

# A Look at the Most Famous Art Educator in the World: Bob Ross

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## Abstract

By some accounts, the eccentric, wild haired, happy painter, Bob Ross, is the most famous art educator in the world. This article describes Bob Ross' life and his approach to making and teaching art. We examine why Bob Ross continues to be so popular, even years after his death, as we address issues of copying, simplicity, therapy, and democratic participation, as well as reflections on the work of R. G. Collingwood, Bill Ivey, Michael Kimmelman, and the Hudson River School of painters. Implications for the field of art education are suggested.

**Key Words: Bob Ross, Landscape Painting, Kitsch, Art Education, Television, Famous Art Educator**

*New York Times* critic Michael Kimmelman (2005) calls Bob Ross (1942-1995) the most famous artist in the world. This designation is in spite of an Art World that describes his work as kitsch, or more simply, just plain bad art. When Bob Ross' name is mentioned, people seem to either smile in delight, raise an ironic eyebrow, or question why anyone would bother to discuss such a low-level artist and television character. Likewise, Bob Ross' reputation amongst academically trained art educators elicits mixed reactions. To approve of his teachings seems to fly in the face of "good" educational practices. No matter what you think of Bob Ross as a painter, his works are highly valued all over the world and the price of his landscape paintings continue to rise. And no matter what you think of him as an educator, his television programs are more popular than ever, and classes aimed at learning how to paint like Bob Ross are increasing all over the world.

Although many art educators may express disdain for Bob Ross' mechanically constructed canvases, they should not overlook Bob Ross' ability to engage audiences from diverse backgrounds. What is it about his artwork that is so compelling? How is it that his teaching methodology captures the attention of so many people around the world? What does he contribute to people's lives, which makes him important so many years after his death? Some say his work is just therapy. If this statement is true, how does his teaching approach function in this manner and is this a negative criticism of his work as an educator?

In this article, we: 1) examine who Bob Ross was and is, and why he is increasingly popular in so many places in the world, both as an artist and an educator; 2) analyze how Bob Ross fits in with some current ideas about art and art education; and 3) suggest implications from this analysis for the field of art education. However, readers looking for a biography of Bob Ross that is historically factual and accurate will not find it here. Readers also will not find our approach focused on the negative aspects of Bob Ross' art and teaching methodology. While we don't discount the importance of such an approach to Bob Ross, our purpose here is to consider art education as it has developed culturally in relationship to a legendary personality. We accomplish this purpose by using a variety of sources to tell the Bob Ross

legend and the educational culture that it supports and emerges from. Our interest is primarily in what Bob Ross and his method means to people as opposed to the creation of a historically accurate account of who he was. In this way our approach is like art historian Erika Doss' (1999) approach to Elvis Presley in her book *Elvis Culture*. Like Doss does with Elvis Presley, we are looking at Bob Ross as a cultural phenomenon sustained by those who admire him. The account that follows is based on a literary synthesis coupled with our interviews of approximately 20 people who are, in some way, contributing to the Bob Ross phenomenon. These individuals were instructors and participants in Bob Ross classes, university art students who grew up watching Bob Ross, individuals at a Bob Ross exhibition in Kissimmee, Florida, and people in Europe and the United States who have contacted us through email.

## Who Was (Is) Bob Ross?

Despite Bob Ross' international fame, no critical biography with substantiated facts exists. Kimmelman's (2005) essay is the extent of a serious critique of Bob Ross' legacy as an artist, educator, and entertainer. To our knowledge, this is the first research article associated with the field of art education published on Bob Ross. Because of this lack of serious investigation and analysis, it is as if Bob Ross exists outside of any larger artistic, educational, and/or entertainment context. Instead, the Bob Ross story is told through word of mouth, narratives recorded in fanzines, posts on message boards, blogs, Internet tribute pages, obituaries, feature stories in the popular press, *Wikipedia* entries, and Bob Ross, Inc. publications. Bob Ross' "official" and "corporate" story continues to be written by his business partner Annette Kowalski and has been published in *Brushstrokes: The Official Publication of the TV Art Club* published bi-monthly by Bob Ross, Inc. In addition, Bob Ross, Inc. also includes an about Bob Ross section on their website at <http://www.bobross.com/index.cfm>.

