



Bob's easel holds one of his original paintings and several of his brushes. If fans look closely, they can see the spot where Bob smacked his brushes against the leg of the easel.

# *Bob Ross Experience*

Minnetrista  
Muncie, Indiana

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## Spreading the Joy

**Jeannette Rooney**

Like many kids of my generation, I grew up watching *The Joy of Painting* with Bob Ross on PBS.<sup>1</sup> His soothing voice, signature perm, and relaxed approach to teaching the wet-on-wet oil painting style are distinctive and instantly recognizable. Even today, more than 25 years after his death, Bob's positive motivation continues to inspire generations of viewers. As a young friend told me, "He's relatable and encouraging." Creating art can be intimidating, but Bob Ross made it accessible, and the legacy of the beloved cultural icon lives on in the *Bob Ross Experience* at Minnetrista.

The exhibition is small, comprising several rooms in the historic house where Bob Ross painted (fig. 1, p.110), but it packs a big emotional wallop. It is extraordinary to stand where Bob stood all those years ago, creating "happy little trees" and beating the devil out of his brushes. It is fascinating to learn about the little-known, behind-the-scenes details that went into making *The Joy of Painting*. The power of place is evident here, and Minnetrista has certainly harnessed this significant aspect to form the foundation of the exhibition. But they have broadened the scope as well. Visitors are invited to consider the extensive reach of the show, from the time when people watched Bob Ross on television sets across the country to his pop culture icon status today. And beyond the physical space, Minnetrista has expanded the *Bob Ross Experience* to meet people where they are in ways that echo Bob's own work to spark cheerful artistic creativity among audiences everywhere.

The critique is a writer's assessment of an exhibition, shaped by their professional expertise and their own visitor experience, and formed without (or with only minimal) consultation with the exhibit's creators. Its audience is the profession.



**Fig. 1.** On the campus of Minnetrista sits the Lucius L. Ball home where *The Joy of Painting* was filmed, now the site of the *Bob Ross Experience*.

**Fig. 2.** Visitors can watch – and discuss – a clip of *The Joy of Painting* on the television camera viewscreen while looking at his original easel, artwork, and supplies, which are positioned on the spot where he painted.

## Bob Ross's Enduring Popularity

In 1983, when Bob Ross arrived in Muncie, Indiana – a small city an hour north of Indianapolis – he was working as a traveling art instructor, visiting malls and venues across the country to teach painting. Bob approached the local WIPB-PBS station for advertising for his local painting demonstration, and the result was a sizeable turnout. Based on this resounding success and the warm welcome he received, Bob and his business partner sat down with the station to discuss the possibility of a series.<sup>2</sup> And the rest is history.

Over the following years, his viewership increased to PBS stations across the country, with approximately 80 million people tuning in by the end of the decade.<sup>3</sup> Sadly, Bob passed away in 1995, but his fame endures today. His YouTube videos are wildly popular, and when Twitch recently launched a nonstop marathon of *The Joy of Painting*, 5.6 million people tuned in live. There's something about Bob's voice, the sound of the paint, and his positivity that just makes people want to watch.<sup>4</sup>

### Inside the Bob Ross Experience: Where it All Happened

Located in the heart of Muncie, Minnetrista is a welcoming, 40-acre campus featuring a museum, extensive gardens, and several historic homes that once belonged to the Ball family (makers of Ball mason jars). It was in the Lucius L. Ball home, which at the time housed the WIPB station, that *The Joy of Painting* was filmed from 1983 to 1988.<sup>5</sup>

Like many people, I had no idea that Indiana had a connection to Bob Ross. It doesn't



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seem to have been common knowledge in more recent years, and the house in which he painted was used as a general classroom space by Minnetrista. But when visitors occasionally learned that Bob Ross had worked there, the reactions were eye-opening. Some people cried. Others were amazed. And the curators noticed. It became important to tell the story of Bob Ross and *The Joy of Painting* in the place where it happened.<sup>6</sup>

Visitors are warmly greeted at the *Bob Ross Experience* by a staff member who encourages us to explore, touch, and interact with our surroundings (this is important; without being thus sanctioned, I'm not sure I would have felt comfortable handling a lot of the items). On a wall in the entryway, a series of three panels frames the story of Bob's work and how he came to Muncie.

Stepping inside the room in which *The Joy of Painting* was filmed feels a bit like entering a shrine, and judging by the teenager who enters after me with her hands over her heart, I don't think I'm the only one affected. My gaze is immediately drawn to the far corner where two television cameras face Bob's easel (*intro image*), which holds one of his paintings and gleams under spotlights against a backdrop of black curtains. His voice can be heard, and when I step up to the back of one of the cameras, I see a recording of *The Joy of Painting* (*fig. 2*). It is a bittersweet moment, contrasting the lone paint-splattered easel with the vibrancy of seeing Bob in action.



