

The Incredible Paintings Of Frank Frazetta

by Donald Newlove

The artist as hero

Her oval face was beautiful in the extreme, her every feature finely chiseled and exquisite, her eyes large and lustrous and her head surmounted by a mass of coal black, waving hair, caught loosely into a strange yet becoming coiffure. Her skin was of a light reddish copper color, against which the crimson glow of her cheeks and the ruby of her beautifully molded lips shone with a strangely enhancing effect. She was as destitute of clothes as the green Martians who accompanied her; indeed, save for her highly wrought ornaments, she was entirely naked, nor could any apparel have enhanced the beauty of her perfect and symmetrical figure. Similar in face and feature to the women of Earth, she was nevertheless a true Martian—and prisoner of the fierce green giants who held me captive, as well!"

—A *Princess of Mars*, Edgar Rice Burroughs

Who remembers Thuvia, Maid of Mars? Dejah Thoris, Princess of Helium? Ayesha—*She-who-must-be-obeyed*?

Or Dale Arden—and Princess Aura, lustful daughter of Ming the Merciless? *Jane!* (Lady Greystoke)? Princess Aleta (now mother of four little Valiants)? The Dragon-Lady? And Burma, temptress of *Male Call*? Moonbeam McSwine's cliff-like massif, which strongly abused a boy's imagination, to say nothing of the great milky groin under Daisy Mae's falling polka-dot blouse? Surely a history of adolescent sex aids must somehow include jelly-breasted Barbarella? Zaftig, so zaftig, Little Annie Fanny? And ravenous Vampirella, a gold bat twittering on her G-stringed pelvis (detail not to be missed!).

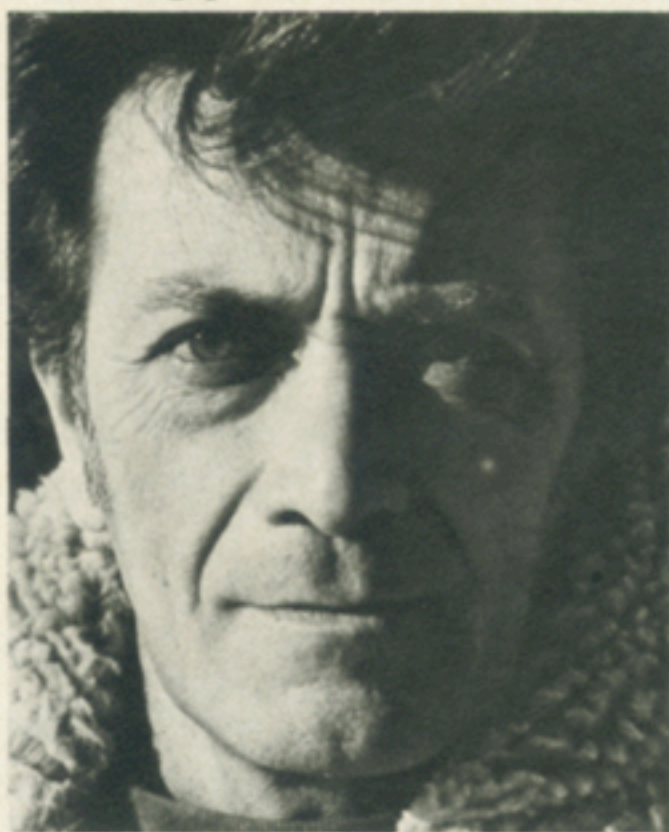
We are not exhausted (what a great assignment). . . . The inner eye floats off, magnetized to the skimpy halter of Taia, the four-thousand-year-old lovethrob of Ibis

Donald Newlove's recent two-volume novel *Leo & Theodore* and *The Drunks* is about Siamese twins and alcoholism. His novel *Eternal Life* will appear this year.

the Invincible. To Sunday mornings on the living-room rug with plump-busted Boots (*and Her Buddies*), her long rounded legs so blissfully marriageable—mine forever, I'd never tire. Flirty French doll Betty Boop with the Mae West figure and come-hither eyelashes. Or back to Esquire's own Petty Girl from the Thirties and Forties, those buoyant boobs, lyric slabs of leg, her hosiery, her flesh color, her. . . . But enough; I thought I was over all that. Over Malory's mistily lecherous sorceress Morgan le Fey? King Kong's river-wet Fay? Electric-eyed Elsa's fantastically perverse, goose-hissing Bride of Frankenstein (even her totally bandaged body was head-spinning). And what of Homer's musky Helen "shaped by heaven," "the smoky sweetness and desire" infused in Helen's heart by Homer, her "Unearthliness. A goddess the woman is to look at"?

And now, out of the land that time forgot, from the earth's core and the mists of Pellucidar, from scarred landscapes ravaged by Cimmerian hordes, comes, clothed in sea spume and spidery breastplates (if clothed at all), attended by gigantic lizards, immense serpents, fat leopards and saber-toothed tigers, and defended by large-knuckled superheroes with whipcord arteries and wielding sledge-like swords, her doll's eyes dumb-brained with longing, desperate for bed play . . . comes, yes, yes . . . the Egyptian Princess . . . The Moonmaid with the Pearl-white Gluteus Maximus (at its maximal!) . . . the *Frazetta Woman*.

And come she truly has. To every college dorm and sci-fi collector's file across the land, throughout England, Italy, France and Germany, and even into Japan—wherever the name of Tarzan is known, wherever Conan the Conqueror may raid the paperback racks, wherever a grown man's heart still lusts for the impossible pleasures forever withheld (seemingly) by dull daylight. Oh, no human hand is without God-given livingness and light. But not every hand lifts the forebrain into an erotic contemplation usually reserved for Rodin statues socked into



Frank Frazetta

The Death Dealer, 1973, oil, 24 x 16"



▲ *Banth*, 1972, pen and ink, 12 x 10"

◀ *The Moonmaid*, 1972, oil, 20 x 16"

▼ *The Silver Warrior*, 1972, oil, 24 x 16"



an eternal kiss (remember his hand caressing her haunch?). And the Frazetta Woman's curves are as lovingly bestowed by their creator as are Rodin's on his lifelong obsessions.

One second's thought before I plunge in. Am I here to lift kitsch into Fine Art? To shoulder the wheel of Chic, shake the heavens of Cult, strain at the gnats of Fad? What is my assignment? Why am I writing this? Let us put that aside until more facts and feelings are marshaled and see if we can make this trip a refresher on what satisfies in erotic illustration.

