

2019 Wooden Boat Show Artist Destined to Create

Suzanne Christian was destined to be an artist from birth.

“It was intentional,” the 2019 Georgetown Wooden Boat Show poster artist said recently at the South Carolina Maritime Museum. “I was named Suzanne after my dad’s favorite sister, who was indeed an artist. Just to show you how early parental guidance can influence a child, almost every piece of artwork I did from Kindergarten through eighth grade went up on the kitchen refrigerator. I have been drawn to study and paint ever since.”

When Suzanne was a high school senior in the 1960s, her parents moved their 10 children from Michigan to southern California to take advantage of the state’s free university tuition program, since a college education was a No. 1 priority. Her father was an inventor who was most often struck by inspiration in the middle of the night. When that happened, he roused Suzanne to come downstairs and illustrate his latest idea.

“The one I most remember was his can of Bloody Mary mix with the vodka already in it, which was unheard of at that time” she said. “I was to draw a gnarly hand gripping a tomato with bloody drips all over. I was 10 years old and had nightmares for weeks.”

In college Suzanne majored in English and art, and after graduation was hired by Trans-World Airlines to be a stewardess based in New York flying international routes.

“It was great fun – so many adventures,” she said.

It was in New York that she met her future husband, Jim, a Secret Service agent. Three years after their wedding and expecting their first child, Suzanne was forced to quit flying, because pregnant “stews” were not the image the company desired. She happily stayed home and raised their three children.

During this period, Suzanne put away the oil paint, because one too many toddler outfits were ruined with unforgiving oil stains. Colored pencils cleaned up easier.

“I set up the dining room table with my pencils and worked from there for an entire year,” she said. “I enjoyed this immensely, but my love remained oil paint.”

When the children were all in school, Suzanne resumed her career, this time as a flight attendant with American Airlines. Once again, she was based at John F. Kennedy International Airport flying international routes, and she did this for 18 years.

When Jim retired from the Secret Service after 20 years, he took a job with Novartis Pharmaceuticals. As the youngest of their children went off to college, Suzanne and Jim went to Switzerland, where they remained for 10 years.

Eventually it became time to think about where they wanted to retire. When the children were young the family vacationed at Kiawah Island and fell in love with the Lowcountry. They wanted “somewhere warm and beautiful” and picked the Debordieu community north of Georgetown. They’ve been there full time since 2010 and love it.

Suzanne describes her work as “impressionistic realism,” and her subjects are diverse, including beekeepers, children at play, gardens, beach scenes, country roads, boats and more.

“Some pictures I take just call out to be painted,” she says, “some have to be tweaked and almost all end up nothing like the photo. At some point in the process I set aside the photo and just wing it. That’s where the fun is.”

When she was asked to paint the poster art for the Georgetown Wooden Boat Show, Suzanne headed to the Front Street docks to take photos. What she found was inspiring, and she chose to paint the Capt. Andrew, which is one of the city’s most historic wooden boats.

Built on Lee Street out of yellow pine and oak by Leon Jordan and James Richard Jordan and named for a family ancestor, the 75-foot trawler is Georgetown’s oldest wooden hull

shrimp boat. The Capt. Andrew launched in 1968 from the Fish House railway, and it is still in use today. Its captain, Larry Owen, is the son and nephew of the Capt. Andrew's builders.

Suzanne sought permission to paint the Capt. Andrew, and then she went to work mixing color boards. Mixing color is her favorite part of the process, and the colors in this painting are rich with soothing blues, greens, grays, yellows and browns blending masterfully with the boat's varying shades of white as it sits at dock. A small American flag waves jauntily from atop a furled net.

Suzanne's works are created in an attic space equipped with skylights, and she can capture the light quality she wants by adjusting the time of day she paints. A normal day has her heading there about 9 a.m. where she remains for approximately four hours, depending on how the project is going.

It takes quite a while for her to declare a painting finished.

"I have to look at it for a long time," she said. "I bring it downstairs and pretend to ignore it for about a week. Every day I see a needed tweak, which I fix, and this goes on until I either don't see any more needed fixes, or I'm so sick of the painting I want it gone. And then I sign it, and my rule is I can't touch it after signing."

Suzanne Christian's original painting of the Capt. Andrew will be auctioned on October 18, 2019 at the Goat Island Yacht Club Regatta held the Friday night before the Wooden Boat Show. Posters featuring the painting will be sold for \$20 at the SC Maritime Museum and at the 30th Annual Georgetown Wooden Boat Show on Oct. 19 and 20; visit woodenboatshow.com for more information.

You can see more of Suzanne Christian's work at schristian.faso.com.