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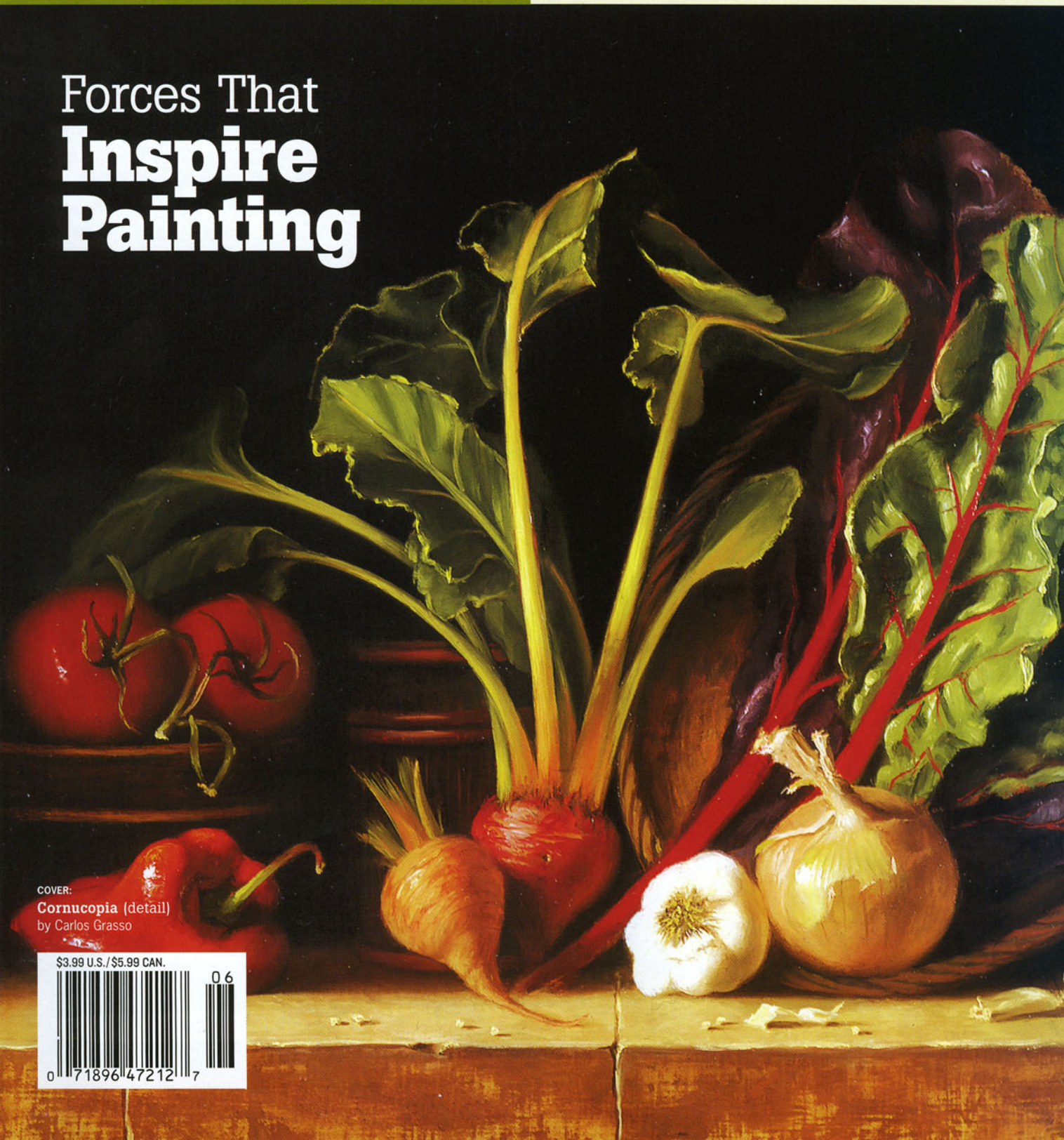

