# The Smoketree School

## Painters respond to the call of the desert

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*By Ann Japenga*

CARL EYTEL WAS CONTENT TO LIVE ALONE IN HIS SHACK BY TAHQUITZ CREEK, riding out each day on his horse, Billy, to paint the dunes and canyons. But then, in the early 1900s, Palm Springs' art colony of one suddenly had company.

Strangers started to pour in from art academies in New York and Europe, full of new ideas about painting. The Impressionist movement that began with Claude Monet in France had reached a crescendo as it made its way to the East Coast and then Southern California. Inspired by the exotic desert and by Eytel himself, the artists eventually journeyed to Palm Springs.

When I started to write about early desert artists on my website, www.californiadesertart.com, I named the genre the Smoketree School. On the California coast, it seemed that everyone painted the eucalyptus tree; art critics referred to the Eucalyptus School. In the desert, it seemed that everyone painted the smoke tree. Given the painters' love for the shrub, it seemed only fitting to call them the Smoketree School.

The artists arrived in great numbers, looking for more than a pretty arroyo. For many, a trip to the Palm Springs area became an essential spiritual pilgrimage. After all, for thousands of years, the desert has been a universal symbol of the soulful quest. But the desert held allures aside from enlightenment.

"Artists could live there for nothing, and the desert was the warmest place around, " says Santa Barbara art dealer Gary Breitweiser. Many painters, such as Jimmy Swinnerton, came to cure their tuberculosis. Also, there was no artistic establishment in this remote village, so artists could feel free to experiment. You could live under a cottonwood tree, like Bill Bender did, and survive on grapefruit.

Two of the earliest arrivals, John Frost and Alson Skinner Clark, met in Giverny, France, giving the desert's Smoketree School a direct link to Monet. Clark made his earliest trips to the desert in a Dodge truck in 1920, then built a house near the Tennis Club in 1924. The Impressionist painter Frost stayed at the Desert Inn, where proprietor Nellie Coffman nurtured many artists. (Look for a new book about Frost, including details of his desert days, to be published by the Irvine Museum in coming months.)

Once the surge of California Impressionism abated in the 1930s, the Smoketree boom lulled. Winston Churchill's book "Painting as a Pastime," published in 1948, launched a new wave of desert pilgrims. In the 1950s, President Dwight Eisenhower became

America's most famous amateur artist, further swelling the ranks of desert seekers. Eisenhower had a house in Palm Desert and could himself be called a member of the Smoketree School.

Eytel died in 1925 with $10 in his pocket. The army of painters arriving in his village would have astonished him. In 1949, *The New York Times* declared "Amateur Paintitis" a new medical diagnosis. Suddenly, bankers and salesmen were sketching on the backs of time sheets and receipts. The paint-by-numbers fad of the 1950s added fuel to the "anyone can paint" trend. As it turned out, many people *could* paint, and they all wanted to paint the desert.

After the war, civilians had Jeeps to bring them to the more remote oases. Artists wandered into every canyon, forming a never-ending chain of alliances. Swinnerton painted with Eytel and R. Brownell McGrew. John Hilton, who had a gem shop, palled around with Clyde Forsythe and Swinnerton.

Another friend of Swinnerton's, Sam Hyde Harris, made desert trips with fellow painter Hanson Puthuff. (Harris also had a house in Palm Springs.) Carl Bray and Fred Chisnall painted at Point Happy in Indian Wells and sometimes dropped in at the McGrew home for dinner.

The artists congregated at Desert Art Center in Palm Springs and Desert Magazine Art Gallery in Palm Desert, where the inspired owner Ginger Renner brought Western art — Olaf Wieghorst, Bill Bender — into the Smoketree mix. Another favorite hangout was the north shore of the Salton Sea. In the winter of 1938, Maynard Dixon lived in a shack near there.

Many artists — such as Maurice Braun, Desert Hot Springs pueblo builder Cabot Yerxa, and Agnes Pelton of Cathedral City — were influenced by theosophy, a mystical religious doctrine that emphasized looking into the essence of things. For Pelton, the pursuit was inspired. Some critics now say her work is greater than that of the most famous desert painter: Georgia O'Keeffe.

For a few decades, modern art was in vogue, and no one wanted paintings of smoke trees. Then, in the 1970s, California Impressionism soared in favor among collectors. The works of desert painters who once lived on free pancakes now set records at auctions. Palm Springs art dealer Kevin Stewart says a recession is a good time to buy desert art.

The Smoketree School encompasses not only traditional landscape, but also modernist and Western works, watercolors, and even abstract painting, as well as contemporary artists, such as Terry Masters, Elaine Mathews, and Diane Best. And any of these painters would have been at home before Eytel's creosote twig fire.

*For more on the Smoketree School, see www.californiadesertart.com*