

The Icon Painter

Tim Bascom

“Of all the paintings you could ruin, why one of ours?” the curator wanted to know, lowering her face into her hands until she was hidden behind a screen of silver hair. “Why not mess with some kid’s finger painting?”

Zauditu wanted to explain, but how? She had been in the U.S. for only half a year, speaking broken English, and she had been working at the Art Institute for only four months. So how to explain that this particular painting had become as recognizable to her as her own eyes in a mirror? How to show the curator that she knew what was missing from it now, even though she had never seen art of this nature back in Ethiopia – with all its random slashes of color?

The piece they were talking about hung in the central room of the modernist exhibit, right across from a much larger painting that Zauditu disliked very much, a giant canvas with drab colors splattered all over it. She had been so thankful *not* to get assigned to that wing of the museum when she had started working as a guard. The art in those rooms seemed like a mockery to her, at least at first. A painting of a fireplace with a locomotive chugging out of it? A big blue and yellow bullseye? A pile of shimmering candy in foil wrappers, which according to one of her fellow guards, was a portrait of someone in Los Angeles?

Crazy. Completely “ibidi,” as people would say back home.

As for the huge splatter painting, it was such a mess of black swirls and artichoke greens and washed-out pinks that it actually made her angry. Why would anyone want such stuff? Paintings like that seemed sinister, as if they had come from

the mind of a lunatic.

She wanted to explain all this to the curator, but Zauditu was terribly aware of the little bottle of paint that she was clutching in her pants pocket, and the tiny, still-wet brush. She was also conscious of the security camera at their back. The two of them shouldn’t be here. It was fifteen minutes past closing. By now, all the other staff were on Michigan Avenue catching buses, and Zauditu should be there too.

She waited nervously while the curator kneaded her brow with knobby, waxen fingertips. Dr. Joliet, or Dr. J as she was known to all the staff at the Chicago Institute, was a brilliant scholar who seemed to know everything about every type of art. She was the one who made all the decisions about what pieces should be acquired and how they should be displayed. However, on this occasion, Zauditu could practically hear the woman’s thoughts jamming in her head.

She felt wretched to have caused such trouble. After all, she was indebted to Dr. J, who had influenced the outcome of her job interview, stepping in to ask if Zauditu might be from Ethiopia. As the organizer for a new exhibit of Ethiopian Orthodox icons, Dr. J had questions that Zauditu could answer right there on the spot, explaining that her father was actually an icon painter from the ancient city of Axum. Prior to that, Zauditu was certain she would not get the job. The head of security was just tolerating her, putting up with her accent and cornrow hair and distrusting eyes. But when Dr. J showed up, then Zauditu became someone worth noticing.

No, without Dr. J she would not have gotten the job, nor would she have been assigned to the visiting Ethiopian

exhibit. And what a privilege it had seemed to step into that space the first time, wearing her new uniform and gazing around at such familiar art – images that she had known since she was a baby, that she had even begun to copy when she was seven years old. Back then, her father could not afford extra paper or vellum, but Zauditu had made a brush out of her own hair, and she had made her own paints with ground minerals, creating a Virgin Mary on her thigh then washing it off and painting it again until her father approved of the orange and yellow halo, and the blue scarf with its gold stars, and the wide almond-shaped eyes. Amazing! To come all the way across the ocean and to find herself back again with the Virgin Mary and Saint George and Tekle Haymanot and all the others ...

“Why?” asked Dr. J. “That’s all I’m asking. Were you trying to see what you could get away with? Is that it? Or were you trying to make some sort of statement?”

Zauditu wanted to explain. Yes, there was probably some way in which she was trying to “make a statement.” Yes, she had reacted when she had to switch and guard the art in this modernist wing. In fact, she *still* found herself reacting to some of the pieces – which, to her, felt like aliens from a disturbing world. She wished she had the words to respond because she knew that, of all the museum staff, Dr. J was most likely to understand. Zauditu had sensed it ever since the elderly curator pulled her aside one afternoon and asked how she was doing, telling her that she too was an immigrant – that she had come from Italy when she was only 20, arriving on a boat with \$40 in her pocket.

“Okay, so maybe you were bothered by the way this particular piece was painted?” asked Dr. J. “I can see how that might happen if you were not used to such paintings.”

