



TODAY'S
MASTERS

DON TROIANI BRINGING THE PAST TO LIFE

The Connecticut painter Don Troiani (b. 1949) is having a moment. Through September 5, Philadelphia's Museum of the American Revolution is presenting the exhibition *Liberty: Don Troiani's Paintings of the Revolutionary War*. Based upon the artist's painstaking research, the more than 40 works on view reconstruct a variety of the conflict's events and participants with both rigorous authenticity and technical virtuosity. In the accompanying catalogue, the museum's chief curator, Philip Mead, rightly praises "the power of Troiani's art to confront the errors in our expectations, and to see the Revolutionary War with its far-reaching promise, and bitter ironies."

A PROUD HISTORY

American art depicting military history has a rich heritage traceable back to Benjamin West, Charles Willson Peale, and John Trumbull. Heroic paintings such as William Powell's *Perry's Victory* (1857) and Peter Rothermel's *Battle of Gettysburg* (1870) wowed

popular audiences with romanticized depictions of mortal combat. James Walker favored a sweeping cinematic approach in his paintings of the Mexican-American War (1846–48) and the Civil War (1861–65). Suffering from childhood paralysis, William T. Trego (1858–1909) overcame severe physical difficulties to produce a remarkable oeuvre of action-packed battle scenes.

Working alongside soldiers at the front, "special artists" such as Alfred P. Waud and Winslow Homer plied their trade for image-hungry weeklies like *Harper's* and *Frank Leslie's*, which later sent Frederic Remington to the Southwest to cover the U.S. Army's pursuit of Geronimo. Like Homer, Remington favored artistic reportage. As many fine-art painters became swept up in the excitement of European modernism, their more tradition-minded colleagues embraced a new identity as illustrators. Howard Pyle and N.C. Wyeth (who lived in a house on Pennsylvania's Brandywine battlefield) won acclaim for their treatment of historical subjects. Costume designers working in the nascent

BY JAMES LANCEL MCELHINNEY



The Redoubt, Bunker Hill, 2009, oil on canvas, 37 x 51 in. (framed), private collection





WILLIAM T. TREGO (1858–1909), *Bringing Up the Battery: Civil War Battle Scene, 1887*, oil on canvas, 19 x 29 in., James A. Michener Art Museum, Doylestown, Pennsylvania, museum purchase funded by Anne and Joseph Gardocki



Photograph of a stolen (and still unlocated) painting by **HOWARD PYLE (1853–1911):** *The Battle of Bunker Hill*, oil on canvas, 24 1/4 x 36 3/8 in. It was commissioned to illustrate “The Story of the Revolution” by Henry Cabot Lodge in *Scribner’s Magazine*, February 1898. Photo courtesy: Delaware Art Museum Archives

greater accuracy in living-history “impressions,” museum displays, and theatrical costuming scoured archives for records, patterns, fabric samples, and period images to develop best-guess depictions of clothing that was no longer in existence.

MAKING HIS OWN WAY

Growing up in Westchester County, New York, Troiani was surrounded by relics of the past. He was an only child, and his antique-dealer parents nurtured his appreciation of historical objects — an upbringing that prepared him to become a collector. Drawing since early childhood, he chose soldiers as his primary subjects. Following high school, Troiani enrolled in the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA), where he recalls getting little instruction.

Realist painting in the late 1960s was not only unfashionable, it was taboo. The military subjects to which Troiani was drawn were beyond the pale. Nevertheless, he recalls his years at PAFA as productive. There was regular access to life models and guidance from some of the older teachers who still revered the traditional craft of painting. During the summers, Troiani took classes at the Art Students League of New York, where he studied with Arthur Foster. He recalls:

Everybody in this class hated [Foster] because he would criticize what they were doing, which obviously destroyed their creativity. So he would come in and sit down with me and go through my whole pad, looking at all the soldier drawings, and then tell me how to do each one better. I learned a lot more when I moved up to [western Connecticut] and met new friends like Edward Bell. He was a real old-time hardcore illustrator, a superb draftsman. I would have him and other illustrators I knew critique my work. Half an hour with them was worth six months at PAFA.

motion picture industry drew heavily on these sources, which were often inaccurate.

Representational painting fell out of fashion during the Cold War, but the 1961 centennial of the Civil War renewed interest in military imagery. Fashionable artists like Larry Rivers flirted with historical themes. Commemorations of specific events and battles took the form of alfresco amateur theatrics staged by hobbyists and

living-history interpreters dubbed “reenactors.” Historian Edward Tabor Linenthal likens these activities to religious observances in which reverence is measured in terms of historical authenticity.

Incorporated in 1951, the nonprofit Company of Military Historians provided collectors and researchers with a publishing outlet for their findings. Interpreters, artists, and traditional craftspeople striving for

As America prepared to celebrate its bicentennial in 1976, Troiani wrapped up his formal training and launched his career. Since then, he has produced hundreds of paintings, many of them published as limited-edition prints. Troiani’s work has been widely exhibited, collected by museums, national parks, and other public venues, and highlighted in more than a dozen books. He



Raiders of the Mohawk Valley, 2019, oil on canvas, 49 x 56 3/4 in. (framed), private collection

also serves as a historical consultant for the entertainment industry.

