

Plein-Air Reproductions from the Collection of Mrs. Joan Irvine Smith and the Irvine Museum

Mission San Juan Capistrano is proud to partner with longtime Mission supporter Mrs. Joan Irvine Smith to display reproductions of historic plein air paintings from her private collection at the Irvine Museum. Mrs. Smith and the Irvine Museum are committed to conserving the artistic style of Plein-Air painting and its ability to record history in a unique and beautiful way. It is through this partnership that we are able to bring these reproductions of historic landscape paintings to the Soldiers' Barracks Gallery at Mission San Juan Capistrano, historic landmark and museum.



Joan Irvine Smith

The Irvine Museum is the only museum in California dedicated entirely to the preservation and display of California Impressionism or Plein-Air paintings, an art style that flourished in California from 1890 to 1930. Mrs. Smith and her mother, the late Athalie R. Clarke (1903-1993), founded the museum, which is located in the City of Irvine, in central Orange County, in 1992.

To plan your next visit to the Irvine Museum, go to www.irvinemuseum.org. The Museum is located at 18881 Von Karman Avenue Suite.100, Irvine, California 92612 and exhibits a range of premiere art shows throughout the year.

What is Plein-Air Painting?

The term plein-air or en plein-air is a French phrase, which mean “in the open air” and generally categorizes outdoor paintings created in one sitting.

This style gained popularity in the late 1800s and early 1900s as the result of the European Impressionist movement made famous by such artists as Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, and Vincent Van Gogh. In the latter half of the 1800s, the creation of easy to carry collapsible easels and packaged, pre-mixed paints also helped to propel this movement.

Inspired by the popular European Impressionism movement, American artists soon followed suit and took to the outdoors to capture what they found. Much of the art documents the splendor of the land before huge population growth and mass urbanization. Here in California, a regional variant of this American Impressionism developed and most works consist principally of landscapes that document the splendor of California. Artists’ compulsion and love for Mission San Juan Capistrano as a painting subject over the years provided testament and insight into our history.

Jean Stern, Director of the Irvine Museum, comments:

“Among these artists was Elmer Wachtel, painter of the influential piece, Capistrano Mission painted in the mid-1890s before restoration of the roofs over the arcade.

These artists were interested in preserving what had already been built in early California, instead of rebuilding. Though at the time, these structures were barely 100 or 150 years old, these artists still had romantic notions about them. The Missions represented personal histories, legends, stories, travel and a sense of place. The artists interpreted the California Missions not as archeological sites, but rather as places where people had lived. As subjects for paintings, these sites represented life, death, happiness, and sadness - all elements of a golden past. To them, Mission San Juan Capistrano was something much more than the stones and the flowers; it was the site of our heritage.

It is believed that Mission San Juan Capistrano in particular was among the most popular locations for painting, outside of New York City. This Mission was chosen [as preferred subject matter] above all others, because of its unique beauty in terms of what had been.”

To learn more about the Joan Irvine Smith Museum and collection and California Plein-Air please visit the website www.irvinemuseum.org. Information and directions are obtainable by telephone at (949) 476-2565.