Zauditu opened her lips then closed them. She didn’t want to be misunderstood. Yes, she didn’t like this newer art at first. It seemed much less valuable than the pieces in the Ethiopia exhibit or, for that matter, the ones she had guarded in the medieval and renaissance rooms before being assigned to the modernist wing. After all, how could such crude abstractions compete with a life drawing of the “Madonna and Child” by Leonardo? What could all the accidental swipes of modern painters accomplish next to such a sensitive rendering of Mary in graphite and brown wash?

Sometimes, even though Zauditu had felt bored during the first months, when she was guarding the renaissance area, she had been amazed by Leonardo’s “Madonna.” It made her feel as if someone had reached right across 500 years to touch the most tender place in her heart. On those days, she had ridden the bus home thinking she was truly blessed. Maybe she only made \$15 an hour and ached at the end of the day. Maybe she had to come home to a dingy two-room apartment in a huge, rundown building on the South Side where men were always catcalling. But Zauditu was proud of the work she was doing back then.

She really had no hesitation about her job at the Institute until she was shifted to the modernist wing and had to walk into the room that housed her least favorite painting – that huge absurd canvas with sweeping dribbles of paint. After a single day in that space, she rode the bus home thinking: Why? Why am I helping to protect something this meaningless?

The drip painting had seemed so repulsive to her that she found herself refusing to really look at anything in the modernist wing. For the first week, Zauditu hardly acknowledged the new array of art, even though she stood next to it hour after hour. And she certainly didn’t give any attention to the painting straight across from the drip painting – until one afternoon when she heard a child called out “mommy, mommy” and realized that the tiny girl was trying to touch the bottom frame of the four-foot tall piece.

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She ran to intervene. She ran not because she cared for that specific painting but because she had seen what happened if any art *got* physically touched. When she was still guarding the renaissance exhibit, an elderly man had stumbled and bumped the frame of a tall 15th century Spanish painting of St. George saving the princess from a dragon. So, she knew why even the smallest of touches was to be avoided.

What had happened on the other occasion was not nearly as dramatic as in the movies. There was no siren to wake the dead, no guards galloping. But after alerting security, Zauditu had to fill out an accident report and explain to Dr. J, who was kind but seemed very concerned, as she righted the painting with gloved hands. Worst of all, though, she had to go to the office of the head of security, the same beefy white man who had barely tolerated her accent during the interview, and she had to listen to his lecture again.

The cameras would serve as a record, he said. The cameras would help to capture the thief or to prosecute the vandal. But her job was to keep the paintings from getting touched. That was her one, ultimate responsibility. And because a painting had been touched in her designated area, Zauditu could not help feeling as if she had somehow failed.

No, she did not want that kind of scrutiny again, and she did not want to hear the same lecture. That is why she suddenly shouted at the reaching toddler: “Stop!” It is why she dashed toward the girl awkwardly, still not accustomed to moving in pants.

“No touching,” she added. And the little girl froze.

Zauditu slowed and the girl looked a bit more defiant, as if to say, “Who are you to tell me what I can do?” The child glanced at her mother, who had swung around with a baby in

a kind of papoose on her chest. Then the little one reached towards the painting again, with all its creamy white patches and bolts of bright color.

Zauditu had no choice. She slapped the toddler's reaching hand, causing the girl's eyes to gape, and her face to bulge as she began to cry.

"Honey," said her mother, "you can't touch. You know that."

"She hit me," wailed the child, and Zauditu, in an attempt to control her racing emotions, concentrated on the painting instead of the people. Instead of facing the little girl or mother, she stepped close to the threatened art and stood there with her back to them both, arms out like a barrier, staring straight ahead, which meant that she really saw the piece for the first time.

Hadn't she tried to do her job well? Zauditu thought. And this made her more confident to look into the eyes of Dr. J. However, she was met by a weary glare. "I can stay all night," the curator said. "You do realize how serious this is, don't you? It's not just about your job. It could be seen as criminal action."

Zauditu was silent, although she wanted to speak. She wanted to explain what she had felt that day, three weeks ago. Immediately she had noticed the rough red triangle in the top right corner of the painting, with its bright yellow center and its hasty black edges. The red was so boldly brushed, widening on the final stroke, that it popped out of the jagged white background. And the yellow at its core made it even more eye-catching – full of bright warmth. Then she noticed how there were little threads of white streaked across the red, and specks of black as if the artist had flicked a brush.

She wished she could describe the interaction of all those vigorous brush strokes and textures, which were inviting in a way she had never anticipated. "Hulu" was the Amharic word she would use. And "gobez" was the word that seemed to fit the intelligent action behind the brush. But how to convey this in English?

