

# BECKMAN

**Bend it like**

*Ford Beckman has made an impact on many communities — the fashion design community, the arts community. But another community has made an impact on him — Tulsa. Here is the story of the ORU grad's amazing career.*

**BY CONNIE CRONLEY**

Beckman walks past one of his famous "Black Wall" paintings, which is on display at a Tulsa office building.





Beckman's painting "Clown with Hat," completed in 1991, represents what the artist calls "an international icon."



Beckman's "Rhythm" series, completed in 2008 and including this painting, was part of an exhibition in Tulsa in December.

## "Oh, I paint a little."

That's what Ford Beckman says these days when people in Tulsa who don't know him ask what he does for a living.

That's like Tiger Woods saying he plays a little golf.

In fact, playing a little golf was the reason Beckman came to Tulsa in the 1970s. He left here in 1980 to become one of the top fashion designers and contemporary artists in the world. Now, he is back temporarily for family and business matters.

The story of his amazing career was the subject of our conversation when we met recently at a coffee shop.



Despite the 100-degree heat, he was wearing a pink, long-sleeve Ralph Lauren shirt, ironed as stiff as a book cover; khakis splattered with paint; and madras canvas shoes.

The look was so right for a man who has created a career half in the cutthroat

world of fashion design and half as a high-dollar painter based in New York.

We met not far from the Oral Roberts University campus, and that was right, too, for it was ORU that changed Beckman's life.

"Everything I've done, I've done on faith," he says. "Oral (Roberts) taught me about faith."

Beckman grew up nicknamed "Clancy." The name suggests someone with the gift of blarney, and that he has, in the sense of being loquacious. He is a nonstop storyteller who breaks into Southern drawls or Italian accents as he repeats accounts of internationally known art collectors Giuseppe Panza and Cy Twombly. At one point he even imitated the sound of a Laundromat.

He is talkative but also private to the edge of secretiveness. He is confident about his talents and matter-of-fact about his successes.

When the world yanks the rug out from under him, he seems to take it with aplomb.

"(Beckman's) work is vibrant, intense and energetic.

"He has more notoriety in Europe than in the United States.

"I own one of his new 'Rhythm' series and it hangs in my library, where it balances the room and is aesthetically pleasing.

"He is a gentle, nice soul whom I respect and admire."

**HOLBROOK LAWSON, PH.D.,  
ART COLLECTOR**



"I've known good times and not-so-good times, just like everyone else," he says.

How does he take life's knocks so well?

"My faith," he says. "My faith is strong."

Beckman's Christian faith is a powerful element in his life. On the back of every painting, he writes, "To God be the glory." And, before starting his most recent series of paintings — the rhythm paintings — he asked, "OK, Lord. What do you want me to paint? Show me the rhythm."

"I'm not kooky," he says. "That's just the way it is."

Beckman has been entertained in European embassies and courted by high-dollar art collectors, but he has kept his feet on the ground, and it is a simple ground: "I grew up on a dirt road in Florida."

Then he came to Tulsa.



Beckman was born in 1952 in Columbus, Ohio. His parents divorced when he was 1 year old, and he and an older brother shuttled back and forth between his mother in Florida and his father in Ohio. His mother, Ricki, was a painter ("just cats and dogs") and his father, Spook, was one of the most popular radio/TV personalities in Columbus.

"He was a very creative man," Beckman says.

Young Beckman took his artistic talent for granted. What he wanted to be was an athlete. A couple of colleges offered him golf scholarships. When he was a junior in high school, his father asked him to visit ORU. A major sponsor of Beckman's father's TV show also was a significant financial supporter of the university and suggested Beckman take a look.

"I'd never heard of ORU, but it was a free trip," he says.

He came, "saw the space ship" and, after a stint at Dade Junior College in Miami, transferred to ORU on a golf scholarship and majored in art.

"ORU changed my life," he says. "I thought I was a Christian before, but here I really learned about faith — serious Christianity."

