



The National Museum of Wildlife Art purchased *The Mystic Forest* (oil, 48 x 96") in 2005 for its permanent collection. At present it is on loan to Grand Teton National Park in Wyoming, where it hangs in the park's Moose Visitor Center.

Mary Roberson

At One with Wildlife

BY LAURA ZUCKERMAN

Idaho painter Mary Roberson is hardly at ease with her humanity, a discomfort that serves as the impetus for her extended excursions to Yellowstone National Park to watch the wildlife that is at once a source of reaffirmation and inspiration. It is with animals, where all the secrets of nature are laid bare, that Roberson finds whatever truth mankind can live by. It is a truth unadorned by artifice, a refreshment to the mind and a salve to the senses, and it is a truth that Roberson has fought long and hard to attain. At 59, she is a woman who has overcome grave difficulties—some imposed, others internal—and she is not about to invite into her life the sorts of negative



Mary Roberson

people and harmful influences that once caused her to abandon her innate artistic talent for the sake of roles and regimens that were not her own.

Roberson abides by a personal philosophy that speaks to the heart of the conservation ethic. "What animals have done for me is beyond words," she says. "There's no way to describe that feeling, so I paint it."

Freed in mind and lightened in spirit, Roberson says what she thinks, and thinks what she feels. Recently negotiating with a well-heeled client in her Hailey studio, Roberson delighted him with the assurance, "I'm not one of those artists with a paintbrush stuck up my butt."



Roberson has been painting in earnest for 17 years after a 19-year hiatus. She has her reasons. While still in her teens, her talent was acknowledged by an instructor at Redondo Union High School in California. After examining the drawings in Roberson's sketchbook, he asked insistently about her art education. "He asked me where I had studied," recalls Roberson. "I told him nowhere. He said, 'Are you a liar or very talented?' I said, 'Neither.'"

Do not expect Roberson to do what is expected. She is the enemy of convention, and she has come by it honestly. Raised in a household where being a good girl was equivalent to godliness, Roberson was a victim of abuse whose outrage had no outlet. She became a rebel with a cause—to destroy herself. Her paintings were being honored with awards and the 'cradle Catholic' could hardly countenance the disparity between outward honors and interior loathing.

Fought Internal Battles

"I was being praised for my art and it ticked me off in my head because I thought I was bad," she says. "I kept wondering why God would give a gift to someone so bad. I gave up painting. I started smoking. I started drinking."

Roberson attended art schools in Los Angeles. Directionless,

despondent, she drifted into marriage and began having babies. She believed married life would prove the antidote to her distress, and while motherhood met her yearning for love, she continued to harbor a sense of dread about her future and a dislike for herself. "I had so much self-hatred," she says now, her tone indicating the empathy that has welled, with age, for her younger self. "My desire to paint would come and go but overall I was glad I had an excuse not to do it. I wouldn't go to galleries and I wouldn't speak to other artists. I pretended it didn't exist."

Today, an examination of Roberson's work, which has been purchased for the permanent collections of such institutions as the National Museum of Wildlife Art, will suffice to explain how deeply the self-imposed separation from art likely cut. Her paintings are drenched with meaning, some of which is obvious to the eye, but much of which speaks to the heart in a language that the heart readily understands. Roberson's oils capture what is ephemeral and, paradoxically, what is lasting: a thought, a feeling, an intimation.

Cast a quick eye at her elk, bears and bison, and the sense emerges that she is not painting the animal itself but its totem. Roberson stands before one style—realism—even as her backdrops evoke abstraction. The oil titled *Take This Moose* prompts the observer to wonder, "Which moose?" The moose in fact or the moose suspended in the act of emerging from Roberson's prodigious imagination? Animal images spring forth, fully formed from Roberson's brush, like Venus from ocean foam.

She is heavily influenced by the representational animals produced by Paleolithic cave painters whose horses, stags and bulls gallop, spring and charge through the walls of Lascaux in southwestern France. The spirit that infuses the work of this native Californian is the same spirit that stretches over the distance of millennia to express an emotion that can only be likened to love. "I paint the animals because it's my way of expressing how



Take This Moose (oil, 48 x 48")



In the Mountains (oil, 54 x 60")

much I care for them; it's my way of expressing how humbled I am by nature," she says. "We see things at Yellowstone that make us cheer and cry, like a calf bison struggling in the mud. Even when a wolf is eating a bunny rabbit, I love the wolf and I love the bunny rabbit, too. It's all an element of the cycle."

And Roberson is an element of the cycle. The lines between what is human and what is animal blur for the artist whose work is featured in galleries in such upscale cities as Ketchum, Idaho, and Park City, Utah. "I think of myself as part of the wildlife," she says, "the part that doesn't judge the outcome, the part that lives in the moment."

"The wolf doesn't dwell on what happened in the past or have worries about the future," says Roberson. "If it could talk, it would all be kind of laid-back: this is what I have to do now; now I have to have a pup; now I have to go get some food. Humans are different; we hurt ourselves. You don't see that in nature."

