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THE KING OF THE CREEKS

For nearly 40 years, Negros sugar heir Alfonso Ossorio and his partner, Ted Dragon, ruled over The Creeks, the largest waterfront estate on Long Island, where the Filipino-American artist became a great patron to Jackson Pollock and hosted the grandest parties the Hamptons had ever seen. **Tats Rejante Manahan** finds a real-life Gatsby whose immense wealth overshadowed his tortured, tormented brilliance

THE KING'S COURT. An aerial view of The Creeks, whose glittering parties demanded the company of artists from Rothko to Duchamp, and social figures from Capote to the King of Spain. Photo by Russell Turiak / Getty Images.

On August 11, 1956, on the way to a benefit concert hosted by a wealthy Filipino-American artist-collector in his East Hampton mansion, a dangerously inebriated Jackson Pollock decided that he didn't want to attend the party after all.

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The painter was driving his green Oldsmobile, still intoxicated after an afternoon of heavy drinking. In the passenger seat was his 26-year-old mistress, art student and ex-model Ruth Kligman, and her friend, Edith Metzger. His wife, Lee Krasner, had just gone away to Europe, angered by Pollock's affair.

Outside the gates of The Creeks, the artist-collector's grand estate, he suddenly swung a big U-turn in a violent rage. The girls pleaded desperately for him to stop. Speeding down the wooded highway, Pollock smashed into a tree and was thrown several yards out of the car, killing him on impact. Kligman survived, Metzger was crushed.

As the distant echo of ambulance sirens drifted into The Creeks, the artist-collector—who on many occasions had rescued Pollock from his drunken escapades—received a telephone call informing him of his dear friend's death.

As he silently wept over Pollock's split-skulled corpse, splayed on the ground in a pool of blood, he covered the painter's face with a handkerchief embroidered with his monogram: A.O.

THE BEAUTIFUL AND THE DAMNED. Alfonso Osorio, 42, at a Grace Hartigan exhibit in New York's Tibor de Nagy Gallery, 1959. Photo by Fred W. McDarrah via Getty Images.

Alfonso Ossorio, a Harvard-educated heir to a sugar-refining fortune in Negros Occidental, Philippines, was at the center of Hamptons society for nearly 40 years. An artist ahead of his time and a staunch supporter of Abstract Expressionism, Ossorio's prolific artistic output was as well known as his wealth.

In 1997, *Newsday* labeled him as "The Man Who Had Too Much." "For all [his] accomplishments, [his] wealth was often a major distraction, the money obscuring his talent, spreading his reputation as a dilettante; his cultured manners disguising his passion," the article noted. "His work was purchased by only a few collectors who liked his particular style. But, of course, he didn't have to sell anything to make a living. The result was a poor little rich kid never quite taken seriously."

"In our culture, we tend to expect artists to be poor and bohemian and suffering," says Klaus Kertess, a former curator

of the Whitney Museum. “It is hard for people to accept the fact that someone who is wealthy might still be a good artist.”

Born into a life of tremendous affluence in Manila on August 2, 1916, Ossorio was the fourth of six sons of Don Miguel J. Ossorio, a Spanish sugar baron who founded the North Negros Sugar Company in 1917 and the Victorias Milling Company in 1919, both situated in the island province of Negros Occidental. His mother, Maria Paz Yangco, descended from a wealthy Chinese-Filipino shipping clan. “It was a world of being taken care of,” Ossorio once said of his life in Negros. “Each child had his own nurse. You never took your own shoes off.” His father would later live in America, and his mother in Europe. The family would gather mainly for summer holidays in seaside resort towns such as San Sebastian in Spain and Saint-Jean-de-Luz in France.

His downline lineage begot two well-established artists on both sides. On his father’s maternal Luzurriaga line is filmmaker Peque Gallaga; and on his mother’s side, the Yangcos, is the late artist Anita Magsaysay-Ho. (Though not related by blood, genealogy from this end traces the shared ancestry to an alleged affair between Ossorio’s grandfather, Luis Yangco, and Magsaysay-Ho’s grandmother, Ramona Arguelles vda. de Corpus, that bore them a son, Teodoro Yangco, presumably out of wedlock.)

