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The metaphysical visions of artist Morris Graves

By OWEN McNALLY
Courant Staff Writer

Morris Graves, an idiosyncratic, visionary artist from the Pacific Northwest, burst onto the national scene in 1942, when the Museum of Modern Art exhibited 30 of his paintings in a wartime blockbuster exhibition called "Americans 1942: 18 Artists from 9 States."

Graves, an introspective, mystical and never formally trained painter, became an instant celebrity in spite of his otherworldly self.

Suddenly, this exotic figure was the darling of the East Coast's intellectual society, which toasted him in its posh salons. Over the next two decades, the cloistered artist, who once lived in a small shack in a Walden Pond-like haven in Puget Sound, was one of America's most famous and beloved painters.

What made him hot then and has contributed to his appeal over the past half-century is examined in "Morris Graves: Reconciling Inner and Outer Realities," a traveling exhibition that wraps up its five-city tour at the New Britain Museum of American Art, where it will be shown through Jan. 2.

Graves' star soared until his quiet, metaphysical art was bumped by new, flashy fashions, particularly by Pop Art.

Pop's glitz, glamor and clamor were light

years removed from Graves' meditative nature paintings, rooted in solitude and Zen Buddhism — as different, say, as Warhol was from Buddha.

An intensely private man, Graves, who's 83 and still paints, habitually shuns interviews and cameras in this publicity-hungry, media-blitzed era. And he has continued to do his own thing, keeping his distance from the art world's mainstream, with its changing trends, glitter and politics.

"Graves uses the forms of living things — plants and flowers, birds, snakes and fish — as visual metaphors," says Daniel DuBois, director of the New Britain museum. "His works are very much a philosophical and spiritual journey, a reconciliation of Western and Eastern philosophies."

Selected from private and public collections and Graves' own holdings, the exhibition comprises more than 40 oil, tempera and watercolor paintings and drawings, spanning five decades and themes ranging from birth to the ravages of war.

Graves has removed himself from the hubbub of modern daily life to his hermitage in Northern California. His pastoral sanctuary has exquisite living quarters, elegant gardens and a collection of exotic fowls he raises and uses as models.

Despite Graves' spiritual withdrawal, DuBois says, the artist is very much attuned to the sweep of contemporary history. This is indicated by his powerful, anti-war works, "Bird Maddened by the Length of Winter" and "Winter's Leaves," painted in 1944 as World War II raged.



Adam Reich

■ "Wounded Brant" by reclusive artist Morris Graves is part of a traveling exhibition of his works at the New Britain Museum of American Art.

"Look at 'Bird Maddened,' DuBois says, "and you see the almost camouflaged central image of a very fragile bird looking back over its shoulder while just barely hanging on by the points of its claws to a rock in an environment, which is extremely hostile. Without a doubt, this reflects Graves' sense of the fragility of life in war."

"The wind-swept leaves in 'Winter's Leaves' evoke memories of skeletal remains and speak eloquently of the impact of war on people's lives."

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