

“This picture...has beauty. I’ll not deny it;
it must be that human life is beautiful.”
--John Sloan

As a child, Stanley Bard felt no love for the Hotel Chelsea. In fact, he was jealous of the looming edifice on West 23rd Street that kept his father away from their home in New Jersey for such long hours for so many years. Granted, there was some creepy pleasure to be had in exploring the Chelsea’s labyrinthian corridors, peering through half-open doorways at elderly gentlemen half-buried beneath towering stacks of newspapers, thoughtful young women noodling on a piano, or gaggles of adults hunched around a coffee table, arguing politics and smoking cigarettes. But it wasn’t until after he’d grown up, attended college, and earned his degree that Stanley took a look at the Chelsea not as a monumental rival for his father’s affection but as an entity in its own right--a strangely anthropomorphic being with its own personality and quintessentially New York past.

Stanley’s father, David Bard, had bought the hotel in partnership with a group of fellow Hungarian emigres in the wake of the Depression, in somewhat shabby condition but at an excellent price. The hotel’s greatest asset, in the purchasers’ eyes, was its central location; the preponderance of artists, actors, musicians, and other creative types among its population hardly drew their notice, at least not as first. David Bard’s correspondence, tucked within the archives of such famous residents as Virgil Thomson and John Sloan, reveals Bard as unfailingly polite, yet unfailingly professionally. A writer (Paul Bowles) is advanced cigarette money on credit “with our compliments.” A painter (John Sloan) is asked to vacate the top-floor studio he can no longer afford is offered a cheaper room because “you are one of the Chelsea’s favorite guests.”

Bard may not have known whom he was dealing with at first, but as the son of a schoolteacher, he knew how to listen and how to learn. Over time, the nineteenth-century putti ringing the ceiling of his ground-floor office darkened beneath layers of cigar smoke as Edgar Lee Masters, Thomas Wolfe, Dylan Thomas, Virgil Thomson, Arthur Miller and so many others dropped in to require about hot water or noise issues and remained to reflect long into the evening about life, love, literature, and art. Thomson could have told him that this hotel had been designed for artists, like no other in New York. Masters could have regaled him with stories of Isadora Duncan dancing in its apartments and Mark Twain entertaining in its dining room. Miller knew all about the playwrights and producers making arrangements in its lobby that would lead to the creation of a district called Broadway.

Little wonder that young Stanley was jealous. Little wonder that, as a 22-year-old college graduate with grand mid-century dreams of a grand midtown office career, he resented his father’s insistence that he come to work at the down-at-heel Chelsea and learn how his father financed his secure suburban youth.

But he was obedient, and so he went. Apprenticed to his father’s partner, a plumber named Julius Krauss, Stanley shimmied through vertical airshafts and horizontal crawlspaces, searching for elusive Edwardian-era piping while his college

friends lunched at the Plaza, all for a glorious paycheck of \$60 a week. Gradually, though, loping down halls he'd known nearly all his life, it dawned on him that some of the grizzled faces he encountered belonged to people whose work he'd studied in college. Wasn't that Edmund Wilson? Mary McCarthy? Brendan Behan? Paul Bowles?

Whereas the writers had most successfully caught his father's interest and imagination, Stanley soon found himself drawn most strongly to the visual artists among its residents. John Sloan, New York City's ultimate humanist and a Hotel Chelsea resident since 1935, had died in 1951, but he had predicted what was coming in New York's prosperous postwar creative culture: a "new era of artistic creative impulse," when "we see clear skies ahead," when the modern movement brings "artist and public together...painting things as they appear within us and not the way they look to the naked eye."

As luck would have it, in 1964--just as David Bard died and Stanley, only 29, took his place at the helm—the Chelsea was exploding with an international onslaught of new young artists "rising up and staggering out of the muck" of '50s abstract expressionism and in love with any art that is "political-erotic-mystical, that does something other than sit on its ass in a museum." Claes and Patty Oldenburg moved in while working on his vinyl-and-formica "Bedroom Ensemble." for a show at the Janus Gallery. On Claes's recommendation, Larry Rivers took a third-floor suite with his wife Clarice and infant daughter Gwynne, and began painting the "Dutch Masters" in a room on the ninth floor. As exhibitions of *nouveau-réaliste* works began to take hold in New York, the Americans were joined by a phalanx of Europeans including Yves Klein, Martial Raysse, Arman, Niki de Saint Phalle, Jean Tinguely, Daniel Spoerri, and Christo and Jeanne-Claude.

