



A Happy Occupation: Agnes Pelton in Her Own Words

by [Ann Japenga](#) • [2 Comments](#)

May 11, 2019—The star-maker machinery, as Joni Mitchell called it, is working hard for Agnes Pelton. The current exhibit at the Phoenix Art Museum positions her as the next Hilma af Klint. An ethereal wisp high on metaphysics, Pelton touches down only long enough to paint an occasional palo verde in order to pay for groceries.

A hiker surveys Cathedral City village in 1940. The photographs of Cathedral City in Agnes Pelton's era are from the Robert Hillery Collection of the Cathedral City Historical Society. The late Bob Hillery was a childhood friend of Agnes Pelton's.

The newfound celebrity would please Agnes, no doubt. But I'm not sure she'd recognize herself in this portrayal. When Agnes lived in tiny Cathedral City (1932-1961), she attended Women's Club meetings and made jello candy for neighbors. She toted pastels up into Cathedral Canyon and studied the smoke tree with the ardor of a besotted botanist. "A happy occupation it is," she said of desert painting.

Though she struggled to carve out time for the demanding abstracts, her "deserts" as she called them were no less important. Also important were her portraits of neighbors and family. "The portraits mean little financially, but quite a lot in other ways," she wrote. Agnes moved gracefully between the neighbors, the canyons and the cosmos—valuing all equally.

The first house in Cathedral City, 1926. Agnes Pelton arrived in town five years later.

What is valued today, however, are Pelton abstracts. They can bring hundreds of thousands of dollars while her landscapes bring less than a thousand. The market dictates that you'll be hearing lots more about Agnes-the-Theosophist than about Agnes-the-Nature-Girl. (I contributed to the notion that Agnes painted landscapes only for money in a previous Palm Springs Life article. I hereby correct myself.)

But don't take my word for it. See for yourself what mattered most to Pelton in these letters she wrote to her

friend Jane Levington Comfort. The following excerpts are reprinted with permission of the [Agnes Pelton Papers, 1885-1989](#), Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

(April 15, 1935) I have been desperately busy. I pulled off an Exhibit of little portraits — 6 done since Christmas — had a tea party for them right here in my tiny house. It was a most successful afternoon. The portraits mean little financially, but quite a lot in other ways. Since then one of my big smoke tree pictures was sold from the Gallery in Palm Springs for a respectable price and there have been several others... So now I am concentrating on desert landscapes. A happy occupation it is — but very strenuous physically. The flowers are lovelier than I have ever seen them. Along the highway they are drying up — but in favored cups of the sand dunes they are luxurious and lovely and will be for some time I think. I am out at work at early hours every day....

(June 13, 1935) Hot it is! About 112 degrees....Smoke trees in bloom, they are later this year — trees in bloom in the early morning filled with bees — I'm doing nothing now except work on smoke trees, early and late — I sleep and lounge about all the rest of the day — the mornings are never too hot. How lovely Venus is over San Jacinto now — It is very quiet here now, blissfully so

Cathedral City's first elected mayor, Bob Hillery, at right hiking with a boyhood friend in the hills above town.

(August 12, 1935) Went to see the collection of a "Rockologist" called "Chuckawalla Slim" — a huge man with a red beard, perfect diction, and tattooed everywhere on his visible surface. He had a high sort of covered wagon, packed with specimens of all sorts — some especially lovely moss agates with real landscapes in them...

(August 20, 1935) My fourth summer in the desert — the weather now is just dreadful — I've spent the summer almost entirely on the landscape — working in the early morning hours every day, and have of course considerable material and some large pictures for next winter started... but already the season has changed and I can, I am sure, go on with them better from sketches when it is cooler....It has been a most uncomfortable summer. I have luxuriated in plenty of ice this time, and am in pretty good condition, though it is time I left, and for one thing, I shall appreciate a cool bed!

(October 13, 1935) The desert is perfectly beautiful now — I am working on the larger desert pictures from last summer's studies... it is really so lovely here now — still warm enough to sit out evenings and not too hot day times — the sun slanting, and no longer too hot and the evenings beautiful with the rich glow on the sandhills, which always seem deeper in the autumn — today is the full moon — tonight. The sand is trying to blow but the moon may triumph....

An early date grove in Cathedral City. Pelton visited the groves to make sketches.

Agnes Pelton's date painting. Courtesy of Bob and Kay Hillery.

(October 12, 1936) This is a drowsy day — I am working on some pictures for the opening of the Gallery in Palm Springs. A very large one of dates among other things...It is still hot daytimes — rather charming in a way, if my neighborhood was more relaxed, but an orgy of building is going on, little houses springing up everywhere — new children, new dogs, new radios! Twilight is filled with a human medley — and I reluctantly watch new strips of the dear desert being torn up by the tractor, and smell new piles of lumber — watching beside doomed cactus bushes....

