



# Monterey Bay Rose Society

# THE BAY ROSE



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## FEATURED ARTICLE

## PAINTED PERFECTION

by

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The stone staircase was longer than I remembered and the combination of 90° heat, 100% humidity, and several slow tourists, made the ascent longer than my 18 year absence deserved. But I got there, and held the heavy bronze door open for the older couple I'd passed on my way up the steps of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. I walked into the rotunda and saw the Mercury fountain and the enormous dark green marble pillars which support the dome. The pillars were larger than I remembered, much larger. I had always thought that as time passed, one's concept of the size of things grew. When one returned, he or she would be surprised at how small a once frequented place was. Memory made it bigger. In this case, the opposite happened and I found it unnerving. I was so excited to see the paintings of the Italian renaissance that I once thought I knew so well. They came alive again with my new older, more experienced eyes, ones that fell on a bouquet the Blessed Virgin held. "Must be *Rosa centifolia*," I thought to myself. Several visitors looked at me curiously as I was so closely studying what to them was an insignificant part of the painting. Further on, I convinced myself that I recognized *Rosa gallica Officinalis*, the Apothecary Rose, Red Rose of Lancaster (has all those names and more) sticking out at the base of a column in the bottom corner of a triptych. It shared a gallery with *Rosamundi* (a striped

*gallica*), *Tuscany* (aka Old Velvet, the black rose) and *Rosa alba Semiplena*. The paintings were delightful. All the masters had had some help as apprentices eagerly sought to work beside them. Painting in those times was very much a family affair and others quite likely painted what I looked at. Eventually, I arrived in the gallery I most wanted to be in, Dutch and Flemish paintings. Yes, two rooms of Rembrandts! Landscapes by van Ruisdael! But my focus was on a sub-genre.



Roses and Tulip by Jan Philips van Thielen

With the increase in world wide trade, the Low Countries found themselves in an economically convenient geographic location. As a result of the exchange of material goods in their ports, a middle class developed. This newly formed middle class wanted, among other material things, paintings. An enormous output of pictures sought to satisfy the demand. One of the most popular genres and what I wanted to see was realistic still lifes.

Framed representations of vases crammed with flowers adorned parlors and bedrooms, cottages and castles. The National Gallery of Art converted an unused storage space adjacent to its main galleries into a representational “kabinet” or room, the scale of which lets viewers get up close to view these small paintings. Realism was a style, not a documentation. The still life artists painted flowers from their sketches so that spring flowers often appear in a vase containing summer-blooming roses. These paintings are fantasy pictures.

Sixteenth Century Holland was also a fantastic time and place for horticulture. Tulips were introduced from Turkey in the 1550's and immediate demand for these and other “exotic” plants drove their prices up to unbelievable sums. Certain tulip bulbs were worth more than a house with a garden. Much of the price was on paper rights to bulbs. Investments were made and these papers were traded and prices soared and paper was sold. As abundance caught up with the demand, the market for tulips crashed and this financial crises became the first documented European economic depression.

My tour of the Main Building ended and I headed over to the East Wing. On the lower level is a display of small 19<sup>th</sup> century French paintings. The one I like best was a table setting by Henri Fantin-Latour. Among the items he depicted is a vase full of old garden roses. The Impressionistic style makes it hard to be certain but the stripes and swirls remind one of *Tricolor de Flanders*, *Camieux*, *Rosa centifolia Variegata*, and who knows, roses long forgotten.



Detail from *Still Life* by Henri Fantin-Latour

What happens to Museum visits? What happens to vacations? They end. I was happy to return to my own garden. I was unhappy to see weeds had also returned. I was warmly greeted by an abundant display from my best roses. All “hand painted” ones!

In 1971, Sam McGredy IV introduced the first of

a long line of what he labeled “Hand Painted” Roses, **Picasso**. Color blends had existed for many years. Note the painting above. However, with modern color combinations—McGredy’s palette was greatly extended.