At eight years old, Ossorio left the Philippines and studied in England, then later at Rhode Island’s Portsmouth Priory, a Benedictine school whose motto “*Laborare Est Orare*” (To Work Is to Pray) made a strong impression on him. It would unwittingly become a motivating mantra in his career. It was from here that religion, oftentimes subject to his own musings and philosophies, began to figure quite prominently in his lifework. An early piece, *Sidrach, Misach and Abednego*, which depicted the prophet Daniel’s three companions in the Babylonian exile of the Jews, was praised by critics for its “strong composition with balanced decorative detail,” but called it “fairly grotesque.” Ossorio’s fascination for Christian iconography ran deep, as evidenced by “Spiritual Influences on the Visual Image of Christ,” his senior thesis at Harvard University, where he graduated with a Fine Arts degree in 1938.

His work was a hybrid of excellent draftsmanship, which critics compared to Durer’s, and had an added quirkiness associated with surrealism. His portrait of Bridget Hubrecht, a Spanish-Irish divorcee whom Ossorio married against his parents’ will in 1940, had the deftness of illustration, depicting her head emerging from a conical seashell, each tendril of hair articulated, highlighting her Pre-Raphaelite beauty. His attention to anatomical perfection sometimes verged on cadaverous, if only to underscore a kind of deathly foreboding, which he captured in the glassy stares of his subjects.

That same year, following his discovery by legendary Manhattan art dealer Betty Parsons, Ossorio held his first exhibit at the Wakefield Gallery, where he eventually had five solo exhibits. It was also Parsons who picked up Jackson Pollock after his patron, the heiress Peggy Guggenheim, closed her famed gallery, Art of This Century, and moved to Venice, where her museum of modern art now stands.

“A certain morbidness clings to [Ossorio’s] beautifully executed watercolors and drawings . . . a surcharged religious symbolism is also in evidence,” Howard Devree described his work in *The New York Times*. Classical subjects such as “Apollo and Daphne,” as well as religious-inspired, albeit dark Biblical themes such as “Job on the Dung Heap” belied his Catholic indoctrination.

His marriage to Bridget Hubrecht, whom he lived with in D.H. Lawrence’s New Mexico ranch, was brief: a month after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, on January 6, 1941, the Ossorios separated. Shortly after, he was hit by a taxi and broke his leg. Conjecture has it that Ossorio’s possible depression over his broken marriage, anxiety over the opening of his second exhibit, and a growing guilt may have caught him off kilter. Suppressed by a somewhat Victorian upbringing, the “guilt,” it is presumed, was in his confirmation and acceptance of his attraction to the same sex, and later, his voracious appetite for pornography—particularly of colored men. Hubrecht, who was purportedly an opium addict, died that same year.

In his second exhibit, following the accident, the mix of the beautiful and the morbid was even more pronounced. He was drafted into the army as he recovered from his injury, and was assigned to Mayo General Hospital in Galesburg, Illinois, where he did medical drawings for three years, perched on a ladder above an operating table while emergency cases were being treated. The blood, gore, entrails, and various cases of war-induced atrocities would become the ghoulish inspiration for his paintings. He continued these sketches even after his discharge from the army in 1946. Twenty-two of these drawings were exhibited at the Mortimer Brandt Gallery in New York and he was labeled by critics as “a surrealist,” “a classic draftsman with a fantastic vision,” one that was “tortured.” “Dali is kid stuff compared with [Ossorio’s] weird demonic visions,” critic Emily Genauer commented. What followed for the artist was a period of deep confusion.

