

MORT KÜNSTLER

"THE GODFATHER" OF

PULP FICTION

ILLUSTRATORS

TRAVELING EXHIBITION SERVICE



INTERNATIONAL
ARTS AND ARTISTS



***"A TRUE GENIUS OF A
POPULIST HYPERREALIST
STYLE... THOUGH PAINTED
AT FACTORY-OUTPUT SPEED,
[HIS] COVERS POSITIVELY
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[THEY ARE] LUSHLY TINTED
AND VISCERALLY KINETIC."***

- John Strausbaugh, The New York Times

1. detail of Mort Künstler, *Spice of Life*, 1952, Gouache on board, © Mort Künstler, Courtesy of Mort Künstler.



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Featuring the work of one of the most skilled and prolific illustrators of the twentieth century, *Mort Künstler: "The Godfather" of Pulp Fiction Illustrators* showcases more than 80 original drawings and paintings that graced the covers of American magazines, paperbacks, and weeklies

throughout the 1950s and '60s. These dramatic scenes portray daring heists, POW escapes, standoffs with wild animals, and military strikes, revealing the anxieties and deep-seated desires that captivated the nation during the Cold War era. Vivid, provocative, and boldly kinetic, this exhibition transports museum visitors to an exciting and pivotal time in American pop culture history.

THE RISE OF PULP FICTION

The rise of "pulp fiction" in the United States began as a flamboyant offshoot of the sudden and unprecedented democratization of reading that followed the upheavals of the Civil War. Soaring literacy rates among the working class, joined with new technologies of paper production, created a thriving market for accessible, entertaining stories in an inexpensive, portable format. To meet this demand, the pulp book and magazine industry invented itself from the ground up, recruiting hundreds of new artists and writers; and by the 1920s, publishers were churning out an astonishing number of magazines and books in such wide-ranging genres as science fiction, romance, Western, horror, and crime. In an increasingly saturated market of mass distribution, pulp publishers competed for consumers' attention with sleek cover art whose bold colors and design masked the cheap paper stock lurking within.

Although the pulp fiction industry began a precipitous decline with the age of television and the ever-increasing use of photography in print marketing, a new strategy of targeted advertising led to a renewed flourishing of niche market publications, particularly those known as "men's adventure" magazines. Between the lurid covers of these magazines, readers discovered titillating stories reminiscent of earlier generations of pulp fiction, but suitably modified to appeal to middle-class men: thrilling tales of military skirmishes, courageous escapes, and Cold War espionage—often replete with generous doses of sexual intrigue, and frequently packaged as "true accounts." At the height of their popularity in the 1950s and early '60s, titles such as *For Men Only*, *Male*, *Action Life*, and *Stag* are collectively estimated to have sold about 12 million copies a month.

PULP [pŭlp]

1. A moist mixture of cellulose fibres, as obtained from wood, from which paper is made.
2. A magazine or book containing sensational material, and usually printed on cheap rough paper.

2. detail of Mort Künstler, *Whale of a Tale*, 1955, Oil on monotype on canvas, © Mort Künstler, Courtesy of Mort Künstler.

MORT KÜNSTLER: PULP ILLUSTRATOR



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It was into the red-hot crucible of this heady, fast-paced industry that young Mort Künstler was cast. After graduating from Pratt Institute in 1950 and apprenticing in a design studio, Künstler already possessed the requisite command of form, color, composition, and visual narrative to distill the essence of the stories he now illustrated. As he noted in an interview with Heritage Auctions, “We told stories directly and immediately. You had to be creative and you had to meet deadlines.” While Künstler accepted assignments from a range of publishing firms, the bulk of his work came from Martin Goodman’s Magazine Management, which was also the parent company to Marvel Comics. Künstler used fast-drying gouache paint and worked 12-15 hour days to complete his commissions.

