

The painted desert



All of the big names were here. These artists, whose paintings now garner unimaginable sums at auction, worked “en plein air,” away from their studios, capturing the changing colors in the great outdoors.

It was a time of innocence and exploration in California’s desert wilds. Some painters were driven to escape the ravages of tuberculosis, and others, like Lockwood de Forest, who made 10 documented visits in the very beginning of the 20th century, were drawn by the extraordinary landscape made glorious by an indescribable yellow light.

But De Forest, Maynard Dixon, Conrad Buff, Clyde Forsythe, Milford Zornes and other “California Impressionists” weren’t the only ones; there was a cadre of more permanent desert dwellers. The desert proved a haven, a place to work where one could survive and make a living at fine art. As a result, the desert’s thriving artist community in the early 20th century rivaled that of Taos, Santa Fe or Carmel.

John Hilton, R. Brownell McGrew, Fred Penney, Karl Albert, Carl Bray and Jimmy Swinnerton became local stars known beyond the valley. Painstaking representations of the unusual landscape and its adapted plants were contrasted with loose, interpretive styles; the subject scenery was conducive to both.

Transplants with serious artistic chops like Carl Sammons, Fredrick Chisnall and Sam Hyde Harris, coexisted with local charcoal portraitists and cartoonists. Wilton McCoy published his “Painting the Desert” how-to book, recognizable to generations of art students, while composing serious canvases.

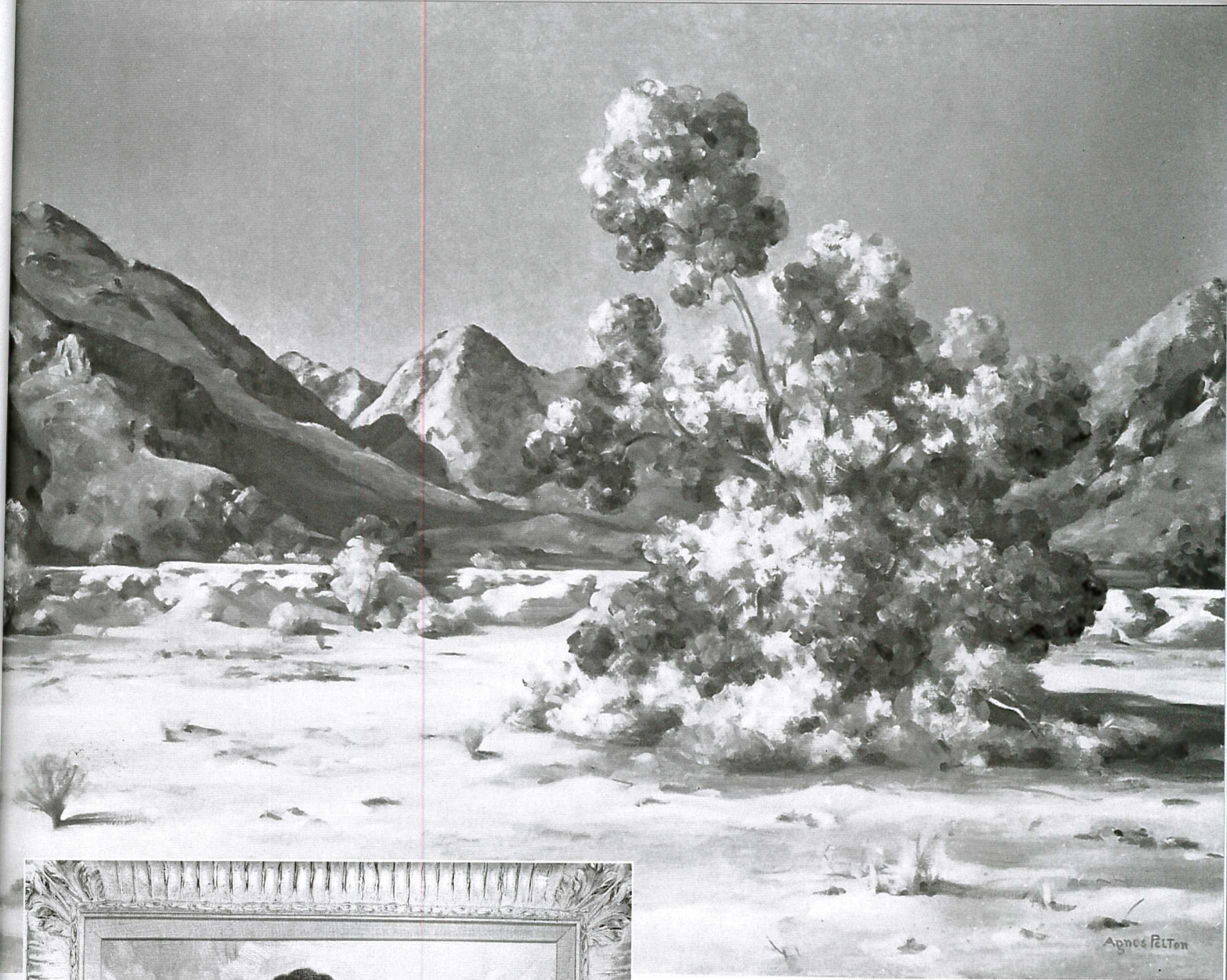
Commercial art also was surprisingly viable here. Paul Grimm had a studio on Palm Canyon. There he met President Eisenhower, an avid painter and thereafter companion of Grimm. Stephen Willard sold hand-tinted photographs as souvenirs but was also a painter. O. E. L. Graves’ interesting creations graced the covers of *The Villager*, published in Palm Springs for decades. That a local magazine would hazard to put art on the cover speaks of a rare confidence that even big-city periodicals didn’t have.

