

You name it, versatile Vero Beach artist Bob Berran has drawn it.

ROMANCE, RAZORS AND RELIGION

BY ELLEN FISCHER



Roll over, Norman Rockwell! In a series of dog food ads, Bob Berran pays homage to the hero of homespun.

Movies, razors, Jesus and romance sum up the variety of Bob's Berran's life in art. His career as an illustrator has included the sacred and the profane, the tame and the tawdry, the vulgar and the Vulgate. His work has sold everything from soda pop to Schlitz, starlets to sedans, seduction to salvation.

He has painted it all with equanimity and fabulous attention to detail, and it in turn has supported him and his family, afforded them some of the better things in life and

made the sum of his 83 years comfortable

and happy. Paintings of courting couples, the men sporting silk waistcoats and the women in elegant dresses, line the walls of the spacious house where he lives with the wife of his youth. One wonders if the artist in the salad days of his career could have envisioned so complete a picture of prosperity at its summit?

**After 7 years of good eating
why change your dog's food?**



Because after 7, his needs are changing.

When your dog is over 7, he begins to change on the inside. His digestion may be more delicate, his metabolism may be slowing down. So the food he's been thriving on all these years may not be right for him now. That's why it's important to change his diet to Cycle 4 dog food. Cycle 4 is the only dog food specially formulated to meet the changing nutritional needs of dogs over 7. It provides your dog with highly digestible, high-quality protein. It supports his kidneys can handle. It gives him the extra calcium he needs for his bones. Plus minerals and vitamins to help keep him healthy and happy.

Cycle 4 comes in bags of delicious nuggets or cans of tasty chunks. If your dog is over 7, start feeding him Cycle 4.

Free Dog Care Booklet: To learn how to care for your dog over 7 - just send your name, address, and Zip Code to: Cycle 4 Dog Food, P.O. Box 3802, Kankakee, Illinois 60901.

Cycle. Nutrition...for the life of your dog.

If he had not been sickly as a boy his life might have followed a very different course. He was prone to bouts of pneumonia and stayed inside a lot in his hometown of Scarsdale, N.Y. Coloring books helped him while away the hours, and then he began copying cartoon characters from the funny papers. His favorites were the adventure strips *Steve Canyon* and *Terry & the Pirates*.

After attending preparatory school in New Jersey he entered that bastion of academic art training, the Art Students League in New York City. He was lucky enough to study with George Bridgman, anatomist, draftsman and author of books such as *Constructive Anatomy* and *Bridgman's Complete Guide to Drawing from Life*. Bridgman was a perfectionist who expected his students' drawings to demonstrate their knowledge of the human form, inside and out.

Bob remembers Bridgman more than once picking up a cham-ois—a common tool for erasure in the studio—to rub out a student's belabored drawing. He would then deftly touch charcoal to paper, resolving the drawing problem with devastating accuracy. With a terse “Do it like that next time,” he would move on to the next mortal. To some, Bridgman seemed heartless; now and then a girl would cry when her drawing disappeared in a puff of dust. To others his tough love was the best—no, the only way to learn.

“Rockwell studied with him, and so did Frank Reilly,” Bob says. Clearly, for him the results justify any sensitivity issues Bridgman may have had. You probably have heard of Norman Rockwell; back in his day Frank Reilly was a triple



From fur-lined collar to fringed knife sheath, this rugged portrait is a tour de force of realistic detail.

threat, famous as an illustrator, muralist and charismatic teacher. Bob was to study almost exclusively with him, but that would come later. First, there was a war to attend to.

Bob left the Art Students League for the Army in 1942, where he served as a combat medic. His unit eventually became part of Patton's Third Army. “I spent three years in the Army, 18 months in the U.S., and 18 months in Europe—and complained about it all the time,” he says, adding that he did not



Bob Berran poses with the tools of his trade: an easel, a mahlstick and a fistful of sable brushes.

realize what a great adventure he'd had until it was over.