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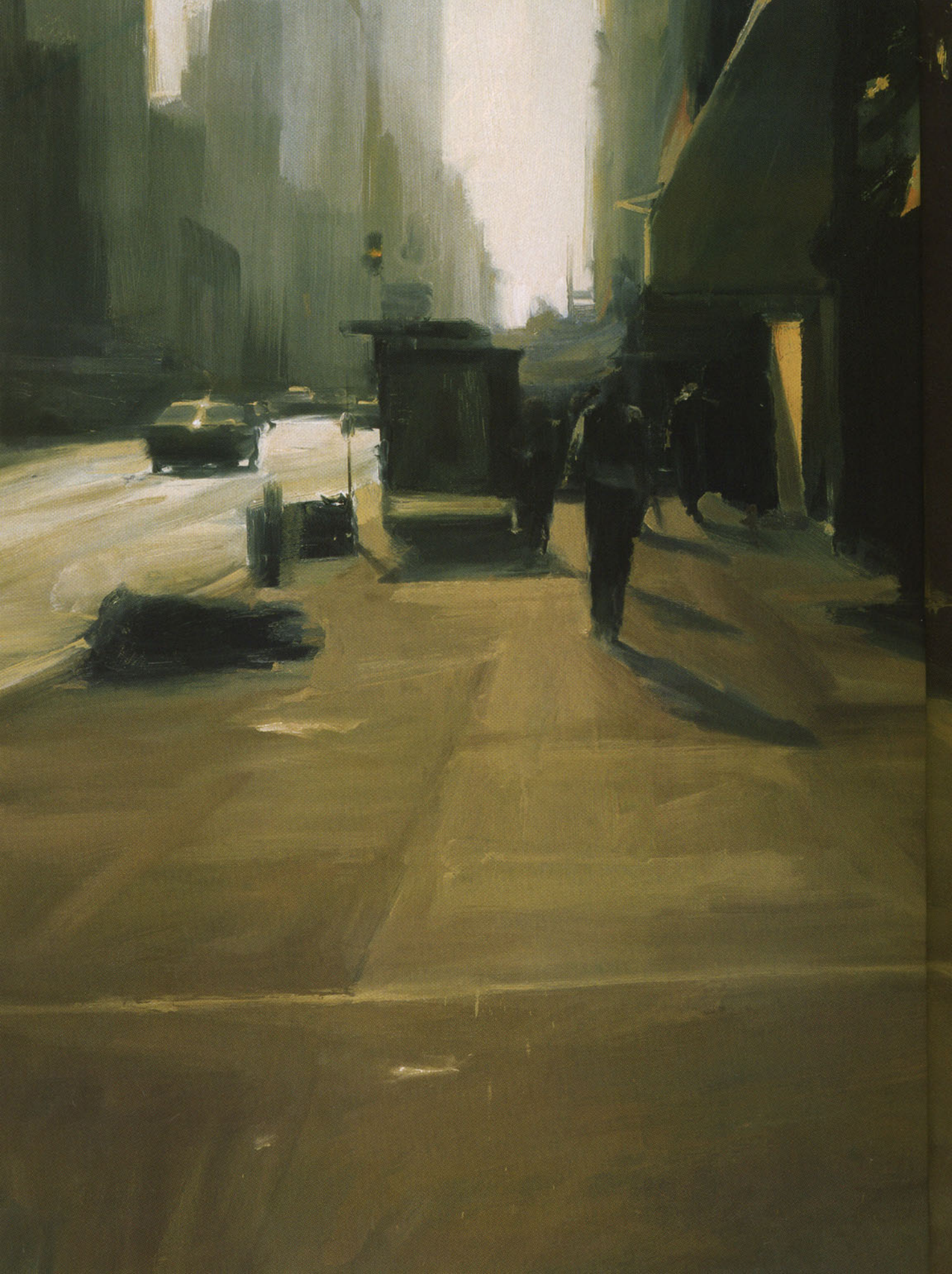


Ben Aronson: Urban Geometries

Ben Aronson of Boston creates dynamic cityscapes that unite gestural and impressionistic brushwork with elements of realism and abstraction.

