



Harter, J. B. (1940-2002)

by Linda Rapp

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Artist and museum curator J. B. Harter drew and painted throughout his life but only began showing his homoerotic works soon before he was murdered.

The only child of a doctor and a journalist, John Burton Harter was born on October 7, 1940 in Jackson, Mississippi. The family soon moved to Louisville, Kentucky, where his father established a very successful practice in thoracic surgery.

Harter painted since childhood and pursued his interest in art by earning a bachelor's degree in art history at the University of Louisville and then going on to Louisiana State University, where he majored in studio arts. He continued his studies with graduate work at the University of Pennsylvania, Hebrew University (Jerusalem), the University of Vienna, and Arizona State University.

Harter was also interested in anthropology and, he wrote, "attempted to pursue a graduate program in Archaeology and South Asian Studies, thought better of it, and became, ultimately, a museum curator." He joined the staff of the Historic New Orleans Collection in 1967. A few years later he took a job as a registrar at the Louisiana State Museum, also in New Orleans. His meticulous work earned him promotions to curator and, in 1986, to Director of Collections, a post he held until he retired in 1991.

Co-workers praised Harter as an extremely competent and effective leader. Commenting on his work after a 1988 fire that caused considerable damage at the Cabildo, the building housing the museum, his colleague Deena Bedigian stated, "Burt was extraordinary during the Cabildo fire. He could see the extent of the catastrophe but quickly came up with a punch list of things to do. He handled the condition of the whole inventory, the insurance, and everything."

The museum suffered another loss in 1989, this time by theft. Sixty prints from John James Audubon's "Birds of America" series, valued at around a million dollars, and approximately forty other artworks were stolen. Some months later, Michael Moskaluk, who had volunteered at the museum, attempted to sell the Audubon prints in Vermont and was arrested.

Moskaluk, who, it turned out, had also stolen rare books from libraries in New Bedford, Connecticut and Haverhill, Massachusetts, as well as fifty-two other Audubon prints from the Boston Library, attempted to shift the blame to Harter. He claimed that Harter had come up with a scheme to give the artwork to him to sell and "generate money for him as well as myself."

Police were immediately skeptical of the story. It was Harter who had reported the thefts. In addition, and unbeknownst even to most of his friends, Harter was wealthy, having inherited millions after his father's death in 1982. He had used his assets to add to the museum's collections, putting the lie to Moskaluk's claim that Harter had sacrificed valuable pieces for "\$500 here, \$1,000 there."

Moskaluk was convicted in a 1993 trial and given a fifteen-and-a-half-year sentence. He died in prison in

1995.

Harter was a witness at Moskaluk's trial and was obliged to testify that he had assets of some three million dollars. One of his secrets had been revealed; another--his homosexuality--was generally still hidden.

Harter was known as a painter of abstractions, still-lives, and landscapes reflecting the vivid and stunning colors of the American Southwest. His landscapes were the subject of a highly successful show at the Louisiana State University Museum of Art in 1999. Art critic Anne Price of the Baton Rouge *Advocate* praised his work, saying, "The painter manages to convey the feeling of endless space and timeless beauty of a unique arid landscape within the confines of a single canvas."

Harter was also an excellent photographer and produced postcards from his journeys around the globe, on which he was often accompanied by his mother, who shared his love of travel.

It was only after her death in 1996 that he began showing his homoerotic artwork and published a collection of his paintings and drawings entitled *Encounters with the Nude Male* (1997). In his introduction to the book, Harter wrote, "I have been turning out works of gay-oriented art for nearly thirty years, most of which almost no one has seen."

He also stated that he "came relatively late to gay life at twenty-seven," by which time he had been briefly married and divorced. He "felt like an explorer in new territory . . . [that] itself was changing" as he "witnessed the promise of sexual liberation swept away by the emerging threat of AIDS."

The disease would cost Harter many friends. On a wall in his home he hung portraits of some eighty HIV-positive acquaintances and painted a small coffin next to the name of each of the over fifty men who died of AIDS.

Harter frankly stated that he had lived much of his life closeted, "partly . . . in deference to family, partly in deference to employment." Sadly, for decades he "felt more comfortable living the proverbial double life" than being able to live openly as a gay man.

Since he remained closeted, he wrote, "Of necessity I became my own most accessible model." It was only after twenty years that he began showing his work to a few friends, who suggested that he use other, younger subjects as well.

Harter heeded their advice and began seeking models, whom he typically photographed in preparation for paintings.

Of his technique he wrote, "I little direct the poses my models take for the camera. Each finds his own gravity and the result suggests uses to me I would not have imagined were I more controlling. In this way the model contributes to the creativity of the artwork I make from him and innocently collaborates in the direction it takes."

Following his friends' advice and perhaps his own aesthetic taste, he depicted many Adonis-like figures in his art, but he also painted an elderly "Silenus" (1995). "Not everyone is ever-young after all, and the body does represent the forces of aging which we cannot ultimately deny," he noted.

A major influence on Harter's style was the work of Paul Cadmus, but his interest in other cultures is also reflected in his art, which includes Mayan themes and an image of the Hindu "Lord Shiva" (1994), whose "imagery has not been sufficiently explored by men in the West who are interested in men," wrote Harter.

Harter was also greatly influenced by the city in which he spent most of his life, New Orleans. Not only did he paint images of the city's buildings and landmarks, but he also depicted its bar scene and its gay subculture.

Harter's sense of humor is evident in his comment on his "Roman Idyll" (1995): "It has been customary in the slow emergence of homocentric art for artists to add on classical references to their gay images so as to give them a veneer of respectability. We all know how those Greeks and Romans were, but culturally we forgive them because they could be such good artists and they're safely dead." His sly humor is also evident in many of his works, even those that are sexually charged.

Harter bought a warehouse in the Faubourg Marigny district of New Orleans and refurbished it to serve as a gallery for his art. His plans were never realized. He was found murdered in his home on March 13, 2002.

There was no sign of forced entry, and Harter's assailant apparently stole nothing except his pick-up truck, which had been hot-wired and was subsequently found abandoned. The murder remains unsolved.

A second book of Harter's art, *The Drawings of J. B. Harter* (2003), was published posthumously.

Harter was honored with an exhibition, "The Culture of Queer: A Tribute to J. B. Harter," in the New Orleans Contemporary Arts Center that opened on July 22, 2005. Curator David Rubin called it "a dialogue with the art of Burt Harter," adding, "He dared to chart the uncharted territory while he was still in the closet. He began to explore his sexual identity during the sexual revolution."

The show featured, in addition to Harter's drawings and paintings, the works of Robert Mapplethorpe and Andy Warhol and several contemporary Louisiana artists, including George Dureau and Roberto Rincon. Scheduled to run until September 11, thus being in place for Southern Decadence, the New Orleans festival celebrating glbtq culture, the show was cut short by the catastrophe of Hurricane Katrina. Happily, the artwork escaped damage, and the exhibition reopened as planned at the Leslie-Lohman Gay Art Foundation in New York City in May 2006.

Harter's artwork is in the collections of a number of museums, including the New Orleans Museum of Art, the Louisiana State Museum, the Historic New Orleans Collection, and the Leslie Lohman Gay Art Foundation.

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