

Jean LeGassick: In Love with the Land

by Molly Siple



WHEN JEAN LEGASSICK FIRST DISCOVERED HOW much she enjoyed plein air painting, she remembers thinking, “I want to wake up every day and say, ‘Oh boy, I get to paint outdoors!’” That was more than twenty years ago. In the intervening time LeGassick has become one of the premier painters of the western American landscape and in particular the Sierra Nevada. Paintings such as *Afternoon in the Granite Chief Wilderness* show her great skill at rendering the unique subdued light qualities and forms of this terrain as well as her deep-felt reverence for the subject matter. As she says, “The great outdoors is the Church of the Blue Dome and I worship in it.”

But LeGassick’s life in art began long before this phase of her career. “By first grade I had a painting framed and hanging in the hallway of the school and everyone realized that painting was going to be my deal,” she says. Growing up in Glendale, California, LeGassick graduated from **Art Center College of Design** in Los Angeles in 1979 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in advertising and illustration. As she describes, “This program was great because we were taught drawing and painting from life, both still life and especially figurative work. Film, photography, layout, and design were also included, an excellent major I thought.” With this training LeGassick kept herself employed with commercial design work for many years, and also began painting portraits, including portraits of pets. At this time, after hours, she also became intrigued with drawing very detailed images from nature, such as seed pods and, as she recalls, “even a dead bird pinned to a board,” so different from the out-in-the-wild approach to her art today and yet excellent practice in the observation of natural things.

Then, in 1985, everything about her life and artwork changed. LeGassick moved to the rustic town of Bishop in northern California at the foot of the magnificent eastern slopes of the Sierra. As she recalls, “I wanted to get out of the city and be more rural, and here’s this landscape that knocks your

socks off. At first I tried to work from photos and paint four-by-six-foot canvases of the Sierra in the studio. These were not successful! I then tried painting on location, with all the sun glare and wind blowing over my easel, and realized I needed help, a humbling experience after all the training and professional experience I had had.”

Ever industrious and ready to learn, LeGassick plunged into plein-air painting workshops, taking at least three a year. “These workshops became my graduate school, an invaluable experience,” she says. LeGassick recalls the struggles of these days with much candor. “Halfway through a week’s course I sometimes would call

home in tears. I wanted to be so good, even remotely like my teachers, and I felt so frustrated. But to be an artist you have to go through a period of learning skills and new lessons. You need a tough skin and even be a little masochistic to take the rejections and emotionally survive the years of painting really

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— JEAN LEGASSICK



Afternoon in the Granite Chief Wilderness
Oil on canvas board 20" × 24"



Along the Mono Pass Trail
Oil on canvas board 11" × 14"



Campsite Lightshow
Oil on canvas board 11" × 14"

awful work." And she continues, "In fact, I really feel that to become a painter requires perseverance more than talent. Talent is way over-rated."

For LeGassick one workshop in particular was a breakthrough experience, the class she took from master plein air painter **Michael Lynch** at the **Scottsdale Artists' School**. As she says, "My life changed, right then and there.

Subsequently I also studied with **Kevin Macpherson**, **Len Chmiel** and various other plein air artists, all invaluable training for my landscape work. In these workshops, I learned about the special plein air painting equipment I would need and how to dress—in dark clothing which doesn't reflect light onto your canvas. I also began to learn how to *edit* nature. A photo gives you a little window to work from, but outdoors you have a 360-degree view. It's the artist's job to decide what to add or remove and what elements, if any, to mentally move into view and add to your painting."

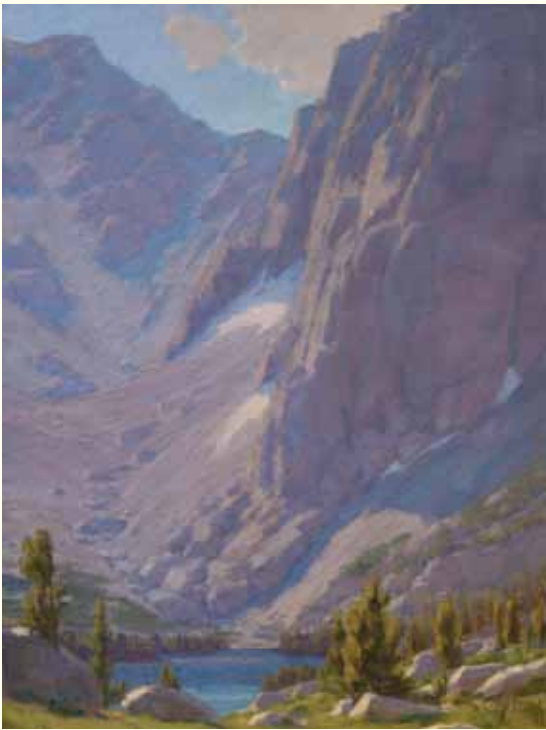
Some years later, LeGassick discovered an intriguing example of such manipulations. She and fellow artists went on a jaunt to paint in the Sierra's Big Pine Canyon and took along reproductions of paintings by historic California artists to compare how they had painted this same terrain. In a canvas by **Edgar Payne (1883–1947)** of easily identified Temple Crag, they saw he had deftly moved an equally well-known lake from elsewhere in the Sierra into his composition.

