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Alder's Accounts

Cowboys, Indians and Saxophones

Life and Art of Paul Salisbury

by Tom Alder

When I see early Utah artworks that reveal something about our history, I'm reminded of a conversation I once had with Bob Olpin. During an American art history class at the U, I was impressed with Bob's command, not only of art history but American history as well. After class, I pressed him on a point about John Trumbull, one of the artists who completed murals for the US Capitol rotunda. Bob elaborated on his earlier point, saying that Trumbull, a colonel in the colonial army, resigned his commission because George Washington had been promoted over him. Trumbull stuck with painting and created considerable portraits and other historical scenes in the tradition of the Grand Manner (Washington didn't do too badly either). Bob concluded by saying something like, "You can learn a lot more about history in an art history class examining paintings than you can over in the history department."

One artist that frequently reminds me of Bob's dictum is Paul Salisbury [1903-1973], a realistic painter born in Richfield who spent most of his career in Provo. He was well-known for his depictions of cowboys and Native Americans wandering through sagebrush, set against the colors of the western landscape scenes Salisbury knew from a childhood spent on his father's ranch near the Kanosh Indian Reservation, as well as by frequent summers spent on the Navajo Reservation in the four corners area.

Salisbury grew up in Richfield, Utah at the beginning of the twentieth century. His father was a farmer and rancher and Salisbury developed his interest in art early on, saying he learned to draw animals before he learned to write. On the ranch he spent "much of [his] time drawing and sketching horses and other animals to develop a realistic attention to details" (Painters of Utah's Canyons and Desert). Though rural, Richfield wasn't without some culture, at least in Salisbury's circle. His grandfather, a Swedish immigrant, had helped to establish the first playhouse there in the 1870s and Salisbury grew up among artists. There was his uncle Cornelius (although he left town when Salisbury was eleven, and before that was often away developing his talents -- more on him next month). Some of his cousins also liked to paint. His aunt's brother-in-law, Brigham Young Andelin, was an oil painter, later active in Ogden. His neighbor, Andrew Knaphus, was an amateur painter; and Knaphus' artist brother, Torlief, had also lived in Richfield when Salisbury was a child. In addition to the visual arts, Salisbury developed a young and abiding love for music. He learned to play the saxophone in grade school and became so accomplished at it that he was frequently in demand as a soloist at concerts and other activities when he was in high school.

After high school (at the earliest 1924 and possibly 1925), Salisbury moved to the Salt Lake Valley, where his uncle Cornelius was teaching art, first at Jordan High School (1925) and later at West High (after 1928). He received instruction from his uncle as well as more formal training under Bent F. Larsen and E.H. Eastmond and Brigham Young High School. He also received art instruction and painted with famed Utah landscapist, LeConte Stewart, also a native of the Sevier River valley.

For good stretches of his life Salisbury made a living as a musician, playing both the saxophone and the clarinet. He played in the first Salt Lake Symphony, the BYU orchestra and band, Liberty Park band, and Herb Adkins Band. In the summers he played to fans at Saltair and Lagoon, and during the winter at theatres in the Salt Lake area. During his career as a musician he even traveled outside the state, playing on the Pantages circuit, a series of theatres and playhouses that dominated the entertainment scene west of the Mississippi.

Salisbury had a photographic memory (I do too; I just forget to put the film in sometimes). Christensen said he would often paint strictly from memory. "He would stand before his blank white canvas, and do a very simple drawing with vine charcoal. Fresh paint was placed on the glass palette: Zinc Yellow, Cadmium Orange, Cadmium Red Light, Alizarin Crimson, Permanent (Ultramarine) Blue, and Titanium White. Then he would begin 'blocking it in', and within a short time the canvas was alive with cowboys and horses, or with some Navajo Indians of the Southwest. This beginning piece would look finished to anyone but Paul. But it would be put aside to dry, and later added to. Sometimes it would be one of his wonderful landscapes, or a winter scene. You didn't disturb him with a lot of talk. Watching him paint was spell binding; it took your breath away."

In 1952 Salisbury gave a magazine interview in which he commented on the influence of the Southwest in his paintings. In the winter he spent his time in the studio, but in the summers he liked to go to the Navajo Nation, often bringing the family with him. "Something about the Southwest keeps calling me back to desert sights and sounds and sensations. My brush instinctively seeks out vivid colors on the palette and before I'm fully conscious of it, I'm painting the desert again . . . I like to think of this stretch of desert as my country . . . I am completely at home on it, and it seems to own a part of me."

Salisbury painted en plein air, believing it kept an artist fresh, but in the studio also frequently used transparencies. Getting details right was important to him and he remarked that he would spend hours in a library studying, say, the turkey, before he would include one in his painting. Christensen suggested that Salisbury's style was not photorealistic. "The detail was there but it didn't dominate the theme." She added that Salisbury did not subscribe to modernism and abstraction and was shunned by a number of professors in other institutions who had adopted that style. "I believe in conservative painting," the artist said in 1952. "The more realistic the picture, the better. Modern art, with its abstractions, holds no attention for me."

It was Salisbury's practice to choose six students from each of three schools, [from Springville, Spanish Fork, and Payson] and teach them his and Frank Tenney Johnson's methods. Christensen was one of the fortunate few who learned at Salisbury's feet from 1957 to 1964, both in school and privately. By 1960, according to Christensen, only two Utah artists were supporting themselves by selling their artwork Arnold Friberg and Paul Salisbury. The rest relied on teaching and other professions to make ends meet.

