



# The Challenges & Triumphs of Creating a LARGE-SCALE MURAL

California artist **Ron DiCianni** used his many years of experience as an illustrator and painter to imbue a recently completed mural with larger-than-life impact. | **by Allison Malafrente**

TAKING ON A COMMISSION THAT MEASURES NEARLY 12 feet high by 40 feet wide would be a daunting task for most artists, but California painter and illustrator Ron DiCianni was up for the challenge. When the Museum of Biblical Art, in Dallas, contacted DiCianni after a fire had destroyed much of their collection, including their Pilgrimage Pierce mural, and asked him to create a large painting based on that work, the artist did not hesitate to accept. Although there were certainly challenges associated with creating a mural of such magnitude, for DiCianni the significance of the subject matter far outweighed the technical difficulties associated with its scale.

DiCianni was not always a painter of Christian subject matter, and he actually began his career in the commercial field, illustrating for some of the largest advertising agencies and corporations in the world. His major assignments during that time included working as the Official Olympic Illustrator for the 1980 Moscow Olympics, painting for the Smithsonian, and a White House portrait commission of former President George W. Bush. But somewhere along that path DiCianni realized he wasn't fully satisfied as an artist. "I am grateful for the experience and training I had during the first half of my career, which greatly prepared me for what I'm doing now, but I got to the point where I wanted to dedicate my

talent and subject matter to the One who gave it to me and paint pictures that inspire the viewer to want to know more about Him," he explains. "I've always felt that art has more to do with communicating a message than it does with just being aesthetically pleasing."

When the Museum of Biblical Art called DiCianni with the concept for the replacement piece, he had just finished four large murals for Assemblies of God Church, in Springfield, Missouri. Although these murals were not as monumental in size, they still gave the artist some of the conceptual and tactical practice he needed for this latest commission. The museum and the artist agreed that the theme of the mural should be "The Resurrection of Jesus Christ," and DiCianni began by conceiving a unique way to convey this classic Biblical story. "The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is the greatest act separating Christianity from every other religion and philosophy," the artist explains. "I

**THE COMPLETED MURAL:**  
**The Resurrection of Jesus Christ**  
2009–2010, oil,  
12' x 40'. Collection  
Museum of Biblical  
Art, Dallas, Texas.

wanted to communicate this message in a powerful way that hadn't been done before, so I decided to paint Jesus emerging from the tomb, with many of the Old Testament and New Testament heroes awaiting his arrival.



**LEFT**  
One of the main challenges DiCianni faced was painting nearly 20 feet in the air on a scissor lift, which prevented him from occasionally stepping back to read his progress from a different perspective.

**ABOVE**  
In this photo DiCianni is working on painting some of the details as he stands on a scissor lift to reach the mural's soaring heights. One lesson DiCianni quickly learned throughout this process was to put each stroke on with a confident hand, as he could not go back and correct mistakes.

"All the figures in the mural had to be done life-size, and I called upon four wonderful contemporary artists to model for me," DiCianni continues. "Morgan Weistling posed as David, Thomas Blackshear as Abraham, Chris Hopkins as John the Baptist, and C. Michael Dudash as Isaiah; and I had my son pose as Jesus. I set up the scene as if I were putting on a theatrical production, employing set designers, costume designers, and working out the composition and design with rough sketches before I began painting. Warner Bros. built the backdrop of the tomb for me, and I had every costume for the Biblical figures made by my future daughter-in-law, who is an amazing professional clothing designer. All of this preparation helped greatly in setting the stage for the work, but little did I know how challenging the actual process was going to be!"

One of the first obstacles DiCianni faced was finding an art-materials manufacturer with a roll of canvas that fit both the height and width requirements of the mural. He searched all over the country and contacted just about every canvas company in business, but no one was able to provide him with the materials he needed. Luckily, a contact at Warner Bros. studios in Hollywood was able to locate an enormous roll of canvas



they had in their inventory from a previous project. DiCianni ended up creating the mural in his large warehouse studio in Southern California, screwing the canvas to the wall and using a scissor lift to reach the heights required of its vertical dimensions. "This was a real challenge for me because I have always had a fear of heights, and it also prevented me from standing back from the painting to make sure I wasn't losing perspective," the artist admits. "Almost every brushstroke had to be laid down correctly the first time, so I was forced to really trust my decisions and gain more confidence as a painter."

