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Rafael DeSoto was born in 1906 in Barta Rolta, a small town in Spain on the border of Portugal. He came to the United States to study architecture at Columbia University in New York. The depression forced him to quit school and support himself by drawing. He studied anatomy under George Bridgeman at the Arts Students League and eventually went to Pratt Institute and higher degrees.

But Mr. DeSoto will tell you that he picked up his real training in his first two years as a dry brush illustrator for Street & Smith's western, mystery and adventure pulps. By 1934 he had done his first magazine cover for one of their "less advanced" pulps, Top notch. He was soon Street & Smith's most versatile cover illustrator, doing covers for *Western Story*, *Doc Savage*, *The Shadow*—in time over two hundred other titles.

Because he could work more than twice as fast as anyone else in the business (he could knock out two to three covers a week) and because he was an innovative illustrator in demand by every publisher, Mr. DeSoto holds the record for doing covers in the '30s and '40s.

In time, Popular Publications, one of the great pulp publishing houses and the publishers of *Black Mask* in the '40s, dominated his time. But no one owned him.

He did covers for *Argosy*, *Adventure*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Redbook*, and *The Saturday Evening Post*. In the fifties he worked for the paperback houses. "All of 'em," he tells us, including Dell, Ace, Signet.

Rafael DeSoto also did some notable advertising work. He did a series of illustrations for the first Frigidaire campaign. He also did White Owl and Canadian Club advertisements.

Mr. DeSoto, who now teaches anatomy and composition at Farmingdale College on Long Island, feels that the magazine illustration of the pulp era is as close as commercial work has ever come to a fine art in America.

"In the old days everything was done for impact," he said. "Nowadays it's all design. The old drawings that jump off the page at you, the illustrated initials, the fine line work—that is an art that is almost lost and I wish that they would revive it."

We here at *Black Mask* are reviving it. This is the first interview Mr. DeSoto has granted to the press. Usually he lets his covers speak for themselves.

Keith Alan Deutsch: Were you reading the pulps? What made you try out for them? For westerns?

Rafael DeSoto: I used to see them on the stands. Constantly. There seemed to be hundreds of them. And naturally I used to buy them. They were fascinating. I read them. And soon enough I pursued them. It was the depression. I had never done any work. Somehow I prepared a quick western for a sample and went to good old Street & Smith. The Art Director was Mr. James. The assistant Art Director was Harry Laury.

When I was in the waiting room and looked at all the beautiful paintings hanging around I got cold feet. When my time for an interview came I left my painting outside, I wouldn't show it because I knew how bad it was.

So the inevitable happens and the Art Director says, "I can't give you any work until I see something you've done." So I went back out and brought my painting in to him. He looked at it a while and said, "You know, this is the most Spanish cowboy I ever saw."

So I went to the library and I studied about Western life. About heels and boots and chaps and ten gallon hats and six gun holsters and so forth. I will say the second drawing I made was a little better. He hired me to do dry brush illustrations. Dry brush is when you get your brush filled up with ink, but you dry it up a little and work with it. You can get very fine lines and sometimes double lines as you go along. You get very nice effects. It's not used too much nowadays.

So he started me on dry brush drawings and I learned more doing those things than at any point in my career. I learned about composing a story. I learned about composition. After a while they became easy. It was those two years that prepared me for my later illustration. After those first years I got so busy doing covers I had much more work than I could do."

Deutsch: When did you start doing *Black Mask* covers?

DeSoto: Well I wasn't doing them at first. That was the top magazine. First I did mostly Street & Smith titles. I did *The Shadow*. After I started on the important magazines, I always thought that I should do something different with *Black Mask*. To make it stand out. So I decided to work with very dark backgrounds. So I decided to put jet black backgrounds around the shadows right into the black. Only the light part would show.

When I brought the first one into Mr. Steeger, the publisher of Popular Publications, he hit the top. "Golly, that's good," he said. "That's what I want."

Naturally I had reduced the whole scene into a close up because it is hard to work, to get too many things into the backgrounds. I think they were very effective. Harry Steeger knew what he wanted. If he liked something, he bought it. If not you couldn't sell it to him. nlt really brings back memories. I had a lot of fun doing those things.

Now Terrell, who was the editor of *Black Mask* at that time, always thought that I was a little meek about drawing the gun. He'd tell me, "The gun is very important. Make it look big. Make it look like a cannon, And give it some flesh contact between the villain and the girl. Not exactly hurting her. Maybe his hand across her mouth. Some physical contact to show that the girl is in danger. Without being hurt. She's not screaming because she's hurt, but because she's scared." And I played on those things.

Deutsch: How did you meet Mr. Steeger?

DeSoto: I just went there. He was the publisher. He either liked it or he didn't. I approached the Art Director and he brought me to the editors and the publisher. The very first example I brought to Popular Publications they bought. Left me without a sample. Before I went to Popular I was working for Dell doing western and detective covers.

Street & Smith bought my first cover for \$60. I remember I would get up early in the morning to go out and see if my cover was on the stands yet. In a short time my price was up to \$150 and then \$250. I could do two or more a week. Pulps were very much in demand, very much in style. With no TV you had to read then. Every month Mr. Steeger called me in and told me I shouldn't do anybody else's covers. Four years after Street & Smith had started me I was straight Popular, I worked for them for ten years. But he couldn't stop me from doing whatever titles I wanted to do outside.

Deutsch: What about horror covers? I noticed among the many cover paintings you showed me one with a mummy in it. Popular Publications had quite a few horror titles. Did you work any of them?

