

ANTHONY RUSSO

BY ELIZABETH HOWARD

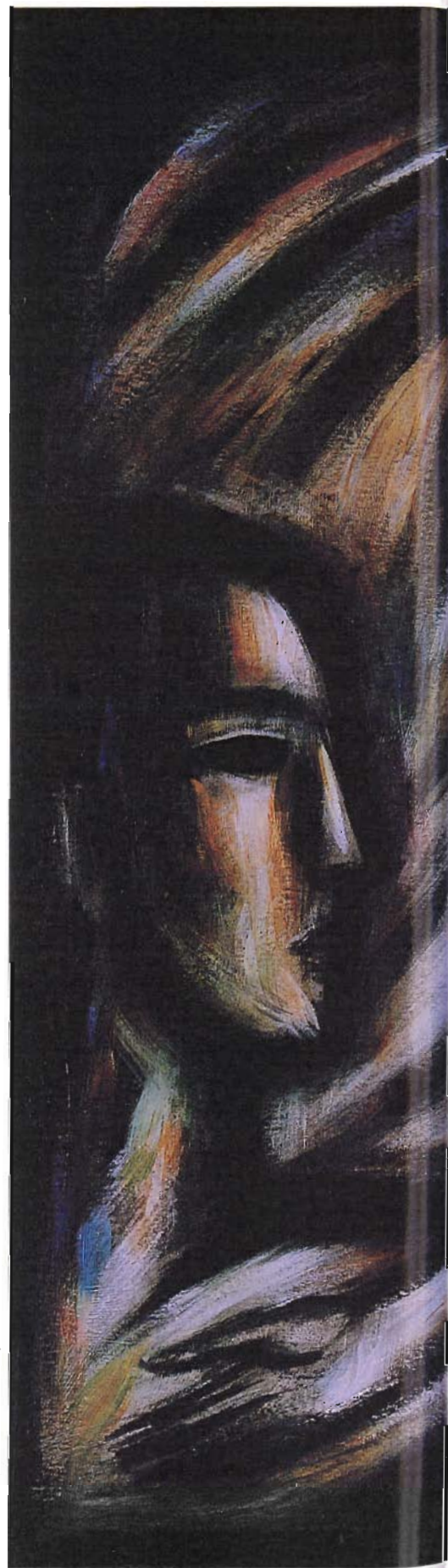
ILLUSTRATION IS A DISTILLED idea." That's a basic belief for Anthony Russo. "It is the most primitive form of communication." Russo's interest in pictographs, cave drawings and symbols relates to a desire to strip things down to their essential elements. Drawing, he says, is the common language that can be understood in our collective consciousness and transcends the boundaries of culture and language. He agrees with Dr. Carl G. Jung. The Swiss psychologist held that modern man has preserved the symbol making capacity and that symbols still play a role of psychic importance.

