

# Robert Bateman says goodbye to a piece of Haliburton

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Staff Reporter

First, a long, pointed beak appeared, then a single yellow eye. Next, it was a curve of neck, and feathers – blue-grey, charcoal, white – alive in the play of light, and the love of a naturalist. Robert Bateman stood behind, holding the corners of a print nearly as large as he was. For a moment, he raised his head above the great blue heron's back.

"This is scrap," he said.

The 36 members of his three-day Passions and Practices workshop at the Haliburton School of Art and Design moved closer. They removed camera lenses, aimed iPads.

"I'll cut it up later and you can take the pieces home as souvenirs," Bateman said of the artist's proof FedExed to his cottage that morning that wasn't "quite right."

The students kept clicking. Bateman smiled.

In just a few days, Bateman will leave behind more than just the pieces of a great blue heron. He and his wife and fellow artist Birgit Freybe Bateman will fly from Toronto to Vancouver, returning to their home on Salt Spring Island, something they've done countless times over the decades they've been coming to the Haliburton Highlands together. But this time is different.

Today, in the heart of a traditional log cabin of white pine and cedar, Birgit writes emails to family: "Was it this rocking chair or that rocking chair you wanted?"

"We're in the throes of de-acquisitioning," says Robert.

Bouquets of wildflowers decorate wooden tables – Queen Anne's lace, goldenrod, blueweed. The smell of sun-warmed cedar fills the room. Light pours from the cathedral ceiling to the well-worn floor.

The Buck Slides cottage just went up for sale. ReMax calls it "Robert Bateman's Haliburton oasis that inspired some of his most famous paintings."

But it's more than that. The cottage forms part of nearly 80 years of history in the Haliburton Highlands. In *Boshkung*, Robert's youngest brother Ross, who is also a painter and former art teacher, writes of the "little hilltop cottage called Wildwood" on the south end of Boshkung Lake that the Batemans rented in the summer of 1938. What followed was an unbroken chain of summers on Boshkung, then a place of elderberry bushes, iceboxes, wild raspberries, sheep farms and the "call of a whip-poor-will."

"It was the beginning of cottage culture," says Robert.

It was the beginning of Robert's career as a young artist, a place where he set off into the hills with his Group-of-Seven-inspired wooden case filled with oil paints, palettes and 12 x 16" masonite boards, where he "wandered around looking for a composition that had rhythms going through it."

The Haliburton Highlands, it turns out, are filled with many such rhythms.

"Coming here is one of the most important parts of my life," Robert says.

Even though Ross is just 10 minutes away at the family cottage on Boshkung, a cottage the Batemans have owned since 1946, there's "a certain elegiac feeling hanging over me," Robert says. However, "ties are not being untied."

Badminton rackets poke out of a basket. Cross country skis lean against a wall. A Minto canoe lays overturned on a deck beside a jade-coloured pond. Greenery fills the spaces between rock and sky. The sound of flowing water fills the spaces between Robert's words.



'This says it all,' Robert Bateman says as he stands in front of his cottage. Traditional log cabin, canoe paddles, a splash of nature. In just a few days, ReMax will be showing potential buyers around the Buck Slides property.

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**The most important thing behind a piece of art is thought.**

— Robert Bateman

"Call me Bob," he'd said earlier on the telephone.

But it's difficult to call a man who is an Officer of the Order of Canada, the recipient of 13 honorary doctorates and countless awards, and the namesake of three schools "Bob." The Audubon Society calls him one of the 20th century's "heroes of conservation." Sandra Dupret, the dean of the Haliburton School of Art and Design, calls him an "art rock star."

In a previous interview with the *Echo*, Dupret also called Bateman the "quintessential Canadian artist." Known as an artist whose work appeals to the masses, and whose reproductions are affordable to the masses (not always a trait admired by what Bateman has called the "priesthood" of the art world), Dupret said "even if you work in more conceptual or edgy stuff, artists still appreciate what Robert Bateman is bringing to the art world."

When Bateman opened The Robert Bateman Centre in Victoria in 2013, the *Globe and Mail* wrote: "The art snobs may sneer, but the people will come."

And the people came to Bateman's Passions and Practices workshop, filling up within days of opening for registration. From Aug. 9 to 11, the students spent hours listening to stories and philosophies, and watching Bateman work live on a demonstration painting of a wolf at Buck Slides (a painting, incidentally, which sold for \$18,000 at the HSAD Faculty Art Auction on Aug. 11).

