

Common Ground: Early 20th-Century Artist Communities in Southern California

Intro Panel

In the early 20th century, three artistic communities, located in Los Angeles, Laguna Beach, and La Jolla, catalyzed the development of California plein-air painting, art created outdoors that sought to capture the transient effects of light and atmosphere through vibrant colors and lively brushstrokes. These artistic outposts were defined by clubs with selective membership as well as looser associations with open membership and a more egalitarian attitude.

Despite occasional disagreements about membership and which works to present in group exhibitions, these circles cultivated friendships and artistic exchange. Some of their members, such as George Gardner Symons and William Wendt, traveled together and painted in each other's company. Others, like Frank Cuprien and Maurice Braun, transformed their homes into exhibition halls and gathering places for fellow artists. Shared memberships across these groups further multiplied the connections between creative spirits. Though exclusively for artists, these groups never lost sight of the broader community, promoting "a spirit of cooperation and fellowship between the painter and public," as the constitution of the Laguna Beach Art Association states.

These bustling artist colonies valued camaraderie, but also spearheaded suburban development—even as their works focus on scenes of seemingly uninhabited and unmarred wilderness. The works on view promote a mythical image of California as an untamed and deserted frontier that belies both the gregariousness and reciprocity of their social world, and the incipient suburbanization they fostered. The exhibition maps out these invisible social terrains through its juxtapositions of landscape paintings by key figures from each artistic community.

The Painters' Club of Los Angeles

Founded in 1906, the Painters' Club of Los Angeles was a small, short-lived artist association composed mainly of recent arrivals to the developing city. The intimate club was invitation-only and limited membership to men, thereby excluding notable Los Angeles artists such as Marion Kavanaugh Wachtel and Julia Bracken Wendt. By staging regular meetings at members' homes or studios, the club fostered lively debates on new works. Membership soon grew to over 50 artists.

Committed to depicting the California landscape, the group was championed by Antony Anderson, a founding member of the club and the first art critic of the *Los Angeles Times*, who described the group in 1906 as "an association for mutual betterment in their craft and for

good-fellowship.” Despite its growing size and a regular exhibition program that drew substantial audiences, the club disbanded in 1909. Accounts attribute this to the disgruntlement of members who were upset when their works were not selected for the club’s second and final juried exhibition. Historians have also speculated that the club’s exclusion of women was a contributing factor in its dissolution.

Franz A. Bischoff, *Santa Cruz Island, Near Easton’s Landing, 1918*

Before emigrating to Los Angeles with his family in 1906, Bischoff was known for decorative portrayals of roses on porcelain objects such as the vase adjacent to this work. After his move, Bischoff became a member of the Painters’ Club of Los Angeles and, influenced by his new colleagues, came to favor landscape painting. This painting of Santa Cruz Island renders the island’s hills, rocks, sand, and trees in muddy grays and ochres, a sharp contrast with the delicate pinks and mauves common to his work on porcelain.

William Wendt, *The Lake, View from Lake Vista Trail, 1940*

Wendt, who moved from Chicago to Los Angeles in 1906, was a member of the Painters’ Club of Los Angeles and co-founded the Laguna Beach Art Association after relocating there in 1912. Wendt advocated painting directly from the landscape using loose brushstrokes, thereby upholding the techniques of Impressionism, which dominated the output of these artists. This later painting demonstrates a lifelong adherence to the style Wendt and his colleagues developed during their years in the Painters’ Club. He held to this approach during the rise of modernist painting, describing abstraction somewhat crankily as “the modern way of many young painters, flip wielders of the brush who are forever striving for an ‘effect’ I have no patience with.”

William Wendt, *Two Soles, circa 1898*

In these illustrated quotations, which borrow lines from popular 19th-century plays, Wendt puns on “sole/soul.” The second quote comes from the play *Ingomar the Barbarian*, which originated in Germany—like Wendt—and toured extensively in the United States. The shoe soles allude to Wendt’s extensive travels, which began in 1880 while the artist lived in Chicago and included frequent trips to California. These objects, wedding presents to a friend of Wendt’s, express an impulse to travel that foreshadows Wendt’s subsequent move to Los Angeles in 1906 where, along with other recent arrivals, he joined the Painters’ Club.

