

The Happiest Man Alive: A Visual Poem in Jaconita/by Angela M. Gutierrez

By [Pojoaque News](#) • on May 1, 2011 • [Facebook](#) • [Comment Feed](#)



Bill Preston

Bill Preston was on a train from the southwest to Washington D.C. ten years ago when he became aware of the natural images flashing across the window like slowed down snippets of a moving picture. As a long time artist, in lieu of closing his eyes and envisioning portrait landscapes, he opened his eyes and became absorbed by soft desert expanses, cholla cactus and white clouds tumbling across forgiving Colorado skies.

Bill had worked as an artist in the most literal term, painting-drawing-sketching, winning awards and medals for his mostly Western approach to oil painting, but that day on the Amtrak, he began to know the images that he was seeing in his mind's eye-his consciousness; maybe even feeling the pictures in his body.

That day became a moment in Bill's life that was certain to be a catalyst for change in the way he viewed his art and himself. "I had a spiritual crisis. I grew tired of the work that I was doing." The train became more than a physical vehicle but a spiritual one where William Preston embarked on a journey seeking a "...new way of seeing." This journey became the exploration into a new expression of beauty that was Sumi-e, as well as his true Self

Light seizes darkness
The mind's eye begins to blink
Doorways creak open

Sumi-e is typically an Asian style of painting that has been practiced for well over a thousand years. Literally defined as *ink painting*, it is an art form that strives to imply the essence of an object or scene in the fewest possible strokes, allowing the observer's mind to complete the image. In early adulthood, Bill was taught Sumi-e by a Japanese UCLA professor turned gardener during the fringes of the Beat Generation. What started as a practice soon became a passion that now defines his life as both an acute observer and well-received artist.

From his webpage bio on www.inkpainter.com, Bill highlights that he has drawn and painted since childhood. As an “energetic kid”, his fascination with art emerged from the loving mentoring of a Sunday school teacher in Evanston, Illinois, and blossomed during frequented trips to the Chicago Art Museum, surveying the prized works of Rembrandt and Rodin from overseas museums, seeking salvage from Nazi regimes during World War II.

His fascination with art and photography continued through high school and Bill managed time to study in the evenings at the Chicago Academy of Fine Art while working full time for a commercial ad agency. A stint in the Air Force, led Bill to eventually make his way to California and the LA Times, and then onto Mexico City where he aptly supported himself by selling bull-fight ink drawings at the locals *tienta* “testing of the small bulls.”

This intense training and traveling took Bill across the United States. Again from his bio: “Bill practiced sumi and photography in Los Angeles, illustrated books in New York City, sold elegant watercolors from his lobster shack gallery in Maine, exhibited drawings and paintings in Key West, and had solo shows in Boston, Maine, Washington, D.C., Miami, Texas and New Mexico. His prize-winning watercolors and oils are in museums and corporate collections on both coasts and published as posters. He mastered oil painting after moving to New Mexico in 1983, and his intimate familiarity with its landscape has powered his sumi expression of the Southwest and its flora and fauna.”

The orchids have bloomed
The stem now has intention
Displaying its chi

Sheltered in a sweet adobe Jaconita compound, Bill, now 81, refers to himself as the luckiest man alive. Rightfully so, surrounded by his love and fellow artist Marianne Hornbuckle, he does what he loves and feels the most alive when painting. Bill's daily practice includes a little coffee, mindful meditation, painting and traversing the organic New Mexico landscape finding inspiration in the sun soaked vistas of Las Barrancas. As I sit on the exposed adobe banco of his home/art studio/sumi dojo looking at his black and white images of Canyon de Chelly and color images of cacti (what Bill likened to a poem and novel, respectively), I find myself longing to bring myself back to the practice of meditation.

I almost chuckle at myself, letting my mind wander off on the process of meditation, knowing that meditation is about stilling the mind and losing sight of distractions. I ask Bill if Sumi-e is a meditation. He really did not need to answer, since the writing, I mean paintings were on his walls. Sumi-e, like mediation, brought Bill Preston back to himself, and continues to allow him to experience his full being, beyond all patterns of conceptualized artistic conformity. In the stillness of meditation, we can often glimpse and return to that deep inner nature that we have so long ago lost sight of amid the distractions of life and of our mind.

A brush with black ink
Painting, writing, scripting yet
Not without gods' hand

Bill's works combine tradition with ingenuity, definitely evoking a pure distillation of beauty and nature through simple lines, allowing each individual's mind to complete the landscape. It is this dichotomous nature of black ink and white rice paper; a sumi painting evoking a time or season, but with no definite place; an eastern tradition flowing from a western landscape; so eloquently connected and tied together by the experience of the viewer. What excites me, as it must Bill Preston, is the knowledge that since each eye is different, each individual experiences the totality of his pieces within his or her Self.

Compassionate eye
Seeking nurture through nature.
Finding peace on earth

Bill Preston is a sumi teacher and artist. Check out his website www.inkpainter.com for classes and online portfolios, or make sure you stop by his gallery, home and sumi dojo in Jaconita during the Pojoaque River Art Tour, September 17-18, 2011.

Blessings!