

The Master in Pieces

Kyrsten Carlson

The breeze drowned in the drizzling sky leaving people uncomfortably warm in their coats. Take it off, get wet, leave it on, suffocate. So everyone choked. Lights winked in the windows like glitter thrown across the skyline. The soft moon hid behind whispers of clouds, providing a stream of light here and there, like looking through a funeral veil. The night was young, but the day, tired and tried.

Inside, Mr. Oliver Hamilton stood to the side. His brown tweed jacket and orange sweater vest beneath nearly yelled out his age, a robin among cardinals and bluejays. Removing his matching flat cap, he wiped his brow with a yellowed handkerchief. Returning his small, chubby hands into his beige pleated pants, he shifted about in his slightly-too-large brown shoes he'd forgotten to shine.

Around him, people molted, their falling coats revealing bare shoulders, smooth against the deep blues, shining reds, vibrant greens of their gowns, turning each into a colorful gem strung up on a necklace. The men unwrapped themselves like cigars of various neutrals and unbuttoned suit jackets with sighs of relief. It was a sight, the colorful birds of paradise against the concrete interior of the museum, but not one cawed with delight, shook hands without calculating judgments, no, not one meant a thing.

Though the night spoke otherwise, this was a happy occasion. A celebration of art reborn, reincarnated into something still to be discovered. On this night, the modern art museum of San Francisco was having its soft reopening to those in high society that could afford donations and couldn't afford suffering reputations.

Somewhere in front of an ever-murmuring crowd, the museum director gave her thanks for all the support from the art community and motioned to the now-open bar. The group flocked to it, their voices rising to cheer the night along. The champagne fizzed out into bubbly laughter from bright red lips while the men gave hardy whiskey shoulder slaps to a chorus of ole sports and champs.

Mr. Oliver Hamilton, not one for drinking and less for socializing, wandered ahead into the reconstructed gallery that was, at that moment, for his eyes only. They'd chosen to open with color field - large canvases of color blocks on top of color blocks on top of color blocks daring to mingle at the edge. It didn't thrill him. But, nonetheless, it had something to it, right? He turned a corner and came upon a few pieces of contemporary art. Smears of color abstractedly thrown onto a blank canvas. The next round of framed pieces was abstract expressionism, a canvas that cried in color and screamed in chaos.

He continued on, puffing up at this piece, strutting away from another, until he came to it. A painting. A scene. A woman's eyes, wide, broken, staring out in an empty room. From her eye traveled a drop of brown paint, down the canvas, and onto a chair that protruded from the wall.

"Strange, isn't it?" chirped a smooth voice. It startled poor Oliver who, looking wildly about him, realized he wasn't alone. "Strange, right?" she repeated.

"What's so strange about it?" Mr. Oliver Hamilton asked, his feathers all ruffled.

"Well," the woman traded her drink from hand to hand, "why does the tear become a solid object? It's clearly supposed to represent emotion, but as it solidifies, does it mean she is stuck that way? Left to forever feel sad?"

Intrigued, Oliver turned to the woman who continued watching the painted lady's gaze. "Perhaps, or perhaps it shows that feelings can be rooted in the concrete, in the real and the touchable."

She straightened up and crossed her arms, "Hm. I suppose, but really, why a chair then? It seems rather arbitrary to me, depressing even."

"But if anything, art should make us feel and to feel saddened by it is to be touched by it, is it not?" Yet when he looked for his audience, he saw her sauntering away to another piece. "Well, I certainly think so."

"You think what?" a tall, slender man asked. "To me," he finished his wine, "to me this piece says, well, frankly nothing!" He clapped Mr. Oliver Hamilton on the back with a chuckle.

"Nothing at all?" Oliver said.

The man straightened his bow tie before clapping Oliver on the back again. "Ha, ha, old chap, this is that new stuff that no one gets. Maybe in a few decades we'll come to see something of it. Ah, Carrie, Carrie, dear, it's been too long!" He gave Oliver's shoulder a goodbye squeeze and followed a silver bird as she disappeared into the crowd.

Mr. Oliver Hamilton looked around, his eyes landing on a thin vase of a woman all dressed in ivory sequins, staring at a large stone statue of a child kneeling and clutching its arms around the neck of a dog. The child's arms and hands seemed to melt into the hard fur of its companion.

"Ah, and what does this piece say to you?" Oliver asked while removing his cap to dab at his forehead.

