HABITAT: MAKING THE CALIFORNIA ENVIRONMENT

CURATED BY JAMES NISBET

SEPTEMBER 20, 2025–JANUARY 10, 2026

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, IRVINE
JACK AND SHANAZ LANGSON
INSTITUTE AND MUSEUM OF CALIFORNIA ART

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In his introduction to the influential book *Landscape and Power* (1994), scholar W. J. T. Mitchell opens with a provocative aspiration—"to change 'landscape' from a noun to a verb."[1] Landscape, as Mitchell goes on to explain, is not merely a view of something or an otherwise static thing, but a cultural formation that acts as an agent of influence. It creates and then normalizes particular ways of looking at the world, which in turn forms expectations for how our world should look and how we should act within it.

While many societies over thousands of years—arguably dating back to prehistoric cave paintings—have incorporated different practices of depicting the natural environment within their visual arts, the tradition of landscape painting in which the artists featured in *Habitat* were trained originated in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic. During that time, artists began creating pictures in which land was the central subject, and in which humans and other animals were either tiny in scale or absent altogether. Viewers of these pictures were (and still are) invited to contemplate the significance of land and plant species as important subjects in their own right. In those Dutch paintings, made by artists such as Jacob van Ruisdael and Philips Koninck, the local lands pictured—including agricultural fields, roads, forested groves, and waterways—would have resonated strongly as environments that had been drained, shaped, or altered to suit human needs.

Though many of those same influences appear more indirectly in the collection of paintings assembled in *Habitat*, the role of human stewardship in their depicted landscapes is no less important. Our language and culture still perpetuate words like "nature" and "wilderness" to describe places imagined to exist outside of human influence, but such places are not only fabrications, but actually, importantly, fabrications that we ourselves have generated.[2] The paintings on display, therefore, do not purport to show California nature or wilderness, but rather habitats, places that are inhabited and that support different forms of life, whether human, animal, plant, mineral, atmospheric, or otherwise.

In planning this exhibition, I paused more than once on the show's subtitle. To suggest that the artists—or, more accurately, residents of California—have "made" its environment and continue "making" it to this day stems from a slightly different position of shared responsibility. Environments are indeed never made on their own, but nor have humans alone fashioned the biological worlds in which we abide. The hubris of suggesting as much lurks beneath the increasingly popular notion of the Anthropocene, a new geological age created by human activity in a mere fraction of the time that shaped prior eras. It also lingers in projects like Biosphere 2 in Arizona, or popular phrases like "spaceship earth," which suggest that our technological capacity is so great as to be able to completely replicate or control life on our planet.

Reality is always messier. Just as history is written (as the adage goes) by those in power, the kind of environmental "making" that is possible among different groups in society is similarly uneven. On April 15, 2025—the very day that chief curator Alaina Claire Feldman and I began planning this essay—I attended a presentation on the UC Irvine campus by the Tongva biologist and science illustrator Samantha Morales Johnson Yang titled "Tongva Ecology and Our Relationship to Fire." The presentation responded to the devastating fires that struck Southern California at the beginning of the year, but its relevance reached well beyond present-day land and fire management policies. When first Spanish, then Mexican and US colonists violently removed California's Native peoples from their traditional homelands, the stewardship of those lands radically changed. In Tongva sciences, as in other Indigenous sciences, there are four siblings of development in the history of the planet—elemental, vegetable, animal, and then human—with each subsequent group being more dependent on and less wise than the groups that came before. Humans need other animals more than they need one another, those animals need plants, and so forth. This recognition of environmental adaptation assumes a more fragile understanding of human culture and influence than is perpetuated by Western science. Against the hubris of environments *made* by humans, such a worldview emphasizes the obligation of human activities to mutually support the life forms that preceded and sustain our existence.