One of the keys to Salisbury's financial success was a unique arrangement he made with a local bank. In the early 1950s, Salisbury presented a proposal to some of the officers of Springville Bank: they would advance him sums of money while he created his artworks; in return the paintings would be used as collateral and the completed paintings put in the bank's vault. As the paintings sold at various sales and one-man shows, the loans were repaid with the profits. This arrangement lasted several years, and the (renamed) Central Bank still has many of his works. (I doubt this kind of proposal would get any traction from present-day banks, but fortunately, there are banks that fully support artists by purchasing their works and even sponsoring them with artist receptions as does Zions Bank each November).

In the sixties doctors discovered a small tumor in Salisbury's lung and although surgery was indicated and successful, the result eventually affected his heart, requiring open-heart surgery in 1973. While recovering in the hospital, Salisbury contracted pneumonia and lingered for several days until passing away at the young age of 69.

Largely less known in Utah than his more famous uncle Cornelius, Salisbury's legacy can be seen in his tranquil themes. His resulting paintings straightforwardly provide a visual narrative of the vanishing west. Landscapes, arguably the most popular among Utah art purchasers, have an added bonus with Salisbury's works if they include cowboys, Native Americans, and cultural practices that are rarely portrayed with first-hand knowledge. Christensen concluded her Salisbury memories by describing his final artwork. "The last painting he had been working on was two Navajo women (in native hairstyle and dress) on their horses at a desert tank. (A tank is runoff water trapped in the sandstone.) A colt is wandering in the foreground, with brilliant blue sky above and bare canvas below."

In Memoriam

Frederick Brayman 1943 -2009

In the summer of 1928 the Columbians, a dance band made up of twelve young men, made a name for themselves playing at the Old Mill club (the old Cottonwood Paper Mill at the mouth of Big Cottonwood Canyon). Led by a fellow Richfieldian, Virgie Brienhold, the band consisted of twelve soloists, including Salisbury and his cousin Lavell Andelin; it quickly gained a reputation as the best dance band in the state. Salisbury must have cut quite a figure up on the stage, his striking Scandinavian features behind his saxophone attracting the local flappers (if those were allowed in Utah). His eyes, though, were on one particular young lady, Chloe Murdock, a singer who came from a musical family in Provo (her parents had 15 children and led the Murdock orchestra). They married in September of that year, and Salisbury continued to play in his various bands and orchestras.

In the thirties, while the depression devastated the economy and dampened the enthusiasm of the roaring twenties, Salisbury concentrated more on what he could accomplish with his hands than with his lips. Traveling musicians may have been less in demand, and with two young children Salisbury may have been looking for a way to spend more nights at home; or the artistic muse may have simply exerted a stronger influence at the time.

In the summer of 1935 he traveled with his uncle Cornelius, and aunt Rose, to the Oregon coast. The three artists showed the works from this trip at the University of Utah invitational exhibition that winter. In April of 1936, the Richfield Study club exhibited Salisbury's works along with other established and emerging artists from the area. This must have been a source of satisfaction for the artist, who that year moved his young family to California, a decision that would dramatically influence his art.

Salisbury had family in LA, including his father and an aunt and uncle. He stayed for three years, playing his saxophone and studying art at Los Angeles Junior College, the Art Center, and the Chouiard School of Art. In Los Angeles Salisbury was able to study with celebrated western artist, Frank Tenney Johnson. I tracked down one of Salisbury's art students, charming Neva Christensen, who remembers well her experiences with her teacher. Of Salisbury's training under Johnson, Christensen said in a narrative that she wrote some years ago, "Johnson had a great impact on Paul's work. He emphasized painting subjects familiar to the artist, keeping the paintings 'real' and natural. He used the palette which Paul adopted in his oil paintings, consisting of only five colors and white. Black was never used after Paul studied with Johnson. He contended that black did not occur in nature, only 'rich darks.' Johnson's technique can be seen in Salisbury's paintings. The grass, sagebrush, and foreground work in their western scenes is most evident. The night scenes of cowboys and cattle, campfires and chuck wagons are very similar."

In 1938 Salisbury received recognition from local art critics when he showed the results of his studies in California at the Utah State Fair. One wrote that: "'Pack Outfit,' [manages] the effect of light falling through trees with a fine authority, and his 'California Sycamore,' where sunlight dapples the rocks edging a brown stream, unites emotional quality with firm draftsmanship." Salisbury's landscapes were popular, and he also painted wildlife paintings, but he would become best known for his western art.

After Johnson died in 1939, Salisbury returned to Utah, settling by his wife's family in Provo, where he continued to play music while he was building his reputation. By the 1950s he had developed a strong following, especially among out-of-state collectors in places where the myth of the west was strong: Texas, California, and Montana. In addition he held contracts to do western paintings with a global calendar company (Bigelow), and with Leanin' Tree Christmas Card Company. The latter firm additionally accepted Salisbury's paintings in their galleries.

[continued next column ↗](#)

becoming art

it took a long time
never suddenly
or quickly
beyond myself
realizing or
sensing painful
contradictions

i had become
my art
in present
past and future
everything
in fragments of
one continuous
mystery never
to be solved

everything left
to unlearn
the cause
the effect
an expectation
or belief

the uninterrupted
replications of
mistakes and
alternative
mistakes

the other choice
was doing nothing

in defiant personal
defense
my art with
only scavenged

muted muddled
metaphors

replicating sundowns
dissolving
ruby red
we never had
a choice



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