Irving Sandler’s goodbye

by Karen Wilkin

On the legendary art critic, scholar, and museum director, who died in 2018.

BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE

Irving Sandler

*Goodbye to Tenth Street*

Pleasure Boat Studio: A Literary Press, 373 pages, $22.95

If Irving Sandler (1925–2018) had been Japanese, he would have been declared by his people a “Living National Treasure.” From the 1950s to his death, he was a crucial figure in the evolving story of American vanguard painting and sculpture: a friend of artists and frequent studio visitor, director and founder of alternative galleries, art critic, professor of art history, museum director, and, above all, witness and chronicler of the changing desiderata of the moment. When Sandler died in June, a few weeks short of his ninety-third birthday, the art world lost a legend. Until the very end of his long, busy life, he was a seemingly ubiquitous presence who knew or had known everyone, tirelessly attending exhibitions, panels, and lectures, taking exhaustive notes in his tiny handwriting and asking probing, informed questions. The four volumes that bear witness to his experience—The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism (1970); The New York School: The Painters and Sculptors of the Fifties (1978); American Art of the 1960s (1988); and Art of the Postmodern Era: From the Late 1960s to the Early 1990s (1996)—together provide a history of (mostly) American art after World War II. Required reading for several generations of scholars and collectors, and equally fascinating for those with even a casual interest.
in the subject, these books are notable for their deep, firsthand knowledge and their jargon-free, lucid prose.

Sandler dated his discovery of his lifelong passion to 1952. He was a twenty-six-year-old impoverished veteran of World War II, then a candidate for a Ph.D. in history who was losing interest in his subject. (He hadn’t seen combat, but he’d been an officer in the marines, which he called his “moment of glory.”) His epiphany came when Franz Kline’s 1950 black and white abstraction Chief suddenly compelled his attention on a casual walk through the Museum of Modern Art. As Sandler described it, “It was the first work of art that I really saw, and it changed my life. . . . Chief began my life-in-art, the life that has really counted for me.” Soon after, the young enthusiast was befriended by Angelo Ippolito, a second-generation Abstract Expressionist, and became a regular at the Cedar Tavern, where both card-carrying and aspiring Abstract Expressionists pondered the vexed aesthetic issues of the day in intense, often acrimonious debates fueled by ample amounts of alcohol, tobacco, and ambition. Although Sandler was about twenty years younger than most of the Abstract Expressionists, he became part of their inner circle, visiting studios and attending their events. Eventually he became the woefully underpaid “manager” of the cooperative Tenth Street Tanager Gallery, which placed him in the thick of the younger downtown avant-garde and led to lifelong friendships with artists of his own generation such as Alex Katz, Al Held, and Philip Pearlstein. Over the ensuing decades, Sandler seems not only to have gotten to know everyone, but also to have made it his mission to record everything he could about what the artists he followed were making, exhibiting, and talking about. Held termed him “our Boswell.”

Remarkably, Sandler’s curiosity, appetite, and enthusiasm were neither focused on a single approach nor restricted to artists of his own generation or to the older abstract artists whose work had first stimulated his passionate “life-in-art.” As attested to by his memoirs and by the art that he and his wife, the eminent historian of medieval art Lucy Freeman, lived with, his interest was captured by the work of artists as diverse in age and in ways of working as Joan Mitchell, Louise Nevelson, Judy Pfaff, and Robert Berlind, to name just a few of the many whom Sandler followed closely and who became part of his astonishingly wide-ranging circle of friends.

Despite his significant friendships, Sandler always maintained that he strove for objectivity in his four volumes, choosing the artists he included, he said, not as much because of his own predilections as because of consensus—what the larger art world deemed important, at a given moment. Yet his love of the entire art-making milieu and his affection for particular artists comes through in all his writings, however dispassionate their tone. So does the eyewitness quality of his perceptions. These characteristics are even more visible in the informal, informative memoirs, A Sweeper-Up After Artists (2003) and Swept Up By Art (2015), that Sandler published in his last decades, intimate commentaries drawn from his copious notes that offer a more personal, less dispassionate view of the New York art world. Now, the gloves have come off completely in Goodbye to Tenth Street, Sandler’s last book, a rowdy quasi–roman à clef that mixes composite, invented characters with walk-on parts for real New York art world figures.1 Goodbye to Tenth Street can be read as the outtakes from Sandler’s art history books—that is, the novel includes all
the gossip, conniving, back-biting, sex, and bitchiness that, for obvious reasons, are conspicuously absent from his other accounts of the New York art world of the 1950s and 1960s.

