

Autobiography

My name is Niele Toroni. I was born on March 15, 1937, in Muralto, on Lake Maggiore. It is in Ticino, the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland, in the southern Alps, and in the spring the camellias and mimosas are in full bloom; there are also palm trees, banana trees whose fruit never ripens, and lemon trees which do produce ripe fruit now and then. (Whenever this happens, it makes the press.) In the garden of my childhood, there were even gardenias. In Muralto, on June 29, 1940, Paul Klee died. I have been told that he did not live very far away from us, but quite honestly I don't recall him. Mikhail Bakunin had stayed in the same neighborhood—I think it was in the villa Baronata—but that was a long time ago. Four kilometers away, in Ascona, a number of unsuccessful artists and small-time philosophers had gathered, but I didn't experience those glorious times either. A pity; otherwise, I might never have gone to Paris.

When I was a little boy I used to accompany my father, a great trout angler. The mountain streams taught me a thousand and one of the tricks of good fishermen. In August I would catch grasshoppers—not the green sort, but brown ones with yellowish-orange bellies—which we had to attach to our hooks without damaging them too badly. You should have seen the trout leaping up to swallow the grasshoppers as they were borne along on the current!

When the water was muddy, during or after a storm, we would use worms for bait: beautiful, purplish-red worms which I dug up in the neighbor's garden, and which wriggled around in the can. It was important not to forget to pierce holes in the lid—otherwise, they would suffocate. It was quite an art to thread them onto the hook, making sure the metal was entirely covered and leaving only a wriggling tip free.

We used to make our own flies with feathers, threads of wool, threads of silk in every conceivable hue, variously sized hooks, and a little glue. Every stream had its favorite colors, for the trout were creatures of habit. Best of all, though, was fishing with live bait.

My mother had a beautiful voice. She often sang, accompanying herself on the piano; she knew a lot of French songs, from “Roses blanches,” which made me sob, to “Rikita,” interspersed with “J'ai deux amours: mon pays et Paris.”

Later came the time with my friends. In 1954, the brothels were still open in Italy. The ones in Intra and Como, just across the border, welcomed us with open arms. Even better, with the exchange rate in our favor, it was a gift! In Milan, the Chiaravalle really was a “clear valley” for us; on occasional Sunday afternoons we would go there on a pilgrimage, after the Milan-Inter game. It was there that I did my first nude studies. The blinds, always down to keep out the sun, accentuated the chiaroscuro.

In 1956, after indeterminate studies at the école normale, it was time for me to earn a living. I got a teaching post in Maroggia, Switzerland, on Lake Lugano. In the evenings I attempted to paint. Through my window I could see in the distance the lights of Bissone, the village from which Francesco Castelli, alias Borromini, had departed a few centuries earlier. Carlo Fontana and Carlo Maderno had set forth from the banks of the same lake before him.

In 1959 I decided to go to Paris “to paint.” Today, December 6, 1986, I am still here and painting.

Paris, December 6, 1986

Let me update my biography by adding that on December 25, 1993, I played Father Christmas. Besides this, I keep trying to paint, despite a growing conviction that there's no gaining control over a painting.

Paris, January 30, 1994

Biography Update

In 1997, the year of the buffalo, I celebrated (and celebrated well) my sixtieth birthday. I received a bottle of Armagnac as a gift, a vintage bottle that is supposed to be the same age as me. But the package, the bottle, the label, it's all so beautiful (a real work of art!) that I haven't dared have a go at it yet. So I still can't tell you if it is good, very good, very very very good . . .

Otherwise, I've noticed that, despite my sixty years, I still don't take myself too seriously. Luckily enough, I take the art world even less seriously, along with its regiments of arted forces, whose members I occasionally meet and sometimes read.

Probably this accounts for the fact that I still feel like doing my work/painting.

Everything is beginning. Look at this letter from Rainer Maria Rilke to Lou Andreas-Salomé:

Oberneuland near Bremen August 11, 1903. Tuesday.

I don't want to separate art and life; I know that at all times and in all circumstances they have the same meaning. But in face of life I'm awkward, so it focuses all its efforts on me, stops me, holds me back, and makes me lose many opportunities—like in those familiar dreams when you just can't finish getting dressed, and because of the stubbornness of two shoe studs, you let an important occasion slip away. And it is true that life passes and that it doesn't allow for tarrying or wasting time, especially for anyone who wants to be an artist. Art is something that is much too big, too heavy, and too long for one lifetime, and old people have just barely started down the road. "I was about seventy-three when I understood more or less the real shape and nature of birds, fish, and plants," Hokusai wrote. Rodin has the same feeling, and so, no doubt, did Leonardo da Vinci, who died so old. And yet they lived out their lives in their art, focused on that single object and bringing all else back to it: how depressing then it must be for someone who seldom rises to his sanctuary because he lets himself get caught in all the snares that life sets to trap him, and helplessly collides against all the obstacles. If I seek with such anxiety and such impatience each day's work, each day's task, it is because life can only become art if it is at first labor . . . Please forgive me if I keep you waiting: like a guide you've started out on the journey, but I am still straying, straying like animals do when the hunting season is no longer closed . . .

Paris, July 1997

Translated from the French by Gila Walker.

Note: In all of his publications, Niele Toroni authors his own biography. This particular biography was originally published in Niele Toroni (Bordeaux, France: CAPC Musée d'Art Contemporain de Bordeaux, 1997).

The artist has chosen not to update it for this publication.