

About the Artwork



Emil J. Kosa Jr., *Freeway Beginning*, circa 1948, Watercolor on heavy wove paper, 22 x 30 in. The Buck Collection at the UCI Institute and Museum of California Art

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In Emil Kosa's (1903 –1968) watercolor painting, *Freeway Beginning* (circa 1948), an unfinished freeway ramp swoops toward the viewer, offering the prospect of swift movement throughout a growing Los Angeles. The painting emphasizes the contrasts between old and new in a post-World War II urban environment. The historical Bunker Hill neighborhood is painted in the background and behind it looms a silhouetted building in L.A.'s downtown.

Curator Sheri Bernstein calls the painting an “unreservedly positive view of the processes of **urban development** in California.” The freeway, she continues, “spills out welcomingly into the viewer’s space and completely elides the downtown area, which appears only as a benign, picturesque backdrop.”¹⁸

Kosa was ahead of his time in his selection of subject matter. Before California's Pop Art movement of the 1960s—made famous by David Hockney (b. 1937) and Ed Ruscha (b. 1937)—few of the state's artists documented changes to the built environment. Early painters in the state concentrated mainly on undeveloped landscapes, depicting rugged coastlines and fertile valleys. Kosa was one of a small group of watercolor artists who turned their attention to the human-engineered urbanscape in the 1930s. They painted drive-ins with carhops, open-air markets, double-decker buses, new freeways, bridge construction, and the growth of L.A. traffic. Curator Maudette Ball says these watercolors were a

“documentation of the rapidly changing landscape of California, the tension between the open, rolling hills and the beginning of a high-tech environment.”¹⁹

In *Freeway Beginning*, Kosa captures the excitement of this post-war boom with its promise of new development and a new way of life. Ball says that in Kosa’s painting, the freeway “comes zooming out at you” as if to say the future is here.²⁰ Kosa had reason to be optimistic. In 1933, at the height of the Depression, he began working in Hollywood as a **scenic painter** and special effects artist at the 20th Century Fox movie studio. He achieved great success in the industry, pioneered new techniques, and earned an Oscar.

While Kosa’s painting may reflect his positive attitude about these changes, the urban renewal and development projects of the 1940s and 50s (like the expansion of California’s infrastructure) had decidedly negative effects on many lives. These projects often displaced residents

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and led to the “white flight” of white residents from urban areas to segregated suburbs, harming non-white urban neighborhoods in the process. Indeed, the neighborhood in Kosa’s painting, Bunker Hill, was the subject of a campaign to convert “blighted” neighborhoods into profitable new commercial and civic districts. Neighborhood residents fought it, but were unsuccessful.²¹ Kosa even made another painting depicting the demolition of Bunker Hill’s Victorian homes to make way for skyscrapers. Yet as curators at the Bowers Museum in Santa Ana, CA write: “We see that these scenes of change are uncondemned by the artist. Indeed, they are as lovingly painted as his idyllic landscapes.”²²

About the Artist

Emil Kosa



Artist Emil Kosa painting *en plein air* in California, 1941.
Photo by Peter Stackpole/The LIFE Picture Collection
via Getty Images

About The Artist

Emil Kosa Jr. (1903–1968) was a key member of the **California Scene Painting** movement, a regional movement in the early decades of the 20th century. California Scene Painters created **landscape paintings** and **genre paintings** depicting everyday lives during times of cultural change—everything from the aftermath of the Great Depression to industrial changes leading up to World War II to the growth of Hollywood.²³

Born in Paris, France to a mother who was a pianist for the Paris Opera and a father who was an artist, Kosa grew up in the United States and Europe. His family moved to the US when he was four years old, only to move back to his father’s home country of Czechoslovakia four years later. Kosa received art and music instruction at a young age and was talented at both art forms. He eventually chose to pursue visual art, but many who knew him said he could have been a successful musician.²⁴ He studied in Prague and then at the California Art Institute of Los Angeles.

In 1927, he traveled to France to study art for a year at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris.

After settling in California in 1928, Kosa started a business with his father to produce decorative art in churches and auditoriums. He

also took on portrait commissions and sold his paintings to galleries. By the early 1930s, he was pursuing a career as a watercolorist and was an active member of the California Water Color Society.²⁵

In 1933, at the height of the Depression, Kosa started working as a scene painter and special effects artist at the 20th Century Fox movie studio in Hollywood in order to financially support his family. One of his first jobs was designing and painting the famous 20th Century Fox “searchlight” logo. He was an art director at the studio for 35 years and became famous as a matte painter, depicting background locations to create the illusion on film that the characters are in a setting. Kosa won an Academy Award for Visual Effects for his work painting the backdrop of ancient Alexandria in the 1963 film *Cleopatra*. He also painted the ruined Statue of Liberty at the end of the 1968 film *Planet of the Apes*.²⁶

Kosa specialized in contemporary scenes of downtown Los Angeles and dramatic views of the rolling hills and farms in Southern California.

