

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Desert landscape influenced Ann Japenga's stories

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Special to Palm Springs Desert Sun
USA TODAY NETWORK

Ann Japenga is a superb writer. That is abundantly in evidence from her successful career writing for numerous prestigious publications. Her work has been published in The New York Times, People magazine, Palm Springs Life magazine, The Los Angeles Times magazine and many more. On staff at The Los Angeles Times, she became entranced with the California landscape, and describes that after moving to Palm Springs, she “zeroed in on ‘deserata’ — the natural and human history of the California deserts from the San Geronio Pass to the Colorado River.”

Indeed, Japenga has been writing about little-known aspects of desert life for decades now and her collection of stories is an amiable way to while away any free hours you might find available. Her own website features an amazingly wide selection of stories from botanical explorations to historical eccentricities. But Japenga's other offering, California Desert Art, is even more remarkable.

California Desert Art features a stunning collection of articles and images of the Southern California deserts that warrants deep exploration.

The site explains that it is “an online magazine and gathering place for desert rats, collectors, historians, artists and anyone who loves the early painters of the desert. This is where landscape, history and art come together under the brow of Mount San Jacinto...While the early landscape painters of Laguna, Carmel and Santa Fe are better known, Palm Springs was the apex of an equally important movement. From the early 1900s through the 1950s and beyond, hundreds of artists settled in the desert or passed through with their paints. The Impressionists who roamed California (many of them trained in France during the heyday of Impressionism) liked to test their skills on the desert dunes and furry cholla. It



Carl and Luella Bray stand outside his Indian Wells studio in the 1970s. He was known as the painter of smoke trees.



The Carl Bray studio in Indian Wells, complete with a large landscape painting on display outside. PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF PALM DESERT

was part of a painter's initiation.”

The site recounts the serendipity that led to Japenga's fascination with the desert and subsequent expertise. It started with buying a painting at Carl

Bray's roadside gallery in Indian Wells.

“Though she fretted over whether to drop \$100 on the painting, she wound up with a far better deal than she could have guessed. The canvas was her

doorway into the rich, bohemian world of the early desert artists.”

She became close friends with early artists like Carl Bray and Bill Bender and then learned of their rightful heirs, people like Terry Masters, who is appropriately named as he is truly the master of the desert landscape, and Elaine Matthews who captures, en plein air, the golden light here as well as anybody ever has.

Japenga writes of the pantheon of desert artists like Jimmy Swinnerton, R. Brownell McGrew, Agnes Pelton and John Hilton. Along with the stories of these famous artists she writes about lesser known, but equally gifted, painters.

The “site is about art, but it's also about place. We're telling the story of the California desert via the paintings and painters. Herein are all the big themes of the West—the surveys, the railroads, the cowboys, the Indians, folklore, myth and above all landscape. The land is the main player here, so we'll explore the places that inspired all this fecundity: the north shore of the Salton Sea, the hidden palm oases of the Mecca Hills, the north face of Mount San Jac. There's adventure in the mix, too, because it wasn't always easy to get there.”

Japenga's articles tell those real adventures in riveting detail, making history come alive. The stated goal being “to unite the fanatics and create more obsessive fans of this art, unearthing stories along the way.” And in the process making the early desert painters as famous as those of the much more famous Taos or Laguna art colonies.

In chronicling desert details potentially lost to time, Japenga herself has become part of the story, the history of the desert. For an interesting read on wholly unexpected topics, take a peek at californiadesertart.com.

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