

# David Joel Pratt



## Selected Paintings



April 2019

Text by Joseph Pratt

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## Introduction and Acknowledgement



As far back as I can remember, David and I shared the common belief that art can change lives in positive ways that nothing else can. He proved that truth as he saw the impact that art made in the lives of the inner-city students that he taught. I once asked him, "What is art?" Without a moment's hesitation he answered, "Art is therapy." Art asks us to slow down and be healed from the sickness of haste which abounds in our world today. It asks us to see and not just look; and to open ourselves to the possibility of having our attention arrested by what we see (that is to truly "behold"). It would cure us of our blindness. It would heal our inability to sense more deeply the evanescent whispers of truth and would open our eyes to the gossamer filaments of beauty invisibly suspended all around us. It would heal us of many spiritual and mental maladies.

When David moved to Florida in his old age, he was unable to take his lifetime of art with him. So, he gave it to me, his brother. His natural question was "What will you do with it?" At that time, I did not fully realize what an honor and a responsibility had been placed on my shoulders. Nor did I realize that my responsibility extended well beyond my brother and myself. As I began to study these paintings that I had grown up with, they 'spoke' to me in profound ways as testaments of the human spirit! As they brought healing to my own soul; I realized how unique and powerful my brother's vision as an artist really was. I further realized that his art could potentially affect the lives of many others for good. The realization dawned that I was not a possessor but a steward of a body of art work that truly belongs to others whom, as yet, I have not met. My love for my brother as well as people whom I do not even know drives me

onward. I am inwardly driven to get David's work "out there." Now at last through the manifold kindness of Michael Johnston, Gallery Director for the Colorblends Gallery, I am able to take another step that long journey. I may safely say that it is both my own and my brother's desire that you who have come to this retrospective exhibition, be among the first (and hopefully not the last) of those who will realize that David's art really belongs to them. It is my sincere hope that the paintings presented here will bring such joy and peace to your life that you will truly find your stillness well repaid.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to Michael Johnston, Gallery Director for the Colorblends Gallery, Bridgeport for his kind encouragement in presenting these several posthumous works of an otherwise unknown American artist, David Joel Pratt.



David Joel Pratt  
(1926 – 2008)

Joe Pratt.





1. *New York City Piers* ~ c. 1956-57  
Oil on Canvas (22 x 28 in.) signed 'D. J. Pratt' lower right

At some point David transitioned from treating the New York Skyline as background for paintings of local scenes in New Jersey to using them as his primary subject matter. This early skyline painting reminds us that, although David was committed to painting recognizable objects (particularly buildings) he was not bound by the necessity to portray them exactly as they existed. For him, forms were subservient to color and

composition. In this unusual painting, the skyline is viewed with two vanishing points. On the viewer's right is a skyline that recognizable as the west side of Manhattan looking south, (including Riverside Church and Grant's Tomb). On the viewer's left, there is (what appears to be) a pastiche of various architectural elements some from lower Manhattan and some of which are fanciful. These two "skylines" meet at the middle of the

picture at a bifurcated set of docks whose principal axes follow the direction of each skyline. They almost appear to look out

