

# Tales from a mountain home Painter Robert Johnson

by Suzanne J.E. Tourtillott

Nowhere is it more natural for folks to tell stories than here in the Appalachians. Like their forebears, today's mountain folk spin tales for entertainment, to explain natural phenomena, or to help immortalize people they've known. Robert Johnson's whimsical paintings give texture to these spirited mountain tales, translating an oral tradition into tangible visual images.

Although Johnson's work appears to be the product of a fevered imagination, his carefully planned paintings are the result of a serene and well-ordered mind. In these dream worlds, he combines his voice with those of hermits, bear-spirits and trees. The imagery is magical and sinuous, fantastical and humorous, based mainly on stories about people and places close to his home in the Celso Community of Burnsville, N.C.

Johnson's formal education was eclectic. Born in Venezuela, he moved to Pennsylvania as a teenager and did undergraduate work at the University of Louisville. For the next decade, his studies took him across the country and back again. In the Northeast, his instructors were disciples of such varied schools as the Bauhaus, Abstract Expressionism and traditional realism. His late 1960s West Coast/Bay Area influences emphasized symbolism, dream imagery and Jungian philosophy. The luminance of late medieval Siense painting inspired him to go to Italy for self-study in egg tempera, an ancient and difficult technique. Over the years, he has adapted the egg tempera technique to acrylics

which, in combination with oils, has become his principal medium.

After a determined international search for an ideal place to live and work, Johnson settled on the Burnsville area 20 years ago. To fully appreciate Johnson's art, it's important to understand the connection between his work and his environment. He and his family are part of the country's oldest land trust, the intentional community of Celso [see "Critical mass: Intentional communities in WNC," *Green Line*, Oct. 1993]. Johnson believes that the communal life of Celso empowers people to be temporary, caring stewards of the land they occupy, and that such an approach to land-use is consistent with his intuitive relationship with nature.

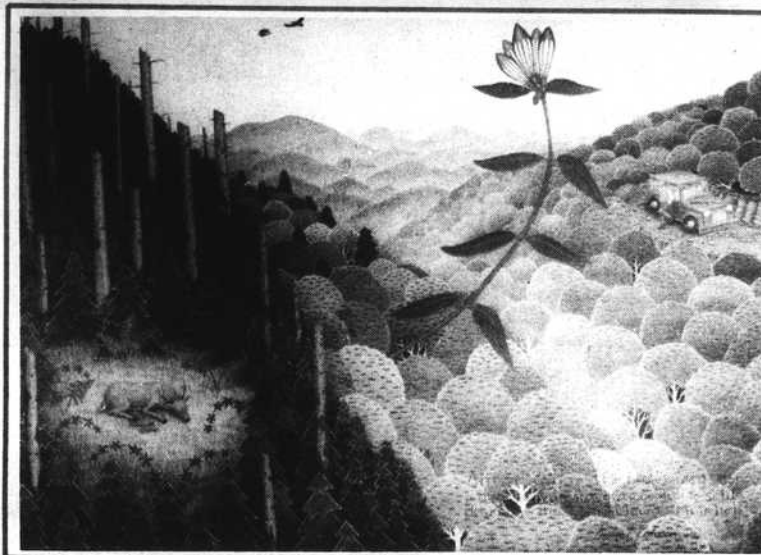
A younger Johnson found that he was caught between two worlds — the idealism of "beautiful nature," he said, "and mythological and dream imagery." His problem, as he saw it, was how to fit the interior and exterior imagery together. Realism, he said, did not tap his inner, experiential self.

The wellspring of Johnson's work comes from mountain living, sketching, meditation and listening. The tales have a gentle voice: how standing mountain got its name; the "Legend of Estatoe"; how Peggy Clauson once drowned a bear. The paintings incorporate the stories he hears about a place and its people. Where visual images cannot fully tell a story, Johnson incorporates textual elements. For example, "Hermit of Bald Mountain" depicts the tale of David Grier. On the canvas, Johnson adds the inscription, "spurned by a woman he loved ... he claimed Bald Mountain as his own and made his own laws." The salient details are

arranged on the canvas in a cyclical manner: Grier occupies a wood-snail's shell; he sits in lonely contemplation amid stylized trees and rocks; a unicorn glows faintly within a solar eclipse. Although the text is in Johnson's own voice, he says, "I think [that]

stories about specific places can generate similar images for different people. These paintings are about people you run into, what they get out of being there." The handwriting illuminates what can't be imaged, an "adjunct to the visual." In this unique fashion, Johnson expresses his synthesis of a rich outward reality (both his own experiences and the stories he hears), and an equally potent, highly individualized interior state.

He explained further: "In Nature, each ecosystem has its own set of forms, whether rain forest or desert." Johnson's mood and the resulting images are specific responses to the biological or form level, he said. Becoming aware of that "feels more like I'm connecting to the earth, [but] I don't have



"DEER HUNTER"

a coherent mythology that fits together — it's all in bits and pieces."