Before the war Bob had supported himself as an office boy at the McCann-Erickson advertising agency in New York. When he returned, the agency rehired him. He wanted to work in the art department but was placed in the production department instead. One day at lunchtime a

co-worker saw Bob doodling a *Terry & the Pirates* cartoon. "You're too talented to be wasting your time here," the man said. "Why don't you go to art school?"

At the time Bob was living a thrifty existence at the YMCA on West 63rd Street. His expenses were \$14 a week, \$7 for the room rent and the other \$7 for food. There



A movie poster for "Julia" (1977) features Jane Fonda as Lillian Hellman, Vanessa Redgrave as Julia and Jason Robards as Dashiell Hammett.

was not much left over for school but, with the help of the G.I. Bill, he returned to the Art Students League for a three-year course of study.

Bridgman died in 1943, and Frank Reilly, with whom Bob had taken a class or two before the war, was teaching the life-drawing class. He also taught painting, picture composition and color. Reilly was a popular teacher and students who signed up for his courses often found themselves on a waiting list.

Once inside the class they became the willing slaves of their tough-talking taskmaster. "All youse guys standin' around here now—not many of you are gonna have the guts to finish my course," Reilly would growl in a Brooklyn

accent that, according to Bob, was exaggerated for comic effect. He was a systematic teacher whose formulaic approach delivered consistent and, most important to the commercial artist, bankable results. "Almost like you learned music by a scale, he taught you to paint by a scale," Bob says. "He turned out many successful artists."

Bob was in one of Reilly's classes when he first spotted his future wife, Suzanne "Suzie" Culbertson, who was studying fashion illustration. She was the room monitor for Robert Hale, Bridgman's successor in anatomy. In those days every art school owned a human skeleton, its whitened bones wired together and suspended from an iron stand. It was Suzie's job to carry the skeleton from the classroom, where it spent part of its time with Frank Reilly, to Robert Hale's class next door.

She would enter Reilly's classroom quietly and spirit her charge away, eager to avoid disruption, but her caution was useless. Bob was riveted by the young woman who was, to his mind, as unlike any other girl in the school as she was to the grotesque figure that clattered out of the room beside her.

They were married in 1952, a couple of years after leaving school. Before her marriage, Suzie worked as a fashion artist for Gimbel's; after it, her art career ended. "Back during the '50s, husbands didn't want their wives to work and so I dutifully stayed home," she says. With the alacrity of a man schooled in 55 years of marital repartee, Bob counters, "So, do you want to change it now?"

If Bob discovered love in Reilly's



Beautiful, confident women take center stage in many of Bob Berran's illustrations.



"Woman's work" is an antique notion to this modern couple of the 1970s.

class, he also engaged in his share of male bonding there. He found friends in fellow students James Bama and Clark Hulings. All of them went on to careers in illustration, although Bama and Hulings later found additional success as fine artists. When Bob reentered the Art Students League, Bama was already a student there. He finished his course of study about a year before Bob, and began to freelance for the advertising department at Twentieth Century-Fox.

"In those days they paid \$150 per poster, and they'd give you three posters to do at once," Bob says. "That was pretty good money. I followed Jimmy over there the next year, in 1950."

Bob remembers being "nervous as a cat," on his first job, a 24-sheet billboard advertisement. The movie was *The Japanese War Bride* with Shirley Yamaguchi and Don Taylor. Bob's skills evidently passed muster because he produced a number of movie posters over the next two years, including one for a film titled *O'Henry's Full House*. It featured Marilyn Monroe alongside Fred Allen, Anne Baxter and a host of other mid-century stars.

Movie posters were one thing; getting a illustration on the cover of a major magazine was quite another. It was a tough market for a young illustrator to break into. "I used to do a lot of human interest stuff and tried to sell it to the *Saturday Evening Post*," Bob says. He was at the Red Cross on Lexington Avenue, where there was a blood drive on for the Korean War effort, when he witnessed a cover in the making.