Brooklyn-born Frank Frazetta, forty-nine, has hit as an illustrator, after a long career in comicdom as a struggling, often ripped-off artist. He could stop painting today, he says, and not have to worry about money for a very, very long time. He has a swell spread for his charming country estate in East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, a yellow '77 Coupe de Ville (black top), owns his own lake (which he had dug out), and he has all the time in the world to pursue his first passion in life: playing baseball. Day after day he's out with his baseball, or playing stickball with his teen-age sons, or golfing or bowling. For a day or two each week, should the mood strike, he paints. What he rarely does is answer the phone or reply to letters from fans. Or letters from professors around the world who write symbolic head trips about his paintings. Freud offends Frank. "Even the Japanese are writing me questions," he cries. "When the Japanese are after you, you're lost!"

But lost Frank's way. In the Sixties, Frank was asked to do some cover work on an Ace paperback reissue of the endless works of Edgar Rice Burroughs, and the Burroughs heroic-fantasy fad rose phoenix-like on the wings of Frazetta, with many readers collecting books just for their covers. Those covers gripped the fancy—not just their eroticism but often their compelling sense of composition, of a picture that really delivered fantasy with a looming hammer-blow. Even Frank's covers for Burroughs' Westerns show tremendous fantasy. On *The Return of the Mucker* the hero has not only pulled the bad guy off his horse, he has whammied the horse to earth, too. "Ha ha, a guy couldn't do that, of course," Frazetta says. "Hell, it's not even in the story. I just wanted to do it *my way*." When I visit Frank for this interview, the hi-fi by his easel has Sinatra's *My Way* on the spindle. Whatever Frazetta does these days, he does Frank's way.

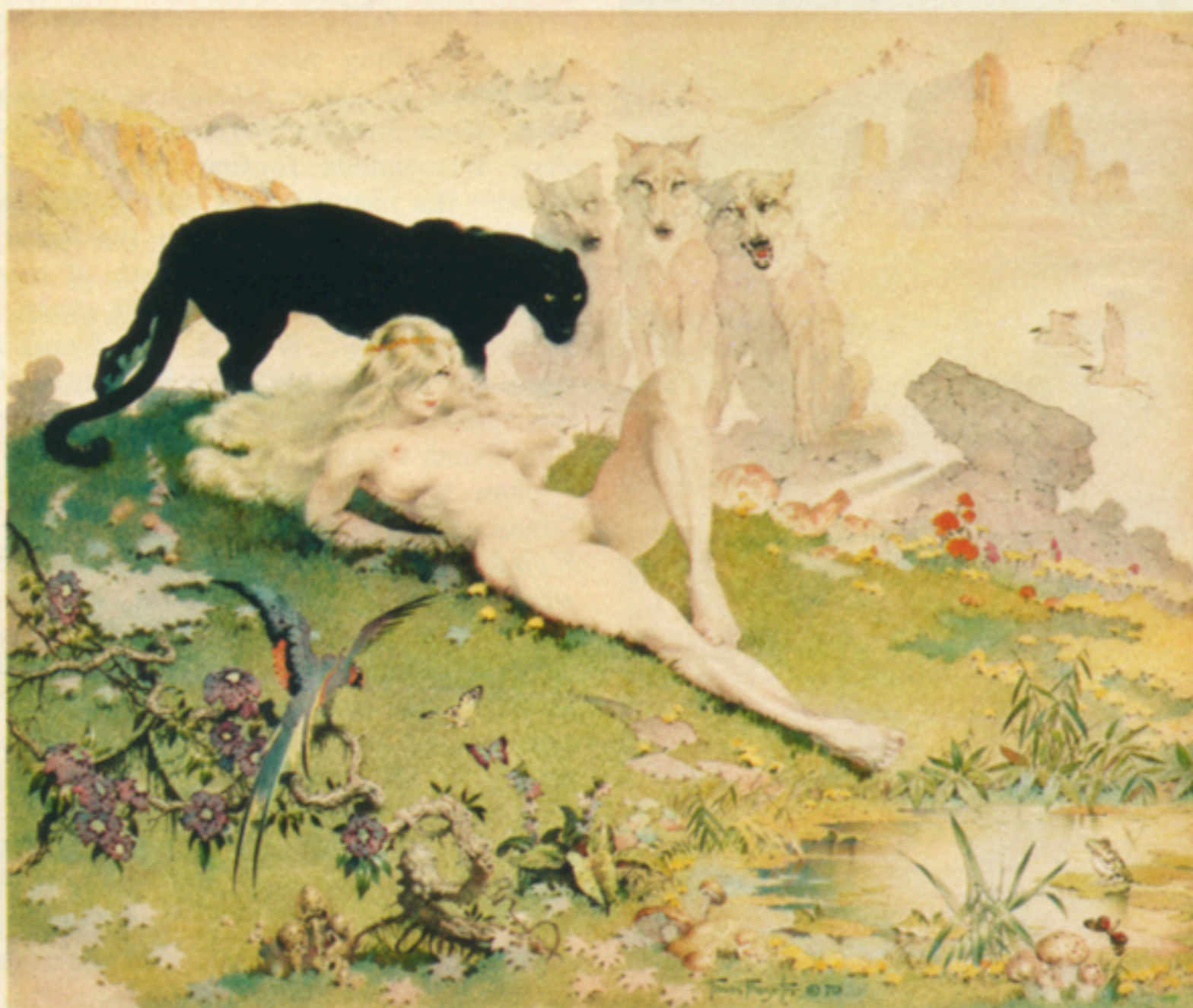
Then he started doing covers for Lancer Books' Conan series, an interlocking heroic-fantasy epic by a *Weird Tales* writer from Texas, Robert E. Howard, who suicided at thirty and left a vast, frenzied body of tales about a supernaturally strong, mystically minded barbarian named Conan! Frazetta's covers in no way overstate the grim, sinister, blue-glittering splendor of Howard's imagination, the impossible beauty of his princesses, or the unleashed bloodlust and shearing steel of bullnecked Conan the Cimmerian hacking through a tangle of Picts or Hyperboreans or Asgardians, his eyes glowering "volcanic blue," his massive chest "dripping blood at every step," "his veins on fire with madness" and thews "started out like cords on his forearms." And always,



Sea Witch, 1966, oil, 20 x 30" ▲

Swamp Demon, 1968, oil, 20 x 18" ►

Golden Girl, 1955, watercolor, 9 x 11" ▼





nearby, as his steel simmers harshly, *She* stands waiting "and in her dark eyes he saw her love flaming, a naked elemental thing of raw fire and molten lava." On the strength of his Conan covers, Frank's star took off.

