

Richard Blow in Photos



Circa 1910

Photograph of Richard as a young boy with his mother Adele. It's a formal, staged photograph, resembling an oil portrait. He's dressed in white collar and tie as befitting the son of a wealthy American industrialist; there's a feeling of quiet, Victorian domesticity to the composition. They're photographed playing a board game at the family's 2,000-acre Deer Park estate in LaSalle, Illinois, 90 miles southwest of Chicago. The Estate included a 26-room mansion, a four-car garage, a caretaker's house and a private fire station. 50 men maintained the estate grounds, and Richard was driven around by a chauffeur named "Dickie." It's a calm, safe, ordered life, a present filled with luxury, a future filled with promise.



1923

A 1923 passport photo of 19-year-old teenage Richard. Dark-suited, slicked-down hair, tight tie, reserved expression., the stiff upper lip of the upper crust. A rising Junior at Princeton, Richard is headed back to Europe on a luxury steamship for another summer there, touring France and Germany before returning via Quebec. But he's restless -- moving, away from architecture towards his true love, art.



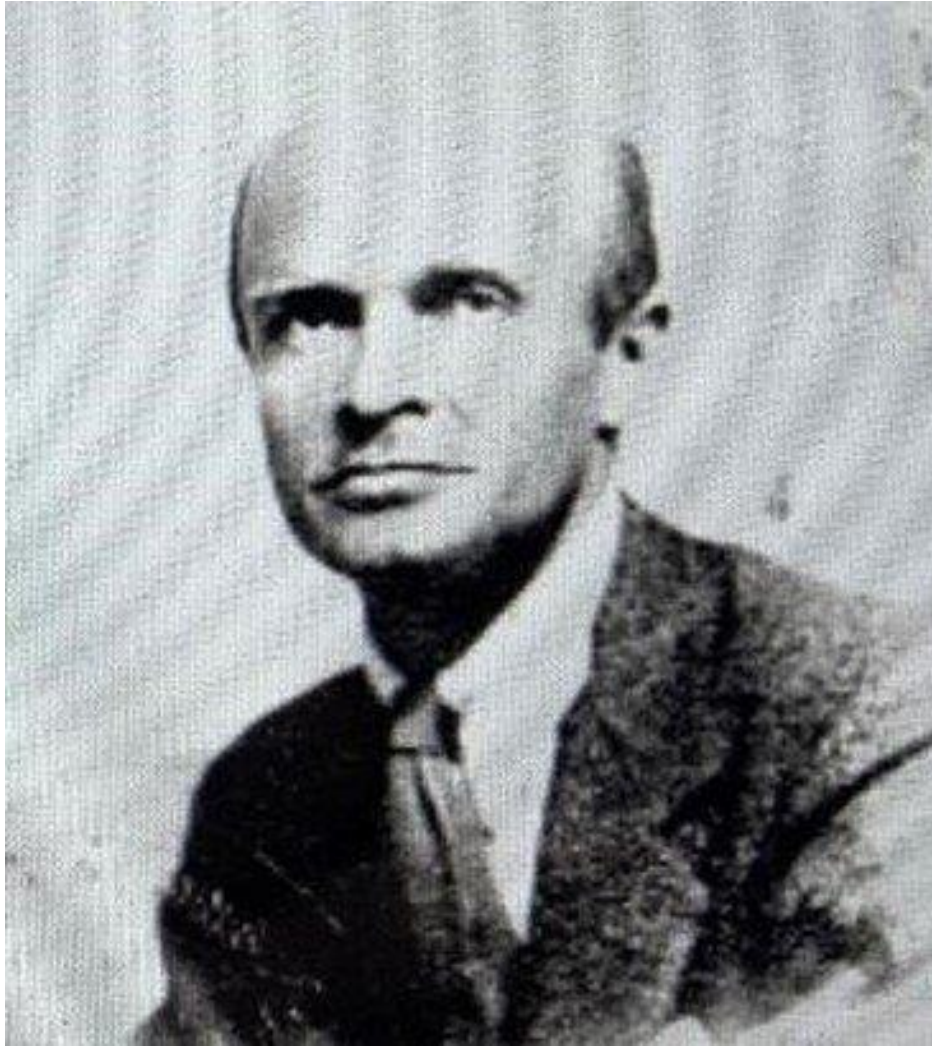
1926

Wedding photograph showing a tall, imposing, 22-year-old Richard and his 19-year-old bride. He's dressed straight out of the Fred Astaire song Putting on the Ritz -- "high hats and arrowed collars/white spats and lots of dollars." The song celebrated the London Ritz hotel; Richard does his celebrating at the granddaddy Paris Ritz. They're posing but comfortable; they belong there. In terms of wealth and social position, they could be characters in Fitzgerald's Great Gatsby novel. After a breakfast reception there, he and his debutante bride are married at the American Cathedral Church in Paris. The American colony in Paris turns out in force, along with European royalty and the J.P. Morgan banking family.



1936

Richard and future second wife, Marya Mannes in Italy. He's got an uncommon smile on his face. She's got a broad grin. Both have managed to ditch their first spouses. They're starting afresh. Everything is new, exciting again. It's a Bohemian, laid-back arrangement; no one is talking marriage. The strict, stratified society they were both born into is now in the rear-view mirror. He's impressed by her intellect, her free spirit, her art (she's a sculptor), her joie de vivre. She's impressed by his elegant villa, his haunting and lyrical paintings, his sartorial style. He's still wearing a tie, but he's moved to a sport coat for the hot Mediterranean summers. His hair is thinning, but he's still a tall, handsome catch.



1941

