

# Former actor finds new artistry in painting

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Tom Mason stands in front of a group of firefighters who are posed for a reference photo he used when he created an oil painting to honor the Fire Department of New York, on March 22, 2015, at the Setauket Fire House, Hook and Ladder Co. 1, Station 3N, in Setauket. Painting was to be presented Sept. 2016. (Credit: Heather Walsh)

colorful supply sergeant who dabbled in drugs.

As an actor, Tom Mason had his first brush with fame in Francis Ford Coppola's 1979 masterpiece, "Apocalypse Now," playing a

Today, he's creating his own masterpieces -- of the oil on linen variety.

Mason, who is 66 and lives in Locust Valley, had a prolific career for more than three decades in movies and has even headlined a few short-lived television series. His bread and butter, he admits, was mostly guest spots in a lot of bad episodic TV. "That was my specialty," he says.

About 12 years ago, he realized the drive just wasn't there anymore. "The alarm would go off and I knew I had to go into the city and audition for some TV show that I didn't want to be in, and I had to take the LIRR to get there and make my way through the city in the middle of February," Mason says. "The ikigai was not there," he adds, referring to the Japanese term pronounced ee-key-guy, and defined as one's "reason for being."

Artistic painting had been a lifelong passion, and he took brush to canvas on and off while he was acting. "I was a closet case because I never really did anything with it. Then my daughter, Brigid, one day said to me, 'Dude, it's time for you to get serious about oils.'" That's when Mason says he found his ikigai again. Now, he works on paintings for clients --



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everything from religious images to family portraits and pet pictures.

Among the artists whose work he's long admired are Renaissance painter Titian and 17th century masters Caravaggio, Van Wyck and Rembrandt. The latter's "Night Watch" was the inspiration for Mason's most ambitious project yet, "FDNY Night Tour," a large mural saluting the 150th anniversary this year of the New York City Fire Department. Mason donated the 100-inches-by-78-inches painting scheduled to be installed Sept. 24, at the department's training academy on Randall's Island, where it will be permanently displayed.

"I lived in New York City for many, many years and I always hero-worshipped the firemen when I saw what they did day in and day out," Mason says. "And then 9/11 happened and they were running into that building. I felt compelled to figure out something to do to honor them."

#### Man with a mission

Like "Apocalypse Now," Mason's tribute to the fire department has also been years in the making. The project began more than a year ago, when he got the idea to create the painting. A local businessman who was familiar with Mason's work even volunteered to anonymously underwrite the whole endeavor. Getting an introduction to someone at the New York City Fire Department was a challenge, and through a friend, he met Ken Cerretta, a fellow artist and a retired assistant chief with the department who was able to connect Mason with NYPD Commissioner Daniel Nigro, who was flattered by the idea. But when Mason said he wanted to set up his models at a city fire department location and to use their equipment, he ran into legal snags.

"Tom asked for permission to do a lot of things that we could not do" to facilitate the work-in-progress, says Frank Gribbon, deputy commissioner of public information. Then Joe DiBernardo, a retired fire chief in the Bronx, came to the rescue. DiBernardo, whom Mason calls "Joey the Producer" because of his role as a facilitator, got the cast and equipment Mason needed and made arrangements for them to be posed and photographed at the Setauket Fire Department. DiBernardo appears in the painting and is the only one in civilian clothes, representing all of the firefighters of the past. Cerretta wore his old uniform and suggested using 343 as the number for the engine company in the painting.

"There is no engine company 343, but I recommended it to represent the number of firefighters that were killed on 9/11," says Cerretta, 73, who lives in Massapequa.

For his models, Mason used about a dozen actual firefighters, including a cousin because he wanted to have family portrayed in the work. He even included a Dalmatian that was based on a past family pet.

"It was an honor to be a part of this," says DiBernardo, of Stony Brook, who is in his early 70s. "This is going to be a part of immortality."

#### Actor in the making

Mason, who grew up in Oyster Bay, says his interest in painting and theater stemmed from the Hollander family, neighbors he knew in his formative years. "The father was a violinist for Toscanini; brother was a concert pianist, and I was part of that world," he says. "Paul Robeson and Lillian Hellman would show up at this house. It was a fantastic cultural salon."

Being there opened his eyes to the arts. He started drawing and reading plays they would give him. In college, he started acting in plays.

"It was an experimental school in Maine, which meant no grades," he says.

After college, he studied with renowned actress Uta Hagen, who played Martha in the original

Broadway production of "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" From there, he had numerous roles in regional theater throughout the 1970s. He and his wife of 46 years, Cathleen, toured the country as he toiled on stage. Cathleen, who is a nurse, would get a job wherever Mason was acting.

Then came "Apocalypse Now," which Mason describes as "an astounding experience," even though most of his early time on the set was spent sitting idly in the jungles of the Philippines. "Coppola knew he wanted me in the picture, he just wasn't sure doing what. One night he came up with it -- a supply sergeant who does a drug deal and was with the Playboy bunnies," he says. "But it took him five weeks to figure out."

Mason says there was no script when filming began. "They made the stuff up," he says. "Michael Hare wrote the book 'Dispatches,' and he provided an outline, but everything was done on a day-to-day basis."

As a surprise during the long shoot, Coppola arranged for Cathleen to fly to Manila and visit Mason. The day she arrived, it took four hours to get from the airport to the set, where shooting was taking place in the mountains. Many of the cast and crew came down with stomach poisoning, so Cathleen was put to work nursing them. "The next day, I was on the set," she recalls, "and Francis Ford Coppola came over and said to me, 'I only want to ask you one question: Are you having a good time?' "

The trip did end up getting better. After Mason was done shooting, he and Cathleen took a trip to Hong Kong. "I ended up coming home pregnant," she says. The couple have two children: Brendan, 37, a film producer in Brooklyn, and Bridget, 31, who lives in Los Angeles and is also a painter.

"Apocalypse Now" opened other acting opportunities for Mason, and he became steadily employed. "Once I got in that movie, I got a lot of TV and film work. For a young actor to get in a Coppola movie was a big deal," he says

He landed big-screen roles in "Crimes of the Heart" with Jessica Lange and Sissy Spacek, "Runaway Bride" with Julia Roberts and Richard Gere, and Clint Eastwood's World War II drama "Flags of Our Fathers." His favorite roles were a "Nero Wolfe" TV movie pilot, in which he played the detective's partner in crime-solving, and "Our Family Honor," an NBC series. Despite critical raves, the show lasted only 13 weeks.

Mason also did a lot of episodic TV. "It was a fertile and busy time for me as an actor doing rotten television," he jokes. "And when you're a guest star, you're always getting killed." The traveling also kept him away from his family much of the time. Throughout that period, they lived in upstate Dutchess County and Beverly Hills before returning to Long Island in 1999 when his mother announced she was going to sell the family home. Mason helped her fix it up, and he and his family bought their home in Locust Valley.

He continued to trek into Manhattan to try out for TV roles, but the ikigai was fading. "I called my agent and told him I would no longer be auditioning. I'll have a meeting with people, and if they want me, I'll be happy to work," he says. "As a result of that, they stopped calling."

And so, he found a new calling in painting. Last year he even had a showing of his works at a studio in Glen Cove where he was housing his works. "That was a luxury that I really couldn't afford. The owner of that complex was more than generous," he says. But eventually, the owner was given a better offer for the space and Mason had to move his works to his home studio.

It's a smaller space, but Mason is happy to have his ikigai back in full swing, he says. "Now I wake up in the morning and I can't wait to get down here."

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