

Why and How Bob Ross was WRONG



by Miles Mathis

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Just my opinion as a professional working artist

I will start this by reminding you who I am. If you are just getting here, you may know me only as that guy who claims everything is fake or scripted. Well, before I became that guy, I was a successful painter in the Southwest Art scene, working with many of the top realist galleries in the region. I also did classical portraits in oils and pastels, mostly working with women and children, who were my specialty. I was known as one of the top pastellists in the world, and I was doing things no one else was doing in the contemporary markets. I taught myself to paint by reading old books and copying the Old Masters in museums, here and in Europe. I used traditional techniques few use anymore, including priming my own linen canvases with white lead and grinding some of my own colors with a mortar and pestle. So if you are saying “how dare I criticize the great Bob Ross?”, this is how:



Just so you know, I did not paint that with two-inch house painting brushes in under 30 minutes. I also did not trace it from a projected slide or use a computer to help me produce it. It was painted the old way: drawn free-hand and completed over many hours and days. It looks far better and richer in person. My paints, brushes, canvas, ground, and even thinner is completely different than that of Bob Ross. Most of his paintings are hidden in storage by the Kowalskis, and my guess it is because they are already falling apart. That painting of mine will last hundreds of years, because it is painted with the same things used by the Old Masters, and their paintings have lasted that long, most of them with little diminishment.

The painting by Ross under title is now up for sale at a gallery in Minneapolis that is asking almost \$10 million for it. It is the first painting he did on PBS for his series, so it is being sold as a rarity. Sad, since it is obviously just some creepy people trying to cash in on a dead man's fame. Ross was a cute guy who put on a good show, and I have no problem with his everyman appeal. But paintings like that are done with some simple tricks and are a dime a dozen. You can get pretty much the same thing for a few dollars in any Goodwill store, minus the fancy frame. Look at the huge signature in red obliterating a quarter of the painting. You have to laugh. It should be TOSS. As in toss this in the garbage.

But it is even worse than that, as I was reminded today. One of the outlets reporting on this new story was nice enough to link to that [first show of Bob Ross on PBS](#), and it was very informative for me, as it will be for you now. In it, Ross explains his entire technique, including his paints, brushes, and even his brush cleaner. His brush cleaner is odorless paint thinner. He says, "We don't use turpentine". Why do I care? Why have I stopped my usual production of earth-shattering research to comment on cute little Bob Ross and his brush cleaner? Because tens of thousands of aspiring artists have followed Ross's recommendations over the decades. They have long sold all his products as part of the blitz to cash-in on his fame, and that includes Bob Ross odorless paint thinner. If you do a general search on odorless paint thinner, the first result, promoted by Bing, is this question: "what odorless paint thinner does Bob Ross use?" Problem is, that crap is actually far *worse* for you than turpentine.

To start with, it is worse for your paint layers, since of course it gets into your painting. Turpentine, made from pine tree sap, is completely natural, so it mixes perfectly with traditional paints. You can use it safely as a medium since it can live in that paint layer with the oils for centuries. The same isn't true of odorless paint thinner or turpenoid, which is made from naphtha, toluene, and acetone. Mineral spirits made from oil or gas are far stronger than turpentine, both in odor and their ability to dissolve paint, so they aren't good in paint layers. While good turpentine smells nice, mineral spirits smell like death. Naphtha has been around for centuries and the Old Masters knew about it, but they didn't use it as a medium or brush cleaner. Hardware store turpentine is fairly weak compared to mineral spirits, and is actually less aromatic than the refined or distilled turp they still sell as an art supply. This distilled turp evaporates faster, smells worse, and is worse for your paint, plus it costs far more. It is just too strong. Which is why I have been recommending hardware store turp (the old gum spirits of turpentine) for decades.

The bigger problem is one regarding health, and that is why I am here today. Ross died very young at age 52 of lymphoma. They want you to think it was due to smoking, but I don't think it was. Notice he didn't die of lung or throat cancer. I suspect he died from a combination of factors, only one of which was the smoking. The other was that odorless painter thinner he was breathing all day, evaporating from that big open can. I have seen other artists die of that or similar things. The great Spanish portrait painter Joachin Torrents Llado, who influenced me, died at age 47 in 1993 from a combination of smoking and bad art products, and I happen to know that his doctor confirmed that diagnosis. His

doctor told him the combination was lethal and that he should stop immediately, but he either didn't listen or couldn't quit. He was using a new medium made up especially for him, based on mineral spirits and a special retarder, to keep the paint from drying so fast. Like Ross, he was painting wet into wet, but unlike Ross he wasn't completing paintings in 30 minutes. He needed the paint to remain wet for days, and this product allowed that. But I could tell it was toxic the first time I encountered it. It smelled like death. I wouldn't stay in the room after he started using it. It killed him in just a few years.

