



## WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA SPORTS MUSEUM

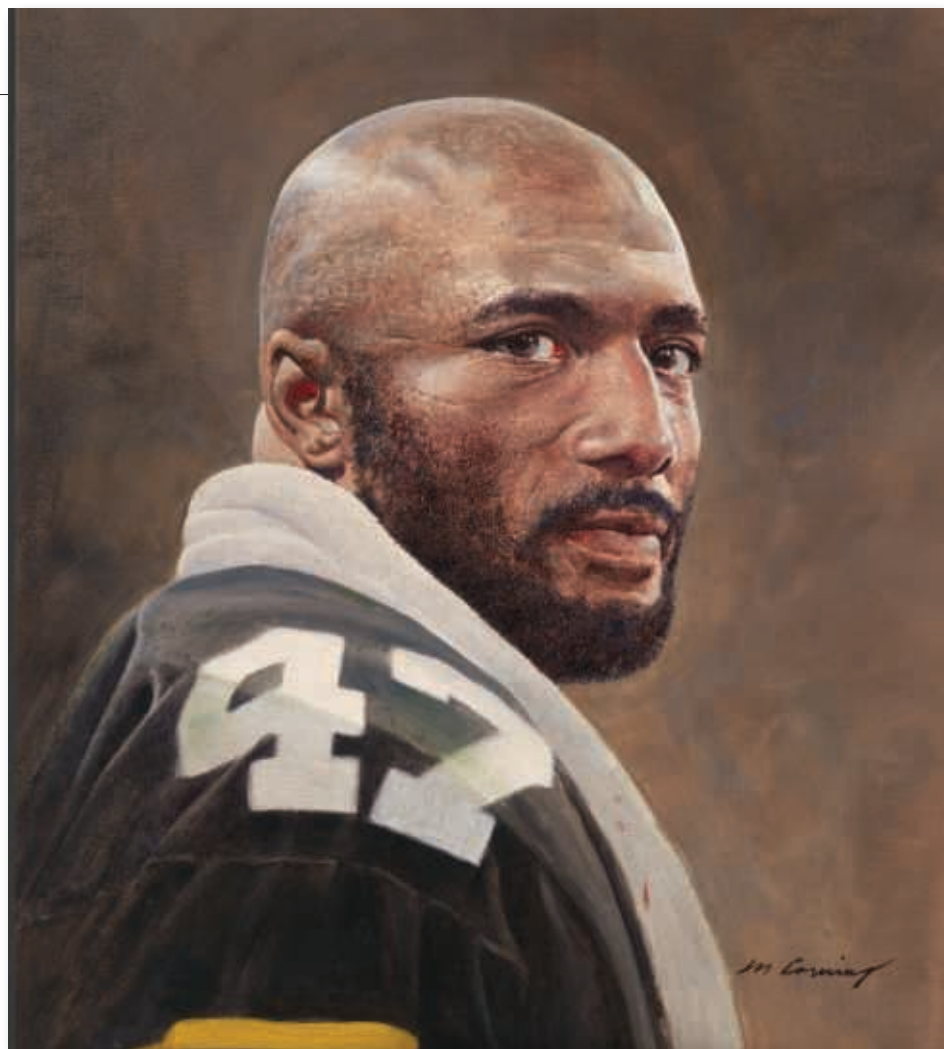
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### Picturing Pittsburgh's Athletes

Sports art, the rendering of the human figure engaged in activity or the athlete in repose, has a long tradition. The Greeks believed the perfect body was an athlete's—they decorated vases and urns with images of sportsmen competing and adorned temples with life-size sculptures of the human body in motion. They used this art of athletes to commemorate victory, to confer hero status on competitors, and to create a visual representation of the attributes that Greek society valued. Art focused on the athlete captured the struggle to persevere and triumph, as well as the exhilaration of victory.

More recently, the advent of new technologies such as photography, the mass production of printed trading cards, and film and television, have made sports imagery accessible and available to all. Much of that imagery documents competitions and events, endorses products or burnishes a brand, or satisfies the desire of fans to own a representation of their favorite player. Artists have also continued to create singular images of athletes meant to capture and preserve their likeness, their attributes, and their relevance for the future.

One such artist from California, Merv Corning, dedicated much of his career to painting athletes. His work attracted the



**Mel Blount** by Merv Corning, oil on canvas, 1988. The prototype cornerback of his era, Blount excelled at pass defense using his size, strength, and speed to physically dominate opposing receivers. Chosen for five Pro Bowls, the Hall of Famer was All-Pro for four years, and the NFL Defensive MVP in 1975. This image captures the intensity the four-time Super Bowl champion brought to the game.

