

Robert Burt

Artist, Sojourner

How much can one learn about an artist by looking at his work? A review of painter Robert Burt's latest pieces reveals a great deal about the soft-spoken artist's life and passions.

Abandoned adobe churches; deserted city streets from small towns in Mexico and South America; long, rolling, country roads disappearing into the distance. Each scene conveys a sense of peace and solitude, while simultaneously portraying a feeling of whimsy, a joyful stroll down a sunny lane. Burt's bold use of color and strong compositional elements convey the intense beauty the artist sees in the world around him. His paintings invite the viewer on a journey to explore a world that lies far from the hustle of everyday life.

Robert Burt's personal journey as an artist began in childhood. Born in the 1950's in the upstate New York hamlet of Kingston, Burt showed an aptitude for art from an early age.

"My uncle lived in Manhattan and was an artist working in the advertising field," Burt recalls. "When I was eight or nine, he started giving me lessons in chess and more importantly, in painting." Burt's interest in art flourished under his uncle's tutelage and by the time he was in his teens, Burt was taking figure-drawing classes at a local art gallery.

In high school, Burt began taking summer classes sponsored by the Art Students' League of New York in Woodstock, the heart of a burgeoning artists' community. The young artist studied under Franklin Alexander and further developed his drawing, painting and composition skills.

Burt went on to study fine art at Ulster College while continuing with summer studies at the Art Students' League. After leaving school he began working in batik, an art form with origins in Southeast Asia. The batik artist creates designs on fabric by masking areas with hot wax and then dyeing the cloth. The coated area doesn't take the dye, and by coating different areas in wax and dyeing the cloth repeatedly, the artist can create complex, layered images.

Burt loved the technique for the bold compositions and strong colors he was able to achieve. He began selling his batik apparel in art shows and shops, eventually opening his own gallery in Lake Placid, New York, which he ran successfully through the early 1980's.

In the mid-eighties, Burt decided to move his gallery to Asheville, North Carolina. His work was well received there, and within a few years he had opened a second location in Chapel Hill.

During this period, Burt had several important experiences that would move him toward a full-time career as a painter. In an effort to broaden his artistic work, Burt began painting on silk in addition to dying it. He also traveled for several months through Europe and Asia, where he was deeply moved by the richness of the cultures and landscapes he encountered. Inspired to utilize a new medium, he bought a set of pastels while in Amsterdam. Upon his return to the U.S., Burt began painting in earnest.

Through the late eighties and early nineties, Burt devoted increasingly more of his time to pastel work. For six months he apprenticed with Ben Konis, a well-respected pastelist living in Amarillo, Texas who shared his expertise in both technique and business sense. By the mid 1990's, Burt had sold his batik galleries in North Carolina and moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico to pursue a career in pastels.

"I always loved the drama of the Southwest," Burt explains. "I chose Santa Fe because I wanted to be among the artists and galleries there and because of the convergence of the Hispanic, Indian, and cowboy cultures. I love to paint the adobe architecture set along the small, winding roads around Santa Fe and throughout New Mexico."

In Santa Fe, Burt soon made another important change in his artwork, moving from pastels to acrylics, which allowed him to better capture the bold colors of the landscapes, the people, and the architecture, and to work in a larger scale.

Burt spent several years developing his style, drawing upon techniques he used in batik, silk painting, and pastel to create bold color fields and a depth of vision within his paintings. His subjects were varied, but most came from his extensive travels.

In 2003, he saw photographs taken by a friend who had visited Peru. "I knew right away I had to go," Burt says.

Burt spent a month traveling through Peru, led by a guide who was happy to show him areas not often glimpsed by foreigners. They visited small villages and traveled by back roads into the Andes. The sketches and photographs Burt compiled on the journey kept him painting furiously once he returned to Santa Fe. "In fact," Burt admits, "Peru still finds its way into my work."

A sculptor friend of Burt's took note of the artist's love for Latin culture and scenery and invited Burt to visit his home village in the mountains of Northern Mexico. Burt accepted the invitation and in the fall of 2004, the two made the journey to Huachinera, located about five hours south of the Mexican border.

During the visit, Burt was introduced to the governor of Sonora and was asked to assist in the building of the first school in Huachinera. This experience led him to purchase a plot of land and build an adobe home and studio. During his time there each year, he teaches art classes at the school he helped to construct, describing the work as deeply rewarding, a chance to give back to the community that inspired his life's work.

Burt's travels inspire a wide range of subject matter in his work. One canvas may depict the softly curving lines of a New Mexican adobe, the next a winding street in a South American village, each a colorful passport to places where time appears to stand still.

"I start a story with each of my paintings," Burt says, "but I allow the viewer to join me in finishing the story with his or her own experiences and emotions."

For his part of that story, Burt employs bold colors and reduces the scene to its most elemental and powerful components. Each painting vibrates with artistic energy and color, entertaining the eye and mind. "I want to create paintings that convey a bit of mystery and adventure," the artist says, "but also the feeling of joy." Burt currently divides his time painting and teaching in Huachinera, Santa Fe and on the open road.