

## The Artist: An Illustrated Biography

### RICHARD ALLMAND BLOW (1904-1983)

#### RISE AND FALL OF AN ANCIENT ART



**1588** - Grand Duke Ferdinando I de Medici establishes the Opificio delle Pietre Dure, the most famous workshop of the Italian Renaissance, creating elaborate artworks of inlaid precious and semi-precious stone, including the Medici Chapel.

**1860** – The royal Opificio enters a phase of irreversible decline as Italy is swept by a tide of revolutionary fervor ending in a new nation. The *pietra dura* craft moves to small, private workshops which struggle to survive. Skills, taste, and materials suffer. A 300-year old art slides towards extinction.

#### NEW BLOOD, BLUE BLOOD



**1860** –As an old world dies, the New World across the Atlantic gives birth to Richard Blow's father, Capt. George Preston Blow (1860-1922). He's American aristocracy. Ancestors settled in Virginia in 1609; graduate of U.S. Naval Academy; Spanish-American War hero; knighted by Hawaiian Queen Liliuokalani ; married to daughter of a Midwestern millionaire/business tycoon (mining, manufacturing, Westclox fortune). Four children. Powerful political friends in DC, high society circles in New York, aristocracy in Europe. The definition of power, grace and style.

## **“THE RICH ARE DIFFERENT THAN YOU AND ME” – F. SCOTT FITZGERALD**

**1904** – Richard Allmand Blow born Feb. 22 in LaSalle, Illinois, 90 miles southwest of Chicago. Grandfather Frederick Matthiessen owns half of town, also runs it (Mayor). Family lives on 2,000-acre estate, Deer Park in 26-room mansion. Estate includes a four-car garage, a caretaker's house and a private fire station. 50 men maintain the estate grounds. Richard driven around by chauffeur named “Dickie.”



**1908** – Four-year-old Richard makes his first trip to Europe on Hamburg America’s new luxury liner “S.S. Moltke.”



c. 1910 – Richard with his mother Adele at Deer Park estate

c. 1910 -- Richard's interest in art blossoms early, *"stimulated by watching his mother, who had studied art in Paris before her marriage. It was her habit to roam the estate, sketching from nature, and Richard recalls following her around making his own drawings. It is certain that his interest in nature, animals, birds and insects began early also, for he kept many odd pets and began collections of butterflies."*



**1914** – Richard’s father buys historic Nelson House in Yorktown, VA, makes it his Washington, DC pied-a-terre. House previously owned by signer of Declaration of Independence.

**1914** – Ten-year-old globe-trotter Richard returns from family trip to the Panama Canal aboard the United Fruit Company steamer “Turrialba.”

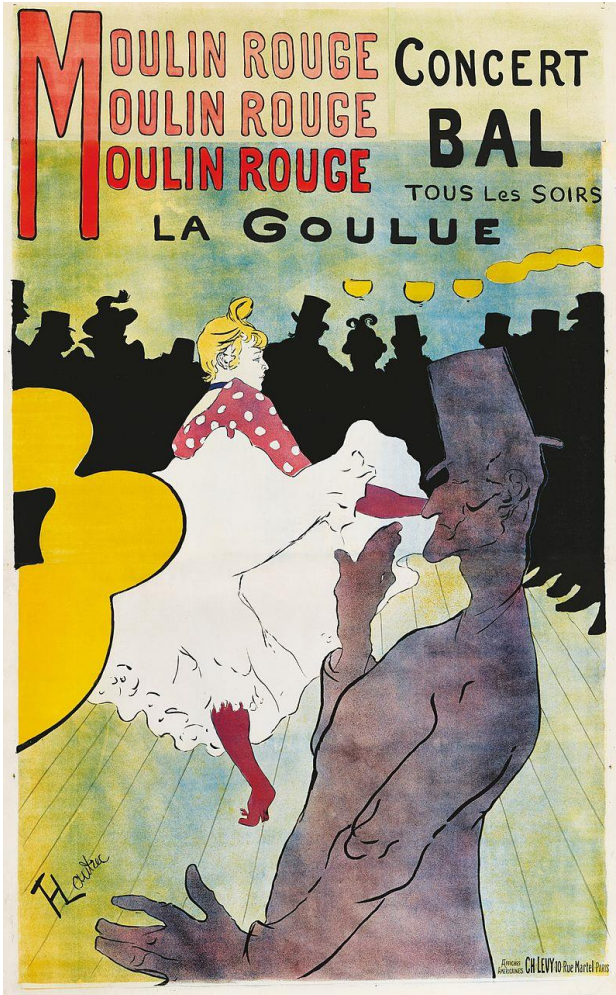


**1915-1920** -- Richard gets a proper East Coast prep school education. Attends exclusive Virginia boy’s boarding school, Woodberry Forest School (famous alumni include U.S. Senators, ambassadors, son of President George HW Bush, Beto O’Rourke).

Done there, he heads off to venerable Lawrenceville School in New Jersey (founded 1810, with 700-acre campus designed by Frederick law Olmstead, designer of New York’s Central Park. Alumni include sons of movie star Charley Chaplin and newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst; future business tycoons (Malcolm Forbes, Walt Disney head Michael Eisner); President of Honduras; head of West Point U.S. Military Academy; U.S. Senators, Governors, bankers.

**1919** – Fifteen-year-old budding artist Richard paints his first mural, a trompe l’oeil, 18<sup>th</sup> century outdoor garden scene, decorating wall of family mansion in Deer Park.

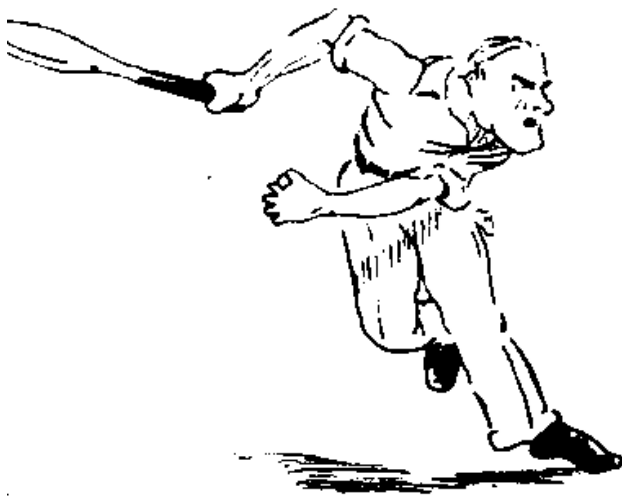




**1920** –Richard and his older brothers Frederick and George W (junior) arrive in Paris. France for the summer. Their arrival makes the society pages of the *New York Sun* and *New York Herald*.

**1921** – Richard tours Europe again, returning to New York Sept. 3 via Liverpool England aboard the White Star Line steamship “Celtic.” Then it’s off to Princeton University.

**1921** – Richard begins his Ivy League education as a freshman at Princeton University, joining brother Frederick who’s already a Senior there studying electrical engineering; and rejoining his friends from Lawrenceville School (they’re got their own club at the university). Richard enrolls in architecture; practices his art skills as cartoonist for the college newspaper *The Tiger*; becomes Assistant Manager of the Princeton Tennis Team (their match schedule includes Harvard, Yale and the Baltimore Country Club).



**1922** -- Richard's celebrated father dies, buried with military honors in Arlington National Cemetery in Washington DC.