Zauditu recalled now how, for a moment, she had actually quit thinking about the crying girl. The painting made her think instead of her father's old worktable, which was streaked with varying hues due to the way he mixed paints. As a child, she loved to stare at the top of that table, enjoying the accidental patterns. Some of the smears had sharp defined edges because her father had slapped white gesso onto a fresh panel and painted right over the edge, leaving a stroke of off-white with a crisp edge. And sometimes little droplets of color seemed to float over the wider brushstrokes. She remembered how lovely the whole table had seemed to her – as a record of her father's choices and gestures, as a suggestion of his very energy. And now, of course, that table felt very Ethiopian too, with the three colors that dominated it – red and yellow and green.

"Zauditu, look at me," demanded Dr. J. And Zauditu *did* look, seeing the shock of silver hair and the deep frown and the pulsing jaw muscle. "This painting was purchased by a

very wealthy donor, and it cost a huge amount. So, you can't just stand there, ignoring me."

Zauditu's eyes brimmed with unshed tears. She shook her head in distress. How ironic that, at first, she had not even known who made the painting!

After the toddler and her mother had left, Zauditu had stayed put, still thinking that art like this might be a kind of public trick – clever but not really worth the attention it garnered. Yet as she struggled with her doubts, she realized that the red and yellow swathes in the bottom left balanced nicely with the red and yellow triangle in the top right. And she noticed how all the little streaks and lines of sky-blue, interspersed against the white fragments of the background, broke the white into rough facets, making the whole painting active but balanced.

She had looked at the placard next, which revealed that the piece was called "Interchange." A puzzling title. Who was interchanging what with whom?

And she read the name of the artist: "Willem de Kooning," which of course meant nothing to her, not until later that night when she used her cell phone to do research. Willem was a man. Weren't they all? But the colors in his paintings were so bold that she felt captivated, drawn to anyone who could revel in such bright reds and yellows and blues ...

Dr. J. sighed. She turned toward the outer hall. "Okay, then. If you aren't going to say anything, I'll have to call the Director."

"Please no," Zauditu blurted out, surprising herself. "Can't you wait?"

"Wait for what? You haven't said a word. I don't know any more than I did fifteen minutes ago when I came by this room and saw you standing too close to that painting then realized you were actually touching it with a brush."

"It is hard for me ..."

"Well, it is hard for me too. I'm the one who is going to have to take responsibility, since I was the one who helped you get a job and got you placed in the Ethiopia exhibit and told the head of security that you could be trusted."

"It is hard to explain," Zauditu murmured. "This painter ... I think I understand this one."

Dr. J. stared at her in a surprised, skeptical way. "Okay, he was from another country. But there are an awful lot of people in America who come from another country."

Not people like me or Willem de Kooning, Zauditu thought. And maybe not like you either. Not people who see shapes and colors in their dreams, shapes and colors that are full of secret emotions.

The night after her confrontation with the toddler, Zauditu had used her cell phone to research more about this Willem de Kooning. She had learned that he was from the Netherlands but that, when he was 22, he traveled to the U.S. as a stowaway. She looked up the word "stowaway" and learned that it was someone who hid on a ship to get into

another country. In other words, this painter, like her, had been so desperate to leave his home that he was willing to cheat.

De Kooning's stowaway trick made Zauditu remember how her own father, after fighting with her, had reluctantly come to the capitol to help her apply for an exit visa. And how he had helped to influence the sour-looking consulate official by sliding ten 500-birr notes under the paperclip of her application, bowing deeply, and murmuring to the disdainful man, "For your family."

Intrigued by her research, Zauditu had also stumbled across a website that said when de Kooning arrived in America, he had worked as a house painter, and he was so poor that he and another artist named Kline bought two gallons of enamel house paint – one black, one white – then experimented with that, trying to create what people would eventually call "action paintings."

It seemed wrong to Zauditu – even wasteful – for an artist to slap paint onto a canvas, stabbing and slashing to create a dynamic effect but not thinking about anything recognizable. It seemed almost sinful. And yet ... it also seemed brilliant in its own elemental way. It challenged her like no icon could, with all those centuries of predictable conventions, the ones her father had passed down to her as virtual laws.

Her father would be outraged, asking how, if the art made no sense, there could be anything like a true "inter-change." He would curse, hissing "Yetabot." He would lecture on the centuries of carefully kept rules that went into proper painting, and how those rules must be passed down from father to son.

"Abate" and "liji." Those were the words he would use. Not "seht liji," the term for "daughter." And she would chafe under those patriarchal words because she and her father both carried a secret that neither could acknowledge – the secret that she, unlike any woman in their long family line, had actually learned how to paint icons.