In line before him a brawny policeman sat down to have his blood typed. When the nurse pricked his finger, the cop gripped the chair with his free hand and quickly looked away. What a picture! Bob engaged the two to pose for him and returned the next day with a photographer. "I think I paid them the grand sum of \$25 each," says Bob. "I made that painting and took it down to the *Post*. I waited around for four or five hours and finally the art director saw me. He said, 'Well, it's painted pretty well, young man, but we don't get behind things like the Red Cross, or do any causes or anything like that for our covers—maybe some other time.' I sent them many ideas for covers after that, but they never took anything. The story was that Rockwell and some of the other illustrators had the *Post* all wrapped up."

All was not lost, however. Bob sold the charming image of the tough guy grimacing under the ministrations of the pretty nurse to *American Weekly*, the Sunday magazine supplement for Hearst Newspapers.

Eventually, Bob did do illustrations for many of the major magazines, including *Collier's*, *Coronet*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Good Housekeeping* and (between covers) *The Saturday*



Before her coronation as Miss Rheingold Beer of 1958, model Maggie Pierce posed for this Gillette razor ad. The happy shaver is Bob's self-portrait.

Evening Post. "Then that all went away," he says. "One of the last covers I did was for a magazine that uses photographs all the time now, *Prevention Magazine*. It wasn't my fault, I hope!"

Bob was on his way to show samples of his work to a prospective client one day when, on a whim, he left the subway at 72nd Street and made his way to an advertising agency he had heard about. The Illustrator's Group was headed by Jack Wittrup, who was impressed with the young man's work. "He said, 'You're good—sit down, let's see what we can do for you,'" recalls Bob. "And that's how I got into advertising."

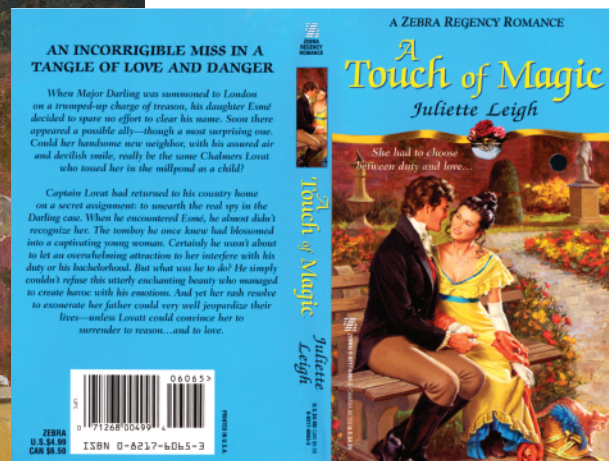
The work was mostly billboard ads and point-of-sale displays. The studio had prestigious clients, including Coca-Cola, Ford, Gillette, Nabisco and Schlitz. Fourteen artists worked together in the studio; several of them, including Nick Hufford, Al Kortner, Victor Livoti and Jack Wittrup, had come from the Chicago studio of Haddon Sundblom, famous for his Coke-tipping Santas.

"I was the youngest guy there," Bob says, "so it was a

great opportunity to learn from the others. I'd get in early every day before they arrived, sit at their desks and make notes of what they were doing." One of the things he learned was Sundblom's unwritten rule for painting pretty, smiling girls. "You don't put lines up here," says Bob, pointing to either side of his nose. "You put them down here." He moves his hands downward to form parentheses at the corners of his mouth.

As it does today, New York City in the 1950s held many attractions for a young artist. "Our studio was not too far from the Met; the Frick was even closer," Bob says. "We would go into the Society of Illustrators, have lunch and visit the museums." One thing he didn't do was become part of the fine art scene of the times. Abstract Expressionism was raging, and by the end of the decade Pop Art would turn with ironic intent to the art of advertising itself.

It made little difference to Bob what the DeKoonings, Johns, Rauschenbergs or Warhols of the art world got up



to. "I looked at it but I certainly wasn't influenced by it," he says, partly because he was too busy painting pictures of radiant women and smiling men touting everything from toothpaste to floor wax. Those are the pictures that sold; the ones that a husband and new father could raise a family on.