Richard Blow May 1941, visa photo for trip to Brazil. He looks serious, almost somber. His personal life is a mess. Bowing to social pressure, and the imminent arrival of second son David Jeremy, he and Marya have formally tied the knot (1938). He's got a second kid, David, but neither he nor Marya are built for parenthood. His marriage is on the rocks. World War II has already started in Europe with Hitler's invasion of Poland in 1939. Marya and Richard are refugees from Italy, their beloved Villa Pizza Calda taken over by Mussolini's Fascists. They're now living in a New York City apartment. Japan is getting ready to attack America. Why Richard makes this flight to Rio de Janeiro at this particular moment is a mystery to me. Get away from fights with the wife and a crying three-year-old baby? Practice his flying skills in preparation for enlisting in the military? (he pilots his own plane down there). Maybe a secret mission for the U.S. government? (not a completely crazy conjecture -- his brother George is working in the Dept. of the Navy in Washington DC. The family is politically connected, and his father was a U.S. Naval Academy grad and famous Spanish-American war hero). Whatever the answer, Richard's mind is no longer on painting.



1944

Lieutenant Richard Blow, (*far right, back row*), Naval Air Station, Bunker Hill, Indiana. He's grown a moustache, his caps is rakishly tilted right, his jaw square and set. But he stands in the back of the ranks, end of the row, unobtrusive, just another guy; a small cog in a giant, well-oiled machine that at this point in the war has trained and graduated over 3,000 pilots in basic flying. The millionaire enlistee has become a common soldier. Gone is the villa, the servants, the butler, the gardener, the silk sheets and personal privacy. Gone from his life are wife, sons, paint brushes, art gallery soirees. In a few months, his chess piece will be moved forward to the bloody Pacific theater. As he sweats at attention on an airport tarmac in the Indiana summer heat, some 5,000 miles away the British Eight Army is driving Germans from Florence, Italy, taking over Richard Blow's Villa Piazza Calda. The sweeping view across the Arno valley that captivated Richard is perfect for wartime reconnaissance and observation. Germans shell the Villa but do minimal damage. Before they retreat, the Nazis round up 250 Jews in Florence and send them to the death camps. Marya, now safe in America, will not be one of them.



Circa 1960

Richard Blow in his workshop at Villa Piazza Calda. Richard is at the top of his art game – inspired, inventive, successful, famous. He’s cheated death, surviving a bloody car accident and a scary bout of amnesia. Finally recovered and back in sunny Santa Margherita as Montici, Richard sits at his workshop desk, sports jacket and striped tie, silk handkerchief tucked into the breast pocket, sketching and designing a surreal pair of birds. Post-War Italy is booming. American tourists are flocking to Rome and Florence, enticed by Hollywood hit films like *Roman Holiday* starring Audrey Hepburn and Gregory Peck joy-riding the city on an irresistibly cute Vespa scooter. Italy is sophisticated, sassy, affordable. Just like Montici mosaics.



