

Why I Created Professor Knestor Jackdaws

By Jim Meskimen

You may or may not be aware that about a year and a half ago I reinvented myself.

I didn't really set out to reinvent myself, it just happened.

Here's how it began:

Long ago, when I was a confused and meandering art student at UC Santa Cruz, there was one teacher whose opinions and viewpoint I clung to as a sailor adrift on the sea will cling to a piece of flotsam. His name was Jasper Rose.

He was a Brit, with long white hair and bangs that framed his slightly beefy, always ruddy cheeked face. His black eyebrows arched with almost Spock-like defiance towards opposite sides of the compass, and he always sported a bow tie, a Harris tweed jacket and a cane, for he had a subtle limp.

His passion for teaching was remarkable. His lectures, whether for 200 students or for six, were never canned or by rote as those of other teachers lamentably were; indeed, he had a strong intention and ambition to do something only naive or brilliant teachers do— to have a positive impact on every student within the sound of their voice.

For a time, I MAJORED in Jasper Rose.

I took five courses from him. He helped me navigate the early Greeks, Egyptians, Romans, the Renaissance, and the modern periods, right up to Picasso.

A bibliophile and collector of rare books, he invited several of us students for a special course in book illustration that he held in the mahogany paneled library of his home, a Victorian mansion near a rustic Santa Cruz graveyard.

He gave assignments for us to try and emulate various artists by copying simple drawings by Daumier, Picasso and others, and then had the ability, by dint of his affectionate way, to critique each one without in any way offending the student, helping and never judging.

To say that I absorbed his personality would be an understatement. After a two hour lecture, I would view the redwood forests and lovely seaside vistas of Santa Cruz in a completely fresh way, as I limped back to my student housing, my thoughts continually enunciated in his Oxford accented prose.

So, thirty years or so later, when I was searching around for an entertaining way for me to express certain things about art and culture, I stumbled upon the mental portfolio I had stocked full of the nuances and exclamations of Jasper Rose, and created a tribute to him in my Professor Knestor Jackdaws, (a name that

at first glance seems to be a recombination of the letters in “Jasper Rose”, but doesn’t, yet still carries a bit of the flavor of his uniquely evocative monicker.)

I hired a very talented Hollywood makeup man to create the signature teeth that help give Knestor his own sound and look. (Jasper Rose’s teeth were not particularly prominent, especially when overshadowed by his vaulting dark eyebrows.)

The reason why I have continued to develop the character, who now after many live performances and dozens of travelogue YouTube videos, has his very own life, viewpoint and collection of peculiarities, is because I have noticed that audiences continually remark on how much they enjoy seeing a work of art created in mid air as in his Virtual Museum.

It is the amount of audience contribution that is inconspicuously woven into it that makes The Virtual Museum such a hit with people; indeed, they see the painting as clearly as I do at the end. If that isn’t audience participation I don’t know what is.

In any case, I am eternally grateful for professor Jasper Rose, (who I am told is still alive and probably lecturing in England somewhere; if anyone knows how to contact him, please tell me) and not only for the unknowing loan of his persona, distorted as it is by yours truly, but mainly for his passion and interest in artistic expression, and his dedication to passing on that passion to others.

I find inspiring others with art, my own and that of others, is an eternal source of pleasure to me, and I am very happy when I am doing it. (You can see Knestor as a guest lecturer at my upcoming show, JIMPRESSIONS, March 25th & 26th, 2011 at [The Acting Center](#).)

Who knows? Maybe someone will be imitating me thirty years hence, for a similarly noble and/or silly purpose, and adding to the character their own refinements. As long as it is in the service of inspiring others to look at and enjoy art in all its variety, I will be pleased indeed.

The End