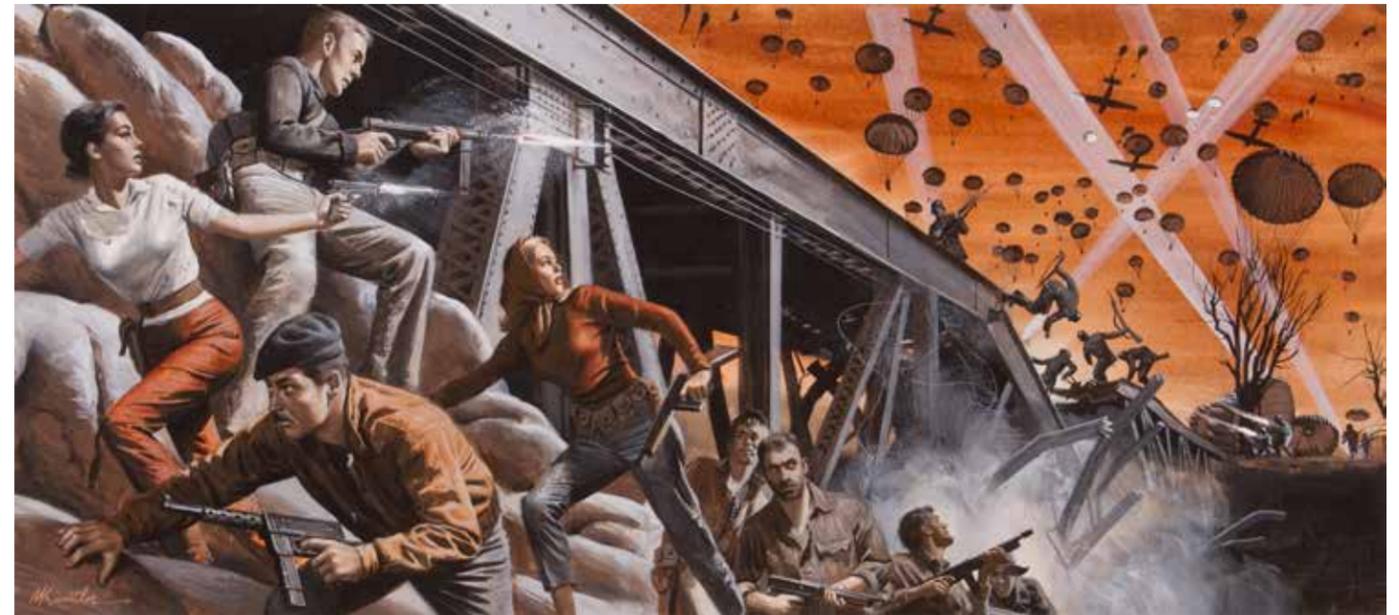
Despite this rapid turnaround, Künstler’s works are highly finished, dynamic, and bursting with detail. In *Jet Sled Raid*, the intense gaze of the female driver and the flying mist of snow that surrounds her escalate the urgency of the scene, while the sharp trajectory of the Soviet jet bearing down on her speeding vehicle threatens to bring the chase right off the canvas (or page). In this hyperbolic work, Künstler is careful to replicate such realistic details as the gleaming surface of metal and the black and white scuff marks on the vehicle’s bottom side. These formal strategies and story-based minutiae work together to intensify the visual and narrative impact of the painting.

WORLD WAR II SCENES

While the stories in “men’s adventure” magazines varied in their settings and subject matter, by far the most popular and reused tales involved World War II exploits. With America’s rapidly changing social landscape, rising anxieties about geopolitics, and the existential threat of nuclear warfare—and the overall climate of paranoia that characterized the Cold War era—the skirmishes and battles of World War II became (somewhat ironically) a source of nostalgia: a sentiment eagerly and flamboyantly exploited by “men’s adventure” magazine publishers.

Künstler produced a vast number of World War II scenes, including *Take Out the Bridge or the 82nd Airborne is Trapped*. It is not surprising that the 82nd infantry airborne was chosen as the subject for one of these stories, since they were famed as a highly-

skilled division specializing in assault operations into denied areas. Nevertheless, they appear only as small parachutes in the background of the sweeping panorama, ceding the foreground to a vividly personalized character study of various Resistance fighters, each of whose faces represents a distinct emotional response, from determination to trepidation. The drama is further enhanced by the group’s masterfully rendered physicality: e.g., the twist of the female fighter’s torso as she fires over her shoulder at pursuing Germans; the tense posture of her male companion who crouches warily below, clutching a rock for support. Künstler’s eye for detail and dramatic composition brings to molten life a thrilling event that, in all probability, never took place.



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3. Mort Künstler, *Jet-Sled Raid on Russia's Ice Cap Pleasure Stockade*, 1967, Gouache on board, © Mort Künstler, Courtesy of Mort Künstler.
4. Mort Künstler, “*Take Out the Bridge or the 82nd Airborne is Trapped...*”, 1963, Gouache on board, © Mort Künstler, Courtesy of Mort Künstler.