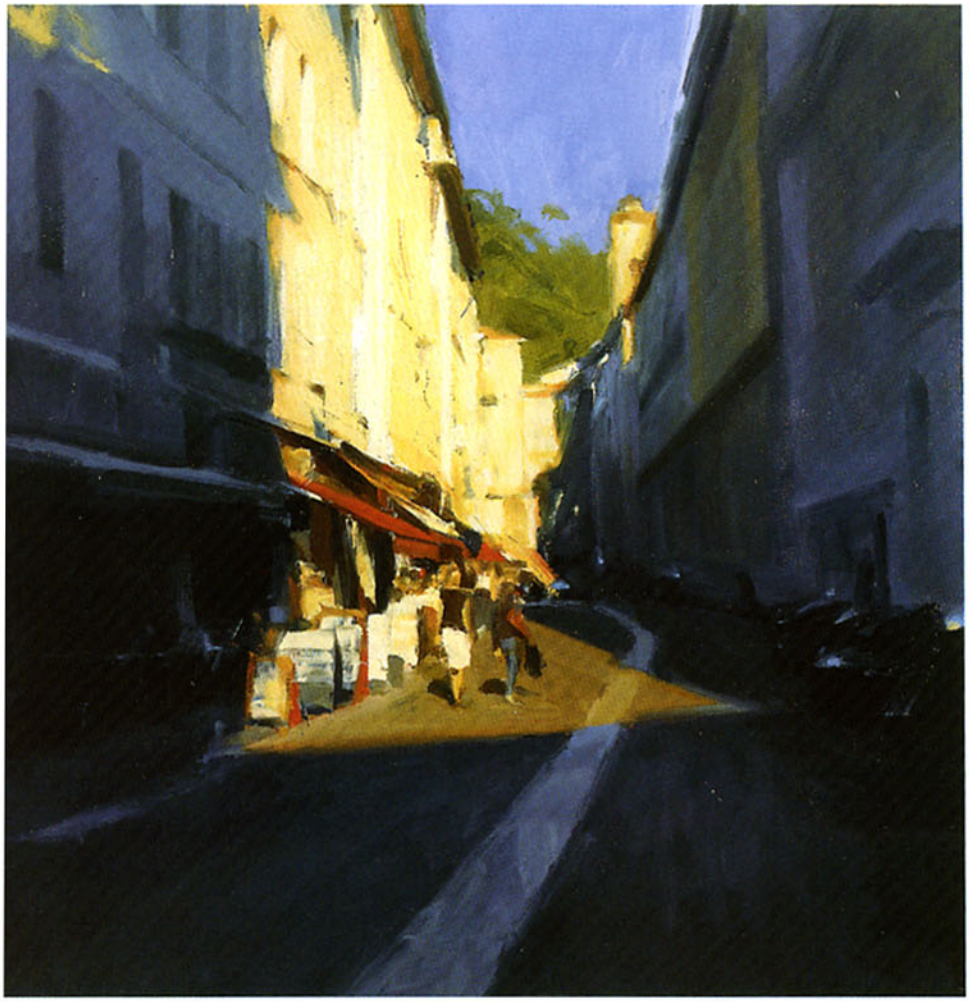
by Daniel Grant

Ben Aronson is well aware of the benefits and drawbacks that come with being a painter of cityscapes. On the plus side is the travel: to New York City, San Francisco, Chicago, Paris, and wherever else he and his wife, Eileen, might decide to visit. Each city has its own atmospheric effects, quality of light, and topographical and physical characteristics. Los Angeles, for example, is very horizontal, whereas New York City is more vertical. Inky-black urban canyons dominate New York City, while Los Angeles revels in sun-drenched vistas. Working in different cities, the artist finds, is a great way to keep one's eye fresh and able to introduce new qualities to the work.