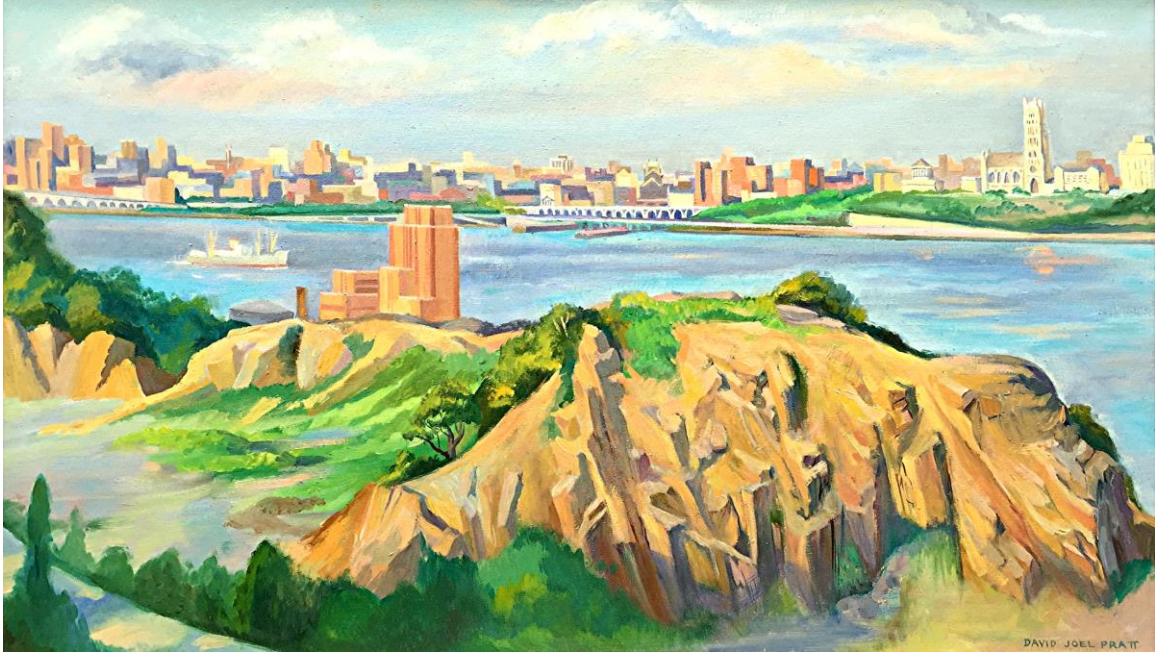


*Missing Sketch of New York City Piers (from a photo)*

on two different rivers that meet at mid-canvas. Wrapping around the two skylines to unite them is an elevated train that merges with the west-side highway. At about two-thirds up on the canvas, the line of the combined elevated train / highway forms a soft ellipse that separates the actual composite skyline from the docks below. It is these few docks that dominate the picture. One might ask why David would compose the picture from this point of view. The answer lies in David's childhood experience. Much of David's early life as a boy was lived on the New Jersey side of the Hudson River near an area below North Hudson where the railroad tracks bordered the edge of the Hudson River and where old barges were

abandoned in the mud flats. He grew up haunting such places for scrap iron from the burnt and rotting barges which he sold to earn a few pennies in order to go to the movies or to take the ferry to New York to visit the art galleries in lower Manhattan. It is no wonder that the sounds, smells, and the memories of such childhood adventures surfaced years later in paintings like this. Yet for all the nostalgia that may have influenced his selection of this subject matter and his treatment of this early skyline, David was still struggling with the problem of light, particularly at sunset. In this painting, the sky is aflame with sunset reds, oranges, and yellows. The western sides of buildings in both halves of the skyline are brightly lit in answering yellows and oranges while the northern sides are deep purple, blues, or even black. The area under the elevated railway, facing northwest, is a succession of rectangles and triangles that are each filled with deep blue, turquoise, or purple as a kind of mosaic. The entire turquoise surface of the river reflects the hot evening colors in a kind of impressionistic vision while the pilings reflect darkly in the rippling waters. On the one hand, David is clearly honing his mastery of the more intense palette that will characterize his later work. On the other hand he has still not found exactly what he is looking for in terms of a unique style that will allow him to use color and not specific detail to express the complexity of his vision.





## 2. "Second Mountain" View C. 1958

Oil on Canvas (26½ x 41½ in.) signed "David Joel Pratt" lower right

It was not unusual for David to return to a subject that he had undertaken years before. In the case of the "Second Mountain" he completed no fewer than five paintings from various angles. This is the last of that series and in many ways marks his final solution of the problem. By comparing this painting to the ones that he had done almost twelve years before, several things are apparent. As noted elsewhere, David's palette shifted away from dusty yellow, ochre, and brown to chromatically more intense green, blue, and purple. Not that yellows and ochre are not in this painting. They had to be included because that was the color of the rocks. But the shift makes this painting much more radiant and intense.

In this painting, David assumed a much higher vantage point which, in effect, lifts the New York Skyline up from behind the mountain. Also the location of the skyline as indicated by the tower of Riverside Church is much nearer its actual location when viewed from the end of Bender Place.



*The New York Skyline Anticipates later Paintings*

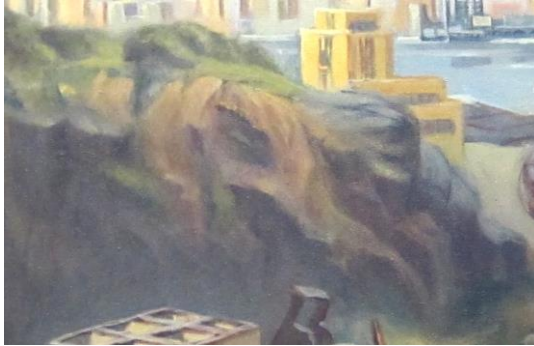
This shift also allowed David to elevate the Hills Brothers' Coffee Plant as a strong vertical uniting the middle ground of the mountain with the far ground of the New York Skyline.



*Detail: Second Mountain View*

The building also nicely frames the freighter traveling down river as a well balanced and completely self contained composition.

By now David had also mastered the naturally occurring abstraction of the blasted rock face of the mountain.

