

EVER-PAINTING NEIMAN SALUTED AT FRIARS

BY ALLAN KREDA

Conjuring images of the proverbial "good life" without Friar LeRoy Neiman's art would be akin to champagne without bubbles or an oliveless martini. Few have experienced life in the manner of the globetrotting colorist who has captured on canvas and even cocktail napkin virtually everyone who is anyone during his illustrious career.

Thus, the Monastery salute of the peripatetic artist by fellow Friars was wholly deserved. The evening before a packed house was a rollicking good time thanks to performances by Friars Pat Cooper, Stewie Stone, Mickey Freeman, Larry Storch, Sal Viviano, Julie Budd, Sal Richards, Gianni Russo and Dean Freddie Roman. Broadway producer Friar Irv Welzer who has been a close friend of Neiman's for many, many years, along with Friar Herb Blodgett who is also the president of the Players Club, produced the picture-perfect event.

Friar Mark Simone was the evening's Master of Ceremonies, commenting that Neiman's color-bursting painting style is definitive. "Blurry," Simone stated.

Sports legends also made the trek to 55th Street. Former New York Met stars and Friars Keith



Top row: Friar Sal Viviano, Friar Julie Budd, Dean Freddie Roman, Friar Herb Blodgett, Friar Pat Cooper, Friar Gianni Russo, Larry Holmes, Friar Keith Hernandez, Friar Rusty Staub, Friar Mark Simone
Front row: Friar LeRoy Neiman, Friar Ambassador Joseph Zappala, Friar Hon. David Dinkins, Friar Stewie Stone, Friar Irv Welzer, Friar Mickey Freeman, Friar Dick Capri, Larry Storch

Hernandez and Rusty Staub came to applaud Neiman as did ex-heavyweight boxing champion Larry Holmes. "LeRoy is my friend, and he's one of kind," said Holmes, whose reign spanned 1978-1985. "I had to be here for him!"

Often portrayed as the ultimate man-about-town, Neiman through the decades could be found surveying the scene at a Las Vegas blackjack table, mingling with the well-heeled in Monte Carlo or



Producer Friars Irv Welzer and Herb Blodgett

perusing the paddock prior to the Kentucky Derby. He attended countless Super Bowls, World Series, prizefights and Olympic Games. He always made the mundane magical. Luminaries continue to seek him out to immortalize them in a "Neiman." Yet he remains unfailingly modest.

"Sure I'm a maverick, and sure I have been everywhere," says Neiman, who lives and works at the landmark Hotel des Artistes just off Central Park. "But I'm a minor celebrity at best. The only

reason I went where I've gone is because I was there as an artist."

With his ever-present but usually unlit cigar and signature handlebar mustache, Neiman is practically a caricature of himself. He professes no need or



Larry Holms, Friar Irv Welzer, Friar Pat Cooper

desire to tout his image or accentuate his accomplishments. After all, his inimitable style featuring people and places portrayed in vivid color speaks for itself. Even the least art-aware of us know when we are gazing at his color-splashed renderings.

"I'm a maverick by realization but I didn't set out to become one," he adds. "Frank Sinatra and I discussed the importance of doing something your way. That has always been important to me, and I feel pretty good that I have always made my own decisions. You can't change who or what you are."

The evening's festivities at the Friars included the Chairman of the Board, whose portrait by Neiman graces the dining room. Performers made sure to acknowledge Sinatra's image, though Friar Cooper needed extra time to surmise the identity of the colorful swirls.

"It took me a half hour to realize that was Sinatra," the angry but always funny comedian quipped. "LeRoy, paint something we can figure out!"



Friars Sal Viviano, Julie Budd, Gianni Russo

Neiman didn't mind. Dressed in a trademark white suit, he laughed along with fellow Friars thoroughly basking in the attention. He began drawing as a youngster on grocery store windows in his native St. Paul, Minnesota and quickly became cognizant of his unique ability.

"I could always draw and use color and my family needed money. So I would draw a turkey, a cow or a fish with the prices on windows around town," Neiman recalls. "Then I would draw the guy who owned the store. I thought that was pretty clever."

Neiman joined the Army in 1942 and went to Europe. Again, his artistic aptitude was the difference. "I discovered many ways to exploit my talent," muses the former Army cook. "I started painting murals on mess hall walls, which developed into my work finding its way into officers' clubs. One thing led to another and because of my art, I met show business personalities like Mickey Rooney and Marlene Dietrich while I was overseas."

After his Army discharge, Neiman studied at the St. Paul Gallery and School of Art. He later enrolled at the Art Institute of Chicago. "I took every kind of class there was," remembers Neiman. "I wanted to soak it all up." Neiman started concentrating on offbeat subjects not considered appropriate for the "serious" artist. He

took a liking to painting people in nightclubs, boxing gyms and jazz clubs.

During the early 1950s, Neiman also was working as a fashion illustrator for the department store Carson Pirie Scott in Chicago. There he met a young copywriter named Hugh Hefner. The twentysomething artist began contributing to *Playboy's* early issues and his sketches of the "Femlin" character still appear on the magazine's "party joke" page, flip side of the centerfold.



Friar Irv Welzer, Dean Freddie Roman, Friar LeRoy Neiman

Centerfolds became his subjects and many hours were spent sharing time with celebrities at the Playboy mansion in Chicago. "It was all fantasy," Neiman says of *Playboy's* allure. "If we didn't have fantasy in this world, where would we be?"

Neiman also has seen a metamorphosis of the casino scene from the underworld tough-guy hangouts of yesteryear to the mainstream antiseptic arenas of today. "I first went into a Vegas casino before Caesar's Palace (opened 1966) was built," he remembers. "At the time, gamblers acted like gangsters. The places were full of smoke, and they were called 'carpeted casinos.' There always were guys vacuuming. And there were always prostitutes circling about. There was a magic about those places that doesn't exist today."

So how does the famous Friar view himself? "I am an artist that responds to his time. I have always felt that I have been part of every generation," he reveals. "I think I have exceeded my limitations, and I think I did better than I expected to do. I also think I have improved more than I thought I would."

Richard Lynch, president of Hammer Galleries in New York, which has marketed and displayed Neiman's work for more than four decades, was present at the Monastery for LeRoy's salute. Lynch marveled at the colorist's supreme staying power.

"No one even comes close to his popularity," offers Lynch. "The word legend is used too often but LeRoy absolutely is one. People love action in art, and that is what LeRoy captures best. He is a social commentator who is honest."

Of course, no discussion of LeRoy Neiman would be complete without his thoughts on cigars. He's had one as part of his persona ever since Salvador Dali advised him many moons ago it was a good prop. "I'll admit that I am very fussy about cigars, food and wine," he says. "I like to smoke the best cigars, and I still do because people are always giving them to me."

Along with the cigar, there's also that famous mustache. Also a prop? "Sure," he states. "You have to hang on to whatever it is that identifies you. We each have only so much. The minute you try to be or do something that is not you, it won't work."

As he headed home following his special Friars night, Neiman flashed a smile through his memorable moustache. "Nice night, wasn't it?" he whispered. "It's great to be thought of so well at the Friars Club!"

Which begs a question: Is there a formal label that can be applied to a body of work influenced by everyone from Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec to Jackson Pollock, Leonardo Da Vinci to Vincent Van Gogh? Is LeRoy Neiman the American Impressionist? An Abstract Expressionist? Or a Realist? "A friend once told me that my style is 'Neimanism,'" he says, "which I guess it is."