



CALIFORNIA ART CLUB NEWSLETTER

Documenting California's Traditional Arts Heritage for More Than 100 Years

Sunshine, Trains and Hollywood Bring Artists to Southern California

by Elaine Adams

LEL PUEBLO DE LA REINA DE los Ángeles, *The Town of the Queen of the Angels*, was founded by the Spanish colonists in 1781 and was the second pueblo created in the territory of *Las Californias*, just four years after the founding of Pueblo de San Jose in Santa Clara County. The original Los Angeles settlement consisted of eleven families, made up of eleven men, eleven women and twenty-two children who were of Mulatto, Criollo, and African descent. They were recruited from Mexico's Sonora y Sinaloa Province to populate the 17,000-acre ranchland with the goal of securing the territory for the Spanish Empire.

Spain's strategy to colonize consisted of three parts: religious, military, and civil. The religious and military phases occurred concurrently and involved the establishment of Catholic missions to cultivate the native Indians who also worked as labourers, while at the same time presidios were built to house the military guard. The third stage was the development of civil towns referred to as "pueblos" that were structured as cooperative farming communities.

In 1821 Mexico became independent from Spain. *Californios* were now free to exercise their new-found legal rights as Mexican citizens, which included acquiring land. Agriculture and cattle ranching became the dominant industries. Prior to 1824, the year Mexico relaxed their trade rules, California

averaged less than three merchant ships per year with thirteen years showing no arrival of ships at all. As California became significant traders of cattle hide and tallow (fat used in the making of soap and candles), the average number

of ships that docked the ports from 1825 to 1845 increased to twenty-five per year. The *Californio* aristocrats and their hired *vaqueros* (cowboys) established the most successful cowhide and tallow industry in North America and provided exports



Louis L. Betts (1873–1961)

Mid-Winter, Coronado Beach, c. 1907

Oil on canvas 29" × 24"

(Painted for the Santa Fe Railroad Collection)

Collection of The Irvine Museum

West Fraser: A VOICE FROM THE SOUTH

by Molly Siple

I PAINT THE MAJORITY OF MY WORKS IN THE LAND I LOVE AND CALL home—the Lowcountry of South Carolina and Georgia, among the draping moss and shore breezes,” says artist West Fraser. “This region is encompassed by Atlantic beaches and sea-island waterways, what American poet **Sidney Lanier (1842-1881)** calls ‘a world of marsh bordered by a world of sea.’ Here Fraser found his ideal subject matter many years ago and since then he has built a reputation for being one of the most accomplished painters of the American South.

In the 1980s, as a young artist, Fraser was full of hope and dreams, and his career was indeed off to a very good start. In 1984 his work was shown in a duo exhibition at the **Grand Central Art Galleries** in New York City, and the **Gibbes Museum of Art** in Charleston hosted his first solo exhibition in 1986. Beginning his career as an illustrator, he entered fine art as a watercolourist. The realistic and detailed maritime subjects and harbour scenes he created during this period earned him critical praise. But he was not a modernist, and he grappled with self-doubt while still searching for what he wanted to say as an artist.

Browsing through stacks of what he describes as “exciting and mostly unaffordable” art books at **Hacker Art Books** in New York City, he came upon a small volume about Canadian artist **Tom**

Thompson (1877-1917), who found his artistic voice painting the wilderness of **Algonquin Provincial Park** in the north woods of Canada. When Thompson’s creative passion and energy came to the attention of more accomplished artists such as **A.Y. Jackson (1881-1917)**, **Arthur Lismer (1885-1969)**, and **Lawren Harris (1885-1970)**, they included him in their circle. Together they painted outdoors, making art by living the Canadian experience. While the works of artists such as **Pablo Picasso (1882-1973)** and **Marcel DuChamps (1887-1968)** were having their debut in New York at the 1913 **Armory Show**, these painters were anxious to make a new artistic statement as Canadians—and they did so successfully. They found painting inspiration in their Canadian backyard, in local towns, and in the Canadian wilderness and became known as the now famed **Group of Seven**.