The feeling of veneration is balanced by a purposeful casualness in the room, however, giving the impression that perhaps Bob and the crew just stepped out for lunch. Paper is taped over the window to keep out the light. Painting smocks hang from a coat rack. Cardboard boxes sit on the floor, with labels that tell of Bob's travels. Along one wall leans a series of unframed paintings (created by Certified Bob Ross Instructors, who are trained to paint and teach in Bob's style) which we can examine. Small labels throughout the space share bits of history, anecdotes, and quotes.

On built-in shelves, I find a broad array of seemingly random objects (fig. 3). A pair of glasses. Keys to a Datsun truck. Extension cords. A plastic cup. A hair comb. A photo album. Their arrangement is casual, and visitors can pick them up and examine them. I read laminated fan letters written to Bob and numbered cue cards with stories on the back. Here and there, printed labels mounted to the fronts of the shelves provide context. One tells how the crew and Bob spent their breaks telling jokes on the front steps of the house. Another shares how Bob would clear his sinuses before each show with a whiff of Vicks® VapoRub™. These little things might seem insignificant, but they offer a treasure trove of insight into the world of *The Joy of Painting* and bring to life the people who worked here. In this room, Minnetrista fully embraces the importance of place and a moment in time while allowing visitors to immerse themselves in the story and fully explore it in more intricate detail.

### The Historical Experience of Viewing at Home

Across the main entryway lies the other half of the exhibition, a living room that seems plucked from my '80s childhood (fig. 4). This space is intended to evoke the other side of the camera, transporting the visitor to the viewing experience at home and exploring the broader reach of *The Joy of Painting*.

There is a strong sense of nostalgia here. A comfy couch and a plaid chair sit behind a coffee table. The color scheme captures the era in vivid detail in beige, orange, and olive green. A rotary telephone, VHS tapes, a soda can, and many other little touches complete the scene. On the wood-framed television set, I find four options for shows, and press

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**Fig. 3.** A visitor reads a fan letter to Bob Ross. Built-in shelves like this one contain items that reveal the everyday lives of Bob and the crew, while interpretive labels provide anecdotes and context.



**Fig. 4.** The “living room” area of the exhibit is a place where visitors can feel what it was like to experience *The Joy of Painting* at home in the 1980s and watch a show on television. Interpretive labels are creatively placed throughout the space, such as those printed on the throw pillows.

a button for “Happy Accident.” I settle into the chair to watch for a while.

As in the studio, the stories in this room are further revealed through exploration. I thumb through magazines and a painting instruction manual. Here again, museum labels are cleverly integrated into the setting. I find one on a drink coaster. Two of the fabric throw pillows on the couch are printed with quotes and interpretive text that describes the connection Bob felt with his audiences at home. Along the back wall, shelves contain items illustrating Bob’s continuing popularity as a pop culture icon: a toaster that can imprint Bob’s face on your breakfast bread, skis featuring his artwork, and other trendy merchandise.

Throughout the exhibition, there seems to be an intentional balance between traditional museum interpretation techniques (educational labels, quotes, and important objects under vitrines) and an encouragement for visitors to examine items at random – an exploration that is further

supported by the nontraditional placement of many of the labels. The resulting experience forms intriguing possibilities to make connections that can be strung together in a very personal way, emanating Bob’s spirit of discovery.

### **Amplifying the Experience Beyond the Walls**

After several years of development, the *Bob Ross Experience* opened in the fall of 2020, during the height of the Coronavirus pandemic. While it might seem counterintuitive to launch a new museum exhibition in the midst of a rather dark time, for this particular exhibition it seems appropriate. It is, at its heart, a feel-good experience, something many people need right now.

While the opening offered limited tickets, visitors came from 16 states to view the exhibition, and it quickly sold out.<sup>7</sup> Online, thousands tuned in to watch and discuss as it was livestreamed on Twitch and Facebook.<sup>8</sup> During the outdoor festivities on the grounds,



**Fig. 5.** Visitors wear Bob Ross costumes and paint along with *The Joy of Painting* outdoors at the opening celebration of the *Bob Ross Experience* in 2020.



**Fig. 6.** Attendees at a painting class learn how to paint in Bob Ross's style.

fans donned Bob Ross costumes and painted in front of a big screen that showed videos of *The Joy of Painting* (fig. 5). Certified Ross Instructors taught painting classes (fig. 6). Over the next few months, Minnetrista hosted virtual programs on what it takes to become a certified Bob Ross Instructor, how a Bob Ross masterpiece comes together, behind-the-scenes moments and memories of the crew of *The Joy of Painting*, and how Bob Ross brought joy to people worldwide.