Along with comic-book covers came wraparound dust-jacket illustrations for the Doubleday Science Fiction Book Club Burroughs line, offers to create movie posters, and the suggestion by Ian Ballantine of Bantam Books to do a large-size Frazetta portfolio for the Peacock Press series *The World of Fantastic Art*, which already featured Kay Nielsen, Edmund Dulac and Arthur Rackham fine-art fantasy books. Volume One, *The Fantastic Art of Frank Frazetta*, which includes several smashing heroic-fantasy paperback covers, many line drawings and some eye-catchingly lecherous doodlings, instantly sold out its first printing of 50,000 copies and has now sold 220,000 copies in its sixth printing. Volume Two will be out this month. Meanwhile, *The Frank Frazetta Calendar 1977* had appeared and instantly sold out its 100,000 copies. The '78 calendar is all ready to be shipped, and the run has been upped to 150,000 copies. And back at the Frazetta estate in East Stroudsburg, a back room has been set aside for mail-order sale of Frazetta posters (over 40 available) that are the same size (18" x 24") as the original paintings. Poster sales have exploded since the mail-order address was broadcast on all those calendars and books. "How marvelous," says Ian Ballantine. "Here is a man who was never romanced by

▲ *John Carter & The Savage Apes of Mars*, 1970, oil, 18 x 23"

The Destroyer, 1971, oil, 23 x 20" ►

▼ *Study*, 1968, pen and ink, 11 x 9"



the art critics or the big art dealers but was simply seen by the public—and now his work is being eaten alive.”

Tom Wolfe, whose recent book *The Painted Word* is a blast at phonies, myths and dealers in the modern-art world, is not astounded.

“The intellectual proprieties have been ruling art for thirty-five years,” he tells me when I awaken him by phone at eleven-thirty a.m. “Here is the whole irrational boiling away underneath—the id, the red-eyed animal. Nobody’s touching it. So it’s left to the illustrators to be the vanguard of the unconscious, people with animal powers. God, look at the record jackets! Innately talented artists from universities have been intimidated and steered into fine arts, fearful of leaving their unconscious out of the box—so we *have* to go to the illustrators. The most really interesting stuff today is in unserious art. A lot of it’s junk. But look what the twelve-tone music did, the devitalization it brought. Most rock is junk, but whatever is powerful is likely to be found there. The commercial arts are now a good decade ahead of the intellectuals, a submerged, turbulent river, ready to break out.”

“I think of Life!” he roared. “The dead are dead, and what has passed is done!”—“The Pool of the Black One,” *Conan the Adventurer*, p. 192.)

Must I huff and puff and fall into the fine-arts trap myself, showing how the English painter-cartoonist William Hogarth, in 1737, brought a Frazetta-fresh air of eroticism to fashion-bound England with his shocking series *The Harlot’s Progress* and *The Rake’s Progress*? How Frazetta’s gigantic barbarian could well have been rocked to his privates by a blow from Michelangelo’s equally muscular Adam? That the Frazetta Woman’s glorious pearl globes, fore and aft, have been rendered even more lushly, tenderly and stunningly (for his day) by Rubens? Every painter’s nudes are shocking at first appearance: Titian’s Venuses, Manet’s *Olympia*, Goya’s *Maja Nude*, Courbet’s *Sleeping Woman*, Degas’ bathers, Renoir’s bathers, Ingres’ whole Turkish bath, all these odalisques and Aphrodites and voluptuous ladies getting in and out of the water, Picasso’s fleshly lyric line in his late drawings, the old satyr in love with curly-haired pubes. And even Wyeth shocks us at his recent Met show with a bona fide, soon-to-be-invaginated virgin (*The Virgin*), her tufty thatch and blushing nipples exposed to the millions (as well as her woodenly painted shins and badly foreshortened left foot). Must I fine-art? No! WHO CARES?? No *Origins of Frazetta in Fuseli and the Viennese School of Vampires and Femmes Fatales*. Or in Heinrich Kley. Better by far to point to Alex Raymond, Frazetta’s deeply admired friend (“Did you know him, Don?” Frank asks. “Such a wonderful man!”) whose *Flash Gordon* brought torchlit sex to just where it was most needed: the living-room rug on Sunday morning.

Not so strangely, Frazetta’s beginnings include an eight-year grounding in fine arts (and today, for realism, he will add a classical pillar or highly wrought piece of armor to his fantasies) that began at the age of eight when his parents entered him in the Brooklyn Academy of Fine Arts, a small school at which he re-

mained until sixteen. He was quite happy to sit under the tutorship of a classical Italian artist, Michael Falinga, who ran this exclusive school with a free hand. (“We used to sit around and draw anything we wanted to as students. It was *very* informal,” Frank says.) But the object of the class was to render, which Frank did in his own bouncy way. During his last two years at high school, he was already a professional artist, doing fill-in work on comic books for a science-fiction cartoonist, John Giunta, through whom Frazetta’s first independent strip, “Snowman,” appeared in *Tally Ho* (December, 1944). It was a success he hid from his schoolmates. According to Mike Gross, the artist’s former editor at *National Lampoon*, “Frank couldn’t face the tough Brooklyn street fighters he grew up with, until one day he took on the biggest bully in the neighborhood and beat him; then he became the meanest kid on the block.” His fine-arts education became newly evident last year when *American Artist* magazine featured a cover story on Frazetta. There loomed a haunting figure on an armored horse, the orange-eyed, horn-helmeted menace, *The Death Dealer*, sitting on a wealth of filigree-worked steel and chain mail!—and that issue’s newsstand sales shot up thirty percent. “That’s a slap at those barn painters, isn’t it?” Frank says. “I can’t bear those barns and baskets. They bore me.”

