



## Byzantium in Venice: A Visit with Huguette Caland

Article and photography by Joanne Warfield

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During my many walks through a Venice, California, neighborhood, I watched a concrete fortress emerge from an otherwise timid-looking row of typical suburban houses. I wondered *who* could be constructing this huge austere structure nearly covering the entire extra-deep lot. It appeared rather forbidding from the outside with its massive expanse of straight concrete walls, except for the little smiling face of a sculpture peeking through a narrow slice of glass running the full height of the house—the only opening in the front of the building. I knew it must be the home and studio of an artist. Upon mentioning the site to a friend from the neighborhood, I found out that, indeed, it belonged to an artist named Huguette Caland from Lebanon. My curiosity was peaked. A few weeks later, I happened to see her along the side of her house tending some flowers, so I said Hello and mentioned my artist friend. She was very friendly and graciously invited me in to see the house. I *love* art and architecture, and enthusiastically accepted.



The driveway evolves into a walkway leading back to where the entrance is recessed into the side of the building, giving it privacy. There is a row of calla lilies gracing one side of the walkway, and the sound of a small water fountain gurgling opposite the front door evokes a tranquil mood. The antique, tribal-looking green door made of hand-hewn, metal-punctured planks from India softens the rough concrete surface surrounding it. As I stepped over the threshold into the house I realized that I was in a very special place indeed — a sanctuary of light and art, where cares and worries are left outside. The

“fortress” image quickly vanished upon entering this exquisitely private place, buffered and protected from the outside world with its great walls, which were the perfect solution for creating a retreat and masking the noise of a sometimes raucous neighborhood.

The “tour” was a visual treat of colors, textures, surfaces, and art work displayed with an almost-sacred simplicity. We migrated right, toward the large dining room and kitchen. There is no formal living room, and I could see that all the entertaining and “living” either took place around one of the two large tables in each room, or outside on the wall-enclosed patio filled with plants. A huge, sweet-smelling belladonna tree in bloom half-covers the door to the patio, which is next to a sauna and a stunning 75-foot lap pool where Caland swims every day.



In the dining room, several folk art pieces, such as a rustic ladder serving as a sculpture stand, perfectly contrast the sharp lines of the building, which perform beautifully as an ideal back drop for her contemporary art. The space is warmed further by the humble simplicity of the polished plywood and Formica used for her tables, counter tops, and even chairs. Huguette told architect Neil Kaufman, “I want my house to be like a cathedral — it is my institution.” It shows: the 4,600-square-foot “cathedral” is the unique blueprint of Huguette, and therefore striking, warm, and intimate.

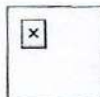
Her artist’s touch shows in every detail of the house, which she helped contractor Paule Michel Nahas finish over a six-month period. The kitchen walls are filled with her whimsical, intricately-stylized “Byzantine” painting, resembling tile. Other such additions throughout the house are equally surprising and delightful.



Near the large kitchen table are two walls of Huguette’s framed, evocative nude sketches from her Paris days in the early 1980s. The counter below the longest wall is lined with a series of organic, figurative animal sculptures in natural terra-cotta that she created in Paris with the

encouragement of Rumanian sculptor George Apostu. She also worked in stone, wood, and *papier maché*, or any material that appealed to her. Her more recent large-scale abstract drawings and paintings hang in the spacious dining room, as well as in her studio

The entryway features a large evocative collage/painting which contains portions of five kilograms of letters in French that she sent to a friend many years ago. Says Huguette, "He gave me back all these letters before he died to save them from the war in Lebanon." After a year of keeping them she finally decided to make the collage, tearing off pieces that she wanted to use. It is a striking work that is a revealing portrait of a very important chapter for her. Huguette is totally open and honest, and her own stories often end up in her art. In her work, as in her life, she begins with an idea and consumes "every last drop of its being." She is passionate about life and does nothing half way.



Two large towers, one at each end of the building, function as stair wells, thereby preserving the openness of the main part of the house by not cutting into it. One of the towers serves as another gallery, full of works by many of Venice's top artists such as Ed Moses, Laddie Dill, Larry Bell and Kenny Price (and others) whom she has gotten to know since moving to L.A. The artists have become good friends and often drop by for conversation or a casual lunch, which can continue on into dinner. She has created the perfect gathering place and environment for art.



