

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

HISTORY

Cartoonist Jimmy Swinnerton found new life in Palm Springs

Tracy Conrad

Special to Palm Springs Desert Sun
USA TODAY NETWORK

“Jimmy Swinnerton came to the desert to die in peace – and found so much beauty to paint that he crossed up the doctors and got well.” Fellow artist John Hilton so summarized Swinnerton’s introduction to the desert.

Swinnerton had been diagnosed with tuberculosis and was given only weeks to live. His publisher and boss, William Randolph Hearst, devastated that his favorite cartoonist was gravely ill, sent Swinnerton packing to Palm Springs.

Years before, in 1892, Hearst had plucked the 16-year-old artist out of the California Art School in San Francisco depositing him at the San Francisco Examiner where he started the “California Little Bear” cartoon series, said to be the first time a comic cartoon regularly appeared in an American newspaper. Prior, all cartoons in newspapers were strictly political.

Soon Hearst sent Swinnerton to New York where he drew the “Little Jimmy” cartoon featuring his trusty dog companion “Beans.” By 1903 though Swinnerton’s health was waning. He was 28 years old and weighed 98 pounds. He was not expected to survive when a heart-broken Hearst sent him back to California. When Swinnerton arrived in the little village of Palm Springs, he increased the total population of white settlers to 12.

The desert climate proved curative. Swinnerton, ensconced in his “Sidewinder Shebang” cabin at The Desert Inn recovered completely, finally weighing in at 182 pounds.

Feeling progressively stronger, he began traipsing around the desert, camping and sketching. His paintings capture distinctive moments of the early morning or during the late afternoons, when it seems the heavens highlight a gorgeous feature of the landscape in a golden glow against a dark background. His style is unmistakable.

Swinnerton observed, “Nature is the only true teacher of art,” and Hilton added that in Swinnerton’s case, this applied to the art of living as well as painting. Rejuvenated, he began travelling much further afield to the vast open country of northern Arizona, camped on the Navajo reservation, sat around the Hopi cooking fires, visited the pueblos atop the mesas at Moenkpi, Oraibi, and Walpi.

He developed a deep affection for the American

Southwest and its indigenous people. He said, “No one can become bigoted and narrow in the midst of broad desert vistas and great canyon walls.” Swinnerton particularly loved the Native American children he encountered. He memorialized them in a cartoon strip for Hearst’s “Good Housekeeping” called “Canyon Kids” that appeared in every issue of the magazine for decades.

The indigenous culture’s deep ties to the land made sense to Swinnerton. “You know, Indians are extremely art-conscious. You can see it in everything they make and do. Every little household utensil has its own good proportion or decoration, and art has an important place in their religion. Why, they even use art in the form of sand drawings, to cure the sick. Some of our modern hospitals with glaring white walls would do well to study the psychological effect of color and design on sick persons. Maybe the Indians have something!”

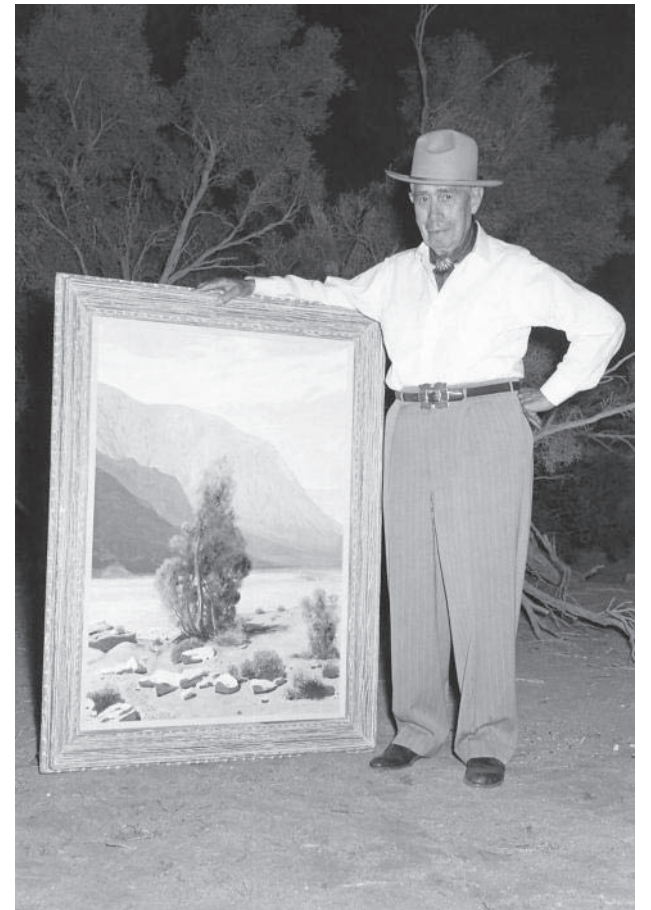
Swinnerton thought “Canyon Kids” a valentine to indigenous children. “I was called upon to help arrange a children’s party. I thought for some time about something that would please the youngsters, and finally decided upon a set of place cards showing little Indians performing their everyday tasks and playing with their pets, surrounded by the colorful background of their homes.”