After five years as a minor handyman for a host of comic houses, he landed his first major assignment in 1949, taking on the *Shining Knight* strip for Adventure Comics. More strips followed—the Westerns *Ghost Rider* and *Tim Holt*—then he came on with his marvelously virile and sexy *Thun’da*, his own completely Frazetta comic book of jungle tales. This magazine won admiration everywhere (a facsimile now sells for ten dollars). He also found himself in the funny-animals field and doing highly regarded shock and horror covers. His own strip, *Johnny Comet*, failed (great art, poor scripts) and he took up ghosting, working on Don Barry’s *Flash Gordon* daily strip (Alex Raymond abandoned his creation in 1944 when he joined the Marines), and then for nine years he helped Al Capp produce *Li’l Abner*. “I got one hundred fifty dollars a week and had to work only a day and a half. I was always out playing ball—what a life, I thought. Then I saw I was getting nowhere, not growing—and Capp, whom I liked, was gonna cut my salary—so I quit. I’ll get back into cover illustration. So I had holes in my shoes and was taking these great covers around to the publishers—and they were too good! These guys would blink and nothing registered. My Buck Rogers covers. So I told them, Hey, I’m the guy whose covers always used to boost your circulation before I left to do *Li’l Abner*! Didn’t get through. I was ‘old-fashioned.’ So I get a job to do a little head of Ringo Starr. And that got me a phone call to do the movie poster of Woody Allen’s *What’s New, Pussycat?*. My God, suddenly I had a check for five thousand dollars, a whole year’s pay, earned in one afternoon! Ho, we had *that* check photographed.”

At that time, he was also doing some *Mad* magazine covers and turning his hand to the busting beauties of Little Annie Fanny (just her figure) for *Playboy*. Then came the Tarzan job (*Continued on page 149*)

The Incredible Paintings of Frank Frazetta

(Continued from page 94) with Ace. And Conan. And offers from the art market for his Conan originals, which he will not part with, even though the offers start at five figures.

("It mattered little to him where they sailed or whom they fought. He found the life good."—"Queen of the Black Coast," *Conan of Cimmeria*, p. 96.)

As I follow the private road winding under huge primeval firs and pines, passing the large, scooped-out lake with a small island built up midway across the breaking ice, I think of R. Crumb and other comic-strip artists, their bottle-thick glasses and terminal acne, all of them ripped off over the years by publishers who now have all of the artists' early works in their vaults. Frazetta, no longer a comic-strip artist, has emerged as a full-fledged illustrator, with his wife, Ellie, as his business manager. And I think of the hidden trove of erotica I've heard about. What's that like?

We are with Mike Gross, Esquire's art director, who is along to choose the paintings for this issue.

"Ellie set a precedent," Mike says. "She protects his work and gets it back from the companies. He was pretty bitter when his early Burroughs covers that were bought for two hundred fifty dollars were resold for five hundred, and then sold again, and so on. It got him. He took one Burroughs cover in to the publisher, who said he was going to keep it, and Frank said he wanted to take it home and touch it up. Then he did a quick rough overnight and handed that in. Ha. He's a street-tough Brooklyn guy from Sheepshead Bay, and it shows. You know: Catholic family, Italian cooking, good smells. But he's completely out of this world. Until recently, few people beyond fantasy collectors knew his work. But he has won some medals as an illustrator and is becoming recognized. He's an incredibly good-looking man and quite a womanizer. I mean, he and some of his buddies would see a girl coming down the street and he'd stop his pals at a window. 'I want to meet this girl!' And she'd walk by, Frank eating her up, and the guys would watch. 'She's a dog, Frank!' 'No, no, those ankles, that arm, look at that neck!' He'd see something in her, but a dog, you know? I came out to visit him three years ago. He sits me down in front of his big cabinet and starts showing me picture after picture. For four hours! And there's more in there. 'Just tell me when to stop,' he says. He has done some of his best paintings in forty-eight hours; he uses fast-drying oils, sometimes delivers covers that are still tacky. 'Don't touch it; it just landed.' Today, he's a family man, with a close, loving exchange with his wife. She's a woman of strong opinions—she's not swallowed up by her husband, nor he by her. She's very out front about prices, won't come down. And no compromise; Frank owns everything he does. And it's paying, because the *big* breakthrough has

been these portfolios and calendars on art racks everywhere. Success comes to deserving people."

We come to a flagstoned Hansel and Gretel cottage, with statues of gnomes and frogs set about. At first it looks small, but then we see that it has been added to and just keeps on spreading out back. We go around to the side door, and Frazetta himself welcomes us in, with a large, wide-armed ho-ho for Mike.

I finally get a good look at Frank. Christ, it's impossible. I clasp my hands before me as if firing a heavy pistol. "Frank, do you own a Magnum?"

"Naw!" He grips his hands far in front. "It's a camel's-hair brush!"

"No, he is *not* Clint Eastwood!" Ellie says. "I can't stand everybody saying that. He's not that kind of man."

He indeed looks like Clint: the same head, flat belly, hard-sucked cheeks and a flat grey stare that has a sharp, raw-edged wariness. In fact, Mike has told me he hates interviews, never talks about his work, and that he told Mike over the phone about me, "If he asks me the wrong question, I'll punch him out."

("What are the wrong questions, Mike?" "Oh, I don't know.")

"Mike, Mike! Ya gotta see this new camera I got," Frank cries, and hurries us into his studio. We spend a lot of time in the studio, since not Frank, a panatela smoker, nor anyone else is allowed to smoke in the main part of the house. His eight-year-old daughter, Heidi Lee, has asthma (the other kids, Holly Jean, thirteen, Billy, seventeen, and Frank Jr., nineteen, are fine and so gregarious that the house is constantly filled with visitors, has three TV sets going and kids sleeping over all weekend).

The camera, the camera, Frank dances with his camera, shooting off motorized clicks that have the loud, oiled whack of the combined German and Japanese camera industries. Frank already has a half dozen other cameras, but this Canon is *it*. He goes on about its virtues for five minutes. Then as he's putting it away, he asks me, "How d'ya like this? It's my Walther."

His Walther is a pistol, which he hands to Mike. Mike stands holding it. It seems heavy.

"It's loaded," Frank says.

Just lying around? No, he has a bunch of pistols in a closet room, which is also his darkroom.

"Hey, we had a big snapping turtle in the lake out there. He decided to live there. A two-footer! Can't have that; they're dangerous." Frank holds out his pistol, enforcer-style. "Pow. Right through the head. I think I killed him, but he sank to the bottom. We had this big *rat* running around. *Terrible!* My God, we're living with rats, I think. But its only a muskrat. *Pow-w-w...*"

He puts the gun away. "Lemme show ya the house."

We follow him through the many

rooms, as he adds, "We like to throw golf balls out on the ice and try to make 'em dance across the lake with a twenty-two."

I suppose this is more of a ball-player's stroll than a Clint Eastwood roll, this wide-armed, leaning back, gesturing enjoyment. Rifles and shotguns lean like shocks of wheat in corners.

