

Conrad Buff, Painter of the American Southwest

by Deborah Epstein Solon

As a young immigrant to America in 1905, Swiss-born Conrad Buff (1886-1975) could not have imagined the life and career he would build in his adopted country. Buff departed from Antwerp, landing at Ellis Island, New York, on May 10, 1905. He was a penniless nineteen-year-old with no family, no English skills, no meaningful artistic training, and no apparent prospects. Yet by the 1930s, he was considered one of the most important

modernist artists working in Southern California, one who had forged a distinctive artistic vision during a transformative and often turbulent period in American art.

Buff's talents spanned various media, from easel and mural painting to lithography and book illustration. He exhibited extensively across California and on the East Coast, earning national recognition. His interest in mural painting foreshadowed by nearly a decade the critical role that murals would play in major corporate commissions for artists in the Depression-era Pub-

Solitude and Silence: Conrad Buff, Painter of the American Southwest is on view from September 20, 2025 through January 25, 2026, at the Laguna Art Museum, 307 Cliff Drive, Laguna Beach, California, 92651, lagunaartmuseum.org. A catalogue accompanies the exhibition.

lic Works of Art Project and Federal Art Project as part of the New Deal.

Los Angeles Times art critics Antony Anderson and Arthur Millier praised Buff's work as a tour de force, a tribute to the





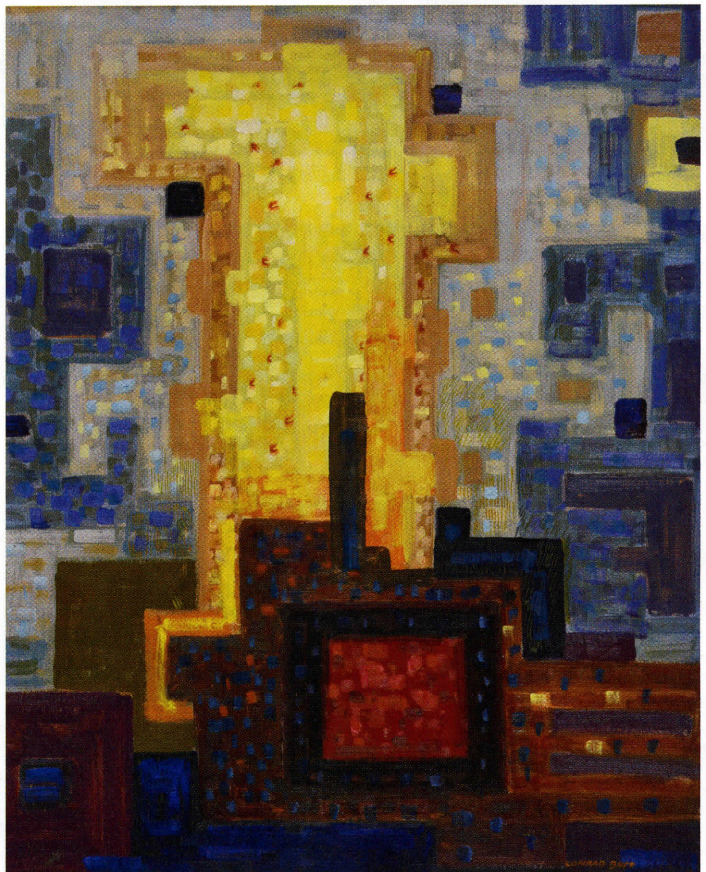
ABOVE: *The Mittens*, o/Masonite, 54 1/2 x 78 1/2, Bruce and Lisa Gelker.

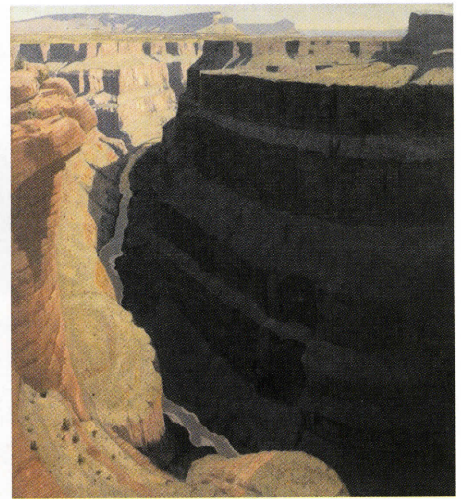
RIGHT: *Untitled No. 3*, c. 1913-17, o/board, 11 3/4 x 7 1/2, Brigitte Medak.

