

Interview

Not as Simple as Black and White

Local Artist's Near-Death Experience Afforded Him New Life

by Anna Gawel

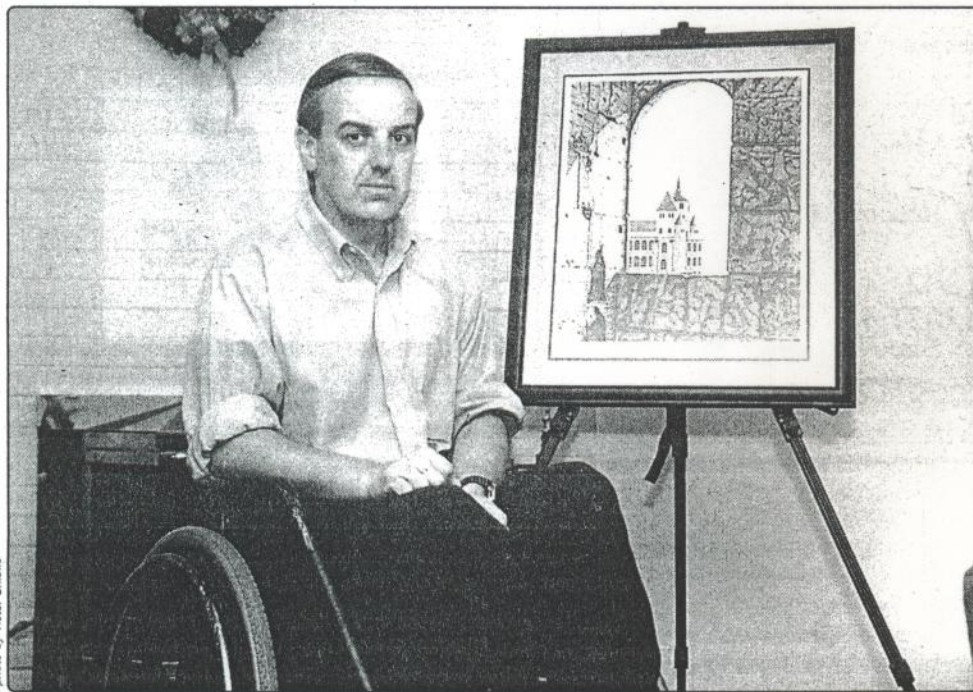
Sitting in his comfortable McLean, Va., home, Armando Meschieri appears to have it all: a wife and daughter, a successful career as a diplomat for the Argentine Embassy as well as a budding art career. His intricate pen-and-ink drawings are in private collections worldwide. But Meschieri's life has not been as black and white as the drawings he creates.

In 1981 when he was 24, Meschieri was more interested in airplanes and army missions than diplomacy and art. He was a young parachutist in the Argentine Special Forces looking forward to a long career in the Air Force. Then one day during a routine training jump, both his main and reserve chutes failed to fully open, hurtling Meschieri 1,000 feet to the ground. The resulting fall shattered most of the bones in his body and compressed his spinal cord in what he calls an "explosion from the neck down."

After three years of hospitalization, Meschieri eventually regained the use of his hands and arms, but he would never walk again. Still, Meschieri sees his accident as a rebirth.

During an interview, he described the fall as "the end of one era and the beginning of another—a new life."

Meschieri has certainly made the most of his new life. Determined not to completely abandon the Air Force, he stayed on as a volunteer, doing what he could, while also studying computers. He later became a computer engineer for the Air Force and now heads the computer division at the Argentine Embassy. In addition he devotes about three to four hours each day to his



Armando Meschieri uses the finest-point pens to create a subtle web of details and shadows within shadows in his intricate pen-and-ink drawings.

formal art training, Meschieri has spent the past three decades perfecting his unique brand of pen-and-ink art. But amid all of his achievements, Meschieri is well aware of the long and often painful journey he endured to get to this point in his life.