TOP: Paul Grimm painted this portrait with a background of soaring mountains. Grimm came to Palm Springs in 1932 and made portraits of the local Native Americans in addition to numerous landscape paintings.

LEFT: A Palm Springs Art Center show in November 1945 exhibited a wide variety of offerings.



PHOTOS/Carl R. Thompson, Grimm's Studio, courtesy, Tom Cooney



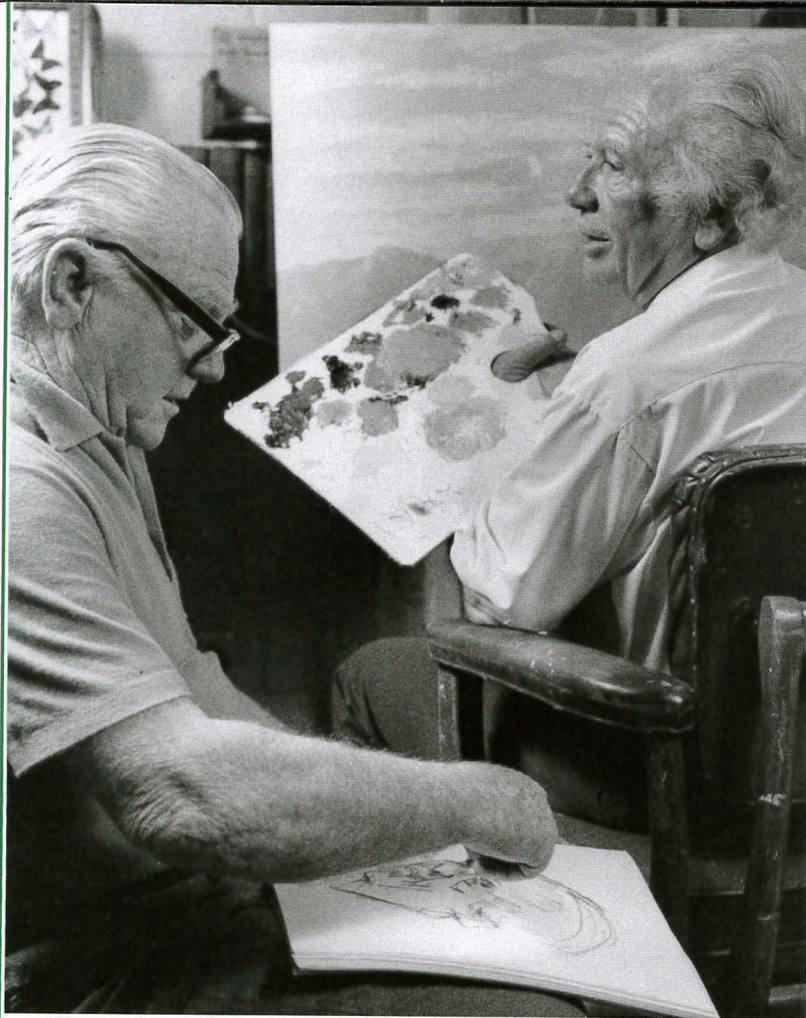
ABOVE: This smoke tree landscape was painted by Agnes Pelton. Often compared with Georgia O'Keeffe, Pelton lived in Cathedral City and worked in oil as well as pastel. Her paintings uniquely capture the soft desert light.

LEFT: A 1947 portrait of Mrs. Harold Hicks by Snow Creek artist Linus.

Graves' paintings ran the gamut from highly stylized illustrative art to completely surreal depictions of found objects.

