

Lines in the Sand: Light

Paintings

In this paper I focus only on paintings in the “Light” gallery, although there are many other traditional and contemporary art works in the same room. These four of the paintings are located just inside the room. All paintings in the room use light in different and unique ways. A few are traditional desertscapes, such as those by John Hilton, Agnes Pelton, John Anthony Conner and Jimmy Swinnerton. Others, such as those by Lockwood de Forest and Edward Biberman, take different approaches. For each of painters I have provided a brief biography and compare/contrast comments.

Carl Eytel

1862-1925

Evening Desert Scene (1925)

Carl Eytel was born in Germany in 1862. He was well-educated and read widely about the American west. In 1885 he emigrated to the United and in 1903 moved to Palm Springs. He had an extensive knowledge of the desert and accompanied authors George Wharton James and J. Smeaton Chase as illustrator. He accompanied the painter Jimmy Swinnerton across the desert, serving as guide and inspiration. He also traveled alone by burro. Eytel was one of many desert artists who belong to the Smoketree School. He is often called the desert hermit artist. He never married, and in lifestyle was similar to Agnes Pelton, another Smoketree School artist who never married and also lived a monastic existence. Eytel is most famous for his drawings, but he also painted. He died of tuberculosis in 1925.

Painting

Evening Desert Scene reminds us a bit of John Anthony Conners’ painting described below. Eytel’s painting is set in the evening and Conners’ painting, *Dawn at Palm Springs*, is set in the morning. Yet the scenes and even the colors, muted blue/gray and tan, are similar. Paintings with these qualities are sometimes called “tonalist.” In the foreground are dark boulders with four dark palms reaching high into the atmosphere, partially blocking the tan desert floor middle ground, with the eye traveling out to the distant horizon and the setting sun.

Sources

Wikipedia

<http://californiadesertart.com>

John W. Hilton

A Touch of Spring – Indio Mountain (1949)

Enchantment of Sunrise (1960)

1904-1983

John Hilton was born in Carrington, North Dakota in 1904. He has a reputation for desert landscape painting as well as for being a cowboy, a singer and guitar player. He moved to Los Angeles in 1918. By the 1930s, financially broke, he moved to the desert, determined to become a painter and supporting himself as a singer and guitar player. He had no formal art training and was primarily self-taught. Maynard Dixon had the most influence on him. Sketching trips with Maynard Dixon, Jimmie Swinnerton and Clyde Forsythe influenced his style. They taught him informally about composition, color harmony, drawing and the handling of paint. He combined a beeswax mixture with his paints that gave his landscapes a special luster.

Paintings

Light and sunshine in landscapes is what Hilton is famous for. In *A Touch of Spring* we see a narrow band of desert floor with Indio Mountain, bathed in pink morning sunshine, looming large in the middle ground and background against a pale blue sky. Similarly, in *Enchantment of Sunrise* we see another mountain sunrise with a narrow band of desert floor, this time with white blooming yuccas piercing the middle ground, inserting themselves almost into the distant mountains. Contrast Hilton's bright, sunny paintings with James Swinnerton's *Monument Valley* (1922). While Swinnerton painted many bright, sunny landscapes, this particular one is very dark; the foreground and middle ground are almost black, with the famous Monument Valley land form rising above against a setting sun, dark clouds and even rainstorms.

Sources

Wikipedia

<http://californiadesertart.com>

Agnes Pelton

1881-1961

Between Storms (1937)

Future (1941)

Agnes Pelton was born in Germany of American parents. She returned to New York with her mother in 1888. In the summer she studied painting and in the winter she taught piano at her mother's conservatory in Brooklyn. In 1913 she exhibited two imaginative paintings at the International Exhibition of Modern Art (The Armory Show). Before 1920 she traveled to Taos, New Mexico and befriended Mabel Dodge Luhan and Georgia O'Keefe. While in New Mexico she perfected portraiture and began a life-long interest in the occult, mysticism and theosophy. She traveled to Hawaii, Syria and California. She had several major exhibitions, at the Grace Nicholson House (Pasadena) and the Montross Gallery in New York. In 1931 she moved to Cathedral

City. She continued to exhibit in New York and Pennsylvania. She joined the Transcendental Painting Group in New Mexico and exhibited in their shows. In 1961 she died of cancer.