"It's not really fair," the woman said.

"And why is that?"

“It’s always about being younger and younger. I’m quite tired of it,” she said.

“Perhaps the child merely represents innocence instead of a particular age?” he offered.

“Listen, if he wants to go, then he can go,” she snapped.

“Which? The dog? The child? Perhaps one clings to the other for stability of the mind or of time which passes too quickly.”

“Alright, Roger, you tell him I’ll sign the damn papers. He can travel the world with that college dropout if he wants to. They can be two idiot dodo love birds together.” She angrily returned a phone to her bag and turned, nearly running into Oliver, huffing as she made her way past him.

It was a waste. All of it. The night, the people, the minds, the art - oh, god, of course, the art. Wasted. He searched for any consolation, any sign that he was wrong, that it had meaning. The answer, perhaps, lies with a child tugging on his suit sleeves, a futile attempt to stretch them so they might hide his wrists. Mr. Oliver Hamilton approached with caution.

Sitting in a large metal frame that jutted out well past the canvas was a cityscape on fire. Only the silhouette of the buildings gave light to what they were, all the windows one would expect to see were closed, no movement within. Most peculiar water seeped down the painting from some hidden mechanism. Each drop would catch onto the yellows, oranges, and reds of the painted flames and bring them to a muddled conclusion along the bottom lip of the frame.

“Well, what do you think?” Oliver asked.

Giving up on his jacket, the boy shoved his hands deep into the recesses of his pockets. “Who’re you talkin’ to?”

“You, boy, I want to know what you think of this painting!”

“Uh,” he glanced at the elderly man with his large caterpillar eyebrows asking the questions. “It’s kinda cool how only the fire melts. Or whatever.”

“What does it make you think about?” Oliver asked.

“I dunno, I guess, like, the water is putting out the fire,” the boy kicked at the ground.

“Anything else you notice?” It wasn’t the most splendid conversation on art he’d had in his long life, but it was more worthy than those he’d held, or thought he’d held, throughout the night.

“Um, there’s no people?” It was clear the boy was searching for the right answer rather than giving his own opinions.

“That’s not untrue, but what does that tell you?” Oliver encouraged.

“Hm,” he stared into the painting. A smartly dressed man in a suit that matched the boys made them a trio.

“Who’s your friend, Jojo?” the man said.

The boy looked at Oliver and then the new man, unsure who to answer. “I hate it when you call me that,” he said.

“It’s what your mother calls you,” the man returned.

“That’s because she regrets naming me after my dad. I like Joseph.” He shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “I think that it’s interesting there’re no people, but the city’s on fire. Like, you know people have to live there because why else build a city? But no one cares. Did they leave? Before the fire or after? Where’d they go?” he said to Oliver.

The man laughed with a smugness that only comes with a fat wallet and a good-looking face. “Oh god, wait until I tell your mother you think you know about art.”

“The boy’s got an interesting perspective, art isn’t the same to everyone. The important thing is he’s asking questions.” Mr. Oliver Hamilton said.

Putting his emptied tumbler in his left hand and putting his right on the child’s shoulder, he glanced from boy to Oliver. “Should you really be talking to young boys? Come on, Jojo, your mother has absolutely got to hear this.” Though he tossed his head back to laugh, his hair remained perfectly sculpted to his head.

Before he could respond, the two were too far away approaching a cardinal wearing a necklace of pearls. The adults exchanged words and the mother, he presumed, threw back her head, curls bouncing with each laugh. Having had enough, the boy jerked his body out from under his stepfather’s repressive hand and found a bench against an empty wall where he could consider his hate.

Mr. Oliver Hamilton sighed. His heart sighed. His mind sighed. His whole body shivered with one big releasing sigh—of anger. And he left.

And he returned.

“Hello, mister, I’m sorry, but the museum’s closed. Been closed for about three hours now.” The security guard waved him back toward the door he should have locked.

The intruder produced an ID. “I am Oliver Hamilton. I explained to Ms. Cathay Bates that I needed to fix my exhibit before the second night.”

“I don’t know anything about that sir, I’m afraid you’ll have to leave until Ms. Bates...”

“I’m here, Henry, it’s alright,” Cathay Bates said as she entered the front door, struggling to get a thin strap of her shoe around her heel. “Mr. Hamilton, I’ve really got somewhere I need to be so I’ll give you the key to your exhibit and then you leave it here with Henry when you’re all done.” She handed him the key and moved on to tame her hair. “Please do whatever you want to, stay all night, I don’t care. My car is here, I must go.”

