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From Chapter 6: The Arts

The bull of Manhattan

The 3,200 kg bronze bull in Bowling Green Park in the Financial District represents the prosperity of Wall Street and it was sculpted by Arturo Di Modica, a Sicilian from Vittoria born in 1941. The bull was sculpted in his workshop-home at 54 Crosby Street that he literally built with his own hands. Di Modica has sculpted since, as an adolescent, he used to go to the workshop of the master cart maker in his town, where he worked with olive wood, helping to shape the characters of the Sicilian puppets. His father didn’t like his passion for carving and one day flung a chair at him. After that, still an adolescent and with a few liras in his pocket, Di Modica left Vittoria for Florence where he stayed for twelve years, he studied, he perfected his

craft and in the end he clashed with the interests of the galleries that wanted to dictate to him what he had to produce and how to exhibit it. In 1971, when he got the opportunity to put on a show in New York he crossed the ocean on a voyage that changed his whole life. In Manhattan he found an art world where “sculptors create and are free to exhibit.” It was the possibility of being independent that pushed him to stay. His first house was at 127 Grand Street but his challenge was to build himself a new house from scratch, one that could also function as a workshop. He found the piece of land on Crosby Street (which is now part of Soho), he erected a fence and began to build. He found, carried and assembled everything by himself: lime, beams and bricks. He worked by night in his undershirt. He raised the building floor by floor. He bought four jacks for armored tanks to support the roof that he raised every night a few centimeters. Then with a few Hispanic workers he finished the job, digging out two floors underground. In this environment, built by himself from nothing, he decided that he wanted to “help New York” when in the fall of 1987 the market crash swept over Wall Street and hurled the metropolis into its worst nightmare. “I thought of the bull because it’s the symbol of prosperity, I worked sparing no costs, it took everything I had to purchase the materials.” Until the night of December 15th that year when he brought the giant bull by crane and placed it right in front of the entrance to the New York Stock Exchange. It was a way of spurring the markets to pick up again, the city to rise again. But the following day the metropolis was taken by surprise and the tabloids put the mysterious bull on the front page. Richard Grasso, however, the Italian American who was President of the New York Stock Exchange in 1988, didn’t much appreciate the exploit and he ordered the bull be moved, and it vanished out of sight. Di Modica didn’t give up, he went in search of his artifact, which wasn’t too easy to hide, scouring the city until he found it in a police warehouse in Queens. He had to pay a heavy fine to redeem it but he paid what was due and got back to business. “The arm wrestle with Grasso was tough,” he remembers, “he wanted at all costs for me to sculpt a bear too because in the world of finance it symbolizes the downward markets, but I didn’t want to do it, what was important for me was prosperity.” A compromise was reached when Bowling Green was chosen as the new location for the bull, and it still stands there today where its tail is caressed by tourists who want to be photographed beside it, on top of it and under it, because they’re convinced it will bring them good luck. For Di Modica, it marked the beginning of the bull phase: there are five copies of the original which were recently bought by the British philanthropist Joe Lewis, then he sculpted others (different in color and in positioning of the hooves) for the Shanghai Expo, and now he’s working on a third set destined for Vladimir Putin’s Moscow. “New York, Shanghai and Moscow form a triangle of prosperity that must also be a triangle of peace” he states, identifying in his bulls a strong symbolic element that is “capable of uniting the world.”

The other value in which Di Modica believes is “the memory of the past as a source of wealth for Sicily.” This is the reason why, whenever he can, he returns to Vittoria to work on the “project of my dreams”: two giant bronze horses, both 30 meters high, destined to form one sculpture in the Ippari Valley through which the eponymous river flows. In the belly of each horse there will be a history museum, one about Ragusa and the other dedicated to Vittoria. “Sicily is dying, Third world countries are stealing our jobs and well-being,” he says explaining the motivation that drives him, “the only way to save it is by attracting tourism and by reevaluating our history which is our wealth.” When the horses will be in place in the valley beside the river, Di Modica plans on organizing “big displays of naval battles between vessels that will be identical to those of the ancient Roman and Greece,” so that “my valley will attract people from all over the world, allowing it to be reborn.” This is why he buys land so that he will have enough space for his horses, he funds his international art school, he builds structures, and he sculpts. With this same passion he builds bronze doors in Hong Kong, fountains in Kuala Lumpur and bulls in Shanghai. “I work in Asia, I live in New York and I love my native Sicily” he repeats gesturing as he sits at a table at Cipriani on West Broadway. He designed the restaurant himself and helped start it up fifteen years ago, making, with his own hands, the iron stools benches and tables that are still part of the decor. The place with yellow curtains at 376 West Broadway is “my second home” and his friendship with the owner Giuseppe Cipriani is “very close.” When he’s not working at his new house at 253 Church Street, he spends his time here, drinking only tea. He sold the building on Crosby Street a few years ago after a very ambitious project fell through: he had invested 1.2 million dollars to create a pub on the underground levels of the house where the artists of Manhattan could meet, exhibit their work and speak to the public informally, building objects of all sizes and types to decorate the different spaces. But at the 11th hour City hall denied him the permit to set up shop “and you know what I did then? I told them they were animals and went home, I closed myself inside and I destroyed everything that I had built with my own hands, everything.” His passion was just as intense in the destruction as it had been in the construction. And now, at just over seventy years of age, he lives commuting back and forth between Church Street and the foundries of Wyoming where the new bulls of the XXI century are being created.