**1922** -- An 18-year-old Princeton sophomore, Richard sails to Europe for the summer aboard the Cunard Line's majestic "RMS Aquitania." Nicknamed the "Ship Beautiful" her plush interiors and first-class dining salon were designed by the architect who did the Ritz hotels in Paris and London. *Photo: RMS Aquitania*



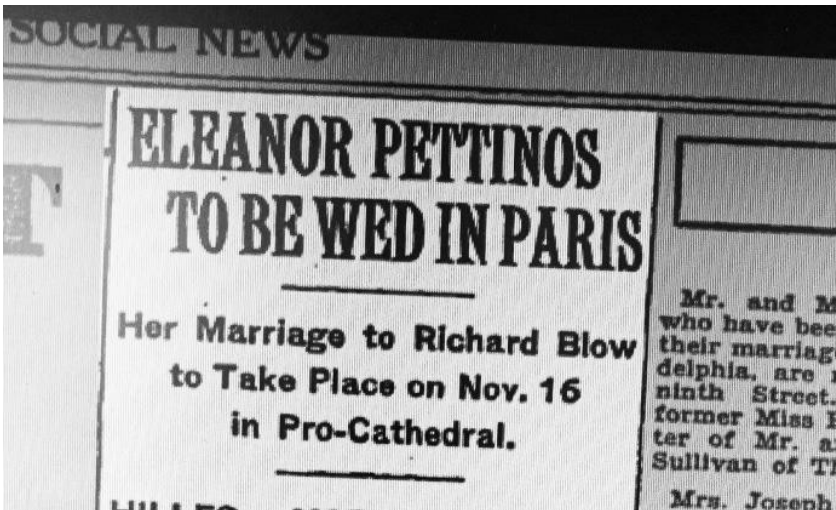


**1923** – A rising Junior at Princeton, Richard spends yet another summer in Europe, touring France and Germany before returning via Quebec. But he's restless -- moving towards art, away from architecture. At a crossroads. His mother supports him. *Photo: Richard's passport photo 1923*



**1924** – Richard abandons Princeton, enrolls in Chicago Art Institute. He wants to be a painter. The American art scene is moving towards abstract paintings, modernism, but Richard studies under **Leon Kroll**, proponent of realism – figures, still life, landscapes. After graduating, he returns to Deer Park to continue to paint.

*Photo: Leon Kroll painting*



**Summer 1926** – Richard heads back to Europe to sketch, draw, paint, explore the Seine in a canoe with his older brother Frederick.

But he's also fallen in love. On July 20, the news breaks in the society pages of the

*New York Times, Chicago Tribune, Los Angeles Times, Associate Press.* He's engaged to New York City debutante Eleanor Joy Pettinois. His 19-year-old fiancé is the only daughter of a millionaire industrialist (the "Graphite King" of Bethlehem, PA). Like Richard, Eleanor's been raised with butlers, maids, cooks. Over 500 people attended her lavish debutante ball the year before at the chic Sherry Hotel in Manhattan. Her family winters at the Plaza Hotel, spend summers at their Great Gatsby-style, Oyster bay mansion on Long Island. They hobnob with the Astors, Vanderbilts, Rockefellers.



**CHICAGOAN WEDS NEW YORK GIRL IN PARIS.**

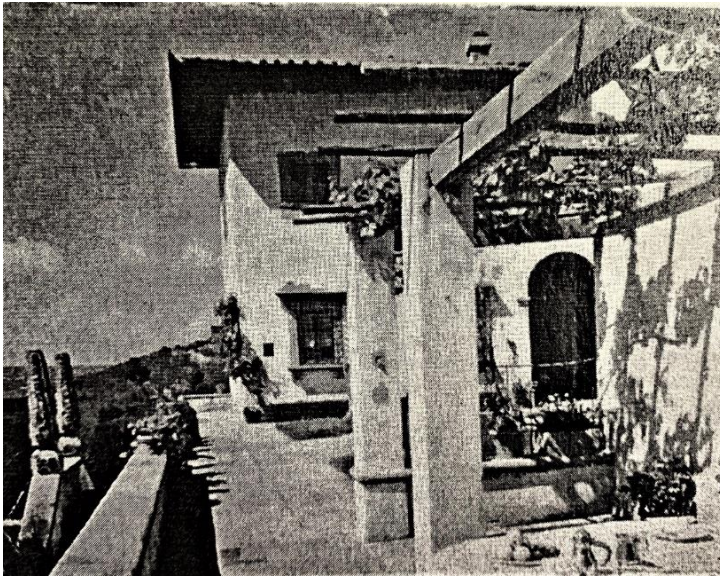
Mr. and Mrs. Richard Allmand Blow after ceremony at American pro-cathedral. Mrs. Blow was Eleanor Joy Pettinos of New York.

[Wide World Photo.]

**November 1926 --**  
After a breakfast reception at the Ritz Hotel, Richard and Eleanor are married at the American Cathedral Church in Paris. The American colony in Paris turns out in force, along with European royalty and the J.P. Morgan banking family. According to the *New York Times*, the newlyweds will head for a honeymoon in Italy, then "return to New York City to make their home." Instead, Richard falls in love with Florence, Italy.



## A CHARMED LIFE



**1927** – Richard acquires the Renaissance-era Villa Piazza Calda, on a hilltop in Santa Maria a Montici, overlooking Florence. Money no object, he hires English architect Cecil Pinsent, who worked on art historian and connoisseur Bernard Berenson’s Italian Villa, I Tatti. He restores the house, grounds, gardens; adds a grotto and stone obelisks, opens up stunning vistas and views from every window,

creates an artist studio where he can retreat to and work on his paintings.

Richard and Eleanor travel back and forth between Florence, Paris, New York and Chicago. He paints and starts to exhibit; she entertains, shops, socializes on two continents.



Richard studies painting at L’Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, under French Cubist painter **Andre L’Hote**. L’Hote originally painted in a Fauvist style, later worked alongside **Villon**, **Duchamp**, other fathers of modern art. It’s an eye-opener for Richard. He’s attracted to the “geometric clarity and rationality of Cubism” He continues to paint realistically, but begins to explore Modernism using new imagery,

techniques and materials.

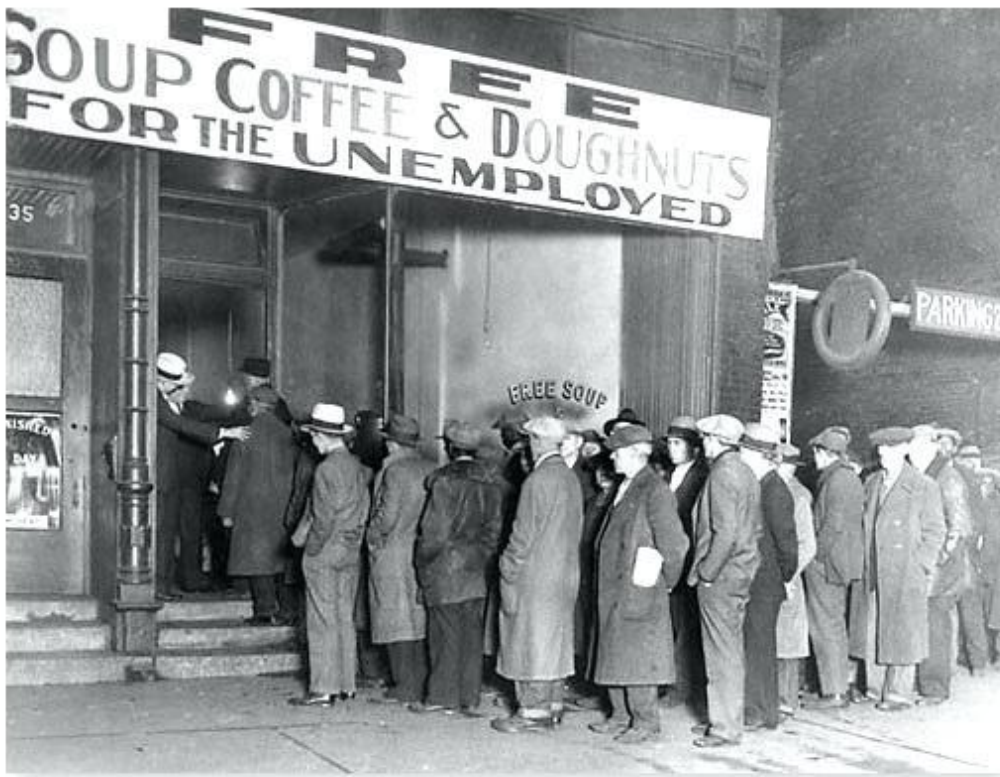
**1928** – Richard’s first son born February 17, in Lausanne, Switzerland, baptized Richard Marco Blow (nickname “Nikky”).

## THE GATHERING STORM

**Sept. 1929** -- Richard's mother Adele, 61, dies in Manhattan, New York. She leaves an estate worth \$400,000 (\$6 million in today's dollars), no written will.

**October 1929** – U.S. stock market crashes, starting global Great Depression (1929-1939), the deepest and longest-lasting economic downturn in U.S. history.

**1930** – With Adele's death, Blow family opens up Deer Park estate to public. Children are off elsewhere. Richard lives in Florence, Italy and New York; his brother Frederick in Paris; both George W in Chicago; sister Adele Margaret in Nantucket, Massachusetts.



**1931** – Unemployment in the United States hits 22 percent; millions of Americans are out of work. Soup kitchens and bread lines open up in cities to feed the unemployed and homeless.

