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Ben Abril: The Ambience of the City

The city of Los Angeles has always been a paradox, a study of contrasts a magnet drawing people from every corner of the globe. It is also a city that grew up too fast, and razed its handsome old buildings long before their time. Artists have been among the most enthusiastic appreciators; what realtors and developers seem determined to take away, they have attempted to preserve through their own creative efforts.

Through the year's artists Mae Babitz, Millard Sheets, Phil Paradise, Phil Dike, Fred Penney, Ben Messick and scores of others have left an important record. It is doubtful, however, that any one artist has focused on the subject with the insistence and dedication of Ben Abril.

Abril was born in Los Angeles! That may have given him an edge. There was a time, not too many years back, when a native son was a novelty. "You mean to say you were born in Los Angeles?"

Abril grew into a career of painting the local scene as naturally as he grew from boy to man. Los Angeles was his territory! And he scampered all over it as busily and as happily as a squirrel protecting her many nests painting whatever took his fancy.

'Setting up' for a day's painting was easier then. Just pick your curb or street corner and dive in! Tackle your subject boldly. Not too much traffic to worry about. No great hordes of people, but still, enough of them to stop and watch an artist at work: businessmen working in downtown Los Angeles, secretaries on their lunch hour, winos from East Fifth Street, and tourists visiting the Plaza.

This spectator sport never bothered the good-natured Abril. He is an uncomplicated man, loving what he is doing and doing it with assurance. Some days a passerby might ask, "Will you sell me that painting?" Or "How much do you want for that picture? I'll pay you."

Abril, young and inexperienced, was amazed. "I couldn't believe anyone would pay me for a painting. I sold quite a few that way, for five or ten dollars apiece."

Let us hope that these collectors have hung on to their 'early Abrils.'

Bunker Hill, with its plethora of old mansions, Salt Box cottages and California bungalows, offered irresistible bait. It had once been the centerpiece of early Los Angeles, the former home of the socially elite. For a long time it had been in a state of disrepair, but artists are not put off by antiquity, or shabbiness. Crumbling walls, peeling paint and wallpaper are invitations to bet busy!

Abril is no exception.

"I have always been fascinated by old buildings; the way the light plays on the forms, the patterns that sun and shadow throw on the textured walls."

For years, the figure of this stalwart, rugged individualist painting, easel in front of him, sometimes wearing a broad-brimmed hat, was a familiar figure to residents on the hill and adjacent areas.

He might be discovered at the foot of Carroll Street, a steep incline hugging the hill, with its array of small houses. (They have recently been refurbished, with brightly colored facades.)

Or it might be Clay Street, two blocks long that was once used as a service road to rooming houses and hotels. Or Court Street with its colorful houses, each one different from the other, at the time the only 'skyscraper' visible in the distance was City Hall, thirteen stories high.

Hotels and apartments of that early era offered special inducements to artists. How often did Abril stop at some example of rococo at its best or colorful worst? Stained glass was everywhere! The Lovejoy Apartments at the top of Angel's Flight, the Dome Apartments with its Russian-influenced dome decorating the roof, the famous Patterson Hotel which met its fate with the inevitable bulldozer.

And what artist could withstand the charms of West Temple Apartments. Turrets, Steeples, endless dormer windows embellished the walls of its three stories.

And of course, there was Angel's Flight, the shortest funicular railway anywhere! Its charms have been applauded in poetry, film, music, photography and by artists. While Still in its original location (now located in Heritage Square) Abril painted it from many angles and different perspectives, from top to bottom, in close up and from a distance.

For the artist, Los Angeles has claimed the center of his affections. But a man as vigorous and full of curiosity and interests as Abril must also reach out and take to the road at intervals.

In one sense, he is like a photojournalist. He finds his subject, sets up his easel, whether it is a creek bed, a muddy lane, a deserted schoolyard, and gets his story with a spontaneous attack on the canvas. He paints it as he finds it, with a large dash of poetic license – the artist's privilege.

He takes high roads and low roads that lead anywhere. No timetables urge him to go faster than he cares to move. Each road has a character of its own and he takes enough time to discover its uniqueness. His paintings of roads reach beyond their physical appearance. They suggest all sorts of images.

The Juregui Ranch (Painting at Whites Gallery) is typical of his road pictures. It suggests endless stretches of meadowlands. Do they reach to the mountains beyond the horizon or the deep woods, a place where one could quickly become lost? It is for the viewer to ponder. It is the kind of imagery that makes Abril's pictures so appealing.