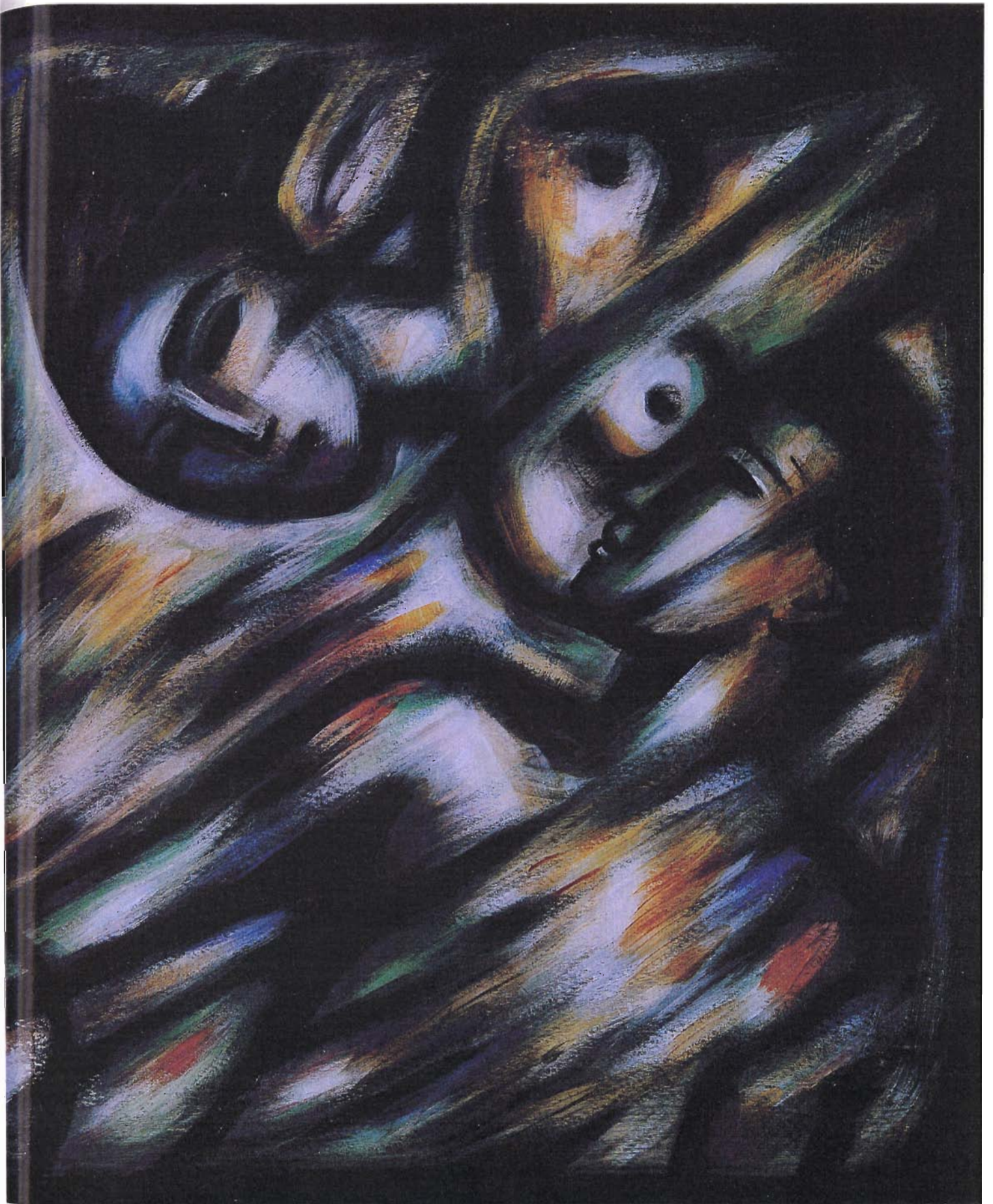
As an artist, Anthony Russo is intense, curious, reflective, self-directed and a loner. He grew up in Rhode Island and studied painting and sculpture at the University of Rhode Island, graduating with a degree in fine art. However, doubtful that his painting and conceptual art would be accepted outside the academic environment, and without an interest in moving to New York and the gallery scene, he took a few years to travel in the southwest United States and New England, explored ancient ruins in Peru, read religion, anthropology and philosophy and worked at various jobs.

"I had to support myself. Working in uncreative endeavors wasn't satisfying. I needed to fulfill my need for expression. I love to draw, so I organized a portfolio, rented a studio in Providence and started showing my work. *The Boston Globe* bought a drawing and then *The Real Paper* bought one. It was at that point that I became an illustrator."

Through assignments for these Boston newspapers, Anthony Russo learned the discipline of meeting editorial deadlines and the nature of the relationship between the text and the figurative image. "I was on the editorial pages and the food pages. I was working for a metropolitan daily paper and an alternative weekly publication with a definite point of view." His work was noticed, the assignments continued and the telephone calls began coming from New York, Los Angeles and, after a few years, Europe.

Illustration for an *Esquire* fiction piece, "Downstream," about the journey of three friends, a woman and two men, on a rafting exhibition. Like the river, the dynamics of their relationship changed from calm to violent and rapid. Rip Georges, art director.





His work is prodigious. Even so, he takes the time to read most of the articles he illustrates. "Of course, sometimes the content is downright mundane and trivial. I have illustrated articles on 'How Secretaries Really Run Things' or 'How to Iron Shirts.' The subjects are of no interest to me, yet I try to do an interesting drawing and have some fun." The comment is not unexpected from one who spends his life visualizing concepts.

Art directors and designers in Europe communicate with him by telephone. And although he has studied French and German, and is currently learning Italian, he usually doesn't have an opportunity to read the articles in foreign languages. For these assignments it is the lack of information that provides the challenge. "An art director called from Munich and requested a colorful illustration for an article on Italian ice-cream. That's all the information I was given."