That Siense influence — narrative, highly detailed and polished — is strongly evident in all his work. All the forms are simplified yet intricately patterned and modulated, using the flattened spatial effects often seen in folk painting. Stylized vegetation and animal or geographic forms are often deeply symbolic, lushly curving and pulsing with intuitive harmonies.

Johnson has taught painting for many years, primarily in North Carolina, and now teaches egg tempera fresco technique at Duke University. A number of his frescoes can be seen in the Burnsville area — one at the Burnsville post office. He exhibits regularly throughout the region, and is represented in the Fall Color III exhibit at Blue Spiral I in downtown Asheville, through Nov. 13. For more information, call (704) 251-0202.

## Art Beat continued from Z1

Pine. (704) 765-1562.

### White Gold Gallery

has added an upstairs exhibition room at its Biltmore Village location to 4 All Souls Crescent, Asheville. Gallery owner Kate Godshalk is inaugurating the new space with an exhibit of her porcelain artworks. (704) 274-3355.

**Zone One Contemporary Gallery** will feature the work of internationally renowned sculptor Dorothy Gillespie of New York. The show opens with a reception from 5-8 p.m. on Nov. 4 and runs through Jan. 1, 37 Biltmore Ave., Asheville. (704) 258-3088.

## Continuing shows

### Asheville Art Museum

at Pack Place presents "Paper Pleasures: Drawings 1500-1980," which looks at nearly 500 years of Western Art from Italian Renaissance figure studies to California Conceptualism, through Nov. 28; and "Frammenti Domestici," an exhibition of mixed-media works incorporating tile fragments by South Carolina artist/teacher Carol Pittman through Nov. 7. (704) 253-3227.

### Blue Spiral 1

presents Fall Color III, with featured artists Becky Gray, Bryant Holsenbeck, Robert Johnson and Michael Sherrill. The work of Coralie Tweed is presented on the lower level, and Roger Smith's Hip Hop Theatre is in the sculpture garden. Through Nov. 13, 38 Biltmore Ave. (704) 251-0202.

### Creekside Galleries

in Banner Elk is exhibiting the works of over 200 local, regional and national potters, painters, sculptors, weavers and other artists through Nov. 12. (704) 963-4288.

### Folk Art Center

Guild members are featured in "The Indelible Object," through Nov. 14 in the Main Gallery. Milepost 382 on the Blue Ridge Parkway. (704) 298-7928.

### Galax Artworx

is hosting Asheville painter Chad Adair's first solo exhibition, through Nov. 21. The gallery continues to show works of the Meaders and Howell families (North Georgia folk pottery); Andrew Costine (fine woodwork); and Feng Wei (mixed media). (704) 254-1170 or 258-9738.

### Mint Museum of Art

presents paintings and photographs by Susan Brenner through Nov. 21. "Rivers of Gold: Pre-Columbian Treasures from Sitio Conte," featuring

123 pieces of gold work from an ancient Panamanian cemetery site, through Jan. 2, 2730 Randolph Road, Charlotte, NC. (704) 337-2000.

### Smoky Mountain Art Center

features drawings and three-dimensional works by Venezuelan artist Nelson Figallo and works in a variety of media by Puerto Rican artist Annaruz Bayon, through Nov. 30, 103 Depot St., Bryson City, N.C. (704) 488-2403.

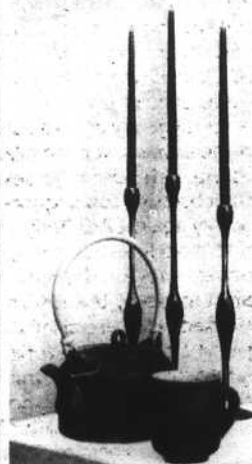
### Touchstone Gallery

continues to show the works of photographer Dr. Kenneth Srinish; glass artist Mark W. Sanders; jewelry designer Mary Heald; potter Jeni Babin; box-maker Lou Woods; painters Carol Bomer; Ernie Howard and Slade Tanner; multi-media artist Iris Sandkuhler; etcher/painter Joseph Culpepper; watercolorist Mary Alice Braukman; papier mache sculptor Basil Polevoy; and soapstone sculptor Alice Massengale. Also on display are photographs by Carol Faust; sculptures by Mark Strom; commentary art by Joe Bruneau; wind sculptures by Michael Tarillion; raku pottery by James Franklin; flash-fired raku by John Sherrill; paintings by Robert Smet; and pottery by Tom Ferguson. 318 N. Main St., Hendersonville. (704) 692-2191.

### UNCA's University Gallery

hosts "Reflections" — 50 black-and-white photos by Alice Hardin, the culmination of her work toward a BFA at UNCA. (704) 251-6559.

Inspired Creations  
Select, contemporary American crafts  
including candlestick sets and tea pots.



HEARTWOOD  
CONTEMPORARY CRAFTS GALLERY

Main Street, Saluda 704-749-9365

Look Great In Print!

Invitations, announcements, leaflets, brochures, posters, periodicals, books, and more - we can handle all of your publication needs.

We offer a 7½ percent discount to all of our new customers.

Let us create the "publication of your fancy."

sublime 704/258-3018  
innovation