The following story of Bob Ross is synthesized from a variety of sources like those described above. This includes what we have learned from people we have interviewed as a part of our ongoing fieldwork associated with the Bob Ross phenomenon. This story should be read as legend. Bob Ross,

while a historical personage, seems to primarily exist as a legend akin to what is associated with people like Elvis Presley, Ram Dass, Selena, and Frida Kahlo. Bob Ross, like all of these personages, is associated with changing and saving people's lives in time of despair and tragedy through his art, his educational method, and presence (both in person and as documented on video).

Bob Ross was born in Daytona Beach, Florida on October 29, 1942 to Jack and Ollie Ross. His paternal ancestry purportedly includes members of the Cherokee. His father worked as a builder, his mother as a clerk and waitress. Bob Ross' parents divorced when he was a year and a half old. He is said to have dropped out of school in the ninth grade and began work as a carpenter sometime after that. As a child he reportedly had a pet alligator and an armadillo. Bob Ross' love of animals continued throughout his life and at one point he had a pet squirrel named Peapod.

In the early 1960s Bob Ross joined the US Air Force and was assigned to Alaska. His primary responsibility was as a medical records keeper. At this time, Bob Ross took his first painting class at the Anchorage USO Club. While in Alaska, Bob Ross used his USO Club art education as a basis for painting Alaskan landscapes on the bottom of gold pans that were sold as souvenirs. While in Alaska, Bob Ross married Linda and in the mid 1960s a son, Steve, was born. Steve Ross is said to paint and teach in the style of his father.

The 1980s are significant years in the Bob Ross story. These were the years in which Bob Ross, after retiring from the Air Force and divorcing Linda, took oil painting classes from William Alexander in Salem, Oregon. This was also the decade in which he began to teach, first as a representative of Alexander's Magic Art Supplies Company and later on his own.

In the 1960s Alexander combined landscape painting with an educational program that he made available to the public through workshops, publications, and television. Alexander was born in 1915 and died in 1997. He was a former mural and decorative painter of coaches in East Prussia, and he taught an oil painting technique across the US that he described as "wet on wet" (Alexander, 1981). This wet on wet technique allowed painters to create imagined landscapes illuminated by evocative lighting. Alexander's

purpose was about “capturing dreams and putting them on canvas” (Alexander, 1981, p. ii).

Alexander’s method of painting was communicated through personal appearances, a 1979 publication and a television show consisting of thirteen episodes broadcast on KOCE-TV in Huntington Beach, California. Alexander (1981) described his “wet on wet” technique as enabling

the artist to express freely and creatively any scene of which he or she may be thinking or dreaming. The success of the method depends upon the use of specific paints, standard as well as specialized tools and equipment, and particular techniques....The Alexander Magic White paint is essential to the success of the technique. The paint, which is used as an undercoat for almost all paintings and as a thinner for other paints, provides a wet, smooth surface on which to apply and blend colors. (p. 1)

Bob Ross built on the techniques and skills of Alexander. Beginning sometime in the late 1970s, and continuing until his death in 1995, Bob Ross produced a reported 30,000 landscape, floral, wildlife and portrait oil paintings. A large number of these paintings are landscapes using the “wet on wet technique.” A primary distinguishing characteristic between the two artists is Bob Ross’ seeming desire to create landscapes even more luminous than Alexander’s. With titles such as *Valley Waterfall*, *Delightful Meadow Home*, *Secluded Forest*, and *Golden Glow of Morning* Bob Ross depicts landscapes that, while possibly referencing what he experienced in Alaska, are clearly synthetic representations of unspoiled and uninhabited environs. If there is any evidence of the presence of people, it is through the inclusion of a single abandoned and sometimes-ruined cabin.

Eventually Bob Ross left the employ of Alexander and the Magic Art Supplies Company. Building on Alexander’s method of teaching oil painting, Bob Ross, with the backing of a business partner and student Annette Kowalski, made oil painting instructional broadcast tapes at a Washington, DC area TV station. Together they are packaged as the *Joy of Painting*. In the same year another series of episodes were taped as the *Joy of Painting II* at WIPB in Muncie, Indiana.