The paintings on display in *Habitat* offer views of California in flux between the beginning of the changes initiated by colonization and the present day—changes that are registered in the shifting landscape of plants. These paintings show, for instance, a number of plant species that are not native to California as well as native ecosystems that are now widely disappearing. With respect to fire, in particular, many of the plants that have been "introduced" to our state, such as black mustard and eucalyptus, ignite easily and spread fire quickly. And beyond the sheer fuel loads of the plants now growing throughout California, Native Californians have also been prohibited for hundreds of years from carrying out the controlled burns that previously created fire breaks, kept fuel loads manageable, promoted the healthy growth of native plants, and curtailed the natural occurrence of fire from reaching the devasting scales of the disasters that now regularly ravage the state.

The Canadian eco-critic Catriona Sandilands has reflected on the vexed experience of actually trying to eradicate invasive plants. Of Scotch broom, an invasive species in the Pacific Northwest region of North America that maintains no value to local Indigenous cultural practices and spreads rapidly across untended lands, she comments (shears in hand):

> Despite my loppers, I have mixed feelings about my participation in broom busting (aka bashing, blasting, or blitzing). Part of me is uncomfortable with the ease with which the often-connected concepts of "alien" and "invasive" are applied to plants that, for the most part, white settlers don't want to have around at this historical moment. Plants like scotch broom are, in my experience, largely categorized as invasive because they interrupt current colonial economic and aesthetic interests and not only (or even mostly) because they are non-native (exotic) or ecologically intrusive (invasive), although they may also be both. The very definition of an invasive plant as a foreign, unruly species that exceeds the interspecies dependency of anthropogenic cultivation—that is, it has naturalized and continues to thrive and expand without human assistance—makes it clear that the concept of invasiveness is as much about control as anything else.[3]

This notion of control is provocative because it separates the native and the invasive, and/or alien, as separate, not only by a history of place, but also by their trajectories within an ecosystem. Control, power, and the fantasy of making new worlds—these ideas and their legacies are all intermixed. Native species, by implication, long ago worked out their relationship to coexisting with other species in the region, while some introduced species, like Scotch broom, or mustard, or eucalyptus, don't play well with others. As Sandilands, alongside scholars including Robin Wall Kimmerer, Nicholas Reo, and Laura Ogden, has argued, addressing the invasiveness of so-called invasive species is "not just a matter of cutting [Scotch] broom in bloom [and] definitely not a matter of buying and applying [chemicals like]

Roundup," but rather about attending more carefully and truthfully to the introduction, history, and ongoing role of particular species in particular ecosystems.[4] What is needed, in other words, is clear-eyed resistance to the repercussions of colonialism, rather than of a plant.

It is remarkable how capacious works of art can be. Viewers might appreciate the individual style of a William Alexander Griffith or Marion Wachtel, or the beauty of the paint handling, the color, or even the places depicted in certain pictures in *Habitat*. Rather than addressing any of these works individually, however, this essay has sought to offer an additional perspective. Looking at the whole group of landscape pictures on display in the exhibition—at this precise moment in time, during ongoing debates about how to effectively address the current climate crisis and promote environmental justice—these paintings open a window onto California's changing terrains that connects the politics of plant geographies to the continuing struggle to decolonize lands, environments, and social orders.

1
W. J. T. Mitchell, "Introduction," in *Landscape and Power*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (University of Chicago Press, 1994), 1.

2
See for instance Raymond Williams, "Ideas of Nature," in *Ecology: The Shaping Enquiry*, ed. Jonathan Benthall (Longman, 1972), 146–64; *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (W. W. Norton, 1996); Kyle Whyte, "Settler Colonialism, Ecology, and Environmental Justice," *Environment and Society: Advances in Research* 9 (2018): 125–44.

3
Catriona Sandilands, "Loving the Difficult: Scotch Broom," in *Kin: Thinking with Deborah Bird Rose*, ed. Thom van Dooren and Matthew Chrulew (Duke University Press, 2022), 35–36.

4
Sandilands, "Loving the Difficult," 38–39. See also Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (Milkweed, 2013); Nicholas J. Reo and Laura A. Ogden, "Anishnaabe Aki: An Indigenous Perspective on the Global Threat of Invasive Species," *Sustainability Science* 13 (2018): 1443–52.

