

Pamela Matosian An Art Full Life

By David Rutter



INSPIRATIONAL
EXCEPTIONAL
VISIONARY
LOVING
SUPPORTIVE
SENSITIVE
ENTHUSIASTIC
PASSIONATE
CHERISHED



Pamela Matosian's eclectic collection of art — on display in her Evanston store, her farmhouse in Wilmette and in a new space in Chicago — reflects more than an eye for aesthetic beauty; over the years, Matosian has used art as a vehicle for treating sexually abused teens through her work as a clinical art therapist.

Art is her life; and life is her art. It is a gentle but insistent way to live. She has mastered it, by most accounts. That's because art is not something she does. It is who she is.

But who is she? That's a more complicated a question than it seems because she has lived a half-dozen or so lives, all intertwined like ivy scaling a wall. Her life does not reduce well to a linear chronology. She had many careers, some simultaneous — teacher, artist in multiple mediums, collector, entrepreneur, mom to an adult son, art therapist.

But start here:

She is 3. "Who ARE you?" her dad asks plaintively.

"Where did you COME from?"

The family is living a comfortable middle class life in Chicago. But at 3, Pamela is already a style maven. It's a fully developed sense of colors, shapes, objects, patterns and fabrics. Her wardrobe choices accept no consultation. At 3, she wants to own an Austin Healey sports car. She is a totally tasteful 3-year-old. She has a mastery of how the external world interacts with the senses.

"Dad didn't get me then," she says with a rueful smile. "Or now. Mom didn't either."

She is 8. It is Halloween, and she is trick or treating. She's hit the same house six times. It's the house that captivates her; not the candy. "The house mesmerized me," she remembers.

"You've been here before. There are other places with candy," the exasperated homeowner says. Pamela's eyes grow wide as she peers inside. "Do you want to come inside?" the woman at the door says more softly. The house, says Pamela, is so perfect that it soothes her soul. Every angle and nook is perfect. The house sings to her. She marvels at it. How does such

THERE IS A DISTURBANCE IN THE FORCE.

Someone — someone without a soul, maybe someone from the Empire — has stolen the totem pole. You can't mistake the thing. It's a 12-foot-tall ghostly New Guinea artifact known by all who pass Pamela Matosian's store at 1937 Central St. in Evanston. It was secured by chains near the front door. There is only one in the entire world. Now it's gone.

The miscreants can save themselves from the curse attached to such a crime. The penalty involves warts, unexplained bank overdraft fees and the sudden loss of several external body parts. Plus, New Guineans are known as head hunters. The thieves are messing with mojo fundamentals.

And if there is anyone tuned to these hidden eddies of life and the wider universe, it is assuredly Matosian.

She is a big deal.

She would laugh at that because that's not how she sees the world or herself. She's not politically powerful, or rich. She's not a celebrity in the mundane sense of the word. To know her, you'd actually have to know her.

But her taste — how she intuitively shapes the verisimilitudes of human aesthetics — is influential and complex. It defines her. Her artistic spirituality has affected homes, businesses and lives far from the prim little 130-year-old farmhouse where she lives in Wilmette. She is a mistress of art treasures, many of which she created as a world-class sculptor, painter and glass designer. Others she collected, and almost begrudgingly, sells in her Urban Totem store.



a house come to be? And how does an 8-year-old know to ask that question? She will know this house's soul better than her father's house.

"Fast forward 30 years," Pamela says. "I'm invited to a party at a friend's house. They have just bought a house that was designed by (Frank Lloyd Wright's sorcerer apprentice) Walter Burley Griffin. I get to the house and walk inside. It's the house. THE HOUSE from when I was 8. I remembered everything about it, exactly. Every room."

Artists with a breath of serendipitous taste normally aim to become the next Coco Chanel or Edith Head. Pam Matiosian might have headed for that Everest, too, but she chose to travel a different road. Her art education at New York University, Murano in Venice (glass blowing) and Japan (fabrics) eventually honed a natural gift that made her the first to stage a one-woman show at SOFA, the Navy Pier art gala that draws the world to Chicago each year.

In the art world, she has street cred.

In fact, she's worked nearly as hard at not becoming a world trademark as she has at refining her art. Mostly, she has evolved into a collector whose work is everywhere you'd expect to find refined artifacts. She'll expand that realm soon with a new store in Chicago to match her 5,000-square-foot emporium of earthly delights on Central Street.

