

Redwall Buttress, Merrill Mahaffey

Acrylic on Canvas, 2000

This painting was part of an exhibition of Mahaffey's work at our museum in 2000, the same year we bought this piece from him.

MM is 78 years old and he simply loves to paint - has all of his life. But he only paints landscapes...and only western landscapes...and only in the 4 corners area of the U.S. (AZ, CO, UT, and NM)...and only the Grand Canyon and the Colorado River that flows through it. This is not a western artist who you'll find painting cowboys or pastoral scenes! He is a very focused and passionate and successful artist painting what he calls his "life's work".

MM was born in 1937 in Albuquerque, NM and by 8 he was drawing. His interest was sparked by his dad who was a map maker for people doing appraisals for Indian tribal settlements. He used a lot of colored pencils for his map making so art supplies were always in the house and MM and his sister would spend hours sketching.

At 14 he won 1st place at an art competition and by 18 told his parents he was going to be artist - a decision he took very seriously. He said: "I had to give it my all and not squander it by lack of knowledge, discipline or laziness -- that would be unforgivable."

So off he went to Sacramento State where he got his BA and then on to Arizona State for an MFA in mid-1960s. At AZ State - and for a number of years after -- he struggled with the pressure to become a contemporary artist, as op art and abstract expressionism were the gospel! He tried to adapt but was just not comfortable and his art showed it. But he also knew he didn't want to be traditional western landscape painter so he taught art at Phoenix College for 15 years and he painted but wasn't really on track until 1973 when he had an epiphany.

While hiking in Colorado near his grandmother's house, he looked at the cliffs and saw white snow in the black cracks and realized that the mountain were abstract. It was his aha moment and from this point on,

“his interest in landscape painting grew stronger while his interest in abstract art grew weaker.” He began describing his art as “abstract with a high degree of realism, simultaneously” and he told me (in a long phone conversation) “I know I’ve been successful if my art looks realistic from afar but abstract up close.” Check it out; it’s true!

When you first see Redwall Buttreass, it is so bold and big and colorful and different from typical landscapes that are like bird’s eye views. Instead, this painting is a massive 600’ limestone mountain that takes up almost the entire canvas. When touring, I use Jimmy Swinnerton’s panoramic landscape (next to MM) to compare/contrast the differences - similar to looking at a map of a state (the big picture) and then looking at a detailed inset of one of the cities with all the roads, rivers, monuments, etc.

Redwall Buttreass is perfect representation of most of MM’s paintings. In 3 words -- color, rocks and water - you understand the unifying themes of all of his work.

- **COLOR** - MM has a scientific bent and loves to dig deep into any subject he studies - including paint. He did his Master’s thesis on paint chemistry - most unusual -- with a focus on acrylic paints which in the ‘50s/’60s were new. He started mixing his own paints to achieve effects that he couldn’t get from store-bought acrylics or even oil paints and often added mica or copper to achieve sparkle or metallic richness to rocks, as you can see in this piece. All his paintings are colorful and he attributes this to a number of the California painters he knew but especially to Richard Diebenkorn and Wayne Thiebaud’s who were particularly influential. He calls Thiebaud “his God”.
- **ROCKS** - MM’s 2nd theme is rocks and he knows them intimately. He knows the technical names, the geology and history of rocks, the explorers who discovered them. As a boy, MM gave certain rocks names and loved their cracks and facets and geometry and interplay with the sunlight. He said: “Rocks age and fracture and I, the artist, study them like a palm reader, trying to isolate images and paint my interpretation of these glorious palm prints.”

- **WATER** - His 3rd theme is the Colorado River where he spent his entire life hiking, climbing, camping, fishing, rafting, raising children. For MM, water is useful as a reflector of his precious rocks - another way of seeing them. Water is also the element that carved the chasms and canyons and crevices he knows and loves so much. In this painting, he depicts turbulent water leading down to the open area of the river where it is calm. One art historian summed up MM's philosophy saying, "To him, rocks are the bones of the earth while water is the spiritual arteries."

One thing you'll never see in a MM painting is people or narrative detail. He always wants the landscape to be essence of the story and has said: "The human element diminishes the place and asks the viewer to instead wonder what the person is doing in that place. The land then becomes a setting or stage for the actors." He added to that: "So far I've left figurative narration to those who are more empathetic to people." This was true from the beginning when he was 8 years old and only wanted to draw things and places.

MM uses a 4-step artistic process to create his paintings:

- 1 - He travels to the place he wants to paint. This sounds fairly obvious but he studies maps, reads about the area, explores, climbs and finds new vantage points to capture scenes that are fresh and original.
- 2 - Like other artists, MM takes loads of pictures from every conceivable angle and often makes sketches on site.
- 3 - Back in the studio, he makes water color renderings to - as he says - "acquaint himself with the subject" which translates into identifying the details he wants in the final work.
- 4 - He goes to the canvas where he paints in linear patterns with thickly textured, horizontal brush strokes which contribute to the forcefulness and directness of his work.

He said "With the start of each new picture, I feel like I've forgotten how to paint and have to figure it out all over again". This approach helps retain his enthusiasm and energy as he paints each new piece.

Like Karen Kitchell, who provides a nice compare/contrast based on the similar subjects and environmental interests, MM's landscapes are not political but he's very concerned about the collision of the natural beauty of the wilderness and tourism - with the increasing hordes of people visiting our parks and the attendant increase in roads, trails, campgrounds, motels, etc. Think of the growing commercialism in the Grand Canyon today with the glass floor that's been built, jutting out over the canyon and good for nothing but selfies! This bothers MM tremendously but he's not an activist and chooses instead to paint the natural beauty that he loves so much in the hope of encouraging others to develop their own sensibilities toward preservation.

MM is still hard at work today, continuing what he started over 50 years ago. He paints every week, does 2 shows a year with mostly new works, and continues to paint in water color, oil and acrylic although his love of acrylic remains - due in large part because it's easier to work with, dries quickly, makes the painting process faster than oil, is lighter which makes the transportation of his art easier, and isn't as messy (think brush cleaning).

He has been fortunate to make a good living all this time doing the one thing he loves and has dedicated himself to. He still has commissions and is represented by several galleries. His paintings can be as small as 8"x13-1/2" (good for the tourists who want a memento they can carry home in their suitcases) or as large as 30'-40' - massive paintings where he uses whisks and push brooms as his initial paint brushes - literally. Buster is the name of the largest one!

MMs work is collected by people like Robert Redford, companies such as IBM and Exxon and public institutions including libraries, airports and art centers. He is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in NYC, the Smithsonian National Museum of Art, the Phoenix Art Museum and, of course, our wonderful museum where his show was curated in 2000 by Katherine Hough.

I came away from my research on MM with great admiration for his long-term dedication to his art and his continuing passion about what he does. He's like a kid who just can't get enough of something. Going back to the epiphany he had over 40 years ago in Colorado, MM said: "I

had been changed permanently. I found a direction for my career and I've never looked back.”