Single flower of Picasso, 1971

My Picasso (I do own one you know.) is, at the moment in its most spectacular bloom ever. It’s been in the ground now for about eight years. It is technically a floribunda but its form is more like a loose shrub. The ends of every cane sport clusters of red, semi-double flowers with about six or seven flowers in a cluster. The petals are its striking feature. They are essentially white underneath and in the center and somewhat at the petal edge, the rest is bright cherry red. This fantastic shrub holds on to its leaves and makes a nice roundish bush about 5 by 4 feet. It gets a little blackspot lower down but drops its spent petals. Regular dead heading will encourage it to stay in bloom all season long. I’ve learned not to prune it heavily, but rather reduce the plant by a third and remove spindly growth. The photo below gives a better indication of Picasso’s effect in the garden.

As the photo reveals, I need to relocate the **Matangi** a little to the left. Matangi is also one of McGredy’s Hand Painted Roses and is even more vigorous than Picasso which was a bit slow to get started. My Matangi however, fell victim to the over spray from an application of RoundUp. I was trying to kill the nut grass and succeeded in stunting my Matangi. The nut grass is still there. I’ve nursed Matangi back and this fall I will give it more space. It is similar to Picasso except its color is orange-red and the white is a bit more pronounced. Matangi was introduced in 1974, a cross between an





Picasso in full bloom with Matangi on the left

unnamed seedling and Picasso. Picasso's heritage is more complex. Its seed parent was *Marlena*, a red cluster flowered shrub from Kordes. Its pollen parent was *Evelyn Fison* which it resembles in shape crossed with a cross between *Orange Sweetheart* and the old hybrid spinosissima *Fruhlingsmorgen*. It was a curious mixture of roses which resulted in these curious flowers with an excellent bush, generous reblooms, and great disease resistance.

The hand painted introductions flowed forth. There was also 1974's **Old Master** which sported larger flowers, a red similar to Picasso but the underside white a little more prominent in the center and at the petal tips.

In 1979, McGredy brought out **Regensberg** with even more pronounced white underside color coming over to the top of the petal which is light pink. The irregularities and uniqueness of each individual flower further reinforced the Hand Painted appeal. Regensberg is a smaller floribunda achieving only two to two and half feet. It's been used quite dramatically as a border or edging. From a distance, of course, the detail on a hand painted rose is lost. It has merit as a cut flower, but because of the cluster flowered nature of the bush, one of the individual blossoms will be a little ahead of the others. Because the plant cleans itself well, I recommend it in good viewing locations. In the 2008 ARS handbook For Selecting Roses, it has also earned a fine 7.9 ARS rating.

In 1980, **Sue Lawley** was introduced and the attractiveness of individual flowers was established. Her parentage was incredibly complex, incorporating all of the successes of her forebears. Sue Lawley is more of a tri-color. A very light pink underside, a darker pink petal top, and a blend of these two colors veining through the lighter and darker colors, AS IF SOMEONE APPLIED THE COLOR WITH A PAINT BRUSH. Its ARS is 7.6.

**Maestro** came out the following year and amazed the rose world. It's a combination of dark purplish red, pink, dark pink, and light pink, sometimes some white. It's as startling to the eye as any rose going. Its ARS is 7.3.

Sam McGredy introduced **Little Artist** in 1983.

It's a hand painted miniature and is perhaps the highest rated of all hand painted varieties achieving an 8.4 in the 2008 ARS Handbook. It spreads a little and does change color depending on the food and water it gets. Just like in vineyards, the degree of stress effects the quality of the wine. Too much rich soil, and water can lead to undistinguished wine. Similarly, good rose care can cause the color variations to be less dramatic as can too much sunshine. You can't let the roses die though so it's up to you to find that happy medium between health and beauty.



A single Matangi bloom

**Stretch Johnson (Rock 'n' Roll)** appeared in 1988. It shares similar qualities with its predecessors, however, its color palette is based on yellow with orange and russet "brush" strokes. Neither name is listed by ARS.



