

# PRESERVING HISTORY

by Peter Rindlisbacher

The ASMA is a big tent. If you have a heritage interest, your painting can range from a casual stab at a historical subject, all the way to an intensively researched portrayal as accurate as current sources allow. I strive for the latter in that range. For those already doing historical works, most of what follows will sound familiar; for the rest, I'll be candid.

First let's deal with the liabilities. If you intend your art as an efficient meal ticket, carefully calculating hours on a painting until it's turned into cash, then historical marine painting can be frustrating, especially early on. Some reasons for this? Historians and archeologists tend not to be rich, and heritage institutions often have only limited discretionary funds to pay you, and recently they are even more stressed. Everywhere, heritage projects are screaming for art support - as long as it's free.

Another reason for the weak link to compensation is that research takes time, especially if the era, event or vessel is new to you. You have to teach yourself about the subject in order to paint it properly. The actual painting may not be slow, but confirming and correcting all the historical details can be. If the assignment is unfamiliar, then weeks of education, assembling sources and conferring with experts, all go into the time sacrificed. And you can't charge what it really costs.

How well do you take criticism? With this stuff, you can't hide behind your muse or "artistic license"; you are

approximating an objective reality and you're either historically right or wrong. Experts who have dedicated years to becoming intimate with the fine points



"Engagement in the Gale, September 28, 1813 • Oil on Canvas • 30" x 48"

of a subject don't suffer in silence when they examine a painting whose subject you took only weeks to learn about.



"Steamer HEROINE on the Red River, 1838" • Oil on Canvas • 24" x 36 "



"Battle of Hudson Bay, 1697" • Oil on Canvas • 24" x 36"

Sometimes you have to do, re-do, then correct it again, until experts say it's right.

You are a loner, and demand total autonomy as an artist? Then historical marine painting can be a challenge because you complete your effort in isolation then expose it to the world as a finished product – and results have to hold up or get shredded. Surrendering some of that autonomy to take expert advice early on can save you much embarrassment later.

Are you good at juggling? In doing a seascape, you have to determine focal point, horizon line, viewer elevation, balance, cues to depth, and so on. That's hard enough, but now pack on considerations of wind strength and direction, sun azimuth and elevation, proper flags at that moment, how many

gun ports, amount and type of shot damage, what sails were set, how many shrouds on that mast, number of crew on deck, etc. The more specific the portrayal of a historical event (sometimes down to minutes on a certain day), the more exacting the details, and the greater the risk for historical inaccuracies.

In the face of all these serious concerns, why on earth devote yourself to historical marine art? Well, in short, because it's the most rewarding pursuit that will ever near drive you crazy. You are telling a chapter in the human story, creating a bridge between past and present, striking out against modern-day corporate homogenizing amnesia. You find a historical moment lost to Time, and with all the skill you can muster, you immortalize the beauty of it for others to see. A noble calling, if ever there was one.

Work may go slow at first, educating yourself about a vessel or era, but over time your files grow, your knowledge grows, and results improve. If you're commission-driven, you're sent in very different directions, but you hone your research tactics over time and get better at it. Complete many works on the same vessel or same era, and in time you become the "Go-to Guy – or Girl".

With historical marine art, the piece and its image often lead different lives. The original frequently goes to a collector/investor or to an institution and never moves. Sometime, it fetches you only a pittance for the time spent creating it. The image, on the other hand, may have a very energetic afterlife, appearing in prints, publications, slideshows, on CD covers, brochures, the Internet, and so on. It goes to work for you for years afterward, sending its parent home the money. Sweating the details and doing careful research can make your work an authoritative image of a subject. As wrecks are discovered, as commemorative anniversaries arrive, your work is hunted down and exhibited, often because no one else bothered to paint those subjects.

We historical artists have never had it so good, in terms of access to information. The Internet permits images and articles to flash to us in seconds, where it used to take weeks of slogging in a distant library. Experts that you have never met can closely coach and critique your work over the phone lines, as you send them progress photos from a digital camera. Increasingly, historical documents are being digitized which brings them



"Outbound from Louisburg, 1744" • Oil on Canvas • 36" x 48"

right into your studio in minutes. As you become known in the network of historians, remote but joined through the Internet, they alert you to sources you never knew about. You establish happy circular relationships of assistance and generosity. You are giving, cooperative and user-friendly to historians, and the friendly comes back to you in spades.

Art can be a solitary endeavor, but with historical marine paintings, you often work with those who have devoted decades to a topic. Although you can at times feel like a chew toy in the dog pen, when you are part of a network of gifted individuals all sincerely bent on accurate historical re-creation, something very special happens. You all share a zeal in trying to get the story right. You are positioned on the front end of a dream



"Steamer COLUMBIA, C. 1905" • Oil on Canvas • 24" x 36"

team. Historians may be the world's greatest authorities on a subject, but ah, we artists command the express routes right into the emotive places in the human brain. Effective historical marine art doesn't just communicate data from the past, it brings the moment vibrantly alive for the viewer; it's Time Travel, with you as the medium.

Marine art can punch above its weight as Marine Heritage eternally battles against present-day neglect and apathy. In the same way that a passionate poem once ignited the public's attention to save "Old Ironsides" from certain demolition, a fine historical marine painting can excite, can inspire, can change minds and thereby change history. The great American psychologist Carl Rogers once said, "Don't be the ammunition wagon - be the rifle". You want your art to be more than just pleasant wall covering? You want your painting to make a difference? Then embrace a cause. Go historical -- Marine Heritage needs your talent!



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