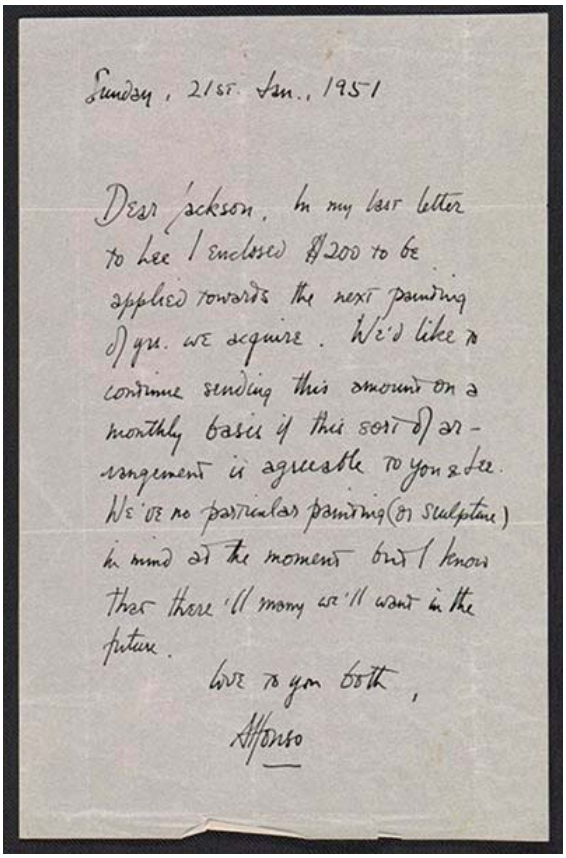
In the summer of 1948, he met the dancer Edward “Ted” Dragon Young. According to Steven Gaines, author of

Philistines at the Hedgerow, an explosive book on the Hamptons' most eccentric personalities, their meeting was nothing short of an idyllic pastorale.

Ossorio, who had rented a house for the summer in the Berkshire Mountains of Massachusetts, was sketching in a meadow engulfed by wild summer flowers. Dragon, who was also there as a scholar of dance company Jacob's Pillow, was traipsing in the same meadow picking nosegays.

After a "peripatetic courtship" that lasted until the following spring, the 33-year-old painter asked the 25-year-old dancer to move in with him.

The son of a French-Canadian mother and a restaurateur father, Dragon first aspired to be a concert pianist. Later, he took up ballet, first casted as a Broadway chorus boy in the 1941 production of Agnes de Mille's *One Touch of Venus*. (It was de Mille who told Dragon to omit "Young" from his name.) Although his dance background was limited to training at a local YMCA, his handsome angular features, natural stage presence, and flair for the dramatic helped him realize his goal of dancing ballet, earning him roles at the Paris Opera and New York City Ballet. His partnership with Ossorio would last almost 50 years until Ossorio's death in 1990, which made him the artist's sole heir and executor of all his properties.



Sunday, 21st Jan., 1951

Dear Jackson, In my last letter to Lee I enclosed $200 to be applied towards the next painting of yrs. we acquire. We'd like to continue sending this amount on a monthly basis if this sort of arrangement is agreeable to you & Lee. We've no particular painting (or sculpture) in mind at the moment but I know that there'll many we'll want in the future.

Love to you both,

Alfonso

(http://rogue.ph/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/ossorio-2.jpg)

THIS SIDE OF PARADISE. A 1951 letter to Pollock from Ossorio, his greatest patron. Letter courtesy of the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institute.

In the spring of 1949, Ossorio purchased the first of many works of Jackson Pollock, whom he called "the man who had gone beyond Picasso." It was a large 8×4 panel entitled *Number 5*, purchased from Betty Parsons's gallery for $1,500 and the only Pollock painting sold in the exhibit.

Dragon recalled Ossorio saying, "You'll be very surprised by the painting that's going to be delivered today. I don't think you'll like it at all. It's by a painter named Jackson Pollock—and it's all drips!" When the painting arrived damaged, Parsons arranged for Pollock and his wife, Lee Krasner, to have a look, so that it could be fixed in "The Springs," Pollock's home in East Hampton.

Ossorio and Dragon, curious to see the Hamptons for the first time, loaded *Number 5* into their Ford station wagon and drove out to see Pollock. It was, to them, a shock to discover his living conditions: a 200-hundred-year-old tumbledown house with no heating (save for an old stove) in the midst of nowhere, which Ossorio described as "lamentable

borderline squalor."

