

Isabel Piczek - A Belated (and Sad) Valette...

Ian Wilson

Among the many Shroud specialists with whom I have been closely associated over the decades, undoubtedly one of the most engaging and consummately professional was Los Angeles-based artist Isabel Piczek, whose services to sacred art were awarded the pontifically bestowed title Dame of the Order of St Gregory in 1998. Hungarian-born, an ultra-devout Roman Catholic, and a chronic workaholic who created distinctive and stunningly huge murals, mosaics and stained-glass windows for literally hundreds of churches and cathedrals - her seven-times life size risen Christ mural for the Guardian Angel Cathedral, Las Vegas, is but one example. [photo 2]).



1 Isabel Piczek, photographed with the author at the time of her interviews for her biography in 1999.
Photo: Judith Wilson.



2 Isabel completing her work on the risen Christ at the Guardian Angel Cathedral, Las Vegas, 1978.

Isabel was also a passionate advocate of the Shroud's authenticity. When the 'Leonardo faked it' cult was at its height, Isabel was at the forefront of refuting this claim. Very much in tune with my own way of thinking, she argued for the impossibility that any artist, at any period of history, could or would have created a figurative imprint of the subtlety and photographic accuracy of that visible on the Shroud. The fact that Isabel died three years ago, on 28 September 2016, might therefore make it seem to be very late in the day for me to be writing this quasi tribute to her memory. Except that the task of determining the truth of that memory

(insofar as this is clear even now), has proved to be unexpectedly long and disturbing, for reasons that will become apparent.

I first met Isabel at a Shroud Symposium held in Paris in September 1989, coinciding with her first-ever return to Europe in more than three decades. From this encounter there quickly grew a close and very prolific correspondence. We met relatively often because she became a regular lecturer at international conferences on the Shroud. She also gave a very memorable talk to the BSTS when she visited England in November 1992. At that talk as at others, she would show a preliminary series of slides of her early artworks by way of demonstrating the long-standing and wide-ranging artistic expertise that she brought to Shroud studies. Notable amongst these artworks, because of its claimed precocity, was a

377 sq. ft. fresco 'The Miraculous Draught of Fishes' that she created for the Refectory of the Pontifical Biblical Institute, part of the Vatican in Rome [photo 3].



3 The Pontifical Biblical Institute's "Miraculous Draught of Fishes" fresco which Isabel claimed she painted at the age of thirteen in partnership with her elder sister Edith. Photo Judith Wilson.

This she described as having been painted when she had been only thirteen years old, not long after she and her elder sister Edith had arrived in Rome following a dramatic 'cross-mountains' escape from the communist oppression in their Hungary homeland. To achieve this prestigious art assignment the girls had entered a competition in which the judges had had to make their decisions based purely on the quality of the proposed designs, without knowledge of the entrants' identities. When Isabel and Edith's design won, there was understandable stupefaction when the winners proved to be two unknown Hungarian teenagers – and female! Upon my first hearing this story, one that Isabel

repeated widely in press interviews, it seemed so remarkable that I wanted to hear more of it. Accordingly, when in 1999 Isabel invited me to Los Angeles to write a full ‘official’ biography for her, I needed little persuasion.

We met at her studio in early July 1999 and it provided an ideal opportunity for me to experience at first-hand exactly how she reconstructed the man of the Shroud’s burial pose, a favourite theme for her lectures (she would show the work she had done using life models [photo 4], and one of the topics that we had often discussed in correspondence.

Even on my first getting into position on the floor of Isabel’s studio, with her directing from the top of a fifteen-foot-ladder, there quickly became obvious the significance of the positioning of the arms that the pose required. The man of the Shroud’s elbows were not dropped to floor level in the manner that the casual observer expects of such a seemingly straightforward ‘body at rest’ funerary position.



4 Isabel in her studio working on reconstructing the Man of the Shroud's exact burial pose.



5 Posed by the author for Isabel in 1999 showing how the elbows were very markedly elevated from the horizontal plane for the attitude in which he lay in death, suggesting that the arms had been fixed in the crucifixion position by rigor mortis and forced into the burial position for carrying into his tomb.

