Artist Joseph Csatari Captures the Spirit of Mack

Bending over his drafting table, Joe Csatari looked the picture of a young art director — tall and thin with dark hair, a generous smile and intense eyes that reflected his Hungarian heritage. He raised his head to see his boss gesturing toward him. There was another man in the office, a big man. As Csatari walked down the hall at the Boy Scouts of America headquarters in North Brunswick, New Jersey, he felt a mixture of nervousness and excitement.

“Joe,” his boss said, “I’d like you to meet Zenon Hansen, the president of Mack Trucks and a big supporter of the Boy Scouts.”

Hansen looked as tall as Csatari with broad shoulders, gray hair and glasses and a pipe the size of a trowel. In the lapel of his blazer he wore a gold pin depicting a Bulldog. He had come from Diamond T-White Trucks to assume the presidency of Mack earlier in 1965 and served on the national executive board of the BSA since 1959. He knew the organization, and Csatari’s work. He got right down to business.

“The most important thing to a company is spirit,” he said. “Without that, you have nothing.” He showed Csatari the photo of a painting. “This is the best-known symbol in the trucking business, and it typifies what I want the company to stand for — a tough and reliable product. I want you to redo it.”

Csatari took a closer look at the photo. It showed a white Bulldog standing on three legs, the fourth obscured by a hind limb. “I want strength,” Hansen said. “I want you to put the other leg in — everyone knows that a Bulldog has four legs instead of three. And it should be a brindle color. It can’t be white. That’s the color of the competition.”

Csatari agreed to the commission. Hansen shook his hand, looked him in the eye and said, “I like your style. I know you can do it.”

And he did.

Portrait of an Artist

Joseph Csatari has painted the portraits of some of the most well-known figures in modern history — Dwight D. Eisenhower, First Lady Betty Ford, the picture of Chef Boyardee that appears on cans of mini ravioli. He has illustrated more than 300 books, magazines and other publications. His work has appeared in the Saturday Evening Post, Time and Outdoor Life. But it’s his association with the BSA and the organization’s first official artist, Norman Rockwell, that attracted public acclaim … and the attention of Zenon Hansen.
Csatari was born in 1929 in South River, New Jersey. His older brother wanted to draw and paint, and so did Joe. He loved Rockwell’s work with its combination of craftsmanship and heart, and copied the artist’s covers for the Saturday Evening Post. After studying art, he joined the BSA Supply Division’s advertising department in 1953. In 1958, he became the art director and in 1973 served as art director of Boy’ Life magazine.

His meeting with Rockwell would change his life.

“When the Boy Scouts would come up with a theme for a painting, I’d interpret it with a layout,” Csatari said. “Then I would get the models and take them to Norman’s studio in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. He had my layout and the models and a photographer. He would pick the photographs that would tell the story and start painting.”

Those paintings graced the covers of everything from the Boy Scout Handbook to the Scouts’ annual calendars. When Rockwell retired from the Scouts in 1976, the BSA named Csatari its official artist. A year later he launched his career as a freelance artist.

Today, at age 84, he lives in the same town in which he was born, South River, with his wife Susan. He continues to work upstairs in his studio, light filtering down on the easel from skylights, framed sketches and paintings of his and Rockwell’s work covering the walls. And while he has never driven a truck, he remembers with pride the day Zenon Hansen asked him to paint what has become the symbol of trucking around the world. “I was flattered,” he said. “He wanted my style.”

“Filling in the Details”

That style was meticulous, bold and heroic, the very qualities Hansen wanted the Bulldog to portray. The commission, which took about three weeks, went smoothly.

“I made little roughs on tracing paper,” Csatari said. “I traced the sketch onto canvas, then I went ahead with the painting. They were very pleased with it.”

That’s an understatement. This wouldn’t be the only time Csatari worked for Mack Trucks. He would paint the Brockway Husky, the mascot of the Brockway Motor Company, a firm Mack purchased in 1956. But this time felt different.

“I took the painting up to [Hansen’s] office and showed it to him. He looked at it and said, ’Joe, that’s it. You hit it right on the head. I like it.’”

Hansen was so pleased that he had numerous copies made on canvas and hung the original behind his desk at World Headquarters, a constant reminder of the rugged spirit of Mack.

“The most important thing to a company is spirit. Without that, you have nothing.”

— Zenon C.R. Hansen
Chairman and CEO, Mack Trucks, 1965–1974

“A Place in History”

That one painting has assured Joe Csatari’s place in Mack history.

“He was an important contributor to the turnaround of Mack Trucks in the Zenon Hansen days,” said Don Schumaker, curator of the Mack Trucks Historical Museum in Allentown, Pennsylvania. “Csatari’s creation was an instant hit. Like his mentor, Norman Rockwell, he was able to visualize and depict a very lifelike and determined looking Bulldog. The picture has been used everywhere since then.”

The original painting now hangs in a fitting place—at Mack World Headquarters in Greensboro, North Carolina, outside the office of Kevin Flaherty, president of Mack Trucks North American sales and marketing.

The artist who succeeded America’s best-known painter is pleased to help promote the world’s most-famous truck.

“I feel very humbled, very privileged, that my logo would represent this great Mack company.”

The BSA honored first responders to the September 11, 2001 attacks with a dramatic work depicting firefighters, police, rescue workers and Scouts with the remnants of the World Trade Center buildings in the background. In the weeks that followed the attacks, Boy Scouts supported rescue and recovery efforts by providing water and other supplies as well as organizing blood drives. The BSA calls Csatari’s painting “Prepared to Do a Good Turn.”