



CALIFORNIA ART CLUB NEWSLETTER

Documenting California's Traditional Arts Heritage Since 1909

DOUBLE
ISSUE

How the San Gabriel Valley Inspired California Impressionism and Lured Artists from across the Nation

PART I OF III

by Elaine Adams

THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN outstanding artist requires a process that can be compared to that of nurturing a delicate seedling to full maturity and potential. Cultivation, environment, and faithful caring all have an influence on the final result. Throughout history burgeoning artists have instinctively, and certainly out of financial consideration, opted to live in close communities with fellow artists. In such settings, artists create their own subcultures as they spend their days among like-minded friends who speak their language—a form of communication that is based on their specific brand of artistic discipline and philosophy.

Fellowship among artists becomes an essential source of sustaining encouragement in this lifestyle which can be sporadic in work and income. At times, an artist may travail obliviously over many days and weeks with only occasional breaks for quick meals and minimal sleep. Then, there are dry periods when the flow of inspiration struggles. When such occurs, artists often resort to congregating with other artists to talk *art* for extended hours. This activity becomes part of an artist's nurturing process.

Impressionism in California a Century Ago

At the turn-of-the-twentieth century, California's various communities of artists first developed in San Francisco and the Monterey Peninsula in the north, and then, Pasadena and Laguna Beach in the south. Due largely to the differences in flora, geology, and



John Bond Francisco (1863–1931)
Out of the Dust, c. 1918
Oil on canvas 34" × 46"
Private collection

climate, there are distinct characteristics in the artwork created in the north, as compared to those created in the south. Impressionist paintings from San Francisco and Monterey are imbued with cooler light, often veiled in fog, thus creating a softer, tonal interpretation, a style that is known as *Tonalism*. Impressionist paintings from the south are typically more colourful, vibrant, and filled with reflective sunlight, and more identified with the tenets of *Impressionism*.

The basic premise of being an

Impressionist painter, although the early practitioners did not refer to themselves as such, is to create spontaneous "impressions," rendered with loose, immediate, and painterly brushstrokes. Patches of paint are applied in relation to their adjacent colours to optically blend from a distance as singular colour notes in perfect pitch. These colour notes read either as vibrant and *vibrato* or tonal and *legato*. The concept of Impressionism came about in France in the later quarter of the nineteenth century, primarily in opposition to the refined



Claude Monet (1840-1926)
Impression, Soleil Levant, 1872
 Oil on canvas 18.9" × 24.8"
 Collection of Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris



Examples of early plein air easels (note the carrying case at lower left)
 Winslow Homer (1836-1910)
Artists Sketching in the White Mountains, 1863
 Oil on panel 9.5" × 15.875"
 Bequest of Charles Shipman Payson
 Collection of Portland Museum of Art, Maine

academic painting of the period, but also in reaction to the increasing use of photography. It was the French critic and humourist, **Louis Leroy**, who pronounced the 1874 exhibition of thirty artists in the *Salon des Refusés*, as "The Exhibition of

the Impressionists," a sarcastic comment inspired by the title of **Claude Monet's** (1840-1926) painting, *Impression, Soleil Levant* or "Impression, Sunrise."

Leroy wrote that Monet's painting was at best a "sketch" and certainly not

finished. Half-a-century later, a similar pronouncement was made in southern California when the art critic **Merle Armitage** referred to an exhibition of paintings that featured local southern California landscapes as "harmless art" and dubbed it the "Eucalyptus School" (*West Coaster*, September 1, 1928). It was not until the 1982 **Westphal Publication** of *Plein Air Painters of California: The Southland*, followed four years later by *Plein Air Painters of California, the North*, that the term "Plein Air" became the definition for California landscape painting. Today, the terms "California Plein Air" and "California Impressionism" are interchangeably used to describe the same art movement.

The Birth of Plein Air

It is no coincidence that California Impressionism developed at the same time as the **Arts and Crafts Movement**, also known as *Mission Style*, which took place from 1890 to 1920. Creative minds of the time were greatly inspired by an aesthetic philosophy based on skill and craftsmanship, as well as an appreciation for nature as the artistic source. Moreover, the profusion of colour and light in southern California created a particular impetus that energized painters. The artists' intent, then and now, continues to be making something in the spirit of the Movement—*sans* machines and technology—to express the need to create based on personal observations, experiences, and interpretations. In this act is the manifestation of human intellectual achievement—the very definition of *culture*.

