

IN PRAISE OF ROBERT L. HUMPHREY

October 7, 1939 - November 15, 2002

One of the most important attributes that differentiates our species from the rest of the animal kingdom is our ability to laugh, and even more important, our ability to laugh at ourselves.

— Robert L. Humphrey

“The best thing about *AnthroNotes* are the cartoons,” said Dennis Stanford, director of the Smithsonian’s Paleoindian Program. Our *AnthroNotes* readers enthusiastically agreed and often wrote praising the publication’s articles and cartoons. Bob Humphrey died unexpectedly this past November (from complications following a cerebral aneurysm), and we, like hundreds of others, lost a friend, colleague, and mentor, as well as an admired artist, cartoonist, and humorist.

A serious artist with a large portfolio of exhibited works in multiple media, Bob also enjoyed doodling on the classroom blackboard and drawing cartoons for his syllabi. He had cartooned since the 1950s, but it is probably fair to say that his cartooning career changed in 1978 when he drew a brochure illustration announcing a new, National Science Foundation-funded George Washington University/Smithsonian Institution Anthropology for Teachers Program. This cartoon used in many contexts since, was redrawn in 1998 replacing a cityscape with the Smithsonian “castle,” making it a perfect frontispiece for the Smithsonian Institution Press anthology, *Anthropology Explored: The Best of Smithsonian AnthroNotes* (Ruth Selig and Marilyn London, eds.), illustrated by over 40 Humphrey cartoons.

In 1980, two years after *AnthroNotes* began, we received a hand-written letter from Sol Tax, the distinguished editor of *Current Anthropology*, congratulating us on our new publication. “It seems to me always good and getting better!” he wrote. Tax continued, “And Robert Humphrey is not just an artist—he is the best anthropological cartoonist I can recall.”



Trained in art history and anthropology, holding a Ph.D. in anthropology and archaeology from the University of New Mexico, Bob came to George Washington University (GWU) as an assistant professor in 1967. He already had distinguished himself by finding and describing in *Science* a possible link between ancient Siberian spear points and those of the Paleo-Indians. The evidence he described had been found during fieldwork in north Alaska alongside fellow New Mexico graduate student Dennis Stanford.

From the beginning of his teaching career, Bob’s interests ranged beyond archaeology to the whole area of how culture is communicated through objects and visual images. He put together an interdisciplinary archaeology major at GWU and encouraged one of his finest students, Carolyn Rose, to develop the new field of ethnographic conservation. In cooperation with the Smithsonian Institution, GWU students were trained to study, preserve and stabilize objects rather than restore them to their original state as art conservators are trained to do.

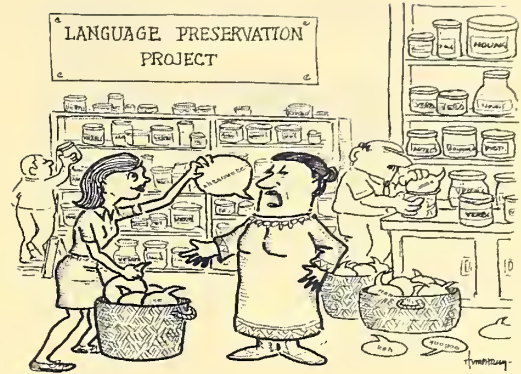
Bob taught courses in archaeology, cultures of the Arctic, culture and the environment, art and anthropology, and museum anthropology. At the end of his first year teaching, the department chair wrote in Bob’s annual report: “He gives every evidence of developing into a truly outstanding teacher.... Humphrey is an intellectual and very warm person who lacks entirely those irritating idiosyncracies popularly attributed to the gifted.”

Bob directed programs in Mesoamerican archaeology, ecology, and history and established the Museum Studies Program, serving as its first director. He was his department's chair for 12 years and created exhibition space in the department's offices. After his retirement from GWU in 1998, Bob continued to cartoon for *AnthroNotes*. We were editing this current issue when he died.

Bob never took himself too seriously, and in his cartoon world he pokes fun at himself, but also at anthropology, anthropologists, cartoonists, and cartooning. For example, one cartoon illustration shows a long line at the registration table for the American Anthropological Association's annual meeting, with various anthropologists waiting to register, along with representatives of the societies they study, including a member of our closest relatives, the chimpanzees.

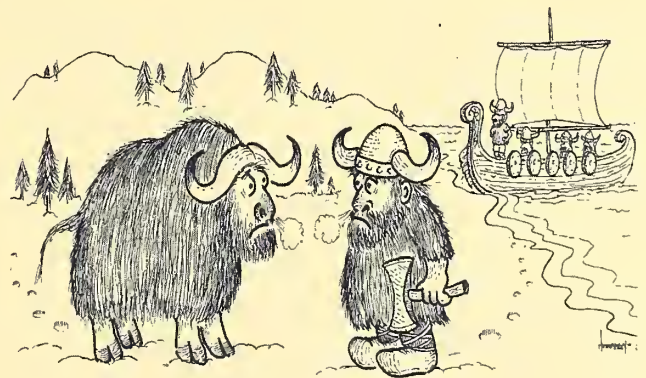


Bob's cartoons often gain their humor from his ability to visually exaggerate an idea or subject combined with a literal interpretation of words. Reading an article on surviving on the bare essentials led him to wonder just what are a bear's essentials.



An article about language preservation among the Mayan Indians found Bob drawing a "preservation" scene, with linguists "bottling" phrases that had been spoken into "bubbles," then "preserved" in canning jars up on shelves, much like pickles or jam.

Bob created an entire visual world with his cartoons; the themes and inhabitants of this world reappear over and over: clovis points, mammoths, and elephants; cave men and women, apes, and archaeologists. The humans and animals are often interchangeable, reflecting the anthropological perspective that the human species is an animal species similar to others in the natural world. Hence a Viking man arrives on America's shore and meets his counterpart, the musk ox; but lo and behold, the Viking and musk ox look alike.



Along similar lines, Bob loved to intermix ancient and modern times. In one illustration, a cave man is shown "playing golf" with a golf club made from a stick and stone tool, while his wife "files her nails" with a clovis point, her hair up in curlers made of animal bones.



Invention (and its close cousin artistic creation) is a deeply human characteristic, and the subject of many Humphrey cartoons. For example, a light bulb goes off in a woman's head as she watches her husband fall to the ground, his chin dragged through the earth by the bison he has been hunting, giving her the idea of a plow.

Bob loved to take a familiar image and put it into a surprise context. One of his cartoons shows the familiar "Wheel of Fortune," with Vanna White turning blocks of letters spelling out "Noam Chomsky." Three contestants sit at the table with name plates labeled Pan, Pongo, and Gorilla.



"The ability to make and understand cartoons represents some of the most complex symbolic thought, expression, and self-reflection of which humans are capable...As an anthropologist, I particularly enjoy drawing for AnthroNotes because I am able to work as an artist and anthropologist simultaneously."



We will miss you, Bob. On behalf of all the *AnthroNotes* readers who have enjoyed your artistry and humor these past 24 years, we express our heartfelt thanks for all you did to create a world of irony and humor, levity and insight, which enriched ours and others' lives in immeasurable ways. Neither we nor our readers will ever forget you.

by Ruth O. Selig with the other *AnthroNotes* editors, Alison S. Brooks, Ann Kaupp, and JoAnne Lanouette.

