



One Young World, by
Burton Morris, digital print
on canvas, 2012.

Morris' signature image
for this gathering of 1,300
young leaders from 182
countries set a welcoming
tone, profiling the city and
connecting it to the world.

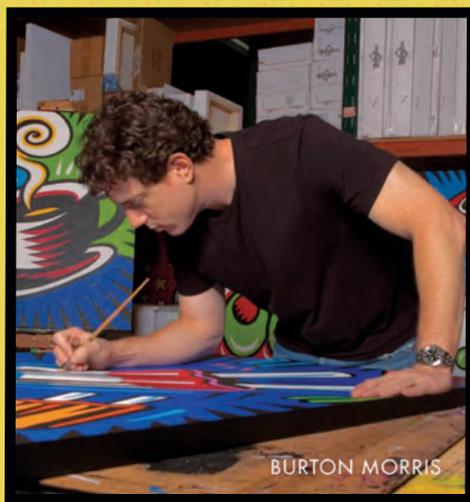
Burton Morris collection, photo by Rachellynn
Schoen.

Burton Morris

POPTASTIC!

The Art of Burton Morris

By Anne Madarasz



Burton Morris at work.
Burton Morris collection.

Though comic books served as a major inspiration for Burton Morris' art, it may well have been a television show that sparked his career. From 1966 through 1968, Ron Ely portrayed Tarzan on TV, capitalizing on the popularity of the film character. Morris, then three years old, sought to emulate this hero, swinging like Tarzan on the monkey bars outside. A bad fall landed him at the hospital; a broken femur resulted in a body cast. Unable to move around by himself, Burton spent weeks laying on his parents' bed, watching cartoons on TV, and drawing. His first efforts looked like the work of most young boys—simple crayon drawings of cars and airplanes. But as he drew, a love of creating something new, putting ideas down on paper grew.

CAPTAIN AMERICA



Captain America, pen and ink drawing, age 13, from 1977.
Burton Morris collection.

Burton Morris '77



(Above) Burton Morris in cast, age 3, 1967.

Burton Morris collection.

In 1973, Burton, age nine, stood in front of the family home in Churchill holding a Captain Marvel comic book. An avid collector and reader of comics, the drawings inspired his earliest art and remain a subject he revisits.

Burton Morris collection.

As Burton got older, his fascination with comic books inspired him to increasingly focus on drawing active, muscular superheroes. They filled his life—his school book reports became brief summaries of a comic followed by pages of illustrations, and even his diary from age 12 contains “footnote” drawings of comic-like characters. The work led Morris towards tightly detailed drawing. The gift of a rapidograph pen further encouraged him to create intricate pen and ink drawings, and the awards he won for that work marked his growing skill.

Morris’ parents supported his burgeoning talent, enrolling him in art classes at the Carnegie Museum and collecting and saving his work. Study at the College of Fine Arts at Carnegie Mellon University polished Morris’ skills in design and illustration. Hired by an agency, Morris worked as an art director after graduation, producing commercials and advertisements. He had his first published illustration in *Pittsburgh Magazine* in 1988. A desire to return to that first love, drawing, led him to leave the agency and set up his

own business, Burton Morris Illustration. Commercial work generated during this period details the emergence of the key elements now associated with Morris’ paintings—a spare portrayal of individual objects or ideas, presented in an active environment, suffused with energy.

Morris’ big break came in 1993 when Absolut Vodka ran a national campaign highlighting an artist from every state in the Union as well as the District of Columbia.

Each artist chosen developed an advertisement that showcased Absolut Vodka and their state. Those ads then ran in *USA Today* with a new one appearing every other week. In addition, Absolut commissioned and sold 300 lithographs of each artist’s work and created a book featuring all 51 pieces. Selected from more than 800 artists to represent his home state of Pennsylvania, the Absolut campaign gave Morris national exposure and linked him to a group of emerging artists.

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(Opposite Page) *Absolut*, by Burton Morris, acrylic on canvas, 1993. Morris developed two separate concepts for the Absolut Statehood campaign—the company chose the keystone concept and ran it as a full-page advertisement on July 1, 1993, in *USA Today*. Absolut never used the remaining concept, so Morris submitted it to an ad book, seeking illustration work from other clients. He kept the original art, which hung in a show at Gallery G that same year. While the two concepts differ in the background treatments, both show the emerging elements of Morris' post-Pop style.

Burton Morris collection, photo by Paula Andras.

(Right) On the *Friends* set, 1990s.

Burton Morris collection.