THE GODFATHER STUDIES

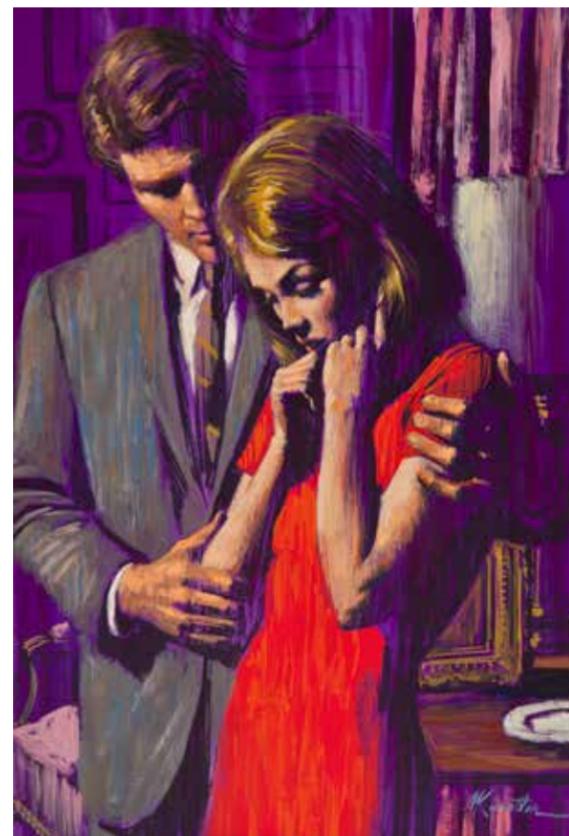
Künstler's illustrations were, of course, accompanied by text, the work of authors who were likewise laboring to meet the market's insatiable demand for heart-pounding action fare. One of these authors was Mario Puzo, who often wrote under the pseudonym Mario Cleri. (Künstler also employed several pseudonyms, due to the sheer volume of the work he produced.) Although his stories covered a variety of subjects, Puzo particularly excelled at World War II narratives, conducting extensive research and then exaggerating casualties and the intensity of the combat in order to boost his readers' excitement. Künstler and Puzo frequently collaborated on World War II stories, and three illustrations resulting from this partnership are featured in the exhibition.

While steadily producing pulp stories for Magazine Management, Puzo was simultaneously crafting his seminal novel *The Godfather*. Published in 1969, the book sold over nine million copies in two years, inspired two Academy Award-winning movies, and

went on to become one of the most successful and critically acclaimed franchises of literature and film. *The Godfather's* popularity and enduring influence can be credited in part to Puzo's clever reinvention of the Mafia genre: by shifting the dramatic focus away from tough guys engaged in shootouts and to an insider's perspective—exploring the interpersonal relations between members of the Corleone family and their business operations—he added a potent new dimension to the material that was both mythic and human. As illustrator, Mort Künstler played his own essential role in this revitalization of a genre.

Künstler's *Godfather* illustrations, which accompanied excerpts of the novel in several magazines prior to its publication as a book, not only provided readers with their first visual analogues for these unforgettable characters, but also perfectly captured Puzo's unique blend of emotion and intrigue. In one portrait, Michael Corleone puts his arm gently around Kay, who gazes downward with closed eyes, her hands clenched just below her distraught face. The portrait conveys a striking depth of emotion, showing tenderness but also a troubling disconnect between the two lovers, as Kay's mistrust of Michael grows. Similarly, in a portrait of Vito Corleone, Künstler emphasizes the Godfather's commanding personality, portraying him with an intense gaze and knitted brows. Behind Vito's head, Künstler has pasted a collage of actual *New York Times* clippings detailing various Mafia crimes, further emphasizing the novel's "ripped from the headlines" realism.

In total, six of Künstler's *Godfather* illustrations are featured in the exhibition, giving viewers a rich, pre-cinematic perspective on the notorious and alluring Corleones.



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MORT KÜNSTLER

5. Mort Künstler, *Study for The Don*, 1969, Mixed media, © Mort Künstler, Courtesy of Mort Künstler. (opposite)
6. Mort Künstler, *Michael and Kay*, 1969, Mixed media, © Mort Künstler, Courtesy of Mort Künstler.

