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Curt's Flood: A Rembrandt Off Diamond

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Cards' Flood: A Rembrandt Off Diamond

By NELL GROSS

In the St. Louis Globe-Democrat

ST. LOUIS, Mo.—Every baseball fan knows Curt Flood's title, "greatest center fielder in the game."

But not many know his nickname, dubbed by Cardinal teammates.

It's "Rembrandt."

And it fits.

Because Curt Flood is an artist with brush and oils as well as the fielder's mitt.

Not long ago, the pro baseball player turned professional portrait painter, too. Now he bats out portraits (priced from \$250 to \$300 each) at the rate of three or four every two weeks.

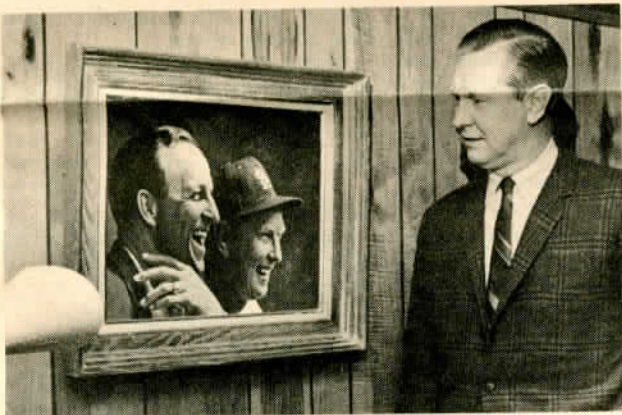
"Baseball and painting make a good balance," claimed the virile, vigorous young man whose spectacular runs and graceful leaps explode from musclepower held in taut check and balance. "Baseball is virile," he said. "It's rough and tough. Painting is sensitive, quiet. It's an outlet to overcome tension."

Curt paints portraits the way he plays ball. Fast. Smooth. With perfection.

He works on three or four paintings at a time to speed things up. An oil color smears if a second one is added before the first one dries. So he goes as far as he can on one portrait, then turns to another. Oil paint takes a long time to dry. And Curt Flood is impatient.

His colors flow on, slick and smooth, rounding over features touched with highlights, blending into deep-toned shadows. The portraits have a plastic look, a three-dimensional quality—you think that if you touch them they'll feel like sculpture.

He uses a pantograph for perfection, tracing a stylus



"IT LOOKS more like me than I do in real life," quipped Red Schoendienst when the Cardinal manager saw a Flood portrait of himself and Stan Musial, senior vice-president and his long-time buddy.

around a photograph that Curt insists must be at least an inch in size. A pencil at the other end of the pantograph copies the drawing onto paper. When he's got it "exactly right" he transfers the penciled drawing onto canvas—usually a 15 x 19 inch size—and paints at it off and on for a couple of weeks.

The results are so lifelike it's amazing.

"It's perfect! It looks exactly like her," marveled a grateful father given a Curt Flood portrait of his 7-year-old who had died of leukemia. Curt did the painting at the request of the child's mother, later gave his commission to the Leukemia Guild of Missouri.

Curt Has Sharp Eye

All he needs is five or ten minutes with the subject to get an idea of color and temperament. "I've got a good eye," Curt said, frankly. "You've got to have good vision to see a ball come off a bat 300 feet away!"

He claimed he "works tight," with the careful accuracy of mechanical drawing. It comes from past experience with an engraving firm in his hometown of Oakland, Calif., when he did mechanical drawing for a tool-and-die firm and used a power-driven pantograph to engrave tiny letters on metal dies.

Even as a kid, Curt could "draw a good likeness" and was "always scribbling around, drawing." But it wasn't until the fall of 1959 that he went in for art seriously. He enrolled in the College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland on a special, limited basis—because he could attend only three months in winter, after the ball season's end.

He went for two years, learning art techniques—"all those things you have to learn if you want to paint."

And he got the hang of it. "There's more to art than just putting paint to canvas," he said. "Like perspective, and a knowledge of light and shadow."

About a year ago, Curt did a portrait of Cardinal Presi-



Curt Flood Breaks Tension by Painting at His Town Apartment in West Central St. Louis.

dent Gussie Busch. He got a notion he wanted to do it "because Gussie's got such a classic face—wrinkles, good features, intelligent eyes."

He caught the wrinkles, the features and the eyes all right. But he slipped up on a little thing. Working from a black and white photo, he painted the braid on the yachtsman's cap gold. "I didn't know that meant 'captain of the vessel,'" Curt said with a rueful smile. "The owner of the ship wears black braid."

The Orders Poured In

But that didn't slow down sales. From that time on, orders seemed to snowball. They came from ball players, businessmen and parents. Cardinal pitcher Bob Gibson wanted a family portrait of himself and his wife and children. Other families wanted separate portraits.

Sometimes, like last summer when the Cards were pennant-pointed and Flood was busy fielding and leading the team with his .335 batting average, art has to take a bleacher seat. Portrait production slows down to a walk.

"That's because I can only paint when I feel like it," Curt admitted. "I have the nerve to be temperamental. I can only paint when it hits me—and that could be 4 a. m."

For that reason, he never paints in "the studio," a sales

office he's opened at 8007 Clayton Road. His studio is a spare room in his new three-bedroom apartment on the nineteenth floor of Executive House in St. Louis. He calls its plush green and blue elegance his "bachelor's quarters"—though Curt, now 30, is a divorced father of five.

Perched on a high stool, his 5-9 frame hunched over a drawing board, Curt brushes on colors lovingly, with a craftsman's hand. "I like to paint portraits," he said. "With people, I can stay close to a likeness. I know where I'm going and what I'm doing."

That last statement sums up Curt Flood. From the time he was "the littlest kid in Oakland," fielding and catching on a neighborhood team, baseball was his game and drawing was his hobby and he figured to make it big in both.

He's succeeded.

Now he's a five-time winner of the Gold Glove Award, given for the year's best fielding at each position. And he's recognized today as one of the National League's best all-round performers.

As a "great" artist, he feels he has a way to go. He'd like to learn more art history. Maybe learn to use acrylic paints. And he might try a few abstractions—though the ones he's done so far "look like mechanical drawings."

But his portrait work is definitely a financial success.

Great artist Rembrandt Van Rijn died broke.