The artist used his usual style of painting for this mural, which he defines as "classic contemporary realism." Because he was classically trained, he acknowledges that this influence is still in his work, but he also admits that he has a more painterly approach than strictly illustrative or photographic. "I want to make sure that the subjects I paint are done soundly enough that the viewer is not distracted by too much technique, but

**LEFT & LEFT BELOW**

DiCianni did several compositional studies before painting directly on the final mural in an effort to work out design and structural decisions. "The Raising of Lazarus sketch helped me identify how much texture to put on the stone near the tomb, and several of the sketches of Christ helped me decide on the stance of the main subject," the artist explains. "I also did a number of sketches for the positioning of the angels, such as the one you see here, and ultimately decided that rather than have them stand, I would have them kneel before Jesus."

## DiCianni's Materials

### CANVAS

"Any quality canvas maker that can supply me with a canvas that is ultradurable and made in a huge roll. If the mural size is under 10 feet tall, there are tons of manufacturers!"

### PALETTE

#### Old Holland paints

"Because of the endless possibilities inherent in a mural, I normally don't use a standard palette. (I do use a standard array of colors when I am working on smaller paintings.) Therefore, I probably have 40 to 60 tubes of different hues that I can customize on any given day. There are always the basics in my palette such as burnt umber, burnt sienna, yellow ochre, alizarin crimson, and the cadmium reds and blues."

### BRUSHES

"I use a variety of types and sizes, but I tend to stay away from flats and soft brushes, such as sables, because they really don't work for my style and size of painting. I have found that the brushes I use have to hold up to some pretty rough treatment, and believe it or not, I still use the brushes I used 30 years ago."

### MEDIUMS, TEXTURE GELS, & VARNISHES

#### Turpenoid (preferably the natural version)

"For the murals I use an impasto texturizer after I have my sketch already on the canvas. As you can imagine, the amount of texture varies even within the mural, but I find that it makes such interesting "accidents" that it is a joy to paint on. Although I haven't tried every gel maker out there, I do have a favorite: gel impasto by Bulldog (a local Southern California company). We have a long history together, and I have learned straight from them as the manufacturer how to best use the product.

"It's important to know which varnishes have a tendency to yellow over time and are prone to cracking. For me, putting a sealer (such as Winsor & Newton Retouch) on first helps to even out the final varnish and reduces the variance of sheen in your painting. MSA varnishes usually work as well, and a friend suggested Gamvar Varnish by Gamblin, which is also good. I have also had good results with Soluvar Varnish by Winsor & Newton."



## About the Artist

**Ron DiCianni** trained at the American Academy of Art, in Chicago, under Bill Parks, before embarking on a commercial illustration career. During that time, his artwork won him international recognition with many important corporations and groups including ABC, NBC, the Smithsonian, and the United States Olympic Committee for the Moscow Olympic Games. After several years in that field, the artist left to pursue Christian imagery and has been painting and illustrating for about 35 years since. His recent large-scale mural for the Museum of Biblical Art, in Dallas, will be unveiled in the early fall of 2010. For more information on the museum and this mural, visit [www.biblicalarts.org](http://www.biblicalarts.org). For more information on original paintings by DiCianni, as well as prints and reproductions, contact his publisher, Tapestry Productions at [www.tapestryproductions.com](http://www.tapestryproductions.com), (877) 827-7763, or [sales@tapprod.com](mailto:sales@tapprod.com). (Gallery inquiries welcome.)

I am also a proponent of seeing some evidence of the artist's hand in the work," DiCianni explains. "At some point in my career, and probably as a result of spending a great deal of time studying the paintings of the great masters—including Michelangelo, Sargent, Waterhouse, Rockwell, Parris, and Wyeth—I've found a style that I feel is immediately recognizable as my own, without being a copy of anyone else's. N.C. Wyeth once said, "Technique, in and of itself, is a very hollow



thing.' It took quite a few years for that to sink in, but I think I finally understand what that means to me as an artist."

Having just finished the mural, DiCianni's next step is to varnish it, take it down from his studio wall in California, and send it off to the museum for installation. The piece will be unveiled in the early fall of this year, after two years of work on the artist's part. DiCianni readily admits that this project presented some unforeseen challenges, but he is grateful to have had the opportunity to challenge himself as a painter and to convey such a powerful message through his art. "All I'm trying to do with brush and paint is use all the excellence, creativity, and passion I can to shed light on a subject that I believe is worth sharing," he says. "If I can inspire one viewer to take an honest look at the evidence and consider the significance of what's being depicted in this mural, I will feel I've done my job as a painter." ■

Allison Malafronte is the senior editor of American Artist.



OPPOSITE PAGE  
**Simeon's Moment**  
1994, oil, 36 x 28.  
Private collection.

FAR LEFT  
**In the Garden**  
2004, oil, 28 x 22.  
Collection the artist.

ABOVE  
**Divine Healing**  
2005, oil, 5' x 7½'.  
Collection Assemblies  
of God, Springfield,  
Missouri.

LEFT  
**The Clay**  
1993, oil, 32 x 24.  
Collection the artist.