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This hallowed ground

By Chad Konecky

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Lynn artist Jeff Fioravanti's powerful pastels enliven battlefield landscapes with a present-day pulse

Surprisingly enough, the paradox of Jeff Fioravanti's Lynn home interior isn't instantly evident.

Gradually, mind you, the sensation dawns that viewing his art requires a tabletop, a chair back or a nearby doorjamb. Not a single piece of art - not even a family photo - adorns the walls of Fioravanti's house. A curious, but altogether fitting phenomenon, considering his Civil War battlefield depictions don't portray a single soldier.

Jeff Fioravanti creates images of hallowed ground. Unfettered. Serene. Landscapes just as they are today. And much like they were before the War Between the States turned the acreage into Hades, if only for an hour, a day or a weekend.

"I paint the battlefields as they are; I don't illustrate the battles," says Fioravanti, a Saugus native and a member of the Saugus High Athletics Hall of Fame as a former hockey and soccer standout. "I paint the open spaces. I paint the green spaces. These are some of the most pristine landscapes in our country and I want people to appreciate them for what they are, whether they're a Civil War buff or anyone else. Plus, my wife isn't going to let me put paintings of a lot of guys getting shot all over the house."

The pleasant, ankle-level clutter of an artist at work offsets the blankness of Fioravanti's walls at eye level. His dining room is overrun by framed giclee prints, produced via a high-end ink jet process, and by a row of tidy brown boxes stacked with packaged notecards. Along another doorjamb, an even tidier tower of boxed notecard envelopes.

Fioravanti doesn't work for Hallmark. This is merely the latest emblem of his burgeoning success and notoriety.

In April, his Civil War battlefield landscapes were part of an invitation-only exhibit in Gettysburg, Pa. And for good reason. The Gettysburg National Military Park has commissioned the scenic notecards of Fioravanti's work.

In his second-floor "studio," really just a converted guestroom, the 45-year-old graphic designer creates in tightly cramped quarters. He is surrounded by a waist-high semicircle of pastel sticks. Every imaginable color.

Close at hand are the grays and blues that give him his Gettysburg skies and his Antietam creeks. The yellows and greens that become sawgrass and white oaks rest in their trays nearby.

This week's project is Young's Branch, a valley across which Federal columns pushed their advantage as demoralized Confederates retreated to the shelter of the Robinson House Hill. This was the first battle of Manassas, Va. July of 1861.

Fioravanti sternly notes that, like most Civil War battles, the clash is known by different names, North and South. Union forces named battles after the nearest distinct geological lay of the land - in this case, Bull Run. Confederates identified battles by the name of the nearest town.

To accurately depict the scene, Fioravanti works from slides of photos he takes while visiting the battlefields. But this isn't paint by the numbers. He is maniacally loyal to capturing the essence of the landscape. And to that end, he'll flash the image on his projection screen for just a few instants, then flick the "off" switch and work from his mind's eye.

"I have to paint from my own feeling; I have to put my own emotion in there," he says. "I use the slide as a guide to gain an initial understanding, but then I like to be on my own."

A vested interest

Getting a handle on how an ex-jock who spent 12 years as a production planner at a manufacturing firm became a thoughtful preservationist of historical landscapes is easier than it might seem. Easier than explaining Union General Irvin McDowell's reluctance to press the issue against Confederate regulars at Bull Run, if you ask Fioravanti.

First off, there's a family history of passion for history. Fioravanti's maternal great uncle, William Collins, was a graduate of West Point and served as chair of the history department at Purdue. His older brother, Richard, was a history major at UMass.

Both sides of the family encouraged his natural inclination toward the arts. Drawing pens and markers were constantly shoved upon him as a child visiting his grandparents in his father's native Gloucester. Fioravanti, who lives in Lynn with his wife, Cathy, and his 8-year-old daughter, Nicole, got serious enough to take a few painting lessons in his late 20s, but dropped the hobby throughout most of the 1990s due to work and family commitments.

He began painting regularly again in 1996 after being laid off, and the passion was rekindled. Fioravanti stuck mostly with seascapes. He met with relatively rapid success: his sea themes currently hang at South Hamilton's Art Research Associates and the Art 3 Gallery in Manchester, N.H.

For the record, his rationale for failing to hang his work at home is rather prosaic. "We just had the interior done; I don't want to put any holes in the walls," he mutters.

In August of 2001, he took his first crack at hallowed ground. Fioravanti sketched the beginnings of what became "Silent Guardian: Battery L, 1st Ohio Light Artillery," a painting of a Union gun battery now preserved at Gettysburg's Little Round Top. The piece is now one of the notecards.

He didn't approach the easel on a whim.

An instant Civil War buff after viewing the period war sketches of Harper's Weekly artists Winslow Homer and Alfred Waud as a child, he founded a 30-member Confederate Civil War reenacting group, the Sumter Rifles, a half-decade ago. The group hits about 30 events annually, split evenly between big productions and smaller-scale appearances like parades and school presentations.

