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The New York Times

Where Are All the Bob Ross Paintings? We Found Them.

[Video](#)

Bob Ross painted more than 1,000 landscapes for his television show — so why are they so hard to find? Solving one of the internet’s favorite little mysteries.

Credit Bob Ross Inc./Photo illustration by The New York Times

By Larry Buchanan, Aaron Byrd, Alicia DeSantis and Emily Rhyne

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Watched the video? Here are a few more details.

What will be in the Smithsonian?

Bob Ross made three versions of each painting that appeared on “The Joy of Painting.” The first was made before the show, to be used as a reference. He painted the second during the 26-minute taping, sometimes with last-minute improvisations. The third was made afterward, for instructional books.

The donation to the Smithsonian includes the book version of “Blue Ridge Falls,” from Season 30 (1994):



Image: Credit Bob Ross Inc.



Image: Credit Bob Ross Inc.

As well as all three versions of the painting “On a Clear Day,” from Season 14 (1988):



Image: Credit Bob Ross Inc.



Image: Credit Bob Ross Inc.

Other items include a converted stepladder that was used as an easel used during the first season of the show, and two handwritten notebooks that were used to plan the production of Seasons 2 and 3.

How were the objects chosen?

“The hardest part was choosing the paintings,” said Eric Jentsch, the entertainment and sports curator for the National Museum of American History. Mr. Jentsch and his colleague Ryan Lintelman visited the offices of Bob Ross Inc. in Herndon, Va., to find the images and materials that best exemplified Mr. Ross’s lifetime of work.

The Smithsonian also acquired fan letters sent to Mr. Ross, including some written after he died of lymphoma in 1995 at 52. “These letters help reveal the significant impact Ross has had on diverse individuals and communities, helping them to express and feel better about themselves,” Mr. Jentsch said.

The paintings and other objects officially became part of the museum’s permanent collection on March 22.

For now, the Smithsonian has no plans to display the paintings.

How many Bob Ross paintings are there exactly?

We don’t know.

According to an analysis by the website [FiveThirtyEight](#), Mr. Ross painted in 381 of the 403 episodes of the show (the rest featured a guest). If three versions were made of each of those paintings, at least 1,143 originals would exist. Bob Ross Inc. estimates that it has 1,165 paintings stored on site.

But Mr. Ross also painted as an instructor, as well as for public events and for charity, so there may be additional paintings out there.

How much does one cost?

In the rare cases when a Bob Ross painting does surface, it depends who is buying. Joan Kowalski, president of Bob Ross Inc., said she has seen authentic Ross paintings sell online for \$8,000 to \$10,000 in recent years.

After we set out on our quest, a three-panel painting described as a “Bob Ross Original Oil Painting Triptych Mountain Landscape” surfaced on eBay. It is listed at \$55,000:

