

OPPOSITE PAGE

Laguna Eucalyptusby Guy Rose, ca. 1918, oil,
40 x 30. Collection The Irvine
Museum, Irvine, California.

Plein Air Painting
in Laguna Beach:

An Enduring Landscape Legacy

ARTISTS IN LAGUNA BEACH (1886–1930)

As early as 1886, artists began to flock to Laguna Beach, a small coastal community about 50 miles south of Los Angeles. The attraction, from the artists' point of view, was the clear and intense light, as well as the sheer beauty of this small coastal village. The unique light, which exists all along the Southern California coast, is similar to that of Southern France and other Mediterranean locales. It offers artists large vistas and intense, pure colors, all bathed in the fluidity of natural sunlight. It also allows access to other diverse landscapes nearby. Within a 50-mile travel radius, an artist can paint in the snow-covered peaks of the San Gabriel Mountains in winter, reach the southern edges of the hot and barren Mojave Desert, paint rocky coasts and wide, gleaming beaches, or simply sketch rolling hills that are abundant with wildflowers in the spring.

In her book *The Laguna Beach Art Association, 1918–1928*, Janet Blake observes that the first artist of note to visit Laguna Beach was the English-trained watercolorist Norman St. Clair (1863–1912), who reportedly painted sketches there around 1900, which he later exhibited in San Francisco. Shortly thereafter, two friends, George Gardner Symons (1863–1930)

Art historian Jean Stern and artist and writer Molly Siple bring the past to the present with a look at the original Laguna plein air painters and several California-based Weekend With the Masters instructors who painted in those same locations this past September.

and William Wendt (1865–1946), arrived in Laguna for the first time and quickly succumbed to its charms. Symons built a studio home in Arch Beach (now called South Laguna) in 1903, which he visited periodically throughout his career. In August of 1906, when *Los Angeles Times* art critic Antony Anderson visited Laguna Beach, he reported that Symons was living there year-round and that St. Clair, Wendt, and William Swift Daniell (1865–1933) were each obtaining land to build a studio. Anderson also noted that Elmer Wachtel (1864–1929), Granville Redmond (1871–1935), Benjamin Brown (1865–1942), William Lees Judson (1842–1928), and Gottardo Piazzoni (1872–1945) had painted in Laguna Beach “in recent years.”

Anderson returned in 1915 and wrote that he made “the rounds of the new studios, which are strung along the high







LEFT

Cannery Row, Newport Beach

by George Brandriff, ca. 1926, oil, 14 x 18. Private collection. Image courtesy The Irvine Museum, Irvine, California.

BELOW

La Jolla Seascape

by Alson S. Clark, ca. 1922, oil, 35 x 47. Private collection. Image courtesy The Irvine Museum, Irvine, California.



shore like jewels, from Arch Beach to Laguna Cliffs." He wryly observed, "Today, there must be a hundred canvases that bear the alluring title 'Rocks at Laguna.'" He then reported at length on visits to the studio of seascape painter Frank Cuprien (1871-1948) and to those of William Swift Daniell and Anna Hills (1882-1930).

In the span of less than 10 years, the number of artists living permanently or part-time in Laguna Beach had increased to about 30 or 40. In 1918, Edgar Payne (1883-1947), who had first painted in Laguna in 1911, recognized the need for a gallery in which artists could display and sell their work. Payne persuaded the city council to allow the artists to use the old abandoned Town Hall. The single room was situated in a eucalyptus grove near the Laguna Beach Hotel. The transformation into a viable gallery was accomplished by closing off all side windows and installing a skylight. In addition, they brought in electric lights, prepared the walls for hanging paintings, and installed a new roof.

On July 27, 1918, the first exhibition of what would soon be the Laguna Beach Art Association opened with nearly 100 paintings in both oil and watercolor. Twenty-five artists participated, including Cuprien, Hills, Payne, Redmond, Wendt, and Franz A. Bischoff (1864-1929). The exhibition was an immediate success. After three weeks, nearly 2,000 people had signed the guest book. The artists quickly recognized the need for an organization that supported the activities of the gallery. In turn, the Laguna Beach Art Association was officially founded that August, with 150 members, 34 of whom were artists and the rest of whom were patrons. Edgar Payne was elected as the first president. The stated purpose of the



TOP

California Landscape With Poppies

by Granville Redmond, ca. 1925, oil, 30 x 80. Collection The Irvine Museum, Irvine, California.

