

An un-still life



A talented painter found a way to keep his art going and to live a big life—even after MS symptoms tried to muddy his canvas.

by Vicky Umland

Herb Moses' family can't remember a time when he wasn't a painter. Growing up in the 1930s and '40s, he spent his summers capturing the landscapes around his Hartford, Connecticut, home in watercolors and oils. At age 8, he won his first local art contest.

When he began attending Michigan State University in 1947, Moses spent his free time hanging out with art students. "He was majoring in engineering, but he hated it," remembers his wife, Sally Moses. "His friends convinced him he should switch majors and become an artist." But when Herb told his parents his plans, they discouraged him from majoring in something so impractical.

So Herb changed his major to physics—a field he loved as much as art. But he kept on painting. Even after he was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis at age 25 and lost the feeling in two fingers of his right hand—his painting hand. Even after the disease progressed to the point that he had constant tremors in that hand. And even after the spasticity in his hands left him unable to hold a paintbrush.

Herb finally stopped painting about 10 years before his death at age 81 in 2011. By that time, he was using a wheelchair and had more limited use of his hands. "But he never stopped talking about painting," Sally remembers. "He always had an idea for a painting in his head.

People would ask, 'Are you still painting?' and he would say yes because I think he always imagined he was."

A tale of hope, love and perseverance

Sally thinks Herb's MS symptoms first appeared when he was an undergrad at Michigan State. Over the course of the next five years, the symptoms became more intense, and Herb's "diagnoses" from various doctors ranged from thyroid problems and brachial neuritis to a manifestation of psychological issues.

"We were newlyweds, and some doctors even suggested it could be due to the stress that can occur early in a marriage," Sally says. "Finally, in 1954, after the process of eliminating everything else, he was diagnosed with MS. But it wasn't until [magnetic resonance imaging] was invented that we knew for sure that MS lesions had damaged his brain."

Herb was determined that MS wouldn't change his life. He got a master's degree and a PhD in physics, and began teaching at The College of New Jersey. He and Sally had three children, Carolyn, Lara and Mike. And he continued painting in his spare time.

"He was adamant about being viewed as any other person and not having this disease define him," says his daughter, Carolyn Moses Johnston. "He would want his legacy to be that he was a husband and father, a physicist and an artist, but not a physicist/father/artist with MS. He felt that people could do anything with determination and that his circumstances were just that—circumstances."

Despite symptoms like foot drop and tremors in his hands, Herb continued to play tennis and jog. He took the stairs rather than the elevator. And he stopped talking about his disease. "He told me, 'It is what it is. I'm not going to be obsessed by MS because I've got other things on my mind. I want to win the Nobel Prize for physics and have my paintings in all the major museums in the U.S.," Sally says.

As Herb's disease progressed, he made adjustments. He began walking with a cane and then a walker. When his right hand began shaking so much that he was no longer able to create the fine lines that his realistic painting style required, he experimented with different styles.

He went through impressionist and abstract periods, and then in the late '60s and early '70s, he experimented with a spiral period that featured precise blocks of acrylic color, partially influenced by his scientific studies. He also was an incredible trailblazer, Carolyn notes. "He didn't just paint the canvases; he also innovated and constructed shaped, three-dimensional canvases that did not require framing. His work is still considered unique and distinctive in style from other artists who work with shapes.

"He would section off his design with masking tape, so if his hand shook he would get the paint on the tape rather than on the canvas," says his son, Mike Moses.

When spasticity in his hands left Herb unable to hold a brush, he began dripping paint onto

the canvas, a la Jackson Pollock. Finally, he used his fingers to create haunting portraits of Albert Einstein and Abraham Lincoln.

Though he never had any formal art training, Herb produced more than 500 paintings throughout his life, along with many drawings and charcoals. His work was sold in major New York City galleries, and he had shows in over a dozen museums and galleries. He was one of a handful of New Jersey artists whose work was selected for display at the 1964 World's Fair. And his painting, "Shadow Over the Moon," was jury-selected for inclusion in an art-show exchange with Russia soon after the fall of the Iron Curtain.

About a dozen of Herb's paintings were lost when his brother's condo burned down, but the rest survive—as part of more than 70 different private collections around the world, and in the garage and basement art studios in Herb and Sally's house in Trenton, New Jersey. Herb's paintings also hang in permanent collections of the New Jersey State Museum, the University of Connecticut, The College of New Jersey and The Trenton Jewish Community Center.

Sally believes Herb was able to accomplish so much in his life because he refused to be defined by his disease. "He would always say, 'Don't label yourself and don't allow others to label you. Just do the best you can do. If a person would stop at each point along the way and consider whether his next move is worth it, he might end up by never doing anything.'"

Vicky Umland is freelance writer and editor in Lafayette, Colorado.

To see more of Herb Moses' art, visit herbmoses.com.