

Happy Accidents

By Dennis Knight

I will often flip channels on a Saturday afternoon, going back and forth between athletes in pads and helmets and artists in smocks and aprons. I enjoy watching both, but strictly as a spectator. My admiration for Peyton Manning hasn't prompted me to buy a football, Julia Child doesn't inspire me to get a blowtorch and Tom Silva hasn't sent me off for a pneumatic nail gun. I will admit, however, I have more than once had to resist an urge to shop for lathes after spending thirty minutes with Norm Abrams and the New Yankee Workshop.

My passive arts and crafts fascination started with watching Bob Ross and the Joy of Painting. He was a Florida native who dropped out of school, enlisted in the Air Force at seventeen, and spent most of his career in Alaska. He was so inspired by the mountains of his new state that he took to capturing their beauty on canvas. Ross adopted a quick method in oils called "wet on wet." It was a matter of layering wet paint on top of wet paint.

Ross studied the new technique under a German painter named Bill Alexander, and it came so naturally to him that he soon was earning more from his paintings than he could in the Air Force. So he retired as a master sergeant and sold his way into a new gig as the host of The Joy of Painting on PBS. He would instruct viewers in his soothing voice and slow pace, but his technique was quick and strong, and the show soon became a hit around the world.

Ross hosted the Joy of Painting for free, recording entire thirteen-episode seasons in two days, with practically no production costs. Not only did he take no pay, he donated all of his paintings to PBS stations. His earnings, and they were in the millions, came from selling Bob Ross branded art supplies, books and videotapes, and from hundreds of Bob Ross trained and franchised teachers.

His speedy technique often found him dripping a little paint or applying an unplanned stroke, but he always celebrated that happenstance with his famous catch phrase, "we don't make mistakes, we just have happy accidents". A stray blob of black would be coaxed into a granite stone and the show would go on. It was a rare episode that didn't feature at least one such happy accident.

In thirty happy minutes, with oils, a knife and a happy two-inch brush, Bob Ross could produce a masterpiece with happy mountains, happy trees, happy little clouds, a happy little accident, and make happy talk through the whole happy episode. They say a picture is worth a thousand words, but I say it isn't fair. It will take me all night to paint that picture in prose, and they've rationed me five hundred lousy words to do it. I'm going to need a pot of coffee, a thesaurus and some happy damned accidents.