

Framingham artist completes series of judge portraits

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Artist David Wells Roth stands in his Fountain Street studio recently with portraits he painted of the federal court judges of Puerto Rico.

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FRAMINGHAM —

Dabbing a sable-hair brush in red paint, David Wells Roth prepared to sign his portrait of a black-robed judge, completing the last of 31 paintings linking his Fountain Street studio to the Federal Court of Puerto Rico.

He spent Thursday evening alone finishing Hon. Francisco Augusto Besosa's portrait, adding the final touches on a crystal eagle behind his chair. Roth, a Framingham resident, wanted to ensure "light refracting" through the eagle didn't conflict with the subtle tones of his subject's face.

Roth said, "The drawing has to be exact."

"If it is off by a millimeter, the character or the expression can be entirely different from the person sitting in front of me," said the tall, rangy and paint-spattered artist. "In other paintings I might choose to distort the image but I refrain from doing this in a formal, judicial portrait."

Around 11 p.m., he painted in red "David Wells Roth 2010" in the lower left corner of the portrait.

After three years of intensive work in his studio overlooking Farm Pond, Roth has finished portraits of every judge who has served in Puerto Rico's Federal Court since 1899.

Already, 26 of his paintings are hanging in the common area of the Clemente Ruiz-Nazario U.S. Courthouse in San Juan, Puerto Rico. The remaining five portraits will be shipped to the court

after being displayed in a coming exhibit of Roth's work in the Whistler House Museum of Art in Lowell.

Titled "Places and Faces," his show opens April 28 with a May 15 reception at the museum at 243 Worthen St., Lowell. In addition to the portraits of the judges, it will include 35 street scenes, landscapes and portraits.

The chief judge of the U.S. District Court for the District of Puerto Rico praised Roth for capturing his subjects' characters in a "seat of the pants" project that began with an element of uncertainty.

"We put all our faith in David when we started this project in 2007," said Hon. Jose A. Fuste by telephone from San Juan. "When we started, we had no idea what many of our judges from before the 1950s looked like. I think David has really got their characters and personalities."

Fuste recalled when Roth unveiled his portrait of the late Hon. Thomas Hagan Roberts in 2008 his son who'd been invited to the event cried at his likeness.

The judge said he especially enjoyed how Roth individualized each portrait by incorporating personal details, in his case, a model of his beloved Harley-Davidson motorcycle on a shelf behind him.

For a judge who loved baseball, Roth painted a small model of Babe Ruth and other Yankee players he kept in his office while Hon. Carmen Consuelo Cerezo, the first appointed woman judge, is depicted raising her hand during her swearing-in ceremony.

Raised in Sudbury, Roth's passion for painting sent him to art school and France, back to a Southside studio and then south to San Juan.

After earning a scholarship to Boston University where he studied under master expressionist David Aronson, Roth worked as a street artist in New York City. In the 1980s, he traveled alone to Paris where he spent 15 years studying the Old Masters and painting for a living.

Roth returned to the U.S. in 1997 and during a period of personal uncertainty worked as an illustrator before picking up his brushes four years ago.

In 2006 his commissioned portrait of U.S. District Judge Richard G. Stearns caught the attention of Judge Fuste who also works with him in the Joseph J. Moakley U.S. Courthouse, U.S. District in Boston. The First U.S. District Court serves Massachusetts, Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Puerto Rico.

At the time, Puerto Rico's Federal Court was considering commemorating its judges through a series of painted portraits.

Roth was invited by Fuste to San Juan where he submitted a sample painting of Puerto Rico's first federal judge based on a black-and-white photo. After further discussion, he was commissioned to paint the 31 portraits which were to be finished by April 2010.

Fuste said Thursday the families of former judges were asked to gather old photos of them while researchers collected available images of earlier judges.

During five trips to San Juan, Roth met all surviving judges, made preliminary watercolor paintings of them and took hundreds of photographs of each one. He was so busy he guesses he "only spent about 15 minutes at the beach" during all his time in San Juan.

Working mostly in chronological order, Roth first completed in 2007 a portrait of Hon. Noah Brooks Kent Pettingill, Puerto Rico's first appointed federal judge who served from 1899 to 1900.

For the next three years, Roth concentrated almost exclusively on judicial portraits often working 10- to 15-hour days. Roth worked simultaneously on four to six paintings "to keep things fresh."

The project, said Roth, required "massive amounts of organization and thousands of photos" and other preparatory studies.

"I wanted to capture the unique essence of each person. If I'm true to what I'm painting, their character will come through," he said.

After devoting most of his life to painting, Roth considers himself a "figurative realist" who imbues street scenes, landscapes and still lifes with a "slight impressionist flavor."

When painting, he said, "Everything falls into an unconscious state. Then I can relate to my subject in a more personal way and not excessively focus on technique."

Last year he took a three-week break to paint scenes from Boston and New York which he hopes to show at the prestigious Allan Stone Gallery in New York.

His third-story studio resembles the kind of creative hive one imagines obsessed painters have always occupied.

A wooden stool brought back from Paris stands in a corner. A thick book, "Rembrandt's Eyes," rests on a table next to a book about the Spanish artist Velazquez. Across the room, Roth's self-portrait of a younger, long-haired version of himself looking like Rembrandt sits on a chest.

Roth admits the long project has both fatigued him and reinvigorated his interests in more projects and eventually a museum show.

Asked if he'd succeeded in the series, he paused and said, "I'll let the judges be the judge of that."

When asked what he'd learned professionally or personally from the project, Roth replied without hesitation, "It's infinite."

To learn more about David Wells Roth, visit www.davidwellsroth.com.

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