ABOVE

Second Street, Laguna Beach

by Joseph Kleitsch, 1924, oil, 16 x 20. Private collection. Image courtesy The Irvine Museum, Irvine, California.

association was to advance the knowledge of and interest in art and to create a spirit of cooperation and fellowship between painter and public, while maintaining an art gallery open every afternoon of the year. In 1919, the association became a chapter of the American Federation of Arts, and the following year it was incorporated as a nonprofit corporation. During the first few years, the juried exhibitions changed monthly. Admission was free, and there was a paid custodian, who received a small salary plus commission on sales. On Saturday nights, there was an open house with the artists acting as hosts to the visitors in an informal atmosphere. The regular Saturday-night get-togethers proved immensely popular.

An article published in *The International Studio*, in March 1920, reflects the fact that the association had brought the Laguna Beach art colony a national reputation. The writer, Neeta Marquis, noted that many nationally famous artists were active members of the association. She wrote, "Even though Laguna Beach is a small place, it is destined to play a large part in the development of art appreciation not only in California but throughout the whole United States." She also went on to say, "France has the imperishable glory of the Barbizon; the Eastern United States has its Gloucester; and the Southwest has its Laguna Beach. ... So this settlement, old, quaint, remote, on the Southern California coast, is already synonymous with landscape art as developed in the land of perpetual sun."

In July 1920, it was announced that a special annual exhibition would be established in August, which would thereafter mark the anniversary of the founding of the association. Over the next few years, the Laguna Beach Art Association grew to prominence and attracted many noted artists, including Maurice Braun (1877–1941), George Brandriff (1890–1936), Colin Campbell Cooper (1856–1937), Joseph Kleitsch (1882–1931), Jean Mannheim (ca. 1862–1945), and Guy Rose (1867–1925) to participate in programs and exhibitions.

Eventually, the Laguna Beach Art Association outgrew its temporary gallery in the old Town Hall, and a series of exhibitions was held to raise money to buy a piece of land and construct a permanent gallery space. In 1926, the association purchased a lot on the southwest corner of Coast Highway and Cliff Drive. On February 16, 1929, the association's new gallery was officially opened to the public. Over the years, it became the Laguna Beach Museum, and in 1986, the building—now known as Laguna Art Museum—was expanded to the size it is today.

—J.S.



ABOVE

Arch Beach, Laguna

by Jean Mannheim, ca. 1915, oil, 34 x 39.
Private collection. Image courtesy The Irvine
Museum, Irvine, California.

LEFT

Afternoon Idyll, Cambria

by Franz A. Bischoff, ca. 1924, oil, 19 x 26.
Collection Paul and Kathleen Bagley.



BELOW

Marcia Burt offered a participant advice on her painting during her acrylic landscape workshop.

RIGHT

Frank Serrano conducted a sunrise demonstration on the grounds of the Laguna Cliffs Resort & Spa.



TODAY'S ARTISTS IN THE GREATER LAGUNA BEACH AREA

The Laguna area continues to attract artists from near and far and is one of the reasons *American Artist* magazine selected this section of the California coastline as the locale for its hugely popular 2010 Weekend With the Masters event. Among the many workshops, demonstrations, and lectures offered during the conference, several focused on plein air painting in the Laguna Beach and Dana Point areas. As one of the plein air instructors, Frank Serrano, commented, "You can go to this area any day, sunny or foggy, and get a great painting. There is a full spectrum of paintable subject matter. Along the coast there are the cliffs and the eye-catching shoreline, and only a mile back you can set up your easel to paint canyon terrain, valleys, and creeks."

Marcia Burt, another native California plein air instructor, concurs. "The Laguna coast still retains its original cliffs and beautiful coves and rock formations," she explained. "The coastal terrain has changed very little despite considerable development in the area. In other sections—for instance in Santa Barbara, where I live—almost all the coastline has been altered by natural and commercial development. The Laguna area is one of the few places in Southern California where the dramatic coastline remains unaltered, still ideal subject matter for plein air landscape." She also added, "Another special feature of this part of the California coastline is that it runs east to west, making for better lighting effects. When you stand facing the ocean to paint the view on an east-west shore, you tend to have the sun coming up on your left and setting on your right, which gives you wonderful shadows on the shore and in the water. The same is true for moonrises. But when the coast runs north to south, far more common in California, the sun comes up behind you. Then the light directly hits the breakers and produces just a general glare, which is far less interesting."