Walking into her painting studio, which is at the front of the house, almost took my breath away. It is a huge room (the largest in the house) with an 18-foot ceiling, fantastic gallery walls, and track lighting. One large work (6'x12') on unstretched canvas has the "breathing room" of the entire 25-foot wall. The other walls are hung equally spare, which creates an ideal viewing of the work.



One of her intricate "Neo-Byzantine" paintings on canvas hangs above her square work tables which are constructed like her dining room and kitchen tables, with the addition of large casters. At the front corner of the studio entrance is a



deep-chocolate velvet chaise stacked with

exquisitely embroidered pillows done by women of the Sabra and Chatila Palestinian refugee camps. The extraordinarily fine needle work beautifully compliments Huguette's current paintings. There is a resonance between the intricate, traditional "tribal" embroidery and her intricately-painted "Ikat embroidery." They share the same rich colors of deep orange, brown, and gold. Caland's subtle luminous paint captures the feeling of gold silk threads.



The thin slit of a window that I had seen from the front, weeks before, is on the front wall of the studio. The cutout sculpture figure that had peered out at me stands guard at the window displaying a humorous caftan — both being Caland creations. The front and back of the caftan are embroidered as a "nude" woman. It was in an exhibition at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C., and with her usual aplomb, Huguette has worn it to gallery openings.



Some of her earlier works of painted rocks and geometrically-painted *papier maché* sculpture are displayed atop tall matching antique tribal drawers that flank a long wooden bench from India.



Hers is the kind of studio that every artist dreams of. It is Huguette's dream-come-true and the manifestation of her life's creative journey.

Huguette was born in Beirut, Lebanon in 1931 where her father became the country's first President after it gained independence from France. While growing up, she was surrounded with Byzantine art which had a deep influence on her work. "It happens on an unconscious level because one is suffused with it," she says. Her interest in painting began at age 16 under the tutelage of Italian artist Fernando

Manetti. From 1964 to 1968 she studied art at the American University of Beirut.



It was during that time that she began the first prototypes for her embroidered, hand-painted gowns — the caftans that have become her signature style and her “uniform.” Her many painting smocks are all in canvas and each is a work of art, painted-on at will and serving as “caftan diaries” — notebooks for her thoughts or things to remember. Some of the notations and drawings are erotic or humorous with the tic-tac-toe grid being the favorite. With Huguette’s flair, the simplicity of the ancient caftan shape became elegant in her hands when she used more elaborate materials such as silk or wool, in dark, rich colors. Her unique style was not missed by the keen eye of Pierre Cardin, who spotted her in his salon in Paris in the 1970s soon after she moved there. He engaged her to design a line of 102 elegant caftans. It was an 11-month project and the only time she ever “had a job.” At one of her gallery exhibitions a few years later she wore one of the beautiful Cardins, and also displayed one as a gallery piece which she had painted. It was titled *Premier et Denier Emploi* (First and Last Job). She said, “this is *haute couture*, but I painted over it!” — an artist’s prerogative, filled with artistic abandon.

Huguette moved permanently to California in 1988 where she presently lives and works. She is anxiously awaiting her citizenship papers that are to arrive any day. She *loves* her life Venice and thinks of it as a blessing. And, as she said in a recent *L.A. Times* interview, “I love every minute of my life. I squeeze it like an orange and eat the peel, because I don’t want to miss a thing,” — said with the passion of someone living her life to the fullest and finding the *beauty* in it.



Huguette’s works have appeared in group and solo exhibits around the world, including Beirut, Paris, Rome, Venice (Italy), Barcelona, Baghdad, Tokyo, London, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C. She was

recently visited by the Los Angeles County Museum Arts Council led by curator Howard Fox. She appears (as herself) in two photography books by Veronique Vial: *Women Before 10 a.m.*, and *Splash*.

Joanne Warfield's award-winning photography is in several museum collections and is in a new book titled *Polaroid Manipulations* by Kathleen Carr. Joanne was featured in the August 2001 issue of *TheScreamOnline*. To view her work, visit her website at [www.JoanneWarfieldFineArt.com](http://www.JoanneWarfieldFineArt.com).

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