Richard and Eleanor are untouched.

# Debs Pop Out

**NANCY**  
*ominates . .*  
**For This Week's  
 Fashion Prize**

*By Nancy Randolph*

**T**HERE'S music in the air, and the tune is the debutante crowd's theme song, "I Won't Be Home Until Morning." Sun-dodgers, that's what the younger generation's composed of. It emerges at dusk to start its day at this or that tea dance and tiptoes into the old family duplex at dawn. Wotta life!

In the meantime, the adults sit home and write 'etters to Santy. That's about all they can find to do, for the holiday parties are designed for the Bright Young Things. They started yesterday with the tea dance given in the main ballroom of the Ritz-Cariton by Mrs. Roland Douglas, 1650 Park Ave., for her daughter, Betty Schuster, and drove home with the milkman this morning following the French ball given at Pierre's by Mr. and Mrs. Gustavus T. Kirby for their daughter, Wilhelmine.

### Muff Supplants Bouquet.

All the prettiest debs and handsomest gallants were at Betty Schuster's tea dance. Betty looked something elegant in a gown of white wrinkle crepe made on modern lines, with the skirt flaring about the ankles. The briefest of eight-inch jackets with short sleeves banded with white fox was the trickiest part of the dress. A belt and slippers of water green velvet did their bit, and a scrumptious muff of white crepe, edged with green and covered with white orchids was Betty's chic substitute for the usual bouquet.



**December 1931** -- *New York Daily News* society columnist features photo of Richard's wife Eleanor, fresh from Europe, in her stylish seal coat.

*Nancy Nominates for This Week's fashion Prize Mrs. Richard A Blow*

*"The fur upon the humble seal  
 Imparts to him more woe than weal  
 He is almost sad to bear it  
 Because he gets to seldom wear it."*

*However, the seal or seals responsible for Mrs. Richard A. Blow's neat and nobby sport coat would certainly be proud if they could see how smart their fur looks in its present reincarnation. The former Eleanor Pettinos wore this wrap when she walked down the gangplank of the SS Europa recently. The former New York girl, who divides her time between Chicago and Florence, Italy, is home for the holidays...wide black velvet ribbon...coat's swagger appearance... adds*

*width to the shoulders, so necessary to present day chic....bodice...buttons...scarf...black leather belt...trench cap is of black seal skin, her gloves of grey and her high heel oxfords of black suede."*

The column goes on to note wealthy families heading to Florida on their yachts, debutante balls, luncheons hosted at the Waldorf Astoria.





**December 1933** – New York society pages announce arrival of Richard and Eleanor. They will spend the Christmas holiday with her parents at the Savoy Plaza Hotel. It's a tense affair. Their marriage is on the rocks. After the holidays, the couple sails back to Europe on the luxury liner *SS Rex*.

**1934** – Richard and Eleanor divorce.

A bachelor again, Richard returns to Florence and doubles down on his painting.

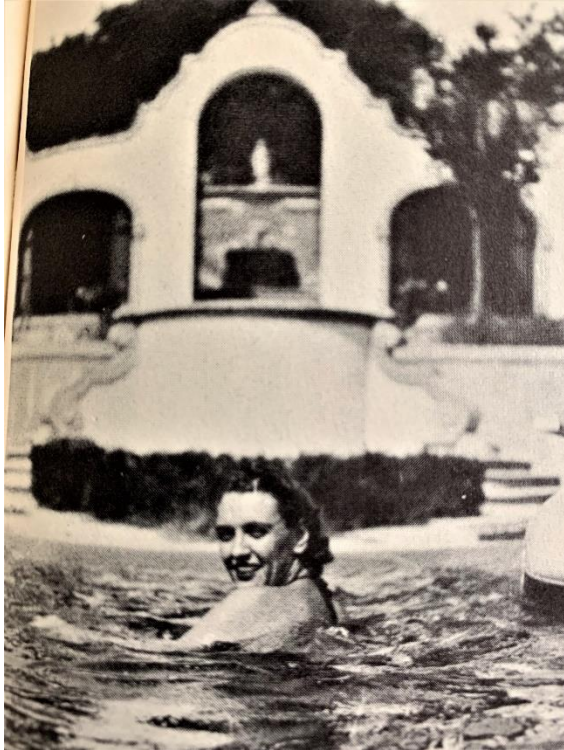
**December 1935** – Richard arrives back in NYC from Cherbourg, France aboard the liner "*S.S. Brennan*." Makes the rounds of New York galleries with his latest work.



Richard catches the eye of feminist, playwright, sculptor and *Vogue* magazine writer Marya Mannes. She's everything Eleanor Pettinois isn't. They both have one failed marriage behind them.

*"...in the winter of '35 and '36 I began to see more and more of a handsome, complex, and talented American with the means to live partly in Florence and partly in this country as a serious painter, Though he was never satisfied with what he did, and often left his canvases unfinished, his painting struck me as haunting and lyrical: the product of a poetic and immensely cultivated perception..."*

*Photo: Vogue magazine cover*



**Spring 1936** -- Marya moves to Florence to live with Richard. Their families disapprove of their bohemian, unmarried lifestyle, but they're in love. Marya is enraptured by Italy, and Richard's Renaissance villa.

*"In the Spring of 1936 I left Vogue and went to live with him in Florence. His home was the most beautiful place I had ever seen: a Medici villa on top of a hill beyond the city and across the river from Fiesoli. Miles of Tuscan terraced hills like this one spread out below and beyond to the clear horizons of Giorgione or Piero della Francesca. The ancient folds of this marvelous land were velvet shadows."... "The owner of this domain, my host, had made every part of the villa and its gardens a visual feast, inside and out. It was a fusion of love and knowledge and perfectionism that I had never known, and thanks to him, a continuing education of the eye..."*

While Richard paints, Marya sculpts, and servants go about their business.

*"(Richard) painted and supervised the household at large (the staff of servants had been with him through a former marriage and needed no coaching... I was given the lemon house, under the villa – a stone arcade facing the Tuscan hills - as a studio..." She notices "the marvelous Italian craftsmen; almost always there to work on the continuing additions to the villa's grounds: terraces, grottoes, fountains designed by its never-satisfied owner, then redesigned."*



**1936** – Italian dictator Benito Mussolini signs military pact with Nazi Germany Fuhrer Adolph Hitler. Mannes, part-Jewish, watches with growing fear.

*“To live on this hill of beauty and luxury isolated from the tightening vise of Fascism was an anomaly fully recognized by us both....”*

They consider abandoning the villa and Fascist Italy, but hesitate. They're confused, conflicted. Resist? Flee?

*“What can one do? Would we blunt the edge of dictatorship, help tip the axis of tyranny, if we left Italy, abandoned this home? Perhaps people of greater conscience would have done just that.”*

**1937** – Marya suddenly decides she wants a baby. Richard is unsure.

*“It was in this beauty and isolation that I wanted a child...My husband had already a son of eight who lived with us from time to time, and I doubt if his urge for another being was as strong as mine...”*

**June 1937** – Marya is pregnant, but having second thoughts about motherhood.

*“the pregnancy was a time of total happiness and peace.... I was a mother. In love, yes, but not in nurture. There would always be nurses. What did I know about taking care of a child, free and over thirty, always in other worlds? No more prepared to be a mother than his sire a father?” But then I saw nothing wrong in nurses if they were good and one could afford them. The guilt came much later... I loved to hold my child, but not diaper him...”*

**November 1937** –Richard and pregnant Marya arrive in New York from Genoa, aboard the Italian luxury liner *Conte di Savoia*.

Bowing to pressure, they get married.





**February 1938** -- Richard's second son -- Davide Jeremy Blow -- is born in New York City. Should they return to Italy? War clouds are gathering. The Gestapo is rounding up Jews in Germany; Nazi dictator Hitler is threatening to invade Austria; Japan has signed a military pact with the Fuhrer and Mussolini. But Villa Piazza Calda is home now.

They return. Nervously.

