

Abbett on Art

By Bob Abbett



Joseph Sulkowski is a staunch believer in the classical traditions of creating art: a strong understanding of light and anatomy, even personally preparing the pigments and canvases.

“I have a Thomas & Thomas fly rod and a very nice Browning 525 over/under 12-gauge shotgun,” the soft-spoken painter of dogs, Joseph Sulkowski told me as we chatted about his award-winning, worldwide career. “I wish I were more experienced with them, but I’m just as likely to pull out a sketchpad or set up a field easel when I’m on an outing.”

Joseph’s history reminds me of Winslow Homer’s. He has traveled far geographically – France, Italy, Ireland, the Caribbean, as well as in subject matter, painting whatever attracts him – people, polo horses, dogs, most in a relatively short time.

“I look at other domestic animals such as thoroughbred horses, hounds and such, and if they inspire me, I’ll see a painting there and get excited about it. But the only subject I return to over and over, and about which I am most passionate, are the dogs.

“As a portrait artist, I always felt likeness was equal to the personality of the person, thereby seeking to make art happen. The same with dogs, and that’s an exciting challenge that never gets old to me.”

In English Setters Afield, Sulkowski set out to capture the “unbridled passion” of a friend’s dogs as they coursed a field for bobwhite quail. Opposite: Pointers on the Grouse Moor captures two Elhew pointers during a hunt in the Scottish Highlands.

Born one of identical twin boys in Pittsburgh in 1951, Joseph Sulkowski grew up about 20 miles away in the small town of Canonsburg, home of singer Perry Como. Joseph’s family was definitely art oriented. “My mother is Italian so she is an artist in the kitchen – and she always accepted and encouraged my art,” said Joseph. “My father, a practicing dentist, was also gifted as

both a sculptor and painter. He was my first teacher, giving me oil-painting lessons when I was only five. Christmas came for me whenever Dad took me to the art store. I knew then that I would be an artist – and I have never looked back!”

Joseph and his brother Jim had an art studio in the basement where they could draw and paint. His parents would often load up the kids in the car and take them to the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh. “It housed an incredible collection of great paintings and sculpture,” Joseph recalls. “Whenever there was a blockbuster art exhibition, we were there!”

And there, Joseph gained and would never lose his vital, almost religious respect for many of history’s most

important painters: Michelangelo, Rembrandt, Rubens, Vermeer and one whom he regards as the greatest of all, Velasquez.

Still in his teens, in 1969 Sulkowski was accepted into the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, and suffered one of the few bumps in a rather smooth career. Formerly a traditional art school, it was caught up in the then-current “just express yourself” excesses.

“We had required figure and cast drawing classes, but no one there could actually teach us!” He left after two years and went to New York City where he studied at the Art Students League and also met his future wife, still-life artist Elizabeth Brandon.

His teacher at the League was painter Frank Mason, who also became his mentor. In spite of the many

modern art movements and soup can experiments of the times, Mason was fortunately a teacher of the same traditions that had inspired the young Sulkowski. “I studied with the maestro there for five years.”

To help his finances, Sulkowski ushered at Carnegie Hall in the evenings and also apprenticed to Mason at his private studio in “Little Italy.”

“My apprenticeship was an education unrivaled anywhere else,” he said. “My duties even included keeping the studio’s old wood stove going in the winter.”

In 1979, now married and finished with their schooling, Joseph and Elizabeth began their careers in a New York City loft on 8th Avenue. Without money to travel there, they connected with bump number two, a gallery in Taos, New Mexico that did not pay them for their sales.

“We kept sending paintings and yet no checks arrived. And of course, the gallery conveniently went out of business.”

Unfortunately, several of my own students have suffered similar scams. Now I remind them to never leave a painting anywhere without getting a signed consignment sheet.

I asked Joseph if there was a ‘turning point’ at which things really got going for him.

“There were two events that were significant to my career,” he responded. “When I was 28, the first was a commission from the Saudi Arabian government to create two historical murals for a museum in Jeddah. The panels, 5 by 12 feet, were painted on canvas and shipped to the Middle East with hand-carved, gold leaf frames.

“The second came in 1983. The Wally Findlay Gallery in New York took me on as one of their artists. They were interested in my sporting paintings, particularly polo and equine pieces.

“These events gave me a credibility as a young, upcoming artist who painted in the old master tradition.”

Since boyhood he has marveled at and studied the works of these idols.



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“Yes, I still grind my own colors, mix my own pigments, and “cook” the painting mediums from scratch out in the back yard,” he explained. “I even prepare the canvases myself, and I enjoy employing some of my favorite old masters’ methods. But the paintings I create are certainly always my own.”

I asked Joseph what part of the painting process is the most important in making a successful painting?

Drawing, design, brushwork, etc.?

“To me, the absolutely most crucial part is the lighting, I even compose with the lights and darks before I put brush to canvas. Light is a nonlinear phenomenon, the revealer of form, and therefore a most necessary tool for the artist. This goes to the heart of my work and explains my fascination with the old masters. They had no digital cameras as we do, and yet their works have visual effects that we may find difficult to equal.

“Brushwork is also very important,” he continued. “With any number of different strokes available, whether dragging or stabbing with a loaded brush, etc., I can create contrast on the surface quality of the painting.”

Sulkowski has been represented by the Halcyon Gallery in London for the past eight years. “This has been a very good period for me as London has become the art capital of the world,” Joseph said. “My work has truly become international in terms of sales not only in the UK, but in Europe and as far away as Singapore.” His art is also on display at Dog & Horse Gallery in Charleston, South Carolina.

Joseph, Elizabeth and their two children live in the rolling countryside of Franklin, Tennessee. Their home has a separate studio building with room and north light for them both. He is a quite well-regulated artist – up early and done by sunset – painting exclusively from natural light. Elizabeth continues to paint and recently had a sellout show in Carmel, California.

Awards for Joseph’s work include the AAPL Grand National Award, the Grumbacher Gold Medallion Award, and Best in Show Award in *Southwest*

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Art magazine's “Mountains” Exhibit.

Joseph is a life member of the Art Student's League, the American Artists Professional League, the National Arts Club in New York City, the National Society of Mural Painters and the Society of Animal Artists.

Looking at Joseph Sulkowski's paintings, one sees the art of a man who has always done his homework. He studies his subjects tirelessly and remains firm in his resolve to create traditional scenes of sport and animals. At the same time, he is at home in portraiture and even landscapes as an occasional change of pace.

I like Joseph's dogs – it's obvious that he paints them with both knowledge and adoration. And I agree with his use of lighting to explain their coats, their stances and their anatomy. Dogs both large and small have obviously worked their way into his pleasure. And I agree with his saying that the most important thing is the dog's eyes. He's right about that, and does a superb job with them.

He is obviously a believer in the classical traditions of creating art: understanding of light, the use of realistic draftsmanship, knowledge of anatomy, both human and animal, and the personal preparation of pigments, painting mediums and canvases,

“The difference between an art store canvas and one prepared the old-fashioned way is like comparing a loaf of Wonder Bread with home-baked.”

Again, taking in the breadth of Joseph Sulkowski's marvelous work with animals, including his dogs, one has to realize that this kind of career is not obtained by watching some purring Sunday morning TV personality try to show us what fun it is to paint “happy clouds.”

Rather, his art has been truly an intensive devotion from five years of age to the present. His paintings are good because he has never lost his balance with pop techniques or trendy modes of the month. Nor has he stopped trying for perfection; always reaching for the next high branch. 🐾

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