During her late childhood, Zauditu had become her father's hidden apprentice, helping him to grind charcoal and minerals, helping to prime surfaces then to finish the drapery or almond-shaped eyes. And when he saw just how skilled she was, he had begun to let her make icons fully, from beginning to end, which doubled the number he could sell. In fact, what no one ever realized was that Zauditu was actually a *better* painter than her father, a reality which he had bitterly admitted when he came home drunk one night. He had stumbled into the house, shouting at her poor mother, who kept trying to soothe him, helping him into bed. "It makes no sense," he bellowed as she pulled off his shoes. "She's a woman, damn it. If God can make her so good, then why not me?"

Dr. J was still waiting for further explanation, her eyes narrowed.

"I am a painter," Zauditu suddenly blurted out. "In Ethiopia, believe me, I paint many icons."

"But I thought only men were allowed."

"Some women – in big cities – they are painting now. And in our place, Axum, I make icons for secret."

"No one knew?"

"Only my father. He says the paintings are from him, but really I am making them."

Part of Zauditu could still sympathize with her jealous, conflicted father, despite all the frustration. If anyone had known that she was painting icons, then her father would have been disciplined by the patriarch, denounced openly. Women were not allowed in Orthodox monasteries, where the most famous paintings could be viewed. Women were not allowed to be ordained or to sit on the same side of the church as men. So, they were certainly not allowed to paint the most holy of images – like those Zauditu had been painting ever since she was 13-years-old.

If anyone had known that she was painting icons, then her father would have been disciplined by the patriarch, denounced openly.

She understood her father's dilemma. However, because she had become resented, she eventually had no choice but to leave that jail-like compound on the edge of that jail-like town with its ancient stelaes and its never-changing rules. Even while her father hounded her to make more icons, awkwardly dropping back-handed compliments, she began to save up the small allowance he allowed. And while he was out there in the front yard receiving the admiration of visiting dealers – blushing modestly as they sang the praises of *his* colors and *his* life-like figures – she was in her bedroom scheming.

The dealers came all the way from the national capitol. They especially wanted the new, improved images, so Zauditu began to touch up her father's old paintings, bringing them to standard. And when the dealers saw the altered pieces, they were willing to pay twice as much, not even realizing they were buying "revisions." They strolled down the long display table in front of the house while Zauditu's father deflected their admiring comments: "God is the eye. I am just the hand."

Then he shouted – "Daughter, get out here. It's time for coffee."

And so that is how she had to interact with the men who bought her work – as a virtual slave, scuttling out with a tray of cups.

"But why change *this* painting? Why not another?" Dr. J asked. "It's nothing like the ones you would have made in Ethiopia."

"Because it could be better."

Dr. J smirked. "How?"

"In the colors."

"Are you talking about the green you added here and here?"

Zauditu nodded, glad that the older woman knew the painting well enough to see the changes. "It had much red

and yellow,” she said, “and some blue. But it needed green, to balance I think. Something more cool maybe. Not so hot.”

Dr. J was silent, staring at the painting and shaking her head. Then she asked, “What paint did you use? Tell me it wasn’t oil.”

“No. Just acrylic.”

The older woman was silent again, still staring at the painting. Then she murmured as if in a daze, “Listen, young lady. I shouldn’t be doing this. I am only doing it because I think I understand what you’ve been through, and I feel a bond of sorts. But I want you to forget this conversation. Tomorrow, when you come to work, it will be just another day. Okay? And tomorrow this painting will come off the wall for a routine cleaning, and when it goes back on the wall, it will look like it used to look. And you will never talk to anyone. Do you understand?”

“What about the green?” Zauditu asked.

“I can get it off. I know how.”

Filled with astonished gratitude, Zauditu bowed. She released the little paint canister in her pocket and took the wrinkled hand of the older woman even though the camera was still behind them, creating a record. “Thank you, thank you. I am so sorry. I did not mean to make this problem.”

“I understand, I think.”

“But you will help me?”

“Yes. For you, I can. And besides ... there are times when I really don’t like the work of this guy, to be honest. He’s amazing, but he’s *not*.”

For the first time Dr. J smiled like herself – relaxed and conspiratorial. And Zauditu smiled back. She let go of the anxiety in her eyes. She would not be in jail this evening.