EXHIBITION CURATOR: JAMES NISBET
INTERIM MUSEUM DIRECTOR: RICHARD ASTE
CHIEF CURATOR AND SERIES EDITOR: ALAINA CLAIRE FELDMAN
GRAPHIC DESIGN: SCOTT PONIK
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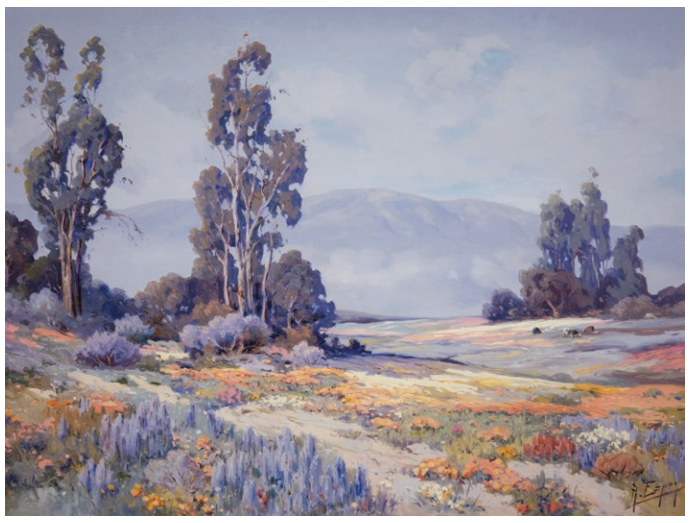
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, IRVINE
JACK AND SHANAZ LANGSON
INSTITUTE AND MUSEUM OF CALIFORNIA ART

