Robert Benassi, Head of Medical Illustration at Mayo Clinic, MCG graduate, AMI Lifetime Achievement winner passed away on March 15, 2018.

Robert C. Benassi was born in Duluth, Minnesota to Emily and Charlie Paul Benassi. Shortly after graduation from High School and technical school, where he learned technical and mechanical drawing, Bob entered into WWII on April 6, 1943.

When asked how he became interested in medical illustration, Bob replied that it was due to the war. On June 7, 1944—the day after D-Day—Bob waded onto Omaha Beach. Assigned to the 29th Army Tactical Air Command, Bob had two jobs. First, he aided in coordinating air-ground support for front-line troops. This was an extremely dangerous job, which frequently took him behind enemy lines as a forward observer. Second, he also was responsible for creating maps tracking the movements of Allied forces as they advanced across France and into Germany. In order to accomplish his job responsibilities Bob was provided with two very important pieces of equipment—a Thomson 45-caliber submachine gun to keep him alive and a graphics design kit, which included a Leroy lettering set. Bob learned about medical illustration on the battlefields of Europe. During his reconnaissance missions he would come across abandoned German combat aid stations. In these stations he found line drawings of field surgeries and the procedures for dressing wounds.

After the war, Bob returned to Minnesota determined to learn more about medical art. In his search for information, Bob first paid a visit to Jean Heard, a medical illustrator working for the University of Minnesota. She gave him the list of schools with medical illustration programs. The University of Illinois at Chicago was the closest, so he went and visited with Program Director Tom Jones. During this meeting, Mr. Jones made many suggestions about the courses Bob should take in order to become better prepared to study medical illustration. Bob put his nose to the academic grindstone and in 1949 graduated with a B.S. in Zoology from the University of Minnesota.

Following graduation he applied to all the medical illustration programs. The first school he heard from was the Medical College of Georgia (now Augusta University), so he immediately sent his deposit to hold a place. Bob became the first graduate of the Medical Illustration Graduate Program at MCG, in 1951.

After graduating, Bob and his wife Rita moved back to Minneapolis. With no job prospects, he started knocking on doors. His first stop was the University of Minnesota photographic lab. The medical photographer offered to introduce Bob to the surgeons. Soon he met Dr. Owen H. Wangensteen, Chair for the Department of Surgery, who was working on a surgical atlas and needed a medical illustrator. Word spread, and Bob became associated with many innovative surgeons. Bob became one of the first successful private practice medical illustrators.

Wangensteen was a pioneer in various types of surgery. Medical students and surgical residents from all over the world were attracted to his department because of his strong emphasis on research and laboratory experimentation. Through his leadership, University of Minnesota surgeons pioneered open-heart procedures, including doctors C. Walton Lillehei, Richard L. Varco, Christian Barnard and Norman E. Shumway. Along side, Bob was illustrating the new surgical techniques and discoveries.

In 1952, cardiac surgeon and pathologist Jesse E. Edwards, MD left the Mayo Clinic to move to Minneapolis / St. Paul. Bob met Dr. Edwards in 1954 and began a collaboration that continued for 40 years. Bob worked with Dr. Edwards on An Atlas of Acquired Diseases of the Heart and Great Vessels, and Congenital Heart Diseases. During their collaboration Bob created over 5,000 illustrations.

Bob was also the medical illustrator for Dr. John J. Wild, developer of the diagnostic ultrasound machine that would ultimately provide pregnant mothers with the first images of their unborn child. Wild is considered the Father of Ultrasound.

Bob was in private practice from 1953 to 1971, when Bob was recruited to Medical Graphics at The Mayo Clinic. Mayo had a large backlog of illustration work, and Bob was the right man for the job. In 1973, Vince Destro, Section Head of Medical Graphics, stepped aside and Bob stepped up, providing innovative and visionary leadership for the next 16 years.

Bob led many significant advances. For instance, Mayo became the first medical institution in the US to use computer graphics. For this accomplishment and the support it provided, particularly for Urology. Bob received the William P. Didusch Art Award from the American Urolological Association. Bob also led the establishment of a digital archival system for the 60,000-plus medical illustrations at Mayo. Perhaps most importantly, Bob was instrumental in establishing an institutional policy for copyrighting all Mayo medical illustrations in order to retain the intellectual property rights. Mayo became the recognized leader and champion for other medical institutions and entrepreneurs about the importance of retaining and protecting intellectual property rights.

In 1989, Bob stepped down as Section Head of Medical Graphics at Mayo. He retired in 1995.

The AMI honored Bob with the Lifetime Achievement Award in 2011. A true gentleman, scholar, artist and colleague, Bob will be deeply missed by all who knew him.