Simultaneous with the telecast of the *Joy of Painting*, Ross traveled around the country teaching the “wet on wet” oil painting technique as applied to landscapes and wildlife. He purportedly taught his workshop at a World’s Fair. In the mid 1980s he traveled in a truck he called the “white warehouse on wheels.”

A decade after launching himself as an artist and art educator, a *New York Times* article (Stanley, 1991) described the Bob Ross television show as being the top rated art program carried on 277 public television stations. Bob Ross, Inc. was described overall as a fifteen million dollar enterprise comprised of books, videos, and art supplies. There were 300 certified instructors and a million Bob Ross painters.

Four years later, Bob Ross died of lymphoma on July 4, 1995. He was at the height of his popularity. A *Washington Post* obituary (Bob Ross PBS Instructor, 1995) reported that 2.5 million copies of his books were in print and that there were 1,000 Ross certified art teachers. Four hundred and three installments of the *Joy of Painting* had been taped. Following his death, Bob Ross’ popularity continued to grow. Those wishing to view his paintings first-hand could visit a permanent exhibit on the walls and ceiling at a Bob Ross, Inc. gallery and teaching studio in New Smyrna Beach, Florida. In the mid 1990s a New Orleans Rock Band formed with the name “Bob Ross Experience.” In 2003 an animated Bob Ross and Jerry Springer fight took place in MTV *Celebrity Death Match*. It was also possible to play Bob Ross video games. In 2004 Bob Ross appeared on Stankiewicz’s history of art education timeline as a significant event in the 1980s (1983) along with Serrano, Haring, Watchmen comics, and the opening of the National Museum of Women in the Arts (<http://www.personal.psu.edu/faculty/m/a/mas53/timelint.html>). Bob Ross t-shirts have been sold through Urban Outfitters, Target, and by independent t-shirt artists. Demonstrating that the Bob Ross image still has power in the popular imagination, Nitrozac and Snaggy (2010) in their *The Joy of Tech* comic pictured Bob Ross in front of a painting of the Gulf of Mexico stating,

ONCE YOU’VE PAINTED YOUR HAPPY OCEAN, TAKE A BLOB OF OIL AND START BY DABBING, USING THE CORNER OF THE

BRUSH...AS YOU WORK ACROSS THE WATER, PUSH A LITTLE HARDER, SPREADING MORE, THEN JUST GO ON AND ON, SMEARING THE OIL EVERYWHERE. AND DON'T FORGET THE HAPPY LITTLE TAR BALLS...

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The continuing power of the Bob Ross image is also exemplified through the 450 public television stations that now broadcast his show reaching 93.5 households. The show is broadcast in Japan, Mexico, the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Turkey, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Germany, Switzerland, Belgium, Austria, Costa Rica and Canada. Five million copies of Bob Ross' books are in print and there are 3,000 certified instructors in the US alone (Bob Ross, Television's Favorite Artist, 2010).

### **Bob Ross' Instructive Power**

The Bob Ross method of oil painting should be understood as a part of the larger context of artists who develop techniques for teaching people (mostly thought of as "hobbyists") how to quickly learn oil painting. As discussed earlier, Bob Ross developed his technique and curriculum after studying and working with William Alexander. After a year of having Bob Ross as a pupil, Alexander invited Ross to assist him in his educational enterprise.

Alexander can be associated with the crafts industry that served hobbyists who emerged after World War II. This industry, in turn, grew out of industrialization in nineteenth century America bringing leisure to many people for the first time. Gelber (1999) argues in *Hobbies: Leisure and the Culture of Work in America*, that a basic distrust and discomfort with free time encouraged Americans to engage in hobbies of various types including crafts. Painting was among those crafts that people chose to engage in because of the availability and portability of materials. According to Gelber, classes and publications of various types were available to people who wanted to learn to paint. Engaging with crafts and other hobbies was seen as virtuous in that they kept idle hands from engaging in the devils work.

