

A Path Less Traveled By **J.T. Felton**

The paintings and politics of John August Swanson

Throughout his life, artist John August Swanson has taken the path less traveled.

Born on January 11, 1938 in Los Angeles, California to a Mexican mother and a Swedish father, John is deeply rooted in both cultures. He has spent most of his life in the Los Angeles area where he lives to this day.

Growing up, John had ambitions to attend college. He was accepted to The University of California, Los Angeles, but quickly found that academic pursuits were not his calling. In the late sixties, John discovered his vocation as an artist through the guidance of the famous Sister Mary Corita Kent. Corita is still acknowledged as one of the foremost serigraph artists in the country. As a teacher at Immaculate Heart College she passed her knowledge on to many students, including John. Her impact on him was so profound that he still lists her as the main reason he became an artist specifically in serigraphy. Serigraphy involves multiple screens and laying colors over one another. All screens are drawn and cut, and then each color is applied one at a time. Since John's paintings have up to 89 colors in them, this is an extremely tedious process that takes months to complete. An advantage, however, is that multiple prints can be made at the same time leading to a series of the same work.

John says that his early years as an artist were the most difficult for him. There were many times, even into his 30s that he wanted to walk away from art, but it always called him back. Eventually, he prevailed through perseverance. John likens his journey as an artist to the famous Bible verse John 21:6. This verse speaks about having faith and trying again when you believe you still are against a wall.

After again and again "casting his net into the sea" he finally began to gain some recognition. John creates his art not just to spread beautiful paintings around the world, but instead to communicate his ideas. He recognizes the power his art has on people, and while many different interpretations can come from any one painting, he feels it is important for him to find a way to express his own message. "My work is my most social act. My art is the way I can talk to you," he says.



FESTIVAL OF LIGHTS, 2000



THE LAST SUPPER, 2009

Like many artists, John August Swanson began to develop his own style with many themes running through it. This began with his Mexican heritage. His paintings contain many bright colors and symbols often associated with the Southwest United States and his mother's home of Mexico.

Beyond his upbringing, John also was able to incorporate his life experiences into his art. One of his favorite memories from childhood and something he still enjoys, is visiting the circus. Many of his paintings embody his love for circus folk with an emphasis on clowns. He recalls that, when he was younger, his reward for good behavior would often be a trip to the circus.

Another common theme revolves around his beliefs as an activist. He has fought for causes through his art, but he has been most concerned with the plight of immigrants and laborers. This is a tie-in to his Mexican roots as he saw people he identified with persecuted for being different.

In many cases, John has turned to the Bible for inspiration. One of these scripture-based pieces has made him one of the few modern artists to be featured in the Vatican Museum Collection of Religious Art. Titled "The Procession", the serigraph depicts perseverance and determination, not unlike his own life journey. He believes the piece, which contains 89 different colors, to be his greatest life work. His works are also featured in The National Museum of American History, The Smithsonian American Art Museum, and The National Air and Space Museum. His largest collection of artwork resides at The Chandler School of Theology at Emory University. In 2008, The Chandler School purchased over 55 of his pieces to adorn the walls of their newest building. For his contributions he was awarded The Dean's Medal for his art's positive impact on the campus.

Now, at 73 John continues to create. His art is what he loves, and despite the devastating loss of a longtime friend and fellow printer, he continues to produce inspirational paintings. John's rise as an artist is a story he loves to share in the hope of inspiring others to chase their dreams. John uses a creative way to inspire, and communicates a clear message through his paintings: do what you love, and be great at it.

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WASHING OF THE FEET, 2000