Aronson is familiar with the difficulties of traveling with art supplies, particularly getting through airport security in the post-9/11 era. Also for reasons of security, he has found it increasingly difficult to get to the high vantage points he used to use to derive good compositions for his paintings. "I remember when I could walk into a Manhattan hotel and pass a five-dollar bill to a bellhop and get access to the roof," he recalls, "but not anymore." As a result, most of Aronson's recent works are views taken from street level. Composing these cityscapes, however, presents some problems. Some are environmental and involve the wind, dirt, and grit that sweep down urban sidewalks, but others involve nosy humans. Curious conversationalists can distract plein air artists, and offensive folks may prove hard to take.

If painting the urban landscape is a balancing act, so too are the works Aronson creates. The 47-year-old artist likes to combine elements that ordinarily don't seem to go together.

Morning Toward the Park
2003, oil, 52 x 50.
All artwork this article private collection unless otherwise indicated.



Aronson treats the urban landscape as a still life, emphasizing not the human-oriented hustle and bustle but rather its agglomeration of geometric shapes, volumes, shadows, and colors.

LEFT
Street in Old Nice
2005, oil, 38 x 38.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Hill Street, San Francisco
2005, oil, 84 x 60.

He treats the urban landscape as a still life, emphasizing not the human-oriented hustle and bustle but rather its agglomeration of geometric shapes, volumes, shadows, and colors. Rarely have cities been depicted as so quiet, so inactive, so abstract. Aronson also combines styles on his canvas, with abstract backgrounds in the manner of Philip Guston (1913–1980) playing behind realistic foregrounds. Concurrently, if his delineation of shapes can be described as "hard-edge," his handling of paint is often gestural. "I've always believed it's through technique that one achieves his or her own unique voice," the artist says. "The techniques of great masters—both past and contemporary—have always influenced my process, particularly the Abstract Expressionists."

Aronson's work reminds us that categories in art, such as realism and abstraction, are rather artificial lines of demarcation that may be more helpful to art writers than to anyone else. One may see traces of Franz Kline (1910–1962), Wayne Thiebaud (1920–), and Richard Diebenkorn (1922–1993) in Aronson's work, but his parents have been equally influential. Georgiana Nyman Aronson, a renowned portraitist, and painter and sculptor David Aronson encouraged their son's artistic bent; and by the time Aronson was an adult he was assisting his parents with their work.

Born in Lithuania in 1923, David Aronson moved to Boston at age 6. In the 1940s and 1950s, he made an impression in the New York art world as one of the "Boston Boys" alongside Hyman Bloom and Jack Levine. The group shared an enthusiasm for the techniques of the School of Paris, particularly those of Chaim Soutine (1893–1943), as well as an interest in Jewish subject matter.

Unlike Bloom and Levine, who both moved to New York, David Aronson remained a Bostonian, raising a family in the outlying town of Sudbury and devoting much of his time to his own artwork and teaching. He began his teaching career at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, before moving to Boston University, where he founded the art department in 1955. Although Ben Aronson's work looks nothing like his father's, the lessons he learned at home helped to hone his artistic sensibility. "The story line, the narrative part of my father's work—having to do with Jewish themes of Kabbalah and so on—were interesting, but what really excited me were the formal elements of how pictures worked," Aronson says. "I also admired the way my parents lived their daily lives as serious artists. I remember

LEFT
Over Madison
2005, oil, 38 x 38.

OPPOSITE PAGE, LEFT
Le Marais
2006, oil, 12 x 12.

OPPOSITE PAGE, RIGHT
Evening, San Francisco
2005, oil, 12 x 12. Collection National Academy Museum, New York, New York.

seeing my father going into his studio every day when I was little, and I'd be thinking, There must be something fascinating going on there. And I wanted to be part of it."