Paintings

Pelton could paint and enjoyed painting anything. She sustained herself economically by painting portraits and desertscape for locals and tourists, but she preferred her spiritual or imaginative paintings. In this room we have both types of paintings, which we can compare and contrast. In *Between Storms* we have a traditional realistic desertscape of desert terrain and shrub in the foreground, not much middle ground, and in the far distance hills and clouds. There is some color. In *Future*, one of Pelton's imaginative or spiritual paintings, we have a desert landscape; a wall of rock rising up on the right side and a wall of dark sky with a star rising on the left side. In between we have what looks like some kind of portal, perhaps to a path, leading out and upward to what looks like an illuminated cross. This is typical Pelton showing movement from thinking and pondering to opening up to ideas to giving birth to ideas and a finished product.

Sources

Agnes Pelton, Poet of Nature (1995 Palm Springs Art Museum catalog)

<http://californiadesertart.com>

Lockwood de Forest

1850-1932

Indio (1911)

Mt. San Jacinto from near Palm Springs (1912)

Lockwood de Forest was born in New York in 1850. During a visit to Rome in 1868 he first began to study art seriously. There he encountered Frederic Edwin Church, who became his mentor. De Forest accompanied Church on sketching trips around Italy until they returned to America in 1869. In the late 1870s he traveled to Europe, the middle east and North Africa, where he first encountered desert landscapes. After a winter in Santa Barbara around 1902, he built a house and moved there permanently in 1915. There his primary occupation was landscape painting of California sites. Between 1904 and 1918 he made at least 10 documented painting tours to the Palm Springs area. His desertscape are unique and not like later generations of artists who painted in the area. He died in Santa Barbara in 1932.

Paintings

De Forest's works in this rooms are small compared to his larger studio works. His palate is limited, yet light radiates from the canvas in both his daylight desertscape and darker moonscape. He was relentless in his desire to capture the subtleties of

light and atmosphere. Compare his desertscapes with those of other artists in this room, such as Jimmy Swinnerton and Agnes Pelton, both of whom used plenty of color. Also compare his desertscapes with those of Edward Biberman and Lockwood de Forest, who used very little color.

Sources

Wikipedia

<https://www.californiadesertart.com/lockwood-de-forest-exhibit-opens-in-palm-springs/>

John Anthony Conner

1892-1971

Dawn at Palm Springs (1935)

John Anthony Conner was born in Illinois in 1892. Orphaned at four, he was sent to live with his grandparents in Massachusetts. His first studies were used to illustrate a book his grandfather was compiling of the Anthony family. He spent several years in the art department of National Advertisers and later traveled in the interest of outdoor displays of eastern corporations. Following service in the army during World War I, he moved to Los Angeles. He was employed in the art departments of MGM and other movie studios. Although he painted portraits, seascapes and cowboy-Indian genre, his forte was desertscapes of the Mojave and Coachella Valley.

Paintings

In *Dawn at Palm Springs* we see a desert landscape very much in the mold of the desert painters already discussed above. His paintings have a soft focus with plenty of foreground, middle ground and background. He seems to prefer a winding trail or road with a view into the distance of a mountain or mountain range. This particular painting is a little different from his typical work. With its muted grays and brown it almost seems like a tonalist painting or a nocturne painting.

Sources

<http://edanhughescollection.com>

Edward Biberman (1904-1986)

Palm Canyon (Lyric Landscape), 1968

Edward Biberman was born in 1904 in Pennsylvania. He studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, followed by three years in Paris. He lived in New York from 1929

to 1936, where he came into contact with Mexican muralists Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros and Jose Clemente Orozco. Due to their influence, he became a champion of public murals. In 1931 he lived for the summer in a Navajo settlement at Monument Valley. His experiences in the southwest caused him to move to Los Angeles in 1936, where he would produce some of his best known work. He befriended other southwest artists such as Georgia O'Keefe and John Marin.

Painting

Biberman modified realist painting by applying a modern aesthetic. We can see this clearly in *Palm Canyon (Lyric Landscape)* 1968. While we have other paintings in this room of palms in desert landscape, his is unique: the palms and shadows are two-tone, and while the painting does show depth, most of it is very flat and takes up most of the surface of the painting. Biberman often painted the figure as a way of addressing issues of race, immigration, labor and social inequality.

Sources

Wikipedia

<http://art-for-a-change.com/blog/2009/02/edward-biberman-revisited.html>

<http://art-for-a-change.com/blog/page/33>