

# Classic yachts kept alive by marine artist John Mecray

By Susan Carroll

When he started painting some of the world's most famous vessels more than 30 years ago, marine artist John Mecray didn't imagine that his love of the classic boats he memorializes in his work would someday develop into a second career to help save them. But that's exactly what happened after he painted the 1885 schooner Coronet, and then co-founded the organization that would ultimately undertake to return the yacht to her original splendor.

Mecray's interest in art surfaced at a young age. "I always liked drawing and making pictures," says Mecray. He was encouraged to develop his talent by supportive parents — who proudly displayed his early childhood drawings to friends and family — and an art teacher who led him from grade school through high school in his hometown of Cape May, N.J.

With their help, he was awarded entry into a prestigious art school, the Philadelphia College of Art (now the University of the Arts). For Mecray, the step was a deciding one. "Art was the only thing I did well," he says. "I wanted to go to a school that was all art, all the time."

While in Philadelphia, Mecray majored in illustration. After his junior year, with the military draft an issue, he enlisted in the Army and quickly found ways to put his talent to use. He gained a position in the operations section

of an armored regiment and went to Europe where he crafted signs, charts, maps and other graphics. He then transferred to the 7th Army Symphony Orchestra and Soldier Shows Company in Stuttgart, Germany, where he designed scenery and sets. Mecray later worked with a psychological warfare company designing leaflets and posters.

He returned to college after two-and-a-half years and set to work augmenting his studies with real-world experience. "I convinced one of my professors to allow me to seek freelance illustration jobs for credit," says Mecray. "He wasn't very confident that I'd succeed." But Mecray did. In fact, while still in school, Mecray was hired to illustrate the Senior Girl Scout Handbook.

After graduation, Mecray accepted a position teaching a drawing class at his alma mater one day a week. The rest of the time he freelanced out of a studio in Philadelphia, where he was kept busy illustrating for a wide range of clients in the telecommunications, health-care and transportation industries.

"The good news was that I had all the work I wanted," explains Mecray. "The bad news was that I had done such a variety of work that my portfolio looked like it had been done by six different people."

Feeling the pressure to focus, Mecray found his muse during a six-day sailing trip to St. Thomas with his cousin. "It was a pro-



John Mecray in his Jamestown studio with his latest painting, the J-Boat Ranger under sail.

Photo by Jeff McDonough

found experience," says Mecray. "Being on the ocean can be quite dramatic."

He returned home and began painting marine scenes while still working as a freelance illustrator. His interest in the sea was cemented when he acquired a period painting by marine artist James E. Buttersworth. "I thought, 'I could do that,'" says

Mecray.

Knowing it would require the kind of focus that his illustration lacked, Mecray left behind a successful career to embark on one that would ultimately bring him even greater acclaim.

Within a few years of his maiden sailing voyage to the Virgin Islands, Mecray found representation for his work with

Kennedy Galleries in New York. He decided to move to Newport, where there was no shortage of inspiration. "I saw yachts I had only read about," says Mecray. "I didn't have to search for subjects. Narragansett Bay was a magnet for wonderful vessels."

And while he envisioned his

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