LEFT: *Desert Landscape with Yucca*, o/board, 24 x 30, Mary Ingrebrand-Pohlad.

American Southwest. Buff generally rejected the prevailing regional style of Impressionism that dominated early twentieth-century California painting. His meticulous, exacting, cross-hatching technique central to the earlier part of his career stood in stark contrast to Impressionism's broken brushwork, high-key palette, fugitive light, and scumbled surfaces.

Buff sometimes described his paintings as "pointillist," but that label is loose. Though his work is often categorized as Neo-Impressionist Divisionism or Pointillism, he followed no strict style. Instead, he developed a hybrid approach using less precise dots than Pointillism and integrated impossibly thin strokes of cross-hatching. These were sometimes laid on broad areas of complementary and analogous colors, other times painted on top of each other, which created a textural surface and a visual explosion. This labor-intensive technique, influenced by his background as an embroidery designer, resulted in richly detailed surfaces. Traditional Pointillist artists, best exemplified by Georges Seurat and Paul Signac, applied small dots of unmixed color on the canvas, instead of using fluid brushstrokes. Such an





ABOVE: *Grand Canyon*, 1932, o/c, 60 x 54 1/2, courtesy of Automobile Club of Southern California Archives.

LEFT: *Still Life with Roses*, o/board, 30 x 24, used by permission from FineArtConservationLab.com.

BELOW LEFT: *Jawbone Canyon*, before 1931, o/c, 60 1/4 x 79 5/8, The Buck Collection at UC Irvine Jack and Shanaz Langson Institute and Museum of California Art.

RIGHT: *On the Road to Zion*, o/c, 47 1/2 x 64 1/2, Anthony and Mary Podell.

BELOW RIGHT: *Late Winter Landscape*, o/Masonite, 48 x 96, Laguna Art Museum, gift of Dr. and Mrs. Lawrence F. White.

BELOW: *Bowknot Bend*, lithograph on paper, 24 x 18, Buff Family Collection.

