

About the Artwork



Louis Betts, *Mid-Winter, Coronado Beach*, circa 1907, Oil on canvas, 29 x 24 in. The Irvine Museum Collection at the UCI Institute and Museum of California Art

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In Louis Betts's (1873–1961) *Mid-Winter, Coronado Beach* (circa 1907), the California sun is its own character. It gleams from the sand, reflects off clothing and skin, and frolics amongst the shadows like visitors to the beach. In the painting's foreground, two children—one in summer whites and the other in a blue dress with matching bow—appear unsullied by their play in the golden sand. Just behind them, a statuesque woman wearing a bright white dress and shaded by an umbrella strolls past. Further in the background, a sea of beachgoers wade into the frothy surf. It is an idyllic scene that implies many sensory delights: sand in the toes, the spray of cool ocean water, and warm sun beating on skin. Indeed, the painting's title adds to the suggestion that these beachgoers are to be envied; this is "mid-winter." Those living in Chicago or New York at this time of year are suffering through the trials of a brutal season: icy sidewalks, creaky furnaces, frostbitten fingers, and cooped-up children. Meanwhile, here in Coronado Beach, a sandy peninsula off the coast of present-day San Diego, CA, life appears good.

Mid-Winter, Coronado Beach

Of course, the image is a highly romanticized one. It was produced as part of a railroad company's marketing campaign. Each year, the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railway invited popular painters on three- or four-week painting expeditions along train lines in New Mexico, Arizona, or California to make art for use by their advertising department. The resulting paintings were reproduced on train folders, calendars, travel brochures, and dining menus, and the originals displayed in train stations or ticket windows. In exchange, painters traveled for free. The Santa Fe route was used primarily to transport produce and cattle from the West to consumers in the eastern United States, and railroad owners wanted to drum up business for return trips by attracting tourists.³⁰

Betts participated in the travel program for two years starting in 1906, and he and other artists made images to appeal to European-Americans with money. This image, with its Impressionist style of loose brushstrokes

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and playful use of light, would have brought to mind social landscapes in the tradition of European and East Coast Impressionists like Auguste Renoir (1841–1919), Edouard Manet (1832–1883), or William Merritt Chase (1849–1916)—one of Betts' teachers—and their depictions of beach picnics and boating parties.³¹ Like other

East Coast Impressionists, Betts' subject matter differed from California Impressionist painters known primarily for their undeveloped, rugged landscapes.

Images by Betts and his fellow commissioned artists not only shaped the tourist industry but also contributed to the economic boom of the 1880s and rapid expansion of population in Southern California. Taken as a whole, they formed the basis for some of the earliest conceptions of California and the "West" in the minds of Americans. Viewed by those on the East Coast, this scene would have presented a very attractive vision of what a railway ticket to California could buy. Yet the construction of the railroads was not a boon to all. A direct result of railroad expansion was the colonization of millions of acres of Indigenous lands. In addition, Chinese laborers who had been recruited by the thousands to build these railroads—and who worked under dangerous conditions for as little as a dollar a day—were laid off after its completion. They found themselves unemployed in the state's depressed labor market of the 1870s. To make matters worse, many white Californians blamed Chinese immigrants for the poor economy and anti-Chinese riots broke out across the state. Eventually, many Californians came to believe that the white men who oversaw and profited from construction of the railroads had accumulated too much wealth and power. Angry citizens criticized the railroad as a monstrous "octopus" strangling other businesses and corrupting government. In this way, romanticized images like Betts' told an incomplete story of the transatlantic railroad and California in the late 19th century.³²

About the Artist

Louis Betts



Louis Betts, 1915. Photo from Alamy Bygone Collection.

About the Artist

Louis Betts (1873–1961) was born in Little Rock, AR. His mother died soon after he was born and his father, Edwin Daniel Betts, Sr. (1847–1915), was his first art teacher. After his father then married one of his mother's sisters, the family moved frequently. Louis Betts's half-siblings, all of whom also grew up to be painters, were each born in different cities: St. Louis, MO, Chicago, IL, and New York City.³³

In 1894, Betts moved to Philadelphia where he enrolled at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. While there, he studied with William Merritt Chase, one of the era's most respected art teachers. A successful Impressionist painter who had studied in Europe, Chase painted portraits, **still lifes**, and landscape scenes and was well known as a society portraitist. He often painted portraits of his students to demonstrate techniques in the classroom.³⁴ A portrait he made of Betts circa 1900 shows a confident man in rimless glasses.³⁵

Like his teacher, Betts specialized in **portraiture** and traveled to Europe to study the work of two 17th century painters known for their expressive brushwork and lively portrayal of sitters, Frans Hals (1582–1666) and Diego Velazquez (1599–1660). Betts left for Europe in 1902 with funds from a traveling scholarship.³⁶

By 1906, he had settled in Chicago where for two years after his return he participated in the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railway's artists program that invited popular painters on painting expeditions along train lines in New Mexico, Arizona, or California. The resulting paintings were reproduced by the advertising department; in exchange, the artists traveled for free.³⁷

In 1910, Betts moved to New York City where he became respected as a portrait and landscape painter and received many portrait commissions. Betts continued to paint Impressionistic works with bright colors, a playful use of light, and a loose style. At the time of his death in August 1961, Betts lived in Bronxville, NY.³⁸

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View and Discuss

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Ask students to imagine stepping into this painting. What would it be like to be there? Ask them to explore all their senses. What would they hear? Smell? Feel? Encourage them to describe the parts of the painting that they think suggest these sensory experiences.

