

In the Spotlight

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 31, 2022

LIVING HISTORY



by Gene Pisasale



Barclay Rubincam painting of three ships, courtesy Bonnie Musser.



Winter Quarters: Generals Washington and Du Portail at Valley Forge by Rea Redifer.



Photo courtesy Chadds Ford Historical Society
Hessians Marching Past The Barns-Brinton House at the Battle of Brandywine by Barclay Rubincam.

Artists in the shadows: Barclay Rubincam and Rea Redifer

By Gene Pisasale
Contributing Writer

The Brandywine Valley has produced dozens of gifted artists through the decades, most notably Howard Pyle and the Wyeth family, whose talents and notoriety have tended to eclipse those of others in their profession. Two men who knew and studied with the Wyeths had an impact on the local art scene, but are generally unknown nationally. Barclay Rubincam and Rea Redifer carved out their own niche in the art world, often in the shadow of their more famous colleagues. A reexamination of their art brings a heightened understanding of their unique contributions and importance.

Barclay Rubincam was born on July 9, 1920 in

Newlin Township, Chester County and attended Unionville High School. He was a student at the Wilmington Academy of Fine Art, where his teachers included N.C. Wyeth, as well as Frank Schoonover and Gayle Hoskins. These men were themselves strongly influenced by Howard Pyle, the premier American illustrator of the early 20th century.

Rubincam's local roots inspired his landscapes. In "Barclay Rubincam: A Retrospective," Beverly B. Sheppard states that he worked at the Warner Theater in West Chester, once sketching the surrounding street scene from its roof. A result: his painting "Looking North on High Street." Local resident Bonnie Musser and her par-

ents knew the Rubincams. Bonnie's father told her that, early on, Rubincam's family was not too thrilled with Barclay becoming an artist and at one point were literally throwing his art work into a fire. Her father "rescued" a painting from the flames, a canvas portraying three ships — possibly Columbus's Nina, Pinta and Santa Maria. Today the painting, unknown to the general public, hangs in the offices of Tri-M Group in Kennett Square.

His "West Chester-Originally Turk's Head" highlights many historical topics, showing the Turk's Head Tavern (1769), the West Chester Academy (1813) and the Mansion House Hotel (1831). His love for the Battle of Brandywine, a theme he used at least 20 times, is shown in "The Trap Was Sprung," "Revolutionary Soldier" and the magnificent "Hessians Marching Past the Barns-Brinton House at the Battle of Brandywine." Rubincam's "Sentry at Birmingham" depicts a haunting shadow of a soldier on the doors of the Birmingham Meeting House, a scene bathed by eerie moonlight. One fascinating element of the painting is that there is no soldier, but just a shadow of one. Lydia Willits Bartholomew, Chairman of the National Bank of Malvern knew Rubincam and owns several of his paintings. She says: "He was... 'living history'... and he grabs... simplicity in his paintings, even though there's a lot going on. He was the real thing..."

Rubincam died in 1978 at the age of 57. Numerous local collections, including the Brandywine River Museum of Art, the National Bank of Malvern and the Chester County History Center own his works, creations of a man who passed from the scene many years ago, but whose influence can still be felt today.

Rea Redifer came into this

world at the depths of the Great Depression- June 10, 1933 in South Bend, Indiana, later moving to Kennett Square. He served in the Air Force during the Korean War, a stint which gave him material for one of his themes, fighter planes- not the modern steel ones we all know. Redifer loved depicting those fragile contraptions brave pilots flew during World War I. His love for flight helped him produce "Once Upon A Canvas Sky" which had many of his watercolor illustrations. Of the work, Andrew Wyeth said: "I feel that these paintings are among the finest of their genre that I have seen. They go beyond mere illustration and live on their own."

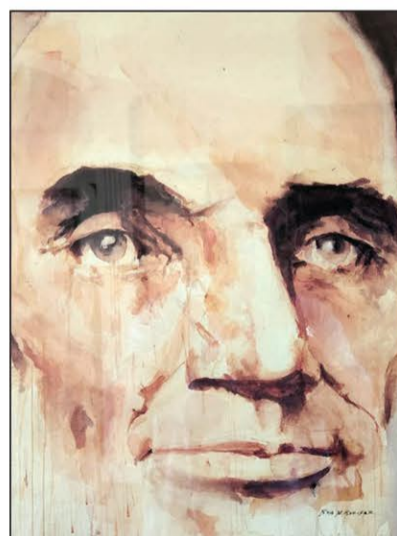
Wyeth once said Redifer was his favorite local artist. Linda Kaat, a longtime collector of Redifer's art, says he "centered" his world in the Brandywine Valley. Redifer's artistic view is encapsulated in his statement: "To merely paint pretty pictures has never held much appeal for me... I am seeking some elusive thing beneath the surface..." His imagination roamed far and wide: Brandywine Valley landscapes, local wildlife, many-faceted views of Abraham Lincoln, Civil War soldiers and much more.

A riveting watercolor of Lincoln's face occupying the entire canvas brings the viewer close to the man who saved the Union, won the Civil War and ended slavery forever. One gets a sad feeling from it. There appear to be tears flowing from Lincoln's eyes, down the canvas, giving viewers the impression they are experiencing the President in a moment of deep depression, of which he had many. It is a superb painting, perhaps Redifer's finest work.

Redifer's interest in history included the Revolutionary War. His "Winter Quarters: Generals Washington and Du Portail at Valley Forge" captures the General with his chief engineer looking



Photo courtesy of Brandywine River Museum of Art.
Sentry at Birmingham by Barclay Rubincam.



Lincoln portrait by Rea Redifer.

across a bleak expanse of snow during the encampment which claimed the lives of 2,000 men, but from which they emerged strong and ready to fight again.

He wrote four screenplays for films, two books and had a column in *The Kennett Paper*. Redifer also created a play titled "The Last Waltz" about Chris Sanderson, namesake of the Christian Sanderson Museum in Chadds Ford. Sally Denk Hoey knew Redifer and was deeply saddened upon hearing of his passing on May 12, 2008 at the age of 74. "He was a true Renaissance man... for all his genius, he always seemed painfully shy. This is a huge loss."

The teams at the Brandywine River Museum of Art and the Chester County History Center were enormously helpful in exploring the art of these

two men. Viewing Redifer's works, you come to understand what he meant by "...beneath the surface..." Rubincam's ability to project a mystical sense to his subjects remains one of his legacies. The works of these two men live on... and show the gifts they had for portraying such depth on canvas, giving new meaning to life for all who view them today.

Gene Pisasale is an historian, author and lecturer based in Kennett Square. His ten books focus on the history of the Chester County/mid-Atlantic region. His latest book is *Forgotten Founding Fathers: Pennsylvania and Delaware in the American Revolution*. Gene's books are available on his website at www.GenePisasale.com and on www.Amazon.com. He can be reached via e-mail at Gene@GenePisasale.com.



Barclay Rubincam's studio in his home on North New Street, 1978.
Photo courtesy of Lydia Willits Bartholomew.

Barclay Rubincam in his studio.



Rea Redifer and wife Patricia from *The News Journal* Sept 10, 1968.