***Excerpt from “Classic yachts kept alive by marine artist John Mecray”, by Susan Carroll, published in The Jamestown Press, August 18, 2005:***

When he started painting some of the world’s most famous vessels more than 30 years ago, marine artist John Mecray didn’t imagine that his love of the classic boats he memorializes in his work would someday develop into a second career to help save them. But that’s exactly what happened after he painted the 1885 schooner Coronet, and then co-founded the organization that would ultimately undertake to return the yacht to her original splendor.

Mecray’s interest in art surfaced at a young age. “I always liked drawing and making pictures,” says Mecray. He was encouraged to develop his talent by supportive parents — who proudly displayed his early childhood drawings to friends and family — and an art teacher who led him from grade school through high school in his hometown of Cape May, N.J.

With their help, he was awarded entry into a prestigious art school, the Philadelphia College of Art (now the University of the Arts). For Mecray, the step was a deciding one. “Art was the only thing I did well,” he says. “I wanted to go to a school that was all art, all the time.”

While in Philadelphia, Mecray majored in illustration. After his junior year, with the military draft an issue, he enlisted in the Army and quickly found ways to put his talent to use. He gained a position in the operations section of an armored regiment and went to Europe where he crafted signs, charts, maps and other graphics. He then transferred to the 7th Army Symphony Orchestra and Soldier Shows Company in Stuttgart, Germany, where he designed scenery and sets. Mecray later worked with a psychological warfare company designing leaflets and posters.

He returned to college after two-and-a-half years and set to work augmenting his studies with real-world experience. “I convinced one of my professors to allow me to seek freelance illustration jobs for credit,” says Mecray. “He wasn’t very confident that I’d succeed.” But Mecray did. In fact, while still in school, Mecray was hired to illustrate the Senior Girl Scout Handbook.

After graduation, Mecray accepted a position teaching a drawing class at his alma mater one day a week. The rest of the time he freelanced out of a studio in Philadelphia, where he was kept busy illustrating for a wide range of clients in the telecommunications, healthcare and transportation industries.

“The good news was that I had all the work I wanted,” explains Mecray. “The bad news was that I had done such a variety of work that my portfolio looked like it had been done by six different people.”

Feeling the pressure to focus, Mecray found his muse during a six-day sailing trip to St. Thomas with his cousin. “It was a profound experience,” says Mecray. “Being on the ocean can be quite dramatic.”

He returned home and began painting marine scenes while still working as a freelance illustrator. His interest in the sea was cemented when he acquired a period painting by marine artist James E. Buttersworth. “I thought, ‘I could do that,’” says Mecray.

Knowing it would require the kind of focus that his illustration lacked, Mecray left behind a successful career to embark on one that would ultimately bring him even greater acclaim.

Within a few years of his maiden sailing voyage to the Virgin Islands, Mecray found representation for his work with Kennedy Galleries in New York. He decided to move to Newport, where there was no shortage of inspiration. “I saw yachts I had only read about,” says Mecray. “I didn’t have to search for subjects. Narragansett Bay was a magnet for wonderful vessels.”

And while he envisioned his career as a marine painter would involve a variety of subjects — from fishing schooners to naval battles — in less than a year, Mecray turned his full attention to classic yachts.

“What intrigued me about yachts was their power and grace,” explains Mecray. Consequently, he only paints boats underway. “If it’s not moving, I’m not interested.”

Since most of his subjects no longer exist, Mecray works from scale models to capture their intricacies. It’s the realistic details that have garnered him a worldwide following of sailing enthusiasts who appreciate the way his works accurately depict everything from the direction of the wind to placement of the cleats and winches.

His signature style — coming in close — was born after he cut off the top of the sails in his first painting. “I wanted to capture the immediate feeling of being close to these wonderful objects as they move by,” says Mecray.

He portrays the boats in a variety of views — coming, going and in profile — enabling him to paint the same subject more than once, as he did with his favorite yacht, Coronet.

And while he may have a favorite boat, he doesn’t prefer one particular painting. “I have favorites for different reasons, mostly because I associate the works with a particular period of time that holds great memories for me.”

The pieces have the same effect on their owners. “What I enjoy most is that people buy my work to hang in their living rooms, that it evokes some response in people.”

Mecray decided early on to publish his works in print form. Today, he sells the original paintings through his agent, Marguerite Riordan, of Stonington, Conn., and Mystic Seaport distributes his limited edition prints to galleries and dealers.

Mecray says he’s lucky to complete one painting a year. The process begins with a detailed sketch of the vessel on tracing paper, which he then transfers to the canvas. He builds the work from there, working on the water, boat and sky incrementally.

“I like to keep the whole piece evolving,” says Mecray. “It all has to build together.”

His Web site, www.mecray.com, offers an insightful look at the development of his painting through a series of animations on works in progress. Mecray’s only critique of this novel feature is that it makes the process look too easy — and fast. “Hard-edged realism is time consuming,” says Mecray.

This year, the object of his focus is not a yacht but a book about his subjects to be published by Mystic Seaport in October 2006 in conjunction with a retrospective exhibit of his work.

“It follows the development of yachts in this country,” explains Mecray. But he also hopes to inject into it his enthusiasm for preserving the heritage of these vessels. His interest in the survival and restoration of classic yachts is Mecray’s true passion, fueled by an article he read 25 years ago about Coronet. And it’s what led him to found the Museum of Yachting in Newport and cofound the International Yacht Restoration School (IYRS). Today, IYRS owns Coronet and the organization just embarked on a massive project to restore the grand yacht to her former glory.

To date, IYRS has successfully brought back over 40 Beetle Cats, among other boats, and has trained students in a discipline that is in great demand. Mecray’s work with IYRS is not only satisfying; it’s of what he’s most proud. “In the abstract, my paintings might help save some classic yachts but IYRS is actually doing it,” he explains.

Despite his role with IYRS and his book commitment, Mecray still plans to publish another print for next summer’s busy season. He hasn’t, however, yet selected a yacht to feature. But that doesn’t worry him. “I’ll never run out of subjects.”

And does that include subjects other than yachts? “Absolutely,” says Mecray, who notes a longtime interest in seascapes. “I would love to spend a year at Beavertail and really focus on it. I’ve done two or three paintings there and would love to do another 10.”