Stanley Bard kept busy, in what reporters were now calling the "Ellis Island of the avant-garde," delivering drop cloths to artists, looking after their children, and mediating their disputes. But hard as he worked, he had never been so happy in his life. After all, these guests were his age. They invited him to their parties, he attended their exhibitions, and together they created the ultimate New-York-insiders' world. It was a perfect symbiotic relationship in which both host and parasite found absolute satisfaction. When Daniel Spoerri stayed up past two in the morning, drilling his breakfast dishes to a hotel tabletop in the name of art, Stanley merely commented supportively, "Good luck to him." When Christo and Jeanne-Claude arrived from Paris, to find an unmade bed in their rented room, they shrugged it off and called downstairs to request, in cheerfully broken English and without complaint, a fresh supply of "clean shits." [Or: When Christo created his first life-sized *Store Front* for the May 1964 Castelli show, he incorporating an ornate brass doorknob from his Chelsea Hotel bathroom door.] On the tenth floor, Nikki de Saint-Phalle filled the hall with giant papier-mache female figures she called "nanas." On the ninth, Arman staged a Happening with Allan Kaprow, Andy Warhol, Spoerri, Christo, and others called "The Artists' Key Club," in which signed works of art and valueless "gifts" were randomly distributed in various lockers in Penn Station, so that participants who paid \$10 for a locker key had "1 to 2" odds of retrieving a work by a name artist but "104 to 1" odds of having fun.

Stanley wasn't just having fun, though. He was learning about art--learning about artists and about how they see the world. One day out of the blue, Christo invited Stanley up to his room to show him a woman standing on a pedestal, wrapped in clear plastic. "You look at her, you see a beautiful woman," Christo tried to explain in his imperfect English. "But when I wrap something it becomes a work of art."

Art was being stripped to its essence, Stanley's new friends explained to him. If John Sloan had proved that art didn't have to be conventionally beautiful, and the Armory artists had shown it didn't have to be realistic, and Pollock had demonstrated that it needn't have a pictorial subject, Christo, Warhol, Oldenburg and Arman had reached the logical conclusion that art didn't have to be anything and, conversely, that anything could be art.

What better preparation for the world of New York in the latter half of the 1960s, as William Burroughs and Brion Gysin moved into the Chelsea to sell New York on their psychedelic Dream Machine, Allen Ginsberg shared a dinner of boiled peas with resident Communist Party leader Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, and Andy Warhol co-opted its hotel-noir mystery to complete "Chelsea Girls?" As new artists including Bernard Childs, Sidney Nolan, Carl-Henning Pedersen joined the never-ending party, Stanley struck a deal with his old friend and Fillmore East owner Bill Graham to house his rock bands at a discount, adding a new type of creative energy to the Chelsea Hotel atmosphere. Viva was there. Janis Joplin. Jane Fonda. Jim Morrison. Patti Smith. The faster the spin, the deeper the vortex, and the more transcendent the shared creative state that William Burroughs had dubbed the Third Mind.

Then came the crash. The drugs. Stagflation. Smog. Crime. The Fillmore East shut down. Poets died, actors retreated to rehab. Still, one could find inspiration inside the Chelsea's walls. If anything, the artists grew even fonder of Stanley, who saw only good in the hotel. You saw him in the evenings—still in the office with the dancing putti, while his family waited at home, just as he had for his own father—his desk piled high with file folders, bills, books signed by grateful authors, a box of love letters he had long been safeguarding for the ex-wife of Eugene O'Neill. The Chelsea was "unique in providing all the conditions artists need to do their work," he told curious reporters on the telephone. Creative people have to feel comfortable, he explained, so as manager he sometimes had to "allow things to go on that you couldn't do in the Hilton Hotel." We create "a different kind of atmosphere, one of comfort and serenity. One feels good as he walks in...the nouveau riche, they would not be happy here."

The nouveau riche, maybe not. But the artists remained happy. Not only happy but grateful for the presence this sympathetic spirit, as evidenced by the inscriptions on the backs of so many of the works here: "For my dear friend Stanley Bard who made my stay at the Chelsea so wonderful," from Don Olsen. "Avec le meilleurs vœux pour une très heureuse année" from Théo Tobiasse. "Dedicated to

Hotel Chelsea from Chieko Kawasaki.” “For Stanley, cordially, Corneille, NY, 8 Dec. '80.” “For Stanley with Affection – Tom Wesselmann.”

Is this not the definition of a life well-lived? To have done good in the world, to have made a better life for those one encounters, to have added to the quality of the cultural air we inhale together every day? Bad times would come. Sid would kill Nancy, or not kill Nancy, but the fact would remain that both Sid and Nancy would die. The syndicate would fracture, and Stanley would be unseated, then ousted. The hotel would be sold. And, finally, Stanley Bard would die.

What remains of this dream? The Hotel Chelsea, and these works of art by those lucky enough to have experienced that anomaly in New York life, a welcoming home for artists and the opportunity to live a free creative life. “What luck for us, and is it not lovely, that we have such friends as artists,” wrote John Sloan’s good friend, the critic Van Wyck Brooks. “The mere thought of it warms all the way through.”

Here’s to Stanley Bard and the artists he loved. A better life was never lived.