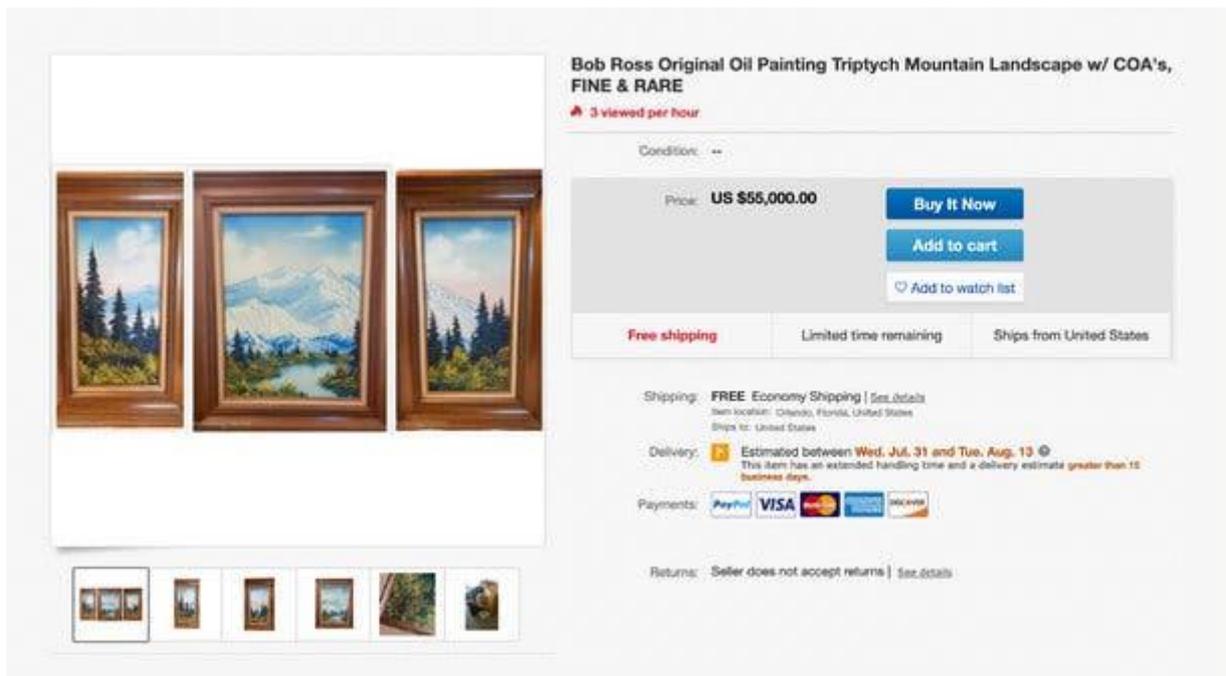


Image: CrediteBay

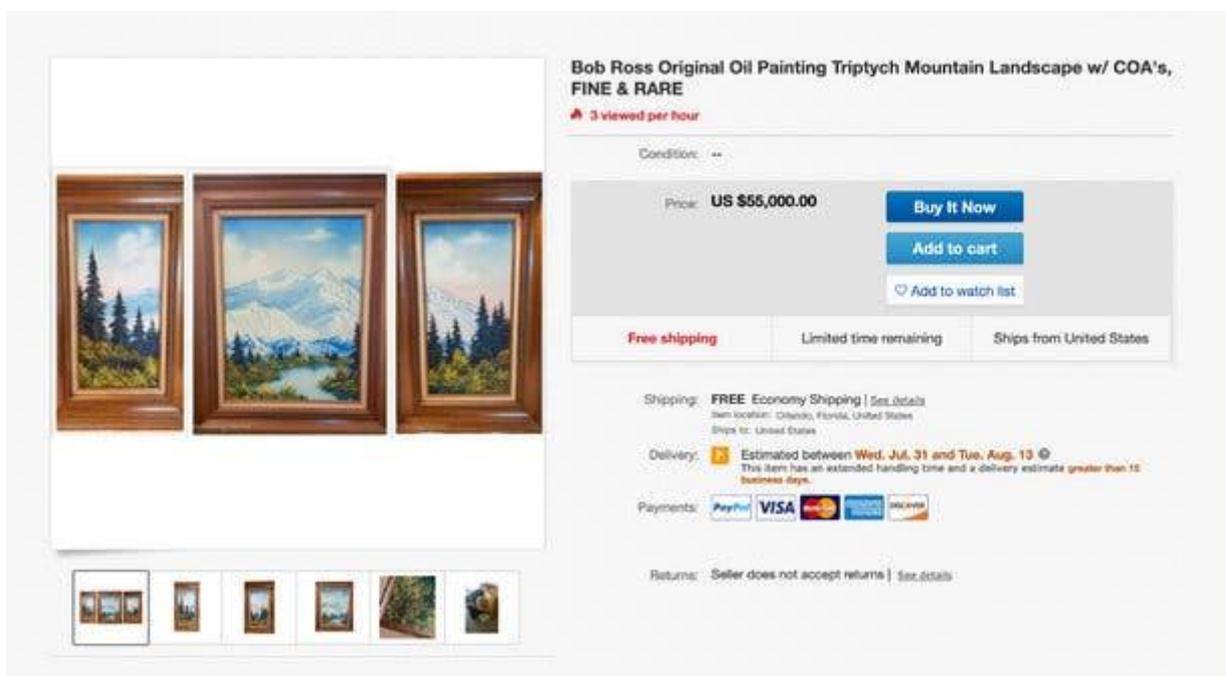


Image: CrediteBay

How do I have a painting authenticated?