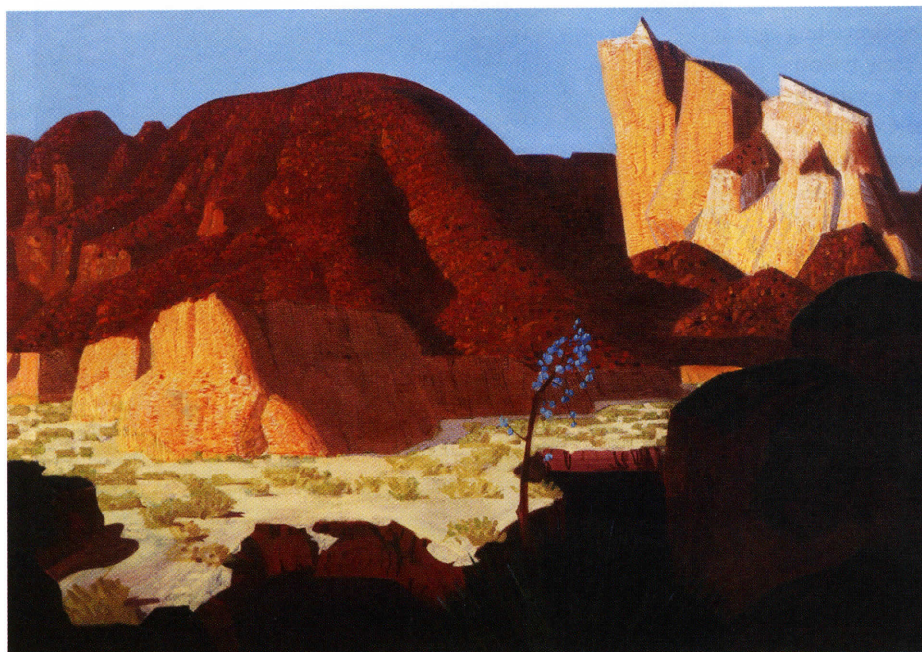


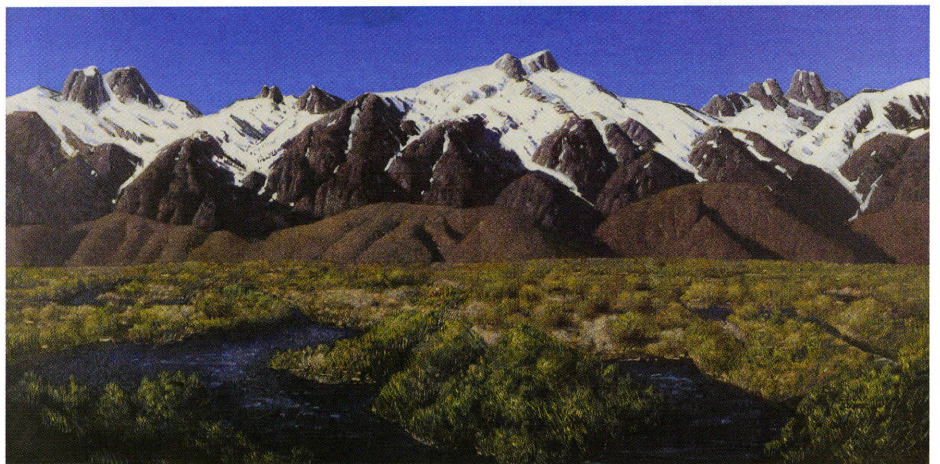
image becomes more legible as the viewer moves further away and the dots “blend” together into a visually recognizable scene. The technical skill required to achieve his desired effect, especially on Buff’s large-scale works, is remarkable.

His primary subjects were the dramatic landscapes in California, Utah, Arizona, and Alaska. These works demanded a particular aesthetic sensibility from viewers. Buff never crossed over to more “radical” (surrealist, nonobjective) aspects of modernism, and he remained a painter of repre-



sentational landscapes throughout his life. Nonetheless, his early color studies were notably avant-garde, not intended for exhibition, and were undated—but based on his recollections, may have been painted in the second decade of the twentieth century. He practiced sketching abstract forms, having remarked “before abstractionism was at all thought of or heard of, but I always felt that the foundation of all painting...lay in the arrangement of areas—area against area and color against color.”

When Buff arrived in Los Angeles in 1907, its cultural infrastructure was still developing. With little institutional support for artists, he took odd jobs before working as a housepainter in Eagle Rock, where he began experimenting with mural painting in private residences. By the 1910s, the Art Students League of Los Angeles emerged as a powerful institution. Having had no formal training in Europe, Buff attended life-drawing classes in the evening. In 1917, his life changed when artist Edgar Alwin



Payne invited him to work in Glendale, California, on murals for the Congress Hotel in Chicago. Afterward, Payne invited Buff to join his family on a sketching trip in the High Sierra. Payne was a well-traveled, established artist who had already earned a substantial reputation in California, and was completely enamored of Western scenery. Buff's interest in mural

paintings was not just a flirtation, but serious and sustained; by the 1930s, he was recognized as one of the premier muralists in Los Angeles.

Buff was invited to move to Laguna Beach—then a burgeoning art colony dominated by a modified impressionist style—by Payne and his wife, artist Elsie Palmer Payne, and their family. Buff's excellent



LEFT: *Capitol Reef, Utah*, o/board, 23 x 35, The Hilbert Collection.

BELOW LEFT: *Decorative Figure (Portrait of Mary Buff)*, between 1922 and 1923, o/c, 41 x 41, The Buck Collection at UC Irvine Jack and Shanaz Langson Institute and Museum of California Art.

RIGHT: *Owens River*, o/panel, 26 x 30, George Stern Fine Arts.

BELOW RIGHT: *Still Life with Old Fashioned Roses*, o/board, 16 x 20, George Stern Fine Arts.



Included was *Decorative Figure (Portrait of Mary Buff)*, a synthesis of Buff's various styles. The subject is depicted in fluid, painterly terms, whereas the trees and ground where she sits are rendered in patches of color overlaid with small strokes. The work is reminiscent of Arthur Mathews, and could be compared to his Art Nouveau-inspired figurative murals.

Throughout 1923, Buff exhibited regularly and received awards and accolades for his work. In 1924, Buff's career as a commercial mural painter began in earnest. He was commissioned for the First National Bank, Covina; the Eagle Rock State Bank; and the William Penn Hotel in Whittier. He believed that murals should harmonize with architectural space, and color was central to that harmony. That same year, Buff and his wife visited Zion National Park for the first time. The remote, awe-inspiring terrain motivated many return trips before these places were tourist destinations, and Buff expended herculean effort to access remote locations. He described the region as the "most wild country he had ever seen." He captured the grandeur of Zion, Capitol Reef, and Canyonlands national parklands in many works that were, at the time, unfamiliar geography in the eyes and experience of the general public.