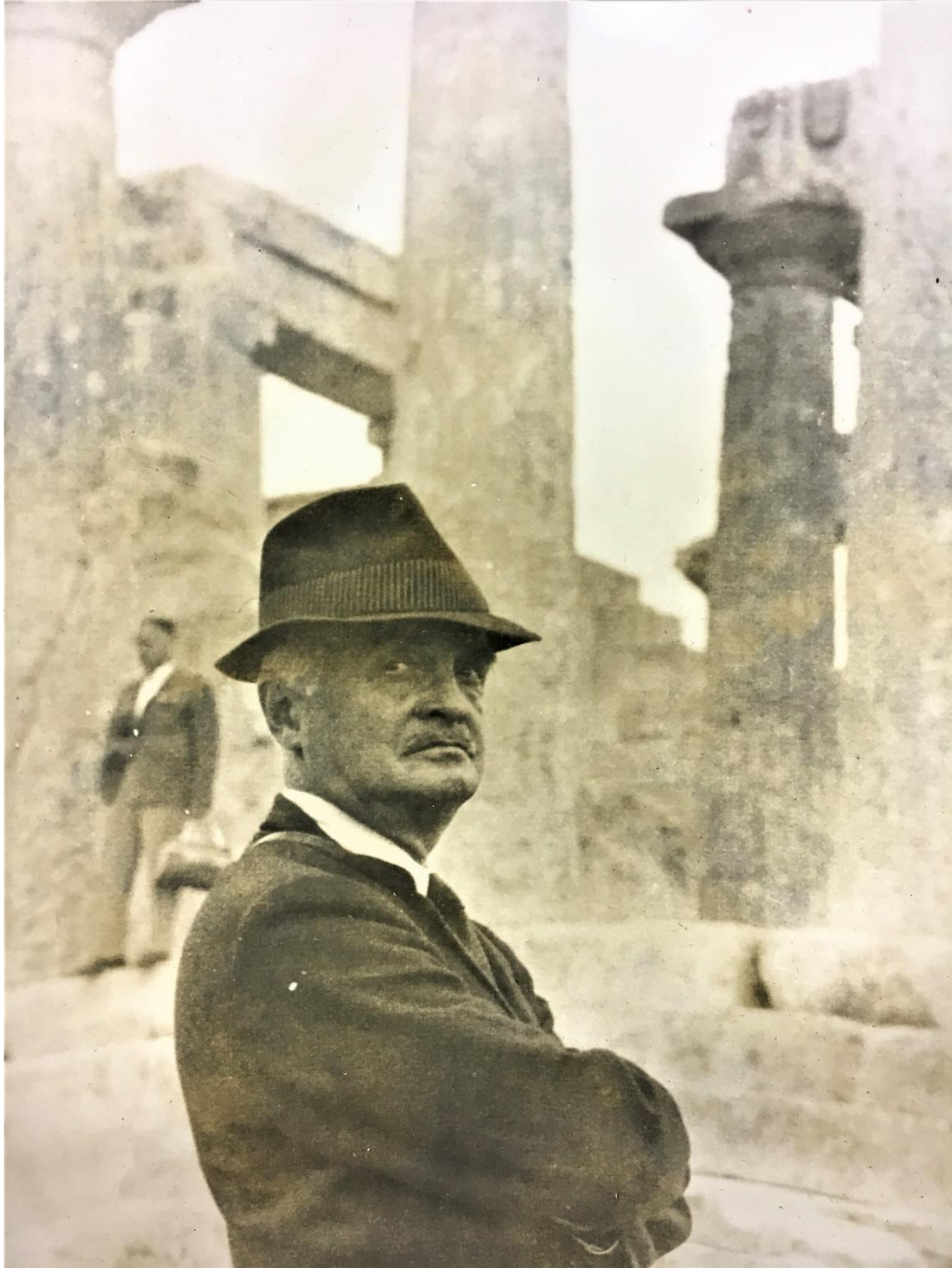
1960s

Richard gets hip in a black shirt. Gone (for the moment) is the stiff, starched, collared white dress shirt that has anchored his wardrobe his whole life. It's a surprisingly bold move by Richard, befitting a socially restive Sixties. The white business dress shirt has been a powerful symbol of class, wealth, sobriety, and uniformity since the Victorian era. But "the times, they are a changing," as singer Bob Dylan warns the Establishment in 1964. As an artist, Richard enjoys a bit of social leeway; everyone knows artists are non-conformists. But perhaps too shaped by the weight of his upbringing, Richard stops short of full rebellion. Coat and tie remain. He's now in his late 50s.