Odorless paint thinners are even more dangerous, since they lull you into a false sense of security. Because turpentine smells, you can tell how much is in the air. If it gets too thick you can cover the can or open a window. But with the odorless stuff, you don't know how much is in the air. Because there is no odor, you think you are safer. Nope. Just the opposite. The lack of odor just hides the fact that mineral spirits are more toxic than turpentine to start with. I think the odorless ones should be illegal, since they have killed many people, probably including Bob Ross.

As I continued to [watch Ross videos](#) [minute 1:00 and 1:57], I could see Ross slapping that big brush into the thinner over and over, pulling it out dripping, wiping it on some big rag off-camera, then flapping it around to dry it further, sometimes on his leg. Thinner is flying around everywhere. Oh my God! Not a happy little studio. Even his cameraman probably died of cancer.

The best thing you can do is use hardware store turpentine and keep it covered at all times. Yes, this makes it a little more inconvenient, since you have to uncover the can each time you dip. But that is the only way you can keep it out of the air. The other trick is to change your wiping rags often and be sure to throw the old ones outside as soon as you switch. Same for brushes you aren't using. If they have been impregnated with turp in the early stages and you aren't using them in the latter stages, toss them outside until you finish. This is what I do and I have never had any problems. My lungs and lymphs are fine at age 60. I know that some people paint or even draw in masks or respirators, but that isn't necessary. It is taking it too far, in my opinion. If you work with caution and discipline and common sense, you don't need masks. As we now know from Covid, masks have their own health risks, and I personally would never do anything that required a mask for more than a few minutes. I use a respirator when sanding a white lead ground, but otherwise not. I have been tested three times for lead, and tested *lower* than normal every time.

I just asked Bing “why is turpentine outlawed in California?” The first answer is this:

[Turpentine is a mucosal irritant that causes inflammation in the nasal and respiratory tracts and ocular irritation. California has banned mineral spirits, which contain volatile organic compounds \(VOCs\), to keep the air healthy for all residents](#)

But wait, that isn't even true. Mineral spirits come from petroleum and turpentine isn't a mineral spirit. It doesn't come from petroleum. It comes from pine sap. Plus, mineral spirits *aren't* banned in California. They are available to this day, and I have recently bought both mineral spirits and odorless mineral spirits, both of which are worse for you than turpentine and don't work as well. It is only turpentine that is unavailable. So what's up? My guess is the oil companies don't want the competition from turpentine anymore and are phasing it out nationwide. California is just the tip of the spear. The usual monopoly posing as environmentalism or health.

OK, I have provided my public service announcement for the day, and hopefully that will save many lives. Let's move on.

Part of Ross's appeal, beyond the “happy little tree” and “almighty sky” stuff, was his sermon that everyone was an artist. He sold that from the very beginning, opening his first show with it. In one way it is true: everyone is creative and it is great for them to create things. But in the modern world it isn't left at that. In the twentieth century that idea was expanded and mangled so that it could be used as a weapon against people like me. Which is why I take this all a bit personally. Unless you have been reading the top art magazines over the past 75 years and following mainstream art criticism, you may not know that the kind of art I do has been WAY out of fashion since about 1910. More than out of fashion, practically forbidden. It is not even considered to be art anymore, and they try to shame people like me as soon as we get out of highschool. Everyone is taught that realism is passe, backward, sexist, patriarchal, and now I suppose supremacist. It is equated to Nazi illustration. It is not taught at the university or college level, and it has been strongly censured for many decades. If you show a realist portfolio in college, you are laughed off campus.

But many people don't know this because they try to hide it. Watching TV or films, you would think realism is alive and well in US colleges. For instance, in *Felicity* she was shown taking art classes at New York University, and they are painting one another's portraits. One problem: that hasn't happened since about 1940. No traditional art of that sort has been allowed for many decades. If you want to learn to draw or paint in New York City, you have to go to the Art Students League or someplace like that, and even there Modernism has infiltrated.