## WE ALL FALL DOWN

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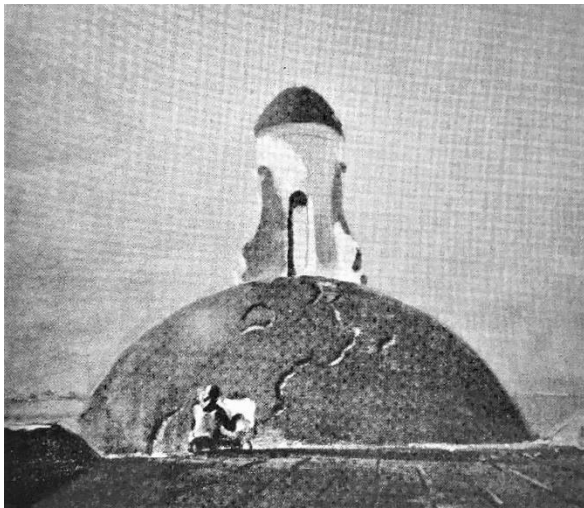
108 EAST FIFTY-SEVENTH STREET, NEW YORK CITY

**March 1938** -- Richard's painting career is taking off. New York art critics are noticing. He holds his first one-man show, at the posh Maynard Walker Gallery on East 57<sup>th</sup>.

*"...Despite Cubism training with L'Hote, at his first personal show at the Walker Gallery, he presented himself as a traditional realistic-romantic American artist from the Hudson*

*River school and Madsen Hartley in terms of his choice of subjects (mostly landscapes and a few thoughtful figures) and the rarified atmospheres...”*

*“...He traveled back and forth between Europe and the United States, painted constantly wherever he was, and exhibited work in various group shows until 1938, when he had his first one-man show at the Maynard Walker Gallery on East 57<sup>th</sup> in New York. Critical notices for this show praised the artist for his free handling of the brush, his fine composition, and his use of subtle color in works variously described as nostalgic, classical, and sculptural in feeling. It is interesting to note that Blow's favorite classical artist is **Piero della Francesca**, and there is in his landscapes, his figure painting, and his still lifes, the same quiet, grave strength, the same perfection in perspective, the same feeling for luminosity and light, and for color. At the time of his first one-man show, perspicacious collectors began to acquire his paintings...” (Simon biography)*



The New York Metropolitan Museum of Art buys his surreal oil masterpiece “The Painter.”

*“One of the paintings, executed in Naples during one of his many trips to Italy .and entitled “ the Painter” was bought by the Metropolitan Museum of Art at the end of the show... he was placed among young American painters who had placed themselves in an international current through their attention to contemporary art outside the country -recuperating the traditional great European masters, in particular the late manierista and baroque, and filtered through the neo-Romantic figurative art of the Frenchmen*

**Christian Berard and Eugene Bergman.... “**



**May 1938** – Nazi dictator Hitler visits Florence, Italy with Mussolini. Marya heads down to the city to join the crowd, impelled to see what she hates and dreads most.

*“In no more than 10 minutes, with no warning, they drove along the Lungarno toward us in an open car: Hitler and Mussolini side by side. As they turned slowly toward the Ponte di Ferro, they were no more than twelve feet away...Several people raised their*

*arms and cried ‘Duce! Duce!’ but the rest seemed dazed. I was, myself. All I could think of all the*

way up the hill to Piazza Calda was that I could have thrown some flowers and a bomb with ease into that car. And that I would have happily died for having done so.”

Richard is constantly traveling. Florence society shuns both of them.

“...at the villa my sense of isolation, of loneliness slowly grew. The gente per bene – the old, established society of Florence, of which many were friends of my husband, and especially of his former wife – now ostracized both of us because I had lived with him before marrying him...”

**Spring 1939** – The Italian Fascist police threaten Marya.

“... the Questura (Florentine police) had come to the villa to check on me. The signore’s wife was partly-Jewish, was she not? Then the signore could anticipate certain – embarrassments, shall we say? – as a result of enforcing the new laws on persons of Jewish blood. The signore did. Everyone was very polite.”

**August 1939** – War is imminent. Nazis sign “Pact of Steel” with Italy; Stalin brings Russia into the deal. Britain and France face disaster. Richard and Mary (carrying baby David) abandon Villa Piazza Calda and flee to Paris. Richard wants to stay in Europe and fight.

In Paris, briefly, my husband confirmed his decision to stay in France and then find out what he, as an American, could do to work for the Allies in any capacity. I was to go back to New York with the baby and nurse and await developments in New York.”



**Sept. 1, 1939** -- Hitler invades Poland. Britani and France declare war. World War II begins. 80 million people will die before it's over. Marya hears the shocking news on the SS Aquitania.

“The brilliant terraces of light on the big Cunarder were blacked out at night, and the talk was of submarines and horror as we ate and drank.”





**Sept 18, 1939** – Richard and hundreds of other Americans refugees evacuated from France arrive in New York on the “George Washington.”

**Spring 1940** – A frustrated Richard settles into New York apartment with his family, watches Europe collapse. France surrenders, Hitler enters Paris in June. England is alone. In July Battle of Britain starts

Richard paints in his studio, but

spends hours at Roosevelt Field on Long Island, learning to fly small planes. He knows its only time before America joins the war. They’re both restless, unsettled. Marya turns her two-year old baby over to the nurse, and resumes painting.

*“In the next two years, we led a normal New York life. underlaid, however, by state of suspension. But thanks to my husband, I could afford to indulge in the luxury of not having to earn.”*

**Summer 1940** – US Federal census snapshot confirms Marya’s comment. 15 percent of Americans are still unemployed. Poverty is widespread. Meanwhile, Richard and his family are living in a nice apartment on the Upper East Side. He’s age 36, white, married, head of household; occupation artist. Rent is \$200/month, but he’s got an income of \$5,000 (almost \$100,000 in today’s dollars). Other sources of income: Yes (they’re not living on his painting). They’ve got three maids (Emma, Marian, and Margurite). Marya can afford to leave Richard and baby David to their care. She joins the war effort, using her language skills to monitor German and Italian broadcasts for the government. They’re arguing a lot. They both know their marriage won’t last.

Marya later reflects back on the end:

*“The marriage by that time turned an ugly corner into destruction, acerbated by war. War was a release for responsibilities unsought and now grown irksome, and from human confrontations somehow to be avoided... (It was) easier to make specific and urgent requests for divorce from a distant port than face emotional scenes at home; and nothing you had to explain to a four-year old.”*



**Spring 1941** – Richard earns his pilot’s wings, eager to enter the U.S. Naval Air Force. Marya is busy debriefing Jewish refugees from Europe. Relatives are looking after baby David.

**Summer 1941** –Richard flies off alone to San Juan, Puerto Rico, then Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (secret missions for the Navy? Richard’s brother George W is working in the Dept. of the Navy in Washington DC.) Richard’s passport photo shows a well-dressed, 37-year-old man with thinning hair and determined look. The artist is ready to go to war. And he’s not joining up to paint scenery for traveling USO shows. He wants to fly combat.



**December 7, 1941** – Japan bombs Pearl Harbor. America declares war on Japan, Germany, Italy.

**THE ARTIST GOES TO WAR**

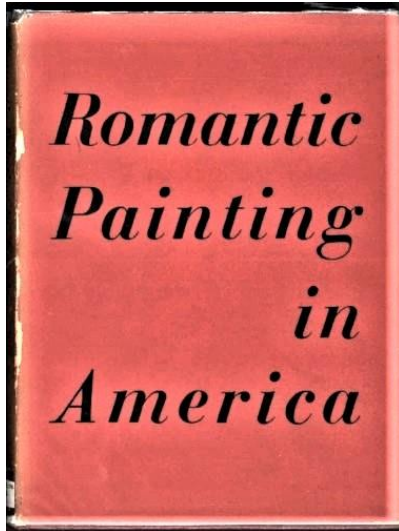


**Feb. 1942** -- Richard enlists in the U.S. Navy as a Lieutenant in the Air Arm. At age 37, he’s deemed too old for combat. He’s sent to Pensacola, Florida for training, starts ferrying troops to Europe from a naval base near Washington DC.

**1943** – The U.S. desperately needs more pilots as America fights Japan and Germany simultaneously. Richard is sent to Naval Air Force Training Base, Bunker Hill, Indiana to train transport pilots.

A year later, he’s suddenly picked to serve as U.S. Naval Attache in the Caribbean. It’s a plum assignment, a diplomatic posting usually reserved

for senior military officers (did his brother in DC recommend him?) His Ivy League education, familiarity with English society, experience flying the Atlantic, make him a perfect fit. Most likely, he served as liaison to the British government and British military fighting off German and Italian submarines trying to choke off Venezuelan oil supplies to the Allies.