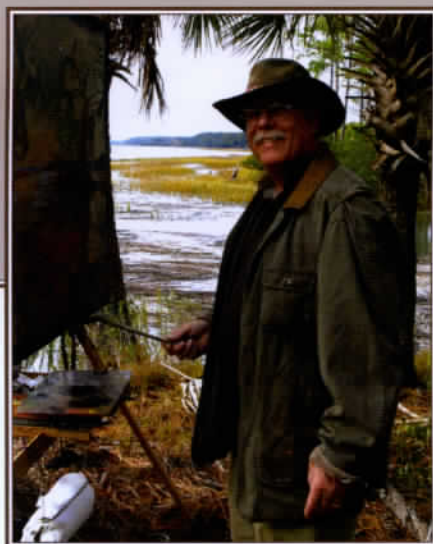
“In the life stories of these Canadian painters I gained renewed confidence and discovered a cause for my own art spirit,” says Fraser. “Around that time I was also discovering the work of the **New Hope Impressionists**, who made a mark on the art scene in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, in particular **Edward Redfield (1869-1965)**, one of the most award-winning American painters of his time.” Realizing the power and quality of this regional school of painting propelled Fraser’s art in a new direction, and he began to paint the southern regions of America’s East Coast, a place where his family has deep roots.

Fraser counts among his ancestors Puritans who landed in Massachusetts in the 1630s and their descendants who in the 1690s moved to South Carolina, where they helped found the city of **Dorchester**. And in 1752, some Frasers

Turned Tide

Oil on linen 30" × 36"

Private Collection





A Quiet Calm
Oil on linen panel 20" × 24"
Private Collection

headed to Georgia where they received a **King James Grant** for land just south of the newly established Savannah. Fraser himself was raised in Georgia and later on Hilton Head Island in South Carolina, always living close to the coast that he paints with such deep understanding.

In *Turned Tide* Fraser captures the difference in the colour of dry sand compared to sand with just a slick of water covering it, that moment when the tide turns. After painting for so many years, challenges like this require expert seeing and quick decision making that, as the artist says, "keep me excited about painting and spawn the story of the picture." *A Quiet Calm* also shows a typical Lowcountry shoreline. By 1989, Fraser had started painting in oil, en plein air, and his subject matter eventually also included unique urban rooftop views of Charleston and intimate street scenes of this venerable and extensively preserved city. One plein-air gem is *Boxx's Filling Station*, a corner of old Charleston that was soon after torn down to make room for condos. Such paintings display Fraser's

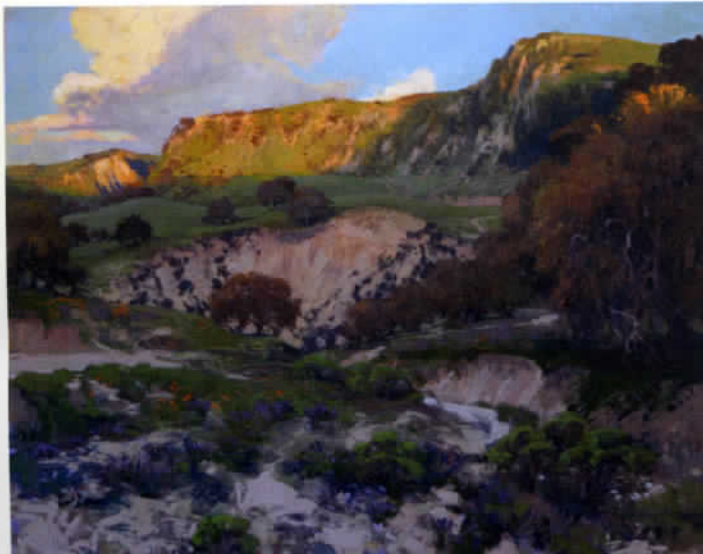
skill at rendering natural light effects specific to the time of day and season. *Winter Schedules* gives a sense of the crisp, clear air of a cooler season and the red-orange light of a sun about to set. Recording typical Charleston architecture, as seen in this painting, is also one of Fraser's specialties.

The artist also travels to paint other locales, sometimes Maine, sometimes California, as well as Europe. His beautifully designed and poetic canvas portraying the California hillsides, *Before the World Was Made* earned him the highly prestigious **Edgar Payne Award for Best Landscape** at this year's 100th **Annual Gold Medal Exhibition** of the California Art Club.

ON LOCATION FRASER PAINTS LARGE SCALE—SOMETIMES as large as 24" x 30"—which is not the usual sketch size that plein-air painters generally prefer. The artist uses the sight-size method of painting, working with his arm fully extended and using his brush to visually measure the objects he plans to paint. "The subjects of my paintings are large environments," he explains. "To visually reduce that to fit on a small canvas would be very difficult, and trying to enlarge small studies later in the studio would be problematic."