HOURS: TUESDAY–SATURDAY, 10 AM–4 PM
IMCA.UCI.EDU

INTERIM MUSEUM LOCATION:
18881 VON KARMAN AVENUE, SUITE 100
IRVINE, CA 92612

HABITAT: MAKING THE CALIFORNIA ENVIRONMENT

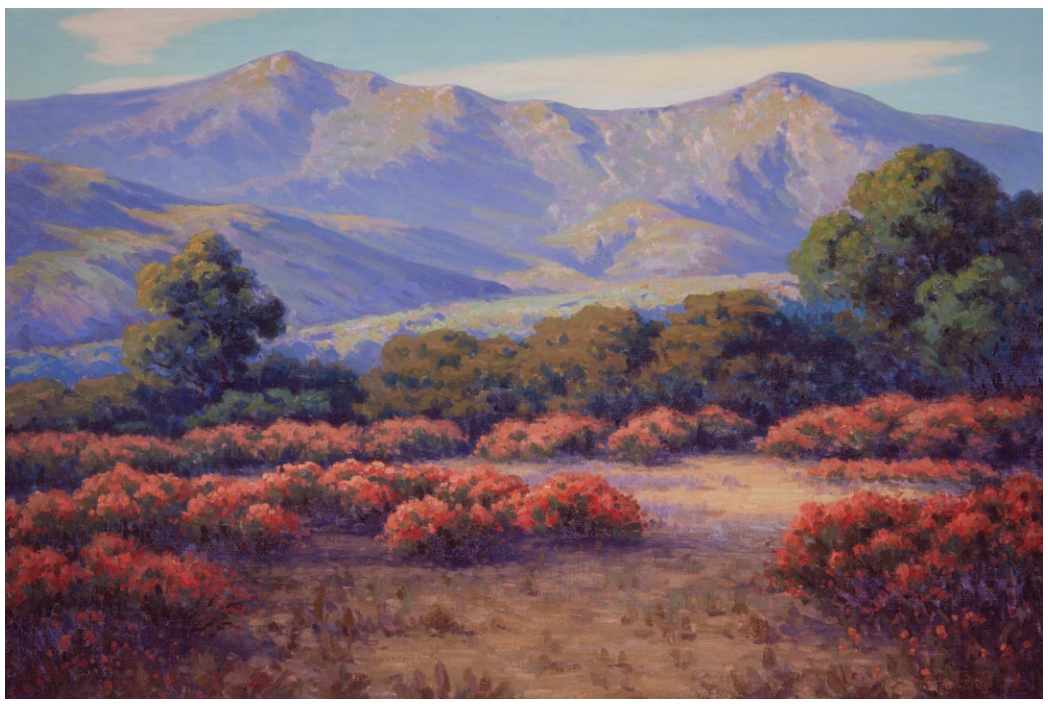
Works in the Exhibition



ANGEL ESPOY, *UNTITLED (POPPIES, LUPINES AND COWS)*, AFTER 1914

William Adam
Back Corridor, San Juan Capistrano Mission, after 1894
Oil on board
15 ¾ × 20 ⅞ in.
UC Irvine Jack and Shanaz Langson Institute and Museum of California Art.
Gift of The Irvine Museum

Harry Cassie Best
Redwoods, circa 1910
Oil on canvas
36 × 20 in.
UC Irvine Jack and Shanaz Langson Institute and Museum of California Art.
Gift of The Irvine Museum



JOHN M. GAMBLE, *RED BUCKWHEAT, SANTA BARBARA*, AFTER 1906

Elizabeth Jaynes Borglum
Mission San Juan Capistrano, after 1908
Oil on canvas
15 × 22 in.
UC Irvine Jack and Shanaz Langson Institute and Museum of California Art.
Gift of The Irvine Museum

George K. Brandriff
The Bells of Old San Juan, between 1929 and 1933
Oil on canvas
20 × 24 ¼ in.
UC Irvine Jack and Shanaz Langson Institute and Museum of California Art.
Gift of The Irvine Museum

George K. Brandriff
Sacred Garden, between 1929 and 1933
Oil on canvas
20 ¼ × 24 ¼ in.
UC Irvine Jack and Shanaz Langson Institute and Museum of California Art.
Gift of The Irvine Museum

Maurice Braun
California Hills, 1914
Oil on canvas
40 ⅜ × 53 ⅛ in.
UC Irvine Jack and Shanaz Langson Institute and Museum of California Art.
Gift of The Irvine Museum

Maurice Braun
Summer's Sycamores, after 1909
Oil on canvas
25 ⅜ × 30 ⅛ in.
UC Irvine Jack and Shanaz Langson Institute and Museum of California Art.
Gift of The Irvine Museum

Curtis Chamberlin
The Old Coast Road (Arch Beach Road), after 1917
Oil on board
19 ⅞ × 35 ⅞ in.
UC Irvine Jack and Shanaz Langson Institute and Museum of California Art.
Gift of The Irvine Museum

Alson Skinner Clark
San Diego Mission, 1922
Oil on board
16 × 20 in.
UC Irvine Jack and Shanaz Langson Institute and Museum of California Art.
Gift of The Irvine Museum

William Swift Daniell
San Juan Capistrano Mission, between 1905 and 1923
Oil on board
9 × 12 in.
UC Irvine Jack and Shanaz Langson Institute and Museum of California Art.
Gift of The Irvine Museum

Julie Mathilde Morrow DeForest
In the Mission Garden, San Juan Capistrano, 1928
Oil on canvas
26 ⅛ × 30 ¼ in.
UC Irvine Jack and Shanaz Langson Institute and Museum of California Art.
Gift of The Irvine Museum

Frederick Melville DuMond
Laguna Beach, 1911
Oil on canvas
24 ¼ × 36 ¼ in.
UC Irvine Jack and Shanaz Langson Institute and Museum of California Art.
Gift of The Irvine Museum

Angel Espoy
Untitled (Poppies, Lupines and Cows), after 1914
Oil on canvas
30 ⅛ × 40 ⅜ in.
UC Irvine Jack and Shanaz Langson Institute and Museum of California Art.
Gift of The Irvine Museum

Ben Foster
Irvine Orange Grove, between 1910 and 1919
Oil on canvas
18 ¼ × 22 in.
UC Irvine Jack and Shanaz Langson Institute and Museum of California Art.
Gift of The Irvine Museum