During a recent conversation, Troiani shared insights into his working method. His studio in Connecticut's Litchfield County measures 22 by 40 feet, with a large north-facing window. Scattered across one wall is an array of weapons, and nearby are racks full of reproduction uniforms. By the time Troiani left school, he was already a collector of military artifacts. He made his first purchase at age 11: a German helmet from World War II, acquired at a Parisian antique shop. Today, he owns thousands of objects — enough to establish a museum.

Because most original uniforms of the Revolutionary period were worn to tatters or eaten by moths, garments have had to be

reconstructed from period artworks and the descriptions of deserters published in newspapers. Inaccurate paintings by Charles Willson Peale and Xavier Della Gatta have come to be accepted as documentary evidence, as have sketches by soldier-artists such as Friedrich von Germann. Part of Troiani's mission is to set the record straight. He explains:

Take Howard Pyle's Battle of Bunker Hill [1898]. It's fantastic, but the British didn't march up the hill that way. Their uniforms are actually more Napoleonic than anything else. Virtually everything is wrong, but it's still a great painting. Another example is Trumbull's

Surrender of General Burgoyne [1821]. Because many portraits of the officers involved were painted after the war, they didn't want to be shown in old-fashioned clothing, but rather in the latest style. That means a lot of traditional historical art is really inaccurate.

A passion for accuracy also guides Troiani's choice of models and how to pose them:

There's an assumption that all reenactors are accurate, but they're not. There are some with really good impressions, but there's almost nobody you could use cold, just as they are. A lot of reenactors tend to



Battle of Pound Ridge, 2021, oil on canvas, 36 x 48 in., private collection

be overweight, or too old, or their hair is all wrong. Probably about 5 percent have just the right look. I'm looking for guys that are the right size, with good faces.

If they don't have a pose, I show them. Sometimes artificial poses can work better in painting than the real thing. Let's say we're doing a charging scene. I'll have the guy actually do it, then I'll also pose fake running scenes; propping a leg up, we'll put something under the front foot, so it's turned up. Lean forward, I'll tell them — more, more. Sometimes they'll smile a little. I'll go over to them, and move their lips around with my fingers until I get the right expression. And then there are the chronic smilers. I'll give them a little plastic cup of vinegar to drink.

Some models can be a little stiff, so I loosen them up. My drive-



JEAN-BAPTISTE ÉDOUARD DETAILLE (1848–1912), *19th Chasseurs*, 1893, watercolor and gouache on paper, 13 1/2 x 19 1/2 in., collection of Don Troiani



KEITH ROCCO (b. 1955), *Marshall's Crossroads*, 2006, oil on linen, 30 x 44 in., collection of the U.S. Cavalry Museum, Fort Riley, Kansas

way is 300 feet uphill, so I'll make them run up and down it wearing all of their equipment until it loosens them up. If the painting will show a lot of fighting, I'll blacken their hands and faces with makeup. It's not unusual for me to take ten or fifteen thousand photos for a single painting, using a digital camera. I'll shoot the figure at three different exposures and then shoot close-ups of the faces, hands, and everything else. Three exposures are needed because if a guy has a broad-brimmed hat, a regular exposure might go black under the shadow.

STUDYING THE EVIDENCE

Before Troiani starts a painting, he conducts exhaustive research into the uniforms and equipment consistent with the event depicted. He engages sartorial historians like Henry Cooke to re-create the uniforms, and today his archive of original and reproduction uniforms numbers in the hundreds. When new research unearths further details, the garments are modified.

At the time of our conversation, Troiani was working on a painting inspired by an event during the so-called French and Indian War — the 1758 attack by Britain's Black Watch regiment on Fort Carillon, the precursor of Fort Ticonderoga in upstate New York. Troiani had two Highlander outfits, which he had altered because the cut was of a slightly later period. He also had one complete French uniform, which he brought to Ticonderoga. Augmenting props and clothing from his own collection with those from Ticonderoga's archive, the costumed models were staged where the actual event occurred. He notes:

Ticonderoga's uniforms are terrific. I borrowed a few of their extra coats and accouterments, which I used to pose the rest of the action back at my studio. Having done a lot of my own research into the French uniforms, the staff at Ti provided a lot of detailed research on the battle. I also consulted [Canadian military historian] René Chartrand and several experts in France on all the minor details. I had a French regimental flag made because you just can't fake a full-size French regimental Cross of Lorraine or the pole with a white silk scarf on top.

This rigorous attention to detail extends to Troiani's landscapes. Since blood was spilled at Lexington and Concord in 1775, America's Eastern Seaboard has been blanketed by second-growth forests — terrain that would be unrecognizable to the combatants.