Nicolai Fechin, a Russian-born artist famous for his Native American portraits, lived in a small collection of houses at the base of Mt. San Jacinto. He painted there under the patronage of John Burnham at his extensive enclave, which survives today as Colony 29 (see *Desert Magazine*, October 2012).

Other artists bought houses. Sister and brother Rachel and Marius de Brabant had a spectacular compound in the Movie Colony where they painted and hosted fellow artist Hanson Puthuff.



Easels set up in studios, near or in houses, also were common. Winston Churchill came to paint at Gordon Coutts' Dar Maroc. Carl Bray's modest board and batten house survived decades as his studio and home and as a testament to the remoteness of his choice spot (in what is now Indian Wells), only to be unceremoniously demolished recently to make way for nothing.

And then there was Agnes Pelton. Now famous, she was a pioneer who graciously donated a painting of a smoke tree to raise funds to start the Desert Art Center. Established in 1950, the center had shows and published souvenir books, promoting the desert and artists alike. There was even an outpost in Cathedral City where Pelton lived. Today, the center continues to pursue its founding mission.

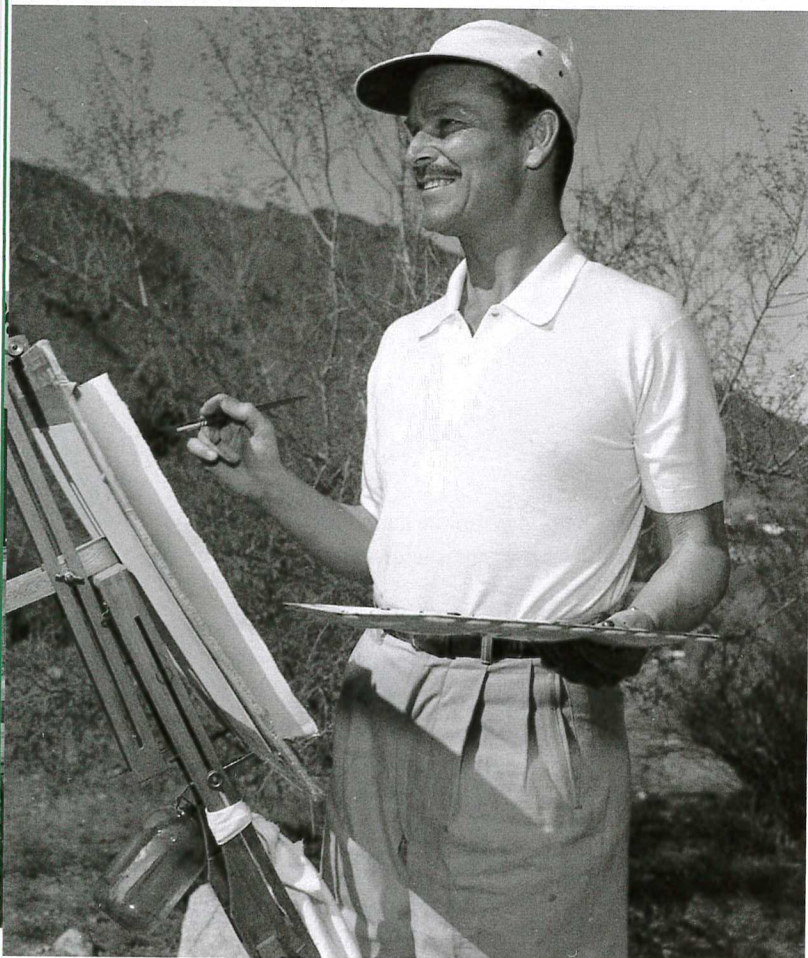
Palm Springs might be better known today as an artists' colony had that identity not been obliterated early on by the desert's other growing renown as the secret weekend playground for Hollywood stars. Even so, the fact that a tiny town in the remote desert became a haven for art and artists alike is a delightfully surprising part of our shared history.

—TRACY CONRAD

TOP: Bridging Hollywood and the desert arts community, film and Broadway megastar James Cagney paints with desert artist John Hilton.

BOTTOM, LEFT: Artist Earl Cordrey, working en plein air, composes a canvas. Cordrey was the official teacher at the Palm Springs Palette Club and the Palette Club at Thunderbird Country Club.

BELOW: Cathedral City's Desert Art Center.



►►DETAILS

DESERTSCAPES: The city of Palm Desert pays tribute throughout this month to the Coachella Valley's rich history of desert landscape painting. The public is invited to a multitude of painting-related events. For a schedule, (760) 837-1664; desertscapes.net.

Tracy Conrad is a board member of the Palm Springs Historical Society, and also of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation. She has served on the Historic Site Preservation Board and the Planning Commission for the City of Palm Springs.