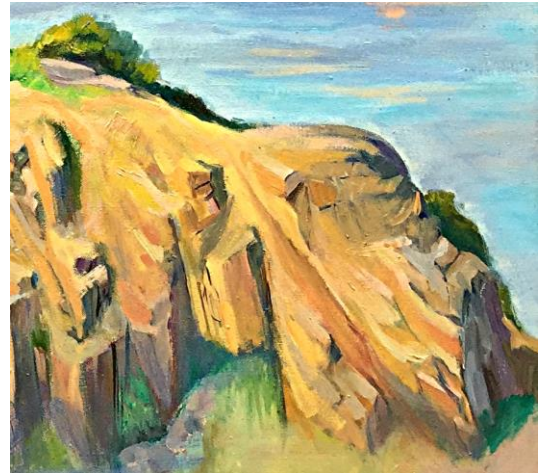


*Second Mountain Detail (c.1949)*

Rather than burying complex details of the rock in an amorphous brown mass he deliberately highlighted each facet by playing vibrant yellow ochre against blues and purples in a consistent pattern of light and dark that invites the viewer to consider the rugged nature of this once active quarry.

By choosing an oblong canvas, David was able to expand the view of the mountain to

include its total length and not just its southern half as he had in earlier paintings.



*Second Mountain Detail (c.1958)*

Finally David, by ending the view at the southern end of the mountain, omitted the details of the industrial complexes lying far below that he had included in all his earlier paintings of this scene. The resulting composition achieves a better balance between near and far scenes. After this painting David stopped painting the mountain and turned his attention southward to survey the unobstructed New York Skyline that he had increasingly come to appreciate.





### 3. *Parisian View* ~ 1966

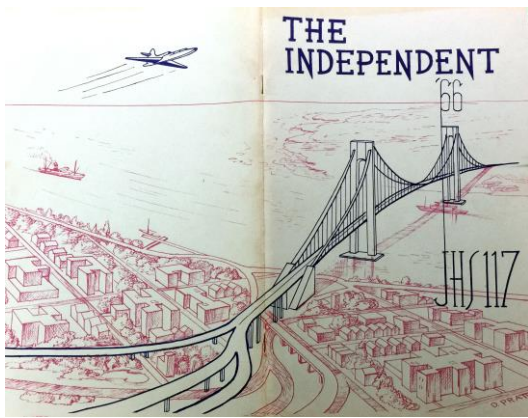
Oil on Canvas (20¾ x 26¼ in.) signed "D. Pratt" lower left

It was during the late 60's that David began to develop what would become his fantasy approach to portraying cities. The paintings in this mode would include Paris (shown here), Venice (6) , Bridgeport, Ct. and New York City (7). Although the paintings were completely different, the approach used was the same in each case. Significant, iconic, or just interesting architectural structures were selected and assembled together using extensions of the elements' horizontal, vertical, and curvilinear lines to form a complex and coherent geometry, amplified by patterns of light and dark as they are juxtaposed to one another. Finally the composition is further defined by fields of complementary colors. Although the architectural elements would be more or less recognizable, their orientation in the

composition and the associated colors would have little of no relation to their actual geography. It was the way in which recognizable shapes were assembled that was the fantasy. As such, the resulting painting was fundamentally an abstraction but with recognizable elements throughout that could appeal to a public more comfortable with representational art. Compositionally, David had been exploring this approach in his Christmas cards and yearbook work for several years before he used it in oil. The Parisian scene, shown above, marks the first transition to this new genre for David. It came about as follows.

One of David's responsibilities as the art teacher at JHS 117 was the production of the annual yearbook for the graduating class as a memento for the graduates, and to make

the school look good. David not only produced the master for the book, but did the cover and most of the artwork as well.



P.S. 117 Yearbook Cover - 1966 (Signed D. Pratt lower right)

On the staff page, David was listed as Art & Layout, Photography, and Advertising managers. (He also did all the write-ups as well.) On page 43, devoted to the foreign language department, there was an unusually small staff picture (only four teachers) and no student group. So David had a space to fill at the bottom of the page. Since his days in World War II, David had a fascination with Paris. He passed through the city on his way to the American University in Biarritz for a semester study after the war was over and before he was discharged. While there he obtained a series of reproduction watercolors of the iconic sights. He used those watercolors to prepare a small sketch that brought together arguably the five most recognizable sights of Paris. They are the very icons one sees on the average souvenir coin: the *Moulin Rouge*, the *Cathedrale de Notre Dame*, the *Basilica de Sacra Coeur*, the *Tour Eiffel*, and the *Arc de Triomphe*.



#### Familiar Sights of Paris

But David arranged those sights in a totally new way.



