

Desert beauty gave artists solace, inspiration

Tracy Conrad

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It was remarkable then — and even more amazing now looking back — that so many important artists came to the desert in the early days.

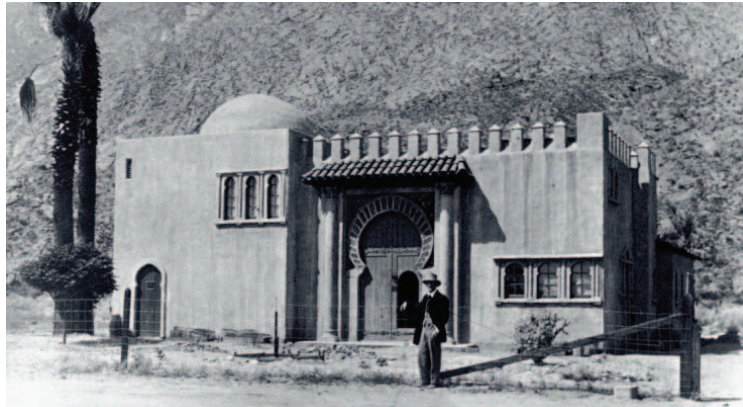
These artists, whose paintings now garner unimaginably handsome sums at auction, worked “en plein air,” away from their studios, capturing the subtle and ever-changing colors of this unique landscape.

The early 20th century was a time of innocence and exploration in California’s desert wilds. Some painters were driven to escape the ravages of tuberculosis, and others, like Lockwood de Forest, who made 10 documented visits in the very beginning of the 20th century, were drawn by the extraordinary views made glorious by an indescribable yellow light.

World-famous painters Maynard Dixon, Conrad Buff, Clyde Forsythe, Milford Zornes and other “California Impressionists” weren’t the only ones; there was a cadre of more permanent desert dwellers as well. The desert proved a haven for artistic types. An artist could actually make a living here at painting. As a result, the desert’s thriving artistic community rivaled that of Taos, Santa Fe or Carmel.

John Hilton, R. Brownell McGrew, Fred Penney, Karl Albert, Carl Bray and Jimmy Swinnerton were locals known beyond the valley. Painstaking representations of the unusual landscape and its adapted plants were contrasted with loose, interpretive styles. The subject scenery was conducive to both approaches.

Transplants with serious artistic pedigrees like Carl Sammons, Fredrick Chisnall and Sam Hyde Harris coexisted with local charcoal portraitists and cartoonists. Wilton McCoy published his “Painting the Desert” oversized how-to book, recognizable to generations of students, while composing serious canvases.



Dar Marroc, the moorish home of painter Gordon Coutts. Winston Churchill painted here. PHOTOS PROVIDED BY PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Commercial art was also surprisingly viable here. Paul Grimm had a studio on Palm Canyon Drive. There, he met President Eisenhower, an avid painter and thereafter companion of Grimm. Stephen Willard sold hand-tinted landscape photographs as souvenirs but was also a painter. O.E.L. Graves’ interesting still life creations graced the covers of *The Villager Magazine*.

That a local publication would hazard to put fine art on the cover speaks of a rare confidence that even big-city periodicals didn’t have. Graves’ paintings ran the gamut from highly stylized illustrative art to completely surreal depictions of found objects.

Nicolai Fechin, a Russian-born artist, famous for his Native American portraits, lived in a small collection of houses at the base of Mt. San Jacinto. He painted there under the patronage of John Burnham at his extensive enclave, (which survives today as Colony 29.) Burnham wanted to foster the arts by providing a residential colony for their support.

Other artists bought or built houses. Sister and brother Rachel and Marius de Brabant had a spectacular compound in the Movie Colony where they painted



Self-portrait Gordon Coutts.

and hosted fellow artist Hanson Puthuff. Carl Bray’s modest board and batten house along Highway 111 survived for decades as his studio and home, and as a testament to the remoteness of his choice spot (in what is now Indiana Wells) only to be unceremoniously demolished within recent memory to make way for nothing.

Winston Churchill came to paint at Gordon Coutts’ Dar Marroc (now the Korakia Pensione.) Coutts was quite fam-

ous in England, Australia and Morocco before settling in Palm Springs. Born in Scotland, he studied in London and Paris. He lived in Australia and Tangiers for long periods. Museums in all these places have his canvases. Traveling to California for a tour, he decided not to return to Tangiers, but instead build a Moorish house on the desert here, which was suffused with the same unusual golden light of North Africa. He spent the rest of his life in Palm Springs, entertaining many visiting artists and dignitaries including Churchill.

And there was Agnes Pelton. Pelton’s paintings bring hundreds of thousands of dollars today, and she is often compared to Georgia O’Keefe as an early pioneering female artist. Pelton worked in oil and pastel and her early figurative work was overtaken later with dreamscapes and abstracts with soft desert light. Now famous, she was a pioneer who graciously donated a painting of a smoke tree to raise funds to start the Desert Art Center. Established in 1950, with the help of Gordon Coutts’ daughter Jeanne, the center hosted art shows, featured art classes and published souvenir books promoting the desert and artists alike. There was even an outpost in Cathedral City where Pelton lived. Today, the Desert Art Center continues to pursue its founding mission.

John Hilton painted with Jimmy Cagney. Earl Cordrey was the official leader of the Palette Club in Palm Springs and at Thunderbird Country Club. A stand of easels with plein air painters was a common sight at picturesque spots throughout the valley. Painting outdoors was a serious recreational activity in the desert for amateurs and professionals alike.

Palm Springs and the desert might be better known today as an artists’ colony had that identity not been obliterated early on by the desert’s growing renown as the secret weekend playground for Hollywood stars. Even so, the fact that a tiny town in the remote desert became a haven for art and artists alike is a delightfully surprising part of our shared history.