

# Charles S. Kovach

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When I look back upon my childhood relative to the arts and the Coal and Coke Era, I am compelled to say that the exposure to both occurred in concert. I was and of course continue to be involved with art. I spent my primary school days in the coal town environment of a small town in Southwestern Pennsylvania. And of course coal mining was a major livelihood for many members of my extended family, not to mention the majority of my classmates' families.

In those days my summer was often spent in the shade of the slate dump, within some of the abandoned mine buildings, or at my grandparents'. Our Boy Scout Troop headquarters was the former lamp house of the Ralph Mine (owned by H.C. Frick Coal and Coke). It was also back in those days, during the sixth grade, that my first work of art depicting coal mining scenes was produced.

That was the 1950's and 1960's. A person could still witness the last vestiges of the Coal and Coke Era which occurred in Southwestern Pennsylvania and Northern West Virginia. My personal observations were facilitated by riding along with my Dad during the summers and weekends as he traveled about the region for the trucking company which employed him.

By the seventh grade my parents had moved to the nearby town of New Salem, PA. where they currently reside. Even though "city life" there was more urban than a coal town, the surrounding villages remained as re-

mindes. I can still quite vividly recall the several occasions when our school bus traveled the highway adjacent to a coke yard. The smoke would so heavily obscure the road that we would actually detour directly through the coke yard. This was the small town of Shamrock. The operations there provided me with many images of the coke workers' environment.

During my junior and senior high school days most of my time was spent in the mechanical drawing room, as it was called back then. I worked on anything I could get my hands on. Of course this was the start of many serious things to come along in the future. I worked on architectural and mechanical designs: bridges, homes, autos, and airplanes. This was when I also became exposed to the commercial side of art. I had always enjoyed the outdoors, so early starts included wildlife art.

College days found me at Penn State studying Drafting and Design and, later, Architectural Engineering. It was here I had the good fortune of having a very understanding advisor and Dean of Academic Affairs, Dale J. Drost, A.I.A. When it came time to select "technical electives," Dale and I succeeded in presenting the case to the Dean of Academic Affairs that Fine Arts, as they relate to architecture, were just as valid as any other elective available. The small portfolio of examples of my architectural renderings supported our case. So while many of my classmates were laboring through additional Physics or Engineering Me-

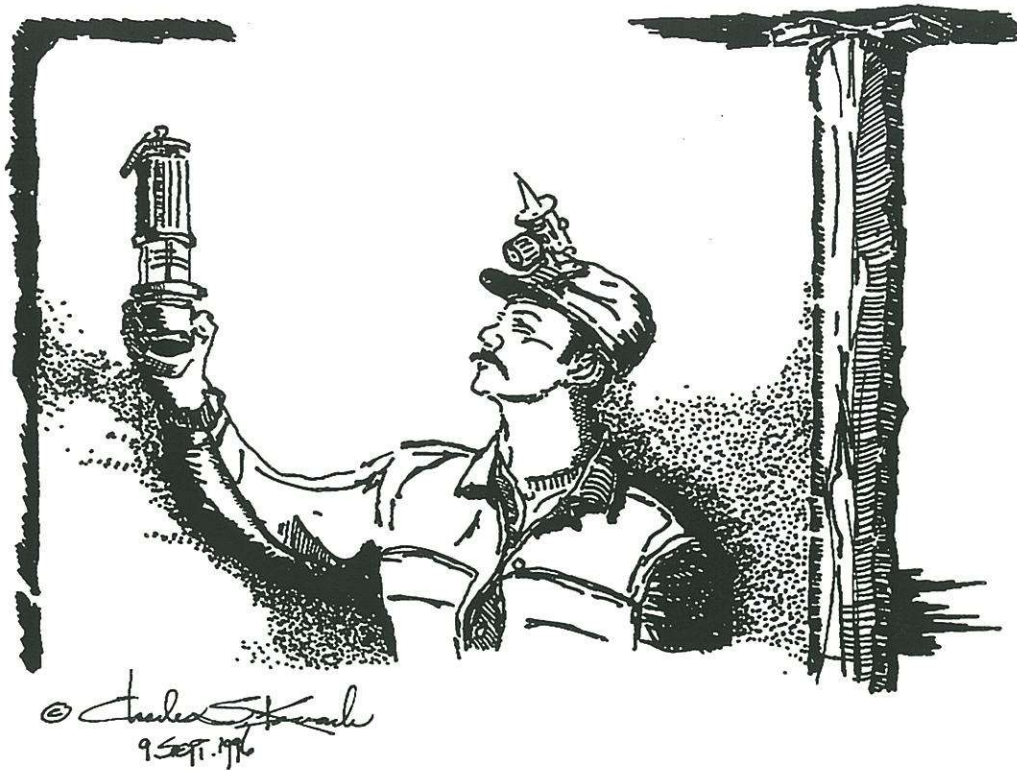
chanics courses, I was quite busy and quite happy in the Art Studios.

