

California Impressionism

California at the beginning of the 20th century was a particularly attractive region for artists, as it was for the hundreds of thousands of other people who began to immigrate to the state from across the country and from Europe. Artists found in California varied and sublime coastal and mountain scenery, of a type unavailable in other regions of the country, including deserts, fields of colorful wildflowers, and romantically crumbling remnants of the California missions. The inspiring landscape, along with excellent climactic conditions for painting outdoors all year around, and a clear, bright light, made the region exceptionally conducive to plein air painting in an Impressionistic style. The final and longest-lasting offshoot of American Impressionism, a school with its own distinctive spirit and style, California Impressionism flourished from the first decade of the 20th century through the 1930's.

Unlike the French and East coast Impressionists, who besides landscapes often depicted city and industrial scenes, and closely observed human activity and the conditions of modern life, the California artists usually avoided such subjects, strongly preferring to paint the natural landscape. Even those who had specialized in other subjects before arriving in California soon transformed themselves into landscape specialists, often exclusively. Leading artists such as Maurice Braun and Joseph Kleitsch, who had previously painted still lifes, figures and portraits, and Franz Bischoff, who had specialized almost exclusively in flowers, were typical in switching to painting plein air landscapes, ones that more often than not are devoid of figures. They depicted California as an unspoiled and unpopulated land, and continued to paint it as such even as it began to be more and more developed. The California Impressionists' vision of nature is romantic and nostalgic, ranging from pleasantly escapist to deeply reverential. William Wendt, often referred to as the "Dean of Southern California Landscape Painters," painted some of the most powerful images of California as a land of spiritual renewal, almost always without signs of human presence. His views of an enveloping, awe-inspiring nature resonate with religious overtones. Edgar Payne, another of the most highly respected California artists, sought out remote locales in the High Sierras and Southwest deserts, especially areas with monumental natural landmarks, and when his scenery included people at all, they were often blurred marks of paint incidental to the vast landscape around them.

Besides scenery, California also offered a great deal of artistic freedom, especially in the southern part of the state, which was sparsely populated and therefore had no entrenched artistic traditions. For this reason Southern California is more strongly associated with Impressionist painting than Northern California. When artists began to settle in Southern California, starting with Benjamin Brown in 1896, and followed by a stream of others such as Paul de Longpre, Hanson Puthuff, William Lees Judson, and Elmer and Marion Wachtel, Impressionism quickly became the dominant style there, and once established retained its preeminence long after other parts of the country had moved on to more modern styles. Though San Francisco had hosted exhibitions of French Impressionism as early as 1891, artists in the North resisted adopting the bright palette of Impressionism, preferring the subdued Barbizon and Tonalist style paintings by cultural leaders William Keith and Arthur Mathews. The Tonalist aesthetic was deemed better suited to the foggy coastal regions of the North, and remained popular there well into the 1920's. Many California artists worked in both the Northern and Southern parts of the state, but usually adopted brighter colors and more Impressionistic techniques when working in the South. This can be seen in the work of Granville Redmond, whose subdued Northern California works contrast with the bright poppy field paintings with short, pointillist-like brushstrokes he created in Southern California.

Some scholars have identified this use of small dabs of color, as well as the bold, wide brushstrokes seen in the work of such artists as Wendt, Bischoff and Payne, as the two main types of brushwork in California Impressionist works, though there were a wide variety of approaches. The California Impressionists, in keeping with the tendency of American Impressionists in general, used their brushwork, along with traditionally constructed compositions, and adherence to colors as found in nature, to preserve the solidity of underlying forms, in contrast to the French Impressionists' tendency to dissolve form through surface effect, color, and flattening of the picture plane.

While California Impressionism differs significantly from French Impressionism, a great number of California artists did live and work in France. Among the first artists to bring back to California Impressionist works that they had painted in France were Guy Rose, Evelyn McCormick, and Ernest Peixotto, who had all painted in Giverny in the 1890's. Giverny was one of the most important art centers for American artists, who were gradually converting from a Barbizon and Munich-influenced Tonalism, or Gray Aesthetic, to Impressionism, and American artists had begun to gather there around 1887, four years after Monet had settled in the hamlet. Guy Rose, a Southern California native, lived in Giverny for twelve years starting in 1904, after several previous visits. He joined other Americans such as Frederick Frieseke, Richard Miller, and Lawton Parker. Rose was one of the very few artists to have any direct contact with Monet and was in

his own time, as he is now, the most celebrated of the California Impressionists. He was, however, typical of the California artists in that he was well-traveled and highly exposed to contemporary developments in the art world in the major European and American art centers.

After many years in France, and travels elsewhere in Europe and the US, Rose returned to California permanently in 1914, settling in Pasadena for his final years. In 1918, as the director of the Stickney Memorial Art School in Pasadena, he invited Richard Miller to teach at the school for a year. Miller had an enormous influence on the local art scene during his one-year stay. Another artist who had painted with Rose and Miller in Giverny was Alson Clark, who replaced Rose as the Stickney's director in 1921 after Rose became too ill to continue in the job. Clark, a native Chicagoan, had trained in his home city and Paris, and traveled widely before arriving in California. Though not a member of the "Giverny Group", he had painted with the group long enough to fully absorb their aesthetic, as shown in his famous series of paintings documenting the construction of the Panama Canal. Among California artists, he and Rose are considered to be of more importance to the broader history of American painting than most regional artists. Clark painted several murals in Pasadena and Los Angeles, and often depicted figures and architecture, but considered himself primarily a painter of landscapes, and after his arrival in Southern California he adapted his use of color to the demands of the local light and landscape, like so many other artists did, to depict the deserts and High Sierras.

