

# Magic Sticks

In the early 1970's, I received a fellowship from the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City. I was one of 14 artists chosen from about 1,400 from around the world to do Independent Study in New York.

I moved all of my supplies and equipment to my new studio in New York and expected to continue working on the series of paintings that I was currently involved in. However, once in New York, I decided to stop my current work and use the time to experiment and grow as an artist.

Being on foot now, and in a colder climate, I began to pick up sticks and dowels that I happened to find on the street. No longer having a car made getting art supplies a different experience!

I intellectually let go of all the "criteria" for making art that I had learned to that point and went on an exciting journey of experimentation. I filled my studio with sticks that I painted and then wound through canvas and fabric. I made piles of sticks. I drew sticks. I created installations of sticks. I wrapped sticks in groups. I carved sticks. I put sticks in boxes that I painted. I wrote about sticks. I made new shapes out of sticks. I filled sketchbooks full of "stick" ideas. My studio was abundant!!

Before I knew it, it was time to leave New York and return to Houston. The very last day that I was there, a friend took me to the Museum of American Indian Art. Little did I know before making this trip out to the Bronx that I was about to have a lasting and memorable art experience. I knew nothing about American Indian art and had not even heard of this museum. When I walked in...my mouth dropped open! I stood before the showcases of artifacts with shock and astonishment. Right here in front of my eyes, I saw so many of the images that I had just spent months filling my studio with. What in the world was this coincidence all about?

I realized that I had just learned, first hand, about the reality of "collective consciousness". Before this, I had read about it...but oh what a difference it made to be bowled over by this true phenomenon in front of my eyes. I had to acknowledge that there must truly be forms, shapes, images, patterns, ideas, and needs that we carry with us as part of the human species, since the beginning of time.

Here in the museum, I saw shamans with their medicine bundles. Inside the bundles were what they called "Medicine Sticks". They were like instruments of communion between themselves and all that is important and sacred. A life force resided in these forms and the shamans used them to explore and read the mysteries of many situations. As I have come to understand, they spilled them out like "Pick Up Sticks" and read them (much like a fortune teller would read a palm). And so, life and death, rain or wind, sickness and health, war and peace, and numerous other mysteries, could be foretold through the reading of these sticks.

What an extraordinary gift I received that day. Meaning, connection, and knowing there is a life force residing in all forms, meant more to my education than any formula or technique I could be taught. I decided to call my sticks, "Magic Sticks". Since that time in 1972, "Magic Sticks" have continued to be an integrated motif in my sculpture, paintings, works on paper and furniture designs. I build structures with them. I paint them. I draw them. I incorporate them into my sculpture. They become metaphors in my paintings. My challenge is to continue to reinvent with original eyes...and with all respect and appreciation for what has been given to me, to see as though for the first time, this soul-smacking, heart rending gift of—world.

Roberta Harris