

Earl Cordrey used his art to redefine Palm Springs

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"We have it on the authority of Douglas Haskell, publisher of The Architectural Forum, that illustrator Earl Cordrey's... Colony is the BEST piece of architecture in Palm Springs! Mr. Haskell didn't take personal responsibility for this statement, publishers are smart people and seldom take personal responsibility for anything, but he said it was the 'consensus of opinion' among the convening architects. Over 300 of them milled through the studio Colony Sunday afternoon, so they should know. The Colony was designed by Palm Springs architect, Stewart Williams, and decorated by its artist owner, Earl Cordrey."

Priscilla Chaffey was reporting on the prestigious meeting of The Architectural Forum in Palm Springs in 1949 and reflected on architects who had visited the village previously. She continued, "All of which reminds us of the greatest of them all (modern division), Frank Lloyd Wright. He was an impetuous, high tempered old gentleman, and on the bright and sunny morning we interviewed him many years ago and asked him what he thought of Palm Springs architecture, he brandished his silver-headed cane with violence and said, 'It's TERRIBLE! The worst I've ever seen any place, and I thought I'd seen everything.' He wore a black opera cape and a wide-brimmed black hat and looked very dramatic and handsome. 'Imbeciles have been at work here!' he muttered, glaring balefully across the street at a local hotel."

"That hotel was designed by your own son," we retorted tartly. Paternal pride won the brief battle we could see churning around inside the eminent architect. "A worthy piece of work," etc. "A worthy piece of work," he said broodingly. "That worthy piece of work, Oasis Hotel, was designed by Lloyd Wright, his son, and was just around the corner from Cordrey's Colony which won the



Illustrator and fine artist Earl Cordrey with sketchpad and pen in hand. PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY/SPECIAL TO THE DESERT SUN

sincere approbation of the architects gathered for The Architectural Forum. Their assessment that the building was a fine piece of architecture spoke volumes. Rather than imbeciles having been at work in the desert, there were avantgarde artists and architects cultivating highly sophisticated tastes in their respective fields.

The Colony was built as a home and hotel, a gathering spot for artistic types. Cordrey noted, "...artists usually go to Palm Springs, Florida, to escape the rigors of New York winters, but that the season in that resort were too short. Aerial travel makes it possible for these

men to make the trip to the coast and Palm Springs, (California) quickly." Thinking the publicity of artists in residence good for the town, he wanted to attract more. A friend of Cordrey's and fellow illustrator noted that the popular belief "that artists are not normal, and all come from Greenwich Village, eat garlic bread constantly stepped in red wine and grow long hair is a misconception. These people believe me are absolutely normal. They have families...suffer ulcers, like to go on picnics and some of them like Democrats and pay exorbitant taxes." They are the type of persons like "Earl Cordrey, who is acclaimed as one of the best assets in the community."

Born in the tiny town of Piru, California, Cordrey grew up in Los Angeles. His father had been part of the great migration to California in search of gold in 1849. After high school Cordrey studied at the prestigious Chouinard School of Art and freelanced in the studio of Sam Hyde Harris, who would become a renowned desert painter. Cordrey began working for major magazines and after marrying his wife, Catherine, (nicknamed Kay) moved to New York, looking for more work in magazine illustration. Cordrey and his wife found themselves in the desert by the early 1940s and quickly became integral to the community, promoting art and artists.

His art graced the covers of many Collier's Magazine covers, notably even an illustration for a short story by F. Scott Fitzgerald. Working freelance for publishers of romance novels, Cordrey produced hundreds of gorgeous pictures, with attractive couples in various period costumes, as dictated by the book's story. He created postcards for the legendary Stork Club, and cover art for American Weekly magazine. He worked for Hearst publications including Cosmopolitan and Redbook magazines. He produced art for advertisements, particularly Catalina sweaters, and depicted idyllic settings with smartly dressed, perfectly appointed, beautiful, young American men and women.

By 1942, the Cordreys were back in Southern California, specifically in Palm Springs, living a life more like that of the idealized versions he painted for work. The desert was indeed perfect for them. The city was newly incorporated and Cordrey created the city's seal. Cordrey had a highly developed aesthetic and was wildly successful in commercial art. He had more time to paint for his own pleasure. He taught art classes and led painting groups, called palette clubs, while continuing to work professionally. Earl and Kay would regularly entertain, were guests at many a swanky party, and worked diligently to contribute to the community. His colony was a gathering place for an interesting group of people, who were having a good time doing good work.

The newspaper noted in 1947 "Earl Cordrey, famed magazine illustrator and Village homeowner was acclaimed this week as one of the most civic minded citizens of Palm Springs. Ever since he and his wife and children moved to Palm Springs he has always stood by ready, willing and able to assist any worthy cause. One of the highest paid illustrators in the nation, the artistic talent he has lent to projects in the city cannot be estimated. Last week he graciously



Iconic Earl Cordrey images for Palm Springs Life Magazine continues to define the desert. COURTESY OF THE PALM SPRINGS LIFE COLLECTION

stopped his own work to assist the Village Insanities in designed one or more of the stage settings and took time out to prepare the artwork for a poster. He wasn't through with this work when the Desert Air Circus...asked him to draw something..."

Completely encoined in his new desert digs, by 1950, the Cordreys entertained an old friend. "William Chessman, art editor of Collier's magazine, who gave Earl Cordrey, Villager, his first chance as an illustrator for a national magazine back in 1934, held a reunion with the now famed artist at The Colony operated by the Cordreys here in Palm Springs. It is the first trip west for Chessman... 'I'm amazed at the beauty of Palm Springs,' declared Chessman. 'This community and surrounding country is (sic) truly an artist's paradise.'"

In his artist's paradise, Cordrey agreed to be part of a group founding a little town magazine in 1958. It would appeal to sophisticated travelers and the increasingly cosmopolitan citizenry of the village. Called "Palm Springs Life," Cordrey served as its art director and created its logo as well as its inaugural cover art. His jaunty, deliciously fun depictions in the publication through the mid-1960s would come to define not only the magazine, but life itself in Palm Springs. The exuberance and wit in his paintings were synonymous with a Palm Springs lifestyle as enviable as the Palm Springs weather. Along with the magazine, he had lots of other projects. He conceived of the original logo for the famous Thunderbird Country Club in Rancho Mirage and designed the same for William Holden and Ray Ryan's Mount Kenya Safari Club. Cordrey would go on to retire from illustration and concentrate on fine art for the remainder of his life.

Cordrey's art works are found on many of the early magazine covers defining the ethos of midcentury Palm Springs. The Palm Springs Historical Society uses an iconic Earl Cordrey image for its Walking Tour brochure thanks to Palm Springs Life's visionary publisher, Frank Jones. His father, Mill, collaborated with Cordrey and took over the fledgling magazine back in 1958 creating a serious publishing concern and practically inventing the local lifestyle magazine genre. But that's another story.

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A lifelong desert resident, Eavan is currently studying psychology at Northwest University, a top-ranked Christian college near Seattle, Washington.