

About the Artwork



Guy Rose, *Laguna Eucalyptus*, circa 1917,
Oil on canvas, 40 x 30 in. The Irvine Museum Collection at the UCI Institute and
Museum of California Art

About the Artwork

With its emphasis on light and shadow, Guy Rose (1867–1925) was clearly influenced by **Impressionism** when painting *Laguna Eucalyptus* (1917). A native of California who studied and painted in the state, Rose had direct experience with European Impressionism. He lived in Giverny, France where he came to know Claude Monet (1840–1926). This is one of the signature paintings the artist made on his many visits to Laguna Beach from 1916 to 1918. Like Monet, Rose often painted a series of pictures of the same setting. In this case, he started with a small *en plein air* sketch, painted while outdoors, and then made two more paintings of the same subject.¹ Here, the famous, non-native eucalyptus takes the spotlight, windswept on a hill in Southern California. The trees' distinctive, stylized trunks and branches bend and sway, while their leafy canopies echo the fluffy cumulus clouds they seem close to touching. Rose has presented them in portrait orientation—instead of the traditional landscape view—suggesting **anthropomorphization**.

Laguna Eucalyptus

The subject of Rose’s painting was such a popular one that a critic at the time even coined a term using the genus name: “Eucalyptus School.” The phrase describes landscape painters in Southern California from about 1915 to 1930 who painted “with attractive, acceptable coloration and loose brushwork,” writes curator Nancy Dustin Wall Moure. But the designation also came with a “negative connotation,” she continues; these artists were criticized as decorative.² Moure contends that the “Eucalyptus School” was “a definite offspring of Impressionism, but probably did not adhere to enough of French Impressionism’s original tenets to deserve to be called Southern California Impressionism.” Still, she writes, the term “‘impressionistic’... meaning a colorful, light-filled rendering of landscape” could apply.³

So how did the eucalyptus tree become such an iconic subject for so many California artists? The Homestead and Timber Culture Acts of 1862 and 1873, respectively, are a big part of the answer. These acts offered land ownership to European American settlers in exchange for them moving west, building homes, and planting crops and trees. Under the Homestead Act, 1.5 million white families gained ownership of 246 million acres of Indigenous lands. Taken together, these acts created a long legacy of property ownership and economic mobility that excluded Black, Indigenous, and other nonwhite people.⁴ They also created lasting changes to the environment.

White settlers perceived the land they were occupying as unhealthy and thought the best way to reduce disease was through the introduction of European American agricultural practices. They believed specific plants

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had advantages. Eucalyptus trees had already been imported by colonists to Algeria, southern Africa, and Cuba. Settlers thought the tree’s aroma could prevent disease and that it could make areas such as swamps healthier by absorbing water and protecting soil. Doctors and other marketers recommended planting eucalyptus

trees in the Central Valley. By 1874, according to Linda Nash, professor at the University of Washington, Californians had planted almost a million of them.⁵ The trees thrived in Southern California’s climate. Indeed, the main street of Laguna Beach’s business district was planted so heavily with eucalyptus that it became known as Forest Avenue.⁶ But many of the purported special properties of the eucalyptus—as lumber for building and as medicine for healing—would eventually be debunked. Railroads built with eucalyptus were more prone to rotting and cracking, and the hoped-for medicinal benefits—as treatment for respiratory ailments, for instance—were never verified by science.⁷ While the tree did not turn out to be what the marketers and boosters claimed, it was a key subject for California’s artists, perhaps more than any other tree in the state’s history.



Guy Rose at the San Francisco School of Design, 1887

About the Artist

Guy Rose (1867–1925) was a key part of an important shift in California Art from an academic 19th-century artistic style to an Impressionistic style. Born in San Gabriel, CA into a wealthy family, Rose grew up on his family’s ranch known as Sunny Slope. As a nine-year-old child in 1876, Rose was accidentally shot in the face during a hunting trip with his brothers. During his recovery, he learned to sketch and paint.⁸

Ten years later, Rose traveled to San Francisco to study at the California School of Design. There, in 1886 and 1887, he took classes with Emil Carlsen (1853–1932), an

Impressionist painter who had emigrated from Denmark, and Virgil Williams (1830–1886), an American landscape and portrait painter. In 1888, he studied abroad in Paris where he enrolled at the Académie Julian, a private art school that was a fertile ground for artists from around the world.

In 1904, Rose and his wife Ethel settled in Giverny and became members of the vibrant artist colony there. Between 1885 and 1915, the previously sleepy village attracted more than 350 artists from at least 18 countries. They wanted to be in the presence of the master Impressionist painter Claude Monet (1840–1926), who settled there in 1883, but they also wanted to practice *en plein air* painting, enjoy the beauty of the environment, and be close to cosmopolitan Paris. Perhaps most importantly, they wanted to socialize with other artists. By 1900, Giverny was an artistic center with garden parties, tennis games, and artist-owned homes.⁹ Although Rose did not paint with Monet, they were friends and often socialized together. This era of artistic camaraderie came to an end with the beginning of World War I.