Uses Nature's Muted Colors

What you do see are the muted colors—pale gold, browns and greens whose glow appears to have been washed with water—which Roberson prefers. She frowns on fantasy displays of color, believing them false. "I don't have color getting in the way of composition," she says. "Here are the colors in nature; how can I improve on that?" The overall effect is one of understatement, straining mightily to be seen and yet unseen. It is the same



Once There Were Millions (oil, 54 x 78")

quality of color that allows a bear to be camouflaged by brush, an elk to recede from view right in front of you. It is a world at once familiar and foreign, a place of reality shaped by myth.

Before the advent of aesthetic modernism at the turn of the 20th century, John Ruskin, the Victorian Age's authority on art, wrote that a key trait of great art is that it is inventive, powered as it is by imagination rather than the forms—be they landscapes, animals or people—set before it. Roberson is anything but a copyist, faulting other artists so deeply devoted to super-realism, which she terms "brain painting," that the animating



Bohemian Waxwings (oil, 18 x 16")

characteristic of creativity cannot enter.

Roberson's paintings exhibit a daring that is as diffuse as the light that arcs across many of her canvases. Curves meet lines and representation encounters abstraction in *In the Mountains*, where a bull elk takes shadowy form amidst earth-toned squares in descending size. The composition suggests a canvas atop a canvas, full of shading and fancy, signifying everything. It is a device that Roberson employs elsewhere, squares aside. A bison half turns its outsize head in an almost palpable illustration of its sheer mass and a metaphorical commentary on the animal's place on the planet in *Once There Were Millions*. A herd of small-scale bison thunder below, barely there, their images interchangeable. "My paintings are stories of their lives," says Roberson.

If there is a single skill Roberson has mastered—and she is the mistress of many—it is the art of getting out of her own way. "I've made my life simple: painting and watching wildlife," she says. "Tapping into a source of creativity is very easy for me, almost to the point where I used to feel I had to step in and create a difficulty. At one time, I made it difficult to start a painting. Then I made it difficult to finish a painting.

Paints from the Heart

"What I do is pure; I'm blessed because I can trust my feelings and believe in my work," she adds. "I do it more from a spiritual aspect than for money. The more I paint, the more compassion I feel. I don't necessarily care for the world—that's why I paint."

After overcoming more than her share of struggles—a massive stroke, a bitter divorce—Roberson says she is not confused about her priorities. "I've had a lot of hardships, things that just made me stop in my life," she says. "Things are out of our hands. I'm closer and closer to believing we don't run the show." Roberson now is capable of shrugging off disapproval, where once it induced paralysis. Humor is her vehicle. "Now anytime someone criticizes me, I say, 'You don't have to do that—I'll do it for you. And you know what? I'll do it better.'"

The massive stroke in 1987 that left her unable to move ironically acted as a catalyst. "I recovered in three days," she recalls. "The doctor said I must have a very strong will to survive in such conflict and, for the first time in my life, I realized I could do something." And Roberson has since learned she can do something else. "I feel like an empty vessel. When you learn to un-grow, there's all sorts of room inside," she says. "At some point I realized I had spent a lot of my life learning what I



Ballet of the Cranes (oil, 32 x 32")



Rut 101 (oil, 54 x 132")

didn't need to know."

Roberson has had the startling experience of turning a painting on its head—literally—only to allow the image to come into focus. Armed with a keen sense of curiosity and an irreverence that has allowed her to thrive despite difficulty, Roberson sees the potential for harmony in nontraditional places. "I used to hate to clean my brushes, but now I love it," she says. "I turned the task around. I said to myself, 'These are my tools.'"

Roberson is unafraid in the face of public opinion and she rarely seeks widespread applause. "I don't need to sell myself," she says. "My work comes from my heart. If my art doesn't speak

for itself, I'm on the wrong path."

When patrons inquire about the length of time it took to produce a given painting, Roberson hardly hesitates. "A lifetime," she says. 📖

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Roberson is represented by Meyer Gallery, Park City, Utah; Meyer-Milagros Gallery, Jackson, Wyo.; Mountain Trails Gallery, Cody, Wyo., and Steve Eich Fine Arts and Antiques, Ketcham, Idaho.

Images courtesy of the artist.



Raven with Purpose (encaustic, 8 x 10")

Ancient Encaustic Technique Is New for Roberson

Mary Roberson has recently started working in the ancient medium of encaustic, where pure color pigments are mixed with heated beeswax and resin. "With encaustic you can apply layer upon layer as fast as the wax sets up," she says. "You could do 100 layers a day if you wanted to. With oils, you have to set it aside and let it dry." Since some of Roberson's oils average five to 50 layers, it can take her months to finish a single painting.

"Encaustics retain their brilliancy better than other mediums," Roberson says, noting that ancient Egyptian encaustic works have kept their color for thousands of years. And she debunks the myth that encaustics will melt in a hot house. "If a house is on fire, all the paintings will be destroyed," she says, regardless of medium.