When Pollock finally returned the "restored" painting, it was, much to Ossorio's surprise and horror, an entirely different work. Nevertheless, Ossorio politely accepted it. By then, the two artists had forged a most unlikely friendship: Pollock, a homophobic drunkard who was known in New York art circles to eat with his hands and unabashedly paw at women; and Ossorio, a handsome, soft-spoken, boarding school-mannered homosexual artist, who became the biggest collector and staunchest patron of Pollock. Throughout his life, Pollock received a $200 monthly stipend from Ossorio, who would even pay for his weekly theater trips to watch Westerns or sci-fi movies. Pollock's *Lavender Mist* (1950) had been singled out by Ossorio as his potential masterpiece when he purchased it for $3,000. True to his discerning eye, the work is now the most coveted of Pollock's oeuvre.

If there was one artist whom both men admired, it was the French modernist Jean Dubuffet, whom Ossorio promptly visited in Paris upon the suggestion of Pollock. Dubuffet was not well known in America, yet his concerns about denying "the validity of past academic traditions" were all too familiar to both Pollock and Ossorio.

Like Ossorio, Dubuffet came from a comfortable background, but the French avant-garde master pursued art at a much later stage in life, first working in his family business before plunging himself entirely into an art form he called L'Art Brut, which he defined as raw works "uncontaminated by artistic culture" and the "hangovers of classical or fashionable art." Ossorio thoroughly bought into this view, once more a kind of rebellion to the structures that defined his life.

ALFONSO'S APOCALYPSE. Detail of 'The Last Judgment (Angry Christ)'. Photo via 'Art After War: 1948-1969' by Patrick D. Flores.

Dubuffet's aesthetic was greatly influenced by psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn's 1922 book, *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*. This influence, in turn, resonated with Ossorio profoundly, particularly when Dragon became unstable and slowly spiraled into a phantasmic world of his own, eventually spending periods of time in mental asylums.

In 1952, Ossorio hung Dubuffet's entire L'Art Brut collection in his home. The strong bonds of friendship between the three artists saw each of them supporting their respective endeavors, many times exchanging paintings among

themselves and even writing forewords for each others' books.

In 1949, Ossorio's father, Don Miguel, demanded that he return to the Philippines to paint a church in Victorias City that was being built as a memorial to their family's sugar plantation.

Ossorio, along with untrained Filipino assistants, spent 11 months in Victorias painting a 36×20 yard mural called "The Angry Christ" which dominated the back wall of the altar. "The church had been oriented so that the sun would come in and strike the celebrant as he stood at the altar with this enormous figure behind him . . . and although they loathed it at the time, it is almost now a place of pilgrimage," Ossorio said of his work years later.

Explaining how such a radical, irreverent image was allowed by a conservative provincial community, Ossorio said: "The patron who pays the piper calls the tune. In other words, it was one of my brothers in charge of the whole operation. If he hadn't been behind me, the local bishop or parish priest would likely have said no." Dubuffet, in his fascination for his Filipino friend's work, wrote nearly 30 pages of notes and commentaries regarding the Church of the Angry Christ, based on the 300 drawings Ossorio had made for the commission.

THE LOST GENERATION. Ted Dragon (extreme left), Ossorio (center), and Pollock (far right) by the steps of The Creeks, 1954. Photo courtesy of 27east.com & Ateneo Art Gallery.

While Ossorio and Dragon were in Paris in August 1951, a large East Hampton property, once owned by the wealthy artist couple Albert and Adele Herter (their family's interior design firm furnished the homes of J.P. Morgan and William Vanderbilt), was put up for sale. Pollock immediately cabled Ossorio and suggested that he buy it.