I graduated from Penn State, Classes of 1971 and 1987, and also from Geneva College, Class of 1991. My career in the architectural and engineering fields and that of a regional artist began in 1973. This was the year that I began exhibiting my work in local galleries in Uniontown, PA. and participating in local community art events.

From 1970 to 1973, I was employed by a number of local architectural and engineering firms. On July 3, 1973, I began my employment with what was then the United States Steel Corporation at their Frick District headquarters in Uniontown, PA. This district was in charge of all coal production and supporting services for U.S. Steel in Southwestern PA. I worked as a draftsman / designer and construction inspector in the District Construction Department. Among my many technical responsibilities was the maintenance of the archival files which included vintage drawings and photographs dating back to the 1880's. These files were more than interesting - they were exciting! I spent whatever time was required to maintain them.

This was also the time I was exposed to underground mining activities. In fact, my first full week of employment was a training period in which I worked underground with District mine inspectors.

My first serious work of art depicting the Coal and Coke Era was pro-



duced in 1978 for my cousin, who was also working for U.S. Steel. The rest, as they say, is history. I have been involved in coal and coke industrial art ever since.

There are, however, two very important points to be made here. The first is this: The early production of this "historically accurate" artwork really demonstrated the need for accurate research material. As a result, I began collecting mining tools, artifacts, books, photos, etc. Whatever I could find. This collecting, of course, led me to meeting you and many of our fellow collectors at the C.O.M.E.R. show at W.V.U. This was also the beginning of my present association with C.O.M.E.R. and the University.

The second point is that industrial art and coal and coke is but one component of my focus as an artist. My major areas of focus are historic architecture and historic resources which range from the Colonial Era  
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to the present, including the industrial arena I've already discussed.

My work can be found in numerous galleries in Southwestern PA. and with clients across the U.S. and parts of Europe as part of private, corporate and institutional collections. Corporate collections include USX, Exxon, and Wendy's. Institutional collections include Penn State, W.V.U., and Geneva College.

Mediums in which I work are graphite, pen and ink, watercolor, and pen and ink with watercolor wash. I have worked with other mediums: oils, acrylics, and alkyds. But the first four are the most requested. I have even spent some time studying egg tempera with Doug Wiltraut and noted Brandywine River artist George Weymouth.

I have applied graphite to my coal and coke work because to me it

seems to be a natural fit. Here I am depicting an industry which works with material extracted from the ground and, in the case of coke, a refined form of carbon. Such is graphite.

I decided to depict the coal and coke era with an original focus from 1865 to the present (or at least the 1970's. That is when the beehive ovens were extinguished in Southwestern PA.) because this has been a portion of our cultural heritage which has been neglected.

My purpose is not to recollect the hard times of mining. My purpose is to look at a time when people had genuine commitments to their family, religion and ethnic heritage.

This was an era when thrift, honesty, hard work and craftsmanship meant something. It is this pride that I hope people can see and identify with in

my work. Although these times were characterized by depressed economic conditions and oppressed people, Southwestern Pennsylvania was and still is a proud region. It is this human potential and pride that, like the machinery and coke ovens, need to be accurately and artistically rendered.