By 1995, LeGassick became an Artist Member of the **California Art Club** and was also admitted into the **Plein Air Painters of America (PAPA)**, becoming a Signature Member and appropriately enough, Workshop Chairman. Ever a fan of workshops, she says, "When I was not teaching a class at one of PAPA'S conferences, I sat in on as many of the other classes as I could manage."

For subject matter, LeGassick likes to paint the world with which she is familiar. You won't find her hopping a plane to go paint in Provence! As she says, "For me deciding what to paint is about knowing a place. I need an emotional connection with my subject matter. That's *my* kind of stimulation. I'm not so crazy about new things, and what I know is the American West, which is so full of things I love." Adding, "I need to know about the geology of an area, how the streams come down from the mountains. The locations where I've

been painting these past years, the Sierra and the terrain in northern Nevada, these places are in my bones. I'm painting and I hear a bird call—and I know it's the white crown sparrow come down from the mountains because it's winter."

To immerse her senses in a locale, she will first explore it on



Veritcal Rise Above Third Lake
Oil on canvas board 24" × 18"



Beneath Warren Peak; Surprise Valley Near Cedarville, CA
Oil on canvas board 10" × 12"

foot. "I spend some time wandering and stumbling around," says LeGassick. "I smell the fir trees and feel the breeze on my skin and hear the insects buzzing. I'll tell myself, 'The view must be much better over the ridge.' But I might actually end up fairly close to my van where I started from. And by then, all those sensations I've had while tramping around will get mixed in with my painting and get applied to the canvas in some subtle way, which I hope may carry over to the viewer. Becoming totally familiar with a certain spot and intimate with my surroundings is also my way of possessing a place that seems to me so beautiful and wonderful. That way, I can take the treasure home with me."

Painting the Sierra, LeGassick will hike into the mountains. "That is my way of acclimatizing myself and getting in shape," she says. "Some people like to ride in on horses or mules and enjoy a full-service pack trip with cooks and tents set-up. But I don't want anyone telling me when dinner is ready. I want to decide when I stop painting or I may just want extra time to enjoy the alpenglow at the end of the day."

Le Gassick's ideal paint-out is a "spot trip," for ten days or more. One of her favorite destinations is between the Sierra's Fourth and Fifth Lakes, very steep and rugged terrain at 11,000 feet elevation. Base camp is a pack station where all the supplies have been carted up by mules and then the porters leave. Everyone in the camp is in charge of their own food and on their own schedule. There is a communal kitchen area with an ice chest and little stoves. As LeGassick explains, "By camping you can be at your painting site at first light and paint until the last rosy glow leaves the peaks. You can also easily set up for night painting. In the middle Sierra the granite tends to be pale and reflects the moonlight that floods the land. **John Muir** called it the 'Range of Light.' And she

adds, "I am totally cut off from the world below, with no cell phone and no distractions. I'm only there to paint, and with artist-friends, one of the most wonderful parts of the whole experience."

In the field LeGassick likes to work small, each canvas intended as a finished piece that records the atmosphere of a specific time and place. "I'll use a canvas as large as sixteen-by-twenty only if the light is really steady or if I'm at a simple sea shore and it's a foggy day when you can't see much detail." Once when she was feeling bogged down working in her studio and sealed off from the natural world, she built her own six-by-eight-inch pochade box and headed outdoors, just so that she could at least do a small, quick painting outside even if she had a lot of studio work to complete. She began to paint in spare moments in places and in weather conditions that more elaborate equipment usually discourages.

Inspired with the success of these quick paint-outs, LeGassick then came up with a plan to finish one painting a day, using her little pochade box. As she recalls, "It was the greatest thing I ever did to help my growth as an artist. Working small, day after day, taught me to look for the essence of a scene, using the minimum amount of strokes to say what I wanted to say. Using a small canvas also lets me finish a painting quickly. I remember painting outside when it was twenty degrees and snowing and I did really good work."

In the workshops she occasionally teaches, she also insists on small canvases for her students, nine-by-twelve-inch and under. She laughs describing how students arrive in some spectacular setting, thinking they will tackle a major work in accordance with the grand scenery before them and then she asks them to paint diminutive studies, in order to learn.

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