While Impressionism still dominated Southern California art, modernism was gaining traction. In 1929, Buff exhibited at the Los Angeles Museum alongside Hanson Puthuff, Lorser Feitelson, and Nathalie Newking, Feitelson's first wife. Though the selection of Buff's work was small, it included some powerful images of Zion and the Sierras.

The 1920s saw an expansion of new galleries and the increased support of private patronage, but the Great Depression soon devastated the arts. In Los Angeles, the effects were delayed because of prepara-

cooking skills were the trade-off for the companionship and a sense of artistic belonging. But he lacked the self-confidence to exhibit his work. In 1920, Buff finally showed some of his sketches to Mary Marsh, an accomplished artist herself and assistant curator at the Los Angeles Museum. She helped organize his first museum exhibition in 1921, and they became

close and were married in 1922. Prior to this move to Laguna Beach, Buff had been living in relative isolation, describing his experience as lonely and "rather bitter."

In December 1923, sixteen more of Buff's works were exhibited at the Los Angeles Museum. In an extensive review, Antony Anderson commended Buff's abilities and applauded his stylistic evolution.



tions for the 1932 Summer Olympics and a lingering building construction boom. Still, the 1930s brought financial hardship, but also new opportunities. Mary taught at the Hollywood Progressive School, and to sustain themselves during the Depression, the Buffs turned to children's books, which Mary wrote and Buff illustrated. They produced fourteen books together—an enduring collaboration and a financial success.

In 1932, Buff was commissioned by the Automobile Club to create a cover for *Touring Topics* (it became *Westways* in 1934), and he traveled by boat from Seattle to Skagway, Alaska. He sketched extensively, with the benefit of relatively warm weather and long hours of daylight. The resulting works culminated in an exhibition of thirty-one pictures in March 1933, at Ilsley Galleries at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles.

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inevitably changed Buff's world. American museums remained open, but visitor attendance declined due to fuel rationing and the frequency of his exhibitions decreased. A notable exception came in 1944, when Encyclopaedia Britannica Corporation established an art collection and included one of Buff's paintings—a testament to his distinguished position in the eyes of critics and contemporaries, and proof of his continued relevance.

By the 1950s, Buff's work had fallen out of favor with juries, and exhibitions ceased. Ironically, while his early artistic period pushed the boundaries of representational art and often challenged his viewers, his later work was seen as insufficiently daring and too traditional in the age of Abstract Expressionism and forms of nonobjective art.

By 1960, at age seventy-four, Buff was still using crosshatched, detailed patterns and painting in the style he had established as a young man. However, his work was

about to change. Despite his resistance to nonobjective painting, Buff's work from this period can be recognized as part of the post-painterly abstraction of the 1960s. Typical of his work, it is not easily categorized, nor does he slavishly adhere to any rigidly formulaic style, but he began to paint in broad strokes with a shorthand notation. The color palette brightened. His work was always informed by geometric elements, but shapes became dominant. The subject matter remained his beloved, monumental landscapes, but the execution was entirely different. He recounted how "in the earlier pictures I used the [Pointillist] technique in order to be truthful to the light of the deserts and the mountains. But later on I found a way of expressing that clarity of air by broader application of colors, by more bright application of brighter colors." He had new-found spontaneity.

Buff offered no explicit explanation for this shift, but age may have played a role. The meticulous technique of his youth required immense dexterity and rigor, and instead of taking months to complete a painting, he could now work with alacrity.

The process became more spontaneous and less demanding, enabling him to paint daily, nearly until the end of his life.

Buff was an artist's artist, someone who took his craft extremely seriously. He was dedicated, innovative, and uncompromising. His journey was hard fought and honestly won. His distinctive style, while critically acclaimed, often challenged the taste of buyers of conventional art in the 1920s and 1930s. Yet Buff could never have painted the ubiquitous poppy fields, eucalyptus trees, or dappled sunlit oceans that were a staple of artists that he both knew and admired. He famously remarked, "I just couldn't get interested in the verbenas and the sunsets." He didn't need to. He had mountains to climb.

—Adapted from the accompanying exhibition catalogue.

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orders, such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, addiction, and Alzheimer's disease. In addition, they established the Garvey imaging core to support research in stem cell and regenerative medicine. For