

Renowned marine artist to sail into city

By Michael Lea, Kingston Whig-Standard

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Flight of the Royal George In light winds, with all sail set, the flagship HMS Royal George ran for Kingston Harbour on the afternoon of Nov. 10, 1812. Pursuing American schooners closed the distance under sweeps, but Royal George gained the protection of her port and shore batteries before they could catch her.

The devil is in the details for Peter Rindlisbacher.

The Queen's University psychology graduate, seen as one of the best marine artists in the country, specializes in getting every historic detail correct in his oil paintings and has been known to toss out any work that fails to meet the high standard he places upon himself.

He will be at the Marine Museum of the Great Lakes on Sunday, April 7, to promote a new book of paintings detailing the sailing battles of the War of 1812.

“He is recognized within the marine art community — the people who actually paint boats and ships — as probably the premier person working with Canadian vessels, that’s for sure,” said Bob Hilderley, whose Quarry Heritage Books is publishing Rindlisbacher’s work.

It includes more than 120 of his paintings on the war, including one of the Flight of the Royal George.

His work can also be seen around Kingston. The marine museum has a couple on display, and both Brit Smith and Michael Davies have also been good customers.

“He is so meticulous,” said Hilderley.

It’s not just the ships in his paintings that he wants accurately represented. He even wants the time of day and the weather conditions right.

“He goes back and researches all the weather patterns, he researches the maps of the villages and towns that can be seen off on the edges of some of the paintings.”

Born in Windsor to a boat-builder father and a commercial artist mother, Rindlisbacher was always exposed to both ways of life as he grew up, developing a passion for sailing, history and art that would later combine in his paintings.

“We have an art family,” he said from his current home near Houston, Texas.

“We always had paper and pencil and paints in the house. It was just a thing we all did.”

Painting was originally “the consolation prize” in his life, he explained.

“Back in the early days, art was something I did in the winter when I couldn’t go on the water.”

Later, painting became a way to beat the stress of his studies while he was out in Alberta, doing his honours bachelor of arts degree.

“Being so far from big water out there, it was certainly how to stay sane,” he said.

He came to Kingston to continue his studies at Queen’s University.

“I arrived there in the fall of ’84 and crawled out in the fall of ’92 with a PhD in clinical psychology.”

He continued with both his painting and his love of the water.

“When I got to Kingston, I kept on painting. I was enjoying the waterfront and racing sailboats,” he said.

The city provided its own inspiration for his work, he said. He knew the role Kingston had played in the War of 1812.

“It was a really powerful atmosphere to be in. It sort of all just came together. I could paint on an ice floe, but having your centre right there in the most important naval base in Canada at the time, you couldn’t get any better than that,” he said.

But a heavy academic workload at first limited how much he could paint.

When an unexpected break in his studies cropped up, he started doing paintings for heritage groups needing art for their projects.

“I knew they needed some artwork and I began painting pretty seriously, doing 1812-era subjects. It just took off.”

His studies meant he was in no position to take his paintings on tour, like a lot of artists do, going from show to show. But his father owned a printing company and began producing prints from his paintings that could be sold at fundraisers for the heritage groups.

“So pretty soon, these heritage groups were selling my prints to raise money, giving me a royalty as well on the deal. And one thing led to another, and pretty soon I was having relationships with a lot of historians that needed visuals to go into their work, and I certainly needed their research benefits. Basically, the hobby just grew bigger and bigger.”

He never did go into psychology as a career.

“By the time I got my degree, the hobby was in full gear.”

He thought he might try to do a bit of each on a part-time basis, but that never developed.

“I drifted back to my old home digs in Essex County, outside of Windsor, and things happened.”

He met his wife, started a family and painted at home while watching the kids.

It was the research that gave him the most joy in his work as he struggled to make every little detail in his paintings historically accurate.

“I don’t think I’m obsessive-compulsive,” he said. “I do enjoy art, but the chase, I guess you call it, the CSI-kind of investigation, trying to nail down every possible detail about a subject, that sort of search, that investigation, I find really satisfying and very challenging.”

“You assemble what you know about a subject based on the best sources. What you try to compose is the best re-creation of a scene according to what we now know, which sometimes isn’t very much because it was so far ago that it happened.”

There is always the chance that, in spite of his best efforts, someone will find a mistake in the details.

“You get greatly humbled when an expert comes forth with something.”

He has had times when he would be halfway through a painting and a historian has called with the bad news.

He remembered one occasion when his painting of a particular ship's action included a sunset in the background. But then he learned from an expert the action had, in fact, taken place at noon.

Likely nobody except for Rindlisbacher and the expert would know of the mistake, but that was two people too many.

"At that point, I took the painting and wheeled it into the closet in a rage because I had to start all over again," he said.

"You do your best effort at being accurate and try to talk to the most knowledgeable people about the subject. I found to my penalty that whenever I didn't talk to the best authority I knew about, I regretted it later. So early on I began to seek out these guys and say I really need to know what you know about this."

Bob Hilderley remembered hearing about other examples of Rindlisbacher's insistence on perfection.

"Two paintings he has had to destroy because the details were discovered later to be incorrect," he said.

In one, he had a background geographical feature in slightly the wrong location.

"Instead of correcting it, he just threw it away," said Hilderley.

"It's a challenge. You are trying in a very humble way to get it right," said Rindlisbacher.

"Sometimes you do and sometimes, through no fault of your own, there is some big pitfall and you get sucked in."

The new publication is the first time he has published a major book. A couple of years ago, he gathered about 40 of his 1812-era paintings and produced a small handbook.

"I have never had a coffee table-style book on my art," he said. His work has appeared in the Canadian War Museum, book covers and magazines, galleries and other museums in Canada and the United States.

Friends and publishers had often asked him to do a book, but he had always deferred, saying it wasn't yet time.

"I'm patient. Every year I am creating a few more candidates to go into it, and at a certain point it will happen. But I am not going to push it," he had always said.

Then Hilderley approached him to do a book.

"I was skeptical at first," Rindlisbacher admitted.

Part of his reluctance came from the bad timing of the request. His wife had just received a job offer in Houston that was too good to refuse, so he was in the middle of moving.

Rindlisbacher's library and studio were getting put into boxes for the move.

"It was touch and go that I was going to be able to get this out in any amount of time," he said.

"But (Hilderley) prevailed and said this could come together. And lo and behold, it is actually doing it."

The move to Houston didn't pose too many problems to his painting career.

"I have always been pretty portable with what I am doing, increasingly so with the power of the Internet where I can get historians' material and photographs and research of all kinds off the Internet anyway."

Now 57, Rindlisbacher and his wife are living on a lake, so "it's easy to feel close to Ontario whenever I need to."

He has his own 27-foot longboat with eight oars and two cannons, but the lake has a 10-foot limit on boats so he can't take it out onto the water. He has a small dinghy for that.

But whenever the day comes that they are leaving Houston, he plans to take his longboat out onto the lake and fire off his cannons to say goodbye.

He has been back to Kingston many times since his school days, once to take part in an 1812 reenactment.

"That's my hobby now, as opposed to painting."

He takes his longboat to the reenactments.

"It's a blast. When you actually act out some of the stuff that you are painting, there's a really nice circular tie in with that, because you get the feel of what it is like to actually do it. And that has got to help the authenticity."

michael.lea@sunmedia.ca