

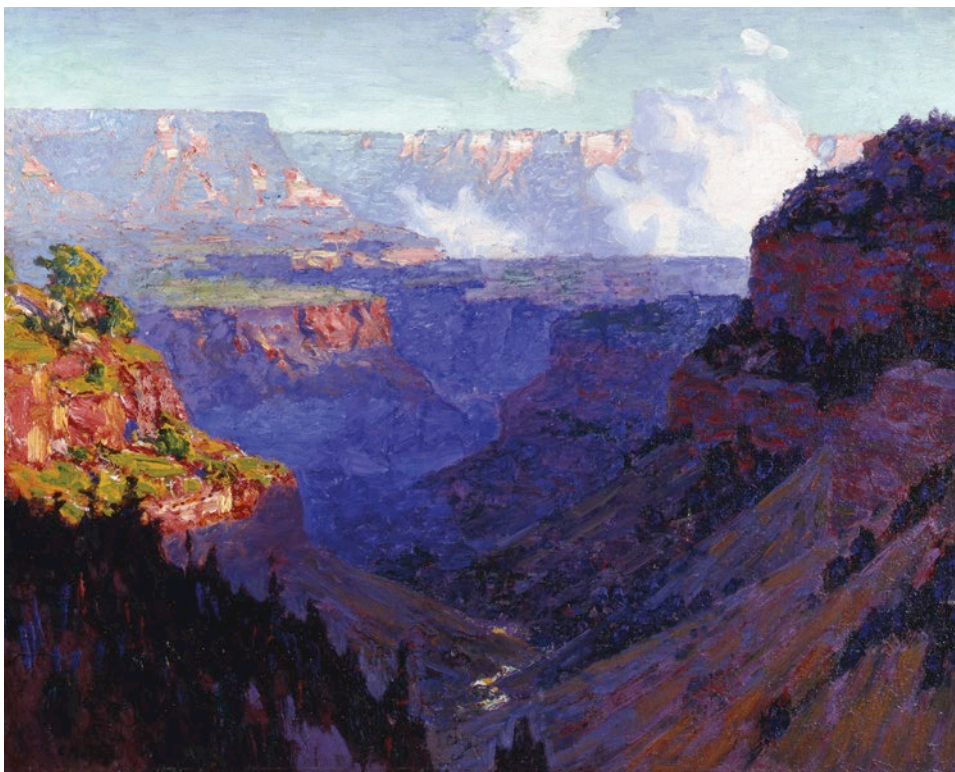


W H E R E
the Past

M E E T S
Present

PLEIN AIR EVENTS CELEBRATE CENTENNIAL ANNIVERSARIES
OF GRAND CANYON AND ZION NATIONAL PARKS.

By David M. Brown



Edward Henry Potthast (1857-1927), *Looking Across the Grand Canyon*, ca. 1910, oil on canvas, 24 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 30 $\frac{1}{8}$ ".
 Courtesy Phoenix Art Museum.

“People like Thomas Moran, Maynard Dixon, Gunnar Widfors...I am walking in their footsteps—caught in the same spell...” —Roland Lee, artist

Arts and our national parks are brush and canvas.

Three years ago, Americans marked the 100th anniversary of the National Park Service Act. It was signed by President Woodrow Wilson in August 1916 “to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.”

This year, Grand Canyon and Zion

national parks are marking their centennials with two plein air events. There is the 10th annual 2019 *Centennial Celebration of Art* at Zion in Utah, November 6 to 10, and, in Arizona, the 11th annual *Plein Air at the Canyon*, September 7 to 15, as part of the *Grand Canyon Celebration of Art*, through January 20, 2020.

Creating their work outdoors, the participants continue a robust century-and-a-half tradition of artists responding in diverse styles and media to these spectacular landforms: realism, impressionism, abstracts, pastels, oils, watercolors. Inspired by European landscape traditions and the

indigenous work of the Hudson River School, early parks painters such as Englishman Thomas Moran and German-born Albert Bierstadt celebrated both the sublime and picturesque elements of the parks.

