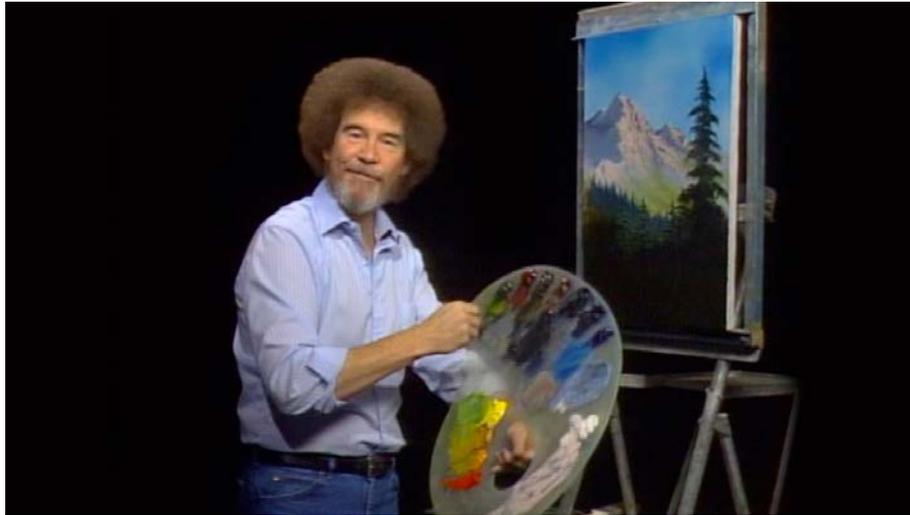


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By *Kelly Crow*

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Bob Ross achieved pop-culture fame as the bushy-haired public-television host of “The Joy of Painting” in the 1980s. Now artists and fans are attempting to secure a spot in art history for him as well.

Over the past few years, younger artists who aren’t as concerned with distinctions between highbrow and lowbrow have started making pieces inspired by Mr. Ross, who died in 1995. Others, who have only now rediscovered him through online reruns, are starting to organize shows of their own to persuade the art establishment to give him a closer look. They have been joined by more than 3,000 “Certified Ross Instructors”—people who have studied his oil-painting methods so they can teach them to the masses.

Even Bob Ross Inc., the artist’s warehouse headquarters in Herndon, Va., that lines up the certification workshops, has pivoted from merely selling his paint supplies and approving licenses for T-shirts, wigs and waffle-makers—the batter cooks into the shape of Mr. Ross’s head—to making appeals to museums like the Smithsonian’s American Art Museum to put his originals on display.

“See these? Aren’t they fantastic?” Joan Kowalski, Bob Ross Inc.’s president, said at the warehouse, as she rifled through a stack of the artist’s landscapes in an otherwise spartan office. The company moved to an industrial complex called Renaissance Park near Dulles International Airport, a year ago, Ms. Kowalski said, and her workers haven’t yet had time to hang them.

These efforts could prompt the art world to reassess the legacy of someone whose work was dismissed as kitsch during his lifetime. At a time when the art world was swept up by early attempts at video and graffiti art, Mr. Ross preferred rendering mountain scenes brimming with wispy clouds, shimmering pools and scrubby trees. His style evoked 19th-century landscapes, only breezier. He almost never painted people into his utopias. His work hasn’t been shown by major art museums or sold in auctions outside of [eBay](https://www.ebay.com) , where the going rate for an original is about \$8,000 to \$15,000.

Christie’s specialist Vivian Brodie said the artist’s democratic approach—the whole point of his show was teaching the public to mimic his style—may have hurt his chances in a marketplace that prizes unique objects. He seemed content with the TV show and didn’t insinuate himself into the roiling, 1980s New York art scene where peers could have introduced him to curators.



The Bob Ross waffle-maker cooks batter into the shape of Mr. Ross’s head. PHOTO: UNCANNY BRANDS

“Look at the artist’s history tends to admire—they’re addicts or they struggle or they died young,” Ms. Brodie said. “The market doesn’t like artists happy.”

In 2009, a Queens auction house called RoGallery sought to sell a 1980s Ross work, “Untitled (Northern Lights),” with an \$8,000 low estimate. It went unsold.



‘Untitled (Northern Lights)’ by Bob Ross PHOTO: BOB ROSS INC.

David Arquette, who completed a three-week teacher-certification course at the company’s Bob Ross Art Workshop in New Smyrna Beach, Fla., last year, said he would “love to see the art world give Bob Ross a little more credit.” Having gotten into collecting through the world of graffiti art, Mr. Arquette said that Mr. Ross’s TV career shouldn’t stigmatize his reputation. The “Scream” actor is pitching a talk show where he and guests chat while painting alongside each other. (His dream guest: President George W. Bush, also an amateur painter.)

Mr. Arquette said he often watched “The Joy of Painting” when episodes originally aired on PBS between 1983 and 1994, but he recently rediscovered Mr. Ross while browsing [Netflix](#) —and got hooked anew. When the streaming-video service [Twitch posted an eight-day marathon of Mr. Ross’s show](#) three years ago, more than 5.6 million people tuned in, including younger viewers who had never seen the show before.

All of it has refocused attention on Mr. Ross, who was born in Daytona, Fla., in 1942, and spent 20 years in the U.S. Air Force mainly posted in Alaska, where he learned to paint at a United Service Organizations outpost. Initially, he sold his landscapes to tourists, including scenes he painted on gold-prospecting pans. Later, he traveled the U.S.

demonstrating his painting techniques in shopping malls before he caught the eye of a TV station manager in Virginia who offered him a no-frills show on PBS.