Instead, the elbows were unnaturally suspended several inches above the horizontal plane [photo 5]. The only logical explanation was that the man of the Shroud’s arms had previously been in an outstretched crucifixion position, had become fixed into this by the onset of rigor mortis, and this rigor had then needed to be forcibly broken (necessary, not least, for the

body to be carried through the narrow tomb entrance). It was a procedure that I could positively ‘feel’ in the awkward and painful shoulder position that I needed to adopt

in order to conform to what the Shroud image prescribed. Furthermore,

when I brought my arms directly outwards without any flexing or straightening, they automatically reverted to a crucifixion-type attitude.

Sadly, this line of research is often shrugged off with indifference (and worse), even on the part of those otherwise supportive of the Shroud's authenticity. Yet for me, as for Isabel, the project provided a most powerful indication that the Shroud genuinely contained a very real, crucified human body. I can therefore only remain ever grateful to her that she granted me the opportunity to experience this for myself under direction. Reciprocally, she valued working on the experiment with a

keenly interested Shroud researcher, rather than with a bored professional life model. As will be evident from the, this otherwise serious exercise (which can be found more fully reported in BSTS Newsletter no.51), did have its light-hearted moments....



Unfortunately, the interviews that my wife Judith and I conducted for Isabel's biography took place during the days immediately preceding this 'burial pose' experiment and can no longer be remembered quite so light-heartedly. Each day Isabel would collect us from the hotel and drive us to her studio where I would ask her the questions needed to compile an in-depth account of her life, and Judith would tape-record her answers. She told us she had been born at Hatvan, Hungary, on November 14, 1941 (an immediately memorable date because this my birth year likewise), to Zoltan Piczek, a science and art

6 Photo: Judith Wilson

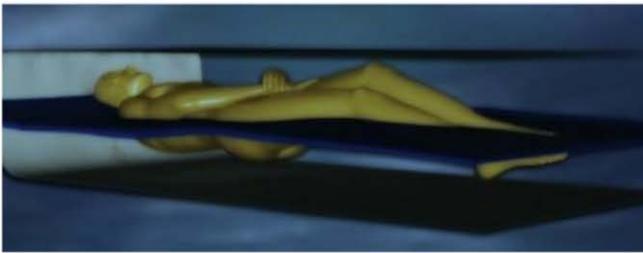
teacher, and his wife Ilona. As evidence that she was a child prodigy she showed us a large and convincingly talented pencil drawing depicting every human figure and architectural feature on Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling. This she had assiduously copied at the age of seven. Her and Edith's flight from Hungary she dated to the end of July 1954, the sisters spending some time in Austria before venturing to Rome where they created the Pontifical Biblical Institute fresco the following year (except that she puzzlingly mentioned that the Vatican had officially backdated this fresco to 1950 to commemorate the Holy Year held that year¹). Onward from Rome the girls reportedly first stopped over briefly in Canada before in 1956 arriving in Los Angeles where an aunt who owned a run-down hotel allowed them to use one of its rooms as a studio. The steady flow of commissions that the sisters received to create large artworks for a wide range of churches and cathedrals enabled them in 1962 to purchase the premises that would become their permanent home and studio, 2228 Echo Park Avenue, Los Angeles. When I asked Isabel whether there had ever been a romance in her life, she said there had been an Anglo-Indian, Balwant, whom she had come across in the street and asked to model for her. He had become her fiancé, but fell ill, and died of kidney failure in 1986. They had never married.

This and a wealth of other information Judith dutifully included in a first draft assemblage of Isabel's life story as based on the series of tape-recordings of Isabel's reminiscences that we brought back with us to Australia. To our surprise, when Isabel read this first draft she approved the bulk of it, confirming its accuracy, but adamantly insisted that all reference to Balwant should be removed, likewise all possible reference to her sister Edith. This latter in particular we viewed as absurd – after all, Edith had indisputably partnered her in all their earlier adventures and artworks - and grossly unfair. At the time we interpreted it as Isabel wanting to be sole occupant of the book's spotlight, consistent with the fact that although Edith was usually present at the studio whilst we were there, Isabel invariably seemed anxious to avoid us talking to her at any length. In any event, Isabel's insistence on such an arbitrary 'editing' above and beyond the normal process of fact-checking acted as a serious

¹ Why she felt obliged to mention this will become apparent later in this tribute

obstacle to further progress, markedly at variance with the principles of conscientious journalism that I have always tried to uphold,² as a result of which the biography project gradually became abandoned.