Sketch of the Sights of Paris for the 1966 Yearbook

David decided to use this charming little (4" by 6½") sketch as a basis for this painting. While it was not the first time he had used a piece of ephemera as the basis for a canvas, it was the first actual fantasy of any city. Unlike all of his other fantasies, however, the point of view is strictly at ground level or looking up at the *Basilica de Sacra Coeur*. David had to preserve the point of view of the watercolorist in favor of his own preferred point of view: above center and looking down.

In the sketch and the painting the *Tour Eiffel* dominates the composition as a strong vertical among several others, the next closest being the towers of *Sacra Coeur*. The Tower bisects the strong verticals of *Basilica's* domes which David shows somewhat distorted as seen from the *Place du Tertre* in the heart of *Montmartre*. The *Moulin Rouge* is shown from the median park near Metro Station *Blanche* looking back up the *Boulevard de Clichy*. *Notre Dame* is shown from a point near the *Hotel-Dieu* on the *Ile de la Cite*. Its juxtaposition to the *Moulin Rouge* would be scandalous for any other city than urbane Paris though (perhaps) David was unaware of the dichotomy. Lastly the *Arc de Triomphe* is viewed from somewhere around the great circular hub of Paris.





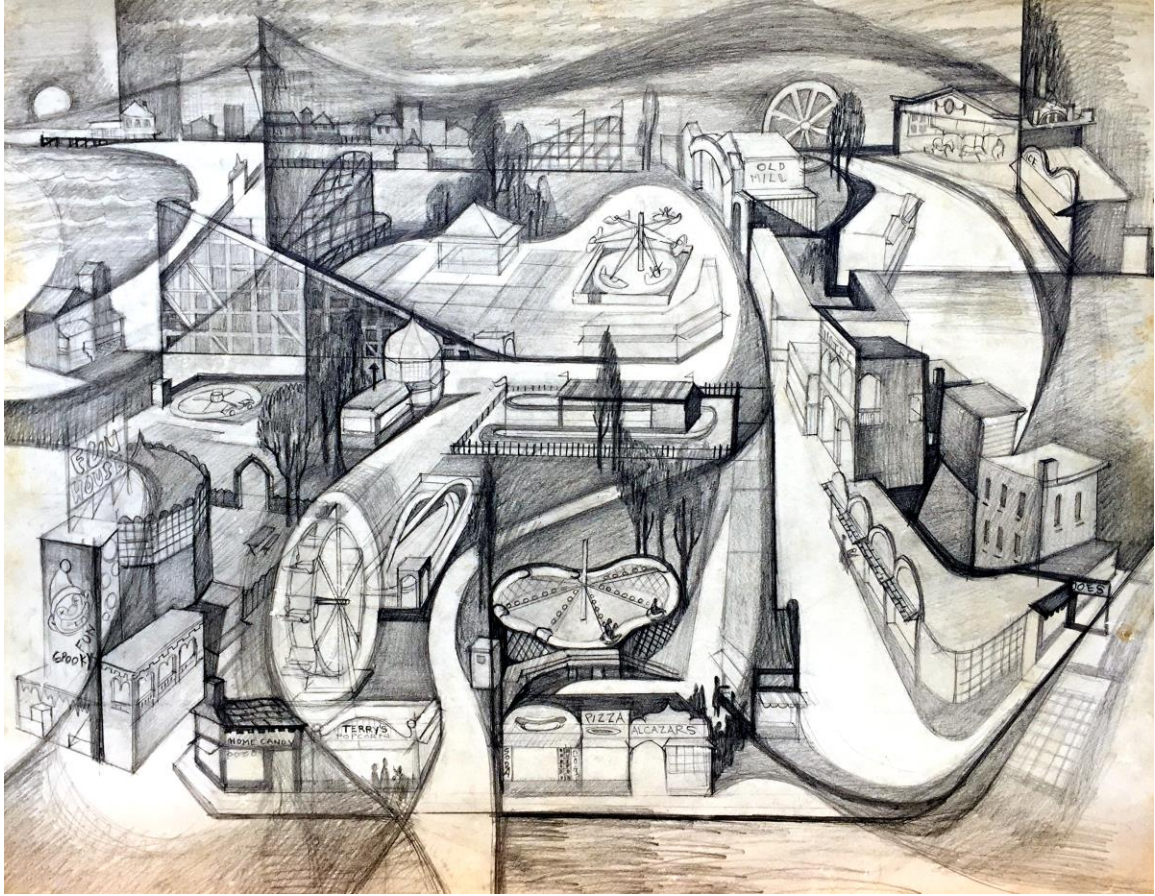
#### 4. *Old West Haven Park ~ 1966-67*

Oil on Canvas (26½ x 32½ in.) signed "D. J. Pratt" lower left

In 1962, David's youngest brother Joseph graduated from Stevens Institute with a degree in Engineering. Within a week, he started work at Sikorsky Aircraft, a helicopter manufacturing company in Stratford Connecticut. He moved into an apartment in Stamford but soon became unhappy away from his family, so he moved home. Thus began many years of a long commute between New Jersey and Connecticut. As Joseph became aware of the areas around Stratford, he discussed them with David. One site in particular attracted David's interest, West Haven Amusement Park. When Joseph discovered the park, it was totally defunct with only a few landmarks still standing. A closed and shuttered merry-go-round, a few old concession stands that had continued on as independent businesses and an abandoned

roller coaster were still enough to engage David's imagination of what the park might have looked like. This painting is the result of trips the brothers made to West Haven in the winter of 1962-63. In this painting, the individual rides are not specific to the park, though there were probably some like them. David's intent was to capture the ethos of such parks, rather than describe the one of which David had seen only the vestiges. The orientation of the rides has no relation to where they were actually situated. Many of the best rides were located along the beach front on Long Island Sound, unlike those shown clustered together here. Many rides in this painting lack definition. It is actually the flow of color and light that define the work. Unlike the linearity of "exurbia", the composition is dominated by strong sinuous





*Sketch "Old West Haven Park"*

lines derived from the roller coaster, the merry-go-round, the Ferris wheel, and various circular rides, shown throughout. The few strong verticals and horizontals are all partial. While the painting mirrors the sketch quite faithfully, the sketch includes far more detail than was necessary to support the painting. In separating the patterns of the composition, David seized the opportunity to invent an amusement park based on his experience of West Haven. But the sketch does not tell the whole story. David makes use of the early evening (note the moon rise in the upper left corner and the after glow of the sun set in the center top) to explore that wonderful hour when natural light has not completely subsided but artificial light has been turned on