Though Los Angeles grew from a population of 50,000 in 1890 to reach 1,368,000 after World War I, scenic landscape subjects were within easy reach, located within and just beyond city limits. A very popular area with artists was Pasadena, which boasts the Arroyo Seco canyon running through the western portion of the city. The Arroyo Seco had at the time a beautiful natural stream and was covered with white-barked sycamores and fields of bright orange poppies, set against the backdrop of the San Gabriel Mountains. The Arroyo can be seen in the paintings of the many artists who lived along the canyon's edge, including Rose, Clark, Jean Mannheim, and Franz Bischoff. Los Angeles's rival city to the South, San Diego, was the other major urban art center in Southern California. After two land booms in the 1880's, San Diego had grown steadily from 1900 onwards. Two of the first professional artists to settle there were Ammi Merchant Farnham and Charles A. Fries, who moved there in 1896. Other artists, including Edith White and Maurice Braun, were drawn to San Diego by the establishment of the Theosophical Society on Point Loma in the late 1890's. The Hungarian-born Braun was the most famous of the city's artists, arriving after tiring of the artistic pressures he had felt in New York. Braun founded the Academy of Art in 1912 and served as its Director for several years. Alfred Mitchell was one of the prominent artists who studied under Braun, and he was active in San Diego through the 1950's. Possibly the most important year in the art history of San Diego was 1915, the year that the city hosted the Exposition in Balboa Park, and that a group of artists founded the San Diego Art Association, whose members included Braun, Mitchell, Fries, Charles Reiffel, and Everett Gee Jackson.

Southern California's closest approximation to an artist's colony such as Giverny, where like-minded painters worked and associated informally in a country setting, was Laguna Beach. Laguna thrived as an artist's colony in the 1910's and 20's. Until the 20's, Laguna was a small village with simple wooden buildings and dirt roads. Norman St Clair is credited with being the first artist to paint landscapes there, first visiting in 1900. By the time that Anna Hills and Edgar Payne founded the Laguna Beach Art Association, as many as thirty artists may have been living in the area. Among the many artists who maintained studios in Laguna or visited often, were William Wendt, Joseph Kleitsch, Jack Wilkinson Smith, Granville Redmond, Donna Schuster, Jean Mannheim, Hanson Puthuff, and Frank Cuprien. Cuprien, like several other Laguna artists, specialized in coastal views, but the area also featured canyons and eucalyptus-covered hills. Eucalyptus trees were not native to the area, but were such a popular subject that the name "Eucalyptus School" (originally a mildly derisive term) was applied to Southern California painters as a whole. Many of the artists, including Clarence Hinkle, Karl Yens, and William Cahill offered summer classes that drew more artists, professional and amateur, to the area.

The other most notable artist's colony, as opposed to urban art center, was in the Monterey/Carmel area. Several artists had moved there after the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire, and it offered some of the most spectacular coastal scenery in the state. The foggy atmosphere and its muting effect on light and color did not inspire as many brilliantly colored Impressionist works as did Laguna, but several of the top Impressionists worked there. One of them was E. Charlton Fortune, who painted the area in a bold and exuberantly colored Impressionistic style that borders on Post-Impressionism. Fortune had a very strong influence in the area- it was she who induced William Merritt Chase to give classes in Carmel in the summer of 1914. Fortune's paintings command some of the highest prices at auction today, and she and Armin Hansen are two of the most respected of the area's Impressionists. Hansen, who took up permanent residence in Monterey 1914, was one of the few California artists to depict industry and labor, showing the canneries and fishermen at work, often dramatically battling the force of the sea. By contrast, some of the

most lyrical interpretations of the area's scenery are the coastals painted by Guy Rose as he passed through on his travels, though these works clearly reflect the difference in the Northern light when compared to his Southern California works. Franz Bischoff also did excellent work in Carmel, though like Rose he is not primarily associated with the area. Other artists working in the Carmel/Monterey area in a more colorfully Impressionist, as opposed to Tonalist, style were Mary DeNeale Morgan, Bruce Nelson, Paul Dougherty, Clark Hobart, William Ritschell, Arthur Hill Gilbert, and Evelyn McCormick.

Northern California lays claim to many other notable Impressionists, such as Joseph Raphael, who was raised in San Francisco and maintained ties to the city during his long residence in Belgium. Many consider Raphael Northern California's most brilliant Impressionist and the truest to the style's European roots. He was a particularly devoted admirer of Van Gogh. More modernistic in outlook were the Oakland-based Society of Six members, an independent-minded, Fauve-influenced group, comprising Selden Gile, William Clapp, Maurice Logan, Louis Siegriest, August Gay, and Bernard Von Eichman. Self-described as "painters of joy," they countered the prevailing Bay Area trend toward muted, grey colors with a sunny palette. Their unorthodox use of color, often veering wildly away from reality, distinguished them as some of the most experimental artists of their time and place, and certainly far less conservative than most of the California Impressionists. John Gamble, a more traditional Impressionist of the first generation and famous for his poppies and lupine landscapes, worked in San Francisco until the 1906 earthquake, then settled in Santa Barbara and became, along with Colin Campbell Cooper, one of its preeminent painters. Other important San Francisco Impressionists were Jules Pages, Bruce Nelson, and Theodore Wores. Wores and Pages both depicted San Francisco's picturesque Chinatown, and these are some of the very small number of Impressionist images of the City.

Interest in California Impressionism has experienced a rebirth since the 1970's, and has grown steadily over the past several decades, attracting an ever-expanding audience of new admirers. Collectors have a seemingly insatiable appetite for these works, scholars have zealously undertaken new research in the field, and contemporary artists have adopted the school's style and spirit. With exposure from exhibitions around the country and abroad, the school's appeal now resonates far beyond the region, and this attention is well deserved.

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