"I guess I didn't scare anyone away,"



Bateman said at the beginning of Day Two's class, then launched into an explanation of how he orchestrates a painting. He hummed the rhythm of his work process from beginning to end.

"I don't believe in normal workshops," he said.

Nor does he believe in being politically correct.

At the Art Talk later that day, he told the jam-packed Great Hall, "This is going to get politically incorrect."

By then, he'd told the crowd he was wearing his "painting shoes" by mistake, and held up a paint-speckled Birkenstock from the '80s. He'd proclaimed his love for Haliburton and the HSAD. He'd introduced his wife, his two brothers and sisters-in-law, his nephew. He'd said that after the Art Talk "I'll sign anything you want me to." By then, the crowd was laughing, straining forward in their seats. They were ready for whatever Bateman threw their way, whatever his so-called "rants" brought forth – the preservation of heritage housing, the meaning of art, the plight of the environment, the superiority of all things English.

He clicked through slide after slide – post-cards of a life of travel, of examining the smallest feather, of painting "thought."

"The most important thing behind a

Bateman holds up a print he intends to cut up and distribute to the class.

Bateman, right, and one of the 36 students of Passions and Practices hold up the prints noting elements that "aren't quite right," according to Bateman's high standards. The class took place from August 9 until August 11 at the Haliburton School of Art and Design.

piece of art is thought," he said.

Cape buffalo in Africa. Polar bear in Antarctica. Cliff swallows circling a stone bridge.

"Is the bridge still there?" he asked the audience. "The old Highway 35, just north of Minden?"

Woodpecker on Boshkung. A Minto canoe.

Robert points to the same green canoe now overturned on the deck.

"The Canadian Canoe Museum will come pick that up on Monday," he says.

Beyond the pond lies the path from which he first discovered this property in the early '80s, the path beside a waterfall in a landscape he calls "absolutely beyond Walt Disney pretty." He'd been painting the waterfall, close to one of his family's favourite picnic spots, and got up to stretch.

"I started walking upstream and here's this little pond with a little beaver dam, and a cliff dropping into the pond, and then I saw a 'for sale' sign. I said 'What? This is owned by God, it can't be for sale.'"

In the wood shed, Robert surveys an old barbecue, a couple of bicycles, a small pile of firewood.

"Here's where the broad axe hit; a

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From Aug. 9 to Aug. 11, 36 students immersed themselves in Robert Bateman's Passions and Practices course at the Haliburton School of Art and Design. His demonstration painting of a wolf on Buck Slides, left, was donated to the Faculty Art Auction on Aug. 11.

## Artist sells Haliburton County cottage

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record of that moment in 1894," he says, stroking one of the pine beams salvaged from the barn on Boshkung where Robert and his brothers once played as children.

From this perspective, Bateman admires the cabin, what he describes as a combination of Swiss, Bavarian and early Quebec. A heavy-lidded box painted with a "Mozart-days motif" holds their garbage cans. The 200-year-old front door is topped by a lintel molded from a plaster cast he and Birgit brought back from a year of living in Bavaria. The "cluster of freshly caught fish" suits Haliburton, says Robert.

"I like my world to be surrounded by things that have meaning," he says and opens the front door.

Birgit continues to type. Robert settles into a chair, looking toward the stone fireplace filled with freshly split logs ready for someone else to light. To the right, three lion cubs look into the distance, not looking back – a old print Bateman calls "worthless."

After three non-stop days of teaching, giving talks, attending dinners and

auctions, and signing autographs, you'd think an 86-year-old might be tired.

"One thing I don't particularly enjoy is leisure," he says.

He already misses his class, calling the experience one of the greatest of his teaching career.

"On the last day," he says. "I had the feeling I was with family."

Family is important to Robert. He has five children, 10 grandchildren. He and Birgit just celebrated their 41st wedding anniversary.

"Everything is better with Birgit right with me," he says.

When it's time to take photos, it's time for Robert Bateman, the artist whose paintings hang in royal palaces, to take charge. He looks for the right pool of August light, the right hue of cliff face, the right composition of nature and man.

"This sums it all up," he says back-dropped by the cabin's white pine, canoe paddles propped against the side. To the right, a palette of forest shimmers against Canadian Shield, illuminating the shadows.

"This is me," he says, and turns to face the camera.



Ross Bateman stands in front of the family cottage on Boshkung Lake with a canoe paddle painted by his brother, Robert, when he was a little boy. The family has been coming to the Haliburton Highlands since 1938 and purchased this cottage in 1946.

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