This varied California terrain offered Weekend With the Masters instructors an abundance of visual material for teaching their particular approaches to painting landscape. Colorist Camille Przewodek said, "For me, every locale has its own special coloration and light. Here in this seaside area, I have the chance to teach



Photos: Jill Burks



students about the visual effects of all the moisture in the air and the special blue cast to the light." In turn, Daniel Pinkham, whose focus is on creating paintings closely linked to an emotional response to a scene, relishes the variety of landscape in Laguna because it offers students the opportunity to express the full range of their feelings in relation to a particular location.

That the Laguna Beach area is a thriving, vital community is also a plus. As instructor Peter Adams, the president of the California Art Club, commented, "This is not just a tourist destination; this is where people live and enjoy life. When you paint here you sense that vitality, and it shows up in your work. Some of the best artists in history have been inspired to paint here, and with the surf, the light, and the eucalyptus, we artists feel that same inspiration." Indeed, the gorgeous settings where the plein air classes of this Weekend With the Masters took place—whether high on a cliff overlooking a grand arc of shoreline or at Mission San Juan Capistrano—energized both teachers and students. These outdoor classrooms became the ideal environment for learning new ways of seeing, and each teacher generously shared his or her

BELOW

Camille Przewodek taught Weekend With the Masters participants about the color and light associated with coastal landscape painting.



unique perspective on painting and landscape.

Frank Serrano, who cheerfully talked his way through a morning demonstration (a view of a sweeping coastline), showed students the way he builds a painting through a thoughtful step-by-step approach. First assessing the relative value and color of grayed hills fading into the distance, he laid these in with deliberate brushstrokes. Next he proceeded to paint darker foreground trees, then some ocean and the foreground beach. This was all in preparation for adding the focus of the painting, the sparkling morning light on the water. "I love high-impact light, but I call myself a tonalist," Serrano explained. "I'm into subtleties. I want a painting to suggest a mood, to evoke an emotional response in the viewer." His use of a limited palette helped ensure color harmony. He starts with ultramarine blue, alizarin crimson, and cadmium yellow pale, adds burnt sienna and yellow ochre for graying, and for intensity relies on phthalocyanine green, used very sparingly.

Design is one of the hallmarks of the work of Peter Adams, and it was a subject he covered thoroughly in his classes. "Intentional composition can be a means of leading the viewer's eye through your painting," he said. To demonstrate this point, Adams began a landscape, selecting and moving eucalyptus to frame a sea view, later moving background color into the tree masses to create interesting decorative shapes and outlines. The graceful eucalyptus, with their towering and distinct branches, were ideal subject matter for such manipulations. Like his mentor, Theodore Lukits (1897–1992), Adams is a master pastelist, and he chose to demonstrate with this medium for its atmospheric effects. With students gathered around, he showed them how he works a painting, starting with the background and how to apply ample chalk that can be blended later.

The students who took classes with plein air colorist Camille Przewodek learned more about the power of color in their paintings. Przewodek's forte is creating form with color changes rather than value changes, in the tradition of Monet and the Impressionists. She learned this approach during many summers of study with Henry Hensche (1899–1992), who had assisted famed American Impressionist Charles Hawthorne (1872–1930) at the Cape Cod School of Art, in Provincetown, Massachusetts.

One of Przewodek's classes took place in the cloistered gardens of San Juan Capistrano, a lush location with an array of richly colored roses and Mexican heather. As the instructor explained to her students, "If it's the right color, it's the right value, as well as the right hue and saturation." She also demonstrated how color is affected by the quality of light striking it. A color in shadow is very different from the same color in light. As a dramatic example, she held up a rectangular block, one half painted white, the other black. She then pointed out, to the amazement of the students, that the black half in sunlight appears lighter than the white half in shadow, going against all expectations. Przewodek also asked students to look for the way the warmth or coolness of light affects local color, reminding students that usually shadows are cooler on a sunny day and warmer on a cloudy day.