Stretch Johnson, a.k.a. Rock 'n' Roll, 1988  
Courtesy of Bob Bauer's Photography Site

McGredy wasn't alone very long, once the popularity of these terrific roses caught on and their value as healthy, ornamental garden occupants supplanted the novelty of the petal coloration. In 1983, the United Kingdom's Colin Horner created **Champagne Cocktail** from a cross between Maestro and Southampton—a cluster flowered apricot blend. A quick look at internet photos shows a great variation in this rose's color. It seems unstable which would make it a perfect choice for a hand painted parent as the uniqueness of each flower is part of the charm. I've grown Champagne Cocktail for eight years now and this past spring it was at its best. Its ARS rating is 7.5 which is good. It blackspots a bit but mine gets great air circulation so that's not such a problem. It's a much stiffer plant than say Picasso or Matangi. Fewer leaves, bigger diameter cane, more hybrid tea like than floribunda. Still the flowers are unique. The re-bloom is never as profuse as the first one in spring but there's usually a flower on the bush for some passerby to marvel at.

Champagne Cocktail is a much larger flower, 4 to 5 inches, as compared to Picasso's 3. It also holds well in a vase, if it's picked early enough.



Champagne Cocktail, 1983

Sam McGredy is a third generation rose hybridizer. He was born in 1931 in Portatown, Northern Ireland. After World War II, he restarted the family nursery. In 1973, McGredy moved his family and business to New Zealand. Land was available and he would no longer have the added expense of heating greenhouses. He

is among the most prolific of rose hybridizers, rather he's been quite fortunate to lead the rose buying taste of the public with the roses he bred. The hand painted look allowed for great creativity and unique plant pairings.

Rose styles fall victim to fashion. The incredible interest in modern "old" roses created chiefly by David Austin, but repeated by others in the rose world, is likely to wane. Partly because of the daunting flood of selections to choose from, partly because many of them are prove mediocre in the ground, and partly because gifted hybridizers lead public taste. They are quite logically ready to show rose buyers the path to the next, great new rose marvel.

"The things we do not work for, I and other hybridists, are pink hybrid teas, because they appear in breeding lines anyway, and we do not work for white, because there is a limited demand for white." So said Sam McGredy in his book, "A Family of Roses," co-written with Sean Jennett and published in January 1971.

"I do not work for single or semi-double floribundas either, because they would have to be exceptionally good to be at all popular. The market shows clearly enough that what people want are floribundas with blooms of hybrid-tea shape. I work for climbers of many kinds, and at present I am working on miniatures. My idea for roses in my lifetime is that the gardener may order any colour he wants in any form -- as a bush rose, as a climber, or as a miniature. I would do away with the terms 'hybrid tea' and 'floribunda'. Instead I would classify roses according to use -- for house decoration, for garden display, for exhibition, for climbing or rambling, for ground cover, for greenhouses..."

Sam McGredy also created Sexy Rexy, Olympiad, Oranges 'n' Lemons, Tropical Sunset, and his firm's first AARS winner Rubaiyat in 1947.

In an article by Lois Taylore appearing in the Honolulu Star Ledger, September 19, 1997, Sam McGredy talks about how the hand painted rose came to be. "I was looking for hardiness, using a German species rose '*Fruhlingsmorgen*.' I planted thousands of seedlings in Ireland, and I saw one bloom with white-edged petals. I took the pollen from that flower to obtain a new rose."

Now he needed a name. It looked painted so he picked Pablo Picasso. "Because I wanted to patent it to collect royalties, I needed Picasso's permission to use his name. So I wrote to him, asking for permission, and I got a letter from his manager saying that it was OK. I sent the letter to the patent office and they turned me down because the letter wasn't signed by Picasso himself."

"So I wrote another letter asking for the artist to sign the permission note. Then I got a scathing letter back from the manager, furious because he felt I was insinuating that he didn't have the authority to sign for



Picasso. Only later did I discover that Picasso never signed anything he wasn't legally obliged to, because his autograph sold for \$10,000." In time, the patent office accepted the manager's letter and this landmark rose was named for a landmark painter.

Now, I am off to find a painting by Picasso with a rose in it. Perhaps, it will be sticking out of the base of a column in an insignificant corner. Perhaps my memory will make it larger in real life, too. I want to find it and stare at it, bewilder others who may see me studying Picasso's technique and marveling at the artist's ability to paint by hand and bring joy to life by capturing the true nature of the thing.

*Editor's Note: With the exception of Bob Bauer's shot of Stretch Johnson take from his website, all the other photographs are the property of the author. They were taken over the course of the past five years.*