Ben Abril has devoted his life to painting; he has never been a starving artist. He is far too industrious to be without a job. He worked nights at the United States Post Office, in order to reserve days for painting and study. He honed his natural talents with formal study at the Glendale School of Art, Otis Art Institute, Art Center School and Chouinard's School of Art.

For ten years he was on the design staff for Los Angeles County as a color consultant and architectural delineator. What a great, disciplined training for one destined to paint such a vast number of buildings.

His interest in trains led him to illustrate three children's books on the subject, with texts by D.R. Burleigh: How engines Talk, Piggyback, and Sho-Fly. He taught and lectured on art, and in the mid-fifties he worked as a designer for motion pictures and television.

Abril is not an unsung hero in his own territory. His paintings hang in many administrative buildings in the city: In the private offices of District Attorney John Van De Kamp, Judge William B. Keene, Supervisors Baxter Ward and Kenneth Hahn and at #1 Bunker Hill, formerly the old Edison Building. Awards, citations and exhibits

mounted by the city, have been plentiful. Perhaps the most memorable tribute to Abril's talent was a long running retrospective of his Bunker Hill paintings at the Los Angeles Museum of Natural History in Exposition Park, during the first three months of 1969. From this large body of work, 36 paintings were purchased for the Museum's permanent collection.

On March 8, 1964, the California magazine section of the Herald-Examiner devoted its cover and five pages to his paintings of early Los Angeles. This large display caught the eye of VIPs in the United States Navy at Washington, D.C. As a result, the secretary of the U.S. Navy commissioned Abril to paint in occupied Japan for the Navy Combat Art Collection.

He was flown to Japan to paint ports and harbors with their anchored battleships and riverboats, temples and shrines in Tokyo, Kyoto, Nagasaki, Iwakuni and many other areas. As usual, he carried his easel and art materials with him. Every picture was begun at its historical site, but because of limited time, they had to be completed in his studio at home.

Five months later, the entire collection was presented to the Navy with a showing and reception at historic Barnsdall Park, hosted by then-mayor Sam Yorty.

With all his driving energy, Abril has never attempted to sell his own work. He was, and is now, represented by the Biltmore Gallery. His latest show attracted over six hundred people on opening night, at which time more than half of the paintings were sold. Collectors flew in from several other states in order to pick a favorite. His shows have always been sold out.

What is the magic ingredient, which draws collectors to buy his paintings? Other artists paint old landmarks?

"People seem to relate to what I paint," Abril points out. "They will say, 'Hey, I've been there!' Or, 'I've seen that before.' And it's the color too! They seem to like the color!"

But it is more than a sense of recognition of familiar places. Abril paints with skill and authority. He frequently becomes eloquent when expressing the mood of a day: sultry skies, rainy city streets with shimmering reflections and myriad lights, all reflect the affection with which Abril paints the ambience of the city. Without striving for a style, a style of his own has evolved. Without exhibitionism or striving for fame, fame has come to him.

For years Alexander Cowie was both friend and dealer. He understood the man and his talent and once wrote: "In his paintings, Abril grasps the moment of vision. His art is a series of fresh looks at the landscape, painted while the elation still inspires him. Thoroughly conversant with drawing, design, and color, he does not impose these on his pictures, but lets the act of painting reflect what he sees and feels."

His one-man exhibits, too numerous to mention here, include showings in many galleries and museums around the country, including a major show at the Charles and Emma Frye Museum in Seattle, Washington. He has been represented in many travel shows, both national and international including: The Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Virginia, Belles Artes Museum, Mexico City, and the American Watercolor Society's Traveling Exhibition, of which he is a member.

His work is housed in many well-known collections, including: the City of Los Angeles, Home Savings and Loan, American Watercolor Society, Glendale Federal

Savings, Franklin Life Insurance Company, Department of Power and Water, Hornblower and Weeks Investment Company, Carol Kennedy Collection, and that of Vincent Price, actor and art collector.

The art press sometimes underestimates artists who paint romantically. Norman Rockwell was a prime case in point. Yet the whole world celebrates his talent.

Ben Abril's paintings also touch the heart. He is a dedicated artist, who never stops painting, never stops loving what he is doing for a living. His work keeps improving. He is dedicated to his family, a loving unit: his wife Dorothy, daughters Lori and Debbie, and his son Dana – all young adults.

Ben Abril is a life-size portrait of the 'most happy fella.'