The great outdoors was the place to be, and with the mid-nineteenth century innovation of packaging oil paint in aluminum tubes and the invention of portable easels, artists were no longer restricted to the confines of their studios. The portable easel, commonly known as the "French Easel," gave artists the liberty to paint in the open air, that is, *en plein air*. The design of the French Easel has not altered much in the past 150 years. Its primary function is to haul artists' equipment, particularly to the open field. The word "easel" may have been derived from the Dutch term "*schildersezel*," whereby "*schilder*" translates to "painter" and "*ezel*" to "donkey," thus, the "painter's donkey" that carries the artist's supplies. Once opened, the box legs extend to

support the artist's canvas. The great outdoors becomes the artist's studio, one filled with natural light.

The population of Los Angeles in 1900 was 102,479, of which approximately 400 were practicing artists in various fields. Many of these artists had academic pedigrees and personally knew each other from their student days or were at least aware of each other's artwork. The artists who migrated to California typically studied in Paris at the **Académie Julian**, **Académie Delécluse**, and **Académie Colarossi**. Some studied with the muralist **Frank Brangwyn (1867–1956)** at the **London School of Art**, and others studied in New York at the **Art Students League** or with **William Merritt Chase (1849–1916)** at the **Chase School** (later to become **Parsons School of Design**), or in Chicago at the **Chicago Art Institute**. In preparation for their future careers, these artists were rigorously trained in the time-honored tradition of figure painting.

In southern California it was natural for artists to gather and exchange ideas. The two key creative enclaves existed chiefly along Pasadena's Arroyo Seco and in Laguna Beach, with several artists taking up residences in both locations. The excitement of abundant

and available beauty in nature was overwhelming and provided an inexhaustible supply of subjects to paint. Thrilled with California's natural environment and year-round sunshine, many artists abandoned figure painting altogether or at least decreased the practice in favour of painting the area's still unspoiled landscape. But how did the San Gabriel Valley become an integral influence on art history?

A Mythical Paradise— Spanish Eyes on California

It is believed that California got its name from *The Adventures of Esplandián*, a Spanish novel written around 1500, in which the author, **Garci Rodriguez de Montalvo**, described a mythical paradise island named *California*.

Sebastian Vizcaino mapped the Pacific Coast in 1602, but soon Spain feared the possibility of losing California to foreign rivals. England's **Sir Francis Drake** sailed the Pacific Ocean in 1579 and landed in California near Point Reyes. Drake named the land "New Albion", the archaic name of Great Britain, and claimed it for **Queen Elizabeth I**. Then in 1725 **Russian Emperor Peter the Great** commanded navigator **Vitus Bering** to explore the North Pacific for potential colonization. Although there



Walter W. Francis (Born 1846)

March of Portolá to Monterey

Drawing reproduced in "The March of Portolá and the Discovery of the Bay of San Francisco" by Zoeth S. Eldredge

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were no immediate subsequent actions by the British or the Russians to colonize California, the Spanish believed there was realistic cause for concern.

New Spain's Viceroy **Carlos Francisco**

de Croix and **King Carlos III of Spain** exchanged dispatches on January 23, 1768 urging to colonize California. The Spanish nobleman and military officer **Gaspar de Portolá** was immediately

