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Mark Susinno: A Sense of Light and Space

Roxanne Kamin



Mark Susinno painting in his studio.

MARK SUSINNO STANDS before his easel, contemplating. He's not contemplating what to paint or how to execute it. Decades of experience as a classically trained artist and a lifelong passion for angling afford him great confidence and conviction. Rather, he considers how to paint a unique image: a perspective, composition, and design different from his previous works that will be visually and compositionally interesting. Even on cold, late-fall days when he's not chasing fish, Susinno's muscle memory—both physical and mental—is ready to apply paint to canvas to produce works for which he has achieved international recognition and acclaim. It's not the raw material itself, but its emotional and creative effect that has his attention. Each canvas is a new journey into his own emotions and creativity, fueled by his pursuit of fish and the beautiful surroundings—both above water and below—in which he finds them.

Born in 1957 in Washington, D.C., Mark Susinno grew up in the Maryland suburbs of the nation's capital. His first

experiences with fishing were in his grandfather's boat in the Chesapeake Bay, where he fished for bluefish and the occasional rockfish, but mostly for spot, croaker, blue crabs, and sometimes the endearingly hideous oyster toadfish. Susinno enjoyed fishing, but mostly he loved being out on the water with his grandfather and whichever of his parents, siblings, uncles, or cousins was along for the trip that day.

He moved to Brooklyn to attend Pratt Institute on a four-year, full-tuition merit scholarship. Upon graduation in 1979 with highest honors and a bachelor of fine arts degree in painting, Susinno went to work as a torch cutter and truck driver for a scrap metal and dismantling firm in Brooklyn. In his free time, he was primarily creating abstract forged and welded ironwork sculpture and painted-wood wall constructions. He continued to make art in a variety of media and styles for the next several years, but didn't settle back into a realistic representational style until the mid-1980s, right about the time he began to tire of a disparaging boss at a bulletproof-door fabrication shop. Seek-

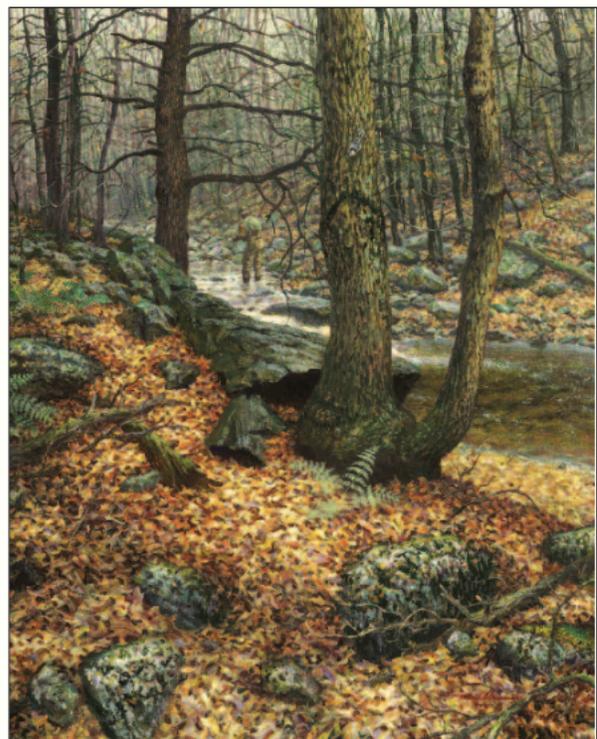
ing a change in direction, he began to enter waterfowl and trout stamp contests.

Susinno won the 1986 Maryland Trout Stamp competition and decided to concentrate on art professionally. He quit his job to become a fish artist, despite the fact that he had only recently gotten back into fishing under the guidance of his younger brother, Byron. "My first fish painting was a side view of a brown trout, which I did for my brother," he says. "When I began to enter trout stamp contests, it became necessary to paint some sort of underwater scene around the fish, which I viewed as mostly a chore. But over years of accumulating underwater photos I had taken primarily of habitat, I came to enjoy painting the background as much as or more than painting the fish."