Like other American artists in Giverny, Rose never abandoned the underlying structure of traditional painting, but did experiment with innovative methods of using light, color, and brushwork. In the early years, Rose drew the surrounding landscape of fields, hills, and streams and tried painting without first drawing an outline. He also experimented with painting on-site rather than in the studio. He took longer to incorpo-

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rate more radical methods. It was not until 1900 that he began to paint with unblended strokes of color, a signature technique of Impressionism.¹⁰ But Rose's style was uniquely his own. A critic at the time wrote, "Rose is a direct, artistic descendent of Monet, but he is a man of today, and he is therefore more personal in his point of view. In him, Monet's passion for paint has been metamorphosed by time and spirit into a poetic feeling for nature, a more fastidious faculty of selection."¹¹ Rose returned permanently to the United States in 1912. Two years later, he settled in Pasadena, in part due to bouts of lead poisoning from the paints he used.¹² Back home, he embraced the local landscape and painted primarily in the southern part of the state until about 1917. The following year, Rose visited Carmel, another artist community that had attracted East Coast artists such as Childe Hassam (1859–1935) and William Merritt Chase (1849–1916), as well as artists who relocated after the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. Rose was taken by Carmel's unique environment and rugged coastline and soon after settled there, beginning a productive period of landscape painting.¹³

In 1921, Rose suffered a stroke that left him partially paralyzed and unable to paint. He died in 1925.¹⁴

View and Discuss

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Ask students what they notice about this painting.

What choices did the artist, Guy Rose, make in how he presented the landscape? How did he orient the canvas? What point of view did he paint from? How did he show light and shadow?

Find a photograph of eucalyptus trees and compare this painting to the photograph. What is similar and different? What has Rose experimented with in terms of how he depicted the trees?

One critic of the time said Rose had a “poetic feeling for nature.”¹⁵ What do students think he meant by that? Ask them to use evidence from the painting to support their point of view.

Rose first sketched the scene *en plein air*, which means to paint outdoors. Rose was friends with Claude Monet, an avid *en plein air* painter, and helped bring these ideas to the United States. Ask students what they think the benefits might be of painting *en plein air*? What might the challenges be? Would students like to paint *en plein air*? Why or why not?

Eucalyptus trees are not native to California and were planted in great numbers by European American settlers claiming land through the Homestead and Timber Culture Acts. As a class, discuss these acts and their legacy of racially exclusive property ownership. As scholar Linda Nash notes, white settlers believed the best way to create healthy environments was to introduce European American agricultural practices. Ask students how the introduction of non-native trees like the eucalyptus could have affected the environment and Indigenous communities.

Activities

Activities

The Impact of Westward Expansion on the Environment

In many ways, the eucalyptus tree is a symbol of westward expansion and the colonization of Indigenous lands by white settlers. As settlers moved west, claiming Indigenous lands through the Homestead and Timber Culture Acts, they also changed the environment with non-native tree species, believing that these species would create more healthful spaces. Ask students to identify an element of their local environment that has been altered through population changes and settlement. Challenge them to “show” their research through two landscape paintings: one before and one after.

The Great Eucalyptus Debate

The eucalyptus tree was planted by white settlers in great numbers after the Civil War and was believed to have special properties, including eliminating disease; it was often used for lumber and medicine. Many of these beliefs have since been debunked, but even today, the tree is the subject of great debate. Some environmentalists believe that non-native species, like the eucalyptus, should be removed from the ecosystem. Other environmentalists believe there is no way to return to a completely native ecosystem and that the removal of eucalyptus trees has drawbacks, including the use of chemicals to fully remove them.¹⁶

Assign students to learn more about this issue and then stage a debate in class, with one side arguing to keep eucalyptus trees and the other arguing to remove them. Encourage students to bring in images of the eucalyptus—paintings, photographs, or other—as part of their debate.

En Plein Air

After studying Impressionism in France, Guy Rose was an artist who introduced the idea and practice of *en plein air* painting to the United States. Now it is part of a tradition of landscape painting in California and beyond. Encourage students to try *en plein air* painting. They should bring their canvases and paints to an outdoor setting and, without first laying down a sketch, capture the light, shadow, color, and forms of the setting on their canvas. When they are finished, ask them to compare the experience of painting on-site to painting indoors. What are the benefits and drawbacks of each approach?

Ode to a Species

Guy Rose was not the only artist to turn his attention to the eucalyptus. A critic at the time called a group of landscapists the “Eucalyptus School.” Writers also loved the tree. Dr. George Wharton James, literary leader of the 1915 Panama-California International Exposition, wrote in his Exposition Memories: “Then, too, the trees! When the wind was blowing I fairly revelled in the moving pictures formed by the tall and stately eucalyptus against the pure blue San Diego sky.”¹⁷

Challenge students to identify a species of plant or animal in their neighborhood, town, or state that they love and want to paint or write an ode to. What aspects of this species will they highlight? How will they show their appreciation for it in paint or words?

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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