

the art of elias friedensohn

1924–1991



The Mystic Marriage | Oil on canvas | 60" h x 72" w | 1975

The Mystic Marriage Returns Home

A man had come into her life, Vivian announced, and he made her uncommonly happy. Now she wanted to transform her bedroom "into a chamber of love." We were having coffee and cookies in the dining room, and Vivian was sitting with her back to the garden, staring at Eli's *Mystic Marriage*. Mesmerized. A pair of cherubic lovers, in flight over a postcard-perfect Italian village, grasp hands. Oblivious to ordinary constraints, they relish one another and the moment. The female, sporting a purple stocking on one leg (the other is bare) holds an apple in her hand. Delicious temptation! Eros everlasting!

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Issue #13 looks at one of Elias Friedensohn's wittiest love paintings. Doris Friedensohn tracks its journey from Leonia, New Jersey, into the world and home again.

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The Mystic Marriage | detail

Above their heads, a pair of doves flutter. The colors are soft pastels, the mood dreamy. "Bliss, uncomplicated love, and the illusion of freedom," Eli commented, "inspired by a honeymoon week at the Lago di Garda. Twenty years ago." He didn't mention the tree, bare of leaves, the only dark note in the composition.

What an odd moment, I remember thinking. Vivian, Eli's friend from the High School of Music and Art, had followed his career over the years and—with her late husband—had bought a number of his paintings. A successful New York psychoanalyst, she was now on the verge of a new life. After 15 years as a widow, she had found a worthy mate. Eli, after two decades of a happy second marriage, was ill with cancer. The doctors gave him another two months.

Our stay in the Italian Lake Country (in the summer of 1969) remained, as Eli remarked, almost too vivid. As the Michelin Guide promised, we enjoyed magically clear air and sparkling water; also easy-drinking wine, the freshest seafood, love in the afternoon, and no fear of flying. That moment, transmuted into madcap parody in *The Mystic Marriage*, would be ours forever.

Now it was celebration time for Vivian. *The Mystic Marriage*, 60" x 72", belonged over her bed, she said. Eli gave her a special price in honor of their long friendship and love in her life.

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After the deal was done—and after Eli arranged for his framer to replace the red tape along the edges with a proper gold frame—Vivian worried. What would happen to the painting when she died? She was only 65, but still. Art may be forever, but our time is limited. None of her four adult kids would want the piece, she felt certain. Don't worry, I assured Vivian. I'll buy it back from your estate—for exactly what you're paying.

Some weeks later, I attended a party for the painting at Vivian's apartment. A waiter was passing around champagne as I entered the living room, and I took several quick sips before looking around. Many paintings and drawings—at least two by Vivian herself—covered the living room walls. Several shrinks and their spouses were talking about travel plans, movies not to be missed, and the price of real estate. In the master bedroom, people accustomed to probing the Unconscious giggled and raised their glasses to the work of art installed over the bed. Avoiding the lovers, I focused on the old-fashioned, high topped shoe on the ground beneath them and the perky white lap dog lounging on top of it. Eli had borrowed those symbols of the sacred place (the shoe) and faith (the dog) from Jan Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Wedding Portrait*. Here—in the painting's new home—they seemed even more deliciously comic. Feeling the buzz, I raised my glass on behalf of the artist and drank to love. I had been so lucky for a quarter of a century.

Twenty-five years later, as she was dying, Vivian fretted about the fate of *The Mystic Marriage*. Quite as she predicted, none of her offspring had space for the painting. What would become of it? She wrote down my name and phone number for her daughter Carol.

The family was dismantling Vivian's apartment on East 72nd Street, I learned just before Thanksgiving. I felt the urgency in Carol's voice—and something else, too. I didn't want too much time to mull over what I knew I would do. Paul, whose New York apartment is filled with elegant paintings and remarkable masks, offered to come along for a look. Perfect. It wasn't his judgment about the quality of Eli's painting that I needed but rather his comfort with it. Although *The Mystic Marriage* isn't destined for our bedroom, it will loom large in the Leonia house we now share.

After the visit, Paul surprised me by offering to hang *The Mystic Marriage* over the bed in his mostly unused apartment on East 77th Street. A gorgeous gesture, but not what I had in mind. *The Mystic Marriage* will be returning to its former place in the dining room—on the large wall opposite the windows, for the two of us and our guests to behold—with wonder and glee.

—Doris Friedensohn



The Mystic Marriage | detail

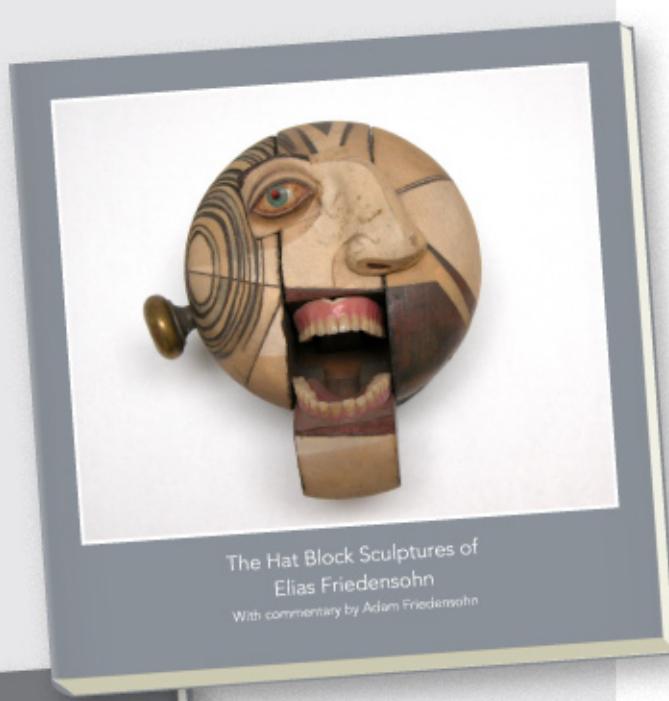
Books

**Two full-color books
on work by Elias
Friedensohn are
available for order:**

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