The current store has been her passion for a decade. How to explain it? It's jammed from ceiling to floor with magnificent chandeliers, artwork linking

centuries and furniture you're sure you saw in a Bette Davis film. Then there are the random acts of *art d'Pamela*. The 1955 blue dial telephone that still works just fine. Downstairs are a half dozen linked rooms filled with amazing human creations, all unique. A grand piano there. Over here a small settee that soon will be some home's most prized possession. And around the corner, seven antique typewriters she bought just because they were beautiful.

It is a museum devoted to personal taste. Hers.

She has declined to sell items to collectors whose intent to warehouse them away from public view offends her moral balance as an artist.

The upstairs gallery is so richly upholstered with history that families seek her out to host significant family gatherings. It's a deceptively expansive space where children frolic regularly and come to cuddle Loomis, Pamela's gentle Bernese Mountain Dog. At 135 pounds, he is either a very big dog or a small truck.

As much as an artist, Matiosian was trained as a clinical art therapist, a calling that has given her deep satisfaction and nearly as deep grief. For years, she specialized in treating children who were sexually abused.

She has mended little souls with that combination of art and science. It's a craft that takes decades to master. No amateurs need apply. "Art therapy is not a diagnostic tool," she says. "But people just don't understand it. If you're not an artist first, you don't truly know how it works. People learn to treat

themselves by exposing their hearts. You don't fix them. But it takes so much out of you as a therapist. I dealt with so many children who suffered post traumatic shock so deeply."

She soothed one little girl who had seen her mother murdered. And seen her brother slain, too, after the children were sent to a foster home. The little girl's self expressive art project began as a child's impression of what the electric chair might resemble, "because she said that's what should happen to the people who killed her mother and brother," Pamela said. But the little electric chair eventually was transformed over the weeks into a little girl's chair with soft colored fabric and gentle beauty. Against Matiosian's advice, the state ordered the little girl back to foster case too quickly. She shattered emotionally within three days.

Matiosian has mostly given up clinical art therapy these days. The defeats can be too painful for the healer. But this summer, she'll try again, renting a house in Ojai, Calif., up the road from Santa Barbara and hosting therapy seminars for women. Time to reach out again. Time to restate what her soul stands for.

Thus it is not merely casual wordplay that Matiosian employs with the name of her store. She is never casual about spirituality and symbolism.

The entire store is a totem, a magical refuge and symbol. It protects all the spirits who enter. It has power.

The thieves who took Pam Matiosian's totem probably don't know all that. But they have been warned.

Here are some words shared about Pamela Matiosian:

I have known Pam for 16 years and am familiar with her work as a gifted artist, an exceptional art therapist and an inspiring teacher. As her colleague at the Rice Child and Family Center, I had opportunities to observe her work with both residents and staff. When I left there to become the Director of Social Work at Christopher House, I asked Pam to provide workshops and individualized training for my entire social work staff on the process of creating art as well as the usefulness of art for expressing and enhancing our understanding of the human condition. She brought intense energy and enthusiasm to her work, which is both exciting and inspiring. She participates in the process of making art while teaching, which serves as a model and motivator for her students. Pam creates an encouraging and supportive tone and is able to speak articulately and sensitively about art, which results in people feeling safe to create and talk openly about their own work. Students learn from the observation of her work style yet are encouraged to develop their own means of expression. Her store expresses all her talents and is a lively and exciting place to visit as well as to be inspired to bring art into all our lives.

Donald Halperin LCSW
Director of Social Work at Christopher House



My mother, Pamela, has always been a great inspiration for me. She has been the most loving and supportive mother anyone could ever ask for. In addition to being a great mother, she is a super cool lady. This is something I have always known but have come to realize more and more as I get older. I will always feel blessed to have her as my mom and friend.

Jarrett Knize

It's difficult to know where to begin when you have 30 years of memories to reflect upon. I first met Pam at a Gold Coast art gallery featuring her work. It was clear that we shared a passion for art, design and education. Her credentials, vision, creativity and ability to inspire truly define her as a Renaissance woman. Most of all, she is a cherished friend. Marlene Dietrich believed the friends that matter are the ones you can call at 4 a.m. — Pam is my 4 a.m. call.

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