The cartoon fascinated readers and created an appreciation of Native American culture. In 1965 he published a complicated children’s book based on a 2000-year-old story, known by the Hopi. The tale was told at Evening Sings or gathering for chants and storytelling. Swinnerton suspected the nomadic Navajos undoubtedly were exposed to the yarn.

The book was called “Hosteen Crotchetty or How a Good Heart was Born.” The dust jacket asked “What’s in a name?” And explained, “What does Hosteen mean? Well, it’s about the same as ‘Mister.’ And ‘Crotchetty?’ Though you won’t find the word in Webster’s Dictionary, any one knows that is a crotchetty person is a grouchy person. So – Hosteen Crotchetty is also Mr. Grouch.”

Swinnerton’s story is a Native American “How the Grinch Stole Christmas” tale; one of redemption by nature and community. The illustrations are highly stylized and show the triumph of kindness over meanness and power of children working together towards heroic feats.

Swinnerton himself had found a community in the desert with likeminded artists and captured the imagi-



Jimmy Swinnerton displays one of his landscape paintings. PROVIDED BY THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

nation of the country with his unparalleled depictions of the landscape.

“Nature is the only true teacher. An art school can teach one to observe and to master the ability of drawing and painting, but no mere technical skill is sufficient to bring out the fine things in nature. First an artist must love and humbly study nature, remembering all the while that man with all his skill and scientific knowledge cannot so much as create a blade of grass or a grain of sand...The duty of the artist is to experience these things and then reconstruct his experience on canvas.”

See SWINNERTON, Page 14A

Swinnerton

Continued from Page 13A

“The painter who works entirely in the studio on abstract nothings conjured up by his own feverish brain has very little to give the world. His paintings may find favor in the eyes of a few other neurotics who have had similar nightmares, and if his stuff follows the me-

chanical rules of color, balance and composition it may furnish the material or the writings of sensation-seeking art critics and their pseudo-sophisticated followers. But art that does not find its inspiration in nature has little to recommend itself to future generations and will be remembered principally as a curiosity.”

“To me, landscape painting is a short-cut to faith. The artist cannot hope to recreate nature. The finest artist in the world cannot paint a perfect flower. The real purpose of a painting is to call attention to the beauty in nature. A successful painting is a sign post reading, ‘Yonder is beauty! Go see for yourself.’”

Swinnerton’s painting are very fine sign posts indeed, and his preference for painting the desert served the less-known subject well. He observed, “There is no end to the beauty of sand and rocks and sage-brush, but few persons see it when they pass through the desert. All the serious work I have done has been on the desert, and there is enough there to occupy me the rest of my life.”

Instead of quietly dying in the desert, Swinnerton lived to be a few months shy of his 99th birthday, painting the beauty of the dry, desert landscape he dearly loved.

Tracy Conrad is president of the Palm Springs Historical Society. The Thanks for the Memories column appears Sundays in The Desert Sun. Write to her at pshtracy@gmail.com.