



Adding Dimension to Your Artwork Through Life Experiences

By [RJ Wattenhofer](#) | Submitted On November 26, 2011



A good piece of artwork captures the essence of the subject matter as seen through the eye of the artist. A great piece of artwork exposes the inner-workings of the artist and connects to the viewer on a human level.

I preface this article by stating that I tend to shy away from writing pieces that have a personal or emotional connection to me; however, who better to write about the career of an artist that has spanned nearly five decades than someone who has observed it first-hand?

I am speaking about my father, Raymond J. Wattenhofer, Jr. He is the quintessential example of the man who has soaked up everything the world has to offer and in turn captured those experiences on canvas. Judging from the point at which he began his walk through this world, you'd think he'd be the last one to express his observations on life via paintbrush and canvas. And yet, that is the medium he chose to tell his story and, in turn, change the perspective of each person who views his pieces.

Raymond entered adulthood an experienced Midwest rancher and horseman who, by the time he was seventeen, had amassed his own impressive cattle herd and quickly learned the ropes to becoming a successful cattleman. The Vietnam War was in full swing and, seeking adventure, he enlisted in the United States Coast Guard, earning his way onto an elite search and rescue team stationed off the waters of Puerto Rico. The thought of this may stir up adventurous passion in a young man, but there was a dark side: He and his team were responsible for collecting bodies after major conflicts and airline crashes. This experience affected him deeply for years to come and became the critical juncture of his evolution from boy to man...and man to artist.

After the war, he and my mother moved back to the Midwest, at which time he adopted the isolationist lifestyle and evolved further into a self-reliant, hardcore do-it-yourselfer: Raising honey bees, growing his own food, making his own alcohol and even creating paper products from raw materials. This is when the need to express himself through art began to smolder in his belly and soon burst into a full-on inferno of artistic passion.

He taught himself the lost wax process for creating bronze sculptures and, although my family was extremely poor, managed

to scratch together the materials to build his own foundry. What followed was a very prolific period of sculpture creation to which he applied his knowledge of animal husbandry and created magnificent pieces that captured the essence of the western horseman and cattle rancher. He even created a handful of life-size and heroic size pieces which are currently displayed around the country.

As his artistic evolution continued it became apparent to insiders that his work was extremely cathartic and, ever so slowly, the darkness in his soul receded. But the deep-rooted angst he had felt for years would not be completely quelled until he brought himself to the next level. One day he woke up and decided it was time to become an oil painter.

Years of frustration followed as he painfully learned the techniques of oil painting that would fully capture the essence of what he strove to convey. But technique is only part of what makes a great painter: You have to be willing to put it all on the line and expose your soul to the world. Until an artist is willing to stand naked and vulnerable before the world he/she will never connect with their viewers. This was the hardest obstacle for Raymond to overcome. He was raised with a "carry your own water" mentality, where real men were strong and silent and never exposed personal weakness.

There is nothing sadder than an artist with great technique but who is unwilling to put themselves into their work: technically proficient pieces, yes. And yet, completely soulless. It takes a great leap of faith to transcend our own fears and say to the world, "This is the real me, warts and all." You want your viewer to stand and contemplate your work, make them want to see it through your eyes as the real you sees it. If they walk away with a new perspective, seeing the world just a little differently and thereby changed, you have achieved your goal.

Years of blood, sweat and tears have paid off for Raymond. He has achieved what all great artists must achieve to bring their artwork to the next level: Expose your joys, your pains, your sorrows and your flaws and the world will love you all the more. Don't fear your own humanity for that is what connects you to the rest of us.

To learn more about Raymond J. Wattenhofer, Jr and view his artwork, please visit <http://www.raymondwattenhofer.com>

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