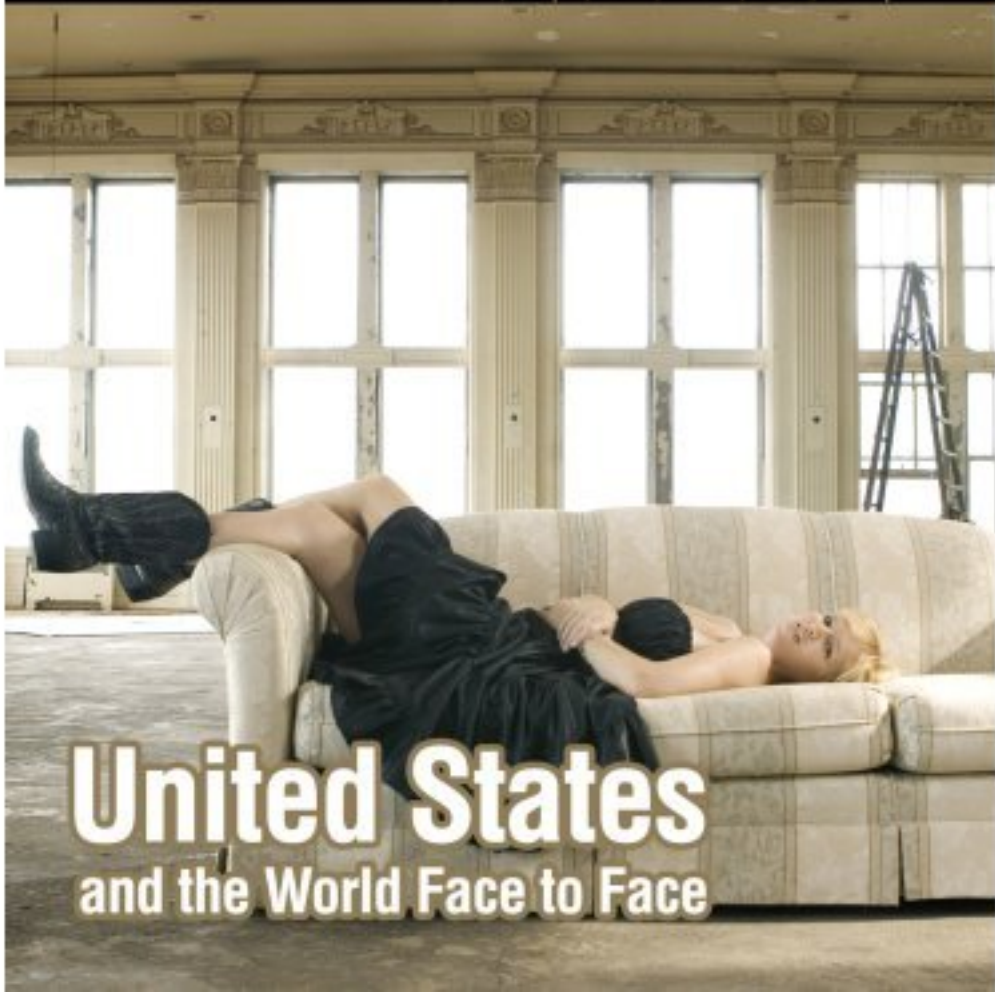


# MAXIMILLIEN DE LAFAYETTE

America's Best and Worst: Women, Men, People, Ideas, Events, News, Gossip



**United States**  
and the World Face to Face

## Chapter 6 ▶▶

# Maestro Vincenzo Balsamo, Italy's Living Legend

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How sweet success is. But, it comes with a heavy price; doubt, fear, perseverance, rejection, incertitude, years of hard work, desperation, immense talent, innovative creativity, competition, persistence, stubborn determination and self-confidence. Maestro Vincenzo Balsamo is a living example of the difficult and sweet moments in the life of a great artist. Balsamo Vincenzo was born in Brindisi, Italy, in 1935. Today, he lives in Verona. He toured the globe and was received as a living legend. He had his ups and downs, highs and lows, but never gave up. He left his hometown on a train heading toward Rome, the capital of the art world. He went alone, unknown with a few Liras in his pocket. In a sense, his trip to Rome is not quite different from the conquest of Ulysses. He had to prove himself to the toughest critics and most demanding high society of the Immortal City. The competition was unmerciful. Rome was saturated with world-class artists and the most famous painters of the era. The young Balsamo had to fight all odds. Alone, without a "letter of recommendation" or "introduction from a powerful insider" of the challenging, shrewd, delightful and canning world of art and all its glitzy, vain and arrogant galleries. He had to make it in one way or another. Many times, the young and talented Balsamo, the perfect stranger in Rome had his doubts and fears, for an uncertain future laid ahead. But, he knew deep in his heart, the Brindisi kid had all the ingredients of a future "grand" artist. My visit with Balsamo will take us back in time to the early days of the "genius of Brindisi". Balsamo talked to us with warmth, candor and friendly wisdom. He shed lights on the difficult moments in the life of an aspiring talented artist. Lessons, we learned from his past experiences. Rays of hope shined through his smile, deep thinking and honest answers. I would be delighted to share with you, my brief visit to the magical but truthful lands of Balsamo, his reflections on life and the art business... Today, Vincenzo Balsamo is a living legend; one of the few and last remaining great artists of the divine and sublime dawn of abstract and cubism cosmos.