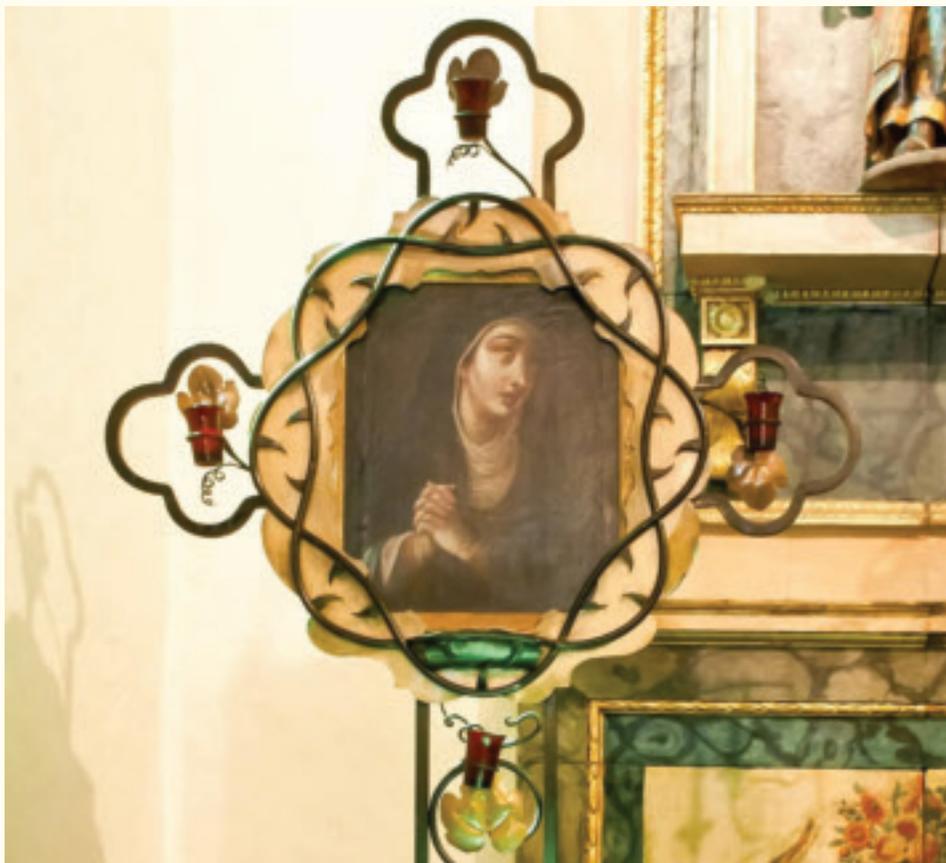
named Governor of the Californias and placed in charge of an overall plan, which called for a joint land and sea exploration up the Pacific Coast. The three ships on the expedition departed from La Paz, Baja California in January of 1769. The land expedition left from Loreto (approximately 150 miles north of La Paz) at around the same time. The land expedition was divided into two groups. In the lead group was **Fr. Juan Crespi** who maintained the journey's diary. In the second group were Portolá and **Fr. Junipero Serra**. Serra was given the responsibility of building the Missionary churches. Both Crespi and Serra were Roman Catholic priests of the Franciscan Order from Majorca, Spain.

Discovering the Arroyo Seco

On August second of 1769, Portolá and his expedition party, consisting of approximately 60 soldiers and Christianized Indians, reached the Los Angeles River and named one of its tributaries *Arroyo Seco*, meaning "dry stream." It is believed that Portolá met **Chief Hahamog-na** near Millard Canyon where there was a settlement of Tongva Indians. These indigenous peoples were baptized as Christians and helped construct the **Mission San Gabriel Arcángel** which was completed in 1771, and henceforth, they became known as Gabrieleño Indians.

Winning over the confidence of the natives required various strategies. There is a legend in which art played a role in peace-making. It is purported that a certain band of hostile native peoples gathered with the intent of driving out Portolá's troupe. But when one of the priests displayed a painting entitled *Our Lady of Sorrows* on the ground for all to see, the natives were immediately struck by her beauty and were calmed. Today, that same painting, now around 300 years old, hangs in front of the old altar in the Mission San Gabriel's sanctuary.

After discovering San Francisco Bay in 1769, Portolá and his soldiers embarked on a second expedition and returned via the Arroyo Seco on Easter Sunday in April of 1770. Upon seeing a blanket of blooming golden poppies they named the area, *La Sabinalla de San Pascual* (The Grand Altar Cloth of Holy Easter). Chief Hahamog-na adapted to his new culture and was baptized under the name of



Artist Unknown, 17th Century

Our Lady of Sorrows

Collection of Mission San Gabriel Arcángel



Guy Rose (1867-1925)

The Hut, Sunny Slope, c. 1880

Watercolour

Private collection

Pascual and married a Spanish woman named **Angela Seise**. It was said that Pascual lived a long and happy life.

The areas of San Pascual in the San Gabriel Valley encompassed what are today the towns of Pasadena, Altadena, Alhambra, South Pasadena, San Marino, and San Gabriel. Ninety-four years after Portolá's expedition and the founding of Mission San Gabriel, the Arroyo Seco attracted a new wave of visitors.

Artists-in-Law

Perhaps the first renowned native California artist was **Guy Orlando Rose (1867–1925)** who, in fact, was born and raised in San Gabriel as one of ten children. Their parents were **Amanda Jones Rose** and Bavarian-born, **Leonard John Rose**. The Rose family was among the earliest settlers in Los Angeles, arriving by wagon train in 1860. Their trip westward, which started in Iowa in 1858, was joined by the Baley wagon train, making a total of twenty wagons, 100 people, and 500 cattle, and became the **Rose-Baley Party**. Their journey was full of hardships including a hostile attack by 300 Mohave Indians that resulted in the deaths of eight from their party including five children. The loss of supplies and ammunition forced them to trail back 500 miles to restock before continuing their journey to California. After reaching Los Angeles, the Rose family purchased a 2000-acre ranch in the San Gabriel Valley and named it *Sunny Slope* where they grew grapes, walnuts, and oranges, and produced thousands of gallons of wine and brandy per year. The Roses then acquired a subsequent ranch which they named *Rose-Meade*. Located just east of Pasadena, this land eventually became part of the City of Rosemead. In 1887 Leonard Rose was elected to represent Los Angeles as a California State Senator.