1960s

The quintessential Richard Blow portrait. Discovered by my brother John in a trunk of memorabilia passed on to our family by the late Muriel King. He's the urbane, sophisticated, mature artist, stylish in maroon jacket and tie, cigarette dangling from his fingertips (movie stars of the era always had one in hand or mouth. Think Bogart). He's holding a mosaic that perfectly embodies the revolutionary iconography he used to revitalize a dying Florentine pietra dura industry. He wears a big smile on his face. The little boy from LaSalle, Illinois has followed his heart into the world of art and achieved his dream. It was a crooked path that started in oil, but ended in stone. His painting purchased by the Met has been shuffled off to the storeroom where it sits unseen; but his unique Montici artworks hang on walls in hundreds of homes, offices, and museums. Many a spoiled millionaire has wasted his advantages. But Richard has used his money and connections to both create wonderful art and rescue an Italian patrimony.



1960s

Richard on holiday in Rome. A youthful President John F Kennedy, taking the oath of inauguration bareheaded, with a full, thick head of hair blowing in the breeze, pushed the American dress hat industry into permanent decline. But back in Europe, Richard kept it in his wardrobe. He looks good in them. Here, striking a nonchalant pose for the photographer -- his close friend and Montici PR director, Muriel King -- he sports his Alpine hat.



1969

A photo from our family collection. Richard with my mother, American art dealer Rayanna Schmuecker, at Villa Piazza Calda. My mother was 5 foot 2 inches, average height for a woman of her generation. Richard towers over her. He's 65, with only a hint of a potbelly. The beauty of Villa Piazza Calda is on full display – manicured lawn, ivy-covered stone, potted plants, pine trees, warm yellow stucco walls, and one of Richard's imposing obelisks flanking the steps. Richard is at home, relaxed, short-sleeved polo shirt replacing the normal sport coat. He's hosting a small dinner for her and my sister Rosemary.



1969

View of the busy Montici workshop 1969. Facing camera: Bruno Lastrucci (left); Richard (center); Rayanna Schmuecker (right). The figure drawing on the wall (center) appears to be Richard Blow's rendering of Bruno's father Guido, who served as the master gardener at Villa Piazza Calda. The same image appears on page 2 of Bruno's autobiography, *The Mosaicist*. *"Both my Dad and grandfather were portrayed several times by Mr. Blow (paintings that I still hold with care) going about their daily work."*