Whatever he wanted.

“Well there you go, mister, I’ll be down here waiting.” Henry resumed his usual pacing.

Whatever he wanted. What did he want? The short man hurried to his exhibit space. It was haunting so late at night. The ghosts of gentlemen and ladies with their light laughter and empty words shivered in the dark. The security lights only shone in the far corners where a corridor led to a bathroom or an elevator or stairs. It was like walking through a neighborhood at night, the lights blinking out as he passed them.

He found the bench where the young boy Joseph had sat. Oliver’s feet dangled as the child’s had. It only deepened his sense of foolishness. He didn’t mind if someone didn’t understand a piece so long as they thought about it! So long as they questioned it, questioned it with wonder, not irritation.

That’s what he loved about art—about creating it and viewing it. All these moments of life, his birth, his mother’s warm smiles, and warmer hugs, his father’s cigarette ashes burning late into the night as he read the newspaper, his teasing classmates who said things about his height, his knowledge of artists, the first kiss from his first girlfriend, the first time he tasted a real New York slice of pizza, losing his childhood dog, his grandmother still and quiet in her casket. All of this made up him, Oliver Hamilton. All the little day-to-day moments were his and his only, his perspective, his life. And all sorts of little moments made up another person. Both had equally complex lives with heartbreak, with laughter, sorrow and joy, fear and courage, family and friends—each the main character in their own novel. All this made for different minds, different thoughts, different reactions.

So he created a piece with one vision, but someone else saw it through their own vision. New interpretations, new questions with new answers. It wasn’t so much the art that was special as it was the interactions between people, the conversations, the discoveries, the connection from person A to person B living parallel, now perpendicular because of a piece of art.

But these people didn’t care! He stood. They saw themselves as pieces of art. He stomped. Decorated with lavish pieces of gold and silver, gowns like liquid poured over their thin bodies. He circled. One woman’s red dress with a high slit to make her irresistible to another woman’s husband. He paced. One man’s gift of three-tiered pearls to his wife, not out of adoration, but so his ex-wife might

see how well he was doing after their divorce. He cried. Oh maybe they glanced at the art, but they studied the human anatomy, let their jaws hang loose and their morals looser as they jabbered and slobbered at her backless dress or her plunging neckline. He sobbed. A bunch of wild peacocks spreading their feathers of wealth to dance at their own reflections. He lost it.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I see many familiar faces among the crowd, I’m so glad many of you have returned. This is a first in the art world, a living, reacting, breathing museum. As I know many of you are new, we’ve established a mini gallery, if you will, of photos of how the Hamilton exhibit began. Be sure to really take a moment to absorb those into your mind before entering the actual exhibit and have your mind wonderfully expanded. Remember, we again have the open bar and encourage all to have a memorable night. Thank you!” Ms. Cathay Bates opened the door leading to the exhibits.

The champagne and wine again flowed, the flirting and glances shook egos and stirred emotions, the night was intoxicating. When they reached the Hamilton exhibit, their eyes widened, their chatter crescendoed.

The chair was in pieces. The canvas of the woman, the city, all ripped and hanging. The child and dog, now separated, lying wounded on the ground. Frames hung askew, some resting on the floor. Everything ripped, broken, shattered, destroyed.

And they laughed. Someone commented on how fragile life was. Another on how short it was. Another still on how unpredictable. One woman bumped another causing her to drop her glass of wine, staining the shreds of canvas, splintering glass on glass. They all clapped at the additional chaos. A perfect addition! A symbol of togetherness! No, a sign of outside force! No! An indication of how sorrow begets sorrow!

And there sat Mr. Oliver Hamilton, a man more broken than the broken mess he’d made. Now they found meaning, now they discussed, they argued, they thought. Bird-brained idiots picking at trash to find a crumb.

He lunged. Short as he was, he grabbed a fistful of necklace and tore it from a slender neck, the stones flying. He took a man’s whiskey and catapulted it against a shredded painting. None dared to stop him. His eyes lit with fire. He shoved a woman, her drink cascading down the rhinestones of her dress. He punched a man who doubled over onto the floor bringing with him a woman he’d tried to grasp for stability. He shouted. He screamed. He jumped through the window.