**November 1943** -- As Richard fights enemy submarines, the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in NYC stages its "Romantic Painting in America" Exhibit (Nov. 1943-Feb. 1944). Richard's oil "The Painter" is selected to hang on the wall next to the crème de la crème of American art – **Eakins, Sargent, Sloan, Whistler, O'Keefe, Hopper**. It's the first of three exhibits Richard will eventually have at MOMA.

**July 1944** – British Eighth Army drives Germans from Florence, Italy, take over Richard Blow's Villa Piazza Calda. The sweeping view across the Arno valley that captivated Richard is perfect for wartime reconnaissance and observation. Germans shell Villa but do minimal damage. Before they retreat, they round up 250 Jews in Florence and send them to concentration camps. Marya, now safe in America, will not be one of them.



**August 1944** -- Lieutenant Commander Richard Blow assigned to Naval Air Transport Squadron ELEVEN (VR -11) in Hawaii (where 54 years earlier his father was knighted by Hawaiian Queen Liliuokalani). He's now co-piloting big, four-engine Douglas C-54 "Skymasters," hauling ammunition and scared soldiers across the Pacific war theatre to the Philippines and Shanghai as America tightens the noose on Emperor Hirohito. One of VR-11's special missions is to deliver whole

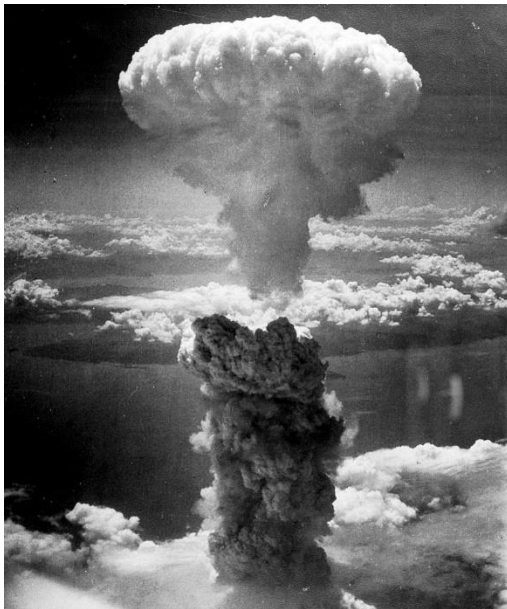
blood to Pacific battle areas. At the bloody Battle of Iwo Jima, it was rushing 1000 pints a day.

**April 1945** – Hitler commits suicide, Germany surrenders; Victory in Europe. America pivots to smash the Japanese army in the Pacific.





**May 1945** -- Richard has survived three years of fighting, but his chances of survival suddenly dim. He's now being groomed to pilot Mitchell B-25 bomber attacking Japanese ships and supporting U.S. ground troops. He gets command of his own transport plane -- just in time to join the invasion of Japan. U.S. military planners are coldly calculating that two to four million American soldiers will die as the fanatic Japanese nation fights to the death.



**Aug 6, 1945** -- U.S. drops atom bomb on Japan, Japan surrenders.

**October 10, 1945** -- War is over for Richard. Instead of dying over Tokyo, he kisses his VR-11 Squadron goodbye, takes off from Momote Airfield, Papua New Guinea, and flies back to civilian life, and an uncertain future as an artist.

He's going on 42, middle-aged, divorced, two failed marriages; a seven-year-old son. He hasn't picked up a paintbrush in four years. He's psychologically out of touch with the new, younger, emerging, post-War arts scene. Romantic painting is passe. It would be easy for him to call it a career, kick back and clip coupons, maybe return to that Upper East Side apartment (he's still got money), look up a few pals, start hitting the Harlem clubs, summer on Long

Island, buy a few stocks, slip into the vacuous boredom of his class.

But he doesn't.

## **THE RESURRECTION AND REINVENTION OF RICHARD BLOW**

**Spring 1946** – Richard reinvents himself. He wanders the New York City galleries, looking, learning, soaking up the rich ferment of modern art – **cubism, surrealism, abstract expressionism**. Then he flies back to Italy, reclaims his beloved Villa Piazza Calda, rehires his former servants, settles into his old studio in the toretta. He returns to painting, assimilating **Leger, Picasso, de Kooning, de Chirico**.



*Photo: Florence Italy after WWII.*

**Summer 1946** – Richard roams his old artistic haunts. Italy’s economy is shattered, factories in ruins, mass unemployment. Florentine artists are starving; studios and workshops closed. The city’s most celebrated art form, Florentine mosaics, is stagnant, irrelevant, dying. Distressed, Richard makes a decision. He’ll save it, bring it back to life with his money – and his artistic imagination.

*“... in 1946, having come back to Florence after many years of absence, I noticed the decadence in which the Florentine mosaic had fallen into, and this was not because of the War, nor for the lack of great artisans, but because of their insistence in wanting to infinitely repeat the same designs, now long from the original Medici masterpieces and which brought no imprint of contemporary modern art. This way the great mosaic art has been reduced to a commercial genre of trinkets where no one, especially foreign markets, where they were mostly proposed, gave them any importance. And so these excellent Florentine artisans, discouraged both morally and economically by the lack of profits necessary to the life of their work, will soon abandon an activity which is one of the glories of Florence and one of its qualities which distinguish it abroad. So I decided to transform my painting studio and I began to have some of my personal designs executed...”*





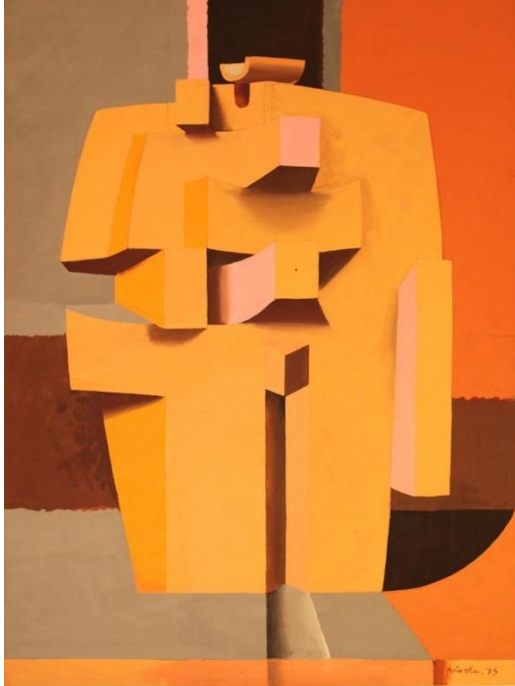
**Circa 1947**—Richard creates the Montici workshop on his Villa grounds, giving him more artistic control over the process. (*Photo: Montici workshop, early days, with Bruno lastrucci and Richard Blow. Photo credit: John Schmuecker collection*)





Richard quickly falls in love with the medium. (Photo: Blaw at desk in his Villa. Photo credit: John Schmuecker collection)

*"...The eclectic artist (Blaw) saw in this technique, in the visual organization of the forms and colors of the stones on a plane and in space, a modern instrument capable of expressing the art of the most famous artists of the time."*



**1947** – Richard recruits Italian sculptor and muralist **Costantino Nivola** to help him create additional fresh new designs in pietra dura. Nivola is close friend of **Le Corbusier**, designer, painter, pioneer in modern architecture. Nivola injects Le Corbusier’s post-Cubist aesthetic into Montici mosaics. Nivola escaped Italy in 1938, ended up in Greenwich Village, New York City, attended meetings of the anti-Fascist, Italian-American Mazzini Society, presided over weekly gathering of artists that eventually includes **Leger, Alexander Calder, Jackson Pollock, De Kooning, Saul Steinberg**.

Richard also recruits Hungarian painter and jewelry designer Eva Carocci Vedes for inspiration. Her husband Alberto Carocci is a poet, novelist and Italian resistance voice during the German occupation.

*(Photo: Costantino Nivola: “Painting of a Masculine Figure.”)*

**1948** – Richard’s first son, Richard Marco, graduates Harvard, spends Spring at the Villa attending the University of Florence, By Fall he’s gone. Second son David remains in the States, being raised by relatives.

**MoMA**  
**The Museum of Modern Art**

**November 1949** –Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) NYC selects two Blow pietra dura marble boxes for their gala “Design Show: Christmas 1949.” (Nov. 16, 1949- Jan. 8, 1950). It’s Richard’s second MOMA show (first in 1943 was for his painting; this time for his mosaics.) Exhibit features 90 pieces from around the world *“with one quality they all have in common: their excellent design.”* Richard’s boxes are exhibited alongside desk lamp by

Japanese-American artist/designer **Isamu Noguchi** (iconic modern furniture designer)

ohn McGhie (left) and James Hannafin, | hauled three youths into the Wil- | bylaws was an attack on academic  
captured Blanda. | son Ave. police station for ques- | freedom.