Posters, brochures, advertisements and a number of book covers are also included in his portfolio. "I love books and assignments for book projects." Specifically, he enjoys the control, and the opportunity to study an author's work. He has illustrated jackets for books by Kafka, Richard Wright, Nadine Gordimer, Ishmael Reed and I. B. Singer. He has also illustrated the covers of published plays, including works by Archibald MacLeish, Edward Albee and Arthur Miller. He is now working on covers for works by Naguib Mahfouz, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1988.

Russo expresses a fear of developing a repetitive style. "I try to keep myself off-balance, keep my energy level high and offer a spirit that goes beyond routine." One can recognize the influence of a particular artists or style in an Anthony Russo drawing,



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yet identifying a communality isn't easy. An illustration in the June issue of *Esquire* seemed to reflect Chagall, while the influence of German abstract expressionism on him is strong, as is the influence of Matisse and Edvard Munch.

"I travel in an attempt to break out of my routine. I try to keep ahead of myself." This summer he is renting a villa with a working studio in the Tuscany region of Italy. "The quintessential Italian vacation," he laughs. During the winter he spends a month in Jamaica. This spring he spent a week in Germany. "Just to say hello. I didn't try to sell any work. Just wanted to meet some new people." When he needs to get away from it all he takes a ride on his BMW motorcycle and explores the Rhode Island countryside.

Russo has a quiet studio in a historic neighborhood bordering the campuses of The Rhode Island School of Design and Brown University. Filled with books and paintings, it seems years and miles away from the frenetic and competitive world of publishing. Here he still paints, yet he loves commercial illustration and hasn't ever thought about leaving it to return to fine art. "My visual vocabulary continues to develop and challenge me." He works in a number of techniques and uses watercolors, gouache, pen and ink and both black and white scratch board.

A teacher at RISD, Russo and his long hair, thoughtful gait and casual clothes could easily have him pass for a student. As for the students he teaches, Russo says, "Students don't know who they are in college. I teach them a visual vocabulary and how to reduce complex reality to a single visual image. They need to think about the essence of things like love, hate, death, despair, pain and what says joy."

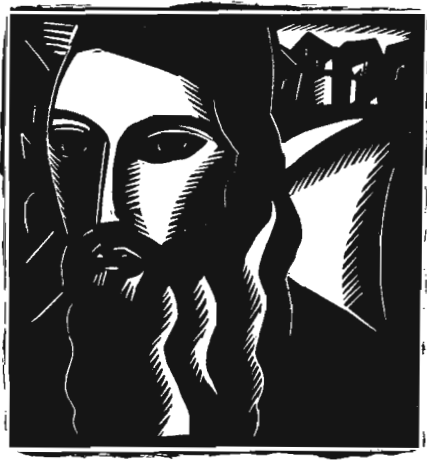
With his illustrations in demand internationally, the freedom to travel, the freedom to make choices about the projects he accepts, and the freedom to determine where and how he lives with his wife and young son, success does not frighten Anthony Russo. His only fear, he says, is still the danger of repetition, complacency and of ultimately "losing the edge."



Scratchboard illustrations for Schocken Classics series; *Yoshe Kalb* by I.J. Singer; *The Complete Stories* and *The Castle* by Franz Kafka. Louise Fili, designer; Random House, client.

Ad for Toyo Ink. Headline: True color does not match a chart, but a mind. Tyler Smith, art director/creative director; Lee Nash, writer.

