

5 January 2002

PARA EL DIA DE LOS MUERTOS

Scott and I have always followed our interests as far as the subject matter of our art is concerned even though we have had more than our share of gentle nudging by important art people not to venture too widely from the Texas landscapes, still lifes and portraits that have been our trademark subject matter for many collectors. Some people remain curious and puzzled by our paintings of Mexican subjects as if such works were but a sideline or an eccentric departure from our other art. The simple truth is that since early childhood our drawing and painting skills have always been employed to record subjects that compelled our fascination, and Mexico has been one of those subjects practically from the beginning. I sometimes think of our art as a kind of diary, our paintings recording phases in our lives much in the same way as does a family photo album.

In this way we differ from those who pursue their art as an aesthetic exploration in which subject matter is treated as a motif, a springboard for personal expression and the display of style. Other contemporary art movements like conceptual art seems to me almost completely obsessed with aesthetic formalities. It bores me. And so does Performance art.

If our book "From Time to Time" has a central purpose or message apart from simply showing a more complete range of our work to more people, it is to convey how deeply interconnected our interests have always been. Our connections to our Texas home, our love of history, both of the old world and the new, our fascination with nature, with classical music, with books and the art of other cultures past and present has always provided us with a rich source of artistic ideas, a mine whose riches will never be exhausted.

Also, from the time we were seven years old and had a menagerie of snakes, lizards and toads and other crawling things in the bathtub of our horrified neighbor's servants' quarters we have been collectors. At the age of ten I began to add to our collections of mounted butterflies and other bugs a number of transmogrified songbirds I had learned to stuff from a correspondence course. Also, as children of the Davey Crockett craze and with a growing interest in John James Audubon, Scott and I began collecting books on American history. Today it seems like we were always interested in the American Revolution, the Civil War and the Alamo. It was only natural that we would develop a fascination with the weaponry of those times and what people wore. With the acquisition of a few flintlock guns and a growing curiosity about uniforms and other clothing of the past, our desire to know how our forebearers actually looked became a serious one. Being visually oriented, Scott and I were never satisfied by the costumes we observed with Hollywood history films. Too often they bore little resemblance to paintings of the period or to the daguerreotypes we so carefully scrutinized in our books.

Scott and I will never forget the brown silk frock coat

worn by Robert Livingston circa 1817 that we saw in the Cabildo Museum on our first trip to New Orleans when we were not yet teenagers. We had no idea that examples of clothing so old had survived, and it was not until 1966 while we were students at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts that we discovered that we could indeed acquire beautiful examples of historic costume.

I purchased the bicorn hat shown here in Oaxaca in 1978. It is the hat of Mexican military officer made of beaver fur and dates between 1820 and 1840 or roughly from about the time of the fall of the Alamo (1836). I have added the red Turkey feathers to replace the originals, remnants of which remained sewn to the inside of the brim.

I always wanted to paint that hat but didn't get an inspiration until the Museum of Modern Art here in Fort Worth decided to honor the Mexican Day of the Dead in 1987 with a lavish display of papier mache skeletons and marigold bedecked altars covered with sugar skulls, religious artifacts and photo portraits of deceased loved ones.

I went to a costume shop and purchased a bunch of red-dyed turkey feathers to replace the missing ones. I thought about making a papier mache skull to put it on but in the end decided to use a real skull given to Scott and me by a doctor friend. The resulting painting was only meant to be a study, though I wasn't sure what it was to be a study for. Although I had successfully drawn human skulls many times before and infact loved drawing them, I had problems with this picture from the start. Finally in frustration I put the unfinished painting in a portfolio and forgot about it for a few years.

In 1990 I decided to do a kind of diploma piece still life and self-portrait that would say something about me and my love of Mexico and my thoughts on fame and success. An altar recalling the Day of the Dead seemed to suggest the perfect format. While assembling and arranging the various objects and offerings, this unfinished watercolor of the skull and hat came to mind. It took me a few days to find it, and when I did, I had no trouble making the necessary corrections. After I finished I immediately began work on what I believe is one of my best paintings, "Autoretrato para el Dia de los Muertos." This skull and hat became an important element in that picture.

SWG