

Inspired by Historic Landscapes

by Jacqueline Tobin

November, 2005

Jeff Fioravanti is an artist on a mission. "Painting today, to preserve the past for tomorrow" is how he describes the driving force behind the subject matter that has most recently dominated his artwork, as well as his thoughts. For the past two years, the Lynn, Massachusetts-based artist has been painting images of Civil War battlefields as they exist today—minus the bloodied soldiers, monuments, and any modern-day markers, such as telephone poles. "I'm not trying to depict the way the battle was, but rather show what we see when we walk the fields today," he explains. Fioravanti's paintings may seem like simple pastoral scenes but are, in fact, quite evocative of a time past: He picks a historic site—such as Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, or the site of The Battle of Bull Run, in Manassas, Virginia—and gives it a life of its own. "The battlefield is a place to behold," he exclaims, "both because of the history attached to it and because of the physical beauty inherent in it. I'm trying to help people achieve a connection to the legacy of our country. It's so rich and alive and full of personality, but a lot of people don't seem to see what these places hold. These lands are links to who we are as a people and a nation."

Fioravanti likes to choose a site, time of day, or mood to focus on that carries the viewer to the place he is re-creating. Sometimes that means taking his audience right onto the battlefield. In *Oh God That I Could See My Mother*, Fioravanti explains the origin of the phrase as being from a Confederate captain as he's assaulting Little Round Top at Gettysburg. "These are his last words as he's dying," Fioravanti says. "His thoughts are of his faraway home, to see his mother one last time." In this wooded scene, with the light breaking through to a clearing, you can almost see the soldier taking his last gasp of air, proclaiming his one dying wish. "This is what I try to convey through my work," Fioravanti states. "People who sacrificed their lives to help us be where we are as a country today. I admire their stories and want to keep their memory and connection to us alive."

A large part of Fioravanti's work also represents everyday scenes that he encounters during his walks along wooded paths near his home. "I've done a lot of seascapes. I love to explore the coast along my native New England, as well as the rolling hills of Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia, where I am attracted to the play of light, be it the way it dances upon the water, flicks across a blade of grass, plays among the clouds in the sky, or wraps itself around the trunk of a tree. I am, and have always been, mesmerized by how light can soften a piece of granite or make it cold and stern as a palace guard," the artist remarks.

Fioravanti enjoys painting both en plein air and in his studio, his workspace being the equivalent of just a spare bedroom in his house, about 50 square feet. "Once you see the collection of pastels, papers, stacked paintings, easels, and the like, I'm probably really painting in a 3'-x-3' area. It sort of makes me feel like a mime doing the classic 'Trapped in a Box,'" he laughs. But he manages nonetheless, surrounded at every turn by pastel sticks in every imaginable color, though he says he finds himself painting much more loosely out of doors than in the studio, where he relies on notes and slides. And although he feels that color from slides is truer than that in a photograph, he cautions to not become a slave to the reproductive image. "Even though I use slides, I do so mostly at the outset to lay down the initial sketch and colors. I often find myself shutting the projector down completely and working strictly from memory to develop a better connection to the piece."

Before embarking on a new painting, Fioravanti prefers to first sketch out the image he has in mind on paper. "Lately I've been using Wallis sanded paper, usually toned with gouache, or the Art Spectrum pretoned [terracotta] paper for my work. I tend to gravitate toward the cool blue-green end of the spectrum, and using toned papers that complement my senses really help to make the colors pop." The artist says he also finds that the Wallis and Art Spectrum papers allow him a more natural feel to each composition. "I've also experimented with watercolor board and

toned canvas, among other supports."

As for the pastels themselves, Fioravanti says they are his medium of choice for all of his finished work because they are "pure, immediate, and luminous—all important components in my interaction with, and interpretation of, the American landscape. They are durable and offer great freedom to express and apply a wide range of techniques."

At the moment, the artist has no particular preference for any one brand, finding great use for almost all of the brands available to an artist today. "The process I use to apply pastels does not follow a set formula. Though, if pressed, I would have to say I lay down all my initial colors with the harder varieties, such as Nupastel or Winsor & Newton. But I'm just as apt to start out with Unison or Sennelier. It all depends on which colors might suit my needs and the effects I'm trying to achieve."

For blending and layering, Fioravanti uses his fingers or the pastels themselves. "I use the pastels more and more often these days as much for the effects of play between the colors as for saving my fingers," he notes. The artist avoids using finger cots, packing peanuts, and many of the other items other artists use to achieve certain effects in their work, but he doesn't discount them. "These items can obtain wonderful results, but I prefer to have that connection between me and my art."

Although he may work in cramped quarters or spend his days traipsing through the countryside in search of inspiration, the artist is meticulous and methodical in how he approaches each new work, even when he seems to be improvising. "When I first began using pastels, I would always start in the upper left and work down to the lower right. However, these days I am more apt to travel all around the paper when working on a painting. Though I will more often than not block in the darks first, the choice to bounce around allows me to apply a rhythm to my work that I believe only helps to enhance the piece. Unless, of course, I am working a piece with distinguishable and visible sky, then I still tend to work left to right, top to bottom, and complete the sky before continuing on to the remainder of the painting."

Once his painting is complete, the artist shoots slides of it, which he says serve not only as a record of the piece but also as one last chance to determine where any touch-ups might be in order. As a rule, though, he never uses fixative, "except on the rare occasion when I might need to darken a shadow area. But even then, I use it only early in the painting process, and never, ever, at the completion point. I want those colors to sparkle and sing, to play upon the light, and I find that fixative far too often does not allow this to occur."

That, after all, is largely what the artist's work is all about—a time, a place, a feeling that calls to him. As he likes to put it, "If I ever get in an auto accident, it's not because I'm fiddling with the radio or reading a newspaper or drinking coffee. It's because all of a sudden some light or shadow or form has caught my eye and I turned my head to admire it. For me, it's all about the way the sun might kiss the earth and the rocks and the trees, and how the light and shadows play off each other."

"And as I walk the battlefields of yesteryear," he concludes, "I touch the ground and feel the air and the spirit of the place—walking where they walked or, after reading their words, feeling what they felt. That's what inspires me, drives me to paint and preserve the memory of thousands. To echo the words of Abraham Lincoln, 'The world will little note, nor long remember, what we say here, but can never forget what they did here.'"

Jacqueline Tobin is the deputy editor of Photo District News, a publication geared toward the professional photo industry. In her spare time she freelances for other arts publications, including Drawing and Watercolor.

About the Artist

Jeff Fioravanti lives in Lynn, Massachusetts, and is represented by Art Research Associates Gallery, in South Hamilton, Massachusetts; Art 3 Gallery, in Manchester, New Hampshire; and Gallery 30, in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, where his recent show "Past, Present, Future—An Artist's Crusade to Help Save the Historic Lands of America," debuted this past April. The award-winning artist is a member of several national pastel societies, with signature membership in the Pastel Society of America, the Pastel Society (Meriden, Connecticut) and The Pastel Painters Society of Cape Cod. To learn more about Fioravanti, and to view samples of his artwork, visit www.fioravanti-fineart.com.