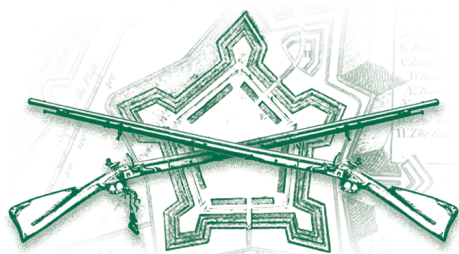


# UP FRONT



## FORT PITT MUSEUM

By Kathleen Marie Lugarich, Education Manager,  
Fort Pitt Museum

### The Artist Robert Griffing

While exploring the Fort Pitt Museum, many visitors instantly recognize the artwork of Robert Griffing. Utilized for exhibit murals, videos, brochures, and souvenir post cards, Griffing's art in the museum accomplishes his goals of inspiring and engaging others in 18th-century frontier history.

Born in Linesville, Pennsylvania, Griffing was surrounded by woods and Lake Pymatuning, where he found his first arrowhead, which inspired his interest in American Indians. His interest in art started, "ever since I could hold a pencil." He thought up stories and made cartoons and drawings to go with them. "And of course, it carried onto what I'm doing now, still telling stories."<sup>1</sup>

Griffing attended the Art Institute of Pittsburgh and studied commercial illustration. After graduation, he took his first job at the Houze Glass Company creating designs for silkscreens. He later joined Goldman, Shoop & Rothchild, which merged with MARC Advertising in 1968, one of Pennsylvania's largest advertising agencies. During his more than 30-year career in commercial advertising, he was known as the "Duke of Design" for his ability to compose and organize a piece for clients, skills he carried over into his painting career.

In the 1980s, his advertising work took him to Albuquerque, New Mexico, where



Some of the arrowheads  
collected by Robert Griffing.  
Photo by Kathleen Lugarich.



Robert Griffing with new painting,  
*Respect for the Ancients*.  
Photo by Kathleen Lugarich.

he was shocked at the artwork displayed. "I couldn't believe my eyes when I first saw Indians actually depicted in a realistic, historic style."<sup>2</sup> The trip rekindled his interest in American Indians, and he began painting in his spare time.

In 1991, he participated in a show in the Art Institute of Pittsburgh's Barclay Memorial Gallery where half of his artwork sold out within days, including his first print, "Seneca

Robert Griffing's Forbes Medal. Awarded to him in 1999 by the Fort Pitt Museum and Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission for his contributions to art and the promotion of Western Pennsylvania history.

Photo by Kathleen Lugarich.



**New painting featuring a blow gun and darts made by Michael Galban.**

Photo by Kathleen Lugarich.



**Michael Galban and Robert Griffing preparing a photo shoot.**

Photo courtesy of Michael Galban.

Scouts.” “That’s when it really took off,” said Griffing. “This is something I never would have dreamed. That there were that many people out there with the same interest.” According to Griffing, and several of his artist friends, no one was depicting Eastern Woodland Indians at the time, which is what made his artwork so popular. That, along with the release of the film *The Last of the Mohicans* starring Daniel Day-Lewis, intensified public interest.<sup>3</sup>

Griffing’s drive came from his passion for educating the public about American Indians and Western Pennsylvania’s role in American history. In addition to speaking with local 5th grade classes, that Griffing describes as “the greatest,”<sup>4</sup> Griffing’s artwork also inspired Robert and Kathleen Millward, educators from the Indiana University of Pennsylvania, to create video and curriculum materials for teaching history. Their materials focused on his artwork

and utilized teaching methods that can be applied to other time periods and subjects. His artwork provides clarity to the mental image of old growth forests, American Indian councils, the Point, and Fort Pitt at the Forks of the Ohio River. According to historian Dr. David Preston, “Historians and students have known in an intellectual way many of the details and sources that inspire Robert’s scenes. But it takes his masterful brush to make them human.”<sup>5</sup>

Combined, his first two books, written by George Irvin and Tim Toddish, feature over 200 paintings that are woven into the history of the 18th-century frontier. The third book, *The Historical Art of Robert Griffing Volume III: An Amazing Journey*, written by Michael Galban, Mono Lake Paiute/Washoe and Curator and Interpretive Programs Assistant for the Seneca Art & Culture Center at Ganondagan, provides an American Indian perspective on the frontier

and greater understanding of American Indian communities.

Griffing met Galban through annual shows at the Seneca-Iroquois National Museum. Their first major collaboration was Griffing’s *The Great Treaty of Canandaigua*, which was unveiled at the annual treaty commemoration in Canandaigua, New York on November 11, 2010. Galban organized the photo shoot for Griffing including casting live models, providing historically accurate clothing, and setting eight to nine separate scenes that would come together in the final painting. Griffing says, “It was exciting because this was the first time I had worked with someone in that capacity as a team trying to achieve a common goal.”<sup>6</sup> *The Great Treaty of Canandaigua* was the biggest, and most rewarding, project Griffing has ever done. Over the years, Griffing continued working with Galban and knew he wanted Galban to write the third book to provide an indigenous perspective on frontier history.

Hundreds of paintings, prints, and three books later, Griffing has several favorites, but said it is hard to choose just one because each painting has its own story, meaning, and its own reason for being painted. As for the future, Griffing says there is always something, but he might not get enough paintings for a fourth book ... maybe a shorter book.<sup>7</sup> ☀

<sup>1</sup> Griffing, Robert. Personal Interview. February 13, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Irvin, George. *The Art of Robert Griffing: His Journey into the Eastern Frontier*. Ashville (NY): East/West Visions, 2000, p. 140.

<sup>3</sup> Griffing, Robert. Personal Interview. February 13, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Galban, Michael. *The Historical Art of Robert Griffing Volume III: An Amazing Journey*. Panama (NY): Paramount Press, 2018, p. vii.

<sup>6</sup> Griffing, Robert. Personal Interview. February 13, 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.