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Spirit OF ADVENTURE

Mort Künstler's long career in illustration and the Civil War honored at the Norman Rockwell Museum in Massachusetts.

By Michael Clawson

Mort Künstler, the great Civil War painter, opens with a bombshell: "This will be the last Civil War painting I ever do. I'm switching gears," he says. "I'm almost glad. I find it nearly impossible to come up with new and exciting material. So when I move on, I'll try not to look back."

This shifting out of a genre is pretty normal for the 83-year-old artist, who has ventured far and wide in his vast career, which has included Yankee North, Confederate South, space shuttles and rockets, the earth's prehistoric past, headline news and, memorably, men's adventure magazines, which allowed him to paint giant whales, killer armadillos, naked cowboys, man-eating polar bears and a cover illustration on a prison break story with the headline "Two years is enough. We're busting out of Camp Kargopol."

Künstler—his last name literally means "artist" in German—says history has given him a solid escape plan from the Civil War: the 150th anniversary is next year, a perfect occasion to switch his focus around. He's already put the

finishing touches on a scene of the surrender at Appomattox, and then will begin finalizing a piece called *LaGrange Versus LaGrange*, which chronicles an obscure passage in history that occurred a week after Robert E. Lee's surrender at a Virginia courthouse. The painting depicts the all-female Nancy Hart Militia protecting the town of LaGrange, Georgia, from Union officer Col. Oscar LaGrange—"No relation," Künstler adds. During a stalemate at the center of LaGrange, the militia and the invading colonel came to an agreement that the town would be spared if the women fed the soldiers. Both pieces will be unveiled next year during Civil War ceremonies.

In the meantime, a retrospective of his work can now be seen at Norman Rockwell Museum in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. *Mort Künstler: The Art of Adventure* pulls from much of the artist's varied career, some of it from his childhood. There will also be work from a 1962 bicycle trip Künstler took through Mexico with a friend. "We painted a watercolor every day. We came back with lots of watercolors, but

also in great shape...probably the best shape I've ever been in my life," he says. "We were also pretty good at watercolors."

Some of the Rockwell retrospective will focus on Künstler's illustration work, including the men's magazine illustrations from the 1950s and '60s. Working a furious schedule that often produced two new pieces a week, the New York artist created original art for publications such as *Male, Stag, Adventure, For Men Only*, and *Men in Adventure*. He worked so much he invented a pseudonym, Emmett Kaye, to give himself more job opportunities, including with his own company's competition. At the time, the pieces were photographed for the magazines and then promptly forgotten. Today they're collectibles.

"If I told you how many I threw out and burned or how many I never bothered to pick up, you'd be horrified. Even the company I worked for probably threw the things out," he says. "Back then, if I would have thought these pieces would be in a museum, everyone would have thought I was smoking funny cigarettes...I was just working, trying to make ends meet. My personal feeling is that most artists remind me of salmon swimming upstream. They all want to make a living, and they all have families, and they all want to eat and not have their kids starve. They try a little here, and then if that doesn't work out they back out and try another way. That's what I was doing with all those images back then."

Künstler would go on to create images for model kits, book covers, *Newsweek*, *National Geographic*, the space program, a *Jaws* parody for *MAD Magazine* and a number of movie posters, including *The Taking of Pelham One Two Three*, *The Poseidon Adventure*, *The Golden Voyage of Sinbad* and many others he can't even

Mort Künstler works on a piece in his Oyster Boy, New York, studio.

Opposite page: *The Kansan*, 1973, book cover for *The Kansan* by Richard Brister, oil on board. Collection of the artist. ©Mort Künstler Inc.





© W. K. ...



Go Tell the Spartans, 1976, gouache on board. Collection of the artist.
©Mort Künstler Inc.

remember, including “that Bronson one where he’s hanging off the ledge.” (It’s Charles Bronson’s *Breakheart Pass*, if you’re curious.)

Even though Künstler would find fine art success in the 1980s with his cowboy and Civil War historical pieces, he still looks back on his illustration days with genuine fondness. “All the great artists were illustrators,” he explains.

“Even Michelangelo was an illustrator. Just look at the Sistine Chapel: Michelangelo’s art director was the pope, and his publisher was the church. I know some people feel that there are no lower callings than illustration, but I never saw that nor did I ever feel that way about myself,” Künstler says. “Just look at the greats: Norman Rockwell, Maxfield Parrish, J.C. Leyendecker, Frederic Remington. All illustrators.”

Today, Künstler’s own collection is filled with original works by these artists and many others. He fills his walls with pieces that tell stories, like his own works. “That’s the most

important thing you can do as an artist: tell a story. I use all the devices I can to tell it—light and dark, perspective, color...The general principle I follow is to use every element,” he says. “The artist should know exactly where the viewer’s eye is going to go, and where it’s going to move within the painting.”

His style and dedication can be seen clearly in pieces in the exhibition, which is on display through March 8, 2015. In *The Kansan*, the natural movement of the eye begins with a cowboy framed against a pinkish sky, curls around an adjacent tree and its serpentine roots, and then circles down into Künstler’s red rocks and detailed earth. In *Buried Alive*, action takes place on four separate plains as a miner rescues a woman, while other figures below her prepare for her eventual fall. In *Angel on the Battlefield*, war-weary Civil War soldiers take comfort in the presence of a single woman offering water amid the haze of war of death.

Friend and professional acquaintance Seth

Hopkins, executive director of the Booth Western Art Museum in Cartersville, Georgia, says Künstler has always told fascinating stories within his works, including the Western and Civil War art. “Mort is incredibly versatile and hugely talented. He’s been so focused on Civil War works, but once you start digging into his important legacy you’ll see he’s one of the leading artists of American history,” Hopkins says. “The more time passes the more we will appreciate the range of what he’s done, and will recognize his works as iconic artworks.”

Künstler is very conscious of the passing time. At his age, he reasons, it’s hard to avoid. “Honestly, I can’t believe I’m still doing it. I’ve been going a long time, and I don’t see it ending anytime soon,” he says. “At this point I’m so busy I’m booked through 2016. And I keep waiting for those calls that will book me up after that. I’m a little frightened thinking about my schedule, but it’s still exciting and fulfilling after all these years.”



Absolution Before Victory, 2012, oil on canvas. Collection of the artist. ©Mort Künstler Inc.



Angel of the Battlefield, 2010, oil on canvas. Collection of the artist. ©Mort Künstler Inc.

**Mort Künstler:
The Art of Adventure**

When: Through March 8, 2015
Where: Norman Rockwell
Museum, 9 Route 183,
Stockbridge, MA 01262
Information: (413) 298-4100,
www.nrm.org