That same year, Morris began to work with Fred Rogers, designing the art for the 25th anniversary of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* on PBS. Morris developed a special connection with Fred Rogers: the work of each inspired the other. "Fred was an inspiration to me in so many ways. It meant so much to me to be able to represent his Neighborhood," Morris recalls. Rogers became Burton's mentor, demonstrating how to gracefully handle his fame and the importance of treating all people with kindness and dignity. He also encouraged Burton to use his art for the betterment of others, especially children.

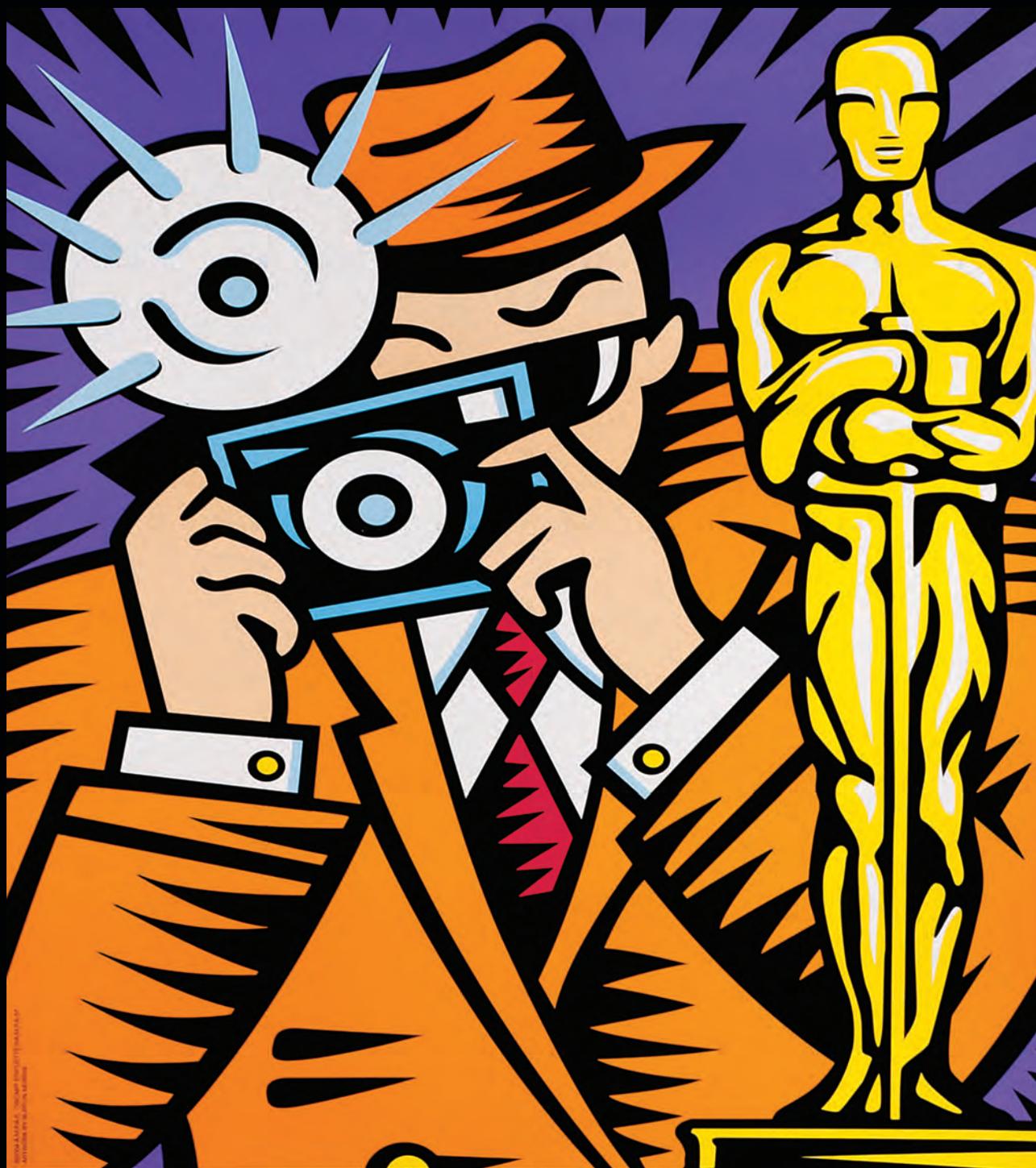
Morris quickly followed the Absolut campaign with another major achievement,

**The big
break on
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t-shirt, not a
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placing his art on the television show *Friends* and beginning to build a network of connections in California. The big break on *Friends* came first with a t-shirt, not a painting. Morris' sister Stacey placed some of the t-shirts he had designed in California boutiques near where she lived. *Friends* producer Kevin Bright bought a "Big Hitter" shirt and gave it to actor David Schwimmer (Ross) to wear on the show. After seeing it on the show, Morris got in touch with Bright, who invited him to a taping. That trip resulted in Burton's art being used on the coffee shop set, Central Perk, in addition to his other t-shirts and ties being worn by the actors.