Often supported by the railroads and encouraged by “manifest destiny,” the early artists helped establish and promote the parks. Moran’s inspired depictions of the Grand Canyon of Yellowstone, for example, encouraged President Ulysses S. Grant to designate it our first national park in 1872. Contemporary artists, including those working in plein air, reaffirm the importance of these sacred places.

“Artistic renditions of the wonders of Zion Park have contributed to its conservation and appreciation by visitors from around the world,” says Jeff Bradybaugh, superintendent at the park,

which President William Howard Taft first named Mukuntuweap National Monument (“straight up place” or “straight canyon,” Paiute) in July 1909. “Nineteenth-century artists such as Frederick Dellenbaugh and Thomas Moran contributed greatly to the establishment of the national park, and present-day artists continue to work in the tradition of earlier artists extolling the beauty and fascinating landscape of this American treasure.”

In Arizona, Sarah Creachbaum is acting superintendent at Grand Canyon National Park, which was protected as a national monument in 1908 by President Theodore Roosevelt. She says, “As Grand Canyon celebrates its centennial as a national park, we are reminded of the important contributions of artists, from the early days of the grand

landscape painters such as Thomas Moran and Gunnar Widforss, to today’s modern artists, including our Native American artists community, whose works continue to inspire preservation and stewardship.”

A Palette of Painters

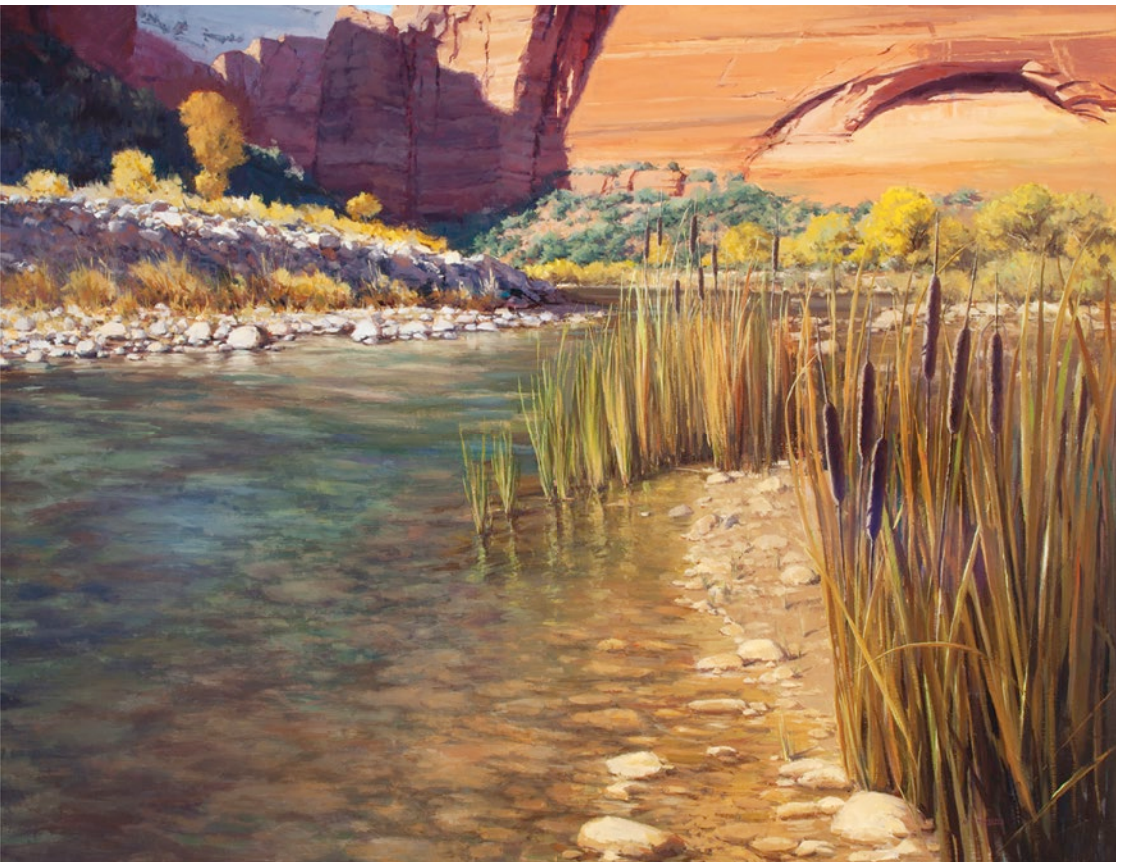
In Zion, 19th- and 20th-century painters, working mostly in oil, include Alfred Lambourne, John Fairbanks, Howard Russell Butler, John Fery, Leconte Stewart, Isaac Loren Covington, John Henri Moser, Maynard Dixon, Jimmie Jones, Lynn Berryhill and G. Russell Case. Jones lived on a rocky ridge overlooking the park. A child once cogently said to him, “I like your paintings because I can see so far.”