About the Artist

Emil Kosa

Kosa was a prolific painter in oils and watercolors and would often paint for three or four hours after dinner in addition to spending weekends painting *en plein air*.²⁷ He specialized in contemporary scenes of downtown Los Angeles and dramatic views of the rolling hills and farms in Southern California. He also made many **commissioned** portraits of movie stars, businessmen, and politicians. He painted the official portrait of Earl Warren, former Governor of California and Chief Justice of the United States, now in the collection of the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC. Kosa even explored **non-objective art** and expressed his love for music through these experimentations.



View and Discuss

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Ask students to describe this watercolor painting in detail—starting with the **foreground**, moving to the middle ground, and ending with the background. Compare those parts of the painting.

What choices did the artist make in terms of light and shadow, perspective, subject matter, and framing?

Tell students that Emil Kosa painted backgrounds for movies in Hollywood. This painting was not made for the studio. It is a watercolor he made of Los Angeles, where he lived, but it is also a setting. Ask students what kind of story they think could be set there.

Then ask them to think about the subject matter he chose to paint—a new freeway under construction. Based on how Kosa painted it, what do they think his point of view is on his subject? Explain.

Curator Sheri Bernstein calls the painting an “unreservedly positive view of the processes of urban development in California,”²⁸ even though developments like new freeways had negative impacts on existing neighborhoods. What do students think about Bernstein’s analysis? Do they agree that Kosa’s view of this development is positive? Why or why not? Ask students how the painting would look if his view of the development was more negative. What would be different?

Ask students to think about new construction in their neighborhoods. What is their point of view on this new development? Is it negative, positive, in-between? Explain.

Activities

Activities

Urban Development

Emil Kosa's painting depicts the post-World War II urban development happening across the United States at the time. This kind of development often had negative consequences for neighborhoods, frequently displacing non-white residents. Today, there are still instances of urban development displacing Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC). As an example, show students a recent painting series by artist Eddie Arroyo (b. 1976), who depicts the effects of gentrification in Miami, and compare it to Kosa's depiction: <https://whitney.org/exhibitions/2019-biennial?section=1#exhibition-artworks>

Challenge students to research examples of new development in or near their neighborhoods or cities. Then ask them to make a watercolor painting depicting an aspect of this development. Encourage students to consider how their choice of color, light, perspective, and framing help convey their point of view.

Scenic Painting

Kosa had a successful career as a scene painter and art director for a movie studio in Hollywood. He painted the backdrops for famous films. For this activity, challenge students in small groups to create a setting or backdrop for a performance. This performance could be a short scene derived from a book, dance, or even a virtual performance designed for a mobile app. Ask students to think about how to create a setting that will work as a backdrop in the format they have chosen—even in a digital format. Then invite students to present performances against these backdrops.

European vs. American Style

According to curators at the Bowers Museum, Emil Kosa worried that his work was not as experimental as art made in Europe at the time. His friend and painter Millard Sheets (1907–1989) encouraged him to continue to paint in his own style: “You know how to paint. Go out and paint to suit yourself. Paris is all right, but we have a job to do here in America and California.”²⁹ For this activity, ask students to research and compare paintings that were made in Europe and the United States after World War II. What styles were artists using? What do students think Sheets meant by “we have a job to do here in America and California”? Do students think an American style should be distinct from a European style? Do they think there is an American style of music, film, painting, or writing now? Why or why not? Ask them to write an essay with their ideas about what constitutes or what should constitute an American style and why.

Vocabulary

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Source: Merriam-Webster.com (unless stated otherwise)

Anthropomorphize: to attribute human form or personality to

California Scene Painting: a regional art movement in the early decades of the 20th century of mainly landscape and genre paintings depicting everyday lives during times of cultural change

Source: Hilbert Museum of California Art

Commissioned: ordered to be made in exchange for payment

En plein air: of or relating to painting in outdoor daylight

Foreground: the part of a scene or representation that is nearest to and in front of the spectator

Genre paintings: paintings of scenes from everyday life, of ordinary people in work or recreation, depicted in a generally realistic manner

Source: Britannica.com

Impressionism: a theory or practice in painting, especially among French painters of about 1870, depicting the natural appearances of objects by means of dabs or strokes of primary unmixed colors in order to simulate actual reflected light

Preservation: the activity or process of keeping something valued alive, intact, or free from damage or decay

Landscape paintings: a picture representing a view of natural inland scenery

Lithograph: print from a plane surface (such as a smooth stone or metal plate) on which the image to be printed is ink-receptive and the blank area ink-repellent

Non-native species: species that have occurred outside of their natural range; that natural range could be as far as another country or as near as a different region of the same country

Source: The National Park Service at nps.gov

Non-objective art: art representing or intended to represent no natural or actual object, figure, or scene

Portraiture: pictorial representations of a person usually showing the face

Romanticized: treated as idealized or heroic

Scenic or scene painter: a painter of theatrical scenery

Still life: a picture consisting predominantly of inanimate objects

Urban development: the development or improvement of an urban area by building

Source: collinsdictionary.com

Notes

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