While art instruction through correspondence, television, or other forms of media is not unique to Bob Ross, what is unique is what Bob Ross' method promises. Those who use the method, or even watch a painting being created through the method, are promised not only a finished product, worthy of framing, in a relatively short amount of time, but also "joy." Testimonials by those who have participated in the Bob Ross method confirm that the method delivers on what is promised. In our fieldwork associated with the Bob Ross phenomenon we routinely encountered people who attributed the method to getting them through depression, divorces, major illnesses, and bouts of loneliness, despair, and isolation. For example, Danny Coeyman, an emerging artist with an MFA, was inspired by Bob Ross as a child. Coeyman says he spoke quietly, but he acted quickly. He communicated with others, but he was in his own introspective world and his overall sense of presence in the world was inspiring.

The effect Bob Ross has on people should not be underestimated. As Kimmelman (2005) claims, his purpose "was as much to massage souls as it was to teach painting" (p. 34). Understanding that Bob Ross' purpose was to promote hope, he backs up his claim by referring to words the teacher used with his students: "This is your world on this piece of canvas. . . . You can do anything that you heart desires here. You have absolute power. This is the only place in the world I have power. Here, I am dictator—boy, I can do anything here, anything, and you can too" (p. 34). According to Coeyman, Bob Ross teaches that we can all be godly because we can all create. The kicker is that this creative power can be easily captured; we only need to believe (have faith) and pick up a paintbrush—the right paintbrush at the right moment.

Even his partner, Annette Kowalski acknowledges and promotes Bob Ross' power to change the world. *Bob Ross' New Joy of Painting* (Kowalski, 1993) begins with a tribute, where she describes the method as a way to access the creativity that each of us possesses. She reports having found in Bob Ross and his method a way to deal with personal tragedy. She also recounts acquiring from Bob Ross a concern for nature and the environment. She describes his voice as a "liquid tranquilizer" that allowed her to "face the future with a positive outlook" (n.p. Introduction). Kowalski writes that Bob



Ross advised his students that “there is no failure in painting, only learning” and saying that “I hope you never create a painting that you’re totally satisfied with, for it’s this dissatisfaction that will create the motivation necessary for you to start your next painting, armed with the knowledge you acquired from the previous one” (n.p. Introduction). Bob Ross advises his students that there “are no great mysteries to painting. You need only the desire, a few basic techniques and a little practice” (n.p. Introduction). Through practice “confidence as well as your ability will increase at an unbelievable rate” (n.p. Introduction). Ultimately, Kowalski argues that the Bob Ross method is a way of life. She writes,

By making Bob Ross and ‘The Joy of Painting’ a part of our lives, it’s more than an interlude, much more than just a pleasant half-hour experience. We are developing a healthy, lifelong interest in nature’s beauty, and in our own personal sense of expression. (n.p. The Author)

Even more dramatic, she quotes Bob Ross in saying, “While *The Joy of Painting* might be responsible for creating the spark, it is you, viewer and friend, who has nurtured and fed the spark into a warm and wonderful glowing fire” (n.p. The Author).

Today the Bob Ross method of oil painting can be learned through repeats of the television show, DVDs, books, and by taking classes with Bob Ross, Inc. certified instructors. Certified instructors teach classes in craft stores, shopping malls, and in their homes, and certification is advertised as open to anyone. Tuition for a certification course of study is approximately \$375.00. In the US, certification is offered in New Smyrna Beach, Florida; Portland, Oregon; and Chantilly, Virginia, among other locations.

Certification is by genre: Landscape (CRI), Floral (CRFI), Wildlife (CRWI), and Portrait (CRPI). There are three levels per genre for certification in that genre. Completion of each level requires attendance in classes over five days 9 AM – 5 PM each day. Across the levels and genres pre-service Bob Ross instructors learn design foundations, use of tools and techniques, strategies for motivating students, strategies for correcting student work, product sourcing, class set up, promotion, and job

opportunities. Certified instructors are able to teach “make it and take it” courses as well as creating an environment that stimulates “joy.” Participating in these classes requires 124 hours of instruction per certificate level. At a university on the quarter system this would equate to the clock hours associated with three four credit courses.

As a part of our research on the Bob Ross phenomenon we both talked to people who have worked with the method and participated in classes. In July 2004 we took a Bob Ross landscape painting class with landscape certified instructor David Wensel at the Bob Ross Gallery in New Smyrna Beach, Florida. As mentioned earlier, the walls and ceiling of this gallery are covered with paintings by Bob Ross as well as Annette Kowalski. In addition to hosting classes, the gallery sells Bob Ross painting supplies and is a frame shop.