“Moran visited Zion Canyon in 1873, and Dellenbaugh’s paintings in 1903 and 1904

are credited with opening many eyes to the splendor of Zion. After spending several weeks in Zion Canyon in the summer of 1903, his series of Zion paintings hung in the St. Louis World’s Fair in 1904,” says Lyman Hafen, executive director of the Zion National Park Forever Project for 20 years. With roots to 1929, the group supports stewardship and responsibility; with the park, it supports the plein air event each year.

At the Grand Canyon, many distinguished artists have contributed to the tradition. Among them are William Henry Holmes, Edward Potthast, DeWitt Parshall, Louis Akin, William Robinson Leigh, Oscar Berninghaus, Ernest Blumenschein, an increasing number of women artists such as Edith Hamlin, and Native Americans including Hopi Fred Kaboutie and Navajo Tony Abeyta.

Kate Starling, *Big Bend*, oil, 56 x 72”



Because of his technique and fidelity to subject, watercolorist Gunnar Widforss is one of a number of artists who have had great presence at Grand Canyon and Zion. Known as “The Painter of the National Parks,” he was commissioned by the first director of the national parks, Stephen Mather, to complete Zion paintings for his May 1924 article for *The World’s Work* exhibition on the national parks.

“Today, Widforss is the artist who the majority of contemporary Grand Canyon painters cite as their greatest influence or inspiration,” says Museum of Northern Arizona curator of fine art Alan Petersen, who is writing a monograph about the painter at the Gunnar Widforss Institute at the Flagstaff museum.

Early masters Moran and Bierstadt often sketched outside or painted from photographs and completed their work in the studio, but plein air artists create almost entirely outside—enveloped by their subject at rim or river edge in the Canyon or looking up at the rock monoliths of Zion. This makes

the two annual events uniquely appealing: Visitors experience the artists where they have been inspired and can speak with them during the hours of creation.

“The contemporary plein air artists who paint the Grand Canyon are quite literally on the edge, engaging a subject of stunning immediacy with a long historical provenance that remains emphatically present and real,” says Betsy Fahlman, adjunct curator of American art at the Phoenix Art Museum.

“Plein air painters must simplify complex landscapes into exciting compositions on the spot, while racing against changing light and shadows, battling bugs and weather, using only painting gear that can be easily packed in,” says artist Roland Lee, who lives in St. George, Utah, just outside Zion. “But the upside is being able to really see and understand the landscape firsthand unfettered by the distortions and limitations of photos.”

The artist and viewer are uniquely bonded. Lee says, “Collectors can not only watch the painting develop but listen to the artist discuss his or her feelings and motivations. Whether a

painting changes hands or not, both collector and artist leave having shared an enriching artistic experience.”

Zion Event Names ‘Centennial Artists’

For the 100th anniversary park celebration at Zion, Arlene Braithwaite is the Featured Centennial Artist in 2019. In addition, 10 others who have participated throughout the first decade of the event have been named “Centennial Artists”: Lee, John Cogan, Michelle Condrat, Bill Cramer, Cody DeLong, Kate Starling, George Handrahan, Buffalo Kaplinski, James McGrew who is a park ranger in Yosemite National Park, and Suze Woolf who has been an artist in residence at Zion.

