

'60s pop art icon keeps on trucking

Peter Max, who turned hippie visions into an art-world brand, will make rare S.A. visit

By Steve Bennett

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When we think of Peter Max, the last person who comes to mind is Norman Rockwell.

Both names are synonymous with American art, but one is known for creating the heartland family album, while the other will always be the cosmic chronicler of the turbulent '60s. It's like the generation gap personified in art.

Surprisingly, it doesn't take anywhere near six degrees of separation to connect the two.

Max's story begins with his parents fleeing Nazi Germany with their young son in 1938. The family lived in Shanghai and Israel before finally settling in Brooklyn in the '50s. Young Peter wanted to be an astronomer, but he was good at art and, egged on by a classmate, began his formal art training in 1956 at the Art Students League in Manhattan. His teacher was an artist named Frank Reilly.

"Believe it or not," Max said in his thick New York accent during a recent telephone conversation, "when Frank was a young art student, who do you think sat next to him? A guy by the name of Norman Rockwell. So Rockwell and Reilly were buddies in art school, and in that same classroom was where I studied art for seven years."

Max will show a collection of artwork, including recent portraits of singer-songwriter Taylor Swift and "American Idol" host Steven Tyler, as well as iconic images of Texas such as his take on the Lone Star flag and a Dallas Cowboys helmet, at the Russell Collection in the Shops at La Cantera beginning Friday. He will be on hand to discuss and sign his works during two receptions Aug. 13-14.

"I studied realism, so I knew how to draw and paint very well," Max, accessible and friendly, a talker, continues. "I was very skillful in drawing hands and faces. It's so important to have a good foundation."

Then, as so often happens, "One thing led to another." Max began illustrating children's books and record covers in his small studio.

"And then I veered off into abstraction, composing large pieces, small pieces, color next to color, which had nothing to do with anatomy. But if anatomy had to play a role in it, I had it in me," he said.

With his posters and merchandise ranging from book binders to lunch kits to bed sheets, Max played a key role in inventing the iconic look of pop culture in the '60s. His psychedelic vision reflected the anything-goes zeitgeist of the times. The artist's 1968 "Love" poster, for example, hung in many a hippie's hallway and today is considered a classic image of the era, along with works such as "2,000 Light Years," "Captain Midnight" and most notably "Different Drummer."

Over the years, the accolades and honors have continued to pile up:

In 1970, many of Max's products and posters were featured in the exhibition “The World of Peter Max” at the De Young Museum in San Francisco.

The U.S. Postal Service commissioned Max to create the first 10-cent postage stamp in 1974, commemorating Expo '74 in Spokane, Wash.

With his Statue of Liberty series, beginning in 1976, the artist helped raise funds for the restoration of the statue.

In the '80s and beyond, Max has been the official artist of the Grammy Awards, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and the Super Bowl. He also took his art literally to the air with a special skin for a Continental 777.

Now 73, Max continues to be a force in the art world. Recently, the artist painted portraits of Tyler and Swift, based on her “Speak Now” album cover. At his Web site (www.petermax.com), patrons can purchase original artwork and prints of a variety of subject matter, from flags and flowers to sports and space.

A worldwide brand, Max remains a working artist, spending hours in the studio almost every day. He is lucky, he says, to have an “endless, endless well,” attributing his longevity and success to “just being creative every day.”

“Every day is a here-and-now,” he says. “Every day is now, now, now. I don't go back to what I've done yesterday or two years ago or 25 years ago. I'm just creating in the moment. It's like writing new songs. I just keep creating new stuff. I'm just evolving very nicely. My range of stuff is beyond, beyond immense. My warehouse is filled with diversity and variation. I just love creativity. There's nothing I like more that going to my studio every day. I get excited every day a block away and going up in the elevator.”

When talking about his art, Max frequently turns to musical metaphors.

Like this one: “Did you ever go into a jazz club and you see a jazz guy sit down at a keyboard and he starts playing? And it's like an amazing song? You go up to him and he says, ‘I've never played it before. I just made it up on the spot.’ I just start painting, with no point of view, except I love this color now and this color goes good with that color, this shape goes good with that shape. I let it build and suddenly something emerges, and I'm totally engrossed and engulfed and involved in it. And then I have a feeling in one moment that it's done. So I sign it, take it off the easel, put up another canvas and get going again. I do that several times a day. Sometimes two times a day, sometimes seven or eight times a day. I love painting.”

Or this one: “I was talking to Paul McCartney about how he creates music. And he sits down and he just plays. He doesn't know what he's going to play. He doesn't walk around in the street and wait for an idea for a song and take it home and play it. The song happens as he's playing. So I create these pieces as I'm painting. I allow it to happen. But it just happens.”

Astronomy remains a vital interest for Max, who says his next challenge will be to take his fantasy world to animated film.

“It’s my pet subject outside art,” he says of studying the stars. “They are two separate loves. But they inspire each other.”

His greatest inspiration, however, remains his wife, Mary Max.

“You know how I draw beautiful women’s faces?” Max asks. “She has the most beautiful face I’ve ever seen.”

The artist enjoys traveling the country for shows and sales of his work like the upcoming one in San Antonio.

“I can’t wait to get off the plane and walk into a room of two or three hundred people who are there for me, for the art,” he says. “My life is art, creativity.”

The Russell Collection’s **Peter Max Exhibition** is set for Friday through Aug. 14 at the Shops at La Cantera, 15900 La Cantera Parkway. The gallery is located between Barnes & Noble and the Yard House restaurant. An uncrating party is set for 6 to 8 p.m. Friday, with exhibition previews beginning Saturday. Two Meet the Artist receptions are scheduled with Max, from 6 to 9 p.m. Aug. 13 and 1 to 4 p.m. Aug. 14. Please R.S.V.P. at 888-513-8385.

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