



- Home
- Arts/Ent.
- Automotive
- Dining
- Financial
- Health
- Home & Garder
- Just for Fun
- Senior Living
- Travel
- Contact
- Advertise

# In-Focus



Ralph Sirianni

## Ralph Sirianni

### He Lives and Breathes His Passion for Art

By Paul Chimera  
In-Focus Columnist

Seated in the living room of his North Buffalo home, artist Ralph Sirianni nods respectfully toward a large abstract oil painting, "Atmospheric Gusto," which occupies an entire wall. "That one," he acknowledges, is the work he just might consider his favorite.

But not so much for its esthetic quality (though it's lovely) as for the memory it evokes in the 57-year-old painter. The work was his first departure from realism, toward a more expressive representation of his inner self – and he credits Walter Prochownik for helping to bring it out in him.

"He was my mentor," says Sirianni about the late painter and University at Buffalo art professor. "He recognized some talent in me and took me under his wing. He taught me that you have to take what's in here (pointing to his gut) and put it there (gesturing toward the canvas)."

Such appreciation for people and their good deeds finds a parallel in Sirianni's day job – that of creative art therapist at the Veterans Administration Medical Center in Buffalo, a position he's held for six years. He joined the VA in 1977, working in various capacities, though mainly in recreation – games, movies, music – aimed at improving patients' quality of and outlook on life.

#### A Song in a Saloon

Mostly, though, Sirianni's life is about his art. It is an all-consuming passion, and has been that way since he was a young child, born on Buffalo's west side and growing up in Kenmore.

His artistic sensibilities also include music – singing to be precise – and he recalls being about six when he and his brother, Mario, ten years his senior, would actually go to saloons, where Mario would offer a shoe shine and the young Ralph would offer a song.



"Atmospheric Gusto," oil on canvas, 50" x 49", from Sirianni's Atmospheric Gusto series, 1978.

Their earnings went to their mother, an early gesture of the selflessness that drives much of what artist Sirianni is about today. In talking about his work as a creative art therapist at the hospital, he notes how he'll sometimes break out into a Sinatra tune during Karaoke sessions. "I handle it like a nightclub," he says, "and before you know it someone is tapping his foot and an hour later they're all singing. You have to get them fired up. They've often closed themselves in; you want to break them out of their shell."

Sirianni breaks out of his shell armed with a paintbrush and an unquenchable thirst for artistic expression. "I'm literally living and breathing art. It's my true love," he declares, with the confidence of a man who knows exactly where he's supposed to be.

That's apparent, no matter in what genre he's currently focused, and his oeuvre is eclectic. Having done a 1968-1972 tour of duty in the U.S. Marine Corps, including assignment Vietnam, some of his best and most well known works reflect that life-changing chapter in his life.

Several of his war-inspired pictures – including the haunting "Crucifixion/Nam," appear, together with his well-crafted explanatory text in the book, *The National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum (Chicago) – Vietnam: Reflexes and Reflections* (edited by Diana Murphy; Harry N. Abrams, 1998).

Sirianni's "Buffalo Soldier" – one of some 160 life size Buffalo figures herded about the region – presently sits in the V.A. Medical Center's auditorium, but enjoys outside display during nicer weather. It features a WWI army helmet, a star-spangled shield painted on its side, and the image of a U.S. Marine painted on one of the bison's eyeballs.

### **Suffering for Your Art**

Sirianni's granite sculpture, "Water Run" – depicting a kneeling soldier reaching for a water canteen – is a permanent fixture at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Park in Sprague Brook, New York. If sometimes an artist suffers for his art, Sirianni is literal living proof: he sustained a hand fracture while whittling down the original 7,000-pound slab of granite.

A trenchant "Colosseum Series" – inspired by the artist's trip to Italy and daylong, painstaking explorations of the ancient stadium – is consistent with earlier influences in his life. At age 15, he was into boxing, judo, and the martial arts. "I learned to appreciate the fighting arts," Sirianni explains. "I enjoyed the discipline of it."

At the Coliseum in Rome, he remembers



"Jimmy Hendrix," Ralph Sirianni

imagining the sounds of the chariot wheels, the smells of the foods. "I could hear the roars coming from inside – the sound of armor on armor." He has long been seduced by the notion of gladiators.

One of his mixed-media pictures, "A Contest," features two gladiators in a dramatic death grip, one clearly victorious, the other falling limply in a his descent to death.

Sirianni's art is often poignantly expressive, shining a light on those things that move him. Whether it's the tragic futility of war, the spectacle of gladiators fighting to the death, or musical subjects such as guitarist Jimi Hendrix, about whom Sirianni is so passionate he has an image of the rock legend tattooed on his chest, near his heart.

But his art also depicts less turbulent or iconic dimensions of the human condition. An exhibition of his "Peaceful World" series of oil and pastel paintings concluded at the end of December at the Virginia Weiss Gallery (Empire State College, 617 Main Street, 3rd floor), inspired by scenes of his backyard, which he enjoys daily from his studio. "It's the space I find peace in," he says.

### **He's Put Some Behind Bars**

For Sirianni, who in 2004 received the Mayor's Award for art that serves the city of Buffalo, living and breathing art also means employing his talents in unexpected ways. He offers his draftsmanship, pro bono, to help the Buffalo Detective Bureau nab sex offenders, sketching victims' recollections of assailants' descriptions. "I've helped put some of them behind bars," says Sirianni, who also helps in homicide and robbery cases.

Similarly, he accepted the special challenge of doing courtroom sketches, cutting his teeth in the art form on the internationally covered James Kopp case – the man found guilty of murdering Amherst physician Dr. Bernard Slepian. And he sketched inside the courtroom during the equally infamous Lackawanna Six trial, garnering requests from CNN and journalists as far away as Greenland to shoot his drawings for on-air or print presentation.

Last year, he made Buffalo history when he was the first artist to mount a local exhibition of 31 courtroom drawings at the Virginia Weiss Gallery.

Luckily Sirianni is skilled in capturing a likeness quickly, a talent he puts to use regularly, teaching caricature drawing in studio art classes for the Kenmore-Town of Tonawanda continuing education program.

You can catch his latest exhibition, "Healing Arts Tribute to Trauma Survivors and Respondents," at the Adams Gallery in Dunkirk, through January 10. It then moves to the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, from Jan. 18 - Feb. 5 (Sirianni is scheduled to deliver a talk about his work there on the evening of Jan. 27). Plus, go to [www.ralphsirianni.com](http://www.ralphsirianni.com) to enjoy a virtual tour of more of his work in various mediums.

Most of the photos on his web site are by Ulysses John Kontos, whose late brother George was an art teacher at Kenmore West High School and one of the important early influences on Sirianni's artistic development.

Mostly, though, Sirianni sings the praises of Walter Prochownik (1923-2000), whose photo on the cover of a Buffalo magazine hangs near the door to Sirianni's studio. "He nurtured my love of art. He re-lit that flame for me. He taught me so much."

Ironically, Prochownik became ill with Alzheimer's disease, and the World War II veteran ended up at the V.A. Medical Center - a patient of his former protégé. "I would actually guide his hand," says Sirianni, who proudly believes in angels and considers Prochownik one that's helped him stay grounded.

Little wonder, then, how his three sons came by their names: Raphael, Gabriel, and Michael. All of which reminds this columnist of what Michelangelo once said: "I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free."

Got an idea for "In-Focus"? Email Paul Chimera at: [chimera1@verizon.net](mailto:chimera1@verizon.net)

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