BCM



(Left) *Paparazzi*, poster for the 76th Annual Academy Awards®, by Burton Morris, unveiled November 2003.

Burton Morris collection.

(Opposite Page) *Coffee Break*, by Burton Morris, acrylic on canvas, 1991–92. Along with the popcorn, this is probably one of Morris' most iconic works, and the painting usually identified with *Friends*. The coffee cup appeared on 45–50 episodes of the show, hanging on the wall in Central Perk. It is an image that captures its time, when Starbucks and coffee had become a routine part of our lives.

Collection of Debby and Nathan Firestone, photo by Rachellynn Schoen.

OSCARS

Sunday, February 29, 2004 

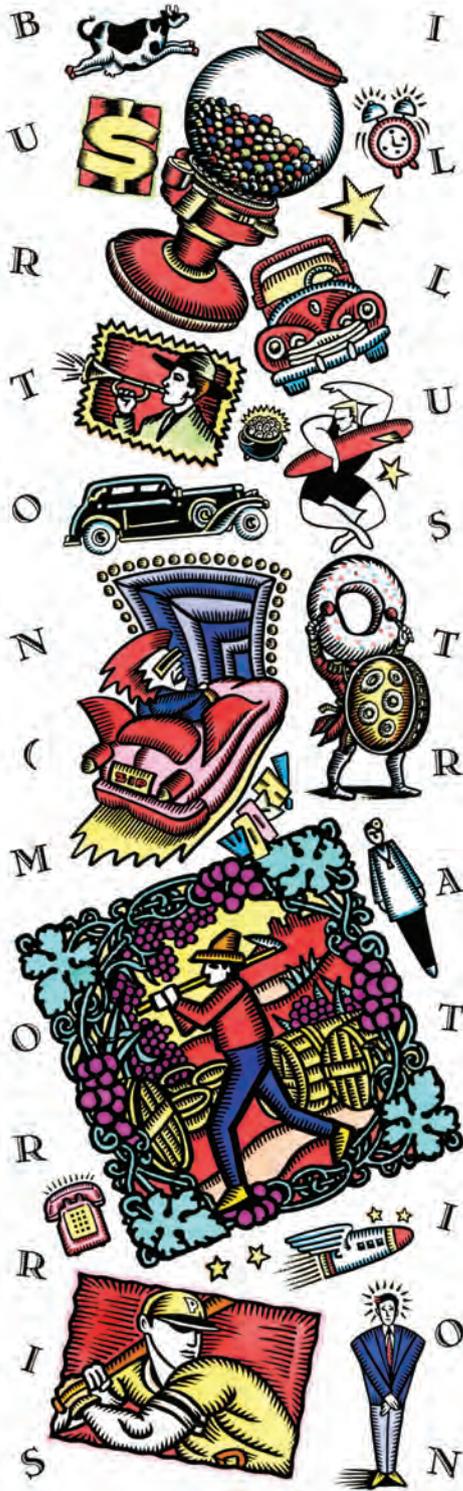
By this time, Morris had begun to create the icons that define his post-Pop style. All feature single objects rendered larger than life. These icons, as he thought of them, symbolized new ways for Morris to present the everyday experience. Thick black lines, or shards, animate the works, infusing them with movement and life. Morris repainted each icon numerous times, in different colors or with different backgrounds, seeking to ingrain the symbol in popular culture. Some of his most definitive works (the popcorn, the coffee cup) date to this period and helped to launch Morris in the art world.

At the same time, Morris continued his design work for corporate clients and began to broaden the market for his work beyond the United States. In 1996, Perrier hired Morris to design art for limited edition bottles sold only in Europe. Two years later he was hired as the official artist for the World Cup soccer games in Paris. The biggest single event sporting competition in the world, Morris' bright, active imagery paired well with athletics. It also appealed to those in entertainment, business, and philanthropy who sought a new way to identify their events. The 76th Annual Academy Awards® sought out Morris to refresh and redefine the look of the Oscars. Morris brought his bright colors and bold design to this red carpet project, which included posters, trailers, invitations, and building wraps. Millions saw the art that Bruce Davis, the executive director of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, described as "youthful and fun.... It captures the excitement that surrounds the Academy Awards." Other corporate clients in the U.S. and abroad have relied on Morris' unique style to identify their products. In addition, Morris' art has branded charitable and fundraising events and raised millions for worthy causes.

