



contents

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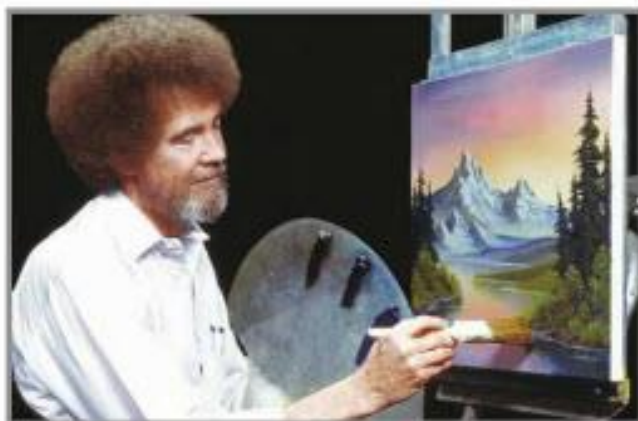
features

- 12 **Myth of the 'Big Break'**
By *Geerat Seaman*
- 20 **E-newsletter is Alive and Well**
By *Gig Ruinberg*
- 28 **Benefits of Fieldwork**
By *Thsa Firo-Bloom*
- 36 **Bob Ross: America's Most Underrated Painter**
By *Peter Snodden*
- 42 **Success Without Galleries**
By *Orn Sorenson*
- 48 **Book Excerpt: ART/WORK**
By *Heather Darcy Bhandari and Jonathan Melber*
- 54 **Are You a 'Real' Artist or a Hobbyist?**
By *Derral Grant*
- 60 **Working With Nonprofits**
By *Gregory W. Flux*
- 66 **How to Negotiate**
By *Paul Dorrel*



*Bob
Ross*

AMERICA'S
MOST UNDERRATED
PAINTER



BY PETER SMOLENS

Although his paintings might not be hanging in the Smithsonian or the Museum of Modern Art, Bob Ross is owed a debt of gratitude by the American painting world for introducing people (including this author) to the world of painting. Through his weekly PBS television shows that ran for more than 10 years, Ross, who died 20 years ago, introduced a generation of beginning artists to the world of landscape oil painting using folksy sayings like “happy accidents” and “friendly trees.” Yet when art critics talk about the great American artists, you never hear Bob Ross’ name mentioned.

If you followed *The Joy of Painting* show, Ross demonstrated, through his painting examples, how to discover the artist within yourself. Bob Ross compositions were beautiful landscape paintings featuring mountains, trees, lakes, rivers and sometimes a waterfall or a little cabin in the woods. They looked simple, but all were painted with the extraordinary skill of a master artist who made it look easy. It was that easygoing manner that made you feel you could accomplish the same if you tried. Ross used to say in interviews that he was simplifying the oil painting process. By keeping the selection of tools and colors minimal, the viewers wouldn’t have to make large investments.

The Evolution of Bob Ross

Ross learned the “wet-on-wet” method from William “Bill” Alexander, a German painter who had a show on a few PBS stations starting in January 1988. Ross became an instructor with Alexander’s company, teaching the Alexander wet-on-wet technique. This method was actually a centuries-old painting process called the *alla*

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(7)



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“We never make mistakes. What we make are happy accidents.” – Bob Ross

prima method of painting. *Alla prima* is Italian meaning direct method, first attempt or all at once. The premise of this method is that a thin paint will stick to a thick paint. Using this style of painting was simplistic, allowing you to continue on (without letting the paint dry) and complete the painting in a short time. This method was faster compared to the long waiting periods required for layers to dry in traditional oil painting. If you made a mistake, you could just blend it away. When Ross talked about “happy accidents,” he was referring to the fact that you could scrape off the paint and/or paint over an area to correct the mistake.

The goal of each Bob Ross show was to teach the viewer to enjoy the creation of art. According to the PBS documentary *The Happy Painter*, the programs were taped live. He went to Muncie, Indiana, for a week and created the 13 shows in each season in a few days. Only when there were technical problems would he redo a painting for the show, and then it would be a completely new show from start to finish.

Ross made three copies of the paintings created on the show. One he painted beforehand, which sat off camera as reference. The second painting he created on camera and a third painting he created afterwards so an assistant could take pictures of the process for his painting books.

Each week, Ross employed a 2-inch brush (more commonly used for painting a wall or a window frame) to build a sky. With little crisscross



(9)

(7) *Old Weathered Barn* by Bob Ross, Bob Ross Wet-on-Wet Technique oils on canvas, 18" x 24". (8) *Spectacular View* by Bob Ross, Bob Ross Wet-on-Wet Technique oils on canvas, 18" x 24". (9) *Seascape Fantasy* by Bob Ross, Bob Ross Wet-on-Wet Technique oils on canvas, 18" x 24". Copyright © 1990 Bob Ross Inc. All rights reserved. Used with permission from Bob Ross Inc.

“The TV shows were originally created to promote Bob’s local painting classes. For years we would go around the country giving painting classes. — Annette Kowalski”



motions, he applied paint to the canvas that had been prepared with “liquid white,” which made the canvas wet. As the painting took form, he scratched in a mountain range in the background with a flick of his painter’s knife. Then he tapped below the mountains to create a soft, misty base. This also provided separation of the mountains from the trees.

His workflow was always the same. He started by painting a dark undercoat then added highlights. Then he would explain how you determine your light source. He expertly employed a fan brush to make a pine tree as he filled in the landscape. As with most landscapes, he added a river or pond in the foreground that reflected the mountains.