Sandler plainly had fun writing Goodbye to Tenth Street, and it’s generally fun to read. The time frame is 1956 to 1963, the tumultuous years after World War II and during the Cold War, when the first-generation Abstract Expressionists were increasingly accepted and acclaimed by the small establishment art world of the period and, at the same time, increasingly challenged by younger artists associated with Pop Art and Color Field painting. It’s a world Sandler inhabited and whose participants, on all levels and in all capacities, he knew well. He reminds us, in a brief preface, that “My subjects are fictitious, but they and the situations in which I have put them hopefully possess a sense of reality,” adding that while his protagonists never existed, he “met the likes of them in my more than six decades in the art world.” Part of the fun is trying to identify the models for the novel’s leading characters—artists, collectors, dealers, critics, and the like—and trying to find prototypes for the novel’s events and actions.

The main character in Goodbye to Tenth Street, the painter Peter Burgh, for example, seems like an amalgam of Mark Rothko and Philip Guston (absent Guston’s last, fierce, politically charged figurative phase), to judge by Sandler’s descriptions of the evolution of Burgh’s work, from early Social Realism to lyrical abstraction for which he was recognized and admired, followed by a transformed, less popular last series. An influential female art dealer, Celia Loeb, shares the sexual appetite attributed to Peggy Guggenheim, while the artists she exhibits remind us of those supported by the less flamboyant Betty Parsons. Herbert Stein, a perceptive curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, shares some of the aesthetic leanings of the legendary Henry Geldzahler, the museum’s first curator of twentieth-century art, in the 1960s, but Sandler gives Stein none of Geldzahler’s well-known personal predilections. An unpleasant critic, whom Sandler calls Marshall Hill, seems intended as a caricature of Clement Greenberg. Hill is described as doing everything that Greenberg’s enemies accused him of, including telling artists what to paint. Sandler certainly knew this wasn’t true, but he never liked Greenberg much. Is the character in the novel a kind of revenge? Witness Sandler’s ferociously ambitious younger painter, Neil Johnson, who solicits Hill’s advice and follows it—a sign of his questionable character. And so on. The real art world figures from the 1950s and ’60s, both well-known and obscure, who appear briefly, the way Alfred Hitchcock did in his films, add an amusing subtext.

Like Rothko and like Frenhofer, the troubled artist in Honoré Balzac’s The Unknown Masterpiece (who is referred to throughout Goodbye to Tenth Street), Burgh commits suicide. We learn this at the start, in a prologue dated September 30, 1963, when a close painter friend of Burgh’s discovers his colleague’s body in his Tenth Street studio. One of Burgh’s obituaries notes that the works in his last exhibition “were failures, the issue of an artist in decline,” while another maintains that “Abstract Expressionism is the triumph of American painting, and in large measure, its stature depends on Burgh’s paintings.” Flash back to July 22, 1956, when we meet a hard-drinking, chain-smoking Burgh at work, wracked by anxiety about what is evolving on his canvas. Leaving the studio, he heads for the Cedar Tavern, where Jackson Pollock is sitting with the invented
Greenberg surrogate, Marshall Hill. And we’re off. Goodbye to Tenth Street traces the accumulation of events and emotions, including adulation, betrayal, changing reputations, a shifting art world, and personal doubts that gradually leave Burgh deeply dissatisfied with his work, drinking heavily, and finally unable to paint—a combination of insurmountable horrors that leads him to take his own life.