Thus concomitantly came about a decline of what had hitherto been a very prolific correspondence, followed by a temporary but very heated rift over a Dallas Conference in 2001 (see my Editorial, BSTS Newsletter 54), then a decline further due to Isabel's refusal to follow the general global communications drift from fax to email. In 2005 she suffered a serious fall from the scaffolding that she regularly used for climbing up to her lofty artworks. With characteristic ingenuity she used the required 'recuperation' period to create a quarter-life-size sculpture of the man of the Shroud, and with equally characteristic kindness sent me photos of the result [photo 7] Pose-wise she had made this in very much the same attitude that she and I had worked on together six years earlier, except



7 Isabel's 2006 sculpture of the Man of the Shroud's burial attitude illustrating her theory that the body somehow floated in zero gravity at the less-than-a-millisecond moment when the Shroud's imprint was formed.

that she now pitched the body as if it was floating in the air, defying gravity. Alongside this artwork she formulated the most difficult-to-grasp theory that the Shroud's imprint had become projected

onto its fabric during a kind of beyond time, space and gravity 'Big Bang' (dubbed by her an 'Event Horizon'), generated during the less-than-a-millisecond moment when Christ's body underwent the process of resurrection. In her own explanatory words:

According to the nature of event horizons the dead body must have left its image on the two surfaces of the event horizons. At the time (when

² Although I have never been a professional journalist as such, for ten years I worked in newspaper management at a time when those journalistic principles were still highly valued

time stopped), of the explosion of the event horizons these images were ejected onto both sides of the Shroud, with the body hovering parallel to the event horizons. This explains why the image shows a dead man, not the risen body.³

It should be noted that according to Isabel's account of her life, she was as well qualified in nuclear physics as she was in art.

Over Isabel's final years our communications reduced to the occasional airmail letter or telephone call. On the phone she sounded still characteristically effusive but complained of increasing health problems cramping her workaholic energy. In 2012 she lost her sister Edith, hence at her own death four years later, 28 September 2016, there was effectively no-one left to convey the news to me. Because I tend to avoid reading the plethora of Shroud social media, I learnt of it by chance only when she had been already dead nearly four months.

Nevertheless, the altogether bigger shock came when I looked up her *Los Angeles Times* obituary and funeral notices. In both she was described as aged 89 at her death, and born in 1927, not the 1941 which Judith and I had heard from Isabel's own lips and had understandably assumed to be correct. My first reaction to this was to suppose that because Isabel and her sister Edith had lived largely reclusive existences in Los Angeles, with no progeny or known relatives in the vicinity, those who had become responsible for looking after their worldly effects must have made a serious mistake. This caused me quickly to get in touch with Monsignor Francis Weber, the archdiocesan priest whom I understood to have been closest to Isabel in her last years, and who had conducted both her and her sister Edith's funerals.

Much to my exasperation, however, Mgr. Weber proved dismissive and obdurate. First he ignored my concerns, then when I pressed him hard on the issue, pointing out that I had a tape-recording of Isabel giving her birth-date as 1941 he brusquely declared 1927 to be the date on her

³ Quoted in Chuck Missler, 'An Easter Surprise: A Quantum Hologram of Christ's Resurrection'. Press Release for the Grizzly Adams video documentary *A Fabric of Time*, 2007. I have made one slight editorial adjustment (the positioning of the parenthesis 'when time stopped'), in an attempt to make better sense.

'proposals', adding that in any case 'I can't think of anything about that noble lady that has less to do with her work or place in history.' Independently I learnt that Isabel's national insurance gave 1927 as her birthdate. I also heard that someone unnamed was compiling a book about Isabel's life and artworks following this same date, and they would not be interested in seeing any of the very extensive biographical materials and correspondence with Isabel that I had in my possession.

Now in other circumstances the possibility of Isabel having provided false information for her date of birth might be readily understandable and excusable as merely a proud Hungarian lady's vanity. In Isabel's case, however, the issues were considerably more serious. If 1927 was her true birthdate this meant that her arrival in Rome as a thirteen-year-old would have coincided with the very height of World War II in Italy – not at all consistent with everything else that she had told us of this phase of her life. So, was she not thirteen when she had painted that fresco? If it was painted in 1955, and her true birth year was 1927, she would have been 28 at the time – nowhere near as remarkable as the story that she had been telling everyone for decades. The one undeniable truth was that the Pontifical Biblical Institute fresco existed, because Judith and I had directly viewed it admiringly during a trip to Rome. So, something, somewhere, had to be seriously in error. Surely the ultra-devout Roman Catholic Isabel whom I thought I knew – nothing less than a Dame of the Order of St. Gregory - could never have calculatedly concocted the 'thirteen-year-old' story as a massive lie?