Upon entering the gallery, workstations were set up for seven participants, ranging in age from seven to over sixty. At each station was a canvas, brushes, paint on a palette, and solvents. A few simple pencil marks had been drawn on the canvas to guide us in the placement of the landscape elements such as the horizon line and the larger and smaller trees. A lavender color was mixed for us because, as we were told, of the time it would take for each of us to accomplish that task. Over the next two to two and a half hours, our teacher led us through the process of creating a landscape painting modeled after a finished painting by Wensel in the style of Bob Ross.

Several people in the room previously had taken painting classes. One participant claimed to have painted “hundreds” of Bob Ross style paintings. Some, like us, were newcomers. Some expressed some anxiety about participating, claiming they had no talent. Step by step we were instructed in several of the Bob Ross techniques for creating a landscape bathed in evocative lighting. Our instructor only used the most positive language to guide us through the process. If we were having difficulty with one of the techniques, as Blandy did in achieving the details on the trees, our instructor asked if he could take our hands and guide us through the technique. His goal was to create an environment in which each of us could achieve the desired effects that he was teaching. No one failed. Wensel encouraged all

of us to take pride in our work and to express this pride through the purchase of a frame for our painting at the conclusion of the class. No one seemed to mind this suggestion and several people did purchase a frame for their painting.

We also learned from Wensel that he himself had used the Bob Ross method of painting to transcend significant health and financial problems. Wensel spoke enthusiastically about the sense of community that is possible when people believe that everyone can become an artist and that by engaging with the Bob Ross method one can experience personal satisfaction, delight, well being, and peace. Not only do students learn to paint, they learn to find joy in the world through participation.

The goals that are set out by the Bob Ross method seem to be accomplished. Students learn how to paint in a step-by-step process, and finish a painting. All the participants also experienced pleasure in the process. Although we did not purchase a frame or hang our works, we delighted in the experience. The therapeutic goal, at least to some degree, seems to have been accomplished.

As Kimmelman (2005) points out, Bob Ross understood that people need an outlet away from the stress and demands of their everyday lives. Wenzel explains, "It's not a great art school thing; it's a community thing. Some [students] come for years." According to Wenzel, Annette Kowalski started the New Smyrna Beach studio in the early 1990s when she was planning a barbecue and went to the grocery store to purchase some food. She saw some old men sitting on a bench by the Publix grocery store. Kowalski thought they needed something to do and she immediately decided she was going to go get a coffee pot and some cookies and tell the men to come and paint.

The instructional power associated with the Bob Ross method can be associated with a variety of circumstances. Some of these circumstances are societal as, for example, the changing nature of work and leisure in the United States and elsewhere. Also contributing to the power of the method is Bob Ross' adamant belief that his method will result in personal transformation and the charismatic personality through which this message continues to be delivered through a variety of media. In addition, the

strategic thinking of Kowalski cannot be underestimated in contributing to the power of the method through her oversight of the institutionalization and commercialization of instruction through Bob Ross, Inc. This corporation provides an extensive worldwide infrastructure through which the method is communicated and sustained. This includes the certification of instructors; the production of media; the production and distribution of supplies; and the ongoing management and control of a posthumous personality.

There may be other reasons why Bob Ross is so successful today. Our need for instant gratification is rewarded as is our desire to think of ourselves as creative, something most of us are told when we are young, perhaps by an elementary art teacher. If art educators encourage us all to be creative, to be artists, this is one way we can respond to a deep-seeded need to participate in the world as artists.

## **Implications for the Field of Art Education**

It has been easy for academically trained art educators to dismiss or ignore Bob Ross' influence and his teachings as unworthy of attention. His paintings may be thought of as poorly done work and his teachings simplistic. But we believe there Bob Ross' paintings and teachings have merit.

The Hudson River School painters created their work from about 1825 to 1875. Like these artists, Bob Ross painted images of untouched areas of natural beauty. The most influential artist in the Hudson River School is Frederic Church (1826-1900) who was the only pupil of Thomas Cole (1801-1848). Church had a keen observant eye. He naturalistically painted American scenery in vivid detail as if he had examined all its individual parts before creating a composition that scanned a huge vista. He presents the viewer with the wonder of nature with detailed foliage in the foreground that might also include such delights as butterflies and bird nests. Many critics, including the influential John Ruskin saw art, nature, and morality as linked together through spirituality (Craven, 2003).