Here he met Cynthia, who would



Reflecting Beckman's devout Christian faith, his Roma painting, completed in 1994, is titled "At the Foot of the Cross."

boy of Dick Jacobson, who had discovered Ralph Lauren. He was represented by Mark McCormick/IMG (International Management Group), whose clients included top entertainers, designers, models, athletes and — no kidding — the pope.

Beckman designed lines of men's and women's clothing under the Ford Beckman label. By 1980, he was in the thick of the fashion world in New York, working out of a 3,000-square-foot office on Madison Avenue. He was no longer Clancy.

"When I went to New York, I decided to use my real

name," he says.

With a creative eye for color, he designed textiles — wools, silks, tweeds and cashmere — that were manufactured and sold in England, Scotland, Ireland, Italy and elsewhere. Princess Diana wore his cashmere sweaters. He designed the Wimbledon Tennis Line for South America country licensees.

What made Beckman unique in the fashion world, he says, was his creativity.

"There are lots of merchandisers," he says, "but few creators."

In an era of madras wedgies and penny loafers, Beckman was a hot young designer with avant-garde fashion concepts, such as his "Wer" line made of rubber, nylon and Velcro. While that concept never materialized into a wearable line, it was indicative of his style. He was hip.

By 1986, he was nominated for the Cutty Sark "Most Promising U.S. Menswear Designer."

"I was in my 30s and I was all over Europe with my own line," he says.

And then ...

He sold the lifetime rights to his label to earn money, a lot of money — an opportunity Beckman describes as "every designer's dream." In a whirl of transactions, it ended up in the hands of a large business conglomerate, and the very morning of Beckman's fashion show, he found himself padlocked out of his office and sent home in a limo. It was 1991 and his fashion career was over.

Crushed by the experience?

"I've known Ford for more than 30 years. I know that his art is real, with profound integrity and deeply passionate. It is very personal."

**DOUG CAMPBELL,  
INTERIOR DESIGNER**

become his wife and pillar. After 23 years of marriage, they had a daughter, Isabella, 14. "My girls," he calls them.

Here he got to know Oral Roberts, often caddied for him and occasionally hit balls with him. Here he got to know the Lord.

In 1977, "totally by faith" and with little inventory, he left ORU and opened a small men's clothing store in Brookside.

"I had maybe a dozen ties and a dozen pants and it was right beside a Laundromat — chuga, chuga, chuga," he says.

He named the store Clancy's, after that childhood nickname. It morphed into a specialty-clothing store in Utica Square.

Almost immediately, Beckman went from selling clothing to designing it. He designed nearly everything in his store. Then he ventured off to New York, where he quickly became the golden



"To tell you the truth, it was kind of a relief," Beckman says. "I was the Pat Boone of the fashion world. I'm not gay. I don't do drugs. The garment business is a hard world. I enjoyed the creativity, but it wears you slick. I'm a reclusive guy. I'm extremely shy. The press, the parties — that was hard for me. When you design clothing, everyone wants you to change it to fit their concept or line. When you paint, it's just your work, one person's creation. I felt the Lord wanted me to paint, so I left fashion."



He broke into the art world the same way he hit fashion — like a rocket. As a minimalist, he was acclaimed first for his "Black Wall" series. He had been working on the series privately for three years while still in the thick of the fashion world — large squares of plywood, stapled over with canvas, waxed and covered with many coats of paint and industrial varnish that built into a skin symbolizing human skin.

"The square is so simple," he says. "Clean but so demanding."

The "Black Wall" paintings were very personal — "the pressures, my divorced parents. All paintings are self-portraits; collectively they are like a choir that represents the artist, just with many different voices."

When collector Giuseppe Panza and his entourage first visited Beckman's gallery to see "Black Wall" paintings, he sat quietly in front of each one for 10 to 15 minutes. Then he rubbed his hand over the black paint and told the artist, "It's so human."