Ah, the '50s! The era's ads promoted a vision of America that was clean, efficient, God-fearing and eager to partake of the bounty of the post-war economy. Advertising assured Americans that the deprivations of the Great Depression and World War II were behind them. Comfort, elegance and luxury were things that the hard-working man could now afford; no act was too simple or pleasure too small that advertising could not extol to sell a product.

One of Bob's ads from this era is a case in point. For want of a better (read "cheaper") model, he depicted himself lathered up and wielding a razor for Gillette. His satisfied expression says it all: "Fellas, shaving is bliss!!!"

From advertising Bob moved into book illustration—the Good Book, that is—through the auspices of

Many a romance novel was sold on the strength of Bob Berran's covers.

REPRINTED WITH
PERMISSION
©VERO BEACH
MAGAZINE

Harry Anderson, one of the most prolific religious illustrators of the century. Bob met him through their mutual association with the Illustrator's Group. Born in 1906, Anderson began his career in Chicago with Haddon Sundblom. According to Bob, Anderson was something of a roué in his youth. But when Bob met him he had long since become a tee-totaling Seventh Day Adventist. His religious work was done for the Adventist publishing company, the *Review and Herald Publishing Association*.

When Bob expressed an interest in getting some of the same work, Anderson introduced him to the art director, T.K. Martin. The first project Bob worked on was *My Bible Friends*, a 10-volume set of Bible stories for children published in 1963.

Bob was responsible for a considerable number of the 1,200 illustrations in the book. You've probably seen some of them; a sample volume, bound in a distinctive blue cover was for decades ubiquitous in waiting rooms throughout the land.

"They were so nice to work for," Bob says of the publishing house, which supplied all the people required for models and outfitted them in biblical costumes. Best of all, Bob was given 10 jobs at a time to work on.

A Presbyterian in his own religious practice, Bob does not delve into any denomination's particular ideology in his illustrations. They are by and large straightforward imaginings of the characters and events of the Bible as told from a Christian perspective. Recently, his work has expanded to include depictions of holy personages in *A Catholic Child's Illustrated Lives of*

the Saints, published in 2002. For the past 17 years he has worked for Quadriga Art, a company that commissions work based exclusively on the New Testament. It publishes greeting, mass and prayer cards, bookmarks and the like.

Bob is aware that his depictions must have the ring of truth for many different believers. He reflects that, in daily life, "You see the most wonderful faces—all different kinds of faces. I would prefer to paint those kind of faces, but in the business that I'm in you have to have a certain standard-looking kind of hero and heroine, even in the religious work I do. I mean, it's kind of preposterous to think I'm the one that says 'This is what Jesus looked like,' since no one really knows."

He speculates that Jesus probably had dark hair and skin, "but in order to sell the material" his employers opt for the Europeanized features to which custom and prejudice have inured many Americans. He cites the example of illustrator



Bob's son Scott posed for this depiction of a beatifically smiling Jesus.

Dean Cornwell (1892-1960) who, Bob says, portrayed Jesus with blue eyes and flowing blond hair.

Bob's own depictions of Jesus envision him with brown hair and dark eyes. In at least one of his paintings for Quadriga Art, Jesus bears a striking resemblance to Bob's son, Scott. While Scott never wore his hair long or had a beard, people expect Jesus to, and so Bob added these accessories to his son's handsome, smiling face. Yes, Jesus is smiling in the picture right at us, a thing that he never would have done say, before the mid-20th century. Back then religious pictures did not stray from the biblical text. Everyone knows that "Jesus wept" but where is it written that Jesus laughed or smiled or, for that matter, frowned?

The precedent for taking liberties with the canonical Jesus has been credited to Bob's old colleague Harry Anderson who, in the mid-1940s, began to show a traditionally robed Jesus interacting with people in modern clothes and environments. (One of Anderson's more fantastic works shows a gigantic Jesus knocking, as at a door, on the side of the steel-and-glass United Nations building.)