"My God, what's this?" I ask, lifting a *huge* double-barreled shotgun. "For shooting down trees?"

"Dinosaurs," Mike says.

"Aw, that's Billy's. He wanted it."

There are crossed battle-axes on walls, Samurai swords, war axes, Masai spears—all authentic—and massive oak sideboards, fluted with decorative carvings, heavy chairs with big carved snake-head arms and scales, a carved dragon chair from China, Renaissance chairs, gargoyle-legged Italian leather chairs, steer horns, a terrarium, a parrakeet, a Maltese dog like a silk-silver living toy, and a tabby. And kids.

And, absolutely everywhere you turn, a painting by Frazetta. They wash about the house like astral windows onto a hashish dream. Gigantic polar bears loom out at you, a tyrannosaurus, great lizards and serpents, the incredible breast blossoms of the *Egyptian Princess*, my God, and here is *Thuvia, Maid of Mars!* My eyes pop. Electricity leaps from my breast and hits a boy reading in bed thirty-five years ago. It is unbelievable. No mere drug could grant me this. And John Carter's son Carthoris stands protecting Thuvia from a rhino-size Martian banth with a mouth like an angry manhole. And Thuvia herself, here Frank has succeeded in top form; that shy princess behind her protector has an arabesque to her legs and hips that carries into her upper figure with such sinuous lyric impact that she seduces my eye from the banth. Thuvia's extra twist of sex is all bathed in an unearthly blue twilight, a mid-world blue-burning dusk, shimmering with energies of evening, my heart's home feelings carrying me back to sapphire eyelids gently closing, closing and melting me into their lenses.

"Gee, Frank."

"Good?"

"Terrific. I haven't seen the others yet, but this is my favorite."

I see the Doubleday dust jacket for Thuvia, the painting reduced sixfold into a dull, clammy, plastic set of hues that hideously cinderize the original's vibrance. Even the figures lose their power. Thuvia's a thug. I look back at the painting's rich blue thin subdued and starlight glow, a blue your fingers might touch like chalk. A Thuvia girdled and pelvic that might walk out of the painting and up your arm—one of Dr. Praetorius' bell-jar ballerinas—and sit on your shoulder, a star sapphire of elfin sex.

"Who do you like to read, Frank?"

"Oh, uh, uh... I don't... no time."

"Burroughs?"

"Good God, no. Are you kidding me? Oh, I might thumb through for a pic-

ture. I, uh, mainly I'm outdoors. Or if I'm reading, I get guilty. Here I am entertaining myself when I should be painting. My reading, well, I like, uh, Howard, Robert E. Howard. We think alike. He has something. I liked animal stories as a kid! But I can't stand wasting time."

"Well, let's get back to painting. Hey, where's the harness on these polar bears? Aren't they pulling that sled?"

"Harness? Ha! Who needs a harness? This is *emotion*; those bears are comin' at you, you don't have time to see a harness."

"Wow."

"I paint feelings! I *thought* of the harness, but it'd make a ridiculous clutter. Same thing with *Jongar Fights Back*."

We move on to Jongar. A detail from this is on the cover of the '77 calendar and it looks terribly as if Jongar is sodomizing the heroine while drawing his bow. I mention this.

"Yeah, well, they *must* have thought of that."

In the painting itself it's quite clear that the heroine is sliding down the back of a giant horned lizardgator.

"See?" he says. "The arrow and feathers should cross his face. But I left 'em out. You'd never see those feathers! This is danger, emotion, the pterodactyls are coming!"

"And the feathers would hide his face."

"Now you're with it."

We continue through the glorious Pleistocene zoo, living-room wing. A monstrously tall Sony color TV with a forty-two-inch diagonal screen monitors the living room like a Japanese Hal the Computer. ("Frank. Stop. I can feel you, Frank. TURN ME ON.")

"I gave Ellie two thousand dollars and told her to buy something. She brought this home. Suddenly some guys are uncrating this Frankenstein in our living room. Whew."

Beside the Sony stands a large replica of King Kong, delivered to Frank by Dino De Laurentiis.

"Dino calls me up, will I do a poster for Kong? I say let me do it the Frazetta way or I'm not interested. He wants it his way. So I'm not interested. Then he really is begging me! No, no. Next damn thing, there's electricity in the air. A *plane* is flying over. I mean, the heavens are shaking; you can feel it through your skin. It's Dino, landing a quarter mile up the road at the local airport in his own plane. He's coming personally! He comes right in here. I'm still not interested. And I don't get interested."

We stop at *Egyptian Princess*, with her back flanged to a flesh-colored pillar, her unbelievably low-slung and eye-sucking girdle, her chained leopard, her Nubian with a scimitar, a brown pillar behind him . . . the possibilities for miscegenation seem enormous.

"Gosh, Frank, every time I see this I can't help feeling sorry for that poor guy. He'll *never* get into bed with that girl."

"*Whattaya mean!* You don't *know* this guy! Not get into bed? Wow. Hey,

I get all these idiotic letters interpreting this stuff."

I look at the big brown pillar behind the Nubian and at her big orangy pillar. "I can understand that."

"I get mad."

"Well. I thought she was doing something with the *leopard*, a little hanky-panky."

"Yeah? What d'ya see in this one?"

"I see a winged man flying out of a vagina."

"That's a tepee! It's not a vagina, for Christ's sake. It's like a stone tepee or something."

"Yeah, you could say that."

"Some of these letters are really weird."

We're in the studio, looking at *The Sea Witch*, a marvelous painting of a Frazetta water witch on a wave-racked sea rock being attended by perhaps a giant octopus or else it's several serpents and a spiny seagoing lizard. Although it's already in Volume One, he's repainting the original canvas board for Volume Three.

"She was too luminous. You could hardly see her body. Now it's more lavender and has shape. It's molded."

"It's got it now. A lot of it."

"Hey, I almost lost it! I started doodling on the face and, God, I lost the eyes! That mad witch look—I lost it, couldn't find it. You know, you can lose something forever, trying to repaint. Hours I worked, I thought it was gone, just gone. What a sweat! But I got it back."

He puts *Swamp Demon* on the easel. A black Frazetta Woman, her big brown mind-boggling maximus highlighted as a serpent curls up her body and a huge genie-demon out of *Fantasia* emerges from a swamp. But the actual focus is the top of her shaved head, in which, on the original, the fontanel area is sublimely suggested.