Share the title, *Mid-Winter, Coronado Beach*, and ask students what it makes them think about the artwork.

Tell students that this painting was produced as part of an advertising campaign developed by a railroad company to increase tourism from the East Coast to the West Coast at the turn of the 20th century. What do they think about the painting now that they know this? Ask students to imagine the company wrote a slogan below the image. What would it be and why?

These images helped to shape conceptions of California across the country. What do students think of when they think of California? How does this image relate to their ideas about the state as it exists now, as well as the state's history?

Some have called these paintings produced for advertising purposes “romanticized” images. What do students think? In what ways might this be a romanticized image of California?

The construction of the railroad enabled people to travel west and discover beautiful scenes of leisure like this one. However, it also resulted in the colonization of millions of acres of Indigenous lands. Thousands of Chinese laborers also risked their lives for as little as a dollar a day to build the railroads and, after their completion, were left without employment and discriminated against by white Californians.

For more information on why and how people settled in California, see the California Historical Society's “Teaching California” primary sources:

www.teachingcalifornia.org/inquiry-sets/why-did-people-settle-in-california/

Also see these primary sources from the National Archives on the impact of westward expansion on Native American communities:

www.docsteach.org/activities/teacher/the-impact-of-westward-expansion-on-native-american-communities

Ask students: what scenes—positive and negative—would need to be painted to capture the real California of 1907?

Activities

Activities

Art and Marketing

Mid-Winter, Coronado Beach was painted as part of a marketing effort by a railroad company. Ask students if they can recall seeing ads for any travel destinations. How do travel companies advertise today? You might discuss social media marketing campaigns or more traditional methods like billboards. How do their images try to entice visitors? For this activity, students should step into the role of marketer. First, ask students to choose a place they love, whether it is somewhere they visit frequently or not. Then ask them to paint a picture of it that might entice people to visit. What techniques will they use? Will they make it realistic or romanticize aspects of the place? What perspectives, times of day, or scenes will they choose? After reflecting on their artworks together, discuss how marketing employs different artistic techniques.

Settling in California

Paintings like Louis Betts's were not the only reason why people settled in California. Most did not come for mid-winter vacations and leisurely walks on the beach. Talk with students about the reasons migrants and immigrants came to California throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries. For instance, thousands of Chinese laborers were recruited to help build the railroad. These jobs were dangerous and low-paying, and once the railroad was completed, the laborers were left without employment and became the focus of anti-Chinese violence. View and analyze the photographs and other primary sources on these sites—about settlement in California and work on the transatlantic railroad, respectively—and compare to images like Betts'. Here are two useful references:
www.teachingcalifornia.org/inquiry-sets/why-did-people-settle-in-california/
<https://calisphere.org/exhibitions/18/the-transcontinental-railroad/>

Encourage students to pick one figure from either Betts's painting or a photograph from the time. Assuming the perspective of that figure, they should write a postcard home to a family member or friend and describe the California they have encountered. What different perspectives of California do these postcards reveal?

The Impact of Art on the Environment in the West

European American artists had a major impact on the environment in the western United States. Population booms and industrial development from colonial settlement and tourism dramatically increased water and air pollution and led to major changes in agriculture. While paintings like Betts' spurred greater public appreciation for environmental treasures and legislation to protect them, these changes often resulted in dire consequences for some groups. Thomas Moran's (1837–1926) watercolor paintings of Yellowstone in 1871 led to the creation of the first national park. During an 1872 debate in Washington, DC, railroad executives used the paintings in their argument for land **preservation**.³⁹ However, the creation of the national parks also resulted in the displacement of Native Americans from Indigenous territories their ancestors had historically occupied and used.

Activities

Artworks made by Indigenous artists offer a different perspective. As a class, research artists such as Jaune Quick-to-See Smith (b. 1940) and Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds (b. 1954) or California-based artists such as Gerald Clarke, Jr. (b. 1967) and Mercedes Dorame (b. 1980). What stories do they tell? What images do they use to tell them? How do they compare to artists like Betts?

Then ask students to select an environmental issue they care about—whether it is the preservation of an endangered species or body of water or a type of pollution they are concerned about. Ask them to think about and research that issue from multiple perspectives and give oral presentations to the class about what they learn. For older students, these presentations could include proposed legislation. As an added challenge, students could be asked to create persuasive posters to bolster their oral arguments.

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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