So that is the attack from one side. Old fashioned art is “over”, so people like me are in the same category as cobblers or coopers. On the other side is this idea sold by Ross and many others that “everyone is an artist”. As promoted by Ross, the idea may have been relatively benign (or not), but when used by art critics it is anything but. In [an older paper](#) we saw Jerry Saltz at *New York Magazine* saying pretty much the same thing, but his intent was malignity incarnate. Talented artists are the worst enemy of Modernism, since if art returns to its old definitions, all these Modern phonies are out of a job. So they have to bury people like me a second time by telling people that there is no such thing as talent and that anyone can paint pictures. It is true that anyone can paint pictures: no one is stopping them, and if they enjoy it, fine. But not anyone can paint a really fine picture, and Bob Ross certainly never did. He painted the same pine-tree landscape every week for eleven years because he couldn't paint anything else. He couldn't paint people, animals, cars, flowers, or even most trees. In that first show we see him bragging that you don't need any drawing on the canvas to start with: you just make it up as you go. Not much of a brag: it just showed he couldn't draw. Drawing has been seen as the basis for painting for 2500 years, but Ross drove right around that, selling his tricks as an improvement that allowed anyone to be an artist. Except that it didn't. At best it allowed his viewers to paint the same pine tree landscape over and over like he did. That doesn't make you an artist.

Jerry Saltz is even worse than Bob Ross, since he can't even paint a pine tree. Just triangles. But he wants you to believe he is the equal or better of Michelangelo and Leonardo because he is a Modern and paints from his feelings. Moderns are psychologically aware, politically active, *au courant*. Their art “has a critical function”. It “deconstructs its milieu”. In others words these folks are the cutting edge of woke, and were woke long before you were born. They have always been the cats pajamas of psychologism. They can talk you out of your shorts, your wallet, your taxes, and your rationality.

But they have never created anything beautiful in 120 years.

Which is of course why they want to outlaw beauty, and why for more than a century they did.

I know what some of you will say. You will say or think I am just being a snob. But if so you misunderstand the entire dynamic here. If I were richer or more famous or had more promotion than Bob Ross, and I decided to attack him in this way, then you might rightly call me a snob. A snob is a rich guy who hits down. Go reread the definition. But Ross had heavy promotion from the beginning, while I had almost none. Ross and his heirs have made millions, while I have barely paid rent in most years. I am poorer now than I was thirty years ago. The ceiling is very low in realism and I hit it very quickly. I could have sold out and made a bit more money, it is true, but you know how I am. I couldn't do it. Even if I had I would never have been given a big show in New York, been written up in the big mags, or been promoted like the artists of Modernism. Realism is allowed to exist, but it is still very small.

I already had too much ambition for the Southwest Art scene in the early 1990s, and my galleries were trying to squash me to fit their clientele. While I wanted to paint big multi-figure scenes like Van Dyck, they wanted me to paint little florals and cafe scenes and colorful Southwest landscapes. It was hard to move my figures and nudes and character studies. Some wouldn't show my drawings, though drawing was my forte. Others wouldn't hang charcoals or pencils. A couple refused nudes.

Classical art had already been destroyed long before I was born, and by the time I hit the market in 1990 it had been moldering in a shallow grave for eighty years already. Realism had been squashed into a few tiny niche markets in the Southwest, held together over the decades by a handful of cowboy artists and landscapists. On the East Coast it had been wiped down to a single living family: the Wyeths. In the 1990s a small resurgence began, so tired were people by then of Modernism and all its false claims of relevance. By 2000 that resurgence had even hit New York, at which time the Moderns rushed in to infiltrate and coopt any market power realism had. But mostly, I think, they still wanted to snuff it out. It would always remain a danger to the Moderns since talent is not something you can predict, control, or keep in the families. Art remains an adjunct of the social register, and that was not going to change. So promoted realism had to be fit to the abilities of their own kids, leading to stuff [like this](#).



Since paintings like that are achieved by copying photos or slides, that gave the Modern critics the opportunity to jump back in with the “anyone can do it” claim again. Anyone can project and trace a slide. That's a little harder than painting like Bob Ross, since although it uses tricks, it does require a bit of drawing, or at least tracing. Most people would take longer than 30 minutes to trace that and then paint it, because the details can't be faked with large brushes. But my point is it once again sullied realism, by giving your average person a completely faulty idea about what art is or what an artist is, probably on purpose. Like Ross, the guy who painted that—Tim Eitel—was the beneficiary of a huge amount of promotion. Ross was promoted because he was Air Force and Eitel was promoted because he is social register, but neither were promoted because they created great paintings.

So on the one hand, your average person gets the idea art is about connections or sales; while on the other hand—on the question of technique—he gets the idea realism is about magic little hacks like those of Ross or copying photos like Eitel. And if he digs a little deeper, he may come across David Hockney's promoted theory that even the Old Masters cheated, using camera obscuras and so on. The end product being a complete misunderstanding and purposeful destruction of my field.