Bob Ross' work also depicts a somewhat detailed foreground and towering mountaintops in the background. Ross encourages his students to create their own details as he invites painters to imagine their own worlds by making their paintings their own. Like Church, Bob Ross also took great

pleasure in the landscape, especially the mountains which he grew to love while he was stationed in the military in Alaska. Revisiting this land of peacefulness for Bob Ross took place every time he painted a mountain scene. If Church's purpose was to elicit caring for the earth, Bob Ross' goals were also oriented in this direction. But was Ross as powerful in reaching his goals as Church was (and is)—especially given the fact that we might all agree that Church's paintings, as works of art, are far better executed?

The philosopher R. G. Collingwood (1889-1943) wrote about aesthetic ideas after Church's time and before Bob Ross became a globally recognized figure. He expressed the importance of collaboration in art and aesthetic theory. Like Church and Bob Ross, Collingwood was interested in the imagination. He felt that the experience of a spectator can repeat the rich and highly organized experience of a person who has created a painting. By looking at the work, the viewer is painting as well. That is why, as so many people would agree, we "see more in a really good picture of a given subject than we do in the subject itself" (Collingwood, 1997/1945, p. 288). Furthermore, Collingwood claims, we "can never absolutely know that the imaginative experience we obtain from a work of art is identical with that of the artist" (p. 228). Something more than mere concrete collaboration can happen between a painter and a viewer. According to Collingwood, this happens when viewers' own imaginative powers and experiences are triggered and activated. The participant (in the case of Bob Ross, a student viewer or painter) then becomes an artist. The trick that has worked so well for Ross, is that he not only transports someone to the scene in a way that sparks someone's imagination, he also invites them to actually create with oil paint, extending the creative possibilities to numerous people in a way that is easily accessible.

Collingwood believed that the idea of artist as genius that was prevalent in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was dying away. Furthermore, Collingwood did not feel that an artist needed to be technically an expert in order to elicit powerful collaboration with his/her audience. He wrote, "An artist need not be a slave to the technical theory, in order to feel that his [or her] audience's approbation is relevant to the question whether he [or she] has done his [or her] work well or ill" (p. 290). Collingwood recognized that

every artist takes his or her lead from other artists (Ross learned from Alexander and he teaches in a very prescribed step-by-step manner) One cannot invent, claims Collingwood, every aspect of a work of art. “everything he [or she] does is done in relation to others like himself [or herself]” (p. 291). So a work of art is a collaboration, partly from those whose works we borrow from, who are, one way or another, our teachers. We utilize the work of others in order to make our own work.

What we are suggesting here is that, in part, Bob Ross’s aesthetic power is in his ability to impart to others two things: 1) the collaborative experience of spiritually loving the landscapes that are depicted in much the same way as someone might respond to the work of Frederic Church, and 2) communicating the aesthetic idea that one could plagiarize the work of Ross and in this role become an artist him or herself.

While this second point might disturb many people, we must recognize the numerous students who work in his style with seriousness and pleasure. Many university art students give credit to Ross for getting them started as artists and allowing them believe that being an artist was a role they could take for themselves.

As Michael Kimmelman (2005) wrote:

Ross thereby touched on a basic reason for making art—to have a place to indulge your id and comfort our ego, an area of authority, where perhaps, secondarily, with luck and a little effort, you might make something good enough to hang on a wall or show to strangers. Ross’s message was: You may feel hemmed in by work or by family, but before an easel (or by implication, at a piano keyboard, or in a dance studio, or typing our novel) you are your own master. (p. 34)

Kimmelman understands that Ross’s goal was not to make a “good” painting in the traditional sense of what a “good” painting was. He didn’t even care if any one was painting along with him as he did his television show. Only about 3% of his audience did (Kimmelman 2005, p. 34). Most watched to marvel at his skillful ability to quickly paint a landscape, disrupting that idea of art taking years of laborious work to learn. It makes student

artists happy, and it releases them from the confines of their everyday issues. It is, as Kimmelman says, about “deliverance” for just a short while (p. 34). Not only is this a deliverance from the worries of one’s daily chores, economic situation, and fear of the future, it moves the viewer into a world where “ozone holes, melting ice caps, Amazon deforestation, rising temperatures, [and] acid rain” are not issues. Ross’s landscapes are not depictions of flooded cities, destroyed farmlands, collapsed skyscrapers, or chemical poisoning” now portrayed in so many of images of the land (Harris, 1994, p. 99). Instead, with both a Church and a Ross painting, we can move ourselves into a healthy world of therapeutic and spiritual healing.

