

## THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

# Paul Grimm painted landscapes majestically

Desert artist's work was seen on the big screen, magazine covers

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Special to Palm Springs Desert Sun  
USA TODAY NETWORK

Opposite The Desert Inn was the Paul Grimm Gallery where his paintings were displayed in the front window and offered for sale. The little gallery building, at 122 N. Palm Canyon Drive, was described as a "gem of desert architecture" and reportedly constructed in 1941.

Enticing to passersby, Grimm's paintings were also featured covers of the Palm Springs Pictorial magazine, and the magazine explained in 1942: "A colorful, likeable fellow is this Paul Grimm, who, together with his charming wife, has been a component part of the Palm Springs citizenry for the past ten seasons. Completing the Grimm family picture is 'Cholla,' the inseparable fox terrier pet of the Grimms."

Grimm painted the desert landscape in its protean manifestations. His keen eye captured the eternal and infinitesimal. "Mountains, desert landscapes and desert clouds are his forte. However, he has roamed the west for years and has produced many striking canvasses of pastoral scenes, marinas, High Sierras, missions and other typically Western views. Grimm paints with a broad stroke, and is best known for his ability in portraying those two best known attributes of the desert, sunlight and billowy clouds."

The likeable fellow settled in Palm Springs in 1932 and was a resident for the rest of his life. Born in South Africa in 1891 to German parents, he grew up in Rochester, New York, won an art scholarship to the Dusseldorf Royal Academy, spent time in Chicago painting theater backdrops and curtains, traveled to South America and landed in Hollywood where he immediately found work as a scene painter.

He explained years later: "I showed them my drawings, and I got a job right away and I worked every day." First at MGM, then Fox and finally Warner Bros. Grimm painted scenes for movies with the biggest stars of the 1920s: John Barrymore, Douglas Fairbanks and George Arliss.

In the early days of cinematography, expensive backgrounds would have required travel to capture on film. To save on excursions for the entire crew to expensive locations and to obviate the need to build sets, backgrounds were instead carefully painted on the upper parts of large glass panels which were then placed close to the camera. The actors would be photographed through the lower part of the panel, creating the illusion they were in some foreign land or standing on the steps of an historic building.

Grimm's knowledge of architecture and perspective made for highly realistic renderings. One of his most famous paintings, lauded by Darryl Zanuck himself was for the movie "Noah's Ark," where he painted massive backdrops that conjured up fantastical images like the far away desert of biblical times and the Tower of Babel.

According to an article in the Riverside Press-Enterprise by George Ringwald, Grimm recalled that at the height of his movie career in the 1920s he was paid \$350 a week, "and that was a lot of money in those days." He figured he could have made more.

"But I wasn't a businessman. I saved them millions of dollars on buildings, on sets - if I'd had any sense, I would have charged more. And I'd be a dead millionaire...I got tired of it. I was almost a nervous wreck. It's hard work. I said to my wife, 'Now, this page is turned over. We start a new life.' Then, we took a trip to Palm Springs, and well, here I am. And I'll be here I guess until I die."

Grimm later had a studio/gallery up the street from The Desert Inn where he was working when interviewed by Ringwald who explained, "A student of modern art would likely sneer at this work on display at 428 North Palm Canyon Drive - traditional, realistic, representative art, the desert scenes of a uniform prettiness, the portraits of a predictable style and expression."

"And his comments are unabashedly unsophisticated ... But Paul Grimm will sneer right back at your modern art people. It's kind of a fad - this thing called modern art ... it's nothing but a racket. Modern art is 99 per cent baloney. People want the easy way ... nowadays, people want to get a canvas and paint a painting on it right away."

"Unsophisticated" or just classically trained and able to paint representationally, Grimm captured the desert's glory. His paintings were wildly popular, selling for several hundred to more than a thousand dol-



Paul Grimm painting Mount San Jacinto, June 1944 COURTESY PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

lars in the 1950s. They were collected by intelligent visitors and adorned the finest homes and populated museum collections.

His facile brush and congenial nature made him very popular. Amateur painting enthusiast President Dwight Eisenhower was charmed by Grimm and his work. Grimm was awed by Eisenhower, who visited the studio to watch the artist at work and learn by observation.

Ellen Saunders of the Press-Enterprise got the story. "I've never been nervous when anyone watched me painting, but I'll admit that the first time General Eisenhower came to see me I was a bit on edge. Then he gave me that sweet, warm smile of his and I was completely at ease. ... From the start he was a perfect gentleman, so very humble, kind and courteous. Soon he was calling me Paul and we were chatting like old friends."

They discussed the great masters and their mutual fondness for Michelangelo and DaVinci, color theory, painting techniques and composition. Grimm summarized: "I've been painting for 60 years so there were numerous short cuts I could explain to him. He was very reticent about his own talent. He didn't pretend to be an artist."

The two had a regular correspondence, but while Eisenhower was alive Grimm never publicized the fact

that the general visited him. When Eisenhower died, Grimm was bereft, pouring out his sympathies to Mamie Eisenhower in a condolence letter and poem.

Grimm died in Palm Springs in 1974 at the age of 83, having never regretted one moment of his more than four decades on the desert. His life had been rich beyond money. He deeply understood the majesty of the desert; had observed the passing clouds and changing light for countless hours; and he was a cherished member of a true community.

When Grimm died, one of Eisenhower's letters was quoted for the Desert Sun obituary. It read, "I can only hope that I profited from the experience of seeing how a real artist goes about the business of creating the effects he wants." Eisenhower knew Grimm was a real artist, a master painter.

That obituary also noted: "While traveling along the Morongo Pass, a friend once asked Grimm to paint a particularly dazzling sunset. Grimm responded, 'A master artist has made that picture and no human can do justice to it.'" Through his decades of landscape painting, Grimm had done the desert justice.

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