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**...signs marked ideal places to paint outdoors with a guide to the colors you might use, offering an avenue to find inspiration in the outdoors.**

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The exhibition also expanded into the gardens (fig. 7). Visitors could meander along pathways to follow a series of panels that displayed pages of the children's book *Bob Ross and Peapod the Squirrel*. At other places, signs marked ideal places to paint outdoors

with a guide to the colors you might use, offering an avenue to find inspiration in the outdoors.<sup>9</sup> It seems fitting that the *Bob Ross Experience* is here so aptly aligned with nature, art, and community.

At the very heart of Bob Ross's work was the vital importance of meeting people where they are to kindle an excitement for art and creativity. Through *The Joy of Painting* and his local painting classes, Bob brought his passion for the work to communities everywhere. By broadening the reach of the *Bob Ross Experience*, Minnetrista continues the tradition and champions Bob's message. The exhibition offers an experience with some potential staying power – a boost of confidence, an interest in trying new things, or even just a positive outlook – that builds on his legacy.

The *Bob Ross Experience* is still evolving. Painting classes are ongoing, and many are sold out months in advance. According to Minnetrista's website, there are plans to open Phase II on the second floor of the L. L. Ball Home this fall.<sup>10</sup> The expansion will include a gallery space and a painting workshop that will feature TV paint-alongs and live events. It will be interesting to watch as they continue to develop new ways to engage audiences in Bob's story.

**Fig. 7.** A series of panels in Minnetrista's gardens display pages of the children's book *Bob Ross and Peapod the Squirrel*.

If the primary objectives for the *Bob Ross Experience* are to offer a shrine of sorts for devoted fans, a place to learn more about Bob's work, a positive message, and a hefty dose of encouragement, it certainly succeeds, both within the walls and without. The curators paid attention to their audience, and it shows. I should note that the exhibition neatly avoids any critical perspectives that might have examined potentially more weighty topics, such as the commercial aspects of *The Joy of Painting*, but I'm not sure that the *Bob Ross Experience* is the right place for that type of serious exploration. While it's often vital for museums to offer our audiences the opportunity to grapple with tough issues, it's also important to remember that for many people, museums provide a retreat from the world into a space where they can relax, get a breath of fresh air, and contemplate beauty and joy. For this exhibition, perhaps just being a happy place is enough.

There is something special about visiting the spot where *The Joy of Painting* was filmed, but it is also a powerful thing that people are able to participate and find inspiration by simply strolling the grounds, attending a painting class, or learning about Bob Ross through virtual programs. The messages of encouragement and artistic creativity that he espoused are thus carried forth into the world. As Bob said, "just sort of let your imagination go and take you wherever you want to be." ■

1 The Public Broadcasting System (PBS) is a nonprofit American television broadcaster that provides media and programming through its member stations nationwide. See [www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org).

2 The previous year, Bob Ross had filmed a painting series with a PBS station in Virginia, but hadn't committed to another season. From the opening panel of *Bob Ross Experience*, Minnetrista.



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3 Michael J. Mooney, "Why is Bob Ross Still So Popular?" *The Atlantic*, July 8, 2020, accessed July 7, 2021, [www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2020/07/why-bob-ross-still-so-popular/614431/](http://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2020/07/why-bob-ross-still-so-popular/614431/).

4 Bob Ross, Inc., "The Bob Ross Story," accessed May 12, 2021, <https://experience.bobross.com/the-bob-ross-experience/>.

5 In 1988, WIPB moved to Ball State University, where Bob Ross continued to film the show until 1994. Ashley Stimpson, "Bob Ross Was Here," *Belt Magazine*, September 4, 2020, accessed May 12, 2021, <https://beltmag.com/bob-ross-experience-muncie-minnetrista>.

6 Ball State PBS, *Bob Ross Experience*, YouTube video, January 30, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bQlhqPagZuo&t=2918>

7 Brian Boucher, "The Bob Ross Experience, a New Interactive Museum, Is Open in Indiana. Can It Calm a Nervous Nation?" *Artnet*, November 6, 2020, accessed July 7, 2021, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/bob-ross-experience-interactive-museum-1921695>.

8 Minnetrista, "Bob Ross Experience at Minnetrista," Twitch, October 31, 2020, accessed July 7, 2021, [www.twitch.tv/bobross/video/785659750](http://www.twitch.tv/bobross/video/785659750).

9 Unfortunately, these panels weren't on display when I visited in the spring, but a staff member shared that some of them would be put out again this summer.

10 See [www.minnetrista.net/bob-ross-expansion](http://www.minnetrista.net/bob-ross-expansion).