When artistic passion met pastime, a more perfect union was formed.

"I just felt like I might be able to make people pause and reflect," says Fioravanti, whose day job is as a graphic designer in the IT department of Wakefield's TK Keith, Co., a credit-card processing firm.

Maybe so. But any attempt to consecrate a battlefield is considerably different than brushing out a seascape. Particularly when the battlefields in question were bloodied during what most historians view as a fusion of the first modern war in terms of technology and the last "gentlemen's" war in regard to tactics.

An estimated 620,000 Americans died in four years of fighting during the Civil War. The conflict is renowned for its savagery and the alarming pace of casualties. In the course of two hours at Franklin, Tenn., on Nov. 30, 1864, General John Bell Hood's Confederates lost over 6,000 men.

"It's a challenge to elicit that sentiment," admits Fioravanti. "You do get the same type of intensity in seascapes. The power of the ocean during a storm. The peacefulness of the harbor on a summer evening. The struggles of the fishermen. The lighting is different, but the message they evoke is similar."

Shall not perish

A report from a Cincinnati Gazette correspondent (from Frank Moore's "Anecdotes, Poetry and Incidents of the War," 1866) following the second day's operations at Chickamauga, 1863:

It was about half past twelve, when, hearing a heavy cannonade open up on the right, I galloped over in that direction to see what it might mean. A longitudinal gap in the Mission Ridge admits the Rossville road into Chattanooga valley, and skirts along a large cornfield at the mouth of the gap. Looking across the cornfield, you see thick woods upon the other side. The cornfield itself is a sort of 'cove' in the ridge ... while I stood gazing upon this scene from the summit of the ridge, some rebel skirmishers appeared in the skirts of the woods opposite the gap.

This is what Jeff Fioravanti strives to and succeeds in capturing. The possibilities within the landscape. Even the ghosts. His work is still, but vibrant. Respectful. Savory in its composition and balance. Elegant. Unpretentious.

His interpretation somehow further sanctifies the subject matter.

His devotion is inspired. Fioravanti paints deep into the night, sometimes rising at 3 a.m., so the photographic image he slide-projects burns crystal clear into his memory in the blanket of darkness.

He makes the seven-hour drive to Gettysburg, even further to other battlefields, on weekends to harvest his photographic tableau. He painstakingly selects appropriate quotes and phrases from the period to title his works.

And all the while, he labors in the cramped conditions of a substandard art space. To reset his perspective on many of his landscapes, Fioravanti removes them from the easel, sets them at one end of his second-floor hallway and surveys them as he flushes the pastel from his fingers in the bathroom down the hall.

"His attention to detail (in his seascapes) is flawless," says Josh Megyesy, co-owner of Beverly's Mingo Gallery, which will exhibit Fioravanti seascapes as part of a group theme show on July 18. "He's a perfectionist. Some of his work can be kind of moody and it's very realistic in that way. I'm really interested in seeing some of his new work."

"Jeff's depictions of Gettysburg are so evocative of everyone's experience of visiting the battlefield," echoes Nadine Mironchuck, secretary of the Lynn-based North Shore Civil War Round Table, a discussion group formed in 1991. "It's just fantastic how he recreates the feeling of being there in a place that, in a way, is so unremarkable and so irreplaceable at the same time."

Fioravanti's notecard series hit the stands at Gallery 30 on Gettysburg's York Street earlier this month. There are two, four-landscape sets. The first print run was 1,000 of each.

Baby steps. But momentum is building.

The director of the National Museum of Civil War Medicine has invited Fioravanti to show his work in a Frederick, Md., exhibition this fall. The Gettysburg Battlefield Preservation Association has requested his presence at its July 3-5 book show - Fioravanti has donated an original for auction to benefit the GBPA's preservation and restoration of the Daniel Lady Farm. And the Adams County Land Conservancy, charged with preserving battlefield and historical properties in and around Gettysburg, will also auction off a donated Fioravanti original this year.

"Hopefully, we'll get a good response," says Fioravanti, who is partially funded and marketed by two silent partners he calls his "benefactors." "The idea is to make a living, but I want to give something to these places - contribute to them being remembered."

The timing for both pursuits is perfect. Gettysburg National Military Park is in the midst of a \$39 million makeover, in which the planned demolition of some buildings will allow for restoration of about 20 acres on the edge of the field where Union troops turned back Confederate soldiers on the battle's third day. A new visitor complex will include a museum to display a priceless collection of Civil War rifles, drums and other artifacts currently in storage.

"People lived in these areas before and after the carnage took place there," Fioravanti continues. "Because of those three days or that segment in time, they're well-known, but they're otherwise beautiful places. It's just that something else happened there. You try to access that emotion when you're painting them."

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