## Find N.Y. Divorcee and Youth Slain

Florence, Italy, July 7 (AP).—A New York City socialite and an Italian youth were found shot to death here today in her fashionable apartment.

Police believe Mrs. Eleanor Pettinos Blow, 41, was killed by the youth, who then shot himself.

Her nude body was found on a bed. Cesare De Vera, 25, of Milan, lay nearby on the floor fully clothed and dead, with a pistol in his hand.

Mrs. Blow was a divorcee who frequently had stayed in Florence, where she was well known in society.

Her ex-husband, Richard Blow, also has been in Florence for some time, living in a hotel.

Police said the youth left two letters, in one of which he said he had planned to throw himself from the bell tower of historic Palazzo

Vecchio. Police declined to give a motive for the tragedy.

Mrs. Blow was the daughter of the wealthy and socially prominent Mr. and Mrs. Charles E. Pettinos of 525 Park Ave. She had a son, Richard M. Blow, who was graduated from Harvard in 1948 and was believed to have been in Italy with her.

The Pettinos were unavailable last night, but employees of the apartment building, which is at the corner of 61st St., recalled that Mrs. Blow formerly lived directly across the street at 530 Park. An employe at the latter address said

she had moved "about a year ago."

Eleanor Pettinos made her debut at a brilliant reception and dance given by her parents at Sherry's on Nov. 29, 1923. The guest list was headed by the Prince and Princess of Hesse and studded with Vanderbilts, Goulds, the Marshall Fields, Franklins, Fahnestocks, Phelps, Stokeses, Harrimans and Longfellows.

Three years later she was married to Richard A. Blow, of Chicago, a young artist in the Pro-Cathedral in Paris—another brilliant social event that many American society folk made a special trip abroad to attend. The couple spent a great deal of their time after that in Paris and Florence. They were divorced in 1936.

**July 5, 1950** -- Richard's first wife, Eleanor Pettinois killed by her Italian lover in a shocking murder-suicide in Florence, Italy.

*"For the year leading up to July 5th, Eleanor and Cesare Silvera were a romantic couple who traveled together throughout Europe. Cesare was 21 years her junior and was described as a strikingly handsome man. He lost a leg during World War II as he fought in the Italian Army. He compensated for this loss with a wooden leg. A month before the incident Eleanor began avoiding Cesare. She wrote him notes that the affair was over. She stayed away from her luxurious apartment in Florence, Italy, and hid at friends' homes. Cesare's notes to Eleanor had frightened her. He threatened to commit suicide by jumping off the Grotto's Bell Tower. She returned to her apartment the night before her scheduled trip back to the United States. Cesare confronted her there and shot her twice with his Italian Army revolver. He then shot himself. The police found both their bodies the next morning."*

Richard and Eleanor's son Richard Marco is deeply affected by tragedy. He never marries, becomes a rootless, restless traveler, never staying in any place for long, eventually dying alone in Uruguay in 2000.

## REBIRTH OF AN ANCIENT ITALIAN ART





**1950-1951** –iconic “Made in Italy” branding movement launched in the U.S. with famous, traveling exhibit “Italy at Work: Her Renaissance in Design Today.”

Richard Blow (“pietra dura and mosaics”) joins **Salvatore Ferragamo** and **Guccio Gucci** (“costume jewelry and accessories”) and **Olivetti** (“industrial design”) in a 12-city tour that begins at the Brooklyn Museum in NYC and ends at the De Young Museum in San Francisco. In between they will show at the Baltimore Museum of Art; the Albright Gallery in Buffalo; the Art Institute of Chicago (where Richard started his art studies a quarter-century earlier); the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston; Minneapolis Institute of Fine Art; Carnegie Institute in Pittsburg; the Portland Art Museum in Oregon; Providence Museum of Art, Rhode Island;

the Toledo Museum of Art; and the Art Museum of St. Louis.



Richard’s featured work (pictorial mosaics, boxes, obelisks) praised for their artistic excellence. Richard himself cited by Meyric Reynold Rogers, exhibition book author, for personally reviving the ancient Florentine mosaic industry.

*“It remained for an American artist to grasp not only the aesthetic possibilities of the (pietra dura) process, but the necessity of realizing them if the craft was not to die....Artistically, the results have been singularly successful....His production is based on the necessity of developing work of the highest quality but of a nature and scale to bring it within a reasonable price range.*

*Though the small pictorial plaques, boxes, table tops, etc., so made are not cheap, since the material and labor involved are relatively costly, they are well within the reach of that large segment of the market able and eager to acquire objects of individuality and high quality."*

**May 1951** – To keep up with exploding demand for Montici art, Richard hires apprentices from the Opificio delle Pietre Dure, founded in 1588 by Grand Duke Ferdinando I de Medici.

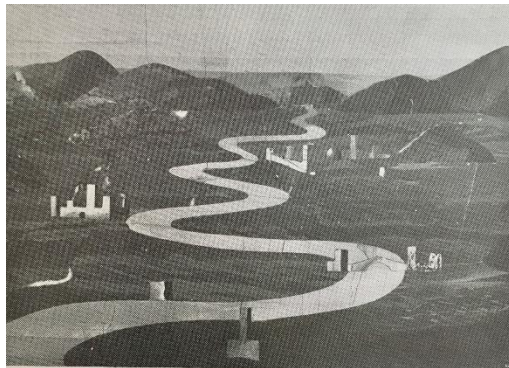
**May 1951** – Richard registers the original Montici brand logo in the United States. The double-pyramid design is executed in legendary Venetian Murano glass.



**July 1952** -- Richard teams up with New Opificio director Lando Bartoli to sponsor a "competition for a design to be produced in hard stone," with the purpose "to create new designs to give a modern impulse to the antique art of the Florentine mosaic." Montici will own and execute the winning design. Winner is Mauro Bini, for his design "Fondo Marino" (sea floor). Richard arranges for piece to be exhibited in his "Intarsia Montici" show held at Knoedler Gallery in NYC.

Opificio is inspired by Richard's work to experiment further.

*"Richard Blow's activity stimulated a period of experimentation in the 1950s and 1960s, in collaboration with private workshops and the Opificio delle Pietre Dure. Thanks to the initiative of Lando Bartoli, director at the time, it invited young artists to submit cartoons for mosaics between 1952 and 1954. A course was also set up for young mosaic artists, taught by the painter Mauro Bini and the master Angiolo del Sarto."*



**Circa 1953?** – Richard opens up his own Montici Gallery in New York City at 156<sup>th</sup> East 64<sup>th</sup> Street. Upper East Side is art capital of the city -- and the U.S. It stretches along the East side of spacious, green Central Park, is home to millionaires and celebrities. Richard's gallery is mere blocks from the New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. He's selling everything the Montici workshop can produce, to an ever-growing crowd of sophisticated American and European art connoisseurs.

MONTICI  
PIETRE INTARSIATE

*Designed by* RICHARD A. BLOW



156 EAST 64th STREET  
NEW YORK, N. Y.

On his frequent return trips to the States, he's also continuing his passion for flying planes – entertaining wealthy clients on flights aboard his twin-engine Cessna, flying out of a woodchuck-infested, private airfield in Dutchess County, north of the city





*Photo: John Schmucke collection Blow in NYC circa 1950s.*





**August 1954** -- New York's Modern Museum of Art (MOMA) features Richard's art for the third time in a decade, at their show "The Modern movement in Italy: Architecture and Design" (Aug. 18 – Sept. 6). Richard is now firmly established as a mid-20<sup>th</sup> century modern art figure, for his surreal painting (1943); his intarsia boxes (1949), and now his brilliant pietra dura art plaques (1954). This time, Richard's design genius is showcased alongside designs by architectural icon **Pier Luigi Nervi** (UNESCO headquarters in Paris, among notable buildings); and Italian racing car designer **Pinin Farina** (designer of Ferrari, Alfa-Romeo, Lancia, Bentley). Montici workshop is humming.

