



FAWN POTASH

Artist Barry Hopkins

The Wilderness Sense of Place

BY BARRY HENCK

Outdoor illustrator Barry Hopkins is interested in what makes a place different from an environment, and connecting with special natural places has inspired his drawing, teaching, and life for the past 30 years.

"You've had a meaningful experience with a place," he said. "It holds a piece of your heart and then you have that connectedness."

Hopkins' main artistic format is pencil drawings of shady groves, small waterfalls, and points where woods turn into wilderness. Most of his art originates in mountainous locations in the northern Catskills and the Adirondacks. He first takes sketches or photos of locations that he considers to be meaningful and then completes his drawings in a studio.

Barry Henck is a writer and editor residing in Catskill, New York.

"Usually I'm so filled by what's happening that I need to go back and distill what I've experienced," he said. "Then I come back and react to the experience through pencil and drawing and get the things essential to the scene."

While Hopkins is interested in getting an overall sense of a site, he has come to appreciate the camera because it can capture a moment when light conditions are ideal. As he draws, Hopkins tries to depict the emotion of an inward journey as much as a physical journey.

"I want the viewer to feel as if he has just come upon the scene and is viewing it alone," he said.

Drawings by Hopkins are usually set in stained oak frames; the largest of his works are three feet high. A handful of his artworks are surrounded by arched mat frames reminiscent of a church window, and this unique shape helps connote some reverence for the scene.

Hopkins makes an unusual offer to those who purchase his art. With each drawing sold comes a promise to hike with the buyer to the place that inspired the picture.

"If it's nothing more than a pretty picture, then you don't have a lot of value," he said. "The sights in Nature are more important than the pictures."

Nature is always spelled with a capital by Hopkins, who draws from the transcendentalist theories of Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. He is also familiar with the artistic philosophies of painters who lived and worked near his home in Catskill. Asher B. Durand and Thomas Cole, the founder of the Hudson River School of painting, were also known for illustrating spiritual aspects of the land. One of Hopkins' rituals is to visit the places where these artists lived and draw the same places they painted.

"The very first artwork was cave paintings, and back then all art was tied to ritual and ceremony about the natural world," he said. "I see myself as celebrating my spiritual connection to the earth."

Hopkins also holds to a pantheistic belief that a spirit or life exists within everything. All aspects of nature fit together in a way that can be accepted only with a sense of awe. Hopkins uses wildflowers as an example of nature's depth and variety. He has found and identified about 315 varieties of wildflowers during walks in New York.

A middle school art teacher by trade, whose penchant for appreciating locale plays a significant role in his teaching techniques, Hopkins makes it his mission to help students appreciate where they are from.

One of his special activities is to arrange an annual conference for the middle school titled "Towards a Greater Sense of Place." For two days, students participate in workshops and special activities that help them value the best spots in their region. This includes the history of Main Street, the ecology

the Hudson River, and the fun of canoeing a tidal marsh. A workshop called "The Artists' Trail" takes students to the places where Thomas Cole painted and James Fenimore Cooper wrote.

During the day-to-day teaching of art, Hopkins takes a student-centered approach where children are encouraged to grasp their own beliefs.

"I try to help awaken children to the possibilities of their life — their own passions and their own belief systems," he said. "I would much rather have a better human being come out of my class than a better artist. I realize that only a small percentage will become artists."

Hopkins also tries to challenge the values of his students by letting them react to social issues and assess his own points of view. Some art projects are for students to explore a social issue they care about.

"The student needs to know that the teacher has his or her own strong points of view; they need to be taught by example," he said. "They also need to see that I pay for my beliefs."

Hopkins is involved in a number of outdoor organizations that take him canoeing in the north country, running along old carriage trails in Ulster County, and touring the haunts of the Hudson River School painters. He is most at home in the woods and it is here where his best drawings originate.

"Most of my art comes out of the wilderness experience," he said. "I don't chase after art or a photo; I go out for the pure sake of going to Nature."

Hopkins has also been known to speak out on the dangers of corporate exploitation of land, the urgent need to confront pollution, and the consequences of a super-mobile society. He sees art as a way to bring attention to Nature and elicit respect between people.

"Beauty on any level of fine art and in all of the humanities has a way of elevating behavior and giving people a sense of reverence and respect for life, each other, and themselves."