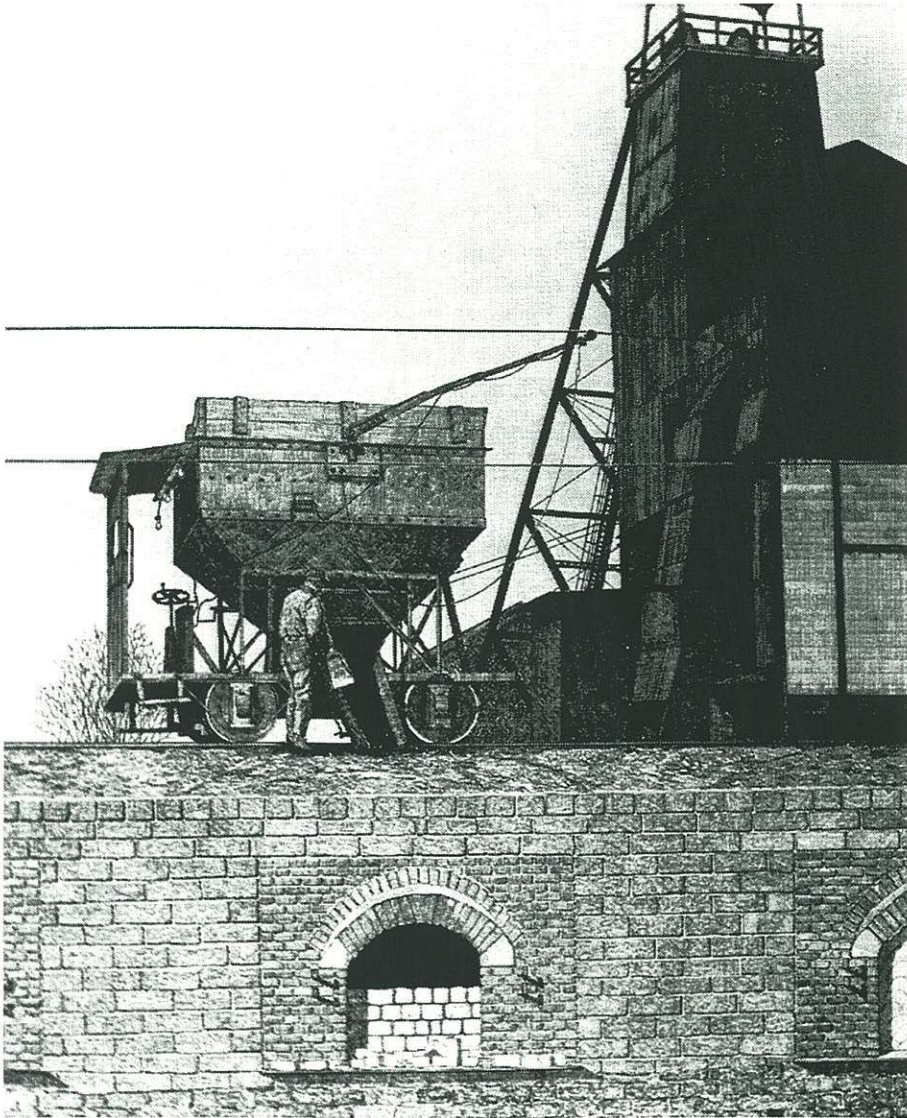
ing the Pittsburgh area. Many of the key military people of this time figure heavily in this aspect of our historic resources. At the present time I am working as a full time artist and historic resource consultant.

concerned. I also currently provide historic resource advice and information to Dr. Bindocci at C.O.M.E.R. My participation in the recent invitational show at Penn State, "Coal, Coke and Art", was rewarding. Several pieces of my art work were accepted and one, "The Coke Puller", was voted Best of Show.

Continuing education is a must no matter your career. I'm constantly reading, studying, and experimenting. Recent studies have included early Renaissance egg tempera and egg-oil emulsion techniques.

Early on I relied upon my personal sketches and photos as well as vintage images for the historic work that I produce. As the field of historic resources continues to grow there is a rapidly growing need for artists to produce images of historic drama which simply do not exist in image form. Where it does exist is in the hearts and minds of the people who experienced it all, in oral history and in literature.