After World War II, East Hampton had become a refuge for European artists—particularly and notoriously, the Surrealists. Salvador Dali, Piet Mondrian, Marc Chagall, and Max Ernst were among those who had visited or had lived in the area. This artistic exodus came upon the instigation of Jazz Age socialites Gerald and Sara Murphy, following their return to Long Island after years of living in the French Riviera. Gerald Murphy, heir to the Mark Cross leather-goods fortune, was an artist himself who had collaborated with Picasso and designed sets for ballet impresario Sergei Diaghilev's Ballet Russe. Famous for their ragtime parties and glamorous circle of friends, the Murphys became F. Scott Fitzgerald's inspiration for Dick and Nicole Diver in his 1934 novel *Tender Is the Night*.

Spearheaded by Pollock, the Abstract Expressionist movement had its origins in this small, well-heeled village at the East End of Long Island, eventually putting New York—and in particular, the Hamptons—at the center of the art world.

Ossorio, having decided to purchase the Herter property for $50,000, asked Dragon if he would give up his dancing career to permanently move in with him. Dragon consented, but only after a dramatic exit performance at the Nice Opera. Partnered with the great Russian dancer-choreographer Serge Lifar, Dragon performed the *pas de deux* from

Paul Dukas's "La Peri," allegedly in drag and dressed in chiffon and diamonds.

Ossorio and Dragon built their domestic nest in this moneyed artist colony by the sea. Their 60-acre East Hampton estate, on the picturesque edge of Georgica Pond, was christened "The Creeks" and was crowned by a 40-room Italianate villa.

The rambling mansion had nine fireplaces, a library of 15,000 books, a four-car garage, a 6,000-bottle wine cellar, a studio-theater, a dramatic oval pool, and a view of the Atlantic. The main door led to a diverse ethnographic collection of artifacts from all over the world: African masks, carved ivory dragons, Indian temple friezes, Filipino wind chimes, Victorian chandeliers, Oriental carpets, and exotic caged birds.

The Creeks soon became the hub of artistic and social activity in the Hamptons. Aside from the Pollocks, it saw the comings and goings of Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, Jasper Johns, and Marcel Duchamp, as well as Truman Capote, Mrs. Douglas MacArthur, and a young King Juan Carlos of Spain. There were performances by opera singer Enrico Caruso and dancers Anna Pavlova and Isadora Duncan. There were piano concerts for the benefit of Guild Hall, the Hampton's cultural center where local artists and intellectuals gathered. Conservative East Hampton was really coming alive artistically, and this transition was sealed upon Ossorio's opening of the Signa Gallery in 1957 with artists John Little and Elizabeth Parker.

Ted Dragon took his place as host and master organizer extraordinaire, arranging the furniture and artwork, minding the table settings for themed dinner parties that included elaborate flower arrangements. He was also adept at needlepoint and loved to cook.

It was, as Dragon recalled, "a magical time," recounting the night when the mansion was lit with 1,000 candles as opera singers walked about singing Mozart. "They say Ossorio owned The Creeks, but it was Dragon to whom The Creeks belonged," observed Steven Gaines.

"Alfonso was one of the most brilliant and broadly cultured people I've known," B.H. Friedman, the art critic who authored Ossorio's 1972 monograph, told *The New York Times*, describing an artist who spoke eight languages, including Latin and ancient Greek. "He had an elegant generosity of a kind that doesn't exist any more." And of Dragon, he said: "Ted could take a weed and make it absolutely extraordinary."

The two often had to contend with Pollock, their most frequent guest at The Creeks, whose *Lavender Mist* was the centerpiece of the main dining room. As Pollock's ever-munificent friend and collector, Ossorio was a patron of remarkable patience, putting up with Pollock's violent outbursts when the painter threw himself overboard with drink.

Once, Pollock stormed into a black-tie party and began to bang down on the piano, appearing to mock Dragon. Pollock then got up and returned with an ice pick from the kitchen and smashed all the ivory keys of the Steinway, leaving Ossorio with a bill that amounted close to what he had paid for *Lavender Mist*.

Despite the frequent social events at The Creeks, Dragon was often distant, feeling that the celebrities that peopled the champagne-soaked affairs did not take an interest in him. Insecure that they regarded him as "some kept thing," he would many times disappear at the height of the evening. Little by little, Dragon supposedly started to display strange behavior.