The artist whose pictures Bob says have had the biggest influence on his own religious work is Carl Bloch, a Danish painter who died in 1890. Bloch's classically proportioned figures and dramatic use of chiaroscuro make Bob sigh with envy.

"They really did it right in those days," he says, adding that his predecessors had the luxury of time and affordable models who would pose for them for as long as it took. Plus, "They had the greatest costumes! The things I do, I have to



The model for this fire-and-brimstone preacher was Steve Holland, who played Flash Gordon on television. Note the portrait of Ronald Reagan in the congregation.



Bob's couples display all phases of courtship, from flirtatious attraction to white-hot passion.

get out pretty quickly...you can't spend a lot of time on each painting or you won't make much money."

And making money is what illustration is all about. In an attempt to make more of it in the early '60s, Bob hired an artist's agent and struck out on his own. For 17 years he was

represented by Joe Mendola, and then by Hankins/Tegenborg for 10 more years. Bob admits that working as a freelance artist was "interesting and scary, especially when you have three children and you're waiting for the phone to ring."

Representation took the onus of

negotiating with clients from Bob's shoulders, and that was well worth the agent's 25 percent commission. Bob recalls Mendola in action on one of the first jobs the agent negotiated for him, a movie poster for *Lost Horizon*. "I heard Joe on the phone saying, 'Oh, Bob wouldn't do that for under \$1,500,'" Bob chuckles. "The truth is I would have done it for \$600. That's why it paid to have an agent. They got a reputation of having responsible artists who could do the job, so they could ask for the big money."

The biggest money Bob saw in his career came from his paintings for paperback book covers, mainly romance novels. Bob's agent could demand \$2,500 to \$3,000 for a cover, while a "wrap-around" (an image that continues from front to back cover) brought up to \$5,000. All the client was interested in was buying first rights to the image, so Bob could keep the original artwork; the client would even pay the additional cost of hiring models who would pose for the illustration. Bob estimates that it took "probably \$700 or more to get the job off the ground."

Even so, illustrators of Bob's vintage had to turn out a lot of product to survive, let alone do well. They had to do it within the constraints of a deadline, they had to please the client, getting approval for their ideas at certain stages in the project, and they had to remain flexible enough to make changes at any point along the way.

Bob outlines the steps he took to produce a book cover. First, a manuscript of the story would arrive at his house. Suzie was often the one to read it, especially if it was a romance. She would sum up the storyline and main characters for Bob, who would produce a few ideas in rough thumbnail sketches to show the client. After



Bob cast himself as an advisor to the Pope in this paperback cover.

an idea was agreed upon, Bob would go to the Elite or Ford agencies to hire models. Then he rented costumes.

For a time the English Regency (1811-1820) was a hot era for romance novels, so he dressed a lot of his men in knee breeches and frock coats and the women in a prismatic assortment of high-waisted gowns. The next stop was a studio where Bob Osonitsch, a photographer for many of the top illustrators, would shoot the models with black-and-white film. Bob would act as the director, posing the models and approving the shots. To get the

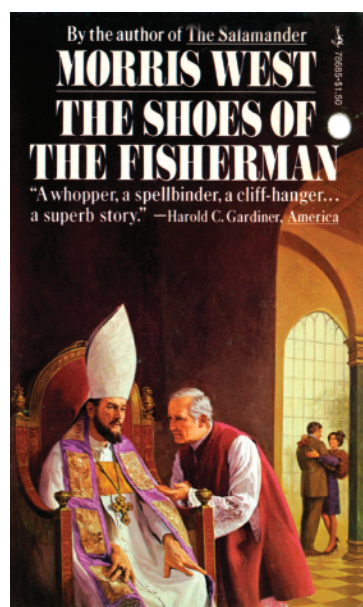
kind of realism that made characters stand off the page, illustrators (even including such icons of homespun realism as Norman Rockwell) made extensive use of photography.