"How d'ya do that?" they ask me. A Nubian! I just wanted to do something different. Nobody else has ever had a *bald* Nubian as heroine! I made it up. They can get something to go with it. Or use your imagination."

Painting after painting flows over the easel. He's now revising *The Cat Girl*. "My sentimental favorite. I finally got it all together. Impossible lighting, huh? Who cares! Look at those branches. Guys are already copying 'em with broads leaning all over."

This Frazetta Woman is uncopyable. The delicate witchery of the bosom, highlighted against green murk, has a maddening fulfilledness that is hypnotic on the canvas, a faerie smallness and perfect mastery that only a thousand rehearsals could have produced. I speak of the canvas on the easel, in which the figure is as fully realized as any of Coleridge's dream lines from *Kubla Khan*. It is not butter-soaked kitsch, however popular the mode. It is a fragment of Frazetta's imagination brought up, perhaps from childhood—Morgan le Fey, the fairy sister of King Arthur—and delivered wholly, for our delectation and to satisfy the artist, and perhaps for an even higher purpose. No carnal photograph, the

picture suggests that Frazetta has the eye of an angel and the thoughts of an arrested teen-ager. But in woman after woman, his intent is simply to embody the erotic, not the pornographic. Even his monsters are clean monsters, not slurping psychotic eaters of the dead. There is never anything ghoulish in his work, no bleeding cuts, only a bit of blood on the swords; there's no love of decay and fetidness—his swamps and jungles are soft green, lush, aswirl and gently vivid, germinal, sprouting, wriggling with green superlife, a perfect setting for the erotic.

And what is the erotic feeling he brings forth? In *The Cat Girl*, something skilled beyond parody, something so serious he calls it sentimental, something so baldly shown at last that he has to hide, turn aside. Because she was lurking behind all those Frazetta Women leading up to her, in all their ridiculous exaggeration. Sometimes he gets too brilliant and gorgeous, too red or yellow, and loses the primal somberness at the heart of his work, the seductive tones he works best in. Here all is right. And the erotic image he has longed to make as real as paint can suggest has at last been struck. Where does it come from? What is it? He paints, he says, the image a woman has left on his mind. Like that ankle or arm or neck of that woman you and I might call a *dog*, a lady of low incandescence. Frank, though, sees the light God put there, some livingness in the curve or gesture. I have been to bed with the Frazetta Woman, *and she looks just like that*. Believe me, *The Cat Girl*, many times, has answered me, lain to my touch, those breasts in my palm, making moans and sighs—and at last shut those wild wild eyes I kissed to sleep. I don't know whom *you* go to bed with, but I go with La Belle Dame sans Merci. Every time, friend, without fail. I can't help it. A good clean erotic surge that idealizes every sensation and transfigures poor bone and flesh into just what the imagination demands. No choice, it *demands*. What's more, for years, it has not been possible to do other than obey. I've been in good mental, physical and spiritual health. My best impulses rise up; no fears, no menace. And after a while, deep within me, a rosy serpent comes alive and gets ready to shake me, and it is God slithering around in me, not the devil but my Creator, and He throws up this terrific golden cloud into my brain and says, I'm coming to get you. And then this fireball with a serpent's body makes more demands I won't number here. But He wants to burn to the cleanest possible ash in the greatest possible heat, something that no amount of wear and tear and clanging and banging will bring about. He's much subtler. He knows sex is in the brain and so He breathes on each phase of imagery my poor brain summons up.

Now, friend, I must add that I detest sex fantasy during sex. That's just personal. And so, I let my body do the imagining, with whatever's at hand, and I invest my hand itself with imagi-

Fashion Locator

The fashions editorially featured in this issue can be purchased at the following retail stores. This list is not intended to be a complete shopper's guide. If certain items have no store listed, or no store listed for your community, we have included the address of the manufacturers. A note or call should get you the name of a local store.

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SHIRT:

Arthur Richards Man (31 W. 56th St., N.Y.C. 10019)

MASSACHUSETTS: Cambridge—The Camel's Hump; NEW YORK: New York City—Lord & Taylor

PANTS:

Pinky & Dianne Ltd. for Private Label (730 Fifth Avenue, N.Y.C. 10019)

CALIFORNIA: Los Angeles—Maxfield Blue; ILLINOIS: Chicago—Ultimo; NEW YORK: New York City—Bloomingdale's; Stone Free.

SWEATER:

Kiffe (184-10 Jamaica Avenue, Hollis, N.Y. 11423)

JEANS:

New Man (9 W. 57th St., N.Y.C. 10019)

CALIFORNIA: San Francisco—Wilkes-Bashford; ILLINOIS: Chicago—Ultimo; NEW YORK: New York City—De Noyer; PENNSYLVANIA: Philadelphia—Dimensions

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MIDDY SHIRT:

Tric Trac (37 W. 39th St., N.Y.C. 10016)

CALIFORNIA: Berkeley—Yarmo; ILLINOIS: Chicago—Ultimo; NEW YORK: New York City—Dianne B.

PANTS:

Potential for Men (2 W. 33rd St., N.Y.C. 10001)

D.C.:—Woodward & Lothrop; MICHIGAN: Jacobson's; NEW JERSEY: Newark—Bamberger's

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JACKET:

Fiorucci (127 E. 59th St., N.Y.C. 10022)

NEW YORK: New York City—Fiorucci; Reminiscence

PANTS:

San Lucas (3184 K Airway Ave., Costa Mesa, Cal. 92626)

SCARF:

Glentex (417 Fifth Ave., N.Y.C. 10016)

D.C.:—Garfinkel's

SUNDRESS:

Peter Paris for The Combine

(101 Vallejo St., San Francisco, Cal.)
NEW YORK: New York City—Charivari

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COVERALL:

Mimi Loverde for Adolphe Lafont (116 Franklin St., N.Y.C. 10013)

GEORGIA: Atlanta—T. Edwards; NEW YORK: New York City—Fiorucci; PENNSYLVANIA: Philadelphia—asta de blue

CLOGS:

Olof Daughters (350 Fifth Ave., N.Y.C.)

NEW YORK: New York City—Olof Daughters

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PARKA:

Reminiscence (800 Sixth Ave., N.Y.C. 10001)

CALIFORNIA: San Francisco—Town Squire; GEORGIA: Atlanta—T. Edwards; NEW YORK: New York City—Fiorucci; Reminiscence; WASHINGTON: Seattle—Baby & Co.