John Frost
Near Lone Pine, California, circa 1924
Oil on canvas
9 × 12 in.
James Irvine Swinden Family Collection

John M. Gamble
Calce de Oro (Poppy Field near Banning), before 1939
Oil on canvas
30 ¼ × 40 ⅛ in.
UC Irvine Jack and Shanaz Langson Institute and Museum of California Art.
Gift of The Irvine Museum

WILLIAM ALEXANDER GRIFFITH, *IN LAGUNA CANYON*, 1928

John M. Gamble
Red Buckwheat, Santa Barbara, after 1906
Oil on canvas
28 ¼ × 42 ¼ in.
UC Irvine Jack and Shanaz Langson Institute and Museum of California Art.
Gift of The Irvine Museum

Percy Gray
California Landscape with Rambling Fence, 1930
Watercolor on paper
31 ½ × 39 ⅜
The Buck Collection at UC Irvine Jack and Shanaz Langson Institute and Museum of California Art

William Alexander Griffith
In Laguna Canyon, before 1928
Oil on canvas
30 ⅛ × 40 ¼ in.
UC Irvine Jack and Shanaz Langson Institute and Museum of California Art.
Gift of The Irvine Museum

William Alexander Griffith
In Laguna Canyon, 1928
Oil on canvas
30 ¼ × 40 ¼ in.
UC Irvine Jack and Shanaz Langson Institute and Museum of California Art.
Gift of The Irvine Museum from prior gift of Mrs. Josephine N. Milnor

William Alexander Griffith
Sycamore Trees, Early Spring, 1923
Oil on canvas
20 ⅛ × 24 ⅛ in.
UC Irvine Jack and Shanaz Langson Institute and Museum of California Art.
Gift of The Irvine Museum

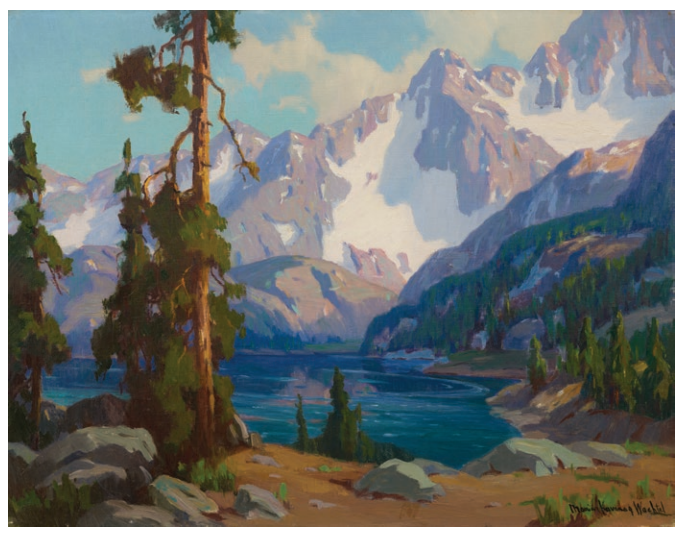
Joseph Kleitsch
Red and Green, 1923
Oil on canvas
36 ¼ × 40 ¼ in.
UC Irvine Jack and Shanaz Langson Institute and Museum of California Art.
Gift of The Irvine Museum

Paul Lauritz
Autumn near Big Bear Lake, after 1919
Oil on canvas
28 × 34 in.
UC Irvine Jack and Shanaz Langson Institute and Museum of California Art.
Gift of The Irvine Museum

Paul Lauritz
September Eucalyptus, 1923
Oil on canvas
40 ⅛ × 46 ½ in.
UC Irvine Jack and Shanaz Langson Institute and Museum of California Art.
Gift of The Irvine Museum

George Henry Melcher
The Eternal Hills, after 1907
Oil on canvas
30 × 40 ¼ in.
UC Irvine Jack and Shanaz Langson Institute and Museum of California Art.
Gift of The Irvine Museum