to create an aura of light and shadow in the offset center of the park where anything is possible. Light and shadow (deep blue-purple and yellow-orange) seem to waltz through the canvas in a sinuous flow that is frozen at the moment of transition from day to night. It is this interplay of light and dark, not the details of the rides, that dominates the canvas, giving it a life that the sketch can only anticipate. In the sketch the rides play an important part, but in the painting, David suppressed many details to give color a far more important sweep. The lines of contrasting colors flow off the buildings and rides that anchor their presence and into the roads or the sky beyond. This is the joyous celebration of the effects of light and dark on the soul of the artist.





### 5. East River Drive ~ c. 1966 - 67

Oil on Canvas (18¾ x 25 in.) signed "D. Pratt" lower right

Many people see the artist is someone different, even strange. In high school, David used to call himself the "Old Master" as if to promulgate his ability or perhaps to build youthful self confidence. David and I used to laugh when I called him "the crazy artist"! But for all such hollow jests, David was profoundly human and, in his art, did what all of us try to do in our lives (even our dreams) – make sense of experience. For David, life was supremely a visual experience and making sense of life meant achieving compositional coherency even where no compositional pattern was manifest. Life for many has to have meaning. For David, this translated into a painting having to "work." As an art teacher in the inner city, David was exposed to New York in many ways, some of which were unpleasant, and some of which were everyday drudgery. The daily commute home from work or to Columbia at night after work was definitely of the latter. But for all the drudgery,

his commute from 109<sup>th</sup> street in Spanish Harlem up the FDR and Harlem River Drive exposed him to the skyline along the East River. Visually the skyline of New York is a jagged affair. The heights of the various 'skyscrapers'; driven by economic necessity as much as (in some cases) the wealth and vanity of the builders; are of all different heights. The buildings all along the East River Drive were similarly chaotic.



*A Later New York Skyline by David  
(The heights seem chaotic until one sees  
the "X-like" pattern in the center and many salients)*

What to most commuters went unnoticed was, for David, a challenge to make visual harmony out of architectural chaos. He did what many human beings do - look for a unifying principle that could help them understand what they are seeing. Basically he was challenged to see, not the imaginary but the ideal. And he found this in the bridge just to the right. It is not clear which of the several bridges David used. But it is clear is that he has integrated the curve of the roadway with the catenary of the bridge on the right to present a powerful thrust that carries the viewer's eye from the lower right foreground up into the canvas where it merges with the catenary of the bridge that carries the viewer's eye up into a series of five counterpoised catenaries that sweep the eye quickly up and down first to the left (or west) side of the painting and move the viewer to the east again. Looking back the viewer realizes that David has now adjusted the relative chaos of building height and replaced the jagged skyline with a series of buildings which, while they do not lose their individuality, all blend into a harmonious composition. Chaos has been replaced by harmony and order. Going back the viewer realizes that the curve of the roadway is given a kind of solidity (reality) by the inclusion of the other median (itself a rising catenary) in the middle of the two lanes and the light post in close association to the bridge abutment. The reality (or stability) of the bridge's catenary is attested to by the triangular support structure of the bridge. But the resulting intersection of the two lines points the eye to a slanting roof that is balanced by the bridge abutment which slants in the other direction. The resultant movement is not immediately apparent but it places the viewer's eye between two catenaries that are not at all "real" but are superimposed as an organizing shape for the otherwise jagged skyline. The eye finds it easier to move up the one third distance to the upper catenary that introduces it to a series of delightful curves