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PARACHUTE PANTS:

Reminiscence (800 Sixth Ave., N.Y.C. 10001)

SHIRT:

Tric Trac (37 W. 39th St., N.Y.C. 10016)

CALIFORNIA: Berkeley—Yarmo; ILLINOIS: Chicago—Ultimo; NEW YORK: New York City—Dianne B.

BOOTS:

Clarks (350 Fifth Ave., N.Y.C. 10001)

NEW YORK: New York City—Bloomingdale's; Tip Top Shoes

nation, and my shoulders, and so on, my balance, too; all of me is imaginative and *really there*, not off in some counterfeit or mental dummy. Somehow, I feel that this is what *my* imagination demands—a surrender to the concretely erotic. Now I have told you something private. But I'm not sentimental and won't turn my face. I'm happy to try to say something commensurate with the subject: the erotic imagination, awakened in childhood, passing through an over-brilliant and too gorgeous adolescence and finally put to the service of my Creator. Or *its* Creator—let's leave that to the intellectuals.

Well, some whiskey has arrived and my friends are drinking. I don't. I've had enough, years ago.

"Where's the pizza?"

"Go get some pizza!"

The room turns white. A Pennsylvania hill storm bursts, blots blowing on the windows, a few casual raps from Conan in the night. Frank and Mike shoot off to the pizzeria.

Ellie secrets us off to the bedroom; on the wall hangs a fabulously crammed painting of Frazetta nymphs and satyrs copulating in soft red foam, and he has taken his knife to the bedposts and carved an upright phallus into a vagina on each post. They're not Freudian. We've seen a few sexy doodlings out of the cabinet, too, the sex always undercut by parody.

"He's just got to get into sculpture," Ellie says. She's a short, bright-eyed little blond charmer who has kept her shape by lots of exercise. Her energies are endless; she spills and spills with talk, her eyes as girlishly intent as Frank's are Eastwoodian. "Really, sculpture! He's done it as a painter. He'll just be repeating himself. He's got to get all those muscles into stone. What a husband—he just lives for his home, me, the kids, never wants to go out, only for baseball. He's not like any artist I know, not egocentric, not neurotic. All for the kids. A man."

Rain shakes the big studio windows. Mammoth saurians slouch through the trees. Bolts bang and crack.

"I was trying to play God," she says. "Run the poster business, the house, the kids, Frank's assignments—I answer the phone. But Frank's not selling any originals. There are bids, but we let it be known they're not for sale. The money would just go off in taxes, so we may as well hang onto them. Y'know, you *look* like a writer, I like you. Now, Frank, he can read a man's character instantly on first sight at a hundred yards. I tend to believe more in goodness. I have ESP very strong; I know everything that's going to happen in my family before it happens. I know when deaths are going to occur two weeks before they happen. I know when my husband's going to do *wrong*. It's something in my heart. The *National Lampoon* wanted to do an outer-space crucifixion with Frank's distorted planetary monster figure, for the *Lampoon's* science-fiction-satire issue. I told him: you will be *in trouble*. Don't! But he went ahead—and they even had to

touch up his figure—and it was a four-armed *DISASTER*."

"Do you think the Frazetta Woman has ESP?"

"Oh, sure! I see my eyes in the Frazetta Woman, they have a trance look. That's my body. Those are my belly, my thighs, my etcetera. I got a magic about me only Frank has a big eye for. I see pyramids! I mean *I'm there*. Sand, stones, *big stones*. I'm sure about some Egyptian life in my past."

The storm whangs and pours. The pterodactyls are coming.

Mike and Frank return with boxed pizzas and complaining about Stroudsburg.

"The people walk around like mutants," Frank says. "Cold. People in Brooklyn—one person has more personality than this whole town."

"It's very stoical," Ellie says. "Nobody smiles."

"The kids are gonna grow up nice and dull like everyone else."

"We take the kids to Europe and all around the Continent," she says.

Frank settles down with me, our cigars slipstreaming.

"I think I'm a better line artist than painter. You saw my box of illustrations for Tolkien's Middle-earth and for *Kubla Khan*. I think all these young artists who are imitating me are missing the trick. They don't see I'm just being me.

"I'm very physical minded. Brain, fine, but this body is put here for use. If *anybody* could jump around like my heroes, it's me. Not many artists are physical types. I've been jumped on by twenty guys in a movie theater and got out alive. In Brooklyn I *knew* Conan, I knew guys just like him.

"This popularity, it was inevitable. No surprise. I knew since I was a kid I'd find myself. When I was sixteen and finally saw some professionals at work, I knew I could do that stuff easily. Not technique, not color or drawing—I appeal to the basic feelings. The hamminess in me asks will this audience like it, will the sophisticates think I missed? Is there a little something for everyone? People buy my covers and the authors are reborn. Robert E. Howard, a lot of kids didn't even know who he was. He was no literary genius, but he had some images.

"Talk about influence. Howard Pyle maybe, the father of American illustration. His student, N.C. Wyeth, was shallow by comparison. My main influences are the countless European illustrators. There's a fine line between illustration and fine art. I give more of a fine-art approach with a beginning, a middle and an end. You don't really tire of my stuff. Years go by and they don't fade a bit in interest. To me, people are more terrifying than grass and rocks, which don't move me. I can't do what Andrew Wyeth does. I want *feelings*. My fine-arts background, eight years of it, it had nothing to do with the fantastic stuff I do now. My illustrations pop out of my head. Sometimes I only *lure* you into the text and the painting—I literally leave the text

unillustrated. To hell with what's expected. I'd be less restrained than anyone before me. I pulled the frustration out of current illustration. I wanted the bosom. I *did* bosoms. I do *beautiful* women, so damn pretty—everybody likes to dream—and if ya have 'em in your brush, why not, why not? But I have a fire I haven't tapped out of sheer laziness. One painting, *Downward to Earth*, very strange painting, very surreal, I went all out surreal, total barrage—*what's he doing?*—it won an award! The snobs gave me an award. They've been educated to think there's only one school of Art. They forget Rubens and Michelangelo's superheroic figures, but because mine aren't religious...

"Of course, they are, Frank."

"Aw, that's only content they're quibbling about. The test is time. The impact of my best work never lessens; it only looks better. And better! I'm my own worst critic and I know what the competition has done. But mine holds up, design, color, movement, no gimmicks, plenty of solidity, and form. You don't tire of it. I'm talking about my best work."