"In the beginning I couldn't do anything. I couldn't eat, I couldn't take a shower. I remember thinking—to not walk, this is the worst thing that can happen to you, and I believe that is the moment when you reach the end, the bottom," he said. "Not only did I lose my career, I lost half my body."

To compound his troubles, Meschieri's father had a heart attack shortly before his fall. When Meschieri was transferred to a veteran's hospital in Boston, where he would spend the next two years, his mother could only stay with him for three weeks before having to return to Argentina to take care of his father. Alone, paralyzed, in an unfamiliar country, Meschieri's situation looked bleak. But he chose to see things from a different perspective: "When you lose everything, you don't have anything more to lose, so you say, OK, from now on I will start to recover and each step will be very important."

He vowed to focus on getting out of the hospital and back to a normal life. He credits much of his recovery to

not give up on him, and to the art he rediscovered while he was recuperating.

Meschieri's love of ink drawing stems from his high school days, when he would doodle with pens during class. But what began as a way to escape boredom in the classroom quickly became a full-fledged hobby, with Meschieri drawing everything from racecars, to airplanes and people. After his accident, Meschieri did not think much about his artwork until a fellow officer sent him

some art supplies as a gift. At first the drawing kept him busy, made him feel useful again. But after a while, his art took on a deeper meaning. "When you draw, you don't pay attention to any physical condition. You feel free. I can spend hours drawing and enjoy it," Meschieri said.

Twenty years after his accident, Meschieri is still absorbed by art, constantly fine-tuning his technique and the use of shadows and details that brings his drawings to life. Today most of his subjects include houses, buildings and places he has visited during his travels. For Meschieri, the beauty of his art lies in the details.

He spends two to three months completing each piece, working with the finest point pens available to highlight every crevice of every brick. Ironically, Meschieri says it is the details that people least appreciate. He says the eye naturally goes to the overall image in the picture; then slowly makes its way to the finer details, so "what you spend more time on is what people actually spend less time looking at."

Nevertheless, Meschieri painstakingly pores over each detail because taken as a whole, these details are

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what ultimately constitute the “essence” of the picture.

Shadows too shape and define Meschieri's work. Illusion of depth is key for black and white art, and Meschieri's distinct use of shadows is what gives his drawings their gripping three-dimensional feel. In his earlier works, his shadows consisted of single, bulky lines. Now his technique has evolved to produce a subtle web of shadows within shadows.

In many respects, Meschieri considers black and white painting to be trickier than using colors. With colors, he said, an artist can more readily convey a sense of texture and depth, whereas with pen-and-ink drawings the artist must rely on delicate shading and details to keep his work from looking flat.

For Meschieri, this combination of shadows and details is what so vividly differentiates the cloth on a jacket from the metal on a helmet, the smooth shingles on a roof from the rough surface of a brick, the glassy surface of a window from the crystal clear waters of a lake.

There is also less room for error in an ink painting. “When you work with ink you cannot go back. Any drops that go on the paper can destroy everything,” Meschieri said. “Here, if you rush, you lose.”

To avoid mistakes, he covers his

entire drawing with paper, leaving only a small window for the section he is working on. The tedious process of laboring over each separate component is a soothing experience for Meschieri. It has forced him to slow down, relax and become a more patient person.

As much as his work has matured over the years, Meschieri still keeps one drawing from his youth prominently displayed in his studio. It is the piece he completed the night before his accident depicting champion Formula 1 driver Jackie Stewart and his manager Ken Tyrell. Meschieri had forgotten about the drawing, but his mother kept the piece for two years until she could return it to him once he left the hospital. Even in this early work, Meschieri points out the minute details that gently define the contours of the two men's faces, enhancing the intensity of their demeanors.

Indeed, Meschieri revels not only in the details that pervade his artwork, but also in the everyday details that many people take for granted—like driving his 12-year-old daughter to the bus stop in the mornings. He always tries to remind her to “enjoy every day because tomorrow you never know what will be.” It is a lesson he has taken to heart in his own life.

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