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INTERVIEW

An Interview With Carolina Hirsch

Carolina Hirsch can run circles around people half her age. At an age when people are expected to be in nursing homes or under the care of their children, Carolina charges full-steam ahead under her own power. Married three times, she now shares her living quarters with a roomful of paintings. Not only does she act young, she looks far younger than her chronological age.

During our interview, I sat in a rocking chair, while she flitted around the room.

LE: When and where were you born?

C: I was born Carolina Marino in Naples, Italy, November 7, 1900. I'll be 96 in November. In four more years I'll be a hundred and you can throw a party.

LE: Thank you. If I'm still around, I will. I understand that your parents brought you to America when you were 1½, is that correct?

C: Yes, I have a picture of me in a big hat. First my father came, and then my mother came. They made a big mistake.

LE: In what way?

C: They went to a little mining town (Dunmar) in Pennsylvania instead of New York City. My mother had gorgeous clothes. She was only 19 when she went to this coal mining town. When she wore her beautiful clothes, people would say, 'only bad women wear those beautiful clothes.' She was very unhappy. She cried all the time.

LE: What did your father do?

C: He managed a macaroni factory - the same as he had done in Italy. When the owner died, the oldest son gambled everything away, so they went bankrupt. Then my father opened a grocery store.

LE: When did you begin to paint?

C: I was about 19 when I started. I have continued since then except I got married three times. My husbands didn't stop me from painting, but it's very difficult, you know. Now that I'm by myself, I'm painting up a storm.

LE: Did you take art classes?

C: When I got older I went to New York to study art at the Art Students League - of which I am a lifetime member. I studied there for a year, and then got into show business. I have pictures. I was a dancer. I should have gone into singing instead of dancing, but I didn't have any friends in New York telling me what to do.

LE: Did you continue your art while you were in show business?

C: Yes, when I wasn't in the show, I painted.



LE: Tell me about your exhibits.

C: When my husband passed away - he was a colonel - I started painting very seriously, and I was put in an exhibition. My painting got the highest purchase price of all the artists in Florida. The Women's City Club in Hollywood, Florida bought it. I'm sorry to have parted with it because I liked it.

LE: Did you continue your studies?

C: Yes. I attended art school, and exhibited at the museum in Detroit, Michigan.

LE: Did you sell paintings?

C: I didn't try to sell much. But I did sell some in Miami and New York City and Washington. We had an exhibition in a park in Washington. A man wanted to buy my self-portrait. I told him he didn't want to buy that, but he told me that's what he wanted. So he asked what did I want for it, and I said well . . . make it fifty dollars, and he said I'll give you a hundred. I said okay. He wanted to put me under contract and sell my paintings. I would have done it, but he was young and I wasn't sure he knew what he was doing. After that I left and went to New York.

LE: What did you do there?

C: I worked at the Waldorf-Astoria as a cashier. I did all kinds of work after that. I used to quit all the time.

LE: Do you cook?

C: Yes. But I buy textured vegetable protein instead of meat.

LE: Why did you become a vegetarian?

C: I was looking at TV, and they had a cow on there going to the slaughterhouse, and she turned around with those big eyes and looked right at me. I said to myself, 'I'm a cannibal - how can I eat that poor thing?!' From that moment on - no more meat - no chicken, no nothing. That was about 7 years ago.

LE: Do you feel any different since you quit eating meat?

C: I feel great.

LE: Do you take vitamins?

C: Yes, I've been taking vitamins for 15 years. I take them very seriously.

LE: How did that come about?

C: When I was in New York I went into this health store, and this young man said to me, 'if you take pantothenic acid (vitamin B5), you'll never get gray hair.' I said, 'oh that's marvelous, I'll start doing that.' So I've been taking them for 15 years. My hair hasn't turned gray yet. (Carolina's natural hair is medium brown).

LE: Are you from a long-lived family?

C: My mother died young - she was 72. My father died at 97. He would have lived a lot longer if I hadn't taken him to a doctor.

LE: Why?

C: One day the Fuller Brush man said, 'did you notice that your father's ankles are swollen?' I had never noticed. So I called the doctor, and he told me to bring my father down. They put him in the hospital and he died in two days.

LE: I am interested in knowing what vitamins you take.

(She leads me to her kitchen and pulls out a shoebox full of supplements. Her "morning" vitamins are pregnacolone, niacin, bilberry, coenzyme Q10, GH3, beta-carotene, cranberry, vitamin C, ginkgo biloba, and an antioxidant mixture).

C: I take ginkgo for my brain and niacin for my eyes. A woman told me niacin is good for my eyes. My eye doctor told me it was good for sex.

(Later in the day, she takes Asian ginseng, vitamin E, bee pollen, alpha lipoic acid, and various B vitamins. She has never had cataracts, and only uses glasses for reading).

LE: During our first visit you told me you had a potential boyfriend downstairs, but he's 80 and may be too young. What's happening with that?

C: (Just laughs).

LE: What are you working on now?

C: I have an exhibit coming up next week. It's called "Inhabitants of Paradise".

LE: What's that about?

C: It's religious - saints, angels, madonnas. They want me to exhibit seven paintings. I want to exhibit nine.

LE: What's on the agenda after that?

C: After that I'm doing "People from Mars".

LE: People from Mars!?

C: Yes!

LE: How are you going to get ideas for that?

C: They're going to come down during the night and put ideas in my head. A lot of what I do may come from outerspace - I'm not sure.

LE: Seriously, what inspires your paintings?

C: I don't know. They just pop into my head. I know one thing, though: my aliens are not going to be ugly. They're going to be lovable.

LE: I still don't know what gives you so much energy. Maybe it was all that pasta you ate, growing up.

C: Maybe.

LE: What's your final word on staying young?

C: Enthusiasm. Don't look back. I'm trying not to make too many mistakes-I can't afford them at this age.



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