With his perm, soothing voice and chambray shirts unbuttoned nearly to the navel, Mr. Ross was an instantly recognizable hit. During each 26-minute episode, he stood before his easel against a black backdrop and completed a painting, all the while murmuring can-do maxims like “Think like a cloud” and “There are no mistakes, only happy accidents.”



Bob Ross in 1985. TV for him was the ‘biggest show around,’ said Joan Kowalski, president of Bob Ross Inc. PHOTO: BOB ROSS INC.

Ms. Kowalski, whose parents Walt and Annette Kowalski helped Mr. Ross create the show, said Mr. Ross didn’t harbor any ambitions of art-world acclaim. For him, TV was the “biggest show around,” she said.

He tended to glean most of his ideas for his show’s roughly 400 compositions from his memories of Alaska as well as whatever he saw hanging in hotel lobbies or antique shops during his travels. After he died of lymphatic cancer, Ms. Kowalski said her parents “dreamed of getting him a real exhibit.”

Momentum sputtered until a few years ago when emerging and established artists started taking Mr. Ross's work more seriously.

In London, Neil Raitt's signature style is Bob Ross with a twist. Mr. Raitt said he grew up watching "The Joy of Painting" and started collecting Mr. Ross's accompanying instructional books while he was in art school. Today, he calls these step-by-step manuals "my Bible," and Mr. Raitt has gained an international reputation covering his own canvases with overlapping patterns of Ross-style trees, snow-capped mountains and cabins.



Neil Raitt's 'Grand Teton (Indigo Falls),' a Ross-inspired work in the coming exhibition 'Mythologies of a Sublime' at Pedro Cera Gallery in Lisbon. PHOTO: NEIL RAITT

British advertising executive Charles Saatchi and Chicago's DePaul Art Museum have collected his work. On Sept. 13, Mr. Raitt will be included in a show, "Mythologies of a Sublime," at the Pedro Cera Gallery in Lisbon, Portugal, alongside rising stars Claire Tabouret and Alex Hubbard.

"After art school, it was a privilege to return to Bob," whose layering techniques Mr. Raitt treats as rules to be followed, or subverted, he said. "Plus, they're beautiful."

Los Angeles artist Brendan Lynch mounted a New York gallery show three years ago inspired by Mr. Ross. After covering the back room of Untitled Gallery with beige carpet

and playing an audio recording of Mr. Ross’s voice, he lined the walls with landscapes. They included everything from \$5 flea-market pastorals and cheery scenes painted by Ross-certified instructors to an 1860s Hudson River painting by William Mason Brown and an original Ross painting from 1991, “Wayside Pond,” that he borrowed from the artist’s company.



Brendan Lynch’s work at Untitled Gallery. PHOTO: BRENDAN LYNCH

When New York art critic Jerry Saltz stopped by, he [posted an image](#) of “Wayside Pond,” adding the hashtags #YouCan’tTouchThis and #GreatArt.

Later, Mr. Lynch followed it up with another show of his own wall-size paintings of Ross-style landscapes, 11 of which have since sold to collectors for roughly \$17,000 each, he said. Mr. Lynch said the “gnarly woodsman” ethos embodied by Mr. Ross has inspired him to study landscapes in depth.

“You can approach a Bob Ross with the same intent and wonder as any landscape you see at the Met,” Mr. Lynch said. “Those things have a lot of soul.”

Stephanie Stebich, director of the Smithsonian’s American Art Museum, said she could envision a history-museum exhibit where Mr. Ross’s PBS tenure is juxtaposed with others who taught televised painting classes in the decades preceding him, like Jon Gnagy and William Alexander. But she’s not ready to commit him to her museum’s collection.





Actor David Arquette teaching the staff of Zappos to paint in the Bob Ross wet-on-wet painting technique.

Credit: Zappos

“I love that artists are excavating TV and mining his moment to say their own thing,” Ms. Stebich said. “He may cast a longer shadow as a muse.”

For now, Ms. Kowalski plans to ramp up Bob Ross Inc.’s certification program in Florida—it currently runs 21 weeks of classes—as well as explore ways to start classes in parts of the world where the artist has outsize [Facebook](#) followings, like Turkey. She is also organizing mass painting classes at events like Twitch Con, South by Southwest and Comic Con.

A recent uptick in fake Bob Ross paintings has also prompted the company to issue certificates of authenticity for the ones he made and gave away in classes over the years. “There’s a way we can tell a real Bob,” she said.

Doug Hallgren, a former flight attendant who has been overseeing the teacher-certification classes in Florida, said the training is rigorous, with candidates ultimately painting two canvases a day. The final exam is to paint a Bob Ross scene in the same amount of time he had on each episode: 26 minutes. “We really put their feet to the fire,” Mr. Hallgren said.



Doug Hallgren teaches a 'Paint Like Bob Ross' class in New Smyrna Beach, Fla., surrounded by students and paintings by the late artist. PHOTO: ABBY LIGA FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Students pay \$395 for the three-week course. They run the gamut from Bram Bevins, a Tennessee bankruptcy lawyer whose wife convinced him to take a “Happy Little Trees” class at a local craft store after their dog, Petunia, died, to Florida’s David Brancato, an animator and former [Disney](#) sketch artist who didn’t think he could paint until he signed up for a Bob Ross class and fell hard for oils.

It was Mr. Brancato who taught Mr. Arquette to paint and later sold the actor his first portrait—an image of a grinning Mr. Ross.

“It’s in my entry way,” Mr. Arquette said. “I have to see it every day.”

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