Frank Moore
Poppies and Lupines, between 1928 and 1967
Oil on board
24 ⅛ × 30 in.
UC Irvine Jack and Shanaz Langson Institute and Museum of California Art.
Gift of The Irvine Museum



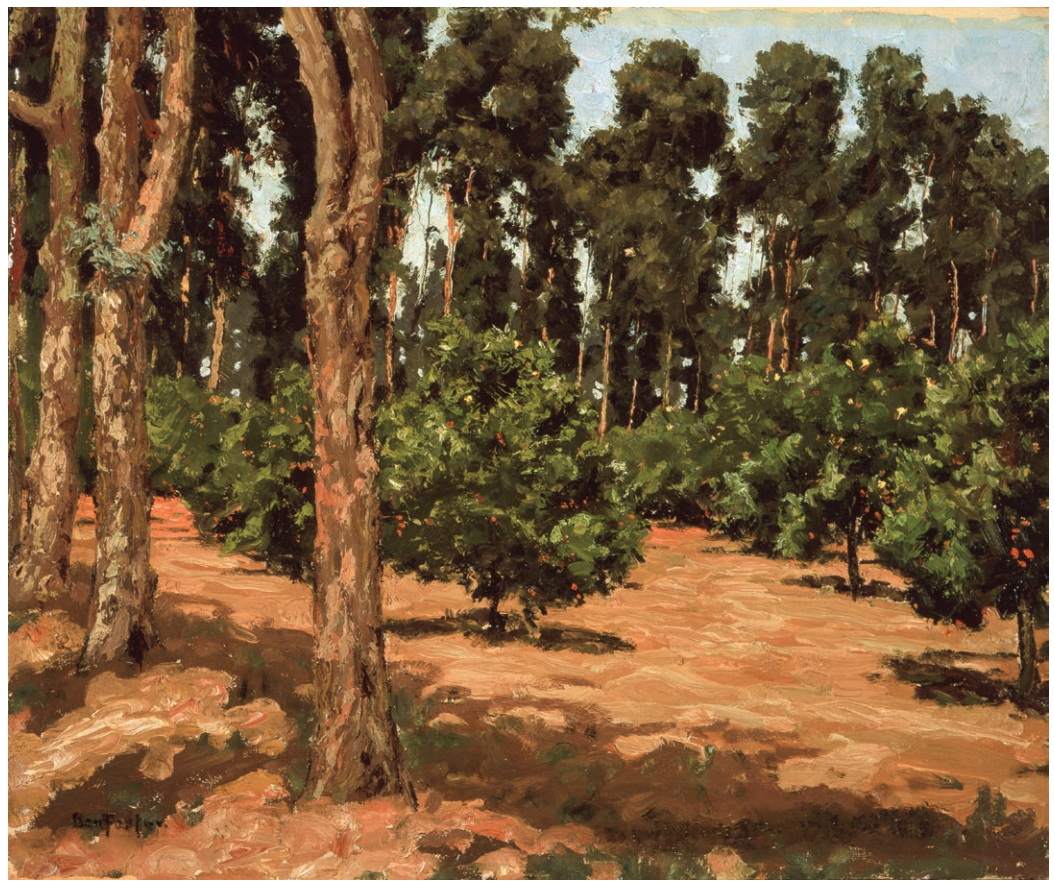
MARION KAVANAGH WACHTEL, *LONG LAKE, SIERRA NEVADA*, CIRCA 1929

William Lees Judson
Laguna Hills, 1915
Oil on canvas
18 ½ × 30 ¼ in.
UC Irvine Jack and Shanaz Langson Institute and Museum of California Art.
Gift of The Irvine Museum

Edgar Payne
Rugged Peaks, circa 1921
Oil on canvas
53 ½ × 51 ⅝ in.
UC Irvine Jack and Shanaz Langson Institute and Museum of California Art.
Gift of The Irvine Museum

Edgar Payne
Sycamore in Autumn, Orange County Park, circa 1916
Oil on board
32 × 42 in.
James Irvine Swinden Family Collection

