



# ASMA

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# PRESERVING HISTORY

by Robert C. Semler

In the Spring issue of the **ASMA News & Journal**, we featured an article by Signature Member Austin Dwyer on his series of paintings of Ernest Shackleton's ships and his quest to circumnavigate the South Pole. This article sparked a lot of interest in historical art and the artists who create it. In fact, our own member and columnist, Christine Diehlmann, suggested that we start a series on this subject. Several of us agreed and so, as an historical artist myself, I am introducing this as the beginning of a series of articles featuring ASMA artists who specialize in this genre.

Some of you may be aware of my interest in the *SS United States*, America's flagship and the only one to still hold the coveted Blue Riband for speed, crossing the Atlantic Ocean in record time on her maiden voyage, Sunday, July 6, 1952, even though she has been finished with engines since November, 1969.

Largely forgotten, her contents have been auctioned off, she was sold to the Turkish government, towed to the Ukraine to have the life threatening asbestos removed, and as a result of a government coup, towed back to the United States after being purchased by a NJ Real Estate magnate, Edward Cantor (since deceased) and brought into the city of Philadelphia, PA, where she has rested since July, 1996. Eventually auctioned for scrap, there were no buyers, so Cantor re-purchased her at a Federal marshal's sale and eventually Norwegian Cruise Lines acquired her, planning on refurbishing and putting her back to sea. All of that fell through and she has since been purchased from NCL by a non-profit organization, the *SS United States Conservancy* who has been trying desperately, through donations, to save this historic vessel. So far, she is still alive.

I first was introduced to the "Big U", as she has come to be known, during a Coast Guard assignment in the mid eighties, "Operation Solid Shield", when



*SS United States, Hampton Roads, VA, 1984*

I was covering the war games between the US Coast Guard and the US Navy for a COGAP (Coast Guard Art Program) assignment in Hampton Roads, VA. As we were passing the Norfolk Navy Yard on a 41' CG patrol boat, escorting the *USS John F. Kennedy* (CV-67) carrier into port, I spotted the *SSUS* at her Norfolk dock. The first time I'd laid eyes on her I immediately fell in love with this sleek, attractive looking ocean liner. Soon after



*"Amazing Grace" • Oil on Panel • 9" x 12"*

that her contents were auctioned off and she was eventually sold to the Turkish government and towed overseas with the intent of becoming a floating restaurant/hotel combination. Turkey eventually wound up having a governmental coup and she was towed to Philadelphia where I was reacquainted with her again in July of 1996. Having been at a business lunch the day she was towed in, I left hurriedly, picked up a throwaway camera, and snapped her at her new pier at Holt Marine Terminal, next to the Walt Whitman Bridge. She was moved again, at the request (or order) of the CG, for fear of her breaking loose and damaging the bridge span, and I was able to photograph her from the old New York Shipbuilding dry dock (owned by Del Monte now) as she was towed north under the Walt Whitman Bridge to her new dock, Pier 82. Later, she was moved again to Pier 86 where she resides to this day.



*"Anticipation" • Oil on Linen • 14" x 24"*





"Nation's Pride" • Oil on Linen • 16" x 28"

It was during that first move, when the Coast Guard determined she could not stay tied up to Holt Marine Terminal where she came in and was escorted under the bridge that I really fell in love with this magnificent vessel. Towed at mean low tide and with only about 8" to clear the bridge decking (having had her forward searchlight removed), it was a moment that affected me greatly. The anticipation of her clearance was a breath-holding moment as everyone watched and I was determined to capture this in paint. Thus was my first oil, "*Anticipation*" completed. The then owner, Edward Cantor, immediately purchased the painting and afterward allowed me unlimited access to the ship itself. Boarding her for the first of three times and scouring her every deck, from the prop shafts, engine rooms, swimming pool, dining saloons, the bridge and then a halfway climb up the crow's nest... I was hooked. This ship had to be saved and if I could become a part of that effort through my support and historic paintings, I was determined to do so.

Eventually I decided on a series of paintings to acquaint the public with the ship and after I became a charter member of the SSUS Conservancy (then aptly named the SSUS Preservation Society), I offered the image of one of my paintings, "*Return To New York*", to the Conservancy for fund raising projects. I understand it has been successful for them in helping raise much needed monies. The painting is an imaginary

scene of her returning to her homeport of NY, possibly as a museum.



"Return To New York" • Oil on Linen • 18" x 24"

The role of an artist who paints historic scenes, such as the SSUS, is very important in recording past as well as present history for the ages. The RMS *Titanic*, probably the most well known liner of all time is gone, but she lives on in Ken Marschall's beautiful paintings for all time to come. The *SS United States* is still alive, but for how long? If we are



"SS United States Berth Day" • Oil on Linen • 10" x 28"

fortunate enough to save her, my images will be helpful in the present, but if she runs out of time and we run out of funds and she is scrapped, she is lost forever to history. Then the importance of the paintings takes on a new meaning.

Marine art is not all just "pretty" paintings. Capturing the history of these vessels and times is an all important aspect of the genre, whether they be of long ago seaports, military vessels, Cape Horn clippers, Gloucester Grand Banks schooners or a proliferation of subject matter, historical marine art is an important aspect of our past, present and future. We are pleased to have many historical artists as members of ASMA and we hope that in future issues of the *ASMA News & Journal* we can showcase this genre as a regular feature. If you are an historical painter, please contact me at [robert@rcsemlearart.com](mailto:robert@rcsemlearart.com). You can send a couple of small images and a brief outline of what your art represents so that I can review them and I will begin to archive those chosen for future issues.

In closing, since my object of the series of the *SS United States* is to help keep the public aware of her and the need to save this last American built and owned transatlantic ocean liner, please check out the website of the *SS United States Conservancy*; [www.ssusc.org](http://www.ssusc.org). If you are not familiar with this historic vessel, your eyes will be opened.



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His work may be seen at [www.rcsemlearart.com](http://www.rcsemlearart.com).