This is when his showmanship would kick in. For most of the program, Ross concentrated on one side of the painting. Then just before the end, he would say something like “let’s get crazy.” He would then paint in a huge tree on the other side, all the while knowing the tree existed in the reference painting. The result was a complete painting in about 26 minutes.

“Bob was never paid for doing the television programs,” said Annette Kowalski, a close friend who formed Bob Ross Inc. with Ross. The company still doesn’t charge PBS for the programs —

they are offered free. “Bob felt that if there was no charge for any aspect of our programs, more stations would be inclined to air them. Of course he was right,” Kowalski said. He also donated all those paintings to the local TV stations. The stations offered the paintings as enhancements for large donations. When a PBS station requested, Ross visited to help fundraise during pledge season, painting on-air while the station collected money, and then the PBS station sectioned off the finished painting.

Ross never admonished his students. “We never make mistakes. What we make are happy accidents,” he said while painting. Then, he reminded his viewers that the painting they created was

“in their own little world,” so that you could add as many trees as you wanted. This was the way he taught his students to grow and develop their own style. Since the show was geared toward beginning artists, the Bob Ross method introduced painting to non-artists.

Painting for the Everyday Painter

Some art critics have dismissed Ross as a commercial hack because of his style, compositions and commercialism. They complained that he painted imaginary generic landscapes and that many of his paintings had a similar style. One critic said his show only showed students how to paint the specific style of Bob Ross because he never discussed painting theory.

But Ross landscapes were interesting and varied. He created a variety of paintings to keep the viewer engaged — often showing landscapes in different seasons. In addition, he made no bones about being a landscape painter. During one show, as he was filling in a row of trees, Ross told an anecdote about his early painting career, when he studied with a famous portrait painter. After a short while, the portrait painter pulled Ross aside and said he should stick to his mountains and trees.

III Shades of Grey by Bob Ross. Bob Ross/Wet-on-Wet Technique: oils on canvas, 18" x 24". Copyright © Bob Ross Inc. All rights reserved. Used with permission from Bob Ross Inc.



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One of his favorite sayings that he repeated often on the show was, "This is your world. You can do anything you want." He went on to say that he was giving his viewers the tools, and it was up to each of them to work on developing their skills and confidence to create original works of art. The idea was not to copy but to create. The style might resemble Bob Ross, but what the painting contained was up to the individual artist.

Although he never specifically discussed color theory or perspective, viewers learned about these aspects of painting from comments he made while working on the painting. He showed how mixing cadmium yellow and sap green produced brown. By leaving space between the rows of trees, he added layers to a painting. By adding layers, he created a perception of depth. Often as he was finishing a painting, he painted in details such as rocks with a fan brush and sticks scratched in with a pallet knife to make the finished landscape more believable.

In recent years, a number of painters on YouTube have attempted to duplicate the types of paintings that Ross created each week on his show. Some of these attempts resulted in the creation of excellent paintings. But, if you look closely, the painter is completely depleted at the end of the painting. I never got that feeling from Ross at the end of any of his shows.

Bob Ross: Entrepreneur

Ross created more than 1,000 paintings for the TV show — countless more when you consider all of the demonstrations and painting classes he presented. The *Joy of Painting* show ran on PBS from 1983 to 1994. At the height of its popularity, more than 300 PBS stations carried the weekly show. In 11 years, he

created 30 seasons of 13 episodes each.

"The TV shows were originally created to promote Bob's local painting classes," Kowalski said. "For years we would go around the country giving painting classes."

Bob Ross Inc. maintained ownership rights to the TV programs, which is how Ross earned money. To accompany the TV show, they produced a book for each series that would explain how the paintings on the show were made. In addition, people could buy a VHS tape of each show from the entire series. The video/DVD sales of the shows and the books became a staple in the Bob Ross mail order enterprise.

Once his show became a hit, heeding advice from his mentor Alexander, Ross developed a painting supply business that included paints, brushes and beginning painting kits, all with his smiling face and signature hair in the logo.

Because of his relaxed and kind manner, Ross became a cultural icon. People who never created art watched the show just to hear his soft-spoken words as he magically painted a landscape. He became the most recognizable TV person in PBS history. He was spoofed on *Saturday Night Live* and showed up in hair color ads. MTV hired him to star in a series of promotional spots that brought an entire new audience of young people to his painting style.

After being on the road for a number of years, Ross had a relapse of a health problem and decided to train and certify a group of painters. Today, thousands of certified teachers around the world teach the Bob Ross method.

On July 4, 1995, Bob Ross passed away from lymphoma. Still his legacy lives on. Check any PBS station on a weekend morning and odds are you will find the *Best of the Joy of Painting* showing. Almost 20 years after his death, he's accomplished his goal of becoming the painting teacher for the masses. I can still hear him saying, as he did at the end of every show, "God bless and happy painting!" with his signature twinkle in his eyes and a wiggle of his paintbrush. ¹⁸

Peter Smolens is a writer, photographer and digital painter who combines his love for taking beautiful photographs and writing articles for newspapers, magazines and online publications. He also uses the photographs as bases for his digital paintings. Visit bestofvolos.com to learn more.

01 Mountain by the Sea by Bob Ross. Bob Ross Wet-on-Wet, Tool Techniques in a Canvas, "8" x 24". Copyright © 1987 Bob Ross Inc. All rights reserved. Labeled in permanent black ink on back.