While Ossorio was away on tours and art exhibits, Dragon—lonely, bored, and angry at being left behind—would allegedly steal furniture from his Hamptons neighbors (antiques, paintings, dueling pistols, four-poster beds, and china, but never cash or jewelry), only to bring them back refurbished. (Taking his cue from a Mickey Spillane novel, a sneaker-clad Dragon would reportedly carry out the burglaries on rainy days, so the water would wash away his tracks.) Some neighbors, though puzzled by this strange gesture, would even send him thank-you notes. "I just loved beautiful things so much, and sometimes I was appalled at how badly the furniture was being kept," Dragon was quoted by Gaines in *Philistines at the Hedgerow*, who considered Dragon's actions the "scandal of the decade."
The East Hampton police, finding no plausible explanation for the thefts, would heavily penalize Dragon. Ossorio would courteously pay the penalties and even bankrolled Dragon's psychological treatment, the last being at a private asylum in Connecticut. Soon, the more conservative of Hamptons society re-named The Creeks as "The Creeps."

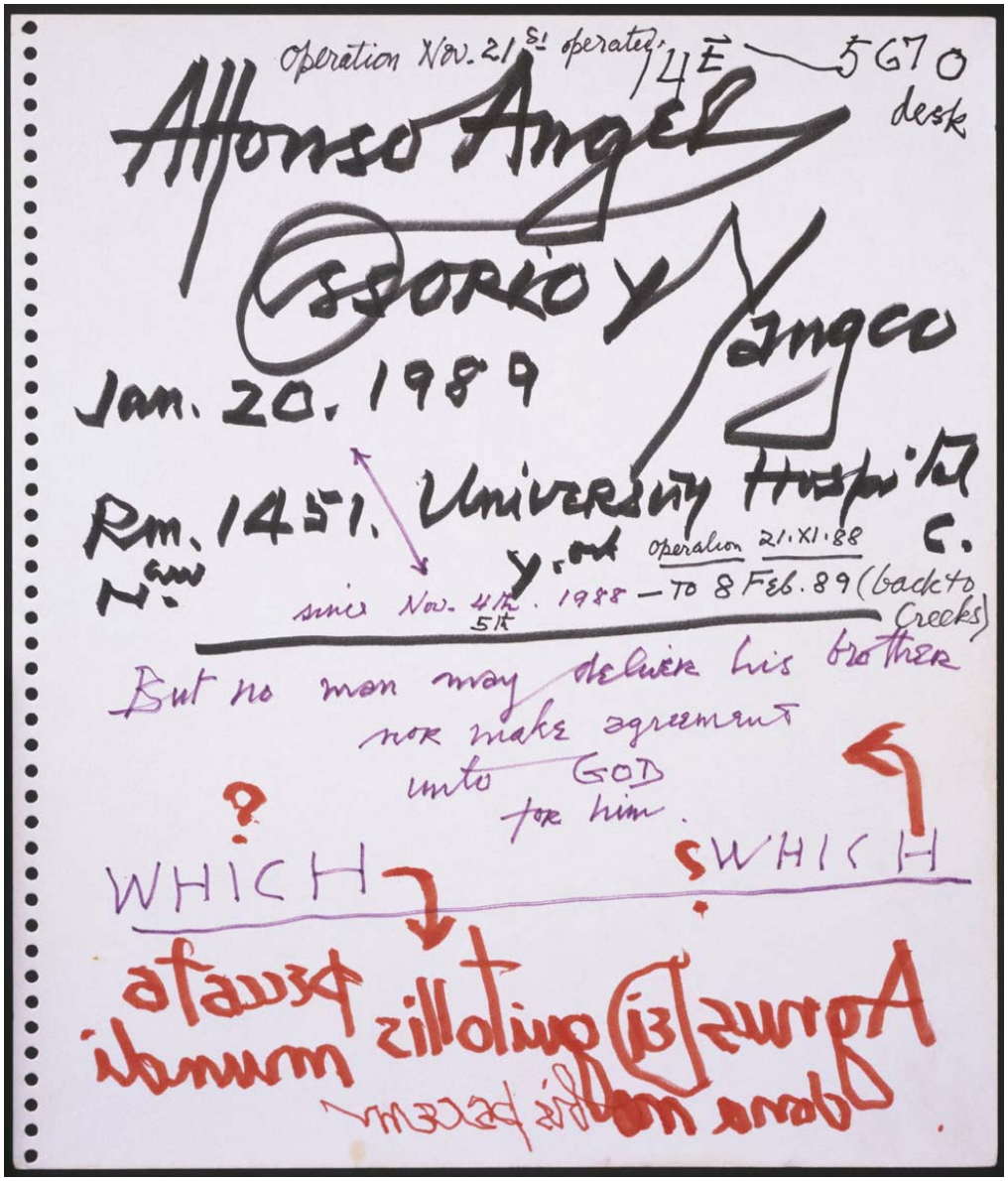
But Ossorio, a proud man humiliated by a public scandal, unconditionally stood by Dragon throughout the entire ordeal—from his arrest to his release from the asylum two years later.