Smithsonian Institution, National Portrait Gallery; gift of Arthur J. Rooney, Jr., © Tula Corning.

painting athletes. His work attracted the attention of the National Football League in the mid-1960s and he spent the next 40 years painting the legends of the sport. Corning's work hangs in the Pro Football Hall of Fame and other museums like the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery. It also adorns the office walls of NFL owners and league officials. And for many years, a sizable collection of Corning's work could be found in the office and home of Art Rooney Jr.

More than 35 years ago, Art Rooney Jr. and his wife Kay visited the Circle Art Gallery in San Diego, California. By the time they left, a new passion had been born. Unable to buy a

seascape that had sold while they shopped, Rooney purchased a portrait instead. Painted by Merv Corning, the work featured Cincinnati Bengals' wide receiver Isaac Curtis, a player Rooney admired. Over the next several years Rooney returned to the gallery while in San Diego on scouting trips or at Steelers' games and bought more of Corning's art. Eventually Corning called him, beginning a friendship and artistic partnership that lasted until the artist passed away in 2006.

Rooney gradually transitioned from buying Corning's art to commissioning specific pieces. He began to collect what he knew and loved—paintings that depicted members of



Chuck Noll Steelers postcard by Merv Corning, c. 2000.

HHC Collections, gift of Arthur J. Rooney Jr., 2007.43.4.



Pencil sketch by Merv Corning, c. 1996. Corning often did these pencil sketches on tissue as he planned or developed a work of art. Drawing served as his grounding, as he explained it, "I think composition is important, but drawing is the main ingredient, the bones in which everything else hangs."

HHC Collections, gift of Arthur J. Rooney Jr., 2013.101.20.



*Johnny Unitas* by Merv Corning, watercolor on paper, 1975. This portrait of Unitas captures him as many on the field saw him: as a focused leader who never backed down from a challenge. Commissioned by David Boss, the NFL's pioneering creative director for a quarter of a century, it also reveals the rising significance of image-making, marketing, and branding in professional sports.

Smithsonian Institution, National Portrait Gallery; partial gift of Carol J. Boss in memory of David A. Boss, © Tula Corning.

the great Steelers' teams of the 1970s. Rooney had scouted many of these players and respected them as athletes, but also as men. Rooney's collection broadened to include pieces by other artists but it has always represented his life, work, and the special relationships he developed through football.

Corning liked to render the game so it could be seen up close—with realism and some subtle drama. An accomplished figural artist, he had the ability to capture the essence of his subjects in his portraits, putting their personality on the page. Rooney felt drawn to these realistic,

emotive works of art. He and Merv Corning became close friends, but they never met face to face. They talked often on the phone and Rooney corresponded by postcard and letter. His notes led Corning to create "postcard" art, by printing on thick cards that looked like trading cards, and corresponding "posters" of those images. Rooney used these cards to write to Merv and also for notes to players, family, and friends. Many are trademarked "Murray Cards" on the bottom, a private joke between the two men that referenced Maggie Murray (Rooney), Art's grandmother.

An adept landscape and seascape artist, Corning's work shows the influence of the artists he admired such as Andrew Wyeth. After the NFL hired him in 1966, he completed more than 300 football images. In 1977 the League contracted him as their official Super Bowl artist. Corning created program covers, working on one, the cover for the Super Bowl XXV program, for more than six months. He said about that piece, "I feel that my 'theme art' illustration for Super Bowl XXV is one of the best things I've ever done ... it was a real labor of love."

In all he did, Corning's art reflected his desire to, "paint things I care about ... anything that has some history in it and shows it. Texture and history appeal to me." The History Center shares three of Corning's works in the exhibit, *Smithsonian's Portraits of Pittsburgh: Works from the National Portrait Gallery*, with an additional piece hanging in the Sports Museum. A book of his art was published by his wife Tula in 2019 and inspired an exhibit at the Canton Museum of Art in Ohio. The History Center shared much of Mr. Rooney's collection in an exhibit, *Art of the Steelers*, in 2012–2013 and some of those pieces are now in the St. Vincent College collection.



*Pitt National Championship* by Merv Corning, watercolor, 1996. Portraits of Coach Johnny Majors and Heisman Trophy winner and Pro Football Hall of Famer Tony Dorsett center this piece created for the 20th anniversary of the 1976 championship season.

HHC Collections, gift of Arthur J. Rooney Jr., 2013.101.1.