At that time I happened to have acquired a very temporary 'trial' membership of Ancestry.com, and decided to try looking up any entry for Isabel, in the hope that this might lead me to a Hungarian birth certificate either for 1927 or 1941. Although I could find nothing of this kind,⁴ what I did come across, in U.S. records, was a very tell-tale marriage certificate. In contradiction of everything that Isabel had told us (and many, many others), that she had never married, right there on my computer screen I found myself reading the formal notice that she

⁴ A helpful neighbour who has Hungarian ancestry and a working knowledge of Hungarian drew a similar blank

had married Balwant S. Thind at Kern County marriage registry, Los Angeles on 13 February 1960. On this same marriage entry her year of birth was given as 1931, her age as ‘abt. 29’. Although this new information only added a fresh birthdate discrepancy, it also provided the first unequivocal signal that the inviolability of Isabel’s honesty could no longer be assumed.

Then, looking up the projects that Isabel had worked on around 1960 (she had provided me with labelled photographs of a high proportion of all her life’s artworks), I came across online a newspaper article in *the Independent-Star News*, Pasadena, California for July 3, 1960, relating to her and sister Edith’s recent completion of two 27 foot high lime secco murals for St Anthony’s Church, San Gabriel, California. The article’s author was Connie Staes, and back at that time Edith and Isabel had evidently told Connie that they had painted the Pontifical Biblical Institute mural in 1949 and had left Rome in 1951, a chronology clearly totally at variance with the 1954-5 dates that Isabel had told Judith and myself when we interviewed her in 1999. (This 1949 date would have meant Isabel having been eight on her arrival in Rome if her 1941 birth date had been genuine.) Connie Staes also reported that Isabel and Edith had worked on seven churches in Canada prior to their arrival in the States in 1955, which checked out with records from the California-based Order of the Sacred Heart that Isabel and Edith were working on frescos and murals at St. Ladislaus Hungarian Church in Courtland, Canada,⁵ as early as 1952.⁶ Isabel and Edith’s stay in Canada must therefore have been from 1951 to 55 – completely at variance with her having told us that they did not leave Hungary until 1954, also that, following their more prolonged stays in Austria and Rome, they had lingered only briefly in Canada because a potential art project there had not worked out. Step-by-step the conclusion became inescapable that the life story that Isabel had spun us in 1999, and which, albeit in much less detail, she had been disseminating since at least as early as the 1970s, was nothing better than a chronological fabrication – a mendaciously

⁵ About 100 miles southwest of Toronto

⁶ Online biographical information concerning the Sisters of the Sacred Heart’s founder, Hungarian-born Sister Ida Peterfy.

fake biography made worse by the fact that she had sought my unwitting authorial services to help her validate it and cement it as authoritatively presented ‘fact’.

Now why on earth someone as immensely talented as Isabel should have wanted to concoct such an elaborate fiction is baffling in the extreme. After all, her *true* life as an artist, one who worked herculeanly on hundreds of large-scale, high profile art projects, who met some similarly high profile churchmen, and who had conducted ground-breaking Shroud research, would still have made for an interesting-enough biography in its own right that I would have been delighted to work on. There should have been absolutely no need for her to spice this up with utterly bogus stories of having worked within the portals of the Vatican as a thirteen-year-old, not to mention muddling up the entire chronology of her early life in the process. So, did something happen to her sometime around 1960 that emotionally jarred her so much that she felt impelled to reinvent her life-story in a way that all subsequent record of that unhappy episode might be forever expunged? Judith and I had noticed during our dealings with her that she had a very marked abhorrence of children, over-reacting to any that might in the slightest disturb her. So, might there have been an unwanted child by Balwant whom, wracked by guilt, she quickly sent off for adoption? Did she want to rewrite herself for posterity as a spotless celibate, ever wedded to her vocation for sacred art. Was this why she was so tetchily insistent that any mention of Balwant should be removed from the biography? Was the reason that she so diligently kept Edith at a distance from us because she was paranoid that her sister might let slip some awkward truth?