"You mustn't ever think [Ted Dragon] was one of my charities. This was an act of love." Ossorio told B.H. Friedman at the time. The incident only "cemented our relationship," Dragon later disclosed, adding that Ossorio was "a rock, the rock of Gilbatrar . . . How could you ever turn away from a person who has stood by you like that?"

Dragon, embracing his new notoriety as the "Robin Hood out on Long Island," supposedly took to wearing wigs, large

flowing caftans, outlandish costume jewelry, and became known as a "questionable fashion guru." Amused by his partner's eccentricity, Ossorio declared to Dragon, "You're like one of my paintings."

Upon Dragon's return from exile in 1961, fashion designer Harry Acton Striebel hosted a party for him. Halfway through the evening, as noted by Gaines, a large hoop of cloth doused in kerosene was hoisted up, and to the strains of Stravinsky's "Rites of Spring," it burst into flames. From the burning hoop's center emerged Dragon, resplendent in a costume of gold brocade, to the thunderous applause of his friends.



One of Ossorio's "Recovery Drawings", created while he was hospitalized for heart failure in 1988. He died of a ruptured aneurysm in 1990.

Ossorio's art arrived at a creative breakthrough during this period, as it continually evolved into more grotesque forms. Unlike Dubuffet's work, which was executed in a naïve manner, Ossorio's was complex and colorful, displaying the same brand of meticulously crafted details inherent in his earlier drawings and paintings. Like Dubuffet's work, Ossorio's sculptures put a face to the twisted aesthetic of the mentally ill. Critics who were expecting to see a three-dimensional representation of Ossorio's brand of Abstract Expressionism instead got an entirely different art genre, described as a "montage," "collage," and eventually "assemblage," a term invented by Dubuffet.

He christened his new technique "congregations," for its religious connotation. Larger and more detailed works emerged, but now the religiosity was darker, more distorted and grotesque, frightening even.

The found objects—a demolition contractor's pile of rubbish, shells, driftwood, glass eyes, human teeth, bones, sheet metal—were enameled in colors of medieval Christian symbolism: red for charity, blue for hope, white for faith.

However, this translated garishly on the pieces. Critics dissed the work, comparing it to "something a pinball threw up." *The New York Times* went as far as calling it "exuberant models of excess and bad taste." Later works, however, made the critics stand up and notice. The remarks were a little kinder, and they hailed him as a "serious surrealist."

Ossorio's work, unlike today's so-called "found object art," was highly polished, impeccably constructed, its concepts resulting from deep meditations and personal beliefs rather than just mere socially reactive commentary. His materials were tediously researched, his techniques carefully tested. These methods were typically Ossorio's modus. While working on the "Angry Christ" mural, for instance, his search for a suitable binder led him to Ralph Meyer, a respected author of painters' handbooks, who recommended ethyl silicate, which to this day has helped keep the mural intact. Being a wealthy artist had its perks—not only did Ossorio enjoy a full education in fine art and design (from Harvard and the Rhode Island School of Design, no less), he had the luxury to source and purchase materials he wished to use.