What the Moderns have wanted to do all along is destroy all distinctions, telling you there is no real difference between Ross, Eitel, me, Wyeth, and Leonardo, sweeping us all into the dustbin. Critics from Clement Greenberg to Adam Gopnik did that, attacking Leonardo by name. For them, realism is realism, and it is all anti-intellectual, unrealized, myopic, and otherwise retarded. Only someone mentally deficient would want to do it. Ross is given a pass because he was cute and stayed in his lane, and because he was Air Force. Eitel is given a pass because he is a rich kid and they are trying to coopt realism through him. Leonardo and Wyeth are dead and therefore unshamable. But me, I am still alive and kicking, and as you know I kick hard. So the screws have to be kept turning there. They have to keep assigning agents to me and whacking them with a stick, to make sure they keep at it even after I have scarred them for life.

There's also a not-so-subtle connection between Bob Ross's sale of art as an equal opportunity game and the way my enemies online always complain about my ego. You may have wondered why they always lead with that. Why not address the arguments in my papers, either regarding physics, art, or history, showing exactly where and why I am wrong? Well, it isn't only because they aren't capable of that. It is because they know that Americans have been brought up from the cradle on this “all men are created equal” idea, and that has been tortured to where now the worst possible sin in the eyes of many is thinking you know something others don't. If they can convince you I have an ego, you are supposed to ditch me based on that alone. They need to create hate and division, and this is the easiest way to do it in my case.

Of course it is selectively enforced, but you aren't supposed to remember that. It is OK if your favorite hero from Hollywood or sports or politics or science has an ego, since that is understandable. Those people are demigods. But if anyone not anointed by the mainstream believes in himself, he needs to be beaten down or ostracized immediately.

In the same way, Bob Ross's equal-time rule is selectively applied. Everyone is an artist, but not everyone is a . . . NBA player, for instance. In Modern America, almost no one feels slighted in having to admit they are not an NBA player. I can admit it and you probably can, too. No matter how much I studied or practiced basketball, or how many tricks I learned, or how many contacts I made, I was never going to be an NBA player. Why? Talent. I was not tall enough or fast enough, I couldn't run, I didn't have the stamina, and I would have been run over by those big guys. It was never going to happen. We all had to deal with that and most of us have. So why isn't it the same in art? Why does

everyone expect to have artistic talent, feeling slighted when they don't? In part it is because they have been misinformed. They have been told that everyone is an artist, that art is a trick, that it is easy, or that it is a primary human right or something. You can see it in Jerry Saltz: he can't understand why he doesn't have any artistic talent. He feels slighted by God himself and is bitter about it. His whole life is colored by that. Does he feel the same way about basketball? I doubt it, though I don't see the difference.

Does LeBron James have to deal with bitter little people coming up to him all the time complaining about their lack of height or other basketball talent? I doubt it. It would be silly, right, whining to LeBron James about how short you are. But although I am way down the fame totem from LeBron, I have been dealing with that my whole life. Everyone looks at me with big accusing eyes, as if I personally stole their God-given right to be a great artist from them. Since that strange resentment isn't equal across fields, my belief is it was nurtured on purpose in art, expressly as another way to destroy it and control it. It was another way to drive people like me out of the field, since no one likes making people feel bad. If you can shame and embarrass real artists enough, they will get out of their own field, leaving it to others. This is exactly what happened in the 20th century.

And it works out in another way for those running the world, since that resentment prevents normal people from complaining when real art and real artists go away. Most people seem to not really care that there are no Leonardos or Rodins anymore. Who needs them? They just remind us we can't paint and sculpt.

But again, isn't it strange you don't feel the same way about basketball players? If they took away your giant basketball players, who *should* make you feel small, you would complain bitterly. There would be a big hole in your life. The loss of those egomaniacs would cause an uprising that couldn't be stemmed. Entire cities would go down in flames.

You will say I am also bitter, but I am not bitter I am *furious*, and have been for decades. So it is the opposite of Saltz. I am furious that my field has been stolen by people with no talent and that I have been defined out of the game. I am furious that art history has crashed and burned, being infiltrated and coopted for money laundering and propaganda. I am furious that a small group of old families has set aside all promotion in all fields for themselves. I am furious that I and everyone like me have been lied to and lied about, slandered and libeled, suppressed and repressed, squashed and corraled, and now censored and defamed, just so some rich people can get richer. I am furious that the man has scared almost all my potential allies into silence or compliance. I am furious that I have to put up with a constant line of hired government and military trolls lying about me all over the internet, stealing my ideas, falsifying data, breaking links, delisting my papers, and poisoning my contacts.

But despite all that, I would still rather be me than them. I wouldn't trade places with anyone.