"Most painters use a view finder to select the scene and composition they want to paint," he continues. "Their line of sight and the perspective remain the same. I use a different approach when looking at my subject matter. My eye is roving all the time, resulting in many lines of sight similar to what you see when you walk carefully into a setting; glancing down to see where you are stepping, looking to the side, into the distance and above, etc. The eye doesn't stop. Consequently, my paintings give more of a wide-angle-lens view of a place, and the foreground becomes a very important part of the painting."

When he first began painting outdoors, Fraser would finish the piece entirely on location, but as his working methods evolved, he found it just as useful to paint one or two days on-site and finish a piece in the studio. "On location I establish the basic design of the composition and record the colours and value patterns as accurately as I can," the artist says. "A photo doesn't tell you much about these things. Then in the studio I'll fill in areas of sky, water, and sand, putting on the flesh of



Before the World Was Made
Oil on linen 24" × 30"
Winner of the CAC's Edgar Payne Award for Best Landscape from the 100th Annual Gold Medal Juried Exhibition.



Trailing Pollen
Oil on linen panel 20" × 24"
Private Collection

the painting later. This approach works well because as you are developing and finishing a painting you're always making changes anyway. I'll adjust surface quality, the intensity of the light, and so forth. It all becomes relative. A painting is an object that stands alone. You're creating a believable illusion."

One reason Fraser's paintings are so believable is that he paints the local flora and fauna with a keen eye for botanical and anatomical accuracy. In college, at the **University of Georgia**, in Athens he minored in biology and continued his studies of the taxonomy of plants, birds, and fish in the years following. "As I paint," Fraser explains, "I try to catch the unique gesture of something. I'm enamoured of palm trees, particularly our cabbage palmettos, which are unique to the Southeast Coast and Gulf states. Such accuracy will catch the attention of the viewer, if only subconsciously, and that sense of truth in the illusion I am creating is very important to me."

Painting in the watery Lowcountry can be logistically difficult, but Fraser is up for the challenge. To reach a painting location, often only accessible by boat, Fraser heads out in his Roughwater 37-foot cabin cruiser, drops anchor, and rows a dingy to an island shore. While painting at water's edge, the tide may come in and begin to spill into his boots, so he wears boots high enough to ward off snakes. The artist may also carefully build a small fire on the damp land with spare twigs and sticks to keep mosquitoes at bay—all worth it for spending the day painting in this vast and compelling landscape.

FRASER'S PAINTINGS ARE NOW IN PRIVATE AND PUBLIC collections across the country, and to date he has been given six solo exhibitions at various museums including the **Bakersfield Museum of Art** in Bakersfield, California in 2007. But Fraser has also figured out a way to take his paintings beyond the world of art, to contribute to society in more diverse ways. In 2007 Fraser opened an exhibition titled *Support American Fisherman* to draw attention to an aspect of American life that he saw taken for granted and endangered. As he says, "We have unbelievably clean seafood sources in this country, and we import fish! We will lose our local seafood harvest if we drive the fishermen away." The exhibition was held at **Helena Fox Fine Art** in Charleston, South Carolina and five percent of the sales from this series went to the **South Carolina Seafood Alliance**.

With the economic downturn, Fraser earnestly wanted to lend a hand again, this time to fellow artists who had fallen on hard times. He had first thought of starting a foundation for painters and then came up with a more attainable goal, launching a program called "Painting in a Tree." Fraser leaves a small oil-on-panel painting hanging from a tree branch where someone on a nature walk is likely to discover it. A note on the back asks the finder to donate to some art-related cause: a local high-school art program, an art organization, local museum, or a talented artist in need. "The whole experience for me has been so much fun, so cool," says the artist. "Some of my most joyful moments are when I hear from someone who has found one of the paintings." If you are interested in going on a 'painting hunt,' Fraser lists general locales of paintings, still out there waiting for someone to find, on his website westfraserstudio.com. ■



Support American Fishermen
Oil on linen 30" × 36"
Private Collection



Winter Schedules
Oil on linen 26" × 30"
Courtesy of Helena Fox Fine Art

Notes:

Contributing editor **Molly Siple** studied painting and art history at the **University of California Berkeley** and is an Artist Member of the **California Art Club**. She has also taken formal training from master artists **Shuqiao Zhou** and **Jove Wang**. Siple is a regular contributor to American Artist magazines. In addition, she co-authored, along with **Jean Stern** and **Roy Rose**, the book *Enchanted Isle: A History of Plein Air Painting* in Santa Catalina Island, as well as the newly released **Skira Rizzoli** publication *California Light, A Century of Landscapes: Paintings of the California Art Club*.