That night Zauditu was still so relieved that she thanked God over and over while lying on her bed. She thanked God for this unexpected ally – this kind stranger, in a huge inhospitable city, who knew her secret but cared enough to protect her. However, afterwards she struggled to sleep. Her nervousness returned as she wondered, what if Dr. J changes her mind?

The other reason she did not sleep was that she allowed herself to admit, finally, why she had dared to alter this well-known painting, creating a plan and putting it into action at 5:05 each evening just after ushering people out of her space in the modernist gallery. Each night for the last week, she had returned to the de Kooning painting, and she had stood with her back to the camera just long enough to make one or two quick dabs with a tiny brush. She couldn’t be sure, but she believed that the man who oversaw the museum cameras would be distracted like everyone else, preparing to get out of the building. It was a risk, but the reason she had taken the risk was that she had read further about Willem de Kooning, learning that he and his wife, who was also a painter, were always struggling against each other. She had read that de Kooning’s wife was a talented portraitist but that she had been overshadowed by Willem – virtually forgotten.

And meanwhile Willem had made a big group of paintings about women, a whole series that Zauditu studied closely on a computer at the city library. All of those women were ugly – all of them – with gigantic breasts and bulging bodies, with wide forced smiles and teeth like a crocodile. Willem had said that maybe he was painting “the woman inside myself,” but she found that he also said, “Women irritate me sometimes. I painted that irritation. That’s all.”

So that was the real reason why Zauditu had decided this man’s painting needed to be improved. She had realized that he did not fully understand beauty itself. And she had determined that, if she studied one of his paintings closely, then she would know how to make it better, just like she had made her father’s paintings better.

In all honesty, Zauditu still believed that the de Kooning painting *needed* to be changed, and she was sad that she had failed. She felt divided, torn between relief and discouragement. She lay in bed all night turning and tangling; and the next morning, when she arrived at the Institute, she was nursing a terrible headache.

To her alarm, de Kooning’s “Interchange” was still on the wall where it had been, and it was still carrying the changes she had created.

It was still there at lunch. And still there into the late afternoon. And at the end of the day, it became apparent that the altered painting was not going to be removed as Dr. J had said.

A young couple were standing in front of it, hands clasped. They tilted their heads onto each other’s shoulders, murmuring, and Zauditu realized that they didn’t know that this was *not* the same painting it had been the day before. In that moment she let herself imagine – tentatively – that no one would ever know. Her heart rose in her chest, worried that Dr. J might have reported her or that somehow they had been found out, but her heart also felt light, like a startled bird taking flight. If nothing else, she had now witnessed this one happy couple who were looking at the changed painting as if it felt complete and pleasing.

As soon as the closing announcement had been made and as soon as she had helped to empty the modernist wing, Zauditu made her way to the room where the guards had lockers. It meant going down a hall next to the administrative offices, and though she was trying not to do anything that might seem out of the ordinary, she could not help stopping at Dr. J’s office.

When she knocked, Dr. J opened the door, startled. The old curator checked to see that no one was coming then ushered Zauditu into her office.

“Why?” Zauditu asked.

Dr. J hesitated, glancing back out into the hall. “It was too soon. I think it’s better to wait a bit before cleaning.”

Zauditu looked at her with lowered brows, peering into the older woman’s eyes to be sure there was nothing more. However, Dr. J just smiled and placed a reassuring hand on her forearm. “Besides,” she murmured, “I think I like it better this way.”

What a feeling washed over Zauditu that afternoon in Dr. J's office – as if some hard knot had been untied inside her. A shiver ran to her extremities. Even after she hugged the woman and went to her locker, she felt as if she might break out in song.

When Zauditu finally stepped out of the Institute that late July afternoon, pausing at the top of the steps with the big stone lions on each side, there was a wonderful bar of sunlight shining from between two buildings, and she stood in the glow. What a wonder, she thought. For the first time

in a decade, she didn't see her own name as a cruel joke. In Amharic, Zauditu meant "she is the crown." But now, having traveled across an entire ocean and having left everything behind, she could actually claim that meaning.

Her braided hair and her scalp were lit with warmth. She closed her eyes, still seeing the yellowy warmth. For a full minute, Zauditu stayed there between the stone lions, simply breathing in and out – before at last she headed down onto the street and went looking for a bus home.

Simon Perchik



Word by word the page clouding over
as if rain would wash the dirt from her face
flower though nothing will change – the sky

still covered with fresh dew not yet the stones
that forage forever as the scent grass gives off
when paper is folded over and over and over

and each crease drains, outlasts its emptiness
taking away, making room in the Earth
for this old love note, your forehead.