*(Photo: Pinin Farina's classic Ferrari 212, first car he designed for Ferrari, 1951.*

**1954**—Tragedy. Richard suffers serious car accident on icy road, fights for survival. Multiple injuries, lingering amnesia effects. He slowly recovers, returns to Italy, continues to create superb pieces.

**Feb. 1956** – Montici logo supplier in Venice runs into difficulty. Per Bruno Lastrucci, impatient Richard creates second official Montici logo while awaiting reorder – this one is stylized letter "M" crowned by white dot. The two logos will continue to be used side by side going forward.

**1958** – Richard stars in documentary film "Montici Intarsia," produced and directed by Academy Award-winning director Richard de Rochemont, a mentor of Stanley Kubrick (*2001: A Space Odyssey; The Shining*)

*“The stone-working artisans of Florence, Italy, tell how their flagging industry was revived by American artist Richard Blow. who introduced modern designs. As a result, intarsia has become an element in modern architecture and interior decoration.”*

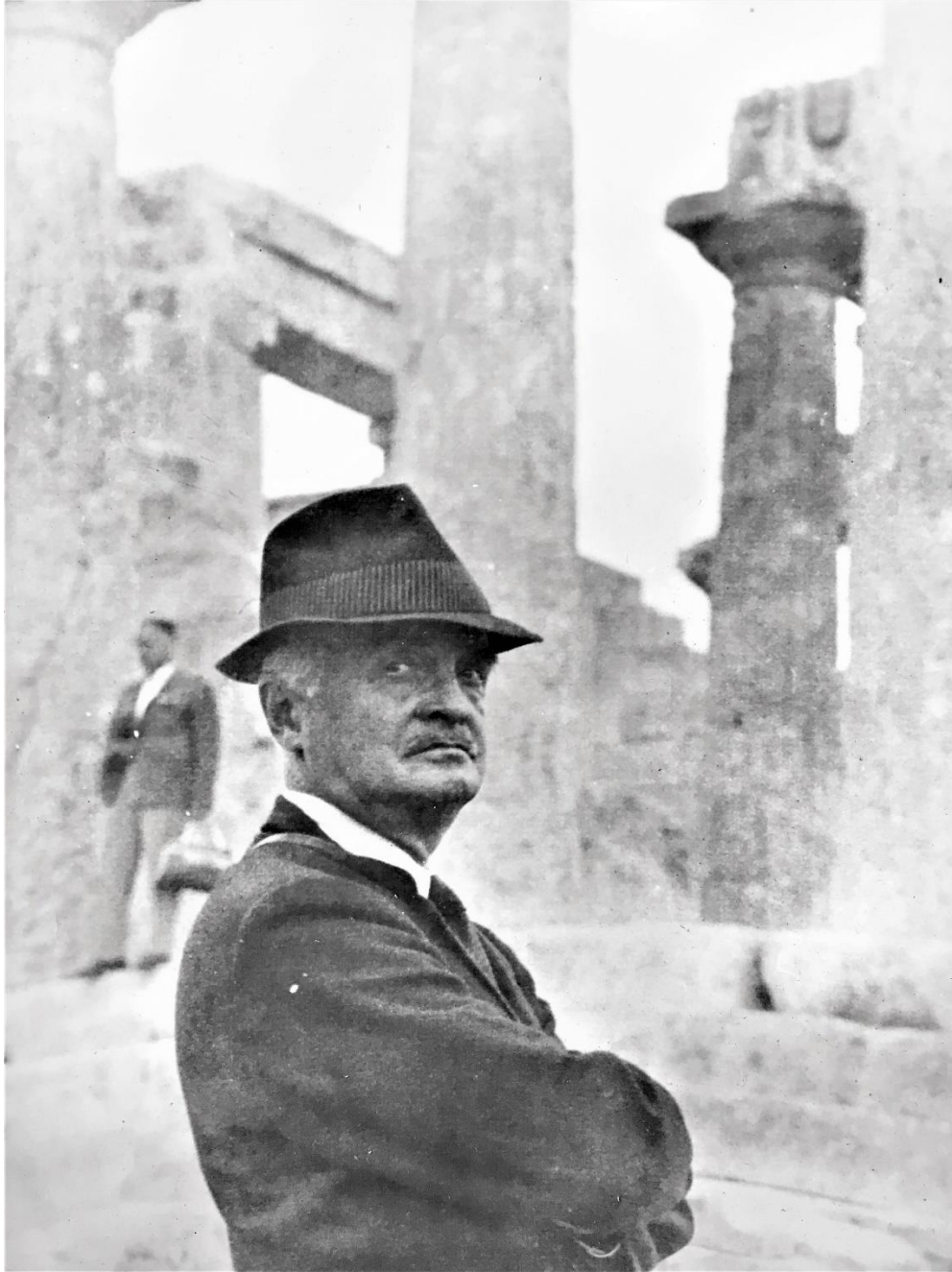
**1960** – Richard’s brother George W dies.

**1961** – Fellini film *“La Dolce Vita”* released. Richard’s reinvention of the Florentine mosaic industry has played its part in creating Italy’s stunning, post-WW II economic miracle. Director Fellini captures the glamor (and psychological dislocation) of “a diverse and glittery world rebuilt on the ruins and poverty of the Italian postwar period.” American tourists flock to Italy attracted by its style, spirit, suaveness.



*“The only word Liz knows in Italian is Bulgari,” joked Richard Burton about Elizabeth Taylor who, photographed in her show-stopping jewels, encapsulated the global obsession with Italy. The 1950s and ‘60s gave birth to a stylish, seductive – and uniquely Italian – iconography: the dazzling Trevi Fountain scene in Fellini’s La Dolce Vita, for instance, and Gregory Peck and Audrey Hepburn’s Vespa moment in Roman Holiday. Italy and glamour have been synonymous ever since....It was the heady combination of celebrity and style that proved the truly irresistible combination, and ultimately it was Hollywood that fully propelled Italian style onto the global stage. The movie industry was drawn to the sunny climate and relatively low costs of filming, and Cinecittà studios in Rome became an international hub, the city itself acting as an open-air set. Films like Roman Holiday and Cleopatra proved huge hits. The exuberant,*

*opulent aesthetic of the 'Hollywood on the Tiber' years spread quickly. Off set the stars were photographed by the paparazzi, then a new phenomenon (and a few years later itself fictionalised in La Dolce Vita). Bogart and Bacall were snapped gliding elegantly in a gondala in Venice, Audrey Hepburn shopping for shoes at Ferregamo in Florence, Taylor and Burton in the boutiques of her beloved Bulgari, while other stars were shot holidaying on the scenic Amalfi coast. These images went around the world, portraying a beguilingly sybaritic and effortlessly stylish way of life." (Quote: BBC Culture: Lindsay Baker)*





Richard's Montici artwork rides the cresting Italian wave. Demand soars, but production remains limited. Richard flies back and forth from Italy to his New York gallery, where his latest pieces are snapped up. *Photo credit: John Schmuecker collection*



Richard has hired good friend **Muriel King** as Publicity Director for his Montici business. They have a lot in common. A celebrated American fashion designer and artist, King helped revive the fashion industry in Greece after WWII. Her clients include politicians' and bankers' wives, Hollywood stars like Katharine Hepburn, Margaret Sullivan (King designed gowns for major studio films in the 1930s and 1940s). After retiring from fashion, she devoted herself exclusively to painting and drawing. King's circle of friends include Pulitzer winning playwright Marc Connelly of the celebrated Algonquin Round Table of New York City; and Italian painter **Massimo Campigli**.

*Photo: Holiday mermaid card designed by Muriel King for Richard Blow, Christmas 1963. From John Schmuecker collection*



*Photo: Massimo Campigli with his painting*

During his career, Richard will operate from two different locations in Manhattan. In addition to a gallery on East 64<sup>th</sup> Street, at some point he also has space at 880 Lexington Ave in Manhattan. This gallery or exhibition space is called “Villa Piazza Calda.” The Montici team at this point includes Bruno Lastrucci and Lorenzo Fracassini heading up “*Produzione*” (Production) for Blow’s Montici company; Lando Bartoli, Director of the Opificio delle Pietre Dure in Florence, is listed as one of two “*Consigli*” (Advisers) to Richard’s business.

**1967** – Richard’s other brother Frederick dies.



**circa 1968** -- According to Bruno Lastrucci, Richard developed a friendship with Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. The former First Lady had a Fifth Ave. apartment in Manhattan; was a huge supporter of the arts (she arranged for the Mona Lisa to be exhibited in America); and had married wealthy Greek shipping Magnate Aristotle Onassis by this time.

