

ART THRIVES IN CALIFORNIA'S HIGH COUNTRY



For more than a century, the majestic sunsets, endless vistas, and rugged terrain of California's Sierra Nevada mountain range have cast a spell on artists, writers, and photographers. Scholars have long highlighted the artists' colonies that flourished in and around Yosemite National Park; for example, it is well known that East Coast artists Albert Bierstadt, Thomas Hill, and Thomas Moran traveled there to sketch and paint. Yet little attention has been paid to the more remote areas of the Eastern Sierra and the extraordinary contributions made by the artists who first documented them.

In the 1870s, the "Fresno Trail" crossed the rugged Western divide and ended at the mining camp of Mammoth City, on the Sierra's more formidable eastern flank. The arduous journey took travelers over Indian routes, switchbacks, and steep passes, and was available only to those using pack mules. The relative inaccessibility of this high country only heightened its allure for those with a spirit of adventure. By 1880, this alpine haven in the heart of the Lake District had a population of more than 2,000.

After the mines' inevitable depletion and a devastating fire, Mammoth City was abandoned by 1898, leaving only traces of buildings and artifacts. Its 1920s rebirth as a mecca for hunting and recreation came about thanks to automobiles, which brought tourists up from the south across the Mohave Desert. The mighty Sierras were no

longer off limits. Today, the town of Mammoth Lakes (population 8,234) offers world-class skiing in the winter; in the summer, it is just a scenic two-hour drive away from Yosemite or a short flight from Los Angeles. Curiously overlooked by most tourists, especially in the summer, Mammoth is proudly regarded by native Californians as a well-kept secret.

A NEW CULTURAL HUB

Anyone planning a trip to the Mammoth area should not miss the **Gallery at Twin Lakes**. Located at an elevation of 8,730 feet, this is quite possibly the highest operating commercial gallery in America. Since winter snows make it inaccessible, it is open only from May through October. Its proprietors, Robert and Sue Joki, are no strangers to the art world; for 25 years they have run the Sovereign Collection, a fine art gallery in downtown Portland, Oregon, specializing in 19th- and 20th-century European and American art. Mammoth Lakes had long been the couple's favorite summer vacation spot, so in 2012, when they stumbled upon the chance to buy a cabin there, they jumped at the opportunity to change their pace of life and take on an additional challenge.

Their Gallery at Twin Lakes opened in May 2013, with a twofold mission that distinguishes it from other such firms. First, it is the only gallery showcasing historical Sierra and Yosemite artists amid the very landscapes

that so captivated them. Second, it is also the Jokis' summertime home. Living on the premises is crucial to their education-minded desire to operate, in Robert's words, a "living museum" that helps preserve the area's rich history.

Stepping through the gallery's rustic doorway, visitors are greeted as if they are entering a private home (as they actually are). A typical summer morning finds Robert and Sue in the living room, sipping coffee beside a potbelly stove as grazing deer peer in the windows. Their nine-room gallery is decorated with wood-hewn furniture, and visitors are encouraged to wander freely while admiring not only fine art, but also historical books, furniture, musical instruments, and manuscripts associated with the region, including a 1930s love letter written by the painter Maynard Dixon.

Since opening, the gallery has displayed works by such blue-chip California masters as Edgar Payne (one of the earliest artists to trek into the Eastern Sierra), Paul Lauritz, Carl Sammons, and F.F. Schafer. Other museum-worthy artists handled by the gallery include Childe Hassam, Enoch Wood Perry, Raoul de Longpre, and Harry Cassie Best, whose *Vernal Falls, Yosemite* hung here until recently. Also on view are works from the Jokis' extensive collection of 19th-century Hudson River landscapes and European genre scenes.

(THIS PAGE, LEFT) **STEPHEN WILLARD (1894-1966)**, *Lake George*, c. 1950, mixed media, 22 x 30 in. Gallery at Twin Lakes ■ (THIS PAGE, RIGHT) The Gallery at Twin Lakes in September 2013 ■ (OPPOSITE PAGE) **HARRY CASSIE BEST**, *Vernal Falls, Yosemite*, c. 1910, oil on canvas, 50 x 25 in. Private collection, Beverly Hills



STEPHEN H. WILLARD

Delving into local history has become a passion for Robert, who recently became president of the Southern Mono Historical Society's **Mammoth Museum**. The Jokis are quick to note that their gallery-cabin itself is as remarkable as the artworks and ephemera exhibited inside. Situated high above Mammoth Lakes on the road to Lake George and Lake Mary, it was built in 1934 as the seasonal studio-home of the Palm Springs photographer and painter Stephen H. Willard (1894-1966). Keen to escape the scorching heat of the Southern California desert, he and his wife, Beatrice, found a mountain paradise where he could trek backcountry trails documenting the scenery. (Willard developed his photographs in his custom-made, if rudimentary, darkroom.) Remarkably, the cabin retains its original floor plan. Apart from a few updates, it still emanates the rustic atmosphere of days gone by.

Seeing themselves as custodians for the future, the Jokis are deeply committed to preserving Willard's memory and artistic legacy. Robert's enthusiasm has sparked plans for a book he is co-authoring with the historian Richard Westman and the retired Getty Museum curator Gordon Baldwin. Moreover, the gallery's inception has been instrumental in reigniting commercial interest in Willard, helping to educate a new generation of admirers and collectors.

While many Sierra artists kept a studio or other base in Yosemite, the more adventurous ones favored short stays in remote locations such as Mammoth. Because it is geographically more isolated than Yosemite, it comes as no surprise that paintings of Mammoth's topography are comparatively rare. The area certainly found its proudest champion in Willard, who dedicated four decades of his career to uncovering its raw beauty. His silver-gelatin photographs of lakes and mountains (once distributed as "Real Photo Postcards") helped popularize the area for tourism, and his documentation of forgotten mining settlements refocused public attention on their ruins.

Though Willard's photographic achievements are often praised, few know his accomplished paintings, which drew inspiration from the California Impressionist movement, in full swing for much of his lifetime. Willard also pushed artistic boundaries by becoming one of the first photographers to apply oil paint directly onto enlarged black-and-white photographs. This innovation blended photographic reality and Impressionism, providing a depth and texture that evokes a truer sense of the landscape. Indeed, Robert Joki believes that Willard's experimentations with color were motivated by a simple desire to bring viewers closer to what the artist experienced himself: the stunning vividness of nature. Made around 1950, *Lake George* is a late work that shows the artist at his best, with heavy applications of paint that barely allow us to see the photo below.

The Gallery at Twin Lakes is a hub of activity throughout the summer season. Its backyard is open to all as a venue for concerts, lectures, and other arts-related events. A few yards away, visitors can peek into a one-room "Miner's Cabin"-style building constructed by Willard. Carefully restored and redecorated, it is now home to a series of artists-in-residence invited by the Jokis to write or make art or music inside it. This initiative has extended the site's creative legacy, and already some famous names are set to work here, including the New York sculptor Joel Otterson, who now teaches at UCLA.

In all of these ways, then, the Gallery at Twin Lakes stands ready to provide visitors with a deeper appreciation of art of both the past and present. It's fair to say that summer in the mountains has rarely been more artistically inspiring. ●

INFORMATION: Gallery at Twin Lakes, 2749 Lake Mary Road, Mammoth Lakes, CA 93546, 760.924.7300, thegalleryattwinlakes.com

BETSY THOMAS runs an art advisory firm based in New York City.