The story is told through encounters between artists, dealers, collectors, curators, and critics, with occasional ventures into the characters’ unspoken thoughts. We meet the generous, the terminally selfish, the ambitious, the canny, and the self-destructive, sometimes in combination as a single, contradictory person. We watch Burgh’s reputation fluctuate and observe Johnson’s efforts to bolster his own position, while dealers and collectors remain constantly alert to their own interests. We note with distaste how dismissively women artists are treated by just about everyone, including successful female gallerists, and admire Burgh’s efforts to help a gifted but self-defeating painter friend. The intertwined stories of the various characters, invented and real, keep us engaged. We follow plausible struggles, occasional triumphs, disappointments, and sometimes disquieting machinations. Sandler is a scrupulous observer, good at noting the revelations of behavior and dress. He’s good, too, at describing ambience, evoking the chaos of some studios and the obsessive neatness of others, and conjuring up the interiors of certain kinds of apartments and galleries by cataloguing furniture and color schemes. The contrast between uptown and downtown locations is made very clear. The rough-hewn, downright scuzzy character of East Tenth Street and its environs in the late 1950s and early 1960s is brought to life, along with its sometimes unsavory inhabitants. Sandler’s artists live in a neighborhood very different from today’s gentrified “East Village.” The nondescriptness of the Cedar Tavern is commented upon several times as a quality appealing to the artists who congregate there.

Sandler’s years of frequenting studios, of spending time with artists, and even of sitting for his portrait—he was painted more than once by his friends Alex Katz and Philip Pearlstein—make the novel’s descriptions of artists at work completely convincing, especially for those of us with a lot of studio experience. Sandler makes us privy to how artists attacking large canvases handle their materials and tools. The voluptuousness of oil paint and its responsiveness to change come through in the descriptions of Burgh at work, alternatingly agonized and ecstatic, as he punishes the canvas with the wet-into-wet, scrape-out, and paint-over methods that result in the contingent, unstable imagery of gestural Abstract Expressionism. Even the choice of postcard images and reproductions on the wall of Burgh’s studio seems accurate. Of course, he’d have something from Piero della Francesca’s great cycle of frescoes in Arezzo! But what Sandler does best is conjure up the passionately held ideas and deepest concerns of the artists of the novel’s period. The political climate of the time is suggested by the presence of still intense old Leftists, by references to Cold War attitudes and anxieties, and by allusions to unflattering “official” perceptions of vanguard artists. (There’s less about the hideous effects of the House Un-American Activities Committee than I would have expected, but that may have been less pressing to painters and sculptors than for my parents’ blacklisted writer friends.) Most of all, we’re made aware of the urgency with which artists argued about the necessity of abstraction, the importance of
authenticity, the requirement that art not depict what can be seen but instead reveal the unseen, and many more thorny issues. And we’re made to sense how deeply the people who debated these ideas cared about them and how obsessed they were with what happened in their studios. There’s also a fair amount about the role of success and what some artists will do to achieve it, which allows Sandler to write about some truly offensive behavior.

*Goodbye to Tenth Street* would have been even better if Sandler had been as good at writing dialogue as he was at observing. Many of his characters’ most telling attitudes and firmest convictions are presented as long rants intended to convey the important ideas of the time; unfortunately, they fail to sound like anything anyone ever said, especially over drinks at the end of a day in the studio. In my admittedly limited experience, several of the younger artist habitués of the Cedar Tavern were notable blowhards—at least, when they were much older and giving self-involved lectures on their work—but even they were less didactic than Sandler’s crew.

Nonetheless, *Goodbye to Tenth Street* is a must for anyone interested in an art world very different from today’s. Sandler immerses us in a time when artists sought aesthetic excellence, intensity, and—above all—individuality, striving to charge their work with their entire being rather than “strategizing.” (Except for the novel’s venal Neil Johnson.) Recognition and sales were, obviously, desirable and welcome, but in contrast to the present day, aesthetic values, rather than monetary worth, were life-and-death matters, to be wrestled with in the studio and, elsewhere, to be argued about, challenged, fought over, and even died for. Sandler vividly recreates the atmosphere in which such beliefs flourished. For facts, *The Triumph of American Painting* and *The New York School* are still essential, along with his two volumes of memoirs, with their privileged information. But for sheer entertainment, go to *Goodbye to Tenth Street*.

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1 *Goodbye to Tenth Street*, by Irving Sandler; Pleasure Boat Studio, 373 pages, $20.

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