### Chat with Maestro Balsamo

Reproduced from World Art Celebrity Journal. Jayson Meynard contributed to this article.

**Balsamo:** "The first client who bought one of my paintings was my own teacher."

**WACM:** Some forty years ago, you left your town and you went to Roma to explore the possibility of exhibiting your paintings. You were not known yet. It was tough to succeed right away and to become famous. One Italian art critic and historian wrote about your first visit to Roma and about the young Vincenzo. "I am imagining him getting sad and crazy and taking the first train back to his village." Do you remember this? How difficult it was for you to become accepted by the high society and critics circle in Roma? How many times, did you decide to go back home and forget all about it?

**Balsamo:** I was 14 years old when I "moved myself" to Rome. I was living with an aunt in my town. I had made that choice because I was trying of creating a stable job that would allow me to live and take care of my family. I have already lost my father when I was 11 years old. I had to abandon my studies and look for work. I found one at the studio of the painter Acquaviva, my first true master. And I did not know, back then, that painting would have become my true occupation. Sure I began and continued to paint and to learn the art of painting by copying landscapes, still lives, "nature mortes", postcards etc. This is how I started...very modest beginning.

• Sure, I remember what that critic wrote about me when I moved to Rome. It is perhaps true what Ugo Mannoni wrote about my first days in Rome. For a young person like me, it was not easy to break through and enter the world of art from the grand front door. Thanks to some friends and with the help of Calabrian Michele, the founder of one of the first art establishments in Rome and magazine Il Poliedro, I was introduced to remarkable Italian schools, artists and

masters like Scuola: Mafai, Scipione, Pirandello, Omiccioli, Monachesi Saints, Vangelli, Afro, Fantuzzi, Guttuso, as well as poets and writers I often love to remember: Sandro Pen, Alfonso Cat, Renato Cakes, Pier Paul Pasolini etc. All these acquaintances allowed me to persevere in my career as a painter and exhibit my work in Italy and in many museums in Europe. You can say, friends and contacts helped me take off.

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**"I have never paid attention to critics, to the "high society" and rich people. I was never part of a vain, rich and superficial society..."** said Balsamo.

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**WACM:** What happened next?

**Balsamo:** Rome had become my own city. I did not want to return to my hometown. I loved the lights, the life, the colors and the ambiance of Rome. I think my paintings reveal all these beauties and feeling toward Rome. So, in 1959 I opened my first studio on Via Margutta. One year later, I met my future wife. I settled for a while and short after, I began to contact the most famous artists of the era. Artists like Cesar, Arman, Kokoscka, Hartung, Leger and Picasso. I did it on my own. Also, I began to visit famous galleries and chat with curators, just to acquaint myself with what is going on in arts and art business. You asked me if there were someone from the "high society" who helped me emerge, my answer is: "I did not want to be the product of the "high society". However, Calabrese Michele was part of the privileged and high society. Being my friend, her social and artistic status did launch my career, I have to admit it. Basically, through Michele, I gained the opportunities to know many influential painters who lived in Rome and therefore, I was on my way to enter the rich cultural milieu of Italy and mingle with celebrities of the day. Yes, it was Michele who helped me...I did not want to copy anybody as I did before, back in my hometown. I had to create my own style. I wanted to find my own artistic identity. The poet Alfonso Gatto, an incredible human-being helped me in my quest and creation for Balsamo Style. Cat and other illustrious painters of the era such as Pieces and Hartung explained to me that finding "what direction I should take in life" is extremely important if I want to succeed as a painter. They told me that I should never copy other artists...Yes, of course, I should always watch what they are doing, assimilate their fundamental concepts. However, learning from them and search for my own identity will ultimately open my mind on new ideas, concepts and techniques. One of their most important advices was this...I still remember it: "Balsamo, Balsamo, you got to experiment, never look behind you, always look ahead, in front of you...And you will see clearer and you will create...". So, as you see, discoveries and experimentation in art are extremely important and necessary to create your own "persona" and artistic identity.