Following in his father's footsteps, Aronson decided to earn his bachelor's and master's of fine arts at Boston University, ultimately enrolling in the senior painting class with his father. "The very first day he tore me to shreds," the artist recalls, with a smile. "After the first week everyone was calling him 'Dad.'" There had been some thought of studying architecture—Aronson interned at an architectural firm while in high school and applied to architecture programs at Princeton and Yale—but increasingly he felt that fine art was the more appropriate path. "It got to the point where any other field seemed like a move in a different direction from the artistic environment I was raised in and had come to love."

Shortly after receiving his M.F.A. in 1982, Aronson began his own teaching career. For nine years he taught at the Beaver Country Day School, a private high school in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts. "If you are the art teacher, you are not only expected to have a great curriculum for the student," the artist explains, "you are also expected to do a variety of other art-related things, from making the get-well card for the sick cook to repainting the white lines in the parking lot."

Although he was diligent about producing his own art on the side, Aronson had a hard time marketing his work. Galleries initially weren't interested and many university art departments turned him down for teaching positions. Traditional skills and traditional subjects were becoming more the exception than the rule at a growing number of art schools, replaced by an emphasis on theory and new media. "I think I was passed over because what I brought to the table was, in many cases, an indictment of what those schools' programs were about," Aronson observes. "There was a lot of cutting-edge art happening, and students didn't want to hear that it was going to take years to learn how to draw. I hear aspiring painters say, 'I'm beginning where Matisse left off,' and I often suggest to them, 'Maybe you'd do well to begin

where Matisse began.' There are fundamental things that don't change with style and time. I think it's important to rephrase the timeless and universal objectives of art using your own voice and style. You find students who went through an art-school experience that was more like recess—and perhaps had a wonderful time but didn't really learn anything—coming out of those programs with huge student loans and not even the basic training to take illustration jobs to help them pay back those loans. It has done a lot of art students a tremendous disservice."

Leaving teaching in 1990, Aronson tried a different and more lucrative form of work: architectural rendering. A friend who worked in the field had pointed him in that direction, which involves taking blueprints and other construction documents to create an image of what a building will look like when it's completed. Artists generally add people, trees, automobiles, plants, surrounding buildings, office equipment, and whatever else is needed to help convey the architect's vision. Aronson's renderings won him an international award and paid his bills but, more significant, they also began to orient his artwork toward architectural elements and cityscapes, most of which are of Paris, New York, San Francisco, and Boston. "I seem to have been painting the same four cities for several years, and it wasn't until recently that I realized why. Each of those cities represents the four schools of art that have been most influential to my work: The School of Paris, Abstract Expressionism, The Bay Area School, and The Boston Abstract Expressionist School."

As his renown for capturing the "feel" of a city grows, inevitably Aronson is asked by collectors to visit their apartments and second homes to paint the views from their windows, and occasionally he will oblige. "I don't want to be a short-order cook," he remarks, "but commissions do get me back to those upstairs vantage points." Aronson's Paris and San Francisco street scenes are much admired, but there is no end of enthusiasm for those of New York City, which are sought out by people who used to live in Manhattan—or want to. "New Yorkers love to see New York," Aronson notes, adopting a Long Island accent. "Where else is there but New York?" ■

Daniel Grant, a contributing editor to American Artist, *is the author of a several books for artists, including* The Business of Being an Artist, The Fine Artist's Career Guide, *and* How to Grow as an Artist *(all Allworth Press, New York, New York).*

About the Artist

Ben Aronson holds bachelor's and master's of fine arts degrees from Boston University. A recipient of numerous awards, including a nomination to the National Academy of Design, in New York City, the artist has had one-man exhibitions at Tibor de Nagy Gallery, also in New York City; Alpha Gallery, in Boston; and Jenkins Johnson Gallery, in San Francisco, among others. Aronson's work has been featured in *ARTnews*, *Art in America*, and *The New York Times* and is in many private and corporate collections. The artist is represented by Tibor de Nagy Gallery, Alpha Gallery, and the Jenkins Johnson Gallery. For more information on Aronson, visit his galleries' websites: www.tibordenagy.com; www.alphagallery.com; and www.jenkinsjohnsongallery.com.