There is so much out there I could spend my entire life as an artist on any one subject in which I'm involved. Current projects include several commissions of historic architecture in Washington and Fayette counties. There is a fund raising effort which focuses upon the town of Dehue, WV. Another large project in the planning stage is the international effort, "Women in Coal." I am working on this with Dr. Gay



*"DAILY CHARGING"*

These days my research takes me back to the 1750's when the French and British occupied this area because we find evidence of their discoveries of the natural resources, including coal, surround-

I was very happy to have W.V.U. extend an invitation for a solo exhibition at C.O.M.E.R. in 1995 and early 1996. That show has provided an excellent opportunity where West Virginia is

Bindocci at C.O.M.E.R. and W.V.U. I'm also preparing for two solo exhibits later this year. Of course there is the continuing marketing and networking that goes along with the business. And lets not forget collecting a mining lamp or two along the way!

I accept commissions of all kinds: public, private, corporate, or institutional. I sell the originals when not keeping them for my personal collection and also sell limited edition prints. Prices are governed by size, medium, complexity of the subject, and time constraints. I work in all price ranges.

#### Influential Artists:

From a historic perspective I have studied the work of Durer. It's tough to beat his draftsmanship. I have lectured several times at Penn State art

classes and have made it a point to place my work in a historic context. I always mention VanGogh with special emphasis on his persistence. He worked his entire life and sold one painting for the equivalent of \$84.00.

I consider myself a realist. Although I have been accused of being nostalgic, the finished product remains realistic. As a realist you cannot escape the effect the entire Wyeth family had on American art.

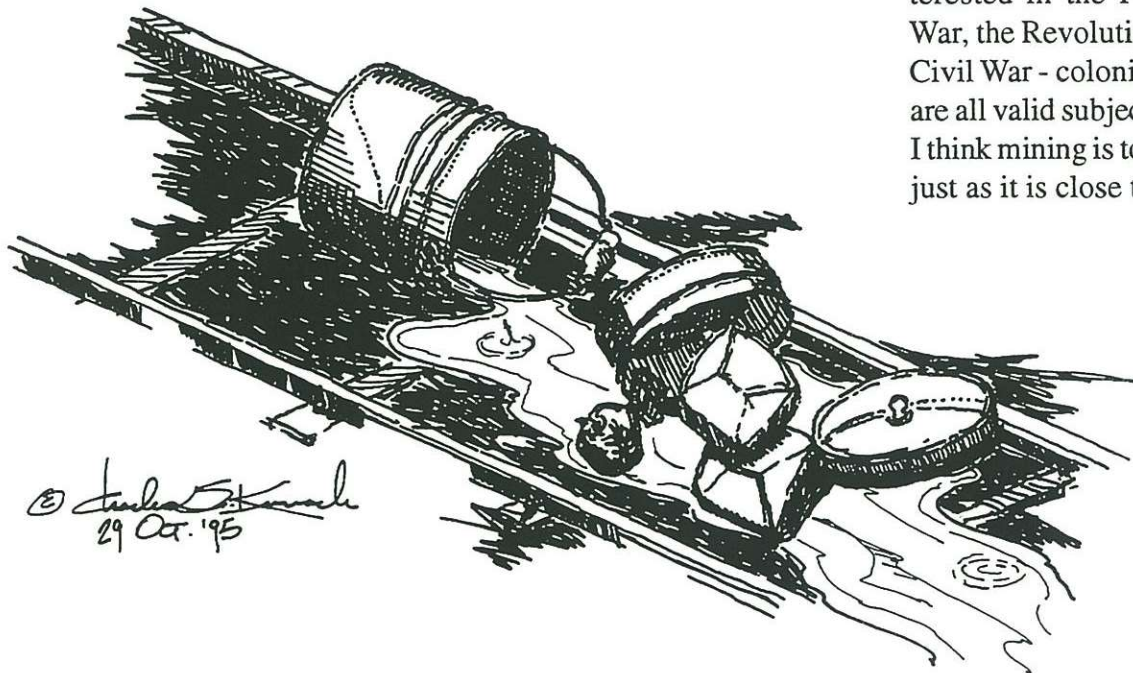
Paul Calle has had a strong affect upon my work. I began admiring and enjoying his work while still in grade school when he was illustrating Boys Life magazine. His graphites greatly influenced my work. There is also David Armstrong, another PA artist, and Eric Sloan.