The only certainty is that even today, three years after Isabel’s death, an extraordinary pall of mystery surrounds the subsequent fate of her spacious Los Angeles studio with its modest adjoining living quarters (2228 Echo Park Avenue, also the huge collection of artworks, many of these Shroud-related, that festooned the premises. Isabel’s funeral Mass was held on October 13, 2016, at Mission San Fernando Rey de España 15151 Mission Hills, California, with Mgr. Francis Weber as the official celebrant. Property records show that only a month later (November 11), 2228 Echo Park Avenue was listed for sale at \$715,000, then four days

later delisted ('Hold do not Show'), with its sale described as 'Pending' on the 17th. Two months later (January 25) the sale was completed, the mysteriously unidentified vendor gaining \$1,050,000 from the similarly unidentified purchaser.⁷ Isabel's named executor was an otherwise unknown Gary Scott who seems to have been able to expedite everything with remarkable speed, given the normal legal sluggishness for gaining even a straightforward probate. The real estate agent for the sale transaction was (coincidentally?), a Mary Scott of Alhambra, California (Coldwell Banker George Realty), for whom the Piczek sisters' property appears to be the only real estate sale that she had ever handled, at least so far as could be determined. Most unusually for a real estate agent, Mary Scott proved to be extremely difficult to contact. When Shroud memorabilia collector Richard Orareo finally succeeded in tracking her down on 21 October 2017, explaining to her that he was enquiring about the sale of 2228, she angrily told him 'You sound like a lawyer. I will not talk to you.' and immediately hung up.⁸

As for everything that remained in Isabel's studio, the owner of 'Blue Rooster', a Hollywood Boulevard art supplies shop, posted this reminiscence of a visit to 2228 Echo Park Avenue on 13 April 2017, just six months after her death, and with the property theoretically long sold:

Nothing could have quite prepared us for what we saw. When we got there a man with a clean pressed monogrammed button down greeted us, shook our hands and lead us up a dusty driveway where workers in grubby t-shirts and particle masks busied themselves around us....The 40 foot walls were draped in several of her vast charcoal renders. Preliminary drawings of what would later become mosaics for any of the 500 cathedrals she worked on in her lifetime. The illustrations were of saints, nudes, angels, demons, Christ, flames, clouds and stars. Figures with their eyes rolled toward the heavens, their hands folded in prayer. Suns and moons poured beams of light over her studies, drenching them in the celestial.... Our guide, the estate manager, informed us he had over 300 of these awe-inspiring 30-foot drawings, and no idea what to do with them. The rest of the studio, thick with the sound and dust of construction was piled high with a horizontal library of art books.⁹

⁷ Redfin property record

⁸ Email correspondence with Richard Orareo

⁹ A Facebook entry for Blue Rooster Art Supplies, 4661 Hollywood Blvd, Los Angeles, CA 90027, USA

Blue Rooster's owner left 2228 Echo Park Avenue merely with some brushes, paints and other art materials. Of Isabel's huge drawings and other artworks Shroud rumour has it that some of them - a significant number of these, to my certain knowledge, prepared in the course of her Shroud researches were acquired by Tom D'Muhala, the scientist who co-led the STURP American team who conducted the exhaustive scientific examination of the Shroud four decades ago, back in 1978. I believe Tom intends these artworks for a forthcoming Shroud Museum at Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina, where they are likely to be joined by Shroud-related materials from the collections of STURP photographer Vern Miller and psychiatry professor Dr. Alan Whanger, both deceased.

I have felt it important that there should be no further delay making public the revelations outlined here, before my own late septuagenarian memories of Isabel dim any further than they already have. Currently Isabel's 'teenage prodigy in Rome' story still features prominently on her Wikipedia entry along with the 'new' 1927 birthdate, even though any critical perusal of this entry should in itself make clear that there is a serious chronological non-sequitur.

For me this task of trying to set straight the biographical fabrications of a fellow Shroud researcher whom I held – and to a degree still do hold – in the very highest regard has inevitably been distasteful in the extreme. Judith and I both greatly liked the Isabel Piczek whom we thought we knew. Alongside her so ostensibly very genuine piety she was generous, sharp-witted and always good company. When she drove us around the environs of Los Angeles showing us the churches, cathedrals and mausoleums that she had decorated, we never ceased to be awed at her prodigious productivity. Nevertheless, the gnawing root problem about someone who has lied to you, particularly one who has lied to you as elaborately and prolongedly as Isabel did, is that you can no longer trust anything that they have told you to be the truth. And with any truth on the Shroud remaining on an ever-precarious knife-edge amongst the ever-sceptic public-at-large, that such a highly respected member of our own pro-authenticity circle should have systematically and prolongedly falsified the most basic facts of her professional career, whatever her motivations, will not have done our cause any favours.