. The only reason I say that is there's a wedding photographer named Ron Rampolla in St. Pete and I don't want to step on his toes, and he doesn't want to step on mine and Renato's my legal name. People call me either one.

AM:

So, about Frank Rampolla obviously I know that was your father but what was your relationship with him like?

RR:

Well, we made a beautiful bronze chess set together. The king's about 5 pounds, 12 inches high, and he taught me how to do woodworking, you know, woodcuts, and I never did get to etchings or lithographs, but he taught me a lot about painting. Can I show you something? This is me and my father when *The Jungle Book* came out and I wanted him to draw Baloo. I'm like 6 or 7 years old here and he's giving me a

whole lecture on why he doesn't want to do it this way, he wants to do it that way from a composition standpoint and I'm like, just draw the stupid thing. Anyway, but yeah, I thought I'd show you that.

So, he died when I was 11. I mention this on my website, that I always wish I had the opportunity to speak to him now that I'm an adult and it's so weird because now, when he died at 40, I'm old enough now to be his father. Isn't that weird? It's kind of surreal. Yeah, but he - it was very good, but he was, I don't know if obsessed is the right word, but he was always [making] art, was always drawing, always making wax figures, things like this. He was always doing art. It was his life. And he was an intellectual, he was also a classical pianist, and so he was always doing something.

But on Sundays, we'd either go to the beach or we'd go to Hillsborough River State Park, and we'd rent paddle boats, and my mom and him and we'd go in the paddleboats and do something. It was always family time on Sundays, Sunday afternoons.

AM:

Did he ever mention how he became an artist? Or in any of your research about him?

RR:

He was actually going to be a classical pianist. He started in that realm, but he always drew, and he got into Cooper Union, and at Cooper Union back then, I don't know how it is now but back then in New York you didn't pay, you had to be accepted to be in there, so it's like an automatic scholarship. So, he did that, and then he went to Boston U and graduated and then started teaching at the Ringling. But how he got into it, I think it was - he couldn't not do it. I mean it's one of those things, same thing with me and photography, I just can't not do it. It's like breathing, you know?

AM:

Did he face any evident challenges throughout his life?

RR:

Yes, he had—again I've never had an opportunity to talk to him about it, but I had through my mother—he had a heart condition [after] he had rheumatic fever when

he was an infant. He had already had his tonsils out when he was an infant, so the tonsils, they basically catch any, I'm not a doctor, but my understanding is they catch viruses and help protect you but without the tonsils as an infant the rheumatic fever went right to his heart. That's how my mother explained it to me. He had a heart condition his whole life, I guess it was a defective valve or something like that.

Toward the end like in '68, '69, he would go to the hospital for a couple days and he wouldn't tell anybody, I mean he told my mom and that was it, then he'd go right from the hospital right to a class at USF when he was teaching and he would tell people that he was gone because his mother was in the hospital. And I'm getting this from Harrison Covington, who was the dean of fine arts at USF, and Bruce Marsh, who was friends with my father, and Mernet Larsen who also knew my father, they all taught together. That was the big challenge. He always felt, and this is quoting my mom, he always had a sense of doom, although he was funny, he was lively, he was cheerful, life of the party type of thing, but he always felt he didn't have enough time. He would always tell my mom, "I don't have enough time," and that's why I think he was so prolific, because he knew he wasn't going to get 60 years or 70 years, he knew it was imminent.

AM:

Wow. Do you have a personal definition of his work?

RR:

It's labeled liturgical or figurative expression, liturgical figurative expressionist work. He dealt with man's inhumanity to man. I have a whole thing of woodcuts on the holocaust type stuff, and it's with Salvatore Quasimodo, who's a poet, and he took his work and translated it, and it was already translated from Italian, and he did woodcuts with it. It's just beautiful, beautiful work and we showed it in 2013 at the Leepa Rattner when we did a retrospective on my father's work there. But it was basically man's inhumanity to man and that transcends what's going on now whether it's Trump or Desantis or this or that, it transcends all that. It's just, how can man be so cruel to— humankind be so cruel to humankind? That's what it was about.

AM:

Do you have any indication of how his work impacted the local community?

RR:

Yea, yea, I mean in the 60's there was a cabal of students that wanted to paint like him, and there's still, Lynn Davison, Rebecca Walker, these are working artists that did really well and when I went to Lynn, she said that Frank Rampolla is in every line she draws. Yeah, let me get something else for you.

[Shows book] I don't have many of these, but this is a book my wife and I put together 10 years ago. We only did 100 copies, but they all sold out and [were purchased by] a lot of former students and stuff. But these were, you can see Mernet Larsen, I don't know if you know these names, she's real popular now in New York, she's done really well. I mean Sid Solomon has a quote in there, there's a lot of different artists.

AM:

So, these are all other people's work?

RR:

No this is all his work and other people's quotes. From newspapers, from people we've talked to and interviewed. I interviewed about 25 people that were former colleagues and students of my father to get a sense more about his work. I can talk all day about it, but I'll try not to. [laughter]

AM:

As much as you like—I'll take any information. That's about the end of my specific questions but is there anything else you'd like to say about him?

RR:

I mean, his work's in the Smithsonian. You can look up *Murder in the Cathedral*, just look up Frank Rampolla in the Smithsonian, and you can see that he transcends... it's time-tested, it transcends. You could look at that and still be affected today. One of the big ones we showed in that show I mentioned in 2000 at HCC was *Lacrimosa* and it was a Pieta holding the Jesus figure, but it was JFK and he did that the night JFK was shot, so emotional. I could show you some prints of a guy, a corpse on a wire, and it says "Vietnam" on it. Where some artists would do those protests and it's very colorful, pretty, you'd hang it up in your living room, this is like whoa, and it sits back, and there was a man, a big burly guy that was in Vietnam—this was in 1982, we had a retrospective at Lee Scarfone Gallery—and he started crying, and his words were "that's me on that wire." Yeah, you don't go there, you know if you want to

elaborate you do, but yeah uh it's heavy, it's heavy, emotional, visceral stuff. It's not something for the bank building or something.

Matter of fact, he was the first living artist to have a one man show at the Ringling Museum. It was called the *Seven Deadly Sins*, one of them ended up in the Van Wezel, in the lobby. Some of the petitions had him take it down because it was too grotesque, you know, this was in the '60s. There was another one, he was in the High Museum he was juried into a show and again it was called *Go-Go Girls* and it had pubic hair and it was too raw right? Something we couldn't show at HCC either even today. But one of the directors was in Europe, and when he came back, he was like "get this down" but it was juried into the show and then there were articles on it, censorship, you know, "High Museum censors artist" and then a lot of artists got together, and the director of the museum resigned, and it was a big deal. High Museum's a big deal, and [the director] said, I love this quote, he goes "Rampolla's work is like a four-letter word in a quiet conversation." That's so apropos, because like, you're just looking at it, everything's nice and then like "whoa" you know, and uh, it's very intense.