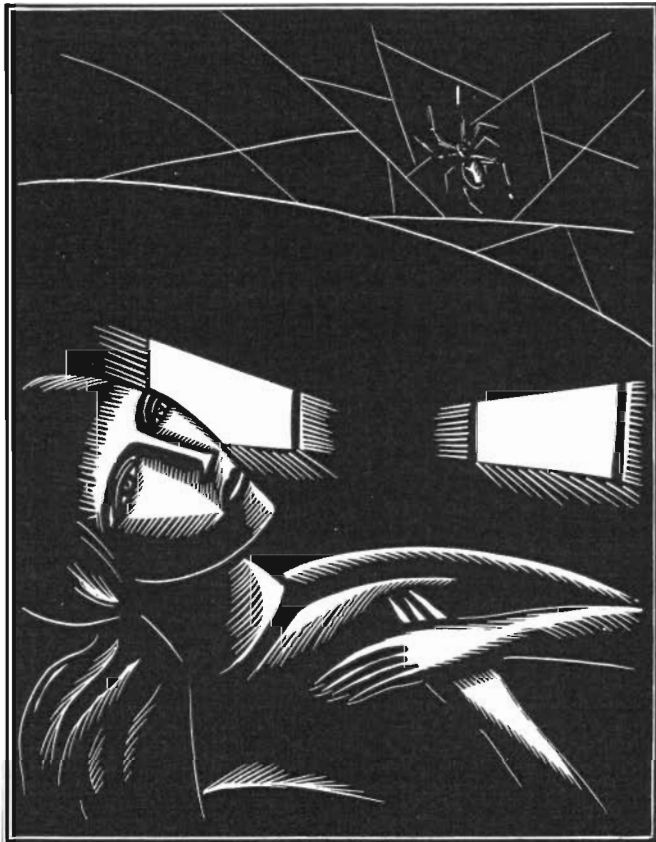
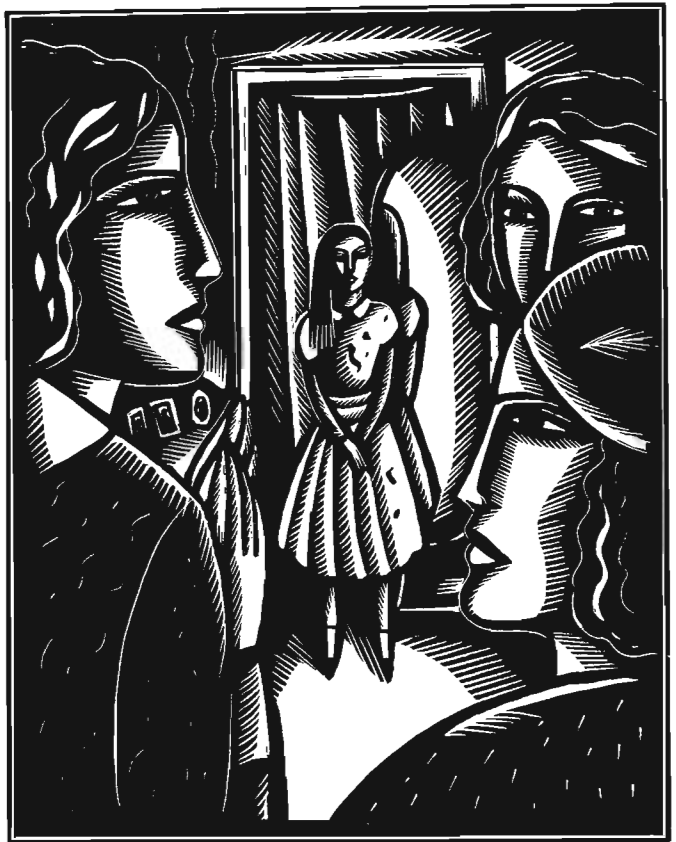
Poster for a fundraiser party backstage to benefit the Trinity Square Repertory Company. Tyler Smith, art director/designer.



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Scratchboard illustrations from *Nine Women*, short stories about contemporary women. Michael Mendelsohn, art director; The Franklin Library, client.

Right: Cover for *The Last Armenian*, about a young Englishman who falls in love with a Moslem woman in Bangladesh. Andy Carpenter, designer; St. Martin's Press, client.



