

Rex Brandt: In Praise of Sunshine

by Janet Blake

Rex Brandt gained national renown for his watercolor paintings during the period from the mid 1930s to the 1990s. As a dedicated teacher of the watercolor medium, he conducted painting workshops at his home in Corona del Mar, California, his summer home in the San Juan Islands off the coast of Washington, and at several international locations. Brandt published more than ten books on watercolor painting, including *The Winning Ways of Watercolor*. Although he painted with other media, he preferred watercolor, which he considered to be the most expres-



sive and the perfect vehicle to paint “light and air.” Brandt acknowledged sunshine as the essential theme of his long career. He wrote: “Whether we are conscious of it or not, everything in the perceived world is in

motion. Sunshine is the mediator, a pervasive quality in which things are lost and found, emerge and recede...”

Rexford Elson Brandt was born in San Diego in 1914. He grew up in Riverside and attended Riverside Junior College and the University of California, Berkeley. The art department at Berkeley was decidedly modernist, in part a legacy of the German abstract artist and teacher Hans Hofmann, who taught there in the summers of 1930 and 1931. Two of Brandt’s teachers had studied with Hofmann—Margaret Peterson and John Haley. Peterson used Hofmann’s idea of “push and pull” in her design and painting classes, a phrase that he had coined





Rex Brandt: *In Praise of Sunshine* is on view through September 21, 2014, at the Laguna Art Museum, 307 Cliff Drive, Laguna Beach, California, 92651, 949-494-8971, www.lagunaartmuseum.org. A 152-page catalogue accompanies the exhibition.

ABOVE: *Path of Light*, 1963, o/board, 29 x 39, private collection.

RIGHT: *July Morning, Dory Fleet*, 1982, w/c on paper, 22 x 30, private collection.

ABOVE LEFT: *Surfriders*, 1959, o/c, 26 x 36, The E. Gene Crain Collection.

LEFT: *Afternoon Sun*, 1986, w/c and ink on paper, 20 x 27 7/8, The Buck Collection.

in describing the “dynamic interrelationships between physical and spatial forces.”

Yearning for that “regenerative warmth of the sun,” after graduation in June 1936, Brandt returned to Riverside. The following years would present a struggle for the young artist as he felt his own internal “push-pull” between pursuing a style influenced by Berkeley and adhering to the



more conservative, straightforwardly representational style typically practiced in his hometown and its environs. He joined the

California Water Color Society and became an active participant with artists of the American scene including Millard Sheets



ABOVE: *San Francisco Pattern*, 1960, w/c on paper, 125/8 x 27 1/2, The Buck Collection.

LEFT: *Balboa Ferry Sunday*, 1972, w/c on paper, 22 x 30, private collection.

RIGHT: *Strong Light*, 1968, w/c, acrylic, ink, gouache, and collage on paper, 22 x 30, The E. Gene Crain Collection.

BELOW RIGHT: *Evening Calm*, 1967, w/c on paper, 22 x 30, Olsen Collection.

and Phil Dike. He was a champion of the so-called California school and organized one of the first group exhibitions of their work, in 1937. In the post-War era, Brandt eschewed literal representation except in his teaching and instead focused on complex, semi-abstract studio works in which he explored the effects of sunlight.

In April 1943 Brandt was given a one-man watercolor painting exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum. Arthur Mil-

lier spoke highly of the exhibition: "In style he moves back and forth between crisp pattern and a broad, tonal use of the medium. In either case he is expert, his work has a high content of beauty and is readily comprehensible."

By the fall of that year, the artist and his family were living in Corona del Mar, just south of Newport Beach. For Brandt, the Newport Harbor area held "untold wealth in painting subjects," more so than

the inland area around Riverside. It was painting and teaching that would remain his passion, and the Brandts' new home in Corona del Mar—dubbed "Blue Sky"—would become the center of that passion. In 1946 Brandt and Dike began to plan for summer classes to be held at "Blue Sky." They would be the leading teachers, and would invite other guest artists to assist. The first season of the Brandt-Dike Summer School of Painting opened on June 26, 1947, a session of six weeks. The first class was made up of thirty painters, both amateur and professional. Summer classes continued at Blue Sky for thirty-eight years with Brandt estimating that over the years some four thousand artists participated.

In 1971, in reflecting on his achievements over the past thirty years, Brandt stated: "If I have an ability, it's not as an artist, but it is to ignite—to achieve a pitch



that comes spontaneously.” Watercolor, he said, “is the perfect medium for depicting air, water and space—the sense of bloom, the spontaneity of life....” In looking toward the future, he stated: “The happiest time of my life is invariably in the present. I’ll just keep painting away...it’s what I can do.

On November 10, 1984, a joint retrospective exhibition for Brandt and his wife, Joan Irving, titled *Two from California*, opened at the Riverside Art Center and Museum. With just ten out of fifty-two works by Brandt in the exhibition dating prior to 1950, it was evident that he wanted to be defined not by his regionalist works of the 1930s and 40s, but by the paintings that revealed his interest in a more expressive interpretation. Even among the ten dating from before 1950, several reflected the progressive influence of his years at Berkeley. Again, the sun was a focal point: “You can’t paint the sun,... You can only symbolize it. It’s the regenerative feeling of its presence that I seek to



paint, not just the look of it.”

Rex Brandt died on March 21, 2000, at his home in Corona del Mar. On May 11,

he was posthumously presented with The Helena Modjeska Cultural Legacy Award (Artist Category) by Arts Orange County.



ABOVE: *Room in the Mirror, Study*, 1948, w/c on paper, 22 x 30, The Andrew and Betsy Wyeth Collection.

RIGHT: *Wind from the Sea*, 1947, tempera on hardboard, 18 1/2 x 27 9/16, National Gallery of Art, Washington, gift of Charles H. Morgan.

ABOVE LEFT: *Evening at Kuerners*, 1970, drybrush on paper, 25 1/2 x 39 3/4, The Andrew and Betsy Wyeth Collection.

LEFT: *The Pikes*, 1965, w/c on paper, 28 x 19, The San Diego Museum of Art, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Norton S. Walbridge.

FAR LEFT: *Rod and Reel*, 1975, w/c on paper, 21 1/2 x 29 1/2, Dr. and Mrs. James David Brodell.

dows repeatedly, producing more than 300 works that explore not only the formal but also the conceptual richness of the subject. The resulting images are often rigorous in their formal construction but deeply personal in subject.

Awarded the National Medal of Arts in



2007 and the Congressional Gold Medal in 1988, Wyeth was the first artist to receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1963.

His work is in the collections of most major American art museums, as well as museums throughout Europe, Russia, and Japan.