“This year’s event will juxtapose the legacy of art in the canyon with the park’s history. It is designed to continue, in a new and exciting way, the great tradition of art in the park established over the first 10 years of our plein air art event,” says Hafen, whose distant cousin was early Utah artist, John

Roland Lee, *A Glimpse of Heaven*, watercolor, 15 x 30”





John Cogan, *Under the Temples Glow*, acrylic, 20 x 24"

Hafen, a friend of John Fairbanks. Admission is free, not including admission to the park.

"We are especially excited to host these 11 outstanding artists whose variety of styles and mediums express the wonder and beauty of Zion Canyon across a wide spectrum of interpretation," he says. "We have the bases covered when it comes to the finest contemporary art in Zion."

A realist painter, Braithwaite is widely noted and awarded for her elegant, majestic pastels. "Pastel is attractive to me because of its immediacy," she says. "I enjoy direct contact with the pigment and the bold-to-subtle-hue mixtures that can be achieved through the hatching and layering of pastel. Each painting I do provides me with the opportunity of manipulating color, shape and edge to interpret reality in a hopefully unique way."

A master of oils and large landscapes, Starling calls her style "observational naturalism." A resident of Rockville, adjacent to the park, she studied geology and started painting the park in 1988. "When I learned to paint I could finally express my curiosity and emotion about the beauty of the places where I spent my time," she says. "Mine is a basic understanding of the geologic process, but those principles apply to every place I paint, making it more fun because I can imagine what happened there to make it look the way it does."

The most abstract painter of the group, Kaplinski, is returning to Zion after a few years' absence. He is undaunted by the logistics of a watercolorist having to haul water, pigments and other supplies to the site. "I like to sit and spread out all my gear around me on the ground," he says,

recalling the procedure of Moran and other American watercolorists such as John Singer Sargent and Winslow Homer. "Plein air is the ultimate landscape experience."

Another artist, Condrat, "has dazzled visitors with her unique style for several years," Hafen says. She also participates in the *Grand Canyon Celebration of Art* event.

Some admirers call the Utah native's brightly colored oils pixelated, cubic and blocky, she says. For her, they represent modern impressionism. "Utah is full of so many unique types of landscape that you can't find anywhere else in the world. It goes from snowy mountains to red rock arches to slot canyons," says Condrat, who left her work in an art supplies store to become a full-time artist last August. "I can't imagine living anywhere else."



George Handrahan, *Mount Carmel View*, oil, 12 x 16"

Lee's 400-plus watercolors of Zion National Park, influenced by park watercolorist Robert Shepherd, reflect his love of the land; he has continuously painted Zion and other subjects from his cabin on the east rim of Zion since 1979.

"Zion National Park is not only my playground but my studio as well. My landscapes feature strong dramatic lights and shadows, towering cliffs and colorful skies," says Lee, who is writing a book on the park and whose work is being featured by the Sears Dixie Art Museum in St. George.

"Watercolor is challenging," he explains. "It requires careful planning from the beginning and the use of negative painting, or restraint, to preserve the highlights."

Born and raised in the Midwest, DeLong for the past 12 years has organized a rafting trip for artists who want to paint plein air in the Grand Canyon.

He has used almost all media including

airbrush, but he loves oils for their versatility and luminousness. He's been working in the medium for 25 years. "I like the wet-into-wet subtleties and being able to block in, and then go back and refine shapes and adjust edges," says DeLong, who has a public working studio in Jerome, Arizona.

He's always innovating, explaining, "I like to let the subject dictate my approach to some degree, and I work hard not to be a formulaic painter.

"Creativity is a delicate mistress," he says. "I love the dance between passion and skill, between knowledge and learning."