that rise and fall like waves or peaks across the top of the canvas.



Detail showing some of the Introductory Catenaries that lead the Viewer to the heights of the Canvas.

As the viewer's eye moves back and forth between the 'peaks' across the top of the painting, the painting glows with a pastel light seems to radiate upward bounded by well spaced verticals that originate in the buildings but propagate heavenward suffusing as they rise. The buildings are seen not as a chaotic assemblage of structures besetting the eye of the weary commuter on his way home but as anchors of an almost divine interplay of light and dark originating on earth but carrying the eye heavenward in sublime light. The organizing principle of a single geometric construct has been used to not only transform chaos to harmony but to open the viewer to seeing the mundane in a totally inspiring new way. One wonders what humanity might realize if, in their pursuit of meaning in their lives, they once laid hold of the principle that David employed here visually to such great effect.



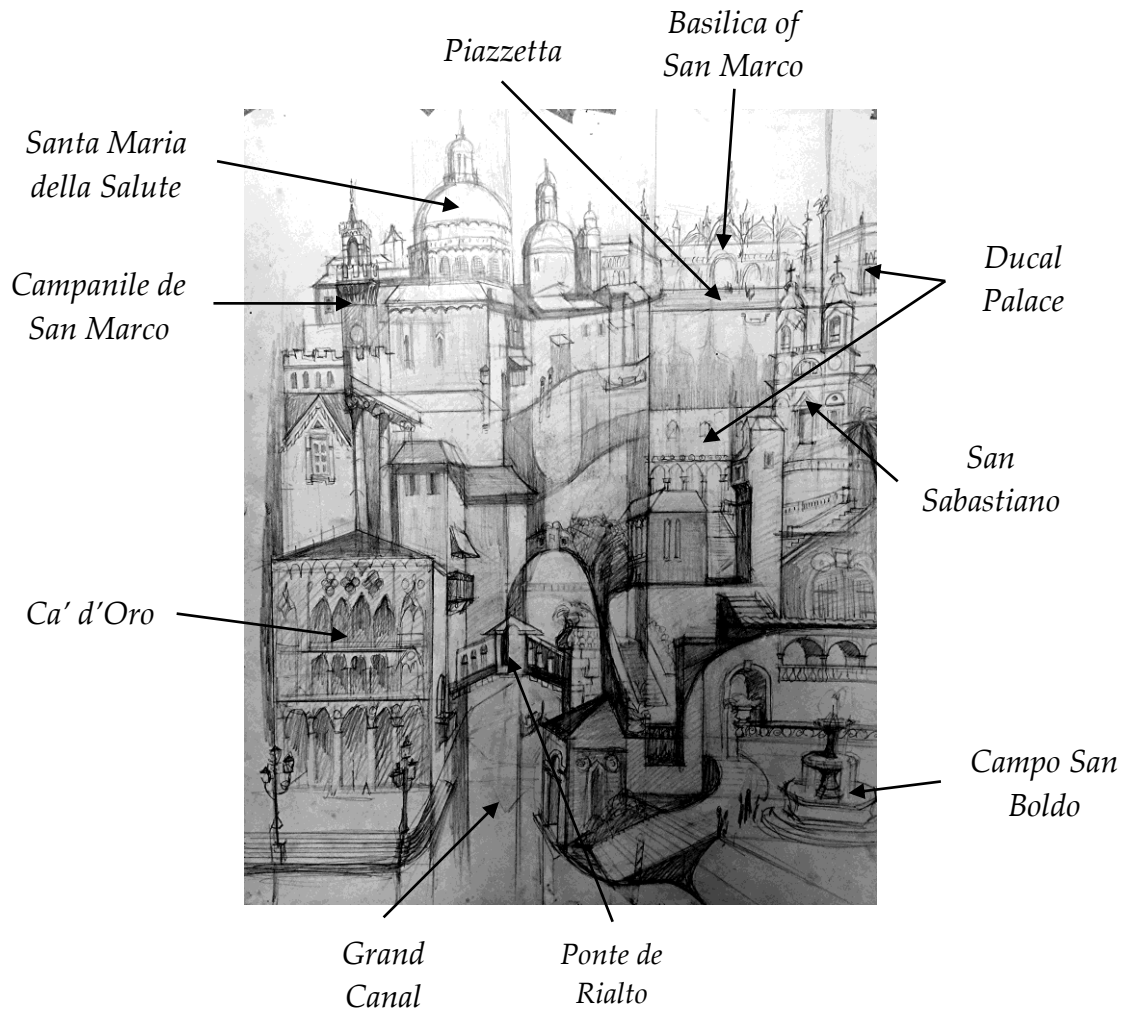


6. *Venetian Fantasy* ~ c. 1967-68

Oil on Canvas (25 x 20¼ in.) unsigned

David loved Venice, even though he was never able to visit it. But he never was happy with this lovely little painting of Venice. He never signed it, framed it, or displayed it with the other eight paintings that he exhibited at the 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue Armory Art and Antiques show in 1969, even though its style is not unlike the others that he did show. I

remember talking to David as he was working on the details of San Marco. I felt it was beautiful, almost like a medieval illumination in a book of hours. I marveled at the detail. But that was the problem. David wanted the architectural elements of his painting be recognizable but in a totally new way, juxtaposed in complex, abstract patterns.



