

JOHN OSLER

John Osler paints on board and canvas in oils. Best known for his ability to capture an emotional moment, his work shows his deep respect for his subject. He combines a fresh and free approach to color and style with a mature skill set. His work is especially admired by fellow artists for its strength and directness. John has won Gold Medals in the prestigious Scarab Club shows and is currently in collections in Detroit, Chicago, New York, Atlanta, Los Angeles, Pasadena, Seattle, Monterey, Minneapolis, New Orleans, throughout the country, Europe and New Zealand.

BACKGROUND:

John, as the son of an illustrator and an art teacher, grew up in Detroit surrounded by art. John worked for 30 years in national advertising photography before turning to painting. During this time, he founded Midcoast Studios and Spike Osler Photography.

In 1992 he walked away from a successful career to return to painting. He traveled and painted. He met extraordinary people many of whom had modest means and fragile futures. They were, however, free with their friendship and rich in spirit. They revealed to John their joy, pain, and hopes. John has tried to capture their time together with the dignity they deserve. He spends his time painting in Detroit, France and New Orleans.

COMMENTS:

“From the joyful abandon of boys splashing in the ocean to the confident dignity of an African-American woman sitting in the back row of a church, John Osler exhibits a masterful understanding of color and light and equally important, a magical ability to translate passion, joy, grief, resignation, and dignity to canvas. What I find so remarkable is how Osler reveals his subjects’ innermost thoughts: their turmoil and resignation, their pain and peace. In a painting that hangs in our dining room, Osler offers a glimpse into his grandfather’s heart in the aftermath of his daughter’s death. The grandfather strides forward and his next step may take him out of the painting. His movement captures his determination to carry on with his responsibilities in this world. Yet even as he moves forward, his mouth tells a story of loss and grief. When I look at this painting I am transported into this man’s inner life: will he laugh again?”

DR. ANNE LEWIS Minneapolis, Mn.

“You have such a strong unique talent and perspective. Keep up the great work!”

MICHAEL SHANE NEAL Artist and Portraitist

“After purchasing a portrait of Barack Obama by John Osler, I arranged to meet him at his home in Detroit where I was struck by the vividness of John Osler’s work. At that point I was responding to the intensity of the color in his paintings and the self-confidence which permitted his inclusion of high energy color without overpowering the subject of the painting. Then he did my portrait. Everyone who has seen it expresses amazement that he was able to bring me to life, as I truly am, personality intact, and flashing. John Osler leaves aside photographic accuracy and reveals the essence of his subjects. He is probably the best impressionist working today.”

KENT BOURLAND, Ann Arbor Mi.

<https://www.metrotimes.com/detroit/painter-and-photographer-john-osler-has-an-eye-for-the-real-heroes-of-detroit/Content?oid=2261587>

Valerie Vande Panne

Osler got his start in Detroit as an illustrator back in the late 1950s and 1960s. Detroit, he says, was home to some of the greatest illustrators of the time, including Bernie Fuchs and Mark English, all flocking here to work for the auto industry, illustrating cars and people with them. As time went on, photography took over from illustration, so Osler started working with photography studios, eventually starting his own. Then, 24 years ago, against a backdrop of an emptying, criminal, deteriorating city, he quit, because, he says, "there was no satisfaction."

Osler then began a journey, one that took him to Jonestown, Mississippi, which was an all black town. He went down there for the blues, but found something deeper in the churches, where he would paint, and the people took him in. "It was an emotional time for me, because I was so used to business where you look at somebody and the honesty wasn't there — everybody was in business." In Jonestown, says Osler, "It wasn't about money; it was about who they were."

Osler continued his travels, exploring the South of France and New Orleans, but says he's never left Detroit. "I'm a Detroiter. There's something about Detroit that gets into you, so I'll always be a Detroiter."

The first thing that struck us about Osler's work is that it is almost entirely comprised of African Americans. We ask Osler, an older white man, about this, and he laughs and comments "Well, they're the ones with color! They're colorful! It wasn't deliberate; it was just that they're more full of life. They were the people who got me into painting, the richness of their spirit inside. I see a lot here now; that's why I want to do large things of the people who are the real heroes of Detroit: the grandmas, the mothers who are so solid and strong. I'm white, so everybody asks me that question and people don't buy my art because it's African Americans. African Americans like my art, but I'm not black and they buy black art. It wasn't intentional; I've done others, but it's just the people who influence me. I've never painted my family, which is interesting. I've done little sculptures and things, but I've never painted them. I guess they've never wanted me to.

"Growing up in Birmingham in the '50s, it was an extremely racist community, anti-Semitic," he continues. "I think we're better today than the '50s. I saw a certain appeal in the other that I didn't know anything about or was not allowed to know anything about. When I finally got more involved with the people and how open they were, they taught me lessons. When I went into churches, I was the white guy in the back of the church, like I was at jazz places in Detroit, but they were also so nice to me. They'd say, 'We know what it is not to be loved, so we're going to love.' So, that's why I'm trying to paint, I guess. That was my story."

Osler also "saw dignity ... saw people who worked hard for a long time in their life."

He says "the older folks couldn't look me in the eye, because they weren't used to looking white people in the eye. They couldn't, because it wasn't part of their culture. They lived their whole life not making eye contact with white people. It was that [way] in the South. But when I put the camera up, they would look in the camera because it wasn't me. So I have pictures of them looking at me, but I have to paint them the way they were. But these are people that 15 years ago, 20 years ago were in their eighties, so it was a different time. It's changed now."

Osler pulls paintings out for us to photograph, and tells how he's starting to paint much larger pieces. He points out the beauty of the walls in the old building, the wainscoting of a time long past.

Osler says that when it comes to what is important, in spirit and life, he is rich. You can see the appreciation in his eyes as he talks, and that wealth of gratitude in his art.