"He got it," Beckman says.

Panza has bought more Beckman art than any one person — a rotation of 57 paintings are displayed in four gallery rooms in his Italian palazzo.

Not everyone appreciated the work. When his brother heard of Beckman's artistic success, he visited the New York studio to see for himself. Beckman's paintings are big. The smallest is 4 feet by 4 feet. The largest is 96 inches by 144 inches or more.

"Scale is a very important part of a work," he says, "for physical and visual power."

His brother stood in the art studio oblivious to the mammoth works that surrounded him and said, "So, where are the paintings?" Beckman laughed and said,

"I think his latest work (the "Rhythm" paintings) is some of the best he's ever done.

"His surfaces are so rich and deep. There's a lot of depth to his paintings and that adds another dimension.

"He's not only a good painter; he's a good man."

**OTTO DUECKER, PAINTER**



"Let's go get something to eat."

Beckman describes how awed he was in 1991 when reclusive artist Cy Twombly arrived in a limo and walked up the four flights to Beckman's studio. The elderly artist was dapper in wrinkled linen, alligator shoes and no socks. He, too, studied the paintings quietly for some time and then said to Beckman in his South Carolina drawl, "Why, these are good."

Twombly nosed around the studio. "What else you got?" he asked. Then he saw paintings wrapped and ready to be shipped. Twombly and Beckman's dealer cajoled until the paintings were unwrapped.

And just like that, to his own dealer's surprise, Beckman was on his way to fame as a pop art artist. They had just opened Beckman's "Clown" and "Red Meat" series.

"Warhol was a strong influence on me in the '60s," Beckman says, "and I was ready to do some representational work."

"The subjects came to me in a vision. I said, 'Lord, what do you want me to paint?' And the answer was, 'A clown and a piece of meat.'"

The "Red Meat" was a Wall Street term of the 1980s aggressive takeovers. The paintings were lifelike raw steaks — "greasy, gross and powerful. They represent muscle," Beckman says.

Ah, the "Clown" series, though — not

your jolly clown pictures on children's toys. With distressed materials and the portrait's details stripped away to reveal painfully unfiltered emotions, the paintings reflect the exhaustion of the culture and time, Beckman says.

"The clown is the guy under the bed," he says. "The meat represents truth, the bottom line. The clowns represent hope."

It seemed like a gamble to exhibit 36 pop art paintings, but they all sold within days. The "Clown" series exploded on the pop art world.

And here's something interesting. Beckman's father was a clown. He ran away from home at 16 to join the Ringling Brothers Circus in Sarasota, Fla., where he fell in love with a Spanish horseback rider and managed the little people.

As Beckman said, all painting is self-portrait.

His art has been exhibited internationally and his work is in some of the finest private collections and museums around the world: New York, Zurich, London, Jerusalem, Hanover, Frankfurt, Stuttgart, Vienna, Lugano, Gubbio and elsewhere, including Los Angeles' Museum of Contemporary Art, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Baltimore Museum of Art, Denver Art Museum, Armand Hammer Foundation and more.



While Beckman and his girls have been in Tulsa settling family business, his friends, colleagues and former ORU classmates pushed him into painting and exhibiting new work — as a gift to Tulsa.

What emerged is yet another series — his "Rhythm" paintings, reflecting his early interest in Jackson Pollock. The rhythm of these paintings, however, reflects the rhythm of the Holy Spirit.

This series could occupy him for 10 years, he imagines.

"As an artist, I'm in my mid-career," he says. "I could paint until I'm 80. Being an artist is a lifelong work. Look at Picasso."

He also is alive with other creative projects — writing, publishing, industrial designs and fashion. Who knows what else he will do next?

"The Lord opens a door and I walk through it," he says.

As we closed our long interview, I asked if there was anything I hadn't asked him that he wanted to say.

"Yes. Thank Tulsa for me." ■