With modern buildings like the Guggenheim, overall shapes are the icon. But with the architecture of Venice, recognition of each structure depended *in part* on the details of their ornamentation. The sketch integrated ten well known structures into a single composition, but, on the scale of this painting, even the most salient shapes were small. To execute the ornamentation David needed would have required great effort which, from an economic point of view, would be unrecoverable. As an unknown artist, the prices of his work could not remunerate the time it took him to produce them. The sky above the Basilica reveals how complex the details were that he felt necessary. I argued that he was undervaluing his work, but he would not accept my reasoning. David responded to sketch details throughout the

composition by leaving many small areas unpainted so the gold ground could show through. In the end he gave up on the painting.

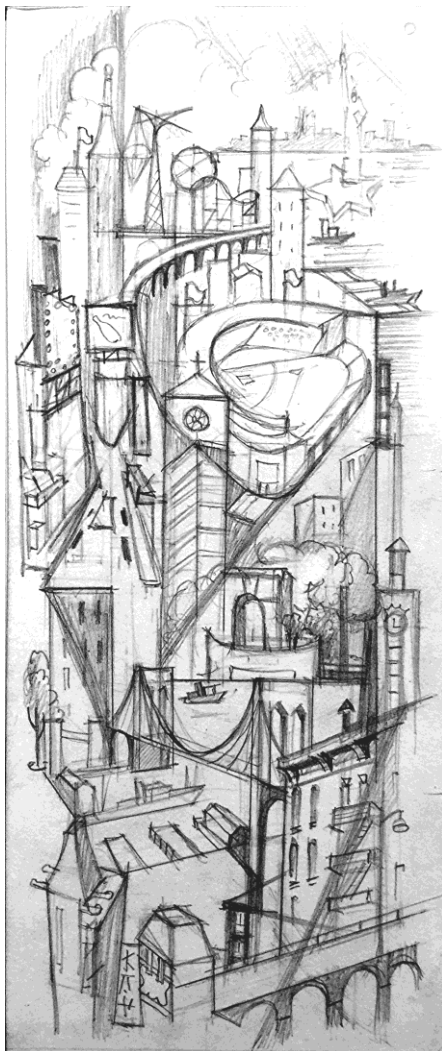
In the composition, The Grand Canal opens on the bottom and guides the viewer's eye up past the Ca' d'Oro on the left and under the Rialto. The viewer can 'debarck' at the Campo San Boldo and go on foot or follow the canal under the successive arches where it disappears between the Campanielle San Marco and the Domes of Santa Maria della Salute (on the left) and the arches of the Ducal Palazzo and San Sabistiano (on the right). Even though he was dissatisfied with it, *The Venetian Fantasy* is still a very important intermediate step between his *Parisian View* and the *Bridgeport Fantasy* that was to follow next.





