

Spiritual Geographies: Religion and Landscape Art in California, 1890 – 1930

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Introduction

Why did landscape painting become a spiritual pursuit at the dawn of California's modernity?

Between 1890 and 1930, California gained a national reputation as a mystical place, tolerant of old and new creeds. In 1930, for instance, *Time* magazine remarked on “the flourishing of cults, of religious novelties, and new fashions in faiths” in the state, concluding that “Flowery, sun-drenched California, where Nature exhibits herself in mystical opulence . . . is particularly propitious for this flourishing.” California's natural world, in other words, was seen as a symbol and a catalyst of its spiritual effervescence.

The state's diverse environments also inspired its art. *Spiritual Geographies* explores how artists channeled religious beliefs into landscape painting as the awesome beauty of California's wilderness and countryside were reconfiguring notions of the divine and sacred. Alongside artworks, the exhibition presents historical publications—often those read or written by Californian artists—that inserted landscape into theological discussions or used religious concepts to comment on landscape art.

The art on view frequently portrays places and flora which hold sacred meaning for California's Indigenous peoples, many of whom were converted forcibly to Christianity and dispossessed of their ancestral lands by colonists and settlers. Their mistreatment exposes the limits and contradictions of California's religious openness at the time. The exhibition acknowledges the original and enduring spiritual significance of these scenes to specific Indigenous communities.

Nature Mysticism from Painting to Print

As the Gold Rush ended in 1855, most Californians decried their wilderness as a godless place, occupied by unchurched Indigenous populations and sinfully greedy prospectors. Nature's only apparent value was as a source of raw materials. However, the popular writings of Rev. Thomas Starr King, John Muir, and Mary Hunter Austin, among others, soon attributed a positive, sacred quality to local wildlands. These thinkers combined Christian ideals with transcendentalism to articulate a mysticism of nature. Immersive

contemplation of the landscape, they argued, could lead to enthralling cosmic insights, and even communion with the divine.

Their mystical appreciation of California's wilderness, especially the Sierra Nevada, spurred its federal protection—an activism that Muir described as “spiritual lobbying.” Conscious that pious East Coast audiences, including Congress, knew the West primarily through art, Muir appealed to them by likening God to an artist whose masterpiece was Yosemite Valley, a key site in the Sierra for Muir's spiritual awakening. Structured like landscape paintings, Muir's influential essays were also heavily illustrated by acclaimed painters, including Thomas Hill and William Keith, who gushed, “We almost thought [Muir] was Jesus Christ. We fairly worshiped him!” Later artists, such as Maurice Braun and Alfred Mitchell, also studied Muir.

Yet while Muir used art to valorize wildlands, his mysticism ultimately directed him to appreciate nature for more than its visual and artistic aspects, inspiring artists to rethink the conventions of landscape painting.

Land as Holy Scripture for Protestants

After a session painting outdoors in 1898, the artist William Wendt exulted in California's immaculate environment, concluding “The perfection of this Spring day makes one think of Genesis when the earth was young.” Like many of his fellow Protestants, Wendt saw California's pristine landscape in Biblical terms, as God's unmarred creation.

A diverse group of Christian denominations, Protestant Evangelicals shared a belief that reading the Bible granted them direct access to God—an immediacy that preachers compared to the instantaneity of sight, and which made reading and seeing analogous activities. And because nature, like the Bible, was a divine creation, its observation offered a similar unmediated contact with God. Protestant sermons and theological tracts therefore often used landscape painting and natural scenery as devotional tools to help congregations visualize religious narratives.

In this culture, the titles of paintings assumed a special weight. Though the works in this gallery were created in the 20th century, some draw titles from popular hymns or Christian poetry of the Second Great Awakening, a period of Protestant religious revival in the early 19th century. Other titles underscore the land's godly majesty, infinity, or eternity, or literalize a view of landscape as holy text such as Emil Kosa, Jr.'s painting *How Marvelous Thy Works* to the left of this panel.

Theosophy's Harmonious Landscapes

In 1897, the Theosophical Society established its new headquarters in Point Loma, San Diego. Still a new religion, theosophy sought to express universal truths by studying nature and synthesizing concepts from science, occultism, and many ancient faiths, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Judaism. Though its adherents were splintered into several factions (some of whom resided in Ojai and Los Angeles), theosophy produced far-reaching publications and well-attended conferences that exerted an outsized influence on an international cultural elite, which included many Californian artists.

Theosophy's optimistic outlook valued harmony and the ineffable wisdom gained by looking beyond material appearances. Many theosophist artists, such as Maurice Braun and Leonard Lester, rejected past styles of landscape painting, finding fault with their sublimity and drama, which, as Lester observed, triggered "bodily reactions" and "disequilibrium" and converted the artist into "a messenger of discontent." Theosophist artists preferred modest, peaceful scenes that could induce a serene mindset and allow for "inner vision." As Braun argued, art could be "the language of the soul, conveying a mystic message to other souls for the purpose of awakening them to a greater realization of themselves as souls with a divine heritage."

Theosophy's understanding of art as a divine conduit between nature, the artist, and viewers gave spiritual significance to the practice of painting outdoors. The meditative and healing mood experienced by the artist in nature was channeled to others through the work of art.

The Catholic Past for a Protestant Future

The growing influence of Protestants in California had, by 1900, significantly eroded the longstanding dominance of the state's Catholics, many of whom were Indigenous or mixed-race Mexican Americans. Anti-Catholic sentiment, often dovetailing with white supremacy, surged in the 1880s, 1890s, and 1920s, even as the state's Catholic colonial heritage was paradoxically recast in positive terms. In the popular 1884 novel *Ramona*, for example, a sentimental tale unfolded amid California's neglected Catholic missions. Despite their history of Indigenous exploitation, these ruins served, to quote the book, as emblems of "a picturesque life, with more of sentiment and gayety in it . . . more romance, than will ever be seen again."

The period's art embodied these conflicting attitudes towards California's Catholic past. Plein air paintings of beautified ruins romanticized Catholic missions but also revived a key trope of mid-19th-century landscape painting—namely, depictions of pagan or vaguely Mediterranean civilizations in decline, as seen in landscapes by Thomas Cole, Frederic Church, and Jasper Francis Cropsey, among others. These ruins served as portents of Protestant dominance, and even of Christ's second coming. Paintings of Catholic missions were, therefore, Janus-faced: nostalgic recuperations of the Catholic past, and intimations of Catholicism's decadence and imminent replacement by an ascendant Protestant elite.