Small town Cathedral City noir.

(November 10, 1936) Several warm lovely nights — then the village began to wake up — Each night another light or two — and — another radio! Man coming in and taking for his own — this surrounding immensity — it is touching and made one feel tender toward one's kind. Now almost all the houses are taken and Palm Springs is filling up fast ... I get up every morning to make some brief pastel sketches of the morning glow on San Jacinto while the mornings are still warm — and a marvelous sight it is too — The nights are downright chilly but the days perfectly lovely — warm and glowing — Just now it is clouding up ...

(January 29, 1940) January has been a “broody” month, the studio too cold to stay in and still unfinished; but my own room has been a pleasure with the little wood stove going, and a number of pleasant people and some real friends have shared tea and twilight hour with me — always lovely at this season — I never knew the birds so ecstatic — for a week at least they have been at it... A meadowlark nearby is now singing — has been all through this day, that piercingly sweet song, and the darling little rosy throats (linnets) are bubbling — song and talk and plans all day long. They fill me so much — it is a real effort to do anything at all. Spring has been in the offing for some time — Three abstracts have been for this month in the Central Library in L.A. and Millier gave me a line in The Times: “Agnes Pelton's well known abstracts are good paintings and make sense”.....

The village of Cathedral City with snow-covered Mt. San Jacinto.

(January 1, 1941) The meadow larks have been singing every day and they are more ecstatically lovely on overcast days — quite noticeably — The bluebirds are back and flutter about at twilight. Three of my best

Abstractions, The Dark Star, now named Challenge, Ascension, and Beatitude with its unfolding wings — are in New York at the Studio Guild from December 20 for two weeks...I heard the New Year last night — the guns in this village or perhaps firecrackers but no human sound except the horn on a distant car...

(April 20, 1941) 3 landscapes were sold in Palm Springs and I had a small commission all in one week — after it seemed as if nothing would sell again! — It was a bad winter for the dealers here — until just this last month. They often keep one waiting about paying up, but it is a help to know when one can, what they have sold, if anything. It's a great relief to be a little ahead now as you can imagine...We had a wonderful showing of encelia on all the ridges of the foothills — gold; but the big show of verbena everyone expected hasn't come off — too much grass or too late sun — the bushes of all kinds are rioting green and the tiny flowers are all on the rocky places...Rudhyar [*ed: Dane Rudhyar was an influential member of the Transcendental Painting Group*] was here for a week and stayed in one of Christine's houses [*ed: Christina Lillian was an early desert arts patron and Pelton's neighbor*]. It was a real pleasure to see him. He has a fine new car and wanted to take me for a drive, so we went toward 29 Palms to see the Joshua trees, as I wanted so much to see them in bloom — We had a lovely day and came back with his car filled with rocks and bleached wood from the dry wash on the way over!! — I'm still putting on and taking off coats all day! — It hasn't been warm or windless enough to sit in the garden — just now there are some large pansies and old fashioned pinks and of course petunias... The orioles came yesterday and the finches have been singing rapturously — one has a nest right beside my kitchen door, so she flies out every time I open it. This is Sunday afternoon and I am waiting to see if anyone is coming for tea, as I have had “open house” for two months or more.

The Cathedral City Women's Club meets at the Hillerys' house, 1946. Agnes Pelton often attended Women's Club events.

(June 16, 1941) The smoke trees are coming into bloom most gloriously — I am getting up about 4:30 to go out to work at them — by the 22nd they should be worth a much longer journey! It's more than ever a real burgeoning, branches bending and breaking with royal purple blue bloom... The heat isn't yet excessive — this is the best time for outdoor painting for me — I shall stay here until July or longer. When I leave I am going up the mountain to a small group of cabins on the way to Idyllwild called Thomas Mountain — I am to have a tiny little cabin built by the Cobbs — my postmaster in Cathedral City... It's a cute little place under some pine trees and it's painted light yellow — In fact they are selling me that cabin and the lot 50×100 feet!

Our village is full of soldiers' wives, and many charming little children and babies in go-carts ...In the fading glow I have lit a candle of the big table in the Studio to finish this letter — the mountain window has a faint yellow sky behind it; and on the big north window, the candle flame shines on top of the big sand dune across the desert!

Cathedral City Rotary project.

(April 15, 1943) This morning I went up the little near canyon where the encelias are all in bloom against the dark rock rocky hill. I took pastels and a stool only, and sat among the mounds of pure gold above the cushions of pale green — I made a small sketch and was so glad to be able to be there... Now it is warmer I shall get up early and by taking the stool I can get to some of the nearer places and I hope learn to paint the desert — in a less strenuous way than I have before, with big canvases and all the heavy things.

