

Character Studies

The obscured letters and literary figures in Thomas Chimes's paintings reflect his various obsessions

BY JUDY WEST

Jag är en eremit” reads a handwritten scrap of paper pinned to the bulletin board in Tom Chimes’s Philadelphia studio. “It’s Swedish for ‘I am a hermit,’” explains the 77-year-old artist, whose daughter, Eva, is married to a Swede. And although this loquacious man hardly fits the description, he does have some decidedly solitary habits.

Living alone in his studio on the fifth floor of an imposing brownstone just steps from gracious Rittenhouse Square, as he has since his divorce 18 years ago, Chimes is at the center of things, but somehow removed. It’s quiet up here in this skylit aerie, devoid of all but the most basic furniture—a table, a bed, a chair, a lamp—and his paintings.

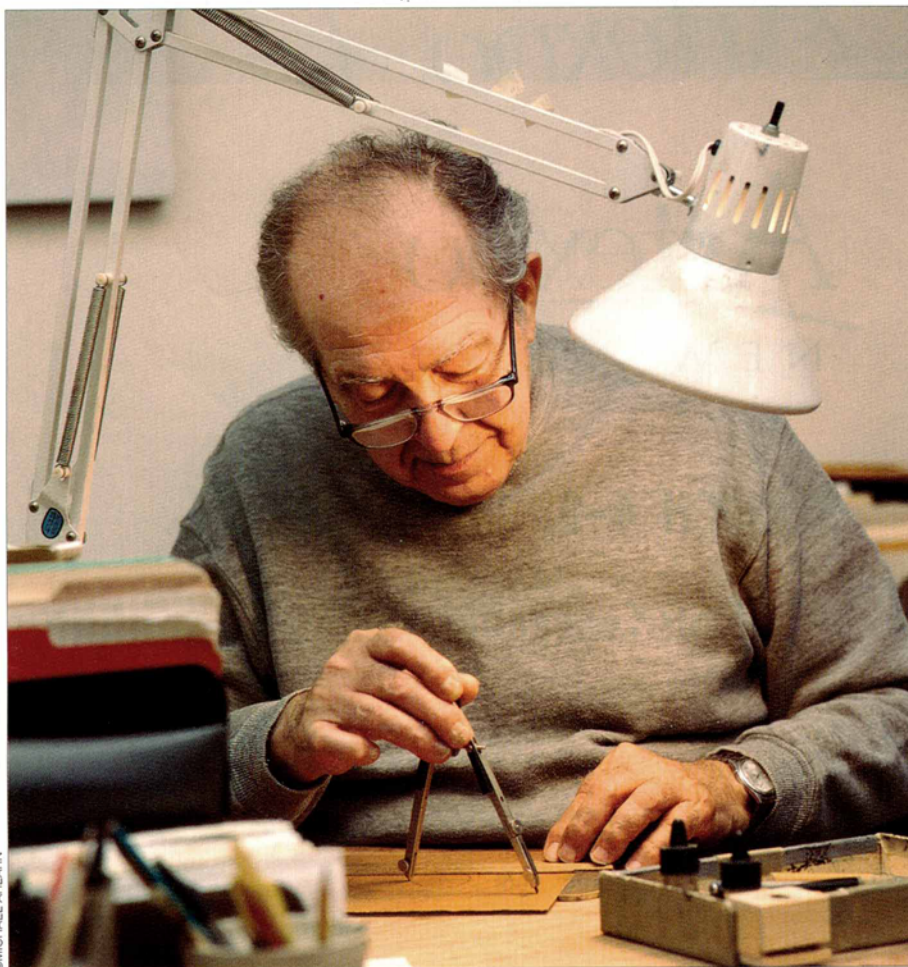
From a distance, the works appear to be blank gray panels, but closer inspection reveals faint lines, glyphs, circles, spirals, and barely decipherable Greek characters. The surfaces are ambiguous, shifting—some marks raised braille-like, others half-buried beneath layers of scumbled and wiped paint. Chimes’s work has been labeled hermetic, cryptic, frustratingly personal. The Greek-born artist doesn’t deny its mystery. “Often,” he says, “I’ll look at something and say, ‘Did I do that? What in the world?’ Then I have to go back and think about what I did. It’s like Duchamp said—you do it and then you try to figure out what the hell you’ve got.”

Since his days at New York’s Art Students League 50 years ago, Chimes has been fascinated with the idea of art as salvation. As an adolescent living in Philadelphia, he discovered clay during a period of depression and clung to art as the only thing that would see him through. His parents, however, did not encourage his interest. “Their desires for me were quite different,” recalls Chimes. “My father saw a career in the military. My mother saw business.”

Fate intervened when the young Chimes, who was working for a subway newsstand company, got into a fight, was injured, and received \$500 in compensation. Chimes put the windfall into a savings account, and in the autumn of 1939 used it to enroll at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. But his studies there lasted only three months, owing both to his family’s efforts to discourage him and to a stint in the United States Army.

In 1946, thanks to the G.I.