Weekend With the Masters attendees also had the option



of immersing themselves in the Russian tradition of painting, which emphasizes an emotional response to a subject above all else. Daniel Pinkham was the spokesperson for this school, and he offered a course on the philosophy and techniques of this approach in a slide lecture and film portraying Sergei Bongart (1918–1985), the Russian master with whom Pinkham studied. He also taught students his method of starting a painting by opening up to a scene and interpreting it according to his emotional response. He asked students to first walk around until something in the landscape caught their eye. Next he told them to take out a notepad and pencil and write down in a few sentences what stood out to them. The sight of a cove may speak of serenity and safety, or a jumble of trees might express conflict or a reaching for resolution. As he explained, “Writing helps you pull away the layers to find what first caught your attention.

“The next step is making several thumbnail drawings of the scene,” Pinkham continued. “This is aimed at quieting the mind. I think of it as a ‘visual prayer.’ Choose the sketch that best expresses your original feelings, using your written text as your guide. Select the one with patterns and shapes that express

what you felt. These speak to a very deep part of us.” And he added, “Your writings can also help you decide what to include or leave out as you develop your plein air color sketch.” Students soaked up this fresh take on preparing to paint and soon could be seen trying out Pinkham’s walk-about-and-write procedure.

Weekend With the Masters also included plein air instruction for those not drawn to structure and planning, such as the delightful classes given by Marcia Burt. She calls the process of methodically building a painting “cabinet-making.” With great charm and a broad smile, she gave students permission to dive right into painting. “Go straight for it!” she said. “Find your own way. If what you’ve painted isn’t right, just try it again. You don’t have to remember any rules. There are no formulas for mixing colors. Fool around until you get the color you want. I also don’t believe in focal points. Then you’re saying that everything else in the picture isn’t important.”

Her chosen medium of acrylic paint supports this experimental approach to beautiful painting. If something doesn’t look right, it can be completely covered with a fresh coat of paint. “You could call this method resolute or fussy, but just keep going back to repaint,” Burt said. To work this way, she opts for quick-drying



LEFT

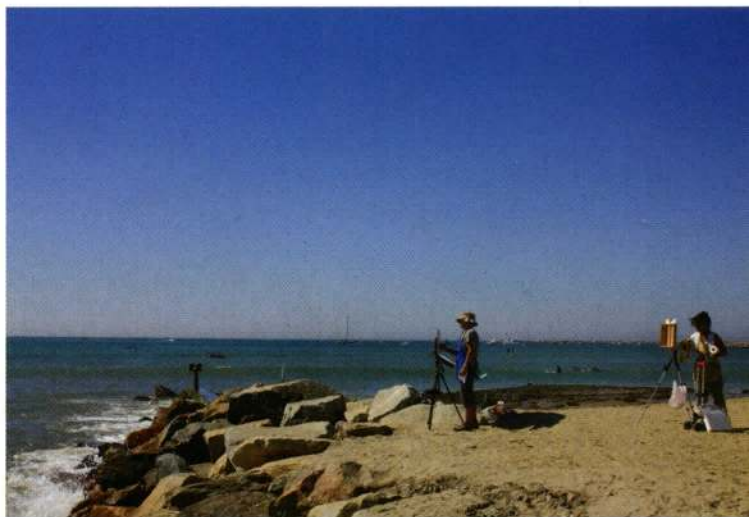
Peter Adams began a pastel demonstration from a vantage point overlooking the Laguna coast.

BELOW

Weekend With the Masters participants painted on Doheny Beach.

BOTTOM

During his workshop at Mission San Juan Capistrano, Daniel Pinkham showed a student how he interprets the landscape poetically.



acrylic pigments and avoids stay-wet palettes. When she first began painting as a child, her father told her to just explore and never sat in judgment of her work. She explored, and she found her artistic voice. In the same spirit, she told her students not to think of some odd brushstroke as a mistake but just as misguided and part of the painting process. "When you're painting over a passage, you're not correcting a mistake. You are re-seeing and re-painting," she asserted. "Paint from your heart, but of course know what your heart says."

When all the classes finally came to a close, students were filled to the brim with fascinating information, procedures, and techniques from the many plein air workshops. Now it was time to head home and put instruction into practice, fueled with enough inspiration to carry them through to the next Weekend With the Masters.

—M.S.

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