

The following text is excerpts from two European interviews, those of Bellumartis and Amis Club.

AN INTERVIEW WITH KEITH ROCCO

When you became interested in art and history; which was first, art or history?

From a very young age, I always had an ability to draw and sketch, but I credit my father with giving me an appreciation of fine art. When I was quite young, I remember his interest in the artists of the Italian High Renaissance. I was probably no more than eight years old. Little did I realize at the time but I was learning, by observing these masters, the importance and use of chiaroscuro to develop shape and mood.

My next memory is being drawn to fine paintings; one of those things that you naturally are sympathetic to or you are not. In my case, I was blessed with an amazement at how someone could create such a work, and I was filled with the desire to create something of my own.

An interest in history began at an early age as well, and again I probably must attribute this to my father, Anthony Rocco. At this time, the late 1950s and into the 1960s, there were many documentaries and some television series based on the Second World War. I watched all of them. This coupled with the knowledge that my father and uncles had served during the war and seeing all the toy soldiers in the Christmas catalogs, it's not difficult to see how a young boy with a passion to draw and a small army of plastic soldiers would put pencil to paper sooner or later.

Do you remember your first painting?

Around 1968 or 1969 I was given a set of oil paints by my parents for Christmas. Before this I had worked only in graphite or colored pencil. I was 13 or 14 years old at the

time. Our family did not have much money so my first paintings were on oil cloth wall paper. I painted on the backside of the wallpaper. They were muddy disasters.

Who are the artists that you admire?

The list of artists that have had an influence on my work is long indeed, especially if we go back to the days of my childhood. Michelangelo, Titian, Vermeer, Rembrandt, Delacroix, Gerome and Lautrec would be some of the earliest, to name

but a very few. But when I made the conscious decision in the early 1980's to follow the path of historical narrative art, there developed a core group of artists that I returned to again and again to study their works. These artists were Jean Louis Ernest Meissonier, Howard Pyle, Alphonse Marie deNeuville, N. C. Wyeth, Jean Baptiste Edouard Detaille and Frederic Remington.

Working in the historical painting genre requires a great amount of accurate documentation. What is the process you follow before beginning a work?

I work in a very traditional and methodical method, the same utilized by Meissonier and those who followed him. For example, when creating a multi-figure painting these would be the steps I would follow. After identifying the subject, I read as many first person accounts of the episode that I can find as well as reading any other historical accounts. I then create a rough sketch of the composition that I have in mind. Once I have this I do further research concerning the terrain and any architectural elements when applicable. Uniform or costume research is also done at this time.



~ Colonel Sourd (detail) ~

At this point I bring in a live model, costumed as completely as I can in the appropriate dress, and pose them according to the figures in my rough drawing.

These photos of the figures are then reworked when necessary to add more movement to an often static model pose. When redrawing these model photos, I can correct any foreshortening

begin painting comes the possibility that changes may have to be made in either the composition or the color, but oil paint is very forgiving. Being opaque it allows for last minute changes. A good example of this is the horse in the bottom left hand corner of "Marshall's Crossroads". In the drawing the size of the horse appeared in proportion, but when I was in the middle of painting this canvas, it was apparent that the horse was definitely too small. I enlarged the drawing, retraced it onto the canvas and painted a new larger horse over the old one.

As for drying time, I do not use any mediums to extend or shorten the drying time. I use only the linseed oil that comes from the tube of paint and for thinning, basic turpentine. This means that by the next day the areas painted the day before will be dry. Areas that have a heavier concentration of titanium white may take a few days to dry but generally speaking, because I paint with a fairly thin impasto of paint, the previous day's work will be dry within 10-12 hours.



~ The Devil's Den (detail) ~

problems created by the camera lens. Once these final individual drawings are completed they are arranged according to the rough sketch into a final full size drawing. This drawing is then taped to the linen canvas or wood panel. Using tracing paper I then trace over the drawing, transferring a chalk line onto the canvas or panel. Because this chalk line is fugitive if touched by turpentine, I must trace once again the drawing, this time using thinned burnt umber or van dyke brown. Now the drawing is stable on the canvas. At this point I am ready to paint.

What are the materials and techniques you employ when you paint? What is your favorite stage in the process?