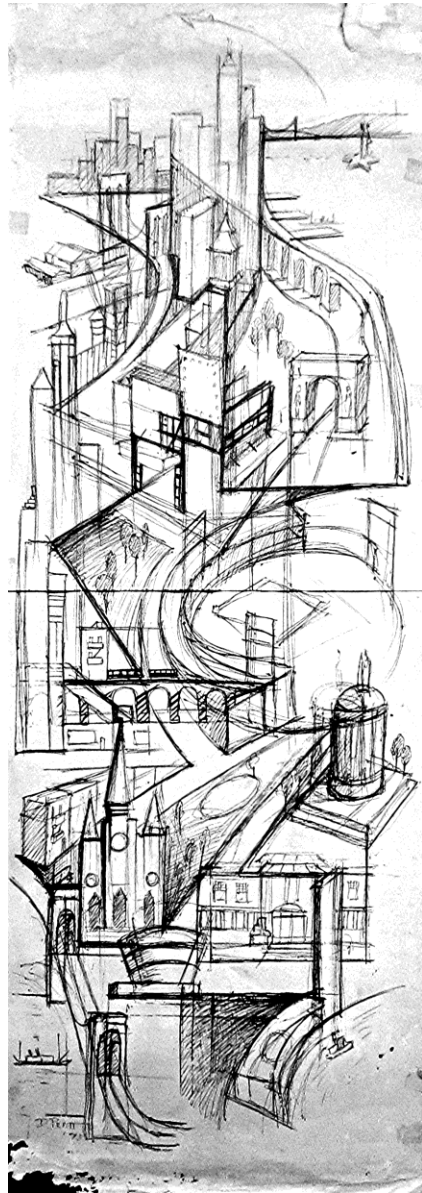
7. *Study for Manhattan Fantasy* ~ c. 1973  
Oil on Canvas (24 x 18 in.) unsigned

Among the paintings that David selected for display at the 7<sup>th</sup> Regiment Armory Antiques and Art Show in 1969 was a painting that he subsequently gave to the show's manager as a thank you gift for allowing him to exhibit his work. The sketch for that painting measured only 9½" by 4" - exactly the size that David used for all his Christmas cards. This suggests that the design for this study and its full-size counterpart may have started as a Christmas card. Despite its small size, the sketch is remarkably crowded with numerous familiar architectural elements.



The nature of the composition is like earlier fantasies of cities: Paris (3), and Venice (6). Individually recognizable architectural elements are arranged to form an abstract pattern without reference to their actual

locations in the city. Principal lines of each element's architectural geometry flow into one another providing compositional unity and as frame work for the painting's coloration. David revisited the subject using a second much larger sketch (26" by 10") dated 1973.



It is amazing that this second sketch, though seven times larger than its little predecessor, does not present any more detail, a testimony to David's draftsmanship. The resulting study allowed David to work out the basic color scheme for the larger painting that would follow.





*8. Floral Arrangement ~ c. 1996*

Oil on Canvas (44¼ x 32¼ in.) signed "D. J.Pratt" lower left

Floral paintings were among the several genres of paintings that David did over the years, but not with any great success.



*Floral Bouquet c. 1954*

In the summer of 1984, David, my wife and I attended an exhibition at the Guggenheim, "Degas to Calder." After the show, we were walking up Madison Avenue toward our car when David saw a small, lovely, and ultra realistic painting of some blue flag irises. Curious as to the price, David stepped inside. He was shocked to find a price tag of \$20,000 on the painting. I remember him muttering almost to himself, "I can do as well – or better." We thought nothing of the event and went home. About a month later he told us he had something to show us and brought out a remarkable flower painting, unlike anything he had ever done. We were shocked, and pleased. By now, of course David was coming out of his creative lethargy but I do not think that he had any pretensions to creating a name for himself. Too many dreams had come and gone. I think David

had retreated to a familiar and well accepted genre of painting with the intension of 'proving' his painterly skill if only to himself. He said that he was going to hold on to the painting as a sample in case someone wanted a similar work. But he also admitted that it took "quite a bit of work." That Christmas, he gave the painting to us as a gift. I never thought he would ever do a similar piece. I was wrong. In December of 1989, David married a woman that he had been in love with some fifty years earlier. Why they never married is a mystery. She married someone else and had children who were grown when her husband died. Remembering David, she called and restarted the friendship. By that summer, David told us he was engaged to be married. I think that the flowering of love late in life, gave David the emotional lift to complete this last flower painting, not to prove his skill as a painter, but as an expression of his new-found joy.

After his marriage, David moved to Florida and for a few years became what is called a "snow bird." Eventually, too old to continue the long commute, he asked us to help him sell his home in Cliffside Park. As we emptied the contents of the house, David gave his accumulated art work to me to manage or dispose of as appropriate, asking only that I not sell the works before his death. As we went over the confused mass of David's lifetime of art work, we came upon this painting. We were amazed that he had created yet another work that surpassed the first. It was in every sense his last flowering. David continued into his eighties painting and sketching in Florida, even after a crippling stroke. He continued to produce scenes of beauty both from local scenery and from his imagination, but he would never reach the height of these last paintings.