

# Passionate Painting



Charlotte artist Tommie L. Robinson uses his talent to raise awareness of causes dear to him.



**I** don't do horror paintings," says Tommie L. Robinson. Even though the Charlotte artist depicts some fairly horrific subjects—among them, the homeless, abuse victims, scarred war veterans, and environmental devastation—his compelling portraits and scenes focus on human dignity, not shock value. Whether realistic or surreal, created in oil, egg tempera, pencil, or watercolor, the artist's richly detailed works entice viewers. "I don't do anything to frighten someone away," he says.

For more than 30 years, the North Carolina native has made a living in the tough, competitive world of art. To this day, the proud father credits son Winston and daughter Crispin for lovingly supporting his artistic endeavors. Now that his children are grown, Tommie, 58, enjoys pursuing art subjects that call to him rather than those he knows will sell.

"Once my children were older and the mortgage was paid, I started to live modestly," he explains. "The modest lifestyle allows me to paint what I want to paint. Now, when I'm really disturbed by something, I try to put it in artistic form."



Tommie L. Robinson focuses his art on society's challenges. He makes many of his own art materials to achieve richer colors than those found in commercial products.

## Universal Appeal

No matter what Tommie paints, whether uncommonly realistic renderings of everyday people or surreal scenes of global-scale disasters, his immense skill touches patrons. The art-savvy Charlotte community frequently honors this beloved native son with public and private art commissions. Most recently, Tommie won a position as one of only five artists whose work will grace the city's new arena, opening this fall. He has also received scores of awards for

his many humanitarian gestures.

Decades ago, amid turbulent racial discord, Tommie called himself a militant and "hated everybody." Now, he says, years of reaping kindness from others, black and white, completely altered his attitude. "Charlotte is a good art town because we have people coming from everywhere. I love the South. I wouldn't want them to bury my bones anywhere else." He chuckles and adds, "I've learned that we are more similar than we are different." ▶

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*Tommie L. Robinson*

## The Artist as a Young Man

When Tommie was a child, a well-meaning guidance counselor—an African American herself—discouraged Tommie from pursuing art. She tried to explain that the elite profession wasn't for black people. "My family, especially my mother, instilled confidence," he says.

Although blocked from resources and knowledge by the segregated practices of the day, he gained access to art books by befriend- ing a sympathetic librarian.

Tommie's stint in the Army as a teenager solidified his vocation. He discovered that the payment he earned for portraits of soldiers surpassed his meager military pay. After his discharge, he spent several years haunting European museums, soaking up the great works. When he returned to the States, he continued his self-teaching odyssey.



Robert Norman, a former professor who chose to live on the streets, serves as an intriguing subject.

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### From the Heart

Tommie often uses his talent to prod awareness of social ills. "I think that we as a society can do a lot more than we do," says the artist, who has taught prisoners and disadvantaged children to paint.

A few years ago, he zeroed in on homeless people and wary-eyed children in a series of acclaimed paintings. For two years, Tommie met and sketched Charlotte's disenfranchised. Among the memorable characters he depicted was Leon, a veteran. "He didn't get proper medical care after Vietnam," Tommie says, pulling out the striking portrait of the man. "He became an alcoholic. He had frostbitten feet, and he just gave up. They amputated his foot, and he didn't want to live anymore." Tommie sighs and then adds bluntly, "He died."

After he flips through more canvases, he stops at one depicting Robert Norman, a former professor with a PhD. Tommie learned that Robert had traded academia for street life. "He raised his family, taught at the university level, and then, once his children were grown, walked away from it," says Tommie, no judgment in his voice. "I try to show strength in people."



Tommie's previous agent posed for *The Tourist*.

### Young at Art

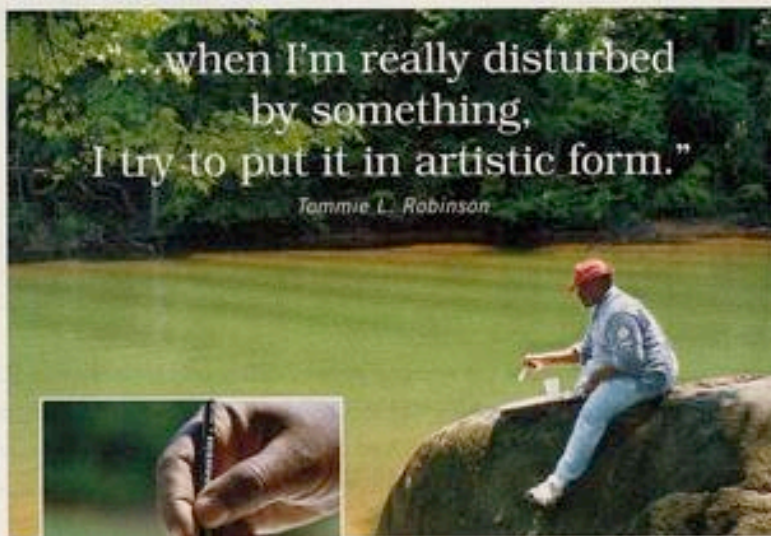
Tommie led a project in which children living in a housing development, along with volunteers, painted a wall of inspirational figures in different professions. Now he wants to do more to find and mentor young artists.

"I want to open an apprentice program where talented kids come in to master crafts," Tommie explains. He abhors art programs that focus on theory and history to the detriment of basic skills.

For the self-taught artist, the fundamentals start with learning

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by something,  
I try to put it in artistic form."**

*Tommie L. Robinson*



The great outdoors often calls to the artist. He sketches and photographs scenes and then depicts them in greater detail at his studio.



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skills that the old masters used. "When I read that artists ground their own colors, using, for example, calcium from bones, I went out and found animal bones that had been out in the weather for years, ground them up, and made paint," he recalls.

"I don't care how people respond to my work, but I do want a response," he continues. "What would really kill me is if someone came in and looked at one of my paintings and found it irrelevant."

Not that he wouldn't soldier on if he encountered such rejection. "In the arts, you have to have a stomach like iron because it's so competitive," he says. Tommie believes many people assume that art requires little work. "I come into the studio six days a week and work 8 to 10 hours a day," he says. He grins, and his eyes twinkle again. "I was coming in seven days a week, but then I decided that since I'm getting old, I better try to find a church somewhere—just in case."

NANCY DORMAN-HICKSON

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Tommie and gallery assistant Jackie Stowe possess opposite personalities. "I'm more laid-back," says Tommie, but he concedes that Jackie's organizational skills ensure that he meets deadlines.