**WACM:** Who did help you to become known, the rich and high society? Friends? Or important art critics?

**Balsamo:** As I have already answered you previously, I have never paid attention to the "high society" and rich people. I was never part of a vain and powerful high status social circle. Vain society is like dead leaves. I was preoccupied with one thought and one single activity: TO PAINT; to experience and replace arguments with artistic continuation, to find my own world. A world that belongs to me, to my feelings and my visions. After 35 years of hard work and so many sacrifices, starting in 1987 with Lyrical Conception to Abstract Art, I have finally found my dimension. I have not really liked critics. I never asked favors from critics. I was not concerned at all. Luckily, some influential critics liked and understood my art. Of course, their art reviews helped my business. But, unfortunately, success and critics' recognition came many years later. Now, for almost 10 years (finally), I began to collect important articles and art reviews of my work worldwide. And I am happy, you are one of those "favorable and positive" art critics and writers...

**WACM:** Who bought your first painting? Who was the first person who ever bought one of your paintings? Do you remember?

**Balsamo:** The first client? The first person who bought one of my paintings was Master Acquaviva, and this happened when I held my first public exhibition in 1957. Master Acquaviva was affected, touched and pleased to see his student

(meaning me!) exhibiting his work. To me, it was an immense joy and a great honor. I was delighted to see my teacher buying my painting and showing me respect. It meant a lot to me. After all, he was my first teacher. No, it was not the "high society" nor the rich people. Simply, a Master Artist who knew and appreciated real art! Of course, later on, many important clients began to purchase my paintings, some of the work I exhibited at Zizzari and well-known galleries in Rome.

**WACM:** What was the first thing you did or think about after you have sold a painting for the first time? Did you spend the money in celebrating or did you send the money home?

**Balsamo:** I used the money to buy my very first true set of colors. This made me feel a "true painter". Oh, your questions bring to me, so much memories, beautiful memories...

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**Balsamo:** "A true artist will always keep some of his artwork for himself."

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**WACM:** How many paintings did you paint in your life? Did you keep any of your early work?

**Balsamo:** I don't know the exact number. Maybe, something like 2,500 paintings of various periods. Did I keep any of my early work? Sure, I did. And I must also tell you, I kept a good number of paintings from each period. They are my life and my history. They are like my children. A true artist will always keep some of his artwork for himself. Money is not everything in life. Art is more noble, more human and more meaningful for all those who love art and beauty in the world. Selling all your paintings and not keeping some for yourself is like selling yourself along with your paintings. you will find a lot of my early work in my studio, study and at home.

**WACM:** Now, since you have become an international celebrity, do you go back in time and look at your early years of your career and re-examine what went wrong, what you should have not done or should have done to make success easier? Any lesson you have learned from past experiences?

**Balsamo:** Thank you for the compliment. I do not consider myself as an international celebrity. Absolutely, I re-evaluate my previous work. I mean the painting techniques and compositions of various periods of my art such as *Decomposizioni*, *Nebulose*, *Evocazioni*, etc., I think, that in those years I had perhaps not given sufficient importance to my work. Today, I realize how little I produced in those early stages of my life. Also, I realized and learned that I was marginal. Instead, I should have been more extensional.

**WACM:** Any regrets in life?

**Balsamo:** I have a very large family; 7 between sisters and siblings and sure the greatest displeasures that I have had up to now have been the loss of 2 siblings and a sister. Later in 1980, I lost my brother. I became so sad and melancholic. I almost decided to quit painting. The pain killed me. I did not want to exhibit my paintings anymore, for many years... But, those very paintings re-energized me and forced me to go back to my studio and paint again. Pain should not invade us as a game. We learn a lot from pain. It is a learning experience. Sometimes, pain is a source of energy and productivity. It forces you to produce and create. In that sense, pain is productive and noble. But, still, I miss the beloved ones I lost...it is tough, you know...That's life, my friend...

**WACM:** What was the question you have never asked yourself and you should have asked?

**Balsamo:** My answer to you will unfortunately take me to a world of controversy. It would be wise to bring this question to all those critics who for nearly 15 years did not even consider me as an artist. For years, they would not acknowledge

my "existence" and notice my work! Consequently, perhaps, logically, the "unasked question" becomes: "Why and how come, they have never recognized and understood my art?"

**WACM:** You are close to 68 now. When are you going to stop painting and begin to relax?

**Balsamo:** I am 69 now. I still feel that I can give a lot. You must understand, painting is my whole life. I live for my art and breath through it. I live my art 10 hours a day, along with my books, my music, my poetry, my fantasy, my thoughts... I had 8 art periods in my "colorful" life and today I am on the verge of creating another period. I will never retire. On the contrary, I keep on experimenting, digging, inventing, re-inventing, searching, exploring new ideas, new colors, new visions, new concepts, new techniques, new themes, new philosophies... I will always try something new, every day. I might stop, only, when and if I begin to feel that I cannot produce meaningful art anymore. However, I will not change my esthetical philosophy and artistic style to please the market... this is another story. I will never do that.

