



THE COMPOSITION OF RALPH GARAFOLA

interview with **ralph garafola** | written by **shelley goldstein**

Brooklyn-raised artist, educator, and author Ralph Garafola has been a commercial illustrator and painter for over sixty-five years, beginning as a draftsman creating technical drawings in the city. After returning home from the army, he became a commercial illustrator, eventually operating his own studio. These days, Ralph has returned to his first love—painting.

What is your earliest memory of making art?

When I was five years old, friends of my parents had a white piano with two white vases on it. I was fascinated by it and kept drawing it. I did not have any art or drawing tools, so I would draw on brown paper bags using pencils.

You worked as a draftsman and then as an illustrator. Were these jobs gateways into painting, or were you always interested in painting?

I started my career as a draftsman in New York City, but I always wanted to paint. I was in the army for two years as a draftsman as well as a photographer making training films. When I returned home, I became a commercial illustrator because my painting style is realism, and in the 1950s, modern art was

popular. As an illustrator, I had to paint everything for product ads and brochures. After fifty years of operating my own commercial studio, I returned to fine art painting.

What is a commercial illustrator, and what kind of work were you doing?

A commercial illustrator is an artist that has to paint everything to his clients' specifications for advertising purposes. I did illustrations for commercial ads and print literature. My clients included Blue Cross, AT&T, Panasonic, Johnson & Johnson, and Schering-Plough. I created illustrations of their products.

How did you transition from commercial illustrator to painter? Were you painting on your own all this time?

I always painted, but time was limited. When I retired from commercial illustration, I returned to painting and started teaching and writing. I am now working on my second art instruction book, *Frank J. Reilly—Outdoor Painting*, which is scheduled to be published by the end of 2018. My first book is *Frank J. Reilly—The Elements of Painting*.

How many different forms of art have you studied or gone to school for? Do you love learning?

I studied fine art—drawing, painting, illustration, and abstract art at the Art Students League (or ASL) in New York

City for over seven years as a student of Frank J. Reilly. I became his class monitor (or assistant). I am always interested in learning, and there is always something to learn. If I am not painting or working on my new book, I am reading everything and anything I can find. I always learn something.

Tell us more about Frank J. Reilly:

Reilly was an American painter, illustrator, muralist, and teacher. He was a meticulous professional—he taught fine art as a science. No individual or teacher has contributed as much knowledge of fine art and illustration as Frank J. Reilly.

Reilly was best known for his twenty-nine years of teaching both drawing and painting at the Art Students League. By 1960, when I was his class monitor, he was teaching more than 320 students in morning, afternoon, and evening classes. His theories and motivations have produced many great artists. This list is monumental. Reilly was probably the greatest art teacher in the country.

Reilly taught because he loved to, and his extensive knowledge of art and its craft is why he taught so well. The famous artist, illustrator, and muralist Dean Cornwell once said, "Frank Reilly could teach anyone to draw and paint, provided, of course, you wanted to paint."