*“Mr Blow started to call our son Iacopo of a few months by the name ‘Jacuelino’ in memory of his strong friendship with Jacqueline Kennedy.” – Bruno Lastrucci.*





Richard is at the height of his fame. He's celebrated in Italy, his art hangs in the Met, he's had three shows at the Museum of Modern Art, his intarsia is collected by museums and decorates the walls of the globally rich and famous. He's an icon of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century modern art.

But the world is about to be turned upside down.

## **TWILIGHT COMES**





**1968** – America finally explodes. Civil rights battles, student protests, the shocking assassinations of President John Kennedy, then his brother Bobby, then Dr. Martin Luther King, the growing carnage of the Vietnam War, race riots in 120 U.S. cities, tear the country apart. Passion, rage, confrontation is in.



Young people reject the “Establishment” and its bourgeois values. Now it’s “Don’t trust anyone over 30” and “Drugs, Sex and Rock and Roll.” The hippie movement mocks anything “square” -- wealth, education, sophisticated manners, suits, civility. Noel Coward is out.

So is Richard Blow.



Art goes pop with Warhol's Campbell soup cans and Brillo boxes; Claes Oldenbergh lipstick sculpture; street art, improvisation, happenings, minimalist exhibitions featuring trash in a corner. Hip is in.

**1970** -- Letter from California art dealer to Richard:

*"I have shown your beautiful mosaics to several galleries – one in San Francisco, one in Los Angeles, one in Santa Barbara. It seems that the Far West is "far out" these days and you are too good*

*for the average man. They seem to prefer twisted pipes, plastic tubes, scrap metal and "hippie" beads. Some day they may come to their senses..."*

Richard is 66. There will be no more reinventions.

**1971** – Marya Mannes publishes her autobiography *"Out of My Time."* She dedicates the book to her son David: "To my son, with love and respect."

**1973** – Richard, a year short of 70, finally shuts the Montici workshop, sells his beloved Villa Piazza Calda. He moves into an apartment. There will be no more Montici art.

**1976** – Richard donates 25 intarsia pieces to Oregon State University. The University publishes an exhibition catalogue, and a biography of Richard by Matila Simon. It will become the standard bio. In it she notes:

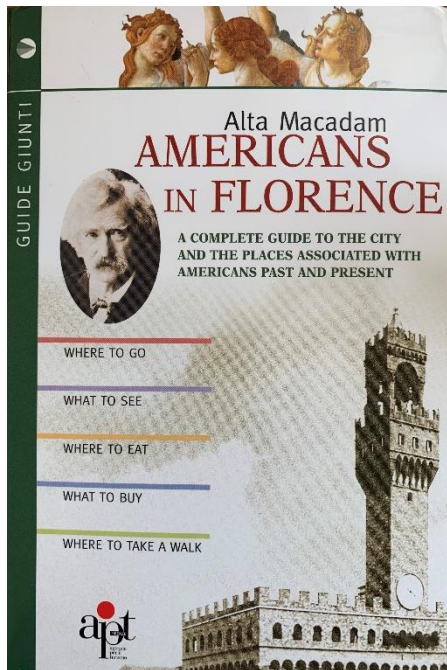
*"...Blow's pictures are the only ones considered worthy to hang with works created before the Medici family disappeared.... The collection presented to Oregon State University demonstrates to artists and art connoisseurs why these works are unique. To have seen them created from the sketch to the final acceptance was, for this writer, a privilege, a return to another world that is vanishing so rapidly it will soon be only a distant memory, an anguished one for those who treasure individualism, craftsmanship, and the application of fine art to everyday living. Imitations of these works will be made for years, but the workshop in Santa Margherita a*

*Montici will produce no more original designs. ...His pictures in stone will endure for centuries. For this we must be grateful."*

**1977** – Richard’s sister Adele Margaret dies. Richard has lost his father, mother, brothers, sisters. His Villa, and the Montici workshop are gone. His first wife is dead, his second is estranged from him, as is his son Richard Marco. He leaves Italy for the last time, and returns to New York.

**1983** – Richard Blow, 79, dies of a stroke in Manhattan on April 5. The ***New York Times*** obituary headlines his lasting artistic legacy: *“Richard Blow, Artist; Revived Florentine Mosaic Technique.”*

## PHOENIX RISING



**1990s** -- Mid-century modern (MCM) Design Movement celebrating interior, product, graphic design, architecture, and urban development from roughly 1933 to 1965 begins to capture the attention of Millennials and Gen-X. buyers. MCM is now recognized by scholars and museums worldwide as a significant design movement. (Wikipedia)

**2001** –First Italian guidebook to feature Richard Blow and the Montici workshop is published: *“City Secrets: Florence, Venice and the Towns In Italy”* by Robert Kahn. Tourists flock to Villa Piazza Calda. A new generation begins to re-discovers Richard and his art.

**2003** – Second Italian guidebook featuring Richard and his art is published: *“Americans in Florence: A Complete Guide to the City and the Places Associated with Americans Past and Present.”* Richard is celebrated alongside other American artists who

visited and worked in Florence -- Alexander Calder, Robert Rauschenberg, John Singer Sargent.

**2005** -- Auction prices for Richard Blow/Montici art start to climb.as art collectors, interior designers bid for his iconic, Mid-Century Modern art.

**2010** – Pinterest and Instagram are launched. A young, digital generation starts posting, commenting on their favorite Richard Blow mosaics, further socializing his art.





Montici pieces start showing up in *Architectural Digest*, style magazines, advertising, online blogs.

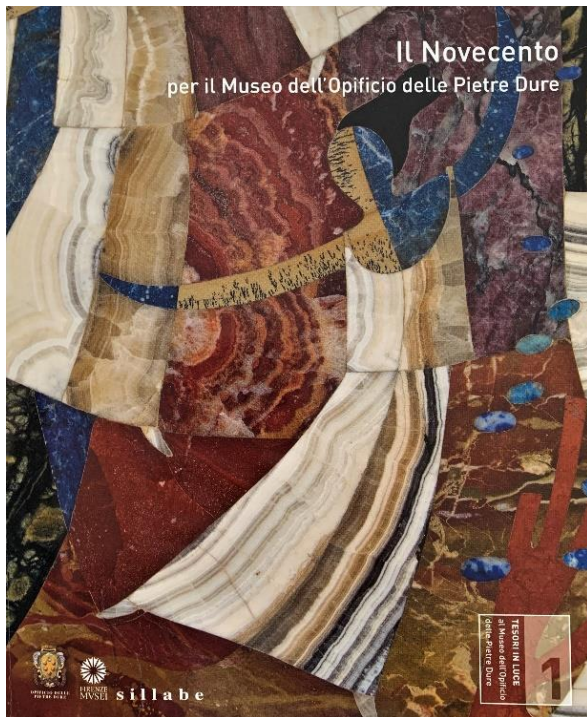
(Photo: *New York Social Diary*, Nov. 16, 2018)

**2015** – Anna Maria Massinelli publishes “*Painting in Stone: Modern Florentine Pietra Dura Mosaic*,” exposing a global art audience to the historic revival of the art form. Richard Blow is credited with saving and reinventing the art form which he “inspired by his visionary and childlike talent.”

**2016** – Richard Blow Montici coffee table sells for \$22,000 at Sotheby’s

**June 2017** – Italian master mosaicist Bruno Lastrucci publishes his personal biography describing his years working at Montici for Richard, providing inside information into Richard’s life in Italy, and how he created and

produced his mosaics.



**2018** – The Opificio delle Pietre Dure mounts seminal exhibit exploring the rebirth of the pietra dura art in the mid-20th century (October 2018 – May 2019). Show highlights Richard’s role in reinventing the iconography that inspired the revival.

Maximalist design movement discovers eclectic Montici art --coffee tables, boxes, wall intarsia -- celebrates Montici color, style, uniqueness.

**Oct. 2019** – Historic, blockbuster Wright auction “*From Medici to Montici*” offers 87 Montici pieces from the Adam Edelberg collection. Half-million dollars of Blow artwork sold in single hour, setting record prices for all categories. Highest price paid for a Blow mosaic tops \$21,000 for first time.

**2021** – The Montici Society founded - - a free, international online community of art lovers

dedicated to the enjoyment, preservation, and promotion of the pietra dura artistic legacy of Richard A Blow and his Montici workshop.

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