The Rose's ranch foreman was **John Wachtel** whose younger brother, **Elmer Wachtel (1864-1929)**, moved to San Gabriel from Lanark, Illinois in 1882 to be near his brother. Elmer worked as a ranch hand and later, as a furniture store clerk. In 1879 John Wachtel married a member of the Rose family, Guy Rose's sister, **Nina Rose**. As a result of this union, Elmer Wachtel and Guy Rose became brothers-in-law, permanently linking these two gifted artists who were destined to become



John Bond Francisco (1863-1931)

The Sick Child, 1893

Oil on canvas 32" × 48"

Collection of the National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution



Elmer Wachtel (1864-1929)

Course of the San Gabriel, c. 1905-6

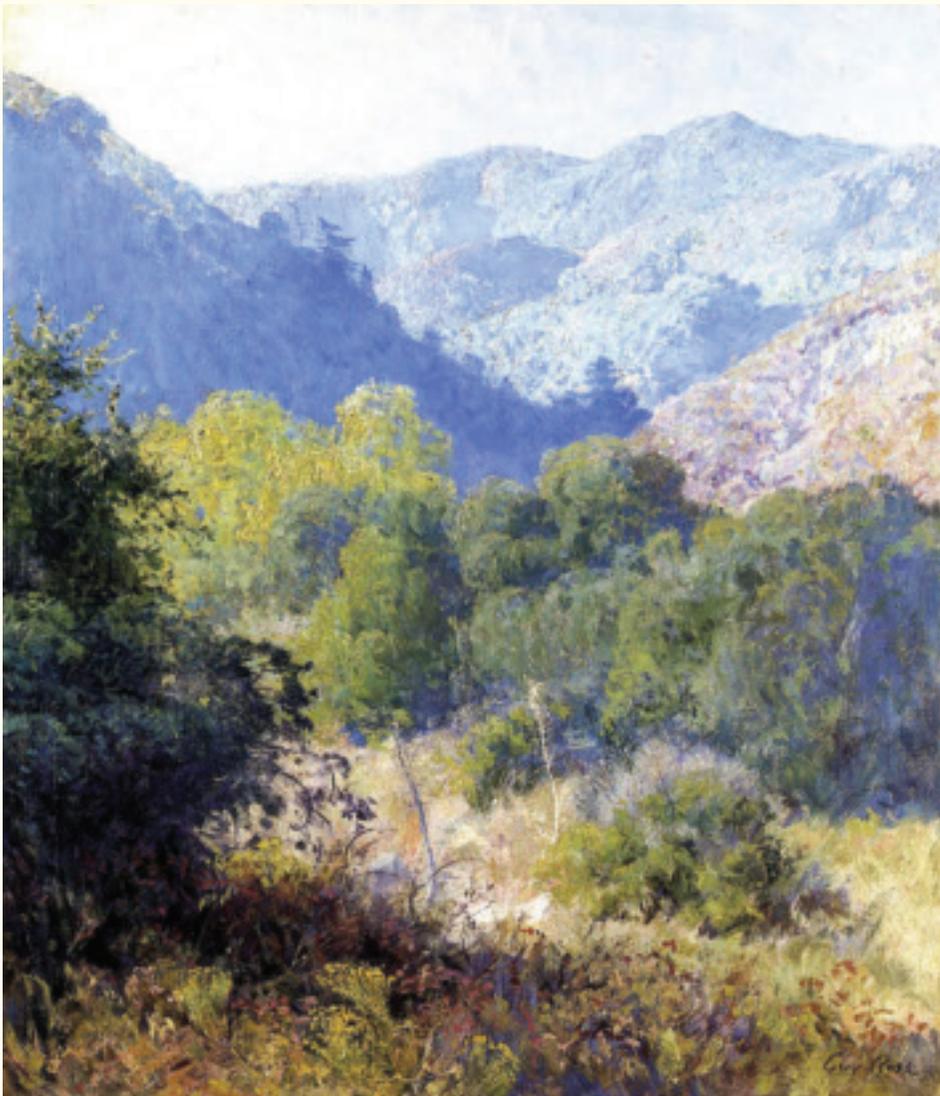
Oil on canvas 36" × 48"

Private collection

luminaries in California art history.

