



*Illustrator and Graffiti
Artist RC*



Written by
Taran Escobar-Ausman
Photography by
Marietta Asemwota

Instagram
rob_has_a_pen

Historian Lewis Mumford famously stated, “The timelessness of art is its capacity to represent the transformation of endless becoming into being.” History is a testament to the people, families, towns, cities, and society that are constantly changing and evolving. Art of a specific time period can bring into focus the spirit of the era, capturing a time of transformation, and revealing a guiding principle of the past.

For illustrator and graffiti artist RC, art can illuminate the zeitgeist of an era by utilizing the seemingly ordinary objects that populate people’s everyday lives. More importantly, creating art connects RC to his family, who have played an integral part in San Francisco Bay Area history.

To understand RC as an artist, we have to begin with a significant piece of Bay Area history. The late 1800s in California was a confusing time; ranchos of the Old West were slowly divided up, sold, or taken, and the days of vaqueros, dons, and wealthy land ownership were coming to an end. The transition from Mexican government land grants to American settler claims under statehood was messy. Before this transition, however, was the Robles family, who arrived in Monterey in 1797. In 1847, brothers Teodoro and Secundino Robles purchased Rancho Rincon de San Francisquito, 8,800 acres of beautiful grazing land located in what is now south Palo Alto. The family home stood at Alma Street and San Antonio Road, where Don Secundino and his wife, Dona Maria Antonia, became known for their hospitality—a stage stop between San Francisco and San Jose. They would offer refreshments, hold bear and bullfights, host fandangos, and allow hunters to ride Secundino’s beautiful horses across the



property. Secundino and the Robles name became a cornerstone of late nineteenth-century peninsula life, known as the land of wealth and abundance of goodwill towards all.

Secundino and Maria Antonia Robles are RC’s great-great-great-great-great-grandparents. Their story and its role in the history of the Bay Area, when the Old West began to meet the modern age, holds significant value for RC when the Old West began to meet the modern age. During this time, innovation and the natural environment lived hand-in-hand. “That time period was interesting because it was soon enough ago that we relate to the objects seen from that time, but they were created with simple materials (wood, glass, metal). There was a boom of modern-day conveniences being invented constantly, but everything still had a natural beauty to it. Most of the objects in your house back then would have been one-of-a-kind, but you could have still felt you were at the edge of innovation.”

The spirit of innovation and entrepreneurship of the Old West influences RC’s approach to art and helps frame the visual aesthetic of his work. RC explains, “I don’t think there are any prerequisites for how a really great artist can come to be, except one—I think they need to possess a rebel or outsider spirit in some way, and it should be very natural. The overarching spirit of the West is that of creative outsiders.” RC carries this spirit as his art and life occupies a space between conformity and rebellion.

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RC is a software engineer—a job that pays the bills and provides health insurance—but his real passion is his graffiti work. The challenge of working within the confines of letter-shape rules and limitations, while simultaneously creating art where one feels they shouldn't, is a welcomed one. "Graffiti is a mental and physical challenge, which gives a higher sense of achievement in return after overcoming those challenges." The discipline of working within a certain form while applying it through a medium historically seen as vandalism mirrors the rebel spirit of the Old West.

Graffiti took hold of RC in high school when all he wanted to do was draw and tag. As his skills grew, people started hiring him for flyers, logos, or website design. Full-time graphic design wasn't paying the bills, so he transitioned and started doing hybrid design and software engineering work. It wasn't until the recent California wildfires and the pandemic that RC found the streets less crowded than usual. "Everyone was staying inside. I remember thinking it'd be a great time to get back on the street again in those smokey years. Then when the pandemic hit, it was like a very not-subtle ask from the universe to paint all the Bandos in my neighborhood."

The letter forms in his graffiti work have a heaviness to them; solid and firmly planted as if they were cornerstones to a building. Yet the letters turn and stretch into each other bringing a lightness and life-like quality to his work. RC's fine art illustrations follow in his graffiti's footsteps as his subjects seem to hold a particular shape, like that of a letter form, with lines that flow and bend in the same direction, giving the subjects a sense of confinement. In one black and white illustration entitled "The Long Hat Horse Rider," a vaquero sits upon a horse. RC illustrates a half-wooden and half-fabric horse whose legs fold upon themselves into wheels. A bird cage sits upon the haunches of the horse as the birds stick their heads out between the bars. The transformational time of the last decades of the Old West produced in ornate detail, grace RC's illustrations. Their overall stamp-like quality further suggests the antiquity of the subjects.



As beautiful as the visual remnants of a bygone time are, those times were hard. Eventually, Secundino's famous hospitality was slowly taken advantage of by those who desired his land, and in 1876 his estate was down to a mere 300 acres. Though the Robles family had to conform to the new norms Americans brought with them, a quiet rebellion took place as Secundino and Maria Antonia never wavered from opening up their home, offering a drink, and allowing visitors to enjoy their land. The Robles hospitality continued into the early 1890s and refreshments were handed out by Maria Antonia to passing bicyclists until she died in 1897.

RC continues to carry his family, their journey, and history with him through his art. Growing up, drawing with his older sister and grandparents planted the seed for RC to embrace the philosophy of staying true to himself. He has carried them through tough times as his art has pulled him out of a "dysfunctional state" after losing a family member to suicide. He carries them now as his graffiti work adorns the concrete landscape of Silicon Valley, the same valley where his ancestors rode across endless pastures and became known for their famous hospitality.

If art can represent the "transformation of endless becoming into being," then it's RC's family and their endless becoming that his art strives to bring into being. "The story of the West, in particular, is one of having no backup plan and being on your own should something go wrong, and without any established settlements to help you, given it was the new land. My great-grandparents had 29 children. Only eight of them lived to adulthood, and I can only imagine what they went through. The strength they had to have back then is inspiring to me, and I think about it a lot when I'm drawing." 