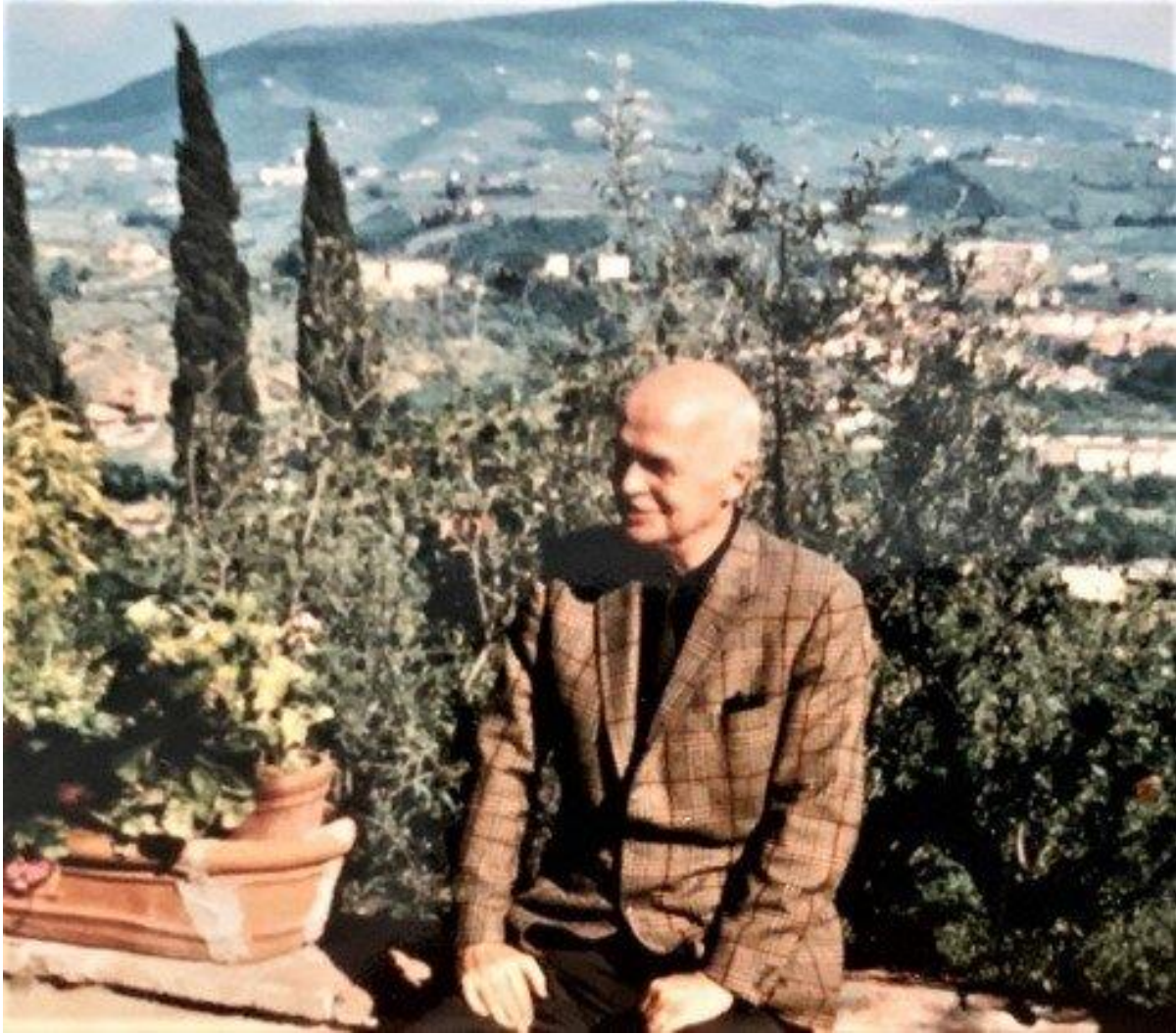
1969

My sister Rosemary (left) enjoying an espresso and game of backgammon with Richard after dinner, during the visit of my mother to his villa. Villa Piazza Calda was both stylish and comfortable, with fine Oriental rugs, a white sofa in front of an elegant fireplace, flowers on the coffee table, sea shells (a favorite subject of his art) gracing the mantelpiece, and beautiful art everywhere in the house.



Circa 1970

Richard Blow with Bruno Lastrucci in the Montici workshop. Bruno is now the maestro. After 20+ years, business is slowing, Richard is tiring. The art world has shifted dramatically. Demand has dropped. Art has gone Pop with Warhol's Campbell soup cans and Brillo boxes; Claes Oldenburg lipstick sculpture; street art, improvisation, happenings, minimalist exhibitions featuring trash in a corner. Hip is in. Richard still creates some strikingly beautiful Montici mosaics late in his career (see "Academic Biography" on the Home page to view 25 works from this late period which were donated to Oregon State University). But the generation of pietra dura maestros he started with are retiring, dying. Now 66 years old, Richard stands there in the photo, detached, hand in pocket, dealing with a 26-year old. It's doubtful Richard attended church often, but he would have recognized Ecclesiastes 3:1 *"To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven."* His time is passing.



Circa 1973

Another photo from our family collection. A year shy of 70, Richard spends his final days on the sunny terrace of Villa Piazza Calda before shuttering the Montici workshop, saying a final *“addio”* to his home of a half-century, and moving into an apartment. There will be no more Montici art. Not long after, Richard’s sister Adele Margaret dies. Richard has lost his father, mother, brothers, sisters. His Villa, and the Montici workshop are gone. His first wife is dead, his second is estranged from him, as is his son Richard Marco. In 1977, he leaves Italy for the last time, and returns to New York. On April 5, 1983, Richard Allmand Blow, 79, will die of a stroke in Manhattan on April 5. The *New York Times* obituary headlines his lasting artistic legacy: *“Richard Blow, Artist; Revived Florentine Mosaic Technique.”*