In some of Morris' early work he experimented with objects that broke the plane or frame of the work, but stayed on the canvas. Then he began to paint pieces that

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Advertisement for Burton Morris
Illustration mailer, 1991.
Burton Morris collection.

actually extended beyond the canvas. In 2000 he introduced “Pop-Outs”—sculptural works that are often silkscreened onto wood and layered. Here the energy or animation in the work is no longer created with thick black lines or shards of paint or marker; it comes from the object leaping off the flat plane of the canvas or base structure. The pop icons of Morris’ earlier work are rendered in 3-D: they move beyond the canvas and occupy space. Morris took this work a step further with a series of “Poptics,” created in partnership with the Entertainment Technology Center at Carnegie Mellon University in 2008. Morris and the ETC developed three digital interactives that marry technology and art. Each features an animated

by the personal objects that might sit on their bedside table. These nightstands are the answer to all the people who ever asked Burton Morris if he painted portraits. In these intimate portrayals of famous people, Morris uses objects to unveil the story of their lives. Fellow Pittsburgher and Pop Art pioneer Andy Warhol served as Morris’ first subject for this new work. He then painted a series related to artists and has since expanded the work to include athletes, comic book characters, musicians, figures from television and entertainment, and legends of popular culture. Morris conducts exhaustive research of the individual’s life or body of work before the portrait is crafted. Each portrait is populated

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piece of Burton’s art that moves or changes. For instance, the Poparazzi Photographer painting has been turned into a photo-mosaic, comprised of smaller pictures tiled and tinted to make up the larger image. When you walk by the screen, the camera in the art flashes and takes your picture. This photo then replaces an older image in the mosaic, becoming part of the art. These interactives enhance Morris’ focus on energy and motion in his art.

Morris’ most recent work features nightstand portraits where the icon is a celebrity or famous individual represented

with personality without including an actual image of the icon portrayed.

No matter where his art has taken him, Pittsburgh has remained a creative muse for Burton Morris. Though he now makes his home on the West Coast, Morris continues to return to Pittsburgh and organizations from the region still seek his eye and hand to create art that brands their events or preserves special moments. Over the past two decades, Morris’ art has re-imagined the city, casting a fresh, energetic vision of our region to the world.

Family and friends also continue to



Wedding of Anna Spiegle and Samuel Reingold, 1921. Morris' maternal grandparents, Anna and Samuel, both from Ukraine, met in the Hill District. After marrying they lived in Homewood, where Samuel had a store, then Oakland, and finally Squirrel Hill. Though Burton's grandfather passed away before he was born, he had a close relationship with his grandmother, "Nanny Annie."

Burton Morris collection.



(Left) *Andy Warhol Night Stand*, by Burton Morris, acrylic on canvas, 2009.

Burton Morris collection, photo by Paula Andras.

(Opposite) *Pop!* by Burton Morris, acrylic on canvas, 2012. Popcorn is one of Morris' best-known icons; he has returned to this symbol of new ideas many times in the past 20 years.

Burton Morris Collection, photo by Rachellynn Schoen.

draw Morris back to Pittsburgh. His roots here run deep and have played a role in the spirit and tone of the art he creates. Though Morris now signs his work, many of his early paintings bear a mark, "BCM," which stands for Burton Charles Morris. His name pays homage, in the tradition of the Jewish faith, to his great-grandmothers. His first name begins with a "B" to recall Bertha Weinberg, his middle name a "C" for Clara Spiegle. Both were gone before Burton came along, but their spirits lived on in their children. One of those children, Burton's "Nanny Annie," made her way from Ukraine to Pittsburgh in 1914

at age 15. She quickly involved herself in her immigrant Jewish community, joining with friends to found the Young People's Zionist League. Her daughter, Burton's mother, is a retired high school health teacher, but still contributes as a community activist. These strong women imbued Burton with their energy and their positive outlook. That belief in seeking a better future, that hopeful nature, is preserved in the art Morris creates.

"I've tried to create everyday ideas and make them, in a sense, pop!" This Pittsburgh-born and -trained artist makes the ordinary extraordinary, animating everyday objects

to create symbolic statements about popular culture and our times. For more than two decades Morris has invited us to see the world in a new way—painting with a bold, bright palette that belies the grey so often associated with Pittsburgh. ☀

To learn more about Morris and see his works of art, visit *Poptastic! The Art of Burton Morris*, at the Histroy Center through February 23, 2014.

Anne Madarasz is the Museum Division director and co-director of the Western Pennsylvania Sports Museum.

*"I've tried to create everyday ideas
and make them, in a sense, pop!"*

- Burton Morris