These days one of the most influential artists on the American scene is Robert Griffing. It is an honor for me to say he and I are friends.

Friendship notwithstanding, Bob has set quite a pace for all other artists. The quality of his work, his attention to historically accurate detail, and his use of quality permanent materials place him among the very best of the art world. His being on the scene constantly challenges the rest of us to be better artists by demanding more of ourselves.

The subject of coal mining is in many areas an unpopular one. I think it has to do with the fact that while it is an important and historic subject, it remains a current topic. There may not have been enough elapsed time for the topic to become nostalgic. I think it also is impacted by the fact that it is one of the most basic of basic industries with very little glamour. Basic industries - coal, coke, and steel - as historic resources suffer since few of the industrial sites are preserved as tangible resources. This is where my type of artwork plays a vital role.

It is romantic and historic to be interested in the French and Indian War, the Revolutionary War, and the Civil War - colonial America. These are all valid subjects. But sometimes I think mining is too close to the soul, just as it is close to the earth.



# An Introduction for “Art in the Mine”

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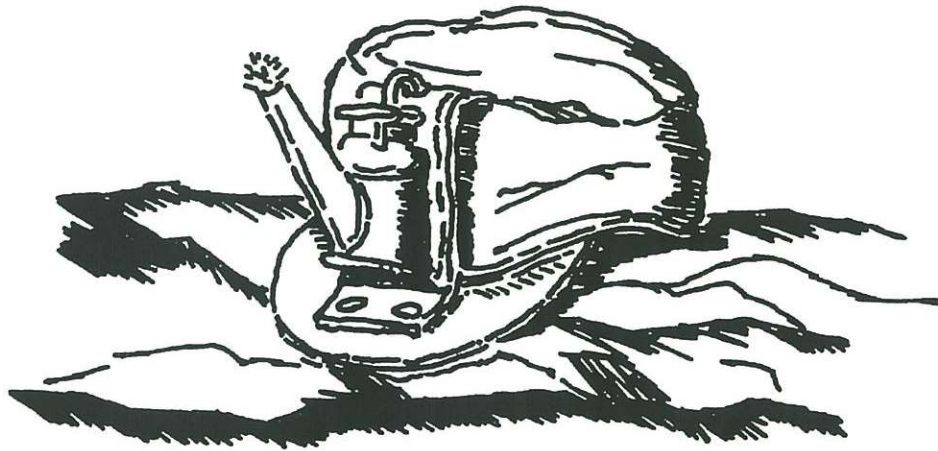
Art in the Mine. What a provocative title for an art show. It's a title which, at first glance, seems out of place. But when we take a close look and recall the historical significance of this region it all starts to fall into place. What we see here is tangible proof of the existence of thousands of unrecorded Americans who fashioned their own tools. These tools are symbols of the sincerity and integrity of these early craftsmen and artisans. Regretably, mass production has made these values as well as these tools obsolete. The craftsmen of the past appear as crude artisans at best until we look closely at the mass produced items of today.

Our tools bear the cheapness of mass production and they are not designed for long term use. Here are items that were fashioned over a hundred years ago. They appear pathetically crude, but they are honest and lasting in a manner that has been lost.

Today, just about everything is collectable. Everyone is saving something because “it will be worth something some day.” At this point I should clarify my reasons for collecting. It's simply conservation and education. This kind of collecting is an excellent way to study the conscience and personality of the early men and women of this region. Yes, there is a monetary connection. But it is in the initial acquisition and not in the long term gain.

A very distinguished tool collector, Eric Sloan, explained it in this manner: “As a collector of early tools, I have also been a collector of information. Antique implements have a price tag on them, but for the information that has been priceless and gratis, I am indebted.”

This selection of implements from my collection shows us how coal mining tools can be works of art — for the workers designed and modified their tools. When we find these artifacts, it creates a special bond between us and the past. These tools hold a special message for us — and we are richer for the experience.



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