Jack Wilkinson Smith, *Sand Dunes and Cypress*

Smith began his career as a commercial artist in the Midwest, where he painted watercolor scenes of California in his spare time, inspired by photographs and his imagination. After settling in Los Angeles in 1906, he joined the Painters' Club of Los Angeles and transitioned to oil painting, a medium he believed better captured the state's dynamic mountains and coastlines. This work depicts one such landscape, with towering cypress trees atop wind-whipped dunes, their grandeur emphasized by a lone, diminutive figure in the foreground. Smith's commitment to his community extended beyond his involvement in the Painters' Club: he helped found the California Art Club and established the Biltmore Salon, an Alhambra gallery dedicated to promoting Southern California artists.

The Laguna Beach Art Association

Surrounded by rolling hills, Laguna Beach was conceived as a tourist destination and an artistic haven. Settlers constructed and financed the area's first hotels in the 1880s. Among them was Joseph Yoch, who hosted artists in his family's cottages and showcased their work in his hotels. A tight-knit community of artists blossomed in this sparsely populated coastal retreat.

These artists often depicted the idyllic local landscape in their works, enhancing the area's reputation as an artistic community. In 1918, a group of artists including Anna Althea Hills, Edgar and Elsie Palmer Payne, and Frank Cuprien established the Laguna Beach Art Association (LBAA) to foster artistic and intellectual exchange. The group took on the task of refurbishing an old local building into a temporary gallery space. As Cuprien stated, "Everybody worked for it without animosity or argument . . . we knew what it would mean to the future of the town."

Unlike some other art clubs, the LBAA supported women artists and promoted their visibility in exhibitions. They also welcomed members of other artistic communities in Southern California, including the California Art Club and Women Painters of the West. Over decades, the LBAA gathered a sizable permanent collection and began operating as the Laguna Art Museum in 1972.

Frank Cuprien, *Reflections of Evening*

Cuprien visited Laguna Beach in 1912 and, captivated by its beauty, built a studio-home on a coastal cliff. He named it "The Viking" to imply his conquest of the open sea. His unparalleled view of the Pacific Ocean would inspire many of his paintings. *Reflections of Evening* depicts a shimmering ocean with waves caressing the shoreline and reflecting the glow of the setting sun. Cuprien channeled his adoration for the Laguna landscape into support for the local arts community and played a key role in establishing and nurturing the Laguna Beach Art Association.

William Lees Judson, *The Wendts at Laguna Beach*

Judson was a leading figure of the Arts and Crafts Movement in Los Angeles and visited Laguna Beach in search of inspiration. His connection with fellow artists William Wendt and Julia Bracken Wendt likely developed at the Los Angeles-based California Art Club, born from the breakup of the Painters' Club of Los Angeles. The Wendts relocated to Laguna Beach in 1918 and embraced a more secluded lifestyle, seldom attending social events. Wendt even posted a sign that read "no visitors" on his studio door. Judson's painting captures an intimate moment between the pair as they contemplate the crashing waves, immersed in their own private world.

George Gardner Symons, *Heisler Cove*

Symons divided his time between winters in New York and summers painting in California and was among the first artists to establish a studio in Laguna Beach. His appreciation for the natural landscape prompted him to spend three months sketching in Laguna Canyon with painter William Wendt. While Symons's New York paintings were relatively subdued, his California paintings used a bright palette and an expressive style to convey the brilliant light of the summer season. *Heisler Cove* portrays coastal rock formations with bold brushstrokes, infusing the scene with drama and movement.