But his home, The Creeks, whose black painted walls served as backdrops to works of Dubuffet and Pollock and other modernists, would remain Ossorio's single most important "congregation," his Factory of Dreams, the artistic extension of himself. A canvas big enough for Ossorio's bold vision, it was here where he retreated, where "the exchange between life and art is more congenial than in the city."

"A lot of people say [The Creeks is] kitschy and tchotchke," Dragon said in an interview. "But it's organized. There is a sense of order, just like Alfonso's congregations."

In the 1970s, these once crowded congregations gave way to massive, brightly colored, geometric-shaped outdoor sculptures, which were softer and cleaner-edged.

"There is a great deal of distance from internal strife in the new sculpture—an almost classical simplicity," observed *Newsday*. To which Ossorio admitted, "There's more acceptance, less revolt . . . the struggle [has become] less personal."

Ossorio lifts the corner of one of his paintings as he prepares to hang it for a gallery show, New York, New York, February 19, 1961. (Photo by Fred W. McDarrah/Getty Images)

Ossorio passed away from a stroke on December 5, 1990 at the age of 74. Shortly after his death, Dragon put The Creeks, their palatial "Disneyland for esthetes," on the market. It was valued, to Dragon's amazement, at $25 million. Among those who showed interest in buying the estate were German princess Gloria von Thurn und Taxis, publishing mogul Mort Zuckerman, and the wife of Texas oil tycoon Sid Bass.

Dragon also held the largest yard sale ever to take place in East Hampton. Aside from six-foot-long elephant tusks, lamps from Venice's Grand Canal, rare Persian rugs, Waterford crystal goblets, and a Chinese opium bed, there was a human skeleton, unopened cans of paint, and a dried shark.

In 1993, he finally sold The Creeks and its contents to cosmetics tycoon Ron Perelman, its current owner, for $12.5 million and moved into a small cottage on Pantigo Road. (The sale included many of Ossorio's outdoor sculptures, scattered amongst the exotic evergreens that he had planted during the last 20 years of his life—an arboretum that was hailed as "the eighth wonder of the horticultural world.")

After Dragon created the Ossorio Foundation in 1994, whose purpose was to "educate the public on the life and work of Alfonso Angel Ossorio y Yangco," he spent his final years in quiet solitude: hearing daily mass and contributing generous tithes at the East Hampton's Most Holy Trinity Church, helping cash-strapped friends, and just living simply. He died without fanfare in his Pantigo Road cottage on October 2, 2011.

"They had a very special thing going," said Gaines, commenting on Ossorio and Dragon's 42-year relationship. "You have to be really lucky to find that in your lifetime."

More appreciated in his time as a collector than as an artist, and dismissed as "a gilded eccentric fluttering on the edges of postwar American art," interest in Ossorio's work has piqued more interest today than it ever did in his lifetime.

"The idea is to take the most ordinary things and make them extraordinary . . . I want to show the richness of even the most disagreeable bits of life," once said Ossorio, an artist for whom fame was fugitive and elusive, but whose search for himself successfully translated to an aesthetic extension, substantiating a long suspected theory that art and angst are inseparable.

"Wealthy artists are often regarded as dilettantes until the entire body of work is unearthed, typically after their deaths as with Gustave Moreau or Marcel Proust . . . and their seriousness and productivity can no longer be questioned," explained Friedman. "Since Ossorio's life and work have been singularly visible, there was no reason to wait."

But while Alfonso Ossorio's artistic legacy now hangs in the walls of Whitney, the Guggenheim, the Smithsonian, the Met, and the MoMA, offering the public unrestricted access to extraordinary oeuvre, Ted Dragon's private documents are archived under lock and key at the Harvard Art Museum, where they will remain unopened until 2026. Only then may we fully comprehend if the oneness of Ossorio's life and art were, indeed, a celebration of his personal fulfillment or, perhaps, torment.

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