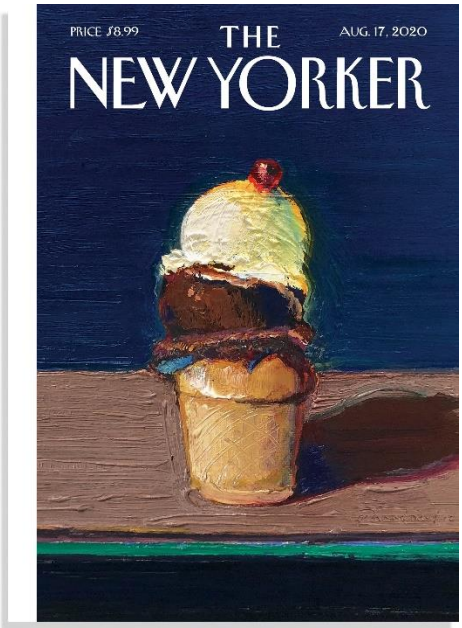
THE NEW YORKER



COVER STORY

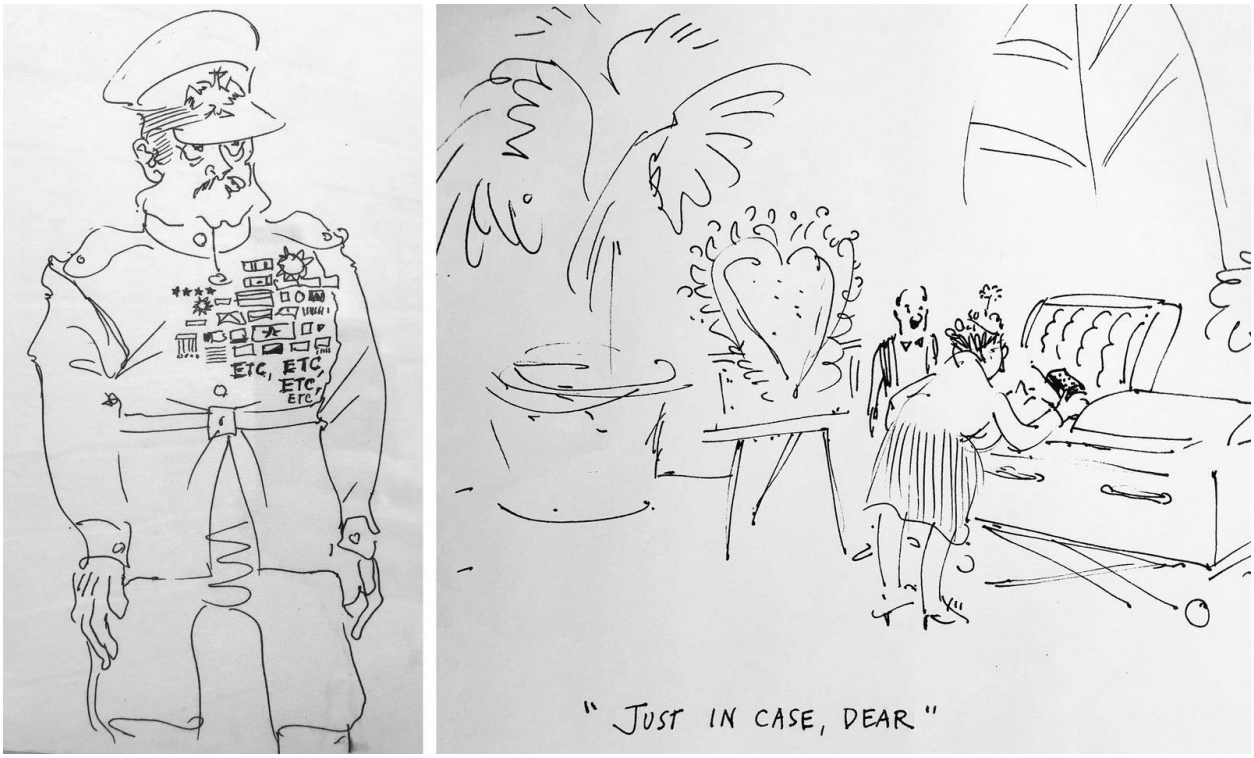
WAYNE THIEBAUD'S "DOUBLE SCOOP"

By Françoise Mouly
August 10, 2020

Wayne Thiebaud is nearly a hundred years old, and he has spent the majority of those years painting. Those paintings—with their thick pigments, bright colors, and obsession with food—have become part of the American canon, and Thiebaud's latest cover is a treat to be cherished in the heat of summer. Thiebaud is a lively presence, even on the phone, and he recently spoke to us about his influences, his love of cartoons, and how unfunny the *New Yorker* cartoonists he met were.

It's wonderful to see this painting: two scoops of ice cream that contain so much story. Tell me a little about how a boy who wanted to be a cartoonist became a painter.

Well, I still do cartoons for myself. I love cartoons—they are so much a part of caricature, and caricature is useful in terms of style. When you think like a cartoonist, it makes possible the idea of diminishment, of exaggeration. It lets you play with all kinds of wonderful things, whether it's color, or space, or whatever elements are in a picture. Your image can depend on a kind of exaggeration or reduction. I feel very privileged to be interested in that.



Two cartoons sketched out by the artist.

Which artists or cartoonists most inspire you?

I love George Herriman. He's a master for me. "Krazy Kat" is more than a comic strip; it's an inquiry into the idea of humanness, vulnerability, love. But there are a lot of others—all those old characters with the big feet and big smiles.

Do you mean comic strips like Elzie Segar's "Thimble Theatre"?

Popeye? [Popeye first appeared in "Thimble Theatre."] That was the first thing that I copied! I was born in 1920, so I'm an old guy. When I was a kid, I looked forward to the Sunday funnies so much. And I had an

uncle who was a cartoonist—he worked on a strip called "Happy Hooligan"—and he would show me how to do them.

Back then, every kid read the funny pages.

Yes, very much so. Especially during the Depression, in the thirties, everyone read them. I once had a good talk with [the late artist] Philip Guston about "Mutt and Jeff," Bud Fisher's strip. Guston was very much influenced by cartoons. Many American painters from my generation loved that tradition. Often, they first fell in love with the visual arts because of cartoons.

And you tried to make it as a professional cartoonist?

Yes, when I went to New York in 1946, I tried to sell cartoons. That was why I went. And I got to meet a lot of those wonderful cartoonists: George Price, Reamer Keller, Helen Hokinson, Peter Arno. But I found them somewhat lacking in humor. [Laughs.] They were kind of angry all the time. Some of them were pretty cynical.

This is your second ice-cream cover—do you feel like your representational paintings are also telling stories?

Yes, I'm very interested in my images being seen or read. I don't see myself as an avant-gardist or an élitist. People and love of people is a great part of my life. I'm very interested in the human condition, and that means we have to correct how we live with one other. That theme was influential on my latest series of paintings, a series of clowns. I just had an exhibition in my gallery in San Francisco, and they're going to a museum in Laguna Beach.