Many scholars have written about how we have become a consumer culture, thereby inhibiting our creative capacities. Marketing forces in the United States have reshaped us from people who make art into people who consume culture. According to Bill Ivey (2008), a folklorist and former chair of the National Endowment for the Arts,

The notion of participating was reshaped—its sense of doing replaced by passive activities like purchasing a recording or attending a concert or exhibition. If we think of expressive life as split between the culture we *take in* and the culture we *create*, the commoditization of emerging art forms up the taking in (consumption) at the expense of making art. (p. 9)

Ivey wants to see a return to the amateur artist, precisely the kind of artist that Bob Ross engages with his teachings. Just as the being an amateur guitarist provided Ivey with part time work when he was a graduate student, it also connected him to a career heading a nonprofit music organization and later the National Endowment for the Arts. Although he never attempted to be a professional musician and didn’t directly make much money from his guitar playing or teaching, being an amateur guitarist provided him with “multiple pleasures of a rich expressive life” (p. 105). When he took risks with his guitar playing, it was, he explains, a matter of choice, and not connected to job performance. It provided him with self-esteem that was disconnected from a world of money, power and “other conventional markers of success and achievement” (p. 106). He further

explains, “Economists claim there is only a fixed amount of status in the world, but art and art making can create a parallel universe that offers new and unlimited ways to succeed” (p. 106). These kinds of skills, says Ivey, are “treasured skills” (p. 106).

The amateur artist is a hobbyist and Ross cleverly promoted popular therapeutic ideas about casual art making (Kimmelman, 2005, p. 106). For the most part, says Kimmelman, it is cheaper than psychotherapy and drug rehabilitation. It expands the parameters of a well-lived life. Bob Ross gives his participants (who create or watch) a reason to believe in creativity as he teaches kindness and forgiveness. For him, “There are no mistakes, only happy accidents,” a metaphor that can read like “making lemonade out of lemons.” Perhaps it is too simple and too corny for some, but Bob Ross’s art and the lessons he teaches in making it have worked now for decades for people all over the world.

If making art Bob Ross style allows participants to “indulge our drive toward success and self-realization without forcing us to buy into the nastiness of American’s unhappy rat race” (Ivey, 2008, p. 106), then we should embrace the work of Bob Ross whether his amateur artist students follow his directions to the tee or veer off in another direction after getting his basic lessons or simply a jump-start into the world of painting. Ross gives us both security (a way to begin, a way to succeed) and adventure (the idea of moving into territory that seemed illusive and made for only a select few). Bob Ross has provided thousands of people all over the world with personal satisfaction, possibly modest achievement, and the admiration of a small select group of family members and friends. Ivey is probably right when he claims that our schools don’t provide this kind of art education (Ivey 2005).

## Conclusion

Our purpose in this article is to consider Bob Ross as legend, artist, educator, and ultimately a cultural phenomenon. In doing so we suggested reasons for his continuing popularity. We also positioned Bob Ross, the followers that surround him, and the commercial enterprise that in some ways stimulates this following within current ideas about art and art education. Our hope is that readers will take from this article a view of art



education that is holistic and systemic and that as such can be studied as a larger cultural phenomenon. Our meaning here is that while art education may be commonly understood to be associated with K-12 education and museums it is in actually much broader based and includes many other community based venues such as the home, places of worship, hobby associations, community arts centers, and commercial enterprises such as Bob Ross, Inc. Viewing art education in this way encourages a deeper understanding about how and what is learned in the arts across cultures and interest groups. Viewing art education in this way also permits the possibility of examining the conceptual boundaries that may limit our view of what constitutes art education while simultaneously allowing us to explore the intersections and hybridizations that are occurring.

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