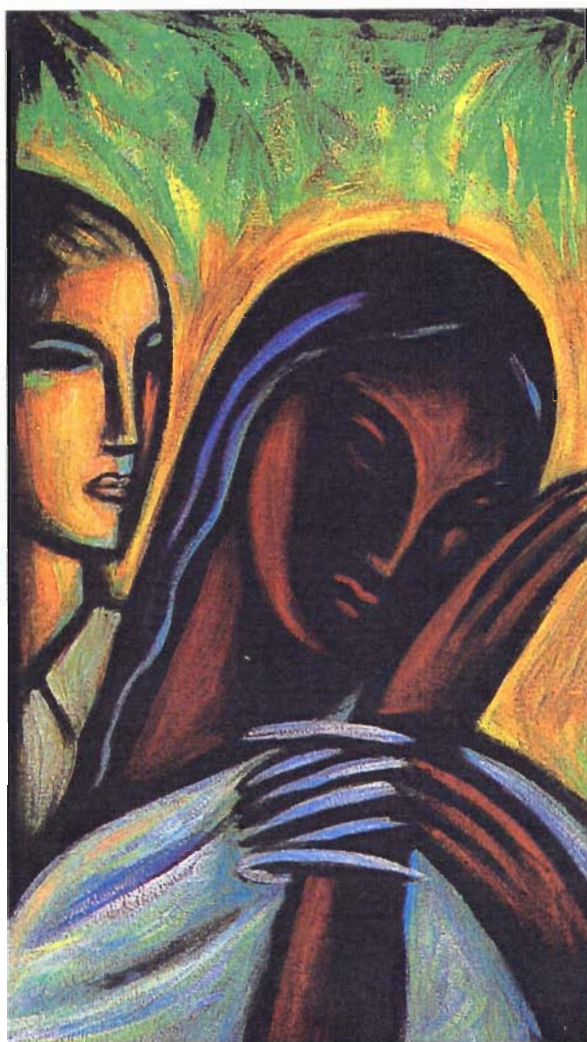
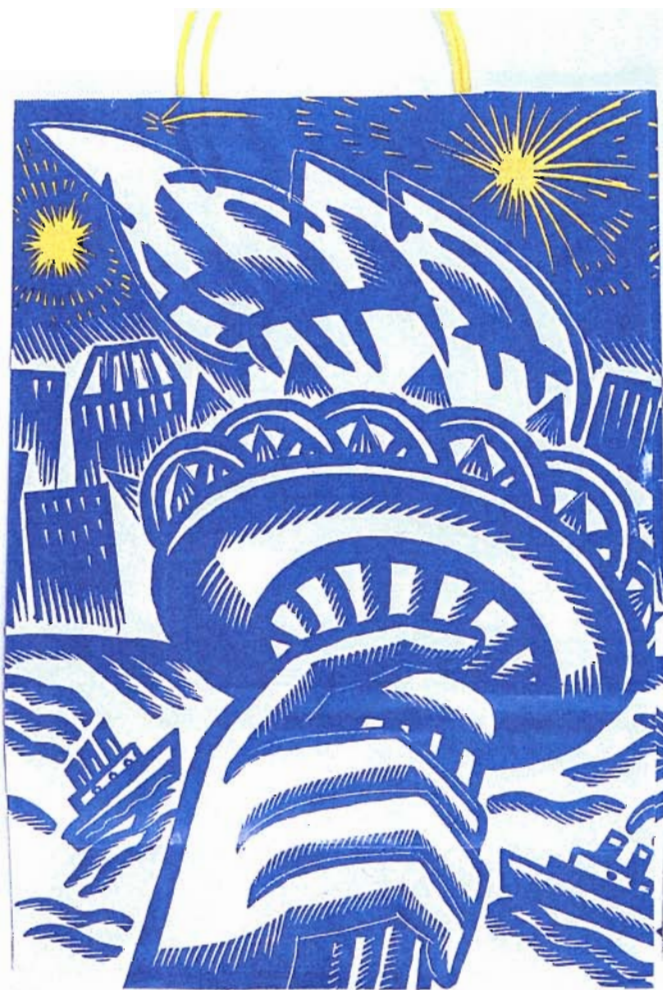


Illustration for *Baltimore Sun* article, "Drug Abuse: The War Within," about drug depression. Donna Albano, art director. Russo used the maze of stairs to symbolize the descent into confusion, despair and isolation experienced by people who get hooked on drugs.

Two shopping bags for Bloomingdale's. John C. Jay, creative director; David Au, designer. The bag on the left celebrated the United States Bicentennial. The right was used for the opening of the Boca Raton, Florida store.

Right: Illustration for *LA Style* article, "Grape Expectations," about the California wine industry. Rip Georges, art director.









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Left: "The Perils of Pot" was a *Mademoiselle* article about the effects of smoking marijuana.

This page: *Rolling Stone* piece, "Fire," about a law student whose classmates set his room on fire with him in it. Fred Woodward, art director.

Illustration for a *Chicago* magazine article, "Chicago Cop," about the different problems Chicago police have to face. Cynthia Hoffman, art director. The use of color and line were kept simple to separate the different situations.