DeSoto: Yes, of course. I have one in my studio of a man that was half metal and half flesh. And nobody could shoot him down. I still have the cover. His arm and one of his eyes and part of his face is metal."

Deutsch: Did they tell you to use girls with most of their clothing missing for the horror titles?

DeSoto: Ah, yes. Even in detective covers they would tell me to reveal as much as possible. I don't know how they published some of them. I used to rip them up, you know. Show half the breast. The legs. Just enough to cover what you couldn't show. Yes, I was told.

One time I did this spicy detective cover, I was told to show a lot of leg, so I decided to show a woman sitting down and putting her stockings on. I did a rough sketch and thought I really had it. I ended up showing it to Mr. Steeger and he wouldn't have it. "It is not what you've exposed," he said to me. "You could even reveal more thigh. You've drawn it wrong. That's all. Looks like she's taking her stockings off. Can't have that. Study someone putting 'em on. It is OK if the lady is almost naked if she's putting her clothes on. But it's no good, even if she's hardly removed anything, to show a woman getting undressed on a cover." Sure enough, I had my wife practice taking her stockings off and there was a difference. I redid the painting and Mr. Steeger loved it.

There was a lot of censorship in those days, but there were rules like that and an awful lot of pretty raw stuff went through. And when pocketbooks first started in the early '40s, well most of that stuff was even stronger. I didn't even read the books after I did a few. All you had to do was show a half-naked woman and a bed. That was a whole other era.

Deutsch: What about the demise of the pulps?

DeSoto: I saw the writing on the wall in the early '40s. There was the war, a paper shortage, but most of all it was the pocketbooks. So I went into pocketbooks, I did a slew of them in the '40s and '50s. Until ten years ago I was still doing 'em. And I also did a lot of work for Magazine Management after the pulps died. After the war most pulp artists went to the men's adventure books like *Stag* and *Men's Adventure* and war stories. I used to do both the covers and the inside illustrations. Duotones, mostly blues. The men's books never used straight line drawings.

Deutsch: This is the age of pocketbooks. The most exciting area of publishing today.

DeSoto: Yes. I agree. They try everything now.

Deutsch: You don't see many line drawings nowadays though, do you?

DeSoto: Well pocketbooks didn't have them to begin with.

Deutsch: Do you think that's a mistake?

DeSoto: Yes. Very much.

Deutsch: Some pocketbooks do have illustrations, notably Ace's science fiction and Tarzan books. But not too many or too much. The appeal of the pulps depended quite a bit on their covers and line drawings. Dramatic, vivid illustrations. Sort of a cross between comic books and fiction.

DeSoto: Yes, that's right. That is an art that has almost died and I wish that they would revive it. You see, many readers love the stories, but they haven't the imagination to visualize the scenes. To picture it. We learned how to approach a situation so that it was not confusing. And so it has impact. Just like the stories.

Deutsch: What procedures were used in planning a cover?

DeSoto: Well, this is what happened. As a rule they had the stories written. I used to read them to pick up a scene for the cover. Not every story was suitable so I asked the editor to give me a little leeway to change things around. So I used to give my own version of what the story was to be. Then I gave them pencil sketches; maybe one or two, and I'd do the covers from them. In time they were asking their authors to do their stories from my covers! Reversed the procedure.

Deutsch: How did you make the paintings from the sketches?

DeSoto: Well I proceeded to take photographs. I built my own studio and took my own photographs. I posed the models. These things have to be done fast. I took many many photos and then I laid 'em out on the table and chose the best for the best parts of a few and made a composite. Always had to distort something. For effect or to make room for the titles. I used to arrange for those in my sketch but they didn't always fit. Everything was planned out from the beginning. Once the photo was drawn I used to sketch in my dark tones and from the dark tones work out to the light. I never presented color sketches or let anyone see my photos.

All my early works was oils. Then I went to casein. An awful lot of my work was casein. Later work was acrylic. Everything was done for impact.

Deutsch: Who were some other illustrators you admired?

DeSoto: Nick Eggenhoffer was a great dry brush illustrator at Street & Smith when I was just starting. His best work was westerns. I remember a great cover man. Scott. W. Scott. Also Walter Baumhofer. He did an awful lot of Doc Savage covers. Harris. R.G. Harris. Arthur Bowker, I remember he did fine work.

Deutsch: What about Virgil Finlay?

DeSoto: Ah, yes. He was a great genius in line work. We used to call him the Salvador Dali of pulp. Fantastic illustrator, but his cover work wasn't very good. He was a poor colorist.

Deutsch: *Black Mask* was something special?

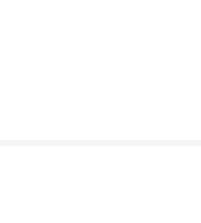
DeSoto: Ah yes. Of all of them it was the best. I worked very hard to make it distinctive. After a while I got the dark backgrounds and I worked all close up as I explained to you. Look at the gun on your cover. It looks like a cannon. I went to a place where they made props for the theater and I had them build me a .45, exactly authentic to the last detail, out of wood. And he painted it so you couldn't tell the difference. Due to the shape of the handle, the grip of the hand was different from any other revolver with a .45. And I did sketches of hands holding it in all positions.

And one thing I hated to see was a gun not being held right. It looks like an amateur shooting. If an amateur is going to shoot, he's not a gangster. He's not a criminal. One thing you've got to say about my *Black Mask* covers. My villains can shoot!

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