(July 11, 1943) Well, the blessed garden! Don't I know what miracles there can be! It is marvelous to produce things, to start them, and experience their response — but look out! — that they don't drain you, dry and eat you up —they can —Nature is wonderful but she hasn't a heart. But who wants any grim warnings? I'll never forget my joy at those tiny fountains of green — my little corn patch at the farm so many years ago, and in the dawn light the shrieks of delight among the neighborhood crows as they sailed down, and I dashed out to keep them off — every day for a week each day, a little taller and brighter, and finally too big for the crows. I loved it all and lived in it deeply — all the things we raised....

Agnes Pelton: Desert Transcendentalist is on view at the Phoenix Art Museum through September 8, 2019. The exhibit of Pelton abstractions travels next to the **New Mexico Museum of Art** and the **Whitney Museum of American Art**, winding up at the **Palm Springs Art Museum** in August, 2020.

<http://www.phxart.org/exhibition/agnes-pelton>

The catalogue accompanying the exhibit includes a chapter on Pelton's Cathedral City years by former Palm Springs Art Museum director **Elizabeth Armstrong**. <https://www.amazon.com/Agnes-Pelton-Transcendentalist-Gilbert-Vicario/dp/3777431923>

For more on Cathedral City as Pelton knew it, contact the **Cathedral City Historical Society**.

<http://cathedralcityhistoricalsociety.com/index.html>



Cathedral City's main street, 1951.

Tags: [Agnes Pelton](#) [Christina Lillian](#) [Palm Springs Art Museum](#) [Phoenix Art Museum](#)
[Whitney Museum of American Art](#)

← A Higher Education: Bonhams California and Western Art Auction

2 comments for “A Happy Occupation: Agnes Pelton in Her Own Words”



Glenda Rice

May 11, 2019 at 2:15 pm

Wonderful article, I so enjoy reading her words and thoughts. Thanks Ann for another article on Agnes Pelton, we can't see the show. I understand the painting I rescued from my cousins estate, Translation, will be featured.



warner graves

May 11, 2019 at 2:19 pm

thanks Ann for setting the record straight regarding Pelton's landscapes. I see in her "deserts" a deep appreciation of nature bordering on the spiritual. The photos add a nice touch to the letters.

Leave a Reply

Your email address will not be published. Required fields are marked *

Comment

Name *

Email *

Website



I'm not a robot



reCAPTCHA
Privacy - Terms

Check here to Subscribe to notifications for new posts

Post Comment

Notify me of follow-up comments by email.

Notify me of new posts by email.

WELCOME

Welcome to California Desert Art. [Click here to read more.](#)



NEWEST COMMENTS ON CALIFORNIA DESERT ART

- warner graves on [A Happy Occupation: Agnes Pelton in Her Own Words](#)
- Glenda Rice on [A Happy Occupation: Agnes Pelton in Her Own Words](#)
- donald street on [An Appraiser Looks at Swinnerton](#)
- Teresa (Morrissey) Turpin on [Ralph Love and Roy Morrissey: The Art Shacks of Temecula](#)
- [Ann Japenga](#) on [Toenjes on the Mojave, Eytel's Canteen, Water Tank Art and More](#)
- Robert Bayly on [Toenjes on the Mojave, Eytel's Canteen, Water Tank Art and More](#)

MORE COMMENTS

[READ ALL COMMENTS](#)

LINKS

- [Anza-Borrego Desert Natural History Association](#)
- [Blue Coyote Gallery](#)
- [Bodega Bay Heritage Gallery](#)
- [Borrego Art Institute](#)
- [California Desert Arts Council](#)
- [Cathedral City Historical Society](#)
- [Coachella Valley History Museum](#)
- [Desert Art Center](#)
- [Elaine Mathews art](#)
- [Historical Society of Palm Desert](#)
- [Janet Morgan and Gregory Frux](#)
- [Jim Toenjjes art](#)
- [Palm Springs Historical Society](#)
- [Terry Masters' Desert Painter Gallery](#)
- [Twentynine Palms Art Gallery](#)

READ THE LATEST NEWS

[Two Agneses, Middle Earth Maps, Joe De Yong, Daughter of Zorro and more](#)

[Bascom Burns, Tributes to Phil Kovinick, Tim Townsley, Silvio Silvestri and More News](#)

[Slow Art, Palm Desert Firehouse Mural, Historic Artist's Home in Danger and More](#)

[Magic Bus, Mutant Cactus, Desert Light Gallery and More](#)

[Neal Lucas Hitch, Agnes Pelton Exhibition, Eric Merrell's Plein Air Poem and more](#)

SUBSCRIBE

Your email:

Subscribe

Unsubscribe

SEARCH THIS SITE

Search ...

MORE NEWS

[READ ALL NEWS](#)