I did a painting of the Battle of Kingsbridge, which took place in The Bronx, in today's Van Cortlandt Park. A lot of the actual site is intact, but it's wooded. It was open at the time, so I had to reconstruct its appearance from maps drawn by the participants. There is also a pre-Revolutionary War map that shows the locations of fence lines, buildings, and so forth. [The British general J.G.] Simcoe had a map in his book, and there was another one. Of course, they're all different, showing different houses and different places, so I had to figure it out. I almost spent more time on the painting's background than on its principal figures. Another painting I did

was of an ambush in Westchester, with the [Hudson River] Palisades in the background. I had to be careful because a section [of those famous cliffs] had broken off 30 years before, and I needed to paint it the way it looked at the time of the action.

Troiani consults a wide range of primary sources, documents, and archives while pursuing his research.

A guy named McDonald went through Westchester County in the 1830s, interviewing everybody he could find about their reminiscences of the Revolution. I went through it all, about a thousand pages, and photographed every page. The ambush in Westchester was described in great detail — the dead horses in the road, with sheepskin saddle covers. A woman told McDonald how she remembered the British troopers at the Battle of Pound Ridge, standing in their stirrups, swords raised over their heads, shouting, whirling their swords around. That's a great tidbit.

Each of Troiani's paintings is a visual essay on the appearance of historical fighting men and the material culture of their age. He readily acknowledges his debt to such European masters as Adolph Menzel, Ernest Meissonier, and Fortunino Matania. Troiani has drawn particular inspiration from Jean-Baptiste Édouard Detaille (1848–1912), an academic realist who worked closely with the French military. Trained under Meissonier, who was renowned for his meticulously rendered episodes from the Napoleonic wars, Detaille won acclaim for paintings of the Franco-Prussian War. Before the art market caught up with Detaille in recent years, Troiani wisely acquired several of his works at reasonable prices.

Those are my painting lessons around the house; I can learn and assimilate so much from looking at them. How he did the trees, or there's that pen-and-ink work on the horses' bits. He has been a huge influence. Detaille painted every day, whether he felt like it or not. I have read a lot of great articles from the 1880s about him and Meissonier, who one day said to Detaille, "My boy, you can go off on your own. There's no more I can teach you." That's a pretty strong statement.



Oneida Warrior 1777, 2014, watercolor, gouache, and pen and ink on paper, 16 x 12 in., private collection



Brave Men As Ever Fought, commissioned 2019 and unveiled 2021, oil on canvas, 38 3/4 x 68 1/2 in. (framed), collection of the Museum of the American Revolution, Philadelphia. Its commissioning was funded by the National Park Service Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route National History Trail.

Other artists active today, such as Keith Rocco, also acknowledge their debt to Detaille. Many are motivated to work in a traditional manner because it allows for fidelity to data and also for creative visual storytelling.

WORKING IT OUT

Recently I asked Troiani to describe his working process in detail:

When I have an idea, I do a quick pencil sketch of the overall layout. I'm not as organized as people think. I just go for it. After getting a lot of the figures blocked in, I start thinking a pose in one place might be better somewhere else. There is a lot of moving around. My process is not like some of those 19th-century artists who would do the entire painting — three quarters of it roughed in and then add finishing touches. Meissonier did endless studies for Friedland, which took him 15 years. Somebody said to him, "I've seen you working on that figure many times before." Meissonier replied, "I just want to make sure to get it right."

Troiani himself might scrape out a figure and move elements around throughout the painting process:

I might do a pencil drawing on the panel, then add some pen and ink, on stuff like weapons, and then I'll cover it with a layer of clear gesso and sand it smooth, which seals the drawing into the primer. That way you can wipe off the paint and start again. In 20 minutes what you were monkeying with for a couple of hours comes out better. I might use a tinted gesso ground to start. Sometimes I start working in color from the beginning, or I might start with a monochromatic underpainting, often in sepia tones.

In addition to his large finished works in oils, Troiani produces small figure studies representing individual soldiers of a particular period or military unit. These are done primarily in watercolor and gouache, with some pen-and-ink embellishment in the details. Here again, his research is unpacked in visual form. Military historians, museum professionals, and historical interpreters regard Troiani paintings like these (see page XX) as today's best source for how 18th-century fighting men once looked.

The exhibition on view now was originally inspired by the Museum of the American Revolution's 2019 commission of Troiani to create "a painting that would capture some of the exceptional contributions to American Revolutionary victory ... of the men of African-American and Native American

descent." The result was unveiled at the museum last September: *Brave Men As Ever Fought* shows the 15-year-old African American sailor James Forten watching Black and Native American troops marching past Philadelphia's Independence Hall on their way to Yorktown, Virginia, in 1781. Now, in the gallery where this painting hangs, a first-person theatrical performance about Forten's later success as a businessman and abolitionist, written by local playwright Marissa Kennedy and performed by actor Nathan Alford-Tate, is presented regularly for school groups and museum visitors.

In the exhibition catalogue, Troiani writes, "It is my hope that my paintings help people today grasp the significance of Revolutionary struggles of the people who lived 250 years ago, whose brave actions continue to shape our lives." ●

Information: amrevmuseum.org. Unless noted otherwise, all images are by Don Troiani.

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