

# Press

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## The Marathon's poster boy

Designing race art fulfills a lifelong goal of successful  
Newton-born illustrator

**By Joseph P. Kahn**

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NEWTON—Standing on the corner of Cedar Street and Commonwealth Avenue, a block from where he grew up, artist Oren Sherman says he realized long ago that despite his sense of connection to the Boston Marathon, chasing Bill Rodgers and Johnny Kelley up Heartbreak Hill was never going to happen.

"I'm a Jewish kid from Newton. I'm not built to run long distances," jokes Sherman, who at 42 looks more like a compulsive gym rat than a competitive road racer. "The funny thing is, I always wanted to do a marathon, and now I finally have—but as an illustrator, not a racer."

Sherman, who guess he saw his first race from a baby carriage in 1957, is the 1999 Boston Marathon's official poster boy, fulfilling a lifelong dream for the Newton-born illustrator and adding an intriguing footnote to today's race. Since 1981, the Boston Athletic Association has licensed out rights to design and sell a piece of commemorative marathon artwork. The posters and lithographs, hand-signed and available in several limited editions (priced from \$40 to \$300), are marketed to race participants as well as to casual fans. As a group, the posters form a prismatic visual history of a race justly celebrated for its colorful pageantry and tradition.

Over the years, artistic interpretations of the marathon have ranged from the impressionistic to the abstract, the hyper-real to the surreal. The race's Hopkinton starting line (1998) and the Boylston Street finish (1987) have been highlighted, with cityscapes a recurrent motif (last year's poster depicted the eight towns through which the 26-mile course meanders). Still, artistic license has occasionally trumped geographic reality.

In 1990 and 1991, for example, racers were posed against a backdrop of the USS Constitution and the Boston Common swan boats, respectively, a curiosity akin to showing Ted

Williams batting righty and playing shortstop in Fenway Park. For the centennial marathon, in 1996, artist E. Joseph Fontaine created a lovely, syrupy portrait of sailboats on the Charles River. Oddly, not a single runner strides through the picture, raising the question of whether the marathon had somehow gotten confused with something akin to the Head of the Charles Regatta.

Donna MacLeod of The Art of Running, a Chicago firm that has published 13 of the 19 official Boston Marathon lithographs, says she looks for artists who can capture both the excitement of the race and the unique beauty of Boston.

"Many artists have talent, but it's different to paint an image that thousands of people will want to buy," says MacLeod. "Oren's style is different from any we've used before. It's not a painterly look, but it does leap right out at you."

Nor is it likely to confuse anybody who knows the Boston course or who is familiar with other works by Sherman such as his Beacon Hill, Swan Boats, and Tall Ships posters. Sherman's portrait of marathoners in motion is bright and bold and geopolitically correct, showing a diverse group of racers as they pass Trinity Church in Copley Square and the John Hancock Building. No water, no boats. No runners with their hair and clothing apparently in flames.

"They said everyone in Boston likes Monet-type things, soft watercolors," Sherman recalls of his first discussions with MacLeod and the BAA. "I asked them to consider something different, and they were fine with that. All they said was that it had to be bright, it had to say running, and it had to be terrific."

Sherman sweated the detail, too. In his initial sketch, he says, the runners did not look athletic enough. In a few strokes, he managed to change the lead runners' physiques from Rosie Ruiz-chunky to Uta Pippig-slinky.

The BAA project has brought Sherman full circle, in a sense. After graduating from Newton North High School and the Rhode Island School of Design, where he now teaches, Sherman made an early splash in the commercial art world. His first sets of posters, self-funded and self-published, were so ubiquitous and popular that an episode of TV's "Spenser for Hire" was crafted around one of his Swan Boats posters. Another project was a poster for the 1984 Kentucky Derby. Sherman never did set foot in Churchill Downs, before or after doing the poster. He did, however, get a free trip to meet the governor of Kentucky and a complimentary mint julep.

Sherman went on to grace the pages of many publications with his distinctive illustrations, tapping into the lucrative corporate report market as well. In 1986, the US Postal Service commissioned a set of "special occasion" stamps. Nearly a billion sets were issued. Sherman's work was on the lips of millions, even if his name and face were virtually unknown.

"You think it's a crank call because you have to say yes before the Postal Service tells you what the project is," says Sherman. "I was worried for a moment they might want me to design the Nuclear Warhead Stamp or something."

When Burger King asked Sherman to design the chain's Double Cheeseburger box, the company dispatched a Lear jet to Provincetown-Sherman has owned a house on the Outer Cape since the early 1980s-and had the pilot wait while Sherman repositioned a handful of sesame seeds on top of the bun.

"I'm lucky; I was successful when I was really young," Sherman says. "There was one week when I turned down 25 jobs. But when the banking and real estate industries collapsed in the late '80s, so did a lot of my accounts. As an illustrator, your work is famous but you're unknown."

Not that Sherman is complaining. Many illustrators are frustrated painters, he observes. And many best-selling posters are cheap reproductions, not original work. Sherman is content to go after what he feels is a seriously overlooked market.

"The art world's attitude seems to be that people who don't have much money don't have a lot of taste either," he says. "That's not true. I've found a niche with city and special-events posters that are handsigned, nicely published, and cost under \$100. I want to reinvent the low end of the art market.

"Illustrators are trained to work outwardly rather than inwardly and personally, and that's great training for an artist. Edward Hopper was an illustrator. So was Warhol. I tell my students that if they want to be successful, 'good enough' isn't good enough. You have one shot at this. You may not like what other artists do, but I guarantee they're working like crazy to position themselves to be successful."

Sherman's lithographs are also featured in the Steve Martin-Goldie Hawn film "The Out of Towners." His latest project is another labor of love. Random House will soon publish an anthology of Greek myths for which Sherman has created 24 illustrations. He embarked on the project more than five years

ago, drawn to classical mythology by an old high school textbook and by his interest in Joseph Campbell's writings.

Using Boston Ballet Company dancers as models, he updated old images from what he calls the "toga party school of classical art." It was also a period when Sherman, who is gay, was devastated by the loss of friends to the AIDS virus.

"Twenty-four publishers had turned the project down," Sherman recalls. "They all said Greek mythology was a dead subject. But I've learned that when you really like something, you're usually a little bit ahead of the curve."

Finding a receptive ear at Random House, he adds, "literally changed the course of my life."

The first figure Sherman drew was Pandora opening the box (actually an amphora) and helping usher in the modern world. As he worked on the image, Sherman gradually saw a parallel between Pandora's youthful innocence and his own generation of gay men who came of age in the 1970s.

"It was the era between contraception and AIDS," says Sherman. "And the gift we were presented with was sexual pleasure without cost. We were told not to open the gift, but of course we did, and the evils rushed out. What kept us going after that, what kept the lid on, was hope."

Mythology, says Sherman, is "really about facing down your fears. It's only dumb luck that I'm alive to day while so many friends are not. I know now that I don't own this success, that you get a shot if you work hard and have some luck. What you do with that shot is then up to you."