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AFTER PULP

By the early 1970s, the once-mighty pulp industry was all but dead, yet Künstler's career was still evolving. He continued to take on a variety of projects, such as advertising assignments, movie posters, and book covers, including a re-issue of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* published by Scholastic Books in 1971. For this piece, Künstler worked directly from a 1931 Universal Pictures publicity photograph of Bela Lugosi as Dracula, adding bats, cobwebs, and two large rats perched on a coffin to complete the macabre setting.

While Künstler is best known today for his elaborate paintings of historic events and Civil War battles, his journeyman years in pulp publishing were vital to the long chrysalis of his dynamic, incomparable talent. As he explained in 2011, "There's no way I could have done what I'm doing today if I hadn't of had that all

that men's adventure magazine work... I learned how to compose, how to tell a story. [It] helped prepare me for all of the work I did later."

Over the past several decades, scholars in the United States have come to recognize pulp magazines as important cultural documents that offer vivid contextual insights into gender, politics, current events, and more. Once viewed as cheap and disposable (even disreputable), pulp magazines are now regarded as essential Americana and are eagerly collected, preserved, and promoted by the nation's libraries and other cultural institutions. *Mort Künstler: "The Godfather" of Pulp Fiction Illustrators* takes museumgoers on a glorious, eye-opening odyssey into a classic American cultural landscape that has all but vanished.

7. Mort Künstler, *Dracula*, 1971, Oil on board, © Mort Künstler, Courtesy of Mort Künstler. (opposite)

ABOUT THE CURATORS

MICHAEL W. SCHANTZ has been the Executive Director, CEO & Chief Curator of the Heckscher Museum of Art, Huntington, New York, since 2010. Prior to his tenure at the Heckscher, he directed the Woodmere Art Museum, Philadelphia, PA, from 1981 to 2009. From 1977 to 1981, he was the Assistant Director of the Grunwald Center for the Graphic Arts, UCLA, now a part of the Armand Hammer Museum of Art, Los Angeles. He has written many essays on American painting and graphic arts for exhibition catalogues and art periodicals over a period of 40 years. He holds a PhD in Art History from UCLA and a Master of Arts degree in Art from San Diego State University.

LISA CHALIF has been the Curator of The Heckscher Museum of Art, Huntington, New York, from 2008 to 2019. She has organized dozens of exhibitions that focused on various aspects of the Heckscher Museum's permanent collection, as well as loan shows on a diverse range of subjects, including experimental photography, environmental art, appropriation, art and the automobile, and solo exhibitions of painters Stan Brodsky and Robert S. Neuman, as well as photographer Joseph Szabo. Previously, she worked as an independent art historian and collection administrator for private collectors of 19th and 20th century American and European art. She earned her Master of Arts degree from City University of New York and her Bachelor of Arts in Art History degree, with honors, from Barnard College, Columbia University.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

MORT KÜNSTLER (b. Brooklyn, NY, 1927) began drawing at an early age, encouraged by his parents to explore his artistic talent. He attended Abraham Lincoln High School, where he was a student of Leon Friend, one of the most progressive instructors of art education in the country. He later attended Pratt Institute, majoring in fine art illustration. Upon graduating in 1950, Künstler began a multi-decade career as a freelance illustrator for New York book and magazine publishers, becoming one of the premier illustrators of the pulp fiction era. As the popularity of men's magazines waned in the late 1960s, Künstler shifted his creative focus to advertising work for national corporations, posters for Hollywood movies, and illustrations for National Geographic. Today he is best known for his carefully researched, highly detailed scenes from American history. His tableau of George Washington crossing the Delaware was exhibited at the New York Historical Society in 2011. He has also had solo exhibitions at the Hammer Galleries, the Nassau County Museum of Art, and the Norman Rockwell Museum.



FRONT Mort Künstler, *Buried Alive for Four Months*, 1961, Gouache on board, © Mort Künstler, Courtesy of Mort Künstler.

BACK Mort Künstler, *Contraband Blonde*, 1959, Gouache on board, © Mort Künstler, Courtesy of Mort Künstler.

EXHIBITION SPECIFICATIONS

Number of Works

Approximately 80

Organized by

The Heckscher Museum of Art

Curator

Michael W. Schantz, PhD
and Lisa Chalif

Requirements

Moderate security; approximately
300-400 linear square feet

Participation Fee

Please inquire

Shipping

IA&A makes all arrangements;
exhibitors pay outgoing shipping
costs within the contiguous US

Booking Period

12 weeks

Tour

January 2021 - January 2024

Exhibition Components

Gouache and oil paintings,
assorted ephemera

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