

VIRGINIA KLEIN HOLZMAN:

Study In Success

By Harriet P. Marcus

A Remarkable Pittsburgher Combines Business and Art



VIRGINIA HOLZMAN, at a table in Klein's, shows one of her newer paintings. Hanging above her as part of the showing is "Brown Lady", Virginia's favorite and what she considers her best effort thus far.

Can you imagine a typical day's routine that runs something like this: wake up early and come downtown to help open up one of Pittsburgh's leading restaurants; read and take care of all its voluminous business correspondence; stand all day wearing a gracious smile while showing hundreds of guests to their seats, chatting personally with each one; go home to spend the evening with an equally busy husband; retire for a while to work on an oil painting in progress... and then wake the next morning, to hang a completed painting in that very same restaurant!

This round of housekeeping, restauranting and painting is very real for Virginia Klein Holzman, career woman of long standing and more recently become a self-styled artist. Her recipe for success includes patience and energy mixed with ambition, seasoned with inspiration and modesty, well-beaten into all the hours of every day. Which is all very simple... if your name happens to be Virginia Holzman!

This tall slender woman with the graceful carriage, never-wilting smile and salt-and-pepper hair is the daughter of Hannah and Joseph Klein, who in 1900 founded Klein's Restaurant, now Pittsburgh's most famous home of seafood specialties. Virginia graduated in 1917 from Fifth Avenue High School, passed up college in favor of helping her parents in the business, and in due time became part-owner of Klein's along with her brothers Sidney and Sam, who have also for many years been integral parts of this family enterprise.

In her early teens Virginia began china painting for fun—"a contemporary hobby," she says. At that time she studied with the famous artist Gertrude Ziegler, who held classes in china painting downtown. But as she grew up,

china painting seemed a childish pastime, and Virginia put away her brushes... though not forever, as it turned out. Before she picked those brushes up again, Virginia Klein had become Mrs. Isaac (Pat) Holzman, wife of a dentist; raised a daughter, Elaine, and had seen her married to engineer Jules Levy; emerged as grandmother of two; and watched both her husband and her son-in-law retire from their professions, to become associates in Klein's Restaurant.

In 1952, when Virginia was vacationing in Martinsville, Indiana, she met a friend from Pittsburgh. Sadie Shapiro, the Forbes Avenue businesswoman, told Virginia that she was taking painting

lessons nearby, and invited her to join the class. "I went first as an observer," said Virginia, "and something hit me. This painter was the nephew of the world-famous Dutch cartoonist, Raemakcer. I said to him that I'd love to do this; he said to come on! I fell in love with the work, and have been having fun with oils, water colors and casein ever since." She and Sadie have also been working together ever since, trying different techniques and teachers. But still Virginia didn't take her painting seriously until about two years ago.

It was about this time that she began to consider the idea of hanging some of her paintings in the restaurant, which became a reality just a few months ago. At present there are nine Holzman originals on exhibit in Klein's and they are changed frequently, in accordance with Virginia's moods and completion of new pictures. Her personal favorite, which does not seem subject to removal for some time, is "Brown Lady," a portrait study in oils. Like most of Virginia's paintings, this is an objective abstract—a technique in which the artist combines pure

realism with freedom of interpretation.

Guests and waitresses alike have been quick to comment on the addition of Virginia's works to Klein's decor, praising the warmth they add to the restaurant's atmosphere. Virginia, who paints from imagination rather than using live models, is often asked by patrons where she gets her ideas. "When I tell them 'from my mind's eye,'" she laughs, "more often than not they are skeptical." It is particularly hard to convince people that "Brown Lady" is her very own imaginative creation. And when her "mind's eye" fails her by not coming up with an idea, Virginia turns to hat-making... "another fine hobby, and much cheaper than painting."

Although such able critics as noted Pittsburgh artists Cy Hungerford and Nat Youngblood have admired the professional quality of her work, Virginia prefers to stay in the amateur ranks, using her talent for personal pleasure and that of others. She will not sell any of her paintings, but often gives them as gifts to family and friends. A "hobby painter,"

Continued on Page 28

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Continued from Page 3

Virginia concentrates her efforts on learning more and more about her art, and doing better work all the time. Now directing her in her new techniques and dispensing helpful professional criticism is young Pittsburgh artist Janice Hill, whose paintings have recently been displayed at one-man shows in the Pittsburgh Playhouse and the Squirrel Hill Theater. That Virginia is accomplishing both her goals admirably is evident; union leaders Tom Murray recently approached her about acquiring her abstract of the Pittsburgh steel mills, which he saw hanging in Klein's, for prominent display in the CIO office!

Although Virginia feels that her best exhibit is the restaurant, her paintings have also been seen in other places. As a member of an amateur group at the Arts and Crafts Center, her work has frequently been shown there, as well as in Kaufmann's Auditorium. Currently she has paintings of steel mills and the Pittsburgh skyline submitted for showing in the city's Bicentennial Exhibit. "But I consider myself very fortunate that I can always have a one-woman show in my own place of business," Virginia says. And, after all, this is a dream-come-true for any amateur artist.

Home with Pat in their 5100 Fifth Avenue Apartment, Virginia has ample space for a studio in an extra room given over to her hobby. "We rented a place with one more room than we needed so that we could really live in the living room, without all my clutter," she explains. And Virginia's husband is not only tolerant of her "clutter"; he is also the artist's very best critic, viewing her latest efforts, studies of two nuns' heads, by the light of a vase-turned-lamp, a last remaining relic of Virginia's early china painting days!

If you'd like to meet this remarkable woman and see some of her work, you're most welcome to visit her any day at Klein's, where she dispenses good old-fashioned hospitality and information on her paintings with equal vigor. But do come by in the morning, or in the early afternoon. For busy restauranteer Virginia Holzman saves her evenings for those happiest of all times: peaceful painting sessions at home!