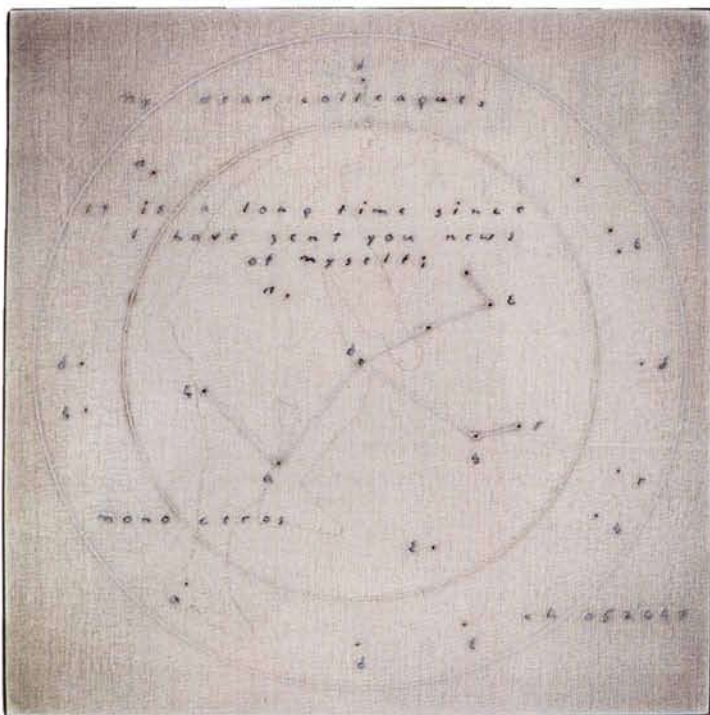
Bill, Chimes was able to return to art, this time at the Art Students League. There he befriended sculptor Michael Lekakis, through whom he met Barnett Newman, Tony Smith, William Baziotis, Robert Motherwell, and other prominent artists living in New York City.



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Chimes sees his work as “pages in a book, each painting growing from the one that preceded it.”

COURTESY LOCKS GALLERY



The artist has found a kindred spirit in the modernist French writer Alfred Jarry, whose work and form emerges in many of his paintings, including *CH 06.09.97*.

Avid and curious, he questioned them about why they made art. Motherwell, for one, said, "If I hadn't gone into art, I would have been a basket case," reports Chimes. "And I thought, 'Gee! We're all the same.'"

Chimes is best known for a series of 48 portraits he painted between 1973 and 1978 of literary figures—including Guillaume Apollinaire, Edgar Allan Poe, James Joyce, Marcel Proust, and Alfred Jarry—executed in a burnt umber that recalls 19th-century daguerreotypes and set within exquisitely crafted wood frames.

While each of the subjects expressed a kind of obsession with which the artist identified, it was Jarry for whom Chimes felt a particular affinity. The author of the Surrealist play *Ubu Roi* has been a recurring motif in his work ever since. Chimes first encountered the early modernist French poet and playwright in a book on Picasso by Museum of Modern Art director Alfred Barr, who bought two of Chimes's works for the Modern (and one for himself) in the 1960s. Beginning in the 1980s, Jarry began appearing again in a series of luminous white panels, his form—often on a bicycle—emerging slowly like a memory, half-observed by translucent veils of paint. Now he is everywhere in Chimes's work—in text from his stories; in the form of the letter Y, which he claimed was the true form of the cross; in abstracted renderings of him.

On Chimes's bookshelves, the Bible shares space with Meros Kafatos's *The Unconscious Universe*, Peterson's *Astronomy*, a Latin volume entitled *Mysterium Coniunctiones*, and Chimes's own sacred text, *Selected Works of Alfred Jarry*. "I'm not going to absorb all this stuff," says Chimes. "What I'm looking for are connections. Like Proust talks about when he takes the madeleine and dips it in his tea, and the childhood

experience comes rushing right before his eyes. That connecting factor is absolutely important."

Working only with titanium white and Mars black since the mid-1980s, Chimes meticulously layers his paint, applying it horizontally, always left to right. "Then I draw," explains Chimes. "I sit down and think about my next step, and now I'm thinking of my work, almost like pages in a book, each painting growing from the one that preceded it." Using a compass equipped with a knife, he draws circles and fills the channel with wood filler to achieve a distinctive, raised edge. Symbols and words are drawn in india ink, painted over, wiped, then drawn in again.

He leaves his studio just once a day—all those stairs to climb—to visit Locks Gallery (where the prices for his works range from \$2,500 for the small monochromatic paintings up to \$25,000 for some of the larger white-panel canvases from the 1980s), to run errands, or to have lunch with his son, Dmitri, who owns three popular restaurants in town. But he's not lonely. "If I live to be a thousand years old," he says, "always there's a next step, and it's emotional, intriguing, fascinating. You don't know exactly how it's all going to wind up. That curiosity, and that impulse to keep moving as an artist, produces work." And besides, he has his paintings for company. "When I spot them, there's an immediate glowing, and it's like, 'Oh, yes.'" ■

Judy West is a freelance writer and editor who lives in Philadelphia.



MICHAEL AHEARN

Working only in black and white, Chimes draws symbols and words, paints over them, wipes, and then draws them again.