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Tennis Artist How a Watercolorist Helps France Lead the World in Celebrating the Sport

BY JOHN MARTIN

When the French Open begins at Roland Garros in May, a white-haired man wearing a suit and scarf and carrying a large satchel will take up a position in Box 62, about 50 feet from where the players enter the court of Phillippe Chatrier.

He is Joel Blanc, a painter who styles himself an artist of the moment or instant.

"I have two enemies," he told me last year, "the weather and jealous people."

As a photojournalist obsessed with images and words, I was intrigued for yet another year. We met in 2013, his tenth year as an artist



THE BOSTON GLOBE/John Martin
BLOOMS AND COLOR: Artist Joel Blanc's watercolors capture the action on Roland Garros's brilliant red *terre battue*.

covering Roland Garros. Search online, and you will discover both *The New York Times* and *The Boston Globe* have printed my stories saluting Monsieur Blanc.

For a photographer, it's a unique sight: a man, a brush, and the blur of a tennis ball traveling 130 miles an hour as a first serve.

In 2013, *the Times* profile began: "In an age of ballistic serves and blinding strokes, not much remains of the artistry of slice and angle in international tennis. But a Parisian artist, his brush strokes creating a swirl of movement and color, has returned for a 10th French Open visit to revive the art of watercolors and stack it against the flash of modern digital images."

Now, preparing to paint his 16th French Open, Blanc's movements around Chatrier stadium (Box B17 is another favorite perch) seem to reflect the speed he seeks to celebrate.

"I am fascinated by movement and energy," Blanc said. Over the years he has painted a swarm of action images, including racehorses, polo ponies, figure skaters, Tour de France cyclists and marathon runners.

"Every sport where people are running," he



WORLD TENNIS GAZETTE/John Martin
BOUNCE: Karen Khachanov of Russia prepares to serve as Blanc puts his brush to work.

Blanc's Watercolors Celebrate Tennis in a Unique Swirl of Images

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said. "Every sport which is difficult to draw. And it's my deal, you know, my challenge."

One challenge to a photographer is to capture action on the court that mimics Blanc's figures on his paper canvas.



fingers in sync with camera controls as players dart from back court to forecourt is my job. Watching Blanc's hand move from his color pots to sketch pad and back is mentally exhausting. So many adjustments, so little time.

Another of Blanc's challenges, as a freelance painter, is to finance his life. Although he worked for French television for

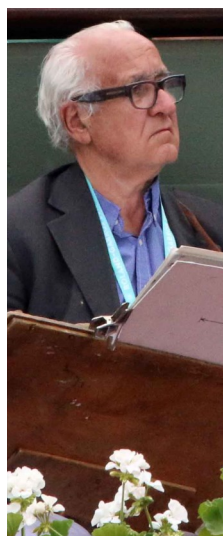
two years, he returns to the French Open now as the guest of Olivier Morvan, a real estate developer. Morvan's father first sat in Box B17 before World War II, Blanc said.

"I like painting in general," Morvan said, "and I think he does a really nice job."

The two men met and became friends when Blanc accepted an invitation to paint Morvan's children sitting in the box. "Every year I order a painting from

him," Morvan said, "and he makes a greeting card for me."

France and the world of tennis get a greeting card every year at Roland Garros from Artist Joel Blanc.

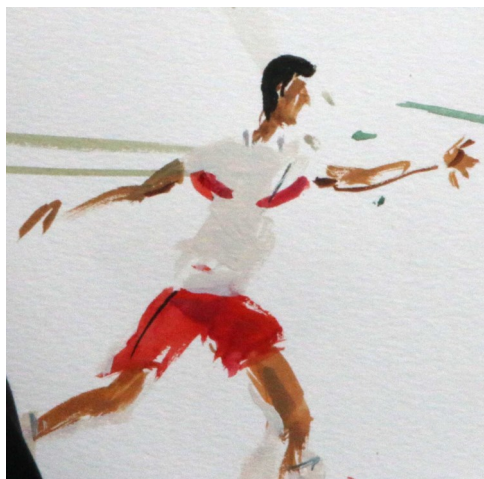


A book of Blanc's tennis figures, published in 2004, contains a time capsule of international tennis from 15 years ago. Andy Roddick turns up stiff in

John Martin for The New York Times
Blanc's watercolor of Rafael Nadal of Spain and Daniel Brands of Germany.

green (his shirt) and white (his cap). Guillermo Coria morphes into a stationary figure in black shorts and white cap, arms extended in a ballet-style forehand. A younger Serena Williams becomes a whirling flash of fuchsia and red.

As I scramble at courtside to get a glimpse over Blanc's shoulder, my admiration for him rises. Keeping



WORLD TENNIS GAZETTE/John Martin
MATCHING IMAGES: Novak Djokovic in flesh and art.

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