Susinno's early career received a significant boost when he provided some of his first prints to the Trout Unlimited national office in Northern Virginia for their banquet program. Not long after Susinno met Dave Kolbert, his contact at TU, Kolbert moved to Minnesota to work



Original painting for the 1991 Pennsylvania Trout/Salmon Stamp, acrylic on rag watercolor paper (8 x 12 inches) and one of the stamps (inset). Images provided by Mark Susinno.



The End of Winter, acrylic on linen on panel (20 x 16 inches). Image provided by Fred Polhemus.

for a wildlife art publishing company called Wild Wings. He convinced the company to publish some of Susinno's images as prints; thus began an affiliation with Wild Wings that continues to this day. Back in the late 1980s and through the 1990s, the wildlife print market was in its heyday, and Susinno concentrated heavily on warm-water species like bass, walleye, pike, and muskies. When the public's appetite for wildlife reproductions began to cool in the early 2000s, he

realized he would need to focus more on selling originals. Consequently, he began to favor cold-water species like trout and salmon, as well as saltwater flats species like bonefish, tarpon, and permit.

Susinno has since specialized in painting underwater depictions of freshwater and saltwater game fish and scenes of fly fishers pursuing their obsession. Along the way, he has added twenty-one more fishing stamps to his list of credits, including the 1991 First-of-State Pennsylvania

Trout/Salmon Stamp and the 2004 First-of-State Texas Freshwater Stamp.

Of his own approach to painting, Susinno offers this in his artist's statement:

I'm a fisherman and that fact affects how I approach making paintings of game fish. I enjoy suggesting the sense of light and space of the shallow-water aquatic environment, but I also feel the need to present the fish themselves such that they are recognizable to the average fisherman, who is most familiar with

how a fish looks when it is out of water. When painting fish (whether in oil or acrylic), my main focus is on creating an interesting abstract arrangement of shapes, colors, textures, and patterns, which I hope will also convey a more or less convincing impression of an underwater scene.

One of the highlights of Susinno's career was the opportunity to get to know Lefty Kreh. Susinno was introduced to Kreh early on, and because they lived less than an hour apart, Kreh asked him to provide illustrations for some of his national magazine articles and books. Their geographic proximity meant that Kreh could demonstrate whatever technique he wanted Susinno to illustrate at

the local pond where he gave fly-casting lessons. As a result, Susinno became a much better caster. He relished the times they got to fish together, most often in Lefty's boat on either the Potomac or the Susquehanna, where they would sometimes run into Bob and Bobby Clouser guiding on the river. Susinno told me, "Everyone knows where he or she was during the attacks of September 11, 2001. I was fishing the Susquehanna with Lefty in the boat of my buddy and local fishing guide Jesse Stoner."

His passion for fishing and need to gather reference material have led Susinno to Alaska after Pacific salmon, trout, char, sheefish, grayling, and pike; Florida for tarpon, bonefish, snook, sea trout, redfish,

and barracuda; Labrador for big brook trout; Scotland and many North American locales for browns and rainbows; the East Coast for stripers, bluefish, and dolphin; Texas for big largemouth bass; and too many places to mention for his beloved smallmouth bass. Susinno is an avid fly fisher in both fresh and salt water. His wife Roxanne, also an avid fly fisher, accompanies him on many reference-gathering excursions. His fascinating experiences, travels to diverse locations and fisheries, and love for both painting and angling are Susinno's greatest inspirations for his art.

FRED POLHEMUS
AMFF PRESIDENT



*Rising to the Fly, acrylic on panel (16 x 20 inches).
From the collection of the American Museum of Fly Fishing.*



*Shallow Water Hunters, oil on linen (24 x 36 inches).
Image provided by Fred Polhemus.*



Roxanne Kamin

*The artist on the water at
Cape Lookout, North Carolina.*