Grand Canyon Event Welcomes Four Guest Artists

This year's *Celebration of Art* will recognize the achievements of 23 contemporary artists. In addition, four guest artists have been added as part of the 100th-anniversary event. Erin Hanson, Curt Walters, Rick

Wheeler and Ed Mell whose landscape oils are known for masterfully combining realism and modernism.

Visitors will have the opportunity to watch the artists paint along the South Rim, and works will be shown at the historic Kolb Studio. Admission is free, not including admission to the park.

"Following in the footsteps of the many artists that have painted the Grand Canyon over the past 160 years, this year's *Celebration of Art* artists will face the challenges that capturing the Canyon presents: its ever-shifting light and shadows and unique perspective of looking down into such vastness," says Kathy Duley, art coordinator for the event. It is also a fundraiser to benefit arts programming at the South Rim.

Born in 1953 in Wichita Falls, Texas, John Cogan learned to paint in oil at 10 or 11 and studied physics. Today he primarily works in acrylic on either stretched or mounted canvas,

gessoed boards for small studies, in plein air and occasionally pencil, oil or watercolor. He has been painting the Grand Canyon since 1978—he estimates 800 times—and Zion since the mid-1980s—about 300 times.

He doesn't name his style other than "representational." "Usually style names are coined by art historians, so I will leave that to them," says Cogan, who lives in Farmington, New Mexico.

Working in oils, Mesa, Arizona, resident Linda Glover Gooch calls her style "painterly realism." She has attended all but one of the Grand Canyon events, saying, "The Grand Canyon is one of my favorite places to paint."

"I'm drawn to canyons as I spent time playing in them as a kid so the love for them started at a young age," says Gooch, one of whose works was selected by Arizona Gov. Doug Ducey for the *Cowgirl Up!* 2019 Governor's Choice Award at the Desert Caballero Western Museum in Wickenburg. "I am blessed to do what I do and love and enjoy the character of my medium of choice," she says.

Originally from the Seattle area, Paula Kosanovic Swain has been painting at the Grand Canyon since 2014, primarily with oils but she also uses watercolor, acrylic

and gouache. She characterizes her style as semi-representational expressionism.

Both parents were art teachers. She says, "On many weekends growing up, my sister and I went plein air painting in the Puget Sound area with my dad." Her parents tried to keep her away from art as a career, so she trained as a registered nurse. Now she paints.

Matt Sterbenz, a Chandler, Arizona, resident, began painting oils of the Grand Canyon and the Arizona landscape when attending grade school in Phoenix, where he was immediately connected to the Southwest landscape.

During college at Arizona State University, he was introduced to plein air painting and learned the importance of painting from life. "Ever since then, I have spent as much time outdoors as possible: traveling, hiking and painting," Sterbenz says.

Prescott, Arizona's Bill Cramer has attended almost all of the Zion and Grand Canyon art events. "I paint in oils in a style that's been called impressionistic realism, where strong brushwork and colors express the vitality and beauty of the natural world," he says, noting inspiration from the California Impressionists of the early 1900s. For the Riverside, California, native, plein

air is a natural. "I truly enjoy the essential act of painting, especially on location. Every landscape is greater than the obvious visual elements," he adds. "The push of an evening breeze, the feel of sunbaked sandstone, the scent of sagebrush or the sound of a raven suddenly overhead are examples of the many unseen elements that inform my work. I'm satisfied when a painting is as rich as the landscape that inspired it."

The two events celebrate the past and present and they anticipate an equally robust future for the arts in the parks.

"As we look back on the 100-plus years past, you can clearly identify the importance of the early artists that documented the parks during their expeditions prior to the park being founded," says Mia Bell, general manager of Grand Canyon, South Rim, managed by Colorado-based concessionaire, Xanterra. "Art plays a critical role in the appreciation of our national parks. We hope that the works of art to come encourage the next generation to discover and enjoy this national treasure of the next 100 years and beyond." 🍷

Brown is an Arizona freelancer. Visit his website at www.azwriter.com.

Frederick Dellenbaugh (1853-1935), *Zion Canyon*, 1903, oil on canvas, 25 x 37". Zion National Park Collection.