**WACM:** If you could stop time, and re-think about your whole life, how would you paint it in a painting?

**Balsamo:** Beautiful question. Creed that cannot be enclosed (all my life) in a single picture, but every period of my work could be reassumed as part of my existence step by step. My life is a sequence of feelings and visions. My life is there, all over my paintings. Let me guide you toward my life on my paintings. *Autoritratto* in 1961. *Fiori, fire, lights in a blue vase* in 1973. *Decomposizione* in 1976. *Trauma and "warp"* in 1977?. *An inquisitive painter* in 1978. *Letters of my life* in 1984. *Ultimate moments...opera...visions, not one single vision.* *Sognando* in 1987. *Romance* in 1993 well depicted in *Atmosfera romantiche*. *My free thoughts* in 2000. *Capriccio* in 2003. I cannot stop for one single moment and I will paint for the rest of my life. My life is all of the above... My life is "many things"... so is yours!

**WACM:** What advice you would give to new talented painters who are having hard time selling their paintings? What they should do to succeed? Tell me about the practical aspect of it?

**Balsamo:** Young painters of our times should accept sacrifices. They must spend enough time studying the great masters. Unfortunately, many of them are not patient enough. They want to succeed right away. This is impossible. Being an artist is not fun all the time. You got to be patient and willing to learn, to practice, to practice and practice again. You have to work out your art. Also illusion of grandeur is destructive. Some artists believe that they have made it already, because two galleries exhibited their work. They begin to tell themselves that they are on the top now. And when, they begin to feel that way, progress stops! If your art is stagnant pond, life dies in it and so you! Something else, young artists should be concerned about. A true artist should not follow "fashion" in art. There is no such thing as the "painting du jour" or the "special of the season", or "trendy art". Art is immortal. Art outlives all of us. It is not the trend, the fashion which makes you a great artist but, the true, humble and sensitive artist who lives inside you who will immortalize your name and struggling art. Art is not a very fine "boutique shopping", Art is not a product on "sale", the French and the Italians refer to it as "Occasion" and *Occasion!* Final advice: An artist becomes a true artist when he or she finds his or her "identity" that nobody can take away from the heart, soul, art and character of the artist. An artist should not paint to please the "shoppers" and the critics. Soon or later, shoppers and critics die and are forgotten. Only, truthful art with truthful identity will immortalize the name, the memory and the art of the artist.

**WACM:** What do you wish for your children to become one day in life: Rich lawyers? doctors? Successful businessmen? Or talented painters?

**Balsamo:** I have 4 sons, two boys and two girls from my first marriage. Roberto, lives in Australia. He is an artist, a sculptor. Francisco works with me, he takes care of my art and exhibitions business. My two daughters, Antonella and Daniela live in Rome. From my second marriage, I have a 9 year old son: Adam. I do not impose my will on them, nor decide what they should do and should not do in life. I do not think about it. Each person in life sees life differently.

WACM: What is a masterpiece, Maestro?

Balsamo: It is what endures in your mind and soul. From the classical art, don't go far, Michelangelo's work. Antonello of Messina or Piero of Francesca. From the modern art: The work of Segantini, some capolavori of Picasso, Braque, Gorky, or Kandinsky. But if I have to choose my favorites, I would select Mirò, Tobey and Twombly.

Final words of Maestro Balsamo: I want to thank you for visiting me. You have asked beautiful questions. They took me back in time...and brought to me memories, memories of my early days...the beginning of my career, dear moments in my life. Also, unfortunately, just to be frank with you, those beautiful questions brought to my heart and to my mind, sad memories, but that is life! Through your questions, I revisited passages and frames of the film of my life with all its intensity...thank you.

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Organic Elegance in Unorthodox Fashion

His work is an example of organized thought and artistic discipline. It has undetermined dimensions which are time and space. If you can define time, you will find it in his form. If you succeed in capturing your thoughts and feelings there like a memory in your hand, you will feel His's human emotional expansion. I was so curious to learn what the art came in his part of the world was about his art. Surprisingly one of them described his art as "a mixture of red, white and blue together to create a discipline of thought." Quite an accurate description. The choice of his artistic colors comes from emotional perception. I believe the conceptual discipline of his form reflects a deep understanding of what comes in his and a shape and what reaches a feeling to an illumination. His is an intelligent artist. His work is a shining light in the artistic Arab world. She is unique. Uncommonly different from any other work I met or have studied in the past. Upon looking at her work, the observer would—more certainly—express a



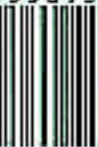
Maximilien de Lafayette visited 46 countries, worked and lived in 10. Lawyer by trade and fluent in 7 languages. He wrote numerous books on world culture, arts, entertainment, civilizations, democracy and 2 encyclopedias. He has to his credits 2 international bestsellers.

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