Addendum: Wikipedia admits Bob Ross was secretive about his private life, and I am beginning to see why. I found his mother [Ollie Ross at IMDB](#), where they admit she is his mother. She was born Ollie Dorothea Helms. She didn't marry Jack Ross until 1964, when Bob was already 22, so how can he be his father? Looks like a stepfather, which means Wikipedia is lying about Bob Ross. Ollie was previously married to George Ellsworth Cox, but didn't marry him until 1943, when Bob was one. So they could have married late or Ollie could have had a third husband before that. Either way, it would mean Bob wasn't born a Ross. And it doesn't explain why she has a page at IMDB. Under credits it says she was mentioned on Bob's show. What? Do you think everyone ever mentioned on TV has a page at IMDB? Very weird. She also has a Geni.com page, but her mother is mysteriously scrubbed.

They don't want you to know a surname there. It looks like these Helms are related to the Shockleys, since a Shockley is managing their pages. Which would tie Bob Ross to Google. Is Bob related to Senator Jesse Helms? Yep, they are cousins. Geni tries to hide that by stopping Jesse at his grandfather Joseph Clayton, but that is easy to drive around since Joseph Clayton has a second page where his parents are listed, taking us on back. They are also related to the Presleys, taking us forward to Elvis. Bob Ross is a cousin of Elvis. So, as usual, you are beginning to see he didn't come out of nowhere.

But there's more. Bob's second wife Jane was a Kennedy. Her maiden name was Zanardelli, but her grandmother was Jane Kennedy. Not, according to Findagrave, the Boston Kennedys, since Jane's Kennedys came over from Scotland in the 1880s, but still. The Zanardellis may look Italian, but they were also Jewish/Phoenician, since they married the Hoffmans. They also link us to the McKennas. Jane Ross's first husband was a Worstell, and he links us to the Hoffmans a second time, as well as to the Janes and Chapmans. These Hoffmans were also Cox, so we are looking at one big happy family, as usual.

But there's more. Jack Ross, sold as Bob's dad but probably his step-dad, wasn't really Jack Ross. At Findagrave we find his father was Benjamin Franklin Swindal. So the name Ross just evaporated completely. Jack's mother isn't even a Ross, being a Nichols. Which could be why all this is scrubbed. This Nichols is also a Morton, a Hayes, an Ussery and a Stewart. This reminds us that Bob's middle name is Norman. Is that a first name or a last name? We don't know, since it doesn't come up in his genealogy. But it begins to look like Bob's mother and father were probably not a carpenter and a waitress, as we are told.

I just discovered Bob permed his hair, which is also strange. I would think you would perm your hair to get some nice curls, but not to frizz it out like that. I always figured he couldn't help it: some people have hair like that and there is nothing they can do about it. But to do it on purpose?

The beginnings of his show are also shrouded in mist, since Wikipedia lies again, telling us that when he quit the Air Force in 1981, his new painting business struggled. Except that they admit he was on TV within a year. Where I come from, that isn't considered a struggle. A struggle would be what I have experienced: 35 years of being buried by the mainstream. His pilot show was produced by a station in Falls Church, VA. I guess you recognize that? Front porch of the CIA. In the first year 60 stations picked up his show. Wow. So, just the opposite of a struggle. I can't really make sense of that, because although his presentation sort of grows on you after a while, it isn't exactly cutting edge entertainment. Nobody would watch one show and go: "that dude is headed for the big time and millions of dollars". No one would have expected him to end up in the Smithsonian.

Also weird is that when he died, he wrote his business partners the Kowalskis out of his will, due to their greed. They sued, claimed his whole art life was work for hire, and WON! Say what? That means the court confirmed Bob Ross was working for someone else the whole time, belying the claim this was a business he started with his wife. But no one ever pauses on that.

In the 2021 Netflix documentary, it is admitted that Steve Ross, Bob's son, was not allowed by the court to inherit his father's 2/3rd stake in the company.* Which means . . . his father never had a stake in the company.

So who is this Annette Kowalski? Well, she should be about 80 now, since she says she is the same general age as Ross. She is supposed to be from DC with a husband named Walt. But if we do a

search, she doesn't come up for DC. That's because she and Walt never lived in DC proper, they lived in Chantilly, Herndon, and Sterling, more CIA towns. And guess what, [they admit Walt Kowalski was CIA](#). I take this to mean the CIA owned Bob Ross from the beginning, and that it is the CIA that still owns his products business. You have to admit that would explain their extreme promotion, as well as the fact they are deadly.

*We are told the company was originally split three ways between Ross, his wife, and Annette Kowalski. But that can't be true, since Ross should have inherited his wife's stake when she died before him. When he died, he didn't own 2/3, he owned nothing.