As for materials, I work entirely with oil paint, a mixed group of paints from several manufacturers. Generally speaking, I will have ten colors plus white on my palette. I employ an alla prima method of painting which suits my personality well. After I have a concept that I am excited about I like to begin painting as soon as possible while my enthusiasm is at its peak. I think the alla prima method allows for this; no waiting for under-painting or glazes to dry over several days. With this type of urgency to

Because of this, I have to complete an area of the painting and stop at a convenient place in order to continue the next day without creating color matching problems. For example, I would want to complete the skyscape of a painting in one day and not have to try and blend into this dry paint the following day.

My favorite stage in the process is beginning to put paint to canvas. This is when the entire color palette for the painting is born and it is very exciting to me to see it develop.



~ Continental Line Infantryman ~

Are there any of your works which have a special significance to you?

I believe that there are several paintings of mine which have become iconic with my name, probably because they are paintings that helped form my early career and that gave me recognition with the public. Two of these would be "Through the Cornfield" and "A Chasseur's Fate".

One painting that has a special significance for me is "The Rear Guard" because it was an idea that I had held onto for years and never had the time to work on it. I finally blocked out two months to devote solely to developing and painting this piece. I was very pleased with the final work and the painting hung in my studio for nearly ten years, hidden from the public eye, until someone came to the studio, saw it and purchased it.

Which painting took the most time?

I've had the opportunity to create works for several museums, three in the US and one in Italy. Two of these were on-site mural paintings. The first museum that I was contracted

to produce murals for was the Wisconsin Veterans Museum in Madison, Wisconsin. The designer had seen my painting of "Through the Cornfield-the Battle of Antietam" and from this wanted me to reproduce a version of the subject on a wall that I believe was 10 feet tall by 26 feet in length. Along with this mural the museum had two other dioramas that required murals, both WWII subjects.

I had never painted on such a scale or on such a surface before, so the first week was a timid learning experience. After a slow and hesitant start, the paint was soon flying off of the brush. I think that this first mural took three months to complete after the composition had been transferred to the wall.

It seems obvious now after the fact, but when I began the painting, I was using ridiculously small brushes for such a canvas. Once I became accustomed to the flow of painting on a wall this size, I was using nothing smaller than a 1 inch wide brush and more often two and three inch wide brushes to block in figures.

Two years later, this project was dwarfed by a series of murals for Pamplin Historical Park's National Museum of the Civil War

Soldier. The area that these combined murals covered was larger than the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. For this project I hired two painters to work on the landscapes while I took responsibility for all of the figures, both human and animal.

I've found projects like these are really physically demanding. Usually you are standing all day long and often climbing up and down scaffolding of some sort or another, retrieving something you've forgotten to take with you. After eight hours a day of that I was exhausted.

How much time do you spend at the easel?

By far, the greatest amount of my works are those created at the easel. After the

drawing is transferred to the canvas, a small single figure usually takes me two to four days to paint while the larger canvasses, depending on the complexity, can be on the easel for six to eight weeks, occasionally more. My painting week is about 30 to 40 hours in the studio.

What do you think the trend will be in the future of historical artists?

This is a very difficult question to answer. As for modern subjects, the ability today for anyone to take photos and video with a cell phone may limit the need for a painter's interpretation. Yet, I would hope that the artist's selectivity of what to put in and what to leave out of a composition to better and more clearly tell the story will



~ Buffalo Hunter ~

be the element that will continue to make historical art viable. For earlier periods, the future of the genre is bright. By faithfully recreating the uniforms and costume, equipment, buildings and objects of the period, it is much easier for the viewer to make this leap to another time, another place. The viewer may not know all of these objects intimately, but because the artist has taken the time to research and include them, there is a truth to the painting, a truth void of anachronisms that otherwise could destroy the viewer's experience.

What are your favorite subjects?

I have always prided myself on telling the story of the common soldier, the often anonymous men who found themselves in extraordinary circumstances. If you look at my body of work, rarely will you see superior officers. My interest lies with the lowly rank and file and showing the viewer through these anonymous faces the breadth of human emotion. Armed conflict seems to be one place where every side

of humanity is exposed, fear, heroism, good, evil and sacrifice. The encapsulation of all these ideas has been a large force which has attracted me to the field of military art.

What are your plans for the future?

My hope is that I will always have the physical ability to create and paint until my last days on earth. I can't say what I may be painting ten years from now, but I'm confident that the passion to create will continue to burn in me. After 45 years of painting, I still feel the surge of adrenaline during those moments when everything is in perfect alignment, and the vision flows from the brain to the eye to the hand through the brush and onto the canvas. Only a fool would willingly walk away from the chance for such an experience, however fleeting it may be.

Keith Rocco 2017



~ "Give Them Hell, Boys!" (detail) ~