As a boy, Elmer taught himself to play the violin, and by 1888 he became the first violinist in the **Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra**. While Wachtel was engaged in his music career, Guy Rose was pursuing his passion for visual art. From 1885 to 1888 Rose

studied at the **School of Design** in San Francisco under **Virgil Williams (1830–1886)**, **Emil Carlson (1848–1932)**, and **Warren E. Rollins (1861–1962)**. Rollins arrived at the Arroyo Seco in 1910, and the following year built a studio in San Gabriel, which he used on occasion until 1917. He divided his painting time



Guy Rose (1867-1925)
In the San Gabriel
 Oil
 Private collection

between San Gabriel, Phoenix, the Grand Canyon, and Santa Fe. Rollins was distinguished for his paintings of desert landscapes and Native Americans, primarily the Southwest tribes of the Hopi, Navajo, and Zuni, and lived with these peoples for months at a time. The artist became respectfully known as the “Dean of the Santa Fe Art Colony.”

Perhaps Guy Rose piqued Elmer Wachtel’s interest in studying art. After artist **John Bond Francisco (1863-1931)** arrived in Los Angeles in 1887, there is conjecture that both Rose and Wachtel studied with him. Francisco was academically-trained at the **Berlin Art Academy** and in the Parisian salons of the Académie Julian under **William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825-1905)** and Académie Colorosi. In Los Angeles he

kept his studio in the Blanchard Building where he taught art and hosted frequent gatherings of painters, musicians, and theatrical celebrities. Francisco held his first exhibition in Los Angeles in 1892, in which he exhibited mainly figure paintings in the academic style, including *The Sick Child*, which received great praise. Like Wachtel, Francisco was a fine violinist, and in 1897, helped form the **Los Angeles Symphony Orchestra** and served as its first concertmaster. In 1889 he opened his art school where he continued figure and portrait painting, and began painting local landscapes. Francisco would hitch up a team of horses and, with his pupil Elmer Wachtel, drive out to the San Gabriel Mountains for a day of painting.

In 1900 Elmer Wachtel decided to

advance his art studies and enrolled at the **Art Students League** in New York. However, the teaching wasn’t to his liking and he quit after two weeks. He continued studying privately for one year with **William Merritt Chase (1849-1916)**, and then left for England to study at the **Lambeth Art School** in London. In that same year, Guy Rose left for Paris to study art at the Académie Julian. These were the times when diligent training was available to those who possessed a spirit of adventure and who were impassioned to learn from the best—and the public was zealous to view their works, and wealthy patrons were eager to collect them. Eventually, both Guy Rose and Elmer Wachtel returned to Pasadena and helped form the burgeoning art movement that would become known as California Plein Air. 📍

Part I Notes:

Elaine Adams is a published author and public speaker on topics relating to fine arts and aesthetics, and is Editor-in-Chief of the California Art Club Newsletter.

*Research sources for this article include: The Call to California: The Epic Journey of the Portolá-Serra Expedition in 1769, by **Richard F. Pourade**, published by Copley Publishing, 1968; Published diaries of Fr. Junipero Serra and Fr. Crespi, excerpts from Fray Juan Crespi, Missionary Explorer on the Pacific Coast, 1769-1774, by **Herbert Eugene Bolton**, published by AMS Press, 1971; California Missions and Presidios: The History & Beauty of the Spanish Missions, by **Randy Leffingwell**, published by Voyager Press, 2005; California Art Club Historic Archives, **Eric Merrell**, Club Historian; The Huntington Library Papers of Leonard John Rose; John Bond Francisco; Antiques and Fine Art Magazine, courtesy **Roughton Galleries**; Pasadena, California: Historical and Personal: A Complete History of the Indiana Colony by **John Windell Wood**, published; 1917; History of Pasadena by **Hiram Alvin Reid**, published; 1895; Artists in Santa Catalina Island before 1945, by **Jean Stern**, published online at tfaoi.com; Los Angeles Times Archives; Inventing the Dream: California through the Progressive Era by **Kevin Starr**, published by Oxford University Press, 1989; Artists in California, 1786-1940 by **Edan Hughes**; and interviews with **Peter Adams** Additional appreciation to **George Stern** and **Roy Rose**.*