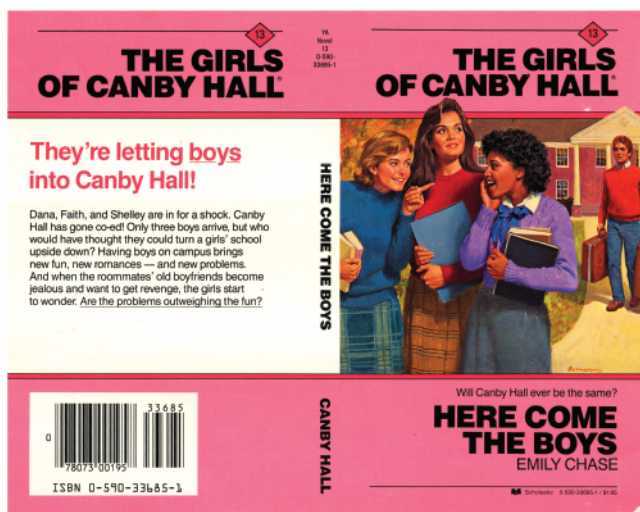
Using his photos as a template, Bob would then work up oil sketches in color on small sheets of acetate. For backgrounds he would go to his own "image morgue," a file cabinet full of picturesque rooms and outdoor settings torn from the pages of home and garden magazines. The client would make a decision for the final oil-on-canvas painting based on one of the sketches. The finished work, if it was good, would set off a chain of events that began with catching the browser's eye and ended in a trip to the cash register. Old adage notwithstanding, people do judge a book by its cover. And Bob's covers were very, very good at telling the customer just what to expect, especially in the area of romance.

"You had to have the boy/girl interest," he says. "And that was part of the challenge." Often, the models Bob selected had never met before the photo shoot. Once there, they had to project the chemistry of people deeply, truly, rapturously in love. Bob would direct their poses, their facial expressions and their glances to express everything from flirtatious attraction to against-all-odds passion.

However, there was not so much of the heaving bosom about Bob's pictures as you might expect. Yes, sometimes it was a "clinch scene," as Bob puts it. But "...most of mine were not so clinchy. They were more delicate," he says. "I got a sensitivity between the models, and I was bought for my detail, my realism and detail." Perhaps the best compliment came when authors liked his depictions so much that they bought the paintings whose images had graced their books' covers.

If Bob ever used himself as a





Years before she found fame on *Friends*, a very young Courteney Cox (seen at left) posed for a series of covers aimed at teenage readers.

model for his romance book covers, he isn't saying. He did portray himself as a supernumerary on the cover of an early paperback edition of Morris West's *Shoes of the Fisherman*. Dressed in clerical garb, Bob looks a lot more like a candidate for the Bishop of Rome than the brooding, bearded man that he placed on the papal throne. When he made his first rough sketch for the composition, Bob didn't know that he would include himself in the picture. But, he says, "In those days they weren't paying model fees yet, so I decided to pose for figures whenever I could." "Yes, he thought he was a pretty good actor," Suzie chimes in. "He enjoyed it."

Often enough, the models Bob hired were actors looking for extra work to make ends meet. For one series of teen romance novels he hired a very young Courteney Cox, later famous for her role as Monica Geller on *Friends*. One of Bob's romantic leading men was Steve Holland, who played



Flash Gordon on television in 1954. Holland also posed for James Bama, who cast him as Doc Savage in a series of paperback covers.

Yet another of Bob's models was Paulette Green, who played Collette on *All My Children*. Green told him that she wanted to get him a bit part on the show. "Well, damned if they didn't O.D. her" before that could happen, Bob says. Green soon after left for the more verdant pastures of Hollywood. "So she never got me on the show. But I started watching *All My Children*, and I still do."