"But I carry around a picture in my dreams I'd like to do . . . *wolves* out in Kansas. Realistic, but just a touch of Frazetta, *creatures* of the night. I hope to paint it. It would be fine art, I guess."

"I had a few years in the late Sixties when I went blah, everything cute and show-offy, too deliberate. I have to work from the unconscious, not too unconscious, but just let the brush start pulling things out I didn't know were in there, use accidents, and go with a focal point, and taste, instinct, without being muddled, just flow over the canvas board, follow the mood, the rhythms. I always do best on departures—something new—the first three or four Conans, *fresh!* *Silver Warrior* with the polar bears: that's new, that's crazy—love it! *The Sea Witch*—something different, a departure. I think of Hal Foster doing Prince Valiant year in, year out—a great artist—but I couldn't do it. His early work, the Tarzans, the early Prince Valiant, beautiful! brilliant! too many virtues to name. Me, I want new characters, new action, new blood."

"They told me twenty-five years ago, You don't put bras on your girls! Now, today's women are Frazetta girls, long witchy hair, tits. My tits move, they sway. It's all instinct. I didn't know what I was doing. Crazy. Then I fell into the design trap. I knew too much. And went into a slump. Funny thing about my girls—I'm an ass man. Not a breast man. Oh, I love incredible breasts. But I like ass that brings out the animal in me. They told me, Frank, you paint all those hairs. You just don't have to. They don't know I separate the camel's hairs on my brush and load each hair and just swirl on the hair—ha! Lizards, now, I'm not vain enough to think I can do better than nature. I *echo* nature, a smidgen of it, trees, leaves, a saurian jaw. People who think I invent all these things, they're crazy. I like *real* women! I never

painted a woman to equal a real woman; they're much better. But can you imagine the Egyptian Princess eyeballing you? Coming at you? All those muscles AFTER YOU! Or the Cat Girl, the ultimate Frazetta figure, simian, muscular, she can tear ya apart!"

He holds up a painting of a sex goddess leading two tigers. "This is a repainting, much fiercer now than when it was published before. This is fine art, right side up or upside down. That doesn't happen in an illustration. But this has a white background, so I'd be told it *isn't* fine art. Detail, rendering, realism, everything fine-artsy—these aren't the essence. The essence is suggestion."

Coney Island Frank, boy stroller of boardwalks and oceans, holds out his cigar . . . pow-w-w . . . ending the evening.

"I have to be restrained. Subtle, somber. I'm not a great painter. I know mood and action and concept. It's action that makes the thing erotic, it's the fluid movement of the woman, not the proportions. I love people, I love form, I got to paint lovable monsters, not too much blood, lots of humor, women cute and pudgy. I'm not going to do the great Roman era, I don't have the heart. When I become a bore, I change. I have the freedom now to do whatever I want. No profound message. Just some fine art."

"I did far more than I ever anticipated. I was quite happy doing comics. This whole reaction has pretty much overwhelmed me. What do I do for an encore? Sculpture? Frazetta does everything in a big way! And *my way*." #

Charleston! Charleston!

(Continued from page 113) "Shall I bring you a traveler?" I thought he was already drunk until we straightened out the nomenclature.

Charlestonians are a convivial and enormously sociable race. Yet it is not just their social vivacity or gregariousness that makes them exemplary guests; they are also the world's most accomplished mixers. After spending a lifetime in New York trying to push one cranky egotist into the conversational circle of another, I was astonished and relieved when I gave my first party in Charleston. My guests took to each other like long-lost brothers. Indeed, the analogy is not entirely fanciful. Most Charlestonians can discover, if they try hard enough, some degree of relatedness between themselves and their fellow citizens, even if it be only a third cousin twice removed in a collateral line. This sudden metamorphosis of total strangers into kissin' cousins is but one of many ways in which you see how incredibly inbred the population of Charleston is.

Another is the endless repetition of the same quaint names: Rhett, Ravenel, Manigault, Pinckney, Heyward, Gibbes, Rutledge. Yet another sign is the physical homogeneity of the local population. I wouldn't say that if you've seen one, you've seen them all, but after you've seen enough Charlestonians, you

understand the meaning of the term "gene pool." Charlestonians start off small, neat folk, with short legs, long torsos and duck asses, and spread by middle age into Queen Anne chairs. Their pink skins, blond polls and comely snub-nosed faces suggest the fair, fleshy look of their English or Barbadian ancestors.

Sometimes the ancestral look is so strong that you feel a stiff old portrait has stepped down from the wall, wrapped a paper napkin around its glass and turned to smile and talk to you in precisely the same accent and the same wry-necked, stiff-backed attitude that you see in eighteenth-century engravings or porcelain statuary. This archaic look was snapped into startling focus last year when Americans began dressing up like their Colonial ancestors. In most parts of the country this assumption of old clothing was ridiculous: big post-hippie lops and beer-bellied businessmen, clowning around like the cast of burlesque musical comedy. In Charleston, the effect was so becoming that I felt for the first time I was seeing my neighbors correctly dressed.

Charlestonians are proud of the fact that they do not talk with a Southern drawl. After alcohol, speech is the South's greatest addiction, and styles of speech count for as much in this part of the country as do styles of dress in New York. The first thing that impressed me, as an English professor, about the speech of Charlestonians was that it was colored by long, close-mouthed vowels that are known in the trade as "continental" vowels. The English student learns about these vowels, comparable to those hard-to-pronounce French vowels and German umlauts, when he studies Chaucer, but of course the sounds continued into the early modern English of the seventeenth century, when the first colonizers arrived in this country. When a Charlestonian speaks with this classic accent—which makes English "house" rhyme with French "mousse"—the effects are of a very gentle stroking and soothing of the auditory nerve. The voice is invariably low, resonant and well modulated; the tempo is best described as *largo*.

After the nervous, impatient speech of New York, especially the fast-talking worlds of Broadway and Madison Avenue, it is at first astonishing and then utterly exasperating to hear anyone speak at this sedan-chair pace. You find yourself constantly smirking and interjecting little signs of agreement or surprise, or practically dancing a jig in your head as you wait for this honey dipper, this mortar spreader, to round his period and wind up his yarn. (If you're really desperate, you may even find yourself interrupting rudely, just to allow yourself to breathe.)

Charlestonians do not all speak in this solemn plainsong (which makes a woman of twenty-eight sound on the phone like a middle-age matron): there are those who have a totally distinct manner of speech, which is all hill and dale, start and stop, quirk and