Granville Redmond
California Landscape with Flowers, circa 1931
Oil on canvas
32 × 80 ¼ in.
UC Irvine Jack and Shanaz Langson Institute and Museum of California Art.
Gift of The Irvine Museum

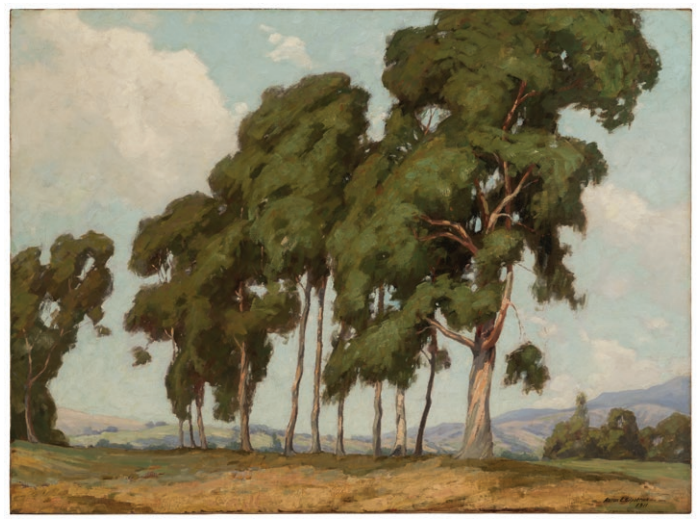


BEN FOSTER, *IRVINE ORANGE GROVE*, BETWEEN 1910 AND 1919

Aaron Kilpatrick
Eucalyptus, 1911
Oil on canvas
36 × 48 ⅛ in.
UC Irvine Jack and Shanaz Langson Institute and Museum of California Art.
Gift of The Irvine Museum

Granville Redmond
California Oaks, 1910
Oil on canvas
29 ⅝ × 42 in.
UC Irvine Jack and Shanaz Langson Institute and Museum of California Art.
Gift of The Irvine Museum

Marion Kavanaugh Wachtel
Long Lake, Sierra Nevada, circa 1929
Oil on canvas
20 ⅛ × 26 in.
UC Irvine Jack and Shanaz Langson Institute and Museum of California Art.
Gift of The Irvine Museum



AARON KILPATRICK, *EUCALYPTUS*, 1911

Arthur Grover Rider
Mission Garden, San Juan Capistrano, circa 1929
Oil on canvas
22 × 20 in.
James Irvine Swinden Family Collection

Guy Rose
Laguna Eucalyptus, circa 1917
Oil on canvas
40 × 30 in.
UC Irvine Jack and Shanaz Langson Institute and Museum of California Art.
Gift of The Irvine Museum

Detlef Sammann
Del Monte Forest, 1915
Oil on canvas
40 ¼ × 50 ¼ in.
UC Irvine Jack and Shanaz Langson Institute and Museum of California Art.
Gift of The Irvine Museum from prior gift of the Edward H. and Yvonne J. Boseker Collection

Elmer Wachtel
Old San Juan, circa 1895
Oil on board
9 ⅛ × 14 ⅛ in.
UC Irvine Jack and Shanaz Langson Institute and Museum of California Art.
Gift of The Irvine Museum

Andrew Weathers
Landscape Hocket (Orange County), 2025
Two-channel sound installation
Commissioned by UC Irvine Jack and Shanaz Langson Institute and Museum of California Art on the occasion of *Habitat: Making the California Environment* (2025)

William Wendt
Edge of the Forest, 1916
Oil on canvas
24 ⅞ × 29 ¾ in.
UC Irvine Jack and Shanaz Langson Institute and Museum of California Art.
Gift of The Irvine Museum

Raymond Dabb Yelland
Donner Lake, 1890
Oil on canvas
23 × 19 in.
UC Irvine Jack and Shanaz Langson Institute and Museum of California Art.
Gift of The Irvine Museum

UC Irvine Jack & Shanaz Langson
Institute & Museum of California Art

RAYMOND DABB YELLAND, *DONNER LAKE*, 1890