Bob Ross Inc. will authenticate paintings that are sent to be inspected in person by Annette Kowalski, Joan Kowalski's mother and the woman who discovered Mr. Ross. (The company will not certify images that can be viewed only as scans or digital files.)

Annette Kowalski said that in addition to the brushwork and other signs of Mr. Ross's hand, she looks for a specific detail in the quality of his signature that she declined to describe:



Image: Credit Bob Ross Inc.



Image: Credit Bob Ross Inc.

If a painting is certified as an original Bob Ross, the owner will be provided with documentation attesting its authenticity.

Can I visit Bob Ross Inc.?

Bob Ross Inc. is not open to visitors. Some of the original paintings are displayed at the [Bob Ross Art Workshop & Gallery](#) in New Smyrna Beach, Fla. Starting next year, people will be able to visit the studio in Muncie, Ind., where the show was taped.

Is it true that there are no people in the paintings?

In the 11 years that Mr. Ross painted on television, there are only a few known instances when he included a human figure in his landscapes. In “Morning Walk” (Series 17, Episode 11, from 1989), two people stroll through the woods:



Image: Credit Bob Ross Inc.



Image: Credit Bob Ross Inc.

In "Campfire" (Series 3, Episode 10, 1984), a figure in a hat leans against a tree:



Image: Credit Bob Ross Inc.



Image: Credit Bob Ross Inc.

According to Annette Kowalski, “Campfire” was among Mr. Ross’s least favorite paintings.

Though cabins often appear in Mr. Ross’s landscapes, they are rarely depicted with chimneys (another sign of people).

How did the Kowalskis come to own the company?

Originally Mr. Ross and his wife, Jane, shared ownership of the company with Annette and Walt Kowalski, who had helped to finance Mr. Ross’s early career. Jane Ross died in 1992; when Mr. Ross died in 1995, the company was left to the Kowalskis alone.

What’s the name of the Kowalskis’ dog?

Cricket.



Image Credit: Emily Rhyne/The New York Times

What were the names of Bob Ross's squirrels?

Mr. Ross had several pet squirrels, a number of which he featured on his show. One was named Bobette — a combination of Bob and Annette. Bobette appeared in several episodes in Series 18 (1989). Another squirrel, Peapod, appeared in Series 22 and 23 (1991). Peapod Jr. joined in Series 30 and 31 (1993-94).

What's the story with the hair?

Bob Ross did not always have a perm:



Image: Credit Bob Ross Inc.

According to Annette Kowalski, Mr. Ross originally chose to perm his hair because it was cheaper than getting frequent haircuts.

Later, she said, he disliked the hairstyle but did not feel he could change it because it was depicted in the company logo:



Image: Credit Bob Ross Inc.

Who was Bill Alexander?

William Alexander was the creator of “The Magic of Oil Painting,” which aired on PBS from 1974 to 1982. In 1984, he symbolically handed over his brush to Mr. Ross in a marketing campaign.

They later had a falling out. In a [1991 interview](#) with The New York Times, Mr. Alexander said, “He betrayed me.” “I *invented* ‘wet on wet,’” he added. “I trained him, and he is copying me — what bothers me is not just that he betrayed me, but that he thinks he can do it better.”

Did Bob Ross want his paintings to be shown?

In 1994, the talk show host Phil Donahue asked Mr. Ross to “say out loud your work will never hang in a museum.”

“Well, maybe it will,” Mr. Ross replied. “But probably not the Smithsonian.”

When The Times asked Mr. Ross [about his legacy](#) in 1991, he gave a similar answer:

Mr. Ross, who said he has produced nearly 30,000 paintings (the prolific Picasso did not match that record), does not sell his paintings or show his work in galleries; he has only had one retrospective — at the Minnetrista Cultural Center in Muncie, a town that boasts of the artist as an honorary native son. Mr. Ross said he had no desire for a major exhibit. “There are thousands of very, very talented artists who will never be known, even after they are dead,” he said. “Most painters want recognition, especially by their peers. I achieved that a long time ago with TV. I don’t need any more.”

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