

his brush with celebrity

the art of james fiorentino

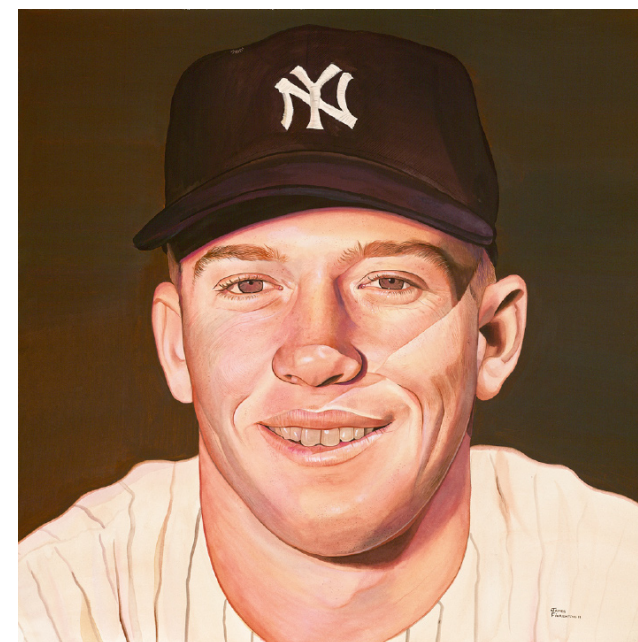


by Nick D'Arienzo

When you get your first good look at the sports paintings of James Fiorentino in person, you're pretty likely to gasp at their artistry - the attention to detail on the athletes' faces, the gentle creases of fabric in their jerseys, the inherent sense of motion within.

A recent exhibition at the terrific Bergino Baseball Clubhouse - a perfect fit, to say the least - afforded **metroBASEBALL** just such an opportunity, with a refreshingly humble Fiorentino on hand to showcase the very best of the golden era of New York baseball, those unforgettable days of Koufax, Mantle, Ruth, Mays, and more.

Like many artists, Fiorentino enjoyed painting at an early age. But his talents displayed a unique maturity for someone so young. While others his age were coloring rough images, his mother Jackie noticed that he could draw fully developed anatomy at the age of three. A child prodigy, to say the least.



It should be pointed out that as he grew, and as his artistry developed, Fiorentino also harbored an equally lofty dream, that of becoming a major league ballplayer one day. Four years at Drew University, and a star-turn as the school's shortstop, certainly seemed promising enough for

the all-state standout. But as with all prospective major leaguers, nothing is ever guaranteed.

Fiorentino's professional art career started innocently enough. Quite simply, he would paint portraits in the hopes of getting some of his favorite athletes to sign them. "My passion was sports, my passion was art - and I was able to combine that," he told **metroBASEBALL**. "Just being a collector, I would think, it'd be great to get so and so's signature - but not on a ball, not on a photo, I'll do a painting! And DiMaggio - I shot high for my first one - DiMaggio was the first guy I made a painting for. He wanted to give me money for it, and I remember thinking, 'Wow, I could really make money doing this.'"

Although Fiorentino's dreams of baseball stardom never materialized, his artistic career would soon take off like gangbusters.

At the age of fifteen, he was the youngest artist to be featured in the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum for his likeness of Reggie Jackson, which hung beside the paintings of Norman Rockwell and Andy Warhol. In 1994, he became the youngest artist to win *Beckett Magazine's* annual sports art competition for the likeness of Hall Of Fame pitcher Steve Carlton. When *Beckett* opened up the competition worldwide the following year, Fiorentino triumphed again with a stunning collage of Muhammad Ali. When Ali saw Fiorentino's portrait of him, *The Greatest* said, "James, you are the greatest."

These days Fiorentino's lithographs are part of the permanent collection in the United States Sports Academy Museum (Daphne, Alabama). James also has his work displayed at the National Basketball Hall of Fame, The National Museum of Art & Sport (NAMOS) (Indiana), Cycling Hall of Fame (New Jersey), Roberto Clemente Museum (Puerto Rico), and The Yogi

Berra Museum and Learning Center (New Jersey), just to name a few. His artwork has been featured in numerous national publications and published as cover art for official commemorative programs for the 1995 Baseball Hall of Fame Induction Ceremonies, Don Mattingly Day in 1997 at Yankee Stadium, 1996 Red Cross Calendar, and the 1995 and 2001-2003 covers of the Ted Williams Museum and Hitters Hall of Fame Induction program. Fiorentino was also the official artist for Cal Ripken Jr's 2131 Consecutive Game Streak and 2632 Ending of the Streak for which he created limited edition lithographs.

Baseball card collectors will no doubt recall the series of ten baseball cards Fiorentino created for Topps Gallery Heritage in 1999. Two years later, Upper Deck followed suit with "The Fiorentino Collection," over 70 paintings, of baseball, basketball, hockey, and football legends for the 2001 sports season. And two years later, Upper Deck commissioned Fiorentino once again to create more cards for their 2003 Upper Deck Playball Series. Modeled after the 1941 Playball series, Fiorentino created over forty paintings depicting current stars, legends of that 1941 year, and a special tribute to Ted Williams.

A short list of painters that Fiorentino himself admires is as varied as the work the ambitious and prolific artist is capable of producing. For example, there's the late Andrew Jurinko, himself a renowned painter of all things baseball, and American masters like Norman Rockwell and Andrew Wyeth.

Fiorentino's medium of choice tends to be water-colors, with everything first sketched on pencil, using photographs for reference. "I started taking lessons when I was about eight years old - experimenting with pastels, oils, acrylics - but ultimately I settled on water color. The way I paint tends to be very photo-realistic, and I just think there's something about water colors that really makes the paints come alive. Just something special about water colors, I feel."

Although he's still only 34 now, Fiorentino has turned his childhood hobby into a thriving business. Prestigious compa-

nies, galleries, museums, politicians, athletes, and entertainment personalities have commissioned him. He's had the opportunity to work with Yogi Berra, Cal Ripken Jr., Mickey Mantle, Ted Williams, and a great many contemporary athletes.

Fiorentino's success as a businessman probably has a lot to do with his own appreciation for the market. "I think myself being a person who collects, who understands the game and a little about the history of the game, I can usually figure out what's going to look kind of cool."

His experiences as a ballplayer have a great deal to do with that, as well. Fiorentino's own diamond experience is clearly what informs the insider's point-of-view that is the hallmark of his work, the intimacy and that feels-like-we're-right-on-the-field quality that makes each painting so special.

And that's really been the best part of the journey for Fiorentino - the opportunity to stay connected in a major way to the game he loves so much. "Definitely being on the field with the players, in the dugout, those kinds of experiences have been the best part of it."

Not to mention, of course, the opportunity to meet and get to know some of the all-time legends of the game. Some of Fiorentino's favorites? "I'll always go back to doing the work with Ted Williams, meeting Mantle. You're 17 years old, you're meeting all these guys, the greatest hitters! I was only 17 years old, and I'm meeting all these guys: DiMaggio, Willie Mays, Stan Musial."

It goes without saying that for James Fiorentino, the passions and dreams of an aspiring ballplayer have already taken him to a place far greater than he ever could have imagined. "I wanted to be a major league baseball player. Couldn't make it, so I made it though my artwork - I made it to the Hall of Fame with my paintings!"

To learn more about the sports art of James Fiorentino, as well as photo galleries representative of his extensive portfolio, please visit www.James-Fiorentino.com.



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MAGAZINE season 2
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