William Alexander Griffith, *In Laguna Canyon*

After a brief visit to California in 1918, Griffith resigned his position as an art professor at the University of Kansas and settled permanently in Laguna Beach. There he adopted diverse mediums, capturing mountain flora in oil paint and leisurely beach scenes in pastels. Griffith's fascination with the rugged hills of the Laguna region led him to embark on frequent multi-day painting excursions into the wilderness, a feat of exertion unparalleled by the Impressionists or East Coast plein air painters. This painting shows Laguna Canyon in spring and foregrounds wildflowers blanketing uncultivated terrain while verdant hills extend beyond the canvas's edges.

Elsie Palmer Payne, *Laguna Coast*

After moving to Laguna Beach in 1918, Elsie Palmer Payne and her husband, Edgar Payne, became integral figures in the local art scene and founding members of the LBAA. With a background in commercial illustration, Elsie depicted landscapes and human figures with solid structure, graceful lines, and vibrant colors. While married to Edgar, she eschewed oil painting, his primary medium, embracing instead a diverse array of subjects, including still lifes and street scenes, in works on paper and bronze sculptures. Unlike some of her contemporaries, Elsie was drawn to the intimate charm of everyday life and often worked at smaller scales. A gouache on

paper depicting the Laguna Coast is here juxtaposed with four bronze figures, testifying to her versatility.

Art communities in La Jolla

Initially a sparsely populated village between Los Angeles and San Diego, La Jolla's cultural scene was sparked by the arrival of Anna Held in 1894. Held, the former secretary of British actress Ellen Terry, used her land to build uniquely designed "carpenter gothic" cottages. Dubbed the Green Dragon, they served as a vibrant gathering place for poets, musicians, and painters.

Held's entourage and the thriving artistic environment of the Green Dragon seeded the ground for future developments. When the British newspaper magnate Ellen Browning Scripps moved to San Diego in 1896 and built a home in La Jolla, she too became a patron of the arts. In 1918, Scripps agreed to fund the La Jolla Art Association. Proposed by Eleanor Parkes, who became the organization's president, its founding members included Alfred Mitchell, Charles Fries, and Maurice Braun, among others. Progressive in nature and led by women, the association's first exhibition was hosted by the Woman's Club in La Jolla in 1919.

Charles Arthur Fries, *Looking down Mission Valley, Summertime*

Fries co-founded the La Jolla Art Association. Where many of the association's painters focused on La Jolla's lush coastal scenery, Fries aimed to capture, as one writer put it in 1931, "the spirit of the California desert." Using warm colors such as brown, beige, and ochre, his work conveys the aridity of California's inland terrain. The work's middle ground features the winding San Diego River, the lifeblood of the region and essential for sustaining the coastal towns. Despite depicting a seemingly desolate and empty landscape, the painting subtly indicates the presence of a larger community by highlighting the river as the element that makes society in this area possible.

Alfred Mitchell, *The Cliff, La Jolla*

Mitchell believed that color is "a living force" that expresses the vitality of nature. "Most of my palette consists of strong colors," he wrote. His portrayal of coastal La Jolla exemplifies this belief by depicting a seascape using an unusual yellow hue instead of the typical blue. This innovative use of color also reflects Mitchell's dynamic artistic community. In 1929, Mitchell, alongside his mentor Braun and fellow artist Fries, co-founded the Associated Artists of San Diego. Later renamed the Contemporary Artists of San Diego, this group represented the thriving professional art community that had emerged in the region.

Colin Campbell Cooper, *Magic City, San Diego*

Though based in Santa Barbara, Cooper traveled frequently throughout Southern California and was an active member of the San Diego Art Guild and the La Jolla Art Association. In 1916, he attended the Panama-California Exposition in San Diego, chosen to host the world's fair due in part to its burgeoning art scene. Cooper was captivated by the Spanish-inspired buildings created for the exposition, many of which remain today in Balboa Park. Aiming to convey "the magic city of Old Spain," Cooper's work depicts romantic buildings emerging from blooming vegetation, with the Cabrillo Bridge leading us toward the architectural marvels ahead.