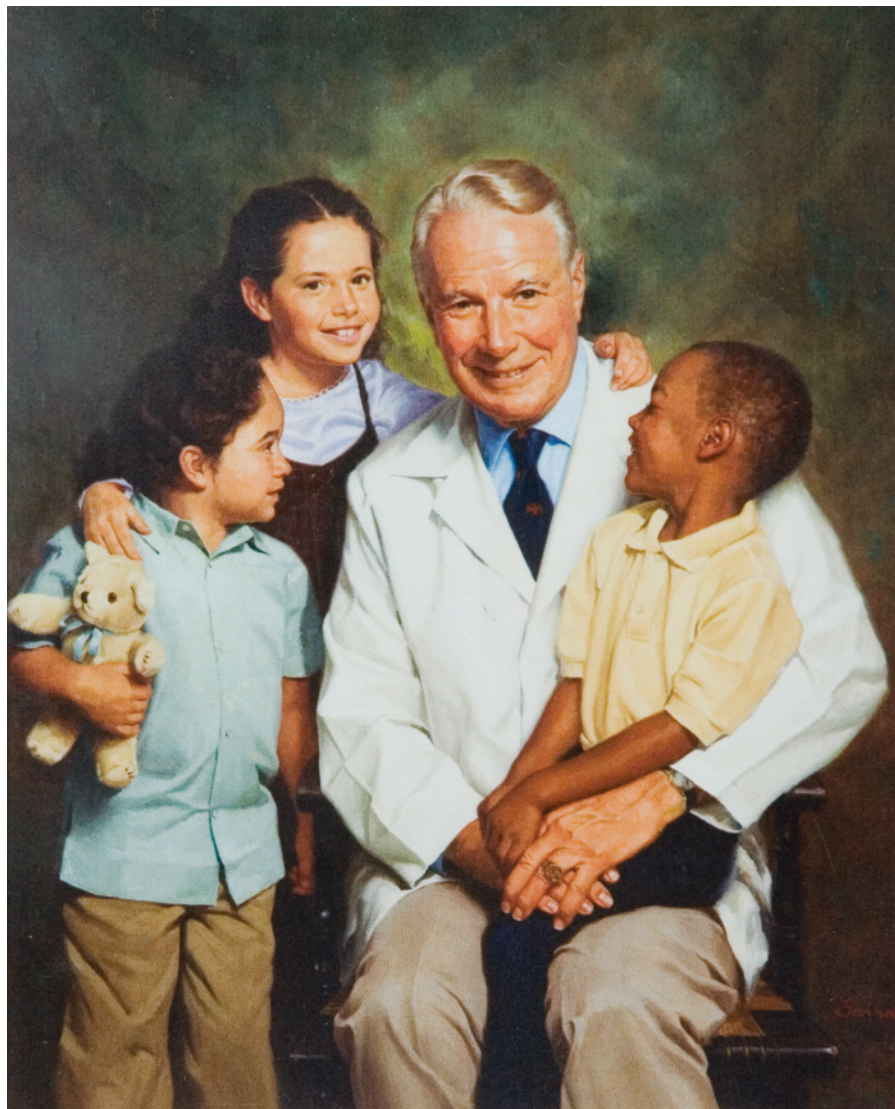
Regency romance novels sold well through the '80s and into the '90s; then demand for them began to fall off. Reflecting on this period, Bob says that he became pigeonholed as the guy who does romance. When asked if he ever considered becoming a fine artist, as did his life-long friend Clark Hulings, he says, "No, I didn't, though I sorta wish I had. Hulings said to me for years, 'Why don't you do something?' But...I'm so used to someone giving me an assignment, telling me what to do. I just look at the canvas and think, 'What am I going to do with this?' You have to have some subject you just want to paint."

Fortunately for Bob, nowadays that "something" (in addition to his religious assignments) is commissioned portrait work, to which he brings the high degree of finish and realism for which he is known. He enjoys interacting with his subjects, the process of working with the client to get exactly what he or she wants.

He is probably the only portrait artist in Florida (maybe in the country) who makes a preliminary sketch for the client's approval before painting the finished portrait. He opens a thick album filled with photos of his completed commissions. "Yes," he says, "I am one of the last ones to do it the old-fashioned way." ❀



This regal lady adorned the cover of another romance novel illustrated by Bob Berran.



This portrait of Dr. Vincent J. Fontana hangs in the Fontana Foundling Hospital in New York City.